Queer Identity Negotiation in Intercultural Host Family Experiences:

Reflections & Recommendations for Global Education & Exchange Programs

by

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Abstract

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Title: Queer Identity Negotiation in Intercultural Host Family Experiences: Reflections & Recommendations for Global Education & Exchange Programs

Intercultural exchange and host family experiences are often framed as opportunities for cultural learning, connection, and personal growth. For queer participants, however, these intimate spaces can also become sites where identity, belonging, safety, and self-expression are continually negotiated. This qualitative study explores how 13 queer individuals experienced identity negotiation before, during, and after intercultural host family exchanges. Drawing on queer migration theory, intersectionality, and theories of identity negotiation, the study uses long-form individual interviews and follow-up focus groups to examine how participants navigated relationships, cultural expectations, visibility, and changing understandings of self.

Findings show that identity negotiation was not a singular decision to disclose or conceal, but an ongoing process shaped by context, relationships, power, and time. Participants navigated visibility and belonging through strategic self-presentation, environmental reading, community-building, and other forms of subjective agency, while also experiencing moments of constraint, surveillance, and uncertainty. At the same time, cultural contrast and relational experiences created opportunities for self-discovery, connection, and new understandings of identity. Collective reflection further revealed community as a source of meaning-making and knowledge production. These findings suggest that exchange programs should move beyond risk-based approaches toward sustained relational care, contextual support, and recognition of queer participants as active agents and knowledge holders.

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Land Acknowledgment

The University of Oregon acknowledges the Kalapuya people, who are the Indigenous peoples of this region and who have lived here since time immemorial. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, the Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in western Oregon. Today, descendants of the Kalapuya are citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and continue to make important contributions to their communities, the University, and the state of Oregon. We express our respect for all federally recognized Tribal Nations of Oregon and for the many Indigenous peoples who continue to call this land home (University of Oregon, 2023).

This thesis understands acknowledgment as an ethical practice that extends beyond recognition toward responsibility. It is in this continued commitment, not simply in the act of acknowledgment itself, that these statements find their greatest significance.

Acknowledgment of Global Mobility & Privilege

This study recognizes that intercultural learning is not synonymous with international travel. Intercultural encounters occur across differences of identity, language, culture, worldview, and lived experience in both local and global contexts. While this research does not define interculturality through the crossing of national borders, all of the narratives examined in this study emerge from experiences of international mobility and host family exchange.

The opportunity to travel, study, and move across borders is not equally available to all. Global mobility is shaped by systems of power, including citizenship, passport privilege, race, nationality, class, disability, language, and colonialism. This acknowledgment does not diminish the potential of international exchange; rather, it situates participants' experiences within broader social, historical, and political contexts that shape who is able to move, where they are welcomed, and under what conditions.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my late friend, Jay, who I would have loved to include in this study. I am grateful that he learned to meet, love, and embrace a few of his many selves before he passed. I am grateful to have had him as a friend. I hope this work can help future people find just as much joy as we did throughout all the ups and downs of an experience such as this. This work is for Jay and all the queer people who engage in intercultural exchange.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Intercultural Exchange

Over the past few decades, intercultural exchange and international student mobility have expanded dramatically, with more than 6 million students now studying outside their home countries each year (OECD, 2024). Universities have increasingly invested in study abroad programs, faculty-led exchanges, and global partnerships, often framing mobility as a pathway to intercultural competence, employability, and personal growth within a broader neoliberal discourse of "global skill production" (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2025). For queer participants in particular, intercultural exchange experiences are shaped not only by cultural difference but by the ongoing negotiation of visibility, self-expression, and safety across unfamiliar social contexts. Despite growing recognition of queer inclusion in education, research on identity negotiation within these intercultural exchange settings remains limited.

Intercultural exchange programs are widely promoted as opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and cross-cultural understanding. These programs vary in format and duration, placing participants in diverse intercultural environments, often across national borders, but also in domestic or virtual contexts. Common formats include academic exchanges, service-learning programs, religious missions, and professional placements. However, intercultural exchange can also occur outside of formal program structures, including independently arranged host family experiences facilitated through informal or platform-based networks.

While these programs create opportunities for relationship-building and mutual understanding, they also position participants within complex social environments where identity, belonging, and power are continually negotiated (Bingham, Brunsting, & Katsumoto, 2023). These experiences also hold a broader cultural significance of adventure, independence, and self-discovery, often framed as a coming-of-age experience that will broaden horizons. More broadly, universities and program providers emphasize outcomes such as language acquisition, cultural competence, and career readiness. However, these experiences are also socially understood by many as opportunities to enter a culturally distinct space that allows them to step outside normative constraints and independently explore; this is particularly true for college-aged students and young adults participating in voluntourism and adventure-oriented programs.

These cultural contexts are sought-out exploratory spaces for identity formation, engagement in new social environments, and experimentation that may not be as readily accessible in their day-to-day life. Research demonstrates that participants develop key skills such as intercultural communication, adaptability, problem-solving, and resilience through sustained engagement with different cultural contexts (Bryant & Soria, 2015). These outcomes are often framed through a neoliberal lens as essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world. In this way, intercultural exchange has become not only a common educational space, but also a widely held travel aspiration and formative cultural experience for many. At the same time, scholars have noted that such programs are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional dynamics that influence how participants experience and engage with them.

Host Family Experiences

It is widely accepted in the exchange industry that host family experiences[1], sometimes known as homestays[2], offer practical language skills and cultural insights (Institute of International Education, 2011). They offer immersive experiences and can act as a "home away from home." However, beyond this focus on neoliberal self-making, host family experiences are fundamentally about building connection and belonging in a new cultural context. Living with a host family provides a unique opportunity for deeper, more authentic cultural immersion through everyday relationships and interactions that extend beyond language practice or cultural knowledge. For exchange participants, these arrangements can offer structured opportunities for immersion and belonging, while also sometimes reflecting a wide spectrum of motivations and levels of desire, from strong enthusiasm to externally influenced participation from family. For

[1] Host family placements are seen as one of the most immersive forms of intercultural exchange. They provide everyday opportunities to practice language in informal, relational contexts and observe cultural patterns in domestic life. Organizations like the Institute of International Education promote homestays as especially effective for helping students build cultural humility, communication skills, and a deeper understanding of local customs, values, and social norms (Institute of International Education, 2011).

[2] The terms "host family" and "homestay" are often used interchangeably in study abroad and exchange contexts, though they can carry distinct meanings depending on organizational or regional usage. In general, "host family" tends to emphasize the household and relational aspect of the arrangement. Meanwhile, "homestay" more commonly refers to the structured program, accommodation service, or the experience itself. In some contexts, the distinction is further used to differentiate between volunteer hosting and compensated arrangements. However, usage is varied across institutions and regions, and the terms are not standardized within the field.

hosts, involvement similarly spans a range from intentional engagement to more pragmatic or situational participation. This can be shaped by social ties, compensation offers, and other factors. Taken together, host family arrangements sit along a spectrum of expectations and experiences, producing varied forms of connection, care, and cultural exchange for all engaged.

Host families are situated within a broader exchange economy, where accommodation, meals, approval, and forms of caretaking structure the terms of participation while also introducing transactional elements into what is often framed as a familial relationship. Host families participate for varied reasons, including interest, compensation, social pressure, education, or community tradition. The largely low-cost (or unpaid) caregiving also makes many exchange models financially viable in the first place. As a result, programs may feel pressure to retain and accommodate host families, sometimes prioritizing their comfort over the needs of individual students, particularly those from marginalized communities. Within this dynamic, cultural expectations around gratitude and kinship can translate into implicit pressures to assimilate and minimize difference. These moments are especially challenging and revealing for participants as they navigate cultural expectations, social dynamics, and questions of identity within new family norms. In turn, participants may find themselves occupying the space as guests who must, at times, tread lightly.

For queer participants especially, this can mean navigating identity more cautiously, as they may experience host family environments in ways that differ from their peers. It is important to consider how queer participants access these already challenging spaces and whether they do so with the same sense of safety, inclusion, and opportunity as others. When queer individuals encounter distinct or additional challenges within host family exchanges, these differences become analytically significant, shaping how participants interpret their environments, assess risk, and make decisions about visibility, disclosure, and connection. At the same time, these conditions illuminate the strategies queer participants use to move through constraint—negotiating belonging, maintaining safety, and asserting agency in ways that are often subtle, adaptive, and context-dependent.

Engaging these dynamics reveals not only barriers, but forms of learning, agency, and relational navigation that emerge from them. Host family experiences act as sites of coexisting

constraint and possibility, shaped by power and culture that influence how different identities engage and feel "at home" in these intimate intercultural settings. Moreover, these spaces reveal how queer participants actively construct meaning, belonging, and self-understanding within and across intercultural environments that may not be fully affirming (Bingham et al., 2023). Across identities, participants may also encounter moments of unexpected or intentional self-discovery, coming to understand their sexual and/or gender identities through new lenses. These experiences underscore the value of examining how self-understanding is shaped not only by freedom, but also through the constraints that structure intercultural exchange.

Queer Identity and Intercultural Exchange

Recent studies show that queer students participate in intercultural exchange programs at higher rates than their heterosexual or cisgender peers (Bingham et al., 2023). For queer individuals, the experience of living abroad and engaging in cross-cultural exchange often presents an opportunity to explore and negotiate their sexual and gender identities in new contexts. These experiences can offer a sense of freedom and possibility, as cultural norms in the host country may allow for new forms of self-expression that are not available in family environments that may be more hostile toward queer identity and gender/sex[3] diversity. These added complexities for queer exchange participants and the experiences they manifest are worth

[3]*Gender/sex* refers to the inseparable and co-constructed nature of what are often labeled "gender" and "sex," emphasizing that they are not distinct or sequential phenomena but deeply intertwined systems of identity, embodiment, and social regulation (DuBois & Shattuck-Heidorn, 2021; Kaiser, 2009; Van Anders er al., 2015)

A Note on The Biological Entanglement of Gender/Sex: Sex and gender are not separate domains but biologically and socially entangled categories that co-produce one another in dynamic ways. Entanglement acknowledges the literal inseparability and co-constituted nature of sex and gender (DuBois, 2025). Rather than fixed or purely anatomical, both are shaped by sociocultural forces that have tangible effects on the body. Studies on brain sex variability further underscore this complexity, showing that human brains form mosaics of traits, not binary male/female patterns (Joel, 2011). As Velocci (2024) notes, the scientific community has long operated with multiple, contradictory definitions of sex, all while those definitions have been deployed to sustain patriarchal and white supremacist structures. Binary sex, in this sense, has never been neutral. It is historically used to justify gendered and racial hierarchies (Velocci, 2024; DuBois, 2018). Scholars such as Laqueur (1990), Oudshoorn (1994), and Fausto-Sterling (2000) have shown how the very categories of male/female and gender/sex were constructed through political, colonial, and medical discourses designed to classify and control bodies. These histories are not abstract: they inform the lived realities of trans and gender-expansive people, especially Black trans women, whose bodies sit at the nexus of gendered, racialized, and classed violence. Recognizing the co-constitution of sex, gender, and race is critical not only for producing accurate, embodied research, but also for affirming the complexity of identity in trans and nonbinary youth. It allows us to listen to participants' experiences without forcing them into artificial binaries and to better advocate for policies and practices that reflect the realities of gendered life.

researching. Importantly, these moments of exploration and constraint do not occur in a vacuum. They are shaped by systems of power that influence which identities are legible, safe, or sanctioned. Notably, queer participants often report profound growth and moments of joy despite hardship (Donahue & Wise, 2021).

For exchange participants placed within host families, these negotiations occur within one of the most intimate spaces of the intercultural experience: the home. Unlike many forms of international mobility where individuals maintain greater personal autonomy, host family placements require participants to navigate everyday relationships, routines, expectations, and forms of belonging within an unfamiliar household. Queer participants may encounter additional decisions regarding identity expression, disclosure, safety, and connection as they negotiate their place within these family environments. Questions of when, how, and whether to disclose a queer identity become intertwined with broader questions of trust, dependence, cultural difference, and the desire to be accepted as both a guest and a member of the household.

Queer migration theory provides a useful lens for understanding queer experiences in intercultural exchange. It reframes movement as more than border crossing, emphasizing orientation, space, and relational positioning across both physical and virtual worlds. It also helps make sense of silence, passing, and non-visibility as active and strategic ways of navigating social worlds rather than absence or failure. By examining host family placements as sites of micro-level migration where identity is negotiated across overlapping and often conflicting social worlds, this becomes a productive framework for interpreting the narratives of exchange participants. This framework also helps one better understand how participants experience identity as fluid, relational, and continuously in motion.

Considerations: Power, Mobility, Affect, Space, & Time

This study examines queer identity negotiation within intercultural host family placements by exploring how queer participants navigate belonging, visibility, and self-expression before, during, and after exchange experiences. Rather than understanding queer exchange experiences solely through frameworks of risk, discrimination, or concealment, this research considers the broader complexity of these encounters, including moments of joy,

connection, growth, and agency. It asks how queer participants make sense of their experiences within host families and how these environments shape identity, relationships, and belonging over time.

This study asks whether queer participants are afforded the same opportunities for connection, growth, and belonging within host family exchanges. If not, what is altered, constrained, or made possible in their place? These differences are analytically significant. They shape how participants experience learning, assess risk, navigate disclosure, and interpret their experiences over time. Attending to these dynamics allows for a deeper understanding not only of the challenges queer participants may face, but of how they process, negotiate, and learn within these environments. In this way, intercultural exchange becomes a temporary, yet deeply affective, site of identity negotiation—one that reveals broader insights into how agency, belonging, and self-understanding are constructed under conditions of constraint.

To explore these processes, this study builds from Stella Ting-Toomey's (1993) Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes how individuals construct and manage identities through intercultural interaction. Queer identity negotiation involves more than disclosure; it is also expressed through everyday forms of being, including dress, movement, language, and affect. These choices can communicate authenticity, manage safety, or create connection within particular social contexts. Each small decision becomes part of a larger process of negotiating belonging and agency. In host family settings, where power, dependence, and cultural difference intersect, identity expression becomes both relational and strategic. Intersectionality, which will be discussed more deeply in the literature review, further highlights how overlapping identities and systems of power shape how individuals experience the world (Crenshaw, 1989). Queer identity does not exist separately from these broader social contexts; rather, these intersections influence how participants navigate intercultural spaces, relationships, and the possibilities available to them.

Queer theory and scholarship on queer migration and mobility further illuminate how identity is continuously negotiated through social interaction, cultural expectations, and movement across spaces (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990; Carrillo, 2004; Decena, 2007; Luibhéid, 2008). Rather than being something individuals simply possess or reveal, queer identity is

shaped through ongoing encounters with others and the contexts in which individuals find themselves. Visibility, disclosure, silence, passing, and adaptation are not necessarily signs of absence or inauthenticity, but can represent strategic ways of navigating particular social conditions. For gender-nonconforming or nonbinary individuals especially, visibility may occur through being "read" by others regardless of personal intention, demonstrating how identity is shaped relationally across space and time. Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification further highlights how queer individuals navigate dominant expectations by reinterpreting and reshaping existing norms to create connection, possibility, and survival. Together, these perspectives challenge narratives that equate authenticity with visibility and instead emphasize queerness as fluid, context-dependent, and shaped through ongoing acts of negotiation and worldmaking.

Together, these perspectives help explain how queer participants navigate host families, institutions, and cultural expectations. Importantly, queer exchange participants are not passive recipients of these structures, but active participants in making meaning from their experiences. Host family expectations, local cultural norms, and institutional practices may create barriers or pressures around identity expression, yet participants also find ways to navigate, reinterpret, and sometimes disrupt these expectations. Michl, Pegg, and Kracen (2019) found that many queer participants would repeat their international experiences despite experiencing hardship, suggesting that these encounters cannot be understood only through harm or exclusion. Instead, queer participants may experience exchange as both challenging and transformative, where constraint and agency exist simultaneously.

Power within intercultural host family settings is negotiated through everyday interactions, relationships, and expectations of belonging. Drawing on Foucault (1978), this project understands power as productive and embedded within social norms, family structures, and institutional expectations rather than simply imposed through explicit acts of control. Within host families, these dynamics are often shaped by expectations of being a "good guest," where inclusion and kinship may become contingent upon conformity, emotional labor, and the management of difference. Participants therefore navigate an ongoing tension between authenticity and relational stability, making decisions about how to express themselves while preserving safety, connection, and belonging. Host family environments consequently function as both sites of care and constraint, where identity is continuously negotiated in relation to

others. In exchange contexts, these negotiations are further shaped by program structures that frequently position queerness as a risk to be managed. Safety guidance may emphasize caution, discretion, or concealment, creating a dynamic in which programs seek to protect participants while participants simultaneously manage their identities to maintain access to safety, stability, and meaningful relationships. Queerness can thus become framed as both something requiring protection and as potentially disruptive to the familial bonds these programs seek to create.

These processes reveal that identity negotiation is shaped not only by individual choice, but also by institutional logics, cultural norms, and relational stakes. Participants' decisions around visibility and self-expression shift across time and space, as experiences before, during, and after exchange involve changing relationships, environments, and understandings of self. Digital technologies further complicate these processes by blurring the boundaries between "here" and "there," creating overlapping social worlds in which participants negotiate identity across multiple contexts simultaneously. Rather than viewing particular locations as inherently safe or unsafe for queer expression, this project considers visibility and vulnerability as emerging through dynamic configurations of space, time, and social relationships. Community also plays a significant but complex role in these processes. While affinity spaces can provide opportunities for supportive dialogue, collective reflection, and the negotiation of marginalized identities (Beasley et al., 2024; Kulkarni et al., 2022), exchange participants often build connections primarily with peers who share similar institutional, mobility, and socioeconomic contexts, potentially narrowing the perspectives available through these relationships (Dolby, 2004; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007; King & Raghuram, 2013). At the same time, research on intercultural learning emphasizes that intentional reflection, relational support, and inclusive program design are essential for fostering deeper engagement and meaning making (Bingham et al., 2023; Bryant & Soria, 2015). Together, these dynamics highlight that queer exchange experiences are shaped through ongoing negotiations among identity, power, care, community, and the broader structures that organize intercultural mobility.

There remains limited understanding of how these practices specifically shape queer participants' experiences within host family placements. This gap points to the importance of not only recognizing the challenges queer participants may encounter but also understanding the strategies they use to create meaning, connection, and belonging. By centering queer

participants' experiences, this study contributes to broader conversations about identity negotiation in intercultural spaces while moving beyond risk-based frameworks to better understand diverse forms of agency, belonging, and self-expression.

Research Questions

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the need to more closely examine how queer identity is negotiated within the intimate, relational, and temporal context of intercultural host family placements. Rather than treating these experiences as uniformly beneficial or inherently risky, this study centers the ways participants actively navigate, interpret, and make meaning of their identities across shifting cultural, spatial, and relational conditions. These challenges point to a need for deeper investigation into the factors influencing queer identity negotiation within intercultural host family placements. The core research question is:

> How do queer people experience identity negotiation throughout intercultural host family exchanges, and what impact does it have upon them and their sense of self?

This question underscores the relational and temporal complexities of identity negotiation in intercultural spaces. To support this inquiry, three sub-questions are proposed:

1. How do exterior factors, relational contexts, and marginalization influence queer participants' identity negotiation and decisions around disclosure?
2. How do one's understandings of self evolve across the temporal stages of exchange—before, throughout, and after—within digitally connected, transnational social worlds?
3. How do individuals experience and interpret returning to home environments that may hold different or more rigid norms around gender and sexuality?

These questions position queer participants not just as subjects navigating risk, but as active agents whose experiences offer insight into how identity is negotiated within and across cultures.

Study Objectives

The goal of this research is to develop a nuanced understanding of how queer participants negotiate identity within intercultural exchange programs, particularly within host family placements. Rather than viewing identity negotiation as a single moment of disclosure, this study examines it as an ongoing relational process shaped by self-presentation, visibility, belonging,

and the navigation of complex social dynamics across changing cultural contexts. Centering participants lived experiences, the study explores both the constraints queer individuals encounter and the strategies, agency, and resilience they develop in response.

Specifically, the study intends to:

- Examine queer identity negotiation within intercultural host family placements as a dynamic, intersectional process shaped by time, space, relationships, context, and identities such as race, gender, religion, ability, and socioeconomic background.
- Explore strategies queer participants use to navigate, interpret, and make meaning of their identities in intercultural settings. Rather than centering victimization, this study emphasizes agency, resilience, and growth alongside experiences of constraint.
- Expand exchange scholarship and address a gap in intercultural literature by documenting and analyzing queer identity negotiation in host family contexts. Examining these insights can inform more inclusive and responsive program practice, formalizing and expanding scholarly conversations that historically overlooked marginalized experiences.

The findings of this study are relevant to all exchange participants, but particularly queer individuals, exchange organizations, program coordinators, educators, advocates, and scholars across sexuality and gender studies, migration studies, and education. By moving beyond risk-based understandings of queer exchange experiences, this research highlights the complexity of identity, belonging, and connection across cultures. It offers insight into how intercultural programs can better support diverse participants through approaches grounded in inclusion, relational care, and recognition of participant agency.

Chapter 2 – Literature

Intercultural Exchange Programs

Current Studies, Themes, and Weaknesses

Intercultural exchange programs provide opportunities for individuals to immerse themselves in new cultural contexts, fostering cross-cultural relationships and mutual understanding. As these programs expand globally, there is increasing recognition of the unique challenges faced by queer participants. Despite growing visibility, research on queer experiences in intercultural exchange settings remains limited, particularly regarding identity negotiation. This gap underscores the importance of intersectional research that considers not only sexuality, but also the interplay of multiple, co-constitutive identities.

This study takes a transdisciplinary approach, drawing from global studies, women's and gender studies, education studies, queer migration theory, and broader social science scholarship on identity. Each of these fields contributes distinct but often siloed insights: global studies foregrounds cross-cultural movement and power relations; education emphasizes developmental outcomes, learning environments, and program structures; queer theory interrogates normativity, performativity, and the construction of identity; and queer migration studies offers critical frameworks for understanding movement, embodiment, spatiality, and temporality in relation to identity. Collective engagement across these fields remains rare in academia, despite their shared concerns with identity, power, and mobility. This lack of holistic integration limits how intercultural exchange has been conceptualized, particularly for queer people living with a host family. By bringing these perspectives together, this study reframes intercultural exchange not simply as geographic movement across national borders or cultural spaces, but as an intimate, relational, and temporally situated negotiation of self within layered intercultural spaces and relational geographies shaped by power, safety, and agency. In doing so, it highlights the potential of applying queer migration frameworks to educational contexts, particularly as a means of understanding identity development and self-making under constraint.

Existing literature on queer participants in intercultural exchanges has largely focused on university-aged students in short-term study abroad programs, leaving significant gaps in

understanding long-term exchanges and experiences outside of academia (Mnouer, 2023). Research remains limited on how extended time abroad shapes identity negotiation, particularly regarding how participants' willingness or desire to disclose their identities evolves over time. For instance, longer-term placements may impact the emotional labor of these experiences, yet this dimension remains underexplored in current scholarship. Narratives that capture the full arc of the exchange experience—*before* the exchange commences, *throughout* the exchange itself, and everything *after* the experience—are rare but essential for understanding identity as a temporal and evolving process rather than a singular, fixed decision.

There is also limited attention to specific identities within the queer spectrum. While female students are more likely to participate in international exchange, identities such as gay and bisexual men remain underrepresented in research (Bingham et al., 2023). Beyond sexual orientation, studies often fail to adequately address gender diversity beyond the binary, resulting in an incomplete understanding of queer experiences across diverse cultural settings. This gap is particularly significant given that trans and gender-expansive individuals may experience identity as more visibly embodied and subject to heightened scrutiny across cultural contexts.

For individuals who are actively transitioning or whose gender presentation is read as nonconforming, this visibility is not always optional and can intensify exposure to misrecognition, regulation, or harm. While some sexual identities may be selectively disclosed or obscured, gender is often read immediately through socially legible cues and regulated through interactional expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although "passing" can shape how one is perceived and present opportunity (Snorton, 2009), not all TGE individuals have the option to avoid misrecognition or policing. This is particularly true for those actively transitioning, which may also constrain opportunities for strategic navigation (Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). As a result, trans and gender-expansive participants may face heightened stigma or increased safety risks, making intercultural exchange (both virtual and physical) an unevenly accessible and potentially precarious space.

Although much of the existing research frames queer identity as a site of potential challenge, some emerging studies underline opportunities for queer individuals. Participants often describe exchange as an opportunity to explore identity in new ways, with some reporting

empowerment presented by the opportunity of navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts (Bingham et al., 2023). For these reasons, many queer participants actively seek out these experiences as spaces for experimentation, self-discovery, and growth. At the same time, recurring themes—such as identity policing, homophobia, transphobia, and fear of violence—underscore the serious complexities queer individuals face, particularly in environments where societal norms conflict with non-normative identities.

Despite growing queer participation in exchange programs, the experiences of those placed in host families remain especially underexplored in research. Host family placements, in particular, represent deeply intimate and relational environments where daily life, cultural norms, and personal identity intersect in ways that are often more immediate and consequential than classroom-based interactions. These unique challenges queer people face are also compounded by the interplay of other identities (race, gender, ability, etc.), social statuses (caste, economic status, education), language, religion, digital connectivity, and much more. (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019; Mnouer, 2023). Given the centrality of host family relationships in many exchange programs—and equitable access to learning, merit, and meaningful cross-cultural engagement—further research is needed to understand how these dynamics shape queer identity negotiation, visibility, and safety. Since host families are central to many exchange programs and shape access to learning and cross-cultural engagement, more research is needed on how these dynamics affect queer identity negotiation, visibility, and safety.

Identity Negotiation

Disclosure & Coming Out

Queer identity negotiation and disclosure are shaped by complex social, cultural, and situational dynamics (Zheng, 2023; Decena, 2008; Ahmed, 2004). “Coming out” is often defined in Western contexts as the voluntary disclosure of one’s sexual or gender identity as a form of increased visibility and authenticity (Acosta, 2011, as cited in Zheng, 2023; Decena, 2008), and is frequently tied to ideals of self-expression and personal liberation. However, this framing emerges from a specific historical context in which queer identity became shaped through liberal and capitalist logics that prioritize individualism, visibility, and self-management (D’Emilio, 1983; Cohen, 1997; Decena, 2008). Within this history, the “ideal” queer subject is often

imagined as publicly visible and economically independent, a model that reflects broader neoliberal expectations around choice, transparency, and personal responsibility. As these ideas circulate globally through media, education, and institutional exchange programs, they contributed to coming out being framed as a central milestone of queer identity development in many contexts (Chávez & Luibhéid, 2017; Ahmed, 2004). In this framing, disclosure becomes associated with authenticity and well-being, even as this assumes a universality that does not account for the cultural and relational differences that shape how identity is lived and understood (Decena, 2008; Villicana et al., 2016). Within contemporary intercultural exchange programs, these norms continue to shape expectations of participation and belonging in subtle but powerful ways, particularly around how identity is made visible or managed in relation to others (Ahmed, 2004; Donahue & Wise, 2021). Thus, queer participants often feel pressure to be seen as "good guests," prioritizing host family comfort and cultural respect over personal visibility (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021).

Many exchange programs, institutional frameworks, and broader societal norms remain structured through heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions. These expectations shape not only participants' experiences, but also host family relationships, program practices, and the institutional design of exchange itself (Bingham et al., 2023). Within these structures, coming out is often positioned as a desired or assumed endpoint of queer identity development for some individuals (Sedgwick, 1990), while openly expressing queer identity can simultaneously become experienced as a source of vulnerability, surveillance, or risk for others. In doing so, institutional frameworks frequently treat disclosure as a universal and voluntary act, despite the fact that appearance, gender presentation, and language cues may already function as forms of perceived identity before any explicit disclosure occurs (Butler, 1988). Within this context, disclosure is highly contextual and rarely a singular decision; instead, it becomes an ongoing process shaped by shifting relationships, environments, and uneven power structures (Zheng, 2023; Mnouer, 2023). Entering an exchange program, many queer participants are already aware of these expectations long before departure. Research on LGBTQ+ students abroad demonstrates that participants frequently anticipate questions of safety, visibility, and disclosure before entering their host communities, making identity negotiation an ongoing consideration throughout these experiences (Bryant & Soria, 2015; Bingham et al., 2023; Michl et al., 2023).

Participants make ongoing layered decisions about visibility, an often-non-linear process of managing relationships and identity across shifting environments (Zheng, 2023). A participant may feel comfortable disclosing their identity within a supportive host family while simultaneously navigating broader societal pressures within the host country or amongst program peers and staff (Evans, 2002, as cited in Donahue & Wise, 2021). Disclosure is not an individual act but a relational one shaped by family expectations, social norms, and collective identity. For example, in studies of Chinese lesbians on exchange, coming out was understood not as an act of self-expression, but as a decision that implicates family reputation, obligation, and harmony **(**Zheng, 2023**)**. This fundamentally reshapes the meaning and stakes of disclosure regarding how an exchange participant might act within intercultural spaces, such as the host family. (Cheng, 2018, as cited in Zheng, 2023). Identity negotiation is deeply cultural and gendered.

Degrees of "outness" vary widely, with many participants selectively disclosing to certain individuals while remaining closeted in other contexts (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019; Mnouer, 2023). Others experience involuntary or forced outings before they feel prepared (Michl et al., 2019). These decisions are often accompanied by significant emotional labor, reflecting the high stakes of disclosure across unfamiliar cultural environments. Coming out is not simply a logistical decision, but a deeply affective one marked by anticipation, fear, hope, and uncertainty (Ahmed, 2004; Decena, 2011). Participants often describe entering exchanges already carrying anxiety about how their identities will be received, sometimes having been warned by peers, family, or program materials not to disclose for their own safety. For many, these transitions are underscored by "pounding hearts" and "sleepless nights" as they navigate the personal and social stakes of coming out far from home (Elliot, 1996, p. 694 as cited in Donahue & Wise, 2021).

For many exchange participants, identity negotiation involves balancing authenticity with safety and relational harmony. Some choose to remain closeted for protection, while others withhold disclosure out of respect for perceived or communicated host family norms (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021). On top of this, exchange programs and online guidance from universities and similar sources often tell participants to hide their identity for their safety. Some programs also recommend withholding disclosure, mentioning respect of cultural norms as

a reason to not disclose **(**Amigos de las Américas, n.d.; World Learning, n.d.**).** Although it is sometimes accurate, there are cases of this advice being outdated or incorrect.

This guidance goes beyond individual programs to broader patterns across international mobility systems, where queer identity is framed depending on relevant institutional contexts. Across study abroad and exchange guidance, consistent global patterns emerges U.S. institutions often emphasize safety in ways that encourage students to limit or carefully manage the visibility of their sexual or gender identity (Georgetown University Office of Global Education, n.d.; George Washington University, n.d.), a framing echoed in governmental travel advisories such as those from the United Kingdom, which similarly encourage discretion in contexts of legal or social risk (UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, n.d.). Some European mobility frameworks, such as Erasmus+ programs, take a more rights-based approach at the policy level but still rely heavily on host-country norms in practice, meaning protection remains context-dependent rather than universal. In contrast, some institutional contexts do not explicitly address LGBTQ+ identity in materials at all, producing institutional silence where identity is neither affirmed nor guided. More rights-based frameworks, such as Canadian guidance, offer stronger recognition of LGBTQ+ protections while still acknowledging variability in safety (Global Affairs Canada, n.d.). Taken together, these approaches do not reflect consistent inclusion, but instead show different institutional strategies for managing LGBTQ+ visibility: through risk management, silence, or conditional inclusion that shifts responsibility onto local contexts. Across these differences, queer identity becomes unevenly recognized and differently legible depending on where and through which program a participant moves.

Additionally, many host family experiences are sold as an authentic familial tie where one is encouraged to assimilate and try new things **(**Amigos de las Américas, n.d.; Peace Corps, n.d.; Where There Be Dragons, n.d.**)**—this can be seen as a site of constraint or discovery. Many perceive that if they come out and do not choose to fit in, they will not be as quickly, or as likely, to be accepted by the family, thus not achieving the program expectations, learning opportunities, personal growth, and possible access to belonging, safety, and success. These decisions carry tangible consequences, as disclosure can directly reshape how participants are perceived, treated, and integrated into their host environments. These have the potential to impact relationships, access to support, and even physical safety in positive, negative, and

neutral ways (Donahue & Wise, 2021). Many participants seek to present as their authentic queer selves in cultural exchange while simultaneously navigating heteronormative assumptions, potential queerphobia, and safety risks. The perceived centrality of heterosexuality within society and exchange programs can further reinforce this tension, which ultimately shapes both institutional expectations and interpersonal dynamics (Michl et al., 2019). As a result, the privilege to come out is never neutral; it is embedded within unequal power relations that structure both the risks and possibilities of visibility.

Trans and Gender-Expansive (TGE) Disclosure

Identity negotiation is not experienced uniformly across queer identities. Trans and gender-expansive (TGE) [4] participants face distinct challenges, particularly in host family placements where their physical appearance may "out" the participants queer identity. While some sexual identities may be selectively disclosed or obscured, gender is often read immediately through socially legible cues and regulated through interactional expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although "passing" can shape how one is perceived and it can also present opportunity (Snorton, 2009), not all TGE individuals have the option to avoid misrecognition or policing. This is particularly true for those actively transitioning, which may also constrain opportunities for strategic navigation (Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). While sexual identity disclosure is often framed as a decision—something one can choose to reveal or conceal—gender identity can be more vulnerable to involuntary visibility[5], resulting in presumed disclosure[6], heightened scrutiny, or exposure to transphobic harm.

[4] For this study, *trans and gender expansive* (TGE) serves as an umbrella term that includes non-cisgender identities such as trans, nonbinary, gender fluid, genderqueer, gender diverse, Two-Spirit, and other culturally specific gender identities. This term highlights the fluidity and diversity of gender experiences beyond traditional Western binaries, allowing participants to self-identify in ways that best reflect their authentic identities. When discussing specific identities, the individual terms participants use will be employed to respect their unique experiences and positionalities.

[5] Visibility refers to the degree to which aspects of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity become socially recognizable or legible to others through appearance, behavior, relationships, language, or context. Visibility may be intentional or unintentional and does not necessarily reflect an individual's desire to disclose their identity.

[6] Disclosure refers to the intentional communication of one's sexual orientation or gender identity to others

As a result, TGE participants often encounter heightened risks of misunderstanding, rejection, and violence (Bingham et al., 2023; Michl et al., 2019). Gender policing is the enforcement of normative gender expressions on individuals whose appearance or behavior does not align with traditional or binary gender roles. Common sites of this enforcement appear through social norms, language, and interpersonal interactions. Gender policing can be more intense in certain cultural contexts, sometimes even within queer communities themselves (Michl et al., 2019). In some cases, participants describe gender policing as varying in intensity, meaning, and affect across contexts, depending on the relationship between local gender norms and their own embodied expressions. Rather than producing a consistent outcome, gender policing can generate a range of experiences—including constraint, discomfort, affirmation, recognition, or ambiguity. Some participants encounter heightened scrutiny when their gender expression diverges from dominant norms, while others describe moments of validation or expanded possibility when local norms differ from those they are accustomed to. These experiences underscore gender policing as a relational and affectively complex process, shaped by shifting cultural expectations rather than a singular or predictable effect across home and hos" environments.

Less so than sexual identity, the visibility of non-normative gender appearance means that TGE individuals may be subjected to scrutiny regardless of their opinions on the disclosure of their identities. This complicates the concept of "coming out," as visibility may precede personal readiness (Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019). For some, this results in involuntary visibility, where gender identity becomes socially legible and subject to others' assumptions or direct questioning based on non-normative appearance, mannerisms, or expression (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Additionally, gendered languages can force premature decisions about identity expression, requiring participants to navigate disclosure within linguistic systems that do not accommodate their identities (Donahue & Wise, 2021; Mnouer, 2023). The use of gendered pronouns, titles, and verb forms can require participants to select or perform a gender category simply to communicate, effectively embedding identity negotiation into everyday interaction**.** Names, forms of address, and honorifics further intensify this process, often making gender legible in ways that are difficult to avoid (Bingham et. al, 2022).

At the same time, intercultural contexts can also create unexpected opportunities for exploration and affirmation. In some cultural settings, gender expression is structured differently, where what counts as normative gender expression can shift, sometimes allowing for more ambiguity or fluidity that may not be as accessible in participants' home environments (Lugones, 1987/2003). For example, gendered dress, modesty practices, and norms of physical proximity vary widely across contexts, shaping how masculinity, femininity, and gender neutrality are read and enacted. In some settings, forms of clothing or bodily presentation may be less tightly mapped onto binary gender expectations, while in others, same-gender physical affection or expressive behavior may carry different social meanings than in participants' home contexts. These contexts may enable TGE participants, as well as cisgender participants, to experiment with expression, reinterpret identity, or experience reduced scrutiny in specific moments (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019). When qualities in each object contrast in comparison, meaning may make itself clear. This cultural contrast contributes to processes of self-discovery, clarification, or affirmation, even as they remain embedded within broader systems of regulation and risk.

These layered challenges highlight the need for more comprehensive and intersectional approaches to supporting TGE participants throughout all phases of intercultural exchange. Recognizing both the constraints and possibilities of these environments is essential for understanding how gender, embodiment, and cultural context shape identity negotiation in these environments in ways that differ significantly from sexuality.

Intersectionality

Queer identity negotiation in intercultural exchange programs is inherently intersectional. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) framework provides a critical lens for understanding how overlapping identities—such as race, class, gender, ability, nationality, etc.—shape experiences of privilege and marginalization. Intersectionality not only highlights the coexistence of these identities, but also how they are co-constitutive, dynamically shaping one another across different social and cultural contexts.

Participants do not experience sexuality or gender in isolation. Instead, these identities interact with other social categories in ways that influence visibility, safety, and belonging. The concept of "master status" is particularly useful here, referring to the identity that becomes most socially salient in a given context (Hughes, 1940). In intercultural exchange, one could hypothesize that the master status is not fixed but shifts across time and space. Participants may find that race or nationality becomes a more salient identity than queerness in certain contexts, shaping how they are perceived and treated. One study noted that while trans identity was important for people during exchange, it could be overshadowed by how they were read through the lens of race and nationality (Michl et al., 2019). For individuals who rarely leave their home community, this may mark the first time that queerness is not the primary lens through which they are understood; for others, it may be the first time that race or nationality becomes hyper-visible. These shifts underscore how movement across cultural contexts reorders systems of perception and power.

Structural inequalities further compound these experiences. Many exchange programs often implicitly reflect ideals of able-bodied, financially resourced, and socially mobile participants (Donahue & Wise, 2021). These assumptions create barriers for individuals which limit exchange access and shape how identity can be expressed, especially for those navigating multiple forms of marginalization. Participants who occupy multiple marginalized positions must therefore navigate not only interpersonal dynamics, but also structural constraints that shape their participation, safety, and sense of belonging within these programs. Intersectionality functions not only as a descriptive framework, but as a critical tool for examining how institutional structures shape the possibilities of identity negotiation within intercultural settings. It reveals how identity is not stable or singular, but something that is continuously reorganized through movement, perception, and power.

While Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality remains foundational, scholars such as Jasbir Puar (2007) and Rahul Rao (2020) offer critical expansions that speak directly to the complexities of global and postcolonial contexts. Puar encourages moving beyond fixed identity categories, urging us to see identity as fluid and continuously produced through power and movement. Rao, meanwhile, critiques how Western LGBTQ discourses can carry imperial assumptions that unevenly shape queer experiences across cultural settings. Together, these

perspectives reinforce a queer migration lens that centers mobility, power, and the uneven global circulation of identities and norms. This is particularly relevant within the fluid and context-dependent environments of intercultural exchange.

Queer Theory

Temporal Geographies of the Closet

A critical yet underexamined phase of intercultural exchange is everything after the program concludes. For some queer participants, this transition involves returning home to a past sense of surveillance and more conservative home communities, which can be particularly difficult after experiencing relative freedom abroad (Donahue & Wise, 2021). However, this is not a simple reversal or return to a prior state. Rather, it reflects an ongoing reconfiguration of identity shaped by shifting spatial, social, and temporal conditions (Martinez, 2012). The end of exchange does not resolve identity negotiation; instead, it once again relocates it.

In some cases, participants report feeling more constrained in their home environments than abroad (Zheng, 2023). This observation disrupts Western-centric linear assumptions about progress, liberation, and queer safety that often underpin coming out narratives. It suggests that queer safety and liberation are not geographically fixed, but shaped by shifting cultural norms, host relationships, and power dynamics within intercultural exchange.

Identity negotiation across exchange is inherently temporal. It unfolds across pre-departure expectations, during exchanges themselves, and everything after the experience concludes (Bingham et al., 2023). Rather than a singular developmental trajectory toward authenticity or visibility, this process more closely resembles what queer theory describes as "queer temporality". Queer time is nonlinear, recursive, and shaped by interruptions, returns, and reorientations rather than steady progression (Halberstam, 2005). Coming out, in this sense, cannot be understood as a one-time event that resolves identity into stability; instead, it is continuously reworked across time and context. Digital connectivity further complicates these dynamics by blurring spatial boundaries, allowing participants to remain connected to multiple communities simultaneously. Virtual applications like Grindr and Tinder allow participants to find and connect with local queer community more easily, producing digital hybrid neighborhoods (Miles, 2021). Moreover, social media, messaging platforms, and surveillance by

family or peers collapse distance, meaning that "home" is not left behind during exchange, nor is "abroad" fully exited upon return. Instead, participants inhabit overlapping digital and physical geographies that extend visibility, risk, and connection across time.

As a result of this, we see "here" and "there", "home" and "away", often overlap rather than operate as distinct spaces, complicating assumptions about queer safety. These spaces shift depending on audience, platform, and moment. A participant may feel safe in one digital environment and surveilled in another, or experience freedom in a foreign setting while remaining constrained in their home online networks. This challenges common global narratives that frame queer safety as geographically predictable, often through simplified North/South or "here/there" binaries that shape policy, expectations, and mobility decisions. Participants may anticipate greater safety in certain destinations, while others experience those expectations as inverted or disrupted. This process is influenced by ideas of risk and safety shaped by stereotypes, lived experience, and social position. These expectations are frequently unsettled for many in practice, underscoring queer safety and decisions on disclosure as relationally produced across time and not just geographically predetermined. Rather than a binary reality between a happy, liberated "out" self or a protected, safe "closeted" self, it must be considered that queer identity and safety within intercultural exchange is better understood as continually made and remade through shifting conditions of visibility, safety, and belonging. The fluidity of the closet across time and space emphasizes the need for frameworks that account for mobility, relationality, and ongoing transformation. It also underscores that coming out cannot be reduced to a singular emancipatory act. Instead, it is a repeated and context-dependent negotiation that may involve expansion, contraction, concealment, and rearticulation across multiple temporalities and spatial settings.

Negotiating Visibility and Belonging

While visibility is often framed as a marker of authenticity, queer individuals engage in forms of strategic identity negotiation that extend beyond selective disclosure. Rather than simply choosing when to come out, participants often engage in ongoing, context-dependent negotiation of identity expression shaped by safety, relational dynamics, and institutional expectations (Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2013). This process is less about hiding or concealment

alone, and more about the continuous negotiation of how much of the self is made visible in relation to shifting social and cultural norms and expectations around one.

To fully understand identity negotiation in host family contexts, it is necessary to consider the role of affect. Affect theory draws attention to how emotions (such as comfort, tension, belonging, obligation, or unease) circulate within social environments and shape behavior, decision-making, and identity expression. Rather than treating emotions as internal states, affect theory understands them as relational and distributed, emerging through interactions between people, spaces, and institutional expectations (Ahmed, 2004; Gould, 2002; Love, 2012). This process can be visceral and impacts the ways we engage with the world and relationships around us (Bonner-Thompson, 2023).

Within intercultural exchange programs, host families function as sites of affective production (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Gould, 2002). Participants are encouraged to feel "at home," express gratitude, and cultivate emotional bonds, but these expectations are not neutral. They are shaped by broader neoliberal logics that frame exchange as a pathway to personal growth, professional development, upward mobility, and the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Bingham, Brunsting, & Katsumoto, 2023). As D'Emilio (1983) argues, modern social structures increasingly position relationships as sites of emotional labor and identity formation rather than purely economic exchange. Within this context, emotional closeness becomes both an expectation and a form of currency, signaling successful integration and cultural adaptation (Ahmed, 2004; Decena, 2008; Martínez, 2012). These expectations can influence how participants are evaluated by educators and program staff, shaping future opportunities such as letters of recommendation, academic advancement, and professional pathways. Consequently, these power structures shape not only who participates in exchange programs, but also how mobility is experienced, recognized, and narrated. For queer participants, particularly those from working-class backgrounds and communities of color, these dynamics create uneven conditions of belonging and opportunity. As queer migration scholarship suggests, inequalities are therefore embedded not only in access to mobility but in how mobility itself is structured, experienced, and made meaningful across different bodies and identities.

In host family settings, this affective economy can influence identity negotiation in subtle but powerful ways. The desire to maintain harmony, preserve relationships, or meet expectations of gratitude can shape decisions around disclosure and self-presentation (Ahmed, 2004). One may soften, omit, or strategically withhold non-normative aspects of their identity not only for safety, but to sustain belonging within the household (Decena, 2008; Martínez, 2012). This form of affective self-management is not simply about withholding identity, but an ongoing process of adjusting what is shared or left unspoken in relation to belonging within the host environment; moreover, it is shaped by the need to remain legible as respectful, adaptable, and non-disruptive within the host environment (Decena, 2008).

Thus, queer participants often feel pressure to be seen as "good guests," prioritizing host family comfort and cultural respect over personal visibility (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Ahmed, 2004). This expectation is often embedded within broader programmatic and institutional norms that frame intercultural exchange as a practice of humility, adaptation, and assimilation into host cultures (Council on Standards for International Educational Travel [CSIET], 2024). Within this framing, participants are often implicitly responsible for managing potential discomfort, meaning that queer individuals may carry a disproportionate burden of emotional and relational labor (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Gould, 2002). This dynamic is reflected not only in interpersonal expectations within host families, but also in the broader design of exchange programs that prioritize cultural integration while rarely accounting for unequal conditions of visibility across identities.

This process of selective identity management is emotionally and psychologically taxing. It contributes to minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and, for trans and gender-expansive (TGE) individuals, can be compounded by transnegativity and heightened gendered scrutiny (Michl et al., 2019). Importantly, this labor is rarely studied in research or mentioned within institutional structures of exchange, even as it shapes daily experiences of belonging, safety, and participation. What appears as smooth cultural adaptation may in fact involve sustained emotional negotiation, self-monitoring, and relational recalibration.

At the same time, representation matters. Encounters with visible queer individuals—whether peers, staff, or locals—can provide affirmation and expand possibilities for self-

expression (Ahmed, 2004; Love, 2011/2012; Bingham et al., 2023; Michl et al., 2019; Mnouer, 2023)). These encounters function as moments of affective rupture, temporarily shifting what feels possible in terms of identity expression and belonging (Ahmed, 2004; Gould, 2002; Love, 2011/2012). Visibility is not simply an individual act but a relational resource that can reshape how participants imagine themselves within unfamiliar cultural contexts **(**Lugones, 1998). Although not all participants have equal access to these moments. Those navigating marginalized identities may be required to expend greater emotional labor to achieve comparable levels of belonging.

This uneven distribution of emotional labor reflects broader structural inequities within intercultural exchange programs, where the benefits of immersion are differentially accessible depending on how identities are read, regulated, and valued within specific cultural contexts. This shapes how participants come to experience, interpret, and evaluate the exchange as it unfolds. Understanding affect highlights how identity negotiation is not solely cognitive or strategic, but deeply emotional. It reveals how feelings of safety, tension, connection, and obligation actively shape how participants move through intercultural spaces, and how agency emerges within conditions of constraint**.** Through this lens, identity is not simply expressed within exchange contexts, but continuously produced through affective relations that connect participants to people, places, and institutional expectations over time.

The Power in Movement & Embodied Negotiation

Situated within this affective lens, this study positions host family placements as sites of micro-level migration, where identity is negotiated across overlapping and often conflicting social worlds. Rather than understanding migration solely as movement between nations, this study conceptualizes it as movement through intimate intercultural relationships, institutional structures, and digital environments that operate simultaneously. Queer migration theory expands migration beyond geographic mobility to include questions of orientation, belonging, temporality, and relationality, providing a framework for understanding how participants navigate power, safety, and visibility across these interconnected spaces (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). This perspective situates intercultural exchange as an ongoing process of movement and negotiation rather than a bounded or static experience.

Building on this foundation, queer migration theory conceptualizes identity as something continually shaped through movement rather than fixed within place (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Chávez & Luibhéid, 2017). Rather than treating migration as purely geographic relocation, queer migration scholarship understands movement as relational and embodied. It is orientation, geography, direction, and movement unfolding through shifting regimes of visibility, intimacy, and power that structure everyday life (Carrillo, 2017; Benedicto, 2008). Migration extends beyond the physical act of crossing an international border to encompass movement through bodies, relationships, and social worlds (Martínez, 2012; Lugones, 1998). By challenging linear narratives of progress from repression to liberation (D'Emilio, 1983; Cohen, 1997), this work directly disrupts the "coming out as endpoint" narrative that often structures both popular and institutional understandings of queer life, replacing it with models that emphasize ongoing negotiation rather than resolution (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2014).

Central to this framework is the concept of tacit identity (Decena, 2007). Tacitness refers to forms of queerness that are implicitly understood but not explicitly named. Rather than viewing silence as repression, this perspective frames non-disclosure as a strategic and relational practice. It reflects an awareness of context, risk, and social dynamics, or what might be understood as a form of expertise rather than neutral silence**.** In that regard, tacitness is not a lack of identity expression, but a mode of agency that negotiates visibility through the implied assumption of social signals over verbal declaration.

Queer migration theory also engages concepts such as passing (Snorton, 2019), selective disclosure (Horton, 2014), and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999), through which individuals navigate dominant norms while maintaining a sense of self. These practices are not simply reactive; they are creative, adaptive, and often generative of new forms of belonging. Muñoz's (1999) notion of disidentification is particularly useful for understanding how queer participants neither fully assimilate into dominant cultural expectations nor fully reject them. Rather, queer people instead work within and against them to create livable forms of selfhood in constrained environments (Decena, 2008; Martínez, 2012).

Movement is also embodied. Drawing on frameworks such as Lugones' world-traveling (1987), individuals shift how they present themselves across different social worlds, adjusting to

varying expectations of legibility**.** Lugones emphasizes that "worlds" are socially constructed spaces with their own logics of recognition, meaning that movement between them requires not only physical relocation but shifts in perception, behavior, and relational positioning. Within each world, new iterations of the self can emerge, shaped by what becomes intelligible, supported, or constrained in that particular context, opening and foreclosing different possibilities for being. These affective movements are shaped by interactions with peers, host families, institutions, and digital networks. This allows identity to be understood as something practiced differently across contexts rather than held as a static internal truth.

Importantly, queer migration theory foregrounds power (Gorman-Murray, 2007). It examines how global inequalities, cultural norms, and institutional structures shape the possibilities of movement and self-expression. These structures determine not only where people can move, but how they are read, what forms of identity are legible, and which modes of expression are considered acceptable or risky (Chávez & Masri, 2017; Alexander, 2008; Kelly, 2014). At the same time, it balances this conversation with attention to agency and how queer individuals navigate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist these constraints. Importantly, this approach allows for a more precise analysis of how power operates at the micro-scale of everyday life. Queer migration theory illuminates how a dinner table, a shared language, or a host family conversation becomes a site where identity is lived and negotiated in real time.

Centering Queer Agency

In these programs, power is not simply imposed from above. Power is navigated, resisted, and at times reimagined. Foucault (1975) reminds us that power is productive: it shapes possibilities, creates norms, and generates subjects. This understanding aligns with queer migration perspectives that view movement as embedded within shifting regimes of regulation and possibility. Within this framework, queer participants negotiate their identities across changing social and cultural contexts. At times they may retreat for safety; at others they may assert visibility, often moving between these strategies as conditions shift. Identity is therefore not fixed but contingent, continuously reworked in relation to the environments through which participants move. This ongoing negotiation reflects not simply adaptation, but the ways participants navigate space, safety, and belonging as integral features of intercultural exchange.

Agency should not be understood as a departure from constraint, but as something that emerges within and through it. Encounters with queer peers and local communities can serve as powerful sources of affirmation, offering alternative models of identity and belonging (Michl et al., 2019; Bingham et al., 2023). These moments often function as points of recalibration, where participants are able to reimagine what is socially and personally possible within a given context. These interactions often occur through subtle, coded forms of recognition, reflecting the resourcefulness of queer individuals in identifying safe spaces and connections. Many participants demonstrate resilience, creativity, and agency in navigating complex intercultural environments (Mnouer, 2023; Zheng, 2023; Bingham et al., 2023). While it is essential to acknowledge the challenges queer participants face, it is equally important to avoid framing their experiences solely through the lens of victimization.

Participants actively construct meaning, build relationships, and experience growth and self-discovery through navigating difference (Bingham et al., 2023). For instance, one participant described the transformative impact of meeting a “very queer man of color” abroad, who unapologetically expressed his gender through painted nails and non-restrictive clothing. Witnessing this individual’s confidence and ease in self-expression became a moment of recognition and possibility, inspiring the participant to embrace their own gender expression more fully (Michl et al., 2023). In this case, visibility did not function as a demand or expectation, but as an accessible form of embodiment that expanded the participant’s sense of belonging and self-understanding.

One way this ongoing negotiation becomes visible is through language. Queer migration theory identifies language as a central site through which belonging, visibility, safety, and self-presentation are negotiated in transnational and intercultural contexts. Queer individuals often draw on coded language, slang, or reclaimed terms to assert identity, build community, or navigate risk in ways that shift across social environments and perceptions of safety (Donahue & Wise, 2021). Within host family contexts, these dynamics become especially pronounced as participants negotiate intimacy, surveillance, and cultural expectations within domestic spaces that are simultaneously personal and regulated. As a result, language use may shift in subtle but meaningful ways, including hesitation before using gendered language for a partner or changes in speech, tone, and embodied expression to avoid being read as "too queer."

Participants frequently describe these experiences as meaningful and transformative, with opportunities like study abroad creating conditions for self-discovery and shifts in self-understanding (Dolby, 2004; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007; Michl et al., 2023). These examples suggest that identity negotiation creates both constraint and possibility. Rather than interpreting these experiences as evidence that constraints disappear, queer migration scholarship situates them within shifting social and spatial conditions that shape how identity is lived, recognized, and expressed (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Carrillo, 2017). Some studies show that participants remain attentive to the unequal power relations that shape intercultural exchange, making ongoing decisions about when visibility, disclosure, or silence are most appropriate. These choices may reflect concerns for personal safety, continued mobility, or a desire to navigate host communities with care as both guests and foreigners. In this sense, agency does not exist outside conditions of surveillance or constraint, but emerges through participants' continual negotiation of belonging, responsibility, and self-expression. Centering agency does not diminish the significance of constraint. Rather, it offers a more nuanced understanding of queer intercultural experiences by recognizing that hardship, possibility, and self-discovery are often experienced simultaneously as participants navigate belonging across changing intercultural contexts.

Policy Recommendations and Gaps

Existing literature points to emerging efforts to support queer participants, including host family vetting, peer networks, and connections to local queer communities (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019). However, these efforts remain inconsistent and often underdeveloped.

Few studies examine how participants themselves engage with these supports, or how institutional practices shape everyday experiences within host families. This gap highlights the need for research that centers participant perspectives and examines the lived dynamics of inclusion, adaptation, and belonging.

Existing literature points to emerging efforts to support queer participants in intercultural exchange, including host family vetting procedures, peer networks, and connections to local queer communities (Bingham et al., 2023; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019). However,

these interventions remain uneven, inconsistently implemented, and often under-theorized in relation to how queer identity is actually lived within everyday host family environments. Many of these approaches remain grounded in risk-management frameworks that prioritize institutional liability and safety compliance rather than relational belonging, affective experience, or long-term identity development.

Few studies examine how exchange participants themselves engage with these supports, or how institutional practices shape everyday experiences within host families. This gap highlights the need for research that centers participant perspectives and examines the lived dynamics of inclusion, adaptation, and belonging. In particular, current studies have limited engagement with how queer participants actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes repurpose institutional resources of exchange—such as orientation materials, host family guidelines, or peer networks—in ways that shape their sense of safety and self-expression.

More broadly, much of current scholarship tends to treat intercultural exchange as a temporally bounded educational experience with a fixed location. Alternatively, studies tend to see exchange as a site of communication or learning, rather than a complex site of identity production that extends across time, space, and relational networks. This limits its applicability not only within education studies, but across multiple intersecting fields, including global studies, gender and sexuality studies, migration studies, identity studies, and research on affect and family systems in transnational contexts. Across these fields, there is a shared but often disconnected interest in how individuals navigate belonging, difference, and power; however, these conversations rarely intersect at the locus of host family exchanges or the lived experience in intercultural settings. Thus, these accounts may not account for the full complexity of lived experience in intercultural settings.

Limitations of Current Research

Key limitations in existing research include a lack of attention to program duration, limited focus beyond university-based exchange programs, and insufficient examination of host family relationships as central and constitutive sites of identity negotiation (Mnouer, 2023; Zheng, 2023). As a result, much of the existing literature implicitly assumes a short-term,

student-centered model of mobility that does not account for longer-term exchanges, repeat mobility, independent experiences, or non-academic forms of intercultural participation (King & Raghuram, 2013).

Additionally, the emotional labor of sustained identity management remains underexplored, particularly in long-term placements. While many studies acknowledge disclosure, they often treat it as a discrete decision rather than an ongoing affective and relational process that unfolds across time, shifting contexts, and changing power relations (Ahmed, 2004/2010). Narrative and longitudinal approaches may offer valuable insight into how identity evolves over time and across contexts.

A further limitation is the lack of sustained attention to host family environments as relational and affective systems rather than simply logistical living arrangements. Host families are often treated as background context rather than as active sites where power, care, surveillance, intimacy, and belonging are continuously negotiated in a bidirectional manner. This omission limits understanding not only within intercultural education research, but also within broader scholarship on family studies, affect theory, migration, intercultural communication, and transnational intimacy.

Literature Review Summary

Existing literature provides important insights into queer identity in intercultural exchange, particularly in relation to institutional structures, risk, and the challenges participants may face within unfamiliar cultural contexts. However, it often remains limited in its ability to capture the nuanced, lived, and evolving experiences of participants themselves, especially within host family settings and across longer-term, non-traditional, or less formally studied forms of exchange. As a result, queer identity negotiation is frequently treated as a problem to be managed or a singular disclosure decision to be made, rather than as an ongoing process embedded in relationships, environments, and shifting temporal and spatial conditions.

This review has shown that what is often missing is not simply more data, but a more integrated way of understanding how identity is produced through everyday intercultural life. Participants do not move through exchange programs as static individuals making isolated

choices about visibility; rather, they continuously navigate belonging, safety, care, and self-expression across multiple, overlapping social worlds. These include host families, peer networks, institutional frameworks, home communities, and digital spaces, all of which shape how identity is expressed, withheld, and experienced over time. In that vein, queer identity negotiation is not a singular act of coming out, but an ongoing relational practice shaped by movement, power, emotion, and context.

Future research must therefore center participant narratives in ways that attend to complexity rather than reduce it. This means taking seriously how individuals interpret institutional structures, how they develop strategies for navigating visibility and safety, and how they experience both constraint and possibility within the same environments. It also requires greater attention to the temporal dimensions of exchange—before departure, during the exchange itself, and everything that follows after return—as well as the ways in which identity continues to shift across these stages rather than resolving within them.

By foregrounding agency and relational complexity, such work can move beyond deficit-based or risk-focused frameworks and contribute to more inclusive, responsive, and ethically grounded approaches to intercultural exchange and global education. Ultimately, attending to these dynamics allows for a deeper understanding not only of queer migration and intercultural identity negotiation, but of how people more broadly create meaning, build belonging, and navigate the worlds they inhabit across time, space, and relationship. As the next chapter demonstrates, these dynamics are most clearly revealed through lived experience. The vignettes that follow do not simply illustrate theory—they actively extend it, showing how queer identity negotiation unfolds in practice, across the intimate, complex, and often contradictory spaces of intercultural exchange.

Study Terms

- *Exchange Programs* -Structured experiences in which individuals engage in cultural exchange through established institutional frameworks, including guidelines, policies, and varying levels of oversight. These programs may be group-based or individual.

Examples may include study abroad, experiential learning programs, religious missions, voluntourism, language learning programs, service learning, professional placements.

- *Individual Exchange Experience* - Exchange experiences that occur outside of formal program structures or with minimal institutional involvement. These are typically independently organized or loosely facilitated, where any organizational role is limited to initial matching or minimal coordination. Examples may include WWOOFing, au pair arrangements, informal cultural exchanges through personal networks, or independently arranged school or community placements.
- *International Exchange* - The process of engaging across national contexts, which typically involves movement (physical or virtual) between countries or across national boundaries. While often geographically defined, international exchange may also occur within digitally mediated spaces that connect participants across national contexts.
- *Intercultural Exchange* - The process of engaging across cultural differences, regardless of geographic location. Intercultural exchange includes both international and domestic experiences and recognizes that cultural interaction does not require crossing national borders. This concept acknowledges the interplay between global interconnectedness and localized cultural practices, and the ways cultural boundaries are increasingly fluid in a globalized world.
- *Host Family Exchange* - An exchange experience involving sustained, often intimate engagement with a host household distinct from one's own. It is commonly understood as a form of cultural immersion, interpersonal learning, and self-making. They can be academic experiences and may function as a programmatic component within structured exchange contexts. This experience can occur independently or as part of a broader intercultural or international exchange program.
- *Host Family* - The individual(s) or household that hosts a participant during an exchange experience. This term encompasses a wide range of family structures and living arrangements, including non-traditional and non-normative forms of family.
- *Homestay* - In this study, "homestay" is used interchangeably with host family exchange to refer to arrangements in which a participant lives with a host household for a period of

time, with the intent of cultural engagement or shared experience. While some contexts distinguish homestays as more transactional (fee-based) and host family arrangements as more relational (exchange-based), these distinctions are inconsistent across contexts; therefore, this study treats the terms as overlapping.

- *Host Family Placement* - The specific pairing or arrangement between a participant and a host household, including the physical and relational site in which the exchange occurs.
- *Participant / Learner / Individual* - The person engaging in the exchange experience, particularly in the role of living with or interacting closely with a host family.
- *Before/During/After Exchange* – Exchange is both temporally bound and temporally expansive. Before typically begins at the moment one decides/commits/starts planning that they will participate in exchange (paperwork, early reflections/decision, health stuff, early contact with family before exchange start often virtual. During is the official program or dates of engagement with the exchange, often leading to consistent interaction with host family in their space, whether digital or virtual. After is everything that comes after, is contact continues this can last forever…. But is harder to determine. Generally everything after since it can be a life-long impacting experience.
- *Program* - The organizational structure, including its policies, practices, and design, that facilitates and governs exchange experiences.
- *Queer* - An umbrella term referring to individuals whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity exists outside of dominant heterosexual and/or cisgender norms.
- *TGE (Trans and Gender Expansive)* - Refers to individuals whose gender identities extend beyond or challenge binary conceptions of gender.
- *Queer Migration* - Understood here as more than transnational or cross-border movement. Drawing on queer migration scholarship, it refers to the ways mobility is shaped by sexuality and gender, as well as how individuals navigate multiple social, cultural, and spatial contexts. This includes not only physical relocation, but also shifts in orientation, belonging, and self-understanding as individuals move through different environments. Queer migration thus attends to how identity is lived and negotiated across

space, through both constraint and agency, and how these movements are experienced in embodied and relational ways.

- *Movement* - Broadly, the shifting between spaces, contexts, and modes of engagement. While it may include physical relocation, movement also occurs across virtual, social, and relational spaces. Individuals may move between multiple spaces at once. For example, navigating a physical environment while remaining connected to digital or transnational communities. From this angle, movement is not limited to geographic change, but includes the ongoing navigation of overlapping spaces and positions, shaping how individuals experience presence, connection, and belonging.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological commitments and research design that guided this study. Building on the theoretical foundations established in Chapter 2, it explains how the study was designed to examine queer identity negotiation as a relational, context-dependent process while prioritizing participant agency, reflexivity, and ethical representation throughout the research process. Rather than restating existing assumptions about exchange experiences, this study centers the lived realities of queer participants, attending to how identity is negotiated across intersecting identities and shifting environments. In doing so, it foregrounds both the constraints participants encounter and the strategies they employ to move through them.

Methodologically, this study is situated within an interpretive qualitative tradition that understands meaning as relational, situated, and co-constructed rather than objectively discovered. As Rubin (2021) argues, qualitative research is inherently "messy" and should not be forced into a false sense of order. I take this to mean that meaning is always partial, interpretive, and shaped through the interaction between researcher and participant, rather than something that can be cleanly extracted or stabilized. Building on this perspective, I approach identity negotiation as fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed or easily categorized. This requires resisting overly rigid analytic frameworks that can flatten the complexity of lived experience in queer intercultural contexts.

Rather than seeking a singular explanation of queer exchange experiences, this study prioritizes participant narratives, allowing patterns to emerge while remaining attentive to contradiction, complexity, and context. Throughout the research process, my goal has been to center participant voices while recognizing that interpretation is always shaped through relationships between researcher, participant, and the broader systems of knowledge within which both are situated.

Finally, this study adopts what I describe as an agency-first orientation. While experiences of discrimination, constraint, and marginalization are essential to understanding queer intercultural exchange, they do not constitute the whole story. Consistent with the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2, this study intentionally examines how participants make meaning, negotiate identity, exercise agency, and at times experience joy, resilience, and

discovery alongside challenge. This orientation does not deny hardship; rather, it seeks a fuller understanding of queer intercultural experience by examining both constraint and the ways participants actively navigate it.

Positionality and Researcher Reflexivity

As a queer, bi-racial, bi-cultural, neurodivergent, Latino man who is often perceived as white, my intersecting identities shape how I approach research on queer experiences in intercultural settings. This positionality includes both privilege and marginalization. Being presumed non-Latino due to my lighter complexion distances me from the racialized experiences of others, requiring sustained attention to how systemic inequities are reproduced and perceived. At the same time, as a cisgender man, I must remain intentional in how I engage with and amplify transgender and gender-expansive voices, recognizing that their experiences cannot be collapsed into broader queer narratives.

My overlapping membership within multiple social categories also provides forms of insider knowledge, including familiarity with language, references, and cultural codes. While this proximity can support rapport and interpretive depth, it also requires ongoing critical awareness of how familiarity may shape what I assume, overlook, or over-identify with in participant accounts. Rather than treating this positionality as either an advantage or a limitation, I understand it as a relational and partial perspective that informs, but does not determine, my interpretation.

Because meaning is co-constructed, I do not view myself as a neutral observer. My positionality inevitably shapes what I notice, the questions I ask, how participants respond, and the interpretations I develop throughout the research process. Reflexivity, therefore, is not a single acknowledgment at the beginning of the study, but an ongoing methodological commitment carried throughout data collection, analysis, and writing. Rubin (2021) similarly notes that researcher positionality shapes what participants reveal: *"Someone might say something different to me than they would say to you."* As a queer researcher, I may be better positioned to recognize subtext, shared cultural references, or opportunities to ask questions that move beneath surface-level responses. At the same time, past relationships with study participants carries risks but also offers intimacy. This will require particular attention to avoid

assuming shared meanings or experience where they do not exist. To navigate these tensions, I incorporated reflexive journaling throughout the research process while also inviting participant feedback through transcript review. These practices helped me remain attentive to my own assumptions, document evolving interpretations, and continually examine how my positionality shaped both the research process and the knowledge produced.

Decolonizing Methodology

Meaning Making in Community

Extending this reflexive stance beyond the individual researcher, I situate this study within broader systems of knowledge production that historically marginalized queer and intercultural experiences. Tuhiwai Smith (2021) critiques the colonial history of traditional research methodologies, calling for approaches that engage with communities in meaningful, reciprocal, and accountable ways. Rather than treating participants as sources of data to be extracted, this perspective understands research as a relational process that carries ethical responsibilities toward the communities involved.

Within this orientation, storytelling becomes a methodological practice through which participants' situated knowledge can remain visible before being translated into broader analytical claims. The narrative vignettes that open Chapter 4 therefore offer more than illustrative accounts; they allow participants' stories to carry their own interpretive and theoretical weight, inviting readers to first sit with the complexity of each experience. These stories are expertise and theory coded as lived experience

The chapters that follow build outward from this foundation. Chapter 5 brings the narratives into conversation, examining where experiences compare, contrast, overlap, and become entangled without erasing their differences. Chapter 6 then turns toward the meaning-making that emerges through collective reflection, considering what becomes visible when these experiences are held together in community. In this way, the chapter structure follows a movement from situated narrative to relational comparison, to shared meaning-making—while simultaensouly resisting the assumption that knowledge must ultimately resolve into a single, unified account.

These commitments are also reflected in other study decisions. Participant agency was prioritized throughout the research process, including opportunities to shape interview conversations, review and revise transcripts, clarify interpretations, and retain meaningful control over how their experiences were represented. These practices were intended not only to strengthen the accuracy of the study but also to recognize participants as active collaborators in the production of knowledge.

This insight also informs my use of focus groups alongside surveys. As Smith (2021) notes, Western research often centers individual experiences at the expense of communal knowledge. Many queer individuals lack opportunities for collective reflection. Some may never realize that their "private" experiences are widely shared until they hear others speak. In this study, focus groups are designed not only as a method of data collection, but as intentional approximations of communal access—similar to affinity spaces, mentorship, or peer networks that may or may not be available to participants before, during, or after exchange. As such, they function as critical points of connection and sites of meaning-making, where participants can process their experiences in relation to others and recognize shared patterns or tensions (Bingham et al., 2023; Michl, Pegg, & Kracen, 2019; Ruben, 2021). In doing so, the study also attends to how access to communal reflection itself may shape identity negotiation and interpretation of the exchange experience, offering a counter to the isolating effects of heteronormativity and positivism. I remain mindful that collective reflection can produce its own pressures. While such spaces can offer validation, they also risk silencing differences if dominant narratives take hold**.** To guard against this, I will share transcripts with participants, inviting clarification and revision after the fact to support participant autonomy and agency.

This methodological commitment also aligns with the study's broader analytical orientation. Rather than reproducing dominant narratives that position queer individuals primarily through risk, deficit, or victimization, I seek to create space for the complexity of participants' lived experiences. While experiences of hardship remain central, participants also describe resilience, adaptability, joy, and meaningful forms of agency. Recognizing these experiences is not intended to diminish structural inequities but rather to resist interpretations that flatten queer lives into narratives of suffering alone.

Taken together, these methodological commitments position this study as relational, reflexive, and participant centered. They shape not only how data were collected and interpreted but also how participant narratives are represented throughout the chapters that follow.

Narrative Representation and Archives

This study also understands participant narratives as interpretive constructions rather than transparent reflections of reality. Participants do not simply recount events as they occurred; rather, they make meaning of those experiences through the stories they choose to tell, the details they emphasize, the relationships they foreground, and the ways they position themselves within those narratives. Following Schwartz and Cook (2002), archives and narratives are never neutral repositories of information but are shaped by systems of power, decisions about representation, and the contexts in which they are created. This perspective informs both the analysis and representation of participant narratives throughout this study. Rather than seeking a singular or objective account of participants' experiences, I approach each narrative as a situated interpretation that offers insight into how participants understand, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities across intercultural contexts. This perspective also informed the development of participant vignettes presented in the following chapter, recognizing that representation itself is an interpretive and methodological act.

Study Overview

This study was designed to explore queer identity negotiation as a relational, context-dependent process shaped through lived experience. To align with this aim, a qualitative, two-phase research design was employed, combining long-form individual interviews with follow-up focus groups. This approach reflects the study's understanding of identity as something negotiated across both individual and social contexts, allowing for the examination of both personal narrative and collective meaning-making.

The study was conducted in two chronological phases. Phase 1 consisted of individual interviews, followed by Phase 2, which involved focus groups with a subset of participants. This structure was intentional. Individual interviews created space for participants to share personal, and at times sensitive, experiences in depth. The semi-structured format allowed participants to guide the conversation toward what felt most significant to them, reflecting the study's emphasis

on participant agency and the understanding that identity negotiation is highly individualized and context dependent.

The second phase introduced a relational dimension to the research. Focus groups provided an opportunity to explore how participants interpreted and reprocessed their experiences in dialogue with others, reflecting the study's methodological commitment to community-based meaning-making. Participants were encouraged to engage directly with one another, creating opportunities for shared reflection, disagreement, clarification, and the development of new perspectives that may not have emerged during individual interviews alone. This phase was particularly valuable for examining how collective discussion shaped participants' understanding of their own identity negotiation over time.

This design also reflects the study's broader understanding that identity negotiation unfolds across relationships rather than solely within individuals. While interviews centered personal narratives, focus groups offered opportunities to examine how meaning is produced collaboratively, how participants recognize shared experiences, and how differing perspectives complicate or affirm individual interpretations. Together, these methods provided complementary forms of insight into the relational nature of queer intercultural experience.

Design Rationale

The research design emerged directly from the methodological commitments outlined in the preceding sections. Because this study understands queer identity negotiation as relational, context-dependent, and continuously negotiated across time, no single method could adequately capture the complexity of participants' experiences. Rather than treating identity as a fixed characteristic to be measured or a singular event to be documented, this study approaches identity negotiation as an ongoing process that unfolds through relationships, movement, reflection, and changing social contexts. Accordingly, the research design was intentionally developed to create multiple opportunities for participants to describe, interpret, and revisit those experiences.

To align with this understanding, a qualitative, two-phase research design was employed, combining long-form individual interviews with follow-up focus groups. These methods were selected not simply as complementary forms of data collection, but because each offers access to different dimensions of identity negotiation. Individual interviews provide space for participants

to tell their stories in their own words, allowing deeply personal, and at times sensitive, experiences to emerge with minimal interruption. The semi-structured format further reflects this study's emphasis on participant agency by allowing participants to determine what experiences, relationships, or moments they considered most significant rather than restricting discussion to predetermined categories.

While interviews foreground individual experience, they inevitably capture only one moment of reflection. Identity, however, is negotiated not only internally but also through interaction with others. For this reason, the second phase introduced focus groups as a deliberate methodological extension rather than a separate method. Bringing participants together created opportunities for collective meaning-making, allowing individuals to revisit their experiences through dialogue with others who shared similar, yet distinct, intercultural and queer experiences. Participants frequently expanded upon, reconsidered, or complicated earlier reflections as they listened to one another, demonstrating that identity negotiation continues through conversation, recognition, disagreement, and shared interpretation.

Taken together, these methods reflect the study's broader methodological commitments to relationality, reflexivity, and participant agency. Interviews privileged individual voice, while focus groups acknowledged that meaning is often produced collaboratively rather than in isolation. The sequential design also mirrors the study's understanding of identity itself: not as static or singular, but as something continually interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed through lived experience. Rather than privileging one perspective over another, the two phases provide complementary ways of understanding how queer participants navigate intercultural host family exchanges across multiple contexts and relationships.

This design likewise reflects the study's decolonizing commitments. Participants were not viewed simply as respondents providing information but as collaborators engaged in the production of knowledge. Throughout both phases, participants were encouraged to guide conversations toward what they considered meaningful, to revisit and clarify their narratives through transcript review, and to retain agency over how their experiences were represented. In this way, the research design sought not only to document lived experience but also to create conditions in which participants could reflect upon, refine, and actively contribute to the knowledge produced through the study.

Situated within this lens, this study positions host family placements as sites of micro-level migration, where identity is negotiated across overlapping and often conflicting social worlds. Rather than treating migration as movement solely between nations, this study conceptualizes it as movement through intimate intercultural spaces, institutional frameworks, and digital environments that operate simultaneously. Queer migration theory expands the focus of migration beyond geography to include questions of orientation, belonging, temporality, and relationality, highlighting how queer individuals navigate power, safety, and visibility across contexts (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). This lens allows for a more holistic understanding of how agency operates, including in moments of constraint, and helps situate intercultural exchange as a dynamic site of queer negotiation rather than a bounded or static experience.

Queer Time as Methodological Design

The theoretical foundations of queer temporality were discussed in Chapter 2; however, they also informed the methodological design of this study. Rather than treating intercultural exchange as a discrete event bounded by departure and return, this research understands identity negotiation as unfolding before, during, and after participants' exchange experiences. Decisions surrounding disclosure, belonging, relationships, and self-understanding rarely begin upon arrival in a host country, nor do they conclude when participants return home. Instead, these processes continue to evolve across time as participants reflect upon, reinterpret, and integrate their experiences into their broader lives.

This understanding shaped both data collection and analysis. Interview questions encouraged participants to move chronologically across their experiences, examining expectations prior to departure, negotiations during exchange, and the long-term ways those experiences continued to influence identity, relationships, and belonging. Similarly, the focus groups provided opportunities for participants to revisit earlier narratives through collective reflection, illustrating that identity negotiation remains an ongoing process rather than a completed event. Viewing queer identity through a temporal lens therefore informed not only how participants' experiences were understood, but also how the research itself was designed.

Critical Discourse Analysis

While Chapter 2 establishes the importance of language within queer identity negotiation, this study draws upon foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical orientation rather than as a standalone methodological framework. Language is understood not simply as a means of communicating experience, but as one of the primary ways through which identity is negotiated, power is reproduced, and belonging is expressed or withheld. Accordingly, this study attends not only to what participants said, but also to how they said it. Language use may shift in subtle but meaningful ways, including hesitation before using gendered language for a partner, or alterations in speech, tone, or embodied expression to avoid being read as "too queer." These adjustments are not only forms of self-protection but also reflect ongoing agency and strategic self-presentation within constrained contexts. Importantly, even silence, hesitation, or partial disclosure can be understood as forms of queer agency within this framework. These shifts in expression reflect the ongoing negotiation of queer identity in intercultural host family settings; therefore, they were treated as meaningful aspects of identity negotiation rather than incidental features of speech.

Participant Recruitment

To capture a broad and meaningful range of experiences, this study employed purposive sampling guided by diversity and relevance. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, self-identify as queer, and participated in an intercultural host family experience lasting a minimum of two weeks. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experience to reflect on identity negotiation within host family contexts.

Recruitment was conducted through network-based outreach, including personal and professional connections, social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn), and relevant communities such as Peace Corps alumni groups, professional exchange networks, and study abroad communities. Flyers containing QR codes and links to an interest form were distributed digitally, allowing participants to self-select into the study.

This recruitment strategy was intentional. Given the personal and, at times, sensitive nature of the research topic, leveraging existing networks allowed recruitment to be grounded in trust and familiarity. At the same time, broad distribution across multiple networks supported diversity in participant backgrounds and exchange experiences.

Interested individuals completed an initial survey providing demographic information, details about their exchange experiences, and contact information. Response volume exceeded expectations within a short timeframe, demonstrating both strong interest in and the relevance of the research topic. Recruitment was subsequently closed after sufficient diversity across participant characteristics had been achieved.

Participants were then selected from this pool based on a range of factors, including nationality, exchange location, program type, number and diversity of host family experiences, and self-identified social identities. This process prioritized diversity across intersecting identities and experiences in order to explore both recurring patterns and meaningful differences in queer identity negotiation.

Selected participants were invited to schedule interviews through an online calendaring system, where they received additional study information, consent materials, and scheduling confirmation. Because some individuals did not schedule or attend their interview, recruitment continued iteratively from a pre-approved waitlist until a final sample of fifteen participants had been confirmed. Due to scheduling conflicts later in the study, two participants withdrew prior to completion, resulting in a final sample of thirteen interview participants, eight of whom continued into the focus group phase.

Study Design

Phase 1: Individual Interviews

Phase 1 consisted of thirteen semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting approximately one and a half to two hours. This format allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences while maintaining flexibility for participants to shape the direction and emphasis of the conversation.

Interview questions explored a range of topics related to queer identity negotiation, including decisions surrounding identity disclosure within host family settings; the emotional and relational dimensions of navigating queer identity; the role of intersecting identities such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status; the influence of peers, host families, staff, programs, laws, and broader cultural contexts; shifts in identity, belonging, and disclosure across time; experiences of virtual connection and blurred borders; returning home and renegotiating identity;

and the long-term evolution of relationships with host families. Importantly, the semi-structured format allowed participants to expand on what they felt was most relevant, often introducing unanticipated but significant areas of insight.

Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, with both researcher and participant engaging with video and audio enabled to foster rapport and connection. Each session began with an introduction to the study, an informal period of conversation to establish comfort, and a review of informed consent before transitioning into the interview itself. With participant consent, all interviews were audio- and video-recorded. Otter.ai was used as a supplementary transcription tool to support notetaking and transcription accuracy alongside Zoom recordings. Following each interview, transcripts were shared with participants for review. Participants were invited to make corrections, clarifications, or additions to ensure accurate representation while maintaining meaningful control over how their experiences were presented. This process reflects the study's broader methodological commitment to participant agency and collaborative knowledge production.

Phase 2: Focus Groups

Following completion of the interviews, participants were invited to express interest in participating in focus groups. Of the thirteen interview participants, ten initially indicated interest. After scheduling was confirmed, eight participants ultimately completed this phase of the study. These participants were organized into two focus groups of four participants each. Group composition was determined purposively based on both thematic relevance emerging from the interviews and practical scheduling considerations across multiple time zones.

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours and was conducted virtually using Zoom, following the same recording, transcription, and participant review procedures established during Phase 1. Unlike the interviews, facilitation during the focus groups was intentionally more interactive and less structured. Drawing on relational and community-based methodological approaches, participants were encouraged to engage directly with one another by asking questions, responding to shared experiences, building upon points of connection or disagreement, and highlighting conversations they found most meaningful. Participants were reminded throughout that they could remain silent, temporarily step away, or withdraw from the discussion at any point. At the same time, care was taken to ensure that every participant had

meaningful opportunities to contribute, including dedicated opening and closing opportunities for reflection.

This format created opportunities for collective meaning-making while also allowing participants to interpret their experiences in relation to others. Hearing different perspectives often affirmed, challenged, or expanded participants' own understandings of identity negotiation, providing insight into how meaning continued to evolve through dialogue.

As in Phase 1, transcripts were returned to participants following each focus group. Participants were invited to revise their contributions, clarify meaning, or add additional reflections after engaging in the group discussion, further reinforcing the study's commitment to participant agency and collaborative interpretation.

Data Analysis

Methodology & Analytical Tools

This study employed qualitative analytical methods to examine queer identity negotiation within intercultural host family settings. Analysis was iterative, reflexive, and conducted across multiple stages of engagement with the data, allowing interpretations to develop alongside continued interaction with participant narratives rather than through a single coding process.

A central analytical commitment of this study is an agency-first orientation. Framed through queer migration theory, this work aims to resist the common narrative that often centers victimization and risk in queer intercultural experiences. Agency emerges not outside of constraint, but through ongoing movement within and across it. While experiences of discrimination, marginalization, concealment, and structural inequality remain essential to understanding queer intercultural exchange, they do not constitute the entirety of participants' lived experiences. Too often, research involving queer communities has centered deficit-oriented narratives that position queer individuals primarily through risk, victimization, or trauma. Although these experiences remain critically important, they can inadvertently obscure the ways participants actively negotiate, resist, adapt to, and reshape the environments in which they live.

Accordingly, this study intentionally examines not only the barriers participants encountered, but also the choices they made, the relationships they cultivated. It asks about moments of belonging and how creativity, resilience, humor, and joy appeared in their exchange

experiences. Adopting an agency-first orientation does not minimize structural inequities or ignore experiences of discrimination. Rather, it seeks a more complete understanding of queer intercultural exchange by recognizing participants as active meaning-makers whose lives cannot be reduced solely to narratives of hardship. Queer life in intercultural host family exchanges presents a valuable opportunity to study how changes to an individuals' cultural expectations of gender and sexual identities can also produce discovery, adaptation, joy, and solidarity.

To analyze these power dynamics, this study adapted Foucault's (1978) concept of the panopticon as an analytical tool. Rather than a single centralized tower of surveillance, one could imagine that there are potentially multiple "watchtowers" that are culturally coded to detect different social categories deemed deviant—race, gender, sexuality, and more. When entering unfamiliar cultural contexts, queer participants may enter spaces where surveillance is recalibrated or temporarily suspended. A behavior policed in one setting might pass unnoticed in another**,** offering space for exploration or accidental discovery. They illuminate through contrast—qualities in each object of comparison may become visible only through a comparison with other objects. These culturally coded watchtowers offer a conceptual framework for understanding how queer participants describe power, regulation, and self-monitoring across cultures. This model further reinforces how surveillance, like identity, is not static but shifts across spatial and cultural contexts. This model is not intended to draw conclusive claims, but to help interpret how narratives of resilience, policing, agency, opportunity, and discovery are articulated within shifting regimes of surveillance.

Methods

The primary analysis focused on the individual interviews, which were examined using thematic analysis to identify key patterns, narratives, and areas of significance in relation to the research questions. During interviews, initial observations and notable moments were recorded through handwritten notes. These notes were expanded during subsequent rounds of audio review as transcripts were checked for accuracy and completeness. Additional notes were taken throughout the writing process, allowing for continued engagement with the data as interpretations evolved.

This layered note-taking process functioned as an initial stage of coding, capturing emerging themes, patterns, and points of analytical interest. These insights were first organized

across a combination of handwritten and digital formats, including notes, documents, and visual mapping tools.

Following this preliminary analysis, all interview transcripts were systematically coded to refine earlier interpretations, identify patterns across participants, and strengthen connections between the data and emerging arguments. In several cases, this process led to the revision or clarification of themes, contributing to a more cohesive and grounded analysis.

Focus group discussions were analyzed using a similar iterative process. In addition to identifying recurring themes, analysis considered how participants engaged with one another, including where experiences aligned, diverged, challenged one another, or prompted further reflection. A final comparative analysis examined differences between individual interviews and focus group discussions, with particular attention to how collective dialogue shaped participants' interpretations and ongoing meaning-making.

As part of the study's commitment to participant agency, transcripts were returned to participants for review, clarification, and confirmation. While intended to strengthen accuracy and representation, this process also became an additional stage of analysis. Participant feedback reinforced interpretations, clarified ambiguities, and, in several cases, prompted further reflection that deepened the study's understanding of participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Recognizing the history of exploitation in research involving queer and other marginalized communities, this study prioritized ethical practice, participant agency, confidentiality, and equitable representation throughout every stage of the research process.

- Informed Consent: Participants received detailed information regarding the study, its procedures, and informed consent prior to participation. At the beginning of each interview and focus group, participants were invited to ask questions regarding the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, expectations for participation, and their rights as participants before providing verbal confirmation of informed consent.
- Confidentiality: Participant identities were protected through anonymized data collection, storage, and reporting procedures. Identifying information was removed or altered where

appropriate to protect participant privacy while preserving the integrity of their narratives.

- Participant Review: Participants were invited to review both interview transcripts and the vignettes developed from their interviews. They were given opportunities to clarify, revise, expand upon, or remove information to ensure their experiences were represented accurately and in ways they felt comfortable sharing. When provided, participant feedback was incorporated into the final representation of their narratives.
- Compensation: Interview participants received a $20 Visa gift card, or an equivalent accessible form of compensation based on region, in recognition of their time and contributions. Participants who also completed the focus group phase received an additional $40 Visa gift card. One participant chose to donate their compensation to a local nonprofit organization in lieu of receiving payment, resulting in a $60 charitable donation on their behalf.
- Researcher Responsibility: Given the personal and, at times, emotionally sensitive nature of the conversations, I sought to maintain a professional yet welcoming environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Throughout interviews and focus groups, I regularly checked in with participants regarding their comfort and reminded them that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time. During focus groups, careful facilitation ensured that no individual voice was overshadowed by group dynamics while encouraging respectful dialogue among participants.

Together, these ethical practices reflect the broader methodological commitments outlined earlier in this chapter. Rather than treating ethics solely as procedural requirements, this study understands ethical responsibility as an ongoing, relational practice that extends throughout recruitment, data collection, analysis, writing, and participant representation.

Study Limitations

This study is shaped by several limitations related to scope, sampling, and methodology. Many participants were recruited through networks closely connected to my own, including affiliations with organizations such as the Peace Corps and my previous workplace. This proximity often supported trust and rapport, allowing for more detailed and open conversations.

At the same time, it occasionally shaped how participants approached the interview process. In several cases, participants appeared oriented toward being "good study participants," initially remaining close to what they perceived as the structure or expectations of the interview. I encouraged participants to move beyond these assumptions, as moments of divergence frequently led to richer and more meaningful insights. Engagement therefore varied across participants, ranging from carefully prepared accounts to more tentative and conversational reflections.

Although this study centers queer identity, the category itself encompasses considerable diversity. Participants represented a range of cultural backgrounds, exchange locations, and identities; however, the sample consisted primarily of U.S.-based participants who completed exchange programs abroad, many within similar institutional contexts. Most participants were also relatively young, resulting in more limited representation from older generations whose exchange experiences occurred under different historical and social conditions. Likewise, the study cannot fully capture every intersecting dimension of identity, including disability, language, or the full diversity of global queer experiences. Because all interviews were conducted in English, participants may express certain experiences differently had they been able to speak in another language. Notably, this study focuses on the experiences of queer students as those being hosted, rather than on the perspectives of host families or the programs that facilitated these placements. Future research could therefore examine how both normative *and* queer host families understand, experience, and negotiate hosting queer students, as well as how program staff and host-family preparation shape these encounters. Such research would offer a more relational understanding of host-family exchange by bringing the perspectives of both those being hosted and those doing the hosting into conversation.

Finally, this research represents a single period of data collection examining experiences that unfold across different moments in participants' lives. Although the study conceptualizes identity negotiation as an ongoing and relational process extending before, during, and after intercultural exchange, participant narratives were collected at one point in time. Some participants reflected on experiences that had occurred many years earlier, while others remained close to or were still actively navigating those experiences. These temporal differences inevitably shape how experiences are remembered, interpreted, and narrated. A longitudinal design would provide additional insight into how these narratives continue to evolve over time. Accordingly,

the findings presented here should be understood as situated and partial, reflecting both the strengths and the limitations of the methodological design.

Writing Methodology

The final methodological commitment of this study concerns not only how knowledge was collected and analyzed, but also how it is represented. Throughout this research, I approached writing as an extension of methodology rather than simply the presentation of findings. The choices made in representing participants—the order in which stories are told, the details emphasized, the language preserved, and the relationships drawn between experiences—are themselves interpretive acts. As such, the writing of this dissertation is understood as part of the research process rather than something that occurs after it.

This understanding follows directly from the methodological commitments established throughout this chapter. If meaning is relational, partial, and co-constructed, then the representation of participants should similarly resist reducing complex lives into simplified themes or isolated quotations. While thematic analysis remains essential for identifying broader patterns across participants, it necessarily fragments experience by organizing narratives into categories. Important analytical insights emerge through this process, but something is also lost when lived experience is separated into discrete codes.

For this reason, the following chapter presents participant vignettes before the thematic analysis. Rather than serving as illustrative anecdotes, the vignettes are intended as a methodological strategy for preserving the relational and contextual nature of each participant's experience. The stories told by queer individuals about their experiences are not neutral. Schwartz and Cook (2002) argue that all archives and narratives are shaped by power. Similarly, participant narratives are shaped by personal histories, social expectations, and institutional discourses. Instead of treating stories as transparent reflections of reality, this study views them as curated, shaped, and negotiated performances. They reflect both personal agency and broader structures that influence how a story can be told.

Centering vignettes and storytelling allows individuals to be encountered first as people—with histories, contradictions, humor, uncertainty, resilience, and agency—before their narratives are examined across broader analytical themes. This ordering reflects the study's

commitment to centering participant voice while acknowledging that no single theme can fully capture the complexity of a lived experience. The vignettes are neither biographies nor verbatim transcripts. Instead, they are interpretive narrative representations developed from interview data and informed by the broader methodological commitments of this study. They seek to preserve participants' voices, relationships, and the contexts in which identity negotiation occurred while presenting narratives in a coherent and accessible form. Particular attention was given to maintaining participants' intended meanings, avoiding unnecessary interpretation within the narratives themselves, and representing experiences with care and respect.

The order of narratives within the chapter was also intentionally structured to reflect the conceptual progression that emerged through analysis rather than following chronology, geography, or participant demographics. The sequence moves through a gradual exploration of intercultural identity negotiation, beginning with preparation and trust from an organization, to unfolding through recognition, visibility, complexity, intersectionality, embodiment, and multiplicity over years to come. Later narratives shift toward belonging, care, survival, and relationships, highlighting how these experiences extend beyond moments of disclosure to broader processes of identity formation, connection, and meaning making across contexts.

At the same time, this ordering is not intended to suggest a universal or linear pathway that all participants follow. Rather, it reflects recurring patterns and relational movements that appeared across diverse experiences, while recognizing the many contradictions, disruptions, and culturally specific meanings embedded within those processes. These narratives reveal both shared pathways and distinct interpretations: similar concepts of belonging, safety, identity, and authenticity may emerge in different forms depending on participants' histories, social locations, relationships, and cultural contexts. Together, these stories demonstrate how individual experiences can reveal broader global patterns without reducing the complexity, uniqueness, and multiple truths present within each person's journey.

Consistent with the study's commitment to participant agency, each participant was invited to review their transcript and the vignette developed from their interview. Participants were given opportunities to clarify and expand upon, or request not to disclose certain information, ultimately at the primary investigator's discretion, before inclusion in the dissertation. This review process served not only as a means of strengthening accuracy but also

as an extension of the study's relational and collaborative methodological commitments, recognizing participants as active contributors to how their stories were ultimately represented.

Positioning the vignettes before thematic analysis also reflects the broader analytical orientation of this study. Rather than asking readers to encounter participants first through abstract concepts or coded themes, the study invites readers to first engage with the richness and complexity of individual lives. The thematic chapters that follow then build from these narratives, identifying recurring patterns while remaining grounded in the voices from which those interpretations emerged.

The vignettes function as more than a stylistic choice. They are a methodological bridge between data collection and analysis, connecting the relational commitments of this chapter with the thematic interpretation that follows. By foregrounding participant narratives before abstraction, this study seeks to preserve the complexity of queer intercultural experience while remaining faithful to the interpretive, reflexive, and participant-centered methodological approach that has guided the research from its inception.

Chapter 4 – Participant Vignettes

Introduction

This chapter prioritizes narrative over immediate synthesis. Rather than beginning with cross-case thematic analysis, it presents a series of analytical narratives that introduce each of the thirteen participants on their own terms. Each vignette functions as a self-contained subchapter, offering a brief account of the participant's exchange experience alongside an emergent theme that will be explored more fully in subsequent chapters. While these narratives begin the analytic process, they are not intended to resolve it; instead, they establish a foundation for deeper thematic engagement in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. My intent is the reader gets to know the protagonists, and that, maybe, their realities and experiences appear more clearly to the reader.

This chapter centers each narrative on its own terms, attending to the layers of meaning held within each story. This separation is methodologically intentional. Consistent with the decolonial orientation of this study, storytelling is treated not simply as a means of presenting data, but as a form of knowledge and theorizing in its own right. Participants' stories contain situated understandings of identity, relationships, power, belonging, and the possibilities and constraints of moving through the world. The story, therefore, is not merely evidence for a theory that exists elsewhere; it is itself a site of theory and knowledge.

Accordingly, this creates space for readers to encounter each person with nuance before engaging in comparison or abstraction. It resists collapsing participants into illustrative examples of generalized claims or treating their experiences as evidence for predetermined conclusions. Instead, it lingers with the narratives, allowing meaning to emerge through the particularities, contradictions, relationships, and contexts of each account. The narratives that follow are thus not simply stories that illustrate the analysis; they are themselves a form of analysis.

Drawing on the educational methods of intercultural exchange, this chapter asks readers to begin not with conclusions, but with people and the textured realities of their experiences. Only after sitting with these narratives does the chapter turn toward broader patterns. In doing so, it invites readers to recognize connections across diverse queer intercultural experiences while resisting reductive generalization or the construction of a single queer narrative.

Survival. Not Resilience.

Soumya | she/her

Bio. Soumya is a queer, bisexual woman of Indian heritage who grew up in Wisconsin, USA and served in the Peace Corps in Madagascar with her male partner. In country, she was publicly understood as a straight, married woman, and some of her living arrangements were with landlords who acted as quasi-hosts and host families. The landlord family controlled the gate and could see who came and went, and conversations in the courtyard often revolved around neighbors' behavior, propriety, and who was visiting whom. Security cameras also pointed into the courtyard and staircase, so that even standing on the balcony or hanging laundry felt observed. Across these spaces, Soumya and her partner occupied rented rooms and small sitting areas that never fully belonged to them, surrounded by questions about children, religion, and future plans that assumed a conventional heterosexual story.

Relation to Researcher. Both met in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. Being from Wisconsin, we quickly connected and became good friends. Although we were placed far apart, we met occasionally and spent time together. After Peace Corps, we stayed in touch through occasional visits, texts, and social media.

Story. Soumya served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Northeastern Madagascar in her early twenties, spending two years in a rural community before completing a third year in the capital city of Antananarivo (Tana). Originally from the U.S. Midwest, she entered the Peace Corps already understanding herself as a bisexual woman but was generally perceived by others as a heterosexual, femme-presenting woman in a long-term relationship with her partner, Roy, a cisgender, straight, white man. Throughout her service, staff, host families, and local communities largely understood the two as husband and wife. As a volunteer, she relied heavily on the host community around her to navigate daily life—from learning local cooking methods and repairing her home to understanding cultural expectations and maintaining her safety.

Soumya's story is less about a single disclosure decision than the accumulation of many small ones. Before ever reaching her host family, she had already received a consistent message about queerness: disclose when required to the institution, but not beyond it. Throughout her interview she described interactions with Peace Corps staff, language facilitators, fellow

volunteers, local advisors, and community members that collectively shaped how she understood safety. By the time she entered her host family's home, the decision had, in many ways, already been made.

Her experience also reminds us of that host families rarely exist as isolated spaces. Rather, they are embedded within a broader host environment composed of institutional policies, peer networks, cultural expectations, local communities, and countless interpersonal relationships. Disclosure within a host family therefore cannot be understood as a decision about one household alone. It emerges from an interconnected web of relationships that participants are continually navigating.

When reflecting on why she remained closeted, Soumya consistently returned to dependence rather than fear alone.

> *I don't want to mess up where I'm living... That's my living situation. I don't want to mess that up. And I was so dependent on people... to teach me how to make certain fires... tell me what to do with my garbage... I need help fixing my cabinet... all these things other people did for me.*

For Soumya, disclosure threatened far more than acceptance. It risked disrupting the relationships that made everyday life possible. As a bisexual, cisgender woman in a long-term relationship with a white man, Soumya also recognized that she possessed privileges unavailable to many other queer volunteers. Rather than resisting heterosexual assumptions, she intentionally leaned into them.

> *I would have never said anything at site... Roy and I were, like, married at site... 'Yes, I'm married to this man here... and if you mess with me, he is a concern.'... I took all the privilege I could. I took all of it that I could.*

What makes her account particularly compelling is that this performance extended beyond concealing her sexuality. It also meant consciously performing gender. Soumya reflected that she was not trying to, "*be a feminist*" at site. Allowing Roy to occupy expected masculine roles, accepting assumptions about marriage, and occasionally stepping into more traditional gender

expectations became pragmatic decisions rather than ideological ones. She recognized these compromises as privilege—options that allowed her to navigate the environment more safely—and repeatedly acknowledged that many queer volunteers simply did not have those same options.

Those calculations were reinforced almost immediately by institutional messaging. After disclosing her bisexuality through required Peace Corps paperwork, she recalled being reassured that, because she was partnered with a man, her queerness would become inconsequential, *"They were like... 'Well, it won't matter because you're married... Don't worry about this. You're married'".* Their guidance reveals an underlying assumption that heterosexual appearance equated to safety. In doing so, the policy implicitly framed sexuality as something that became relevant only when it was visible to others. Queerness was something that could provoke risk if recognized, but otherwise claimed it remained inconsequential. This logic reduced queerness to a simple problem of disclosure based on risk, rather than acknowledging it as a lived identity that shapes relationships, belonging, and everyday experience. More importantly, these internal processes continue for queer people regardless of whether it is visible or not. Soumya's sexuality did not disappear simply because others assumed she was straight. The assumption associated with being perceived as heterosexual possibly diminished institutional concern, but it did not diminish Soumya's emotional labor of continually performing that perception. Even as queer Malagasy community members similarly advised discretion, institutional support rarely extended beyond encouraging volunteers to remain hidden. Participants were taught how to avoid danger, but not how to navigate identity, belonging, or community while doing so.

Soumya later reflected that this approach prioritized institutional understandings of safety over volunteers' lived experiences. She recalled, "When [the program staff] was thinking about how to keep queer volunteers safe... all [the program staff] was thinking about was physical safety, and how to do that was to be not queer." During our conversation, I found myself wondering whether the institutional understanding of queer safety often becomes synonymous with institutional liability: a framework focused less on creating conditions where queer participants can thrive and more on managing potential harm. Soumya immediately recognized this tension. Her account suggests that while concealment may reduce immediate physical risk, it does little to create the conditions for queer participants to experience belonging, trust, or

genuine support. She stated clearly, "I'm only gonna tell people who I already have vetted... There were people I didn't tell".

Isolation continued to build; however, it was not liberation nor independence. Fewer trusted relationships meant fewer places to process identity, seek support, or simply exist in a way she felt was authentic. Even spaces that might be expected to provide solidarity sometimes reproduced exclusion, leaving Soumya to continually negotiate who felt safe enough to know her. Yet her experience also complicates the assumption that isolation itself is either inherently harmful or inherently liberating. Across participants, moments of distance and separation sometimes created opportunities to step outside of constant social monitoring and exist without continual explanation. For Soumya, however, geographic isolation did not always produce that same release because her isolation was not experienced alone; it was embedded within partnership.

At site, Roy's presence provided genuine protection and companionship, but it also shaped the social possibilities available to Soumya. Within her community, their relationship was interpreted through a particular framework: she was not simply Soumya, but Roy's wife. As she described it, "At site, I was fully married and straight, even though those things weren't true, because it was what I perceived as being the safest". That role offered security, but it also required continual calibration. She could draw upon the social privilege attached to being partnered with a cis, straight, white man, but doing so meant inhabiting an identity that narrowed how others understood her and, at times, how she could understand herself. The geographic distance from outside expectations did not necessarily create freedom because the expectations brought by being Roy's wife pre-determined what identities and social roles she *could* negotiate.

This tension became particularly visible in her third year. Soumya moved to Tana, the capital, and spent more time outside of the identity she occupied in her community. Away from the constant expectations attached to being Roy's wife, she entered queer spaces and encountered possibilities for herself that were less available in her rural community. She was "fully part of the queer scene in Tana", because she was moving through those spaces independently rather than always being understood through her partnership.

Importantly, Soumya's exploration of non-monogamy was not simply a reaction against the constraints she experienced in her rural community. Rather, it emerged from the constraint Soumya endured in the limiting role of wife and that intersection of desire, curiosity, and circumstance. As she explained, "I definitely asked for my relationship not to be monogamous because I wanted to explore". The possibility of doing so was connected to the unique conditions of Peace Corps service: distance from family and friends, temporary separation from their previous social world, and the relative privacy created by being abroad. Yet she also recognized that this exploration was inseparable from the years of constraint that preceded it. She had spent significant time in her rural community performing what she jokingly referred to elsewhere as "straight Soumya": carefully managing stories, performing heterosexuality, conforming to gendered expectations, and constantly assessing who could be trusted. Exhausted and confined by this act, non-monogamy became one way to acknowledge a part of herself that had not disappeared simply because it could not be publicly expressed.

Her account therefore resists a simple narrative of repression followed by freedom. The same environment that restricted her expression also created the conditions through which she more fully understood herself. As she reflected, the experience "made me really be like you are bisexual, and you like men and you like women... and you have to explore this identity". Peace Corps Madagascar did not make her queer, but it intensified the process through which she recognized, named, and explored an identity that had been difficult to access within the social expectations surrounding her. In this way, connection and constraint existed simultaneously throughout Soumya's experience. Roy's presence offered security while also reinforcing a particular social role; separation from Roy created opportunities for exploration while remaining shaped by the broader inequalities surrounding queer life in Madagascar. Isolation itself was not inherently liberating or harmful. Rather, its meaning depended on whether it allowed Soumya to step outside the continual work of recalibrating herself around others' expectations.

Toward the end of our interview, I asked whether stepping back into the closet represented resilience. Her response fundamentally challenged that framing, "That was survival... I'm not okay with the fact that I had to hide it... it was survival that I had to hide it and not... resiliency... this was just forced upon me." This distinction is perhaps the central contribution of Soumya's narrative. Resilience implies a degree of agency, reflecting the

capacity to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining one's sense of self. Survival, as she describes it, required narrowing that self in response to circumstances largely beyond her control. Rather than developing resilience, she devoted significant emotional energy to performing “straight Soumya.” Yet throughout the interview she remained acutely aware that these choices were themselves products of privilege. She shared, "I had all the privilege in the world... and if I was feeling this way, I can't imagine what someone who didn't have all the privilege that was attached to me... would be feeling”. Soumya’s experience also demonstrates that participants do not enter intercultural spaces with equal control over how their identities are read. The institutional expectations surrounding her placement had already helped establish assumptions about nationality, race, gender, and appropriate behavior before she ever had the opportunity to negotiate them for herself. Some of the decisions she encountered had been pre-arranged or recommended before she arrived.

Soumya reminds us that disclosure cannot be understood solely as an individual decision between a participant and a host family. It is informed by an interconnected host environment where entangled relationships, institutional messages, social expectations, and uneven forms of privilege shape what kinds of identities can be safely expressed. It argues it heavily influences, if not dictates, which identities are even negotiable. Moreover, her experience demonstrates the limits of a safety framework centered only on concealment and risk avoidance. While passing as heterosexual and leaning into the privileges attached to her relationship with Roy allowed her to navigate her placement with greater security, that security came through the continual labor of managing how others understood her. Soumya’s story ultimately challenges the assumption that safety and freedom are the same: she was protected in many ways, but that protection existed alongside constraint. Queer participants often navigate multiple truths at once. The strategies that create safety can also reinforce invisibility, and the privileges that enable survival can simultaneously shape the boundaries of what feels possible.

Courage in Silence

Bio. Tamara (they/them) is a young Black lesbian from the United States who spent about a year living with a Christian host family in Nigeria. They joined a busy household where church, school, and family obligations shaped the week: early mornings, shared meals, and regular worship and prayer. Their host parents were devout and affectionate, and younger siblings or cousins moved constantly through the house. Tamara was the foreign "sister" whose clothes and music came from abroad. Evenings were spent at church or in the living room, with sermons on the TV and conversation circling back to faith, respectability, and family values.

Relation to Researcher. No prior relation.

Story. Interviewing Tamara was a quiet revelation. Laughter surfaced while building rapport and trust around small victories and discreet joys they experienced during their exchange, and I realized how much my own positionality and ability to cultivate a safe space significantly shaped their ability to open up, reflect, converse, and ultimately further dissect these experiences. Tamara's experience stands out because they were encouraged to live authentically at home and supported by their mother in exploring their queer identity from a very young age. At fourteen, they undertook an independent exchange to Nigeria with the aim of understanding their Blackness in a global context. Their movement therefore carried a different relationship to the familiar language of cultural exchange. Tamara was not simply entering an unfamiliar culture, but seeking to understand an aspect of themselves through a place imagined as connected to their own racial history. Yet, the experience quickly demonstrated that racial connection did not erase cultural difference. Being a Black American teenager in Nigeria did not mean being understood simply as another Black person; their American identity, age, gender, and assumptions about the exchange remained part of how she was positioned within the host family.

What they encountered was not the structured freedom from home, but a host family that was warm yet deeply religious, culturally conservative, and focused on cultivating a "good guest." In this context, Tamara's queerness became a hidden layer; they shared everything about themself except this. They described feeling "shell shocked", noting, "I wasn't born to pray… it felt like a movie". Religious expectations, coupled with cultural norms around propriety and compliance, created a hostile landscape for Tamara where queer expression was limited and policed. Due to their age, Tamare lacked a strong internal sense of self and authenticity, and the expression of the queerness also felt vital. However, and because they passed as normative, their

capacity to sit and observe, to wait and to endure silence, to blend in, to navigate safety, and overcome oppressive conditions became a successful strategy for survival.

This silence was not passive. Tamara articulated a deliberate, almost ritualized observation that they relied on an African proverb passed down by a grandparent, “You are going to a strange place, so don’t come out of your shell. Observe… then come out of your shell”. During their exchange, they balanced what they felt were dual identities: the compliant guest performing devotion, and the adolescent queer girl navigating desire and curiosity. “I was living a double identity… I literally don’t pray the way I did pray there”. Quiet solitude became critical for their resilience, which they described as, “self-time: the time where I’m just alone in my space”. Alone, they regained the energy to reenter the world of their host family, sustaining themself despite the constraints. They continued, "It was solitude… time to be in your space… not wanting to talk to anybody… this is my energy gaining moment to go back into the world and be my other self". These moments of rest were not escapes from the exchange experience but practices of survival that made Tamara’s participation and self-protection possible.

Despite the challenges provided by their host environment, Tamara found joy in subtle, fleeting ways. School became a crucial site of connection: they made friends who shared their values and interests, and these relationships offered a reprieve from the pressures of the home. Even unspoken crushes, such as their early attraction to peers, became a source of euphoria: “There was this girl… I knew if I started it, then everyone’s gonna know… yet it was enough to provide motivation and euphoria to keep going”. Despite social pressures around queerness still being evident amongst their local peers, they found ways to internally validate their queer joys and moments of young lust. Social media also played a vital role, connecting them to queer communities back home and giving them the sense that they were not entirely isolated.

The relationship between safety and autonomy were also deeply paradoxical. Within the host home, Tamara felt agentless: "There wasn't a moment of empowerment… I was always trying to please… to live up to the standard". Their sexuality was largely unexpressed, further fueling this sense of constraint: "It's always me… being straight. So, I was helpless… I didn't see a time where I could confront them, tell them about me, or act me". Notably, this lack of self-recognition does not equate to a lack of agency. Rather than resisting these constraints, Tamara quietly built the conditions where concealment could coexist with an authentic sense of self.

Reflecting back, Tamara knew the exchange profoundly shaped their identity negotiation long after returning home. Virtual host family surveillance continued after the program ended, leading them to remain mindful of their behavior in both physical and digital spaces. Even after publicly coming out online, Tamara stayed attent to how their host family might interpret that queerness, explaining that they "knew [the host family] would see [the post]." Yet even that moment created new opportunities for agency, honesty, and connection. Today, Tamara holds a warm relationship with their host family, one characterized by transparency and mutual respect despite continuing differences in culture and belief. Their story illustrates that disclosure is rarely a single event but an ongoing negotiation of trust, risk, and relational awareness.

Perhaps the most striking paradox of Tamara's narrative is that their enduring sense of disempowerment coexists with profound pride in how they navigated the experience. They continue to describe the exchange as a period in which they felt unable to fully be themself, yet they also see it as a formative journey of resilience and self-discovery. As they reflected, "There is no regret… I embrace glory from experience… made a promise to myself that I will never… deny my reality". The hardship of suppressing parts of themself did not erase the pain of that experience, but it did strengthen their commitment to living openly and without shame. At the same time, Tamara's story raises difficult questions. What was the cost of spending months quietly observing, building trust, and carefully learning the boundaries of their host family before feeling safe enough to be fully known? Yet it is equally worth asking whether that gradual process contributed to the acceptance they eventually experienced. Rather than assuming that immediate disclosure always produces the best outcome, Tamara's experience suggests that relationships sometimes require time before vulnerability becomes possible. Trust itself be the foundation that allowed later honesty to be received with care.

Ultimately, Tamara's narrative complicates simplistic understandings of empowerment and authenticity in exchange programs. Their experience demonstrates that safety can be cultivated through silence, desire can be expressed cautiously, and resilience can grow through solitude, selective visibility, and the slow work of building trust. Thriving abroad does not always require immediate openness; sometimes it requires the freedom to decide when, how, and with whom authenticity becomes possible. Tamara examples how identity negotiation is not only about disclosure, but also the timing needed to cultivate relationships that make disclosure meaningful, safe, and possible.

Assumptions Under the Host Gaze

Bio. Jess (she/her) is a queer cis woman from the United States who now lives in the Pacific Northwest and served in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. During their pre-service training, she lived for about three months with a Malagasy host family in a small rural town: a host mother and father in their 50s or 60s, plus at least two teenage host brothers. The younger brother, around 15–16, was home more often, hanging out in the living area and using her laptop for movies; the older one, nearer 18–19, worked at a hotel and drifted in and out, appearing mainly at dinner or on weekends. Jess slept in a simple bedroom off the main house, washed from a bucket, and ate rice, beans, and local dishes at a small family table, picking up language and habits through the steady beat of daily life in their home.

Relation to Researcher. Both met in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. She arrived one cohort after me and lived relatively nearby. We had intermittent professional and personal interactions during our time there and bonded over shared queer experiences. After Peace Corps, we mostly lost touch aside from occasional communication through social media.

Story. Jessica's story unfolds differently than narratives of high-stakes visibility, explicit danger, or strategic concealment. "Making sure I eat all my food, making sure that I'm cleaning, making sure I don't smell", she mapped her experience onto a quieter emotional terrain: the strain of being watched and racially visible in communal areas, and the continual work of managing hers, her community's, and the institution's assumptions. Interviewing Jessica was familiar; we shared the same program, the same regional office, the same infrastructures of life in Madagascar. Yet I realized how little I knew about her actual host family experience during training. Even with experiences so close, we only reflected here and there. What emerged in this conversation was the kind of quiet recognition that only happens between people who lived inside the same architectures of discomfort, performance, and care. Even when our stories diverged, we understood each other. Even when our stories diverged, we understood each other, not because our experiences were identical, but because we had learned to move through the same infrastructures of program rules, host families, and institutional watchfulness. It was an early reminder that we were, in different ways, products of the same rules.

She told me early on that most of her “queer difficulty” didn’t come from her host family or the community at all, but from fellow volunteers. That alone destabilizes the usual assumptions shared by many exchange practitioners: that peers of the same culture offer a safe space and community. As seen in Jessica’s testimony, this cannot be assumed. She felt both judged and supported by peers, finding that the people who should understand were sometimes the very people who reinforced old insecurities. That contradiction of harm and care living side by side became the backdrop of her service.

One of the strongest themes in Jessica’s account is that her gendered and racial visibility eclipsed her queer visibility entirely. She spoke openly about the catcalling, grabbing, and the seemingly constant unwanted attention she experienced, describing a “heaviness” of walking through town as a white woman whose body felt always up for public comment. “That,” she said, “was the cloud over my service.” Queerness, by comparison, faded into the background. Her safety calculations were not primarily organized around sexuality but around embodiment: how she was perceived before she spoke, before she acted, and before she could assert any interiority. This does not diminish the significance of her queerness; rather, it shows institutional understandings of "queer safety” isolating sexuality as a single axis of vulnerability. However, lived experience is negotiated across multiple, intersecting, and shifting forms of visibility, power, and risk.

Her host family experience complicates yet another assumption: that intimacy is the goal, or that depth is the marker of success. Jessica described her efforts to be a “good” host family member by eating everything, staying clean, not smelling, keeping up appearances. These were her ethics of respect. But the relationship itself remained shallow, not hostile but limited. She wondered aloud whether the host family expected depth at all? How much were the host families trained or engaged with? Were their motives to apply curiosity, English language practice, cultural sharing, societal pressure, or maybe the financial support the stipend provides? Whether the Peace Corps ideal of familial intimacy is something volunteers assume rather than something families demand or even want. “Maybe they’re okay with just text,” she said—meaning scripted interactions, predictable exchanges, small offerings of relationship. Rather than reading this as failure, she read it as a mismatch of expectations: not everyone wants or needs the same level of emotional closeness. And within that ambiguity, she felt the constant pressure of performing: not to hide queerness necessarily, but to play the role she assumed they wanted.

The place she felt most herself was not in community or even with peers, but in the solitude that Peace Corps inadvertently pathologizes. Jessica talked a lot about disappearing into her room or into hotels: long stretches of watching movies, eating simple comfort foods, letting herself exhale. Peace Corps often frames these behaviors as warning signs of depression or disengagement. But for Jessica, isolation was neither. It was recovery from the constant recalibration of identity. “I remember feeling watched all the time in town,” she said. Her room was one of the only places where the watching stopped. Like many queer volunteers, she built a private world where she could exist without performance, where she wasn’t managing anyone else’s expectations. This wasn’t withdrawal from her host family or community; for Jessica, it seemed to be the only available form of rest into the safety of the walls of her host bedroom. It was a pause from the exhaustion of constant room reading and decision-making that she was processing.

Her disclosure practices followed this same logic of calibration. Sometimes she took small risks, like letting a trusted person see parts of her digital life. Sometimes she stayed silent, even when she sensed someone might already know. Once, she casually came out to a doctor’s wife; another time, she tightened her guard. These choices weren’t about fear so much as realism: communities in Madagascar are tightly networked, and information travels fast. She preferred to share with people she trusted not because she feared reprisal but because she understood the relational density around her. In a context of a small village where everyone knows everyone, discretion can become its own form of connection.

The lack of nearby queer community made queer media crucial. She spoke about watching queer media for hours, sitting with *Call Me by Your Name* on repeat, crying alone in hotel rooms in ways that felt both tender and necessary, “This is one outlet where I can watch RuPaul for three hours… cry… recharge my laptop and do it again the next day.” In a later email correspondence, she even added:

> Not sure how relevant it is to mention, but I only referenced male queer media because 1) that's all that was available and 2) queer female media is/was slimmer especially at that time (which is wild to think about how 10 years makes such a difference). I definitely would have watched A League of their Own on repeat for months if we had it at the time.

This was not just escapism. It coexisted with the companionship of queer media; the closest thing to being recognized without effort. She described these moments as grounding, reminders that parts of herself still existed even when unspoken.

A decade later, Jessica still thinks about what people from Madagascar might assume from her online presence. The digital afterlife of service—photos, posts, friendships across platforms—blurs the boundaries between her "Peace Corps self" and her life afterward. She wonders what her neighbors think about her open queer motherhood and woman-woman relationship. She comments that "they had to have seen it." Yet, she wonders now why this still matters to her. In this course of this research, and in engaging Jessica's narrative, I posit that at least part of the answer may be embedded in the structure of exchange in this modern, digital era.

Jessica was navigating two audiences at once, neither fully separate nor fully overlapping. Because social media enables a persistent, potentially permanent gaze from members of the host community, it reshaped how Jessica and others negotiated and maintained these relationships over time. In Jessica's case, her identity negotiation was minimally impacted by this gaze; however, she continues to remain curious of if they are or are not watching from a distance. Relationships don't end cleanly when service ends, especially when visibility and concealment were in constant negotiation the whole time. She now navigates two audiences at once, neither fully separate nor fully overlapping. What mattered here was not only what Jessica knew about how others understood her, but what she could not know. The absence of clear information about what host families, programs, or communities expected left her making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. She had to anticipate possible reactions without knowing which possibilities were real, imagined, or inherited from assumptions about the setting. It questions the idea that exchanges ever end.

What Jessica's story ultimately offers is a different emotional grammar for queer exchange that is defined not by dramatic moments of danger or revelation but by the quieter, ongoing work of managing assumptions. She was always gauging what others expected from her, what she owed to herself, what safety meant in practice, and when solitude was the truest form of care. A common trend is the programmatic simplification of paths that can often narrow queer volunteers' choices between binaries: loud or closeted, visible or hidden, safe or dangerous. Jessica lived something more nuanced: she moved through the world neither as a

symbol nor as a secret but as someone navigating shifting forms of exhaustion, attention, and privacy.

Jessica's experience suggests that disclosure is not only a question of safety or risk. It is also informed by the information available to everyone involved—or by the absence of that information altogether. Participants often make decisions without knowing how a host family, program, or community will respond because those conversations never occur or because no guidance exists, particularly in independent programs or queer-silencing exchange settings. Disclosure therefore becomes not only a decision about identity, but one entangled with the conditions of uncertainty. It requires the time, space, and capacity to decide.

Her story challenges the assumption that rest is unproductive, an expectation that can come from exchange programs, host families, families back home, or the internalized work ethic participants carry with them. Far less attention is given to where participants can rest, where they can stop performing, whether rest is valued at all, how much recovery is necessary for the emotional intensity of an exchange, or where they can find sanctuary.

The power of Jessica's narrative lies in its quiet insistence that queer endurance is not always visible. Sometimes it looks like closing a bedroom door, watching a familiar television show, and existing without being watched or interpreted. Sometimes safety is not visibility but the relief of not being read at all—the chance to pause, to stop recalibrating, and simply exist. And sometimes the most meaningful expression of authenticity is not coming out, but surviving the day with essential pieces of yourself intact. Sometimes it looks like sitting in a room where no one thinks to look, and, for a brief moment, simply being.

No Straight Answers

Bio. Aurora (she/her) is a mixed-race, bisexual aromantic woman who grew up between different racial and religious backgrounds and now lives in a large city in North America. Her first major host-family experience was a year-long study abroad in Spain, living with a family in an apartment in a historic city: a politically engaged host mother, a father, and children who shared long, late dinners and news debates around the table. She had her own, but cramped, room shared with an Evangelical roommate. She crossed narrow streets to class and gradually slid into the household's late-night rhythm of talk and television. Later, in Kyrgyzstan with Peace Corps, she lived first with a training host family and then a village family in a small, mostly Muslim community, where gossip traveled quickly and being an unmarried foreign woman drew steady attention. There she slept in what was her "own room", although she clarified that it functioned as storage by the host family, and the lack of access was inconvenient to them. In the greater home, she helped with chores, and ate around low tables while neighbors and relatives regularly passed through the house, making privacy rare.

Relation to Researcher. No prior relation.

Story. Aurora and I laughed a lot. Not because her story was light, but because humor is the way she moves through the world—quick, dry, and very aware of the absurdities that come with being legible in some ways and unreadable in others. At one point, while describing how she moved through host family life abroad, she paused and said, "You're getting the slightly redacted copy." She didn't describe herself as living two separate lives. Instead, she framed it as a single self, carefully edited dependent on location, playing what she called "the game of being cautious."

Throughout the interview, Aurora returned to these phrases again and again. She described this identity performance not as deception, but as curation: a version of herself shaped by context, risk, and proximity to harm. Across her host family experiences, her identity was kept on a strict need-to-know basis. This did not only apply to her queerness, but also to her bi-racial background and other aspects of her life, underscoring that this was not a single-issue concealment but a broader negotiation of safety and legibility. These choices were not abstract. They were informed by concrete histories of violence, including her knowledge of a queer

person who had been stoned to death in a neighboring state years earlier. As Aurora put it, the rule she lived by (and the advice she would offer others) was simple: “you should get a read of what you are walking into before sharing any aspect of your identity.”

Aurora is a bisexual, biracial (but white-passing) American woman who has lived with host families in two very different contexts: a year in southern Spain as an undergraduate and, later, in Kyrgyzstan as a Peace Corps Volunteer. She realized she was bisexual in high school in a way that still makes her laugh: “I had had a crush on this dude, and then I also realized I’m like, you also have a crush on his sister. There’s something about these genetics that is appealing to you in a very weird way.” But knowing and telling are not the same thing. After that realization, she “kind of panicked about it for a minute” and adopted a need-to-know approach: “I told my best friend, and I was fairly open about it with some folks at school, but… if you don't need to know, then you don't need to know.” She didn’t come out to her mom until the summer before Peace Corps, via a joke wristband that read “So let’s get one thing straight: I’m not,” and even then, the conversation was almost accidental and anticlimactic. From early on, queerness was something she understood as context-dependent knowledge. It was something that could be shared, but not everywhere, not always, and not without consequence.

That logic followed her into her first host family experience in Spain. She eventually told her Spanish host parents, whom she trusted and who were politically engaged and experienced with hosting international students. “I felt more comfortable telling my host family about it… because I’m just, like, y’all are kind of stuck with me for however long,” she explained. At the same time, she never told her American evangelical roommate that she wasn’t straight. The boundary was not about shame; it was about proximity, power, and anticipated fallout. Different people occupied different places in her personal map of risk.

Kyrgyzstan sharpened these calculations. “Going into it in Kyrgyzstan, specifically, my goal was for them to never know, and to the best of my knowledge, they don’t.” This was not paranoia. It was a reasoned response to the social and political realities around her. Alongside a history of lethal anti-queer violence, Aurora understood that queer identities were often associated with predation and moral deviance. These were not abstract possibilities but informed expectations of how her host family and broader community might perceive and respond to her if

they knew she was bisexual. “I don’t need to have ‘pedophile’ also added to that list as to why they don’t want to listen to me,” she added, reflecting on the ways queer people were discussed locally. Concealment was not simply about avoiding discomfort or rejection, it was Aurora’s deliberate strategy for navigating a context in which disclosure carried tangible social and physical risks.

Here, passing mattered. Aurora is white-passing and often read as Russian until proven otherwise. At the same time, she was hyper-visible in other ways: “Honestly, I would say… my weight honestly stuck out to people a lot more.” In a village that was “like 98% ethnic Kyrgyz,” she was already marked as different, as “the weird American.” That hypervisibility paradoxically made some forms of queerness easier to hide. She was keenly aware that this was not a privilege everyone has. Speaking about her younger sibling, who is trans, she put it plainly: “I can hide things, they can’t.”

Hiding required constant work. Communal life in Kyrgyzstan meant constant presence and observation. Peace Corps “pushes you so much to, like, integrate and to be in community… and in Kyrgyzstan in particular… it is very unusual for anyone to spend significant amounts of time on their own.” Her host mother interpreted her need for solitude as antisocial. “She would be like, yeah, like, why are you spending so much time in your room? That’s weird. That’s anti-social… and I’m like, Girl, I couldn’t do that [referring to the expectation they spend the bulk of their free time in common spaces engaging with the entire host family] even if I wanted to, and frankly, I don’t want to.”

What Aurora needed was not just rest, but relief from surveillance. “I need the space where I can be just as I am and know that I’m not being watched.” Privacy was not a luxury. It was a form of survival. She described locking her door, hanging something over the doorknob, and knowing that people would sometimes still try to peek through the keyhole. “There needs to be space that is my space,” she said. Without that boundary, she believed, “it’s going to be a very difficult time.” This private space became the site of small, stubborn rituals: a bottle of wine, chicken-flavored chips (specifically the chicken ones, because those were the best), and an evening that counted as weekly self-care. These were not glamorous acts of resistance, but they were hers.

This is where her framing of the "slightly redacted copy" becomes analytically important. "I wouldn't say that I felt like two people," she told me. "But I definitely felt like a person who was putting on a performance… you're getting the slightly redacted copy." This was not a story of a split self, but of editorial control. The self remained continuous; what shifted was what could be shown, to whom, and at what cost. Disclosure was not a singular moment of truth-telling, but an ongoing calibration of risk that was deeply spatial, temporal, and context-dependent.

That practice was exhausting. It also felt, at times, ethically and emotionally fraught. "You want to integrate," she said, "but… it feels disingenuous to me to be trying to, like, get this deep into this community… but then know that it's like, yeah, but there's something kind of big that y'all don't know about me." Silence functioned as care and self-protection, offering relief from the constant labor of managing disclosure. Yet it also heightened her awareness of what remained unsaid. Aurora did not describe feeling like someone else; rather, she described the strain of continuously performing a version of herself that was authentic, but necessarily incomplete. Visibility and concealment did not simply alternate—they coexisted. She was simultaneously known and not known, fully present yet partially withheld.

Aurora coped by staying busy. "I always stay busy… that's how I'm the only person in my family who doesn't suffer from chronic depression, because if I stop moving, then the depression gets me." She also carved out pockets of partial visibility. Some members of her Peace Corps cohort knew she was bi. "Somebody needs to know," she shared. This was not because disclosure is inherently liberating, but because total erasure felt unsustainable to her. These peers served as a small but crucial space where the redactions could ease.

Even social media became a site of careful calibration. For years after returning, she kept anything that might allude to queerness confined to close friends' stories. More recently, she has loosened that boundary. Still, when she posted a partner, she never wrote, "this is my girlfriend." "It's one of those things where it's like, if you know, you know, and if you don't, you could probably look at that and just think that that's a friend." She wasn't hiding or denying anything, but rather letting the message be implied by those in her circle who would understand the cues. She also assumed that if anyone back in Kyrgyzstan understood these tacit clues, they hadn't said anything in to alert her or maybe they were an ally, or queer, themselves. Distance also played a

major role in this deliberation; once she was physically distant from Kyrgyzstan, the stakes of visibility shifted. “I’m in a different country,” she said. “What are you all going to do?” Here, geography itself becomes a form of protection, revealing how disclosure is not only personal, but spatially and politically situated.

In many ways, this echoed a long tradition of queer communication, where recognition depends less on explicit declaration than on shared cultural knowledge—messages designed to be understood by those who know, while passing unnoticed by those who do not. This logic of selective visibility extended beyond herself. Speaking about her younger sibling, she described how she spent time changing her privacy settings so people in the village would not see photos that might invite misgendering or unwanted scrutiny. “You are not gonna be out here misgendering my younger sibling,” she said as she placed her hands on her hips making a menacing tone. This meant a lot to her. It is in these examples, where we can see how censorship, silence, and curation become a form of care not only for the self, but for others who face greater risk.

What is most striking is the impact of this prolonged, strategic silence on Aurora’s sense of identity. Rather than eroding her bisexuality, it clarified it. “Having had the experience of trying to, like, not share that information… kind of made me realize… you’re not faking it. It’s actually kind of painful to not be able to acknowledge it… it’s like reaffirmed my identity by having to try to deny my identity.” The cost became the evidence. Aurora felt that if it hurt to hide, then the identity being hidden must matter.

By the interview's end, Aurora was certain. “Did I like living with a host family? Not necessarily. Did I learn a lot about how to live with other people? Yes. Did I reaffirm some truths about myself? Also, yes.” She laughed, “I’m tired of people being mad at me in my house.” For someone whose story revolved around careful edits and slightly redacted copies, this was perhaps the closest thing to a straight answer we got all afternoon.

Not Quite The Foreigner They Expected

Bio. Chris (he/him) is a queer Italian American and Jewish man from New York, USA. He spent a year on a Fulbright in South Korea, after earlier host experiences. In Korea, he moved through more than one host-family placement before settling with a middle-class family he came to call his parents and brothers: a mom who loved books, a dad who worked long hours, and sons who shared games, and everyday teasing with him. He stayed in their home for roughly an academic year, sleeping in a small bedroom off the main living space and eating most dinners with the family while slowly learning their routines. Over time he began sharing more of himself with them, first with his host mom, whose shelves of feminist and lesbian books signaled a kind of safety, and later with his host dad from a distance when he was ready to introduce his boyfriend.

Relation to Researcher. No previous relation.

Story. Chris's story is less about a single coming out moment and more about how a self-proclaimed fat, queer, Italian American and Jewish New Yorker becomes both hosted and host. He becomes folded into a Korean family that claims him as a son while he quietly builds queer kinship and infrastructure for another Fulbright in and beyond Korea. Chris, despite his differences, made community building his dedicated intention.

Chris completed a fourteen-month Fulbright grant in South Korea, teaching English at a science high school while living with a series of host families. His story is less about a single coming out moment, but rather of overlapping visibilities. By the time he arrived in Korea, he already understood himself as a fat, queer, Italian American and Jewish New Yorker who had spent most of his life navigating Catholic schools, interfaith family dynamics, and the slow process of finding queer language and community. Those layers did not disappear when he stepped into his host family's home; instead, different parts of himself became more or less visible depending on who was looking and from where. At different moments, his body, Jewishness, and sexuality each became the primary lens through which others understood him. His story exemplifies how host families and host spaces do not simply receive whole people; they selectively illuminate particular identities. Listening back to our conversation, I was struck by how little of Chris's energy was spent "figuring out who he was." Rather than an inward

search for identity, his story centers on the relational work of moving through spaces where others held assumptions about him while seeking out relationships that allowed for more expansive and accurate recognition.

From the outset, he was marked by many Koreans as non-normative to what they expected for a US American. The school anticipated receiving a ‘stereotypical 'American English teacher with straight hair and a lighter complexion. In practice, their first clear reaction was to his age, body, and appearance. On the drive from the training site to the town of his placement, his head of department received a call from the family who had originally agreed to host him, informing her that they were backing out. As Chris recalls, they had imagined “a young boy who could, like, hang out with our kids,” and what they saw in his application photo instead was “like a grown ass man… this man has a beard”. They ultimately decided they “can’t take that risk” with their daughter and complained directly to him that his application photo was “an ugly picture”. The family next door agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to take him in while a longer-term solution was found.

That interim family became his first experience of being hosted in Korea, and it quickly revealed how central his body would be to daily life. Chris describes the household as intensely fatphobic in ways that felt less like cultural curiosity and more like constant scrutiny, “They would be like; you eat too much. Or they had a scale next to the dinner table so we could weigh ourselves after we ate. And I was like; This doesn't seem cultural. This seems abusive”. In this host family relationship where Chris expected warmth and mutual learning, his body becomes a shared project that was watched, weighed, and commented on. In that process, queerness was not what was foregrounded. Before he was anything else, he was the big foreign man whose eating and weight needed to be managed. He was intensely surveilled and monitored. For Chris, this first host was as much about negotiating how others engaged his body than about language or cultural adaptation. It also reminds us that not every discomfort is “cultural difference”. Sometimes, harm is endured to avoid offending those offering shelter and food, especially while vulnerable in an unfamiliar intercultural environment or a new country.

His Jewishness emerges as another axis of intense visibility, particularly in his interactions with his head English teacher, an older Christian woman who supervises his work

and plays a significant role in his institutional hosting. She is fascinated by Judaism as a kind of idealized educational subject. Chris recounts how she would tell him that Fiddler on the Roof was her favorite film and ask detailed questions about yeshiva schools and Talmud study methods, citing Korean documentaries that portray Jewish chavrutas—classmates paired up to debate topics, as Chris explained—as the key to intellectual success. For her, he is not just an English teacher; he is proclaimed, "the first Jew" she has met, and specifically "a half one… working under me". When he cannot perform the expertise she expects, since Chris attended Catholic school rather than yeshiva, she starts questioning whether he is "really Jewish" at all. She determines Chris's options for identity.

In those exchanges, host-like care (interest, curiosity, a desire to learn) slides into a kind of appropriation. Chris becomes a living conduit for a fantasy about Judaism that circulates in Korean educational discourse. His identity was therefore entering a cultural conversation that existed before him, shaped by educational narratives and assumptions he had not created and could not fully control. Chris's experience also demonstrates that identity negotiation was not only something done to him. He had to continually navigate, resist, and make sense of the identities others assigned to him. His Jewish identity was welcomed as a resource *as long as* it matched that fantasy; when it did not, his authenticity was up for debate. The experience leaves Chris with an uneasy awareness that being recognized can sometimes depend on whether one matches the version of an identity that others already expect to see. Again, queerness is not the defining feature of this interaction. He is being hosted, but also used as a symbol of something larger than himself. He is valued less for who he is than for what others imagine he represents.

Although, sexuality surfaces more directly and more awkwardly. On his second day at the school, this same supervisor asks him outright if he is gay. Chris remembers freezing as she filled the silence herself: "so I'll take that as a yes," she concluded, quickly adding that it was "not that I don't like that, it's just, you know, Jesus disapproves of that lifestyle". Rather than offering a simple confession or denial, he reframed the encounter as an employment boundary: he told her that:

> [In the United States] it's illegal for like, your employer to ask you your sexuality… that's a really big like, taboo, like culturally" defending his pause. She adjusted just enough to say, "[I] just won't say bad things about gay people around you".

This small moment contains much of the tension that shapes his host experience. Chris is both hyper visible and partially illegible: his colleagues sense some form of difference, but they do not have the language or structural norms to engage it as anything other than a moral problem or a curiosity. He, in turn, deflects on other scripts like labor law and professional ethics to protect himself. Disclosure is not some heroic moment but this constant, delicate calibration of what can be said in spaces that control his job, housing, and visa. It is also deeply learned; before he lands in South Korea, he has spent years rehearsing which parts of himself can safely appear where.

The story shifts when he finally moves into the host family who will become his lasting home in Korea. They are a couple in their forties with two young sons. His host mother speaks multiple languages and studied at Ewha Woman's University during the 1990s, participating in women's movements and encountering early LGBT activism. On his first tour of the apartment, she shows him the room he will be using and casually gestures to the bookshelf, inviting him to borrow anything. He notices quickly "a shelf of lesbian novels," likely "the largest lesbian literature collection in this city in English," which she casually dismisses with "oh, from my Women's Studies days".

Even with this clear signal of queer-affirming politics, Chris does not rush to come out. Chris had past experiences where people where dependent on him when he was a host brother to Matteo and Chris, his former exchange siblings from Spain and Ireland. They taught him to be cautious about "testing" relationships on which his basic safety and housing rely. This advice in mind, he lives with the family for about a month before finally telling his host mom he is gay. Her reaction is not shock but exasperation that he waited so long: "I can't believe it, you've been living here for a month, and you haven't come out to me. Did you think that I'd be like?" she asks, genuinely hurt. For her, his silence read as a lack of trust in the intimacy they had built. Her assumption was disclosure meant trust. For him, it had been an act of risk management.

Once the disclosure is made, however, the host home becomes qualitatively different from any other space in his Korean life. His host mom becomes someone he can talk to about "the crushes that I had," even on the colleague who shows up to teach in a shirt that says, "rent boy". She also pushes him toward fuller integration as family. Years after his grant ends, when he plans a return trip with a boyfriend he has been dating for two years, he worries aloud about

whether it will be acceptable to bring a male partner to stay in their home. Her response is unequivocal: "'You're family, of course, you're staying with us,'" she tells him, joking that "'my son's coming home and he's bringing a boy like, this is great'".

His host father, despite not being a brawly farmer, was from a region locally framed as tough "farmer man". This had crossed Chris' mind when thinking about the response his host father might elicit in regard to his queerness. However, the host father responds similarly to the host mother when Chris comes out to him by video call before the visit. Rather than theology or policy, he offers kinship: "You're my son. I'm happy if you're happy. I can't wait to meet this boy". In those responses, the host family relationship exceeds temporary hospitality. It becomes a durable and impactful kinship tie that can absorb new information about sexuality without withdrawing care. The disclosure does not redefine the relationship; it confirms its capacity to accommodate new forms of knowing without diminishing care.

Chris's sense of being held in Korea, however, does not rest solely on this household. Parallel to his family relationships, he participates in an LGBTQ Fulbright Facebook group where queer grantees across the country share concerns, advice, and small pieces of themselves they cannot always voice in their host communities. For some, especially those in straight relationships or with more ambiguous gender presentations, simply being in that group is the only place where their queerness is recognized. As Chris puts it, "at least I feel seen in that way, and I can talk through that". Later, he is asked to give a talk to a new cohort of LGBTQ+ Fulbright'ers and deliberately crowdsources short videos from other "LGBTQIA+ Fulbright alumni who lived in Korea". In his own words, he recognizes the existence and importance of multiple coexisting, and sometimes contradicting, truths. He says, "I can't give advice that's just like being me… there are so many other ways of being queer in Korea, especially if you're Korean".

Chris does similar connective work with future Fulbright'ers and even me. He circulates opportunities and, in doing so, confirms my suspicion that he has shared news of my study widely among his own peers. Beyond my gratitude, what stands out is how intentional his community-building labor is. As both participant and informal mentor, Chris experiences queer peer networks as another form of hosting. He is not necessarily hosting people in a single

physical host space (like a home or institution); instead, he engages in a more metaphorical and symbolic form of hosting. These networks become a mobile community that can hold and affirm parts of him that institutional and neighborhood spaces cannot. At the same time, he helps to sustain that community by hosting others, welcoming them in, sharing resources, and making space for their stories, even as they collectively host him in return.

What struck me was that Chris rarely tried to correct every assumption. Reflecting on his experience, he told me, *"I just felt empowered and lucky that there were folks that cared to like be vulnerable with me and listen to me and see me for who I am"*. Chris shows how connection can be more than finding the best host family match. Throughout Korea, different people believed they already knew him: a family who saw a risk, neighbors who saw his body, a teacher who saw Judaism, colleagues who quietly assumed he was gay, and a host mother who wished he had trusted her sooner. None of those readings captured the whole person, yet each shaped the relationships available to him. Visibility was never singular. Chris was rarely seen all at once, especially across cultures. Instead, he moved through overlapping communities that each recognized different pieces of him.

What ultimately made those experiences survivable was not that every assumption disappeared, but that no single assumption defined his entire experience. His host mother embraced his sexuality, queer Fulbright networks recognized experiences that could not always be spoken elsewhere, and the infrastructure he intentionally cultivated allowed him to move between spaces where different parts of himself could be understood. What made Korea livable for Chris was not finally becoming fully legible to everyone, but finding (and helping build) a community where the pieces could exist together.

Reflecting B(l)ack on Queerness

Bio. Felipe (él – he/him) is a Black gay Colombian man whose first host-family experiences came as a teenager in the Youth Ambassadors Program. Around age 15 he stayed with U.S. host families in big cities, staying in suburban houses where he had a small bedroom, rode school buses, and took part in family dinners where his hosts were eager to hear about his life and country. Rules about curfews, chores, and schoolwork were clear, and living rooms and kitchens became the main stages where he performed being a "good" guest. Later, in Mexico on a youth leadership program, he stayed with another host family of parents and children in a modest home. He again followed the family's routines around meals, church or community events, and shared spaces.

Relation to Researcher. Previous colleague from a youth exchange nonprofit. We worked together remotely for about three years, with frequent meetings and a close team dynamic. We met several times in person. Since I left the role, we stayed lightly connected through former coworker chats and social media.

Story. When Felipe reflects on his time as a Youth Ambassador, he often describes the version of himself that host families met as incomplete. It was a filtered version of himself to be a "good" guest and to protect himself from harm. It was a careful curation of his most tolerable attributes. He was fifteen when he participated in the U.S. State Department's Youth Ambassadors program, living with one host family in Seattle and another in Harlem, New York City. He was a very tall 15-year-old Afro-Colombian gay kid—standing out for more than one reason. Nonetheless, when he talks about those families now, his memories are warm and certain. Both homes, he tells me, were "very loving and caring and welcoming," and he remembers feeling "truly like a part of their families." The exchange worked, in many ways, exactly as it was intended: he was welcomed, incorporated, and treated with care.

But the person those families welcomed was navigating an intense internal negotiation. At the time, Felipe was deeply closeted. "I was in the closet, and I was in a very profound denial of my identity and who I was," he told me. He remembers actively trying to fix what he felt inside, while simultaneously dating a girlfriend. "I was aware of this [same sex] attraction… deep inside of me it was there. I was just very actively trying to repress it… telling myself, like,

‘Hey, this is just a phase… if I just keep dating girls or acting such a way, it’s going to pass’… that’s who I was when I was a YA,” he said simply.

In the host homes, this struggle didn’t appear as visible conflict. Instead, it was more of an internal battle and there was motivation to not rock the boat. He was polite, careful, respectful. Looking back, he simply wanted “to just be like a really good guest”, what many exchange programs quietly reward. Despite social and programmatic expectations, Felipe was still learning about himself. Although he had some awareness of his queerness, he was not ready for it to enter the conversation. Social and programmatic expectations, combined with his own stage of personal maturation and the fact that he was dating a girlfriend, meant that coming out was not yet part of his exchange experience. Yet this did not mean that questions of identity were absent. Even without being spoken aloud, he was still negotiating his sense of self internally. He was observing, reflecting, and registering moments that would leave an impression and resurface decades later as he made sense of his queer identity.

However, what shaped this internal negotiation was not the host families themselves, but with his peers. When Felipe reflects back, switching to Spanish to clarify this point, “Era algo mucho más relevante en mi interacción con mis compañeros de YA que con las familias,” he told me. This meant his negotiation of identity was something much more relevant in his interactions with fellow participants than with host families. This comment was a greater reminder of the various communities where identity negotiation takes place on an intercultural exchange and how different factors could impact the hierarchy of priority.

One story he shared illustrates this dynamic clearly. During a group museum visit, the participants encountered a painting with the subtitle “The Greatest Homosexual.” The dedication on the artwork happened to be to someone named John. In their group, there was also a boy named John, and when someone read the subtitle out loud, everyone instinctively turned toward him. What started as joking quickly shifted into embarrassment and tension. John became visibly upset and stopped talking to people for several days afterward. Comments about him had already circulated, teasing him for acting “feminine” and using a tote bag over his shoulder. For Felipe, the moment landed heavily. The incident demonstrated that surveillance did not require an official authority figure. The participants themselves were watching one another, interpreting

gender expression, identifying who seemed to deviate from expectations, and turning those observations into social consequences. For Felipe, watching what happened to John became a form of information about what might happen to him. It confirmed something he had already been sensing there is possible danger and unwanted attention from coming out.

Those interactions with peers did not stay confined to the cohort itself. “I feel like those kinds of things just made me feel like it was definitely not the space to even consider stopping the repression,” he told me. “If anything, it probably made the repression even worse.” They followed him into the host homes. The fear of being perceived in the same way, or becoming the next target of jokes, shaped how Felipe moved through the entire exchange experience. Even within loving households, he remained careful about what he revealed. What if those host parents talked with the host parents of another Youth Ambassador? That information could easily make its way back to his peers or even his own family back in Colombia. The possibility mattered even without evidence that anyone would actually share the information. Because the host families, peers, program staff, and family members were connected through the same exchange network, Felipe could not treat disclosure in one setting as belonging only to that setting. Information had the potential to travel across relationships, carrying the consequences of one interaction into another. It revealed how intertwined the identity negotiation within the host family bled into broader programmatic communities, and vice versa. The information shared with these communities overlaps and impacts each other.

In hindsight, Felipe suspects that his host families wouldn’t have had an issue with his queer identity. “Now that I look back,” he said, “a part of me kind of feels that if I had been open with the families, they would have accepted me.” But at fifteen, he could not imagine that possibility. “I came to the exchange with all the preconceived ideas of like, being gay is wrong that I already bring from Colombia and my home,” he explained. Those ideas were then quietly reinforced by the attitudes he saw among his fellow participants. He was still figuring it all out, and silence felt safer everywhere.

At the same time, Felipe was negotiating another more visible identity during the exchange: his Blackness. This identity surfaced particularly strongly during his time with his Harlem host family. His Black host mother worked at a library dedicated to African American

history and brought him along a few times. He vividly remembered the powerful and positive impact that family had on him. Those visits at the library opened conversations about race that were inspiring, but also very disorienting. People he met there would sometimes ask him a question that he had rarely been asked so directly before, “How can you be Latino and Black?”

The question forced him to grapple with something he had spent much of his childhood distancing himself from. The question did not simply ask Felipe to describe himself; it reflected a particular racial vocabulary through which Blackness and Latinidad were being organized in the U.S. context. An identity that had been difficult for Felipe to claim at home was being made newly visible (and newly legible) in a different national setting. Rather than resolving the tension, the experience gave Felipe a new language through which to understand an identity he had previously experienced as complicated or even burdensome. In the United States, Blackness and Latinidad could be positioned differently than they had been in Colombia, requiring him to reconsider not only how others saw him but how he understood himself. That process of reconsideration also brought him back to the experiences that had first taught him to distance himself from his Blackness. Growing up, Felipe had often been targeted for both his Blackness and his femininity. “Both things were always used against me,” he explained. As a result, he learned to create distance from those parts of himself. Years later, he would come to describe his life as involving two different coming-out processes. “I always say that I had to come out of the closet twice,” he told me. “First as a Black man and then second as a gay person.”

For Felipe, claiming Black identity openly was its own kind of declaration. “When I was able to say, ‘I’m Black and I’m proud of it,’ that was my coming out as a Black person.” Only later did his sexual identity follow a similar path. The two stories, however, unfolded alongside each other in complicated ways. The same childhood bullying that targeted his Blackness often targeted his femininity as well. Race and sexuality were never truly separate categories in his life; they were intertwined forms of visibility and vulnerability.

Even as Felipe navigated these questions during the exchange, another layer of negotiation was happening through digital communication. Physical distance did not mean emotional distance from home. Like many teenagers traveling abroad for the first time, he remained deeply connected to his family through his phone, especially through WhatsApp and

Facebook. Those digital spaces blurred the spatiality of home and host. You could engage with both at the same time.

Eventually, that digital connection would also become the site of one of the most dramatic moments of his coming-out story. While participating in a later youth leadership program in Mexico, now 21-year-old Felipe received a message from his mother asking about a name she had found in his WhatsApp messages—his boyfriend at the time. Without realizing it, he had left WhatsApp Web open on a shared computer back home. His mother had seen the conversation. "I didn't know my mom knew WhatsApp Web existed," he laughed. We laughed together on how we related to this mutual lack of privacy that Colombian mothers can be known for, "Muy mamá colombiana. No respect for privacy." But the moment itself was terrifying. Thousands of miles away, in the middle of a new international program, Felipe found himself suddenly forced to answer a question he had been avoiding for years. So, he did. "I told her, 'Yes, I am gay. I like guys. I have a boyfriend.' And I said that I was tired of hiding, because the only reason I was doing it was to protect her, but in the process, I was hurting myself." He remembers viscerally crying all night; but this time, it was his cohort of peers who supported and comforted him through the pain. Now again, but with a positive twist, it was his community of peers that remained the site of emotional labor, and not the host family.

The next morning, his mother sent him a text message, "My son, I love you. God bless you." Felipe cried when he read it. Looking back now, he interprets that moment differently than he might have at 21 years old. Time mattered. What he once experienced as fear of rejection, he now understands partly as fear for his safety. His mother, he realized later, was not trying to reject him. She was worried about the harm he might face. More unexpectedly, Felipe was negotiating his identity not with the host family he was staying with in Mexico, but with his mother in Colombia as physical boundaries blurred through virtual opportunities.

Over time, the same exchange spaces where Felipe once felt the need to hide became places where he would eventually step into leadership. Years after his Youth Ambassador experience, he returned to these programs as a facilitator and coordinator of youth camps and exchange programs. The memory of how isolating parts of his own exchange had felt shaped how he now approached that work. "The fifteen-year-old version of me would have loved if the

exchange had been a safe space," he told me. "For me, it really wasn't." So, it became his professional goal to make the exchanges he worked for 'truly safe spaces'.

In the programs he managed, Felipe became increasingly vocal about diversity, inclusion, and identity. In one moment, that he remembers vividly, he addressed a room full of YMCA leaders and executives, introducing himself clearly and deliberately: "I am a Black and gay youth leader." He explained that he did not say it because he felt obligated to disclose his identity. He said it because he knew that naming it publicly could shift institutional priorities. His disclosure moved beyond personal visibility and became an intervention into institutional space. He was not only telling others who he was, but challenging the organization to reconsider whose experiences its programs were designed to recognize. In this sense, identity became a resource through which Felipe could exercise agency within an institution. Rather than simply adapting himself to the organization, he used his position to make other possibilities of participation more visible. By speaking those words in that room, he hoped to make inclusion impossible to ignore.

When I look back over my field notes from our conversation, what stands out most is how carefully Felipe frames disclosure—not as authenticity versus hiding, but as strategy. And this strategy was not isolated to one site (the host family) but layered among many sites (peers, work, and home). At fifteen, he became attuned to his agency through silence by learning how stillness and pause (non-disclosure) could function as a way of moving through environments that felt uncertain, unsafe, or not yet fully intelligible. At the same time, he was also coming into an awareness of race, navigating how it was read and negotiated across different settings. Queerness, however, unfolded more quietly and less through the host family context but more through proximity to peers. Among peers, queer discovery existed as an indirect, internal process of noticing, sensing, and imagining rather than something explicitly named or acted upon.

In that sense, the host family experience was never simply a place where he could or could not be queer. It was one piece of a much larger process of becoming. The version of himself that those families welcomed may not have included everything he was still learning about himself. But it was real nonetheless: a teenager negotiating race, sexuality, belonging, and safety across countries, households, and digital spaces all at once. And, like many exchange students before him, he was doing it while trying very, very hard to be a "good" guest.

I Know My Name(s)

Bio. Kelsey/Amé (she/her) is a white queer woman from the United States who served in the Peace Corps in Botswana. She first lived with a training host family that helped her learn basic Setswana and village rhythm. Then she moved in with a longer-term household led mostly by women and girls where she stayed for about two years. Her days there centered on shared chores, walks to school, and afternoon chats in the yard. She started a Zumba club that brought host sisters and neighbors together to dance in a borrowed space. The house felt both familiar and exposed: full of warmth and everyday joking, but also shaped by Christian expectations that reminded her of her own LDS upbringing. She felt fully authentic, while cautious of how she presented herself.

Relation to Researcher. No previous relation.

Story. Kelsey served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana in her twenties, arriving with an identity she believed she understood. She entered service identifying as a practicing Latter Day Saint while also understanding she was bisexual. She was in a long-term relationship with a straight male partner, but during her time in Botswana she came to identify as a lesbian. She lived first with a training host family before spending two years with another host family in a rural village, where she became known by her Setswana name, Amé. Throughout service, she moved among several overlapping worlds: her host family and neighbors, fellow volunteers, local friends, other villages, and eventually the United States she would return to as a more complex person.

Although this chapter centers on host family relationships, Kelsey's story also illustrates that people rarely arrive in those relationships untouched. Decisions made within the home are shaped by a much larger host environment: neighbors, religion, Peace Corps policies, cohort dynamics, previous identities, future expectations, and imagined audiences back home. Long before someone considers disclosing something to a host family, these overlapping relationships began shaping what felt possible to share and the consequences that may follow.

Kelsey entered Botswana believing bisexuality best described her experiences. Yet her story is not simply about coming out abroad. Instead, it reveals how intercultural exchange can

produce multiple, overlapping selves that coexist rather than replace one another. Amé was not simply Kelsey pretending to be someone else, nor was Kelsey waiting underneath for the real version to emerge. Both identities became genuine responses to different relationships, expectations, and ways of moving through the world.

Before Peace Corps, Kelsey had already spent years navigating an environment where queerness felt difficult to imagine, let alone explore. She remembered, "I grew up very much not in... a safe space for queer people... I didn't have the space to explore my identity or even risk identities that I wasn't familiar with or comfortable with". When she arrived in Botswana, however, she found something unexpected: distance. Not necessarily freedom, but enough distance to begin experiencing the other possible versions of self. Importantly, Kelsey describes this distance as operating in two distinct ways. The first was personal isolation. Living alone in a rural village meant long stretches of quiet where no one expected anything of her. The second was cultural isolation. Although Botswana remained deeply Christian, it was not her Christianity. Removed from the constant expectations of Mormon culture, she found room to reconsider both faith and sexuality. She explained:

> The isolation of Peace Corps gave me the space to be like, "I think I figured out a really big thing that's going to detour my entire life." ... The cultural isolation from Mormonism... it still ended up being the space that I'm like, "I'm free to figure out I'm gay.

There is a quiet irony here. Overgeneralizing, Botswana was not objectively "safer" for queer people than the United States. Yet the distance it created from the life she had always known permitted her to begin imagining another version of herself.

Discovering this identity did not mean immediately sharing it. Like many volunteers, Kelsey understood that authenticity and disclosure were not always synonymous. Even before she arrived in Botswana, she had this mentality of, "I want to do this thing. I want to travel. If I got to put [being queer] away for a while, I can do that." Her host family was only one audience among many. Her neighbors, fellow volunteers, church communities in the US, and village expectations all formed part of the environment she was navigating. Within that environment, withholding parts of herself was not necessarily about shame. It was often about protecting

relationships she genuinely valued. Her host siblings, for example, frequently hoped and asked her if she was religious. She recalled their words, "[they] would be like, 'Amé, you're a Christian, right? Because we don't want you to go to hell.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, okay... I'm a Christian'. Rather than seeing this as an opportunity for cultural exchange, Kelsey recognized that disclosure would likely cause sadness rather than understanding in her younger host siblings, "As much as I love cultural exchange, this was not the place for me to show you the real me... I think it would just depress my siblings that I was going to hell". Interestingly, Kelsey later tested these waters in much smaller ways. Rather than disclosing directly, she mentioned having "a gay friend" simply to understand how her host mother might respond. Her rationale was, "I'll never tell you [I'm gay], but I'll feel some comfort knowing that you don't hate all gay people". Her goal was not disclosure. It was testing the waters. Reassurance. Even partial acceptance mattered.

At the same time, Kelsey's experience was shaped by privilege. She repeatedly reflected that queerness was rarely the first thing people saw. "Being a white woman in this village in Botswana was the most important thing about me". Because she was read as a straight US American woman, she often did not have to actively conceal her sexuality. Her experience is an example of how visibility is not distributed evenly across identities: her whiteness and Americanness could make her sexuality less legible, while simultaneously making her highly legible as a particular kind of foreigner. In other words, the relative invisibility of her sexuality did not mean that she moved through the village without being noticed or interpreted. She was highly visible in some ways and relatively invisible in others, depending on which aspects of her identity mattered most within a particular interaction.

She continued, "There was very little work on my part... people weren't suspecting anything from me". Even after breaking up with her boyfriend, she continued referring to him as her partner because that story had become part of the social infrastructure protecting her. "I have established this as like a safety net... I have to maintain this identity and this story". Rather than viewing this simply as performing heterosexuality, Kelsey understood it as strategically inhabiting a role that provided safety. Like many participants throughout this study, she recognized both the privilege attached to that role and her willingness to use it.

Yet one of the most fascinating aspects of her story is that even Amé was never a single identity. In her own village, neighbors imagined Amé as a future wife. Men pursued her, coworkers joked she would marry locally, and queerness was rarely projected onto her. One coworker confidently assured her: "I have the best gaydar... you're into men... you're going to marry a local man". Her response, "great." The humor captures something important: Kelsey realized she barely had to perform heterosexuality because everyone was already doing that work for her. Yet when she traveled to other towns, something shifted. Local queer women often immediately recognized something different, "They're like, 'So... you got a girlfriend?" Kelsey shared how local people made their assumptions, '... I feel like local queer people were like, 'Oh... an American? There's like a 50-50 chance she's gay". The contrast is notable. The same woman, in the same country, was interpreted entirely differently depending on who was looking. There was not simply one Amé. There was village Amé, traveling Amé, cohort Kelsey where Amé surely had influence, and the Kelsey waiting at home. Rather than replacing one another, these selves accumulated. They overlapped, contradicted each other, and occasionally met in surprising ways.

One place where these identities came together was Zumba. Ironically, Kelsey describes feeling most authentic not while discussing sexuality but while teaching dance. She was not revealing every part of herself, yet she also did not feel dishonest. She was fully inhabiting a part of herself that genuinely belonged in that relationship. As she reflected through lyrics from Sleeping at Last, "Even if my family at home doesn't know [I'm gay], and my family here doesn't know [I'm gay] ... I know my name. I know me". Authenticity, her story suggests, may not always require complete disclosure. Sometimes authenticity comes from fully inhabiting whichever part of us a relationship genuinely invites. It is this previous sentence that later brought Kelsey answers while reviewing this manuscript during the revision process. In email correspondence, she said,

> [That sentence you wrote regarding authenticity is] one of my favorite lines you write, and honestly answers questions that I've still been juggling since returning home.

Returning home ultimately produced another identity negotiation. Before Peace Corps, Kelsey feared how they would manage their identity in this culture where they were an outsider. By the

end of service, she feared returning home for exactly the same reason. "I'm stressed about going home because of identity... which is so crazy because it was the opposite at the beginning". Botswana had watched Amé emerge. Her cohort knew a newly out lesbian. Her host siblings knew a devoted Christian daughter. Home, meanwhile, still expected the devout Kelsey who had left. None of these communities were wrong. They simply knew different layers of the same person.

Rather than asking which version of Kelsey was the real one, her story instead invites a different question. Perhaps authenticity is not found through uncovering the most authentic version of our self-buried beneath layers of performance. Perhaps, we can learn how different, genuine selves can coexist across worlds. The Kelsey who arrived in Botswana as a practicing Latter Day Saint, the Amé who became a daughter and teacher in her village, the queer North American clocked in the street, and the person who eventually returned home were not competing selves waiting to replace one another. They emerged through different relationships, constraints, and possibilities.

Kelsey's story reveals that identity is not simply discovered through freedom; sometimes it emerges through distance, uncertainty, and the limits of what feels possible. Botswana did not remove the expectations surrounding her—it rearranged them, creating space for new possibilities without erasing the relationships, faith, and identities that came before. Her journey is not a linear movement from concealment to disclosure, or from one identity to another, but an ongoing negotiation of how multiple truths can coexist. Different communities know different parts of her, and those partial understandings do not diminish the whole. Across time and place, Kelsey and Amé continue to hold together identities that sometimes align and sometimes contradict. They remind us that authenticity is not the absence of contradiction, rather the ability to recognize oneself across it. As I interview Kelsey and Amé, two selves in one body, they re-emphasize: "I know my name."

Closet Whiplash and Rainbow Underwear

Bio. Molly (she/her) is a bisexual woman from Iowa, USA who served in the Peace Corps in Tanzania. Her story centers on her relationship with her host mama and brothers. During training, she lived for three months, all adults. At her permanent workstation, she now lives independently. Nonetheless, she keeps on contact with her host mama and visits occasionally.

Relation to Researcher. No prior relation.

Story. Molly's story is fascinating and really empowered me to think about visibility, safety, and being true to yourself. She captures the emotional labor of being queer in the Peace Corps — the accelerations, the contractions, the constant switching of gears between hiding and being known. She is still an active volunteer, about a year into her service in Tanzania, though at the time of our interview she was temporarily evacuated to South Africa. At the time of this interview, she was living in two hostels with other volunteers while awaiting a return to site in just a few days. The evacuation only lasted a few weeks, but it introduced a limbo: a sense of holding her breath until she can return to the relationships she built. She described it as "hovering," caught between two lives: the village she had grown into and the temporary world of waiting.

Molly is from rural Iowa. Before college, she didn't know she was queer because queerness felt so stigmatized and so unseen in her environment that it didn't register as a possibility. At the university, things loosened; "nobody cared," she explained, and by junior year she came out as bi/pansexual. College became the first place she truly built a queer community and a queer self.

Right after graduating, Molly applied to the Peace Corps while dating a girlfriend. When still preparing to apply, she asked current Peace Corps volunteers for guidance about serving as a queer volunteer. She was told things like "everyone hides something in community," collapsing queerness into an ordinary secret rather than a criminalized identity with profound stakes. So, Molly told her Peace Corps interviewer that she wanted to go anywhere to be of most service "as long as she could be out." Months later, she was offered a position and placed in Tanzania, a

country where same-sex relationships are highly criminalized. This mismatch signaled early how uneven and sometimes careless institutional safety frameworks can be for queer volunteers: reminders of illegality are constant, but meaningful protection is rare. She later told me that the early contradiction of being told to hide, while being assured, she'd be "fine", set the emotional tone of her service.

Once in-country, Molly quickly learned that cultural codes function differently. She joked, "I wasn't in the closet. My community was in the closet," meaning people around her often didn't interpret her gender presentation or rainbow items as queer at all. She also carried privileges tied to her foreignness, such as being one of the only female teachers who wear pants. "Normal teachers don't, but you can," colleagues told her. Within this, she played with gender expression in new ways. Before Peace Corps, she had been exploring masculinity, short hair, and androgyny. But in Tanzania, she found herself growing in both and becoming a more complete version of herself. Along local women, she rediscovered a femininity that felt strong and self-defined in acts like nail painting with friends. She said it simply: Peace Corps helped her "find herself" in a way she didn't expect.

A major part of this grounding came from her host family. For the first three months, she lived with one host mama and two host brothers. She described the terror of the early days. Peace Corps had instructed families not to speak English, which was overwhelming, until her host mama advocated for her joking, "She needs English!" They laughed together. Their evenings of cooking together became the relational core of her early months. "We would cook every night, and I got so close to her," she said. That house, its kitchen smells and nightly routines, became the emotional center of her service.

Yet inside this warmth lived the constant strain of performing two lies: being straight and being religious. Peace Corps had advised her to say she was religious whether or not she was. This meant attending church every Sunday for three to four hours and feeling the tension of being loved deeply by someone who still didn't know her fully. She regretted the instruction immediately. "I would rather have those hard conversations," she said. "Otherwise, I'm building a relationship around a person who doesn't really exist."

During this time, she held onto tiny acts of queer self-preservation. Her "rainbow underwear" came up several times because the underwear mattered and represented an inside joke with herself. Various people associated with Peace Corps had warned against displaying rainbows due to the possible connotation with queerness. But for Molly, they were a subtle, hidden affirmation. She intentionally brought them to make herself happy. But on the very first week, her host mama did her laundry. Suddenly the rainbows were out in the open. Molly said nothing happened. There was no comment, no confrontation, no disruption in the relationship. "She found them the first week and I was scared half to death," she laughed. Yet the fear surrounding those small objects was shaped by more than the possibility of her host mother's reaction.

Like all guests, Molly had entered the household carrying predisposed stories about what Tanzania meant for queer people, what her host family might understand, and what she would need to conceal in order to remain safe. Those stories had been shaped not only by her own experiences, but by Peace Corps guidance and by the unequal histories through which American volunteers and Tanzanian communities are brought together. The imagined host family therefore arrived before the actual host family: Molly had already been given expectations about what her hosts might see, what they might fear, and what she should keep hidden. At the same time, she could not know whether her host mama understood the rainbow symbols in the way Molly or Peace Corps imagined. What felt like a potentially consequential act of disclosure to Molly may have carried an entirely different meaning on the other side of the relationship. The same happened with her rainbow plushie and her tattoos. To her, this non-response meant the symbols were not "registered." And while that may not capture every layer of perception at play, it remains true that nothing in her relational world shifted. Silence became its own form of everyday coexistence. These objects (the underwear, plushies, and tattoos) became micro-affirmations, pieces of visibility she built for herself when fuller visibility was dangerous. "They didn't always understand it," she said, "but it kept me going."

The most powerful moment of queer recognition in her narrative came from her language trainer during her first months of pre-service training. He told the class that queer people exist in Tanzania and that they are "really cool people," quietly opening a door that Peace Corps insisted should stay shut. Molly approached him privately and came out. His reaction was warm, even

celebratory; then, it was followed by the sober reminder: “Don’t tell anyone else.” For Molly, this was one of the very first times she felt truly seen in-country. They now share a mutual, silent recognition: a secret held between them that gives Molly a profound sense of connection and safety. It was the safest relationship she had, and one Peace Corps protocols explicitly framed as dangerous.

As service progressed, Molly described the emotional toll of being unable to express affection openly. When she called her college girlfriend (and also best friend), she whispered “I love you” so that no one would hear. Whispering love into a phone capture exactly what it means to hide in plain sight: to live with warmth but mute it, to be fully yourself but only at an imperceptible volume. Even calling her girlfriend required care like the whispered “I love you,” the fear that the walls were thinner than she hoped.

Because she could not share queerness in her community, she became more open with other U.S. volunteers. She described it as doing it more than she normally would to make up for what she lacked with her host family. Molly craved authenticity in her closest relationships. She explained that if she didn’t have other queer volunteers to talk to, “it would slip in community,” because if you lock something away too tightly, eventually it pushes out. Not all volunteers were a safe space, and some actively questioned her bisexuality as simple indecisiveness; however, she and other LGBTQ+ volunteers found community. One story centered on how the country director, amidst Molly’s recommendation that queer fear was high among Peace Corps Volunteers in reaction to the peeling back of queer rights and legislation in the past year. She clarified in a later virtual correspondence:

> [Due to changing policy of US presidential transition], Peace Corps had to get rid of most language on LGBTQ+ volunteers, it felt like they were erasing us and in doing so erasing our support.

This was building on a decade of such policy change within US politics. So, the country director decided to organize a secret queer retreat in Dar es Salaam amongst only volunteers. “This was HUGE! . . .three or four days… we just hung out… talked about all the hardships but also the good parts.” Safety for her required release valves: Dar es Salaam weekends, where she could

wear shorts and tank top; private queer gatherings organized by staff when collective fear was strong; little reprieves where she could breathe. She learned that in that moment, safety depended on having a single place where she could be 'whole', even if not everywhere.

Throughout the interview, she described a growing desire to one day come out to her host mama. She hasn't seen her in seven months since she lived with her during training, then moved into her own house at site, and then the evacuation pulled her away. Now, she plans to return soon and hopes to come out in the following weeks. She feels both the risk and the necessity. After two years of love and shared life, she hopes that knowing her might shift her host mother's perceptions of queerness. She said that if her host mama doesn't know the real her, "we don't have a true relationship." **"**For the people who truly matter to me," she added, "it's important they know the whole me." She knows disclosure might rupture things, "and I'm prepared for that". Dishonesty feels like the deeper betrayal.

This ties to the larger theme of safety Molly repeatedly returned to.: safety was not the Peace Corps rules. Safety was not legality. Safety was being seen. Safety was connection. The moments she felt most unsafe were not when queerness could be punished, but when she felt invisible, when no one acknowledged her identity, when she had no outlet to be herself. And the moments she felt most safe were the ones of silent queer recognition: the language trainer, the fellow volunteers, the glimpses of city life where she could wear what she wanted. She defined resilience as "staying true to yourself, even when you're not necessarily out", and she emphasized the importance of hiding joy wherever possible, "rainbows tucked everywhere." "The feeling of being seen is so important," she said. "Them saying 'I *see* you, I *hear* you' . . . it means the world."

The contradiction of being queer in the Peace Corps is that concealment is demanded, but growth still happens. Molly didn't go "back into the closet." She came out, stepped into solitude, and found new parts of herself. She did this all while navigating rules that treated her identity as a liability. The emotional labor was immense, unseen, and continuous. As she put it, hearing "I see you, I hear you" means the world. Yet this desire to be seen also raises questions about whose perspective defines safety. For Molly, visibility was deeply connected to authenticity and belonging. Was her host mother already quietly aware and choosing not to make sexuality a

point of discussion? Or did Molly's assumptions about the risks of disclosure (shaped by Peace Corps guidance, conversations with local queer community members, and her own interpretation of the social environment) fill in gaps that could never be fully verified? None of these possibilities diminish Molly's experience. Rather, they illustrate that decisions about disclosure are made through layers of partial knowledge rather than certainty. Safety is negotiated not only through legal or institutional guidance but also through assumptions about how others will respond: assumptions informed by local expertise, personal experience, or organizational policy that can never fully eliminate uncertainty.

Looking ahead, she expressed fear about returning to Iowa. Tanzania, she says, feels safer in some ways because the culture is not her own, the expectations are external, and she can contextualize them. Iowa is "forever culture," and that permanence feels heavier. She is afraid of being a queer teacher there. There is deep complexity in that she feels safer being queer in a country where it is illegal than in her own home, where there is technically more legal protection, although quickly dwindling. Despite simplicity being painted around queer identity, this reveals just how complex and relational safety truly is. "As of right now, I can't be a teacher in Iowa," she said. "I refuse to out students to parents." What was temporally dangerous in Tanzania feels structurally dangerous in the U.S.: "Instead of moving forward, we're going back." But her conclusion remains clear: "Being true to myself is more important than being a teacher."

Molly's story makes clear: safety is not about invisibility. Safety is about recognition. And sometimes the smallest glimpses — a rainbow waistband, a whispered "I love you," a Swahili teacher's quiet affirmation — carry more protective power than any institutional rule. At its core, Molly's story is about the difference between protection and connection. Visibility matters: even silent visibility, even whispered visibility. It is what kept her whole. Institutional safety, by contrast, was risk management: a system that treats queer volunteers as liabilities rather than relational beings. Molly's lived experience shows the gap between these frameworks. Safety on paper said: hide. Safety in practice said: connect. And sometimes that takes risk to create safety and community when you are queer – it isn't avoidable… it's a prerequisite… like to meet queer people in an unsafe queer place we must choose to *risk* safety a bit where risk can *make* safety, and what seems safe may cause pain/risk…. And as she said, if she can be seen, even by a few, "that means the world."

Molly's story makes clear that safety cannot be reduced to visibility or invisibility alone. For her, safety was not simply the absence of danger, but the presence of recognition: the feeling of being known, understood, and able to express parts of herself. Sometimes those expressions were subtle—a rainbow waistband, a whispered "I love you," a Swahili teacher's quiet affirmation. These moments carried a protective power that institutional rules could not provide because they affirmed that she existed beyond concealment.

This reveals a distinction between safety through protection versus through connection. Institutional safety frameworks often prioritize risk management, encouraging concealment as a way to prevent harm. Molly's lived experience revealed the limitations of that approach. Concealment may have reduced certain risks, but it also created isolation. Connection—through queer volunteers, trusted relationships, and moments of recognition—was what sustained her. Yet connection was never risk-free. Visibility required vulnerability, and vulnerability required uncertainty. This is the paradox of queer safety: the very acts that cultivate belonging may involve risk. Safety and risk do not just oppose; they can coexist. For queer participants entering unfamiliar environments, safety is often created while navigating conditions of uncertainty rather than after those uncertainties disappear. Finding community, expressing identity, and building trust require forms of openness that can create both vulnerability and protection.

Molly's experience complicates who gets to define safety. Peace Corps' guidance, legal frameworks, and institutional policies attempted to identify risk from a distance, but Molly's daily reality was shaped through relationships: a host mother who may or may not understand, a language trainer who quietly recognized her, and queer volunteers who created spaces where she could breathe. The question is not simply whether she should disclose or conceal, but how participants are supported in making those decisions with fuller knowledge, stronger community connections, and strategies informed by those who have navigated similar realities.

Ultimately, Molly's story is not solely about coming out nor staying hidden. It is about the continuous labor of creating a life where pieces of oneself can exist. She carried risk and belonging together, finding safety not through complete protection from uncertainty, but through moments of recognition within it. As she reflected, if even a few people can say, "I see you, I hear you," "it means the world."

Anchors (While) Away

Bio. Logan (he/him) is a queer man from China who traveled to Wisconsin, USA as an international student and later met and settled there with his husband. In China, he connected with a US American tutor and eventually met her family in America. Now living in Wisconsin, the family first invited Logan over for holidays and then began hosting him more regularly. Over time he spent school breaks and long weekends in their house, sleeping in a spare bedroom, helping in the kitchen, and fitting into their routines of dinner, television, and errands. When he was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer, this host family became the center of his daily life off campus, driving him to appointments, staying with him in hospital rooms, and making sure he had a quiet place to recover. As his relationship with his partner deepened, he brought him into that same house, and the hosts welcomed them as another couple in the family rather than temporary guests, turning a host-student arrangement into something much closer to kin.

Relation to Researcher. Joined the marching band as a freshman during my fourth year as trumpet section leader. They were placed in my section, and I served as a mentor. We spent significant time together, including daily practices and rehearsals throughout the year. After I graduated, we stayed connected through social media, occasional alumni band events, and casual conversations.

Story. While disclosing sexuality to a host family can be a major barrier or concern for some, Logan almost never described coming out as difficult. Throughout our interview, he repeatedly compared it to other challenges: moving from China to Wisconsin, navigating college in another language, surviving cancer without his family nearby, building a career while worrying about immigration status. By comparison, coming out was important, but it was not foundational. Near the end of our conversation, he reflected:

> When you have an anchor... when you have some kind of security in terms of job security, in terms of having a partner, having an established relationship, in terms of not needing to worry about immigration... it makes coming out more of... the cherry on top of the cake... yes, it's important, but it's not going to shake the foundation.

That simple metaphor quietly reorganizes the story he tells. Rather than treating disclosure as the beginning of authenticity, Logan understood it as something made possible only after enough of life had become secure.

Long before questions of sexuality emerged in his story, Logan was already searching for somewhere he could build a future. The path to Wisconsin began with an English teacher he met while living in China. As he prepared to apply to universities in the United States, she supported and influenced the selection of his future university, “She printed out [the] entire map of the US," he recalled, "and highlight[ed]... all the major university[s] that [had] great engineering program[s]... Wisconsin was one of those”. The University of Wisconsin-Madison appealed to him academically, socially, and financially; although, another factor mattered just as much, “The only person I knew in the US at the time was this English teacher... that lived in Wisconsin. So, I figured... if something happened, if I need help, at least I know someone [there]”. He did not yet know that this mentorship, and then friendship, would later become the kinship he needed during hardship.

His decision reflected more than academic calculation. It also reflected the kind of community he hoped to build around himself. That imagined community was also shaped by what the United States represented to him from outside it: not simply a destination for education, but a place where a particular kind of future seemed available. His movement was not only across geography, but into an imagined social world whose possibilities were themselves shaped by his position as an international student. Logan intentionally applied only to public universities because he imagined they would be filled with students who, like him, were working toward their futures rather than relying on family wealth. As he explained, “My mentality is more on who I'm going to surround myself with... people who actually work hard trying to pay for their own tuition... I want to get to know more folks who are more down to earth”. Belonging, then, entered Logan's story long before coming out. From the beginning, he was carefully considering where he could imagine building a life and home.

That single connection gradually expanded into something much larger. After his English teacher returned to Wisconsin, her family began inviting Logan to holiday celebrations. As Logan described:

> It wasn't like a formal structure program... Thanksgiving is here. Christmas is here. I'm all by myself in Madison... Her family was very kind to invite me... and that kind of started really for me to build [a] relationship with her family.

As there was no program, nor staff, nor expectations, Logan was able develop a relationship organically through repeated invitations and shared traditions. Although Logan lacked programmatic peers and resources, he had the privilege to negotiate at the pace he wanted.

Only a year after arriving in Wisconsin, however, Logan was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. Suddenly, this informal relationship became something far more consequential. Unable to drive, unfamiliar with the American healthcare system, and separated from his family by an ocean, he found himself relying on the people who had once simply invited him to dinner. Recalling those months, Logan emphasized not grand gestures but ordinary acts of care:

> They will drive [40 miles] all the way from Baraboo to Madison... just not even a mile down the road to the hospital, to take me to chemo treatment and sit there with me for hours and buy me lunch... they helped me take notes [in English] and explain... complex medical terms that makes no sense to an international student.

Their care extended beyond Logan himself. They emailed his mother in China with updates after treatments, sent photographs from family gatherings, and became a reassuring presence during a time when she could not be there herself. Logan laughed while describing one small ritual he developed during chemotherapy. Before Thanksgiving dinner, he would photograph his full plate. Afterwards, he photographed the empty one he shared:

> Chinese mother[s]... worry about if you're eating enough... I'll take photos... before I eat... and then take another photo after I clean the plate. Just to show... I am eating well, that I'm taken care of by my host family.

These moments reveal something larger than generosity. They illustrate how care became transnational, allowing his host family to support not only Logan but also his mother, who was trying to parent across 7,000 miles. Looking back, Logan described their presence as essential not only to surviving cancer but to imagining a future in the United States. Before building his

own family, he explained, "the host family... helped me to see myself being able to have that family support in the US" during years otherwise dominated by immigration uncertainty and professional survival.

Throughout this period, however, queerness remained largely unspoken. Logan was not questioning whether he was gay; he had known that long before moving to the United States. Instead, his attention was directed elsewhere.

> When you were as an immigrant, as an international student... you put a lot of effort to trying to learn the language... trying to fit in... trying to be competitive on a job market... So, a lot of effort pour[ed] into that, not a whole lot on your sexual identity.

His reflection offers an important nuance. Rather than describing the closet primarily as fear or denial, Logan framed it as prioritization. Identity required time, attention, and emotional energy—resources that were already consumed by language acquisition, cultural adaptation, academic performance, employment, immigration, and survival. The work of becoming established often preceded the work of becoming visible.

Although same-sex marriage was already legal in Wisconsin, Logan still described himself as "in a way... closeted". Legal protections alone did not produce confidence. He had never dated a man in another country. He had no experiences to reassure himself that intimacy, partnership, or a shared future were actually possible. "I think a big part of that is lacking confidence... feeling that I'm worthy... you don't know if people will like you or not". Later he would summarize that uncertainty differently, "I feel like I need to prove to myself that... I'm worthy. I can go on that journey". Coming out, then, required more than accepting his sexuality. It required believing that his sexuality could support a future worth imagining. That confidence emerged gradually through community. One important source was the University of Wisconsin Marching Band. Logan intentionally sought relationships outside the Chinese international student community, joining an organization where he knew no one, learning a new instrument, and slowly creating a different social world. "I still remember joining [the] band and trying to find my community in a large college... it was really nice to have the community... to feel like... a smaller group". His decision was deliberate. Reflecting later, Logan recognized that many

Chinese students remain together, “[You] find... psychological safety when you are around people that you're familiar with. I kind of intentionally took a turn to steer away from that”. His choice also revealed how belonging abroad could be shaped by hierarchies that participants themselves might reproduce or resist. Logan was not simply seeking community; he was seeking a particular kind of American student identity; one he understood as distinct from the Chinese international student community around him. Yet his position as a Chinese international student remained one of the very identities through which others understood him.

This decision shaped the kinds of relationships he developed and the social worlds in which he felt most comfortable. Rather than finding belonging through an existing international student community, Logan gradually built a sense of belonging through relationships and activities that made him feel more connected to the broader American university experience. He didn’t reject psychological safety outright. Logan was searching for a different kind of it. Stepping away from cultural familiarity eventually allowed him to discover new communities that expanded, rather than narrowed, the future he could imagine. Within the band he encountered openly queer peers whose everyday lives quietly reshaped his own expectations. "There are a few people in the band that [are] also queer... that helped me to be able to see myself in being out*”.* Representation was not abstract. It provided living evidence that queer adulthood, relationships, and belonging were possible.

Study abroad became another turning point. While in Germany, Logan met a Belgian student who became a serious partner. Looking back, he described the relationship less as romance than as confirmation, “That was... a time when I was... deeply seeking... security... I feel like I need to prove to myself that... I'm worthy”. One friendship illustrates how affirmation often arrived through ordinary moments rather than dramatic declarations. His roommate Allison, who was also queer, welcomed his Belgian boyfriend when he visited Wisconsin. As a gift, Allison's mother had sewn Logan and his Belgian boyfriend pillowcases covered in cartoon shirtless men. Laughing at the memory, Ashley explained, “It was their way of saying, 'Hey, we support you.'" Acceptance emerged through humor, domesticity, and everyday gestures that quietly communicated belonging. The relationship eventually ended, but the confidence it created remained. For the first time, Logan began selectively sharing his identity with close friends.

Only years later did Logan decide to come out to his host family. By then, another important piece of his life had changed: he had met Alex, the man who would later become his husband. Having an established relationship fundamentally reshaped how he approached disclosure.

> The pivotal moment... to actually feel more comfortable... is actually having an established relationship... Yes, I'm coming out, I'm gay, and this is my significant other I would like you to meet. It's hard for me to do that first step without the second.

Rather than asking others to respond to an abstract declaration of his sexual preferences, Logan intentionally paired disclosure with relationship. He opened up, “Yes, I'm gay, and this is someone that I value... So, the conversation doesn't just stay at the awkward phase of... 'I'm gay' and what kind of support can they offer?”. His strategy subtly redirected attention away from identity itself and toward the life that identity had already made possible. Rather than centering sexuality, Logan centered relationship. In doing so, disclosure became less about inviting evaluation and more about inviting others into an already existing reality. The response was overwhelmingly positive. His host family immediately welcomed Alex, embracing him as another member of the family:

> They all expressed excitement to meet my significant other... once they... met Alex, they all fell in love... Our relationship with the whole family definitely grew stronger because [we were] able to... be our true self and bring the significant other into these family gathering[s].

Still, Logan resisted universalizing his experience. He repeatedly acknowledged how fortunate he had been. He reflected on his ninety-four-year-old American grandmother who only watched CNN 24/7 and “how it was a lot” even for them. He remarked that "having a progressive family definitely made that experience easier, versus if you're living in a more conservative host family". Notably, he emphasized that his story was not representative of every Chinese international student, noting he had intentionally pursued a different path than many of his peers.

Near the end of our interview, Logan returned repeatedly to the language of anchors. Jobs, immigration security, partners, chosen family, and close friendships all became forms of

stability that transformed disclosure from a leap into uncertainty into one conversation among many. As he reflected, "Regardless of if this conversation goes well or not, it's not going to change other thing[s] that I already have fought for... it's not going to change who I am". This understanding also shaped how he now thinks about community. Earlier in life, Logan intentionally avoided remaining inside familiar cultural "bubbles." Today, however, he speaks differently about queer community in Madison, "It changed my approach... you know what? It's not a bad idea to find a bubble. They make it easier for you to be yourself". What once appeared to be isolation came to represent something else: infrastructure for belonging.

Psychological safety was not something to avoid altogether, but something to cultivate intentionally in places where Logan no longer required constant negotiation to feel authentic. His lived experience complicates the assumption that self-perceived authenticity needs to begin with 'coming out'. Instead, disclosure happened only after years spent accumulating security: surviving illness, building community, developing confidence, finding love, creating family, and imagining a future sturdy enough to withstand uncertainty. Importantly, this does not suggest that disclosure was insignificant, or that authenticity has one universal pathway. Rather, Logan's experience reveals how authenticity, for him, became less about assuming acceptance from every environment and more about building a life that did not depend on that assumption. A life that reduced constant recalibration.

Logan did not have to constantly recalibrate himself around the possibility of rejection because he had cultivated spaces where he could remain grounded regardless of how others responded. Authenticity did not produce belonging. Belonging made this form of authenticity possible for him. As Logan reflected near the end of our conversation, "When you have an anchor... coming out [becomes] the cherry on top... yes, it's important, but it's not going to shake the foundation".

The Care Ethics of the Closet

Bio. Leo (hey/them) is a non-binary lesbian who now lives in the midwestern United States and has lived with host families in both Micronesia and Armenia through teaching and Peace Corps work. In Micronesia they shared a compound with a host family and sometimes other volunteers, sleeping in a simple room where the sounds of neighbors, animals, and the ocean set the rhythm of the day. The host parents and siblings moved fluidly between outdoor cooking spaces, common areas, and sleeping rooms, and unannounced visits from neighbors were part of the daily pattern. In Armenia, Leo lived first with a training host family and later with another family in her work community, where every arrival and departure was noticed and commented on. In those homes they occupied shared rooms and ate around small tables, always aware of how closely their movements and presentation were being watched.

Relation to Researcher. Met through marching band when I was a freshman and they were a sophomore. We were part of the same close group for two years, spending multiple days each week together during rehearsals and activities. Outside of university, we have stayed lightly connected through social media and occasional alumni events.

Story. Interviewing Leo felt less like standard data collection and more like dropping into a conversation that has been running in the back of their mind for years. We share a mutual history from our university marching band and a similar professional trajectory in international programs. Although, Leo dodges the Western queer-abroad storyline seemingly effortlessly. Where others might center danger, disclosure, or the drama of being out, Leo keeps nudging the lens toward everyone else in the room.

They start not with identity labels, but with placements and people. First there was WorldTeach in Micronesia, then Peace Corps in Armenia, multiple host families, neighbors, counterparts, students, other volunteers. From the beginning, the decision about coming out is not a fuzzy, evolving maybe; it is clear, premeditated, and explicitly other-oriented:

> I think that I went in with the knowledge of I'm never going to share this with them… not just because it puts me in a slightly unsafe situation, because I don't know for sure how they're going to react, but also because, like, regardless of what it does for me… it puts

> them in a situation where they have to make a decision about whether they're hiding it or sharing it, and like, that's not what I'm there for.

The ethical center of gravity here is not "Will I be okay?" It's "What am I asking them to risk?" Not coming out becomes, for Leo, a kind of harm reduction practice directed toward host families and counterparts. They recognize people whose social positions, reputations, and safety could be put in play by information they never consented to hold. This stance is especially clear when I ask about their Armenian counterpart who quickly became a best friend. Leo explains that their friendship was not based on sharing sexuality, but rather mutual enjoyment:

> The first time we met, I went to her house, and, like, six hours later, my host family called her mother-in-law to be like, 'Where is our volunteer?' And we were like, 'Oh my God, we've been talking for six hours.' Like, had not even realized it.

For many exchange narratives, that kind of intimacy would cue an expectation of disclosure: surely this is the person you come out to. Leo simply refused that equation:

> I didn't… want you to feel like you're hiding things from your friends and community, even though I think that she would have been totally fine with it… it never really felt like a hindrance to that relationship… I think that a lot of people feel, 'Oh, if I can't share all of who I am with you, how can I truly connect with you?', and I just don't feel that way.

The relationship is real, deep, and sustaining; staying in the closet, in this case, is not evidence of failed authenticity but of an ethic of care. Connection and authenticity are measured by six-hour conversations, not by whether "everything" is on the table.

At the same time, Leo's body and presentation are being read through several lenses before anyone even reaches the question of queerness. They describe presenting as a white, fat, U.S. American woman in Peace Corps terms, but something more ambiguous in Armenia itself:

> "Yes, I was presenting as a white woman, but I was also fat, which impacts things. So, I got a lot of comments on my body, but not quite as much attention from men that I didn't want.' They continue, "I was pretty fluent in the language by the time training was over, and honestly, look pretty Armenian… the assumption was usually, oh, you're Armenian.

> And if I said, No, I'm not Armenian, the assumption was like, Oh, your parents are diaspora. You're Armenian. You're just saying you're not Armenian".

Leo's experience complicated the assumption that racial or national privilege operates uniformly across contexts. Whiteness could shape how they were positioned as an American volunteer, while other aspects of their appearance made them legible through local categories rather than immediately as foreign. Instead of being immediately legible as "foreign," they are first folded into local categories: fat woman, maybe-Armenian, heavily tattooed teacher. Queerness is structurally possible but rarely imagined:

> There's this assumption of heteronormativity that is, like, a very, a very big, you know, blinder for everyone… because they've never experienced or had to think about it that way before. Like their mind is not going to go there.

The result was an experience of being read in ways that did not always align with how Leo understood themself. Their Americanness remained significant, but it did not erase the other social meanings attached to their body and appearance. When queer recognition does happen, it's not from elders or program staff, but horizontally, with students. Teacher memories flood back to Leo, "More than host families and counterparts, I definitely had students who maybe clocked me because I was also clocking them… there was definitely… some mutual Spider Man pointing going on." That small joke of "mutual Spider-Man pointing" is a reference to the meme where multiple identical Spider-Men encounter each other and point in surprise at the recognition of someone who appears just like them. The meme captures where queer legibility actually lives in Leo's account: in fleeting moments of shared recognition between young people, not in formal declarations or institutional categories. The significance is not that either person explicitly names the other's identity, but that they experience a moment of mutual understanding: a quiet recognition of something familiar in someone else.

Meanwhile, Leo is also doing their own internal seeing. Armenia, with its isolation and constant questioning about gendered norms, becomes the place where long-standing gender discomfort is finally named:

> That's where I started having a lot of the questions and conversations with myself about maybe, maybe I am not a woman. Maybe that is not quite right… I was definitely having

> those feelings before then, but like, that's when I really got to examine them a little more closely, I think.

Part of what makes that examination possible is precisely the comparative work they are being asked to do all the time:

> I was thinking a little bit more about what it culturally means to be a woman or a man, because I was thinking about Armenian culture a lot… what are my expectations from my parents and things like that? And so, I got to have those conversations that weren't about, oh, like, this might not be my gender identity, but were very much along the same lines of, like, what does it mean to be a woman? What does gender mean for you?

Later, a friend offers the line that quietly tips something over:

> I had a friend… when I was figuring out the gender stuff, be like, 'Cis people do not spend hours thinking about their gender, they simply do not.'… that is sort of what did it for me.

Again, the shift is internally seismic but externally almost invisible: no big coming-out scene, just a slow accumulation of evidence that the normative category doesn't fit.

When I ask about resilience and empowerment, Leo is careful to distinguish them, "I think that, like, for me… resilience looked very different than empowerment. They were not the same at all". Resilience is the offstage work: calling their gay best friend at the end of hard days, relying on shared media and in-jokes, finding those people (both locally and back home) who can absorb the anger, the confusion, the "what did that comment at the market mean?" conversations. It's where the feelings go so the rest of the life can keep happening. These scenes are deliberately unglamorous, more "queer maintenance" than heroic survival. Empowerment, by contrast, appears when Leo is fully embedded in community projects, especially with students:

> Working with those kids is where I… felt the most like myself… it wasn't necessarily about being queer ever… but it was the time when I felt like I could share the most of myself with them.

They light up describing two students who designed an app from scratch and presented it at a competition in a northern city. Leo pridefully recalled, “They fully designed an app that worked, and created a presentation on it… I got to travel with them to one of the northern cities to present”. If empowerment has a location, it’s an after-school classroom, a bus to a regional event, a hostel basement full of mixed groups of Armenians and volunteers. For Leo, the meaningful question is not they know they are queer, but rather the quality of their time spent together. They responded, “I wanted to have a positive impact on my community. But that part was less important to me than just, like, feeling like I was part of the community.”

Their sharpest critiques are not aimed at host communities, but at fellow volunteers and the institution-shaped culture that surrounds them, “The most toxic experiences, or unpleasant experiences I had related to being queer in country, I had with other volunteers who were queer”. They describe a cohort where fear, pain, and different stages of coming out sometimes translate into policing, competition, or white savior narratives:

> It’s sort of like the family you’re born with versus the family you choose, but somehow the family of entirely queer people ends up being the ones you’re born with and don’t have a choice about… we’re gonna make this group because we need each other to get through this. But like, I would not choose [my queer peers] in any other circumstance.

Leo's account complicates the idea of queer community as an automatically safe or “chosen” family. The relationships among queer volunteers are often born less from affinity than from necessity. It is a recognition that they need one another to navigate an environment where disclosure carries real consequences. That shared vulnerability also shapes how information is handled. In her experience, volunteers who have themselves navigated other forms of marginalization (whether race, class, body, gender, etc.) are often more attuned to the risks of being named or exposed, and therefore more careful with another person's identity. By contrast, volunteers who have not had to negotiate similar vulnerabilities may be more likely to treat someone's sexuality as ordinary conversation rather than information that requires contextual care. Safety does not emerge automatically from shared nationality or even shared queerness. It is produced through a shared understanding of vulnerability: an ethic of protecting one another.

The other major reversal in Leo's narrative is about safety itself. Against the institutional script that frames going abroad as inherently risky for queer and trans people, and the return home as a return to safety. Leo offers a blunt comparative assessment:

> I honestly felt more unsafe in West Virginia as a queer person than I did in Armenia, because in West Virginia I was out mostly, and so there was a much greater risk that someone was gonna know that and not like that. And I dealt with a lot more, you know, homophobia and transphobia in grad school than I ever did from anyone in my Peace Corps experience.

They are clear that Armenia is not a soft place to be queer: they recount stories of gay-bashing, moral panics about volunteers "turning" boys gay at camp, and the very real danger faced by local queer communities. But the ethical and affective calculus shifts when they ask: if something goes wrong, whose body, whose life, whose future is most at stake? Abroad, that answer is often "not mine." At home, it is their own.

Across all of this, a particular throughline emerges. Leo's queerness is never marginal to the story. It shapes how they read risk, intimacy, and self-understanding. However, they consistently refuse to make it the starring moral subject. Disclosure is approached less as a right to be exercised than as a relational act of care shaped by context and consequence. Resilience is built in private, semi-hidden routines. Empowerment is found by being woven into community as "the teacher they saw," even when "the queer they didn't [see]" remains unnamed. Rather than a narrative of failed authenticity, Leo's account offers a different perspective for queer disclosure in intercultural spaces: one where the closet is not simply a site of repression, but sometimes a space of calculation and responsibility toward others. The question is not only who gets to know you, but what relationships become possible when you choose to carry something quietly.

Masc Enough, Femme Enough

Bio. Ilan (he/him) is a gay man from Florida, USA who served in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. Before Peace Corps, he wore his hair long, painted his nails, and sometimes mixed masculine and feminine clothing. Anticipating village scrutiny, he cut his hair short and shifted to more conventional men's clothes before moving in with host families. During training he lived several weeks with a multigenerational Catholic Malagasy family of an older grandmother, her adult daughters, and a grandchild all sleeping in a bedroom just off a busy living space. They shared simple meals at a small table. He later moved to another family in his work community, again as the foreign adult son whose comings and goings were visible to everyone in the house. These homes gave him a bed, meals, and people who checked whether he was late or ill, while the shared courtyards and living rooms made him constantly aware of how he was being read.

Relation to Researcher. Both met in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. They served in the same region, and we became close friends, seeing each other multiple weekends a month throughout our service. After Peace Corps, we remained closely connected through visits, video calls, and regular communication.

Story. Ilan begins his story not with danger, but with the décor behind him. On camera, he is in his living room in the U.S., pointing out a lamba from Madagascar, a brightly patterned woven cloth that can be worn but also a common souvenir. It hangs on his wall behind him as he also shared a small baobab tree figurine and a traditional knife. They are small Betsileo (a regional ethnicity) trinkets that he carried home. It's a small but telling opening. Before we ever get to queerness, we get curation: objects arranged and pieces of a life carefully displayed. Yet, there is a tension between what travels with him and what gets checked at the border. That tension runs through his account of what he made visible while living as a queer man in a Malagasy host community.

By the time he applied to Peace Corps Madagascar, Ilan already knew himself as "a gay man who uses he, him pronouns," someone who had "definitely experimented and explored with my femininity" and had "grown to accept I'm a very feminine male". As a younger person, he remembers thinking, "oh, if I was just a girl, all my problems would be solved. But I'm trying to embrace the… the body I was born with and the feminine man that I am". Before leaving, he was

in what he calls his "experimental phase": long hair, dresses, nail polish, makeup. "I was just, like, super embracing of my femininity". Then the plane ticket arrives, the institutional briefings begin, and another kind of editing starts. Ilan shares:

> Even if there wasn't any fear, I knew going into that I would have to be a different me. I'd have to wear different clothes, behave differently, talk differently, and that definitely came out in my host family experience. I mean, I was not my authentic self in any way.

Ilan doesn't frame this as a heroic sacrifice so much as a familiar calculation. One that many queer people make, but here in a different language and landscape. Some choices were conscious, "I need to wear button up, long sleeve shirts. I need to, like, maybe not carry around a purse. I need to not wear nail polish or makeup." Other adjustments were so ingrained they felt automatic, "As a gay male… we know, okay, I have to act more masculine… the way that actually comes across… definitely lowering my voice a bit, not speaking with that sort of flare that gay people have". What looks like "passing" from the outside is, on the inside, a whole choreography of voice, clothing, gait, and topic selection. A curation of self with natural and performed elements.

His host family during training is a house of women anchored by a widowed matriarch, the neny be, or grandmother, who took care of everybody. Two daughters, a boyfriend, a small child, schoolwork and cooking and church. The gender roles are strong and clear, but not policed in quite the ways Ilan has been prepared to expect:

> I guess what kind of was actually nice for me is there wasn't this dominating masculine presence in the household," he reflects. "It was nice to… I mean, I lived in a house of women… and I think I was able to be a little playful, like even though I couldn't be my full authentic self, in terms of being out with my sexuality, etc., I was at times able to have very playful conversations with, you know, the women in the household.

Even that play, though, turns out to be double-edged. At one point he calls the eldest daughter a "supermodel," a compliment that felt, to him, like the harmless, campy praise of a gay man who adores beautiful women without sexualizing them. He says:

> I didn't even interpret it this way, but my friend Bethany… was telling me, you know, be careful about what you're telling her, because she's looking at you and assuming you're a

> straight man, and if you're telling this woman, oh, she's beautiful, she's a model… she might then try to talk to you and encourage that behavior, maybe even sexually.

What he assumed would come off as femme admiration and playful language could be read by the host family as signals toward courtship, a potential foreign husband, or an economic future.

> I guess that was potentially one way of me expressing my gay identity," he adds, "but I just remember that experience of telling the daughter… and I didn't even think of the repercussions… that I could be some type of, you know, bizarre white husband that could bring money into the household.

What Ilan intended as a small expression of himself could therefore acquire meanings far beyond his own intentions. His position as a white American man carried social and economic associations into the interaction that he could not simply choose to put down, even when his own intentions were playful or affectionate. Looking back, Ilan could recognize a gap between how he understood the interaction and how his position within the host family might have shaped what the interaction meant to others. The realization did not make him feel that his actions had been intentionally harmful, but it made visible the extent to which his identity could carry meanings he had not intended.

This is part of what makes Ilan's chapter less about a simple dichotomy of closeted vs out and more about testing the edges of what's possible. He arrives in Madagascar with a clear plan: "My goal was to just stay in the closet the entire time". Peace Corps' guidance reinforces that instinct: dress codes for men and warnings from language facilitators, "she pretty much told me, like, that's not okay. You can't do that" when he painted his nails at the training center, [0:15:10]– [0:16:32]). There was a general rhetoric that queerness is at best risky, at worst unspeakable. Yet Ilan quickly learned that the actual textures of life in Madagascar didn't always match the institutional guidance from his program supervisors in the capital city. Still surprised, Ilan says:

> I was shocked at the like, lack of homophobia. Well, I shouldn't say maybe homophobia, that's not true… the lack of policing, yes, gender policing," he says. "It was just like, oh, well, yeah, he's a little boy. He paints his nails. That's normal. Or, Yeah, that guy is wearing a pink shirt with rhinestones, but he bought it secondhand. Like, what would you expect?

He notices young boys with painted nails "all the time," men in "jelly sandals and Hello Kitty backpacks", choreographed dances and flamboyant clothing among adult men in his rural community. The codes he was told to fear are scrambled; the visual markers of queerness from U.S. gay culture are not read the same way here.

At the same time, he is very much seen as "other." The most consistent label he hears is sarambavy—a Malagasy term connoting a man who looks like a woman. "What's funny is I never took it derogatory," he recalls. "I think they were just telling me, You look like a woman". He remembers playful exchanges in which people would call him sarambavy, then correct themselves, "Oh, you're sarambavy, but you're bogosy," meaning handsome. "It was this playful interaction… where, yeah, you look like a woman, but you're… you're handsome. Like, Oh, we love your long hair. You have beautiful hair. Don't cut it". They are small moments where gender is named, but it is almost playful and not necessarily sanctioned. Still, the ambiguity unsettles him. At one point, he wonders aloud if sarambavy might carry the same sting as "faggot" in English:

> If it means faggot. Lord, was that going right over my head, because I would never from a straight person, allow them to call me a fag. But I would laugh and respond, 'Oh, but I'm a handsome fag, right?' And so, who knows? You know, maybe that's why it was comical and playful to them is that we were just like, 'Oh, I'm a fag, oh, but I'm pretty, right?'

The joke works because everyone keeps moving; nobody stops long enough to pin down the exact translation. His sense of safety is less about any one word and more about his accumulated practice with the art of deflection, entertainment, and holding an audience captive in confusion.

In his training host family, he stays closeted. In his two-year site of Mahasoa Be, as he learns the language and "felt comfortable, I felt safe," he slowly tests disclosure. Near the end of his service, he comes out on purpose to two people: his local mentor and colleague, who's "been asking me to get a [local friends with benefits] for almost two years," and a fifteen-year-old student next door, who reacts with shock and apology when Ilan challenges him for calling two men in a Beyoncé visual album "animals". Ilan tells the story in detail. He remembers showing the student the film for Lemonade, "There was two men who kissed in one of the videos, and he was just like, 'Kay! Biby ireo. Why are they doing that?'". This comment translates roughly to

“Those men are animals.” It carries a much heavier weight in Malagasy. Biby is not simply a description of nonhuman creatures; when applied to people, it functions as a deeply degrading term that strips them of dignity and humanity. By comparing the men to animals, the comment does more than express discomfort with same-sex intimacy. It positions queer expression as something unnatural, shameful, and outside the boundaries of acceptable personhood. Biby is a slur in this context. Ilan describes a “gut reaction” he hadn’t planned for, “I never intended to tell this 15-year-old boy that I’m gay, but I just saw a learning moment. And I probed him, like ‘Why are you calling them biby? Like they’re not animals, they’re just humans’”.

When the boy cites the Bible, Ilan pushes again and asks where that idea come from? What does it mean? Only then does Ilan say, simply, “Well, I like men.” The boy’s response is immediate and visceral:

> He was so apologetic. And he said, ‘Oh, my God, I’m so sorry. You know, Mr. Ilan, you are not a biby. You are not an animal like you’re a very nice… person, and I would never say that about you’

The category collapses when it lands on someone the young boy knows. His teacher could not be a biby. “I think it just goes to show that any phobia or stereotype or prejudice, like once you get to know someone on a personal level, like, kind of dissolves,” Ilan concludes. Yet this moment also carries risk. Ilan’s disclosure could have produced a very different outcome: the student could have rejected him, shared the information with others, or reinforced the very stigma Ilan was trying to challenge. The possibility of social consequence was real, from gossip among neighbors to a change in how he was perceived.

In this case, a carefully navigated risk opened space for connection, but the outcome was never guaranteed. Here again, passing is both privilege and friction. His Americanness and whiteness shield him:

> I actually never once felt unsafe… particularly when I was, you know, more feminine presenting or anything… I don’t think gender came into anyone’s mind. You know, they are just the first thing they saw was race, and that’s really all they… cared about.

At the same time, that very privilege makes it easier, even expected, for him to keep certain things unsaid he explains:

> If I had the knowledge that I had now, having done three years, going back… I probably would have been a little more daring," he admits. "I would have tested the waters with some phrases, comments, questions to gage how the host family felt".

Instead, in the moment, he defaults to what Peace Corps has reinforced: assumptions about living "in an African country with traditional values and culture" and the need to "present in a traditional masculine fashion".

Interestingly, the place where his femininity explodes back into view is not in the host family at all, but in Peace Corps spaces that are explicitly marked as "theirs": the training center, the regional house, weekend sleepovers. "In a way, I almost feel like I might have exaggerated or hyper-accentuated my homosexuality amongst Peace Corps volunteers, or even at the training center," he laughs, "because I knew it was a welcoming and accepting place". This is where he paints his nails, borrows dresses from the communal trunk, stages photo shoots with friends. The paradox is that, years later, after all this experimentation abroad, he finds himself more visually conventional at home. "Weirdly enough," he says, "staying with the host family and doing Peace Corps helped me kind of understand, slash, maybe value traditional gender roles or traditional culture a little bit more".

Three years of being read as male teacher, foreign man, Catholic-church-attending community member made him acutely aware of how much social life is scaffolded by those roles. "I still, internally, am a very gender queer, feminine identifying person," he explains:

> But I guess I've come to terms with even within my own cultural context, that, you know, I'm just gonna wear my button up shirt to work. I'm gonna buzz my hair and, you know, just give them the traditional male look they're looking for, because that's even what our society wants.

He is careful not to romanticize this. There is a cost. "In an ideal world, what I love to wear a dress to work? Like, honestly, yeah," he admits:

> I think I still have that youthful, playful, experimental part of me deep down inside, but almost after the Peace Corps, kind of having that traditional-ness hammered down my throat for three years, I guess I just kind of accepted it.

At the same time, he insists that this isn't simply passing or surrendering, but a reframing of what masculinity itself can mean. "Maybe the outside world hasn't reinvented masculinity, but maybe for myself, I have," he muses. Others have told him that his willingness to be visibly feminine is, paradoxically, one of the "most masculine" things about him. He goes on:

> I've had multiple people tell me that my freedom, or my lack of care of being myself, is one of the most masculine things about me… the bravery to act however I want, whether that's feminine or masculine, is a manly aspect of my personality,

He is, in his own terms, "a very feminine male," and as his friend once told him, "so much more of a man than I am in so many capacities".

By the end of our conversation, Ilan circles back not to gender, but to otherness. "One of the most powerful things that I left Madagascar with was just a greater sense of what it meant to be another," he reflects. In the United States, as a white gay man, his queerness could be visible, but his race largely went unremarked. In Madagascar, by contrast, "I was racially another, and for the first time in my life, it was visible that I was different". This shift—from being read primarily as queer to being read first and foremost as racially and nationally foreign—reshaped how he understood queerness, immigration, and host family life. He describes Peace Corps as a "semi-immigrant experience," citing the bureaucracy, language barriers, police checks, and the persistent feeling of being watched. These were forms of scrutiny he does not expect to face again in the United States, "regardless of my sexual orientation," he says.

There is one more layer that sits just outside the interview transcript, but not outside the story. I remember walking with Ilan through our regional capital. We walked through market days, soccer fields, and dusty roads that always seemed to attract a small crowd the moment we appeared. People would shout, tease, and clap while Ilan would lean into it, almost stepping into a celebrity role: dancing on the edge of the road, spinning, cracking jokes in Malagasy. Kids and adults would laugh and clap along. I remember wondering, even then: are they laughing at him or with him? And watching Ilan, I also remember how often the answer didn't seem to matter to him in that moment. He would sometimes grin and toss out a phrase I still hear in his voice: "tsy vavy, tsy lahy, fa ny roa." I'm not a woman, nor a man, but both. He didn't bring this line up in the interview, but it runs through my memory as a kind of subtitle for this whole story.

He names many ambiguities in those moments—the possible connotation of faggot in sarambavy, the Peace Corps warnings, the boy apologizing for dehumanizing gay men, the nail polish removed for host family dinners and repainted at the training center. Yet it all condenses into something like queer play. Looking back, one could ask: were they laughing at us, never fully understanding the slur we might have been walking through? Maybe. Maybe we were far less safe than we felt, or safe only because we were read as foreign curiosities rather than local deviants. And yet, in a weird way, we felt in control even if we maybe weren't. That sense of control, however partial or illusory, gave us confidence. The feelings we carried from it has an impact on both of our futures and our relationship to performance of sexuality.

"I'm both," he seems to suggest, even if he never uses those exact words in the recording: both masc and femme, both safe and vulnerable, both protected and constrained by passing, both guest and problem, both visible and redacted. The host family is one site where this plays out, but for Ilan, host family bleeds into school compound, village, Peace Corps house, queer bar down a side alley in the capital, and those impromptu road-side performances where he declared himself "fa ny roa." Across these spaces, he keeps tugging at the same questions: How far can I flex? Who am I allowed to be here? What does it mean to be read as a man, a foreigner, a possible husband, a sarambavy, a teacher, a queer friend? None of these selves fully cancel the others. They coexist, sometimes uncomfortably, while being reflected on a couch thousands of miles away nearly a decade later.

Laughing off Displaced Ribs

Bio. T (they/them) is a trans-masc, non-binary person with citizenship in both Germany and the United States. Their host-family life began with a year-long high-school exchange in Finland and later continued in Madagascar with the Peace Corps. In Finland, they lived in a small town with a family that provided a room, meals, and rides. They often kept to themselves. Evenings were quiet, with T alone in their bedroom while the family stayed behind closed doors. Most of their social world unfolded at school rather than at home. Years later, in Madagascar, they lived first with a training host family and then another family in their work community. Rooms were multi-use, doors were often open, and neighbors always watched who passed by. T bound their chest in the heat, chose clothing carefully, and slept in spaces that doubled as family sitting areas. Still, host family worried about whether they had eaten, where they were going, and when they would return, through a language where there was no gendered pronoun.

Relation to Researcher. Both met in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. We were in the same health cohort and trained together daily for three months. During service, we had professional and personal interactions at events in the capital, though we were placed in different areas of the country. After Peace Corps, we mostly lost touch aside from occasional social media communication.

Story. I know T from our time together as Peace Corps volunteers in Madagascar. By the time we spoke for this project, their story spanned not just one host family, but multiple countries, languages, and bodies that have been asked to bend, compress, and withhold. If some participants describe host families as the place they "found themselves," T's experience is almost the inverse: they entered Peace Corps already knowing who they were and then had to figure out how much of that self could safely cross the threshold into someone else's home.

Long before Madagascar, there was Finland. As a high school exchange student through AFS, T lived with a Finnish host family in a house, "nine or 12k out of town, like, you like, go through some fields into a forest, and then, like, the regular road ends, and then the dirt road ends, and that's where our house was". The family had previously hosted another student who "just really wanted to be left alone and given space" at the start of her stay. They assumed T wanted the same and "just, like, didn't really engage me a whole lot for the first bit. And then I

was like, What the fuck". They were kind, willing to drive T to town, but also distant and quiet. By the end of the year T was "very sad to leave", yet that early period of isolation mattered. It established a template: you can be cared for, fed, transported—and still not really known.

That experience shaped how T approached Peace Corps. "I wasn't overly keen to live with a host family again after that, especially as an adult," they told me. They were older than many of their cohort, had already lived alone, and were entering service as a non-binary person who had been "very actively out as non-binary before coming to Madagascar". The question was not whether to live with a host family at all. Peace Corps requires it during training. Rather, T wondered how to survive intimacy on someone else's terms. "As a queer person, that adds a layer to that. I didn't want to live in a space full time where I had to constantly be extra aware of my identity and how I show up," they explained. So, they had interest in Madagascar's Peace Corps program specifically because of the limited host-family period that felt like "just the right amount".

Any illusion of neutrality disappeared almost immediately. T described the classic host-family pick-up moment at the training center in the small rural community where we would live all of us standing in a courtyard, waiting to be claimed. "They were just like, Here, go home with whoever saying your name". That first evening, sitting with their new family, a dubbed version of *Modern Family* came on TV. When the gay couple appeared, T's teenage host sister pointed and said, "oh, pedophiles." T recalls:

> And I was like, oh, okay, and I was like, Cool. I don't understand a lot of French or Malagasy at this point, but I know that one. And so that was just like a check to a point. And I was like, All right, we'll see how this goes.

That one comment did not cause a dramatic rupture. The family remained "nice people" whom T visited whenever they came back through the training town: "I always visited them afterwards… always, like, a very, like, joyful experience". But the moment quietly fixed a limit. However, kind they were, however integrated T might become into their daily routines, there were parts of T that could not be safely brought into that living room.

Language offered T both constraint and relief. Coming from German, which they described as "an ultra-gendered language," and English, which is gendered "but not that much, really in comparison," Malagasy felt radically different:

> By Malagasy, obviously being not gendered at all, it was really nice, because it gave me a little bit of flexibility in how I talked about myself and others, and it made being, you know, ultimately misgendered all the time, less of a thing.

They knew going in that they would have to "go back into the closet… and make it less of a central part of who I am versus how I exist in US spaces," but they were able to do that, they said, because "I think I was very secure in who I am and how I identified… I don't… need a lot of… validation in that".

That security did not mean being legible. If anything, T describes being a constant object of curiosity. "Did I get misgendered all the time? Yes," they said. "I constantly hear that, like, Are you a boy? Are you a girl? Like, all the time". But unlike in the U.S., where misgendering often carries immediate threat. "Here, when I experience misgendering, it's much more hostile… I'm going to have you arrested", in Madagascar much of it felt more like baffled interest: "That's as far as it went… that came out of a place of, I think, more like curiosity and like, What the fuck are you versus, like, hostility". T's strategy was to meet this with humor. When men proposed marriage, they would reply, "Okay, well, I don't cook and I don't do laundry. So, if you're ready to do all of the cooking and all of the laundry in the household, then like, I'm game," watching as "all the women would just like, fucking die laughing". This would leave the men baffled or disinterred. There was power in comedy. Sometimes they upped the absurdity, "Oh, men are so exhausting. I already have three husbands", deflecting questions regarding gender into jokes that reasserted boundaries and comically dispersed the attention without escalating risk.

If language and humor allowed a kind of soft invisibility, T's body insisted on greater stakes. Throughout their service, "I did wear a [chest] binder full time for basically a [third] year… which I wouldn't recommend living on the coast. It was, like, kind of miserable". They had been binding for roughly ten years prior to Peace Corps, but the combination of heat, humidity, and constant wear led to serious health consequences. Midway through their third year, they began experiencing "debilitating back pain… having trouble breathing". Peace Corps' medical team sent them for MRIs, briefly misdiagnosed a spinal tumor, and then reversed course

after consulting headquarters in Washington D.C. When the possibility of a medical evacuation was raised, it was also quickly withdrawn. T describes being called into the program office and told, essentially, that they could "deal with it and just, like, finish your third year, or you can… go home," with no meaningful treatment options on offer.

It was only months after returning to the U.S., under the care of a chiropractor and physical therapist that T finally received an accurate explanation: "Multiple of my ribs were like, displaced from all that pressure… my whole right side of my rib cage was, like, fucked up". T had suspected all along that the chest binder was the cause and had asked Peace Corps to consider this, requesting care that aligned with what many trans and non-binary people already know about binding injuries. "I tried to advocate for what I… knew I needed… and they just would not provide me that care," they reflected. The binder, like the host-family house, became a site where their transness could not quite be named, even as it was literally reshaping their body. When I asked T how they conceptualize authenticity in these layered, constrained spaces, they reached for an onion metaphor that has stuck with me. They narrate:

> When you start, you're just like your full onion existing there, and then, as you build relationships, you might, like, peel off layers of that. But like, as a queer, trans person, I just think there's, there's more layers, and there's layers that you're never going to uncover.

For T, this was not a sense of split selves. "I wouldn't say that I felt like two people," they clarified in another part of our conversation, "but I definitely felt like a person who was putting on a performance". They talked about things like code-switching and small lies. T explained further that their host communities did not receive a fake version of T, but a selectively edited one whose trans layers remain deep in the middle of the onion, never fully peeled back.

There is grief in that. "I think it's… kind of sad that, like, my host families did not ever get to fully get to know me," T reflected. "I wish that I could have shared all of these things and, like, known that it would have been an okay thing". At the same time, they refuse a simple narrative of victimization. They describe their decision to "step back into the closet" for 27 months as a form of agency in itself:

> I think empowerment is around having access to the information that you need to make choices and having a space to make a choice… being able to, like, actively make… a choice to do Peace Corps and to step back into the closet… I think there was a sense of empowerment in that.

T's story is not about a spectacular coming-out or a singular moment of rejection. It is about a non-binary, now transmasculine person who could not and did not fully pass. T learned to cope with being constantly read and misread; who let host families and communities see enough of them to build real affection and reliance, but not enough to touch the most vulnerable layers of their identity. Their body quite literally absorbed the cost of that negotiation. Humor became a kind of exoskeleton, "I don't cook and I don't do laundry", that held a crushed ribcage together while deflecting curiosity that might otherwise turn dangerous. The binder compressed what it could, the jokes covered what they couldn't, and together they functioned as a kind of improvised armor around a body that refused to disappear.

At the same time, T resists any arc of victimization. They were profoundly successful, maintained close relationships with staff, took on substantial monitoring and evaluation work, traveled frequently for projects, and remained someone the institution relied on. They were hosted, taught, fed, and embraced—just never fully known. Compared to cis volunteers and trans peers who could pass more cleanly, T had little control over how they were read and far more work to do to stay safe. The journey can be differently embodied for trans people, and the consequences of that extra labor showed up in T's bones and breathing. Yet they stayed and adapted. They left service not as a newly discovered self, but as someone whose existing sense of self was sharpened and affirmed. T was more precise about which layers could be offered to a host family, which had to remain in the middle of the onion, and what it costs to build a life in a place where you are always just a little bit mis seen.

Host Mom #4

Bio. Michael (he/him) is a young, queer man from Texas, USA. He has had several long stays with host families through youth exchanges, internships, and education in the Caribbean, East Africa, and South Asia. In one East African town he lived for many months with a host mother and her extended family, sharing a compound where the day began with sounds from the courtyard, shared breakfasts, and regular visits from neighbors. In another placement he stayed with a quieter, middle-class family where evenings were calm and most social life unfolded in front of the TV after dinner. Across these homes he occupied spare bedrooms and guest rooms as a foreign guest, adapting to different household rules, mealtimes, and expectations about how he should move through the space. Some host parents and siblings remain in different levels of contact, and each house sits in his memory as a particular set of rooms, routines, and roles.

Relation to Researcher. Former student from a program I supported through a different agency. He later joined the organization where I worked, supporting the same program as a summer mentor. We have remained connected through alumni networks.

Story. By the time Michael sat down in his Tanzanian living room and told his host third mom he was "a person like them," he already self-defined as "a serial host-family kid." Dominican Republic, Mexico City, Dar es Salaam, a small town in Kerala. Four different households. Four different constellations of adults, cousins, kids, pets, and unspoken rules. What repeated was not a neat arc of "coming out abroad," but a slower building of knowledge of self, queerness, and how one is policed differently in different spaces. Michael lists his exchanges quickly, almost apologetically, like he's aware of how improbable the itinerary sounds:

> The first one I had was through Youth Ambassadors… 2018… Dominican Republic… three weeks, but the host family part was only one week.…The second experience I had was… Mexico… a semester, so like five months.…after that… a full academic year, nine months in Tanzania……and then right after that… two-ish months [in India] … I wanted to be in a family… and so I was with a family there.

Across these homes, Michael is not just a guest; he is a young, queer US American of Indian heritage still learning what those categories mean in different spaces. The repeated act of 'being

placed' with a family becomes a kind of experimental design where he steps into the same role repeatedly, but in vastly different conditions. What shifts is not only the surrounding culture, but which identity markers rise to the surface, and which can stay submerged.

In his early exchanges, queerness is largely ambient for Michael. It is felt, hinted at, but not named. While in the Dominican Republic as a high schooler, he never explicitly comes out to his host family, but queerness still circulates. He recalls, "I never [came out] at that point. But I just only… remember like, talking with other people… I could hear, like, over chit chatter, like there was something they were talking about: Is this guy gay, or no?" Six years later, returning to that same rural community on a visit during Holy Week, he discovers his host mom's sister is living with a woman who is not just "a volleyball friend":

> I go up to… her friend at the time, and I ask her, like, 'Oh, are you queer? Are you bi?'… and she tells me, 'Yes'… And then she says, 'You could suppose that me and [your host mom] … we are a thing.' And I was like, so surprised. I was like, whaaaat?

What struck Michael was not only the surprise of queer intimacy in a rural, religious setting, but the way it remains unspoken inside the family unit. The couple is half-acknowledged, half-disavowed, "something that people caught on to, and it's like a don't… just don't talk about it more". It is in moments like this one, that Michael begins to see that it is possible for queerness to be tacitly understood, managed, but not openly narrativized. He never actually says "I'm gay" to that host mom. Instead, he leans into low-key mutual recognition, "Maybe I could assume that she understood me, or like she knew me. And that was comforting.".

In Mexico City, the pattern shifts slightly. The city itself offers a different kind of queer visibility. The public displays of same-sex affection on the Metro, student pride flags, and a host mom watching *Queer Eye* on Netflix. Michael notices that these objects act like informal barometers of safety, "I knew, like, okay, if this person is actively watching 'Queer Eye'… I figure, okay, my host mom would not struggle to… take in that I'm queer, probably be accepting". Still, he resists the trope of a single, declarative coming-out speech. Instead, he lets queerness appear as a casual fact of daily life with his second host mom:

> It wasn't like, I came out. It was just like, oh, today at school, I bumped into the queer organization… it made me so happy… that I could find people like me… it's something normal… That…there's a community for people like me.

Michael's second disclosure to a host mom is decentered, and not declarative. He folds queerness into anecdotes, rather than a confession. He says it is both a desire for normalcy and a quiet resistance to the demand that he must always "admit something". Rather than treating disclosure as a direct declaration, he allows queerness to emerge and be implied through ordinary chatter, relationships, and everyday experience. His narrative embraces the coexistence of what are often perceived as opposites: saying without confessing, sharing without formally disclosing, and being known without first having to announce oneself. In doing so, he resists the expectation that authenticity requires a singular declaration and redistributes the responsibility of making his identity legible to others. Whether consciously influenced by the Dominican families he lived alongside or not, Michael cultivates a relational and tacit way of being in which queerness can be recognized without requiring him to continually perform the work of declaration. Rather than organizing his life around exceptional defining moments of disclosure, he creates a way of existing that preserves both agency and ordinary participation in everyday life.

It is in Tanzania, however, that the full complexity of his intersecting identities is on display. On paper, this is the riskiest placement of his experiences. Michael was aware, sharing "it's illegal to conduct same sex activities", where queerness is explicitly criminalized. Yet this is also where Michael ends up making his clearest, most explicit disclosure to his third host mom. His Tanzanian host mom is not a blank slate. Before he arrives, she has spent years working as a maid for diplomats, including a Brazilian ambassador who was "very openly gay":

> My Tanzanian host mom] realized, like, 'well, this ambassador is okay. Sure, he's gay. But he's a person. At the end of the day, I'm not just gonna not clean for him because of this one little identity of him.'

Michael learns early on that she has both proximities to queer lives and a nuanced stance: she frames queerness through the religious language of *sin* while insisting on continued care and respect. Her ambivalence matters. It does not make Tanzania "safe" for Michael, but it makes his host mom legible as a moral agent, rather than a caricature of homophobia.

At the same time, the most consistent pressure he feels day to day is not on his sexuality, but on his presumed heterosexuality and his [US] Americanness. Co-workers at his NGO ask, over and over, why he doesn't have a Tanzanian girlfriend:

> It beat into me every single time… There's a chance I'm going to get asked this question again…My beating around the bush felt like I was beating up myself, of, like, my identity. It's like I couldn't be true to myself

Later, when I ask which identities felt most policed, he does not hesitate, "My main identity, I think, was just being American… that was always the standard. I was like, okay, what can I do to be more Swahili-like than American-like?" He shares how his host mom praises him as "better than the average American", but nonetheless, he begins to adapt and obscure his nationality. On the street, he uses his Indian heritage to his benefit to avoid the social and economic scripts attached to U.S. passports and U.S. power. In this setting, queerness becomes a tightly managed undercurrent; however, it was his nationality that visible and of interest to his host community.

The turning point comes late, in the final third of his nine-month stay. By then, Michael is exhausted—by the girlfriend questions, by U.S. policy news, by the long-term work of "hiding" in a place where he also deeply cares about people and institutions. When his host mom once again tells the story of cleaning for the Brazilian ambassador, he hears it differently. This time, he allows himself to enter the frame:

> I don't know what it was exactly that made me like, come out, but I just remember when I came out, it was like, 'Yeah, I'm like, a person like them'.…And I remember my host mom responding like, 'Oh yeah, I knew... I knew very early on.

What follows is not a dramatic rupture but an intimate recalibration. His third host mom sends the younger kids outside. She names his courage; she does so in Swahili. She affirms his pacing, "She told me that I did the right thing of only telling her at the end… that I had good judgment in protecting myself". For Michael, this matters deeply. The person he relies on for all his cultural questions is now explicitly telling him he navigated the risks well. Not only does she validate his identity, but she empowers his agency, discretion, and intelligence. Her approval stitches together his self-protection, his ethics, and his desire for authenticity.

That moment also exemplifies how safety is nuanced for queer people. The risk of disclosure does not simply produce acceptance; it opens access to forms of knowledge that would otherwise remain unavailable. Opportunity emerges from it. Through risky relationships with queer Tanzanians, Michael learns what queerness looks like in East Africa: an underground club in Nairobi whose location is never typed into Uber, street-corner slang distinguishing tops and bottoms with attached moral meaning, and Swahili terms that blur the boundaries between "gay" and "female best friend." These are not merely cultural curiosities; they are forms of situated knowledge. These practices of recognition, discretion, and survival helped Michael navigate his own environment while also expanding his understanding of queer life beyond U.S. frameworks. Just as importantly, these relationships reshape his understanding of privilege. Michael repeatedly distinguishes his experience from that of his Tanzanian friends, recognizing that while he can eventually return to the United States, they cannot leave the social and legal realities that structure their everyday lives. Even as digital media allows those relationships to continue across distance, the asymmetry remains. For Michael, the exchange becomes as much about learning the limits of his own perspective as it is about sharing his own experiences. In his words, he is able, however briefly, to inhabit "someone else's shoes."

The most explicitly triumphant moment in his narrative, however, occurs not in Tanzania but after his return to Texas. After nine months abroad, he lands in Austin just in time for Pride:

> I could wave the pride flag; I could be in the most tackiest rainbow attire as possible… and it was fine… I went through this, and now I can breathe here. The fight isn't over… but it's like, wow, I can exist.

He describes that day not as a simple homecoming, but as a recalibrated appreciation. Tanzania did not make him queer, nor did it convert him from closeted to out. Instead, those serial host families from rural DR, urban Mexico, underground Dar es Salaam, and eventually small-town India composed what he later calls a "queer mosaic." Different pieces of himself became possible in different homes; different aspects were watched, questioned, or quietly understood.

Looking back, the conversation itself becomes another site of discovery. It is through the act of telling his story for this interview that Michael begins to recognize the significance of experiences he had rarely considered together. Moments that once felt isolated become visible as

part of a larger mosaic, each host family and cultural context offering a different way of understanding queerness, belonging, and himself. As he reflects near the end of our conversation, he shifts from recounting events to recognizing their cumulative weight and his perseverance, “I don’t think I’ve given myself my credit. I don’t think I’ve realized what I’ve done… I’m slowly allowing myself to… recognize the weight of things that I went through, and… honoring that”. That moment of reflection is itself an accomplishment. Rather than arriving at a final, coherent identity, Michael begins to recognize the value of a life lived across many coexisting cultural worlds. This is true not only in moments of risk and disclosure, but through the daily work of learning, teaching, connecting with, and participating in the communities that became home.

His story does not end here. By the time of this writing, there has already been a fourth host mother, another home, and new understandings of himself.. I leave those experiences intentionally outside the boundaries of this chapter, not because they are less meaningful, but because the present is not required to make this moment intelligible. This chapter is not an attempt to reveal the "current" or "truest" Michael, as though later experiences overwrite earlier ones. Instead, it preserves one truthful configuration within an ongoing life, allowing the Michael who emerged through these first host families to coexist alongside the Michael who exists today. These versions of self-need not be reconciled into a single, linear narrative. They may reinforce one another, contradict one another, or reveal new possibilities only visible in retrospect, yet each remains true within the cultural, relational, and historical circumstances that produced it.

For now, Host Mom Number Four remains unwritten. That omission is intentional. Her story belongs to another moment in Michael's mosaic; this is not because it resolves what came before, but because it simply becomes another piece of an unfinished whole. Each new home, relationship, and cultural encounter reshapes the picture without erasing the pieces already in place. The Michael who found profound affirmation in the home of a woman living within a criminalizing context does not disappear simply because another story follows. He continues to exist alongside his selves who came before and after, reminding us that identity is neither a sequence of replacements nor a journey toward a final authentic self. It is an evolving mosaic of lives, relationships, and meanings that coexist (and sometimes even contradict) across time.

13 Therapy Sessions

Bio. I, Michael Andres (they/he – él/elle), am ever-changing.

Relation to Researcher. Self.

Story. More than anything, this project started as a question and quietly became a mirror. I didn't arrive as a blank slate or as an expert. I came in with years of being queer abroad myself, with coursework behind me, and with a backpack full of concepts—tacitness, commuters and integrators, survival vs. resilience—that I wasn't sure would land once they left my notebook. I suspected there were larger patterns underneath the anecdotes, but I had almost forgotten how much lived expertise sits in the bodies of people who cross cultures while already marked as different. These are unusually mobile people, yes, but also queer people, BIPOC, fat folks, neurodivergent folks. They are people who, by necessity, have long been noticing misalignments between themselves and a room. Queer experience is itself a case study in micro-anthropology: we naturally collect microaggressions, facial expressions, side comments, inaccessible spaces, unsafe corners. I came in with academic language for that noticing. What I had underestimated was how easily, and how simply, participants would name it themselves. More importantly, I forgot how much I was still unpacking and reflecting on myself.

When they started talking, they didn't give me abstract frameworks; they gave me stories. Someone would describe how a single poster on the wall or a pair of rainbow underwear became a lifeline in a criminalizing context, and without ever saying "tacit queerness," they would demonstrate it. In one group I offered, almost shyly, "Tacitness… like in Spanish, when you drop the subject and it's still understood. Queerness is really understood; no one is talking about it, but everyone knows." They didn't need the metaphor to live it, but naming it gave us a shared handle. Again and again, I watched people do their own meta-analysis in real time, reflecting on why they did or did not come out, how they read their host parents' silences, when they chose to lie or deflect. Sometimes my job in "analysis" felt minimal; they were already doing the work. That recognition nudged me away from treating academia as proof that our realities were valid and toward understanding that our realities are what generate the theory in the first place.

I still cared about the terms; this is, after all, a thesis. But I found myself letting the stories lead and allowing the language to follow. I started returning to my own simple memories

as data, not just illustrations. Rather than dropping concepts on top of people's accounts, I began using those concepts to tie together deeper patterns occurring on a local level at a global scale across intercultural difference. I watched how global discourses on queerness, race, and "safety" looped back to shape host-family expectations, visa regimes, and what a volunteer could plausibly say at the dinner table, and then how those tiny living-room negotiations, in turn, pushed back on or reproduced those global logics. The traffic was never one-way. If anything, listening to people talk about WhatsApp groups, queer Instagram, and long-distance partners, it became clear that exchange now moves in every direction at once. Moreover, diverse neighborhoods and virtual spaces now allow one to engage in intercultural exchange without ever needing a passport or having to leave your neighborhood.

Some of the most humbling moments came when I recognized how much of this so-called theory was what we joked was just 'queer common sense' that nobody had been paid to write down yet. "It's been so fun, and everyone thinks I'm a genius," I joked with T at one point. "Well… I think I'm just gay…and [non-queer academics] don't always think these things… So, I just decided that this was going to be my thesis.". I meant it as a joke, but the more I listened, the truer it felt. Academia has, of course, given us rich work on queer migration, identity development, belonging, intercultural education, and study abroad. Yet this project sat in the overlap of those conversations rather than neatly within any one of them. The host family became a uniquely intimate intercultural space where power, kinship, cultural misunderstanding, surveillance, care, and identity negotiation all unfolded at once. And still, what participants offered me were simple stories. That was the surprising part. These weren't grand theories—they were everyday moments around dinner tables, in WhatsApp messages, on walks home, or in bedrooms decorated with a single affirming object. What looked like my analytic insight was really the iridescence of many people's experiences catching the same light at different angles. My task was less to invent color than to recognize patterns that had always been there. When we overlook the ordinary, we often overlook the extraordinary complexity embedded within it. The richness of these lived experiences was never hidden because they were dramatic; it was hidden because they appeared so deceptively simple.

The host family was supposed to be my clean unit of analysis, the stable center of this study. Instead, people kept stretching and puncturing that category in ways that complicated my

own memories. Some defined “host family” broadly to include neighbors, host siblings who lived elsewhere, close friends, or, in Logan’s case, a family who walked with him through cancer, immigration paperwork, and coming out. Their stories affirmed something I had experienced myself but never fully stopped to examine. I had always felt that the host family extended beyond the shared roof, but I hadn't appreciated just how deeply those relationships become entangled: neighbors, siblings, mentors, coworkers, close friends, and partners. They overlap, contradict, reinforce, and reshape one another, each carrying different assumptions, expectations, and forms of power. They shaped what participants felt they could reveal, conceal, question, and become in different contexts and who had access to and influence within those environments. It was within that web of relationships that participants learned who they could be, and what choices were even made possible.

As I continued analyzing these narratives, I found myself returning to Foucault's (1978) idea of the panopticon but only after bending it a little. Rather than imagining a single watchtower, I began thinking about multiple culturally coded watchtowers, each attuned to noticing different kinds of difference: sexuality, gender expression, race, nationality, disability, masculinity, femininity, class, and more. Crossing cultures often meant those watchtowers shifted. A behavior that felt highly visible in one place suddenly became invisible in another, while something previously unremarkable became newly scrutinized. Participants repeatedly described this recalibration without necessarily using those words. Distance from home sometimes lessened the fear of retaliation, creating space for experimentation or accidental discovery. At other times, unfamiliar cultural norms heightened uncertainty, making every gesture feel newly legible. Even participants who were not queer described becoming aware that their gender, nationality, or personality was being interpreted differently abroad. In that sense, surveillance was never exclusively about queerness—it was part of intercultural life itself. The host family often became one of those watchtowers, regulating routines, media consumption, relationships, and expectations, sometimes gently, sometimes explicitly. Yet that same environment could also become a place of remarkable freedom, care, or transformation. The model was never meant to prove that surveillance functions the same way everywhere, but rather to help explain why participants described host homes as places where regulation, resilience, policing, opportunity, belonging, and discovery continually overlapped.

Yet even as I said it, the interviews were showing me something I hadn't fully let myself name: you can love and be loved where big pieces of you are invisible. "Family" here is doing a lot of work. I'm still not sure what to do with that tension, only that it's real. Some participants' most meaningful relationships were not with the people officially assigned as their host family but with neighbors, mentors, coworkers, teachers, or other local hosts who quietly became sources of safety and belonging. That makes me wonder whether our language sometimes narrows what participants are actually experiencing. At the same time, there is something distinctive about the host family itself. The people providing your shelter, food, and daily care also occupy a position of authority, whether formal or informal. The language of family carries assumptions about intimacy, obligation, gratitude, and acceptance that shape how participants navigate disclosure, conflict, and affection. Those dynamics deserve attention not because host families are uniquely good or uniquely harmful, but because they occupy a particular kind of relational power.

That realization also makes me think differently about training. Preparing participants to navigate these relationships matters, but so does preparing hosts, educators, peers, and local mentors to recognize the experiences queer travelers bring with them. Better support should not fall solely on the shoulders of those already adapting. And even that conclusion resists simplicity. For Logan, for example, his host family became far more than a placement. During serious illness abroad, they cared for him through some of the hardest moments of his life, eventually becoming part of what he would consider his chosen family. Stories like his remind me that host families can simultaneously represent surveillance, obligation, refuge, and profound love. That complexity is precisely why reducing them to either "safe" or "unsafe" misses the point.

Nowhere did all of this feel more charged than around resilience. Participants' stories confirmed my sense of queer and trans brilliance, but they also forced me to notice how often that brilliance was demanded under duress. I had been leaning on the language of resilience because I wanted to celebrate how people made it through. After Soumya and others, that language started to feel thin. "Hyper-awareness is kind of like an observational superpower… but a lot of these skills come from traumatic situations. Bodies are carrying the cost of this 'fitting in.' We can't just call that resilience and clap." (timestamp to be added). I don't want to

throw the word away—there is real, hard-won strength in these narratives, and that deserves to be honored. But I've come to think we overuse it. Resilience should not be a requirement or a compliment we offer in place of structural change. I'm grateful people made it through; I'm upset they had to. The point, for me, is to let that gratitude and anger fuel creative, supportive changes so future queer travelers don't have to be quite so "resilient" just to stay alive or housed. I hope this thesis, in some small way, participates in that work.

I also watched my own internal impostor syndrome loosen its grip. Through each interview, I kept realizing how much we had lived parallel versions of the same architectures: training centers, village gossip, whispered queer networks, the quiet shared look when someone said something casually homophobic across the dinner table. For strangers, the perspectives were fresher, but the logics were familiar. We convinced each other sometimes; other times we simply held two truths side by side and moved on. People arrived at these conversations with different levels of readiness. Some had been carrying stories for years and spilled them out with relief. Others discovered mid-sentence that they had more to say than they expected. A few steered away from certain topics; some were indifferent but still generous; many laughed. Across that range, there was a common thread: people valued the chance to speak these experiences into a space that felt, if not perfectly safe, at least deeply understanding.

The focus groups made that especially visible. I thought I might need to guide them carefully, but after the initial check-ins the conversations mostly took off on their own. Before I could fully articulate a prompt, people were offering suggestions for how programs should change, imagining better training, naming the gaps they wished someone had noticed sooner. This single track for all queer people to 'learn the local laws and customs' don't work for everyone," I found myself saying. "[That advice is] so direction-focused, rather than experience-focused." The legality mattered, but it was a minor element of a larger story where context and nuance are incredibly important.

I keep coming back to birds when I think about all of this. Iridescent feathers are technically colorless; what we see as shimmering blues and greens is just light refracting through structure. The feather doesn't change depending on who's looking, but our angle and the light do. These interviews felt like that. The same host family, the same village, even the same house

in Madagascar could look like sanctuary from one angle and surveillance from another, comforting or suffocating, or both at once. My own story id being Latino, queer, neurodivergent, a former Peace Corps Volunteer, a host family coordinator, and now researcher. That story was one more feather in the pile, sometimes blending in, sometimes sticking out as an odd, gay shade. Through these conversations, I learned to stop asking which color was the "real" one and to pay attention instead to how different truths could coexist without cancelling each other out.

By the end, I was less interested in proving a theory than in honoring the weight people had been quietly carrying for years. In one call I caught myself saying, "Bodies are carrying the cost of this 'fitting in.'" It was the closest I could get to naming how much strain lived off-screen visible on people's chests and nervous systems, in their sleep and their silences. But even that language only gets at one layer. The other half of what I learned lives in the joy people carved out anyway: the little gay wins, the private jokes, the playlists and posters and tiny acts of editing and redaction that made host families livable and sometimes even loving. Across thirteen interviews and two focus groups, it often felt less like I was running a study and more like I was in a therapy session. I was listening, reflecting, saying things out loud I hadn't fully admitted to myself, and letting other people's stories rearrange my own.

There is deep, specific meaning in the ordinary parts of these narratives—the evenings on the couch, the market runs, the quiet routines—and those mundane fragments deserve to breathe just as much as the dramatic moments do. Even here, I can only show small pieces of much larger lives, but even those pieces matter. If this study did anything for me, it reinforced my belief in the danger of a single narrative about the queer host family experience. It is important to show how, in host homes and beyond, queer people keep making color out of conditions that were never designed with us in mind. It is a rich opportunity to learn how we might live better across a multitude of realities.

Chapter 5 – Negotiating Self & Environment

Introduction

Queer identity negotiation within intercultural host family exchange cannot be understood through a simple binary of disclosure versus concealment. Across participant narratives, identity did not emerge as something fixed that could either be expressed or hidden, but rather as something continuously negotiated across shifting relational, spatial, cultural, and institutional contexts. Participants moved through host homes, peer groups, classrooms, workplaces, digital spaces, and local communities while repeatedly recalibrating how they understood safety, belonging, intimacy, and authenticity. These negotiations were rarely static. Decisions that felt possible in one moment could become dangerous in another. Strategies that created connection in one relationship could produce distance in another. Identity itself shifted as participants moved between worlds with different expectations regarding visibility, disclosure, and social legibility.

Exchange programs often frame queer identity primarily through the language of risk management. Participants are encouraged to research local laws, understand cultural norms, and determine whether disclosure is "safe." While these recommendations are frequently well-intentioned, participant experiences suggest that such frameworks remain incomplete. Safety was rarely understood solely through geography or legality. Instead, a few of the ways participants described safety was through relational, emotional, temporal, visceral, and deeply contextual examples. In many cases, the greatest challenges did not emerge from dramatic moments of overt hostility, but from the cumulative pressure of constant self-monitoring, emotional performance, uncertainty, and the desire to maintain relationships within environments where complete openness did not always feel possible.

Participants also complicated dominant assumptions surrounding authenticity. Within many Global North queer frameworks, authenticity is often tied to visibility, verbal disclosure, and public openness. Yet participants repeatedly described forms of authenticity that existed outside complete visibility. Some participants felt disclosure was necessary for intimacy and emotional honesty. Others described strategic concealment not as repression, but as care, patience, or survival. Still others moved between these positions over time. Across the

interviews, authenticity did not emerge as a singular or universal condition. Instead, it appeared as an unstable and deeply personal relational process shaped by factors like emotional safety, cultural expectations, dependency, and interpersonal dynamics.

Host family environments intensified these negotiations because they blurred boundaries between public and private life. Unlike many social spaces where individuals can retreat or compartmentalize different parts of themselves, host family arrangements often involved constant proximity and observation. Participants shared meals, routines, homes, and intimate everyday spaces with people who frequently held significant power over their sense of comfort, belonging, and stability abroad. In this sense, host families could function simultaneously as sites of care, support, surveillance, and constraint. Participants often described pressure to become the "good guest," "ideal participant," or "respectful host child," roles that sometimes required softening, withholding, or strategically managing aspects of themselves to preserve harmony and maintain belonging.

At the same time, participant narratives resist reducing these experiences solely to narratives of repression or victimhood. Across interviews, participants demonstrated considerable agency, reflexivity, and creativity while navigating constraint; notably, participants exerted control even in ways that they themselves did not recognize or value as agentic. They built queer support systems through peers, online communities, media consumption, nightlife, friendships, and moments of temporary escape. They developed highly attuned forms of environmental reading and relational negotiation. They tested boundaries, adjusted disclosure strategies, cultivated moments of privacy, and learned how to move between different social worlds. In many cases, participants were actively theorizing safety, disclosure, and belonging in real time.

This chapter explores these negotiations through five interconnected themes: visibility and disclosure, performative belonging, conditional safety, queer survival infrastructures, and agency under constraint. Rather than treating concepts such as authenticity, safety, and success as stable categories determined institutionally, this chapter examines how participants continually reworked and reinterpreted these concepts on their own through lived experience. The goal is not to produce a singular model of queer exchange experience, but rather to

illuminate the complex and often contradictory ways participants navigated intimacy, surveillance, risk, care, and discovery within intercultural host family environments.

Negotiating Visibility and Disclosure

Across participant narratives, disclosure (or 'coming out') was rarely experienced as a singular event or definitive transition from hiddenness to openness. Instead, disclosure emerged as an ongoing and highly relational process shaped by emotional closeness, environmental uncertainty, dependency, safety calculations, privilege, and interpersonal trust. Participants repeatedly described having to assess not only whether disclosure was possible, but also who disclosure was for, what it might change, and whether verbal openness was necessary for connection or authenticity.

For some participants, disclosure carried strong emotional significance. Molly, in particular, repeatedly framed concealment as emotionally difficult because of the intimacy of host family environments. While she did not necessarily reject strategic concealment in principle, she described moments where withholding parts of herself felt deeply uncomfortable because the emotional closeness of host family relationships created pressure toward honesty and mutual recognition. As she explained, "dishonesty feels like betrayal." Her framing is significant because it complicates readings of concealment as either pure oppression or pure agency. For Molly, concealment was not simply silence. It carried emotional and relational consequences tied to the intimacy of Molly's everyday family life:

> Tanzania is pretty lonely in the queer aspect… it sometimes makes me feel like I'm not enough… And even my other volunteers, which I thought I was very open and out with, like, even they don't understand [how queerness impacts my experience]. … It was really hard to hide [my queerness], because I'd be on the phone in my bedroom, and I'd be worried that they could hear [me talking with my girlfriend]. So, like, I tried to keep it very PG, and then when I would tell [my girlfriend], 'I love you,' I would like whisper it into the phone, because I was worried that [my host family] would hear it.

As she continues, she explained this deeper,

> "It just, it's that feeling of being a double—it's living a double life, like your true self and then the self that you show others. … If [my host mama] doesn't know the true me, we never had a true relationship. And for the people that really, truly matter to me, like my host mama, it is really important for her to know the whole me.

What emerges in Molly's narrative is not simply a desire for visibility, but a desire for relational coherence. Concealment became difficult not only because she wanted to "come out," but because the host family environment encouraged emotional closeness while the conditions for coming out felt simultaneously impossible. This forced Molly to coexist with a tension between safety and relational intimacy that several participants described in different ways throughout the interviews. Molly's experience also reflects Ting-Toomey's (1993) understanding of identity negotiation as relational: the meaning and expression of her identity shifted according to the relationship in which she was situated, rather than existing independently of that relationship.

For Jess, similar tensions surfaced less around phone calls and more around moments of physical intimacy. During training, she and her girlfriend, and now wife, Erica "made out in [her] bedroom," then they immediately worried, "Ah, shit. Did somebody see that? I hope not", Jess recalled. The later discovery that there was a small peephole in the bedroom door only sharpened that sense that even the most private space was potentially under watch. Like Molly, Jess experienced hiding her identity as emotional risk management in a bedroom that was simultaneously the safest place to be queer and the most vulnerable to surveillance.

Tamara similarly described disclosure as connected to emotional connection and relational honesty, yet their experiences also demonstrated caution and patience. Rather than treating disclosure as an immediate necessity, Tamara often framed disclosure as something that required timing, trust, and observation. In several moments, they suggested that immediate openness possibly disrupted relationships before they had the opportunity to develop. Strategic waiting, therefore, was not necessarily experienced as repression, but as a way of allowing relationships to stabilize before introducing potentially destabilizing information. As Tamara put it, drawing on a cultural African proverb from their mother,

> When you go to a strange place, you don't fully come out of your shell. You have to stay put together and just observe the environment, how people behave before you try to come out… you can't just move to a strange land and start behaving like you. … When I started asking questions, listening to people talk, then I knew that, oh, my sexuality is not accepted here. I just have to stay in my shell.
>
> I would have felt unsafe if I ever disclosed, but I never did, you know? … I just wanted my mental health to be in check all the time. I wasn't ready to go through discrimination… So, if you feel something might not end well, it's better for you to just avoid it. So that was what I did.

For Tamara, disclosure is less about concealment than discernment. By drawing on a proverb passed down from their grandmother, they interpret queer identity negotiation through inherited cultural knowledge rather than solely through contemporary queer theory frameworks. Something is striking in this: advice rooted in generations of lived experience becomes a resource that Tamara uses to navigate the very cultural landscape from which it emerged. Rather than presenting strategic waiting as uniquely queer, their account reminds us that carefully observing a new environment before revealing oneself is a longstanding form of social wisdom. Pausing to observe, listen, and understand a social environment is a deeply familiar and intuitive. This universal advice supersedes identity; moreover, it that takes on particular significance when the stakes of visibility include safety, belonging, and dignity.

Aurora's experiences presenting a "slightly redacted copy" of herself while abroad illustrate how visibility often existed in partial, tacit, or negotiated forms through implied social cues, relationships, aesthetics, or indirect references. Her experiences closely resemble what Carlos Decena (2008) describes as tacitness, where queerness is understood relationally without requiring explicit verbal declaration. Within this framework, silence does not necessarily indicate repression or ignorance. Rather, it can function as a socially negotiated form of relational management. Aurora's "redaction" suggests that queer visibility need not disappear when it is not verbally declared; it can instead remain present through what is implied, sensed, and mutually negotiated.

This narrative parallels the stories of several others who likewise described carefully managing what versions of themselves were made available to host families. Ilan curated a more traditionally masculine self, "chang[ing] multiple facets of my identity and how I presented myself to blend in". T similarly described "going back into the closet," being out to Peace Corps staff but not to Malagasy community members, and relying on humor and deflection when others questioned their gender. Soumya emphasized vetting-based curation, "carefully choos[ing] who to tell" about her queerness and leaning into a hetero, married presentation at site, "Yes, this is my husband, and I am his wife". It was Soumya's strategy for safety and access to care. Kelsey, meanwhile, framed her curation around safety and legibility by maintaining the narrative of a long-distance American boyfriend even after they broke up. The figure of a devoted fiancée functioned as a protective shield and he agreed to it: "I have established this as like, a safety net… the worst thing I could do is remove it.". Taken together, these multiple and curated versions of self were less about simple hiding than about managing risk, intimacy, and recognition in highly relational host-family worlds.

Across the project, coming out to family, whether host or at home, often unfolded in relation to exchange in strikingly different ways. Felipe described coming out to family against the backdrop of a youth exchanges where he was staying with a host family, using the distance of exchange to begin imagining a queer future before he could name it to relatives. Logan, by contrast, anchored his eventual coming out around his relationship with Alex, drawing on that partnership as both proofs and protection: once he had a stable job and a long-term boyfriend, he felt better positioned to tell his parents. He framed queerness through the recognizability of pride and accomplishment in his partnership, career, and self. Some, like Molly and Michael, waited until the end of service—after trust with host communities had solidified before disclosing more fully. Others, like Ilan, experienced more accidental or incremental disclosure, where a comment or slip in self-presentation prompted conversations they had not meticulously. Still others, including Tamara and Chris, did not come out to family or key communities until years after their exchanges. They narrated long arcs of internal negotiation before disclosure felt possible or desirable. T's experience complicated these timelines further: they were effectively "outed" on sight in Madagascar. Most people read them as gender-nonconforming immediately; yet this visibility carried a different weight than back home and was more often met with curiosity or

humorous banter. They created safety from risk and intentionally minimized any behaviors that could attract the specific and harmful stigma attached to being trans or nonbinary. Together, these stories underscore set of factors, contexts, peers, partners, distance, and even misrecognition itself. It all shaped how and when people came out.

Across these decisions, what we see also demonstrates how disclosure decisions were shaped by the layered environments participants inhabited. Their negotiations were not simply between themself and a single host family. Instead, they navigated deep networks of relationships. An assemblage perspective helps explain that disclosure was never a decision made in isolation. Instead, participants negotiated visibility within interconnected social, institutional, spatial, and digital environments that were mutually constitutive. Host families, peers, program policies, local communities, and digital platforms became entangled such that decisions made in one context could reverberate across others. This continually re-determined the possibilities and consequences of visibility, safety, and belonging. Social media further complicated these negotiations by collapsing geographic distance and blurring boundaries between different social worlds.

Now contrary to Molly, who felt like they were living two lives, Aurora described herself not as two people, but as one person putting on a performance, "I was sharing the version of me that I think is most palatable to you… I'm editing what you're seeing" while balancing how "it is costing me something to do [this performance]". One cluster of participants experienced multiplicity as painful fracture: Molly felt like she was living "two lives" and "half of a whole," Tamara and Chris also narrated long stretches of "not really [feeling] myself". Another cluster framed multiplicity more as strategic performance: Kelsey/Amé, Aurora's redaction, an "onion" of visibility for T, a carefully more-masculine outer shell for Ilan. A third group organized their curation around timing and vetting rather than daily performance: Soumya, Leo, Logan, Michael, and Felipe managed who knew what and when, delaying certain disclosures for long after service or until they had life-stabilizing anchors like a steady partner, job, or physical distance. Those anchors would ground them in case of crisis. Despite nuance, they all point to various ways of presenting and feeling authentic with oneself, or how to cope with it.

These experiences reveal how disclosure functioned less as a single moment of revelation and more as an ongoing process of calibration. Participants were constantly reading environments, testing reactions, and deciding what forms of visibility felt emotionally or relationally sustainable within specific contexts.

Jessica's experiences similarly highlight the instability of visibility and disclosure. At several points, Jessica described awareness that others had possibly already assumed or suspected aspects of her identity without requiring explicit confirmation. This produced a complex dynamic where queerness existed in a partially known but unnamed state. Many participants also experimented with tacitness, or the implication of being known without ever quite saying it. They were treating silence as a strategy rather than simple repression. Felipe's guarded exchanges, Leo's decision not to come out to host families, Michael's delayed disclosures, Chris's long arcs of partial visibility, and T's willingness to let people's visual readings of them stand all blurred the line between in and out of the closet. Taken together, these stories suggest that for many, the most workable mode abroad was not full disclosure or total concealment, but a tacit, relationally calibrated in-between where queerness could be sensed and lived without always needing to be spoken. Similarly to Aurora, tacitness allowed people like Felipe, Leo, Michael, Chris, T, and others to exist in host-family spaces without full erasure, but it also generated for them a persistent ambiguity: does my host know? do they have no idea? are they aware and playing along, or aware and secretly angry? These questions could never be conclusively answered, because tacit recognition by definition resists confirmation.

Managing assumptions became its own form of labor. In some cases, not correcting assumptions felt easier. In others, silence produced discomfort or emotional distance. For Jessica, queerness operated in an ambiguous field of perception. Among peers, Jessica's queerness is "kind of" assumed; in the host-family context, she imagines that same set of cues dissolving into a more generic category of "weird American." Appearing as "straight-presenting" both reduced her immediate scrutiny and sustained a gap between how she understood herself and how she was seen. Jessica's labor regarding disclosure was not simply deciding whether to "come out," but deciding when and whether to correct assumptions that feel simultaneously convenient and distancing. In the end, Jessica explains how she never disclosed her identity to her host family directly, "I came out to my very specific people, and then word spread, and that was that. … In a

way, it was very unspoken." Notably, it was never brought up by either Jessica or the host party. It remains unknown if the host family was aware of Jessica's queerness or if the simply say what Jessica perceived as her queer signalers, which was possibly interpreted by her host family not as queer, but as "American" or "foreigner". This pattern was not incidental but a major theme across the project: Kelsey, Molly, T, Ilan, Soumya, Chris, Leo, Michael, Logan, and Aurora all described moments when their clothes, mannerisms, or relationships were read less as "queer" than as the quirks of a white American, foreigner, or the Chinese international student, rendering queerness itself largely unspoken.

Importantly, participants did not describe disclosure decisions solely through fear. While fear and risk were certainly present, disclosure was also connected to care, timing, curiosity, experimentation, exhaustion, and relational maintenance. Participants frequently weighed not only potential danger, but also emotional energy, interpersonal consequences, and the broader social atmosphere of their environments.

Strategic concealment also intersected unevenly with race, nationality, gender expression, and passing privilege. Participants such as Aurora and Jessica discussed moments where passing privilege allowed them to move through certain spaces without immediate scrutiny. Yet this privilege was unstable and situational. Visibility could shift rapidly depending on clothing, social context, language, or interpersonal dynamics. Felipe, meanwhile, described race often functioning as a more immediate and visible identity category than sexuality. His experiences highlight how sexuality was negotiated alongside multiple intersecting systems of legibility and perception. Felipe explained how, for him, race is the first identity through which he is commonly made legible, long before sexuality is openly named.

What becomes visible across these narratives is that disclosure cannot be reduced to a singular moral binaries or political framework. Participants were not simply choosing between honesty and dishonesty, courage and fear, or openness and repression. Rather, they were navigating highly relational and unequal environments in which visibility carried emotional, interpersonal, and material consequences. Disclosure was shaped by intimacy, dependency, timing, surveillance, care, and survival simultaneously.

These experiences also challenge dominant Western narratives that position visibility as the primary marker of queer authenticity or liberation. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that identity could remain deeply felt and relationally meaningful even when it was not fully verbalized or publicly visible. Some held seemingly contradictory thoughts at once: for instance, Kelsey carefully maintained the fiction of a long-distance fiancé for safety, yet still insisted that her nightly Zumba classes and intimate bonds with host women were "real" forms of herself, even if her queerness was never named. Her stance echoes Molly's insistence that "just because you have to hide who you are doesn't make you any less queer," directly contesting coming-out narratives that equate authenticity with uninterrupted visibility. Leo shares a similar sentiment, sharing "I think it's possible to make those [deep] connections regardless of whether I share this [queer] part of myself. I still feel like I'm sharing enough of who I am that we can make that connection". While Ilan has a "goal… to just stay in the closet the entire time [of 27 months]".

Across these accounts, participants neither romanticize concealment nor accept visibility as the sole measure of truth. Instead, they situate disclosure within dense webs of intimacy, race, religion, nationality, gender expression, and safety. Together, their experiences show that queerness can remain deeply felt, emotionally real, and relationally significant even when it cannot be fully verbalized or publicly recognized. Disclosure is not granted equally to all, and even for those with some degree of choice, it is shaped by so many intersecting factors that no single narrative of coming out abroad can stand in for the rest—nor should generalized advice pretend to.

Performing Belonging and the "Good Guest"

If disclosure involved negotiations over visibility, belonging often involved negotiations over performance. Across interviews, participants repeatedly described pressure to become desirable guests, respectful participants, culturally adaptable travelers, or emotionally manageable host children. These pressures were communicated both through explicit rules. Other times, they emerged through subtle interpersonal expectations, cultural expectations, institutional messaging, gratitude narratives, and the emotional dynamics of living within another family's home. Chris resonated deeply with that and for a good reason:

> I'd worked so hard to get out of boxes at home, but then I'd go back into them when I was relying on these relationships for a place to sleep. It wasn't that I was lying about who I was; it was more like, I can't risk losing the roof over my head.

Nearly every participant frequently described wanting to be perceived as a "good guest." Yet this desire often became entangled with pressures to soften aspects of themselves, avoid conflict, remain agreeable, and preserve relational harmony. In many cases, participants feared not only rejection, but disappointing people who were providing shelter, care, protection, emotional support, or access to the exchange experience itself.

This dynamic reflects what several scholars describe as affective labor within intercultural and familial relationships (Lugones). Host family programs often frame themselves through the language of intimacy, care, and belonging. Participants are encouraged to become "part of the family," seek meaningful connection, and embrace cultural immersion. Yet these emotional expectations can create conditions where belonging becomes tied to emotional performance and relational manageability.

Felipe' experiences illustrate this tension particularly clearly. Throughout his interviews, Felipe frequently emphasized politeness, respectability, and adaptability within host family spaces. His narratives reveal a constant awareness of how he was being perceived and interpreted. In many ways, his efforts to embody the ideal guest reflected sincere care and gratitude. Yet they also demonstrate how participants internalized responsibility for maintaining relational harmony. As he reflected.

> I was raised to be very polite and respectful, especially in someone else's house. So, with my host family I was always thinking, don't be too loud, don't be too messy, don't be too much. I didn't want them to ever say, 'oh, this Black kid from South America is rude' or ungrateful. I was constantly adapting… laughing at the right jokes, eating whatever they served, helping with chores… because I felt like I had to prove I was a good guest all the time.

For Felipe, being a "good guest" is not a static identity but an ongoing performance that he feels compelled to maintain in order to protect both his own position and the imagined reputations of

those who might follow him, and of the program. As he later added, this responsibility was not only individual but representative. Being a "good guest" carried additional significance due to Felipe' identity as a Colombian national and the culture's deep emphasis on hospitality, warmth, and openness. He was aware that any misstep might be read as a statement about Black people, Latin Americans, or queer people more broadly, not just about him personally. Intersectionality is particularly visible here because Felipe was not negotiating queerness, race, nationality, and respectability separately; the meanings attached to each were produced simultaneously within the host-family relationship. Logan similarly felt the weight of professional etiquette, the job market, and burdening stigma of stigma and racism—it took all of his energy and left him unfocused on those elements:

> When you're an immigrant, an international student, you put a lot of effort into trying to learn the language, trying to learn the culture, trying to be a part of that society, that community, to be competitive on a job market. You're trying to fit into what that society is expecting… Most of my college career was working towards figuring out how to make myself stand out professionally, but the host family does provide a space that helped me to see myself being able to have that family support in the US.

For queer participants, this pressure often became intensified because maintaining belonging sometimes appeared contingent upon limiting disruption. Participants frequently described carefully managing conversations, media, clothing, relationships, or emotional expression in order to avoid creating discomfort within host households. This did not always emerge through direct hostility. In many cases, the pressure operated through uncertainty. Participants often simply did not know how disclosure might shift relational dynamics, and that uncertainty itself shaped behavior.

Across interviews, participants described this feeling as a kind of ongoing performance. Rather than centering on a single person, these accounts collectively highlight how host family spaces often functioned less as private refuges and more as continuous sites of interpersonal observation. Aurora and Tamara, for instance, both reflected on how carefully curated their self-presentation remained even years after their exchanges, describing the way they still hesitate over which photos to post from that period, which captions feel safe.

For others, performance centered less on digital curation and more on embodied self-management. Ilan recalled that during his time in Madagascar he actually performed more visible femininity than he does now working at a desk job in Florida. In Madagascar, he was painting his nails, experimenting with clothing, and playing with gender presentation in public spaces. Simultaneously, Ilan was being extremely cautious in the host home:

> I could be playful and femme with friends in town, but in the house, I was constantly checking, 'Is this too much? Am I confusing them? Am I making things harder for my next host sibling?'.

Logan similarly described preferring to perform the role of a "successful partner" rather than a gay man; when host parents and neighbors asked about his life back home, he emphasized career achievements and minimized questions about romance. He reflected, "I knew they wanted to hear that I was doing well, that I was stable, so I gave them that story and left out the parts about my boyfriend".

Performance also extended into sibling and parental dynamics within the host family. Several participants described performing for host siblings like Kelsey. She was being the fun, interesting, non-threatening older sibling who tells stories about stories but avoids anything that might invite conflict or judgment. Others recalled carefully managing relationships with host parents until or unless they decided to come out. Michael and Chris both described long stretches of time in which they lived as ideal sons in the home. They were helpful, grateful, endlessly flexible, until they felt it was safe to be more open. Michael explained:

> "I spent months being the perfect kid in that house before I even considered telling them I was gay… It felt like I had to earn the right to complicate their idea of me."

That idea stood out to me. As a hostee, Michael felt that he had put in the energy to get close to this family before he had the right make them put energy into understanding him. Finally, some participants framed performance explicitly through humor and emotional regulation. T described "doing bits" at the dinner table. They were turning awkward comments into jokes, smoothing over tension with self-deprecating humor, and quickly changing the subject when conversations edged toward sexuality or politics. T recalled:

> I was always on…If someone said something weird, I'd make it funny, so nobody had to sit in the discomfort. That felt like my job—as the exchange student, as the queer person—to keep everything light.

These moments highlight that performance was not reducible to superficial politeness. It involved continuous negotiation over which emotions, identities, and stories could safely appear in spaces shaped by intimacy, obligation, and uneven power. Participants were not simply behaving well; they were actively editing themselves in anticipation of how they might be read: as queer, as racialized, as foreigners, as representatives of their home cultures, or as potential risks to program reputation.

Several participants similarly described host family life as allowing little solitude or decompression. Unlike university dorms or independent apartments, host family arrangements often required near-constant social availability. Meals, family activities, shared routines, and thin walls meant participants were frequently visible to others. Jessica and Aurora both described needing alone time simply to recalibrate emotionally. As Jessica put it, "Sometimes I just needed to close the door and not be anyone's cultural experience for a couple of hours." At the same time, participants described feeling guilty about staying in their rooms risked being interpreted as rude or ungrateful, while constant presence in the living room left them exhausted. Jessica noted that her preference for solitude was occasionally misread as a mental health crisis:

> There was a point where the program staff started asking if I was depressed because I wasn't always out in the living room. I wasn't spiraling. I just needed a break from being watched and being 'on' all the time.

For her, retreating was a fragile strategy for reclaiming a self that was otherwise continuously available for interpretation.

This constant visibility could produce profound exhaustion. Participants were not only navigating intercultural adaptation, but also the emotional labor of continually reading environments and managing perception. Host family environments sometimes functioned as what participants implicitly described as surveillance spaces. Surveillance here did not rely on

explicit rules or direct monitoring; it emerged through intimacy and self-regulation. As Soumya explained,

> No one told me, 'We're watching you,' but I always felt watched anyway. It was like I was pre-editing myself because I knew they were forming an opinion about my country, my religion, my queerness, all at once.

The intimacy of family life increased the feeling of being observed, interpreted, and evaluated. In a way, the host home resembles Foucault's (1978) panopticon, where the possibility of being seen at any moment encourages self-discipline. Yet Soumya's reflections also show that she was not simply policed by an all-seeing eye; she experimented with how much she could reveal, when to pull back, and when to quietly refuse the demand to be fully legible. Soumya found ways to stop self-regulating while not raising flags. I posit the panopticon was not simply imposed upon participants; its effects were continually reinterpreted through their own situated knowledge of how different identities might be read. She resisted the panopticon as if the cultural lens it has on could not notice elements of Soumya, and although habits from back home were now policed, Soumya in turn could safely engage with new customs this watchtower did not police. Yet Soumya's reflections also show that she was not simply policed by an all-seeing eye; she experimented with how much she could reveal, when to pull back, and when to quietly refuse the demand to be fully legible.

The pressure to be a "good guest" also shaped how participants understood success. Several reflected retrospectively on how much energy they devoted to becoming ideal exchange students: endlessly adaptable, grateful, socially integrated, and visibly transformed. Michael later described wishing he had approached the experience differently, explaining that if he had seen survival and endurance themselves as meaningful accomplishments, he would value small wins more. As Michael recalled:

> Looking back, I realized I had this unspoken rubric of what a 'good' exchange student was supposed to be—super social, totally integrated, always out doing things, learning the language at lightning speed, endlessly grateful and transformed… I wasn't doing all of that all the time, I was really hard on myself. If I had understood that just surviving

> that year, just getting through it with my sense of self mostly intact, was actually a huge accomplishment in that context, I wouldn't have been as hard on myself.

Others echoed this sense that institutional and cultural narratives attach value to highly visible forms of success: participation, openness, amicability, emotional warmth, and ease. Chris noted that "being a good guest" often felt baked into the program's metrics of achievement:

> It always felt like, if the host family loved you and thought you were amazing, then you'd done the exchange 'right.' There wasn't much space for, 'I did my best in a really complicated situation and I'm proud I made it through.

When institutions do not name or complicate these expectations, participants described feeling pushed toward extremes: either over-accommodating to the point of feeling a sort of self-erasure, or rejecting host norms so forcefully in that they feared being read as disrespectful or ungrateful.

These dynamics were further intensified by intersecting systems of race, gender, nationality, class, and sexuality. Participants who occupied marginalized identities often described a heightened sense of representation and respectability. Felipe, for example, navigated expectations surrounding sexuality, race, and cultural representation simultaneously.

> I knew I wasn't just me in that house," he reflected. "I was the Black Colombian kid, the queer kid, the first one like me some of them had ever met. If I messed up, it felt like I was confirming every stereotype they might already have.

Ilan similarly described feeling that any misstep might be read not only as a personal failing, but as a commentary representing "people like him"—other others, queer, nonconforming, foreign. Importantly, however, participants did not simply absorb these pressures without question. Many actively resisted, renegotiated, or reflected critically on the demand to perform belonging.

Leo described a turning point in their exchange when they began quietly loosening the performance:

> At first, I was trying so hard to be perfect that I was disappearing. Eventually I decided, if they're going to like me, they have to like at least a slightly more honest version of me. I still edited, but I stopped pretending I didn't have boundaries or opinions.

Several participants ultimately concluded that complete emotional transparency was neither realistic nor necessary within host family relationships. Instead, they reframed host family bonds as meaningful but partial forms of intimacy. Soumya noted,

> I love them, but they don't know everything about me, and that's okay. Our relationship is real, even if it's not the full story.

Jessica similarly described learning to value "good-enough" connection over idealized visions of familial fusion: "I stopped chasing this fantasy where they understand every part of me. It was enough that they cared, and that I could care back, even with limits." Participants could care deeply for host families while still recognizing boundaries around openness, understanding, and emotional reciprocity.

These experiences complicate idealized narratives of host family exchange as uncomplicated cultural intimacy. Host families were often sites of care, support, generosity, and genuine attachment. Yet they were also spaces shaped by uneven power relations, institutional narratives of success, and the pressure of constant relational management. Belonging was not a stable endpoint nor a permanent status. Rather, it unfolded as an ongoing negotiation between intimacy and performance, gratitude and self-protection, connection and the right to remain partially opaque.

Conditional Safety and Relational Navigation

Participants rarely understood safety as a fixed condition determined solely by national laws or broad cultural attitudes. Instead, safety emerged as highly contextual, relational, and temporally unstable. Participants described safety not as something one either had or lacked, but as something continually interpreted, negotiated, and reassessed across different environments and relationships.

Aurora frequently connected safety to environmental uncertainty and situational awareness. Her narratives demonstrate how participants often entered host family environments without fully knowing how sexuality or gender identity would be received. As a result, caution frequently became a default strategy in new settings. Reflecting on her time in Kyrgyzstan, she described a deliberate practice of "hedging" until she could read the situation:

> Going into it in Kyrgyzstan, my goal was honestly for my host family to never know. I didn't know how they would react or what people were saying about queer people when I wasn't in the room, so my starting point was caution. I would watch how people talked, what they joked about, what they said about gay people. It just made more sense to hedge my bets and not reveal too much until I had a better read on the situation I was walking into.

This caution was not necessarily irrational fear. Several participants described genuine awareness of potential social, emotional, or physical consequences tied to visibility. Many referenced moments where danger or hostility felt possible, even if not always explicit. Yet participants also repeatedly emphasized that safety could not be predicted solely through geography or formal policy. More importantly, memorizing local laws and customs had little impact on the actions of local communities. Some environments that appeared politically progressive still felt emotionally unsafe, while certain relationships within more conservative contexts unexpectedly produced care, acceptance, or understanding.

Molly's reflections particularly complicate geographic understandings of safety. At multiple points, she suggested that safety was not simply determined by location, but by relational dynamics, emotional trust, and temporality. Her experiences reveal how the same environment could feel safe in one moment and unsafe in another depending on interpersonal shifts, emotional dependency, or evolving visibility. For example, Molly contrasted the legal and social climate of Tanzania with the emotional refuge she found in particular spaces within it:

> Even Dar isn't technically safe, it was what made me feel safer. In the village I couldn't be out at all, and if I was only ever in that space, constantly hiding myself, I don't think I could have done my service. In the city I could actually dress how I wanted, go to queer

> spaces, be around people who got it. So, on paper it's still a dangerous place, but in practice it gave me more room to breathe than some of the supposedly 'safer' places I've been.

For Molly, safety was less about a country's legal code than about whether there were concrete people and places where she could exist without constant vigilance. A "safer" location with hostile relationships could feel more dangerous than a criminalizing context that contained pockets of care, nuance, or quiet acceptance.

Beyond Molly's experiences, other participants highlighted how underground bars further complicated the geography of safety and risk. These spaces were often physically hard to find, tucked down alleys, behind unmarked doors, exposed rusty nails, or known only through word-of-mouth. Reaching them required navigating curfews, police presence, and the threat of social or legal repercussions. As Ilan put it, recalling a gay club in Antananarivo, "you had to kind of turn down this alley … it was down an alley and then [literally] underground," and when a Malagasy man warned, "no, no, you don't want to go down there, that's a bad place," Ilan remembered thinking, "Oh, what did I just do?" even as he kept walking toward the club. We both had endless nights of joy there, as someone also kept a lookout at the door for police presence. Similarly, T described the same gay bar as a place you reached only by following a chain of opaque directions: "you go to Cuba, then you turn right, then you turn left at the next alleyway, and then it's the unmarked door on the right that's red"—a cartography of risk that only circulated through queer networks. Yet, for many, those nights were remembered as "huge" not only for the adrenaline and the fun we all had, but because they made visible a fragile, shared sense that everyone present had taken a risk to refuse isolation and erasure together.

Several participants also described safety as connected to temporality. Disclosure decisions often changed depending on how long participants expected relationships to last, whether they anticipated returning to certain spaces, or how emotionally invested they had become in particular relationships. Molly's observation that "forever feels different" captures how temporality shaped risk perception. Short-term encounters, temporary programs, and future distance all influenced how participants interpreted possible consequences. Discussing her plans to tell her counterpart in Tanzania, Molly explained:

> My plan with my counterpart is to wait until the very end. He wants to go do a master's program, so I kind of joke that in his last week I'll be like, 'Hey, by the way, I'm not straight. Goodbye.' I would love to come out to him earlier, but Tanzanians talk, and I'm not willing to put my whole service on the line for one disclosure. I can wait. Forever feels different. If someone's going to be in my life for a long time, that changes the calculus.

By contrast, she described her host mother as part of a hoped-for lifelong relationship, which made hiding feel increasingly untenable:

> I would love to keep talking to my host mama for the rest of my life, but I don't want that if she doesn't know who I am. If she doesn't know the true me, we never had a true relationship. So, it's like, yeah, I can stay closeted to protect my service in the short term, but if this is a forever person, at some point the hiding starts to feel like its own kind of danger.

In Molly's case, temporality does not simply accelerate or delay disclosure; it reshapes what counts as risk and what counts as loss.

Safety additionally emerged through understanding rather than complete agreement or ideological alignment. Felipe' experiences with his mother demonstrate this complexity particularly well. Rather than framing safety solely through complete acceptance, Felipe often emphasized the importance of feeling emotionally understood or relationally held, even within imperfect circumstances. A few days after Felipe came out to his mom from Mexico, his mother had a late-night conversation with him. He recalled:

> She told me, 'Felipe, if you want to be like that, it's okay, but please just move to another country. Colombia is very homophobic. You know how our family is with that as well. I just don't want you to get hurt.' That was the first time I really understood why she reacted the way she did. It wasn't that she was rejecting me for being gay; she was scared that the world was going to hurt me.

For Felipe, these moments did not erase the structural homophobia she named. But they did produce a sense of safety grounded in being seen and protected, even if his mother did not share his politics or fully embrace queer liberation frameworks. So, this brings up the reminder that even though one may be living with a host family, the individual continues to engage with and manage relationships and disclosure back home. Safety, in Felipe' framing, was something felt in the texture of relationships rather than a condition of guaranteed protection.

Alongside the other experiences, these moments reveal that participants were not necessarily searching for perfectly "safe" environments. Rather, they were often searching for environments that felt navigable, interpretable, or emotionally survivable. Participants repeatedly described the emotional labor involved in reading environments. This included observing body language, testing conversations, monitoring reactions, assessing humor, interpreting political comments, and evaluating interpersonal dynamics. Such hyper-awareness frequently functioned as a survival strategy. Importantly, however, this labor was exhausting. Participants were continually balancing self-protection with desires for connection, intimacy, spontaneity, and emotional ease. Safety calculations therefore extended far beyond dramatic moments of disclosure. They shaped everyday behaviors, routines, conversations, relationships, and emotional states.

Jessica's experiences further demonstrate how visibility itself could produce vulnerability. In some contexts, she described heightened awareness of being watched or interpreted. Yet invisibility also carried emotional consequences. Several participants described moments where silence or concealment produced isolation, loneliness, or disconnection even when those strategies felt necessary. Reflecting on being "straight presenting" in Madagascar, Jessica noted:

> I'm very straight-presenting—long hair, dresses, skirts—and in Madagascar that meant people mostly just saw me as this nice, slightly weird American girl. That kept me safe in a lot of ways, but it also meant they liked this version of me that wasn't actually all of me. Sometimes it felt like I was only half-there in my own life. They didn't hate me, but they also didn't really know me.

For Jessica, remaining unread as queer reduced the risk of overt conflict, yet it introduced a different kind of vulnerability: the ache of being present but not fully recognized. This instability reveals one of the central paradoxes running throughout participant narratives: the strategies that protected participants emotionally or physically sometimes simultaneously limited intimacy, spontaneity, or belonging. Conversely, the moments that produced meaningful connection occasionally required vulnerability, uncertainty, or risk. There was a sort of queering safety by the participants. They did not simply move between "safe" and "unsafe" spaces, they were often inverted and other times entangled. They could coexist within safe and unsafe spaces at the same time. Throughout this, she navigated environments that were often contradictory, shifting, and emotionally uneven. Safety was acquired through the constant recalibration attuning to these environments rather than certainty.

Queer Survival Infrastructures and Relational Escape

Despite the constraints participants described, interviews also revealed extensive forms of queer worldmaking, survival infrastructure, and relational creativity. Participants actively sought out spaces, practices, relationships, and routines that allowed them to decompress, reconnect with themselves, or experience forms of affirmation unavailable within host family environments.

For some participants, queer peer networks became essential sources of emotional survival. Jessica, Molly, Aurora, and others described moments where interactions with queer peers provided relief from the pressure of constant self-monitoring. These spaces allowed participants to speak more openly, vent frustrations, joke freely, or simply exist without the same level of interpretive labor required elsewhere. Several participants jokingly described a kind of "teapot effect," where emotional restraint within host family environments eventually overflowed in peer settings. Jessica, for instance, recalled:

> I used to joke with my friends that I was like a little teapot. I'd spend all week in my host family being polite and careful and not saying the gay thing out loud, and then I'd get to a hangout with the other queer volunteers and just pour everything out… every tiny

> microaggression, every weird comment, every time I swallowed a pronoun. It was definitely oversharing, but it was also how I kept myself from exploding.

Similarly, Molly described queer meet-ups in Dar es Salaam as a kind of pressure-release valve:

> When I was in the village, I had to be so careful all the time. What I wore, what I said, who I texted in front of people. So, when I'd get to Dar and be with other queer folks, it was like the lid came off. We'd talk about everything, make jokes we could never make in the village, stay up way too late processing. It was messy and a little intense, but it was the only way to get all that pressure out.

These recognized, but self-regulating, forms of oversharing, venting, and emotional release became mechanisms for managing accumulated strain rather than signs of failure to adapt. Despite the challenges peers present, they can simultaneously be someone's greatest coping mechanism. Notably, many of these behaviors signify excess or laziness; it is likely they would be categorized by exchange agencies as concerns: maladaptation, culture shock, overindulgence, or being inflexible. Rather, I argue the additional barriers overcome by marginalized students are released through equal additional amounts of self-regulation. It makes sense that a participant who overcomes more barriers, may have more to talk about. If I was misgendered once, I may be annoyed. Twice would surely make me share with someone and question. Three or more times and I am going to be venting. Exhaustion is correlated to the amount of energy required.

Digital spaces also played significant roles in sustaining participants emotionally. Participants frequently referenced queer media, online friendships, social media, messaging platforms, or digital communities as forms of connection and self-recognition. Jessica described binge-watching queer media during periods of isolation, while Aurora discussed how digital communication blurred boundaries between home and abroad. As Aurora noted:

> I never felt completely cut off, because I could still text my queer friends back home, send memes, watch the same shows. I'd be in my host family's living room in Kyrgyzstan but also live-tweeting some gay show with my friend in the States. So even

> when I couldn't be out in that physical space, I still had these little portals back to a world where my queerness made sense.

Jessica similarly turned to queer media as a form of self-recognition when she felt particularly isolated:

> There were nights where I would just lie under my mosquito net and binge every queer storyline I could find on Netflix, because I needed to see people like me somewhere. No one around me knew I was queer, but my phone did. It sounds dramatic, but sometimes that was the only place I felt fully real.

Moments of solitude similarly emerged as important forms of survival and recalibration. Participants frequently described needing time alone not as withdrawal from exchange, but as necessary emotional recovery. In environments characterized by constant interaction and visibility, solitude became a form of care. peer houses, and weekly self-care rituals illustrate this particularly clearly. Small routines involving food, media, or temporary escape became stabilizing practices amid turbulent emotional uncertainty:

> Sundays became my little reset day. I would go to the bazaar and buy myself something nice—like fresh bread or chocolate—come back, close my bedroom door, put on some comfort TV that had queer characters, and just be by myself for a few hours. It wasn't about avoiding my host family; it was about remembering who I was outside of being their volunteer. Those tiny rituals were how I kept my brain from fraying at the edges.

These practices resonate with Bruce's (2016) discussions of "twirling" as non-linear movement, reflection, and recalibration. Exchange programs often emphasize constant engagement, productivity, and visible participation. Yet participants repeatedly demonstrated that rest, withdrawal, and temporary disengagement were essential components of surviving emotionally intense intercultural environments.

Participants also engaged in forms of queer worldmaking through local exploration, nightlife, friendships, and temporary moments of freedom. Molly, Tamara, and others described experiences where local queer spaces or relationships allowed them to experience forms of

connection unavailable elsewhere. For Molly, nights out in Dar with other queer Tanzanians and volunteers offered fleeting but powerful alternatives to village life:

> Going out in Dar with other queer folks felt like stepping into a parallel universe. For a few hours I wasn't the careful, closeted volunteer; I was just a queer person dancing with my friends. And then you go back to the village and put the mask back on. It didn't fix the bigger problems, but it reminded me there was more to my life than hiding.

Read alongside Molly, Ilan's story underscores that "doing gender" under constraint can move in opposite directions while raising similar questions about authenticity. Whereas Molly arrives in Tanzania having claimed a more masculine, androgynous presentation and then learns to re-inhabit skirts and spa days without reading that as a betrayal of her queerness, Ilan describes the reverse trajectory: moving from an expansive, femme-embracing style in the U.S. to button-ups, bare nails, and deliberate de-feminization in Madagascar in order to "stay in the closet the entire time" and disclose only to a single counterpart near the end of service. After that disclosure, neither of them "returns" to a single stable gender expression; instead, both carry forward a sharpened sense that feeling like themselves will always involve calibrating how they look and move in relation to particular people and places. Their accounts both show that self-presentation abroad is less about defending a stable, pre-formed queer self and more about learning to inhabit multiple, sometimes contradictory gendered selves at once, as safety, legibility, and desire pull in different directions.

Across the project, participants describe these spaces as brief but vital "parallel universes" that interrupt otherwise constrained routines. Nights out in Dar resembled what the others talked about. These queer bars in Spain, late-night fanfic, and queer corners of TikTok and WhatsApp didn't resolve the structural risks they faced, but they offered moments when people could drop the careful guest/volunteer persona and simply be queer with others. These temporary worlds of relationships, parties, and online feeds made it possible to feel pleasure and recognition, reminding them that life could be more than endurance and concealment, even if only for a night or a scroll. These moments can be understood through Muñoz's (1999) concept of queer worldmaking: participants were not merely escaping hostile environments, but temporarily producing alternative social worlds in which queer existence became ordinary,

recognizable, and possible. Tamara described something similar when they found a small queer-friendly bar in the host city:

> That little bar was the first place I saw queer people just chilling, holding hands, kissing in a corner, and not getting stared at. I didn't even do anything wild. I just sat there and watched and felt my shoulders drop. It was like, okay, I'm not crazy, people like me exist here too.

As their shoulders drop quite literally on the camera. The embodiment of these experiences, these memories, and the act of processing them alone required immense energy, vulnerability, and open-mindedness. Their stress melted, their fear subdued, they felt safe and their guard was temporarily lower than earlier. Importantly, these moments of isolation did not erase broader structural constraints. Rather, they existed alongside them: they were brief respites within wider regimes of surveillance, respectability, and risk. What emerges across these narratives is that queer participants were actively constructing survival infrastructures within environments that did not always fully support them. These infrastructures were often informal, temporary, improvised, and deeply relational. Yet they played crucial roles in helping participants remain emotionally intact, rest, and find privacy.

Constraint, Agency, and Discovery

Although participants frequently described constraint, surveillance, and emotional exhaustion, their narratives also reveal substantial forms of agency, reflexivity, and self-discovery. Importantly, agency did not emerge through unrestricted freedom, complete autonomy, or promised liberation. Instead, it often appeared through negotiation, adaptation, strategic decision-making, and relational awareness within constrained conditions. Participants were not passively reacting to environments. They were actively interpreting, adjusting, experimenting, and theorizing their experiences in real time.

Several participants described exchange experiences as sites of profound self-discovery. Tamara reflected on realizing new dimensions of their identity through the process of navigating unfamiliar environments. Looking back on their time living with a Christian host family in

Nigeria as a teenager, they emphasize that the experience fundamentally reshaped how they understood themself:

> One thing I will never do is hide who I am. I won't do that again. Then let me say that was like a hack of a teenager who never knew what self-defense was or how to defend herself when she's been attacked. But now I've learned better to live in my reality every day, so I would never be in a position where I would deny that I am not queer. I am queer. I've always been queer, and I love my sexuality so much… It makes me beautiful. This is who I am. This is who I'm comfortable expressing myself in. I cannot live a double identity. That is not me.

Tamara refused to romanticize the difficulties they faced. They were traumatizing. Tamara described feeling "lost in [their] feelings" during the exchange, "living a double identity" in order to be a "good guest," and counting down the days until they could "pack [their] bags" and return home. Yet they also insisted that the experience had expanded their sense of what they could endure and who they could become. As they explained later, moving abroad at fourteen and surviving such an intense period of concealment left them feeling newly capable: "moving out of my parents' house into a new family I'd never known from Africa was a big move for me, and that alone made me proud… There is this energy in me right now. I feel like I can actually face the world on my own." Recognizing their achievements, Tamara was damn proud. For Tamara, self-discovery did not mean uncovering a static "true self" untouched by context, but recognizing their capacity to claim that self-more explicitly after having lived through radical constraint.

Molly similarly described developing greater awareness of femininity, embodiment, and self-presentation through the tensions of visibility and concealment abroad. Before Peace Corps, coming out in the United States had coincided with a strong investment in masculinity and androgyny; cutting her hair short and dressing more "masc" felt like finally aligning her exterior with her queer identity. Tanzania disrupted and expanded that understanding. As she recounted:

> Once I accepted that part of myself, I was like, why am I not reflecting who I am and who I want to be? So, I cut off my hair, and then that was just like a—and I started

> dressing the way that I wanted to, and really dressing more masculine, which was… really freeing. I finally felt like myself, and I finally felt like I was finding myself. And then I kind of had to do the exact opposite. I had to come to a country where I was expected to wear skirts every day, wear dresses… But part of it has actually been really helpful for me, because… I've also been able to find my femininity… it's been, honestly, really awesome to explore that side of myself and realize that I really enjoy dressing androgynously, and being able to do both masculine [and] feminine, and being in this country has really helped me accept both sides of myself.

For Molly, self-discovery did not mean simply defending an already fixed expression against hostile norms. Instead, it emerged through feeling "fully back into the closet" in some domains and experimenting with skirts and dresses in others. It meant slowly learning that androgyny could encompass spa days and painted nails as much as basketball shorts and jerseys. Tanzania became a site where rigid internal binaries—masculine/feminine, queer/respectable, inauthentic/out—were reworking under pressure. Molly was starting to exist where she was living within multiple coexisting and seemingly contradictory truths. To embrace masculinity and femininity was a form or radial self-acceptance Molly displayed that re-articulated a past version of self, now in the present being reintroduced within a new space.

Yet discovery was rarely framed solely through simplistic narratives of liberation. Participants did not describe becoming their "true selves" through a singular moment of openness. Instead, self-understanding emerged gradually through contradiction, discomfort, experimentation, and relational negotiation. They learned about themselves not only in the moments when things went well, but also in the instances of misrecognition, regret, and strategic silence.

Then, Michael reframed the skills gained from identity negotiation and applied them explicitly as intercultural competencies. He described disclosure, negotiation, environmental reading, and code-switching as valuable intercultural skills, rather than deficits. Reflecting on participant narratives, he emphasized that the very practices often coded as "overanxious" or "too guarded" in institutional discourse actually required complex, ongoing labor:

> It's not like there is a necessary quitting, but just such a focus on cultural exchange that queer identity was not necessarily the forefront, even though it was a major sacrifice that people went through. And I think it's something that just needs to be accepted as, like—we are doing this, whether that is good or bad, it needs to be accounted for. And the energy amount that goes into doing that is something that other people are not doing.

In subsequent discussion, he suggested that what might appear as "risk management" or "overthinking" could also be read as a set of intercultural skills: hyper-awareness as an "observational superpower," code-switching as a form of cultural fluency, and boundary-reading as a kind of safety radar. In Michael's reframing, queer participants are not simply fragile subjects in need of protection; they are also knowledgeable navigators and protagonists of their own stories developing complex relational and intercultural literacies. Skills such as reading a room, testing conversational boundaries, deciding when and how to disclose, and shifting presentation across contexts can also apply as intercultural communication tools.

At the same time, participants consistently emphasized that this labor carried costs. As Tamara put it, agency did not erase exhaustion, uncertainty, or emotional strain. Their most resilient moments during the exchange were not triumphant performances of strength, but quiet intervals of withdrawal:

> For me, resilience is taking time off and having a cathartic moment… my time to breathe. There are times where I just want to be in my space. I don't want to talk to anybody. That's my energy-gaining moment to gain strength to face the world and [continue living] in denial.

Participants often became highly skilled precisely because environments required constant adaptation. The very life skills that enabled them to survive were also major sources of fatigue.

These contradictions challenge simplistic celebrations of resilience. To frame participants solely as resilient risks obscuring the institutional and relational pressures that made such adaptation necessary in the first place. Yet reducing participants solely to vulnerability similarly fails to recognize the creativity, reflexivity, and insight embedded within their experiences.

Participants were simultaneously constrained and agentive; they developed strategies without necessarily endorsing the systems that required those strategies.

Instead, participant narratives suggest that agency and constraint frequently coexisted. Participants exercised choice within unequal conditions. They developed strategies without necessarily endorsing the systems requiring those strategies. They found connection without always achieving complete belonging. They navigated visibility without fully resolving tensions surrounding authenticity or safety. From this, queer exchange experiences often became sites of ongoing negotiation rather than resolution. Participants were not simply learning about other cultures. They were continually recalibrating their relationships to visibility, intimacy, safety, belonging, and selfhood itself.

Returning to Theory

Intersectionality

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) emerged across these narratives not simply as one factor among many, but as a condition shaping what participants could see, what others could see in them, and what forms of agency became available. Race, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and other identities did not operate independently; their salience shifted across relationships and contexts. A participant might be read first as queer in one setting, Black or Latino in another, American or foreign in another, or through gender, disability, religion, or perceived class. These shifts mattered because the identity made most legible in a particular context could alter expectations, risks, privileges, and available strategies. Felipe's experiences, for example, demonstrate how racialization could precede sexuality in determining how he was understood, while others encountered gendered expectations or heightened visibility around trans identity. What appeared to be a queer exchange experience was therefore never only queer; it was produced through overlapping systems of perception and power. These findings extend intersectionality into the global and institutional conditions of exchange. Identities were not simply carried into new contexts; they were re-read through colonial histories, racial hierarchy, whiteness, nationalism, and uneven global power. Being American could produce privilege in one interaction and foreignness in another, while queer identity could become less salient than nationality or race, or newly scrutinized. Movement across cultures therefore did not simply add

identities to an existing self; it changed which identities became legible, which carried power, and which strategies became possible.

Identity Negotiation Theory

Ting-Toomey's (1993) Identity Negotiation Theory provided a useful framework for understanding participants as active agents who continually negotiated how they presented, understood, and related to themselves across intercultural contexts. Participants disclosed, concealed, code-switched, performed belonging, tested boundaries, sought connection, created privacy, and experimented with different expressions of themselves. Yet the findings suggest that the negotiation itself is negotiated. Culture, race, colonial histories, program policies, host family expectations, legal structures, economic dependency, and interpersonal relationships shaped which forms of identity expression appeared possible, appropriate, expected, or dangerous. This shifts the question from how individuals negotiate identity toward what makes particular negotiations available in the first place. Participants sometimes discovered possibilities precisely because they entered environments where familiar expectations shifted. Molly's experimentation with femininity, for instance, emerged alongside restrictive gender expectations rather than simply in opposition to them. Michael similarly described deciding not only whether to disclose his sexuality, but when he had "earned the right" to complicate his family's understanding of him. Negotiation could produce discovery, joy, connection, and expanded self-understanding, but could also require concealment, exhaustion, sacrifice, or exposure to harm. Agency remained real, but it existed within—and sometimes pushed against—the structures that made particular choices imaginable.

Affect

The findings suggest identity negotiation cannot be fully understood without affect: the feelings, attachments, discomforts, pleasures, and emotional energies through which participants interpreted their environments (Ahmed, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). Participants did not simply calculate whether disclosure was safe or a relationship authentic; they described *feeling* their way through these decisions by reading rooms, sensing tension, noticing body language, and experiencing loneliness, relief, excitement, exhaustion, intimacy, and joy. Safety was therefore

not only an external condition but something experienced relationally and viscerally, sometimes before participants could articulate why a space felt safe or unsafe. Oftentimes, their gut reaction led them to insightful knowledge and significantly influential moments.

Affect also complicates oversimplifying narratives of resilience. Hyper-awareness, code-switching, boundary-reading, and emotional regulation were forms of intercultural knowledge, but also forms of labor. What some participants described as, “observational superpowers”. For example, reframes what institutions might read as overthinking or guardedness as sophisticated intercultural literacy, while Tamara's retreat and solitude demonstrate that resilience could mean withdrawing rather than performing strength. The same conditions could generate exhaustion and connection, vulnerability and intimacy, or constraint and queer joy.

The Panopticon and The Carabiner

Foucault's (1978) panopticon offers another way to understand these shifting conditions of visibility, but the findings require bending the concept. Rather than a single watchtower imposing uniform surveillance, participants encountered multiple culturally coded watchtowers, each attuned to different forms of difference. What became visible, suspicious, or unremarkable shifted across contexts. Host families could become watchtowers through routines, expectations, intimacy, and observation, while simultaneously functioning as sites of care, freedom, belonging, and transformation. Surveillance was therefore neither fixed nor exclusively oppressive. Participants also learned to anticipate surveillance, move around it, exploit its blind spots, and sometimes deliberately make themselves visible. This suggests a form of agency within and against surveillance that a conventional panoptic reading can obscure. Participants could hide, stand out, deflect attention, invite attention, or use one form of visibility to reshape another. Notably, this watch tower did not simply police queerness, but all aspects of identity; the importance of these lessons extends to all students negotiating identity across cultural difference, regardless of sexuality or gender.

I posit that these findings suggest extending the adapted panoptic model toward a more agency-centered framework with some queer flair: a carabiner of sorts, representing a model of identity and surveillance**.** Each identity can be imagined as a key carried by the individual, with

its own color, texture, and shape. The keys, and how they appear, are not entirely fixed. As new identities and experiences accumulate through relationships and movement, they interact, creating new contrasts and shades. A blue key may appear distinctly blue when held alone, but beside a yellow key, it may begin to look green. A familiar identity may become newly visible alongside another, while an identity once experienced as central may recede into the background. Some keys may also exist in multiple colors, reflecting how the same identity can be lived and read differently across contexts. Like wet paint, the keys may leave traces on one another. Experiences of racialization, queerness, nationality, gender, class, religion, disability, or cultural difference do not simply accumulate; they can bleed into one another, altering how participants understand themselves and how others perceive them.

The carabiner itself changes as participants move between cultural contexts**.** They do not simply encounter different watchtowers; they learn how those watchtowers read the different keys they carry. Some keys may open doors, some may draw attention, some may remain unnoticed, and some may do all three depending on where the carabiner is carried. Even when a context felt like a prison, participants who recognized their agency over their keys could find ways to adjust. When participants recognize that they have a carabiner—that they possess a collection of identities, experiences, and learned tools—they can reach for the keys available to them. Sometimes, these keys open doors that were previously unseen, whether through intentional action or unexpected circumstance.

With practice and resources, participants can learn which keys to display, which to tuck away, which to use strategically, and which combinations create possibilities for connection or discovery. It is through learning to notice, understand, and work with the keys they have collected that participants can begin to recognize their capacity to negotiate identity on their own terms. The metaphor therefore retains the constraint of the panopticon while making greater room for agency: individuals cannot necessarily choose the keys they carry or control how others read them, but they can develop greater fluency in navigating the systems around them. This does not mean that accumulating identities necessarily produces greater freedom. Sometimes more keys bring more weight and challenge. At times these keys may make movement more difficult; others may open possibilities only in particular contexts. Rather, the model emphasizes that identity, like surveillance, is relational and continually changing.

Participants do not simply move through different systems of surveillance as fixed subjects. They carry what they have learned from one context into the next, where those experiences can alter the meaning, visibility, and possibilities of the identities they already hold. These keys also become more powerful when they can be shared. Community creates space for participants to compare their carabiners, the keys they have collected, and the stories of the doors those keys opened, or failed to open. The next chapter turns to these communal processes of comparison and meaning making, where participants' individual negotiations begin to speak to one another. Yet the study also leaves open an important question: what happens after a key is used? Participants' choices are shaped by the unequal histories of empire and power surrounding them, meaning that a key mobilized with good intentions may nevertheless produce unintended or harmful consequences. Exploring how agency, power, and consequence interact when people use the keys they have collected offers an important direction for future research.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal exchange as a process in which identity is not simply possessed or expressed, but continually read, felt, negotiated, surveilled, and remade. Intersectionality reveals the uneven systems through which participants entered these spaces; Identity Negotiation Theory illuminates their relational responses; affect shows how those negotiations were embodied and felt; and the adapted panopticon and carabiner model illuminate shifting visibility and agency. Together, these perspectives help explain not only how participants navigated authenticity, safety, belonging, and agency, but how those negotiations were shaped by the broader structures of power surrounding intercultural exchange.

Summary

Participant narratives continue to reinforce that queer identity negotiation within host family exchange cannot be reduced to singular questions of disclosure, openness, or safety. Instead, participants moved through complex relational environments where visibility, belonging, intimacy, and risk remained unstable and continually negotiated.

Across interviews, authenticity emerged not as complete visibility, but as something relational, contextual, and uneven. Safety appeared not as a fixed condition, but as an ongoing process of interpretation and recalibration. Belonging often required performance and emotional

labor, while concealment could function simultaneously as protection, exhaustion, care, or strategy. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that identity negotiation was shaped not only by sexuality, but also by intersectionality and factors such as, but not limited to, race, ability, gender, class, nationality, religion, temporality, spatiality, emotional dependency, or institutional expectations. At the same time, participant experiences resist narratives that frame queer exchange solely through repression or victimhood. Participants actively constructed survival infrastructures, cultivated forms of connection, developed adaptive literacies, and theorized their experiences in real time. They navigated contradiction with remarkable reflexivity and creativity, even while carrying significant emotional labor largely on their own.

These localized negotiations also revealed broader global patterns. While each host family placement was shaped by distinct cultural, geographic, and relational contexts, participants often engaged in similar strategies of disclosure, concealment, adaptation, and meaning making across settings. In this sense, local experiences became sites where larger global dynamics were negotiated: participants encountered shared structures of heteronormativity, mobility, privilege, and inequality while responding through context-specific forms of agency. At the same time, global categories—such as Global North/South, rural/urban, host/guest, or student/volunteer—were not fixed realities but were continually reshaped through everyday interactions. These patterns demonstrate that queer identity negotiation cannot be understood through universal assumptions about culture, safety, or belonging. Instead, it emerges through the interaction between global structures and local realities, where participants continuously interpret, adapt, and reshape what visibility and authenticity mean within particular contexts.

Ultimately, these experiences reveal a broader mismatch between institutional framings of exchange and the lived realities participants described. Programs often define success through visibility, integration, adaptability, and measurable growth, while participants frequently experience exchange through ambiguity, negotiation, emotional management, and partial belonging. The labor required to navigate these environments often remained invisible despite being central to participants' survival and learning. The following chapter builds on these findings by examining how institutions frame safety, success, agency, and intercultural competence, and how participant narratives challenge dominant models of risk, belonging, and educational value within global higher education.

Chapter 6 – Meaning-making among Community

From Individual Narratives to Collective Interpretation

The previous chapter explored how queer participants navigated visibility, safety, belonging, authenticity, and agency within intercultural host family arrangements. Across participant narratives, a central finding emerged: queer experience abroad could not be adequately understood through dominant frameworks that position disclosure as liberation, visibility as authenticity, or safety as the absence of risk. Instead, participants described complex and ongoing negotiations shaped by host families, peer networks, institutional expectations, cultural norms, material realities, and evolving understandings of self. Agency emerged not outside of constraints but through them. Participants continually interpreted social environments, assessed relationships, evaluated risks, and made strategic decisions about when, where, and how different aspects of themselves became visible. Yet while the interviews revealed important insights into individual experiences, they also raised a different question. What happens when these stories are brought into conversation with one another?

The focus groups introduced a fundamentally different dynamic into the research process. Participants were no longer speaking only to a researcher. They were speaking with other queer people who had lived abroad, navigated host family relationships, managed questions of disclosure, and grappled with many of the same uncertainties. As conversations unfolded, participants did far more than simply share experiences. They compared stories. They challenged assumptions. They identified patterns. They questioned dominant narratives. They reconsidered events that had previously existed as isolated memories. In many cases, they began to reinterpret their own experiences through the stories of others. This chapter examines what emerged through those collective conversations.

Importantly, the focus groups did not simply generate additional data. They became sites of knowledge production in their own right. Participants were actively theorizing their experiences. Through comparison, disagreement, resonance, and reflection, they produced new understandings of queer exchange that neither the interviews nor individual narratives alone could fully reveal.

The chapter argues that community functioned as a critical site of interpretation and meaning making. Through collective dialogue, participants moved beyond individualized understandings of challenge and success and toward more relational and structural understandings of queer life in motion across cultures. In doing so, they identified forms of agency, competence, resilience, and knowledge that frequently remain invisible within dominant institutional understandings of intercultural exchange.

At the same time, these conversations revealed something equally important. Community did not simply generate consensus. Participants often discovered difference. They learned that experiences they assumed were universal were shaped by race, gender, nationality, geography, or personal circumstance. In many ways, the value of community emerged not only through recognition but also through contrast.

The focus groups therefore illuminate an important process of collective interpretation. Participants were not merely exchanging stories. They were exchanging frameworks for understanding those stories. The chapter explores a form of exchange nested within exchange itself. Participants exchanged experiences about exchange, generating insights that have significant implications for how programs conceptualize queer participants and how queer participants themselves make sense of their experiences abroad.

Community as Method for Meaning making

One of the most striking findings across both focus groups was how many participants described the interviews and discussions as the first time they had seriously reflected on the relationship between queerness and host family life. This consensus initially shocked me. Many participants had spent years reflecting on their exchange experiences. They had written reports, spoken with friends, participated in alumni events, and integrated these experiences into broader narratives about personal growth and intercultural learning. Yet when discussions turned specifically toward sexuality, host families, and identity negotiation, many participants realized that they had never fully connected these pieces before.

Molly described the interview as one of the first opportunities she had to process these experiences with other queer people. Reflecting on how they were actively in Tanzania where

there were few people to actively process with. Similarly, Felipe explained that the interview prompted him to revisit experiences that he had not meaningfully reflected on in years. Michael noted that the conversation helped him recognize forms of strength and resilience that he had previously overlooked. Aurora, despite having thought extensively about her time in Kyrgyzstan, found herself re-evaluating the significance of host family dynamics in shaping her understanding of disclosure and belonging. These reflections reveal is that experience alone does not automatically produce understanding. Experiences happen. Meaning is made. The two are not the same thing.

Intercultural exchange programs often devote significant resources toward facilitating experiences. Participants are encouraged to immerse themselves in host communities, build relationships, learn languages, and navigate unfamiliar cultural environments. Yet far less attention is devoted to the collective interpretation of those experiences, particularly for participants navigating marginalized identities.

Participants repeatedly demonstrated that understanding emerged not only from living abroad but from *talking about* living abroad. This distinction is important. The interviews and focus groups became spaces where participants could pause, revisit events, and ask questions that had remained unresolved for years. Why did that interaction feel significant? Why did that disclosure matter? Why did that moment remain emotionally resonant long after returning home? Why did something that seemed small at the time later become meaningful? These conversations show how community can function as a methodological tool.

Participants were not merely remembering experiences. They were interpreting them together. This process resembles what feminist and queer scholars describe as relational knowledge production. Understanding emerges not solely through individual reflection but through dialogue (Smith, 2021). People come to know themselves through relationships. Meanings become visible through comparison. Experiences that seem isolated gain significance when they are recognized in the stories of others.

Throughout the focus groups, participants repeatedly encountered moments of recognition. Someone would describe a feeling, a strategy, or a tension. Others would

immediately respond with variations of "I did that too" or "I never thought about it that way, but that resonates." These moments were not simply affirming. They were analytical. Participants were identifying patterns. They were generating theory and asking each other questions. Some even exchanged contact information to continue the conversation later on. Importantly, they were doing so collectively.

This collective dimension is particularly significant given the isolation many participants described during exchange. Several participants noted that they had rarely, if ever, discussed these issues with other queer people while living with their host family. Some were among only a handful of openly queer participants in their programs. Others lacked access to queer community altogether. Many navigated these experiences largely on their own. The focus groups therefore created a space that had often been absent during exchange itself. Participants could finally compare notes. They could ask whether what happened to them happened to others. They could evaluate assumptions that had remained unchallenged for years. And in doing so, the participants may have never produced the forms of understanding that collective reflection generates.

Structural Realities beyond Individual Choice

One of the most profound transformations visible throughout the focus groups involved a shift away from individualized explanations of difficulty and toward structural understandings of experience. Many participants entered conversations carrying questions rooted in personal responsibility.

Should I have come out?

Should I have been more authentic?

Should I have been braver?

Should I have disclosed sooner?

Should I have handled that situation differently?

These questions clearly reflected broader cultural narratives that position both queer identity and intercultural learning as individual responsibilities and achievements. Within these frameworks, success becomes a matter of personal courage, personal growth, and personal decision-making. Challenges become obstacles to overcome through resilience and determination. Yet the focus groups repeatedly complicated this perspective.

As participants shared experiences, many began recognizing the extent to which their decisions had been shaped by larger structures. Disclosure offers perhaps the clearest example. Participants frequently described disclosure as a personal decision. Yet as conversations unfolded, disclosure increasingly appeared less like an isolated choice and more like a negotiation embedded within broader social systems.

Aurora's reflections capture this tension particularly well. Repeatedly, she emphasized that disclosure rarely involved choosing between a good option and a bad option. More often, it involved choosing between multiple imperfect options. As she explained, "Neither of the options is great, but one of them sucks a whole lot more." This statement captures a critical insight that surfaced repeatedly throughout the research. Agency existed; but agency was constrained. Participants were making decisions. Yet the conditions under which those decisions were made were not equally distributed.

Some participants possessed access to supportive peer networks. Others did not. Some occupied racialized identities that shaped how they were perceived. Others experienced forms of privilege that provided additional flexibility. Some had legal protections available. Others faced genuine threats. Some host family environments felt emotionally safe. Others did not. Recognizing these structural realities allowed participants to reinterpret experiences that they had previously understood through individualistic frameworks.

Instead of asking why they failed to disclose, participants began asking what conditions made disclosure difficult. Instead of questioning whether they had been authentic enough, they began questioning why authenticity had become so tightly linked to visibility in the first place. Instead of viewing caution as weakness, they increasingly described it as expertise. This shift represents one of the most important contributions of community. Community did not simply

provide emotional validation. It provided analytical validation. Participants began recognizing that many of the tensions they experienced were not personal failures but predictable outcomes of navigating complex social environments. And perhaps nowhere was this more visible than in discussions of authenticity itself.

Authenticity beyond Visibility

Across both focus groups, authenticity emerged as one of the most heavily contested concepts in participants' discussions. Yet what makes these conversations particularly significant is that participants rarely rejected authenticity itself. Instead, they challenged the assumptions embedded within dominant understandings of what authenticity is supposed to look like and how it is presumed to be achieved.

Much of the existing discourse surrounding queer identity, particularly within contemporary North American contexts, implicitly links authenticity to visibility. Popular coming-out narratives often suggest that to be authentic is to be openly queer and that living fully as oneself requires public disclosure. Within these frameworks, authenticity becomes tied to recognition. One is authentic because others know. Visibility functions as evidence of self-acceptance, while concealment is often interpreted as evidence of repression, shame, or incompleteness. Coming out therefore becomes positioned not simply as one possible expression of identity, but as a developmental milestone and moral achievement.

Participants repeatedly complicated this narrative of coming out equating to the liberation. Importantly, they did not deny that disclosure could be meaningful, affirming, or transformative. Many described moments in their lives when disclosure had deepened relationships, strengthened self-understanding, or created opportunities for connection. What they challenged was the assumption that disclosure should function as the primary measure of authenticity. Across both focus groups, participants repeatedly described experiences that forced them to disentangle authenticity from visibility and to develop alternative understandings of what it meant to live honestly in contexts where complete openness was either undesirable, impractical, unsafe, or simply irrelevant.

Rather than positioning authenticity and concealment as opposites, participants increasingly described authenticity as something that could exist independently of disclosure. Both could contradict and still coexist. This distinction became one of the most significant collective insights generated through the focus groups because it fundamentally reoriented how participants understood themselves and their decisions abroad. Michael articulated this shift particularly clearly when reflecting on his own understanding of queerness and self-acceptance. As he explained, acceptance of his identity did not require repeatedly announcing it to others. In his words, "I can just live like myself. I don't have to always establish that moment of coming out."

What is striking about this statement is not simply its rejection of disclosure as a universal obligation, but the way it relocates authenticity from the realm of public recognition to the realm of personal coherence. Authenticity becomes less about whether others possess information about you and more about whether you remain connected to yourself. The emphasis shifts from visibility to integrity. From performance to embodiment. From being known to being at peace with what one knows about oneself. This reframing appeared repeatedly throughout both focus groups. Participants consistently described moments where they felt deeply connected to their identities despite remaining tacit in particular contexts. Conversely, some described situations where disclosure did not necessarily produce feelings of authenticity at all. Being known did not automatically create comfort. Visibility did not automatically generate belonging. Disclosure did not automatically resolve tension.

What mattered more was whether participants felt capable of making intentional decisions about how they moved through particular relationships and environments. Aurora's reflections pushed this critique even further. Throughout the discussion, she repeatedly returned to a phrase that at first appears deceptively simple: "It's not their business." On the surface, the statement sounds straightforward. Yet analytically, it represents a profound challenge to dominant coming-out frameworks because it reframes disclosure away from authenticity and toward privacy. The question is no longer whether withholding information is honest. The question becomes who is entitled to know. This distinction is subtle but important. Authenticity frameworks often assume an obligation to reveal. Privacy frameworks assume a right to withhold. One begins from the premise that disclosure is inherently desirable. The other begins

from the premise that individuals retain agency over what aspects of themselves they choose to share, when they choose to share them, and with whom. Participants repeatedly moved toward the latter position.

This shift became particularly significant because it disrupted an assumption that quietly shaped many participants' experiences abroad. Several entered exchanges carrying deeply internalized beliefs that concealment was morally suspect. Even when they knew disclosure might be risky, impractical, or culturally complicated, many still felt guilt about withholding information. That guilt often stemmed less from a desire to disclose and more from a belief that authentic people are supposed to disclose.

Community disrupted this assumption. As participants listened to one another, they began recognizing that selective disclosure is not unique to queer experience. It is a fundamental feature of social life more generally. People routinely reveal different aspects of themselves in different relationships. Intimacy develops unevenly. Trust develops unevenly. Context matters. Disclosure is very relational. Jessica captured this dynamic particularly well when she observed that nobody shares everything with everybody all the time and she too would, "…not [be] sharing everything to everybody all the time." What appears to be a simple observation carries significant analytical weight. Jessica's statement destabilizes the idea that authenticity requires complete transparency. Most relationships operate through selective disclosure. People decide what is relevant, what is private, what is intimate, and what remains unspoken. Yet queer identities are often subjected to a different standard, one in which non-disclosure is interpreted as concealment while disclosure becomes framed as honesty.

Participants repeatedly resisted this double standard. Instead, they developed a more relational understanding of authenticity. Authenticity became less about total openness and more about intentionality. It was not whether every aspect of oneself was disclosed. It was whether decisions about disclosure remained aligned with one's values, needs, relationships, and circumstances. This distinction became especially visible in discussions of host family relationships. Several participants described caring deeply for host family members while simultaneously choosing not to disclose their sexuality. Traditional authenticity frameworks might interpret this decision as withholding an important truth. Yet participants frequently

described these relationships as genuine, meaningful, and deeply authentic despite the absence of disclosure. Their care was real. Their investment was real. Their affection was real. What remained undisclosed was not the relationship itself but one particular piece of information within it.

The focus groups therefore suggest that authenticity may be better understood as relational integrity rather than total transparency. Relational integrity recognizes that different relationships require different forms of navigation. It acknowledges that individuals possess multiple identities, obligations, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities that must be negotiated simultaneously. It rejects the idea that authenticity can be measured through a single behavioral outcome such as disclosure and instead asks whether individuals are able to act in ways that remain consistent with their own understandings of self and circumstance. This interpretation carries important implications for both queer studies and intercultural exchange research.

If authenticity is measured primarily through visibility, participants who remain tacit become legible only through absence. They appear less authentic, less developed, less courageous, or less successful. Yet the focus groups suggest something very different. Many participants demonstrated extraordinary self-awareness, emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and relational skill precisely through their decisions not to disclose. They were carefully reading social environments, evaluating potential consequences, balancing competing responsibilities, and making contextually informed decisions. What appears as concealment from one perspective may represent expertise from another. And importantly, this insight emerged not through individual reflection alone but through collective reinterpretation. Community allowed participants to see one another's decisions differently. In doing so, many began seeing their own decisions differently as well.

Shared Experiences, Different Meanings

While moments of recognition were among the most powerful aspects of the focus groups, the value of community did not emerge solely through similarity. In fact, one of the most important contributions of the discussions was the way they illuminated difference. Participants frequently entered conversations expecting confirmation and instead encountered complexity.

They discovered that experiences they had long assumed were universal were often shaped by race, gender, nationality, geography, program structure, and local context in ways they had not previously considered. These moments of divergence proved just as valuable as moments of resonance. Community did not simply generate agreement. It generated nuance.

Throughout the discussions, participants often began by identifying common experiences. Yet as conversations deepened, they increasingly recognized that shared themes did not necessarily produce identical realities. Similar challenges could emerge from very different conditions. Similar decisions could carry very different consequences. Similar strategies could reflect very different forms of risk. The recurring discussion of the "weird American" phenomenon offers one of the clearest examples.

Across both focus groups, several participants described foreignness functioning as a protective category. Behaviors that might otherwise be interpreted as queer were often interpreted instead as American. Foreignness created ambiguity. Local communities could explain away deviations from social norms as cultural difference rather than sexual difference. Logan was frequently busy actively negotiating his identity as an international student from China and rising professional. Kelsey was apparently destined to marry a local man. Ilan could push femininity in places like the local market. Soumya grappled with realizing her newfound disappointment with not being recognized as an American. Foreignness provided a degree of interpretive flexibility that sometimes reduced scrutiny.

Initially, these stories appeared to point toward a broadly shared phenomenon. Yet as additional perspectives emerged, the narrative became more complicated. Felipe's reflections revealed that access to this protective ambiguity was not equally distributed. For him, race often shaped social interactions more immediately than sexuality. The ability to disappear into foreignness, to be interpreted simply as eccentric or culturally different, was constrained by racialized visibility. Race shaped how people interpreted behavior, assigned meaning, and assessed belonging. The same actions could produce very different readings depending on who performed them.

Similarly, Chris described situations in which foreignness did not create freedom but instead attracted additional attention. Being white, male, and American often made him hyper visible rather than invisible. Difference did not necessarily provide flexibility. Sometimes it increased scrutiny. These discussions reveal why community matters. Without collective dialogue, participants might easily conclude that their own experiences reflected universal truths. Through conversation, however, participants began recognizing the limits of their perspectives. They discovered that patterns existed, but that those patterns operated differently across different bodies and contexts.

Intersectionality became visible not simply as an abstract theoretical concept but as a lived reality. Participants learned not only what they shared but why they differed. And this process pushed discussions toward increasingly sophisticated understandings of queer exchange. Rather than producing a single narrative, community allowed participants to hold multiple truths simultaneously. Foreignness could function as protection and vulnerability. Visibility could create opportunity and risk. Disclosure could strengthen relationships and complicate them. The value of community, therefore, was not consensus. It was complexity.

Community as a Resource for Survival and Understanding

Another major shift that emerged through collective discussion involved participants' understandings of queer community itself. Prior to the focus groups, many participants described queer community primarily in terms of belonging. Yet as conversations unfolded, community increasingly appeared less as an identity category and more as a form of infrastructure that made interpretation, resilience, and navigation possible.

Participants repeatedly described queer community as something that allowed other forms of survival and meaning making to occur. Community provided perspective when experiences felt confusing. Community provided language when participants struggled to articulate what they were feeling. Community provided validation when dominant narratives failed to capture lived realities. Community provided opportunities for comparison, reflection, critique, and reinterpretation. We see community functioning less as a destination and more as a resource.

Importantly, participants were remarkably clear that queer community was not inherently harmonious. Several explicitly challenged idealized narratives of queer solidarity. Kelsey observed that not all queer people get along. Participants carried different political beliefs, different relationships to disclosure, different regional experiences, and different understandings of what it meant to be queer. Jessica's comment that "we had narcs" highlighted the tensions, distrust, and internal divisions that sometimes existed within peer networks.

These observations are important because they resist romanticizing queer community. Community was not automatically safe. It was not automatically inclusive. It was not automatically supportive. Yet participants still described it as indispensable. The reason was not perfection. The reason was legibility. Queer community provided spaces where experiences that felt unintelligible elsewhere could finally make sense. Participants repeatedly described the relief of speaking with people who already understood the basic contours of their experiences. Not because everyone had lived identical lives, but because certain explanations became unnecessary. Although queer peers sometimes create constraint, having access to queer community, even unlikable peers, allowed for more productive reflection. I hypothesize that this may be connected to comments on queer exhaustion and isolation from earlier. Isolation reduced the need to explain; I assume that a queer individual with a higher likelihood of. A shared lived experience would also require less energy input and explanation into queer culture and experience. Since that required less explanation than required by a cis-het ear, it took less effort even with people we aren’t the fondest of. Certain fears also required less justification, while certain dilemmas immediately resonated.

Leo's observation that gatherings with other queer volunteers allowed people to relax because "we don't have to be as cautious" captures this dynamic particularly well. Reduced vigilance is not merely a matter of comfort. It creates conditions for reflection. When energy is no longer directed entirely toward navigation, it becomes available for interpretation. Participants could move beyond survival and begin asking what their experiences meant. This dynamic appeared repeatedly throughout the focus groups. Community functioned as infrastructure for meaning making. Without it, experiences often remained isolated and difficult to interpret. With it, experiences became part of broader patterns that participants could analyze, question, and understand.

The significance of this finding extends beyond queer community itself. It suggests that one of the most important resources exchange programs can provide is not simply information but opportunities for collective interpretation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the focus groups fulfilled needs that had remained unmet for years. What they valued was not merely the sharing of stories but the ability to make sense of those stories alongside others. In this sense, community operated as a mechanism of knowledge production. Participants were not merely supporting one another. They were helping one another understand.

Implications for Exchange Program Design

Perhaps the most important contribution of the focus groups was not simply what participants revealed about their own experiences, but what emerged when they began discussing what they wished had existed during exchange itself. As conversations moved toward advice, recommendations, and reflection, participants collectively identified a striking disconnect between the realities of queer exchange and the frameworks through which many exchange programs continue to understand queer participants.

Across both focus groups, participants repeatedly suggested that existing institutional approaches tend to frame queerness primarily through risk. Pre-departure resources often emphasize legal restrictions, cultural norms, safety concerns, disclosure decisions, and strategies for avoiding harm. While participants generally agreed that such information is necessary, they also argued that it is profoundly incomplete. Risk certainly shaped their experiences, but risk was not the whole story. By centering danger so heavily, institutions often failed to recognize the extensive forms of knowledge, skill, adaptation, and agency that queer participants were already bringing into exchange.

This distinction became increasingly important as participants reflected on how they had interpreted their own experiences. Many realized that they had spent years evaluating themselves through institutional metrics that did not adequately account for the realities of navigating queer identity abroad. Success was often measured through visible markers such as language acquisition, community integration, volunteer accomplishments, leadership development, or intercultural engagement. These reflect a broader neoliberal logic in which exchange is

understood through individual achievement, measurable outcomes, and demonstrable personal growth. In doing so, progress becomes something that can be documented, compared, and celebrated through visible accomplishments. Meanwhile, the less tangible work of navigating uncertainty, negotiating relationships, and making continual judgments about safety and authenticity often remains unseen.

A participant who carefully assessed disclosure risks, managed multiple identities across social settings, built alternative support networks, interpreted subtle social cues, and maintained complex relationships across difference might expend enormous emotional and cognitive effort. Yet these forms of labor rarely appeared in program evaluations. Institutions often recognized outcomes while overlooking the sophisticated navigation required to achieve them. In doing so, these frameworks not only obscured queer participants' experiences but also narrowed what all exchange participants (including cisgender and heterosexual students) were encouraged to value and develop. Skills such as relational attentiveness, contextual judgment, ethical self-awareness, and navigating difference with care are central to intercultural learning, yet they often remain secondary to more visible and easily measured indicators of success. By privileging what can be quantified, exchange frameworks risk overlooking the forms of knowledge and capacity that emerge through uncertainty, vulnerability, and sustained engagement with difference.

What is represented through the focus groups was therefore not simply a critique of existing programming, but a challenge to the underlying assumptions through which queer participant experiences become legible. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that behaviors institutions might interpret as caution, withdrawal, inconsistency, or limited engagement were often forms of strategic adaptation. What looked like silence could represent careful risk assessment. What looked like selective participation could represent managing competing vulnerabilities. What looked like distance could represent necessary self-preservation. Meaning that one of the central implications of the focus groups is that exchange programs may frequently misrecognize queer competence because they lack frameworks capable of identifying it.

This dynamic becomes particularly significant when considered alongside participants' discussions of authenticity. Throughout the focus groups, individuals repeatedly rejected the assumption that visibility should function as the primary indicator of queer well-being. Yet many

institutional approaches continue to operate as though openness and disclosure represent desirable endpoints. Participants complicated this narrative repeatedly. They described situations where disclosure strengthened relationships and situations where it created additional vulnerability. They described moments where visibility felt empowering and moments where invisibility felt protective. They described circumstances where disclosure was appropriate and circumstances where disclosure would be irresponsible.

Most importantly, they described the ability to navigate these distinctions as a skill. Several participants suggested that knowing when to disclose, when not to disclose, how to assess relationships, how to read social environments, and how to manage multiple audiences should not be understood as evidence of repression. Rather, these capacities reflect sophisticated forms of intercultural competence.

These possibilities represent a potentially significant intervention into how exchange programs conceptualize both queerness and intercultural learning. Traditionally, intercultural competence is often framed through skills such as adaptability, perspective-taking, cultural awareness, communication, ambiguity tolerance, and contextual sensitivity. Yet participants repeatedly demonstrated these exact competencies through the management of queer identity abroad. Decisions about disclosure required participants to assess cultural norms, evaluate relational dynamics, interpret ambiguous information, anticipate consequences, and adapt behavior across contexts. In many cases, participants were performing extraordinarily complex forms of intercultural analysis in real time. Yet because these competencies emerged through queer navigation rather than more traditional intercultural activities, they often remained unrecognized.

The focus groups therefore suggest the need for a strengths-based framework that treats queer participants not primarily as individuals requiring protection, but as individuals already possessing valuable expertise. Such a framework would not ignore risk. Participants were clear that danger was sometimes real. Aurora's discussion of a volunteer effectively forced out of service after public exposure in Kyrgyzstan serves as an important reminder that safety concerns cannot be dismissed. Similarly, participants across both focus groups described situations

involving genuine vulnerability, uncertainty, and fear. However, participants consistently argued that fear-based frameworks alone are insufficient.

Aurora's recommendation captures this perspective particularly well. Rather than encouraging programs to intensify warnings or expand fear-based messaging, she emphasized the importance of providing accurate, nuanced information that allows participants to make informed decisions for themselves. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that they were capable of evaluating risk. What they often lacked was access to comprehensive information, institutional support, and opportunities for collective processing.

The distinction matters because fear-based approaches can unintentionally reproduce the very limitations participants described throughout the research. When queerness is framed primarily as a liability to be managed, participants become visible largely through vulnerability. Their strengths become secondary. Their expertise becomes obscured. Their successes become difficult to recognize.

A strengths-based approach shifts the focus. Instead of asking how programs can protect queer participants from risk, it also asks what queer participants already know about navigating complexity. Instead of focusing exclusively on vulnerability, it attends to resilience. Instead of emphasizing deficiency, it recognizes expertise. This reframing appeared repeatedly throughout participants' advice to future queer exchange students.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these recommendations was how rarely participants emphasized disclosure itself. Contrary to many dominant narratives surrounding queer development, participants did not encourage future volunteers to come out more quickly, more openly, or more consistently. Instead, their advice focused on self-trust, self-compassion, and the recognition that authenticity cannot be reduced to visibility. Molly's reflection provides a particularly powerful example, "Just because you have to hide who you are doesn't make you any less queer." This statement directly challenges assumptions that emerged repeatedly throughout participants' experiences. Many described periods where limited visibility caused them to question themselves. Molly's observation pushes against that logic. Identity is not validated

through disclosure. Queerness does not disappear when it is not publicly recognized. The absence of visibility does not constitute the absence of self.

Similarly, Leo emphasized that validation ultimately cannot be provided by institutions, host families, peers, or communities alone, "Validation of who you are does not come externally." It may suggest that one of the most valuable forms of support exchange programs can offer may involve helping participants develop frameworks for understanding themselves that are not wholly dependent upon external recognition.

Participants repeatedly described situations where recognition was unavailable, ambiguous, or inconsistent. Yet many also described learning to cultivate forms of self-understanding that remained stable despite these uncertainties. Rather than positioning disclosure as the ultimate measure of success, they increasingly emphasized self-knowledge, adaptability, and intentionality. Kelsey's observation that "you don't have to win in every category" further illustrates this shift. Exchange programs often operate within cultures of achievement. Participants are encouraged to maximize language learning, community integration, professional accomplishment, leadership development, and personal growth simultaneously. For queer participants navigating additional layers of complexity, these expectations can become particularly burdensome. Several participants reflected on the pressure to be ideal volunteers while simultaneously managing questions of disclosure, belonging, safety, and identity. The focus groups created opportunities to challenge these expectations. Participants repeatedly encouraged one another to recognize the legitimacy of limits, trade-offs, and imperfect decisions.

This perspective aligns closely with one of the broader arguments emerging throughout the dissertation. Queer exchange experiences frequently resist binary evaluation. Participants were rarely simply safe or unsafe, authentic or inauthentic, visible or invisible, successful or unsuccessful. Instead, they navigated shifting conditions that required ongoing adaptation. Recognizing this complexity has important implications for how exchange programs define success itself. If success is measured solely through visible outcomes, many of the most significant forms of queer labor remain invisible. If success is understood more broadly to include adaptation, navigation, relational management, self-preservation, and meaning making, a much richer picture emerges.

Importantly, the focus groups also revealed that support cannot be reduced to information alone. One of the strongest points of consensus across both groups involved the importance of spaces for processing experience. Participants repeatedly described the interviews and focus groups as opportunities they wished had existed earlier. For many, these conversations represented the first time they had meaningfully discussed host family experiences through a specifically queer lens. The significance of this finding should not be underestimated. Participants were not simply asking for more information. They were asking for opportunities to interpret information collectively.

Throughout the research, understanding emerged not merely from experience itself but from conversations about experience. Participants repeatedly gained insight through comparison, reflection, disagreement, and resonance. Community functioned not simply as support but as a mechanism for knowledge production.

These observations suggest that one of the most valuable interventions programs might provide involves facilitating opportunities for queer participants to engage in collective meaning-making. Such spaces need not promote disclosure. Nor must they assume shared experiences. In fact, one of the strengths of the focus groups was their ability to illuminate both commonality and difference. Participants learned not only what they shared but also how race, gender, nationality, geography, and local context shaped experiences differently. The goal, therefore, is not consensus. The goal is interpretation.

Participants benefited from opportunities to compare stories, identify patterns, challenge assumptions, and recognize complexities that individual reflection alone might not reveal. Yet the focus groups also produced an important caution. Now as an industry leader and exchange implementor, Felipe's observation that "you cannot open a wound that you're not prepared to support" emerged as one of the most powerful statements across the entire study. The quote highlights an ethical responsibility that accompanies any effort to create spaces for dialogue. Community support cannot simply be performative. Programs cannot invite vulnerability without preparing to respond to what emerges.

If institutions create opportunities for participants to discuss identity, safety, discrimination, belonging, or isolation, they must also ensure that adequate support structures exist. This insight serves as an important reminder that inclusion is not merely a matter of visibility. It is a matter of care. Creating opportunities for dialogue requires resources, training, responsiveness, and long-term commitment. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that meaningful support involves more than symbolic gestures. It requires structures capable of sustaining participants through the complexities those conversations may uncover.

Ultimately, the focus groups reveal that queer participants are not merely recipients of exchange programming. They are active interpreters of exchange itself. Throughout the discussions, participants generated sophisticated analyses of authenticity, safety, visibility, community, disclosure, belonging, and success. They challenged institutional assumptions. They identified overlooked competencies. They articulated alternative frameworks for understanding queer life abroad. In doing so, they revealed a central tension running throughout the dissertation. Much of the knowledge necessary to understand queer exchange already exists among queer participants themselves. The challenge is not simply producing that knowledge. The challenge is creating conditions under which it can be recognized, shared, and valued.

The Power of Collective Meaning-Making

This chapter has argued that community functions as a critical site of interpretation, comparison, and meaning making within queer exchange experiences. Through collective dialogue, participants moved beyond isolated narratives and toward more relational and structural understandings of their intercultural experiences. In doing so, they challenged dominant assumptions surrounding disclosure, authenticity, safety, and success while generating alternative frameworks grounded in lived experience.

Importantly, the focus groups demonstrated that community does not simply produce consensus. Its value emerges through both recognition and difference. Participants discovered shared patterns while also identifying important divergences shaped by race, gender, nationality, geography, and context. These moments of contrast proved just as productive as moments of

resonance, allowing participants to refine, complicate, and deepen their understandings of queer exchange.

Perhaps most significantly, the focus groups revealed that meaning does not emerge automatically from experience itself. Experiences occur, but understanding is produced through interpretation. Participants repeatedly described gaining new insights not because new events happened, but because existing events were reconsidered through dialogue with others. Community became a mechanism through which memories were revisited, assumptions were challenged, and previously isolated experiences became legible within broader patterns. The focus groups represented a form of exchange nested within exchange itself. Participants exchanged experiences about exchange. Through that process, they generated new knowledge about queerness, intercultural learning, host family relationships, and institutional structures.

The central contribution of this chapter is therefore not simply that community provides support, although it often does. Rather, community can function as a site of knowledge production within exchange networks. Through collective interpretation, participants identified forms of agency, expertise, resilience, and competence that frequently remain invisible within dominant institutional frameworks. Their conversations challenge programs to move beyond deficit-based approaches centered primarily on risk and instead recognize the strengths, insights, and capacities queer participants already possess.

Taken together, the findings from Chapters Four and Five suggest that queer host family experiences are not best understood through binaries of disclosure versus concealment, safety versus danger, or authenticity versus performance. Instead, they emerge through multiple co-existing ways of being and contradictions influencing ongoing negotiations shaped by relationships, contexts, institutions, laws, histories, privilege, communities, and so on. Participants are not simply navigating these conditions. They are actively theorizing and taking part in them. By highlighting the knowledge produced through these negotiations, we gain a richer understanding not only of queer exchange, but of the broader processes through which people make meaning, build belonging, and navigate difference across cultures.

Chapter 7 – Broad Significance & Conclusion

At its core, this project challenges oversimplified narratives of intercultural exchange that claim to support and care for queer participants living with host families. Participants' accounts reveal that this care often remained ambiguous and was rarely translated into meaningful action or structural change. More often, queerness was treated as a liability. Or it was not acknowledged at all, depending on whether participants' identities were visible or legible within the cultural and institutional context. Rather than offering definitive answers, this project seeks to provide new ways of communicating across difference and navigating complexity within a global community.

Drawing together queer migration theory, global studies, and education studies, my work positions host family placements as kinship spaces—intimate, relational environments where power, care, surveillance, and belonging are continuously negotiated, impacting the ways we experience and learn. In doing so, it asks: how is queer identity actually made and remade in these spaces, and what can program and participants do with that knowledge?

Recognizing Skill, Agency, and Growth

Existing research on international education provides frameworks for designing curricula, assessing intercultural competence, and managing institutional risk. Yet it rarely centers the home as an analytic object, and frameworks for queer learners are lacking. Host families often tend to appear as context or logistics: a means of language immersion, a line in a budget, the setting for "cultural experience." Conversely, queer migration and LGBTQ+ study abroad literature foregrounds safety, visibility, and skill development. Although this is often at a macro scale that leaves the micro-politics of the living room, the shared bedroom, the bathroom, or the WhatsApp group underexamined.

This study argues that host families are not mere context; they are active sites of pedagogy and power. For Tamara at fourteen, living with a Christian family in Nigeria but not on a formal program, the host home became the clearest instance of what "forced silence" costs—emotionally, spiritually, and developmentally—even when the placement was not overtly violent. Their experience reminds us that not all queer youth abroad are covered by a Peace

Corps, Fulbright, or university policy; many are alone with families, churches, and schools that do not recognize queerness at all, let alone protect it. For Molly, a decade older in Tanzania within Peace Corps, the home was both constraint and laboratory: a place where she could not name herself to everyone, but could experiment with selective disclosure and work behind the scenes to convene queer volunteers and argue for safer training spaces. Kelsey's arc from "hiding" to profound internal transformation in isolation, Felipe's entangling of race, class, and risk, and Soumya's insistence that some forms of hiding are better named survival than resilience all further underline that host families are where the stakes of identity work are felt most acutely.

Host family placements begin to represent deeply intimate and relational environments where daily life, cultural norms, power, safety, and personal identity intersect; often, this is in ways that are more immediate and consequential than what happens in formal classrooms. Treating those spaces as pedagogical rather than incidental helps us see participants not simply as at-risk bodies to be managed, but as empowered theorists and practitioners of safety, care, and self-making.

Eternal Negotiation

Across stories, queer identity in intercultural exchange does not read as a teleological march toward a single, liberated "out" self. It is something continually made and remade through shifting conditions of visibility, safety, and belonging. Participants describe building, revising, and sometimes abandoning strategies as they encounter new host families, new cities, new staff, and new laws. Many articulated a desire to be "mindlessly out," convinced life would be easier if they did not hide, mask, and scan every interaction for risk. For some, visibility is not just a preference but a felt necessity or an uncontrollable fact of embodiment. Molly's and Tamara's stories illustrate this: being out, at least to some people, was central to their sense of self; total concealment would feel like nonexistence. Their need to be recognized externally is shaped by personal history and still-forming self-validation skills, but it is real. It is part of the landscape future participants and programs must anticipate. Michael's account extends this: even when he "got good" at reading a room and choosing when to disclose, he describes that skill less as a solved problem than as a permanent, exhausting calculus about who gets to know which version of him, and when.

Leo's story offers a sharp counterpoint and underscores the persistence of this negotiation. For them, not coming out to host families in Micronesia and Armenia was an ethic of care and harm reduction. Their queerness is deeply integrated into their life, but they do not experience non-disclosure in those contexts as inauthenticity; authenticity is located in how they treat others, what they build in communities, and the internal coherence of their own narrative, even as their own gender and relational life continue to shift over time. Other narratives emphasize how race, nationality, body size, religion, and legal status shape not just risk, but which risks are even thinkable. For Felipe, Blackness in U.S. and Dominican contexts profoundly shaped how his queerness was seen and where it could be voiced. Logan, as a Chinese international student with cancer, offers a model of quite queer thriving in which care from a host family and a mother's slowly changing acceptance matter as much as any public declaration. Chris's shows how multiple stigmas and supports layer together in one home. Different identities made him differently visible in various places, yet his observations opened doors to deeper connection with his host mom. From a more playful angle, Ilan's experiments with gender performance in Madagascar—nail polish, nicknames, and a community that jokes more than it polices—suggest that "threat" is not always where policy and program staff expect it, even as T's account of binders, misgendering, and medical limits in that same broader context reminds us that this room for play is not universal. Together, these lessons frame safety and authenticity as eternally negotiated; tacit knowing and code-switching become central technologies of queer life abroad; host homes become sites of both support and constraint; and intersectionality—race, nationality, gender, class, body, religion—shapes what is possible.

If queer life abroad is characterized by this ongoing negotiation rather than a linear path toward being "fully out," then program logics built around disclosure, documentation, and risk management need to change. Participants' stories show that there are blanket expectations, whether for total openness ("tell us everything so we can keep you safe") or total silence ("don't create problems for your host family"). These statements misrecognize the work they are already doing. Students are not waiting for institutions to decide what counts as safe; they are proactively and reactively calibrating visibility in relation to shifting host homes, peer networks, digital publics, and state surveillance. It is continuous. The question for programs, then, is not how to

produce the "right" form of queer authenticity, but how to make room for these situated judgments without punishing students when their needs do not align with institutional scripts.

This intervention requires more than adding a line about 'LGBTQ+ inclusion' to pre-departure slides. It means treating queer life skills like reading rooms, code switching, managing multiple names and pronouns across contexts as forms of critical knowledge in their own right. It means recognizing that some participants, like Molly or Tamara, may need support to claim visibility that feels life-giving. Others, like Leo or Ilan, may need backing for strategies of quiet, playful, or partial disclosure that staff might misinterpret as avoidance or denial. It also demands that race, nationality, class, disability, religion, and legal status be understood as structuring conditions rather than "add-ons" to sexuality and gender. When Felipe's Blackness or Logan's illness reorganize what is at stake in coming out, those are not deviations from a queer-abroad norm; they *are* the norm. To respond ethically, programs must stop framing queer students primarily as sites of liability and instead see them as co-theorists of safety, belonging, and possibility in intercultural exchange.

Bringing the Literatures Into Conversation

Conceptually, this work draws from and attempts to bridge several bodies of scholarship. International education policy and intercultural competence frameworks offer robust models for structuring study abroad and exchange, yet they largely bracket or essentialize identity, especially queer identity, in the intimate spaces of home. Queer migration and LGBTQ+ study abroad literatures, meanwhile, richly document identity, risk, and movement, but often remain detached from the everyday implementation and design of programs.

By centering host families as intimate intercultural sites, this project argues that those literatures can and should speak to each other. Queer theory has long provided tools for understanding tacitness, passing, code-switching, queer time, and chosen kinship; intercultural education has long attended to adjustment, belonging, and the everyday work of living with strangers. The stories in this project show that these concepts travel into host family living rooms, shared kitchens, and glitchy intercultural Zoom calls, where they become daily practices rather than abstract frameworks. They surface in patterns of people who live one life in the

village and another in the capital; in the queer temporality of relationships that feel eternal but are, in fact, contract-bound; and in the layered spaces where the same bedroom is both a monitored family room and a portal into queer media and community elsewhere via a phone screen. Host homes are not merely background settings for identity development, but rather active laboratories where tacit knowledges of safety, care, and possibility are continually tested. From that, comes the production of knowledge.

A Toolkit of Practices

Before turning to formal recommendations, it is important to name a toolkit of practices that emerged across interviews. This is not prescriptive advice, but a descriptive inventory of what the study participants already did and do to live through these experiences. Participants spoke of:

- Preparation and Reflection: Viewing exchange as a process rather than a single experience. Meaningful preparation before departure and intentional reflection afterward are just as important as what happens abroad.
- Questioning Assumptions: Recognizing and challenging the cultural, institutional, familial, and programmatic assumptions that shape expectations. Many uncertainties participants face could be addressed through proactive conversations, shared experiences, and better preparation rather than leaving people to guess.
- Anchors and Community: Cultivating stable points of connection that provide continuity: a host parent, queer WhatsApp group, weekly call, running route, or favorite café. People may feel more or less able to express queerness depending on who is present and how long they have been immersed in heteronormative environments.
- Multiplicity of Selves: Accepting that different versions of oneself can coexist without being inauthentic. The self at an underground queer club and the self at a quiet family dinner are both real.
- Visibility and Strategic Opacity: Choosing what to reveal, what to leave unsaid, and when ambiguity is enough. Passing can create opportunity, protection, or access. It also creates erasure, exhaustion, and loss. Not everyone has access to passing, and for many, their visibility is negotiated for them by others inferring queerness based on presentation.

- Isolation and Connection: Recognizing that distance can both isolate and connect. Digital media and virtual queer communities can sustain belonging across distance, while introducing new challenges and opportunities for surveillance.
- Contextual Courage: Understanding courage as situational rather than universal. Disclosure is not inherently brave or unsafe. Its meaning depends on timing, relationships, and context.
- Boundaries Without Guilt: Accepting that not every host family becomes chosen family. Functional relationships can remain limited while still being successful.
- Internal Validation: Building a sense of self that does not rely entirely on external affirmation, while finding connection through shared activities, care, and presence rather than identity alone.
- Queer Signals and Everyday Joy: Finding affirmation through subtle symbols, private rituals, humor, and small moments of recognition. That can be rainbow underwear, binging queer media, or the inside jokes only a few people understand.
- Celebrating Survival and Growth: Recognizing not only major milestones but also everyday victories, moments of joy, setbacks, persistence, and the emotional work of continuing forward.
- Contradiction and Coexisting Truths: Accepting that risk and safety, constraint and opportunity, belonging and isolation can coexist and even produce one another. Cultural contrast often becomes the space where new possibilities emerge

These practices overlap with, but are not identical to, the "Recs for Queer Folk (by Queer Folk)" later in this chapter. The toolkit describes what I noted has been done; the recommendations distill what participants want to offer forward as intentional guidance.

From Analysis to Praxis: Implications & Recommendations

If host families are understood as pedagogical kinship spaces where queer identity is continuously negotiated, then both program implementers and queer participants need stronger tools and support. Underlying these goals is a broader objective: increasing the visibility of queer people and expanding access to meaningful resources within intercultural exchange. Importantly, the absence of a message is itself a message. When programs lack clear resources, policies, or

stated commitments regarding queer participants, that silence communicates a stance: one of erasure. To challenge this absence, the ten recommendations below are developed from the experiences of participants in this study and emerge directly from the collective recommendations generated across each focal group.

To avoid that, the ten recommendations below are developed by the participants in this study and emerge directly from the accumulation of recommendations produced by each focal group:

Recommendations for Program Implementors (by Queer Folk)

1. Programs must include critical queer alumni voices as co-designers of policies and trainings, not just as inspirational speakers or marketing material. Alumni like Molly, Soumya, T, or Michael F, who navigated complex safety and authenticity dilemmas, carry situated knowledge that generic "LGBTQ+ 101" sessions cannot provide.
2. Programs must reduce conflict and the pressure to be "perfect" to make room for honest conversations about safety and identity. Many participants describe feeling that they had to be ideal volunteers or guests. The were not to complain, demand, or cause extra labor. That pressure intensifies code-switching and silence.
3. Programs should provide clear, non-fear-based information. Instead of only redirecting students to local laws, staff can offer nuanced, context-specific scenarios, highlight variations within countries and communities, and trust queer participants to decide which risks are acceptable to them.
4. Institutions can invest in student autonomy and decision-making as a safety practice. This includes transparent options to change placements, leave programs, or decline certain housing without penalty, and explicit messaging that self-protective choices are valid.
5. Programs should transition from compliance-based to strengths-based models. Rather than viewing queer participants primarily as liabilities, programs can recognize the skills they bring in reading rooms, navigating difference, building community, and reflecting critically on power.

6. Programs should reframe “risk” as navigable, not just avoidable. This means equipping participants with tools for situational assessment, planning, and repair, not only lists of prohibitions.
7. Programs can build and support queer spaces with responsibility and care, creating intentionally queer-affirming gatherings, mentorship networks, and digital communities while carefully attending to consent, privacy, and differential risk.
8. Programs should ask more reflective pre-exchange questions that invite participants to think through their own thresholds, histories, and strategies, rather than only asking them to state an orientation on a form.
9. Programs can facilitate peer networks so that participants are not the only queer person they know in a given program or country. This is recommended across cohorts, sites, and time zones
10. Finally, programs must consider long-term impacts: how these experiences shape mental health, career paths, political commitments, and future mobility, long after the program ends.

For Those Outside Supportive Programs—or Outside Programs Altogether. This project largely draws on study participants connected to relatively open-minded and progressively valued organizations where at least some staff or peers were willing to talk about queerness, even if imperfectly. Yet, as Tamara’s and Logan’s story shows, many queer people abroad are not on any formal exchange program, or are attached to institutions that either cannot or will not acknowledge their existence. Some examples may include a missionary posting from a small church, a semester at a conservative religious university, a scholarship from a state that criminalizes queerness at home and monitors people abroad.

For these readers, the recommendations above are not automatically available as institutional promises. Still, some of the same logics can be adapted at the individual level:

- Seeking out online forums or encrypted group chats of people in similar positions,
- Mapping where supportive resources might exist in a city even if an official program will never name them,

- Reflecting in advance what kinds of risk may feel acceptable, what lines cannot be crossed, and how you may respond to fluidity within your own identity,
- And, crucially, recognizing that it is legitimate to decline or leave opportunities when legal and social stakes are life-threatening. This is important not only for oneself, but for one's ability to return home, maintain family ties, or stay alive.

The point is not to romanticize "going anyway" as bravery, but to urge serious consideration of the task at hand, and to affirm that saying no or changing course can be an act of care.

Recommendations for Queer Folk (by Queer Folk)

Parallel to institutional shifts, and the patterns I observed, the participants in this study also crafted a set of ten recommendations addressed to future queer travelers and exchangers:

1. They urge peers to prioritize survival and self-compassion, giving themselves permission to choose safety over spectacle without shame. They assert a right to privacy, insisting that not disclosing to a host family, supervisor, or peer is a legitimate boundary.
2. They invite others to redefine authenticity on their own terms, recognizing that visibility does not always equate liberation or to being true to oneself.
3. They encourage intentional disclosure—asking who needs to know, what support exists if things go badly, and what forms of partial or coded sharing might feel right.
4. They caution against centering oneself in cultural change. While many hope their presence and choices will shift hearts and policies, they resist narratives that cast them as protagonists of national transformation.
5. They advise future volunteers to avoid feeling obligated to overexplain their existence, especially when exhausted, unsafe, or tokenized.
6. They suggest reframing host family relationships: allowing them to be functional, limited, or deeply intimate depending on mutual desire and capacity, rather than forcing each into a model of "forever family."
7. They validate a wide range of coping strategies without guilt, from isolation and binge-watching queer media to short, intense "queer explosions" in city spaces.
8. They remind peers to remember that identity negotiation skills are intercultural communication tools. One can apply strengths from queer lived experience to

communicating across culture: code-switching, reading body language, situational awareness, tacitness, reading through the lines, etc.

9. They stress the importance of seeking or building queer community wherever possible—even if that community is one person, a group chat, or a semi-anonymous online collective.
10. Crucially, They accentuate that multiple ways of being can co-exist and contradict.

They collectively emphasize the last recommendation: *there is no single "right way" to be queer in intercultural exchange.* Different bodies, passports, languages, and lives will demand different strategies.

Limitations, Positionality, and Directions for Future Work

This study is necessarily partial. It draws heavily from Western, often U.S.-based participants. There are few trans participants and few nationalities represented, and only one participant (Felipe) occupies a formal implementor role within a notably queer-friendly organization. Most stories involve hard moments, but very few are outright horror stories; truly hostile or failed placements are not represented.

My own positionality as a queer former volunteer, program staff member, and researcher also matters. I knew several participants beforehand and was told repeatedly that this familiarity, and the deliberate care in the interview space, made it easier to share deeply and honestly. I view this as a strength—it allowed for layered, reflective narratives that might not surface in a cold interview. It also introduces bias toward people who felt comfortable with me and toward programs within my own networks. Yet, perspectives are missing: queer people who declined to participate, who are not out to anyone, who had to leave placements, or who were never invited into such programs in the first place.

Future research could extend this work in several directions: comparative studies across sending and receiving countries; a focus on host families, trans participants, program implementors; longitudinal follow-up on the long-term effects of specific stories; and deeper engagement with disability studies, trans studies, critical migration studies. I argue there is some adaptable value in the work to be applied to more repressive legal and social environments where

even being suspected of queerness abroad could endanger return, family safety, or life. At the same time, program evaluations, training materials, and policy documents can begin incorporating insights from (and adding to) similar projects now, rather than waiting for an ideal evidentiary threshold.

Conclusion

Thirteen Examples of Endless Ways of Being (and Teaching) Queer Abroad

Ultimately, the stories in this project show that queer people in and around host family placements are already doing complex theoretical and practical work. Tamara is doing it when they learn, too early, what it means to keep themself safe in a house that cannot hold their whole self. Molly is doing it when she deletes and rebuilds her online life, fights for a queer meetup in Dar, and still wears small signals under her uniform. Kelsey is doing it in the quiet hours when a second self comes into focus. Felipe is doing it every time he reads a room through both blackness and queerness. Soumya is doing it when she refuses to call her own survival "resilience" and insists we name the cost.

Leo is doing it when they decide that not coming out to a host family can be an ethic of care rather than cowardice. Jess is doing it in the choreography of gossip management, septum piercings, and wood-stove lighting—more worried about being a good guest than about being visibly queer. Logan is doing it in Madison kitchens and chemotherapy rooms, stitching together a future with his host family and his mother. Chris is doing it on Korean mountain trails and in group chats, holding fatness, queerness, and Jewishness together in one body. Michael F is doing it as he moves between host families in Tanzania, normalizing queerness in places where advice once said "never." Ilan is doing it in painted nails and village jokes, testing how far playful gender can go. T is doing it in binders, hospital visits, and sharp analysis of what "being yourself" really costs. And I am doing it too, moving back and forth between homes and roles, trying to make this knowledge usable.

If international education is serious about intercultural learning, it cannot afford to leave this expertise untapped. These participants are not simply navigating exchange; they are producing knowledge about it. By centering host families as dynamic assemblages of

relationships, expectations, institutions, and communities, we begin to see that identity negotiation is never an individual act alone. The possibilities available to participants, and the consequences of choosing them, are shaped long before they arrive. We are never fully in control, and therefore can never be fully prepared.

Recognizing this complexity also reveals how much knowledge already exists but too often goes unshared. Across programs, families, institutions, and participants, assumptions frequently replace conversations. Questions remain unasked, resources unwritten, and experiences undocumented. Yet many of the answers already exist in the stories of those who went before. Rather than prescribing a single "right" way to navigate exchange, we can build collective knowledge that expands the range of possibilities available to those who come next. There will always be constraint, and there will always be risk. Yet these stories show that risk and safety are not opposites. They are entangled. Sometimes safety emerges through risk, just as connection, discovery, and belonging can emerge from moments of contradiction or cultural contrast. There is no universal answer because every context reshapes what becomes possible. But understanding that complexity gives people something just as valuable: the freedom to make informed choices, adapt, and find the path that fits their circumstances.

As these thirteen lives demonstrate, there is creativity, tenderness, and even humor in the small, stubborn acts that make another day possible: a rainbow waistband no one sees, a host mother who pretends not to notice, a carefully timed disclosure, an unanswered message that still made someone feel less alone. Those moments are not trivial—they are the everyday practices through which people build lives, relationships, and belonging. As intercultural exchange exists to learn: a language, a culture, new relationships, and new ways of seeing the world. Learning becomes possible when people have enough safety, belonging, and energy to engage fully (Bingham, Brunsting, & Katsumoto, 2023). If queer participants must spend that energy constantly negotiating visibility, managing risk, or anticipating harm, they are denied equal access to the very opportunities these programs promise. Providing proactive resources, shared stories, and community support is therefore not an accommodation; it is central to the mission of intercultural exchange. Doing so not only strengthens participants' ability to learn across difference, but also creates space to challenge assumptions, discover untold stories, and imagine new ways of living together across cultures.

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