A Duo-ethnography of Black International University Students in Canada

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Race and immigration status are factors that can significantly influence post-secondary students' education in Canada (James, 2018). The country's higher education institutions continue to experience steady growth in international student populations (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014) attributed to the government's and tertiary institutions' diligence toward attracting and retaining skilled and educated immigrants. For Atlantic Canada, university student enrollment plays a vital role by enhancing global contacts and reputation, increasing enrollment, generating revenue from tuition, and significantly contributing to Atlantic Canada's growth strategies (Doucette, 2018).

There is an apparent paucity of academic literature that addresses Black international students' experiences as they attempt to understand the unfamiliar Canadian ethos, accept their racialized identity, and accomplish their educational objectives. Scholars, policymakers, and university administrators must intensely examine issues and experiences related to Black international students through Black students' lenses and narratives that counter white supremacy and claims of color blindness and meritocracy that impact the lives of Black international students. This paper provides an autoethnographic account of our experiences as two Black international students attending a predominantly white university in New Brunswick as we consider our identities within a Canadian ethos. Nestled in the intersectional theoretical lens (Crenshaw, 1988), we first situate Black West Indian university students in a unique contextual framework that emphasizes the various interlocking issues that affect such students. We then each narrate our experiences as two Black West Indian students attending one Atlantic Canadian university. Finally, we explore the implications and offer solutions toward more inclusive spaces for Black international students in Canada's higher education institutions.

From Majority to Minority
Canada's higher education system does not adequately address the needs of its international Black students (Hill, Callier, & Waters; 2019). Black West Indians in search of positive educational growth are among the country's immigrant student cohorts. However, synonymous with other international Black students', ambivalent feelings arise as their post-secondary experiences juxtapose their longing for a better academic and professional future and the various issues that place them at a deficit in meeting their aspirations. For many of these students, marginalization due to their immigrant status further exacerbates their racialized status.

Canada's connection to the West Indies dates back to the 1700s, where colonization, slavery, and West Indian plantations fueled the economic development of Europe and North America (Walker, 1985). Reynolds (2016) dedicated an entire chapter to charting West Indian's

immigration to Canada, including New Brunswick, in the early 1900s. The migration of the islands' skilled and educated workforce provided vital human resources to the Atlantic provinces. Today West Indian islands and Canada maintain strong interactions whereby Canada remains a preferred destination for West Indians searching for better education, employment opportunities, and lifestyles.

Black international university students studying in Canada face multi-dimensional issues, and these result from varying factors that interconnect, creating a unique conundrum for these students. Racism and internationalism intersect in a unique Canada-West Indian student context. Islands of the West Indies consist of predominantly Black populations with ancestral linage embedded in slavery and indentureship. As a product of colonization, albeit significantly smaller in population size, white citizens continue to dominate and experience higher economic and social status than their colored counterparts. Thus, moving from a country where Blacks held the majority racial composition to a country where Blacks are minoritized can be a daunting phenomenon for students. Calder et al. (2016) wrote of international university students' challenges in finding affordable, adequate, and suitable housing, un/underemployment, currency fluctuations, unfamiliar society, the pressure to succeed, language differences, cultural differences, and coping with change as major stressors that plague international students throughout their academic lives. These challenges are evidently present in West Indian students' experiences and are exacerbated by their new racial awakenings. With all the factors highlighted in this paragraph, it is inherently crucial that we employ a multi-dimensional perspective approach to analyzing West Indian students' issues as they study in New Brunswick, whereby these issues are perceived as nonlinear, constantly evolving, and products of varying factors.

Autoethnography
Hayano (1979) coined the term "autoethnography." This qualitative research method places the self as the site of inquiry with the aim to critique or extend knowledge through first-hand experiences and critical   self-reflection. (Sigleton, 2020).   When   embarking on autoethnographic work, researchers consider their own beliefs and experiences as they observe and understand the social setting and nexuses within the phenomenon under examination (Chen, 2021). The use of autoethnography to highlight Black issues in higher education is not unique. For example, Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang (2015) employed autoethnography to reflect on their experiences as foreign-born Black university faculty members in a US higher education institution. Henry (2015) used this approach to document her university experiences as a racialized woman working in Canadian and American universities. To reveal Black students' experiences, Hill et al. (2019) employed an autoethnographic approach when they provided a collection of narratives on Black students' educational experiences. This self-reflective narrative approach has proven to be effective when describing Black students' experiences regarding women's hair (Norwood, 2018) and predominantly white education (Hughes, 2020). Furthermore, Chen (2021) and Rajani, Ng, and Groutsis (2018), used autoethnography to describe experiences as non-white international students attending Canadian universities. In this study, we employ an autoethnographic

approach to analyzing our experiences as Black West Indian students attending a predominantly white Atlantic Canadian university.

Influential authors, such as Brand (2001), successfully pioneered the quest to relive minority experiences in Canada. Through her memoir, Brand contests singularity of origin and belonging, thus recognizing the multiple experiences with race, class, and sexuality that Black immigrants encounter in Caribbean and Canadian contexts. 'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History shares the experiences of six African Canadian women who employ anti-racist approaches to exploring Canadian history, race, and education and the dearth of historical Black women recognition. Although our paper cannot parallel the standard of literary offerings of Brand's (2001) or Bristow's (1994) work, in this paper, each author presents their stories separately and as additions to the ways Black realities can be unveiled through narratives.

Existing on the Peripheries
Coming from Trinidad and Tobago's twin-island state and moving to Canada to pursue studies at a New Brunswick university was an immense opportunity to receive internationally recognized education that can lead to more excellent career opportunities. What felt like abandoning a lifetime of friendships, family connections, and island culture was unquestionably a colossal sacrifice. Nevertheless, I enthusiastically decided to undergo the move to ensure I gain the best opportunity and experience needed for my professional advancement.

As I discovered all I could about what would be my new home for at least the next four years, it became evident that I was about to migrate to an area that contrasted in many ways with my homeland. Knowledge of these dissimilarities did not deter my excitement but rather rejuvenated my inquisitive spirit as I prepared to embrace the cold weather and unfamiliar customs.

Rhein and Jones (2020) highlighted various stressors that international students face that can impede their degree of sociocultural adjustment. Opposing cultural backgrounds, financial strains, and severed attachment to home create imposing stimulants and can lead to students experiencing deficits. Although prominent in my experiences, these stressors were somewhat insignificant in comparison to the startling realization that no matter where I went, my apparent colour seemed to place a tag on my forehead that read 'outsider.' I was not just an international student; I was a Black international student—a marginalized subset within an already marginalized group. I found myself in an unknown position. For the first time in my life, as I walked throughout campuses, streets, or visited commercial businesses, I found myself a minority race. For what seemed like the first time, my Blackness became a personal reality. As I struggled to understand my new experiences, my need for social interaction and mentorship became obvious. I needed a confidant, someone to serve as a counsellor. I longed for someone that could relate to my complicated situation and offer reassuring words of comfort and advice. My search was futile as, unfortunately, just as the student population consisted of mainly non-

Black cohorts, so two were the university services mainly pioneered by non-Black personnel. I, thus, found myself lacking mentorship.

The intrinsic force that compelled me to leave my homeland toward the unknown propelled me to capitalize on my newly established racial awareness to embrace the opportunity as a minority to explore and advocate for equity and social inclusion for my Black colleagues. For the first time, I became interested in learning about Black culture and the positive contributions that Black people have made to New Brunswick's development. A skin colour that I previously disregarded now became my source of honorable pride as I learnt of Black-Canada connections through books such as Backhouse's (1999) *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950*, Walker's (1985) *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience*, Reynolds' (2020) *Viola Desmond's Canada*, and Spray's (1972) *The Blacks in New Brunswick*. The pleasing realization that West Indians have a significant history in the province stimulated a connection that was previously nonexistent. After two years of grappling with tumultuous emotions, I began my quest for connection. Once isolated, I now stand on the periphery—not belonging but growing in understanding that there may be a place for me here after all. Sadly, my journey has been self-motivated. I wonder if my university and town pioneered more strategic measures to promote Black awareness, would my early experiences be marred with isolation and detachment that were further exacerbated by already numerous challenges as an international student?

I wonder.

Journey to Black Consciousness
In 2019, at the age of 30, I was admitted to a predominantly white educational institution in New Brunswick. I immediately developed an acute awareness of my darker skin tone. Given that most international Black students share histories of colonization by white European countries, it is reasonable for one to assume that my acute awareness of my Blackness was developed due to my cognizance of racial injustices given my country's colonial historical background. In the higher education context, whiteness is taken for granted to the extent that it is invisible and normal (Madriaga, 2018). Additionally, within the higher education context, Critical Race scholars "have also set out to expose how the prevalence of Whiteness and White supremacy, frequently in the guise of colorblindness, covertly and overtly shapes the culture of higher education." (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 214). Its pervasiveness surfaces in the crude social label of "Black minority." This category is also perpetually reproduced in student academic content and official higher education statistics research and reports, thus reinforcing the white racial category as the norm (Madriaga, 2018; McCaig & Madriaga, 2019).

The awareness of my skin colour (Black Consciousness) created feelings of isolation and loneliness as I struggled to connect and interact with people who did not look like me, talk like me, or understood my St. Lucian accent. Hadfield (2017) describes Black Consciousness as "an attitude of mind" or "way of life." (para. 8). This awareness also led to an internal conflict between my identity as a Saint Lucian and what it meant to be a black minority in Canada. Du Bois (2011) refers to this internal conflict as "Double Consciousness." He describes it as a twoness

or dichotomy of self that colonized groups in oppressive societies experience. This "Double Consciousness" arose when it was evident to me that I stood out in every social setting: the classroom, on campus, in the library, at church, and in the supermarket. I also struggled to decipher whether my difference was welcomed or shunned by the white majority that labelled me as a "minority"; a label to which I could not relate. Having lived my entire life as a black majority in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, the colour of my skin did not place me in an identifiable category, nor did it interfere with my typical day-to-day interactions. I did not anticipate that being a Black international student in a predominantly white university would result in being labelled as a "minority." This realization created feelings of isolation and loneliness that would overwhelm me to the point of having no desire to interact with anyone.

Being acutely aware of my Blackness on campus, adjusting to my student life became extremely problematic even during simple interactions and social transactions. By the first semester, I realized that the social circle I created for myself consisted of only black people of Caribbean and African descent. I also noticed that the black people within my circle also created acquaintances from the "Black minority" groups. In retrospect, I believe that creating a black social circle was both voluntary and involuntary and served to protect myself from feeling like an outcast. My first overt racial experience became a daily occurrence from a white male who tried to intimidate me by making racist jokes while sitting in extremely close proximities to me. I also encountered challenges while shopping for hair products for my hair type, makeup to match my skin tone, and choosing to abstain from social gatherings or events to avoid drawing attention to myself as "the only black person" in attendance.

Having faced these new challenges about my Blackness in white spaces led to an eventual social identity crisis. I experienced confusion about my identity, social groups, belief system, cultural and historical background, and overall self-confidence. Amid my social identity crisis was a global Black Lives Matter protest march after George Perry Floyd Jr.'s killing, an African American man, by a white police officer. New Brunswick soon became part of the global dialogue and organized a protest march to stand in solidarity against the injustices faced by black people across Canada. I never expected to be part of a protest march while pursuing my degree and trying to make sense of my social identity. I navigated my entire university experience by asking myself, "Who am I? Where do I belong? How do I fit in?"

Being Intentional About Diversity
Canada's multicultural policy (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2020) emphasized the value of cultural diversity and equality. Therefore, at the most basic level, similar to George Mwangi & Fries-Britt's (2015) pronouncements, universities must embrace a heterogeneous perspective when developing Black International students' programs. Universities should be intentional in their approaches to enrolling Black international students by understanding and identifying their needs and perceptions of this intersectional student population. As such, Black international students can achieve academic success in more conducive and safe university spaces. Universities must acknowledge the diversity within black communities, such as national origin, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, rather than assuming relatedness exists purely because

black international students share the same race. George Mwangi and Fries-Britt suggested effective strategies that universities can utilize to increase cross-cultural communication, create greater within-group peer interactions in the black student population, and alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. These strategies include pairing Black international students with a student from the African Diaspora, thus creating a cross-cultural partner and establishing formal events that encourage dialogue between both groups about student issues. George Mwangi and Fries-Britt further suggested restructuring the curriculum on Black studies to reflect/integrate a global or diasporic perspective and encouraging the establishment of safe black spaces such as Black Student Unions, Caribbean Student Associations, and African Student Associations.

International students are often viewed as lucrative and attractive to the higher education market, especially in the West (McDonald, 2014). Universities should not commodify international students' diversity. Instead, universities must take affirmative steps to commit to, support, and improve equity on campuses. Universities must move beyond providing support for international students from one focal point, such as an international student services office, that primarily focuses on global policy-related issues such as visa processing and study permits. Instead, universities must provide more profound, meaningful, and intentional support throughout the institution that caters to holistic development and diverse international students' needs.

Conclusion

The intersection of Black issues and international student issues creates a unique conundrum for Black international students. When transitioning from living as a majority in their homeland to living as a minority in a foreign land, facing the unsettling realities is one of the main challenges Black international students encounter. Such were our experiences as Black international students in a foreign post-secondary educational institution. In addition to being categorized as a "minority," we also encountered a series of challenges such as culture shock, language barriers, feelings of isolation and loneliness, homesickness, financial constraints, social identity crisis, racism, and an acute awareness of our skin colour—all while simultaneously adjusting and functioning to meet the academic demands of obtaining a tertiary level education. This paper highlighted unsettling aspects of our transition from a majority to a minority and how these experiences led to inward battles and social identity crises. Above all, these narratives revealed underlying aspects of strength, resilience, and success historically embedded in Black's ability to overcome systemic racialized challenges. Throughout our journey, we were able to overcome perpetual obstacles to become advocates and pioneer transformation while successfully completing our post-secondary education objectives. Over a year, we, the authors, developed a strong friendship fostered by our apparent *otherness* and fueled by our desire to stand in solidarity as we advocate the need for Black student issues to form part of a dialogue aimed at creating safe, equitable spaces for all university students. We hope this paper will add to this crucial discourse.

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