A Duoethnographic Exploration of Race and Gender: A Dialogue Between Female International Students in Canada

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The number of international students in Canadian universities has dramatically increased since 2000. International students are believed to contribute significantly to education and research, as they bring a rich variety of perspectives, experiences, and languages. However, international students should not be categorized into one homogenous group. In particular, international female PhD students have many different reasons to immigrate and undertake a rigorous academic program. Whether to pursue high academic goals, gain personal knowledge, develop research skills, or widen employment opportunities, each student carries a different cultural background that informs their decisions prior to their arrival, their transitions, their adjustments, and subsequently their participation in the new culture. Using a duoethnographic dialogical approach and ideas about bonding beyond race and culture, this article focused on the experiences of two female international PhD students from Costa Rica and Nigeria as we answered questions regarding the intersections between race and gender within our processes behind mobility to Canada.

Le nombre d'étudiants étrangers dans les universités canadiennes a augmenté de façon spectaculaire depuis 2000. On estime que les étudiants étrangers contribuent de manière significative à l'éducation et à la recherche, car ils apportent une riche variété de perspectives, d'expériences et de langues. Cependant, les étudiants étrangers ne doivent pas être classés dans un groupe homogène. En particulier, les doctorantes internationales ont de nombreuses raisons différentes d'immigrer et d'entreprendre un programme universitaire rigoureux. Qu'il s'agisse de poursuivre des objectifs universitaires élevés, d'acquérir des connaissances personnelles, de développer des compétences en matière de recherche ou d'élargir les possibilités d'emploi, chaque étudiante possède un bagage culturel différent qui influence ses décisions avant son arrivée, ses transitions, ses ajustements et, par la suite, sa participation à la nouvelle culture. En utilisant une approche dialogique duoethnographique et des idées sur la création de liens au-delà de la race et de la culture, cet article porte sur les expériences de deux doctorantes internationales du Costa Rica et du Nigéria alors que nous répondons à des questions concernant les intersections entre la race et le genre dans nos processus qui sous-tendent le déplacement vers le Canada.

Every year, thousands of international students embark upon undergraduate and graduate studies at Canadian universities. A substantial number of these international students undertake graduate studies and over 30% of Canada's doctoral students are non-Canadian (Statistics Canada, 2017, as cited in Brouwer, 2017). They come to Canada from across the globe to study, learn, conduct research, and eventually become a part of their communities (Brouwer, 2017).

These international students have different stories and motivations for studying abroad far away from family and friends and no two stories are the same.

To achieve a deeper understanding of the different stories and motivations, we, two female PhD students from two different countries, Costa Rica and Nigeria, employed duoethnography to revisit our lives as sites of research (Oberg & Wilson, 2002). Duoethnography allowed us to break down isolation and loneliness (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown 2014) and build a bridge to promote deeper conversations between us. Inspired by hooks' (2012) ideas about bonding beyond race and culture, we share our challenges in Canada when seeking to bond across differences, our breakdown in communications, our disappointments, and our joys in this new culture.

Our Story

We met in a doctoral seminar class in a faculty of education at a large Canadian university. There were 15 students in the class, of which 13 were international students from different countries all over the world. We navigated our border crossing experience surrounded by other individuals with very different stories and backgrounds, but with one common academic goal: earning a PhD. Through an inclusive curriculum, we navigated our first weeks by sharing our past experiences that acknowledged our previous learning experiences. We honoured our classmates by listening to the circumstances that motivated them to enroll in a doctoral program.

I (Lena) am from Costa Rica, a small green paradise country in Central America. I was born and raised in a rural town in the Southern region and my first language is Spanish. I learned English in a classroom that taught me to venerate American English standard because it was the dominant language variation. While learning this standard language, I experienced a process of indoctrination of American culture. My goal as a language learner and teacher was always to seek to sound "native-like" and aspire to the open door provided by the land of opportunities. Currently, I am an English language instructor in a public university and hope to return home when I complete my studies.

I (Glory) am from Nigeria. I was born in Lagos, a city with over 21.32 million people at the time of writing this paper. I speak three languages, with English as my first language. My country was colonized by the British. Colonization imprinted an awareness and consciousness that the English language was superior to my native language, which is not true. I work currently as a sessional instructor at a Canadian university and am an educator with over 20 years of experience.

Employing Duoethnography to a Race and Gender Research

We chose duoethnography as our method of inquiry because of its collaborative research methodology. Its dialogic focus allowed us to disrupt our stories in order to reconceptualize them in light of what we have learned. This qualitative approach provided us, as researchers, with the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that reflects on our disparate histories about race and gender. As explained by Norris and Sawyer (2012), this type of inquiry enables auto-ethnographic accounts of our research question to emphasize the complex, reflexive, and aesthetic aspects of both the work in process and the product. A valuable trait of duoethnography is its flexibility to explore our hybrid identities and to see how our lives have been situated socially and culturally.

Though challenging, extreme care when presenting and representing others in our stories was anticipated. Regarding situational ethics, the socio-cultural context of our stories is not separate from our experiences, since we truly value the contribution of our stories to the improvement of

the future experiences of other international female students in our similar situation. Our purpose is to promote reflection, more dialogic engagement, transformation, and conscientization (Freire, 2002) that can impact the internationalization curriculum in higher education. Linked to this understanding are ethical stances and trust as tenets of duoethnography. We aspired to conduct research with each other where we kept the status of equals. Our interest in pursuing ethics of caring helped us assist each other in the making of meaning while being receptive.

Hooks' (2012) ideas on bonding across cultures inspired us to challenge our fears of conflict when being with people different from us, to be active listeners, to not fear curiosity, to acknowledge the importance of mutuality, to consider the practice of compassion, and to relate through critical feedback. To confront racism, the place to begin is with our attitudes, our behavior, our questions, our resentments, uneasiness, and fears (hooks, 2012). Aligned with Norris and Sawyer's (2012) conceptualization of *currere* as an act of self-interrogation in a duoethnography, our challenge was to unpack and repack our meanings in the presence of the Other in an act of mutual reclaiming. We used our experiences and decisions in life before and after Canada to better understand how race and gender have shaped our identity construction. We understand that repacking poses a risk since our meaning-making is valid for here and now. When repacking, we also risk packing new bias inadvertently. Aware of these risks, we see our self-interrogations as fluent.

Duoethnography was an ideal research methodology that allowed us to examine our lived experiences, reflect on the past, and based on that reflection, reconceptualize our perceptions and transform (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). As time progressed, we developed a careful observation of social behaviors of not only people from the host culture but people from all over the world. Re-examination of the root of our interest to perpetuate the West Northern countries higher education supremacy took place. Our desire to accomplish an academic dream placed us in challenging positions and surrounded us with racism, imperialism, and language discrimination. Our challenges were intersectional, because our lives were not confined to one realm; we were international students, wives, mothers, culturally different, and visible minorities.

Study Aims and Methods

The aim of this study was to interrogate and conceptualize existing beliefs of what it means to be international female PhD students in Canada for a better understanding of the experiences of similar students today and to promote new dialogues and questions. Although our inquiry started with a set research questions and a series of subsequent questions, dialogic questions emerged throughout our duoethnographic quest. Based on the socio-constructivist premise that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed, the trustworthiness of this inquiry emerged through a critical understanding that reality is constructed as a social phenomenon in a context-specific perspective.

Our dialogue started off as two international students discussing the challenges we were facing as visible minorities. It then gradually became our research interest. One of the tenets of duoethnography is currere which we view as the possibility to use our lives as a curriculum to self-interrogate the meanings we each hold (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). We started our conversations with the understanding that we needed each other to better understand our beliefs. We met biweekly at the initial stage of writing the paper for six months, then monthly for three months to review and make edits on the manuscripts. For the first three months, we met for an hour and 30 minutes for dialogue at the university library and subsequently in a study room in Glory's

apartment. We recorded our dialogues and later transcribed. Our dialogues were focused on our experiences and challenges with regards to race and gender. During our dialogues, we were plagued with different feelings of doubt, and uncertainties of how much of our personal experiences we should share. Sometimes we were emotional, sad or happy as we recalled an experience and the impact it had on us. We both transcribed different sections of the dialogue and shared the transcripts with each other for further dialogue. We then analyzed the data separately and met biweekly to discuss and go over the themes. When the manuscript was ready, we met one more time to reread and review the final edits and followed up with questions via emails. Through a dialogic, intersubjective process, trustworthiness was acknowledged through reflexivity when we shared our stories and co-deconstructed and reconstructed our beliefs. This process included evaluation when providing thick description, transparency, and generativity. This last element attempted to contribute to opening a space for discussion for future international female students' stories.

Our Lives Intersected

Crenshaw (2017) defined intersectionality as the overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination that women face, based not just on gender but also on ethnicity, sexuality, and economic background. In our context, intersectionality is a lens through which it is permitted to acknowledge the challenges of negotiating multiple oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991; Gonzáles, 2017). This understanding gave us the opportunity to dismantle how our race, gender, and immigrant condition intersected and put us in different circumstances. Intersectionality allowed us to see our struggles by understanding its theory, meaning, and implications in our marginalized stories. Intersectionality also gave us the platform to reframe our experiences and be attentive to aspects of invisibilities, power, and relations (Crenshaw, 2014). We self-defined and self-evaluated the existing categories of race and gender in relation to one another as a way to resist discourses that justified our struggles and labeled them as inheritably "complicated," and bonded across the boundaries of race, gender, and diverse experiences (hooks, 2012). In this duoethnography, there is no intent to offer a conclusion, solution, resolution, or intervention (Gonzáles, 2017), but rather to let our stories be told so that we reconceptualize our positions about gender and race to eventually transform.

Difference Within Similarity

As duoethnographers, we share commonalities rooted in our condition of womanhood. However, difference as a tenet of duoethnography recognizes our differing experiences, meanings, and points of view in the way our life histories inform the reasons why we interpret the same phenomena differently. Our different countries of origin, our reasons for pursuing a PhD, our past experiences, and our different cultures dictate different cultural beliefs and values that give each of us a perspective on being an international female student that is unavailable to the other. We believe we can best make our difference available to each other through both dialogical and critical interaction. Difference as a tenet of duoethnography moves research to a place of ambiguity in which multiple meanings can be celebrated. In this duoethnography, we explored how race, culture, our socialization in western education, and language have impacted our experiences as international female students in a North American country place.

Our dialogue started by listening to each other's history and reflecting on our current self-

identification. The realization that our differences surpassed our similarities as international women students led to our starter question: *What are the specific identities that overlap or intersect to make us unique and vulnerable international students*?

Situating Ourselves

Lena—I am a Latina temporary-immigrant middle-aged female international student in Canada. I am also a mother of two: a teenager and an undergraduate student. I recognize myself as a non-native English speaker who teaches English as a foreign language in my country. As an adult educator on a rural campus, I recognize issues of social justice that resonate with my life history and current research interests. I am in Canada earning my PhD supported by a scholarship through a state university in Costa Rica. It is widely known that a universally valuable education can be sought in North America (Stein & Andreotti, 2016) and this is the reason for my mobilization to Canada. Hence, there was no question that I would pursue my PhD in North America.

Glory—I am a Nigerian female international PhD candidate in my final year. English is my first language. I am a mother of two adult sons, who are in their undergraduate programs. My background is in K-12 education. I am in Canada earning my PhD supported by a scholarship from my postsecondary institution. It has always been my dream to study in a postsecondary institution in North America. I have always stood for equality and justice for women, especially marginalized women. I am currently teaching in a postsecondary institution.

Questions About Race

While living in developing countries (Costa Rica and Nigeria), we heard explicit and implicit discourses that positioned Canada and the United States at the top of a global hierarchy of humanity with the rest of the world (hooks, 2012). As a consequence, higher education in these countries was a desirable product. That is why we decided to embark on this academic adventure and left our countries and successful academic careers seeking to pursue our dream of completing a PhD degree.

Once immersed in the new culture, we started to notice our invisibility and marginalization and started our dialogue informally, after class, sharing our unexpected discouraging experiences. That was how we found a point to connect and decided to undergo this duoethnography. Our starting point was ourselves, our currere, which is our living breathing experiences as we reflected on our previous experiences and cultural grounding. From the many dialogues, we analyzed the way racial and ethnic stereotypes informed our immigration process. This interest resulted from the understanding that stereotypes have a direct effect on identity formation and intercultural socialization.

Glory—In Tassie and Givens's (2013) article, they found that African America women faced negative, race-based stereotypes and more frequent questioning of their credibility. This too, has been my experience. Race was never a factor for me before coming to Canada. I had visited many predominately white nations before immigrating to Canada, I had experienced racial profiling and stereotyping in these countries (Ovie & Barrantes, 2019). I was never bothered about those experiences because they were temporary and I could cope. However, because I now live here (Canada) and face racial profiling and stereotyping more often, it is very troubling and stressful for me. I constantly struggle with being stereotyped. Assumptions are made about my intelligence,

as well as the discrimination I face from having an accent (which I am proud of) and with having my skin colour determine my identity. Sometimes it is hard; I have had a difficult time dealing with all these factors and even contemplated going back to my home country. However, I find that having dialogues like this help build my inner strength, resilience, and tenacity. I have developed several coping strategies. I choose to focus on what I can control, such as my studies and my friendships, rather than these discriminatory acts. I see myself as a strong black woman and I am proud of my accent, my skin color, and my heritage. Gibbs and Fuery (1994) echoed my sentiments that black women,

> have overcome many of these barriers through developing a set of cultural attitudes, a pattern of coping strategies, and a series of help-seeking behaviors which have enabled them to survive and sometimes thrive in a frequently hostile, exploitive, and unsupportive environment (p. 560).

For me, there is no magic formula for changing racial attitudes; however, as a person I try to guard against becoming prejudiced by self-evaluating to unlearn racism (hooks, 2012). An encounter I had with a student emphasized the importance of not becoming prejudiced. On my first day as an instructor, I met a young lady who was the only black student in that class. I immediately empathized with her, knowing and understanding that because of her colour, she will be discriminated against. Keleta-Mae (2017) noted that despite Canada's proclamations that it's a fully multicultural and just society, anti-Black racism has long existed within its educational institutions. Being the only black person in the sea of white faces in a predominately white institution presents certain vulnerabilities: you feel so visible, alone, and always trying hard to fit in. Her face lit up, when she saw another person of colour, not as her classmate but as her instructor. During my interactions with her, she said, "when I saw you walk in as my instructor, I was overwhelmed with joy, because I felt if she could do it then I can." To see another international female black student inspired me because she saw herself in me and had hope. This made every discriminatory experience and prejudice I had endured worth it. I recall Cooper's (1892) words, "Only the Black Woman can say, when and where I enter … then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (p. 31). This type of experience encourages me to keep self-evaluating.

Lena—from my experience, I think that the process of self-evaluation is highly subjective. When I weigh my participation as an international student in Canada, I always experience a pressure to see my worth through overcoming my own prejudice. I have a hard time reflecting on the idea that it is not my race but my character and knowledge that help me succeed. I am curious about what self-evaluation means to you and how you keep self-evaluating.

Glory—Lena, as you asked this question, I paused to think about what self-evaluation meant to me, why do I need to self-evaluate? Was it because of my need to understand and process my experiences and feelings? Or was a way to create solutions and deal with my struggles with discrimination and racism? And yes, I do agree with you self-evaluation is subjective, but for me, it is worth doing as it helps me to sort through my feelings of bias and the pain of discrimination. I see self-evaluation as the ability to critically examine my thoughts and actions in line with the experiences I go through. I make a conscious effort to keep working on my actions and thoughts to overcome the feelings of discrimination and racism, so that I can treat people with fairness and kindness. Additionally, self-evaluation provides the opportunity to understand and evaluate my own biases around race as I deconstruct, deeply reflect, and question. I cannot control what people say or how they act, but I can control my reactions and behaviors. I therefore choose to respond with kindness and an understanding that people can sometimes be ignorant and afraid and if they

knew better, they might act differently. Lena, have you experienced racism? Are your experiences similar to mine? What has it been like for you?

Lena—No, Glory, my experiences are different from yours. Canada is my first experience living abroad and I recognize that there has been a strong indoctrination of North American culture in my country. I grew up listening my mom's devotion for President Kennedy and the United States' abundance. At the university, I learned American Standard English and American culture. I learned about the American dream and developed a blind devotion for American entertainment and values. I did not learn anything particular about Canada at home or school. There was this underlying belief that both countries were similar.

I have confronted stereotypes in Canada about my culture. I have found generalizations made that my language (Spanish) is a race uncomfortable. Most people do not have clear knowledge that there are many countries that speak Spanish. People assume that I am Mexican just because I speak Spanish. Mexico and my country have different cultures. I remember someone told me she liked Spanish people. She was using Spanish to categorize people who speak the language. I was not ready for such categorization. I have dealt with this discomfort through the practice of compassion (hooks, 2012). My own lack of knowledge when differentiating between the United States and Canada can be compared to the ignorance of those not able to differentiate between speaking Spanish and being Spanish. What I have learned is that we all make cultural mistakes.

At a personal level, I found moving through an identity de-construction while simultaneously constructing my identity in Canada as an international student challenging because I had difficulty verbalizing my ethnicity. Even though I had traveled to other countries, I was never there for a long stay. It was in my role as a temporary immigrant with a four-year study visa that I started to complete forms and paperwork where I had to state my ethnicity. One day, when I was completing a form at my son's school, I wrote my name and my address, and I then came across the box "ethnicity." I unconsciously wrote Costa Rican. But as I thought about it, I realized that Costa Rican was not an ethnic group, it was my nationality. I wrote down "Latina." This was my first time having to put into words my ethnicity and I had a hard time because I did not identify as Latina. I felt uneasy and lost as it was my first time attaching this label to my identity. I had to learn to dismantle my feelings and confront my own social construction. For some reason in my country, we have experienced that we have better social and economic conditions than other Central American countries. Experiencing better health, education, and safety rankings have positively affected me, and as a result I have constructed that we are better (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2018). Conceptualizing myself as "better" set me apart and never provided me with a strong connection to my ethnicity. The only identifier for me was being Costa Rican—my nationality—and this was not enough. In my interactions with people in Canada, I realized I was considered a visible minority and for sure this has affected my confidence and self-esteem.

Glory—I had the same experience—being identified as a visible minority. I found that hard and difficult to process. What was this experience like for you?

Lena—when my husband was applying for a job here, in his application form there was this question about being a visible minority. I guided him to check "visible minority." This construction of identity is hard to accept. This is hard to my bones. In my country, the minority is another ethnic group from another country, not us! That was challenging as we were forced to de-construct our identity and construct a new one and I experienced some denial in this process and this denial has affected my interactions with the community. I have arrived at the point that I do not want to interact anymore because I do not want to be labeled as a minority. It does not make

any sense to me. I am proud of who I am and of being identified as a Costa Rican. I do not see myself as less of a person, I worry that this superior attitude of mine has become an obstacle to form ties with new cultures. I think it is about the paradox behind the word "visible;" being visible makes us invisible.

Glory—I face the complication of being identified as a visible minority. I find the term "visible minority" disconcerting and demeaning. How do I deconstruct my identity from a largely homogenous black nation to become "visible?" What makes me visible? My skin colour? Why does my skin colour matter more than my qualifications or my person? Am I not a human being first? Why should my skin colour define me? (Ovie & Barrantes, 2019). These questions plague me every day. In a country like Canada, that prides itself on being a "mosaic of cultures" (Rocher, 2015) and a multicultural society, I wonder what the premise is for using the term "visible minority?" What is the rationale behind the term? This, to me is another form of discrimination: I feel marked, I feel I stand out, and I feel vulnerable. I am so aware that I am the "other," a black woman and a minority living in a dominant white culture and society. I constantly struggle with the discourse of being a black female, that I may not be accepted as an individual, as a human being. I have developed a heightened sense of awareness of my skin colour. Why do I have to be burdened with more? My colour does not define me or what I do.

I find that engaging in this dialogue with you Lena, has given me the opportunity to reflect and make new meanings out of my experiences, a voice to talk and write about issues of race, "telling tales and exposing that which would otherwise remain hidden as well as invisible and taken for granted" (McClellan & Sader 2012, p. 149). Lena, how have you coped with the discrimination you faced?

Lena—It is through this conversation that I can expose my hidden and invisible experiences. And in my role as a student I have learned a lot. Even though I am an identified as visible minority, I have never experienced any direct racist comment at the university. In my courses, I always brought my previous knowledge and experiences into my learning tasks. My research proposal addresses issues of professional agency of rural EFL instructors in public rural university campuses in my country. I am grateful to the faculty and my supervisory committees for their openness in this regard. I, however, identified white supremacist practices within the curriculum. Stain and Andreotti (2016) asserted, "Western education is understood to be universally valuable, while education from other traditions is understood to be of limited value" (p. 228). Other than Freire, I never found any reference to contributions in places other than North America, Europe, and Australia. Latin American was not even on the map; it is erased from their construction of knowledge. I find it naive to believe and think that North America is the only region that has made progress. And, by reading Freire (2002), I am not afraid to assert that we have a lot to teach about resilience and liberation.

Moving Toward Language and its Connection to Race

As we continued our dialogue, the topic of race and language was delicate and emotional, but irresistible to explore. We were brave to ask about the challenges in light of being in another country where we felt we were "the Others" and we had to make adjustments in our roles as immigrants.

Lena—in my country, the fact that I speak and teach another language, is prestigious. In my work with the Languages Department at my university, knowing another language gave me access to information that some of our colleagues did not have. When I came here, I was not ready for

this change of view of my language skills. I have been learning English in my country for more than 20 years and I have been learning how to teach it for 15 years. That gave me a lot of confidence in what I was doing.

When I came here, my first challenge was that I did not speak English as well as I thought I could. I realized that people had difficulty understanding what I was saying because of the influence of Spanish. As a direct result of this experience, one of the topics I am researching in my dissertation is focused on non-nativeness in language. When I was preparing my research proposal, I came across a book chapter that explained what I had been experiencing (Kamhi-Stein, 2014). Based on Kachru's (2005) World Englishes theory, Kamhi-Stein (2014) shared how it was common for language instructors from expanding circle countries who move to an inner circle country to earn their PhD start to shift their self-perceptions and view themselves as accented minorities. In this process, their work vanishes and they begin to believe they are not effective English language speakers (Aneja, 2016; Chacón, 2006; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016). This has affected me so much to the point that I honestly feel that I need help to reconstruct my language instructor identity.

In comparison to yours, I had a different experience regarding my physical appearance. I realized that as long as I do not speak, I pass as a white person. Stereotypes come from generalizations. I have experienced the same situations in Costa Rica, but from a different perspective. We hold a stereotype about the people from one of our neighboring countries. If I ran into one of them, I would probably do the same things people do here when they listen to my husband and me speaking Spanish. People change seat or leave the place. My discrimination experience has transformed the way I now see them. I have changed. I have de-constructed a stereotype rooted in me and I have reconceptualized a new view. I am now more mindful about how my actions and overgeneralizations can affect others.

Glory—I find your answer quite intriguing. I had assumed that you would not be discriminated against because of your language. I see your skin colour and assume that you would be accepted as part of the dominant race and culture. That you would not have the same types of struggles I have experienced, but I am obviously mistaken. I have accepted that I will always be discriminated against because of my race. I am happy being black and Nigerian. I wear my Nigerian attire as an expression of my pride in my heritage. There is nothing wrong with being black, white, or Latina.

Lena—Well, let me tell you that I am far from being accepted. A word beyond acceptance from others is the idea of our own acceptance of the other culture and the acculturation process. That made me think that assimilating the Canadian culture is not in my plans; however, there are characteristics that I like, such as being polite, and helping people. I will always appreciate the way I was welcomed here. I needed resources and I got all the resources I could possibly imagine, even funding from the university. I know that is part of their culture and I appreciate that. Still, there are elements that I am not willing to negotiate. I am sure this decision informs why I always introduce myself as an international student, because I feel that my origin is important to me. Glory, how has the process of acculturation been like for you?

Glory—I have adapted to the culture here in Canada. I speak the language (English), eat the food and interact with the people. Moving to a foreign country to study brings many potential challenges and benefits. Due to the globalization of education, I have more access to better education, since I have been socialized to believe that a degree from a western university was a desirable product in the global higher education market (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). A challenge for me was struggling with isolation. I missed my family and friends, my network and support system. It was initially tough adjusting to a new city, not having any friends, and leaving a good job behind

to start life from the scratch. I became depressed and felt so alone. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) identified what I was going through as "stressors" that international students face (p. 204). It took me several months to begin to make friends and I have made wonderful Canadian friends who have become my family. I do agree with Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) that host country friendships increase levels of satisfaction, contentment, and social connectedness. These friendships have diminished my feelings of homesickness. Apart from homesickness and finding a job, my acculturation process has not been difficult. I love the fact that most Canadians are open and welcoming, and I like the Canadian culture, especially the aspects of gender equality. The culture I come from is a patriarchal, male-dominated society, where there is systemic bias against women. Women are regarded as subordinates and we face multiple forms of oppressions (Arthur, 2019) and suppressions. However, being here has allowed me to reconstruct my gender identity: that as a woman it is possible to be more than a wife and mother. I can achieve my goals and aspirations, irrespective of the struggles I face as a minority and a woman of colour.

The Role of Gender

In the process of this dialogue, our reflections led us to re-examine our life histories as they reflect our constructions of gender. We knew that much in our history has been shaped by socially constructed interpretations and wanted to challenge ourselves and be open to a shared understanding of what it means to be a woman in our particular histories. Our understandings took us to a dialogue of how our perceptions of gender and formal education intersected in our home country and in Canada.

Lena—I feel like here in Canada I have not witnessed any difference in gender roles, but then I have only been here for only three years. I have not interacted enough to know if there are cultural issues behind women's roles, but I see a lot of women in the university classrooms. I believe from what I have witnessed that both Costa Rica and Canada share women's participation in formal education. Though there are gender disparities in higher education participation back home (Estado de la Nación, 2017), statistics show that high percentages of women are enrolled in higher education. From my daily experiences at the university, I noticed that both countries share a significant percentage among women graduates. Indeed, both countries have witnessed a significant increase in educational attainment amongst women (Statistics Canada, 2016). The literature shows there is a gap between specialization fields because of gender in both countries (Estado de la Nación, 2017; May, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2016) that makes me think about more similarities.

Lena—tell me about your perceptions, Glory.

Glory—because I am from the south of Nigeria, I had the opportunity to receive a western education. In Nigeria, families save or sell their valuable possessions to send their kids to universities. Those who do not have money or possessions, pay their way through school by working different odd jobs. I was fortunate that my father paid for my undergraduate studies. Western education is available to everyone in the southern part of my country. However, women either get married while in university, or immediately after. A majority of women do not go on to pursue graduate degrees. The pressures of family life, raising kids, and no work-life balance inhibit them from pursuing their PhDs. (Aluko, 2009). I was one of those women. In Nigeria, there is disparity between the level of education in the south and that of the north. The Northerners do not see the value of educating the girl child. Unfortunately, Nigeria has 10.5 million children out of school. States in the north-east and north-west have female primary net

attendance rates of 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent respectively, (UNICEF, 2017, p.1), meaning that more than half of the girls are not in school. Girl child marriage in Nigeria is amongst the highest in world (second only to India), a key indicator for gender inequality (UNICEF, 2017, p.13). I lived in the north, and therefore, had first-hand experience of this practice. It is so heartbreaking to witness girls who are deprived of their right to an education, because they are female. These experiences increased my deep appreciation for my parents and education.

In contrast, from my observations, women in Canada can pursue their education and careers to whatever levels they choose, with about 56.2% of females enrolled in a postsecondary program (Statistics Canada, 2018). This statistic implies that female students are making the largest gains at the university level. These gains are part of the mediators of economic and social change (Sen, 2000). I have witnessed women in Canada drive change in different sectors of the economy. Witnessing women as drivers of change has deepened my convictions about the importance of educating women. Additionally, my identity has been influenced and changed in a different way. I feel liberated from the cultural bias and suppression I faced living in Nigeria as a woman. Although, I conformed as best as I could to the expectations of my Nigerian society, because I did not want to be ostracized. I was often reminded of "my place" and my limitations in the social hierarchy (Arthur, 2019). However, in Canada, I find that there are many possibilities to excel and I feel empowered to succeed irrespective of the challenges I face because of my gender and race. I have built a strong self-efficacy and agency to reshape my life and experienced a deep transformation of self and mind through my experiences and learning. As a woman living in Canada, I can achieve my aspirations and be a contributor to both economic and social change. When a woman is educated, she has the potential to become empowered and to participate in development efforts and economic decision-making. All these can be accomplished despite gender inequality in wage and systemic racism, though not easy, but achievable.

Lena—Your experience brought to my attention that in my country basic education (K-12) is compulsory and government-funded. Girls are not intentionally deprived from formal education, which promotes gender equality. Indeed, Costa Rica's political system values education as a means for closing the gap between social classes as it creates new opportunities for social and economic mobility. Education is the basis of social democracy (Guzmán & Letendre, 2003). This makes me think of the bigger picture behind systemic racism in Canada. At the system level there are regulations and laws that are unquestionable.

We concluded our dialogue by wanting to know how our gender roles impacted our access to education and participation in our surroundings.

Lena—Access to education has had a strong impact in my life. I remember when I was choosing my undergraduate degree, I had a meeting with a counselor and she told me "Now that you are going to be a mom, you have to think about the profession that can give you a stable life very soon." That is how I chose education. I knew I would get a job with the Ministry of Education quickly. She was right. I finished that degree and I got tenure four months later. Being a single mom, I did not have the opportunity to be true to myself and choose a major I really wanted to pursue. Fortunately, years later my husband became my major support. He believes in me and has encouraged me to continue studying. He took home responsibilities seriously and that definitely made a difference. Without his help, I would probably not have my English Teaching Program. He is in Canada with me following my dream to get a PhD. Even with his support, there are many things I never experienced because I decided to be a mother before being a professional. I remember there were some study abroad exchange opportunities that I did not pursue, even though there were many professional development opportunities. I attended two teachers'

conferences a year in the capital city, as this was my limit.

My decision to attend just two conferences a year was informed by my responsibilities as a mother and a wife. My male classmates and male colleagues did not have these limitations even though they were married and had children. These conflicts of roles continued at the university. Once in my role as a faculty member, I said no to projects that I wanted but could not get involved because they demanded my time. I was offered the position of coordinator of an English program in my community; I could not take it because it was going to be time consuming. I was also offered a vice-dean position, but I did not accept the job because I knew that this position would be time demanding. Even though I wanted to take on these positions and had the support of my husband to take the jobs, I said no. I wanted to be present in my kids' lives. My roles have impacted my participation in my surroundings, in my work, and in my field. In Canada, I feel not only responsible but sometimes even guilty of having my husband and kids here because of my dream. The paradox is that I cannot devote the time doing a PhD demands. I wish I could be on campus daily but being the only adult English speaker at home demands a lot of attention from me. I am always going to be a wife and a mother first and that obviously interferes with my PhD experience.

By understanding MacAdams' (1985) proposition that identity is a life story, I think that in the early days of my life, I started to construct my own expectations for how, in my condition as a woman, I should act in my roles as a mother and wife. When I was a teenager, some identity-shaping factors I was exposed to were how my mom, my aunts, and grandmas determined their obligations and self-definition. When I started questioning "How do I fit into an adult world?" (MacAdams, 1985), I constructed a committed role of mother and wife that formed a positive sense of being. That identity construction has prevailed and has been a priority over my role in academia.

Glory—Indeed, those identity-shaping factors came to play in my life as well. My earliest memories are of my father's influence regarding getting an education. In my immediate family, my gender was never an issue; it was rather about your dream, and your goals in life. My parents brought us up to believe that anyone whether male or female could achieve their dream. As the oldest of five kids, I had access to western education; my dad insisted I got one, because he saw the opportunities a western education provided for him. He grew up an orphan and had surmounted many challenges to get an education—he has an undergraduate degree. He also believed that if I got a western education, I would gain some level of financial independence as a woman. He desired that I set the bar high and motivate my siblings to do same. His belief about western education was shaped by the dominant global ideology about western education and colonization. This ideology provided both a descriptive and normative framework for the way things are and what they should be with regards to achieving a western education (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). This form of education is seen as the ultimate. My identity was constructed and shaped to be an educated, financially independent woman from my childhood. Additionally, setting the bar high for my siblings implied that I could exert some influence on them as I could motivate them to get western education. Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken, and Haselager (2004) noted that siblings seem to exert a unique, independent influence on each other. For us to pursue our undergraduate degrees without financial constraints, my dad set up a college account for us, He believed that the less worry we had about money, then we could focus on our studies (it was a practical and pragmatic thing to do. He wanted to set us up for success based on his experiences of being an orphan). This gesture made tremendous impact on my sense of leadership and entrenched the importance of achieving western education. Unfortunately, the colonial experience and the marginal position of our societies in the global economic system has embedded

the feelings of inferiority within us (Beoku-Betts, 2004). We have been socialized to see western education as superior, to the detriment of the values we hold about our systems of education.

When I got married and had kids, there was a shift in identity and role, I was now a mother and my first commitment was to my kids, my dream to continue my education came to a halt. They came first, they were my priority. I waited for my children to grow up before embarking on my PhD. As a mother, my socialization to western education has allowed me to see its importance and benefits and I have made sure that my sons got an education. I have emphasized to them the importance of getting one, especially as immigrants, because of its value. Education is one way to a better future, with many financial benefits and opportunities. I encouraged them to be involved in their student unions and be a part of the school life. As a student, I attended many workshops for professional and career development. I sought opportunities for growth with intentionality as I expanded my capacities. I refuse to allow people's perceptions of my gender or race hinder my success and opportunities for education. I choose not to limit myself as I continue to grow and expand my capabilities.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that writing a duoethnography helped us develop insights into self-transformation and revealed to us the influence of Western supremacy ideals embedded in us. Duoethnography provided us with a research language to expose and engage internalized scripts and allowed us the space to reconceptualize and restory our narrative perspectives (Sawyer & Norris, 2017). We believed this dialogue has uncovered our unconscious biases about race and gender. In my particular case, I (Lena) have restoried my view of North American indoctrination. While nested in my country, I was careless and detached from ideologies that questioned the high positioning of Canada and the United States. Now that I have lived in a North American country, I have witnessed what it feels to be a minority, to be invisible, and to feel less. I have also restoried my disconnection with my ethnicity as I feel more comfortable to verbalize and see myself as Latina. I would have never come to these realizations without my immersion in this duoethnography. I feel that I move to the world with a more critical view of power difference and a new self-perception.

On my part, I (Glory) have gained a deeper understanding of the value and role that my culture and heritage play in my sojourn in Canada. I restored and reframed my ethnic identity in the context of my social experiences by developing an attachment to my home country that was previously non-existent (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014). I have developed stronger resilience and high self-esteem through the discriminations I faced based on my race. Additionally, through this duoethnography, I have come to understand that I hold a bias about western education as the ultimate form of education based on the dominant global imaginary I grew up with. After studying here for several years, I understand that there are other types of educational systems that are equally as important and valuable, such as the Indigenous education, and my Nigerian educational system and many others.

This duoethnographic dialogue served as a transformative tool for examining meaning-making for us. Through this process, we have grown and changed as we bonded together incorporating our existing frameworks from our individual cultures. We share the common awareness that each of us has to critically examine the extent that early socialization continues to influence us and to identify the ways we have chosen to decolonize our minds (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). In our dialogue, probing questions opened an active reflection of

our past in the present. We witnessed the way transformation occurred, as we disrupted our individual narratives, and developed a deeper understanding of our histories and experiences. We reconceptualized our existing beliefs and de-constructed our overgeneralizations of what it meant to be an international student as we recognized that we all navigate this experience in different ways.

We shared our stories because we believe they matter. Our goal was not to provide mere facts, but to tell stories that readers could enter and feel a part of. Our experience, dialogue, and commitment to one another was powerful and connected as we witnessed a bonding process in our lives. We interrogated our past and present histories through dialogue with one another. By doing this, we broke down isolation and loneliness (Janta et al., 2014) and built a bridge to promote deeper dialogue, and aspire that our experience may encourage others to be involved in similar endeavours. Hooks (2012) invited us to create a bond between our cultures, not be afraid of conflict, and to create ties in spite of cultural differences. With a similar intensity, Andreotti (2016) defied us to see beneath our stories to identify the real reasons why we are in Canada.

Although our individual experiences are unique, these narratives encompass representations both positive and negative of what it means to be female international PhD students in Canada. We invite readers and other women in similar circumstances as ours to never comply with ideas that promote international students as one category neither to conform with the discourse that being an international student is merely "complicated." We would like to promote follow-up dialogue opportunities that prompt other female international students to ask questions around the root of their interest to move to North America. Questions such as: Have you experienced racism and/or discrimination? If so, what has been the impact of racism and discrimination on your studies or self-esteem? How can we invite female international students to dialogue about issues of gender inequality and racism? We hope that through these dialogues safe spaces will be created to identify and challenge racism and gender disparity within North American higher education institutions.

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