A Dialogue of Shared Discoveries on Immigration: A Duoethnography of International Students in Canada

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Abstract

International students are believed to contribute significantly in education and research as they bring a rich variety of perspectives, experiences, and languages. International students are frequently categorized into one homogenous group; however, this categorization dishonours their complex intersectional diversity and background that provides cultural capital. There is a need to understand the many manifestations of the complex and intersectional diversity in the backgrounds of international students. These students have many different reasons to immigrate to developed countries and undertake a rigorous academic program, including pursuing high academic goals, gaining personal knowledge, developing research skills, and widening employment opportunities. Using a duoethnographic dialogical approach, this article focuses on the experiences of two female international PhD students, one from Nigeria and the other from Costa Rica as they embark on a journey of shared self-discoveries on their mobility to Canada. Our paper takes a broad perspective on the processes behind mobility coming from different cultures and nationalities that meet in Canada. Some of our findings include the impact of background when transitioning to a new country, the role of reflective dialogue when questioning the source of our cultural assumptions and ethical judgments. In addition, we find that duoethnography has a strong effect to re-story our own narratives and perspectives. Finally, this dialogue allows us to broaden how we come to understand and extract meaning from our experiences as international students.

Keywords International students · Female students · Duoethnography · Immigration · Dialogic reflection

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of international university students in countries with advanced economies. Indeed, drawing on statistics reported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, n.d.) these students have increased in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. This change of scenario can be explained through receiving countries' interest in improving the financial health of educational institutions, attract talent and increase campus diversity (Choudaha and Chang 2012). Universities create their administrative and academic strategic plans toward meeting the challenges of this rapid change.

In Canada, both federal and provincial governments along with higher education institutions continue to recognize the importance of international education in making economy more prosperous, innovative, and competitive (Global Affairs 2016). Canada ranks as the world's 4th most popular destination for international students. In fact, this population grew to 494,525 in 2017 representing a 119% increase since 2010 and an increase of 20% over the previous year (Canadian Bureau for International Education 2018). This process also generates an estimated sum of $10 billion in employment and for some 90,000 jobs in 2015 (Global Affairs 2016). International students are believed to contribute significantly in education and research as they bring a rich variety of perspectives, experiences and languages. Contributing immediate and significant economic benefits to Canadians in every region of the country. Being recognized as a homogenous group, however, dishonours their complex intersectional diversity and background that provides cultural capital.

No two stories of international students are the same. International students have many different reasons to immigrate to developed countries and undertake a rigorous academic program, including pursuing high academic goals, gaining personal knowledge, developing research skills, and widening employment opportunities (Norton and Darvin 2015). Each student carries a different cultural background and rich experiences that inform their decisions prior to their arrival, their transitions, adjustments and subsequently their participation in the new culture. There is a need to understand these many manifestations of the complex and intersectional diversity in the backgrounds of international students.

To gain a deeper understanding of the processes behind mobility, we, two female PhD students, a Black woman from Nigeria (Glory) and a Latino woman from Costa Rica (Lena) employed duoethnography to revisit our lives as sites of research (Oberg and Wilson 2002) to determine how our different experiences and backgrounds informed our decisions prior to arrival, our transitions, adjustments and subsequently our participation in the new culture. According to Norris and Sawyer (2012) duoethnography is the "foil for the Other, challenging the Other to reflect on their own life in a deeper, more relational, and authentic manner" (p. 10). In this duoethnography we reflect on our immigration experiences and make meaning of our personal journeys as international PhD female students. Our goal in this duoethnography was to explore challenges, concerns, barriers

and adjustments made that influenced our decisions and participation in Canada. We see duoethnography as an ideal method to examine our lived experiences, reflect on the past and based on that reflection, reconceptualize our perceptions and transform (Sawyer and Norris 2012).

Between Two Nations

Our life histories were constructed under distinctive surroundings. Fortunately, our dreams to pursue a broader understanding of education put us together in the same country, city, university and faculty. Together we experienced struggles between what we knew as truth from our past life histories and the new paradigms in our roles as immigrants in a first world country. Our words are witnesses of our stories that narrate the days when we left our homelands to start a life in Canada. Our conversations often connect two worlds to find truth in experience. These conversations witnessed our new beginnings, our border crossings, feelings of racism and discrimination, our homesickness confronted with our excitement to take advantage of every opportunity we are given in a different culture. In this new place we, inadvertently, compared transnational conditions and systems, ideologies and institutions. We were divided into two nations.

Method of Inquiry

Drawing on the idea that duoethnography creates a collaborative research space where participants can examine underlying patterns and societal norms, we wanted to critically bring our beliefs, values, and experiences as international PhD female students in Canada to surface (McDermott et al. 2012). We understand this method of inquiry exposes our experiences with a personal interest in rethinking, moving forward and transforming our thoughts. Added to this, duoethnographic research seeks to be an opportunity to inspire a sense of humanity, and in our case a sense of understanding of what it takes to leave everything we know as home to a different country in search of an academic dream. By juxtaposing our life stories, we provided multiple understandings of the process of immigration from the lens of women student immigrants. Through this duoethnography, we invite our readers to "breathe" "with" parts of the text that resonates with them and enter the conversation, rather than merely following our lived experiences (Barone 1990; Sawyer and Norris 2012).

From the intentions behind this research methodology examined by Norris et al. (2012), we recognized our interest to learn about ourselves from the other, to explore personal and collective narratives of resistance and to use ourselves as a site for inquiry into sociocultural socialization. The tenets that serve as the key principles to undertake this duoethnography are referred as polyvocality and dialogue, difference, metanarrative disruption and ethical stance (Norris et al. 2012). Polyvocality and dialogue refers to making our disparate opinions explicit and allowing dialogue to serve as a meditative device; difference and metanarrative disruption refers to the

disruption of self at the personal level by questioning and challenging our beliefs as we experience our immigration process differently and we practiced the ethics of caring as we took an ethical pedagogical relationship with one another as our ethical stance (Norris et al. 2012). We followed a conversational tone that interconnected our ideas and stories of what it means to be an immigrant with our times and histories. Together we explored the dynamic intersections of difference in the way we navigated immigration. To make our voices explicit in this narrative dialogue we blended our stories and literature to portray the complexities of our experiences. We questioned and challenged at a personal level our held beliefs about immigration and presented different points of view without imposing absolute truths. We did not intend to impose our meanings onto the other; rather, to change self (Sawyer and Norris 2012). For this research endeavor, our ethical stances allowed us to research each other. We assisted each other through an ethics of care by acknowledging the role of rapport, as researchers we targeted our commitment to avoid harm and fear by being mindful of elements of our stories that should not be made public (van den Hoonaard 2017). We considered it important to share our narratives about our experiences because critical contemporary issues in education must include these conversations that have shaped our past, defined our present, and enriched our collective future (McDermott et al. 2012).

Beginning the Conversations

We started our conversations with deep commitment to ourselves and the many others who have a role in our stories. We constructed ourselves as being part of our worlds where our children, partners, friends, family members, classmates and faculty are inevitably mentioned. In this search for knowledge, we examined our interpersonal experiences with and within systems and cultures (Norris et al. 2012). We acknowledge that our constructions do not belong to us only and commit to showing respect for their contributions in our stories. In the words of Madison (2012), we recognize the moral dilemma behind the fieldwork challenge of wanting to recognize ourselves as "honest ethnographers." To attain this, we explicitly stated our intentions to be confidential and respect our loved ones' privacy; however, this ethical convention challenges our desire, since we do not always know with certainty what details or discoveries will unfold in our conversations.

Studying Abroad

Lena

My experience relates to Jarvis' (2015) conceptualization of disjuncture. He explained that time does not stand still and consequently our experiences, which are their interactions with the surroundings, are valid for a while. Then, we are confronted with an imbalance when our previous experiences do not help when dealing in new situations. He stated that disjuncture occurs "when we are no longer able to

take our world for granted and so we are not quite so intimately connected with our life-world" (p. 83). He added that it can lead to different responses, slight adjustments in daily life or considerable demanding shifts. The last type of response was my case, when I realized that I could not accept the fact that my professional life will end with a master's degree. In addition, the reality that I was non-tenured faculty, created a bleak and unstable future for me. In 2013, some faculty members in the university I worked, told me about an opportunity to get a PhD abroad. It was then that I started analyzing the possibility of leaving my country.

Lena

Glory, was your experience the same as mine, why did you leave your country to Canada?

Glory

My experience is quite different from yours, Lena. Studying for a PhD had always been a dream of mine and two key incidences in my life propelled me into the reality of achieving my dream. The first incident involved a loss but a positive one. My children moved to Canada for postsecondary education in 2014. I began experiencing the "empty nest syndrome" (Mitchell and Lovegreen 2009, p. 3). For me, this was both a "highly positive event, and a conflicted time" (Mitchell and Lovegreen 2009, p. 3). I missed the "regular social contact, the companionship" (Mitchell and Lovegreen 2009, p. 12) and the tight relationship I had with my sons; however, I was ready to start a new chapter in my life and hence, studying for a PhD was the next course of action. The second incident was the loss of my friend of over 15 years, she died from breast cancer in 2015, a tragedy at a very deep and personal level. I felt "disoriented, uprooted, and isolated" (Schwartz 2014). According to Schwartz (2014) tragic loss changes everything. I was distraught, I questioned my beliefs about life, and its meaning. My values and focus in life were changed. I have always been a resilient person, but I struggled with this loss. I had to find a way to "adapt and even grow" in response this painful loss (Schwartz 2014). Both major occurrences within 2 years redirected the course of my life. I chose Canada to pursue my PhD as well as to serve as a new beginning for me.

Lena

Oh wow…it must have been a very difficult time for you.

Glory

Yes, it was, losing my friend was one of the hardest things I have had to deal with. It was a very tough time for me. Tell me more about your story, why did you choose Canada? You could have gone to any other country.

Lena

Yes, I could have. I was granted a scholarship from my university to study in any country around the world. My specialization is English as a Foreign Language teaching and learning, so my priority was to move to an English-speaking country to improve my linguistic skills. Since I wanted to broaden my horizon and learn about ways to benefit my work in my rural community, I decided to pursue a degree in Educational Research and not a language one. As a faculty member in a rural campus, I have come to understand that the challenges of higher education institutions in rural areas are determined by the characteristics of our Latin American region, in particular, those areas require well-designed academic programs, a clear mission, high-quality faculty, committed students and sufficient resources to be able to perform to a consistently high standard (Atchoarena and Gasperini 2003). I had to be clear on why and what skills or program I needed to do. I had to set a clear goal. Through this process, I discovered my hidden commitment to my rural community.

I focused my program search and as a believer I asked for spiritual guidance. One afternoon, I found the faculty of education I later enrolled. I read about the programs it offered. The Adult Learning program caught my attention and I could not stop thinking about it. This program is rooted in a commitment to human, community and social development which clearly aligned with my professional interest. After that, I did some research about the city, because I needed a safe place for my family. None of them spoke English at that time. But when we started reading about the city, that made the decision way faster. At that time, I felt like I was given pieces of a big puzzle every day. Finally, I got the complete picture.

Glory

That is interesting and fascinating. I hear your concerns about bringing your family to a foreign country. In my case, Canada was a logical choice. My sons go to school here, I could be close to them, yet live far enough to give them the space to grow up as men. Secondly, English is my first language, therefore, there was no language barrier. Thirdly, because I visited so often, I understood the Canadian culture. However, I was not familiar with this university. A friend told me about the city and I looked up the university. I had always been interested in studying leadership, policy, and governance in the postsecondary context, I had a yearning to learn and explore more about leadership, in this context. I had worked as a teacher, principal, and administrator in K-12 for over 20 years and I was ready for a change. As I read about the university, I discovered that they were ranked among the top 200 universities in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016). Furthermore, their faculty of Education leadership specialization program prepared students to be researchers and practitioners for the analysis and resolution of issues and problems related to educational policy and leadership. The university seem to have a rich culture and the city was vibrant and dynamic. I was offered admission and funding; the

funding was the clincher for me, this would reduce some financial stress off me, as I faced the daunting process of acquiring my PhD. Archer et al. (2003) noted that financial concerns played a major role in the decision-making of students. In a finding by Stallman (2010), students with any level of financial stress were twice as likely to report mental illness compared with students with no financial stress. Having funding reduced my potential to face mental illness due to financial stress, "every bit helps" became my philosophy. The next thing for me was to find out about the city, I spoke to a few friends who lived in the city, and I got good positive feedback. I haven't regretted my decision to study here.

In Siddiq et al. (2009) the cost of education is one of the factors affecting an international student's choice of study venue. We found this to be true, for us funding and security were among the key factors that made our decision to immigrate to Canada a possibility. Within a "safe" country, we found the courage to step beyond our comfortable and familiar to pursue our dreams and passion. International students come to Canadian colleges and universities with high hopes. Many choose Canada because of the quality of the education system, but they pay much higher tuition fees compared with their domestic peers (Maru 2018). Universities could improve the funding model and introduce new scholarships for international students. In addition, a cap be placed on tuition hikes and some government regulation so institution cannot raise the fees arbitrarily.

Significant Events in Our Border-Crossing Experience

Lena

I recognize two main significant events. One is the idea of feeling welcome. When I arrived here, there were two Costa Rican families who I had never met before. They took us to their home and we stayed there for a week. They helped us and taught us a lesson about kindness. At the university, an office that advises international students was a good point to connect. They made sure information was available by being the helping hand I needed. In the faculty, my colleagues were international students and that made my process smooth. I felt welcome in every class. The other turning point relates to the concept of embodiment which deals with how my experiences resonated with my surroundings. In the words of Freiler (2008), I constructed knowledge through direct engagement in bodily experiences while perceiving, interacting, and engaging with my new world. I experienced a different weather that made me question who I was and how others behave. I could not connect my body and mind during the short winter days. My mind read the clock, but my body could not respond to darkness. Through embodied learning, I experienced a more holistic view of constructing cultural knowledge. I learned how people negotiated their lifestyles, routines and social life with extreme weather. My second idea of embodiment deals with my changing role in my family. This change was challenging.

Glory

Why was this change challenging? Did you experience role reversal when you relocated to Canada?

Lena

In retrospect, I admit I was naive to think that we were going to have a similar life as the one back in my country. As I shared before, my husband did not speak a word in English when we arrived. As days passed by, I realized that I was taking on the leadership role in my family, talking to the people at the bank, at the registry, at the school board and every place we went. My husband was behind me just trying to decipher what I was doing and saying. I identified this situation as direct engagement in an experience of visualization where the mental image of where I was challenged my previous way of being and knowing (Freiler 2007). When I think about the first months as an immigrant being leading my family's immersion added a sense of accountability that was too heavy for me and I was not ready for my own display of emotions.

Glory

What a complex situation you faced. You captured my thoughts on the lack of social engagement, intergenerational relationships, and financial autonomy succinctly. One of the significant events for me, was isolation. I felt socially, geographically and culturally isolated from my friends and family. I was homesick. I had left my support system, my family, friends, and my job. This increased my stress levels. My sense of disorientation, and alienation, was overwhelming (Sakurai et al. 2010). Before moving to Canada, I had not lived alone, I went to a boarding middle and high school, and shared my dormitory with other students, in my undergraduate years, I lived in a shared apartment with four other students and got married right after my undergraduate degree. At no point in my life had I lived alone. This new experience was stressful, depressing, and overwhelming. I was not scared of living alone, in fact I looked forward to it, however, not having the social network and support I had previously enjoyed was a scary experience.

Gresham (2003) identified that having a support system could be the difference between a smooth transition and one fraught with difficulties. My transition was fraught with the sense of loss and loneliness. Sense of loss because I no longer had a job and a regular income and a sense of loneliness because I had no social capital and support system here. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1998) defined acculturative stress as emotional pain, such as feelings of powerlessness, marginality, inferiority, loneliness, and perceived alienation and discrimination, this became my story. I drew upon my faith, my spirituality, my beliefs about life and resilience to get me through the first 6 months. In my first year, I didn't know about the service the ISS offered.

Lena

Interesting, I assumed everyone knew about ISS. I connected with this office three months before leaving my country. They provided me with key information and even paired me up with a mentor. This mentor was another international student in my faculty and her help had a positive influence weeks after my arrival. I assumed information about this office was easily available to every international student. And you know what? You made me think about how much time it took me to realize that the sense of loss of my job was affecting me emotionally.

Glory

Although, I did not know about the services offered by ISS. I knew about career services and the workshops they offered, probably because I wanted a job desperately and I was struggling with adjusting to a life without a job and what to do with the free time I had. I decided to fill my time, when I was not attending classes and doing assignments, with attending workshops to improve my chances of getting a job. I found that even though I had so much experience I could not get a job because of the barriers of being an international student. When I got to know about the office for international students, I decided to work as a volunteer in the office, my experiences had defined my outlook to life here and I didn't want other international students to go through the same negative experiences I had. Through this process I understand, empathize and relate to the challenges and experiences immigrants face as they adjust to a new culture and environment. As I reflected on my experiences, three things stood out for me. One was the importance of having other people who look like me, who understand my cultural repository, who had been through the same pain of isolation, to talk to and share our experiences with a depth of conversation, that I wouldn't find else. I created such a support group called Friends in Diaspora, made up of international graduate students, it's a safe space to connect, and discuss our research. It is a space where we voice our questions, our concerns, our critical thoughts and challenges. I keep looking for ways and avenues to support and international students' adjustment process. The second important thing was my mental health, I went into depression, I got to learn about the university's mental health resources and I readily sought help and availed myself to the available resources. In my country, mental health issues are a taboo, I would not have been able to talk about my depression.

The third thing has been reevaluating my identity from being, a mother, teacher, principal, and administrator to becoming a student. My self-conceptions, the lenses through which I viewed the world, the means whereby I defined my existence and understood my world changed (Swann 1987). I was no longer a teacher, principal, or an administrator, I was now a full time PhD student. I had a personal struggle of relinquishing the reins of leadership and control of my life, not having my 9–5 structure and routine of a job, to sitting in the classroom and taking instruction. I needed to reorganize the conceptual systems through which I made sense of my new role as

a student (Swann 1987). Navigating this new context and condition as I continue to reconcile my new identity has been an ongoing process for me.

Canada and Ethnic Diversity

Glory

Canada is a multicultural hub, a country made up of a cultural mosaic (Levine and Serbeh-Dunn 1999). The country is welcoming to immigrants, people smile and say hello to you on the streets and you feel accepted. I have experienced tolerance and seen an ethnically diverse country, I appreciate that. However, that is where it stops, there are racial undertones and understanding how to navigate this is learned by experience.

Lena

Are you saying that you have experienced racial biases in this country?

Glory

Yes, Lena, I have experienced discrimination due to my race and gender. It is interesting to note that with each new wave of immigrants adding to the nation's ethnic and cultural composition, you would expect Canadians to be less biased when it comes to race and to be more open to different ethnic groups. But the reverse is the case. Crenshaw (1991) stated that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions. This has been my story. Race was never a factor for me before coming to Canada. I had visited many predominately white countries before moving to here, I had experienced racial profiling and stereotyping in these countries and at airports, I could cope, because this was not my daily life, however, I live here and so face it more often. I am exposed to the "negative attitudes and meaning associated with my blackness" (McClellan and Sader 2012) and it is disheartening and offensive. I face the complication of negotiating my identity as a black female and as a visible minority. I find that term "visible minority" troubling. What makes me visible? My skin color? Why does my skin color matter more than my qualifications? Am I not a human being first? Why should my skin color define who I am? These questions plague me every day. I have developed a heighten sense of awareness of my skin color, which influences my relationships with friends and other international students. I have made the motion "I am Black" a statement of pride, and power, a "positive discourse of my self-identification" (Crenshaw 1991, p. 13). I have taken control what I cannot change and made it a powerful statement of my identity. "I am Black and Proud is my slogan". I have decided to take the socially imposed identity and empower it as an anchor of subjectivity (Crenshaw 1991).

In my campus there is diversity and I have faced less racism; however, I would love to see a more diverse faculty. I find that there is systemic, institutional discrimination. If a university is to live what it preaches, to embody what it claims, to realize the dreams of access and equality then the acceptance of all races must be a powerful part of the community and discourse (Cooper and Stevens 2002). Diversity and inclusion should not be in speech alone but in practice. Our society is full of diversity, color and culture, our institutions, especially, faculty should be reflection of the society. As an international student, I bring diversity, wealth of knowledge, experience, culture, and a richness to the country.

Lena

I would say that I did not expect you to have experienced this strong sense of discrimination. I thought that the fact that you are an English native speaker would allow you to gain power in this country. Have you had any positive experiences?

Glory

Yes, indeed. My experiences have not been all bad, within the university campus, I feel a part of the campus diversity and I have made many friends from different countries of the world, learned about other cultures, worked with different people, whose worldviews has influenced my way of thinking. The university has been a source of great learning and cultural exposure for me. I have been impacted emotionally, psychologically, culturally and socially, I believe I am a better and changed person due to these experiences.

In writing this duoethnography with you Lena, I have discovered more about myself, my experiences both past and present keeps shaping my life, I am evolving, and learning. Change is constant…I know, because I am living it.

Lena

I will have to agree with you when you mentioned it depends on how you define openness to ethnicity. In terms of ethnic diversity, I can see clearly that Canada is multicultural. I feel I am welcome as a student, but when I think about staying and starting a life here, all I see is barriers. In your case, you were a principal, in my case, I was a faculty professor before migrating. Unfortunately, my qualification is not valued here, and this is frustrating. It is hard to understand why I qualify to be a PhD student, but I do not qualify to get a teaching job. Once I realized I was a limited visitor, then I recognized I did not belong. I lost my voice as a professional. I have had a hard time.

Glory

Why do you see Canada as a multicultural country?

Lena

Well, everywhere I visit, I find people from many diverse cultures thriving in society. A characteristic I have observed and witnessed however, is that cultures are in clusters. I do not have a Costa Rican community. I feel isolated. I think Canada should work towards moving from being a multicultural to a transcultural community. I know it is ambitious though. I understand that the government has a clear agenda in bringing international students. They know the benefits this initiative brings. International students are said to provide a significant boost to the economy, and contribute to national and regional sustainable economic development. Through their participation in research and teaching activities they enable universities to extend the country's knowledge base. Also, postgraduate international students, like us, represent an important source of intellectual capital for the creation of new knowledge (Ziguras and Law 2006). My visa states I cannot work in any daycare, primary or secondary school, even when I have a degree from my country that certifies me. I would say Canada is open under certain levels. My main discovery is that if I ever plan to stay in this country, I would have to reconstruct my whole professional identity and become someone else.

Glory

I hear you Lena, in my interactions with immigrants, they echo the same sentiments as you. Their qualifications are not valid and, in most cases, if they have professional qualifications, they would go through the process of recertification. This process takes months, if not years to achieve. In the meantime, to keep body and soul together, they take up jobs, they are more qualified for, or do menial jobs.

Lena

I agree with you and think it is a complex issue that has multiple sides. But I do value what I have learned here. When I go to a social or academic meeting, I always interact with people from different countries. I would never have had this experience in my country, much less in my town. I am learning about different cultures not from books or media, but from the people. That close contact helped me to re-interpret my world and my relationship with it. Unfortunately, I have also faced unexpected challenges that have been hard to navigate. The scariest and most nerve-breaking one is the visa process, for me, this process takes the form of a wall. Although this wall is not a visible construction, it has the power to separate members of the world. I was able to jump over the wall; however, it was an exhausting endeavor. That status is a constant reminder that I have an expiry date and citizen limitations. It seems like all my life history is reduced to a label, "Latin American." This label put me in a list, a list I did not choose to belong.

Guo and Guo (2017) identified discrepancies between internationalization policy and practice. More specifically they reported the challenges in academic and living

environments of international students. They found that students face difficulty in making friends with local students, little internationalization of the curriculum, and problems dealing with stereotypes and racism. Through the in-depth reflection when writing this duoethnography, we found similar challenges. We added to these challenges an overwhelming and threatening visa process. So, we questioned what the government is doing regarding its social responsibility with the well-known transnational mobility and intercultural process behind global citizenship. An interest in marketing strategies should not be placed before ethical influences.

Being an Immigrant-International Student

Lena

I am dealing with the impostor syndrome because of my non-nativeness. Being a non-native speaker of the language puts me in this situation where I feel undervalued. I feel I that I do not have a voice, sometimes I just prefer not to attend a meeting because I do not want to expose myself. And as time passes by, it is getting worse. When I try to be active, I remember I will have to repeat myself, I will be misunderstood, and most probably I will have to clarify what I say. This frustration has hindered my experience.

Glory

Earlier you said you chose Canada, an English-speaking country, in your search for language improvement. Could you have foreseen these road blocks or frustrations?

Lena

No, Glory, I wish I had, I would have been better prepared. This frustration is a constant reminder that I, in fact, am an English language instructor by profession in my country. I question myself asking, how can I be a model for my students? Reading Kamhi-Stein (2014) helped me understand I am not an isolated case. In fact, there are other non-native speaking language professionals dealing with a shift of their self-perception when they enter the world of inner circle countries. Her contribution on the topics helps my understanding, but not my feelings. Even when I can interact with other speakers, now I do not consider myself a legitimate English teacher. Even when I understand I am an international professional, my accent and non-native communication skills position me as a defective communicator in this context. This discovery represents a shift in my self-perception.

Glory

I am curious about this self-perception shift. How did you notice this shift? I believe that may be a helpful analysis of what constitutes your authentic self.

Lena

Back in my country, being an English language instructor was a socially recognized profession—one in which my confidence encouraged me to be actively involved. I am sure the reflection behind this duoethnography would provide with ample opportunities to realize that as a qualified and trained non-native speaking teacher, I still can contribute to the ELT profession. In virtue of my experiences as an English learner myself (Kim 2011) and my interactions as a result of a deep immersion with socially constructed ideals where native speakers constitute the ideal teachers (Holliday 2015; Phillipson 1992), I now possess a broader understanding of the link between language and culture learning.

What about your experiences Glory? I assume language was not a problem for you.

Glory

Language was not a problem for me; however, dealing with stereotypes and getting a job was. I was stereotyped and for me this carry very real consequences. When I tell people I am from Africa, there is an assumption that Africa is a country, which is quite baffling to me. Africa is a continent, made up of 54 countries, the world's second largest and second most-populous continent with 1.2 billion people as of 2016, accounting for about 16% of the world's human population. I am from one of those 54 countries…Nigeria. I assumed that part of being educated is learning about other countries or at least other continents, I feel that people do not have the right kind of knowledge of geography, how then can they be global citizens? After educating people about Africa (which I do at every opportunity I get) the next question is "where did you learn to speak English"? There is an assumption that I cannot speak English. In Nigeria, English is our first language, we were colonized by the British, I had all my education in English. Someone once asked me if we had buildings and roads, (I was really tempted to say no, we live on trees!), however, to answer his question, I pulled out pictures of Lagos and showed the person the city I grew up, he was awed. I come from a very big city with so many similarities to Toronto. In dealing with these stereotypes, I engage in honest dialogue and talk to people about my country, and my culture. This has been a positive transformative experience as I have come to appreciate my heritage, my country, my culture and who I am.

Lena

I am glad you have lived such a positive experience. I guess the impact of your education is significant in your new life. It also makes me question about challenges. Have you dealt with any related challenge?

Glory

In fact, I have. Getting a job has been an arduous journey. I recount writing many cover letters, and application letters. With every reply I received from those who bothered to reply, I was told I was over qualified. To get a job, I am qualified for as a teacher, I must be recertified, even with my years of experience and education. I would gladly go through this process, if it didn't take 6–8 months. During my job-hunting days, I met two amazing ladies, who believed in me and gave me my first job in the university. I will forever be grateful to them and I try to repay that favor as I talk to other international students on the job-hunting process and direct them to the right resources they need to succeed. I am glad for every step and every experience; a human being is made up of all experiences…both good and bad. I believe these experiences challenges us, improves, and make us become excellent human beings, if we choose to turn every negative into a positive.

Rural/Urban Background and Its Impact on Our Transition to Canada

Lena

I can say that coming from a rural town in Southern Costa Rica helped me a lot in my transition to Canada. I got my specialization in the capital city in my country. I traveled on weekends for around 10 years. As a student there, I was always recognized as "the rural other" (Little 1999). I understand the concept of "otherness" comes into play as a result of a range of spatial and temporal characteristics that evokes separation and movement between the other and the same. I always knew I was different in the eyes of my classmates and professors. Not only because I came from a rural region, but also because this specific town is located in a valley and you need to cross a peak to get there. Whenever I mentioned I came from Peréz Zeledón, there were always jokes about how our lives were beyond the scope of cosmopolitanism. Narratives about the "we" and "they" always informed the decisions we made in classes. I learned to deal with that. I always recognized myself through the comments of others through power relations and discourses that determine my view of reality and of what Bourdieu (1991) defined as mental representations. Consequently, when moving to Canada I was already familiar with the idea of being "the other" from a developing world. I think that coming from a rural area helped me a lot to recognize that my voice was not as loud and to acknowledge that I am different, not less…but different. There is an assumption that I know less of the world because I come from a rural place and from a developing country.

Glory

How is this related to your life in Canada?

Lena

My experience in Canada has reinforced this discourse because most people perceive that since I come from a Latin American country my knowledge is not helpful nor valid here.

Glory

In my case, my feelings of "other" was not because of rurality but from race. I grew up in an urban city, I enjoyed living in a city due to its proximity to everything. When I relocated to Canada, I was happy, because the city was not as big as where I grew up nor was it small, it felt just the right size. Transitioning was not a difficult process for me. I felt the "other" because I stood out and was no longer invisible, I was mostly the black person in the sea of whiteness…which always made me more self-conscious. I am learning to reconstruct my social identity, and a different way of being, as a migrant and racialized woman, I speak with an accent, and I look different, my "identity is fluid and constantly shifting" (Davies 2003; Nabavi and Lund 2012). I am learning to adapt, generate new meanings and insights as I connect them to my new context.

Conclusions

Through this duoethnographic dialogue, we had the opportunity to question our experiences, our identities and let the research consciously permeate our subconsciousness as we shared our discoveries on immigration as international female students. This research has been a process of growth, and a dialogic self-discovery causing us to think more deeply about who we are. We created safe spaces to talk and share our personal experiences. As co-researchers, we challenged each other to probe deeper, to clarify our thoughts and feelings and evaluate how this has influenced our perspectives on life. We have bracketed ourselves within our research (Sawyer and Norris 2012) as we gained insights into each other's lived experiences and how each incident described affects our perceptions of each other (McClellan and Sader 2012) and our lives. Through this process we questioned in-depth the source of our cultural assumptions and ethical judgments based on our immersed interaction with various cultures. Our cultural transformation has transcended many cultures because of the cultural diversity in the city and campus. We have had first-hand and deep connections with students from all over the world due to our tendency to connect with other international students.

Duoethnography provided us with a research language to expose and engage our internalized scripts and to restory our own narratives and perspectives (Sawyer and Norris 2012). We were able to make our transcultural transformation explicit through this duoethnography. We developed a more careful observation of social behaviors like friendship, workspaces and mental health across cultures. We developed an

awareness of transnational conditions and systems, ideologies and institutions in our interest to understand elements of economic and social significance in our countries. In addition, we have come to value the understanding of the role of mental health in Canadian society and this understanding has transformed the way we perceive well-being and mental health. We recognized how these changes in our transcultural knowledge have a tremendous potential in shaping our next events in life. As we shared our personal, cultural and immigration experiences, the juxtaposition of our stories and insights have encouraged us to engage in a relational meaning making process. Leading us to self-discoveries and introspections of our journeys and perceptions of our migration.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest as no research Grants have been received.

Ethical Approval This paper is a narrative inquiry and does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the authors.

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