

# The Dislocated ‘Outsiders’ within International Canadian Higher Education

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*Abstract: The internationalization of Canadian higher education has transformed settler-colonial universities into corporate vendors to host international students around the globe for post-secondary education. Literature pertaining to racialized international students’ experiences at Canadian universities during decolonization initiatives is unaccounted for, which poses questions on whether internationalization efforts are undertaken to enrich education or is an exploitative practice that situates racialized international students as vulnerable stakeholders on campuses. In this position paper, I am to explore how racialized international students are perceived as the ‘Other’, and thus encounter habitus-dislocation that hinders students’ success and academic outcomes. Through investigation, I identify reoccurring systemic barriers and conditions that limit racialized international students’ experience of belongingness.*

*Keywords: Racialized International Students, Habitus-dislocation, Decolonization, Higher Education, Belongingness*

## Introduction

Corporatization of international higher education (HE) significantly contributes to a country’s GDP per capita income (Connell, 2017; Guo & Guo, 2017). Canada continues to be a leading participant within HE markets as federal policies entice Canadian post-secondary education (PSE) institutions to increase their enrollment of international students (Beck & Pidgeon, 2020; Trilokekar & Masri, 2019). As of 2019 academic year, international student enrollment at Canadian public universities and colleges equated up to 1,142,091 students (Statistics Canada, 2021). In 2014, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (FATD) established an international strategy, recommending hosting international students who are valuable ‘commodities’ (Stein & Anderotti, 2015) in strengthening Canada’s economy while cultivating skilled and ‘ideal immigrants’ (Scott et al., 2015). Attracting a significant number of international students in metropolitan cities remains a primary objective for PSE institutions; however, little is known about the PSE experience. More specifically, international attitudes of belongingness are largely unaccounted for by Canadian HE institutions. Recruitment and retention departments in HE neglect the challenges international students, particularly those who identify as racialized minorities, encounter within their host institutions. Reportedly, international students from the global ‘South’ express being alienated and having low self-esteem for being ascribed as the “outsider” (Chen, 2006). This essay aims to address how the sense of belonging, or lack thereof, shape international students’ PSE experiences? Given the nature of this exploratory and conceptual essay, it does not intend to generalize the international students’ experiences but seeks to highlight a precise sub-group’s sense of belongingness. Based on the limited literature, I argue that linguistic differences, discrimination, and inadequate resources to social securities are primary factors that contribute to international students’ lack of belongingness. Consequently, racialized international students face estrangement and alienation within the university community which ultimately impedes their academic persistence.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Post-colonial theory (Said, 1979) with Bourdieu’s (1986) habitus, which Lehmann (2013) adopts to develop habitus dislocation, informs the investigation of racialized international students’ sense of belongingness in their Canadian universities. By using post-colonial theory and imposing a social capital lens (which is indicative of habitus), the social conditions that shape racialized international students’ inclusion/exclusion on campuses become apparent.

Critical post-colonial theory understands how North/South identities are negotiated within social and geopolitical domains. For Subedi and Daza (2008), post-colonial theory is often employed “to indicate how the colonial condition has not passed, but rather how the historical context of colonialism is connected to contemporary neo-colonial conditions” (p. 02). Students from the global ‘South’, who arrive at settler-colonial universities, are deemed as the ‘Other’ or ‘Outsider’ due to their cultural differences (Stein & Anderotti, 2015). Traditional Eurocentric representations of the ‘Other’ “as exotic, deviant and different” led colonial powers to exert their “authority over the Orient” (Subedi & Daza, 2008, p. 2). Consequently, these series of dichotomies, such as Colonized/Colonizer and North/South, fracture the racialized international students’ sense of community while denying the ‘Other’ to be an insider. The framing of racialized international students’ cultures, nationalities, languages, and religions trivialize their histories of colonialism and genocide, and continue to reject their presence as meaningful. Subsequently, racialized IS marginalization and discrimination based on racial and ethnic differences push them to occupy liminal spaces.

Although post-colonial theory deconstructs how coloniality maintains hierarchies, Bourdieu's (1986) habitus signifies how languages, mannerisms, and preferences influence our perspectives. Cultural capital justifies one group to be superior in comparison to others based on a single set of knowledge, behaviours, and skills; rejecting those who cannot exhibit the same cultural competence. All of these characteristics define the habitus trait, and one's disposition determines the community they belong to and associate with (Lehmann, 2013). Lehmann (2013) defines habitus-dislocation to occur "when young people from a working-class background attend university and their working-class habitus comes in conflict with the middle-class norms of educational institutions" (p. 95). For this paper, I will replace the working-class context with the 'Southern' cultural habitus which counters the dominant Anglo-Western norms practiced in Canadian settler-colonial universities. The rationale behind removing Lehmann's working-class context is to reject the perception that all international students from the global 'South' come from low-income households. Using post-colonial and habitus-dislocation theories together illustrates how racialized international students experience a lack of belongingness as cultural 'outsiders' while struggling to integrate within their university community.

## Literature Review

The selective literature review was conducted to explore how habitus-dislocation is experienced by racialized international students and how it was transpired within Canadian Higher Education Institutions. Three notable topics of literature were identified when conducting the review: (1) linguistic speaking differences, (2) discrimination, and (3) social security and student welfare. The literature review heavily relied on thick descriptions in the form of block quotes to elicit marginal racialized international students' voices and perspectives; and to gain an in-depth understanding of the habitus-dislocation phenomenon.

### Linguistic Speaking Differences

Racialized international students' sense of belongingness can be identified through narrative inquiry, specifically interviews that recount their lived realities within the university community. Surveys reported that (Collins et al., 2015) racialized international students demonstrate difficulties in integrating within the host institution due to limited language proficiency, accents, and colloquial academic writing. Palmer (2015), a professor at the University of Saskatchewan, reflected on her international student experience when she felt 'othered' because of her non-Anglo-Western inflection. Palmer (2015) recollected:

During the process of the customary introductions, it became clear to me that I was the "other" amidst the group. My Jamaican accent was pronounced and obviously different. To make matters worse, I did not understand, nor could I react to the banter of other members of the class (Palmer, 2015, p. 542)

Furthermore, Palmer's (2015) Jamaican accent became a site of ridicule, leading to her feeling ostracized. In another instance, an international student from China in the teacher education program conveyed that her accent was a barrier that resulted in her being ignored. Although Lily felt physically included, she voiced:

Maybe before you start talking with them, they already have assumptions in their mind that you couldn't speak good English. They don't pay attention to what you say... even [if] you see something more important. They just think because of your accent, your English, they don't take me seriously (Guo & Guo, 2017, p. 860)

Evidently, Lily's difficulties in communicating her ideas in an Anglophone style led her peers to assume that her contributions in discussions were insignificant. The domestic students' ignorance coupled with not having acquired an Anglophone dialect exacerbated Lily's lack of belongingness amongst the student community. However, linguistic differences are not the sole factors that reinforce exclusionary attitudes and environments. Discrimination too has led racialized international students to develop an identity as undesirable immigrants and thereby, segregating their presence within academic spaces.

### Discrimination

The settler-colonial university is a nationalistic project, an emblem that represents the prevailing Eurocentric views and attitudes in colonized territories. Domestic stakeholders (such as faculty, administrators, and students) of Canadian

universities perpetuate xenophobic attitudes towards racialized international students which inhibits their participation in the university's cultural ethos (Myers & Cheng, 2003; Chen & Zhou, 2019). Among focus group interviews, (Houshmand et al., 2014) racialized international students reveal that discrimination unfolds through microaggressions. A Chinese psychology student described her microassault with a member on campus:

I was going to psychology class and on the phone with my mom, talking in Chinese of course, and an old guy pass by me saying, "Please go home," right into my face... I turned back. I don't know what to say so I said, "You go home," but I realize it doesn't hurt him like me (Houshmand et al., 2014, p. 381)

This verbal confrontation on campus reinforces that racialized international students do not belong in Anglo-Western academic communities and suggests inhospitality on the part of the stakeholders. These racial microaggressions conflict with cosmopolitan rhetoric of belongingness while negating the international students' feelings and sensitivity. Given the global reputation of Canada as multi-cultural, "feeling welcomed" and "feeling at home" (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 90) many international students believed they belong and can befriend their classmates. Yet, when racialized international students are confronted with microaggressions within their campuses, their view of Canada as a place of belonging alters. Phillip, a physics major student from South Africa remembered distinct interactions he had with his lab partner:

I had this guy [in my physics class] who had never [been physically close] to a Black man in his entire life. So whenever I came [close], he acts like he's asthmatic. He breathes heavily with lots of difficulty, trying to really tolerate this closeness... Then he told me, "Hey, I'm sorry." I thought that was sort of bold of him to come out and tell me that. I said, "Never mind, I understand. You're in a learning process, that's why you're in university. I'm sure you'll meet other guys like me eventually. You'll have a better experience (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 91)

Notably, the presence of Phillip within the lab produced discomfort for his peer, and in turn, he began to sense that he did not belong in the environment he occupied. The subtle forms of discrimination also speak volumes about the lack of intercultural engagement of his peer. Unlike the Chinese international student who retorted back to her perpetrator, Phillip's reflexivity has led him to consider that he "felt pity for the physics student because he has never come in close proximity with people like [me]" (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 91).

In other occurrences, few racialized international students experienced "drive-by" racism where they were verbally victimized by vulgar racial slurs shouted, "from the open windows of [cars]," both on and off campuses (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 91). Researchers, who used microaggressions as a lens to examine the international students' experiences, reported that cultural and ethnic stereotypes were a form of discrimination which caused alienation. An Indian international student explained that ascribed racial and cultural assumptions perpetuated in dorms created marginalization, preventing him from partaking in social gatherings amongst his peers. The Indian student shared:

The thing about my [residence] floor is that I am the only person who is from India and . . . people [think] Indians are supposed to be very studious or not engaging in any social activities (Houshmand et al., 2014, p. 382)

As a consequence, the Indian international student conveyed that he often found himself withdrawing from certain social spheres within the university community because of the circulating stereotypes about his ethnicity (Houshmand et al., 2014). Microinsults and discrimination based on xenophobic attitudes encourage exclusion rather than inclusion. Furthermore, studies have proven that belongingness is also related to housing and finance.

### **Social Security & Student Welfare**

A reason why universities recruit international students is because they generate revenue and contribute to the local economy. Yet international students face unique challenges in securing housing, employment, and paying for basic necessities (Calder et al., 2016). The spike in the rental market has resulted in international students spending a substantial number of hours working to sustain their standard of living. As a result, international students are limited from participating in extra-curricular activities or social events that foster a sense of belongingness within the

university culture (Calder et al., 2016). Making a temporary home in Canada poses restrictions for international students and these barriers are overlooked and belittled by domestic stakeholders within the university. A Ph.D. international student from the Middle East lamented about their financial hardship:

There was nowhere to improve [in the home country] so okay, I come to Canada, I want to improve. I'm doing a PhD in Canada, which is like, wow, right, but then you're living in . . . a hole and it's like . . . you can barely eat, you know, food (Calder et al., 2016, p. 99)

Issues of housing and immigration can have a profound impact on how effectively they can integrate within their academic community. International students express that local employer are often hesitant on hiring them because their linguistic mannerisms may hamper their business and profits (Calder et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2015). If racialized international students do not have the basic necessities, such as food and housing, they develop difficulties integrating within the social domain of the university, in addition to poor academic retention (Grayson, 2014).

Despite international students being conceptualized as ideal immigrants within the domestic labour market, they face inequities in relation to employment (Collins et al., 2015). Equally important is realizing that securing housing, employment, and welfare is not exclusively for racialized international students but for working-class domestic students as well. Without equal opportunities, international students are not able to afford essential resources. An unidentified international student recalled her roommate's lack of understanding of dire financial circumstances (Calder et al., 2016). This international student indicated that:

One time she kind of . . . raised her voice saying that . . . "You should be getting a cellphone because I cannot get a hold of you." . . . I can't even afford to pay for my food—you want me to get a cellphone? [laughs] Like, people don't understand (Calder et al., 2016, p. 99)

Belonging is also indicative of being understood of one's lived realities and the hindrances they may experience due to their social (or immigration) status (Glass & Westmont, 2014). This predicament places domestic and international students in parallel social worlds, excluding them from meaningful interactions that can foster belonging or personal relatedness. Housing and financial stability are fundamental resources for international students that reinforces their liberty and ability to engage in the host-institution. The blatant disregard of an international students' struggle eradicates its identity as being members of the campus community.

## Analysis & Discussion

Racialized international students' lived realities provide authentic insights into their sense of belongingness within the university community. Racialized international students reported feeling as estranged 'outsiders' or uninvited guests who are intruding a space that exclusively belongs to domestic students. Although Canadian domestic students also consist of people of colour, they all possess a shared habitus that is demonstrating Anglo-Western behaviours, attitudes, mannerisms, and preferences, whether consciously or unconsciously. Alternatively, racialized international students' experiences habitus-dislocation within a liminal space because their global 'South' identities, knowledge, mannerisms, cultures, and customs are viewed as inferior in comparison to Eurocentric attitudes that are upheld by the university's cultural ethos. One can extend this idea further to understand Canadian campuses as a site of neo-colonialism, where the settler-colonial university is an extension of colonial logic (Stein & Anderotti, 2015).

The global 'North' and 'South' binaries are reflective of the citizen versus immigrant binaries. Such binaries stemmed from Oriental discourse produces Canadian exceptionalism (Subedi & Daza, 2008). The presence of racialized international students who display 'Southern' cultural habitus interrupts dominant hegemonic logic, and as a result, their differences become the basis for their alienation. Within the social sphere of the campus, racialized international students become silent subaltern subjects, disengaged from university student culture. Their differences in their habitus traits dislocate and removes them from feeling a sense of collegiality. Moreover, the lack of cosmopolitan virtue and intolerance resulted in racialized international students to be victims of nationalistic and xenophobic slurs, further exacerbating their alienation. As they leave their support systems behind to inhabit new academic settings, they simultaneously experience culture shock. Post-modern post-colonial theorists claim that capitalism, nationalism, race, and cultural differences are all conflated to produce illegitimate identities that are incongruent with Anglo-Western habitus (Subedi & Daza, 2008). These illegitimate identities are projected on racialized international students who are then marginalized.

Liz Thomas (2012) (as cited in Colin Bryson, 2014, p. 12) emphasizes “that a sense of belongingness is created through a responsive interaction between the student and other members of the university community”. For racialized IS to feel inclusive in academia, they seek acceptance from domestic students. Conversely, the domestic stakeholders’ rejection of racialized international students is influenced by European hetero-normative frameworks stemming from colonization. Despite feeling excluded, racialized international students continue to persist within their programs because it is their only means to gain social mobility (Scott et al., 2015). Therefore, racialized international students endure the detachment and microaggressions to complete their education, in the hopes they find better employment and earn income that can support their social welfare.

The habitus dislocation leads racialized international students to become vulnerable individuals on campus who are subjected to hate crime, physical, and verbal assaults (Houshmand et al., 2014). For this reason, most students have admitted to having suppressed their identity or avoid dialogue that will convey their non-Anglophone accent (Guo & Guo, 2017). Racialized international students’ withdrawal from public social events prevent discriminatory or threatening encounters that jeopardize their well-being. Moreover, racialized international students worry over notions of being betrayed because their perceptions of Canada as a place of belonging appear to be misleading when they reflect upon the discrimination, the microinsults, and the social and financial instability they face.

One can employ Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of “play the game” as an analogy to demonstrate how racialized international students do not have the suitable (social and emotional) supports/resources to persist and belong in PSE. To elucidate, as racialized international students have neither the resources nor the preferred identities of their counterparts, their ability to survive and thrive in PSE settings is limited. Policymakers and administrators can alleviate the racialized international students concerns and obstacles by implementing culturally responsive resources, programs, and policies. Without such assistance and equitable measures, racialized international students may forfeit or withdraw from their programs entirely, triggering attrition rates and a significant financial deficit in revenue for Canadian PSE institutions. Ironically, the dissatisfaction of racialized international students’ experiences can potentially position Canadian PSE institutions to become poor contenders within the global HE market. In such instance, racialized international students will re-consider other Anglo-Western settings (such as UK, Australia, Eastern Europe, USA etc.) as their new PSE destination.

Yet, what remains concerning is how university administrators view non-Anglo Western international students as “problem-laden” (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004, p. 127) due to their trouble acclimatizing to Canadian (Anglophone) culture and overcoming culture shock. This very perception stigmatizes racialized international students as an attention-seeking and problematic student population. For this reason, racialized international students tend to self-segregate and refrain from seeking support from university personnel to minimize the stereotypical convention as a troublesome group. The insensitivity of universities’ administrators largely derives from their negligence to reposition. To reposition oneself is to embody the role and characteristic of a particular group to understand what their lived experience are within the campus environment (Apple, 2018). If done correctly, policymakers can conduct reforms according to the lived experience of racialized international students. This will improve racialized international students’ experiences and academic outcomes, in the hopes that they are accepted and valued members of the campus who offer rich intercultural dimensions to the universities’ cultural ethos (Jon, 2013). Such repositioning should be re-conceptualized as a subversive ploy to disrupt assumptions of racialized international students as commodities from the global ‘primitive South’ (Stein & Anderotti, 2015), all while, debunking Anglo-Western habitus tenets.

Arendt (1958) describes ‘otherness’ and the marginal figure only emerges in the face of corruption and disintegration which is proven to be the case for racialized international students as they are ignored and mistreated. There exists a human condition within all of us, that is to belong, and feel related by others within the broader community we inhabit (Arendt, 1958). Though for racialized international students, their subaltern and ‘problem laden’ identities are unequal in moral worth for domestic stakeholders (Parekh, 2011); thus, their need to live in a plural world consisting of differences is denied for them. Their arbitrary distinctions reject beliefs of communitarianism and collegiality.

## **Conclusion**

Racialized international students’ sense of a lack of belonging within Canadian HE is attributed to linguistic differences, discrimination, and securing social welfare within the broader university community they occupy. Their

‘Southern’ identities and habitus are differences that contradict the Anglophone and Western views which are reinforced and maintained by settler-colonial universities. By reason, racialized international students become vulnerable dislocated members of the university with the longingness to belong. Canadian PSE has a moral obligation to facilitate intercultural engagement between international students and the domestic population to ensure a sense of belongingness is fostered for all parties they extend their campus to.

Furthermore, existing literature on international students’ experiences in Canadian PSE homogenizes their lived realities while neglecting to understand there are various sub-groups within international students. Accordingly, comparative research that examines Anglo-Western and racialized international students’ sense of belonging has the potential to illuminate the similarities and differences, which in turn, can help universities target specific group issues. Such research can be adopted in federal international strategies, policies, and programs to foster engagement and mutuality between racialized international students and domestic parties. Research linking racialized international students’ belongingness and student engagement can inform existing intercultural practices on campus allowing for tolerant and enriching educational experiences. Having a stronger feeling of belongingness for racialized international students increases their affiliation to the university community which can influence their student success and outcome. Notably, an individual’s degree of belongingness is stimulated by their relationship to the campus and members of the community. That being said, domestic university stakeholders are also responsible for enabling international students to feel that they belong, therefore, the onus should not fall on racialized IS for failing to integrate. All in all, belongingness is a collective effort and requires the participation of all parties in cultivating tolerant university spaces where unique others can co-exist harmoniously.

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