

“At least we’re in Canada”: A critical perspective applying Du Bois and Simmel to Black African students’ identity experiences in Canadian universities

Ilerioluwa Okusi
University of British Columbia

Abstract. Using concepts from theorists W.E.B Du Bois and Georg Simmel, I examine the sociological dimensions to the identity experiences of Black African students as temporary international or permanent immigrants attending universities in Canada. In what ways do social structures in the host country of Canada inhibit positive experiences of Black African students in Canadian universities? Du Bois’ concepts of ‘double consciousness’ and the metaphor of ‘the veil’ highlight the difficulty that Black folks in America experience as they live their identities against and through the eyes of white supremacy. This concept is extended to the experience of Black African students in Canada where Black people are a visible minority and experience racism (Creese, 2020). Further, Simmel’s concept of the ‘blasé attitude’, also referred simply as blasé, is about the sense of indifference personified by individuals living in metropolises due to overstimulation and an overly commodified lifestyle in the city environment. The blasé is applicable to understanding the experience of Black African students in Canadian universities, which are often in metropolitan cities. Although Black African students, especially those who are international, are largely optimistic as they venture into Canadian universities, using the concepts of double consciousness, the veil and the blasé attitude, a socio-cultural reality is revealed that counters the positive image that Canadian universities themselves portray. In this reality, Black African students encounter particular challenges connected to their perceived or self-proclaimed Black African identities, which serve as an impediment to their wellbeing, academic growth and career advancement. Using a critical race theory framework, Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness and the veil, and Simmel’s concept of blasé are used to examine how systems and practices of racism, neo-racism, and attitudes of complacency infringe on Black African students having more holistically positive experiences while studying at Canadian universities, despite the fact that many

well-known universities are located in ‘diverse’ or ‘multicultural’ cities in Canada. These concepts are applied to show how certain sociological factors, that is, systems, processes, practices and actions that are already in place, work against Black African identities and function against these students once they enter these settings.

Introduction

According to *Times Higher Education*, in 2017 Canada was the most popular and desired international study destination for students around the world for its high academic rankings, job opportunities after graduation, vibrant cultural life, safe and welcoming environment (Bhardwa, 2017). Canada has a significantly increasing rate of international students. While US international student enrollment reduced by 3 percent in the fall of 2016, Canada’s increased by 22 percent (Haynie, 2018). In fact, as of December 2017, Canada surpassed its 2022 goal of 450,000 international students, at more than 494,000 (CBIE, 2018). As of 2019, this number was over 642,000 according to CIC News (El-Assal, 2020). A study by the Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) in 2018 noted that the top three reasons international students chose to study in Canada are: the reputation of education, Canadian society being “generally perceived as tolerant and non-discriminatory” and finally “Canada’s reputation as a safe country” (CBIE, 2018). Importantly, 84 percent of international students in Canada are enrolled in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, provinces which have vibrant metropolitan city lives and, importantly, institutions of higher education situated in these cities (CBIE, 2018). These provinces are also the top three destinations for international students from Africa (Statistics Canada, 2018). As one of the top international student destinations in the world, ranking fourth as of 2018, there is also an increasing number of students from the African continent (CBIE, 2018). Research shows that the number of international students from Africa studying in Canadian universities has steadily increased, doubling from around 11,000 recorded in 2010/2011 to over 22,000 in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2018).

There are significant reasons why Black African students decide to study abroad, mirroring why any international student would choose Canada for the reasons listed above. However, while Black African students may have largely optimistic outlook as they venture to Canadian universities—based on the positive and diverse images portrayed by universities—they are met with a paradox, comprising conflicting realities and challenges in relation to their Black African identities. This reality serves to subvert the well being, academic growth and career advancement of these students.

By using Du Bois’ concepts of double consciousness and the veil, as well as Simmel’s concept of blasé attitude, this study investigates the experiences of Black African students and how they navigate their identities as students in Canadian universities. Du

Bois used the term double consciousness to explain the tension that Black people in America face because of the clash of their perception of themselves and the awareness of how the dominant group sees them (i.e: through the lens of racism) which creates a double sense of self. For Black African students arriving at university in Canada, they encounter systems, views and actions that homogenize Blackness and being African into a simplistic narrative where inferiority and danger are the dominant frames through which Blackness and Africanness are viewed and engaged.

Further, Du Bois used the concept of the veil to explain systems put in place and perceptions that hinder full participation of African Americans in the American society. The veil is a covering—figuratively—that prevents or limits African Americans from fully thriving in society (Du Bois, 1903/2009). This is relevant to the experiences of Black African students who move to Canada to live and study. The veil exists as systems in place founded on racist ideologies, barriers that reinforce negative perception and experiences of Black African students, while double consciousness reveals how they navigate and deal with their identities in a new context where they are perceived as ‘others’, minorities that are looked back at through ‘white gaze.’

In addition to the above concepts, Simmel’s concept of the blasé attitude is used to explain how the blasé attitude in Canadian cities/universities perpetuates the challenges that Black African students commonly encounter. The blasé attitude is derived from overstimulation in city life, which has a psychological impact on individuals, making them desensitized to ills in society, creating a sociological impact of complacency where people consciously or subconsciously act in ways that uphold flawed systems. Applied to the identity experiences of Black African students, the blasé helps to understand how individuals and bureaucracies act in ways that maintain the flawed systems which uphold the veil and create a tension of double consciousness for Black African students.

Overall, the prevalence of double consciousness, the veil and the blasé attitude of metropolitan lifestyle in societies where many Canadian universities are, reveals a socio-cultural reality where Black African students encounter particular challenges connected to their Black African identities. Literature about experiences of African immigrants in Canada and Black African international students in the US are used as the basis upon which these sociological concepts will be applied. Du Bois and Simmel’s concepts are applied as a deductive lens to experiences of racism that Black-African students face while at Canadian universities, bringing into discussion the broader societal frameworks that are at work in individuals’ lives, that they reinforce, adhere to and are even emboldened by.

Methods

In what ways do social structures in the host country of Canada inhibit positive experiences of Black African students in Canadian universities? To answer this question, I use sociological theories that offer explanations to the experiences of Black African students through application to selected studies regarding the identities of these students. Secondary sourced data, such as reports from Statistics Canada and Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) are drawn upon to observe the trends in international student enrolment in Canada and also inform the purpose of the study. Results from qualitative research studies such as Creese (2020), Mensah (2014), and Boafo-Arthur (2014) are drawn upon for further context. These findings presented in the literature review are thematically classified into 'relational' and 'collective' experiences and considered altogether as 'identity experiences' for the purpose of this study. The sociological concepts are further discussed drawing upon findings from these studies to explain how societal forces drive and reinforce these identity experiences in the Canadian context.

The classification of Black African students is conceptualized in this research as both temporary-residents students from African countries, as well as Black African students whose parents migrated to Canada or themselves were born in Canada and hold permanent resident or citizenship status. Black African Canadians are included in discussion because they, as Black students, share common racialized experiences with Black international students. Importantly, many students from countries in the Caribbean identify and are perceived as Blacks students and so therefore, share similar racialized experiences as well. However, for the purpose of this study, research was focused on Black African students who identified having national ties to the African continent. One reason is to shed light on the knowledge gap about this specific group and secondly, for operational limitations, since the data used from Statistics Canada concerning post-secondary education includes variables of country/region of citizenship but not race. Articles discussing Black African immigrants and Black African international students in the US are consulted as they have findings relevant to the challenges that Black African immigrants and Black African international students in Canada face by virtue of holding the 'Black' identities as students or permanent immigrants in these North American countries.

Findings from America are also used because currently, there is a lack of substantial and significant qualitative research that focuses on and analyzes the experiences of specifically Black African students, especially those who are international, in Canadian universities. It is important to note that Creese (2020) is a recent study on the experiences of African-Canadians growing up in Vancouver, and is relevant to this paper. However, there is a need for more scholarly work and research centering Black African international student experiences in Canadian universities. This research is intended to offer a perspective as a response to the knowledge gap in Canadian academia and scholarship, and to also call out the lack of attention to Black African student experiences in Canadian

universities. While a lack of significant amount of Canadian data is a methodological limitation of this paper, this research uses what we know about African immigrants in Canada, Black African and international students in the US to provide a figurative bridge and offer insight to Black African student identity experiences in Canada.

Literature Review

The Relational: Social Interaction with Other Students

Studies show that Black African students upon getting to the US experience depression, isolation, homesickness and fatigue (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). These are not just feelings from basic personal adjustment to a new environment, rather these experiences are correlated to the prejudice and discrimination they face based on skin color and their culture, because of being Black and African (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). As a result, they cope with different styles of social interaction and ‘acculturation’. Acculturation refers to the “cultural changes that result from group encounters” (Boafo-Arthur, 2014, p.117). Being in a new social environment, international students experience culture shock and racial discrimination, which leads to “acculturative stress” (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Culture shock can lead to “self-segregation,” one of the four types of social interaction (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). This is similar to Boafo-Arthur’s (2014) ‘separation’, which involves interacting only with people from the same country of origin, as this helps to boost their confidence in their own cultural identity and to foster feelings of belonging, rather than isolation (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013).

Other ways that international students engage in social interaction as discussed in Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood (2013) are “exclusive global mixing” which is interaction that takes place with other international students of similar ethnicity or nationality (p.418). These findings are similar to experiences in Canadian educational institutions. For instance, findings from Creese (2020), where female second generation African-Canadians in Vancouver went through a phase of social isolation sometimes spanning years in elementary school and eventually making few friends of similar national and/or immigrant origin in high school. Another form of social interaction is “inclusive global mixing,” which involves socializing with “co-nationals”, other international students, and students from the host country (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 419). This is similar to Boafo-Arthur’s (2014) argument of integration as a form of acculturation where Black African students co-exist together with the new culture, as well as their own. The fourth type, host interaction involves sole contact with students from the host country, connecting to assimilation mentioned in Boafo-Arthur’s (2014), where the students immerse themselves in the new culture, replacing their own. This can be compared to the “cool Black guy” stereotype that many 1.5 and second generation male African-Canadians

mentioned they utilized in their high school days, where they gained popularity and acceptance by performing Black masculinity in ways acceptable and desirable by their peers, centered on athleticism and hip-hop as portrayed by American pop culture stereotypes of Black men (p.73, 79 & 80). These above studies show the similarities with how African-Canadians experience their identities in school and Black African international students in universities. As Black Africans, they experience similar acculturative processes because of the common identities they hold as racialized minorities.

The Collective or Group: Solidarity and Association

As a group, Baffoe (2010) highlights the conflicts that first generation African immigrants in Canada face in redefining where they call home. The overarching message is that African immigrants living in Canada, including many who had previously studied in Canada, no matter the effort or how highly educated they were, felt a “strong perception of social exclusion in Canadian society” (p.169). Some expressed regret of coming to Canada although they hoped that the society would evolve to accept their children, holding a better future for them. Some stress they face “insurmountable barriers at every turn in their attempts to full participation in the Canadian society” (p. 158). Consequently, they develop stronger attachment to their home-countries by connecting through food, music, following political events of homelands, and through forming organizations and enclaves, some of which include religious houses (Baffoe, 2010; Mensah, 2014). In Baffoe’s (2010) study, for many of these immigrants, who had spent several years (up to twenty) in Canada, their birthplace in their countries in Africa was still considered home to them, where they feel safe and welcomed despite the fact that they may never return. Similarly, Creese (2020) mentions how for second generation African-Canadians, as young adults many were “reclaiming stronger African and African-Canadian identities”, rather than simply identifying as “Canadian” (p.183). Such self-perceptions are connected to experiences of racism, as those who perceived higher levels of racism either rejected their Canadian identities or emphasized them, and refused to name other places when strangers asked them where they were from (Creese, 2020). These findings highlight the effects of racialization on self and perceived sense of self that Black Africans in the Canadian context experience, thus the connection of identity and associated experiences.

Discussion

Applying Du Bois and Simmel to Black African student identity experiences “Double consciousness” from Social Perceptions

Double consciousness is defined as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p.8). It is the tension between Black people having a perception of themselves and also being aware of how the dominant group views them (i.e: through the lenses of racism) which creates a double sense of self. This concept was coined by Du Bois, an African American scholar and one of the pioneers of modern racial and ethnic sociology in his famous work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) written almost four decades after the abolition of U.S. chattel slavery. In the book, Du Bois writes on the prevalence of racism, forms of discrimination and gaps that existed in the years following emancipation, and about how African Americans were not quite full participants of American society. Double consciousness relates to the experience of living through preconceived definitions, established by “the other world” of how Black people are or supposed to be (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p.8). And Black people have to engage with these perceptions while striving to attain a sense of self they hold for themselves, or sometimes rivaling the perception of others against the sense of identity they already hold for themselves. For Black African students, the case is similar. Rather than striving to establish a ‘true’ sense of self as Du Bois notes for the American Negro, for Black African students the struggle is arguably with maintaining a sense of self, once they come into lived reality that is against their previous ‘true’ sense of self-perception. Prior to coming to Canada, such students have a type of agency in embodying and expressing what it means to be Africans. This sense of self or self-perception is a more nuanced and thus, realistic perspective. Whereas, on arriving in university in Canada, they now encounter systems, views and actions that homogenize Blackness and being African into a dominant narrative, one where inferiority and threat are the dominant frames through which Blackness and Africanness are viewed and engaged. Creese (2020) highlights this theme in the experiences of African Canadians who grew up in Vancouver. For instance, male African-Canadians, especially, recounted many troubling encounters with law enforcement, where they were automatically deemed perpetrators, even in instances where they were not involved at all in altercations (Creese, 2020).

Du Bois argued that, at the time, Black Americans experienced a certain tension as they embodied their Black identities and African roots while also being American, in a society where being Black was treated as a problem. Hence, there is a sense of “two-ness” from “two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p.8). The process that Du Bois describes is still relevant today. It can be related to the experience of Black African students studying in Canada, a country founded on white supremacy ide-

ologies that have sought to erase and oppress indigenous peoples and traditions, and by extension, other peoples that threaten the white “imagined community” of Canada (Anderson, 1991, as cited in Creese, 2020, p.19). For Black African students who journey to Canada, they begin to exist in a society that already has in place its own subordinate perception and treatment of Blackness and being ‘Black.’

As Mensah (2014) mentions, “it is when Black Africans venture outside the continent that their sensitivity to race is stirred up the most” (p.14). Du Bois argues that African Americans are both African and American, holding two identities. Likewise, Black African students, upon getting to Canada become ‘Black’ and also hold their respective African nationalities including other identities which may differ from what people assume about Blackness. Because of the prejudices prevalent in North America attached to being Black, Black African students cannot escape discrimination and so become not only aware, but also exposed to experiences of negative treatments based on these social perceptions. In fact, discrimination is further extended to not only the skin color, but also the culture, as in neo-racism (Bafo-Arthur, 2014). For the Black African international student for instance, it becomes a struggle trying to uphold a sense of pride or belonging as an African, from a respective African country, tribe and so on while experiencing discrimination as a Black person and the inferior image Africa and its peoples are portrayed by the West. This is double-consciousness. The same skin color deemed humane and normal in the homeland, is othered, becoming a symbol of inferiority and even a threat abroad.

Even for immigrants and second generation Canadians, Creese (2020) notes how many recall instances as early as in elementary school, of peers making fun of their African accents, names, the food they eat, their hair, and the colour of their skin, including teachers making ignorant and offensive comments about Africa. Male African-Canadians recounted troubling encounters with law enforcement, where they were automatically deemed perpetrators, even in instances where they were not involved at all in altercations (Creese, 2020). They were aware of how the social perception of Black men as violent and criminal translated into being disproportionately and unfairly surveilled and mistreated in public spaces. Such negative and homogenizing perceptions contrast the cultural pride many Black African people’s parents instill in them as immigrants or as international students who have experiential knowledge about Africa and being African. Living through this sense of contrasting lenses is the double consciousness Black African students encounter while studying in Canada.

To the Black African international students, these negative experiences of racial discrimination are relatively new, so they lack the tools to deal with racism and prejudice encountered (Bafo-Arthur, 2014). This is why some opt to keep to themselves, to restrict their association to other students of same or similar nationality. To cope, some may assimilate. Either way on the continuum of extremes of separation or assimilation, there is the constant struggle that emerges in encounters and institutional workings that remind

the Black African student of holding a place synonymous to inferiority in the white-dominated culture, in opposition to the cultural, national, and/or racial pride that many Black African students have embraced prior to studying or emigrating abroad to places like Canada.

“Diasporic Consciousness” in Association and Practice

Mensah (2014) mentions the idea of “diasporic consciousness” which is the sense of “in-betweenness” and “multifaceted identities” that Black African immigrants express leading to an identity crisis (p.21). Likewise, Black African students face this sense of in-betweenness, as they navigate more than one culture, engaging in transnational connections, both at school and maintaining ties with social networks back home. This is because they have to adhere to the social customs and practices in Canada, while they also have the opportunity to engage at home. As Du Bois argues with double-consciousness, African Americans are Africans first by virtue of their roots, then American. Arguably Black African students are African first, which is a more nuanced perspective held by Africans, before they delve into societies focused on socially constructed stereotypical images of Blackness, with systems built against Blackness and people who hold these Black identities. In this sense, to be a Black African immigrant and a Black African international student is a constant process of double-consciousness, navigating the reins of positive affiliation with one’s homeland, agency/feelings of cultural pride, while also living every day in a society that warns otherwise or only sees one distorted side of Blackness. Black African international and domestic students are thereby forced to make decisions every-day as to what better, truer self to work towards. Questions arise as to whether or how to express ancestral pride or other identities relating to being from an African country and Black. Creese (2020) recounts the case of Danielle, a second generation Canadian whose “integration strategy included refusing to speak Swahili” (p.54) Danielle recounts:

“It was a love/hate thing. I loved the big family gatherings, the people that you’d see all the time, and the friends, and just everybody that was your Auntie and Uncle, and you’d come and say “Hi.” I love that atmosphere. But sometimes I was ashamed of it in a way. Like bringing my ethnic food to school, and somebody would be like, “What’s that? Ugh!” The kind of the reactions that kids have to something that’s new and different. It would kind of hurt me. And as a result, I sometimes didn’t invite people over because I was embarrassed of what they might see or the way my family is.” (p.54)

If cultural expression is decided, to what extent can this pride be expressed without risking social isolation from non-African peers? Such dilemmas are commonplace, like in the case of Ashley, a Black African-Canadian, whose mom stopped packing her usual lunches switching to what was “acceptable” to avoid being treated differently (Creese, 2020, p.66).

Or further, having one's presence viewed as threatening, stemming from stereotypes of being perceived as aggressive, dissenting and criminal. As another participant Michael recounted, he "had been stopped by security guards and accused of shoplifting when he went grocery shopping dressed in his tracksuit after a volleyball game." Because of such encounters, he "no longer bought food on the way home from a game; he went all the way home, changed clothing, and went out again to buy groceries" (Creese, 2020, p.130). As noted for those Canadians who are also Black African, similarly, for Black African students in general, including internationals, in university contexts these challenges can be in seemingly basic activities like deciding how often one could cook their ethnic food when they long for something familiar and comforting, while considering the risk of having their groceries or meals thrown out by roommates for example. Or they can be as blatant as how to respond when being referred to in racial slurs, being suspected of crimes or denied opportunities. All these questions, real life instances and more point to the considerations and realities that Black African students face in balancing their identities and navigating space in Canada, including universities contexts. As Black African students, including those new to Canada in Canadian universities they now take on this additional (thus 'double') consciousness of their identities that serves more to limit their sense of self and self-expression while living as students.

The Veil

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois first illustrates the concept of the veil with one of his first experiences of racial discrimination where a classmate refuses to participate in a card exchange with him, using an unspoken but effective tactic of passive action, a 'peremptory' glance, to communicate the choice to not engage with him. It was in that moment he came to the realization that he was the only 'different' one in his class and he knew then about being treated or seen as a "problem" (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p. 8). Reflecting about that incidence, Du Bois states: "I was different from the others; [...] shut out from their world by a vast veil" (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p.8). He describes the 'veil' as what metaphorically stands between Black folks and opportunity. That is, the veil refers to barriers that prevent or limit African Americans from fully participating in American society.

Like Du Bois' own experience, educational institutions are significant in upholding the veil. Black African-Canadians reported being "largely unaware of their 'difference' from other children until they started school" (Creese, 2020, p.177). Being one of the earliest and fundamental modes of socialization, the school plays a central role in shaping acceptable norms for members of the society. Unfortunately, schools are also where individuals from an early age learn, practice, discover and experience '-isms' from the hidden and non-hidden curriculum of the communities they embody and create. Universities also are educational institutions that are central to proliferating, enhancing and reshaping so-

cietal sustenance and enhancement and so also are sites for generating, practicing and experiencing social ills. Creese (2020) description of schools can be applied to Canadian universities, too, as they are similarly social institutions “where negative discourses of Blackness are [...] encountered [...] including harmful assumptions about African countries and stereotypes associated with being Black” (p.177).

Upon existing in these educational institutions, Black Africans students are immersed into these already negative discourses, treatments and systems, described as the veil, that shuts out completely or limits full participation. They hinder or police the livelihood and enhancement of Black African students at Canadian universities. The veil exists in and as systems in place founded on racist ideologies, barriers that reinforce the negative perception and experiences of Black African students, while double consciousness refers to how they navigate and deal with their identities in a new context where they are perceived as ‘others’ or minorities that are looked back at through ‘white gaze.’

Indeed, Black Africans feel the separation of the veil. The veil is the barrier of divide that translates into social and economic exclusion of Black people. Black African students report in Baofo-Arthur (2014), as well as in Creese (2020), that they are cognizant of the isolation and exclusion that they feel in host countries. In the Canadian society, Black Africans can hold the status of ‘permanent residents’ or ‘Canadians’, engage academically as students and hold seemingly positive or acceptable roles. In practice, though, they constantly encounter negating treatments and barriers that not only differentiate them, but also inhibits their sense of belonging and advancement in society. As Creese (2020) mentioned, according to Oreopoulos (2011) and Pendakur and Pendakur (2011), “names and other markers of ‘difference’ affect access to jobs, even for those with Canadian education, and an income gap linked to race and ethnicity persists into the second generation” (p.175). Whether as Black African Canadians or international students, this constant separation, which pervades through limited and negative perception, brings tension to their lived experiences in Canada. These forms of discrimination can be direct as in being called racial slurs, ‘subtle’ as in being the student in class that other classmates avoid pairing up with or sitting next to, or more systemic like discrimination perpetuated through institutional barriers. As noted, the veil is not just a distorted way of being perceived by non-Black people, beyond that it is also a culmination of barriers impeding on the full and wholesome participation of Black African international and domestic students at Canadian universities. As Du Bois (1903/2009) put it, the veil of race is one that is “above and between all” (p.55). Notably, although felt by Black Africans who do the labor of drawing attention to these forms of oppression, the veil exists, largely as a sort of unspoken or ignored impediment—impediments because they are encountered on all levels regardless of educational or professional achievement; unspoken because they are embedded in or exist as systems even when not ‘blatant’ and unspoken or ignored by many in society—as society life has been formed by and continues to thrive off these inequities.

The Blasé City Lifestyle

Another societal element that perpetuates challenging socio-cultural realities for Black African students is the blasé lifestyle permeating metropolitan cities. In *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Simmel is concerned with how individuals preserve their individuality in a modern city with significant external culture, historical forces and technologies (Simmel, 1950). Simmel's focus is on "how the personality accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces" (Simmel, 1950, p. 410). In other words, Simmel asks how do societal practices and norms affect the psyche of individuals? The blasé attitude is his answer: "The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves" (Simmel, 1950, p.414). Simmel continues, "A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react" or are incapable of reacting appropriately (p. 414). In other words, the blasé attitude is an indifference that emerges from overstimulation of the senses, causing individuals to be unable to react appropriately and also to potentially distance themselves from meaningful connection. This indifference erupts from not just any society, but specifically societies where there is "the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" like the metropolis or city life, which is characterized by constant movement and consumption of ideas, goods and people (p.410). The rapid and uninterrupted multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life that uniquely exists in the city is what generates this blasé attitude, in contrast to a slower and more conscious rhythm of smaller town life, which centers on more "deeply felt" and relational connections (p. 410).

The concept of blasé attitude is relevant to the focus on identity struggles of Black African international and immigrant students because metropolitan cities in Canada are the main destinations of migration for African immigrants (Baffoe, 2010). The blasé attitude points to an atmosphere of desensitization in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Importantly, this numbness is also a way of coping to avoid being overwhelmed from the profound intensity and rapidity of stimulation that surrounds the metropolitan individual. This indifference also extends to unresponsiveness to situations that require responses (Simmel, 1950).

The blasé attitude can be observed in the busyness or liveliness in shopping malls in cities with people focused on reaching their next destination or making their next purchase having less meaningful contact or connection with individuals they encounter on their way, like not responding to an individual laying on the ground in distress or being passive to the lives of people experiencing homelessness. The university located in the city is supported by and adopts this blasé attitude. Sometimes it takes on its own variation of the lifestyle, but still holds the main features Simmel outlined, that of rapidity and intensity from overstimulation of the senses that creates numbness in individuals. We can see how this might play out in universities: imagine the hustle and bustle of shuf-

fling between classes within the few-minute designated travel time, unable to stop for any unforeseen interruptions or avoiding meaningful contact with individuals along the way, causing students to commonly look away from their peers and avoid eye contact. This may manifest in students choosing inaction in situations such as an instructor or classmate making offensive comments relating to the continent of Africa or its peoples. This indifference permeates various aspects of society including lack of substantial and meaningful institutional efforts against racial discrimination and inequality on university campuses. This complacency exists on the institutional and at the individual levels.

The Blasé in Universities

The blasé attitude does not stand on its own; it thrives in a society of intellectualism, and what better place for this rationality to exist than the environment of university campuses? As Baofo-Arthur (2014) article presented, “the difficult acculturative experiences international students of color have, has more to do with the lack of hospitality shown by their host institutions, and less to do with the personal deficiencies of these [international students of color]” (p.117). These types of challenges have more to do with pre-existing barriers and complacency towards them on individual and institutional levels. As a large bureaucracy, the university campus survives on rationality, which is not in itself a defect but a pervasiveness of rationality runs the risk of extending ‘rationality’ to situations that require more social awareness and connection. Using ‘rationality’ or established procedures as an excuse of how things have worked and/or so have to work, subverting efforts that might ‘disrupt’ the way things have always been run, can ignore or fail to appropriately confront policies and practices inhibiting the livelihoods of members of the community such as Black African students.

Baofo-Arthur (2014) discusses how differing value systems can contribute to the cultural identity struggles that Black African students confront in their daily lives: universities in North America are based on more of an individualistic/independent culture dominant in western societies, while Black African students generally, come from more collectivist/interdependent cultures (Baofo-Arthur, 2014). This means that ways by which programs are designed or implemented for Black African students, may seem impersonal and distant. The blasé attitude of the university includes a type of individualism and ‘rationality’ that might be challenging for Black African students who come from collectivist societies and have been accustomed to deal with more subjectivity and relational lenses. The notion of individuality that tends to predominantly focus on looking inward if you have a challenge poses the risk of misattributing societal inequities to personal deficiencies of those experiencing social harms. Putting sole responsibility on students experiencing ill treatments, instead of focusing on institutional change that impacts how other students and members of the university community contribute to those ill-treatments, makes such challenges individualized. For example, not being able to ac-

culturate or make friends or find group project partners in class can be attributed to the unfriendliness or 'strangeness' of the Black students. The typical individualistic solutions are programs focusing on the individual, such as how to be an approachable person or how to be likable by others. A more critical and nuanced consideration, however, would take into account the prevalence of hostility toward such students in their social environment and thus a collectivist/community-centred solution proposed to create awareness and hold other members of the university community accountable for how they treat and respond to Black African students.

Further, there can also be an attitude and practice of 'looking the other way', with the rationale that if something does not affect you personally, then it is not your concern. For example, a situation could arise where a peer or instructor makes a hateful or insensitive comment towards a Black student or about Black Africans. For some students who are ingrained in the blasé attitude, as long as it does not affect the majority of the individuals in the class, then no one speaks up at any point. In such situations, hostile discourses remain unaddressed and oppressive belief systems that inform policies and treatments continue to be upheld in the community. This extent of 'rationality' and individualism embedded in the attitude of blasé practiced in metropolis university campuses significantly impacts the identity experiences of Black African students, shaping how they deal with challenges like self-blame, isolation, and unnecessary emotional and mental stress.

Non-Black students are complacent to the ways they exclude Black African students through their actions or inactions partly due to the blasé attitude they have adopted as individuals acclimatized into the metropolis society. A rationale for differential treatment could be for example, that obviously an international student is not a domestic student and so cannot escape being treated differently, and that this is normal. Another reasoning could be beliefs like having no commonality or having 'inherent' difference in comparison with African students, resulting in avoiding social contact or meaningful interactions, which causes their isolation or disrespectful treatment in class (and out-of-class) settings. These seemingly logical and 'factual' reasonings of difference are not a contradiction to blasé, since rationalization is a typical feature of the metropolis.

As Simmel mentions "[the] metropolitan man reckons with his merchants and customers, his domestic servants and often even with persons with whom he is obliged to have social intercourse" (p. 411), meaning that with blasé, a certain coldness and distance is extended to situations and people that require meaningful relational thoughtfulness. Such rationales are not just about Black African students being different in the general sense of each person's individuality, but are attached to notions of inferiority and malignancy of body and culture (racism and neo-racism). Such false rationalizations lead to a sense of coldness or disregard that is produced in micro-aggressions as well as more overt forms of discrimination against Black African students by individuals. These 'rationales' and desensitization take different forms, whether it is avoiding engagement with

Black African students, because of their ‘strangeness’, assuming they do not have things in common, or a proliferating sense of disregard for their physical bodies, while taking up space in classroom settings and so on. Many individuals within the university community are desensitized, and so fail to question and alleviate the ways they perpetuate discrimination and exclusion, and how these affect the lived experiences of the Black African students in their communities.

Synthesizing Du Bois and Simmel’s Concepts

Du Bois’ double consciousness explains the process of Black African students’ (re)constructing their identities as they begin to navigate another lens through which they are seen in a dominant white society. The veil can be understood as the lens or barrier that limits identity expression and advancement. By discussing these concepts, the identity struggles are better understood, because it presents the tension of upholding two identities that are in juxtaposition to each other, which consequently has a negative effect on the Black African student experience. Simmel’s blasé attitude offers an explanation as to why there is a prevalence of double consciousness and the veil. It explains the why and how of the persistence of the oppressive systems. That is, it is through the blasé attitude, through the desensitization of the dominant group and its institutions, that the veil and adverse effects of double consciousness persist and are reinforced. Essentially, these concepts could be understood in the following way to explain how the contrasting socio-cultural realities of Black African students emerges: the veil is a collection of oppressive perceptions and systems, and through implementation of these systems and resulting treatments, the effect/state of double consciousness is created/experienced which affects identity formation, preservation, or the sense of self. Blasé is the attitude to ignore (the why it still continues), and what also perpetuates these ills (the how it continues, sometimes using ‘rationalization’ to maintain or to choose to be complacent) without feeling a sense to change it and take action.

Although the two texts that introduce these concepts were written in the same year, it is interesting to note how these concepts interpret different aspects of racism. Du Bois’ study focused on racism of a more overt form, since in the socio-historical context of Du Bois’ study, America was plagued with traditional racism, the unashamedly direct type, where the dominant group was unequivocally aware and blatantly upheld the oppression (as in open racism prior to post-Civil Rights Act era in the US.). Simmel’s blasé attitude on the other hand, can be applied to racism that is perpetuated through covert means, that is the attitude of indifference and complacency to societal ills. Now, with establishing laws, racism dangerously continues systemically and might seem to appear largely covert, rather than the traditional open form, especially in a ‘post-racial’ ‘colorblind’ society like Canada (Creese, 2020). Therefore, the blasé attitude complements Du Bois’ double consciousness and the veil in explaining a different portrayal of racial discrimination and

how racism continues today —through desensitization, indifference, ‘rational’ explanations, and so on— impacting Black African student experiences at Canadian universities.

Conclusion

In this analysis of Black African students’ identity experiences in Canada, findings on Black African immigrants, Black African Canadians in Canada and international students in the US are discussed. Theoretical concepts by Du Bois and Simmel are used to explore how these identity experiences unravel and are sustained at Canadian universities. Ultimately, the prevalence of the veil, blasé attitude and the double consciousness that ensues, reveals that Black African students are experiencing challenges related to their Black and African identities while in university in Canada. Examining these identity experiences and addressing these challenges that arise for Black African students is essential for Canadian universities to address these concerns, inform initiatives for community transformation and support services and to enhance more positive transition and experiences.

In terms of limitations, data from Statistics Canada captures total students with citizenship from the continent of Africa, that is those who are Africans by nationality, not identifying students by race. In this research, a logical assumption was made that most or at least a significant number of the students highlighted in these figures are ‘Black’ identifying or socially categorized, since Black Africans make up the majority in the continent. Moreso, the purpose of the findings was to note the general trend, which is an increase in the share of students from Africa, which further necessitates studies to better understand and support these groups. Overall, the findings show that there needs to be more literature about Black African students in Canadian universities. This is both a limitation and matter of fact, a knowledge gap that this research attempted to bring to forefront. As one of the most diverse international student populations in the world, with 186 nations represented in the student body (CBIE, 2018), there is the need for studies and resources catering to all different student groups including Black African students—international and domestic students—as well as Black students from other regions of the world, in creating well-informed pro-active institutional and community transformations and interventions to enhance and support the plight of the Black African international and domestic living and study experience in Canada.

References

- Baffoe, M. (2010;2009). The social reconstruction of “Home” among african immigrants in canada. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 41(3), 157-173. doi:10.1353/ces.2010.0026

- Bhardwa, (2017, Oct 20). Canada is the most popular destination for international students. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/canada-most-popular-destination-international-students>
- Boafo-Arthur, S. (2014). Acculturative experiences of Black-African international students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 36(2), 115-124. doi:10.1007/s10447-013-9194-8
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (2018). International Students surpass 2022 goal. *CBIE*. Retrieved from <https://cbie.ca/international-students-surpass-2022-goal/>
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (2020). *Facts & Figures. Canada's Performance and Potential in International Education* [Video]. Retrieved from <https://cbie.ca/media/facts-and-figures/>
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (2020). *International Students in Canada* [Infographic]. Retrieved from <https://cbie.ca/infographic/>
- Creese, G., & Scholars Portal Books: Canadian University Presses 2019. (2020). *Where are you from?: Growing up African-Canadian in Vancouver*. University of Toronto Press.
- Du, Bois. W. E. B. (1903/2009). *The Souls of Black folk*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- El-Assal, K. (2020, Feb. 20). 642,000 International students: Canada now ranks 3rd globally in foreign student attraction. *CIC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cicnews.com/2020/02/642000-international-students-canada-now-ranks-3rd-globally-in-foreign-student-attraction-0213763.html>gs.ctuc16
- Haynie, D. (2018, Jan 23). The Great Game for International Students. *USNews*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2018-01-23/competition-for-international-students-increases-among-countries?context=amp>
- Mensah, J. (2014). Black continental African identities in Canada: Exploring the intersection of identity formation and immigrant transnationalism. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 48(3), 5-29. doi:10.3138/jcs.48.3.5
- Rose-Redwood, C. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. S. (2013). Self-segregation or global mixing?: Social interactions and the international student experience. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(4), 413-429. doi:10.1353/csd.2013.0062
- Simmel, G., & Wolff, K. H., & Universal Library. (1950). *Sociology of Georg Simmel*. The Free Press.
- Statistics Canada. (2018). *Table 37-10-0086-01 Postsecondary enrolments, by status of student in Canada, country of citizenship and gender* [Table]. Retrieved June 2020,

from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv!recreate.action?pid=3710008601&selectedNodeIds=1D2,1D3,1D4,1D5,1D6,1D7,1D8,1D9,1D10,1D11,1D12,2D2,2D3,3D3,4D127&checkedLevels=0D1,4D1&refPeriods=20090101,20170101&dimensionLayouts=layout3,layout2,layout2,layout2,layout2,layout2&vectorDisplay=false>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710008601-eng>