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“People Would Just Say, ‘That Doesn’t Exist’”: An Analysis of the Experiences of Racialized International Students as Settler Colonial, Racial, and Gendered Violence

« Les gens disaient simplement “ça n’existe pas” » : une analyse de l’expérience des étudiants internationaux racialisés en matière de violence coloniale, raciale et sexiste

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“People Would Just Say, ‘That Doesn’t Exist’”: An Analysis of the Experiences of Racialized International Students as Settler Colonial, Racial, and Gendered Violence
« Les gens disaient simplement “ça n’existe pas” » : Une analyse de l’expérience des étudiants internationaux racialisés en matière de violence coloniale, raciale et sexiste

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Abstract:
A growing body of scholarship reveals that racialized international students in the West are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation and violence on and off university and college campuses, and in public and private spaces. This harm may be due to the actions of individuals (such as landlords, employers, fellow international students, non-international student classmates, professors, strangers, and members of their ethnic communities), as well as the policies and inaction of institutions and governments. These institutional and systemic factors include precarious immigration status and visa and immigration requirements, unregulated homestay programs, unregulated tuition fees, and the intersections of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. This paper draws on interviews with racialized international students and university employees who provide services to international students at a comprehensive university in Ontario, Canada, and argues that the everyday and structural violence the students may face is best understood as constitutive of the violence of White settler colonialism.

Résumé :
De plus en plus d’études révèlent que les étudiants internationaux racialisés vivant en Occident sont disproportionnément vulnérables à l’exploitation et à la violence sur les, et hors des campus universitaires et collégiaux, ainsi que dans les espaces publics et privés. Ce préjudice peut être dû à des actions individuelles (de la part de propriétaires, d’employeurs, d’étudiants étrangers, de camarades de classe non étrangers, de professeurs, d’étrangers et de membres de leur communauté ethnique), ainsi qu’aux politiques et à l’inaction des institutions et des gouvernements. Ces facteurs institutionnels et systémiques comprennent la précarité du statut d’immigrant et des exigences en matière de visa et d’immigration, les programmes d’accueil en famille non réglementés, les frais de scolarité non réglementés et les intersections du racisme, du sexisme, de la xénophobie et de l’islamophobie. Cet article s’appuie sur des entretiens avec des étudiants internationaux racialisés et des employés de l’université qui fournissent des services aux étudiants internationaux dans une université polyvalente de l’Ontario, au Canada, et soutient que la violence quotidienne et structurelle à laquelle les étudiants peuvent être confrontés est mieux comprise comme étant un élément fondamental de la violence du colonialisme de peuplement blanc.

Keywords: racism, sexual violence, international students, settler colonialism, internationalization

Mots clés : racisme, violence sexuelle, étudiants internationaux, colonialisme de peuplement, internationalisation

Introduction

A recent Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary on the experience of Indian international students in Canada highlighted the exploitative conditions facing these students in the context of the marketization of internationalization. Titled *Sold a Lie* (Baksh & Kelley, 2022), the film documented how Indian parents and children were sold the lie of a Canadian postsecondary degree as a solution to upward mobility by Indian recruitment agents hired by Canadian colleges and universities. Agents deceived by affirming to potential students that they could easily secure professional employment in Canada and Canadian permanent residency status postgraduation. To fulfill this dream, Indian families might mortgage their farms to pay for exorbitant tuition fees. Once in Canada many students studied full time while working long hours in low-wage work, endured poor housing conditions and minimal support from the governments and the educational institutions that had recruited them.

In this, and in other media exposés on the exploitative realities of internationalization, the dehumanized treatment of the students, the greed of the recruiters and educational institutions, and the complicity of governments are largely presented as an isolated injustice specific to international students. However, what is almost never commented on in these analyses is how these realities are connected to Indigenous dispossession and a racial hierarchy of entitlements that is endemic to White settler colonialism. White settler colonialism refers to societies in which a central component of colonialism is permanent settlement on Indigenous land, in addition to resource and labour exploitation; thus Patrick Wolfe's (2006) often quoted phrase that in settler colonial societies, "[s]ettler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" (p. 388). Although obfuscated, settler violence and Indigenous resistance are part of the political, social, economic, and legal structure of settler colonial societies. In the national mythologies of these nations, the European settlers become the original and most entitled subjects, and Indigenous and racialized others are relegated to secondary and contingent status (Razack, 2002; Ruiz, 2024).

In addition to media, increasingly, scholars and activists have drawn our attention to how exploitation and violence could be a significant part of the experiences of racialized international students in the West (Yao et al., 2019). While many of these endeavours may point to the links between everyday discrimination and systemic inequities that produce vulnerability for racialized international students from the East and the South, limited research has identified how this vulnerability is tied to the structures of settler colonialism. Also, the small body of work that framed the violence international students experienced as constitutive of settler colonialism was primarily theoretical and did not incorporate empirical research (Brunner, 2022; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). This paper draws on interviews with racialized international students and university employees who provide services to international students at a university in Ontario, Canada, and examines the student's positioning as racialized foreigners living in a White settler society. Thus, this paper contributes to the theoretical field by integrating the everyday realities of racialized international students who participated in our qualitative research. We argue that the violence the students face is best understood as constitutive of the violence of White settler colonialism, as it is settler colonialism that requires racial violence, xenophobic violence, and gendered violence. While we focus on Canada, the issues raised in this paper are relevant for other Western countries, particularly White settler nations such as Australia, the United States, and New Zealand.

The aims of this paper are twofold: (1) to draw on the experiences of racialized international students to document and frame as connected the forms of violence and exploitation

they may experience while studying and working in Canada; and (2) to examine these multiple forms of harm as endemic to ongoing settler colonialism. While the participants themselves may not directly implicate the broader structure of settler colonialism in their story of migration to and experiences in Canada, this obfuscation of settler colonialism is, we will argue, vital to the normalization of structural inequities that disproportionately produce the conditions for violence and exploitation of racialized international students.[i]

We begin by providing a brief overview of critical and decolonial perspectives on internationalization in the settler colonial context. We move on to examine the scholarship on violence against international students in the West, within and beyond educational institutions. We then examine the experiences and perspectives of the participants we interviewed and the ties to settler colonialism.

Critical and Decolonial Perspectives on Internationalization

There has been significant research on the internationalization of higher education and most of this literature focused on the experiences of international students studying in the West (Buckner et al., 2021, p. 33). This large body of scholarly, government, and professional literature primarily framed the problems faced by international students as ones of acculturation and international student deficit (Buckner et al., 2021, p. 34; Johnstone & Lee, 2020, pp. 9–10). Some attention may have been paid to systemic barriers to, for example, adequate housing and employment; however, the emphasis was primarily on improving service delivery, supports, and student's abilities to assimilate. By and large, these dominant views on the internationalization of higher education conceptualized internationalization as a mutually beneficial exchange in which Canadian society and its educational institutions receive economic and cultural value, and international students from the East and South receive a marketable Western degree and advantages towards permanent residency status in Canada.

Critical and decolonial approaches complicated this predominantly optimistic and depoliticized perspective on the internationalization of higher education (Stein, 2019, p. 1). They centred historical and contemporary power inequities and framed all migration and cultural exchange as value and power laden. Indeed, it is the ideology of Western superiority and capitalism that has fueled internationalization's almost unidirectional student mobility, from the East to West and South to North, for much of the 20th century (Chatterjee & Barber, 2021, p. 222). The increased desire for and presence of students from the East and South in the West has been viewed as neither neutral nor disruptive of these unequal power relations. For example, Stein and de Andreotti (2016) reminded us that the West's ability to recruit international students, the desire of non-Western students for Westernization, and the violence and discrimination that racialized international students may experience in the West all arise from a dominant global imaginary of Western supremacy (pp. 225–226). These insights spotlight how colonial and imperial regimes operate on local, national, and global scales to produce the material conditions of internationalization and the dominant frameworks by which power inequities are obfuscated and thereby affirmed (see Stein, 2022).

In White settler states such as Canada, international students (the vast majority of whom are racialized) are frequently conceptualized as relatively desirable temporary migrants and permanent settlers, but this welcoming by the settler colonial state and society is conditional, limited, and contested (Stein, 2018). These students are also constructed as threats to domestic student entitlements and the cause of rising housing prices (Su, 2023). These narratives circulate

because White settler nations are built on the erasure of Indigenous dispossession and the construction of White Europeans as the original and most entitled citizens. Racialized peoples are positioned as latecomers who contributed little to the building of the nation and are "foreign" irrespective of legal status or length of residence in Canada (Razack, 2002). As Johnstone and Lee (2020) asserted, in White settler societies, "differences (e.g., race) are turned into hierarchy while positioning Whiteness as the unmarked and yet superior norm" (p. 4). Importantly, critical and decolonial approaches highlighted how in settler colonial nations like Canada the migration of and possible settlement of international students supports settler colonialism as abiding by Canadian immigration law and policy affirms Canadian sovereignty (see Stein, 2018, p. 464). This presumes and confirms settler entitlement to manage the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. As a settler-colony, continuous non-Indigenous settlement and Indigenous dispossession are required for settler colonialism to prosper. Additionally, internationalization utilizes and supports Canada's national mythology of a kinder, safer, peacekeeping nation built on the welcoming and tolerance of difference. This narrative is often cited as a key reason why international students choose Canada over other Western nations, particularly the United States. Central to Canada's national mythology is the erasure of the violence of ongoing colonialism and everyday and structural racism and heteropatriarchy in the labour market, housing, and education systems in favour of a narrative of a human-rights-oriented, largely egalitarian, immigrant country. As part of this mythology, Indigenous peoples and racialized minorities are periodically and superficially celebrated, while the ongoing colonial violence and the structures of White supremacy are obfuscated.

International students are arguably recruited by governments because they are, as stated by Simran Dhunna of Naujawan Support Network (an activist organization established in 2021 to fight for the rights of international students and workers in Canada) "cheap labour and good business" (Kiwanuka, 2022; see also Coustere et al., 2023). In the neoliberal context of the decrease in public funding, and the proliferation of market oriented higher education, international students are increasingly viewed as a necessary source of revenue (Beck, 2021, pp. 133–134). Accordingly, the number of international students studying in the West has risen dramatically. From 2016 to 2018 there has been an over 43% increase in the number of international students studying in Canada (Surtees, 2019, p. 49). In 2019 international students were 27% of all postsecondary students in Australia (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021, pp. 3–4), 25% of tertiary enrollments in the United Kingdom, and 21% of higher education students in Canada (Buckner et al., 2021, pp. 32–33). International students provide almost $7 billion directly to Canadian postsecondary institutions yearly (Chua, 2022) and over 22.3 billion dollars annually to the Canadian economy in terms of tuition, tourism, accommodation, and discretionary spending (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). This is more than nine of the top 10 export industries in Canada such as lumber and auto parts (IBISWorld, 2024).

While international students comprised just over one-fifth of postsecondary students in Canada, in 2019 they paid 40% of all tuition at approximately five times the domestic rate (Brunner, 2022, p. 241). As noted, the vast majority of international students are from the East and South (see Chua, 2022). Contrary to stereotypes, many international students have minimal economic resources to pay inflated tuition fees, accommodation, and so forth. Increasingly, media exposés highlight the overcrowded living conditions, unsafe homestay arrangements, labour market exploitation, and vulnerability to employers and teachers due to students' newly arrived status as racialized, precarious migrants with limited access to supports, services, and the rights

afforded to non-precarious people living in Canada (such as health care, student loans, and social services) (Johnstone & Lee, 2014; Zhao & Bhuyan, 2024). Johnstone and Lee (2020) maintained that

> the internationalisation of education is a form of imperial formation, manifesting as a national project utilizing "a redistribution of peoples and resources in territories, contiguous and oversea." In fact, education has become a site for imperial projects using "ongoing polities of dislocation, dependent on refiguring spaces and populations, on systemic recruitments" in Canada with Indigenous peoples earlier … and recently by internationalising Canadian education. (p. 2, as cited in Stoler & McGranahan, 2007)

Whether the role of the university is viewed as fostering productive citizens, or consumers and entrepreneurs, wealth and both public and private property in many White settler states have been accumulated through colonialisms, European transatlantic slavery, and imperialisms. As Stein (2021) argued, "the violence of coloniality subsidizes the shiny promises of modernity, even as this relationship is constantly disavowed" (pp. 393–394). Critical and decolonial approaches to internationalization highlighted how in settler colonial states, settler colonial violence is embedded in systems such as education, immigration, criminal justice, and the labour market. Structural inequities in these systems support Indigenous dispossession and a racial hierarchy of entitlements. These entitlements are intrinsically connected to the everyday and interpersonal forms of violence that racialized international students are disproportionately more likely to experience. The next section provides an overview of the limited but emerging critical scholarship on racialized international students in the West and issues of everyday and structural violence.

Racialized International Students in the West and Everyday and Structural Violence

The scholarship on the harms experienced by racialized international students in the West that utilize more critical and/or decolonial perspectives can be divided into two main categories: (1) research on international student victimization that primarily frames issues of racialized international student vulnerability as ones of inequity, discrimination, and/or crime; and (2) research that situates the migration of and treatment of racialized international students in the West within the broader context of colonialisms and imperialisms. The first body of research that centres international student victimization revealed that racialized international students in the West may be disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence on and off university and college campuses, and in public and private spaces. According to this research, this violence may be committed by landlords, employers, fellow international students, non-international student classmates, professors and administrators, strangers, and by members of their ethnic communities (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015). This literature may acknowledge how systemic factors, such as their precarious status and visa and immigration requirements, unregulated homestay programs, unregulated tuition fees, and the intersections of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017), may produce the conditions of vulnerability; however, the violence is rarely recognized as being part of the structures of settler colonialism. Similarly, activist organizations fighting for the rights of international students most often do not frame the exploitation of international students as tied to Indigenous dispossession (see Kahlon, 2021).

In this growing body of scholarship on discrimination and individualized violence, much of the violence is limited to racial violence and xenophobia in countries such as Australia (see Baas, 2015), New Zealand (see Collins, 2006), the United States (see Yao et al., 2019), the United

Kingdom (see Brown & Jones, 2011), and Canada (see Houshmand et al., 2014). The importance of examining gendered violence and its intersections with racial and other forms of violence is, however, increasingly acknowledged. Bonistall Postel's (2020) review of campus sexual assault research in the United States found that the empirical research on international student victimization in general is "extremely sparse" and that there is even less research on international student vulnerability to campus sexual violence in the United States (p. 72). Hutcheson (2020) added that while there is minimal scholarly research on sexual violence and international students, "[t]his scholarship becomes sparser when the lens is focused on international students who are racialized in Canadian society" (p. 194). Forbes-Mewett and McCullough addressed some of these omissions and erasures in their 2016 research on gendered violence and female international students in Australia and the United States. Drawing on 65 interviews with individuals in Australia, and to a lesser extent in the United States, who provide support services for international students (including support staff, gender violence educators, police officers, faculty, and security staff), they found that female international students are more likely than male international students to experience discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, and social exclusion in their places of learning, work, and accommodation (p. 346). They argued that "intersecting inequalities relating to gender, race, and class are often compounded by the status of international students" who are "alienated from many rights and benefits afforded local students" (pp. 344, 357). This may result in increased propensity for female international students to engage in transactional sex and be victims of sexual harassment and intimate partner violence.

In the Canadian context, a large-scale survey on campus sexual violence in six Francophone universities in Quebec found that international students are more likely to experience sexual violence than their domestic counterparts. This holds true irrespective of multiple factors such as genders, sexual orientations, age, grade levels, and duration at the university (Fethi et al., 2023). Similarly, a McGill University report on student psychological well-being concluded that international students were more likely to have experienced something that resulted in "intense fear, helplessness or horror" and connected this to various traumas including sexual assault (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017, p. 84). Hutcheson and Lewington (2017) reminded us that while international students who experience sexual violence in Canada are protected by human rights legislation, they are "constrained by visa regulations, unfamiliar legal proceedings, and service providers not properly trained in cultural competences" (pp. 83–84).

The second category of research that accounts for colonialisms may also highlight individual cases of violence and how international students are differentially vulnerable; however, these harms are conceptualized as being tied to coloniality and contemporary geopolitics, rather than racism and/or patriarchy in the host nation (Chatterjee & Barber, 2021; Yao et al., 2019). Emphasis is placed on the links between structural and everyday degradations. This second body of research situates harms in settler colonial nations as not about inequitable access or differential treatment by (often well-intentioned) individuals or institutions, but as stated by Ruiz (2024) in their work on settler colonialism, "systems-based phenomena, that perpetuate conditions of poverty, war, racism, and sexual violence for some populations but not others—strategically, predictively, and intergenerationally" (p. 33). The next section addresses these issues through the interviews we conducted with racialized international students and service providers at a university in Ontario, Canada.

Methodology
In this section, we map out the complex relationship between settler colonialism and the subjective experiences of the international students who sought out a Western education in the location of our study and the staff who worked with them. International students in Canada are a widely diverse group, come from over 200 countries, and are differently racialized, at the same time as the term "international student" is a racialized construct conflated with non-White foreignness. For this research, we sought out racialized international students and worked in collaboration with a diverse group of eight international student research assistants who were representative of the international student body at the university hosting our study.

This team conducted 45 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups. Demographic data include the following: 40% of our interviewees came from East and Southeast Asia (18), 40% were African or Afro-Caribbean (18), and 20% were South Asian, Brown, and/or Arab (9). Participants were 62% graduate students (average age 27) and 38% undergraduates (average age 21.8). Also relevant is that the host university is a top employer in a White-dominant city and has an active policy of internationalization.

Prior to starting interviews, research assistants participated in a one-day training with human rights staff which emphasized the importance of decolonial and postcolonial frameworks for the research and trauma-informed approaches to interviewing so that conversations could attend to a range of intersecting vulnerabilities shaped by race, socioeconomic status, gender, and religion. The research assistants recruited participants through their existing contacts, flyers posted on notice boards on campus and on social media, and through snowball sampling (Bertaux, 1981).[ii] Recruitment took place over an 18-month period and participants were offered the option of doing the interview in their first language. Only two interviewees chose this and in both cases the interview was conducted in Mandarin, and the research assistant translated it into English while completing the transcript. The authors reviewed the transcripts from the interviewees and focus groups in order to better understand the links between diverse forms of everyday and structural violence and to account for how these affect international student well-being.

The project also interviewed eight staff who support international students in a variety of roles, from ESL instructors, student coordinators, those who provide teaching assistant training, to human rights staff. We cite several of these staff interviews below as they provided a different window into student experiences, and this contrast illuminates the possibilities and limitations of what could be spoken in the student interviews and focus groups. Using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013), we manually coded the data from students and staff through a multiphase process, including (a) immersion in transcripts through repeated readings to become familiar with the overarching content; (b) labelling the data with codes to identify material relevant for our study; (c) organizing the codes into themes to identify those most relevant to our research questions; (d) refining the themes to better understand their complex meanings; and (e) writing up the analytic narrative.

In the first section of our analysis, we explore how settler colonialism shapes international students' "un-belonging" in public space, with a particular focus on anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and anti-Asian racism. In the second section we reflect on the absence of any discussion of gendered violence in our student interviews, and the startling presence of that same subject in some of our discussions with international student instructors and service providers. Indigenous scholars (Arvin et al., 2013; Hunt, 2016) provide important context here, reminding us that settler colonialism is characterized by heteropatriarchy which has imposed and normalized gendered

violence. We then reflect on the ways gendered and racial violence are endemic in settler colonial contexts.

Settler Colonial Racial Violence in Public Space

In 2019, Jessica, originally from Bangladesh, was attempting to get the bus to her mosque with a group of friends to mark Ramadan when they found themselves in an unexpected argument with a bus driver, who refused to accept their tickets.[iii] In the ensuing confrontation, the driver cursed them and called them "rich Indian kids." While members of their party challenged him and the whole group eventually made it to the mosque in time to break their fast for Maghrib, Jessica described the experience as "shocking" and the labour of recounting it still evoked considerable emotion for her (P. 4).

Similarly, taking a bus while Black is also fraught and potentially humiliating territory. Desmond, a graduate student from Ghana described an incident in 2020 where a group of friends gathered inside the doors of a local shopping centre to wait for a bus that was delayed on a cold winter night. When the bus finally arrived, the driver ignored them forcing them to chase after him before opening his doors. As Desmond explained, the driver told us "We were supposed to stand in the cold and wait for him. So, he told us to get down [from the bus]." They did. But then another group of White students arrived. The driver could not refuse these White students, so he let them on, and then had to allow the Black students aboard, too. Desmond concluded: "I felt if those White people didn't get into the bus, we wouldn't have gotten in. … It was an awful experience" (P. 7).

Here we find that students' experiences of racial profiling on public transportation are consistent with a 2017 Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) report that documents the disproportionate targeting of Indigenous, Muslim, Arab, West Asian, and Black people, and it illustrates the corrosive impacts these attacks have on their sense of dignity, safety, and belonging. Common themes in the OHRC report were that transportation providers sometimes denied service to racialized people: bus drivers did not stop to collect them, and that Muslim people were stereotyped as dishonest and assumed to be trying to "cheat the system" (pp. 56–57).

This analysis suggests that the overt discrimination experienced by the students we interviewed is based on their being racialized. However, as noted above, given that these events took place in an overwhelmingly White city with a university that has an active policy of internationalization, racialization and international student status may often be conflated and together position these students as outsiders. Drawing together analysis of race, nationalism, socioeconomic status, religion, and space, we argue that the violence international students experience on public transportation secures these spaces as rightly belonging to the settler colonial, White, and Christian majority. In contrast, Muslim and Black "others" are made to understand that their movement on public transportation is contingent and fraught territory, a process that is key to the racialized regime of differential value that undergirds White settler colonialism. As the majority of international students must take public transportation because they do not have the funds to do otherwise, incidents of racial harassment, verbal abuse, and Islamophobia bring into view the intersecting systems of domination that secure these students' "un-belonging" in the mundane public spaces of daily life, and the ways this un-belonging upholds the territorial violence of Euro-Canadian sovereignty and Indigenous dispossession.

Asian students interviewed for this study also reported experiences of exclusion, the most dramatic of which occurred in the public space of the street. As Amy recounted, one evening in the summer of 2020 she was saying goodbye to her friends at her front door when a tall White man

walked by and shouted at them: “you stupid Chinese animals” (P. 5). She wanted to yell back. But this man knew where she lived, and so she was worried about her exposure to worse danger in the future. In this enforced silence and shock, she said: “you know, I was totally lost for a while watching him walking away” (P. 5).

Here again recent research suggests that the international student status of our participants may be only one significant factor informing why these women were targeted for abuse. In June 2021 the Angus Reid Institute released a survey suggesting that more than half of Asian Canadians have suffered discrimination in the past year (Chau, 2021), with over 1000 cases of anti-Asian racism reported by community organizations in Canada. In these incidents, Asian women made up close to 60% of reported victims; indeed, Canada now has more reports of anti-Asian racism per capita than the United States (Learning Network, 2021). Here the climate of anti-Asian racism promoted by political leaders and populist discourses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious context. However, for international students, their precarious status increases their vulnerability as many believe that if they report a grievance or crime, it could adversely impact their application for immigration, or could even result in them being deported, in addition to the challenges noncitizens face in navigating an unfamiliar reporting bureaucracy (Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022).

Indeed, in our focus group with the research assistants who conducted the student interviews, Chantel, a student from Ghana noted that most participants believed they have no real options for protesting systemic or interpersonal discrimination since they “don’t really have the power to really fight back” (RA FG: 34). Importantly, not only do students feel that they can’t fight back due to their precarious status, several staff also noted that the International Centre was unwilling to acknowledge students’ experiences of racism. Mary, who formerly worked as an ESL instructor, voiced this perspective most forcefully. In her words: “I'm not kidding, like I could not use the word 'racism' in [the International] department. People would just say, 'That doesn't exist' … it was terrible” (p. 14).

Importantly, in both the settler colonial racial violence described by the students and in Mary’s critique of the International Centre, we see an analysis of a racialized regime of differential value that contradicts the dominant Canadian mythology in which “we” are a benign multicultural nation. While the role of settler colonialism remains “off stage” in both the narratives of students and staff interviewed for this project, the ongoing process of Indigenous dispossession is a foundational template. The obfuscation of settler colonialism is a key technology of settler rule as it relies on and reinscribes hierarchies of power.

Finally, perhaps the most popular stereotype about international students is that they must be incredibly wealthy to afford the inflated tuition fees. Our participants told us that Middle Eastern and Asian students most often faced this stereotype, and an almost laughable example was recounted by a student from Hong Kong in the Teacher Education program:

> When people find out that I am an international student they just assume that I am rich. Actually one time I went to … open a [bank] … account. And the bank advisor said: “We want you to do some investments.” I said, “I really don’t have time to do that.” They were like, “Oh no, don’t worry you can just put in like a couple of hundred thousand dollars.” I was like [sounds incredulous] “I just barely have a hundred dollars.” … “I don’t think even my parents have a couple of hundred thousand dollars and even if they do, good for them. That’s not my money.” (P. 6)

Like many participants in our study, this student held down a service sector job in addition to her full-time studies and described her parents as “working their butt off to send [her] here.” (P. 11)

Demographic analysis of our study data suggests that she is not alone, as 42.9% of our interviewees partially self-funded their studies, many with jobs off campus over and above their work as research or teaching assistants. Overall, global economic divisions were most stark for students from Africa, as only 27% of them had parental support.

But perhaps the assumption that international students are inordinately wealthy is most effectively challenged by an international student national survey which found that 79% of international students worried about the ability to afford housing (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018, p. 8). Here we wonder what do the stereotypes of international student wealth produce? We argue that these preconceptions work to undermine international students' experiences of systemic exclusion, at the same time as they reinscribe the logics of racial-colonial capitalism. Together, these discourses confound simplistic narratives about a "win-win" situation for international students studying in the Western academy.

Gendered Violence Within the Settler Colonial University

Here we begin our analysis through foregrounding interviews with international student instructors and service providers in order to reflect on the colonial hierarchies of power that make international students disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) while at the same time largely erasing their capacity to speak about these experiences. While the staff we interviewed confine their analysis to the level of the university, at the end of this section we theorize how these systems reinscribe heteropatriarchal settler colonial discourses, demonstrating how the university operates in concert with the settler state.

We start by returning to the interview with Mary, a former ESL instructor, who worked at our host institution for a decade. In her interview she spoke primarily about the significance of gendered violence while also emphasizing the unwillingness of the university to "support the student or … the staff or the instructors who were facing those issues" (p. 2). To illustrate the seriousness of these concerns, she provided several examples, the first of which was a situation of intimate partner violence (IPV) with a student from Saudi Arabia who "showed up one day with her right arm broken and had a cast on her wrist" (p. 2). Mary believes that this student ended up in a women's shelter and was deported for not meeting the conditions of her student visa (p. 2). While the university may have had a limited ability to influence the outcome for the woman whose case is described here, this example certainly illustrates the precarity that students face in the context of IPV. The university could have helped to mitigate this vulnerability by ensuring that the student received appropriate support including translation services and culturally literate legal and emotional support. Their failure to do so speaks volumes about their interest in student safety—an issue that ironically is a significant "selling point" for universities in marketing themselves to the parents of international students.

The second example was from students facing sexual violence in a homestay. In the context of a writing class, Mary narrated the following incident:

> [students] would write in their journal, in my case, crying out for help. Because they don't know what else they can do. So I had one student from Turkey. She wrote about ... I believe it was actually a relative of hers in Canada she was staying with. And having to lock the door every night because ... there was something going on. … Brought it to the admin and [it] didn't go anywhere. (p. 3)

As so many students have lodgings in homestays, providing support to address situations of sexual coercion or harassment would seem like the minimum a university should undertake to ensure student security. The fact that these services were not available speaks to the ways the International

Services office was structured around an ethic of refusal: failing to believe students when they described GBV and to take action to protect them. These same themes are also visible in the next example, where a student in Mary's class approached her to report she was being harassed on social media by another student in her classroom. She requested to switch to another class to avoid the person but was denied this option by the administration. Mary, who spoke the student's first language, narrated:

> she was *so* upset about the fact that the school did not believe her story and let her continue with her misery, having to face the person who harassed her ... consistently in a class … I ended up encouraging her … [to go to] HR; "and maybe you can tell them the story, I can be the translator." So she shared her story in front of the HR officers, all in tears, very emotional. It was the time I realized there is no system for these guys to really tap into. (p. 3)

Mary noted that other staff colleagues who worked with students in homestays also saw significant abuse from families, and some students who attempted suicide (p. 4). Indeed, Mary noted that both she and her coworkers cited these institutional failures as key reasons why they eventually left the host university (p. 4).

Interviews with two staff from the Human Rights and Equity Office (HREO) emphasized many of these same themes. First, Daisy, the sexual violence support and education coordinator, noted that 30% of those who disclose sexual violence to the HREO are international students (p. 2), a figure that suggests they are disproportionally vulnerable to sexual violence relative to their population (13.7% of students) on campus, while also being consistent with research in this area (Fethi et al., 2023). Secondly, Daisy noted that she "couldn't get in there to do the education in International" (p. 7) suggesting that years after Mary left, it was still impossible for HREO staff to provide any proactive workshops on GBV in International Services. In the context of this continuing institutional silence, it is particularly remarkable that so many international students disclosed to the HREO office.

The inflated tuition fees charged to international students also present a barrier to reporting, as if a student needs to drop a course, the financial cost is much greater. As Daisy said, "there's a lot more on the line for them" (p. 9). There is also more on the line when a survivor is reporting someone who caused them harm from their own community. Daisy noted that when a penalty for causing harm includes being removed from campus,

> well, where are they going to go? Like who's gonna be there to support them? Because … when we're saying you can't be a part of this community … it's not like they can … just go home. That's not always an option. (p. 9)

This reality can also discourage survivors from pursuing formal accountability measures, a concern that Supriya, a past director of the HREO, also noted when IPV occurs when students come with spouses. For example, many may wonder "what [about] reporting because, 'do you lose your visa?'… 'What would happen if you have children?'" (p. 12). Extending the lens of GBV to include gender identity and sexual orientation, Supriya noted that

> because these are issues that are just not talked about in many countries from which our students come, … a number of different places may have very different ideas around homosexuality … sexual orientation … about trans identities. And so that … may make people even more reluctant to come forward. So, I think there's any number of difficulties in this particular area for international students. (p. 9)

Given these realities, it is no wonder that the literature on international students and gender violence suggests that these students reported more PTSD symptoms after campus sexual violence than others (Fethi et al., 2023).

From a methodological perspective, we as researchers, must also ask why none of the 45 students we interviewed actually spoke about GBV, despite our questions to elicit this discussion. We realized that one of the reasons for this silence was that we did not use behaviourally specific questions, which have been shown to yield more accurate results (Fethi et al., 2023). Questions such as, "did someone make insulting or hurtful comments that were sexual in nature?", or "did someone make you suffer negative consequences because you refused to engage in sexual activities with them?", typically garner very different results than more general questions about experiencing sexual and gendered violence. Indeed, many people are unsure about the definition of sexual assault and may also not want to inhabit the presumed "victim" status this term implies.

Of course, there are also many more intersectional barriers international students face when they speak about GBV. Additional factors include housing insecurity (if they speak about harassment or abuse in a homestay), unemployment or labour exploitation (in a context of gendered violence at work), academic failure (and its associated costs) if they report a professor or teaching assistant, retaliation or disbelief from members of their communities, and a lack of familiarity with reporting and support mechanisms in their new educational environment. Taken together, these insights are consistent with research by Hutcheson and Parsons (2022), which noted that people who cause harm through GBV against international students are often in positions of power (e.g., partners on whom they depend, landlords, employers, and teaching assistants, instructors/professors).

While the staff we interviewed focused their analysis on the failures of the university in mitigating these harms, international student's specific vulnerability is overwhelmingly related to the White, heteropatriarchal systems that are characteristic of settler colonial contexts. While feedback from our interviewees provides insights into how GBV is handled in one university, recent research (Yercich et al., 2023) which reported on GBV in Canadian universities highlighted that our findings are consistent with themes in major universities across Canada. This report surveyed policies to address GBV at 26 Canadian universities and found that none of them had referenced any of the specific circumstances facing international students despite the fact that as noted earlier, international students constitute 21% of higher education students in Canada (Buckner et al., 2021, pp. 32-33). While international students are most often subsumed under comments about the importance of intersectional approaches, the key variables that put racialized international students at an increased risk of GBV have never been mentioned. Further, the report did not unpack how settler colonization necessitates international students increased precarity, nor did it provide tools to understand how universities continue to operate as an arm of the settler colonial state in order to secure the space of higher education as rightly belonging to the White heteropatriarchal majority. In contrast, racialized international students find that accountability mechanisms for gendered and racialized violence are not meant for them, a process that is key to the regime of differential value that undergirds White settler regimes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the documentary *Sold a Lie* (Baksh & Kelley, 2022) noted in the introduction of this article. The documentary followed several young Indian international students as they navigated the discrepancies between what they were sold and the realities of their lives in

Canada. The film documented their fight against a private college that accepted their tuition but did not provide them enrollment, and their protest against the employers who refused to provide them overdue wages. In the documentary the causes of the injustice were by and large the predatory practices of Canadian postsecondary institutions (especially private career colleges) and the lack of oversight by well-meaning Canadian governments.

In contrast, drawing on the interviews with racialized international students and university employees offering services to international students, this paper argues that settler colonialism is foundational to producing and normalizing the violence and exploitation international students may experience. We emphasize how all forms of exploitation and violence are systemic and interlinked, albeit often not in ways that are recognized by the individuals experiencing the harm. In White settler societies such as Canada the structure of settler colonialism is foundational and must be recognized in order to examine and address the violence. In fact, the obfuscation of settler colonization is key to its continued operation, and to the differential vulnerability that disproportionately affects precarious migrants, many of whom are international students.

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[i] One of the authors is a racialized settler and the other is a White settler. Our research aims to legitimate marginalized voices and to disrupt structural inequities. Along these lines this paper endeavours to uphold the integrity of the experiences of the racialized international students who participated in our study, as well as to situate these experiences within broader contexts that are often invisible to the vast majority of people.

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[iii] As this was their first summer in Canada, Jessica and her friends did not know that student tickets only applied to high school students. Assuming they qualified, Jessica and her friends purchased student tickets instead of adult ones—and the driver contested their fare. (Jessica P. 4)