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Reconceptualizing Black Students Going Abroad: Heritage Experiences in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The lack of participation in study abroad programs by Black students is a topic of persistent concern yet increasing opportunities has not yielded significant results. A closer look at study abroad programs identifies a gap in program offerings and experiences that Black students might actually desire. Reconceptualizing what Black people value from travel experiences and addressing students' primary obstacles going abroad—the financial burden, fear of anticipated racism, and finding programs of interest (Gasman, 2013)—led Howard University to offer a heritage program approach. This article looks at how the Young African Leadership Initiative (YAALI) fellowship closes the cultural gap that exists for Black students in traditional study abroad programs.

Keywords: Africa, study abroad, minority-serving institutions, culture, travel

Introduction

The “dearth” of Black students in international study abroad programs has been noted both by academics (Gasman, 2013; IIE 201; Tenseley, 2015) and the national media (Fischer, 2014; Tenseley, 2015). However, except for marginal improvements at a few universities (Redden, 2018), participation remains low. The failure of programs to attract Black students, especially at Minority Serving Institutions (MSI), opens the floor

for a closer look at the obstacles that impede Black students from taking advantage of opportunities for international travel and study abroad. An analysis of the history, trends, gaps, and biases that shape the lived experience of Black students with respect to international study points towards rethinking the framework used to design international programming for them. The Young African Leadership Initiative (YAALI) fellowship at Howard University is offered as a case study to examine an alternative “heritage seeking experience” model that addresses the culture-based realities of Black students’ fears, expectations, and desires for community building when engaged in international travel under the auspices of academic institutions.

Why Studying Abroad Matters

Study abroad programs have been a component of the American higher education system for centuries (Hoffa, 2007; Lucas, 2006; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut & Klute, 2012). One of the first international exchanges involved 20–30 students from Indiana University who in 1879 took part in what would become annual “Summer Tramps” through Europe (Indiana University, 2019). Noted as the first faculty-initiated international study abroad program and involving traveling over 250 miles by foot through Europe, the program “recognized the importance for faculty and students to know and teach about other societies; to learn languages; to acquire new knowledge through direct experiences; and to be sensitive to other cultures” (O’Meara, 2019). Yet these opportunities were mainly available to white American privileged or wealthy college students. By the 1920s, alongside a growing number of faculty-led study abroad tours, Junior Year Abroad (JYA) programs and the Institute of International Education (IIE) was established. The latter was a

central coordinating hub to establish political, economic, and cultural collaboration between students, scholars, and institutions worldwide... one of the first institutes to advocate for international exchange, pioneering some of the earliest scholar and student exchanges between the United States and countries around the world. (IIE, 2019)

As more and more universities began incorporating study abroad programs at their institutions, diversity challenges among participants and limiting opportunities for travel just to Europe remained (Hoffa, 2007). After a brief suspension in international study during World War II, study abroad programs later resumed with a revised focus to promote peaceful coexistence between nations by establishing the first study abroad programs in Russia, Asia and South America (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut & Klute, 2012) Financial support increased as well, with the Higher Education Assistance Act of 1965 allowing students to use financial aid for study abroad and The Gilman International Scholarship providing assistance to Pell grant recipients (Bolen,

2001; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut & Klute, 2012). Even community colleges reported new entrants into the study abroad world (Hess, 1982).

From community colleges to private 4-year institutions, higher education continued to expand study abroad opportunities focused largely on the individual benefits of development. Many research studies confirm that studying abroad is a rewarding experience that impacts personal growth, cultural development, intellectual capacity, and educational/career attainment (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009; Potts, 2015; Tarrant, Donald, & Lee, 2013). A survey of college alumni conducted by the International Education of Students concluded that study abroad programs benefits “can even be sustained over a period as long as 50 years” (Dwyer, 2004, p. 161). The advantages are also more immediate: in a quantitative study of 19,100 students who studied abroad, results reflected that “Four-year graduation rates for African-American students who studied abroad were 31 percent higher than those who did not study abroad and 18 percent higher for other non-white students” (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011, p. 9). Yet notably missing from the catalogue of benefits is the academic experience; it is largely the experiences out of the classroom that students harken back to when recalling the “soft skills” and confidence gleaned when negotiating a foreign land.

In 1990 the National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad, the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), and Institute of International Education (IIE) published “A National Mandate for Education Abroad: Getting on with the Task.” This position paper recommended that “by the year 2000, 10 percent of American college and university students should have a significant educational experience abroad during their undergraduate year” (Dessoff, 2008, p. 14). The aggregate number of students studying abroad has increased dramatically, with a 232% increase from 1985–86 through 2001–02 (IIE, 2002). It comes as no surprise to learn that in 2000 President Bill Clinton issued an Executive Memorandum in support of international education and directed the Departments of State and Education to recognize and celebrate International Education Week. Nor did the gains stop there; an additional 250% increase in U.S students participating in study abroad programs was recorded between 2005 and 2015 (Institute of International Education, 2015). It would seem that study abroad programs have reached a high watermark on the cusp of 2020. But does a rising tide lift all boats?

The quick answer is no. The picture painted above of the increasing appeal of study abroad programs is not uniformly felt by all college students. Black students in particular seem not as interested in the current model and understanding why is key for moving the discussion forward if higher education truly wants to increase the number of Black students involved in international programs such that they reap the benefits of such travel.

Black Students Studying Abroad

The same 1990 study recommended that “diversity in undergraduate education abroad should be vigorously addressed,” and a closer look at those dramatic increases reveals that Black student participation in study abroad programs has lagged (Dessoff, 2008, p. 14). On the whole, African American participation in study abroad programs has been on the rise, and the percentage of all students who study abroad at African universities has also increased. Yet the Institute for International Education’s (IIE) *Open Doors 2016* report stated that Black students make up just 5.6% of study abroad participants, and only 5.8% of study abroad programs are hosted in Africa—a 25% decrease from 2010 (IIE, 2017). According to Mark Pires in a study of study abroad and cultural exchange programs to Africa, even though numbers are really low, he states “Among the small percentage of American students who have ventured down the less-traveled road to Africa, many attest to having benefited from an extraordinary, eye-opening, and sometimes transformative life experience” (2000, p. 41)

The picture gets even more complicated when one looks even closer at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), with only slightly more than half of them even offering study abroad programs (Gasman, 2013). While one might assume that among those HBCUs that have study abroad programs the logical destination would be Africa, in fact it turns out that the leading study abroad destination is China. In surveying minority-serving institutions, the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions (Gasman, 2013) reports that the three main obstacles for students of color participating in study abroad programs are financial burdens, fear of anticipated racism and racist encounters abroad, and finding study abroad programs (including program locations) that are of interest to them. Even though research shows that African American students hold a strong desire to go abroad, participation is hindered by fears of fitting in and stereotypes about the study abroad experience (Gearhart, 2005). Might providing international “heritage experience” programming that offers a meaningful cultural framework for Black students to travel to Africa be a clear starting place to “vigorously address” Black participation in international programming?

Heritage Matters

Historically study abroad programs have been populated by White Americans of Western European origin travelling to European destinations (Hoffa, 2007; Lucas, 2006; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut & Klute, 2012). “Since the IIE began collecting data on student racial/ethnic background in 1993, an average of 84% of the total U.S. students abroad are Caucasian” (Comp, 2008). With such a strong relationship between participants and study abroad destination, heritage has predominantly been a critical component of American study abroad programs. Bertrice Szekely (1988) defines heritage travel experiences as “selecting a study abroad venue because of family

background—national, religious, cultural or ethnic.” Craufurd Goodwin and Michael Nacht (1988) argue that students with “Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American ancestors, and especially those from working-class backgrounds, may not be charmed by a rented college in the Oxford High Street or a villa overlooking Florence” (p. 76). Coming to grips with offering international travel abroad programs that speak to Black students will require revising the standard picture of the design and purpose of these programs that dominates the literature. In examining ways to increase Black student participation, heritage must be unpacked differently with students who are not from the host area.

Among the diverse landscape of study abroad programs, Engle and Engle’s foundational 2003 article, “Study Abroad Levels: Toward a Classification of Program Types,” developed a level-based program classification of study abroad program types analyzed across seven areas:

1. Length of student sojourn;
2. Entry target-language competence;
3. Language used in course work;
4. Context of academic work;
5. Types of student housing;
6. Provisions for guided/structured cultural interaction and experiential learning; and
7. Guided reflection on cultural experience.

Scholars have used this analytical model to understand and improve study abroad programs. For example, researchers have found that the more comprehensive and longer the duration of the study abroad program, the better the language acquisition, cultural competency, and overall experience of the participating student (Dwyer 2004). Yet lacking in this analysis is attention to the cultural identity of the traveler. Engle & Engle’s assumption of a “universal” traveler points to a significant oversight in their classification system, as differences in who is travelling abroad have profound effects on the range of possible answers arrived at when thinking about the various components of what comprises a meaningful international travel experience. Indeed, if not every student is looking for the same thing out of a travel or study abroad experience, then what constitutes a “better” experience might not be subject to a uniform one-classification scheme-fits-all answer.

The assumption of “mono-chromaticity” concerning students travelling abroad is part of a broader problem concerning imagining international travel in general. Zim Ugochukwu, the Nigerian founder of *Travel Noire* (2018), created her organization in part due to the lack of Black representation in international travel media. In an interview, she observed that:

every idea starts with a problem. And ours was quite simple: we didn’t see travelers who looked like us. Not in travel magazines, in

digital advertisements, or in leading tourism campaigns. (Anderson, 2018)

Things were so bad that a Google image search of “black travelers” led to numerous web pages featuring black suitcases (Anderson, 2018). According to Ugochukwu “[i]t turns out there was a simple explanation” for why: “The travel industry is dominated by the story of one type of Western traveler” (Anderson, 2018)—a type that unsurprisingly does not speak to the needs of the typical Black traveller who might otherwise be interested in an international experience.

Ugochukwu’s experience is illustrative of the Western assumption that a traveler is typically socio-economically privileged, white, and whose motives and purpose for travelling are largely for leisure and sightseeing. This model of the international traveler is the norm not just for travel generally but for students engaged in international travel for study abroad programs. Indeed, some of the oldest and largest American study abroad programs use the language of privilege and leisure to characterize their programs, such as “The world is our classroom,”¹ “Become global leaders,”² and “Your Discovery. Our People...”³ This kind of language is a shorthand for the way companies shape the structure of their study abroad programs and the type of mindset they believe attracts a student to participate in the program. Yet these phrases echo Western ontologies of materialism, recapitulate the axiology of conquering, and embrace a worldview of control and mastery (Azibo, 1992, p. 528)—an outlook that unsurprisingly is antithetical to large numbers of Black Americans whose ancestors were kidnapped, expatriated from their homeland, and enslaved in the name of western “advancement.”

Research Approach

Today, Africa remains a wellspring of inspiration to the diaspora, and the continent has come to represent a site of reclaimed history and opposition to the current world order. In distinguishing the difference between research methodology – “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed,” and research methods – “listing, interrogating, observing, or

¹ “The world is our classroom” is on the main page of the CIEE website. CIEE is a nonprofit study abroad and intercultural exchange organization that transforms lives and builds bridges between individuals and nations by sponsoring a wide variety of opportunities for the exchange of ideas and experiences.

² “Become global leaders” is the mission of Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) Abroad. Founded in 1950, IES Abroad is a not-for-profit provider with 140+ study abroad and internship programs around the world for college/university students.

³ “Your Discovery. Our People...” is the motto of International Studies Abroad (ISA). Since 1987, International Studies Abroad (ISA) has provided college students in the United States and Canada the opportunity to explore the world.

looking at data for evidence” (Harding, 1978, pp. 2–3), this project challenges two common theoretical assumptions: the understanding of the purpose of travel and the notion of the universal traveler.

The research approach constructed for this study methodologically uses normative theory to examine the *long-view* experiences of African people. While many social scientists instinctually move toward grounded theory, as an inductive approach to the study of social life, it is derived from a western sociological framework. The methodological assumptions of grounded theory, from the field of sociology similar to many of the traditional disciplines, are rooted in the social reality of biological and racial differences. The narrative frame taken for this study comes from centering normative practices out of Africa. As Carr (2006) suggests, this study “must be linked to the articulation of a genealogy of Africana intellectual work which aligns disciplinary Africana Studies within a range of normative practices emerging out of that long-view genealogy” (439). In other words, instead of using western assumptions to invade a conversation about Black life, what are the normative practices, languages and ways of knowing that are culturally centered out of Africa? In examining the lack of participation in study abroad programs by Black students, this lens orients the reader to a historical and cultural grounding that extends out of Africa and influences the behavior of Black people in America.

An African Framework of Travel Abroad

One might imagine in light of the Western model of travel that an African sensibility does not associate travelling with education. Some might even say there is not an issue with adopting the notion of a white “universal” travelling student if there isn’t an alternative tradition to point to. But such a viewpoint only illustrates the general ignorance of African educational models, which one might argue even are the *source* of the notion of studying abroad.

For African people, ancient and indigenous models of education often involved a process of attaining wisdom and knowledge through traveling beyond the typical classroom. Ancient Egyptian writings championed education, celebrating the fact that “intellectual pursuits constituted the very fabric of life in Egyptian society... the literate Egyptian was a constant seeker after the kind of culture which could open up the mind” (Obenga, 2004, p. 245-247). That search for knowledge was not just rhetorical. The pharaonic determinative for the word “school” shows a foot, indicating that movement and memory were involved in the education process. As far away as Greece western philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato spoke of Egyptian scribes as being both teachers and travelers (Obenga, 2004).

Later in African history, one can find indigenous African proverbs that extol the importance of seeking and traveling in the acquisition of new knowledge. An Ethiopian proverb says, “You travel on until you return home;

you live on until you return to earth” (Ley, 1999, p. 108), and the Gikuyu believed that “Traveling is learning” (Press, 2011, p. 80). With a history rooted in oral traditions, travel becomes essential for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. In examining the scholarship around Black repatriation to Liberia and Sierra Leone on boats in the 19th century, Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa movement in the 20th century, and the rise of diasporic expatriates moving to Ghana during the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah to escape US racism a quite different conceptualization of the ends and purposes of “travel” for people of African descent. The conversations about travel, especially back to Africa, has been a long one. Most recently, according to Ghana news sources, “[a]bout half a million Africans in the Diaspora are expected to arrive in the country to take part in “The Year of Return Ghana 2019”, a historic campaign to mark the end of 400 years of the slave trade in the country. According to the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA), out of that number 350,000 participants will come from North America” (Ghana Web, 2019). Conversations of heritage clearly have become a central argument in driving participation in such travel opportunities.

In sum, because other cultures and societies interpret the ends of traveling and the study abroad experience in diverse ways, it is a distortion to frame “the traveler” as being embodied only by White bodies. People of African descent often share a different but equally valuable travel experience that differs from the pursuit of leisure. The sheer fact that the ancestors of people of African descent were involuntarily brought to the Americas, enslaved, and prohibited from returning to their homelands has resulted in a different set of social, political, and even emotional values about travelling and study abroad.

The historical connection between knowledge and travel for African people points to a critical gap in the conversation about the disparities in study abroad programs for black students today. The question should not be about *why* the descendants of those taken from their native land are no longer travelling, but rather *what* has interrupted the journey for knowledge—and what would constitute reinstating those ties. To answer the question of closing the gap for Black students, the construction of the YAALI fellowship program looked back at the function of travel for people of African descent.

Methods

Howard University has a long-established historical legacy of creating, sponsoring, and establishing global initiatives directed at studying abroad (Logan, 1969; Muse, 2002; Stuart, 2007; Journal of Higher Education, 2012). In *Howard University: The First Hundred Years* (1969), Rayford Logan spends an entire chapter on the institution’s international activity. According to Logan, Howard’s interest in Africa stemmed as far back as 1921, when Broad of Trustee members, faculty, and alumni organized

discussions about the emergent Second Pan African Congress. Interest in travel abroad continued to grow at Howard such that by the 1960s, there was “hardly a nation [in Africa] that has not been visited by persons connected with Howard University” (Logan, 1969, p. 540).

More recently in 1993, the Ralph J. Bunche International Affairs Center was established to strengthen study abroad opportunities at Howard University by becoming the official focal point for the university’s many and varied international activities. Home to over 20 study abroad service providers, ten faculty-led study abroad initiatives, and five international fellowship programs, the Bunche Center “serve[s] as the hub and catalyst for enhancing international engagement for the benefit of the HU community” (Ralph Bunche Center, 2018). By 2010 Howard University had begun to institute a university-wide Globalization Fee to address the financial challenges that prohibit international travel. By providing students with funds to obtain a passport and scholarship funds for international travel (regardless of rank and GPA), students were encouraged to engage in any number of international academic opportunities, including gaining language proficiency abroad, participating in international conferences and meetings, visiting international organizations, and of course study, research and travel abroad (Donaldson, 2010, p. 1). Nevertheless, despite these exciting initiatives in place to address the challenges of finances and opportunity, low participation in study abroad programs at Howard University still persisted.

While examining study abroad programs, I became dissatisfied with prevailing explanations for the lack of Black students’ participation that centered on economics, personal resistance, or issues related to the culture of a destination. Analyses that failed to link the identity of the students and the cultural basis for travel abroad by this population seemed to miss an essential factor impacting Black student participation and engagement. I theorized instead that the journey is interrupted by the universalist outlook imposed on Black students that neither addresses their unique concerns as students of color nor offered them a compelling alternative to the western rationale for travel that centered on sightseeing and tourism as its ends. Focusing on racial, ethnic and cultural awareness related to international travel would, I believed, offer a compelling alternative answer to the perennial question of how to increase Black student participation in international programming.

To test my hypothesis and see if the gap for Black students travelling abroad could be closed without recapitulating the study abroad model that seemingly doesn’t appeal to Black students, I developed the YAALI fellowship program in 2014 at Howard University that put a heritage experience at its core and “humanized” the purpose of travel abroad for people of African descent. The YAALI fellowship aimed to go beyond the “typical” study abroad experience for Black students by focusing on the cultural-based realities of student fears and desire for community building when travelling abroad.

Data in this study were collected from two sources: pre and post-travel interviews and student journal entries. Students were first selected for the fellowship opportunity based on their ability to complete an application answering general information, provide evidence of maintaining at least a 3.2 GPA, and participate in a pre-travel interview to demonstrate their interest in Africa and/or Black consciousness. During the pre-travel interview, YAALI participants were asked to retrospectively examine their purpose for wanting to travel to Africa, their understanding of YAALI's purpose, and what they hope to gain from this travel experience.

After being selected, students were asked how they hoped to accomplish their goals in order to maximize their travel experience. Additionally, before students set foot on the continent, YAALI fellows were required to participate in the reading and discussion of a foundational text related to the selected country. During the travel journey, participants answered daily journal questions on the reading of a common text and their travel experiences. The journal prompts provided to the participants were related to the heritage host country and the experiences of participants. The post-travel interview questions returned to the pre-interview questions about their goals, memorable moments on the trip, and how different elements of the program impacted their experiences.

The evidence presented is based on four years of data. A clear majority of the students are Black (99%). Each trip generally cost between \$3,300 and \$3,600. About 60% of the students receive partial or full funding to cover the travel cost from Howard University, and the rest pay out of pocket. Priority is given to students who have never traveled to Africa, do not have a passport, are STEM majors, and/or are males. In the past four years, the YAALI program has not provided course credit.

Findings

I always wanted to go to Africa

In centralizing the question of heritage for Black students at an HBCU, the question of destination was quickly settled. To ensure cultural continuity, in addition to addressing divisions that have developed from a long history of oppression for Black people, Africa was selected as a host destination. While it is understood that at an HBCU students can study African history and culture, take courses in African languages, and meet students from Africa, the opportunity to travel to Africa and connect to the history, culture, language, and community would be a dream come true for most (indeed, it is telling that priority is given to those students who have never traveled to Africa or do not have a passport). Yet it is a dream that Black students can experience only if they get over their well-documented fears regarding racist treatment while travelling to white-majority countries. With IIE reporting in the 2000s, less than 5% of study abroad companies, school-

based programs and faculty-led initiatives offering experiences at sites in Africa, the YAALI fellowship made it a priority to provide heritage experience opportunities to multiple sites in Africa, diversifying the offerings beyond that of the most popular African destination of South Africa (IIE, 2017). However, reconceptualizing the purpose of international travel would require not simply increasing the number of African countries, but also reframing the orientation of student travelers to counter stereotypes regarding Africa by foregrounding the heritage experience purpose.

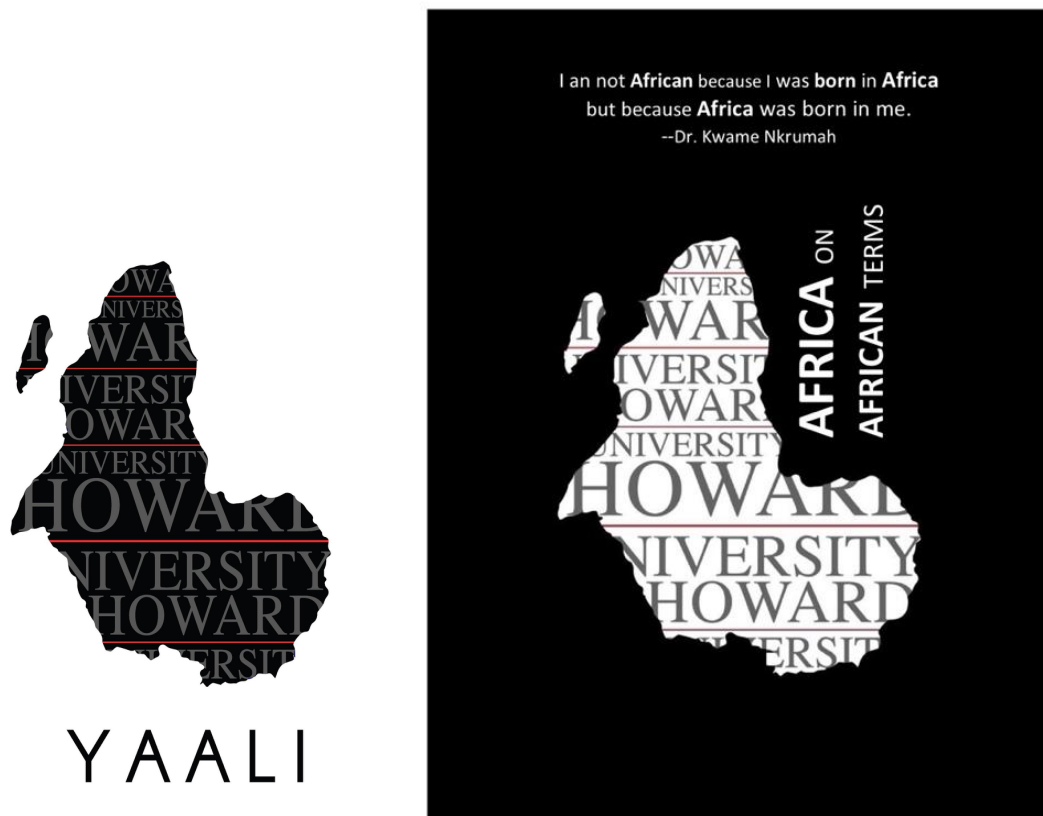


Figure 1: YAALI Logo and Motto

The first step in centralizing heritage was consciously constructing YAALI's logo and motto (see figure 1). At first glance, individuals are compelled to ask, "Why is Africa upside-down?" In attempting to draw students into thinking about traveling specifically to Africa, YAALI first focuses on changing the conversation about "the traveler," starting with imagery. Both the logo and motto of YAALI stand out as among the most radical components of the program. Figure 1 illustrates that the positioning of the continent was inspired by the cover of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations' book *African World History Project: The Preliminary Challenge* (2002). The authors reference a Pharaonic text that dates back to ancient KMT, recounting how the Nile flowed downward toward the Mediterranean and designating the Upper KMT as the southern

portion and Lower KMT the northern portion.⁴ When the Egyptians envisioned the world around them, they drew maps of that world based upon their own orientation within their environment, not according to imposed Western standards. Even though the world is a sphere, without a universal designated portion physically known as the top or North, fellows are challenged with confronting their own pre-formed assumptions about the world's orientation.

The YAALI motto "Africa on African Terms" calls out a meaningful challenge to participants to think about how people of African descent see Africa and the world for themselves. This question is asked during the pre-interview process, providing the fellows any opportunity to showcase their understanding of the program's mission. The responses provided by students are illustrative of the effectiveness of the logo and motto in accomplishing the intended ends:

The YAALI logo, in a way, represents the freedom African people have not simply requested but taken back. The logo is represented as an upside-down continent of Africa because Egyptians described the now southern parts of Africa as the north in their ancient maps. There is a powerful statement hidden in the symbol. The logo demands respect in that it shows the world that they will view Africa from the African perspective. African people have a voice and a history that cannot be erased.

The color red represents love. The color black represents the people. Together, these two colors portray the "love for black people." As African Americans, it is imperative that we stay rooted in where we come from. We must identify ourselves as not only Americans but also as Africans.

Through critical thinking and self-reflection, the program allows students to mount a formidable challenge to the contemporary permutations of a Western state of mind that sees Africa only as the dark continent. With no right or wrong answer, the question points the students in a direction that is inward reflective.

Second, we named the YAALI fellowship program in alignment with the popular Mandela Washington Fellowship program, at the time referred to by President Obama as the Young AfricanA Leadership Initiative (YALI), a federal program committed to investing in developing partnerships in Africa (YALI, 2014). YAALI's mission was to allow young Africana (African American, Caribbean, and Latin American) student leaders to learn the skills, research, and service experiences needed to become global citizens.

⁴ Ancient people from the Upper Nile civilizations called "Egypt" KMT (Kemet) which in translates as "Black land."

YAALI's vision reverses YALI's destination and allows students of African descent to return to Africa to accomplish these goals. As one student put it in a post-travel interview:

I always wanted to go to Africa. Participating in the YAALI program to Ghana was the highlight of my year. Reading about W.E.B. Du Bois and his global scholarship is enlightening. However, visiting his grave, touching his doctoral robe, and seeing the beauty of Africa, he wrote about elevates his writing.... I can't wait to see the South Africa Mandela spoke of.

Another was even more expansive about how the trip affected their outlook:

When I learned about the Young African Leadership Initiative (YAALI), I knew that I had to get involved and refused to miss out on an opportunity to travel to Africa. As I applied to be a Ghana 2016 YAALI fellow, I had no idea how impactful the organization would be in my life. I was excited to explore my culture and learn about my connection to the continent, but I gained so much more. Each trip to Africa with YAALI had a meaning to me, and they all hold a special place in my heart. In Ghana, I found God and learned that my success means nothing if I do not use my platform to uplift other people of the Black diaspora. The trip was the summer after I lost my father, and my experience at Royalhouse Chapel in Ghana fostered my desire to seek a relationship with God. During my first trip to South Africa, I learned about the power of forgiveness and strength. My final trip with YAALI, I was able to travel to Uganda and Rwanda was reminded of my love for those countries and the continent all over again. The trip reassured me of my goal to work to eradicate health care disparities across the Black diaspora and my desire to travel back to Uganda to work as a physician.

The YAALI program contextualized learning by linking its fellows to local realities, including community engagement and service-learning activities. Students have the opportunity to reevaluate their values, vocation, and personal ethics through reflective journaling assignments and structured feedback sessions. In contrast to a western sightseeing outlook, the YAALI fellowship "humanizes" the international heritage experience by linking fellows to local service-learning activities that both build community and encourage students to personally reflect on their identity.

At its core, the goal is not to assume that Africa is poor and requires these services, but to understand that (for example) it is a tradition to bring a

gift when visiting someone else's home. Therefore, the books, dolls, cookies, diapers, t-shirts, toys, trucks, etc. that students would bring on their travels represented the small tokens of appreciation brought in exchange for people sharing their experiences.

As one of the few international programs at Howard University that travels to Africa, YAALI operates year-round through on and off campus programming to engage students in learning about their cultural heritage and building an international community. The cultural learning forums are required before travel and open to the public. Many students bring their friends who aren't traveling to join the discussion, which later on encourages them to travel on the next trip. To date, YAALI Fellows include a 2016, 2017, and 2018 Fulbright Scholar, a 2018 Truman Scholar, International Harvard Fellow, Mellon Fellows, and Gillman Scholars, many of whom never traveled abroad before until participating in YAALI.

I wasn't ready. I was afraid.

One cornerstone of study abroad programs Engle and Engle (2003) discuss is the "context of the academic work." Traditionally many study abroad programs provide language training and culturally based enrichment about the destination country when students arrive or briefly during orientation. Yet within marginalized communities, "fear" prevents students from even applying to participate in international travel programs. With fear in mind, pre-departure educational components were heavily incorporated in the program structure and disseminated through social media to generate interest, assuage initial fears, and address any lingering concerns in this area.

The focus of the educational curriculum requirements of YAALI is to inform and draw students into the historical, linguistic, political, social, and economic realities that countries in Africa and the African diaspora face. Before traveling abroad, students spend five months reading a common text to provide context and the basis for a group discussion about their destination. Past books have included *The Coming* by Daniel Black, *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* by Alex La Guma, *Kingdom of Gravity* by Nick Makoha, and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah. Books like *The Coming* by Daniel Black not only offer a helpful grounding that addresses the fears of students (as one put it, "I always thought about studying abroad and traveling to Africa, but I just wasn't ready. I was afraid. After reading *The Coming*, I was ready to take this journey back to Africa"). It also poses complex questions regarding the experiences of individuals caught up in the African diaspora (according to Love (2017), the novel "offers us a glimpse into the daily lives of Africans before the encroachment of enslavement... Throughout its pages, the question of what was lost during enslavement is answered" (p. 3)). By reading the text before and during the trip, the students elevated their understanding of their self and connection with the diaspora, as seen in the following reflection:

Ghana gave me a sense of peace and reassurance in my destiny and purpose. While on the trip, I fully immersed myself in the experience of the present. [After reading] *The Coming* helped give me the language to articulate would happen to my ancestors and my strong feelings about coming back to Africa ... I fell in love with Ghana because it gave me something much more than a resume builder or experience of traveling abroad, it gave me LIFE... It was there in Ghana, surrounded by so many hopes and possibilities that I reclaimed my self-identity... I returned through the “Door of No Return,” and I voided to not let something like this happen to my people again. “Never again.”

All these books are united in speaking about the human connection made in Africa. A different reconceptualization of western rationalizations for travel to Africa is adopted by YAALI in addressing Engle and Engle’s (2003) sixth component regarding creating “Provisions for guided/structured cultural interaction and experiential learning guided/structured.” After traveling with the YAALI program for just ten days dealing with the fear and unknown, the fellowship then becomes a springboard for students to travel for a semester-long and consider applying to international graduate programs and jobs.

I Don’t Want to Travel Alone

There is an African proverb that states, “To go fast, go alone. To go far, go together.” Another critical component of the YAALI is addressing the fear of anticipated racism and racist encounters abroad (Gasman, 2013). To address this concern, YAALI participants travel to a country in Africa with a group of students that share diverse personal experiences but similar heritage backgrounds, organized by a black-owned travel and tour agency and even flying on an African owned airline. Not being the only black person abroad among a group of white participants and traveling to be a part of a majority instead of a minority population reduced fear. Aligned with Engle and Engle’s (2003) program classifications, during the trip, YAALI fellows form meaningful relationships collectively grapple with identity and the historical legacy of racism domestically and internationally. In the words of one participant:

Try reading Steve Biko *I Write What I Like* with a group of 45 Howard students in the middle of Soweto, South Africa, where Hector Pieterse was murdered. The opportunity to travel to the motherland with a group of inquisitive and driven future global leaders from the Mecca helped shape my perspective on the global advocacy efforts that are so

crucial in our community today... We worked, laughed, shared memories, hopes and dreams of coming back together. This experiential learning opportunity helped me cultivate my knowledge on global health through research and interactions with the people of South Africa. It was a truly humbling, empowering and one of the hallmark experiences of my Howard career.

When students travel to African heritage sites such as Bonwire Kente Weaving Village in Kumasi, Winnie and Nelson Mandela's home in Soweto, or into the rainforest of Uganda with the Batwa Pygmies, the knowledge of oneself is not only enhanced, but also the relationship between people, place, and culture are fostered.

Lastly, along with the fear of traveling alone, YAALI also allows students to unpack the fear and uneasiness about having an unknown ancestral legacy. In other words, when asked the question "where are you from" abroad can be fearful when you don't know or when "America" isn't a sufficient response. Driven by the need to continue to seek out new ways of engaging with ancestral legacies, in 2017, the Sankofa Project was developed as one of the fellowship activities to make the travel experience more of a collective family journey. The YAALI Sankofa Project is a genealogical journey into a fellow's personal and communal history. Coupled with a DNA/genomic and ancestral test, this investigation allows students to look into their pasts and to face the future. Grounded on the concept of Sankofa, which emphasizes the importance of learning from one's past, the project encourages students to "return and get it"—to gather various aspects of their histories to learn about their present and glean something about themselves.

The words of one participant further highlight the issue:

I never knew much about my African past. But now, returning home just feel so more real now. Knowing I'm 60% from Ghana...[traveling to] Kwame Nkrumah Ghana, W.E.B. Du Bois Ghana, Yaa Asantewa Ghana. I'm Ghanaian. Nobody can take that away from me. My family is Ghanaian. Nobody in my family has ever traveled to Africa. No, through me, we are all returning home.

The project includes a family tree (or vine, bush, etc.), artifacts or images, and historical information dating back three generations or more. From student reflections like those above, this added component was an elevating experience. After students return the following semester, they are required to share their research and experiences in on-campus program that also invites other students to apply.

All YAALI Fellows are required to construct an international travel portfolio consisting of a research paper, international travel journal, and reflections from workshops and activities. At the end of the school year in a study abroad symposium, fellows share their research projects with local

students and faculty and provide presentations about their YAALI experiences.

It should be noted that engagement is often best measured through “unofficial” and “organic” mediums. What has been remarkable in the past four years is examining how fellows take it upon themselves to share their experiences with others. Students actively post on all forms of social media (Intragram, Facebook, Snapchat, Tumbler and the YAALI social media platforms), using the hashtags like #yaalihu, #goingghana, and #sayaali, sharing their experience with their family back home and friends:

Every day I woke up in South Africa, I was immersed in unique and unparalleled culture and learning experiences. Whether we were visiting an elementary school in the Alexandra township, walking through Soweto to Mandela’s house, voyaging to the Moruleng Village, “climbing” Table Mountain, or touring Robben Island, each day overflowed with invaluable bonding experiences... The open arms from our South African brethren and the mere fact that we were back in the Motherland made us feel as if we were prodigal sons and daughters and not tourist. However, the two charter buses we lugged around and our impulsive need to take pictures of the scenic backdrop that is South Africa begged to differ. South Africa’s breathtaking beauty is undeniable and is coupled by the beauty of the South African people. ... To encompass the magnitude of our trip to South Africa would be hard to do without relaying multiple personal anecdotes and bombarding people with scores of photographs. Two things can be said about our trip. First: that none of it would have been possible without the hard work of Dr. Amy Yeboah, Kaila Holloway, Brittany Scott, Money-Man Mr. Max, and everyone else on the YAALI team who worked behind the scenes. Second: I will be coming back. (Johnson 2017)

Social sharing of experience like this represent a form of assessment that go beyond conventional program assessment.

Conclusion

The lack of participation in study abroad programs by Black students is a persistent concern in higher education, and Africa remains unreachable for many college scholars despite being a wellspring of inspiration for the Diaspora. This research found it a critical priority not only to increase the number of Black students traveling back to Africa but to seek out new ways of engaging with Black travel legacies on many different levels—not only through sights and sounds but specifically through direct engagement with their heritage. In 2014 the Young AfricanA Leadership Initiative (YAALI)

fellowship was developed for Black students to go beyond the typical study abroad experience by centralizing culture and providing travel opportunities to Africa, combatting fear with education, and mapping a collective self-reflective experience.

YAALI's work recognizes the importance of engaging with Africa on African terms as a way to influence student participation in study abroad programs. In doing so, it starts students on a path that opens up future opportunities to continue their global travel. In organizing a program focused on creating global-minded citizens who can use their knowledge and service to (re)imagine and (re)connect with the African continent, YAALI has offered Black students at Howard a unique heritage experience that addresses financial obstacles, speaks to their fears, and most of all offer a purpose that genuinely interest and engages participants (even more students would join the YAALI program if limited funds were not an issue). Replicating such a faculty-lead program at MSI would not only increase the numbers of programs hosted in Africa but also provide a more unique intimate school level experience that provides students the opportunity to grow within a diverse and collaborative group across disciplines. Since YAALI is only open to Howard University, returning to the University after a trip allows the students to continue the journey together at school. If replicated at a PWI, having a faculty-lead group of just Black students could potentially build up a higher level of pride in a community that feels isolated.

The success of the YAALI program in attracting and holding the interest of Black students with respect to international travel points a way forward for MSIs and HBCUs to create their own programs of study that speak to the needs of their communities. Not following the historical formulated path early Study Abroad program created to Europe but creating our own pathways to Africa can potentially increase Black student participation.

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