AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ABROAD

"They Are Coming to Get Something":

A Qualitative Study of African American Male Community College Students'

Education Abroad Experience in Senegal, West Africa

A paper submitted to A^{2}mend

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Abstract

This paper is a critical qualitative study of African American male community college students' education abroad experience in Senegal, West Africa. Currently, there is a lack of research that focuses directly on Black men who are studying abroad. Using African American male theory as the framework, four major themes emerged: men to boys, challenging the counternarratives, identity, and not-so-distant cousins. These themes point collectively to a transformative experience for the participants. Notably, the educational experience transformed the participants' cultural, social, and racial identities, as the trip fostered a combination of vulnerability and safety that created the conditions for Black men to grow and transform.

This paper is a critical qualitative study of African American male community college students' education abroad experience in Senegal, West Africa[1]. The lead author, who served as one of the hosts/facilitators for student participants and their four mentors, arrived in West Africa a few days prior to the group to prepare for the students and to do his own personal and spiritual work and development. To this end, he had a consultation with one of the local readers who are an integral part of Senegalese society, serving as spiritual and physical healers, doctors, protectors, and diviners. Near the end of the divination session, the reader said to the author and his interpreter/adviser, who also was one of the local hosts/facilitators, that we had many guests coming: She *saw* that participants and their mentors were on their way. She also stated that they were not coming just to visit; rather, as both she and the interpreter gestured their hands toward their abdomens, she stated, "They are coming to get something."

This notion that students, especially Black[2] students, involved in education abroad programs are *coming to get something* aligns with various aspects of African American male theory (AAMT) (Bush & Bush, 2013a, 2013b), which is the theoretical framework for the current study and provided the impetus for and approach to the author's trip. In regard to the significance of this study, we illuminate a distinction between the benefits of education abroad expectations and experiences for African American versus other students. Further, the study aims to address certain gaps in the literature or to point out : (a) the literature specific to Black men and educational abroad experiences is nonexistent, (b) the literature on community college students is miniscule, (c) only a small percentage of students who participate in education abroad programs go to Africa, and when they do go, an overwhelming majority of the time they visit South Africa which presents some problematics that will be flushed out in the literature review

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[1] We thank Dr. Tasha Willis for her guidance on this research project.
[2] Black and African American are used interchangeably.

and, (d) two of the 10 participants are native born Africans which is a peculiar nuance in the already anemic literature on Blacks born in the Americas traveling to Africa for education abroad opportunities.

Literature Review

Overview of Education Abroad Participants and Programs

Research on education abroad programs and experiences, regardless of research methodology, travel destination, duration of stay, race or gender of student, type of educational institution (i.e., four-year colleges, community colleges, historically Black colleges and University, or predominantly White Institutions), educational level, or major, shows such programs to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on students in key areas of development. With respect to achievement for students who are working toward an associate's, bachelor's, or graduate degree, research suggests that students who participate in education abroad opportunities have higher retention, graduation, and shorter time-to-degree rates compared to students who do not participate. Posey (2003) looked at time-to-degree and degree completion for students who studied abroad in the Florida state system at all collegiate levels and found that 93% of those who studied abroad earned their degrees, whereas 64% of their non-participant counterparts did not complete their degrees. Similarly, Hamir's (2011) study showed that students who participated in education abroad programs had a 60% chance of graduating in four years as compared to 45% for non-participants. Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015), who also compared education abroad participants to non-participants found a positive association between education abroad participation and higher grades.

In addition to their impact of basic measures of achievement, education abroad experiences have been found to buttress opportunities to further educational and career prospects

and advancement, as students who noted these experiences on graduate school applications and resumes and in job interviews reported greater success (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Kallick & Brown Murga, 2018; Sanger, 2019). Moreover, researchers found that education abroad participants experienced personal growth and developed attributes and skills (Dolby, 2007), independence (Hadis, 2005), and self-efficacy (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013) as well as demonstrated language (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Kallick & Brown Murga, 2018) and intercultural development (Mapp, 2012; Voss et al., 2017) that positioned them as better applicants for advanced education or jobs or made them more competent at a job that they currently held.

Although there is considerable evidence of the benefits of education abroad, the data also indicate that over at least the past 10 years, the vast majority of those who participate in education abroad programs are White, women, and attend traditional four-year institutions. According to the Institute of International Education (2018a), from 2005 to 2010, the average proportion of White participants in education abroad experiences was 81.18%, and the average proportion for the five-year period from 2012 to 2017 was 73.05%. During the latter period, the proportion of Latinx doubled from about 5% to 10%, which accounts for the drop in percentage in White students. The percentages of African American participants are considerably low and have increased only from an average of 4.04% to 4.7% over the same period. Finally, over roughly the last 15 years, 65% of the participants in education abroad programs have been women, and less than 2% of all participants are students who are pursuing an associate's degree (Institute of International Education, 2018a).

The most popular travel destination of participants is Europe, in particular, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and France. African countries account for only about 5–6% of travel over the past 15 years, with South Africa as a destination 4–5% of the time (Institute of International

Education, 2018b). Notably, with South Africa's history of European control, apartheid, and oppression as well as current power dynamics and structural racism, traveling there may offer little reprieve for African American students who hope to escape conditions of racial trauma in the United States.[3]

African Americans and Education Abroad

It is well documented in the literature that African Americans are the least likely to be represented in educational abroad programs. The paucity of both African American men and women participants may be the reason for the lack of literature on the education abroad experiences of Black male participants. The literature does, however, offer some explanations as to why African Americans are not well represented, suggesting that African Americans have limited life experiences that may further limit their expectations of travel, a lack of involvement in campus activities, low socioeconomic status, choice of major, and college attrition rates (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008; Lee & Green, 2016; Penn & Tanner, 2009).

We find these explanations to be problematic. Many of these reasons focus on the student rather than the institution as a significant factor. Moreover, Penn and Tanner's (2009) research suggests that African American students have a great desire to participate in education abroad programs and, in particular, those that provide an opportunity to travel to Africa. As such, the focus on the student as the unit of analysis is not altogether wrong but is supported by a deficiency model (Bush & Bush, 2013a, 2013b), antithetical to AAMT. AAMT contends that there is nothing deficient about the experiences of African Americans and that their total

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[3] The authors realize the issue of African Americans' traveling to South Africa is a bit more nuanced than what we discuss in the body of the present study, as the country has much more to offer students than its history of apartheid and current related issues. Our main point is that African American students seem to have limited choices in regard to travel to Africa.

ecological experiences, which include the spirit, subconscious, and collective unconscious, mean that African Americans are innately connected to and desirous of travel to Africa.

Although the literature is lacking, it is reasonable to assume that African American students who participate in education abroad programs reap the same benefits as do other student participants. Further, there is an emerging body of literature on the distinct experiences of African American students as compared to those of their White and, in many cases, female counterparts (Willis, 2016; Willis et al., 2019). These distinct benefits appear to center around empowerment, self-agency, and collective agency, particularly in the areas of social justice and self-actualization (Jackson, 2006; Tolliver, 2000; Wick; 2011; Willis; 2012; Willis et al., 2019).

In addition, scholars contend that this distinction between African Americans and others starts with the purpose for the trip. Some researchers posit that many students of color participate in education abroad opportunities because they seek to reconnect with their heritage as a sort of homecoming (Dawson, 2000; Morgan, Mwegelo, & Turner, 2002). These students are termed *heritage seekers*, and the places that they visit are referred to as *heritage destinations* (Wick, Willis, Rivera, Lueker, & Hernandez, 2019). Heritage destinations "are countries or regions where sojourners may have at least a perceived or distant if not tangible cultural, ethnic, or racial connection" (Willis et al., 2019, p. 3). This notion of heritage seekers, heritage destinations, and homecoming underscores the authors' argument with the literature that asserts that the experiences of African Americans serve as impediments to traveling abroad rather than as a reason or drive to do so.

Theoretical Framework

Our work is informed by various aspects of AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013a, 2013b), which pushes our thinking beyond conventional ways of framing African American men's behaviors

and outcomes, including participation in education abroad experiences. Specifically, we lean heavily on the third tenet of AAMT, which states that there is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American men. AAMT asserts that the study of African American men must be anchored in an understanding of Africa because African culture and consciousness have a persistent impact on African American men.

We also draw on the fourth tenet, which posits that all forms of resistance and opposition demonstrated by African American men in society and schools, such as "sagging" and the use of a nonmainstream language, are strengths and a form of resiliency, rather than expressions of opposition to oppression, and serve as an attempt to reconnect with one's African self. This nondeficit perspective, coupled with the theory's ecological systems approach, which includes accounting for the supernatural and collective unconscious, provides us with the tools needed to explore the spiritual dynamics of Black men who participate in educational abroad situations in Africa. Further, not only is AAMT the framework employed in the current study as a lens and a vehicle for analysis, it also is a major impetus for creating the education abroad opportunity of this study and testing the logical trajectories of AAMT.

Program Description

African American Male Education Network and Development (A^{2}MEND) is a non-profit organization comprised of African American male educators who utilize their scholarly and professional expertise to foster institutional change within the community college system to increase the success of African American male students. Since 2006, A^{2}MEND has been the premiere organization that has focused solely on addressing the lack of educational success for African American male students in California community colleges. In 2017, A^{2}MEND started its

cultural exchange program which, via an essay application, selects 10 community college mentees to travel to Africa for 10 to 12 days. The stated learning goals of the program are to (1) foster a comprehensive identity for African American males through deepened proficiency in cultural cognizance by way of stimulating self-awareness, self-love, and self-management apparatuses to achieve academic and life purpose by nourishing intrinsic motivation, engagement, and sense of agency; (2) cultivate leadership dexterities and civic engagement through transformational leadership opportunities that actively promote knowledge sharing, community growth, and the initiative that galvanizes African American males to go beyond their own self-interest and identity to attain higher-order vision and objectives for community-oriented advancement; and (3) enhance students' global citizenship through universal responsiveness by enriching, scaffolding, and coupling the personal experiences of African American males with robust pedagogy that organically contrives salient learning opportunities for reflective scholarship from a broader context of life in a complex and globally connected society.

A[2]MEND partnered with Diasporic Soul, which offers healing and restoration for Black people that includes healing-centered leadership development for Black students and heritage travel experiences in Senegal, West Africa, that integrate culture and contemplative practices. "Soul" refers to what we understand to be a healing resource that reflects the cultural sensibilities of the African Diaspora (Harrell, 2018). As such, Soul supports our capacity to be loving, courageous, and connected to our spirit so that we can practice self-care, experience well-being, and be resilient and engage in resistance. Soul, as a healing resource, reflects the important work of Somé (1997), who reminds us that healing comes when the individual understands his or her identity—his or her purpose in the world of ancestral wisdom—and reconnects with that world of spirit.

Diasporic Soul's healing-centered approach recognizes that we have experienced various forms of stress and trauma, including racial trauma. A healing-centered approach recognizes that trauma is not simply an individual, isolated experience; rather, it is a collective one that requires us to recognize that our healing is both individual and collective in nature. The healing process requires the holding of space for Black people to address the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical toll that systemic racism has taken. A healing-centered approach to leadership practice requires that there be an intentional effort to address well-being and self-care as important. Specifically, self-care in this context carries on Black radical traditions by insisting that our health and well-being are not luxuries but, rather, an act of resilience, survival, and resistance (Wortham, 2016).

Nine students, along with four mentors, took the trip to Africa. The delegation first spent a day and night visiting Morocco before going on to Senegal. One student, who was born in Africa and was already there, met the group in Senegal. The students stayed in one house together with the hosting family/organization and the lead author, who served as an advisor. A central component of the experience was the intentionality placed on *spirit and healing work*, which included an opening Mami Wata ritual, a session with a seer, and another session with a Marabout (Shaman), coupled with restorative yoga and a visit to the dungeon at Goree Island, where rituals took place. The students also visited the African Renaissance Monument and the Museum of Black Civilizations.

Methodology

We employ a critical qualitative research model (Cannella, Pérez, & Pasque, 2016) and borrow from qualitative narrative research designs (Kim, 2015), as these methodologies blend well with the tenets of AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013a, 2013b). The combination of these research

paradigms and theory allow for a critical examination of race and power, while explicitly moving toward social justice and liberation. Moreover, these perspectives center indigenous stories and epistemologies (Denzin, 2017) and embrace the notion that phenomena occur within context and have symbiotic and bidirectional relationships with other beings, matter, concepts, and phenomena. The point of inquiry and purpose of this study was to explore the impact and meaning of an education abroad experience to Africa on the Black men who participated.

Participants

The 10 participants for the study were selected by A^2MEND, which has chapters at several California community colleges and provides mentoring, scholarships, and other support and resources to Black male students. Nine students were selected, but the organization allowed a graduate of the program who had traveled to Africa on a previous trip with them to serve as sort of a junior mentor. Nonetheless, all 10 were part of the study. It is also important to note that, with respect to age, the students were not in the typical age range of 18 to 24 years for college students; rather, the average age of the participants was 27 years.

Data Collection

The trip occurred in June 2019. Data were collected by three authors, using field notes, observations, informal field interviews, and conversations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data also were collected in two focus groups of five students each, conducted by two authors, a day before the trip ended. Each focus group lasted an hour-and-a-half, and the data were collected on paper before being transcribed. A final focus group was held in a hotel conference room in Southern California in August 2019 with seven of the participants, selected based on availability. A staff member of A^2MEND conducted the focus group, which lasted a little over an hour and was professionally video recorded; the data were later transcribed. All focus groups were conducted

using semi-structured interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Several informal check-ins occurred by phone and video calls after the initial data collection.

Data Analysis

The data were approached through the lens of our theoretical framework. We looked for expressions of meaning and impact for the individual participants and collectively as a group, which was the general point of inquiry for the study. The data were coded individually by each author, then brought to a group session for discussion, clarification, and the emergence of themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Based on our critical qualitative research model and that we borrowed from qualitative narrative research methods, we coded small chunks of data and large stories or narratives. We utilized both to substantiate themes and claims.

Trustworthiness

The degree to which one can find our study trustworthy, that is, credible, generalizable, and dependable, rests mainly on the positionality of the researchers. The crux of discussions about trustworthiness across empirical research approaches center on whether other researchers, using the same methodology and similar participants, settings, and conditions, would produce reasonably comparable results. Of relevance to trustworthiness, the current researchers have dedicated much of their lives in professional and deeply personal ways to teaching, theorizing, researching, and building programs for African American college students and, more directly, Black men. We are Black, and we have an intimate relationship with the subject matter and to the participants, regardless of whether we knew any of them prior to the study, and most of us did not. We contend that it is our close proximity, desire for closeness, and emic approach that makes the findings of the present study trustworthy and, perhaps, unique. We suspect that another group of researchers without our theoretical lens, experience, commitment, and

positionality would not yield the same findings. This is not biased research; rather, it is the

essence of pure research in terms of knowing the other, which is the ability to see the world and

phenomenon from the subjects' position.

Findings

There were four major themes that emerged in this study (men to boys, challenging the

counternarratives, identity, and not-so-distant cousins) that, collectively, point to a

transformative experience for the participants. Although identity is only one theme, it is the most

important, as we found that the education abroad experience had an impact on the participants'

cultural, social, and racial identities, as the trip fostered vulnerability and safety, which created

the conditions for the transformation of these Black men.

Men to Boys

"The conversation we need to have is about how Black men, even Black boys, are denied

the right to be young, to be vulnerable" (Robinson, 2013, para. 11). The popular press, in such

articles as *Denied the Right to be Young* (Robinson, 2013) and *Innocence Erased: How Society*

Keeps Black Boys from Being Boys (Williams, 2018), and academic research (Bush, Bush,

Mitchell, Majadi, & Faraji, 2013; Ferguson, 2020) highlight the adultification of African

American boys. Fostered and maintained by structural and institutional racism, this phenomenon

plays out in several ways, e.g., sexual expectations, but most prominently in the over-punishment

of Black boys and men by the school and penal systems (Noguera, 2009). Such adultification

robs Black boys of the innocence of childhood, forcing them to be ready for the weight of

manhood prematurely and to adopt a persona of invulnerability (Majors & Billson, 1993).

It is worth remembering that the average age of the participants was 27 years—men by

any general standard. Nonetheless, what became clear during their visit and seen in the coding of

the data was that their sense of invulnerability decreased rapidly, if not disappeared altogether. This phenomenon became so apparent that the mentors and hosts began to refer to the men as *boys* and had to keep correcting themselves. We cannot overstate that this had nothing to do with the level of maturity of the participants, who displayed an exceptional amount of maturity and respect at all times, nor was this pejorative; rather, the demeanor of the participants changed drastically. "It was if a weight had been lifted," as Medgar stated, and they were free to "ooh" and "aah" and marvel at the smallest occurrences with a curiosity often exhibited by children. Moreover, the experience in Senegal fostered a vulnerability not often seen in a group of Black men, where posturing is generally omnipresent. Examples of this theme abound and include staying up to all hours of the night in the common spaces in the house, talking, as if they were having a slumber party; playing made-up games, generally played by boys; shedding countless tears; and abandoning all notions of *coolness* to join in spontaneous dancing with a local family around a tree while waiting to see the marabout, as described below by Bayard:[4]

> We all started dancing in the village after doing our spiritual bath and reading. We came back from looking at the rest of the village, and the guy that was showing us around had brought over a speaker, playing music. He just started dancing, and we formed a line following behind him, copying his moves. I enjoyed that experience because we all joined in on the moment, and we were just having a good time together.[5]

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[4] All participant names are pseudonyms.

[5] According to the publication manual of the American Psychological Association, an author should follow these guidelines regarding quotations: If an "incorrect spelling, grammar, or punctuation in the source might confuse readers, insert the word '[*sic*]*,* italicized and bracketed, immediately after the error in the quotation" (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 274). To this end, although some participants use a form of nonstandard English, also known as Ebonics, it should not confuse the reader. Therefore, to affirm the participants' way of communicating, we choose not to use sic.

Whereas the above example shows that the participants displayed a childlike openness, the narrative below, concerning Ture, shows an emotional vulnerability that underscores this transformation of men to boys. Perhaps it also demonstrates that, by restoring or reclaiming their boyhood, a new kind of manhood was fostered.

So, one young man in the cohort came to us differently than the rest of the young men in June 2019. He flew to us from directly from Guinea rather than from the U.S. via Morocco, like the other young men. His energy when he arrived might be easily described as smug, maybe not quite arrogant, but definitely smug and somewhat know-it-all-ish. Know-it-all-ish-ness or smugness or arrogance that some non-continental Africans might automatically associate with the fact that he is African, one, specifically, who was born and raised on the continent. It is important to note that is not uncommon for what might be characterized as confidence exuded by continental Africans to be read as arrogance, smug, a sense of superiority, though it may not at all be the case. Yet, there was something about Ture that read, "I got it all figured out." Yeah, oh, there was definitely something "I-got-it all-figured-out" about his energy that when the other men arrived, his all-figured-out-ness was what he exhibited the most.

This is in contrast to the fact that, in the mornings during the visit, he, another young man, and our female hostess usually were up at the same time. This particular young man has his own business in Guinea, and he got up early to work each morning. So, our hostess usually had coffee ready for him and tea ready for the other young man before everybody else woke up. And outside of making sure he had his coffee each morning, there wasn't a whole lot of interaction initially, but one morning, he entered the

kitchen and began to chat with our program leader and hostess, who explained that she had softened to him and he seemed to be softening to her.

During that conversation, he began to tell her his story, you know. One she had heard before, there in Senegal. Where you have been hurt by family dynamics, this is not always uncommon in Muslim families in Senegal. A dynamic that consists of a man having more than one wife and subsequently having children with both wives. And the man or the husband and father often exist in two households simultaneously. And when that happens, whether the father or husband recognizes it or not, when he dies, there is often a lot of upheaval. This is the case with this particular young man. He shared with her that his father passed away unexpectedly, and there was a lot of conflict, and his family among the two wives and what was left behind. A lot of conflict and upheaval about who was to care for what, who was to have what. And in telling our hostess this story, he just began to break down. Like all his walls went down. And she was so surprised and touched by that fact that he ended up in her arms in tears, just weeping. He wept so hard, like he had not ever really allowed himself to do so before. It definitely was not something she ever expected from this young man, who she felt quite a bit of distance from. It always felt like he had his guard up. But something about this experience allowed him to open up and be vulnerable.

Challenging the Counternarratives

Given the variety of first-time experiences, including participation in ancient rituals and having their pasts and futures revealed to them in readings, the researchers were perplexed by what stood out the most or what was the most impactful aspect of the participants' education abroad experience. Consistently, in field notes, focus groups, and follow-up conversations, the

participants pointed to their visits to the African Renaissance Monument and Museum of Black Civilizations as being strongly impactful. The colossal bronze African Renaissance Monument is one of the largest statues in the world, standing approximately 160 feet high. It depicts a proud, determined, and free African man, woman, and child. The Museum of Black Civilizations, through exhibiting important historical information and artifacts, demonstrates humanity and civilization as originating in Africa.

Below, Bayard and Ray speak to the significance of visiting these sites. Both of their comments were made in the follow-up focus group with seven participants. It is important to note that, when the African Renaissance Monument and Museum of Black Civilizations were first brought up by one of the men as a response to a question, there was a spontaneous eruption of excitement, manifested as "oohs," "aahs," movement, and laughter. It was as if the participants had been transported back to Senegal and, more importantly for this current work, transformed from men to boys. Bayard stated:

> I think it helps you, um, realize what's possible as a Black man. By going to Africa, we're basically going back to and seeing our different cultures and then the, like the, monument and then the museum of Black civilizations. Like, we're basically learning about our history way past what, like what America education teaches us. We were learning that Black people actually invented math. For something like, for someone like me, I think I'm a little insecure about math, and knowing that Black people invented math, it basically taught me, like, "Why am I insecure about math, and we invented math . . . like I can do this, like Black people can do this." Everything I was seeing in Senegal and Africa, it was like Black people did. I can do this, like, Black people can do this. I have the possibility to make things happen.

Ray explained:

> To me, it was an eye-opener, not knowing something that was bigger than the Statue of
> Liberty, literally, and, like, the second largest monument in the world. I had never even
> heard of . . . and then, you know, the African American male, holding the child on his
> shoulders with his wife in the other arm. How did I . . . never hear of this? Like ever? No
> books, no nothing, and especially for something of that magnitude? To not even be aware
> of its presence or its construction was, it was like, "What else don't I know?" It made me
> more eager to learn more not only about my own culture but, um, or where I come from
> but also just about Africa, in general, and the different other things that we may not be
> aware of, or not taught.

An emerging aspect of AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2018) is a call for scholars to refrain from using reactionary and deficit words, such as *counter* or *other*. This is particularly prevalent among those who employ critical race theory who advise against the use of words such as *counternarrative*, *counterstorytelling*, and others to describe the phenomenon experienced by historically excluded groups who depart from or whose perspectives run perpendicular to mainstream beliefs or discourse. This practice inadvertently links the origin and location of the narratives of African American men to oppression and oppressors. The story of the Africans, including African American boys and men, worldwide is the oldest narrative by far and is not counter to any story; it just is. Thus, this theme is a challenging of the counternarrative rather than of the narrative.

Thomas and Rappaport (1996) argue that "what is typically thought of as 'art' is a powerful means for communicating the narratives that interpret the experiences and shape our collective understanding of ourselves" (p. 317). It appears that the magnitude, size, and physical

and philosophical weight of certain art, in particular the image of the African man, works as a crushing or disrupting force against the ubiquitously pejorative counternarrative necessary under a system of so-called White supremacy in regard to Black men in the United States. The art seen by the participants reconnected them to themselves and their original narrative, which is embodied in Bayard's opening statement about the African Renaissance Monument: "I think it helps you . . . realize what's possible as a Black man."

Identity

Each theme that emerged is interconnected; nevertheless, the case can be made that all the themes that the authors present are various aspects of a larger umbrella theme that could be labeled as *identity*. Every aspect of the education abroad experience seemed to cause the participants to question who they were and their purpose. Beyond the questioning, the educational opportunity caused the participants to reframe or rename their identity altogether. Below, Malcolm directly speaks to this questioning and renaming:

> I never felt out of place, like, even though, like, I didn't understand practically half. I'm saying more than half of them were saying. I still, like, they still treat me like I was family. I was just one of them. And it was just kind of like . . . I never truly felt African American until . . . [pause] I would just feel like I'm American then after going . . . I'm, like, well, "What am I talking about? I've always been African American, like, it just is."

Malcolm articulates a major shift in his racial identity. Before the experience, he saw himself as being part of a generic and raceless category that he called "American" and tied solely to a land called America. Ostensibly, the default definition of American is White. But Malcolm, like the other participants, now clearly situated his identity as being inextricably rooted in Africa and his "family" as Africans. Medgar's statement below builds on this sentiment but takes this

understanding of a new identity deeper in that he maintains that the trip served to reconstruct his ontological understanding of self and being:

> The experience meant absolutely everything to me! This trip defined my very existence and identity. It meant the ability to educate myself and make connections that are essential in my life, physically, mentally, academically, emotionally, and spiritually as well economically. Going to Africa defined my relationship with my ancestors before their enslavement and transference to the Americas. It's one thing to talk about our ancestors from the states in American history; it's another to be at the *Monument* de *la Renaissance Africaine* [African Renaissance Monument] and talk about our ancestors from African history. I went there with societal and generational traumas, most of which I didn't know I had, to come back restored and fully rejuvenated in spirit and identity. My mind has been stretched tremendously by being enlightened on what family and community means, tangibly and intangibly.

Malcolm's and Medgar's statements provide an opportunity to explore the overlapping and differentiating constructs of identity theorists. Early Black scholars, such as Cross (1991, 1995), created identity development models centered on race, which is a necessary component of identity theory. We see that Malcolm makes this rudimentary, yet important, discovery about himself when he states, "I never truly felt African American until . . . [pause] I would just feel like I'm American then after going . . . I'm like, well, 'What am I talking about? I've always been African American.'" Shortly after the initial work by scholars on race-focused identity (Cokley, 2005; Parham, 2002), another perspective emerged that posited that identity based on phenotype was myopic. Scholars begin to argue for the need to move away from a racial identity to an ethnic and cultural identity that was rooted in Africa (Nobles, 1998, 1989). This

Afrocentric perspective (Asante, 1998), which is based on fundamental African ontologies, epistemologies, and values, places Africa at the center of one's viewpoint. It is not clear whether Malcolm made the shift from a racial identity to a cultural or African-centered identity, but this distinction is clear in the other participants, which is crystallized in Medgar' statement, "It's one thing to talk about our ancestors from the states in American history; it's another to be at the *Monument* de *la Renaissance Africaine* and talk about our ancestors from African history."

Not-So-Distant Cousins

In both the literature and the data from this study is the concept of homecoming, whereby Blacks, who have been unwillingly dispersed throughout the diaspora, travel back home to Africa, seeking kinship-like relations. Our data are saturated with statements such as, "The first thing we heard was, 'Welcome home'"; "We felt like family"; "We were home"; and "Even with the language barrier, we felt a deep connection to the people." What is not at all present in the academic literature, are the experiences of African born male students who return home to Africa, by and large with their cultural heritages already intact, traveling with Black males born in the United States. Popular social media spaces are often the site of various stances that may lead some to believe that the desire to close that gap is one-sided. Our data demonstrate a movement of the American born participants towards Africa and towards their African born peers collaterally. Conversely, the data show a mutual closing of the gap.

Nkrumah, who was born in Ghana and moved to the United States at the age of 10, had already closed any cultural and identity gaps between himself and his African American peers through spending some formative years in the United States. Thus, it is difficult to determine the impact of his education abroad experiences on his movement toward closing these gaps. Since the education experience, however, he has developed a meaningful friendship with one of the

participants and has organized a few to buy land in Africa. This provides evidence that the experience has deepened his connection to Africa and his appreciation of African culture. He stated:

> Like, so last time I was in Africa, I was 10 years old. So, I didn't really understand what was really going on, but coming, like, in a sense, coming back home, it made me have more of an appreciation of, like, our culture as a whole and family.

Although we cannot pinpoint when and where Nkrumah closed the gap between his African-born cultural identity with that of his American-born counterparts, the fact that the education abroad experience provided the platform for it to be demonstrated profoundly is worth highlighting. Below, note how Nkrumah positions himself as he explains his experience in the dungeon where enslaved Africans were imprisoned at Goree Island:

> The tour guide was kind of like telling us all this different stuff, and you can just see, like, I was looking at some of our brothers, and they're just like fist-clinch, like in a sense, tears starting to come. Without actually seeing it, you can kind of see, like, the change of everybody's demeanor and . . . We all, like, circled up in the end, and we, in a sense, started to pray. Mama Phyllis . . . she started doing this prayer, and I think, like, that's where we all started really feeling that emotion because of, like, . . . you could feel the tension in her voice and how she was projecting the prayer; just, like, in agony and pain. It's like we all could feel like the same pain that the people that were there. It was really at that very moment, it was just a presence, is not necessarily something that we actually could feel like we've been through it; but, like, while we're on the island, we could just feel that presence.

Although Nkrumah's immigrant orientation to the United States was vastly different from that of his "brothers," he repeatedly used words such as "our" and "we." When he stated, "Like we all could feel like the same pain," he closes any real or imagined gap between himself and the participants born in the United States. The education abroad experience, if nothing else, provided the space for him to double down on his indifference to his immigrant experience by affording him the space for him to develop friendships and business partnerships. Ture's experience up to and at Goree Island provides a clearer demonstration of movement from an African-born participant toward a closing of the gap that is directly related to the education abroad experience.

When the participants went to see a healer out near Thies, Ture approached two of the program leaders and told them he didn't feel like he needed to go to Goree Island to the house of enslaved Africans with the rest of the group. On other occasions, he was quick to tell them that he had been to Dakar, the capital city. But he clearly came here not understanding that the work of Diasporic Soul and A^{2}MEND involves providing healing and restoration experiences, not a tourist experience, for these young men.

The experience at Goree often left the participants without words when they attempted to explain what took place in the sacred space where their ancestors awaited being packed as human cargo and were never meant to return. For a number of reasons, it was wise that this activity was arranged so that the group had a private tour of the dungeons, described as houses. The hosts, mentors, and participants displayed an outpouring of a range of emotions, including anger and pain, that manifested in uncontrollable weeping, yelling, and what one might call "catching the Holy Ghost." On the boat ride back from Goree, Ture appeared to intentionally sit next to one of the male

hosts. Sitting quietly for some time with silence that seemed to articulate volumes, he began to speak with teary eyes. "I . . . I . . . I am sorry. I didn't know. I . . . we are the same." To which the host replied, "Yes . . . yes, we are, son."

Discussion

Reading between the lines of the current study's findings, it is apparent what we were witnessing what it was like for these Black men to taste freedom. They were free to be vulnerable, to play, to discover new identities, to release generational racialized trauma, to move liberally, to speak in their unique voice and value, and to just be which is not possible in the milieu in the US for many historical and topical dynamics where it is difficult for Black men to imagine freedom using any of their modalities. To this end, when one Googles Black freedom, the overwhelming images, if not all, show African Americans struggling to be free (i.e., pictures of marches, civil rights leaders, and chains). Moreover, a cursory examination on the academic bodies of literature across disciplines overwhelmingly mirror the same quagmire found in the general Google search.

Coming from an environment where freedom images are nonexistent, the African Renaissance Monument loomed larger in the minds of the participants beyond what its, already colossal dimensions, dictate. We would argue that if the African Renaissance Monument was constructed in the US, it would have had images of struggle such as chains connected to it. Yet, in Senegal, there were no such features and limitations for the statue or for the participants. Freedom is what the education abroad experience meant to the participants which was epitomized in monument.

Conclusions

Without question, education abroad programs for all gender, cultural, and college-going groups have a significantly positive impact on important academic and related measurements. This appears to be the first study on an education abroad program for African American men. While additional studies are needed, we know enough about the universal academic benefits of these experiences to justify aggressively creating more opportunities for African American college men as they tend to be, because of structural racism, disproportionately behind their counterparts on many academic indicators.

Beyond the evident academic outcomes, however, for African American men education abroad experience in Africa seems to be a necessary rites-of-passage that provides an opportunity for positive cultural, political, racial, and gender identity development. Moreover, with the growing body of work and focus on the impact of racialized trauma, transgenerational transmission of trauma, and epigenetics (Bush, Bush, & Mahnzili, 2020), these educational experiences offer possible solutions for healing trauma which we now know is the root of many mental and physical health issues (Presumey-Leblanc, 2020). Unfortunately, such opportunities for community college students in general, and African American men in particular, are limited. Axiomatically, funding is a barrier especially if the student must carry the cost for the trip to Africa which ranges between $3,800 to $5,500 per student for a two-week experience. Yet, the financial burden for institutions with multimillion-dollar budgets is minuscule; thus, priorities have to shift. For those who are truly invested in the well-being of African American men, every means to create similar experiences to the one studied here should be exhausted. Those institutions that already have programs for African American men, educational experiences in Africa must be an intricate component of the curriculum.

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