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RACE MATTERS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES  
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATES

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Karyn L. Sweeney

June 2014

Advisor: Dr. Franklin A. Tuitt

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Author: Karyn L. Sweeney  
Title: RACE MATTERS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE STUDY ABROAD  
EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATES  
Advisor: Dr. Franklin A. Tuitt  
Degree Date: June 2014

### **Abstract**

As U.S. colleges and universities face increasing pressures to prepare graduates to succeed in a global environment, African American students continue to be underrepresented in study abroad participation. In-depth interviews and a critical race theory framework were utilized to examine how six African American undergraduates experienced study abroad. Findings were organized around participant backgrounds, motivations, and goals for study abroad; lived experiences abroad, with an emphasis on the effects of race and racism; expectations; and meanings and outcomes ascribed to study abroad by the participants. The study findings offered a counternarrative to deficit-based discussions of African Americans and study abroad participation, and highlighted the importance of examining race and racism in study abroad experiences and outcomes.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

U.S. colleges and universities face increasing pressures to prepare graduates to succeed in a globalized economy. The U.S. Department of Education issued its first international education strategy in 2012, prioritizing educational diplomacy and the development of global competencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Study abroad plays an important role in this process, as “There is growing recognition among educators and policy-makers that more U.S. students need to study abroad to be prepared for leadership roles in the global economy and an increasingly interconnected world” (Freidheim, 2012, p. 5). Study abroad is defined as a credit-bearing academic experience in another country that is applicable to the home university degree program (Hoffa, 2007). Study abroad is a national priority, viewed as an important diplomatic tool and a means of developing solutions to global issues (Lewin, 2009). Participation in high impact educational activities like study abroad may have a positive influence on educational success, particularly for those students who have been historically underserved in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Study abroad is believed to enhance personal development, improve foreign language capabilities, broaden perspectives, positively impact career readiness, and prepare students for graduate study (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009). International study provides opportunities to increase intercultural competence (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009) and student intellectual development (McKeown, 2009). Additionally, participation in study abroad

can enhance knowledge of cultural contexts, lead to improved academic performance upon return, and improve graduation rates (Sutton & Rubin, 2010). The SAGE (Study Abroad for Global Engagement) project surveyed over 6,000 students from 22 colleges and universities, and found that study abroad influenced career and educational choices and had a long term impact on civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and voluntary simplicity (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009).

Not only significant to the learning and development of individual students, study abroad is also viewed as critical to U.S. foreign policy, national security, and economic security (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship, 2005; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, n.d.a). Federal efforts to increase study abroad participation began post World War II (Hoffa, 2007). In 2003, the bipartisan Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program was established through a U.S. Congress appropriations bill, and tasked with examining study abroad participation. The Commission proclaimed that the United States should strive to send one million students abroad annually by the 2016/17 academic year in order to positively influence the nation's global competitiveness, national security, leadership development, and international community engagement (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship, 2005). In March 2014, the Institute of International Education launched "Generation Study Abroad," a five year initiative in partnership with businesses, educational institutions, the U.S. Department of State, and foreign governments with the goal of doubling the number of U.S. students who study abroad (Institute of International Education, 2014).

## **Statement of Problem**

During the 2011/12 academic year, 283,332 U.S. college and university level students opted to study abroad for academic credit; study abroad participation by U.S. students increased by 76% from 2001/02 to 2011/12 (Institute of International Education, 2013c). Participation levels have not been equal across demographic categories; the typical participant has tended to be White, female, middle to upper middle class, and majoring in the humanities, social sciences, or business (Picard et al., 2009).

Underrepresented students are those who do not study abroad at the same rate as would be expected by their presence in a larger population; the larger population may be their home institution, state, or the United States (Forum on Education Abroad, 2011). As illustrated in Table 1, most students of color are underrepresented in study abroad participation. The percentage distribution of African American students enrolled in U.S. higher educational institutions increased from 13.1% in 2005 to 15.1% in 2011, but the rate of study abroad participation grew at a slightly slower rate, from 3.5% in the 2005/06 academic year to 5.3% in the 2011/12 academic year. While Asian/Pacific Islander students participated in study abroad in proportion to or at a higher rate than their overall enrollment, it is important to acknowledge that this category includes many ethnic sub-groups; within these sub-groups, study abroad participation and academic achievement in U.S. institutions of higher education varies considerably (Doan, 2002; Van Der Meid, 2003). White students are overrepresented in study abroad participation, constituting 61.2% (2011) of the total population of students in U.S. post-secondary institutions and 76.4% (2011/12) of the study abroad population (Institute of International Education, 2013c; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Despite efforts to remedy this, the

slight shifts in participation rates are likely a product of increasing numbers of students of color enrolled in U.S. higher educational institutions rather than a direct result of efforts to counteract underrepresentation in study abroad (Stallman, Woodruff, Kasravi, & Comp, 2010).

Table 1

*Total U.S. fall enrollment in degree-granting post-secondary institutions and annual study abroad participation, percentage distribution by race and ethnicity*

Race/ Ethnicity	U.S. 2005	Study Abroad 2005/06	U.S. 2007	Study Abroad 2007/08	U.S. 2009	Study Abroad 2009/10	U.S. 2011	Study Abroad 2011/12
White	68.0	83.0	66.7	81.8	64.5	78.7	61.2	76.4
Asian/ Pacific Islander	6.7	6.3	6.9	6.6	6.8	7.9	6.3	7.7
Hispanic or Latino/a	11.1	5.4	11.8	5.9	12.9	6.4	14.3	7.6
Black or African American	13.1	3.5	13.5	4.0	14.8	4.7	15.1	5.3
Multiracial	*	1.2	*	1.2	*	1.9	2.1	2.5
American Indian/ Alaska Native	1.0	0.6	1.1	0.5	1.1	0.5	0.9	0.5

*Note.* \*NCES data did not include a multiracial category until 2010. U.S. enrollment in post-secondary institution data is from National Center for Education Statistics (2012); study abroad data is from Institute of International Education (2013c).

The implications of underrepresentation of African American students in study abroad will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter; however, the consequences are critical not only for individual students, but also for U.S. institutions of higher education, the global business community, and U.S. diplomatic efforts.

### **Purpose and Significance of Study**

African American students often view and experience U.S. campus climates differently than do White students (Harper & Hurtado, 2011); given this, we should not assume that all students' experiences with study abroad are equivalent. Beyond numbers, little is known about the study abroad participation of African American students, their experiences in the host country, and the significance of these experiences to their lives. This phenomenological study examined African American undergraduate students' lived experiences with study abroad. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do African American undergraduate students experience study abroad?
  - a. How do African American students describe the factors that influenced their decisions to study abroad?
  - b. What do African American students experience as study abroad participants?
  - c. In what ways are African American students' experiences abroad similar to or different from what they had expected?
  - d. What meanings do African American students ascribe to their study abroad experiences?

It is critical to investigate African American students' experiences with study abroad so that we may identify and address inequities and better serve students. Without

knowledge of students' pathways to study abroad, their lived experiences in country, and the meanings African American students ascribe to their experiences, study abroad professionals are limited in their ability to effectively recruit, prepare, and support students throughout the process.

In the plenary speech at a conference focused on diversity in study abroad, Wilson-Oyelaran (2007) questioned whether international educators were serious about diversity:

In reviewing the literature, I was struck by the absence of a scholarly examination of the issue. Much that has been written is anecdotal and fails to address the complexity of the intragroup differences that exist among the students we are trying to serve. It seems to me that if we were really serious about addressing the lack of participation in study abroad, we would bring to this issue the rigorous scholarly examination that we bring to other aspects of our work. (p. 41)

She echoed the same concerns regarding this lack of scholarly attention four years later in *IIE Networker*, a publication for international educators (Wilson-Oyelaran, 2011). With increased institutional and national emphasis on both the importance of study abroad and the need for diversification of participants, it is critical that the study abroad participation of African American and other underrepresented students be more closely examined to learn if and how their experiences differ from those of the more typical (and overrepresented) participant, a White woman. The *NAFSA Guide to Education Abroad for Advisors and Administrators* identified a "clear need to examine policies and practices that are discriminatory and exclusionary, however unintended, as a part of the collective experience in education abroad" (Lebold et al., 2005, p. 212).

### **Implications of Underrepresentation**

Why does it matter who participates in study abroad? The underrepresentation of African American students in study abroad is an issue of educational equity (Washington, 1998). African American students who do not study abroad miss out on opportunities for

personal, academic, and professional development in international contexts. Norfle (2003) stated, “Today few would question that to be competitive at the postsecondary level and in the workplace, international awareness, exposure, and language training are truly advantageous” (p. 9). Non-participants may find themselves at a disadvantage in academic and employment realms that place value on the skills developed through international experiences.

The demographics of study abroad participants have been of concern not only to international educators, but also to the U.S. government. In addition to calling for an increase in the overall numbers of U.S. students who study abroad, the Lincoln Commission advised that the demographics of study abroad participants must be similar to the overall U.S. undergraduate student population, and that the proportion of students from community colleges, minority-serving institutions, and institutions serving low-income and first-generation students should reflect the proportion of U.S. students enrolled in these types of institutions (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship, 2005). The International Academic Opportunity Act of 2000 provided funding for the Benjamin A. Gilman scholarship, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State; the Gilman Scholarship supports students with high financial need who are traditionally underrepresented in study abroad, including students of color (Institute of International Education, 2013a). The 100,000 Strong Initiative was officially launched by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in May 2010 with the goal to increase the number of students who study in China and diversify the type of student who studies abroad (McGiffert, 2011). The U.S. Department of State launched a second 100,000 Strong Initiative for the Americas in March 2011 (U.S. Department Of State, 2012). The

U.S. government aimed not only to influence the destinations of study abroad to impact national security interests, but also hoped to change the face of the typical study abroad student. This was illustrated by First Lady Michelle Obama's January 2011 speech at Howard University highlighting the 100,000 Strong Initiative's efforts to increase study abroad in China with a specific focus on students at Hispanic Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and community colleges (Obama, 2011). More recently, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) outlined its first international education strategy, with its initial objective to "increase the global competencies of all U.S. students, including those from traditionally disadvantaged groups" (p. 5). While the overall strategy focused on improving U.S. education, study and research abroad were offered as means to enhance global competence and understanding.

The underrepresentation of African Americans in study abroad may also have consequences for institutions, employers, and international relations (Lebold et al., 2005). The business sector as well as the U.S. government needs a diverse, globally prepared workforce (Wilson-Oyelaran, 2007). Picard, Bernardino, and Ehigiator (2009) contended that study abroad participation leads to more engagement and improved academic performance, and that increased participation by minority students could also have a positive influence on campus climate. The participation of more African American and other students of color in study abroad and the deliberate inclusion of race in the study abroad curriculum could benefit all students by encouraging them to engage in intergroup dialogue about race and racism abroad, and then to connect this to their realities at home (Gearhart, 2005; Landau & Moore, 2001; Talburt & Stewart, 1999).

Sending students abroad who represent only a segment of the U.S. population distorts others' view of the U.S. and its citizens (Cole, 1991). NAFSA: Association of International Educators, one of the field's major professional organizations, suggested that diversity among participants is necessary to improve the image of the United States abroad (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, n.d.b). Study abroad by African American students may help to dispel stereotypes held by individuals abroad who have only seen misrepresentations perpetuated by media and films (Day-Vines, Barker, & Exhum, 1998; Landau & Moore, 2001). While individual students who do not study abroad miss out on learning opportunities, underrepresentation has even greater implications, as institutions and host communities are denied the contributions of African American and other students of color (Picard et al., 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Civil rights era legislation provided African American students with opportunities to enroll in institutions of higher education that had previously excluded non-White students, but "to characterize the current status of African Americans [in higher education] as inequitable would be a gross understatement" (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009, p. 397). Harper et al. (2009) posited that the underrepresentation of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), student reports of racism at PWIs, the reliance on racially-biased college entrance exams, low levels of persistence and degree attainment by African American males, efforts to end affirmative action, and the decline of need-based aid, among other factors, have undermined attempts to achieve access and equity. Harper et al. (2009) characterized racial subordination as a critical factor leading to racialized disparities and opportunity gaps experienced by African

Americans in U.S. higher education. Study abroad can be considered a microcosm of the overall college/university experience with parallel processes such as program selection; application and admission; the pursuit of funding; and adjustment to a new academic setting, curriculum, and teaching styles. Given the very real effects of racism in higher education, it is critical that educational researchers examine the “subtle and insidious” roles of race and racism when studying the educational experiences and outcomes of African American students (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26).

This study utilized a critical race theory (CRT) lens to examine how African American undergraduate students experience study abroad. Data was gathered through a series of interviews with African Americans who studied abroad as undergraduate students. As a White professional with more than 15 years of experience in the field of international education, I have internalized the predominant discourse surrounding African Americans and their participation/non-participation in higher education and study abroad, so my own assumptions, beliefs, and practices were also examined from a CRT perspective.

CRT emerged out of the critical legal studies and radical feminism movements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); in the mid-1990s, Ladson-Billings and Tate advocated that CRT be used in education to examine race and racism and their relationships to inequities in and out of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT not only illuminates and analyzes structural and cultural facets of education that support White domination, but promotes transformation and change (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). The tenets of CRT most appropriate to this study are listed in italics and described below.

*CRT positions racism as pervasive in U.S. society and institutions.* Racism is ordinary, the “usual way that society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). CRT accepts, however, the intersectionality of race with other forms of oppression including those based on gender, sexual orientation, and class, among others, and works to overcome all forms of oppression (Lawrence III, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Yosso, 2005). The first steps in a CRT analysis of study abroad are to acknowledge that while race is socially constructed, it has very real effects (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), and to recognize that racism is pervasive in all aspects of higher education, including study abroad. Although this study will center race and racism, other forms of oppression are likely to affect African Americans during their study abroad experiences, including those based on gender identity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, among others.

*CRT is centered in the experiential knowledge of people of color,* and often incorporates storytelling and counternarratives to uncover the “contradictions inherent in the dominant storyline that, among other things, blames people of color for their own condition of inequality” (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2010, p. 5). A CRT lens sees as critical the voices of African American students who study abroad in order to better understand their experiences. Harper and Quaye (2009) advised that educators must listen to students, as any strategies intended to improve engagement must be based on the students’ own experiences and backgrounds. Many of the barriers commonly blamed for the underrepresentation of students of color are characteristics of individual students, such as finances, fears, lack of family support, and lack of interest (Cole, 1991; Comp, 2007; Jackson, 2005). The empirical evidence to support these deficit-based

claims is limited and in some cases contradictory, which will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Several studies have shown that there are differences between obstacles identified by faculty, staff, and administrators, and obstacles identified by students themselves (Carter, 1991; Norfles, 2003; Raby, 2006). Kasravi (2009) found that students who studied abroad managed to overcome the same obstacles that non-participants faced, and that these barriers were not unique to students of color.

Harper (2009a) examined Black male student achievement at PWIs and noted that the participants, all accomplished students, had not previously been asked about their strategies or motivations for success. Harper (2009a) urged scholars to spend equal time focusing on the experiences of high achieving students, as “continuing to focus exclusively on the problems encountered by Black men and our deficits is racist” (p. 708). Rather than assuming that individual characteristics and deficiencies are the reason that African American students do not choose to study abroad, this study focused on African American students who successfully navigated study abroad to learn about their lived experiences.

*CRT challenges and critiques White supremacy and the notions of color blindness, meritocracy, equal opportunity, and objectivity* (Lawrence III et al., 1993; Yosso, 2005). Delgado & Stefancic (2001) declared, “Whites do not see themselves as having a race, but being, simply, people. They do not believe that they think and reason from a white viewpoint, but from a universally valid one – ‘the truth’ – what everyone knows” (p. 80). An intentional consideration of how race and racism may impact the study abroad process and experience is crucial. If structures and philosophies are not analyzed, institutions may be operating on the assumption that what is beneficial for

White students is equally beneficial for African American students (Zamudio et al., 2010). CRT requires that we question the assumptions on which systems are organized and structured, and then consider these systems and their effects on student success and failure rather than blaming students (Zamudio et al., 2011). Discussions regarding study abroad participation (or lack thereof) by African American students are primarily deficit-based. Overcoming educational inequities requires a consideration of institutional and structural barriers (Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown II, & Bartee, 2005). While individual circumstances may in some cases impact participation, institutions must closely examine their practices and procedures to determine if and how they contribute to underrepresentation in study abroad. Institutional contexts as well as students vary, so it cannot be assumed that successful practices at one institution will achieve equivalent results at another (Kuh, 2009).

This study attempts to move discourse surrounding the participation of African American students in study abroad beyond a focus simply on access. The experiences of African American students in U.S. higher educational institutions are different from those of White students, as many African American students are subject to constant microaggressions and negative stereotypes about their capabilities (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). We must consider that the study abroad experiences of African American students may also be different from those of White students, and examine our assumptions and practices based on Whiteness as the norm. CRT informed methods of data collection; a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used, emphasizing the stories of participants and how they make meaning of lived experiences. African American students' counternarratives regarding both their pathways to study abroad and

their lived experiences in the host country offer a critique of the color-blind assumptions prevalent in study abroad.

*CRT emphasizes the importance of revisionist history.* Versions of history presented by the White majority are critiqued for the exclusion of minority perspectives, and history is re-interpreted to include these viewpoints and experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It has been suggested that African Americans see study abroad as “not for people like me” due to historical exclusion and lack of role models and mentors (Jackson, 2005). In fact, African Americans have a long history of participation in international travel and education (Beck, 1996; Evans, 2008, 2009, 2011; Pryor, 2008), though this participation is excluded from texts that outline the history of study abroad.

*CRT is committed to social justice and transformation* (Lawrence III et al., 1993; Yosso, 2005). With so many grave inequities in education and society, one might ask why study abroad participation matters. Is this truly a social justice issue? Ladson-Billings (1998) discussed restricted access to enriched curriculum as connected to Harris’ concept of Whiteness as property. In essence, study abroad is restricted curriculum for many African American undergraduate students. While students who do not participate in these activities miss out on opportunities for growth and development, underrepresentation also has serious implications for the country’s image abroad. The lack of participation by African Americans as well as other students of color in study abroad reinforces the idea that a U.S. American is a White person; this also perpetuates White supremacy. If study abroad (among other international experiences) is a prerequisite for positions related to diplomacy and international work, our country will continue to be represented publicly and privately primarily by White individuals.

## **Summary**

This study examined how African American undergraduate students experienced study abroad, from the factors that led to their decision to participate to the meanings they ascribed to their experiences. The lived experiences of these African American study abroad participants provide a counternarrative to prevailing discourse about the participation – or lack thereof – of African American students. The goals of this study are to fill gaps in the literature, center the voices of African American students, and encourage international educators to examine the color-blind racism inherent in the structures and practices of study abroad.

The next chapter examines the literature related to African American study abroad participation. The literature review begins with revisionist history, revealing ways in which African Americans have been omitted from the dominant discourse regarding the history of study abroad. This history is re-centered to include the long history of foreign travel and study by African Americans. I then focus on the literature related to access, the effects of race and racism on the experiences of African American students abroad, and learning outcomes.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

While underrepresented in terms of study abroad participation, African Americans have established a long history of international travel in pursuit of education, starting with individuals who traveled abroad seeking educational opportunities and freedoms unavailable to them in the United States. The first African American to earn a medical degree, James McCune Smith, graduated from the University of Glasgow, Scotland in the 1830s (Pryor, 2008). The first African American to earn a doctorate, Patrick Healy, did so at the University of Louvain in Belgium in 1865 (Evans, 2008). Other notable African American scholars and leaders who pursued international study during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century include W.E.B. Dubois (Beck, 1996); Carter G. Woodson; Mercer Cook; Jessie Fauset; Flemmie Kittrell; Mary Church Terrell; and Anna Julia Cooper, who earned a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in France in 1925 at the age of 66 (Evans, 2009). By 1943, 19 doctoral degrees had been awarded to African Americans by non-U.S. institutions (Evans, 2009). Evans (2011) identified more than 130 African American autobiographies published between 1845 and 2010 describing international travel for political, cultural, religious, and educational purposes. Early African Americans who traveled to the United Kingdom and continental Europe did not experience the discrimination that was typical in the United States; they were readily able to access public spaces and utilize public transportation without restrictions to certain areas, and felt that they were no longer defined by race or subject to discrimination (Beck, 1996;

Evans, 2011; Pryor, 2008). These travelers used their experiences abroad “as evidence of the arbitrariness of racial degradation back home” (Pryor, 2008, p. 11) and critiqued racism in the United States (Evans, 2011). In 1933, Dr. W. Rivers delivered a speech at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and urged African Americans to study Romance languages. Rivers (1934) believed that the study of languages would provide African Americans with access to history and literature of Black persons not included in English-language works, as well as the ability to compete for professional opportunities in the United States and abroad. The ability to communicate in another language also gave the African American “an opportunity to present his case as his own ambassador in the shifting world court of human relations” and the chance to challenge negative stereotypes perpetuated about African Americans (Rivers, 1934, p. 135).

While the historical pursuit of international education by African Americans is not the primary focus of this study, it is important to recognize this example of revisionist history. Revisionist history “reexamines America’s historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities’ experiences” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 20). A two-volume account of the history of U.S. study abroad (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010; Hoffa, 2007) provided an overview of its historical roots, development in the context of U.S. higher education, and current issues in the field. Though two pages in the first volume were devoted to women and study abroad before and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hoffa, 2007), the international pursuits of African Americans during this period were not discussed. Instead, Hoffa

(2007) asserted that in some ways those who embarked on the Grand Tour (a term first used in 1670) abroad in pursuit of educational and social connections reflect those who study abroad in the current era; “To the degree that the Grand Tour continues today, it might be seen in the demographics of contemporary international education, which generally still favors students from wealthy and educated families and affluent nations” (p. 18). This exclusion of the historical participation of African Americans in international educational pursuits was a missed opportunity to counter the notion that study abroad is the realm of Whites. Instead, this narrative was strengthened. The journal that sponsored this two-volume history of study abroad had previously published an article describing the international study of W.E.B. Du Bois (Beck, 1996), so one could speculate that at least some of this history was known by the editors; the journal later included an article highlighting Anna Julia Cooper (Evans, 2009). Although the brief account provided at the beginning of this chapter does not do justice to the many African Americans who have pursued opportunities for formal and informal education internationally, it offers a counternarrative to the prevailing beliefs about the history of study abroad and the demographics of participants.

### **Study Abroad and U.S. Higher Education**

Although the majority of international students who come to the United States do so independently and in order to pursue a full degree, most U.S. students study abroad for a period of one year or less and as part of the academic program of their home institution (Hoffa, 2007). While U.S. citizens have a long history of travel abroad for personal enrichment, the pursuit of knowledge, and volunteer service, the development of

undergraduate study abroad programs for credit as part of a U.S. degree program began in the 1920s (Hoffa, 2007). Hoffa (2007) described three models that developed during this time period: the junior year abroad, the faculty-led study tour, and summer programs. The University of Delaware was one of the first institutions to initiate the junior year abroad, with programs focusing on language and cultural immersion. New York University was the first sponsor of the faculty-led study tour, which concentrated on global issues, visited multiple countries via ship, and attracted students from various universities. Other institutions like Georgetown University created short-term summer programs abroad that emphasized disciplinary learning. While most study abroad initiatives were halted during World War II, the post-war period in the 1940s and 1950s saw a growth in short term programs and the development of programs organized by consortia (Hoffa, 2007).

The Institute of International Education (IIE) was established in 1919 as an intermediary between the U.S. government, U.S. institutions of higher education, and foreign universities as growing numbers of international students came to the United States to study (Hoffa, 2007). IIE's initial attempts to track study abroad participation by U.S. students began in 1949, and IIE continues to administer the only nationwide survey to track participation and trends in study abroad by U.S. students, including the participation of students of color (Sideli & Kreutzer, 2005).

The U.S. Department of State became interested in international education after World War II, believing that area and language studies and educational exchange could positively impact U.S. diplomatic efforts and change the image of the United States abroad (Hoffa, 2007). The Fulbright program was established in 1946 to create

international exchange opportunities for students, scholars, and professionals (Institute of International Education, n.d.). Federally-funded programs like the National Security Education Program (NSEP) and the Critical Language Scholarship program provide scholarships for students who study languages and cultures considered critical for U.S. national security interests (Critical Language Scholarship Program, n.d.; National Security Education Program, n.d.). These efforts have helped to expand programs to non-European countries. Europe still dominates as the region attracting the greatest numbers of U.S. students (53.3% in 2011/12), but the percentage of students choosing European destinations has declined from 63.1% in 2000/01. Latin America hosted 15.8% of U.S. study abroad students in 2011/12; 12.4% of students chose Asian destinations; 4.5% opted to study abroad in African nations; and 2.5% of U.S. study abroad students selected programs in the Middle East (Institute of International Education, 2013b).

In 2000, 65% of U.S. universities offered study abroad programs, and by 2006 this had increased to 91% (Stearns, 2008). The type and number of academic experiences available to students has greatly expanded in the past few decades. While many universities continue to maintain direct exchange relationships with overseas institutions and may coordinate their own faculty-led programs, an industry of study abroad program providers has emerged. A program provider is “an institution or a stand-alone non-profit or for-profit entity that administers one or more education abroad programs primarily for students who are not enrolled there to pursue the primary degree” (Forum on Education Abroad, 2011, p. 9). These providers have allowed universities to offer more study abroad opportunities to their students without having to invest resources in program

development and infrastructure (Johnson, Rinehart, & Van Cleve, 2005). Since 1965, the field of education abroad has focused on democratization (expanding participation) and academic legitimization (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010).

### **Access to Study Abroad**

Discourse as well as research in the study abroad field regarding students of color has tended to focus on access. Although a number of the articles related to students of color and participation in study abroad are not research based (Comp, 2007) and offer “casual anecdotal evidence” (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011, p. 125), it is important to consider these works as well, as they influence beliefs and practices in the study abroad profession. Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella (2009) noted that “Surprisingly, almost no empirical research has explored the potential interaction of factors that affect intent to study abroad” (p. 121). Much of the recent research examining African American and other students of color and study abroad participation has been conducted as part of unpublished doctoral dissertations.

What factors are commonly believed to impede access for students of color to study abroad opportunities? A 1991 speech by Dr. Johnnetta Cole, at the time the president of Spelman College, called for international educators to examine why particular groups are underrepresented in study abroad participation. She focused on African American students, and referred to the “Four Fs” as barriers: faculty and staff, finances, family and community, and fears (Cole, 1991). The “Four Fs” have continued to appear in discussions about underrepresented students in study abroad ever since. Comp (2007) conducted a content analysis of literature related to students of color and study abroad

from the 1980s (when the first article addressing students of color and study abroad appeared) until 2004. The most commonly cited factors for non-participation included finances, lack of family support, concerns about discrimination, concerns about language, and a lack of program sites of interest to students of color (Comp, 2007).

Following, I will discuss the major barriers to study abroad that appear prevalently in both empirical literature and non-research based publications for study abroad professionals and students. While the barriers identified anecdotally are sometimes confirmed by the limited research in this area, research findings confirm that these barriers are far more complicated and nuanced than previously considered. In addition, discussions of barriers to study abroad tend to focus on student characteristics and overlook the role of the institution. Overcoming inequities requires a consideration of deficits at the institutional level (Bauman et al., 2005). While individual circumstances may impact participation, institutions must closely examine their practices and procedures to determine if and how they contribute to underrepresentation in study abroad.

The scarcity of study abroad research using race/ethnicity as a variable suggests that international educators tend to operate from a color-blind perspective, assuming that what is true for White students is also true for students of color. However, two studies have shown that predictors for study abroad participation or likelihood of study abroad intent vary by racial/ethnic group. BaileyShea (2009) used national data sets to examine predictors of study abroad participation, including background characteristics, student academic and extracurricular involvement, and institutional factors such as graduation

rates and structural diversity. BaileyShea (2009) discovered that “White students were more likely to arrive at college with factors that predisposed them to participate, whereas the factors that influenced minority student participation were more affected by experiences and choices students made while in college” (p. 177). Salisbury et al. (2011) examined the choice process of study abroad, and found that aspects of human, financial, cultural, and social capital influenced the intent to study abroad in different ways for the four racial/ethnic groups considered in their study. For example, as ACT scores increased for African American students, the likelihood to intend to study abroad decreased, which was not the case for White, Asian American, or Hispanic/Latino students (Salisbury et al., 2011). Aspirations to a graduate degree increased the likelihood of study abroad intent for African American and Asian American students, but reduced the likelihood of study abroad intent for White students (Salisbury et al., 2011). These findings illustrate the importance of disaggregating results by race/ethnicity instead of using Whiteness as the assumed norm.

**Faculty and staff.** Though individual circumstances or personal characteristics are often blamed for underrepresentation of students of color in study abroad, Carter (1991) argued that campus culture and lack of faculty and administrative support were the major impediments to study abroad for African American students. Faculty and staff assumed that African Americans were not qualified to study abroad or were not interested, so did not work to actively recruit these students (Carter, 1991). Faculty and staff may not feel that study abroad is essential for any student, much less for students who already face challenges in higher educational institutions. Norfles (2003) surveyed

245 staff of Federal TRIO programs and discovered that many of the staff and directors did not value study abroad as important for their students, but rather considered it to be an unnecessary luxury. Sixty percent of staff and directors had never referred a student to the study abroad office on their campus, and only half had any contact with the international office (Norfle, 2003). Washington (1998) examined attitudes and perceptions of 469 African American students toward study abroad with a focus on factors commonly attributed to the lack of participation, including faculty and staff, finances, family, fears, and lack of awareness. Forty-six percent of students identified lack of awareness as an issue, making this the most significant factor in lack of participation; students did not, however, believe that faculty played a role in their decision (Washington, 1998). In a study conducted by Kasravi (2009), participants did not learn about study abroad from their advisors or faculty, but instead from the study abroad office. This is problematic, as only those students who are already considering study abroad are apt to reach out to the study abroad office or take notice of the institution's information regarding study abroad opportunities. Students who are not thinking about study abroad or who have discounted it as a possibility are not likely to pursue further information without encouragement from faculty, staff, or others on campus with whom they are already engaged.

While faculty and staff can affect study abroad participation by not encouraging or actively discouraging students from pursuing these options, they can also negatively affect the process by operating under incorrect assumptions. Results of several studies have suggested that the obstacles identified by faculty, staff, and administrators may

differ from those identified by students (Carter, 1991; Norfles, 2003; Raby, 2006). A study conducted in collaboration with California Colleges for International Education (CCIE) found that California community college system administrators, faculty, and staff attributed lack of participation in study abroad to finances, family/work obligations, and lack of cultural capital (Raby, 2006). Students in these same community colleges, meanwhile, cited lack of college infrastructure, a shortage of study abroad offerings, and lack of knowledge about existing programs as the primary barriers to their participation in study abroad (Raby, 2006).

Although more research is needed to further understand the process of study abroad for African American and other underrepresented students, the studies referenced above illustrate the need to thoroughly investigate study abroad participation and equity issues at individual institutions, and to consult with students in the process. Otherwise, international educators may be striving to resolve problems that do not exist, while remaining oblivious to the real barriers that prevent students from accessing study abroad. In addition, by focusing on individual characteristics rather than structural barriers, we perpetuate the notion that African American students themselves are to be blamed for their lack of engagement in study abroad.

**Academics.** Hembroff and Rusz (1993) examined participation in study abroad by racial/ethnic group at Michigan State University in an attempt to identify factors leading to underrepresentation of students of color. The authors proposed that African American students were less likely to study abroad due to higher attrition rates at the university (students normally studied abroad as sophomores and juniors) and choice of

major; African American students were overrepresented in majors that did not encourage study abroad participation such as engineering and natural sciences (Hembroff & Ruzs, 1993).

Kasravi (2009) found that academic concerns were a priority for both students who studied abroad and those who opted not to participate. Students who did not study abroad indicated that primary barriers included difficulties in getting classes approved and a lack of fit with their academic programs (Kasravi, 2009). While students who did study abroad overcame these academic barriers by changing majors, adding a second major, or delaying graduation (Kasravi, 2009), it seems that better integration of study abroad into the curriculum and deliberate connections between learning abroad and on the home campus would facilitate and enhance the study abroad experience for all students. This curricular integration would require support from academic departments and faculty, who then might be more likely to encourage all students to study abroad.

**Finances.** The expense of study abroad is a frequently cited barrier to participation, not only for some students of color but also for all students with limited financial means. Hembroff and Ruzs (1993) noted that African American students who had decided not to participate in study abroad were more likely to indicate concerns about finances than were White students or other students of color. Washington (1998) found that finances were an issue for 13% of his respondents, but suggested that this was related to awareness, which he found to be the most significant factor in the decision not to study abroad; students were not aware of the availability of financial aid or scholarships.

A study focused on California community college students found that while faculty, staff, and administrators believed that the inability to afford study abroad was one of the major barriers to participation, 70% of students indicated that cost alone would not be enough to prevent them from study abroad (Raby, 2006). Kasravi (2009) discovered that the expense of study abroad was identified as a barrier by both those students who opted to study abroad and those who did not. Students overcame financial barriers by various means, including choosing a shorter or less expensive program, opting for a more affordable destination, applying for scholarships, working more, and moving home to save money (Kasravi, 2009). Efforts to counteract barriers for students are likely to be more successful when the strategies of study abroad participants to overcome similar obstacles are identified, as these approaches can be communicated to prospective students.

While study abroad can be an expensive proposition, there have been developments easing the financial burden over the past few decades. The 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act permitted students to use federal financial aid for study abroad programs (Stallman et al., 2010). Though not all colleges and universities permit students to use institutional aid for study abroad programs, they are encouraged to do so by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, as “denying this support to needy students sacrifices the principle of equal access to all academic opportunities” (Lauman, Stubbs, Gliozzo, & Lee, 2005, p. 110). A number of scholarships have emerged to support underrepresented students in study abroad, including students of color. One notable example is the Benjamin A. Gilman scholarship program, sponsored by the U.S.

Department of State. This scholarship supports high need students who are underrepresented in study abroad, and more than 2,300 scholarships of up to \$5,000 were awarded during the 2013/14 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2013a). In addition, a growing number of study abroad program providers are instituting diversity scholarships for participants on their programs. Although funding for study abroad has increased over the past decades, scholarships and financial aid are not helpful to those students who are unaware that these resources exist (McClure, Szelenyi, Niehaus, Anderson, & Reed, 2010).

Programs such as the Benjamin A. Gilman scholarship can be commended for efforts to improve access to study abroad for underrepresented students with high financial need, and these scholarships have undoubtedly made an impact on many individual students. Hoffa and DePaul (2010b) questioned, however, “whether the increased levels of federal funding, as welcome as such funding surely would be, can ever fully address the challenges and disparities deeply rooted in the economics of study abroad” (p. 4).

**Family and community.** Family considerations are also often cited as a barrier to students of color considering study abroad. Washington (1998) found that a small percentage (3%) of students identified family as a factor in their decision not to go abroad. In contrast, Jackson (2006) found that rather than having to overcome a lack of familial support, “The most important condition for studying abroad is that family, especially mothers, and friends were not only supportive of study abroad but sometimes acted as travel role models and mentors for the participants” (p. 106).

Related to levels of family support is the idea that study abroad may not be valued within communities of color. Jackson (2005) asserted that media influences and historical exclusion from study abroad has led to what she calls the “not for people like me” syndrome for students of color, resulting in little interest in study abroad. First Lady Michelle Obama echoed this sentiment in a 2011 speech at Howard University:

I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, and the idea of spending time abroad just never registered with me. My brother and I were among the first in our families to go to college. So, trust me, we were way more focused on getting in, getting through, and getting out, than we were with finding opportunities that would broaden our horizons. (Obama, 2011)

While the argument that African American students are not interested in study abroad appears in non-empirical literature, this is not supported by the limited research in this area. An examination of factors impacting the choice to study abroad in 2,772 first year students attending 19 institutions found no statistically significant differences between African American and White or Latino/a and White students in regards to the intent to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2009). Penn and Tanner’s (2008) survey of 41 African American high school graduates in a summer pre-college program found that 83% indicated interest in a study abroad experience, which “chips away at the belief found in much of the previous literature that Black students have no desire or information about international education programs” (p. 278).

**Fears.** Although Hembroff and Rusz (1993) found that African American students who had decided not to participate in study abroad were more likely to indicate concerns about discrimination and language difficulties than were White students or other students of color, fear has not emerged as a significant barrier in other studies. One student noted, “Yea [*sic*] right, more racism and prejudice than I experience here in this

country. I don't think so" (Washington, 1998, p. 131). Participants in Jackson's (2006) study expressed that they did not anticipate racism abroad would be greater or different than what they experienced in the United States; one student commented that being Black in U.S. higher education was an isolating experience. Students were more concerned by the prospect of anti-Americanism (Jackson, 2006).

### **Racialized Experiences of African American Participants**

Whereas literature focused on African American students and study abroad has primarily considered access and barriers, there are a limited number of works that have examined the experiences of African American students while abroad, highlighting the affects of race and racism. Several of these studies have been conducted as part of doctoral dissertations (Anya, 2011; Holmes, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Williams, 2006). A number of articles have been written by faculty members reflecting on their roles directing study abroad programs or advising African American study abroad participants (Dawson, 2000; Evans, 2011; Ganz, 1991; Gearhart, 2005; Tolliver, 2000). African American travel narratives and documents written by study abroad alumni have also been considered.

**Freedom from (U.S.) racism.** As briefly described at the beginning of this chapter, early African American international sojourners enjoyed freedom from racism and feelings of safety while abroad that they did not possess at home, and used the experience to critique racism and discrimination in the United States (Evans, 2011; Pryor, 2008). Study abroad participants have felt liberation from U.S. racism, and found that their U.S. citizenship and status as a foreigner provided them with unexpected privileges

and social status denied to them in the United States (Jackson, 2006). Some students encountered racism against other groups while abroad; though they were not the target, these experiences caused them to reflect on race and racism at home and abroad (Jackson, 2006). Faculty-led study abroad programs populated entirely by African American students have been empowering as students learned more about the rich history and contributions of Africans and persons of African descent, whether traveling to Ghana (Dawson, 2000; Day-Vines et al., 1998) or to Paris (Evans, 2011). Studying abroad in a mixed racial/ethnic group can also be inspiring, but may present added complications as the students navigate U.S. racial tensions; this will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

Students also experienced independence from stereotypes about African Americans perpetuated in the media and/or the ability to critique or counter these stereotypes (Day-Vines et al., 1998; Jackson, 2006; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.). Students traveling to Ghana were able to dispel their own myths and stereotypes about Africans (Day-Vines et al., 1998).

**National identity.** Study abroad participants and African American travelers alike have been surprised to find that their nationality becomes a primary aspect of their identity when abroad, though this may not be the case at home; they are first seen as U.S. Americans by their host community members rather than African Americans. Jackson (2006) noted that several study participants began to discover an American national identity as they explored their African American identities; “The participants had previously expressed ambivalence about claiming American as part of their identities

because of issues of racism in the U.S... Therefore, being seen as American first and African American second was amazing to them” (p. 148). A similar revelation by an African American travel writer is described below:

Traveling, they taught me, means giving up personal ego and nationalistic arrogance. My hosts referred to me as the “American.” I had to accept the fact that, as quiet as it’s kept here in my own country, I am an American. Yet nothing in my experience had allowed me to think of myself in that way. At best I was a hyphenate: an African American. Some derivative of the “real” thing. In London I was a different type of “other”, standing outside another norm. *I am an American*. (Lazard, 1997, p. 222)

While students may begin to identify more as U.S. Americans, the study abroad experience has also had a positive impact on racial and ethnic identity development for African American students (Day-Vines et al., 1998; Jackson, 2006; Landau & Moore, 2001; Williams, 2006). Jackson (2006) found that students were able to “reimagine identity” in a new environment where race and racism were redefined. One participant commented, “When you step outside of the box of the United States you realize all this sh\*\* that you’ve been internalized to believe about yourself is not true” (Jackson, 2006, p. 225). A student in Brazil, who previously felt ashamed of her racial identity as one of very few Black students in her U.S. community, noted she felt comfortable with her racial identity and her physical appearance for the first time while abroad, where she was often mistaken for a local (Anya, 2011).

**Race as advantage.** Although fear of discrimination and racism has been cited as a potential barrier to study abroad participation for African American students (Cole, 1991; Comp, 2007), some African American students viewed their race as an advantage in the host country, believing that they were exempt from stereotypes about the “ugly American” (Jackson, 2006; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.). Students

viewed their race as giving them greater access in host communities, as locals were more interested in getting to know them than they were White Americans (Jackson, 2006; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.). African American students were sometimes able to connect with persons of African heritage in predominantly White countries; some of these students identified a common culture and racial understanding, while others discovered they did not share lived experiences with other members of the African Diaspora (Comp, 2008; Jackson, 2006; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.).

One study abroad alumna noted that her experiences in the United States negotiating between cultures had helped her develop flexibility and prepared her for cultural adaptation abroad; this woman felt that the White students on her program did not have these skills because they were not forced to operate in different cultural environments in the United States (Jackson, 2006). Jackson (2006) suggested that while there is a great deal of discussion about why African Americans do not study abroad amongst international educators, “There is little discussion of how long-term personal experiences dealing with shifting frames of reference and cultural difference would make African Americans, or minority students in general, uniquely qualified to be study abroad students” (p. 192).

Study abroad is often marketed as an opportunity to gain cross-cultural skills. Salisbury (2012) proposed that this argument will have little appeal to a student of color at a PWI, for whom every day is an exercise in cross-cultural communication and negotiation. By insisting that one must travel to another country to gain these skills we

may further marginalize our students of color by discounting the skills and experiences they bring to the study abroad experience. In addition, we signal that the cultural differences that exist on our U.S. campuses and in our communities are not as valuable as the cultural differences encountered abroad, and that we do not expect our White students to engage with those different from them unless they travel to another country.

**Experiences as the racial majority.** The experiences of African Americans abroad will vary from location to location and even from student to student; however, students may have higher expectations for countries where they will be part of the racial majority (Dawson, 2000; Jackson, 2006; Jefferson, 1997; Landau & Moore, 2001; Tolliver, 2000). Some students chose a program due to perceived affinity with the Black community in the host country (Anya, 2011). Landau and Moore (2001) found that African American students studying abroad in Ghana were motivated by a quest for personal history and roots. One participant noted, “A Black man going to Africa, you just have to see it for yourself...Black people, Black presidents, and Black people in all sorts of power. Black people as the majority, you are no longer the minority. It’s amazing, and I wanted to witness it for myself” (Landau & Moore, 2001, p. 33). African American students studying Portuguese in Brazil experienced comfort and validation in a country where many looked like them; one student spoke of feeling a common struggle against racism due to Brazil’s own history with slavery (Anya, 2011).

While McClure et al. (2010) suggested that more programs should be developed in countries where persons of color are predominant, students studying abroad in these countries may face unanticipated challenges. Students may expect to fit in and be

embraced, but this does not always occur, as students may be viewed as Americans and foreigners (Comp, 2008; Jefferson, 1997; Landau & Moore, 2001). In an essay about her own travel as an African American woman, a professor described her experience leading a group of African American students to Ghana:

Our destination was West Africa, from which our ancestors had all presumably come. I remember the excitement on the plane as the students anticipated landing in a country where all the people would look like them and the joy and welcome they expected to feel upon returning to their ancestral home... The students' surprise and disappointment was palpable and grew more so throughout the trip as the Africans continued to treat us cordially but as strangers, with no particular relationship to themselves. In Africa, a common skin coloring was apparently not enough to establish kinship, while back in the States a difference in skin coloring was more than sufficient to negate kinship. This realization had a profound impact on the students. They didn't talk much about it, but I could see it in the way they began to complain – the toilet paper was too harsh, the bugs too big, and there was no ice. And I could see it in the growing enthusiasm for returning “home.” (Jefferson, 1997, p. 273)

In leading a study abroad program to Kenya, Gearhart (2005) discovered that the two African American participants faced painful challenges surrounding race and identity, and experienced Kenya in very different ways than did the White students on the same program. Tami, an African American student on the program, described this in a journal entry:

I don't think anybody on this trip understands that my experience is different from theirs, and in what ways it's different. I'm looking at this society and culture through the experiences and eyes of a westerner, but I feel the need and the compulsion to identify with the people. I want to know them, I want to understand them, because I feel like this is my one opportunity to learn about/have a first hand experience with my roots. On the other hand, I'm afraid to let myself just relax and enjoy the trip and feel the culture because I'm afraid of being unaccepted and then really feeling like I don't belong anywhere. Because I'm certainly not fully accepted by these white kids and I know that I never will be...(Gearhart, 2005, p. 80)

Tami expressed fear at not being accepted by Kenyans, whom she considered her own people even though they had different lived experiences and histories. She was distressed to realize that, as much as she felt different from the White students in her group, she did identify with their histories and lifestyles, and was perceived to be like them by many Kenyans (Gearhart, 2005).

African American students may still encounter White supremacy and privilege in countries where the White population is a minority (Gearhart, 2005; Landau & Moore, 2001; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.), which can be disconcerting and disappointing. African Americans may find the attention that White foreigners receive unsettling and unexpected (Anya, 2011; Landau & Moore, 2001), as a student in Ghana described:

They need to stop catering to the whites. That was one thing that totally, totally threw me. That I could be in a village somewhere and trampled to death by people running up to the white folks or even on campus or even in Osu or wherever else. Where Ghanaians want to talk to white people more than they want to talk to black people. I have a real problem with that. I mean I could just go stay in the United State for free and have experiences like that. (Landau & Moore, 2001, p. 45)

**Racial tensions with White U.S. students.** U.S. racial relations and tensions may follow students abroad. Several works have illuminated the difficulties African American students face coping with their White U.S. peers (Gearhart, 2005; Holmes, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Landau & Moore, 2001; Tolliver, 2000). These relationships are often more challenging than those with host country nationals. Tensions among U.S. students can become extreme in situations where students are already dealing with powerful emotions related to race and the history of slavery. Visiting slave castles in Ghana, for example, invoked very different reactions for African American and for White students,

who “clearly...did not have the emotional, psychological, or spiritual connection to enslavement as did many of the African American students” (Tolliver, 2000, p. 113). An African American student who studied in Ghana was initially surprised to find White students on her study abroad program, and had strong reactions regarding their presence: “I felt a lot of resentment within myself on to the white people who were there because I didn’t feel like they should have been there...And it made me know that I had a lot of issues that I was dealing with about black and white when I was there” (Holmes, 2008, p. 81).

White students may be considering their race for the first time while abroad, particularly if they are studying in countries where they are part of a racial minority (Gearhart, 2005; Landau & Moore, 2001; Williams, 2006). This evidence of the privilege to have not previously considered race may be infuriating to African American students, who have had no such luxury. As CRT explains, Whites have the ability to see themselves as raceless and consider their viewpoint as the only viewpoint (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); the combination of being in another country and the racial minority for the first time may be sufficient jolts for a White student to realize she has a race. Tolliver (2000) noted that the experience of being in the racial minority for White students in Ghana was a more positive one than what African Americans experience as a racial minority in the United States, so while White students may become more conscious of race as a result of study abroad, this experience is not at all parallel to that of an African American in the United States.

**Climate issues abroad.** While dealing with other U.S. students may present problems, the climate at the host university and/or in the host community may also have an impact both on the student abroad and future participants. If students of color have a negative study abroad experience, they could be hesitant to recommend the experience to their peers. The study abroad director at a Historically Black College noted that her institution's African American students faced additional challenges abroad in some regions of the world, including touching, looks, and comments from host country nationals who may have had little contact with individuals of a race different from their own (Ganz, 1991). She described one such encounter: "I was with one of my students in Italy four years ago when I heard a little child ask his mother why my student's mother had let her out without washing – how truly dirty she was; he wanted to come over and touch her to see if the dirt would rub off" (Ganz, 1991, p. 47).

An African American student who published a guide for other study abroad participants described her experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina:

I began to realize the stares were because of my skin color, not my nationality. I was a black woman in Argentina, a country with people of mostly European descent. Anywhere I went I stuck out like a sore thumb...No one could believe that I was American...One thing stuck with me that I just could not ignore, why hadn't anyone told me about this before I left? (Lewis, 2009, p. 51)

In addition to being the target of racialized attention, students may also witness racist events in their host country that create a hostile environment, even more so when such events are considered cultural and left unquestioned by locals. Examples include seeing characters in blackface in Spain during Carnival celebrations (Tharps, 2008; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.) and representations of Black Pete around the Christmas holidays in the Netherlands (Jackson, 2006).

The ways in which students make meaning of the racial climate in their host countries are likely to be influenced by their lived experiences with racism in the United States, as illustrated by an African American woman who wrote of her experiences working in Japan:

At first, when people stared at me and children pointed and laughed, I interpreted their behavior as an expression of racism. *What you got to stare at, huh?* It was a knee-jerk reaction, based on what staring meant at home. This was not the U.S.; it was a country that I knew very little about, and, therefore, my assumptions were not always correct. As I learned more about Japan and woke up to the fact that I was a foreigner there, I stopped lumping everything disagreeable that happened to me into the category of racism (while still able to see clearly the racism that *did* exist). Japan is a very homogenous country and many people, I eventually learned, particularly in the islands, had never before seen a black woman. (Radden, 1997, p. 265)

Stares, comments, and even touching may be common occurrences for persons of color who travel to communities where their own race/ethnicity is not prevalent. It is important for international educators to validate students' concerns and experiences rather than dismiss their explanations as overreactions or misunderstandings. An outsider cannot and should not override the student's interpretations of microaggressions and racism.

I was given an opportunity to reflect on this during a site visit to several study abroad programs in Latin America. A lunch-time conversation with other U.S. study abroad professionals and host country staff turned to the challenges an African American student experienced with unwanted attention in her host community. This ranged from stares to comments of "negrita" to the touching of her skin and hair in public places. Most at the table believed she was overreacting, as she did not understand that people were "just interested" in her because she looked different from what was perceived as

“normal” in the host country. I became increasingly uncomfortable as I realized that I had, in the past, also warned African American students that this might occur, but assured them this attention was normally not based in malice. After all, Latin Americans often gave nicknames based on appearance; I had been the recipient of what I (at the time) had interpreted as similar attention while a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala. I cringed as I realized that being called White and blondie was not at all equivalent to being called Black or dark, given our country’s racial history and the day-to-day experiences of persons of color. I realized at that moment that such unwanted attention based on race comes from a position of power, whether conscious or not – those calling names or touching believe they have the right and privilege to do so. While I had shared my experiences with former students in an attempt to provide support and understanding, I instead inadvertently made it clear that I had little or no understanding of their lives in the United States, much less abroad. An African American travel writer described a similar situation as she prepared to teach English in South Korea:

To add to my anxiety, a few European-Americans felt it necessary to warn me about the racism in Asia. The Japanese are racist. The Taiwanese are racist. The Koreans are racist. Nevertheless, never having been the target of U.S. racism, they couldn’t compare it to the Asian variety. I was annoyed; I live with racism every day and didn’t need any warnings. (Shervington, 1997, p. 279)

CRT provides a framework in which to consider climate abroad. International educators need to recognize that racism is endemic in the United States. By warning students of racism abroad yet not acknowledging the racism that they experience at home, we are discounting their lived experiences and operating from a position of White privilege to deny the existence of racism in our own country. African American students may also experience racist acts abroad, but many are, unfortunately, experienced at

dealing with racism as a result of growing up in the United States. Providing opportunities for students to discuss the climate in their host countries, preferably with other African Americans who can share their own experiences, may help students develop both coping strategies and realistic expectations about what they might encounter abroad. The experiences of African American students should be validated, not dismissed; their interpretations of what occurs abroad are real and true. In the limited literature related to climate abroad, the strategies that African American use to deal with these microaggressions and other acts of racism are not addressed. Learning more about how students respond to these issues would be valuable both for international educators and future study abroad participants.

**Role of curriculum and pedagogy.** Several works have addressed the roles that race and racism can play in the study abroad learning experience, focusing on curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom practices. Anya (2011) examined African Americans studying Portuguese in Brazil. She noted that most discussions about African Americans as second language learners are deficit-based; her study aimed to highlight the marginalization of African Americans in foreign language study as well as identify ways in which students can be engaged in the classroom. One student, Rose, was not accustomed to asking for help or forming relationships with instructors due to her educational experiences in the United States. Her learning style was not nurtured in her Portuguese language classroom in Brazil, and humiliation in the classroom further affected her learning. Her instructors felt she was not engaged or trying, yet ignored that she was quite successful in communicating in Portuguese in contexts where she felt comfortable and validated, like

the beauty shop (Anya, 2011). Curriculum was also important; several of Anya's participants expressed the affirmation they felt in their Afro-Brazilian Culture and History course, which led to investment in and engagement with the class and its material. A literature course, on the other hand, excluded any mention of Afro-Brazilian authors and themes. Anya (2011) noted that what was omitted from the curriculum was just as important as what was included.

The inclusion of formal and informal discussions of race and ethnicity, as well as culture and history, can encourage students to reflect on their identities as well as cultural and historical differences. While African American students may face challenges dealing with White students on their programs, intentionally including discussions of race and racism in the curriculum can lead to positive intergroup dialogue and powerful learning experiences for all students. As mentioned previously, White students may recognize that they have a race for the first time while abroad. This initial acknowledgement of race by White students can be capitalized upon to facilitate deeper dialogue regarding race and racism in the United States, but it is crucial to recognize the knowledge and lived experiences of African American and other students of color as part of this process. From the limited research in this area, faculty program leaders appear to be key.

Tolliver (2000) led a study abroad program to Ghana with another African American professor, and described the ways in which they intentionally engaged in dialogue about race throughout the program, beginning with applicant interviews. Pre-departure sessions gave additional opportunities to address racial issues, both among the group and between U.S. students and Ghanaians. After visits to emotionally charged

settings like the Slave River and a slave castle, students first met in racially homogenous groups for discussion, and then met as a larger group. While tensions and misunderstandings still occurred and required careful ongoing facilitation, the professor believed that:

The living/learning community that develops during study abroad in Africa can provide a powerful context for helping students deal with the complex relationships that exist in America today and can provide a backdrop for understanding the historical context of Black-White power relations... What better places are there than the historically significant and emotionally provocative points of departure for the ancestors of many of the targets of present-day racism to serve as a catalyst for the intra- and interracial dialogue about race in America? (Tolliver, 2000, p. 115)

Williams (2006) described Professor Maqhawe, a Black Southern African professor who taught a course on Southern Africa culminating with a three week study abroad program. Maqhawe used storytelling and counternarratives based on his own experiences to make the history and culture real for the African American, White, and biracial students in his course, who were shocked that their previous courses had excluded the history of apartheid and Southern Africa (Williams, 2006). The program structure and knowledge and facilitation skills of the program leaders created group cohesiveness, which made intergroup dialogue surrounding difficult issues like race and racism more successful (Williams, 2006).

Centering race in the formal curriculum can also support African American students who are experiencing a hostile racial climate. Talburt and Stewart (1999) examined the study abroad experience of Misheila, an African American woman who experienced verbal harassment on the streets of Spain. The constant attention was discussed in the classroom with her Spanish professor and White U.S. students, though

Misheila was left unsatisfied with the conversation; she rejected the advice that the comments were playful and should be ignored. The authors proposed that ongoing discussions about race and gender might have led to more productive dialogue rather than, in essence, a dismissal of Misheila's experiences (Talbert & Stewart, 1999).

### **Learning Outcomes**

While there is much discussion of the numbers of students of color who study abroad and potential barriers that prevent students from accessing these experiences, there is little research specifically addressing outcomes in study abroad by students of color. This may be due to the overall lack of research focused on assessment and learning outcomes. A push for assessment in study abroad has occurred in recent years; the Forum on Education Abroad, one of the major professional associations in study abroad, has issued *A Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Study Abroad*, and has identified assessment as one of the most important topics for the profession (Bolen, 2007). The field of education abroad is still struggling to determine what to assess and how best to conduct assessment. As these efforts move forward, institutions and researchers must examine data to see if racial and ethnic differences exist. A focus on access is crucial but insufficient, as study abroad professionals need to understand not only the factors that impact participation, but also the experiences and learning outcomes of students who do opt to study abroad.

Sutton and Rubin's (n.d.) examination of study abroad in the University System of Georgia is one of the only studies that specifically addressed outcomes for students of color, finding that study abroad did have an influence on overall academic success.

African American study abroad participants were 30% more likely to graduate in four years than African Americans who did not study abroad. Four-year graduation rates for other students of color who studied abroad were 18% higher than those of their peers who did not study abroad (Redden, 2010). Study abroad had a smaller impact on graduation rates of White study abroad participants, who were 12% more likely to graduate in four years (Sutton & Rubin, n.d.).

### **Summary**

Albeit limited, the research regarding access to study abroad suggests that those barriers identified by faculty and staff may not be those that are recognized by students (Norfles, 2003; Raby, 2006). Students who do study abroad face the same barriers as students who do not study abroad, yet develop strategies to overcome these challenges; in addition, these barriers may not be unique to students of color (Kasravi, 2009). Salisbury et al. (2009) found no statistically significant difference regarding the intent to study abroad between first year African American and White students; what, then, happens to these students between the first year of college and the third and fourth years, when students tend to study abroad? If lack of participation in study abroad were truly precipitated by student characteristics and deficits (which is not supported by the research), would African Americans express an initial interest in study abroad? Are we failing to encourage students, or even actively discouraging African American students from considering study abroad participation?

While there is a great deal of discussion at professional conferences and at our own institutions about access, we still know little about African Americans who do

decide to study abroad. What are their pathways, their motivations and goals, and their expectations? What do they experience abroad, and what significance to they attribute to these experiences? Since African American students experience U.S. educational systems differently than do White students, it seems plausible that they may also experience study abroad differently. The literature suggests that African Americans may feel empowered and experience freedom from U.S. racism (Beck, 1996; Dawson, 2000; Evans, 2009, 2011; Jackson, 2006; Pryor, 2008), or discontent at finding White supremacy and power replicated in their host country (Anya, 2011; Gearhart, 2005; Landau & Moore, 2001). African Americans may experience microaggressions and racial incidents abroad (Ganz, 1991; Lewis, 2009; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Tharps, 2008; University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad Office, n.d.), yet there is little discussion of how students cope with these incidents, and how this affects their overall learning experience. African American students' racialized experiences in the United States may have provided them with skills essential for navigating a new country and culture (Jackson, 2006). African American students may experience challenges dealing with White U.S. students abroad (Gearhart, 2005; Holmes, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Landau & Moore, 2001; Tolliver, 2000), though the inclusion of race in the curriculum and facilitation by faculty and staff can lead to powerful learning experiences surrounding race and racism for all students (Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Tolliver, 2000; Williams, 2006). Students may have very different experiences abroad depending on whether they study abroad in a country where they are the racial majority or minority; while one might assume that the experience would be more positive in a country where they are for the first time a majority, this is not always

the case. Students may identify as an American citizen for the first time (Jackson, 2006), and/or they may develop a stronger identity as an African American (Anya, 2011; Day-Vines et al., 1998; Jackson, 2006; Landau & Moore, 2001).

Relatively few studies have used race and ethnicity as variables when examining study abroad access or outcomes. International educators cannot continue to operate under the assumption that the experiences of White students are the experiences of all students. The limited studies that have disaggregated results by race and ethnicity have discovered differences among racial/ethnic groups in factors that impact study abroad participation (BaileyShea, 2009), intent to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2011), and the influence of study abroad on graduation rates (Sutton & Rubin, n.d.). As the field of international education focuses more attention on assessment, we must look at the outcomes for all students. A colorblind approach has not resolved underrepresentation in study abroad, and will not provide an understanding of the successes and challenges of African Americans abroad. To best serve students, we must examine their experiences both individually and collectively (Tuitt, 2009). Until institutions have a clear understanding of the experiences, challenges, and opportunities on their own campuses and study abroad programs, they cannot effectively create change to better serve African American students in the pre-departure, in-country, and reentry phases of study abroad.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

As outlined in the previous chapter, African American students are underrepresented nationwide in study abroad participation, and discussions of their involvement or lack thereof in study abroad primarily focus on access. Limited research has explored the lived experiences of African American study abroad participants, and some of these works were not empirically grounded. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover how African American undergraduate students experience study abroad. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do African American undergraduate students experience study abroad?
  - a. How do African American students describe the factors that influenced their decisions to study abroad?
  - b. What do African American students experience as study abroad participants?
  - c. In what ways are African American students' experiences abroad similar to or different from what they had expected?
  - d. What meanings do African American students ascribe to their study abroad experiences?

While the literature offers some examples of the types of experiences African American students might encounter while abroad, these are by no means comprehensive. The phenomenological approach is discovery-oriented and focuses on lived experiences

and meanings without pre-determining content and categories of responses (Van Manen, 1990). The research questions utilized in this study were intentionally broad in order to learn from the participants rather than trying to fit their experiences into predetermined categories. CRT emphasizes the experiential knowledge of persons of color. The participants in this study were the experts as to their lived study abroad experiences, and the research questions were designed to let their stories emerge.

### **Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

A qualitative approach was most appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of African American study abroad participants, as qualitative research:

Begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. (Creswell, 2007, p. 37)

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected for this study.

Phenomenology developed from the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher and mathematician (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The fundamental question in a phenomenological study is, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Phenomenology examines the lifeworld, or everyday lived experiences, and attempts to gain understanding as to the nature or essence of these experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

While there are multiple approaches to phenomenology, Creswell (2007) outlined two major traditions: hermeneutical phenomenology, and transcendental or psychological

phenomenology. Both approaches examine the lived experiences of multiple individuals who undergo a similar phenomenon and are concerned with determining the common essences of these experiences; however, transcendental/psychological phenomenology focuses more on description and less on interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

Transcendental/psychological phenomenology also requires that the researcher engage in “bracketing,” or the setting aside of all previous experiences and assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Attempting to achieve such objectivity is not possible or even desirable:

We cannot disconnect our personal and professional beliefs from our lives and lived experiences...How researchers interpret their experiences and work is the result of many complex factors, mediated by such variables as race, gender, language, political affiliation, religion, region, age, and/or sexual orientation. Thus, the social lenses that we use to see the other are influenced by who we are as individuals. Finally, all research is culture bound. Thus, it is not possible to conduct research where circumstances, demographics, and context can be ignored, minimized, negated, or in any way trivialized. (Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008, p. 83)

I am a White researcher focused on the lived experiences of study abroad participants who identify as African American; not considering my own race and the effects my White racial identity had on this study “risks contributing to the existing body of racially oppressive literature” (Helms, 1993, p. 242). For this reason, I selected a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Hermeneutical phenomenology requires self-reflection, and sees the identification of researcher biases and assumptions as “embedded and essential to the interpretive process” (Lavery, 2003, p. 18). Hermeneutical phenomenology emerged from the works of Heidegger, who emphasized the importance of historicity, or the role that a person’s background, history, and culture plays in his or her understanding of the world (Lavery, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to gather data on the experiences of African American study abroad participants and the meanings they ascribed to these experiences. While each individual's experience abroad was unique, common themes across participants were identified and interpreted to develop a better understanding of African Americans' lived experiences in study abroad. As hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with understanding lived experiences and meaning, it was an appropriate methodology for this study. This phenomenological approach allowed for the use of a theoretical framework, which provided me with a means of "making explicit study assumptions and the researcher's frame of reference" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730). As described in Chapter One, the framework utilized in this study is CRT. Hermeneutical phenomenology is discovery-oriented; it aims to discover how a phenomenon is experienced and its meaning, but it does not dictate in advance what will be discovered (Van Manen, 1990).

### **Research Setting**

Rocky Mountain University (a pseudonym) is a private university that enrolls over 5,000 undergraduate and more than 6,000 graduate students. It is a predominantly White institution (PWI). The university prides itself on its study abroad participation rates, with more than 60% of undergraduates taking part in a program. RMU subsidizes the institution's study abroad program; students who meet certain requirements receive benefits such as airfare to and from the host country and reimbursement for visa application fees, and nearly all federal, state, and institutional financial aid can be utilized while abroad on RMU-sponsored programs. The admissions office highlights RMU's

study abroad opportunities to potential students and their parents, and students who enroll at the university receive additional information at orientation and periodically throughout their first and second years at the institution. Students typically go abroad their third or fourth year of study, and choose a program that is a quarter or semester in length. The institution's commitment to study abroad, high participation rates, and emphasis on longer study abroad programs made it an ideal site from which to recruit participants. In addition, I have personal and professional connections to Rocky Mountain University. These relationships allowed me to gain the trust of staff and faculty who helped to recruit participants, and assisted in developing trust with the participants themselves.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I utilized several approaches to recruit participants. The study abroad office at RMU forwarded a recruitment email (see Appendix A) to study abroad participants from 2010, 2011, and 2012 who were identified as African American or two or more races in RMU's data management system. The university's multicultural services office also forwarded the invitation email to all undergraduate African American students and members of an affinity group for Black students. Announcements appeared on the study abroad office's Facebook page as well as that of the Black students' affinity group. Other RMU staff members who worked in offices such as admissions and student life also assisted in recruiting students. I directly emailed several students who I knew personally and believed might meet the study criteria.

## **Participant Selection**

I utilized purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. Purposeful sampling deliberately selects “information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the question under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). I used a mixed sampling approach (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002), incorporating aspects of criterion sampling and maximum variation sampling. Creswell (2007) describes criterion sampling as appropriate for a phenomenological study, as “it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 128). The criterion for participant selection included the following:

- Participants identified racially as African American or Black.
- Participants studied abroad as Rocky Mountain University undergraduates, on a quarter-length or longer program, and during 2010, 2011, or 2012.
- Participants were U.S. citizens or permanent residents.
- Participants were 19-28 years old at the time of the study.

It was necessary to include participants who studied abroad in multiple years due to the small population of students who fit the study criteria; however, I hoped that by limiting this to a three-year period, differences caused by the passage of time since participation would be limited. The majority of students at RMU who study abroad do so as juniors, and I anticipated that it would be easier to reach and recruit participants who were still students or recent graduates of RMU. U.S. citizenship or permanent residence was also used as a criterion, as the experiences of an international student who studied

abroad in a third country were likely to be quite different than those of a student who had grown up in the United States.

There does not seem to be consensus on the exact number of participants needed for a phenomenological study; Creswell (2007) noted that he had observed one to 325 participants, though Dukes (1984) recommended three to ten (in Creswell, 2007). Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) suggested one to ten participants. In consultation with my dissertation committee, I planned to include four to six participants. Eight individuals responded to my recruitment efforts. To the extent possible in such a small group, I attempted to utilize maximum variation sampling for additional variables, including gender, study abroad program location (country), and major. Three of the eight volunteers (one male and two females) studied abroad in the same country. The two women studied abroad on the same program in the same city, so I opted to select the male volunteer to achieve more variation in terms of program site and gender. Six participants were ultimately selected for the study; while they will be introduced in more detail in the following chapter, Table 2 outlines their chosen pseudonyms, self-identified race/ethnicity, gender, region of study, and length of program. For purposes of maintaining confidentiality, pseudonyms are used, and regional designations for study abroad location will be utilized instead of specific countries, using the United Nations' classification system for geographic regions (United Nations Statistics Division, 2013). All the participants studied abroad in 2011 or 2012. Each participant was given a \$50 gift card to a store or restaurant of their choosing after completing the interview process.

Table 2

*Selected participants, race/ethnicity, gender, study abroad region, and length of program*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Study abroad region	Length of study abroad program
Agatha	African American, Black	Female	Australia and New Zealand	Semester
Danyale	African American, Black	Female	Northern Europe	Semester
Jade	African American, White, Biracial	Female	Southern Europe	Semester
Marcus	African American	Male	Southern Europe	Semester
Murungi	African American, Black	Female	Western Africa	Semester
Sara	African American, White, Hispanic/Latino, Two or more races	Female	Western Europe	Academic year

*Note:* Race/Ethnicity includes the participants’ responses to the eligibility questionnaire (see Appendix B). Study abroad regional designations are based on the United Nations’ classification system of geographical regions (United Nations Statistics Division, 2013).

This study focused on the lived experiences of African American study abroad participants. I chose to include participants who were multiracial provided that they self-identified as African American or Black as one of their racial identities; as indicated in Table 2, two participants identified with more than one race/ethnicity. While race appeared to be more salient to some participants than others, prior racialized experiences in the United States and racial identity development did emerge as influential in determining how the participants viewed the roles of race and racism in their educational experiences at home and abroad, as will be described in subsequent chapters. I felt that

attempting to accurately identify participants' racial identity status at the time of study abroad participation would be difficult, however, as interviews were conducted months or even years after the experience. My goal for this study was to identify common themes across experiences, regardless of participants' stages of racial identity development.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Seidman's (2006) approach to in-depth interviewing was utilized, and three 60 to 90 minute interviews were conducted with each participant. A total of 18 interviews were conducted between July 8 and July 27, 2013. Seidman (2006) recommended scheduling interviews three days to one week apart for each participant so that a series for one person is completed within a three-week time frame, but acknowledged that flexibility may be needed to accommodate the schedules of the participants. In this study, interviews were typically scheduled five to seven days apart for each participant, with two interviews occurring nine and eleven days apart due to participant schedules. All interviews for five of the participants were conducted in person. One participant was living out of state during the interview period, so her interviews were conducted using Skype with video.

The interviews began with broad open-ended questions, and follow up questions built upon the participant's responses (Friesen, 2012; Kahn, 2000; Seidman, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). Each of the three interviews had a specific purpose, and subsequent interviews built upon the previous interview. These interview stages were described as follows by Seidman (2006): (a) focused life history, to put the participant's experience in context; (b) details of the lived experiences related to the context of the study; and (c) reflections on the meaning of the experience.

While three interviews required a significant amount of time on the part of the participants, doing this allowed me to get to know the participants and build a relationship. This was particularly important in this study, as participants of color may view a White researcher with suspicion or fear (Sue, 1993). While the three interview approach cannot entirely eliminate the challenges that racial politics and power dynamics play in the research process, this structure provided me with the opportunity to “demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest” in the participants (Seidman, 2006, p.100).

Within the interview structure I employed a combination of two approaches: the general interview guide and the informal conversational interview. The interview guide approach outlines questions or topics to be explored with each participant; I was able to “build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Interview guides ensure that the same topics are covered with each participant and helps make interviews systematic (Patton, 2002). The interview guide approach was combined with the informal conversational approach, which is open-ended and allows for flexibility and responsiveness to the participant (Patton, 2002). Kahn (2000) emphasized that the format of a phenomenological interview is typically unstructured, and the interviewer needs to focus on listening rather than controlling the conversation. Since phenomenology emphasizes the study of meanings and experiences as lived by the participants, the combination of these two approaches provided structure to the interview while allowing for new topics to emerge through the

course of the interviews. Questions are identified in Appendices D, E, and F. I requested feedback on my interview questions from a faculty member in the Morgridge College of Education and a peer who identifies as African American and studied abroad as an undergraduate student. Their suggestions were incorporated into the interview questions.

The interview questions were informed by the literature related to African Americans and study abroad participation as well as by phenomenological research design. The questions were intended to illuminate the essence and meanings of study abroad, but did not presuppose particular experiences or outcomes. Since the focus of this study was on African American students and a CRT lens was used, I did ask specific questions about the effects of race on the experience.

The audio from all interviews was recorded using an iPad, with a small digital recorder as a backup. I personally completed all transcriptions, and sent the transcriptions to the participants for review. While only one participant offered clarifications and corrections, these were incorporated into the interview transcript. I also recorded field notes regarding the interviews. These were created following each interview, and included descriptions, observations, reactions, and reflections about the setting, participant behavior, my perceptions of how the interview went, and the rapport established, as recommended by Patton (2002).

While data collected through interviews were the primary source of data, I also asked participants if they had saved and were willing to share other forms of data from their study abroad experiences, such as blogs, journals, or reflective papers written for courses. One participant emailed me a link to her blog and another brought her journal to

the final interview and read aloud the sections she wanted to share. In addition, I asked participants to share a few of their favorite photos from their study abroad experience with me and describe the photos. Van Manen (1990) noted that both objects of art and journals can be considered additional sources of meaning about lived experiences.

RMU's study abroad office provided me with pre-departure and post-study abroad survey data for African American respondents from Fall 2010 through Fall 2012. All study abroad participants were strongly encouraged to complete the surveys, though not all chose to do so. Twenty-six African American students completed the pre-departure survey during this period, while eighteen completed the post-study abroad survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in a phenomenological study is often referred to as the hermeneutic circle, with data from each individual considered on its own and in relationship to the whole at multiple levels (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The goal of analysis is the creation of a thick description that “captures the experience from the perspective of the informant in its fullest and richest complexity” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 72).

I utilized the analysis process for hermeneutical phenomenology outlined by Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves (2000), beginning analysis during the interview process. I assigned potential labels for codes and themes that emerged during the interviews and transcription process, and shared some of these early themes with the participants for validation. Once all data was collected and transcriptions were completed, I read through the data multiple times, and identified codes and themes in each participant's interviews.

The next phase consisted of data transformation, when I determined what was important and what was not within the data in relationship to my interview questions. Data was reorganized to group similar topics together across participants. Data was then examined again line by line to highlight key phrases, theme names were developed, and excerpts with the same themes were once again reorganized and examined together. Major themes were divided into subthemes or elements (Cohen et al., 2000). For this study, codes and themes were not pre-identified, as the purpose of phenomenology is to allow meanings and experiences to emerge from the data. I utilized both structural and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013). Structural coding is particularly appropriate for interviews, and “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase” to data, then groups similarly designated segments for further coding (Saldaña, 2013, p. 84). In vivo coding utilizes language used by the participants themselves to create codes, which allows their voices to emerge (Saldaña, 2013).

### **Trustworthiness of Study**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) developed criteria for evaluating trustworthiness, or rigor, in qualitative research; these criteria parallel criteria used in quantitative research, but are viewed as more appropriate to qualitative research. The criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In this study, credibility, or internal consistency, was achieved through multiple interviews with each participant (Seidman, 2006), reflexivity, member checks, the use of peer debriefers, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Morrow, 2005). To engage in member checking, I emailed participants copies of the transcriptions after each interview

and asked for feedback. In addition, the three interview series provided me with an opportunity to ask participants for needed clarifications or additional information regarding data from the prior interview(s). Since data analysis began during the interview and transcription process, emerging themes were also shared with participants during subsequent interviews. As I am a White researcher who worked with participants who identified as African American or Black, it was invaluable to discuss emerging themes and the interview process with a peer debriefer who identifies as African American and has conducted research with college-aged African American students focused on race. A second peer debriefer was consulted during the data analysis process. This individual has a demonstrated interest in students of color and study abroad, and as a long-term employee of a study abroad provider, she was able to offer a different perspective on discussions of diversity within professional circles in international education.

Transferability “reflects the need to be aware of and to describe the scope of one’s qualitative study so that its applicability to different contexts (broad or narrow) can be readily discerned” by the reader (“Trustworthiness,” 2008). I believe this has been achieved through a detailed description of the research process, context, participants, and my role as the researcher, as recommended by Morrow (2005).

An audit trail is “a detailed chronology of research activities and processes; influences on the data collection and analysis; emerging themes; categories, or models; and analytical memos” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). I maintained a journal outlining methodological decisions, connections with the literature review and theoretical framework, reflexivity, and detailed field observations; this demonstrates both

dependability and confirmability. Dependability refers to the practice of developing a systematic process and following it, while confirmability means that the findings are, as much as possible, true to the experiences of the participants (Morrow, 2005). I procured pre-departure and post-study abroad survey data from RMU's study abroad office, which provided a means to triangulate the data.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument, so self-awareness and reflexivity are key throughout the process (Patton, 2002). My own identities shaped how I conducted, analyzed, and interpreted research; while my gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background all affected this work, both my race and professional background in international education became the most salient in this study.

White researchers who study African Americans (or other communities of color) may be viewed with distrust or trepidation, both by potential participants and researchers of color (Parham, 1993; Sue, 1993). African Americans are often "misdiagnosed, mislabeled, stereotyped" (Parham, 1993, p. 252), or portrayed as "maladjusted, delinquent, or pathological" (Sue, 1993, p. 245). White researchers have frequently operated from a deficit perspective, rather than understanding or considering the strengths and successes of participants and their communities (Ford et al., 2008; Harper, 2009a; Nelson, 2007; Yosso, 2005). As outsiders, White researchers are able to intellectualize the lived experience of participants, while for the participants, these are real human conditions (Sue, 1993). In addition, research by White scholars may not offer any benefit to the participant or their communities (Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Sue, 1993). One might

question whether White researchers should conduct research focused on African American communities. As a White international educator and researcher, I believe I have the responsibility to seek out and understand the experiences of African Americans who study abroad, as well as interrogate how those experiences invalidate my long held beliefs about study abroad and its significance for students. If White researchers only focus on White participants, we will continue to view Whiteness as the norm, which sends a message to students of color that their experiences do not matter.

When engaging in cross-cultural research, White researchers must constantly consider their own worldviews, and recognize that one's own perspective may be "insufficient or even inappropriate" for understanding the perspective of participants (Parham, 1993). Tillman (2002) contended that culturally sensitive research approaches and adequate cultural knowledge are the most important characteristics for a researcher focused on the African American community to possess.

As a structured way to reflect on my positionality, I utilized Milner's (2007) framework for cross-cultural researchers in my methodological/theoretical journal. Milner discusses the dangers that can emerge when researchers ignore their racial and cultural positionality, regardless of whether the study explicitly examines race. The framework incorporates the steps below, and also includes suggested questions for researchers at each level:

1. *Researching the self*. Researchers must engage in "evolving and emergent critical race and cultural self-reflection" (Milner, 2007, p. 395).

2. *Researching the self in relation to others.* While continuing to reflect on self, the researcher must also reflect on how her racial and cultural self interacts with those of the participants, and how race and culture affects how the researcher and the participants make meaning of the world.

3. *Engaged reflection and representation.* The voices of the participants should be reflected in the study; if there are disagreements between the researcher and the participant(s) as to how a situation should be interpreted, both perspectives should be presented.

4. *Shifting from self to system.* Researchers must ground their racial and cultural consciousness to “take into consideration historic, political, social, economic, racial, and cultural realities on a broader scale”, addressing how these realities shape the participants’ and the researcher’s “systems of knowing” (Milner, 2007, p. 397).

These steps are both linear and cyclical, and were repeated throughout the study.

While conducting this study, I realized that my knowledge of African American history and culture was lacking. African Americans (like other Americans of color and women) seldom made appearances into my history, literature, or culture courses. To supplement my knowledge, I followed an open-access Yale undergraduate course on African American history during the progression of this dissertation, though this does not in any way offset the neglect paid to this group in my years of formal education. For many years I operated under the assumption that Whiteness was the norm – that all

students' experiences with study abroad were similar to my own, regardless of race or ethnicity. The Higher Education doctoral program and its coursework dealing with inclusive excellence, CRT, and the realities of people of color in higher education have been critical in forcing me to confront my own colorblind racism. This is an ongoing learning and reflective process, and often a very uncomfortable experience. Even as I have gained a growing awareness of my own limitations and misperceptions, I have continued to inadvertently marginalize students, sometimes while believing I was supporting them.

My race affected this study in a number of ways. I believe my Whiteness, and to a lesser extent my role as an international educator, influenced who opted to participate in the study. Overall, the selected participants viewed their study abroad experiences as positive and beneficial. More than one of the participants shared that they knew of an African American peer in a different country who experienced constant comments about appearance and skin color during study abroad. Agatha, the participant who experienced constant racism while abroad, knew me prior to participation in the study, and I was already aware of some of her racialized experiences. Despite the challenges she confronted, she also viewed her time abroad as a source of growth; yet, she shared that she was nervous about sharing her negative experiences with me (though she attributed this to my prior role as an international educator). Other African American study abroad alumni who faced difficult experiences (racialized or other) abroad may not have felt comfortable sharing those with me, and thus did not volunteer for the study.

As I shared in the previous chapter, I realized during the course of this study that I had previously interpreted the experiences of students of color abroad as analogous to my own experiences being a racial minority abroad, which was inappropriate and inaccurate. On several occasions I deliberated over how to respond to comments made by the participants in light of my Whiteness, knowing that speaking up and not speaking up can both be exertions of power and privilege. One participant made comments that I thought played into negative stereotypes about African Americans, yet I was unsure how to address this without causing her to feel alienated. I asked her to explain in more detail, but when she declined to do so, I remained silent; I felt uncomfortable, and knew I did not fully understand what she was sharing about her racialized experiences in the United States. Had I shared her racial identity, I would have felt better equipped to engage in this dialogue. Instead, I still wonder if my silence signified that I agreed with her statements.

My experiences as an international educator also shaped how I interpreted data. Though I am not currently working professionally in this field, having left a position to focus on completing this study, I have fifteen years of experience working in the field of international education at three different universities. These include positions as a graduate assistant, study abroad advisor, assistant director, and associate director of a study abroad office. I have also been the co-leader of two short-term (3-4 week) undergraduate programs abroad. In addition, I lived in Italy for nearly three years as a high school student, was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala, and participated on a short-term language program in Chile and a social work tour to South Africa. While these experiences have added to my knowledge and skills as an international educator, they

have in many ways also reinforced Whiteness as the norm in study abroad; I have often equated my own experiences to those of all students, and have internalized the common narratives regarding students of color and study abroad.

### **Summary and Limitations**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover how African American undergraduate students experience study abroad, recognizing that the experiences of study abroad participants, like those of students on U.S. campuses, differ according to race. Findings can inform practices that better encourage and support African American students throughout the study abroad process.

This study examined the phenomenon of study abroad for a small number of students. The study abroad experiences of African American students who attended a private, predominantly White four-year institution with a culture of study abroad participation may be different from those of students at other types of institutions. The participants attended different types of study abroad programs with varying opportunities for immersion in six different countries. Participants differed in terms of racial identity development, gender, socioeconomic status, and a variety of other social identities that all worked together to affect lived experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them. Still, common themes emerged across multiple participants despite their individual differences and variations in programs. While the essences and meanings of the phenomenon of study abroad that emerged in this study will not be universal for all African American study abroad participants, the findings underscore the importance of investigating students' lived experiences instead of assuming they are known.

The next chapter introduces the study participants, the factors that influenced their decisions to study abroad and their choice of program, and their goals for the study abroad experience.

## **Chapter Four: Participants and Pathways to Study Abroad**

This chapter introduces the six study participants and describes their decisions to study abroad, goals, and factors that played a role in the choice of program. Their study abroad programs are also described; in order to protect participant confidentiality, United Nations' regional geographical designations are used rather than specific country names. As part of the first interview, I asked each participant to complete an identity pie chart. This exercise required that the participant draw a circle and then indicate the social identities that were most important to her or him, with larger slices signifying greater importance. While this study was concerned with race, this exercise provided an opportunity for the participants to introduce the aspects of themselves that they find most significant.

Following these brief introductions, the findings for the first research sub-question will be discussed in more detail: How do African-American students describe the factors that influenced their decisions to study abroad? The chapter will conclude with implications for international educators and others who hope to best support African American students in their study abroad pursuits.

### **Agatha**

*"I knew that was the one thing I wanted to graduate college having done."*

Agatha was the first participant interviewed; when I called her to set up a time, she asked if we could meet that same day. I was relieved that I had tested and charged my

recording devices the day before, as I had not expected to begin interviewing so quickly. We made arrangements to meet in a coffee shop convenient to her home. I arrived early to find a place to sit and collect my thoughts. I was nervous and excited about finally starting the data collection process. While I didn't know Agatha well, I had spoken with her previously about study abroad, and I was happy to conduct my first interview with a familiar face. The coffee shop was nearly full when I arrived, but it was fairly quiet other than the music playing over the speakers. I wondered about the sound quality of recordings with background noise, yet I wanted to let the participants choose a location that would feel safe and convenient. Agatha arrived, and after ordering tea, we began the interview.

Agatha struck me as open, direct, and sure of herself. As will be described in subsequent chapters, her study abroad experience was quite difficult, though she emphasized the positive outcomes. The three largest slices of Agatha's identity pie chart were African, philanthropy/education, and faith. Female and American were smaller slices, though when talking through the identities, Agatha noted that female should be larger than it appeared. Agatha and her parents immigrated to the United States from West Africa when she was a child (specific country names will not be used in order to protect participants' confidentiality). She described an ongoing tug of war between identities, American vs. African. As a high school student she felt more American than African, even though at the time she was not yet an U.S. citizen. After a journey to her country of origin, she felt more Afrocentric and connected to her culture. She describes a different atmosphere:

It was interesting to feel like for once, I don't want to say I completely belonged, but there were a lot of things I didn't have to explain for myself, you know.

People understood my name, they knew how to pronounce it correctly. (Agatha)

Agatha originally planned to go to college in a different state, but unexpected personal circumstances led her to change plans and attend RMU, which was close to home. She expressed a love for travel, and described study abroad as something she had always wanted to do, even before entering college. When she learned of RMU's study abroad opportunities, she knew that study abroad was one of her principal goals for her undergraduate experience. Even before she started thinking about program locations, she told her academic advisor and other staff members on campus that she was going abroad. An older sibling had already studied abroad, and her mother was very supportive of the idea. When deciding where she would study abroad, she knew that she wanted to choose a location that she would not otherwise go. She did not want to study in Europe because it was easily accessible; she thought about options in South America or Africa, but ultimately decided on a program in the Australia and New Zealand region. Her host city's size and character appealed to her, as did the host university's rankings and academic opportunities. She saw study abroad as an opportunity to live somewhere new and make a home there, as opposed to traveling. She wanted to live like a local, not like an American visitor.

Agatha studied abroad for a semester, and enrolled directly in a large university in her host country. Her classmates consisted of degree-seeking local and international students as well as study abroad students from various countries. She lived alone in an

off-campus apartment. While Agatha was proud of the fact that she traveled alone to another country and created a home, her housing situation was at times isolating.

### **Sara**

*“I was going to do whatever it took...it turned in to the one thing that was stable in my life.”*

Sara and I were scheduled to meet for the first time at a mall near her workplace. As I arrived, my phone rang. It was Sara, who sounded flustered - she had been waiting for a bus that had not come, and was going to be late. Since she had to work immediately after our interview, she suggested that we reschedule. I responded that while we could certainly reschedule, I would be happy to come pick her up so that she wouldn't be late for work – we could talk about the study in the car, and if we still had time, we could do the interview once we got to the mall. She protested that it was too much trouble, but I assured her that I didn't mind. I drove to pick her up, and found her sitting in the grass reading outside a small shopping center. We drove back to the mall, chatting about the final class she was taking before graduation, her current jobs, and the purpose of my study.

Sara seemed a little nervous when I'd spoken to her on the phone, but not as much in person. She was soft-spoken, and shared that she apologized frequently, which I had noticed in our initial telephone conversations. She was friendly, yet seemed cautious when she responded to my questions. I learned in subsequent interviews that she had been taken advantage of by several former roommates, and had subsequently decided to be more careful about who she let in to her inner circle.

In the identity pie chart drawn by Sara, the largest slices were woman, Black/Latina, and hospitality/pleaser. Smaller slices included learner, independent, artist, and White. Though White appeared smaller than Black/Latina, when describing these aspects of her identity, Sara remarked that she was accepted for her appearance in the Black community, but not for the way she speaks and acts. Tensions regarding where she felt she belonged and the expectations of others came up several times during her interviews.

Sara traveled abroad as a high school student, and knew she wanted an international academic focus in college. The availability of majors of interest, along with the study abroad emphasis, made RMU an attractive institution. She applied and was accepted to several colleges out of state, but decided she would rather spend a year abroad than go to school far from home. She became estranged from her mother after her first year of college and was declared an independent student, which necessitated working multiple jobs in order to support herself. Sara was even more determined to study abroad, as she started to view the year in Europe as an opportunity to temporarily escape some of the difficulties she faced at home.

Sara studied abroad for a year in Western Europe. When choosing a program, she knew she wanted to live with a host family and continue her study of the host country's language. While her program was designed for U.S. students and she did not have classes with locals, she consciously opted to distance herself from the other Americans and seek out local friends. She had studied the language of her host country for a number of years prior to going abroad, and was committed to practice speaking as much as possible.

Though Sara was no longer speaking to her mother when the time came for her to apply for study abroad, she still considered her a “driving force” in the decision, as she had encouraged her to go abroad in high school. While Sara was unwavering in her pursuit of study abroad, she noted that an on-campus mentor who was aware of her personal and financial situation was constantly encouraging and supporting her efforts.

### **Murungi**

*“I wanted to have my study abroad experience be really studying abroad, experiencing something new, pushing my comfort levels.”*

Murungi and I met for each interview in a small study room in RMU’s library. I found her to be thoughtful and reflective regarding her time abroad, as well as an excellent storyteller. I asked all the participants to bring their favorite photos to share with me during the second or third interviews, and then describe what they meant to them. While many of the participants brought photos of themselves with friends or visiting well-known tourist destinations, Murungi carefully selected a group of photos, most of which told a story of daily life in her host country when combined with her cultural interpretations. For example, a photo of a meal being prepared was accompanied by a description of what foods were eaten for celebrations, family structures and living space in compounds, and gender roles. Whether she was describing her photos or answering interview questions, Murungi offered a vivid sense of place and exhibited a strong connection to her host community.

Murungi described the largest part of her identity as her East African roots; one of her parents is East African, and this has given her a connection to the culture as well as to

her extended family. Other aspects of her identity that she described as important included social justice activism, family, age/being young, and social ally. Spirituality and female comprised smaller pieces of her identity pie chart.

Murungi knew that she wanted to study abroad when she was in high school and selecting a college. When she learned of the high percentage of RMU students who go abroad, she thought that this made sense for her, given her international interests and prior language study. She was familiar with RMU from a young age, as a parent attended graduate school there. This familiarity and the study abroad program were the primary reasons she chose RMU – she said that it “just felt right.” Murungi had traveled internationally several times prior to her study abroad experience, including a trip to East Africa as a child to visit family as well as a service focused trip with her church to the Caribbean.

When choosing a program, Murungi was interested in a less-traditional location, and wanted to push her boundaries and be uncomfortable. She wanted to study somewhere she would not normally have the opportunity to go, and on a program that offered classes that fit with her major. Her goals for her experience were to connect with her host family and make local friends, learn about the culture, achieve language fluency, and branch out from the other U.S. students on her program.

Murungi studied abroad for a semester in Western Africa on a program that was directly tied to her academic interests. The program was designed for U.S. study abroad students, and Murungi took classes at a study center with other students from U.S. institutions. Murungi lived with two host families during her program, one in the capital

where the program's study center was based, and a second in a rural area of the country while completing the internship component of the program. The program was small, and though it was designed for students at U.S. universities, participants had ample opportunities to connect with local residents through their host families and internships. Murungi noted that some of her fellow RMU students questioned her choice of program:

Wow, you're going to Africa, good for you. And I was thinking, you know, good for you is not really the reaction I think is appropriate. I'm not doing it to get a star or something – I'm doing it because I want to...[many friends had/were studying abroad in Europe] so they're more thinking I was doing something valiant instead of doing the same thing they were doing in just a different place.

(Murungi)

She suspected that some of her peers, including those who were African American, had negative stereotypes about African countries and Africans, which led them to see the region as a less appealing study abroad location. Murungi's family was supportive of her decision to study abroad, and her parents were excited about her choice to study in West Africa.

### **Marcus**

*“Choosing to go abroad, I was ready to go to this different planet, be cut off from what was sustaining my life before...to try and go to a place where I have to figure out how to live on my own.”*

Marcus and I also met in RMU's library for our interviews. He was the only male who volunteered to participate in the study, and he was also the most inquisitive. While

the others listened to my explanations about the study and its objectives without comment, Marcus had many questions, including what I expected to find. He was curious about my international background and we had a lengthy discussion about my time as a Peace Corps volunteer, something that he was considering for the future.

The largest slices in Marcus' identity pie chart were student, family, and future/ambitions, with his East African identity slightly smaller. He described all of these identities as interconnected. As a student, he was also conscious of his role as a recipient of a prestigious scholarship. He felt a sense of responsibility to give back, both to his community and family. His parents immigrated to the United States from an East African country, and maintained strong connections to family members across the globe. Marcus considered himself ambitious. He expressed some concern about what his future would hold, as he faced high expectations from his family. Marcus saw his East African identity as growing in importance. Once he became a student at RMU, he had the opportunity to connect with other students of color who were also children of immigrants and shared some of the experiences he had growing up. As a result, Marcus gained more pride in his cultural heritage.

Marcus attended several programs at RMU as a high school student and had a very positive experience; he was the first in his immediate family to go to college, so was interested in a school that was close to home. He attributed the institution's culture of study abroad to one of the primary reasons he decided to attend RMU.

Marcus did not remember what initially prompted his interest in international study, but once he started attending RMU, he found presentations from peers who had

already studied abroad inspirational. He imagined himself coming back and showing others a PowerPoint about his own experiences. He described RMU as a very safe and protected environment, and the idea of having to live on his own in a new setting abroad was appealing. When it came to choosing a program, he was interested in learning a language, and wanted to experience a culture that was different than his own. Prior to departure, his goals were language learning, making local friends, experiencing his host country, and staying away from other Americans.

Marcus studied in Southern Europe for a semester on a program designed for U.S. students. While he attended a university that offered degrees to host country students, his classes were primarily taught in English (with the exception of his language course) and his classes were populated by U.S. and a few other international students rather than local students. He lived with a host mother along with another U.S. student from his program. His parents were a little worried about him going abroad, but were supportive. His father contacted a distant family member who had lived in Marcus' host country and consulted with him for more information about the country, which put his family at ease. They were also reassured that he would live with a host mother. Marcus said that in some ways, he was nervous about going abroad and secretly hoped his family would give him an excuse not to go – but they didn't. He never seriously considered backing out, however, and as his departure time came closer, he became more and more excited about the opportunity.

## **Danyale**

*“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity – why wouldn’t you go?”*

Danyale was living at home in another state for the summer, so we conducted the interviews using Skype with video. We experienced technical difficulties towards the end of the first interview – the screen froze, the sound disappeared, and I was unable to reach Danyale again via Skype or text message for over an hour. While I was not terribly surprised about the technical glitch, I started to worry that she had changed her mind about participating in the study, though I thought our conversation had gone well. I was relieved when I heard the distinct sound of a Skype chat message a few minutes later, and we resumed the interview shortly thereafter. We did not encounter any further technical challenges in the remaining interview sessions.

Danyale was enthusiastic about her time abroad, and smiled often when talking about her experience. She seemed outgoing, though she said she would characterize herself as an observer prior to her time abroad. She tended to be succinct in her responses; while I felt like we had a good rapport, I wondered if interviewing via Skype led to less of a personal connection than we would have had in person.

Danyale divided her identity pie chart into four categories. In order of importance, these were student, young adult, race/African American, and female. She noted that these shifted in importance when she was at home during school breaks. Being a student was less salient during breaks from school, and being African American was also less important when she was in her home community, where she described herself as being part of the racial majority.

Danyale was a first generation college student. She excelled in high school, and was offered a trip to visit RMU by its Admissions Office. Though she had not given RMU much consideration previously, she knew she wanted to travel and attend a school out of state, so she accepted the visit. She was impressed by the personal attention of staff when she visited, as well as the small size and the academic offerings. In addition, she also found the idea of study abroad very attractive, and appreciated how easy the process could be at RMU.

Danyale's initial enthusiasm for study abroad was generated by the desire to travel. She described developing a love for travel as a child, both from going on road trips to visit family and while commuting back and forth to school on public transportation. Living far away from what she knew at home was also alluring:

I've always been a really independent-like person, so the idea of like, going somewhere, and living somewhere on my own, having like a very unstable type of support system that doesn't consist of my family being, like, right at my beck and call every moment? That really appealed to me. (Danyale)

When choosing a specific study abroad program, Danyale knew she wanted to study in an English-speaking country, live on campus, and take classes that were not available to her at RMU. She also wanted a well-known, famous destination. She wasn't sure she would have enough money to travel outside of her host city, so she looked for a large city where there would be plenty to see and do. While Danyale was very motivated by the academic aspects of her program and available classes, she also wanted to make friends, see "all the tourist stuff," and develop a sense of place for her university and host

city. Danyale studied abroad for a semester in Northern Europe, and enrolled directly in a university in her host country. Her classmates included both local and international degree-seeking students in addition to study abroad students. She lived on campus; her flat-mates included other U.S. and international study abroad students as well as local first-year students.

Danyale's family was proud that she studied abroad. Her grandmother was immediately on board; her mother was initially cautious about the idea, but after Danyale explained more about the process and how study abroad fit into her future plans, she became very supportive:

That initial apprehension, like oh my God, she's gonna be away, and this isn't [RMU] away, this is away away. But at the same time there was this, you're doing something that none of us has ever dreamed of doing, so you absolutely have to do it. I got that from all my family... 'Cause it was definitely like I was pioneering something. (Danyale)

### **Jade**

*"That would be really cool, you know, to be the first person in your family to study abroad. And not only that, like, just saying that I did it and I moved to a different country and survived it by myself."*

Jade and I met at a coffee shop close to her home. Traffic was terrible the first time we met, and I was worried that I would keep her waiting. I arrived just a minute or two before our agreed upon time, scanned the coffee shop for someone who might be Jade, then chose a seat. Just then two young women walked in; I smiled at them and they

smiled back, then they walked up to the counter. A moment later a text message came through on my phone: “I’m here.” I approached the women at the counter and introduced myself to Jade and her best friend. I was a little taken aback to see that she brought a friend; I wasn’t sure if they were on their way to or from somewhere together, or if Jade had specifically asked her friend to accompany her to the interview. I decided to go with the flow – if I were in her position and meeting with a stranger, it might be a good idea to bring a friend along for safety reasons. Her friend sat quietly while we talked, and mentioned after the interview was over that it was interesting to hear Jade talk about something she knew was so important to her. While her friend did not come to the following two interviews, Jade shared that she spoke with her family and friends in between our meetings about my questions and our discussions.

Jade was gregarious, open, and willing to share. I immediately felt a rapport with her. Her relationships with others appeared to be very important; she often shared many details about her family, friends, and peers abroad in order to provide me with context. I occasionally worried that I wouldn’t have a chance to ask all of my questions, but I learned to relax. Jade often answered questions that I had not yet asked, and if she was willing to spend her time with me, I enjoyed listening. We usually sat and talked after the interview was over.

The largest slices of Jade’s identity pie chart were family and friend/girlfriend. Next were innovator/author/artist (which included reading, writing, dancer, and make-up artist) and volunteering. Slightly smaller were employee and student; though Jade had already graduated at the time of the interview, she viewed herself as a lifelong learner,

and planned to pursue a graduate degree. Race did not appear in Jade's identity pie chart, though she talked about her racial identity throughout the interviews. In her pre-screening questionnaire she identified as African American, White, and Biracial. Jade was thankful that her family never forced her to choose between being Black and White, but described being biracial as very difficult: "When you're biracial, you don't know where you stand, who you're more comfortable with, who you're comfortable with as yourself."

An older sibling graduated from RMU; while Jade also applied to another institution out of state, she decided to attend RMU for its academics, familiarity, and proximity to home. When her sibling was a student at RMU, Jade remembered that they discussed study abroad as one of their goals for the college experience, though the events of 9/11 disrupted her sibling's plans. When Jade started college, she began taking a foreign language. Her academic advisor pointed out several times that she could study abroad and minor in the language. Jade applied for study abroad on an impulse, as did her friend:

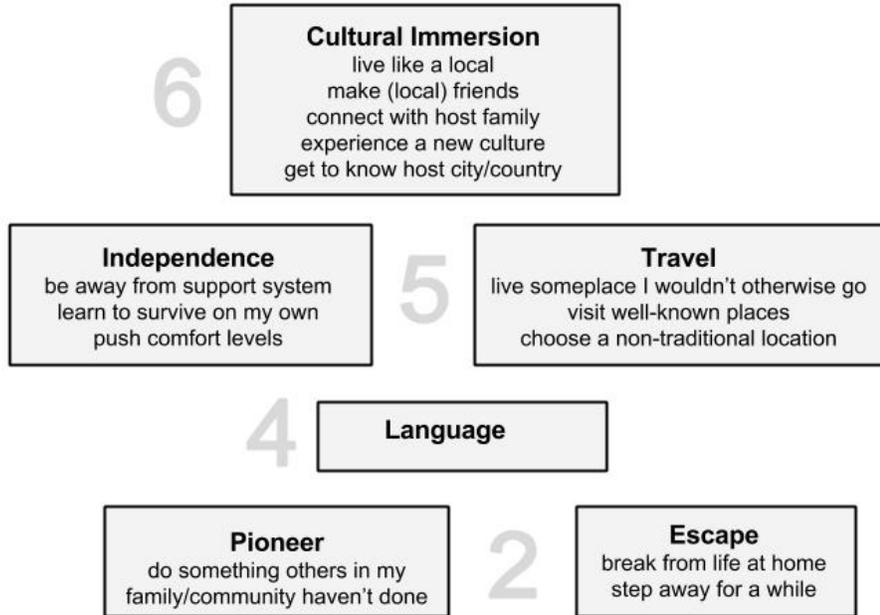
It was like we were planning it, we were saying it, but we weren't actually thinking about getting accepted in the study abroad. And then I remember the day I got accepted I was sitting on my couch, babysitting my niece, and I was like, this can't be real right now. And I like, called everyone, and I was like, Oh my God! And they're all freaking out...(Jade)

Jade spent a semester in Southern Europe on a program designed for study abroad students. She took classes in English and in her host country's language, which she had studied at RMU. Her classmates were primarily U.S. students and other international

students. She lived in an apartment with three other U.S. study abroad participants, one of whom was a friend from RMU. When she selected a study abroad program, she focused on language, finding a city that was not as touristy as other options, and the reputation of the study abroad program provider. Her goals for her experience were language acquisition, learning about the culture, and travel.

### **Pathways to Study Abroad**

Although the participants chose different locations and types of study abroad experiences based on their own goals, as described above, commonalities emerged in their stories of the pathways to and motivations for study abroad. Five of the six participants knew they wanted to study abroad prior to matriculation; Danyale, Marcus, Murungi, and Sara each described the study abroad program as one of the primary reasons they decided to attend RMU. While Agatha had initially planned to attend college in another state, she remarked that study abroad was “something I’ve always wanted to do.” Jade did not seem as focused on study abroad when entering college, though she was aware of the option; she commented that she and her older sibling had discussed study abroad as a goal for their college experiences. The initial attraction to study abroad for the majority of participants was based on opportunities for cultural immersion, the ability to travel/live somewhere new, to experience independence, and to study language, as illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Motivations and Goals for Study Abroad. The numbers on each level indicate the number of participants who indicated this was a motivation or goal for study abroad. Phrases under bolded category headings illustrate ways in which participants expressed the overall theme.

The pre-departure survey administered by RMU's study abroad office asks students to rate the importance of various factors in their study abroad program selection; Table 3 outlines the percentage of respondents who ranked each factor as very important. The factors considered by the study participants when choosing a program were largely consistent with the top five factors considered very important by the larger group of African American survey respondents. One exception was program support, which was not mentioned by the study participants. Four of the six participants, however, selected programs designed for foreign/U.S. study abroad students. Each of these programs

offered a U.S.-based office as well as varying levels of in-country staff to provide support to the students, excursions and cultural activities, and assistance with housing. Agatha and Danyale, on the other hand, opted to enroll directly in a foreign university. Though these universities included international offices with support services for foreign study abroad and degree-seeking students, students were expected to be fairly self-sufficient.

Table 3

*Factors ranked as very important in study abroad program selection by RMU African American study abroad participants, Fall 2010-Fall 2012*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>% Ranking as Very Important (n=26)</b>
Geographic location	77%
Interest in the host culture	73%
Academic focus	69%
Language acquisition	65%
Level of program support	65%
Safety and security of location	50%
Friend or family recommendation	46%
Extracurricular activities	46%
Experiential learning opportunities (field study, service learning, internships, research)	46%
Credits count toward major/minor	42%
Academic quality of program	42%
Housing options	38%
Credits count toward university requirements	19%

*Note.* Pre-departure survey data provided by RMU study abroad office.

As described in the literature review, barriers to African Americans' study abroad participation are often categorized in terms of faculty and staff, academic concerns, family and community, finances, and fears. To shift the discussion from barriers to student success and to provide counternarratives, the participants' pathways to study abroad will be described in relationship to these categories.

**Faculty and staff.** As mentioned previously, RMU prides itself on a culture of study abroad for undergraduate students, and the admissions office actively promotes the study abroad program to potential students and their parents. Information sessions for parents and students are included in both new and transfer student orientations. The early and frequent message that study abroad was a typical part of life at RMU resonated with the participants; Agatha and Murungi both remarked that they were impressed by the high participation rates when considering the institution. When Marcus heard of RMU's culture of study abroad, he thought it would be "a really great thing to try." Danyale noted that her high school and home community did not have a culture of study abroad, in comparison with RMU:

When I tell people I studied abroad...it's definitely like, whoa...what made you do that? And I'm like, well, I'm in college! That's what college kids do – at least that's what I was taught. You go to college, you study abroad! (Danyale)

While the institutional message promoting study abroad was powerful, individual faculty and staff did not appear to play a major role in the participants' initial decision to study abroad, with the exception of Jade. Though Jade stated that study abroad was a goal when starting college, she did not appear to make an effort to research programs or apply until

repeatedly encouraged to do so by her advisor. Jade and a friend applied together for a program, but as described in her introduction, she did so on impulse and had not given much thought to the process or experience beyond the application.

Faculty and staff did play a supportive role for a few other participants; Agatha spoke of conversations with her academic advisor and other staff members regarding her intent to study abroad. Sara found a staff member in the financial aid office very encouraging of her efforts to make study abroad work financially, particularly when she was going through the process of declaring herself an independent student. In addition to the advisor who initially encouraged her to study abroad, Jade cited RMU language professors as influential in preparing her for life in her host country.

The study abroad office did not emerge as instrumental in the preliminary decision to pursue study abroad, as all of the participants were knowledgeable about the possibility of study abroad prior to attending RMU. Several of the participants mentioned consulting resources offered by the office when researching available programs. RMU requires that applicants attend a general information session and meet with an advisor prior to application, and also requires attendance at a pre-departure orientation; presumably all participants were in contact with a staff member or peer advisor prior to study abroad. Agatha was the only participant who articulated any personal connection with her study abroad advisor, whom she kept in touch with while abroad, even though her advisor left her position at RMU prior to Agatha's departure for her host country.

**Academics.** Academic focus and specific course offerings, including the availability of language courses, were important considerations for all of the participants

when selecting a program, but none expressed difficulties finding suitable options or negative repercussions to academic progress as a result of having participated in study abroad. The curricular integration of study abroad at RMU varies by major. The participants were concentrated in majors that largely supported study abroad, in divisions of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; Business; and International Studies. Agatha and Sara both graduated with majors that required study abroad. Sara studied abroad for a year, but was still able to graduate on time, and even added a second major in her host country's language. Agatha noted that she faced challenges enrolling in the classes she had planned to take once she arrived at her host university, but found other options that worked academically.

**Family and community.** Although family members are often viewed as potential deterrents for African American students considering study abroad, this was not the case for the study participants. On the contrary, family members played a key role in supporting and encouraging students as they prepared to study abroad. Sara was perhaps the exception, as she was estranged from her mother prior to departure, but she still viewed her mother as influential due to her encouragement regarding study abroad during Sara's high school years. Sara did receive support from her siblings, with whom she was still in contact.

Not unexpectedly, some families had initial hesitations about their daughter or son traveling so far away, particularly since five of the six participants were from cities near RMU. For reassurance, Marcus' parents sought information from a distant family member who had once lived in his host country; they were also comforted by the idea

that he would live with a host family. Marcus noticed that when he was abroad, his parents would bring up topics related to cultural adjustment and homesickness, so he knew they were carefully reading the materials provided by RMU and his program sponsor in order to best support him through his cultural adjustment. Danyale was both the first in her family to attend college and to travel abroad; her mother was nervous, but once Danyale explained how important study abroad was to her and how it fit into her academic and future career, she became encouraging:

My family was really supportive, and I feel like that made me feel a lot better about it. I mean I've always had the idea that I was gonna go, but having my family say you have to do this! Although we're a little apprehensive because, you know, we won't be there for you, we think you can do it. We're sure you can do it. And we're still gonna be there, just over an ocean and a phone call or a Skype call. (Danyale)

Jade had never traveled internationally, and was proud to be the first in her family to study abroad. She described herself as very close to her mother and sister, who were sources of emotional and spiritual support during her study abroad experience. Both came to visit her while she was in Europe. Her family took pleasure in her study abroad accomplishments; Jade remarked that her extended family still calls her "world traveler" and asks about her experiences.

Although Agatha had an older sibling who had studied abroad and her family members were encouraging, Agatha felt some guilt about going abroad and leaving her mother alone. An immigrant, Agatha's mother was more comfortable communicating in

her first language, so Agatha often served as a translator. In addition, Agatha contributed to her family financially. These responsibilities did not prevent Agatha from studying abroad, however; she continued to assist her mother whenever possible through telephone and email communications.

Murungi had traveled abroad several times prior to her study abroad experience, and her parents were enthusiastic, both about her plans to study abroad and her choice of a program in an African country. Murungi noted that her mother was a little nervous about her being on her own. Her Eastern African relatives were concerned about her living in Western Africa, which Murungi found amusing.

Three of the participants (Agatha, Marcus, and Murungi) came from families where one or both parents had immigrated to the United States. Jade's parents had both served in the U.S. military, and her father was once stationed overseas. These four families were likely familiar with the concept of travel to a new country for the purposes of economic, political, or educational pursuits. All of the participants' families appeared supportive of and interested in their student's educational pursuits. As participation in study abroad was sanctioned by RMU and mentioned early and often, families understood this to be an extension of their daughter or son's college experience.

As more than 60% of RMU undergraduates study abroad, a number of the participants' classmates were also planning to go abroad or had already done so. Agatha and Marcus both consulted study abroad alumni when weighing program options, and Marcus found presentations by his peers who had already gone abroad inspirational.

Several of the participants mentioned that friends who were not going abroad (from RMU or elsewhere) were excited for them as well as envious.

Danyale noted that study abroad was not part of the culture of her high school or home community, so people were curious about her plans. She explained to them that study abroad was part of a college experience, at least at her institution. While one friend didn't understand why she would want to leave the United States, others were encouraging, and another friend decided to study abroad as well after hearing about Danyale's positive experiences. Marcus was the one participant who expressed some reticence about discussing study abroad with friends, particularly those who came from lower income groups (as he described himself). He was the recipient of a scholarship that facilitated his studies at RMU as well as study abroad, which weighed on his mind:

I know that there are students just like me that didn't get this opportunity that I got. And I always wonder, I never want to put other people down in any kind of way, and I feel like I'm privileged to have this education, I'm privileged to have this scholarship, but I don't feel like I'm different from any other student who didn't get these opportunities, so, that's always on my mind. (Marcus)

Marcus noted some of his friends in the sciences and engineering felt they could not go abroad due to academic restrictions. He also described friends who could not afford to study abroad:

I know students who are working on campus and sending their money back home – so how can they have their family not have that income? It's, uh, yeah. It's hard. I don't know what, what's the proper way to address that, especially if it's on a

friendship level – I don't know how to talk about, oh yeah, I'm going abroad, to a student who has to stay and work and support his family. So, you just try to avoid the subject and things. It's weird. It's a weird position. (Marcus)

Jade was the only participant who shared that she encountered resistance to the general idea of study abroad; a few members of her church were concerned about her safety and the possibility of losing her way while far from home. Jade felt that she knew how to comport herself and stay safe, so was not influenced by their concerns.

**Fears.** In most cases, fears did not play a major role in the participants' decision-making process or preparations for study abroad. Marcus was warned that he might experience racism in his host country; since these friends did not have personal experience in the country, he ultimately dismissed their concerns. Agatha's study abroad plans were questioned by some of her friends when attacks on foreigners in her host country were reported in the news. While she did face some doubts, she felt committed to the experience, so went ahead with her plans. Unfortunately, Agatha was subject to a number of racialized incidents while abroad. Knowing what she encountered, she said in retrospect she would do it over again.

**Finances.** The economics of study abroad are often blamed for the underrepresentation of African American students in study abroad. I did not specifically ask participants about their income levels or how they financed study abroad, anticipating that if this were a significant obstacle in their preparations, it would emerge during the interviews. Hints as to some of the participants' income levels did appear during the interviews. Two participants mentioned that they were recipients of scholarships that

included high financial need as a requirement. One participant referred to herself as middle class, and noted that while she was interested in study abroad as a high school student, it wasn't something her family could afford at the time. Sara was the participant who spoke most about preparing financially for study abroad. After she changed her status to an independent student, she funded her own studies at RMU through multiple jobs. She planned carefully for her study abroad experience, though she experienced setbacks when more than one roommate moved out unexpectedly, leaving her to pay their share of the rent. She was determined to go abroad, however, and when asked in what ways she was prepared to study abroad, she said she was financially prepared. When needed, she earned extra money while abroad by doing odd jobs for a friend of her host mother.

When I asked participants about the biggest challenges associated with their study abroad experiences, no one mentioned money. While money did not appear to be a deterrent to study abroad, it did affect if and how some participants traveled while abroad. Danyale noted that she was not sure if she would be able to afford to travel while abroad, so intentionally selected a large city where she would have plenty to do. She did not travel outside her host city, and said that if she could do the experience over again, she would have better prepared financially:

'Cause then I could've planned out more and did more of the, like, traveling I at least wanted to do. But I mean, looking back on it, I'm fine that I didn't. But if I had to change anything, that's what I would've did [*sic*]. Been a little smarter during the summer before, financially. (Danyale)

Danyale noted that some of her fellow study abroad students spent so much time traveling that they were not able to get to know their host city, and they gained little from the academic experience. Jade traveled to two additional countries during her program, but described other U.S. students who traveled somewhere new every weekend. This was not a possibility for Jade or some of her friends while abroad: “We saved for this trip, you know? We’re spending our own money, there’s only so much we can ask our parents for” (Jade). Exploring her host country was important to Agatha, so although she was on a budget, she took advantage of deals through Groupon when planning travel and sightseeing.

### **Summary**

When thinking about study abroad, the majority of these six African American participants were initially motivated by a desire for cultural immersion, travel, and the opportunity to be independent and self-reliant. Once it came time to select a study abroad program, they became more focused on specific factors that would allow them to achieve their goals for the experience. Geographic location, academic focus, an opportunity to get to know their host city and culture, and getting to know locals were mentioned by most of the participants. Host country language was an important factor; Sara, Murungi, Jade, and Marcus selected locations and programs that would allow them to continue prior language study, while Danyale wanted to study in an English-speaking country.

I was initially surprised that all the participants were aware of study abroad opportunities and had indicated plans to participate even before starting college. I began to interrogate *why* this would surprise me. After all, prior research showed no statistical

difference between African American and White students in terms of intent to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2009), and that more than 80% of high school graduates in a pre-college summer program expressed interest in study abroad (Penn & Tanner, 2008). Despite this knowledge, I realized that I had internalized the common narrative about African Americans and their supposed lack of interest in study abroad; the “not for people like me” syndrome (Jackson, 2005). I had anticipated that the participants would have made the decision to go abroad after starting college at RMU, and likely after being exposed to the idea from the study abroad office. As a former study abroad advisor, I overestimated the role of the study abroad office in encouraging study abroad participation by African American students. For these participants, interest in study abroad preceded enrollment in college, and for Danyale, Marcus, Sara, and Murungi, this interest played a role in college choice.

As international educators, we must examine our assumptions about African American students and their interest in study abroad participation. We should also question our assumptions about family and peers as deterrents. Family members were highly supportive of the participants’ study abroad plans. While family resistance is often cited as a potential barrier to study abroad participation by African American students, Jackson (2006) found that family support was an important condition for studying abroad. This was also true for this group of students. Danyale and Jade had not traveled internationally prior to their study abroad experience, nor had anyone in their families studied abroad. While one might expect that their families would be unsure or resistant to the idea, their families were particularly proud of their accomplishments. Danyale

remarked that she was viewed as a pioneer for trying something new. Peers were also largely encouraging. This is not surprising given the high percentage of RMU students who go abroad, but participants' friends outside RMU also thought it was exciting, and wanted to know more. The few critiques or concerns from peers were related to the participants' chosen study abroad destination and its desirability (Murungi) or perceived safety for the student (Agatha and Marcus); the concept of study abroad itself was not questioned. As mentioned previously, Jade was the only participant who encountered community resistance against study abroad, which came from members of her church. Finances are another commonly cited barrier to study abroad participation for African American students; while several of the participants shared that they were considered high need financially at RMU, concerns about funding study abroad did not emerge as an obstacle to participation. This may be because participants received information about study abroad, the transfer of financial aid, and additional funding opportunities even before matriculation at the institution. Deciding to make study abroad a part of their collegiate experiences early on gave them ample time to save or raise money to cover any additional expenses, if applicable.

If access and equity in study abroad are goals, institutional commitment and internal collaborations with offices of admissions, academic departments, financial aid, and other support services are critical. Informing students of study abroad opportunities early on, even prior to the college application process, will support the many African American students who are likely already interested in study abroad, and may capture the imagination of those students who come from families and communities who do not have

traditions of international education. Some of these students will need very little convincing. Danyale, a first generation college student with no prior international experience, declared, “Study abroad was a logical step, like, of course! You have an opportunity to get away while being in school; do it!” Messages that study abroad is a valued part of undergraduate study as well as clear and consistent information about costs, applicability of financial aid and scholarships, and transfer of credit will provide students and their families with the knowledge they need to determine if and how study abroad fits into their academic careers. Institutions must consult with their students to learn more about their pathways, processes, and experiences with study abroad. While not the focus of this study, institutions that struggle with the underrepresentation of African American students should also speak with students who opt not to study abroad in order to explore real or perceived barriers to participation.

While many of the discussions of underrepresentation of African American students in the field of international education are preoccupied with access, it is crucial to understand students’ experiences abroad. The following chapter examines the participants’ lived experiences abroad, with an emphasis on race and racism. In addition, participants’ expectations for study abroad are considered.

## **Chapter Five: Race and Racism Abroad**

Phenomenology is concerned with the essences of lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). While the participants studied in six distinct countries, common themes emerged among multiple participants surrounding the salience of race and the presence (or relative absence) of racism in their study abroad experiences. This chapter will concentrate on what these African American students experienced as study abroad participants and explore the shared essences of study abroad, focusing on the ways in which race mattered. In addition, it will examine the question of how the participants' experiences were similar to or different from what they had expected.

### **Life at RMU**

Although this study focused on the participants' lived experiences in study abroad, their impressions of environments abroad were intricately connected to their experiences at home, to which they compared and contrasted life in their host countries. To provide context to the study abroad experience, brief descriptions of the participants' impressions of life at RMU are included below.

Early in the interviews, I asked the participants what it was like to be a student at RMU. When asking this question I did not mention race, though in later interviews I did ask the participants to compare the experience of being an African American abroad to that of being an African American at RMU. Three of the participants did immediately

reference race, and spoke of the ways in which race affected their RMU experiences, particularly when they first entered the institution. Murungi, Jade, and Danyale all referred to “onlyness,” which has been characterized as the “psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (Harper et al., 2011, p. 190). Jade described meeting her first roommate, who seemed shocked to see her, though they had communicated on Facebook prior to meeting in person. Her roommate had never before been around anyone who identified as African American, and asked awkward questions: “little things she would ask me, like, do you wash your hair everyday? ‘Cause you’re Black, and Black people don’t wash their hair every day...” (Jade). Jade tried to make the best of the situation, but noted that she “always kinda had that wall up.” In her second year, Jade moved off campus with another biracial student; they didn’t have to act different or explain things to one another, which was comfortable. She commented that on campus:

It’s hard to let that defense mechanism down, though, of automatically thinking, oh, I’m the only Black kid in the class this quarter, surprise...First week of class is always uncomfortable...you have to feel out the climate, are you gonna have those people who have really strong opinions on race. You generally do at RMU.  
(Jade)

Jade spoke in later interviews about marginalization in the classroom at RMU, as well as the difference in atmosphere when more students of color were in the classroom and felt empowered to speak. Jade vacillated between frustration and forgiveness towards those

RMU students who made racist and ignorant remarks, declaring, “I realized, like, people grow up differently. They’re taught differently, and hopefully at her time at RMU, she will be educated enough not to make that statement again.” She was not as forgiving of microaggressions perpetuated by a faculty member in the classroom, as she had higher expectations for someone with a Ph.D.

Murungi found her experience different than what she had imagined before enrolling at RMU:

Once I stepped into the actual environment and was surrounded in it, I realized more of the real parts of it. So, for example, being an African American female on this campus...I had not really considered that as much when I was looking in to the school, which was interesting...so, I love RMU, I mean, academically it’s great, and I love the programs they have, but socially, it’s been...an experience. A journey. (Murungi)

Danyale came from a community in another state in which she was the racial majority and most people shared a common background, so adapting to RMU was an adjustment. Race was more salient to Danyale at RMU than at home, as her race was more apparent. Agatha talked about being Black at RMU in the second interview. She noted that she was “shocked at the lack of diversity” when she first entered the campus, but the number of students of color on campus and the environment improved during her years as an undergraduate. Agatha shared that she no longer thought about race much at RMU, even if a few ignorant people continued to exist on campus, including a student who proclaimed, “You know the reason you got here is because you’re Black, right?”

In contrast to the individuals described above, Marcus did not have a feeling of onlyness when entering RMU. Rather, he found himself for the first time around other students like him, both students of color and those who had grown up in immigrant families. He talked about feeling isolated as a child and teenager, imagining that his family was the only one different than the idealized American families he saw on television. Once at RMU he felt he was part of a community, and became more connected to his East African identity:

Kind of relating to them and talking about experiences that I've had growing up that I felt no one else had, and I was feeling very lonely in those experiences, and tried to keep those, like, to hide away from that as much as possible. And then finding people that embrace it, and wanting to have that kind of freedom to just embrace it. (Marcus)

Marcus felt supported at RMU, and expressed the belief that some of the other Black students on campus were too focused on racism: "That's like a virus, like an infectious mindset that's not gonna...I don't know. I can't walk around thinking that, because then you're going to think everyone's against you."

Sara spoke little of her RMU experience during the interviews. She described her first year as typical, but felt that everything shifted once she became an independent student and was forced to work full time. Sara remarked several times during the course of the interviews that she was seen as "whitewashed" for the way she spoke when she was around Black peers, and that she constantly found herself code-switching to fit in.

## **Freedom from Race**

When discussing their experiences abroad, five of the six participants expressed a sense of freedom from having to think about race. Danyale and Murungi both studied in locations that were more racially diverse than was RMU. Danyale said that her race wasn't a big deal abroad, and that she was never "the only brown person in the room." She immediately felt comfortable in her host city: "When I got there, I was like, there's a lot of brown people! I saw things that reminded me of my neighborhood at home...I fit in here." During her study abroad experience, Danyale became more aware that while at RMU race was always in the back of her mind, this was not the case abroad. She described her host city as "a nice breather" from life in the United States, where she was either a racial majority (in her home community) or a racial minority (at RMU): "[My host city] was more of like, you're just a person. There are a lot of people who look a lot of different ways. And that was nice."

Murungi studied abroad in Western Africa:

I had this realization at one point...I was almost experiencing the opposite of what I had grown up with. Because being in the U.S. as an African American, and someone who grew up in predominantly White schools, I was always very aware of my race...I would have moments when I'd be sitting in class, just listening, whatever, and then I'd look around and see, oh, actually, I'm the only person of color in this whole classroom. But in [Western Africa] I really was able to live without that being a factor at all. I never thought about it, except when I was realizing that I just fit in. (Murungi)

When asked how the racial climate was different in her host country than at RMU, Murungi responded:

Starkly different...Here, I just always am reminded of my race, whether or not I choose to be aware of it, it's something that will come up...I was able there to focus on other commonalities I had with people more so than here, where a lot of times people just naturally gravitate towards people who look like them, because there's so few in the African American community here. (Murungi)

While abroad, Danyale and Murungi lived in communities surrounded by many people who looked like them, so their feelings of comfort might be expected. Other participants living in White majoritarian communities, however, also echoed the feeling of freedom from race. Jade sensed the color of her skin didn't matter: "You only felt different because you were American. You didn't feel different because you were Black or because you were White." Sara felt more like herself: "I didn't identify at all, really, with...Black and Latina and White, I just felt more me. I guess I felt more me, and less like...my race. Like, I didn't really have to put a name on it."

Marcus described this freedom in more concrete terms - the freedom from stereotypes:

When I was around [host country] people, I feel like the stereotypes weren't attached to me, because I didn't know about the stereotypes that they had. It was so freeing, being around people who I felt like didn't request anything of me...We start at the same place. Like, we're meeting each other as strangers, and there's nothing really attached to either of us, is how I felt. (Marcus)

Jade also talked about the freedom from stereotypes, and contrasted this with the attitude of her fellow citizens: “There was never that racial there, that with Americans, you kinda already assume that they’re gonna have that preconception about you.” She said at home when she told people she was Black and White, “As soon as those words come out of your mouth, it’s like, oh, what are they thinking now” (Jade). Her classes abroad were still primarily made up of White students, but it somehow felt different; she never walked into the classroom and felt like she was the only person of color.

Perhaps to further distance themselves from stereotypes about both African Americans and Americans, both Jade and Marcus enjoyed that people could not always immediately guess where they were from. Sara also felt her looks (as well as language skills) made her seem racially and nationally ambiguous. She noted that she looked like her Northern African friends, and at other times was mistaken for someone from her host country. When she was with her closest local friend, who was White, she said she never felt different, which she described as nice. Sara emphasized that she did not feel like she had to code-switch in her host country as she did in the United States, even though she was interacting in her second language and within a new culture. Sara had a slightly different take on stereotyping than did Jade or Marcus. She did experience blatant discrimination while spending time with her North African friends; however, she tried to distance herself from this: “Even when I did feel I was stereotyped, or felt prejudice at all, it was like, I wasn’t feeling it for a race that I came from. So, or a country that I came from” (Sara).

Murungi was also not always easily identified as a U.S. American. Members of her host community told her she didn't look American, which they defined as White. She sensed that her professors felt more at ease with the two Black students on the program than with the White students. Not everything was easier for Murungi, however; she faced higher linguistic expectations from her host community than did her fellow U.S. (White) students, which drove her to try harder. Overall, her race proved beneficial in her study abroad experience:

It became a source of privilege, which I had never experienced before – having privilege being African American was something that I couldn't even fathom. But I had that for the first time, and I was able to just be comfortable in my skin, and have people see me, and be comfortable. (Murungi)

While Murungi's local friends and host family members thought she was just like them, she was not; she observed that her experiences growing up as a racial minority in the United States were very different than those of members of her host community, who had always been part of the racial majority. One point where these differences in lived experiences and history became evident was during a program excursion to a historical site where slaves were housed prior to transportation to the United States. Murungi had a visceral reaction. Not only were the historical site and tour disturbing, but she was also bothered by daily life continuing in this setting: "I just didn't feel comfortable. Just knowing the history, and seeing how life had just gone on, and people just lived as if there was nothing, nothing significant about it." This was a challenging experience, but

Murungi appreciated the opportunity to view the history of slavery from another perspective:

So, that whole experience was really hard for me, but it also helped put things in perspective, because I would say in the U.S. our history on slavery is very much from this side. We talk a little bit about the origins of where they would get people from, but it's more, once people came to this side of the world. So it was good for me to see the source of all that – but also so painful. (Murungi)

Murungi wished that she and other students had been given time to talk about the experience afterwards. While the program faculty gave the group some historical background before the tour, they did not offer an opportunity to process the experience, instead shifting to an elaborate lunch with time for shopping from local vendors. Murungi wondered if the faculty members thought the topic was too heavy, and wanted to “lighten up the mood by transitioning so quickly.” Not only did Murungi need to reflect on the experience and her emotional reactions to such a painful setting, but she would have also benefitted from the opportunity to better understand how her faculty members and other locals viewed the space and its history:

I don't really know how [local] people viewed that space. But, I mean, some people live there, and they were just playing soccer there, and hanging out at the beach! So it could just be something that has a lot of history and it's also something that they try and move forward from. Which is understandable, too. (Murungi)

## **Interactions with White U.S. Students**

Although most of the participants expressed liberation from having to think about race while abroad, this freedom did not always persist when they were in groups made up entirely of White U.S. students. Jade noted:

When meeting people, I never felt that discomfort of being biracial, Black, or White. The only time I did feel that was when I was with other Americans – when I would be in a group of people who were all White, and you kind of just, kind of regress to where you're at home, and how you feel at home. But when you're around, like, different cultures and different ethnicities, I never paid attention to it. (Jade)

Marcus also felt that race mattered more when he was around other Americans, and he was forced to play a role he did not want to play:

It probably mattered more in terms of being with the American students than anything else. Because I feel like, like I've mentioned before, I feel like I'm in some sort of representative position, especially if there are not that many other African American students around...Even though it's not said, I feel like that's the case. (Marcus)

Agatha did not experience freedom from thinking about race while abroad, but she also spoke of uncomfortable dynamics with other U.S. students in a U.S./host country comparative politics course. Agatha's White U.S. classmates had similar viewpoints to one another, and resisted her counternarratives describing her own lived experiences,

which contradicted their own. When the host country professor asked if race was still an issue in the United States,

The American kids are like, no, I don't think so, you know, we have a Black president now, so life is great... So I was like, hmmm. OK. Once again, you don't have to go through some of the things that I do, but OK. And I said no, I think it is still very much an issue in America as well. And then they looked at me again like, oh, this girl. (Agatha)

Agatha said she couldn't connect with anyone in the class, and her U.S. classmates did not see her as an American. When I asked how they viewed her, she said that they saw her as:

African. Or Black. They just saw me as a Black girl. And it's funny, because the professor would always be like, African Americans in America, what do you think about that? And I was like, ugh, here we go again. (Agatha)

Agatha was put in a difficult position; not only did she feel rejected as an American by her fellow U.S. citizens, but she sensed that her host country was hostile to both her American and African selves: "Do I say I'm American? Or do I say I'm African? They were not fond of Americans, and they weren't fond of Africans, so I was kind of like, I'm screwed right now. I'm in trouble."

In contrast to her life at home, Murungi no longer stood out based on race, whereas her White peers were the focus of stares, touching, and comments about their appearances. She took advantage of the opportunity to educate her fellow students about racism in the United States:

I said as politely as I could, that really, they were just experiencing what people in the U.S. experience every day...and so, I just mentioned to them, you know, some people, myself included, are always aware of their race, and always aware of how they don't fit in in the U.S. And I can't even tell you how many times people have wanted to touch my hair, or have asked me silly questions about it...Sometimes you just want to go through your daily life without it being a spectacle, and that was just something that they got to experience for the first time – knowing that it was temporary. (Murungi)

Some of the participants made a concerted effort to distance themselves from other U.S. students. Sara's goal was to learn her host country's language, so she avoided other Americans:

I feel like it sounds bad, but I didn't want to spend a lot of time with U.S. students since I'd see them back in the U.S...It isn't that I didn't like them, it was just that I didn't have as much of a connection. And I didn't try for it because I wanted to learn [my host language]. And a lot of the U.S. students that I knew that did end up staying, even for a year, didn't learn very much [language] because they just hung out with one another and only spoke English. (Sara)

Other participants gravitated towards U.S. students with whom they had something in common, including similar goals for study abroad. Marcus originally tried to avoid other U.S. students. This was difficult, as his program was large and his host city was a popular destination for U.S. study abroad participants and tourists. He realized there were some good people in his group after a few of his program excursions; after

that, he only avoided those students who perpetuated negative stereotypes about Americans. Murungi's program was small, and she found that students initially grouped themselves by university affiliation. She described group dynamics as cliquy, but found that she ultimately became the closest to students who had similar interests and a comparable mindset regarding their experience:

I was more grouped with people who were really excited to experience all of this. And we wanted to experience the ups and downs, and we would just talk about that, and we would hang out at each other's houses, and with each other's host families, and tried to be more mixed up. (Murungi)

Agatha and Danyale viewed themselves as having different goals than other (U.S. and international) study abroad participants. Agatha felt that many of the U.S. and European study abroad students at her institution were there to party, while she wanted to live like a local and experience the culture. Danyale developed friendships with a combination of U.S., local, and other international students. She thought that her status as a first time traveler made her distinct in terms of what she hoped to accomplish. Danyale focused on getting to know her host city and university, while some other students traveled every weekend. She was also very serious about the academic component of her program. Danyale saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to take classes not offered at RMU, and her classes were an important part of her study abroad experience. She was surprised at some of her fellow students who did not make an effort to attend classes, some even missing weeks of instruction to travel.

## **Encountering Racism**

The previous section described interactions with other U.S. students; I will now turn to participants' experiences within the host community. Although most of the participants expressed freedom from having to think about race while abroad, some degree of racism and/or White privilege appeared in all of the participants' accounts of interactions in their host countries, with the exception of Danyale. In some cases the participant was the target, while in others, they were observers of discrimination towards other individuals and groups.

Agatha had a very different experience abroad than did the other participants; she was confronted with racism far more while abroad than when at home. She did not feel free from race: "How did race matter? Oh, it mattered very much. It was...a constant reminder I was Black. Things I don't think about here" (Agatha). Her negative encounters began immediately upon arrival, when she was taken aside by customs officials for declaring food in her luggage. She had packed some dried foods like pasta to get her through the first few days; when she explained this to the officials, they went through her luggage anyway, stating that they thought she had firearms and pornography. She was humiliated by the experience, and exhausted by the long flight. After a cold reception from her airport pickup and the staff at her housing complex, she wondered if she had made a mistake.

A disturbing incident happened early in her sojourn as she walked to the university and was bombarded with sticks by older teenagers:

I was just walking to campus, and as I'm getting closer, I see them giving me looks. Faces. I'm like, I don't understand what's going on, so I'm like, maybe I'm just, maybe I'm paranoid. Let me keep walking, keep walking, keep walking. And I walk past them and I get the iciest shiver down my spine, and I'm like, something feels weird. Then I keep walking, all of a sudden I feel THUD. Thap, thap, thap. I'm like, what's...and I, I hear snickering. And I turn around, and I see them, and I seem them laughing, and they give me this dirty look, and they just bolt. Just take off. And I kind of stood there, dumbfounded, like, did this really just happen right now? (Agatha)

Agatha questioned herself when she experienced racism in her host country, wondering if it was all in her head, or if she was overreacting. Her mother had no such doubts. When Agatha shared the experience described above, her mother immediately went to RMU's study abroad office to report the incident. Her study abroad advisor validated her experience, and requested that she report this to the host university. Agatha did so reluctantly, and her story was dismissed. The local staff member commented that she was shocked, as things like that didn't happen there. As a person of color, she herself had never had similar experiences: "Pretty much discrediting my story. And after that, I was like, eh. Just keep my mouth shut and keep moving" (Agatha).

While racism was a constant throughout Agatha's time abroad, her situation improved once she was able to connect with other students and develop a community. Her closest friends were those she met through a club for students interested in African countries and cultures, as well as (non-U.S.) international students. Many of these

students were also of color, and they bonded over racial injustices. Agatha noted that she was the target of racialized and sexualized comments from men when in public. On one occasion, she was barred from a club when with Black friends, who reported that it was based on race and happened to them all the time. A man that Agatha met on a tour harassed her, and continued to do so after the tour ended via telephone; when she contemplated going to the police, her friends told her not to bother: “They won’t do anything about it because you’re Black” (Agatha).

At RMU, Agatha felt a responsibility to speak out against racial injustices, and mentioned being bothered by wealthy African American students who kept quiet and did not meet this obligation. While abroad, she felt out of her element and unsure of the ramifications for speaking out:

It felt worse [than racism in the United States]. Because I was out of my territory, I didn’t know...I didn’t know a lot there, you know what I mean? Because when you feel secure, and you feel like this is your home, maybe you feel more compelled to speak out on things. Whereas you feel like a foreigner, and you don’t know what the ramifications are for what you say. I didn’t know if I was gonna end up in a ditch somewhere, I didn’t know what was gonna happen, so I had to be very careful with my words. (Agatha)

As a result of her study abroad experience, she concluded that although the United States has a long journey ahead in terms of combating racism, the United States had advanced further in this area than had her host country. At the same time, Agatha acknowledged that members of her host country would argue otherwise.

Despite expressing feelings of freedom from race and racism while abroad, other participants shared racialized experiences when talking about interactions with people in their host countries. Jade said that race didn't matter, but she noted that she looked different, "So they'd like ask to touch my hair, ask to feel my skin." She typically allowed people to do this; Jade said she found it funny, but during a trip to another city the attention (always from men) became too much to bear, and she changed the way she wore her hair. Jade spoke fondly of her professor and her professor's young daughter calling her "Princess Tiana" after an African American character in a Disney movie. When giving safety tips, Marcus' host mother mentioned that no one would want to rob Marcus or his Latino housemate. He wasn't sure what this meant, but thought it had something to do with race. Sara shared that someone spit at her and her friend, who was North African; she remarked that she was sometimes followed in stores while abroad (which also happened to her in the United States). As mentioned previously, Sara disconnected herself from this discrimination, saying it was targeted at a population to which she didn't belong; however, she also talked about feeling more comfortable in a city close to her host city, where there was a larger population of persons of color, many of whom were immigrants.

Others also observed racism against various racial/ethnic groups while in their host countries. Marcus recounted an uncomfortable experience where his host mother spoke negatively about immigrants:

She'd make these huge generalizations, and it was weird to be on the other side of that conversation, hearing about it...My roommate and I would give each other

knowing looks, but we wouldn't say anything... We talked about it afterwards, but we didn't bring it up with our host mom. So we were on the same page, we understood. (Marcus)

Jade, Sara, and Agatha also encountered anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments in their host countries, often but not always directed at those from African countries. Sara and Agatha were both mistaken for immigrants at times, and both experienced hostility and discrimination as a result. Jade, on the other hand, said people in her host country differentiated between Africans and African Americans. While her race and appearance garnered attention (particularly from men), her nationality and status as a study abroad student provided her with a level of privilege that immigrants did not possess. Sara, Agatha, Jade, and Marcus all made comparisons between the anti-immigrant attitudes seen in their host countries and the climate for immigrants in the United States.

African American students are frequently subject to stereotype threat and microaggressions while attending PWIs in the United States (Harper et al., 2009; Tuitt & Carter, 2008), and RMU is no exception, despite its efforts to create a more inclusive environment. Assessing the racial climate at RMU was not intended as the focus of this study, but climate issues such as being the only or one of few persons of color, microaggressions from fellow students and faculty, and marginalization in the classroom emerged during the interviews with the majority of participants. Stereotype threat is defined as “a situational threat...that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists...Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype” (Steele,

1997, p. 614). Tuitt and Carter (2008) proposed that stereotype threat and microaggressions work hand in hand to create a hostile learning environment; “Racial microaggressions can be understood as subtle and not-so-subtle racial assaults that confirm and/or reinforce the threats that black students anticipate in PWIs” (p. 53).

Jade, Sara, and Marcus expressed feelings of freedom from thinking about race while abroad, though they did not seem to be studying in locations that were more racially diverse than RMU. All three were taking classes primarily with other (White) U.S. students, but consistent with the literature described in Chapter Two, something felt different for them when outside of the U.S. context. I believe that these feelings of liberation emerged when the participants compared their experiences to those at home. They were no longer exposed to stereotype threat, at least until they were back in settings with all White U.S. students.

In discussing stereotype threat, Steele (2010) argued that identities are “rooted in local contingencies,” and the psychological weight of identities can shift when in another context. He described listening to a radio interview with a Black woman, who spoke of her life in Paris:

Her mood elevated; a happiness came through. She said she is still black in Paris, but it isn't the most central thing about her when she meets people. Her blackness, she said, especially as an educated black person, doesn't mean the same thing to people in Paris that it does in the United States...She noted quickly that the French are no less prejudiced than anyone else. She described their lack of affection for North African immigrants, former colonials, many of whom look like her. She remarked that her American-accented French helps her avoid being confused as North African. (Steele, 2010, p. 81)

Sara noted that while abroad she was not subject to expectations about how she should be or act based on her racial identities, something that weighed on her in the

United States as she navigated Black and White communities. Jade and Marcus spoke specifically about the freedom from stereotypes about African Americans abroad.

Tellingly, Marcus mentioned that while host country nationals might have stereotypes about him, *he didn't know what they were*, so they weren't attached to him. Both Jade and Marcus discussed frustration and resentment with being expected to represent African Americans at RMU; Marcus said, "It's not something I signed up to do." Jade spoke of her classroom experiences:

It was hard, it was like, I'm gonna get looked at every time they say the n-word. Or every time they have a question about being Black. And it's like, guys, I don't know. I didn't live back then. (Jade)

The environment felt different abroad, however, and Jade spoke with amusement about being questioned about being Black by friends from the Netherlands and Canada when she knew all the words to a song by a Black rap/hip hop artist:

And they were like, are you Black? And I was like....And they laughed about it, they giggled. And I was like, actually, I am. And they were like, oh my God! And they were so interested, because there was only, there weren't any full Black study abroad students in my study abroad program...And so they were asking me all of these questions...I don't think they'd ever met anyone from America who was African American. So they thought it was hilarious, and I was like, no, it's really who I am. So then they just started asking questions, and it was mainly about my music interests, and they're like, so all you do is listen to hip hop? And I'm like, I actually can't stand rap, but I know it. I'm like, I'm more of an R&B

kinda person, but I listen to country, I listen to techno, I listen to dubstep, I listen - I listen to all of it. And they found that really interesting, too. But I never had to identify as being African American when I was abroad. (Jade)

Though her friends had stereotypes about Jade and her musical tastes based on her race, she found the experience funny, and was happy to share more about herself. She said that she never had to identify as African American while abroad; when she did choose to identify as African American (and biracial), she was able to share her racial identities and experiences on her own terms.

While Murungi did not personally experience racism in Western Africa, she did find ideals of beauty based on Whiteness to be pervasive. A number of local women associated light skin with beauty, and used lightening creams. Murungi tried to fit in to her community in terms of her dress, but she wore her hair naturally, and women were constantly offering to fix her hair. The preoccupation with changing one's appearance saddened Murungi, and she made an effort to tell her local friends they had beautiful skin in an attempt to shift their perspectives on beauty. She described the desire for lighter skin as:

A social construct, and something that has existed for a long time, stemming from, I'm sure, the Europeans first entering Western Africa, and you know, doing whatever they did. So, yeah, that was something I saw, and...so when they talked about Americans, and Black Americans, it was typically thinking, they're so beautiful with their lighter skin tones and all this. And longer hair, which was usually fake. (Murungi)

In reaction, Murungi became more self-confident and proud of her appearance; she decided to leave her hair natural once she returned home, and to stop worrying about her skin tone if she spent time in the sun.

### **Expectations**

In what ways were the participants' experiences similar to or different from what they expected? In most cases, participants did not have clearly defined expectations for the experience. Several were unsure of what to expect; they knew things would be different, but were uncertain how, and wanted to keep an open mind. Danyale wanted to "live it for what it was, and not put high expectations on it, 'cause I feel like that was the best way for me to be disappointed." Marcus spoke of the trip he took to Eastern Africa as a child, where he expected to have a terrible time due to the level of development. Instead, he had a wonderful experience, and learned that one needs to enjoy a culture like the locals enjoy it. He maintained this philosophy during his period abroad. Murungi was unsure how religious views or gender roles different from those to which she was accustomed might play a role in her experience, but decided, "I'm going, I don't know what it's gonna be like, but I'm open and ready."

Agatha's experience abroad was much more difficult than she had anticipated. She had planned to take science classes and obtain a job while abroad, neither of which worked out. As described previously, racism was also a central and unexpected part of her experience. She advised future study abroad participants:

Just know who you are before you go, that's all I can say. And pray that everything turns out OK. And don't set your expectations too high, because I

think I did. So it was constant letdowns. I'm gonna work when I'm there, and I'm gonna study this when I'm there, and none of that – all of that fell through. So just go with the flow, I would say. Yeah. And you'll enjoy it. (Agatha)

It is important to emphasize that despite Agatha's difficult experience and unmet expectations, she refused to let the challenges define her or her experience: "I think there it was a negative experience – but I think the person who I am is a positive experience, so I think it balances out." She noted that she would do it all again if given the opportunity. Despite her negative experiences abroad, Agatha briefly considered extending for a second term, as she felt there was so much left to see and do in her host country.

Other participants encountered small inconveniences that were not as expected. Jade did not expect the slower pace of life, the lack of potable water, or restricted access to heat in her apartment. Danyale was unprepared for the challenges the time difference created for communicating with family and friends back home, or the adjustments she would need to make as a junk food lover and very picky eater. In most cases, however, participants were pleasantly surprised by the realities of their lives abroad. Marcus thought he would be forced to figure out everything on his own; instead, he enjoyed a lot of support from his program staff, peers, and host mother. Danyale did not expect how much her host city would remind her of home, and how comfortable she would feel, even while some of her study abroad peers were apprehensive about living in a racially/ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood. Sara found it much easier to make host country friends than she had anticipated. Murungi didn't expect to feel so at home: "I never thought that I could really establish a home anywhere else, and so, just the

amount of love I developed for my family was really surprising...It became my home, absolutely became my home.” Jade expected that she would live in another country and learn about its culture; she did not imagine she would learn about herself and change so much.

Adapting to a new country, culture, and academic system can be difficult, but each of the participants exhibited flexibility and openness to new experiences. Each had successfully acclimated to college and to RMU, which, as discussed previously, was an adjustment for those who were used to schools and communities with more compositional diversity. I asked the participants about the ways in which they felt they were prepared to go abroad. Jade described a lifetime of adjusting and readjusting to Black and White environments; in addition, she felt that her status as a commuter student required her to be more open and accepting of people. She noted that her White friend from RMU on the same program had more difficulties dealing with different cultures while abroad. Murungi had always strived to find a balance between her African and American roots, which prepared her for the study abroad experience. Marcus also described his upbringing as a balancing act between two cultures, the culture of his parents inside the home and another culture outside. This, along with his prior trip to Eastern Africa, prepared him to engage with a new culture during study abroad. While Agatha did not discuss her cross-cultural skills, she immigrated to the United States as a child, and was used to navigating African and American cultures. She was also accustomed to operating in more than one language, and often translated for her mother. Agatha knew she was independent and could take care of herself while abroad. Sara

characterized herself as independent, open to other cultures, and adaptable. Danyale felt she came to the experience with an open attitude, and was ready for curveballs. For some of the participants, the memories of challenges encountered and unmet expectations may have faded with time, or perhaps, as Jackson (2006) proposed, students of color are better prepared for study abroad than are many White students due to their prior experiences navigating multiple cultural environments in the United States. By choosing to study abroad, participants were opting for an experience where they expected they would be seen as different. In contrast, those that felt onyeness at RMU had not anticipated this experience at an institution within the United States. Participants expected that life in a new country would be even more difficult than life at RMU, so most were pleasantly surprised when they adapted with relative ease:

That's one of the things I did not expect to happen. Like, it was...the comfort factor by race is really interesting. Because I mean, you go, like my thinking of going into a new country is, of course you're going to be different! You're American; you've got [local] people. But I didn't think of it in those terms. It was more comforting for me to be like, oh there are more people who look like you, regardless of their nationality. So, I didn't expect that. But like I said, it was a nice breather from, you're either a majority or a minority. Like, it's really hard in my life, in America, to find that balance. (Danyale)

### **Summary**

CRT asserts that racism is pervasive in U.S. society and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Race and varying degrees of racism affected each of the participants'

experiences abroad. Participants compared and contrasted their experiences with race and racism in their host countries with those at home/at RMU, and in several cases described feeling free from racialized stereotypes while abroad. Danyale was able to be “just a person”; Murungi could “focus on other commonalities I had with people”; and Sara and Jade were able to feel more like themselves rather than their race. This sense of freedom from U.S. race and racism is consistent with previous studies and accounts of African American international travel (Beck, 1996; Dawson, 2000; Evans, 2009, 2011; Jackson, 2006; Pryor, 2008).

The participants’ lived experiences abroad spoke as much to the racial climate in the United States as to the racial climate abroad. Their interpretations of these experiences were viewed through the lens of their racial identities and their previous racialized experiences in U.S. educational institutions and society. Murungi, Danyale, Agatha, and Jade were conscious of oneliness and microaggressions at RMU, and were able to vocalize how the racialized climate abroad differed. Sara spoke less of her experiences at RMU; while she did feel freedom from racism abroad, she also distanced herself from racism and at times even rationalized stereotyping. Marcus felt comfortable at RMU, and was able to connect with other children of immigrants for the first time. He questioned why his peers were apt to view things through a racist lens; though he spoke of his discomfort with being put in the role of racial representative and stereotypes people might have of him, he seemed to feel fewer negative ramifications of being an African American at RMU. Gender likely played a role in the participants’ experiences at home and abroad, as African American women face oppression not only from racism, but also

from sexism (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Agatha and Jade, in particular, experienced attention from men while abroad based on race and on gender. Since Marcus was the only male participant, it was difficult to identify patterns in how the experiences of men and women differed; this is an area for future research.

In this study, Agatha was the participant most directly affected by racism in her host country. Tuitt and Carter (2008) found that self-censorship and proving them wrong were two responses to stereotype threats and microaggressions utilized by African American students at PWIs in the United States. Agatha engaged in self-censorship in and out of the classroom, both to reject attempts by her professor to position her as the native informant, and to avoid potential danger from speaking up about racial discrimination in an unfamiliar context. She was confident in her ability to succeed academically and complete the study abroad experience, so persisted despite calls for her to return home from her mother and mentor. Agatha told herself, “You can make it. Just keep on pushing.” Agatha developed a supportive network of friends abroad, and also reached out to her family and a mentor at home. She identified spaces in the city where she felt safe, even though others considered them dangerous:

I felt at home, like, these are my people, I don't feel...you know, I don't feel scared. I felt more secure in the city. It makes no sense. People looked like me there. (Agatha)

When I asked Agatha what she was most proud of in terms of her study abroad experience, she initially responded:

The fact that I made it alive, and back here. I'm so serious. Towards the end, I was like, I don't even know what I'm still doing here, but when I came on that plane, just the sense of relief. (Agatha)

While I am pleased that five of the six participants experienced their host environments as racially inclusive and empowering, I believe my own race and role as a former professional in international education affected who volunteered for this study. These six participants, including Agatha, felt that their time abroad led to positive personal, social, and academic outcomes. Study abroad alumni who experienced negative experiences abroad may not have wished to speak about these, especially with me. I knew Agatha slightly prior to this study, and we had on more than one occasion talked about race and her study abroad experience, so I was already aware that she had encountered some difficulties abroad. While I felt that she trusted and liked me, she was honest and admitted she was still worried about sharing with me due to my former position in international education:

I know you all try to make it such a positive experience, and I don't know if people would take...you know, I don't know, I don't know how it would be received, you know what I mean? Because, like, this is our job, this is what we do, we want the best for our students, and when bad things happen, I don't know how people internalize that. (Agatha)

Agatha was careful with whom she spoke regarding her negative experiences abroad; she didn't want to discourage others, but I think she would have appreciated the opportunity to take part in a public discussion that included the challenges encountered

abroad. She mentioned attending an information session, and was relieved to hear another student of color talk about her difficulties abroad, as she felt less alone. Pre-departure orientations can also involve frank discussions with returnees about the racial climate abroad compared to those of the home campus and community, recognizing that different students may experience the same space differently (as evidenced by these participants' descriptions of RMU). Providing study abroad returnees a space to speak about and reflect on their experiences with peers may be as beneficial to the returnees as it is helpful to prospective students and international educators.

CRT provides a framework in which to consider race and racism abroad. While we may be concerned about students encountering racism abroad and warn them of the possibilities, we must also recognize that racism is endemic in the United States, and that the U.S. racial climate may be replicated abroad when students are with their fellow U.S. students and faculty. By warning students of racism abroad yet not acknowledging the racism that they experience at home, White international educators are exhibiting the privilege of denying racism, as well as dismissing African Americans' lived experiences in the United States.

The next chapter will delve into the meaning of study abroad for these six participants, emphasizing the outcomes they ascribed to their study abroad experiences and the forms of capital developed through participation in study abroad.

## **Chapter Six: A Dream Realized**

Looking back on it now, I absolutely have no regrets about it, it was one of the best decisions that I've ever made in my life to do, just because I learned so much...it was honestly a once in a lifetime thing. And there's nothing else like it to me. You can go, you can go vacation in another country, but that's not the same as study abroad. The fact that you're a student, you get to experience a different educational system, along with all the vacation-like aspects. You get to live in a new place. Like, I didn't visit [my host city], I lived there. I stayed there, I had to fend for myself, get my own food, I became part of the neighborhood, the environment. The guy at the grocery store knew me. The guy at my favorite restaurant knew my order by the end. I became a part of the environment. I think that makes it a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I'm really glad I did it.

(Danyale)

This chapter will examine the meanings these six African American study abroad alumni ascribed to study abroad. In general terms, participants described their experiences as “a dream realized” (Agatha), “my life dream” (Sara), “one of the best decisions I've ever made” (Danyale), and “one of the best times of my life” (Murungi). When asked what study abroad meant to them and what they gained, each cited personal growth and development as an important part of the experience:

It [study abroad] means growth to me. Like, that's one period of four months where I felt like I grew as a person. Emotionally, mentally, spiritually, all of it. It was just a time where I had to myself to focus on me and grow. (Jade)

My study abroad experience meant personal development for me. And I was able to really learn different parts of myself that I probably would not have had the chance to learn had I stayed here, just because different locations elicit different responses and emotions. (Murungi)

In addition to personal growth, the time spent abroad resulted in a shift in perspectives on self, an examination of future possibilities, the development of social networks, and a new appreciation for family/community.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

The concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso & Garcia, 2007; Yosso, 2005) provides a framework with which to examine the meanings and outcomes the six participants ascribed to the study abroad experience. Yosso (2005) used the idea of community cultural wealth to highlight the strengths people of color bring to educational experiences, and to challenge deficit thinking. Community cultural wealth is made up of six “dynamic and overlapping” types of capital, including aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 155). These forms of capital are described below with corresponding participant outcomes; in some cases, the participants also exhibited these forms of capital prior to study abroad, and were able to build upon these strengths through the study abroad experience.

**Aspirational capital.** Aspirational capital includes resiliency, and “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The participants (and their families) exhibited varying levels of aspirational capital when preparing to study abroad. As described in Chapter Four, this group of students enjoyed support, encouragement, and feelings of pride from their families, regardless of parental level of education or familial experience with study abroad. This was consistent with Jackson’s (2006) findings, where she determined that family encouragement, particularly from mothers, was instrumental in African American students’ decisions to pursue study abroad.

Study abroad was described as a dream come true for a number of the participants. While participation in study abroad may have been fairly commonplace within the culture of RMU, it is less typical in the broader U.S. context, where fewer than 10% of all U.S. undergraduates study abroad during their college careers (Institute of International Education, 2014). The participants did not take this opportunity lightly; they expressed pride in their accomplishments, and felt they had made the most of their experiences. As a result of the study abroad experience, the participants were able to see new possibilities within themselves and for their futures. Danyale relished her role as a pioneer, both in attending college and participating in study abroad. She described the role study abroad played in relation to her future goals:

I see it as a advantage, like a real advantage, ‘cause I know, at least in the community I’m from, African American study abroad, going to college and other places, is not a common thing. So to me, [study abroad] was just another step in

putting myself on the right path to get to somewhere where I want to be successful. (Danyale)

Danyale, Murungi, Sara, and Jade described discovering new potential career and/or academic interests as a result of the study abroad experience, and Agatha renewed her interest in refugee and immigrant issues. Marcus did not experience a shift in his career ambitions, but began to reflect more on his plans and his family's expectations for his future. Marcus had always believed that happiness mattered far more than money, and was interested in an artistic career; his parents had encouraged him to study business. After living abroad in an economic climate with few employment opportunities for the young, he better understood his parents' hopes and dreams for his future, even though the path they recommended did not coincide with his plans. He described a touching conversation with his host mother where she advised him how to navigate his and his parents' aspirations, based on her experiences as a parent:

So what they might want to advise you is something that they think will, at least will like make you be safe... When you have something that you're interested in and they don't understand it, then it's very hard for them to take it seriously, and it can be like, kind of cutting... At a certain point, you know, you just have to tell your parents, like, listen. This is what I want to do, and she was talking about her life, and like how she'd done things that she didn't want to do, and how you might have regrets later... it was really good. (Marcus)

While all of the participants developed self-reliance and faith in their capabilities, Sara and Agatha in particular gained confidence that they could overcome any obstacles

in order to accomplish their dreams. Sara experienced the most difficult path to study abroad, facing challenging emotional and financial circumstances after her first year of school when she became estranged from her mother and declared herself an independent student. Agatha faced a hostile racial climate in her host city, and relied on her inner strength and resources to thrive in that environment.

**Linguistic capital.** Linguistic capital encompasses skills developed through the use of cross-cultural and bilingual or multi-lingual communication (Yosso, 2005). Yosso and Garcia (2007) expanded this form of capital to include the ability to communicate through creative outlets such as music, poetry, and art.

All of the participants could be said to have possessed linguistic capital prior to study abroad, developed through experiences navigating communication styles and/or languages in multiple racial/ethnic/cultural communities. Each built upon this linguistic capital while abroad through daily communications with individuals from a variety of countries and cultures, including fellow students, faculty and staff, community members, and for some, host families. Four of the six operated in languages other than English while abroad. Murungi was already experienced in speaking one of the languages used in her host country, but needed to learn an additional language for her internship and her stay with a second host family. She described becoming more proficient in non-verbal communication during this period.

Both Jade and Danyale maintained that they became more outgoing as a result of study abroad, and were better able to engage with others. Danyale described herself as an observer, but knew she had a limited amount of time in her host country, and wanted to

make the most of the opportunity: “You don’t know anyone. You have to talk to someone, and you can’t just wait for people to approach you.” Jade called herself a wallflower prior to her time in Europe. She was forced to speak up and use her host country’s language to accomplish daily tasks, and discovered she enjoyed having conversations with strangers while in her host city and traveling. She realized that if she could connect with people in another language, then she could do so at home in English. She viewed her willingness to participate in this study as evidence of her changed self: “I’m really proud of being able to sit and have this interview with you, and not be like, short and shy, and nervous, and actually just stepping out and doing the interview” (Jade).

Several of the participants broadened linguistic capital through forms of artistic expression. One of Danyale’s most meaningful aspects of her time abroad was a songwriting class, through which she was able to connect with others through writing and music:

I loved it. It was one of the best things I have ever done. And if the whole experience would’ve been bad besides that, I would’ve been happy. Because I, really, it was the only time that I’ve ever been with 20-30 other people who write music at once, and then the fact that it was a mixture of study abroad students and students from [my host country] just made it all the better. (Danyale)

Jade considered being artistic an important aspect of her identity, and used journaling as a means of expression and a coping mechanism while abroad. As we progressed through the interviews, she reread her journal, and viewed her entries as

documentation of her strength and growth. Murungi was a talented storyteller and photographer, though she did not refer to herself as such. Her skills emerged during the interviews as well as through the blog she kept while abroad, which captured the essences of her experiences through her photos and depictions of daily life with her host families and in her host communities.

**Familial capital.** Familial capital “engages a commitment to community well-being” and teaches the value of maintaining connections to extended family and communities (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Familial capital includes knowledge learned from the family and community, including “lessons of caring, coping, and providing” and the realization that individuals can connect around common issues and problems (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 165).

For most of the participants, the period abroad resulted in closer relationships with family. Distance and time to reflect allowed Sara to let some things go and make amends with her mother:

Being away from my mom for so long, like, I was kind of, I don't know, able to like let things go...Even if we don't live together and [she is] not, like, financially supporting me at all...I only have like one mom. And, like, not being around her for a year kind of, I don't know, it affects you. So, wanting to mend that relationship was a big one. And I don't know, I guess with my sisters, it got stronger. (Sara)

Jade recognized that she had, in the past, prioritized friends over family. As she became more confident in herself and her appearance, she went through a process of

identifying her true friends, and discovered how important her family was to her. Though Agatha was close to her family prior to study abroad, her time away improved relationships:

I sort of learned a lot in terms of my relationships with my mom and my sister. I could be independent, and they sort of respected me for that. A lot of financial burden was on me before I left. I mean, it's still there, but I've learned to pick my battles, and I've learned to draw the lines...I'm being so serious, it saved my family relationships. (Agatha)

Murungi and Marcus developed a greater appreciation for their families after observing the cultural importance of family in their host communities. Murungi became very close to both of her host families while abroad:

It helped me value my family even more. Because before I had left, I was just used to my family's theme of being kind of split and separate, mostly because my parents were divorced, and I just wouldn't make that strong of an effort to spend time with my family. But once I was in [my host country] I saw the strong, strong underlying cultural value of family and to see the way my host siblings did everything for their parents, and loved spending time with them, it made me realize too that my family is wonderful. So I came back with the intention of showing them how much they meant to me, because I know I hadn't done the best job of that beforehand. And I would say, since I've been back I really made an effort to connect more with my family and my siblings, and my extended family, because they do mean a lot to me and I want them to know that. (Murungi)

Marcus enjoyed seeing how connected families were in his host country. One of Marcus' most meaningful experiences abroad was a visit to a distant family member in Northern Europe, when he learned more about his parents and their contributions to and connections with extended family members around the world. As a child, Marcus felt he was missing out on something by not having the "normal" family he saw on television. When visiting his relative, he gained new respect for his family and his cultural heritage:

My cousin, who just had a kid, is looking to our family to figure out how to raise his kids. And how, like, I can have a conversation with him about it, and it just put me on the other side of like, the situation where I'm not the little kid anymore. I don't know, it just opened the curtain and let me know that it's not a perfect science, figuring out, like, how to raise kids, and how to have a family, and there's no perfect way to do it. The tv isn't real, you know. And I wasn't missing out on much, and wanting to learn more about the culture that I do have – my [East African] culture. Appreciating the United States, and, uh, yeah. It made me very appreciative about family. (Marcus)

Yosso (2005) defined family broadly, and familial capital encompassed connecting with the community around common issues. While each of the participants became closer to their own families as a result of the study abroad experience, several also developed self-efficacy and realized ways in which they could contribute to their communities. Murungi learned she had a passion for working with people in community-based settings, and she developed a strong interest in food justice and food security. She was able to connect these through a community engagement opportunity at RMU, and

shared that she would like to return to her host country one day to work in partnership with local organizations on these issues. Jade developed confidence in her identity as a biracial woman, and began volunteering with leadership programs for young women of color. Agatha became more interested in refugee and immigrant issues, and volunteered with immigrant/refugees who were learning English upon her return to the United States. These community connections allowed the participants to further develop their networks and social capital.

**Social capital.** Social capital encompasses networks of peers and community resources (Yosso, 2005). These networks provide emotional support and information that can be helpful when navigating institutions (Yosso & Garcia, 2007). A number of the participants consulted their existing social networks when choosing a program or when support was needed while abroad. In addition, the participants developed new networks abroad, and some re-evaluated their social networks at home upon return.

When the participants described their study abroad experiences, the social aspects and relationships with others emerged as meaningful parts of the experience. During the interviews, all spoke fondly of the friendships made abroad. Marcus and Murungi both developed a close relationship with their host mother/families; Murungi remarked that she truly considered her hosts to be family. After her history of difficulties with friends and family at home, Sara was deeply moved by the honesty of her friendships abroad. Agatha developed strong friendships that she still maintained at the time of the interviews. These social networks provided Agatha with support and validation when she encountered racism abroad.

As described in the previous chapter, most participants felt that race did not matter in their social interactions abroad, except when in groups of White U.S. students. This was liberating given their lived experiences at a PWI, and most participants were able to live for a period free from the psychological burden of microaggressions and stereotypes. As described in the previous chapter, a number of the participants felt they could be themselves, and were no longer defined by their race or the racialized expectations of others. They were able to connect with others based on common interests and goals, which resulted in increased confidence and self-worth.

Upon return, some of the participants re-evaluated their social networks at home. In addition to identifying her true friends, Jade altered how she approached romantic relationships. She shared that she was currently in a positive, affirming relationship, but prior to study abroad, she often neglected her needs just to be with someone. Both Agatha and Sara noted that they were more careful and deliberate about their friendships when they returned to RMU. Agatha found some of her friendships had shifted, as she and others were now in different places in their lives. She began to focus on seeking out people who shared her dreams. Sara, who appreciated the honesty of her friendships abroad, said, “You have to be sure that you’re letting the right people in to your life.”

Murungi’s closest friends remained constant, but after she returned from Western Africa, she found herself moving away from her larger group of friends/acquaintances and seeking out new relationships. Prior to her study abroad experience she had gravitated towards the multicultural affinity groups, but felt herself socially disconnected

from the larger RMU community. After her study abroad experience, she felt that she had finally found her place:

I was able to branch out and see, oh, there are more people at RMU who I really enjoy spending time with, who have similar interests and viewpoints to me. It was refreshing and made me have more respect for the school and the campus climate.

(Murungi)

**Navigational capital.** Navigational capital refers to the ability to negotiate environments and institutions that were not set up with persons of color in mind (Yosso, 2005). The development of navigational capital includes utilizing individual agency to succeed as well as acquiring skills that improve future functioning in similar environments (Yosso, 2005). As students of color at a PWI, each of these students already possessed certain levels of navigational capital, though there were variations in how they perceived the campus climate at RMU.

Jackson (2006) suggested that students of color might be well equipped to study abroad due to their expertise in negotiating multiple cultural spaces in the United States. Although several of the participants found the adjustment to their host country surprisingly seamless, most took pride in the fact that they successfully navigated a new country, culture, and lifestyle. All but Danyale had grown up within an hour or two from RMU, so were living far from family and friends for the first (extended) period of time when abroad. They were excited to prove their independence and self-reliance to themselves and others. This was particularly meaningful to Agatha, who shared that her biggest challenge associated with study abroad was preparing to go. She struggled with

her family and others' concerns that she was not independent enough to succeed, as she still lived at home. She knew she could do it, but this accomplishment was personally significant, especially given the difficulties she faced in her host country.

The capital the participants developed abroad prepared them to more successfully navigate their environments once they returned home. Danyale saw her time in Europe as a "test run for the future," and afterward felt more comfortable doing things on her own. When Danyale moved into her first solo apartment at RMU, she thought back to her accomplishments in study abroad: "Oh, you did this in a different country. Now you just have to do it on campus. It's nothing now." Negotiating new and different educational environments abroad empowered some of the participants academically. Jade developed a new outlook on learning as a result of her inclusive classroom experiences abroad, which changed the way she engaged with her coursework at RMU:

So it just felt like we were learning, just the bulk and the juicy stuff of everything they taught us. Um, which was really, really fun, and it didn't feel...it wasn't like lecture. Like, we'd have lecture with PowerPoint, but it was interactive, and involved, and you know, but it made you want to go home and do the reading for that night. It made you want to go home and write your paper essay on it for that night. Um, and even reading 18<sup>th</sup> century literature was fun, you know, she gave us questions that related it to our lives now and how we could relate it. It just made it interesting, and really really fun. And I still, I still feel like that's the quarter where I learned the most amount of information. But when I came back to the States, I had a new outlook on how to take classes, how to pay attention in

classes... Even when the professor may not make it fun, you can find something in it that would interest you. Um, and if you can find that one thing that interests you, even if it's the smallest thing, you can learn about it and keep growing in that way. (Jade)

Upon her return home, Jade took charge of her education, and refused to let racialized encounters in the classroom disrupt her learning. She described a class in which a RMU professor engaged in microaggressions and demonstrated a blatant disregard for communities of color in the classroom. Having discovered her voice while abroad, Jade spoke out about the inappropriateness of her professor's behavior on her course evaluation.

While Agatha's classroom experiences in her host country were mixed, she felt she was more academically motivated than some of her peers, and local friends were impressed by her grades. Her ability to succeed abroad despite numerous pressures pushed her to concentrate more on her education when she returned to RMU:

Coming back, I made the Dean's list every quarter, and that was huge because I'd never made the Dean's list, I was always, you know, point something shy. And I don't think I was as serious about my studies before I left. Going there, I don't know. It wasn't necessarily harder, but there were different expectations, and in some ways it was harder. So I came back and I said, you know, RMU is kind of a breeze. Sometimes – not all of the classes, I'm not gonna lie. But I should be trying harder. There's no reason why. And I came back and I – I used to work

three jobs in college. I cut back on my jobs, you know, and I focused more on school, and everything turned around. (Agatha)

**Resistant Capital.** Resistant capital includes the skills and knowledge developed through “oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 166). Individuals can be oppositional with “bodies, minds, and spirits” (Yosso, 1995, p. 81).

In addition to using several forms of capital described in this chapter to create a supportive network and safe spaces for herself when faced with racism in her host country, Agatha utilized resistant capital in order to reclaim her study abroad experience. She refused to allow the negative aspects of life in her host country to define what had been her dream, stating:

I would do it again...it made me much more focused. I came back, I know what I'm here to do, and I'm gonna do it. I really am thankful for it, I know it sounds crazy. People are like, oh my gosh, why did you stay? But it made me such a stronger person, and for that, I'm thankful for it. I would do the same thing over. I wouldn't change the location, I wouldn't change the people I met there, the experiences I had, I'm still friends with them today. (Agatha)

Yosso (2005) described mothers teaching daughters to “assert themselves as intelligent, beautiful, strong, and worthy of respect to resist the barrage of societal messages devaluing Blackness and belittling Black women” as another form of resistant capital (p. 81). Prior studies examining the experiences of African Americans abroad found that the experience of living in a new, less hostile environment allowed individuals

to re-examine and develop stronger racial identities (Anya, 2011; Day-Vines et al., 1998; Jackson, 2006; Landau & Moore, 2001). Jade and Murungi developed more positive racial identities as a result of the study abroad experience, and both described becoming “more comfortable in my own skin.” Murungi felt discomfort and sadness when confronted with ideals of beauty in her host country based on Whiteness, including light skin and long (fake) hair. This caused her to reflect on her own appearance, and to resist these ideals:

It made me conscious of how I stood out because of my hair, but it also made me more proud of that, because I mean, it is my hair, and I can say this is what my hair does. I really don't have to do anything to it, and here's how it is. And I don't mind sitting outside in the sun all day, and I don't care what that does to my skin tone, so upon coming back, that has definitely stuck with me... So when I came back I had a lot of people say, oh wow! Your hair is longer, or it's bigger, what are you going to do with it? And I'd just tell them, just gonna let it grow, let it do what it does. And it really is liberating for me, it's been liberating to be comfortable in my own skin, which is something I guess I didn't have so much of before I left, but coming back, I can say this is who I am. (Murungi)

Prior to study abroad, Jade was focused on the expectations and approval of others, particularly regarding her appearance. While in Europe, she felt free to experiment and dress differently than she did at home:

None of that mattered, and I probably, and now thinking about it, it probably did have a lot to do with my race, and what I identified with, and when I came home I

was comfortable just being biracial. I do veer closer to my African American side, but it's not who I am. I am biracial. I am multiracial...and I think [study abroad] definitely helped with that...because I couldn't, I couldn't do certain things. I couldn't straighten my hair every week, because my blow dryer would blow out if I did. So I had to adjust to being ok with my hair being wild and curly, and me absolutely loving it. And when I came home, I'm like, oh, I'm going to straighten my hair, and I hated it. 'Cause, like, eww, straight hair's so boring! So [study abroad] forced me to be comfortable with myself as a woman, as a human being, as a biracial female. You know, I just never had to go that extra mile. And I think it, it...it helps me with being so outgoing now, you know, because I'm comfortable in my own skin, and I'm perfectly fine with who I am, so I don't have to hide anything. (Jade)

Both Murungi and Jade cited the decision to let their hair go natural as evidence of comfort with and acceptance of self. This is even more meaningful when African America hair is situated in a broader politicized and racialized context, where women are constantly barraged by ideals of beauty based on Whiteness. hooks considered Black hair in an essay first published in 1988:

Despite many changes in racial politics, black women continue to obsess about their hair and straightening hair continues to be serious business. It continues to tap into the insecurity black women feel about our value in this white supremacist society... We talk about the extent to which black women perceive our hair as the enemy, as a problem we must solve, a territory we must conquer... Responses to natural hairstyles worn by black women usually reveal the extent to which our natural hair is perceived in white supremacist culture as not only ugly but frightening. We also internalize that fear. The extent to which we are comfortable with our hair usually reflects on our overall feelings about our bodies. (hooks, 2008, n.p.)

Danyale grew up in a community where most people looked like her and shared a common background. Her experience abroad was different than those of many of the other participants in that it was not the first time in her life she had experienced freedom from being reminded of her race. She felt right at home in her host community, and loved the ability to engage with people from a wide variety of countries, cultures, and backgrounds. This shifted the ways in which she considered her race at RMU, and she no longer felt she had to try and suppress her African American self:

I think I pay more attention to my race at RMU now than I did before. As of before, I felt like it was more of a like, you need to blend in process, so you need to like, uh, compartmentalize and put that somewhere you can deal with it later. I mean now, it's come up more, like I've found I think about it more, I think about how it affects the things I do and how I relate to people more, and I think that has to do with some of the classes I took, too [at RMU], that was [*sic*] like focused on that type of thinking, but I think [living abroad] had a big part to do with that too.

(Danyale)

A number of the participants spoke of learning to have confidence in their own opinions, abilities, and decisions as a result of their sojourns abroad. Murungi discussed developing self-confidence and becoming more comfortable in her own skin. Jade learned to “stand her ground” and express her own opinions. She also began to trust herself to make decisions. Agatha became more focused, assertive, and “grew a spine,” particularly in interactions with her family; she decided that she would no longer sacrifice her own needs in order to take care of everyone else. For Sara, one of the most important

lessons of her time abroad was learned from her closest host country friend and her host mother: “Take your choices, be decisive, and know what you want...Know what you want, and even if you don’t, make your choices wisely as you go along.” Sara believed her time in Europe made her stronger and more secure in her decisions.

As described in this chapter, participants acquired various forms of capital through the study abroad experience, including aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, and familial capital. The development of each of these overlapping forms of capital culminated in resistant capital, as the participants felt empowered to define themselves rather than allowing the expectations and stereotypes of others to dictate their self-perceptions.

### **Summary of Findings**

As these six participants shared their narratives and photos of study abroad, descriptions of ordinary life emerged as meaningful. In the quote that opens this chapter, Danyale described study abroad as a once in a lifetime opportunity because she “became part of the neighborhood, part of the environment.” Others, like Agatha and Marcus, talked about making a life and a home in their host cities. For Murungi, one of her greatest accomplishments was living everyday life as did her host families. Sara was proud of herself for taking the initiative to develop friendships with locals, and felt as if she fit in far better than did her fellow study abroad students.

It is not my intent to suggest that these students were viewed as locals or truly belonged in any sense to their host communities. With the exception of Sara, they only spent a few months abroad, and achieved varying levels of cultural, linguistic, and

community immersion. Rather, the participants' feelings of fitting in to the environment are significant in light of the discomfort sometimes felt on their home campus. While many expected to feel out of place while abroad, they were surprised at the relative ease with which they adjusted to live in a new country. Most of the participants felt that race did not matter in their social interactions abroad, with the exception being when they were in groups made up entirely of White U.S. students. Tatum (2003) referred to racism as "like smog in the air" (p. 6). For many of these participants, the ability to breathe freely was empowering. It was liberating to live for a period free from the psychological burdens of microaggressions and stereotype threat; ordinariness seemed the antidote to the onliness or otherness they experienced at their home university. As Murungi noted when explaining the racialized attention she received in the United States, "Sometimes you just want to go through your daily life without it being a spectacle." While personal growth and academic/career impacts are often cited as outcomes of study abroad participation (Hoff, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Paige et al., 2009; Picard et al., 2009; Sutton & Rubin, 2010), these effects may be even more striking and meaningful for African American students, who often face inequitable educational experiences and hostile campus climates in the United States.

To reiterate the findings discussed in previous chapters, the institutional message that study abroad was a typical part of the undergraduate experience resonated with the participants, both those who had prior international experiences and those who did not. Four of the six participants were attracted to RMU due to its study abroad opportunities, and five articulated plans to study abroad early in their college careers. Common

motivations and goals included opportunities for cultural immersion, independence, travel, and language learning. Families played a supportive and encouraging role, regardless of family background with higher education or study abroad.

Participants shared that they were unsure what to expect from their study abroad experience, so went into it with an open mind. Most were surprised at how comfortable they felt while in their host country. While abroad, five of the six participants expressed a sense of freedom from having to think about race. This occurred across differences in racial/ethnic demographics of the participants' host cities and study abroad program type. This sense of comfort and freedom from race and racial stereotypes was situated in contrast to their experiences in the United States and at RMU, where they experienced varying levels of onliness, microaggressions, marginalization in the classroom, stereotype threat, and expectations to act as a racial representative. Several of the participants did report racialized attention in their host countries, but it seemed to feel different in another setting. This freedom from race did not always persist once the participants were within a group of White U.S. students, where U.S. climate issues often reemerged. While Agatha also faced microaggressions from fellow U.S. students, Agatha's experiences diverged from many of the other participants in that she encountered frequent marginalization and even a physical altercation in her host community. Agatha found that she thought about her race far more while abroad than when at RMU, and characterized her host country as hostile towards immigrants. She refused, however, to allow these negative experiences to define her or her dream of study abroad.

All of the participants reported that the study abroad experience was empowering and transformative. Common themes regarding outcomes included personal growth, new perspectives on self and racial identities, an examination of future possibilities, the development of social networks, and an increased appreciation for family and community. Participants developed aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistant capital through study abroad. These forms of capital enabled many of the participants to more successfully negotiate and engage with their social and learning environments upon return to RMU, as well as envision new possibilities for their futures.

The final chapter will provide implications for international education and areas for future research.

## **Chapter Seven: Implications and Conclusion**

These individuals studied in six different countries in a variety of academic settings, yet common themes emerged in their narratives of study abroad. While the experiences of students at a private PWI with a culture of study abroad participation may not be the same as those of students from other types of institutions, these six participants provide counternarratives to the deficit-based ways in which African Americans and their study abroad participation are often portrayed. Their stories highlight the importance of examining the roles of race and racism in study abroad experiences and outcomes. This chapter will provide implications, areas for future research, and conclusions.

### **Implications**

Although this study focused on examining the experiences of a small number of students who were successful in study abroad, the findings substantiate prior studies that call into question the blanket appropriateness of the “Four Fs” argument (Carter, 1991; Jackson, 2006; Norfles, 2003; Raby, 2006). While the “Four Fs” (faculty and staff, families and communities, finances, and fears) may be barriers for some students (not just African Americans), international educators have been quick to focus on these perceived obstacles without examining whether these are, in fact, barriers or challenges on our own campuses. We focus on access instead of success, and portray students in a negative light. We blame the student for not choosing to participate in study abroad, rather than considering how we might better encourage or support their interests. We operate out of

colorblindness, using Whiteness as the norm. Following, I discuss the implications of these findings for practice and research related to study abroad.

**Reframing African American students.** Prevailing notions about African Americans within the international education community include assertions that they are plagued with burdens such as unsupportive families, lack of knowledge about the benefits of study abroad, difficulties financing the experience, and an overall lack of interest in international study. As described in Chapter Four, none of these assumptions proved to be true within this group of individuals.

Rather than focus on perceived student deficits, international educators should examine the assets that students bring to the study abroad experience. Yosso (2005) challenged us to think of the potential of students and communities of color in a CRT examination of education. As described in the previous chapter, these participants and their families came to the study abroad experience already in possession of various forms of capital, and the participants believed that their prior life experiences prepared them study abroad.

Instead of viewing families as obstacles to be overcome, international educators should clearly articulate the benefits of study abroad, and make this information available to all students and families (not only those who are African American). Danyale's mother was initially somewhat hesitant about the idea of study abroad, so I asked Danyale if there was anything RMU could have done to better support her in her study abroad process. Danyale recommended that institutions encourage students to talk to their parents. This was her strategy, as it was her experience and future:

‘Cause I feel like that was the best thing to help me get through it, like Mom, this is why I want to go. This is where I’m going. This is the school. This is why I’m picking the school. This is why I want to do it. And that, basically, dialogue of me expressing exactly why I was doing it, and why I was so passionate about doing it, I think that was the thing that ultimately got over that initial apprehension, which was scared [*sic*], for my family. (Danyale)

Advisors can assist students when needed in identifying how their academic and professional goals will be furthered through study abroad, and encourage them to share this with their families.

**Institutional commitment to study abroad.** In his study focused on African American male engagement in higher education, Harper (2009b) challenged educators to stop putting the responsibility on students for their own involvement:

Effective educators avoid asking, what’s wrong with these students, why aren’t they engaged? Instead, they aggressively explore the institution’s shortcomings and ponder how faculty members and administrators could alter their practices to distribute the benefits of engagement more equitably. (p. 41)

Equity in study abroad cannot be achieved without first gaining an institutional commitment to study abroad. RMU portrayed study abroad as a viable part of the undergraduate experience, and all prospective and admitted students received early and consistent messages regarding the value of participation, curricular fit, and applicability of financial aid. Additional funds were available to qualified applicants to pay for transportation to and from the host country and visa application fees, which assisted with some of the extra costs associated with a study abroad experience. Study abroad was depicted as possible, and was even required for certain majors. An examination of

institutional motivations and goals was not the purpose of this study, so I am unable to determine if equity was the intent behind RMU's integration and support of study abroad at the undergraduate level. Participation in study abroad was not universal; for example, athletes were limited in the programs that worked with their schedules, and students in highly structured majors faced difficulties finding appropriate classes to fit home course requirements and sequencing. RMU's institutional commitment to study abroad did appear to encourage and maintain interest in study abroad for these six participants.

Levels of institution-wide support for international education, funding, and staffing for study abroad vary considerably, and for many colleges and universities, study abroad may not be at the top of a list of competing priorities. Every study abroad office can, however, work to create alliances within the institution so that prospective and admitted students are made aware of opportunities through various means, rather than relying on outreach efforts from the study abroad office. This requires articulating the benefits of study abroad participation and identifying ways in which participation in study abroad may help achieve the goals of other campus entities. Admissions staff members, for example, are often excited to highlight study abroad opportunities to prospective students and their parents. Academic advisors and centers for multicultural support and excellence want students to succeed and achieve their potential, so may be interested to learn that study abroad can enhance development, engagement, and academic performance. Faculty members and academic departments may be interested in developing programs to supplement on campus offerings and engage faculty expertise. In addition, they may support study abroad because students develop new perspectives on

fields of study, become more confident, bring new ideas to the classroom, or become more interested in learning languages. Developing these relationships requires time, trust, and the willingness to communicate and listen to questions and concerns. It also requires genuine collaboration and involvement with other offices, not just an appearance now and then for an information session. Other departments on campus who believe that study abroad is valuable may also be able to assist in reaching those students who do not consider study abroad to learn why.

For the participants of this study, the resources and staff of the study abroad office were utilized in various ways when deciding on/applying to a program, but with the exception of one participant, the office seemed to play a background role. While this initially surprised me, I realized that the optimum situation is just that – the study abroad office should not be the sole place students learn about study abroad opportunities, but instead, multiple individuals and offices in the university setting should encourage and support students' interests in study abroad from the moment they arrive on campus, if not before. These relationships can also assist in reaching those students who may not be as immediately drawn to study abroad as were this study's participants. Harper (2009b) challenged study abroad staff members to stop "presuming racial minority students will be self-inspired to inquire about overseas learning opportunities" (p. 43) and to instead reach out to faculty, staff, and student leaders to publicize programs and benefits.

**Program design and assessment.** Calls for the development of learning outcomes, intentionality in program design, and improvements in assessment have increased among leaders and scholars in international education over the past decade

(Bolen, 2007; Redden, 2013; Savicki, 2008; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012b). This mirrors a push for learning outcomes and assessment in higher education, but also reflects growing concerns regarding the commercialization of study abroad (Bolen, 2001; Engle, 2012). These developments are welcome and necessary, but the field of international education continues to operate from a colorblind perspective, assuming the experiences and outcomes of those overrepresented in study abroad (White women) are those of all students.

As questions arise regarding whether study abroad programs are reaching their potential for fostering learning, international educators are increasingly engaging in conversations about interventions to facilitate desired outcomes. In an essay examining how to better design study abroad so that it is a transformative learning experience, Selby (2008) noted that study abroad participants “are, perhaps for the only time in their lives, the existential outsider” (p. 6). This may not be the case for African American study abroad participants, particularly those who are already accustomed to being othered and have experience navigating the frequently hostile environment of a PWI. As outlined in Chapter Five, a number of this study’s participants were surprised at how comfortable they felt abroad, despite living in a new country and culture, and for many, operating in a language in which they were not fluent. Rather than feeling like outsiders, many of these participants felt that they could “just be a person” and be themselves for the first time. Most of the participants expressed that they were able to choose when and how to think about race while abroad, an option not afforded to them at RMU.

In another call for more deliberate program design, Vande Berg et al. (2012a)

asserted:

In examining the interdisciplinary and research evidence, most students abroad are at this point not learning to negotiate cultural differences, whether inside or outside the classroom, unless educators intervene in their learning in ways that help them develop the types of knowledge and skills that will allow them to shift perspective and adapt behavior to new and often challenging cultural contexts. (p. xiv)

Again, this may not be true for African American students, many of whom already have a great deal of experience negotiating cultural differences.

The articulation of learning outcomes, more deliberate program design with interventions, and assessment are critical developments within international education, and will result in more powerful learning opportunities for students. However, we need to recognize that not all students experience study abroad in the same way, and learning interventions and outcomes are not one size fits all. We must recognize that many students come to the study abroad experience already in possession of the cross-cultural knowledge and skills needed to adapt and succeed. African American students and other students of color who have these skills may not need interventions to help them adapt to new cultural contexts; instead, they may need interventions that facilitate dialogue around race and racism with their White U.S. peers, create an inclusive classroom where their counternarratives and perspectives are engaged and affirmed, and offer support and validation if they do struggle with racism while abroad.

In operating with Whiteness as the norm, we design learning outcomes, assessments, and surveys to measure what we believe to be true for all students. Paige and Vande Berg (2012) called for more rigorous and well-designed research regarding

international learning and development abroad. The authors described student self-reports of learning as important stories of what the student feels the program has meant, but stated they are “ultimately unique to the student and lack generalizability because there is no external criterion with which to evaluate them.” Paige and Vande Berg (2012) contrasted these stories and self-reports with empirical research, which “allows us to say, with increasing confidence, this is what works if you wish to support intercultural learning among your students” (p. 32). This argument that end of program student evaluations (which often focus on student satisfaction) are not sufficient for assessing learning is valid; however, a qualitative component bringing forth African American student narratives can and should be included in rigorous research and assessment efforts. These counternarratives allow for student experiences we do not anticipate or expect to emerge, and can empower African American students. Harper and Kuh (2007) offered a rationale for including qualitative methods in assessment:

Some reject qualitative methods for institutional assessment because there are usually limited numbers of participants from whom information can be collected. The presumption is that if data come from only small, nonrandomized segments of a population, the results cannot represent the experiences of others. For example, if eight black undergraduates report alienating views of the campus racial climate in a focus group, chances are they are not the only black students at the institution who feel that way...But even if these eight students represent an outlook that is not shared among the majority of their same race peers, their perspectives should not be dismissed. Those who work at institutions that are truly committed to enacting espoused commitments to multiculturalism and inclusivity will use these data to improve the experiences of students who feel this way, no matter how many or how few there are. (p. 8)

Learning more about how all students experience study abroad is valuable for researchers and practitioners alike, and can inform and improve practices in international education. In addition, outcome assessments and other research studies in international education

must disaggregate results by race and ethnicity so that they can be examined to determine whether outcomes and results differ, and if so, how and why. Only through a deliberate attention to race and ethnicity in research and assessment can we counter the tendency to operate out of colorblindness in assuming the experiences of White students are the experiences of all students.

**Student preparation and re-entry.** As evidenced by this study, African American students may encounter a variety of racialized situations abroad. Students might face racism, or may instead feel liberated from the racial pressures and stereotypes of U.S. society – except when with White U.S. students. Students may experience race as a source of privilege for the first time, in contrast to their lives in the United States. Students will perceive these experiences through the lenses of their racial and other identities and prior educational and life experiences. For example, Jade felt free from race while abroad, despite attempts from local men to touch her skin and hair, as well as questions from other international students that showcased their stereotypes about African Americans. An African American student from an HBCU, who is unlikely to experience oneliness on her home campus, may have interpreted these experiences in an entirely different way. How do international educators prepare students for these (and other) unknown circumstances? How do we help returnees process their experiences upon return?

We need to learn more about the experiences of African American students abroad, both through formal research/assessment endeavors and informally on our own campuses. Whether we are based at a U.S. institution, a host institution, or a program

provider, we must talk to students while they are abroad and/or when they return, both individually and in groups. Students are likely to be more forthcoming if a personal relationship has been developed (or can be developed), especially if the international educator and the student do not share a racial identity. Offices that focus on multicultural student services and student affinity groups can also be contacted to assist in coordinating feedback on study abroad. This serves multiple purposes: returnees are provided with an opportunity to reflect, and international educators and prospective students gain knowledge about what situations African Americans might face abroad, as well as their strategies for success in a new country and culture.

Study abroad returnees can be asked if they are willing to be contacts for other African American students who plan to study abroad. They can also be invited to take part in panel discussions for prospective students and orientations for students preparing to go abroad. These can be particularly valuable, as including multiple students will highlight a range of experiences. Sessions may be coordinated by the home institution's study abroad office, or by program providers, who may already host virtual pre-departure orientations for students based at multiple U.S. institutions. If returnees disclose that they did face difficult racialized experiences, they can be asked to share their strategies for coping with the situation. This also offers returnees an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with others. What and if returnees are willing to share and in what type of setting will be an individual decision; some, like Agatha, may be reluctant to speak of difficult experiences in public for fear of discouraging other students. Agatha mentioned that she had attended an information session as an audience member, however, and was

comforted when another student of color shared that her experience had also been challenging. Students should be encouraged to be honest about their lived experiences abroad if they are comfortable doing so. International educators can emphasize to returnees that sharing these difficult experiences provides learning opportunities for staff and faculty, and will help better prepare others for the study abroad experience.

Returnees can also be asked if they would be willing to write about their experiences, share existing blogs, or be interviewed. These resources can be made accessible to prospective students, parents, and faculty and staff. Many international education offices utilize peer advisors; prospective students may be more comfortable speaking to peers (and staff) of color about race and racism. If the institution/organization does not have resources or referrals for particular regions of the world, colleagues at host universities or study abroad providers who sponsor the programs can be asked if they have an alumni network. Social media is another way for students to connect with returnees or students preparing to go abroad.

Post study abroad surveys can include questions about how racial and ethnic identities (as well as other identities) affected their study abroad experience, both in a positive and negative way. This (usually) anonymous way of sharing experiences may appeal to some students but not others. Jade commented that she didn't complete her study abroad survey because she felt it was too broad and did not relate to her experience; she found the opportunity to speak to someone in person far more enjoyable. She recommended that every study abroad returnee go through a post experience interview process; this may or may not be feasible depending on the number of students and staff

members, but would give voice to students regarding their lived experiences abroad and recommendations for future participants.

**Supporting students abroad.** Agatha was the victim of persistent racism while abroad; she initially felt powerless to do or say anything, not knowing what the consequences would be in a new country. After the incident where she was hit by sticks on her way to school, she reluctantly spoke to someone at her host university after her mother reported the incident to RMU. Agatha felt validated by her RMU advisor; the advisor connected Agatha with a staff member of color at her host university, hoping that she would be empathetic, but the staff member dismissed her story. This made Agatha feel even more isolated. By chance she encountered a club for students interested in African culture and countries at a student organization fair; the ability to connect with other students of African descent who believed her and shared their own racialized experiences made her feel less alone. Ultimately, Agatha capitalized on her strengths, created a home for herself, and developed her own support networks. While her experience in her host country was a departure from that of the other participants, Agatha's narrative is perhaps more typical of what comes to mind when international educators think of race and racism in study abroad. We often worry about the discrimination and dangers students might face abroad, without acknowledging or considering the racialized climates that they navigate at home.

In examining Agatha's situation, the best way to support students who share concerns about racism is by listening. Home and/or on-site staff need to affirm and validate what has happened, and resist the urge to make the student feel better by

explaining how they must have misunderstood or misinterpreted the intent of the action. This will only result in silencing the student. A multitude of study abroad program types exist; as Agatha was enrolled directly in a large foreign university, she had very little contact with the international office. It is extremely unlikely that she would ever have gone to the university with her concerns about racism on her own accord. Students on faculty-led programs or provider programs with an on-site staff may be more likely to share these types of incidents, if they have a personal relationship with staff and faculty members. On-site program directors and staff members should become knowledgeable about the racial climate in the host city and country, and can specifically ask African Americans about their racialized experiences, both positive and negative.

Universities and programs that attract large numbers of U.S. study abroad students should also be aware that U.S. racial climate issues may re-emerge abroad amongst students, particularly in classroom or social settings made up primarily of White U.S. students. While being one of the only students of color in a classroom may be a common occurrence for a student from a PWI, this could be an unexpected situation for a student from a HBCU or other racially diverse institution, who may experience onlyness for the first time while abroad. Study abroad offers the potential to create dialogue among students surrounding race and racism; Jade and Murungi individually provided counternarratives to their peers. Agatha did so in a classroom setting, but despite what she felt were the good intentions of her professor, this did not result in a positive discussion. Ideally, faculty and staff working with groups of U.S. students abroad would be knowledgeable about race and racism in the United States and comfortable facilitating

dialogue around these issues; however, as this does not always occur on U.S. campuses, this may not be realistic. U.S. universities may have little influence over the professional development and training of faculty members at foreign universities, but can provide and encourage development around diversity and equity for staff, faculty, and administrators on the home campus. Study abroad program providers are able to set expectations and provide training opportunities for their own staff and program directors.

### **Areas for Future Research**

As already noted, ongoing research and assessment efforts in international education must include race and ethnicity as variables to examine whether differences in opportunities, outcomes, and experiences exist. This study examined the lived study abroad experiences of six students from a PWI; only one of these participants was male. More research should be conducted to determine whether African American men and women experience study abroad differently, as well as the roles the type of study abroad program, location, and type of home institution play in learning and development. To learn more about those students who choose not to participate in study abroad, differences between African American students at the same institution who do go abroad and those who don't go abroad should also be examined, as well as perceived obstacles.

Identifying the participants' stages of racial identity development was not intended as part of this study; interviews were conducted months or even years after the study abroad experience, and I felt that it would be difficult to ascertain the participants' stages of racial identity at the time of their study abroad experiences. Markers suggesting stages of racial identity at the time of the interviews did emerge, however, for some of the

participants as they shared their racialized experiences at home and abroad. The relationship between stages of racial identity development and study abroad experience is an area for future research, and could be examined by conducting interviews with students before, during, and after their study abroad experiences in the same location to assess the effects of identity development on the study abroad experience and vice versa.

Agatha and her family immigrated to the United States from West Africa when she was a child, and she became a U.S. citizen as a teenager. Marcus and Murungi were born in the United States; both of Marcus' and one of Murungi's parents were from East Africa. The role of generational status in the United States, connections with familial country of origin, and prior experiences with race and racism in non-U.S. contexts are additional areas for future research.

### **Conclusion and Broader Implications for Study Abroad**

CRT positions racism as pervasive in U.S. society and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Race matters in the United States, and as we see in the stories of these six participants, race matters in study abroad. Race and racism affect how international educators portray African American students and their families, often focusing on perceived deficits rather than strengths and abilities. Racism allows the long, rich history of international travel and study by African Americans to become invisible, as we assert that African Americans think that study abroad is “not for people like me” (Jackson, 2005). Race and racism allow international educators to operate out of colorblindness and to assume that the experiences of White students are those of all students.

Race and racism affected the study abroad experiences and outcomes of Agatha, Danyale, Jade, Marcus, Murungi, and Sara, though in very different ways. Agatha was constantly reminded of her race; while she refused to let racism define her study abroad experience, I wonder what more she could have accomplished or gained had she not been under constant attack. Murungi experienced racial privilege for the first time while abroad, something she had not thought possible given her experiences in the United States. Danyale found the racial and ethnic diversity of her study abroad location a refreshing balance between her experiences as a member of the racial majority in her home community and a racial minority at RMU. As a testament to the heavy psychological burden of racism in the United States, many of the participants felt freedom from racial stereotypes and expectations while abroad, even while describing racialized attention or witnessing racism against other groups. Racism forced many of the participants to learn to navigate hostile educational climates in the United States, through which they developed the skills that allowed them to be successful in study abroad. In turn, they returned to the United States better equipped to succeed in a PWI, with new self-confidence, enhanced communication skills, and academic drive and focus.

We have much to learn from the counternarratives of African American study abroad participants. Until we have a better understanding of their successes, challenges, opportunities, and outcomes, we cannot begin to better serve them in the study abroad experience, or to learn how best to encourage more African Americans to study abroad. While African American students who do not study abroad miss out on opportunities for growth and transformation, our institutions and campuses also fail to benefit from the

strengths, perspectives, and skills African American students bring to and from the study abroad experience.

Although this study focused on the lived experiences of African American students, the findings suggest broader implications for students of color and for the study abroad profession. Most colleges and universities submit data regarding study abroad participation to IIE, and international educators are able to identify groups that are underrepresented and overrepresented in study abroad participation at a national level according to race and ethnicity, gender, and major (Institute of International Education, 2013c). Not all colleges and universities compare data at the institutional level to examine whether participation rates are equitable, despite the availability of data regarding campus enrollment and demographics. Learning who is and is not studying abroad is the first step in working towards equity in participation. As described in this chapter, institutional commitment and collaboration, focused efforts to learn more about the lived experiences of students, and deliberate program design and assessment are tools that can be utilized to create more equitable study abroad opportunities and outcomes for all students.

### **Final Reflections on Researcher Subjectivity**

My identities as a White person, a woman, and a former international educator affected how I approached this study, interacted with the participants, and interpreted and analyzed data. In turn, my sense of self as a researcher and practitioner evolved as I reflected on the ways in which my identities and those of the participants shaped perceptions of and experiences in environments in the United States and abroad. In some

cases, my experiences abroad were similar to those of the participants, which helped develop rapport; as a woman, for example, I could relate to the stories shared by some of the female participants regarding male attention in their host countries. At other times, the participants' experiences diverged from my own as a White person. I found many of the participants' descriptions of comfort and fitting in while abroad dramatically different from my own international experiences, where I always felt othered. The participants' descriptions of life at RMU were also quite different from my own college experiences at a PWI as a White student. I realized that as a practitioner in international education, my study abroad advising strategies were based on my own experiences and expectations, which did not align with the realities of all the students with whom I worked. I was humbled as I examined the ways in which I had inadvertently marginalized students while assuming that I was supporting them.

Most of the participants noted that they volunteered for the study after receiving recruitment emails from RMU staff members whom they knew well and trusted. Once the interviews began, I attempted to create an atmosphere of honesty and trust. The series of three interviews allowed me to develop a relationship with the participants and demonstrate interest in and respect for their narratives. I was willing to share my own background and experiences with the participants, and communicated my reasons for engaging in this study. I was sometimes faced with self-doubt as I attempted to analyze and portray study abroad experiences that were so different from my own; at these times, peer debriefers were invaluable. While conversations about race and racism may be difficult and uncomfortable, inequities cannot be identified and addressed without honest

dialogue. I am honored that Agatha, Danyale, Jade, Marcus, Murungi, and Sara were willing to share their stories and expertise.

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## Appendix A: Sample Participant Recruitment Email

Dear study abroad returnees,

My name is Karyn Sweeney, and I'm a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of Denver.

I am conducting a study to learn more about how African American students experience study abroad. Nationwide, African American students are underrepresented in study abroad participation. By learning more about the lived experiences of African American students who have studied abroad, I hope to be able to inform practices to better encourage and support the study abroad participation of African American students. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program, and is supervised by Dr. Frank Tuitt, Associate Professor of Higher Education.

If you meet the eligibility requirements below, please consider being part of this study.

1. You identify as African American or Black.
2. You studied abroad as a Rocky Mountain University undergraduate on a quarter length or longer program in 2010, 2011, or 2012.
3. You are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.
4. You are 19-28 years old.

The study will involve three 60-90 minute interviews. Participants who complete all three interviews will receive a \$50 gift card to a restaurant or coffee shop of your choice. The first interview will focus on your life history and the factors that influenced your decision to study abroad; the second, your experiences abroad; and the third, the significance of study abroad for you. In addition, you will be asked if you have blogs, journal entries, reflective papers/essays, photographs, or other artifacts from your study abroad experience that you would be willing to share with me. If you meet the eligibility requirements listed above, learning more about your own experiences with study abroad will be valuable for this study. If you do not meet the eligibility requirements but know someone else who might, please consider forwarding this email.

I hope that you will consider sharing your knowledge and expertise with me. If you are interested in participating in this study, please go to ([link to Qualtrics survey](#)) to complete a short questionnaire to determine whether you meet the eligibility requirements for this study. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com](mailto:karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com) or 720.234.0081.

Kind regards,  
Karyn Sweeney  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Higher Education Program, Diversity and Higher Learning Concentration

## Appendix B: Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

The questionnaire below was administered through Qualtrics. The participant invitation email included a link to this survey.

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study Race Matters: An Examination of the Study Abroad Experiences of African American Undergraduates. Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire, which will determine your eligibility for this study. A few additional questions are included so that a diverse group of participants in terms of gender, major, and study abroad location may be selected. By completing this questionnaire, you agree to be considered for participation in this study, although you may withdraw your consent at any time.

Only the researcher will have access to your identifying information. You will be notified via email if you are selected for the study. If you are not selected for the study, your identifying information will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about this study or your eligibility, please contact Karyn Sweeney at [karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com](mailto:karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com). If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the process of completing this questionnaire, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or [du-irb@du.edu](mailto:du-irb@du.edu), Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-4820.

1. Please select the items below that best reflect your racial/ethnic identity (choose all that apply):

- African American
- Black
- White
- Hispanic/Latino(a)
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- Other

2. If you selected other, please describe your racial/ethnic identity below.

3. Did you study abroad as a Rocky Mountain University undergraduate student?
- Yes
  - No
4. Was your study abroad program a quarter or longer in length?
- Yes
  - No
5. This study focuses on U.S. citizens and permanent residents, as international students at DU may have very different experiences studying abroad. Please select the item below that best reflects your status in the U.S.:
- U.S. citizen
  - Permanent resident
  - None of the above
6. What term did you study abroad? (example: Fall Quarter 2011)
7. Please list the name of your study abroad program/host university.
8. Please list your study abroad host city and host country.
9. What is your gender?
10. What is your year in school? If you have graduated, please list the month/year you graduated.
11. What is your major(s)? If you have graduated, please list your undergraduate major(s).
12. What is your name?
- First name
- Last name
13. Please list your contact information:
- Email address
- Telephone number

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Form**

Research Project title: Race Matters: An Examination of the Study Abroad Experiences of African American Undergraduates

You are invited to participate in a study that will examine the study abroad experiences of African American undergraduate students. This study is being conducted by Karyn Sweeney to fulfill the requirements for a doctoral degree. Karyn Sweeney can be reached at 720.234.0081 or [karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com](mailto:karyn.l.sweeney@gmail.com). This project is supervised by Dr. Frank Tuitt, Associate Professor of Higher Education, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, ([frank.tuitt@du.edu](mailto:frank.tuitt@du.edu), 303.871.2942).

Participation in this study will involve completing a short questionnaire to establish eligibility for the study. If selected for this study, you will participate in three 60-90 minute interviews. In addition, you will be asked if you have blogs, journal entries, reflective papers/essays, photographs, or other artifacts from your study abroad experience that you would be willing to share with me.

Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. Benefits include the opportunity to share and reflect on your unique experiences with study abroad. The findings of this study have the potential to better inform how international educators support and prepare future study abroad participants. Participants who complete the series of interviews will be provided with a \$50 gift card to a restaurant or coffee shop of your choice. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interviews at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Given the relatively small number of students who will meet the criteria for this study, one potential risk is of participation in this study is breach of confidentiality. The steps that will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of your responses include the following: Your responses will be identified by pseudonym and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. All interview recordings and transcriptions will be encrypted. A pseudonym will also be used for the institution. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interviews, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection

of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may email [du-irb@du.edu](mailto:du-irb@du.edu), Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or call 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Race Matters: An Examination of the Study Abroad Experiences of African American Undergraduates. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that in order to participate in this study, I agree that interviews will be audiotaped.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:

## Appendix D: Interview Guide 1

The first interview will focus on the participant's life history and the decision to study abroad, which will enable me to put the participant's study abroad experience in context. The participant will be asked to select a pseudonym in this interview. While a list of questions has been developed to guide the discussion, some of the responses may emerge naturally through the conversation. I will also have the flexibility to explore new topics as presented by the participant.

1. Tell me about yourself. (prompts: where participant grew up, family background, previous educational experiences, previous international experiences).
2. How did you come to be a student at RMU?
3. What is it like to be a student at RMU?
4. What are the aspects of your identity that are most important to you at RMU? (use identity pie chart exercise)
5. What led you to your decision to study abroad?
6. What or who influenced this decision? How?
7. How did you go about deciding on a study abroad program?
8. What were your goals for your study abroad experience before you left?
9. What did you expect your study abroad experience to be like?
10. In what ways were you prepared you for study abroad? What role did RMU play in this process?
11. In what ways were you not prepared? How could RMU have better prepared you for the experience?
12. How did your family feel about your participation in study abroad? Your friends?
13. Is there anything else you think I should know about you? Your decision to study abroad?

## Appendix E: Interview Guide 2

The second interview focused on the details of the participant's lived experience abroad. While questions were developed as a guideline, I also had the ability to ask additional questions based on responses from the previous interview and the emerging conversation.

1. What was it like for you to study abroad in \_\_\_\_\_ (host country)?
2. Could you describe a typical day for you while you were abroad?
3. What was the classroom experience like?
4. Where did you live, and what was that like?
5. Could you talk about your relationships/interactions with other people abroad? (prompts: U.S. students, local students, faculty/staff, community members, host family, if applicable) Who did you spend most of your free time with?
6. Could you tell me about your best experience abroad?
7. Could you tell me about your worst experience abroad?
8. In what ways was your experience different than you had expected?
9. What was it like to be an African American abroad? How was this different than being an African American in the U.S.?
10. Tell me about a time when your race affected your study abroad experience.
11. While you were abroad, what were the aspects of your identity that were most important to you? (Use identity pie chart completed in first interview, then ask participant to talk about ways this was different abroad)
12. Is there anything else you think I should know about your study abroad experience?

### **Appendix F: Interview Guide 3**

The third and final interview focused on learning the significance of the study abroad experience for the participant. It also provide an opportunity to build upon the previous interviews and clarify data, so additional questions could be asked based on the prior interviews.

1. What did study abroad mean to you?
2. What is the significance of your study abroad experience for your life back home? (prompts: personal, relationships with friends/family, academics, future career).
3. What did it mean to be an African American abroad?
4. How, if at all, did race matter in your study abroad experience?
5. How was the racial climate you experienced in your host country different than what you experience in the U.S.?
5. We've talked about your identities in Denver, and how these looked different when you were abroad. Did your time abroad shape how you view your identities now? How?
6. When you look back at your study abroad experience, what are you most proud of?
7. What was the biggest challenge?
8. If you could do it all over again, is there anything you would do differently?
9. Is there anything else you think I should know about your study abroad experience?