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# Spatialized Race and Sense of Belonging: Experiences of Black Students in Study Abroad

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## Abstract

Using a case study approach, this study examined the role that spatialized notions of race and sense of belonging had on 10 Black students from a predominantly White institution, in a diasporic study abroad experience in Cuba. In particular, this study explored how race was situated in the study abroad program (space) and in Cuba (place) and how it impacted Black students' sense of belonging. Findings indicated the location and content of the study abroad experience, along with the group makeup of the trip, created a positive sense of belonging for Black students. Specifically, the themes that emerged include, Racialized Spaces: Connection to Blackness in the Program and Racialized Places: Connection to Blackness in the Destination. This study supports the importance of designing intentional programs that can build community and sense of belonging for Black students abroad.

## Abstract in Spanish

Utilizando un enfoque de estudio de caso, este estudio examinó el papel que las nociones espacializadas de raza y sentido de pertenencia tuvieron en 10 estudiantes negros de una institución predominantemente blanca, en una

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experiencia de estudio diaspórico en el extranjero en Cuba. En particular, este estudio exploró cómo se situaba la raza en el programa de estudios en el extranjero (espacio) y en Cuba (lugar) y cómo impactaba el sentido de pertenencia de los estudiantes negros. Los hallazgos indicaron que la ubicación y el contenido de la experiencia de estudiar en el extranjero, junto con la composición del grupo del viaje, crearon un sentido positivo de pertenencia para los estudiantes negros. Específicamente, los temas que surgieron incluyen Espacios racializados: conexión con la negritud en el programa y Lugares racializados: conexión con la negritud en el destino. Este estudio respalda la importancia de diseñar programas intencionales que puedan construir una comunidad y un sentido de pertenencia para los estudiantes negros en el extranjero.

## Keywords

Black students, diasporic travel, place and space, sense of belonging, study abroad

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## Introduction

Kuh (2008) described high impact practices as activities that increase student retention and engagement. From first-year seminars and learning communities to service learning and research, students that participate in high impact activities report deeper approaches in learning and development, which positively impact their academic performance (Brownell & Swaner, 2009), multicultural competence, and leadership development (Soria & Johnson, 2017). The National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) Institute for Effective Educational Practice identifies study abroad, or education abroad/ international education, as a high impact practice, and we recognize that participation in study abroad can make a significant difference to student persistence, achievement of learning outcomes, and overall student success (Kuh et al., 2010; Tarrant et al., 2014). While study abroad programs help students explore worldviews, cultures, and experiences often different from their own (Kuh, 2008), there is a concerning reality about who participates in study abroad. Students that identify as Black or African American represent 12.6% of student enrollment in higher education (NCES, 2020), yet only 6.4% of them participate in study abroad (Institute for International Education, 2020; also see Lee & Green, 2016; Stallman et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black students who participated in a faculty-led study abroad program offered through a predominantly white institution (PWI) to Havana, Cuba. While past research has considered the experience of Black students studying abroad from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Murray Brux & Fry, 2009; Covington, 2017), this paper explores the experiences of Black students from a PWI who participated in a program created specifically to support a large group of underrepresented students through intentional programming, content focus, and partnership with the institution's student-centered multicultural center. This study will explore students' sense of belonging in both the study abroad program and in the diasporic country destination with a racially and ethnically diverse population. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What role does sense of belonging play in the experiences of Black students studying abroad? 2) What role do spatialized notions of race play in the experiences of Black students studying abroad? This study wanted to explore how Black students studying on a program in a country with aspects of African history and culture experienced a sense of belonging within the learning environment (space) and in Cuba (place). Furthermore, the study wanted to examine how race appears in space and place (spatialized race) and how it connected to Black students' sense of belonging in the study abroad experience.

Black students, implying Black American students, instead of African American students, is used in this paper to reflect the process of racialization experienced by students who are of African descent in the U.S., including from diverse paths to American citizenship such as enslavement and immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, and other locations of African Diaspora. It is noted that Black is a political identity that acknowledges an understanding of shared experiences of injustice as a result of skin color. However, it is also recognized that rather than Black being understood as an identity that highlights differences in itself, Black is a result of the racialization process whereby racism categorizes populations for the specific purposes of discrimination, resource allocation, subjugation, and oppression (Fields & Fields, 2014).

## Literature Review

### Underrepresentation in Study Abroad

Study abroad participation is concomitant with higher education participation (Institute of International Education, 2022; U.S. Department of

Education 2000, 2018). However, there is racial and ethnic underrepresentation in study abroad participation, since the number of racially and ethnically diverse students studying abroad does not reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of enrollment in higher education. Table (1) compares data from total enrollment in higher education and participation in study abroad in 2000 and 2018.

Race/Ethnicity	% Enrolled in Higher Education		% Participating in Study Abroad	
	2000	2018	2000	2018
American Indian & Alaska Native	0.9%	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%
Asian, Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	5.8%	7.3%	5.4%	8.9%
Black	10.9%	13.4%	3.5%	6.4%
Hispanic/Latinx	10.3%	19.5%	5.4%	10.9%
Multiracial	-	3.9%	0.9%	4.7%
White	63.3%	55.2%	84.3%	68.7%

**TABLE (1):** REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDY ABROAD (2000 VS 2018)

The year 2018 was selected over the most recent study abroad data (2020) for a couple of reasons. In 2019 and 2020, the number of students studying abroad significantly dropped due to COVID-19. Moreover, the program in this study was held during the 2018-19 academic year. While the percentage of White students participating in study abroad has decreased since 2000, they are still overrepresented in study abroad. In 2018, White students made up 55.2% of total higher education enrollment but 68.7% of study abroad participants; in comparison, Black (13.4% vs 6.4%), Hispanic/Latinx (19.5% vs 10.9%), and American Indian and Alaska Native (0.7% vs 0.4%) students are underrepresented in study abroad specifically.

The issue of low participation of underrepresented students (broadly to include those marginalized by race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, veteran status, gender identities and/or sexuality) in study abroad is well-documented. Previous research has cited lack of support from academic institutions regarding scheduling, lack of information, or relevant programs (e.g., Key, 2018; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Yeboah, 2019), financial constraints (e.g., Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; McDonald et al., 2019; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Rhodes & Hong, 2005; Washington, 1998), attitudes towards international travel by family or lack of familial support (e.g., Brux & Ngoboka, 2002; Lu et al., 2015; Washington, 1998), overall socio-economic status (Hulstrand, 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009), and trust (e.g., Wilkie, 2017), as factors that affect underrepresented student participation. Considering Black and/or ethnic minority students

specifically, the climate of the host country also plays into decisions to participate: fears of discrimination, anti-Americanism, and racism abroad are critical concerns when it comes to making the decision to participate in study abroad (Dessof, 2006; Lu et al., 2015; Perdreau, 2002; Sweeney, 2013; Yeboah, 2019). These constraints on participation in study abroad are often nuanced, multiple, and overlapping, and should be situated within the context of larger institutional initiatives towards diversity, equity, and inclusion (Sweeney, 2013). When these issues are not addressed, underrepresented students often pass up study abroad opportunities even when they are aware of the academic, professional, and personal benefits they would gain (Lee & Green, 2016; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010).

### Black Students and Study Abroad

Researchers have explored different study abroad program elements that can help overcome some of the constraints to participation. In a study looking at Black students traveling to China, Lu and colleagues (2015) found that, “fear and anxiety over leaving the country can be alleviated if a relatable faculty leader has gone to that country and had a good experience” (p. 448). Additionally, it has been found that peer engagement is an important motivator for studying abroad for underrepresented students (Hulstrand, 2016; Lorz et al., 2016; McHan, 2019), suggesting that marketing and recruiting should come from within social networks that may share certain identities. Intentional programming has the potential to recruit from the inside out, meaning students who have experienced positive study abroad programming building social connections with relatable faculty members and other study abroad participants will likely refer the program to other like-minded students, encouraging student led recruitment efforts and increasing retention of students (Metzger, 2006).

Further, Murray Brux and Fry (2010) noted that centering programs on topics that connect to diasporic and heritage-related ethnic and national roots can be vital to this process. Simply, the programs with destinations that are of the most interest to Black students are those where they can learn about their culture, heritage, and history - diasporic destinations across Africa and the Caribbean (Penn & Tanner, 2009; Yeboah, 2019). In a study that explored the experiences of Black undergraduate students participating in a study abroad experience in Africa, Lee and Green (2016) found participants had an academically liberating experience, developed a stronger sense of their Black

identity, and gained significant research experience. In this case, students were able to explore their heritage and unlearn stereotypes and misinformation related to Africa and African heritage. In this regard, the function of travel can be different for those who are descendants of Africa: a defining motivation to participate in a study abroad program is to connect with their heritage. Providing opportunities to travel to the homelands of their ancestors creates an emotional currency that western-modeled study abroad rarely considers for undergraduates and graduate students of color (Yeboah, 2019). Moreover, Morgan et al. (2002) noted that study abroad provides an avenue for Black women in the U.S. to connect with African women to promote notions of sisterhood and shared struggles for liberation, which was an empowering process for the students. We acknowledge that not all heritage-seeking programs bring about positivity and clarity for an individual's journey; certain countries that are not open to the complexity of intersectional identities situated in gender and sexuality may cause anxiety for students when leaving home and students may still not regard study abroad opportunities as being beneficial for their individual growth if they anticipate that they may not be welcomed, valued, or feel included. Capobianco (2020) transparently noted his positionality, stating that, "I am also proud to identify as a member of the Queer community, which can be a dangerous thing to write depending on where in the world I may be or who may be reading this" (p.14). So, in addition to highlighting the strong relationship that can be cultivated from the study abroad destination inspired by family background, national, religious, cultural, or ethnic factors, instructors of the program should recognize the value of selecting heritage-seeking sites that outwardly show inclusivity of all.

In considering the goal of increasing underrepresented student participation in study abroad, this study sought to examine how diasporic study abroad experiences can contribute to developing a sense of belonging among Black students. In doing so, this paper challenges the traditional idea of the campus as the locus of belonging by situating the processes of belonging in study abroad.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Sense of Belonging**

In the most basic form, sense of belonging can be described as the degree to which an individual feels accepted and included into the fabric of people,

places, and things around them; as Maslow would note, feeling like you belong is a fundamental need that has to be satisfied to move towards transformation and self-actualization (Maslow, 1962). Building on this work, educational scholars began to consider this notion within the context of academic and educational settings, considering it to be the extent to which students feel accepted, supported, respected, and included on campuses and in their school environments (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Sutherland & Taylor, 2011). Some scholars have looked at specific elements of the academic and social experiences of underrepresented populations to find ways to predict and enhance sense of belonging (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and examine the influence and impact of campus environments on student success (Museus et al., 2017).

In recognizing this body of literature that has demonstrated the importance of a sense of belonging to student retention and success, the question that is raised is, how do we intentionally create/promote and increase a sense of belonging in higher education for Black students? Black students report lower levels of belongingness in their educational environments than other groups on their campuses (Duran et al., 2020). For Black students, having a sense of community can help them thrive in unwelcoming environments (Hunter et al., 2019). In this regard, Black racial identity or Blackness have to be understood as multidimensional, fluid, and ever-changing concepts. Dimensions of Blackness can include racial, ethnic, national, cultural, and political aspects, where individuals may embody one or multiple of these modes to different extents (McPherson & Shelby, 2004). Approaches to Black racial identity have included processes and structures in identity development (Cross, 1971, 1991) and self-concepts such as how individuals use race to define themselves and how they perceive what it means to be Black (Sellers et al., 1998). In addressing postmodern Blackness, bell hooks (1990) calls for affirming multiple and varied Black identities and experiences because this creates diverse cultural productions.

In the context of a racialized U.S. society and higher education, thinking about the effect of Black identity development or Blackness becomes critical to the well-being and success of Black students in educational settings. For example, in examining Black racial identity and the connection to Black college students' sense of belonging to their racial group, Hunter et al. (2019) found that

individual and public perceptions of Blackness (authenticity), tensions of “fitting in” while trying to retain aspects of themselves (acculturation loss), connectedness to other Black students, and responsibility to the larger Black community, all impacted participants’ sense of belonging to their racial group.

Samura (2016) contended it is important to go beyond the factors that contribute to sense of belonging to understand a sense of belonging as a fluid, mutable, and an interactional process. “Students do not merely acquire belonging, nor do they reach a state of belonging. Rather, belonging is an ongoing process” (Samura, 2016, p. 147). In a study that explored how Asian American students processed sense of belonging, Samura (2016) found participants discovered a sense of belonging at certain times and with certain people. Students felt they belonged to the campus not through integrating with the dominant culture, but through finding and creating spaces based on shared racial and ethnic identities.

This paper considers the traditional concept of sense of belonging (e.g., students feel accepted, supported, respected, and included) together with Samura’s (2016) notion of a sense of belonging that is fluid as an ongoing process. This situated sense of belonging within the context of a study abroad program challenges the traditional idea of student sense of belonging ‘on campus.’ As noted previously, study abroad participation remains undiversified which has significant implications for the sense of belonging of underrepresented students. Unique to this context is that sense of belonging is informed by the elements of the place or destination visited, as well as the dynamics of the program and the space it creates for these students.

### Spatialized Race: Place and Space

Place is both a spatial location and one’s position in society that consists of identity and symbolic significance from those associated with it (Tuan, 1979). Whether it is a public, sacred, or inconspicuous place, people create meaning in places that range from commanding attention to evoking affect (Tuan, 1979). Place is also conceptualized as “landscapes full of sociocultural and historical meanings to be engaged with” (Pipitone & Raghavan, 2017, p. 2), where interacting and making meaning of a place is a participatory and experiential process.

Study abroad programs are ideal experiential learning opportunities to explore place and space. Engaging students in study abroad programs with



place through social interaction and local rhythms and histories was fundamental to socially producing an experiential learning space (Pipitone & Raghavan, 2017). Study abroad students are not just consuming knowledge, but they are actively engaging in a process, “making sense of themselves, the world, and the places within it” (Pipitone & Raghavan, 2017, p. 2). In this regard, study abroad programs by nature move bodies across spaces, bringing about two aspects of spatialized race: the local destination as a place in which the students are situated, as well as the ‘space’ within the program that can create a sense of belonging (or not) among participants.

Racism and oppression can play a role in how place and space is viewed. *Black Geographies*, an interdisciplinary approach within the field of geography, considers how “an analysis of space, place, and power can be fundamentally transformed by foregrounding questions of Blackness and racism” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 9). In understanding Black spatial life, areas of inquiry include but are not limited to space-making practices, Black geographic imagination, racial capitalism, cities and urban development, policing and carceral geographies, and racism and plantation futures (Hawthorne, 2019). With this in mind, we apply a spatialized lens to understand how experiences are shaped by the ways that social identities, such as race (but also extended to gender, class, sexuality, etc.), are connected to the geographies with which they are constructed (Aitchison, 1999). In this study, we are particularly interested in how the experiences of Black students are shaped by the spatialized notions of race, and how those interplays across the dynamics of their learning environment within a study abroad program.

In reviewing the two disparate bodies of literature on sense of belonging as well as space and place, this paper posits that there is a need to consider the spatialized aspects of study abroad and the way it affects students’ sense of belonging. That is, while it is empirically established that sense of belonging is important for student success on campus, particularly for underrepresented students, the question emerges as to what sense of belonging looks like in a study abroad program that also intersects with spatialized notions of identity?

## Methods

A qualitative study using a case study research approach (Yin, 2003) was used for an in-depth examination of spatialized notions of race and sense of belonging for Black students in a study abroad program. The case study

approach allowed interpretation to help answer the complex research questions guiding this study. A partnership between an academic department and the multicultural center at a predominantly White institution (PWI) designed a study abroad experience to Havana, Cuba. It began with a mutual interest in traveling with students to a diasporic destination and supported by a shared critical lens (in both research and pedagogy). The initial development and recruitment strategy for the program was focused broadly on underrepresented students, particularly those that engaged with programming through the multicultural center. The content of the course within this study abroad program explored social issues through the lens of race, gender, sexuality, and class in Havana.

### Study Abroad Program Location: Havana, Cuba

While it is difficult to comprehend the enormity and complexity of the consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade, what is important to note here is that the histories of the U.S. and Cuba have been culturally and socially intertwined ever since: when the U.S. abolished slavery, American slave traders put their investments into Cuba (Marques, 2012), and when slave uprisings occurred in one setting, slave owners dealt harsher punishments in the other (De Vito, 2018). Intersecting with politics in the 20th century, including the critical turn at the start of the Cuban Revolution in 1953, the contemporary relationship between the U.S. and Cuba can best be described as fragile, unstable, and complicated. However, a notable difference between the two countries, which is reflected in modern diaspora tourism to the island nation, is the prevalence of African culture embedded in Cuban culture.

There were multiple reasons for selecting Havana, Cuba as the destination for this study abroad program in 2019. For one, the prevalence of African heritage and culture is reflected and embedded in modern diaspora tourism in Cuba. For many Black Americans, Cuba had become a diasporic destination when former US President Barack Obama lifted the embargo. Cuba has advantages of being closer to the U.S. east coast (travel time was under half a day) and being affordable to international tourists (e.g., less expensive flights, accommodations) compared to other destinations for the African diaspora. The history, culture, and affordability of traveling to Cuba, made it an ideal destination site for the diasporic study abroad experience.

## Participants

This study abroad program was offered by a Carnegie very high research (R1) land grant university located in the southeastern region of the U.S. The university's enrollment by race/ethnicity reflects a lack of racial diversity where the majority of students enrolled identify as White (76%), reflecting three quarters of students at the university. Following this, the largest racially marginalized group identifies as Black (6.1%). It should be noted that while most of the students participating in this study abroad program were students at this PWI, one student participated as a transfer student from a Historically Black College and University. Fourteen students were enrolled in the study abroad experience, the majority identifying as Black and two identifying as White. Out of the 12 Black students enrolled in the experience, ten agreed to be a part of the study. Likewise, while one of the two students identifying as White was also interviewed, that data was not included in this study given the research focus. Five participants were undergraduate and five graduate students, all from the PWI. Nine of the participants identify as Black and one participant identify as biracial, Black being one of their identities. Additional trip members consisted of two program coordinators (one White woman faculty member and one Black woman administrator) and three chaperones (two Black women and one Black man, all staff members). All members of the research team participated in the study abroad experience in different capacities. These roles are highlighted in the data collection and analysis sections.

## Data Collection

Data sources included semi-structured interviews, documents, and observations. Interviews served as the primary source of data for this study in order to gain a rich understanding through the perspectives of those experiencing it (Biddix, 2018). Interview questions focused on their experiences traveling abroad, experiences in Cuba, and being on a trip where Black students represented the majority of participants. The interviews were conducted a few months after the trip to ensure that the experience was still at the forefront of the participants minds, but also give them enough time to process their experience. Each interview was conducted by the lead researcher to ensure consistency and fairness. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The interviews and focus groups were both audio recorded and transcribed.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of four individual interviews and two focus groups (Table 2). Participants participated in an individual interview or a focus group, based on availability. The lead researcher reached out to each participant for their availability and then scheduled the interviews accordingly. The schedules that overlapped were put into focus groups and those that did not overlap became individual interviews. Individual interviews ranged from 40-90 minutes and the focus groups ranged from 60-90 minutes. Individual interviews allow participants to share in-depth regarding their experience in a one-on-one setting. It also provides space for individuals to share if they are not comfortable sharing in a group setting. One benefit of focus groups is that it stimulates engagement, but a disadvantage is that dominant voices can influence how others respond (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). The same questions were asked in both the interviews and focus groups, but how in-depth a question was answered varied. During both individual and focus groups, the lead researcher observed the excitement of the participants recalling their experiences on the trip, but the difference in interview type resulted in different participant behaviors.

During the individual interviews, the participants were happy to recall their experiences, but they were also calmer in comparison to the focus groups, which is to be expected. Participants in the individual interviews had more time to answer the questions in-depth, allowing them to be more reflective on their experiences. While not planned to occur this way, the first focus group consisted of two undergraduate students that were also friends and roommates on the trip and the second focus group consisted of four out of five graduate students on the trip who also knew each other. During both focus groups, participants build on each other's comments, which helped them recall specific experiences, sparking additional comments and laughter. With the focus groups being small numbers, along with the familiarity of the participants in each focus group, it was easier for the researcher to ensure each participant had time to share. Both interviews and focus groups were beneficial to this study. In retrospect, it would have been ideal for each participant to do both an individual interview and focus group to obtain more in-depth information.

Interview data was the primary source of data for the study and is the focus for this paper. Observations and documents served as secondary sources of data to help inform the study. The lead researcher was an in-participant observer (Biddix, 2018), immersed in the experience while taking field notes on

the behaviors and interactions of all of the participants at the study abroad site and amongst each other. Additional team members were not in a formal observation role, but being part of the study abroad experience inherently results in making observations. The documents consisted of journals and questionnaires. The journals, which consisted of prompts and open thoughts, gave insight to what the participants were thinking and feeling during the trip. The students also filled out a pre- and post-trip questionnaire to understand their experiences with study abroad, how they felt before and after the trip, and what they hoped and actually learned and gained from the trip.

### Data Analysis

Additional research members joined the lead researcher after the data collection period. The research team used a multi-step data analysis process. First, each interview transcript was roughly transcribed by the lead researcher. Then members of the research team did a follow-up transcription by listening to the interviews to make sure all the information was captured in the transcripts. Second, each transcript went through open coding twice. Open coding consisted of initial line-by-line, noting specific words and phrases in the transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). Research team members that were participants in the study did not code their own transcripts. Following the open coding, the research team came together to debrief and collectively share insights from the data. After open coding, a second round of coding consisted of selecting codes that are connected to the purpose of this study and framework. Lastly, the selected codes were compiled to generate themes.

Observations and documents served as supplemental analysis (Biddix, 2018), providing context to support the interview data. The research team read the questionnaires and journals. During the research meetings, the team openly discussed their observations and the information from the documents. Observations and documents have not been aggregated but will be incorporated in a future paper to present a fuller picture of the study (Biddix, 2018).

To ensure quality research upheld through standards of goodness (Biddix, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Tracy, 2010) the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and triangulation guided the data collection and analysis process. Triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) was achieved by having the data in individual journals and observation support the interpretations of the interview data, using more than one type of analysis (open and axial coding),

and different levels of analysis (e.g., individual and group). To this end, multiple researchers analyzed the data at every step of the analysis process. The research team being part of the study abroad experience also supports the credibility of study as the researchers were able to have a deep dive into the context under study and ensure a tight fit between participants' views and researchers' representation of them (Biddix, 2018). By explaining the steps of the data collection and analysis process, this study can be comparable and applicable for others (transferability) and can be reproduced (dependability), thus achieving confirmability (Biddix, 2018).

### Positionality

As noted, the research team also participated in the study abroad experience. Two of the team members were the program coordinators of the study abroad experience: one from the academic department who identified as a White woman faculty member and one from the multicultural center who identifies as a Black woman administrator. The program coordinators synergized the skills and knowledge they brought to the program: the faculty member brought in logistical experience in study abroad programs, experience in the program country, and a critical lens within the topics under study (e.g., intersections of tourism with social structures in Cuba); the multicultural center administrator brought an expertise in student affairs and the underrepresented student experience, and played a major role in recruiting students into the program through shared connections at the center. Thus, they both helped address prominent concerns of underrepresented students when it comes to deciding to participate (e.g., Lu et al., 2015). They worked in tandem in the communication with students and took equal roles as program leads. While it is difficult to discern what effect the race of the program coordinators had on initial impressions of the trip, it can be recognized that the established relationships that the administrator had with students through the multicultural center was key to the recruitment of students to the program. On the other hand, the White faculty member did not have existing relationships with most students and likely raised questions of comfort and familiarity, at least initially, within the program.

Three of the team members were graduate students on the trip and participants in the study: two identify as Black women and one identifies as a Black man. Their experiences as participants helped bring in additional context, while connecting the data across participants. However, the graduate research

team members acknowledge their ability to produce assumptions about participant experiences because they were in the experience together. Finally, the lead researcher attended the trip as a chaperone and researcher, identifies as a Black woman, and had no involvement in the development and coordination of the program. The lead researcher did know some of the study participants on the trip prior to attending and began to develop relationships with the remaining students during the trip. These relationships, as well as sharing the same race as the participants, may have had an impact on the number of students willing to participate in the study and their comfort speaking to the researcher. Since the lead researcher was not a program coordinator or a student participant in the trip, there are some limitations of knowledge and context. Having members of the research team in those other roles, helped capture the essence of the experience. Across the entire research team, then, reflexivity was practiced, and assumptions and bias checked to ensure that we upheld standards of goodness in the research (Duffy et al., 2022; Tracy, 2010).

Name	Classification	Interview Type
Keyonna	Undergraduate	Individual Interview
Precious	Undergraduate	Individual Interview
Sparkle	Undergraduate	Individual Interview
Sunshine	Graduate	Individual Interview
Hanley	Undergraduate	Focus Group #1
Vivian	Undergraduate	Focus Group #1
Frank	Graduate	Focus Group #2
Meghan	Graduate	Focus Group #2
Montell	Graduate	Focus Group #2
Sophie	Graduate	Focus Group #2

TABLE (2): INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

## Findings

This study sought to explore a sense of belonging and spatialized notions of race within the experiences of Black students participating in a study abroad program to Havana, Cuba. The findings are separated into two themes: (1) Racialized Spaces: Connection to Blackness in the Program and (2) Racialized Places: Connection to Blackness in the Location. Each of the themes, along with subthemes, highlight how Blackness and Black racial identity impacted sense of belonging in the study abroad experience for the participants. These concepts are illuminated in the findings through the perspectives of the participants. To

provide a rich interpretation of participants' stories, literature and discussion were also incorporated throughout the findings.

### Racialized Spaces: Connection to Blackness in the Program

This theme is centered on how racialized spaces contributed to a sense of belonging for participants within the study abroad program. Elements of sense of belonging within the group emerged quickly in the data with perspectives that reflected how participants felt within the group given that the majority of the participants identified as Black. As Frank succinctly stated, "Oh, this trip is about to be Black Black. Blackity Black. For me, like, it made it more comfortable." Many of the participants also mentioned that the trip being co-sponsored by the multicultural center and content of the trip centering social justice contributed to their decision to attend, as Hanley shared:

The fact was it was being put out by the multicultural center, it really made me comfortable, to go, just because like, I feel like your group that you go with, it can really shape your experience as far as studying abroad because like, you don't want to be by yourself experiencing things. And if you don't have a group that can really like support that learning environment, then I mean, you out there all alone, and it might really ruin your experience somewhere...I could tell that they wanted people to come like I felt wanted. So that's how I chose Cuba. And like the focus of the class really, really interested in me like what we were going to be talking about. And I was like, I'm a sociology and pan African Studies major, but this is right up my alley.

In this regard, the cues were built into this study abroad program - from program leaders and chaperones who were predominantly Black, to peers mostly identifying as Black, and the content of the course focusing on critical social discussions related to Havana, Cuba. It was quickly acknowledged that in this space, Blackness is included, accepted, supported, and respected. This is counter to other experiences of Black students at a PWI where those experiences are defined by racial microaggressions such as tokenism or pressures to conform (e.g., Mills, 2020), racial stigmatization (e.g., Leath & Chavous, 2018) or even racial hostility (e.g., Harwood et al., 2018). Considering that, with the exception of one student, all participants were otherwise attending a PWI, the program created a space within the group that was a distinct departure from many other campus experiences.



### Authenticity and Freedom in the Group Dynamics

Specifically, many participants spoke on the ease of expressing their *authentic* identity and communicating with other group members. For example, it was easier for students to be themselves as Sunshine shared:

We could say things to each other, and I didn't feel that there were judgments, judgements to the point that it hindered somebody from just being Black, expressing our organic selves through language dress, exchange of ideologies and beliefs, etcetera. And I really enjoyed that experience, which is why I haven't gone before anywhere else.

Participants reflected on how being in a majority Black group made it easier to communicate and contribute to discussions. Past research has noted that for students of color, interactions with like-peers are necessary to help 'buffer' against other factors that may diminish their sense of belonging at a PWI, and those interactions need to happen both inside and outside the classroom (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hussain & Jones, 2021). "I didn't feel like I was left out in no type of way. Because I felt like I could contribute to the discussions," as Precious shared. Sophie and Hanley discussed how it also provided an opportunity to be more vulnerable in spaces:

In [University] having like one or two of us [in a class] and where we are reserved for what we say because we may be either shut down or you feel embarrassed, or whatever the case may be that you don't express yourself fully. But having the most of us that you can connect, relate... you feel more comfortable. There's no walls, you can say whatever you need to say. [Sophie]

I always feel safe speaking on how I feel, like I don't really care how the people feel about it, but it felt good to be reaffirmed... like not even just feel sympathy, but empathy you know. You could really relate because you went through it too. So having the chance to, like, be vulnerable in those spaces... [Hanley]

Participants' experiences highlight an issue with diversity at their home institution and how that impacts their class participation. Typically, Black students at PWIs are the only, or one of a few, in classroom spaces, making it difficult to fully express themselves as they may be concerned with how they are perceived. For example, they may code-switch, which describes the ways that individuals shift their speech or nonverbal communication patterns in

order to convey meaning or intent based on the situation or context they are in (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). In this study abroad experience, though, they felt they could be their authentic, real, selves without judgment. Overall, for participants, there was the comfort of being within a group of similar racial and ethnic identities. Participants felt as though they were able to have more honest debriefs and conversations than they typically would have in their classrooms on campus. This sub-theme highlights how increased racial representation in learning spaces increases a sense of belonging for Black students.

### Countering the Presence of Whiteness

Whiteness refers to “a set of relations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and that are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of white racial domination” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 3). Whiteness is unnamed and appears as the norms and standard in practices, processes, cultures, traditions, and values that often define institutions, organizations, and U.S. society. In this specific study abroad experience whiteness did not define or have overt presence in the space created by the study abroad program dynamics or in the racially and ethnically diverse destination for the program. “It was so freeing,” as Frank responded to not having a large group of White students on the trip. As mentioned before, all of the participants on the trip were not Black and White students were the minority on this trip - to that end a program leader was White. But Frank’s comments refer to how the group dynamics, informed by the majority of those identifying as Black, provided freedom for the participants to be their authentic selves.

Participants were asked if the dynamics would have been different if there were more White students on the trip. “I feel like that's how it was different.” We were able to connect. With that statement, Keyonna discussed how she felt Black students were more culturally immersed in the study abroad experience than the White students, allowing them to feel more connected. While the data can not verify that validity of that perception as it only collected data from Black students, Sophie and Vivian also shared the following:

In [University] you have like one or two of us and where we are reserved for what we say because we may either get shut down or you feel embarrassed, or whatever the case may be that you don't express yourself fully. But having more of us that you can connect, relate to, you feel more comfortable. There's no walls, you can say

whatever you need to say...Other people may not understand the struggle or they don't think that is real. [Sophie]

I probably would have also been more combative in some of the conversations we have, because I would've had certain guards up. Because I know that they don't have certain experiences that I do... Like, it was more comfortable. It was like I was with my family, just in another country. [Vivian]

For Sophie and Vivian, the trip would have felt different with more White students, and they would have felt guarded in certain discussions. Meghan addressed how the White students that were on the trip were not actively contributing to the course discussions, therefore taking up space.

Because the people who weren't Black or who didn't present to be Black, did not have anything to put into the conversation. They were just taking up space, I feel like and in society systematically that's what they do. They take up space and take space away from people. [Meghan]

Discourses around race and culture are typically conducted by groups that are categorized as racialized (Urciuoli, 2009), where White people tend to opt out of these conversations unless it's within their own race (Nelson et al., 2023). However, without interviewing all the White students on the trip, it cannot be concluded why they were not actively engaged in the experience as the Black students. Again, what is important here is how the Black students perceive the presence of Whiteness in their peers. In this sub-theme, participants overall indicated how White students can impact the dynamics within this study abroad experience. Given that course content for this program focused on an exploration of how race, gender, and social issues intersected with tourism in Havana, Cuba, Black students felt connected to the experience. That is, Cuba is a racially and ethnically diverse country and students felt more comfortable fully immersing in the experience with each other. In this experience, the presence of the White students had minimal impact on their experiences.

### Racialized Places: Connection to Blackness in the Location

This theme is centered on how racialized places contributed to a sense of belonging. Because of the efforts Cuba has made to maintain their Afro-Latino/ Black identity, the presence and celebration of Blackness in Cuba made

participants feel connected to the country. A few participants were unaware of the Black presence in Cuba as Keyonna expressed:

I actually didn't expect for it to be a lot of people of color in Cuba...So I feel like when I got there, I was also confused to know that okay, there are people who look like me there. I was actually confused, like, someone actually thought I was Cuban.

Some participants experienced culture shock visiting a country where they had perceptions of what Cubans looked like, based on who they have seen or encountered in the U.S. "Most the Cubans in America don't look like the Cubans back in Cuba," as Hanley stated. These statements can be attributed to the history and who was able to migrate to the states.

### History and Culture

"Having students learn and grasp their histories empowers them to have informed voices in their own struggles" (Adams, 2005, p. 297). As participants were learning more about the history of Cuba, they also reflected on how they viewed history in a U.S. context, represented by what Montell shared:

It made me realize that history is more dynamic and fluid compared to just being in the United States; it seems more static. So learning how everyone's history around Cuba affected their actual culture and history, that made me see history differently.

One way participants felt connected was learning more about the history of slavery in Cuba. "One of my interest areas is, while tracing the roots of the transatlantic slave trade, I'm also tracing the origins of the settlements of where African people are established and reside," Sunshine shared. While Sunshine already had an interest in the history of slavery, for some participants, they did not realize that Cuba was one of the locations during the transatlantic slave trade. Precious stated, "I was like, I didn't know that Cuba was one of the places that had that many slaves or was so Afro Cuban." She continued to share, "it was empowering, when they started bringing up all the gods, and all of our African heritage and African history in slavery." Sparkle found similarities in the history of slavery between Cuba and U.S.:

Oh, and then the historical context of it, like just realizing how much like, we're so similar in terms of like, the human history is very similar to African American history in the US. And just the different forms of oppression they've experienced we too have experienced in

the U.S. in terms of like people of color and also how similar we are in tourism, colorism; all those social issues are really a big issue in the U.S., too. It is not just oh, we had these little bit issues, and you have different issues. We have common issues. I think because we have so much in common, that we'll be able to help each other.

As the participants started learning more about the history of slavery in Cuba, they started to compare it to the history of slavery in the U.S. The shared commonalities of slavery helped the participants feel more connected to Cuba and created solidarity.

Participants also shared how learning and seeing the African culture in Cuba made them feel more connected to the country. Precious, Sparkle, and Montell shared the following:

And it was another eye-opening experience, you know, to see like, Oh, so this is what my people believe in. And this is what they thought. So it brought me even closer, you know, happier to be there. [Precious]

So just realizing that you're more connected than you think you are. I think in regards to us all being like people of color, that really helped drive it in, like, oh, we're very much connected more than what we think we are just because we feel far away. [Sparkle]

I feel like the fact that they were so in tune with their African culture, that was more of a way for us to all come together, compared to if we go to somewhere else where the African culture isn't really there then—it still might be interesting, but we still don't have like that deep connection. [Montell]

Students mentioned in their interviews that in Cuba they felt liberated by being able to express themselves fully in a country where they shared similar racialized experiences. Participants' statements around connecting to the history and culture of Cuba supports the literature on diasporic destinations for Black students as they are interested in learning and connecting to their history and culture (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Penn & Tanner, 2009; Yeboah, 2019).

### Black and Proud

Cultural immersion and the opportunity to interact with members of different communities in Cuba, especially with Afro-Cubans, deepened the connection participants had with the country. Also seeing how Blackness was

acknowledged and celebrated, resulted in participants gaining a different perspective of their own Black identities. Vivian shared:

And it was like they look like people I know back home, except they speak Spanish and don't speak English. So it was just amazing seeing the different ways that Blackness and just opened my mind even more as to like Blackness isn't just my American English speaking Blackness like you could be Black in different ways. And it made me feel like a sense of community because every time we saw Black people on the street, they were like "familia familia." They would point to their skin and we're both Black and that's beautiful, that's powerful like we're both Black.

The students were able to identify themselves in the Cuban fabric because of the warmth, welcoming, and collective actions of the people with whom they were in contact. This intentional welcoming reduces animosities that exist among racial minoritized people that live in the US.

Meghan felt being in Cuba around people that look like her gave her one of the few opportunities where she was not challenged based on her identity:

It was one of the few times that I was proud to be Black because I've always been in spaces where I had to prove myself to other people in the room. And it was the first time where I didn't have to prove myself, people didn't question my intelligence, or who I am based on the color of my skin.

Frank shared how Black identity in Cuba is acknowledged and celebrated made him feel more connected to his African roots, as there are not many opportunities to do so in the U.S.:

As African Americans, sometimes we don't have that connection to our African roots. And I think being in Cuba and hearing that this is a part of their life, like they are Afro Cubans and they had that connection. They have that love and passion and admiration for where they came from. And they know the history, like they can tell you the history, they can sing you the history, they can show you in history books, things that they know about their roots. And that was very different for me, coming from a place where a lot of our histories are hidden or lied about, or we're just finding out things about heroes or hidden figures in our history. And it was like amazing to see like, they're not hidden over there. Like, we celebrate our Blackness. And that was great.

Black students participating in diasporic study abroad experiences can have liberating experiences that strengthen their Black identity (Lee & Green, 2016; Morgan et al., 2002). Participants were excited to see how Blackness was celebrated in Cuba. They felt accepted, appreciated, and respected, an experience they do not have in the U.S. Through being immersed in the African history and culture of Cuba, participants felt a special connection that made them feel part of the community and family and proud of their Blackness.

## Further Discussion

As noted previously, study abroad programs bring spatialized notions of race in spaces and places that impact sense of belonging. When students study abroad, they bring with them their experiences, which are connected to and shaped by a person's identity and hinges on space, place, time, and culture. Black students traveling abroad bring added layers of these shaping mechanisms where the geographic place can help or harm the process of creating a sense of belonging during the program. How race presents itself in the study abroad experience including how the program is structured, the location of the destination, and the dynamics of participants (students, faculty, and staff) can all impact how Black students experience a sense of belonging, which guided our research questions: 1) What role does sense of belonging play in the experiences of Black students studying abroad? 2) What role does spatialized notions of race play in the experiences of Black students studying abroad? This research study sought to understand the experiences of Black students in a diasporic study abroad program. Specifically, this research delved into exploring spatialized notions of race and sense of belonging of Black students studying abroad in Cuba. The findings indicated that racialized spaces and places increased a sense of belonging for Black students abroad.

This fabric that the citizens of Cuba have created cultivates pride in oneself and power in being a part of the majority. This is far from Black American students' reported experiences in their home country, where inequalitarian policies are implemented and sustained. While some of the findings may appear to romanticize Cuba in terms of embracing Blackness, the focus of the study abroad experience being centered around social issues resulted in participants also contending with challenges of race, gender, and class. Although the influence of racism in its institutionalized forms has been eliminated in Cuba, the impacts of racism still exist (Cole, 1980), especially

economically. Selecting the location of Cuba ensured a sense of connection underscoring the spectrum of skin tones and what the spectrum presents regarding stigma or stereotypes associated with the color variation. Students witness that fairer skinned (racialized as White) people typically worked in the tourism industry, in financially better jobs, while darker skinned (racialized as Black) people maintained other positions, such as working in factories. The disparate working positions dependent upon skin color reveal a similar pattern to the way America divides resources according to different racialized groups. Students were able to empathize with the Afro-Cuban community as they have also experienced this similar treatment, thus highlighting the connection of belonging and the sense of social space and place.

The findings highlight how Black students were experiencing spatialized race positively, by sharing how much they loved their experience, due to the centering of Blackness. The findings support the existing literature on how diasporic destinations provide an empowering and liberating experience for Black students due to being able explore and learn about their heritage, history, and culture in different contexts (Lee & Green, 2016; Morgan et al., 2002; Penn & Tanner, 2009; Yeboah, 2019). Participants in this study abroad program were able to examine and experience history, culture, and the impact of segregating policies and practices in a global context. Having knowledge of Cuba through course content and actually visiting places to build connection and belonging appeared to reshape how they view and appreciate Blackness, which in turn positively impacted their Black identity.

The findings also illuminated how decentering whiteness positively impacts Black student belonging. Since whiteness is connected to dominance, it is typically centered and present knowingly and unknowingly in many spaces, excluding non-dominant voices. All the participants alluded to how whiteness can shape spaces, typically altering the behaviors of people who do not identify as white. However, in this specific study abroad experience, Blackness countered the presence of Whiteness in multiple ways: (a) the critical mass of students identifying as Black attending the trip; (b) how Blackness impacted how the group interacted with each other; and (c) Black students' freedom to contribute to the course content without hesitation. This highlights the importance of developing spaces where whiteness is not dominant, not only by having groups of students with Black identities, but also content and experiences that decenter whiteness to increase sense of belonging.



Given the intentional programming focused on creating a space for diverse identities, and the selection of Cuba as the destination for the study abroad trip, this study puts forwards the notion of having an internal sense of belonging, defined by the within group dynamics, connecting to the external sense of belonging, defined by the destination. In this study, both contexts influenced the sense of belonging of the participants, resulting in feelings of greater acceptance, respect, support, and inclusion (Figure 1).

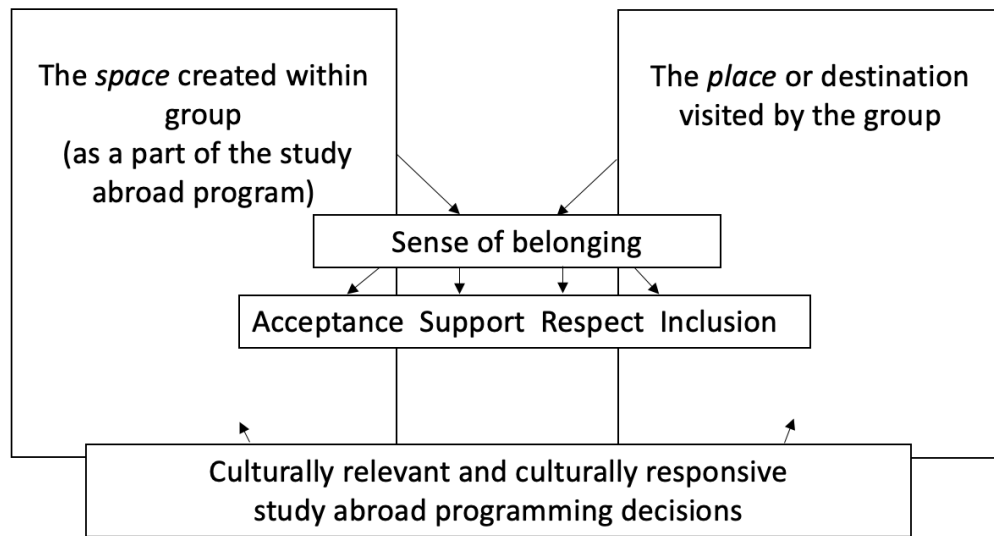


FIGURE (1): SENSE OF BELONGING WITHIN SPACE AND PLACE

Specifically, the data demonstrated the importance of participants feeling accepted, and able to be their authentic, true self. Through this they felt their black identity was respected, especially as African culture was proudly on display through program activities and experiences. Likewise, they felt supported and included by each other as well as the faculty and staff who mostly reflected their identities and helped craft the spaces for the students. They felt that they could contribute more to class, yet they did not have to prove their value of being there. In sum, this study shows the importance of a sense of belonging within the program and destination.

## Implications

Study abroad programs should be an experience available to all interested students. Institutions should start rethinking the direction of study abroad and its implications for Black students. Racism is a global phenomenon and the location of the study abroad program, along with the group dynamics,

can potentially reproduce racist experiences for Black students (Dessof, 2006; Lu et al., 2015; Perdreau, 2002; Sweeney, 2013; Yeboah, 2019). Creating study abroad experiences that center Blackness and Black people is beneficial to how Black students experience the space and place. It allows students to feel connected to the country and create a more meaningful learning experience. Experiences may be transformative to both the students and faculty members, thus providing insightful revelation on home country policies, programming, and services. When institutions are developing study abroad programs they should think about the cultural implications of the location and who is participating in the trip.

## Conclusion

Since sense of belonging is an ongoing, fluid process that may occur at certain times (Samura, 2016), institutions need to create multiple opportunities to increase sense of belonging for underrepresented populations. Black students at PWIs are often in unwelcoming environments, so it is important to create spaces and opportunities for them to build community where they feel they belong (Duran et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2019). The findings of this study offer insight in study abroad programs as spaces for sense of belonging for Black students. This study contributes to the field of international higher education and the limited research on Black students in a diasporic study abroad experience. By analyzing the experiences of Black students (and other underrepresented groups) in study abroad, institutions can better understand how to increase engagement and reconsider the locations of study abroad sites. Diasporic study abroad experiences can be transformative for underrepresented populations. When one is taken out of the everyday imperialist ideology of racial oppression and racism structured society, they have a chance to seek new horizons and apply these new horizons to life and careers at large.

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**Dr. Lauren Duffy** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at Clemson University. Her research program is grounded within critical leisure and tourism studies where she explores issues of power in tourism planning and development, rural and community-based tourism planning, gender and feminist epistemologies, political economy, local food systems, and resident-tourist relationships. Her pedagogical research has focused on critical pedagogy, international education, service-learning, collaboration, and transformative learning.

**Laetitia Adelson** is a Senior Career Consultant and third-year doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Her research agenda focuses on the experiences of Black students and intercollegiate athletics. Her higher education career has always focused on creating programs and spaces that focus on college and career readiness where students can thrive. She earned her M.Ed. in Counselor education at Clemson and her Bachelor of science in Health Promotion from The University of Georgia.

**Jason Combs** is the Director of the Clemson-based college access program Emerging Scholars. He earned a B.A in political science and an M.Ed. in counselor education with an emphasis in student affairs from Clemson University. He has spent his higher education career supporting students along the I-95 corridor of South Carolina as they access higher education. Jason is passionate about his work building bridges to higher education for underrepresented students.

**Dr. Kendra Stewart-Tillman** is an educator whose work and research focuses on creating inclusive campus cultures and building intercultural capacity for all

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