

*Reimagining secondary-level study abroad on the African Continent
via Pan-African Voices & Photovoice*

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Research Question: *What can we learn from students and faculty at a pan-African high school in South Africa that might help reimagine study abroad for young Americans visiting the African Continent?*

Background

When I was a teenager, my family relocated to Niamey, Niger for one academic year as my father conducted research as a part of a Fulbright scholarship. This lived experience, occurring at a critical moment in my adolescent development, would alter my sense of self, my worldview, and my life goals immeasurably. Later, formal, global learning opportunities would add to my impression that international travel programming can be among the most perspective-shifting and transformative individual educational experiences accessible to (select) American high school students and undergraduates. My lived experiences as both a beneficiary and a facilitator have convinced me that study abroad experiences can be paradigm-shifting for participants – they can enable deeply immersive, humanizing, experiential engagement, awaken students to patterns of global and historical oppression and resistance, build solidarity, and serve as platforms for identity exploration.

However, in my experience as a past participant, facilitator, and observer, study abroad for adolescents on the African continent is exceedingly rare, and, when it is undertaken, it tends to be framed uncritically. This is an issue, as study abroad in general and on the African Continent, specifically, are potentially problematic on a number of fronts. For one, study abroad can be an inequitable space, with greater access to international learning experiences going to youth from families with the cultural and financial capital to facilitate them. However this isn't the only angle to inequity; issues regarding power dynamics and access to resources also exist when it comes to interactions with host sites. Many study abroad programs are not only non-exchange oriented (as young Americans are able to visit the African continent but the reverse isn't true), but also may not prioritize reciprocity beyond modest financial compensation and thereby reinforce engrained power dynamics. These inequitable, power-imbalanced, potentially extractive and exploitative realities both echo the historical and enable the contemporary persistence of colonial dynamics. Questions of power, privilege, and positionality become even more nuanced when one considers the experience of majority white vs. majority-POC (ex: African Diasporic) study abroad cohorts (re)visiting the

Continent. Given all of this complexity, study abroad can not only fail to live up to its full transformative potential but can also enact and perpetuate real harm.

Given the many potential pitfalls, there could be an argument made that study abroad on the African Continent is indefensible. If study abroad opportunities for young Americans visiting the Continent are to persist, they need to be critically reimagined in order to simultaneously reduce harm and consider the ways in which their programming could be more impactful for all parties involved and lead to a more equitable and just world through the learning experiences enabled. In an attempt to break from the longstanding tradition of paternalistic and misguided Western projects being implemented on the African Continent that devalue indigenous voices and proceed without consultation from the humans most impacted by those projects, I aimed to reconsider study abroad on the Continent from the perspective of a past and present host community for young Americans visiting South Africa – and to contribute to discussions of a more ethical and humanizing study abroad by seeking out and elevating the voices of the pan-African students and faculty at my former employer, African Leadership Academy (ALA), in Johannesburg. To this end, I applied for and received funding from Harvard's Center for African Studies to conduct research – applying many of the critical qualitative research methods learned in the HGSE course *Emancipatory Inquiry: Listening, Learning, and Acting for Social Change* – on ALA's campus in January of 2023.

Methods

My methods for this project were two-fold but both fell under the umbrella of critical qualitative approaches. First, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten adult members of ALA's faculty and staff. These ten, 30-minute-to-one-hour, recorded interviews were semi-structured in that I had a list of questions related to secondary-level study abroad available but encouraged participants to engage with these questions (or deviate from them) to whatever extent or in whichever order they chose. All participants were full-time members of ALA's "staffulty" who had been at the Academy for multiple years and who had therefore had some exposure to the phenomenon of young Americans visiting the Academy's campus. Participants represented a diverse range of identities and positionalities. All but one participant were nationals of African countries (representing eight different countries), with one participant being African-American (with extensive experience living and traveling on the African Continent). Six of the ten participants identified as male, with four identifying as female. Eight of the ten participants self-identify as black, with two others identifying as South Africans of white/European and Indian descent, respectively. Reflecting some of the demographic biases of ALA, all participants hailed from former English colonies and spoke English as a first or second language. A majority of participants had attained some portion of their educational experiences outside of the African Continent (ex: attended small liberal arts institutions in the US for their undergrad) and many had themselves been participants in study abroad or global exchange programs.

Second, I conducted a short, adapted Photovoice project with three current ALA students. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that integrates aspects of Critical Consciousness, Feminist Theory, and documentary photography and that aims to “interrogate contextually based meanings from an insider perspective as a means to generate new insights into our socially constructed realities and cultures.” This project constituted an “adapted” Photovoice process in that it wasn’t fully participatory given that I, as researcher, dictated the topic for this project (study abroad for young Americans visiting the African Continent) rather than participants generating topics based on their own priorities. In spite of this admittedly less-than-participatory starting point, I chose Photovoice as a method because I surmised that its participant-driven process might negate some of the power differentials and potential for distorting meaning that came along with my identities (ex: my age, race) and positionality relative to the students involved. We otherwise remained faithful to a traditional Photovoice process: students were trained in the method, dispersed to document their daily lives, and then returned to share their photographs, make collective meaning from them, and debrief on what their photographs revealed about “what is good” and “what should be reimagined” regarding American youth studying in their community. The participants were all current ALA students (two male-identifying and one female-identifying) over the age of 18 and representing three different African nationalities.

Findings

In the subsequent months, I employed a speech-to-text AI service to transcribe the recordings from my ten interviews and Photovoice session. I then conducted thematic coding, drawing recurring themes from the interview and Photovoice transcripts and sorting these into categories: “What is/can be good?” “What is/can be problematic?” and “How can we do more good/less harm?”.

What is/can be good:

- Opportunities for individual participants’ intellectual, social growth. Opportunities for identity development (ex: ethnic-racial), growing self-awareness
- Love. Building deep, humanizing friendships across borders. Sustaining mutually-beneficial partnerships
- The potential for global collectivity and connectivity. Building the groundwork for transnational collaboration towards solving global problems
- Visiting Americans injecting new perspectives, infectious curiosity into host communities
- The beauty of and learning from diverse study abroad cohorts (ex: ethnic-racially, socioeconomically)
- Opportunities for participants to come away increasingly cognizant of the nuances, complexity, and diversity of the African Continent and world
- The potential for learnings from study abroad experiences to transfer back home: through newly-honed critical lenses, through a desire to take action to address injustice, etc.
- The potential for study abroad to be a platform for humanization and healing

What is/can be problematic:

- Foundational inequities such as a lack of “exchange” (i.e. Americans visiting the Continent, the reverse not being the case), power dynamics re: who is financing vs. providing services
- Lacking cultural competence/historical consciousness/awareness of privilege & American hegemony
- Entitlement. Americans expecting/receiving resources and treatment unavailable to peers from the Continent
- Transient, transactional relationships. Students from the Continent feeling objectified or instrumentalized. Fears that Americans are extracting experiences “for their CV’s/college applications”
- Microaggressions carried out by insensitive young Americans and the (unpaid) labor asked of host students and faculty to correct
- Exclusivity, visitors moving in cliques. Young people “coming to the Continent to do what they do at home” i.e. not getting out of their comfort zones, behaving and interacting with people in a manner similar to lives back home
- Trips requiring only surface-level engagement and providing a lack of educational value (study abroad as an extended vacation rather than a learning experience)
- Young Americans emerging from study abroad programs overconfident/overgeneralizing in their knowledge of the African Continent (and being treated as experts upon their return)
- Lack of intersectional approach re: preparing and supporting diverse cohorts of students with differing intersectional identities (in both the sending and host communities) ex: designing study abroad programs that equally support BIPOC Americans, LGBTQ students

Recommendations: How can we do more good/less harm?

- Avoiding a top-down approach to program design. Prioritizing dialogue between sending and receiving parties (with an awareness of power dynamics, inequities) from onset. Considering benefits beyond the financial. Engaging in ongoing revisiting and renegotiation of these partnerships
- Considering the implications of foundational design features ex: equal access to resources and benefits, framing as an “exchange” or lack thereof. Avoiding foundationally unequal designs, prioritizing reciprocity in partnerships
- Mindfulness of design features such as program duration and cohort size, as well as clarity around educational objectives
- Increasing diversity of cohorts AND maintaining an intersectional lens during program design and implementation (avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach)
- Requiring mandatory, extensive pre-work and rhythms of critical reflection throughout. Creating space for “Stupid Q’s” before/early on in travels. Building historical consciousness through substantive pre-reading on history of host country and community including colonial histories and contemporary legacies. “Doing the work”

- Designing reflection-heavy programming that enables “the sweet spot” for learning and growth through a delicate balance between discomfort & comfort for all
- Creating egalitarian spaces for group learning ex: students from host, visitor communities reading and collectively discussing common, carefully-curated, provocative texts
- Prioritizing play. Adults “getting out of the way.” Creating space for joy. Remembering the importance of informal learning through “just hanging out”

Final Reflections

As previously mentioned, the interviews I conducted were semi-structured and therefore for the most part fluid, organic, and shaped by the participant’s interests – I encouraged participants to answer (or not) any of the predetermined questions I had articulated and to do so in any order they saw fit. However, the one question I managed to weave into every interview was: *“Should study abroad on the African continent exist?”* In response to this one question, I receive a diverse range of answers:

“Yes. Without reservation. I think it's a benefit for both parties. ...There's a healing that needs to happen. There are gaps in the stories, on all sides. And we must continue to try and, you know, connect in order to rebuild...to heal.”

“I don't think so. No... as long as there is inequity that's very radical... whatever resources are important in study abroad programs should go to something in the [visited] institutions...that benefits the students there.”

“If you're gonna keep doing things as they are, I don't think so.”

“[Yes, and...] if it's not challenging you might not be thoughtful enough.”

As demonstrated above, responses were varied and nuanced, ranging from an absolute “no” to an unequivocal “yes.” However, a majority of participants’ answers resembled something along the lines of “yes, but...”; most participants believed in the positively transformative potential of such programs but agreed that we should proceed with caution and only after meeting certain conditions.

There are convincing arguments to be made for ceasing study abroad programming on the Continent. If we are to proceed, it’s essential we reimagine such programs in a manner that shifts them from the merely transactional to the mutually transformational, a shift can only take place with great criticality and socio-historical consciousness and through real, reflexive, and recurring dialogue between all parties. If so, we stand a chance of imagining experiences that enable young people...

“to ask questions about the world they live in and what the world they could live in.”

“[to experience] difference and common humanity [which] should be an important educational experience for everyone...whether that's on a domestic, regional or international level...A good outcome is like falling in love with humanity.”

“to engage with the common humanity of someone that you think is very different from themselves. You can learn a really powerful lesson from making a friend: I thought the distance between us was so far, but actually, the distance is miniscule.”

“[to enable] the stuff that is the most beautiful thing: love. And it is manifested in the form of lasting meaningful friendship – that spark between two people who might not otherwise have met.”

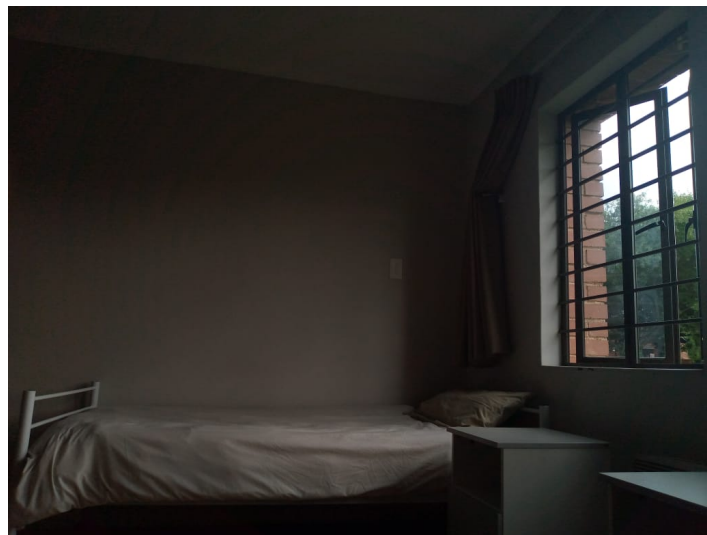
Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Who are you? What is your role at ALA? What has your experience with study abroad for young Americans on the African Continent entailed?
2. What is good about what already exists (re: current study abroad programming)?
3. If you could reimagine study abroad programming on the African Continent, what would it entail? Possible adaptation: what would it look, sound, and feel like?
4. What are the best-case outcomes of young Americans studying abroad on the Continent?
5. What are the worst-case outcomes of young Americans studying abroad on the Continent?
6. Follow-up: how might we enable the best-case and prevent the worst-case?
7. What should partnership, exchange, and reciprocity look like for study abroad programming on the Continent?
8. What are three things you wish every young American (or adult) visiting the African Continent should be bringing with them when entering your communities? Follow-up: What should those same students/adults be leaving with?
9. What should Americans preparing for study abroad programming on the African Continent be reading/listening to/viewing/engaging with?
10. Should study abroad on the African continent exist?
11. What would a “decolonized” study abroad program on the African Continent look like?
12. What relationship might exist between study abroad and developing Critical Consciousness?
13. How have you seen intersectionality at play in study abroad programming on the Continent?
14. Do you have any other stories about young Americans visiting the Continent that you would like to share?
15. What questions have I not asked that I should be asking?
16. Regarding reciprocity: how can I be of use to you during my time in S. Africa and onward?

Appendix B: Examples of student photographs from Photovoice process



In our Photovoice session – after documenting their daily lives as they pertained to the topic of Americans studying abroad in their community – participants selected the photo above to discuss in detail and collectively “make meaning” from. When discussing this photo, participants raised the significance of intersectional identities in the subjects pictured, noted what they perceived as subtle power dynamics manifested in the physical arrangement of the subjects, and voiced their belief in the importance of downtime and informal spaces in building humanizing friendships, among other topics.



One Photovoice participant submitted this somewhat haunting, tender image to represent the empty bed of their American former roommate who had left at the conclusion of the semester prior and whose presence and friendship the participant missed (perhaps encapsulating some of “what is/can be good” in study abroad)