

2022

Asian American Heritage Seeking: Toward a Critical and Conscious Study Abroad Curriculum

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Twishime, Porntip Israsena, "Asian American Heritage Seeking: Toward a Critical and Conscious Study Abroad Curriculum" (2022). *Historically Underrepresented Faculty and Students in Education Abroad*. 22. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13056-4_11

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**Asian American Heritage Seeking:
Toward a Critical and Conscious Study Abroad Curriculum**

Invited book chapter for

*Historically Underrepresented Faculty and Students in Education Abroad:
Wandering Where We Belong*

by

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Word count: 6948 (excluding abstract and references)

Author Note

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

The author examines the connections between education abroad, race, and belonging through a framework that is critical of U.S. empire. Drawing on her experience as a Thai American heritage seeking study abroad student and a former study abroad advisor at two different public universities, the author shares stories about race and belonging from semi-structured interviews with fellow Asian American heritage-seekers. The author connects these stories with the politically- and militaristically-driven development of U.S. education abroad programs and demonstrates how these stories confront the ongoing and historical processes that racialize Asian Americans as “perpetually foreign,” as in belonging elsewhere—Asia. These stories illustrate a need for a critical and conscious education abroad curriculum that addresses issues of race for all students. The author suggests that education abroad curriculum ought to cover topics including U.S. empire, race, and belonging, and that this curriculum can be developed in collaboration with ethnic and transnational feminist programs and scholars, diversity and inclusion offices, mental and psychological health professionals, and other experts in these areas. The author concludes with a list of action items that can move us toward a more critical and conscious education abroad curriculum.

Keywords: Education abroad, Curriculum, Race, Belonging, Asian American

**Asian American Heritage Seeking:
Toward a Critical and Conscious Study Abroad Curriculum**

Racism can surprise students expecting a warm welcome.

Beatrice B. Szekely, 1998

The sun was rising over the Chao Phraya River when my plane landed in Bangkok. I followed the waves of people to the customs and immigration checkpoint. The stoic immigration officer opened my U.S. passport, scanned the first page, and looked up at me. Our eyes locked. My eyes held a longing for recognition, and his, a sense of obligation and scrutiny. My cheeks reddened when I realized that he might speak to me in Thai after seeing my name. I wanted him to speak Thai even though I'd have no way of understanding him or responding to him since I had come to Thailand to learn Thai. If he did speak to me in Thai, I figured, it would mean that he recognized me as a Thai American "returning" to Thailand. I anticipated a warm welcome. Thailand, I had imagined, would be the place where I wouldn't have to explain my name or how to pronounce it. I would belong, be recognized, known, and seen. No one would ask me questions about "authentic" Thai food. Instead, I could ask all my own questions in the University's Thai cooking class that I registered for. I would no longer have to differentiate between Thailand and Taiwan. I would lean on my father's family to cultivate a sense of belonging. I had imagined that Thailand was awaiting my return, just as I had been awaiting my arrival.

There are many reasons why college students participate in study abroad and there are many factors they consider when selecting their host country. *Heritage-seekers*, like me, "select a study abroad venue because of family background—national, religious, cultural or ethnic" (Szekely, 1998, p. 107). In 2012-2013, I studied abroad in Thailand because I wanted to learn

about my family and my cultural and ethnic background. I also selected Thailand as my host country because at the time I believed it was where I belonged. This belief came from my experience growing up and being “othered” in an American racial landscape that marked me, and other Asians and Asian Americans, as not belonging in the U.S. —as “foreign.” This type of othering is referred to as *the perpetual foreigner* (Lee, 2015; Lowe, 1996; Park, 2015), an American “type of Orientalism” (Lee, 2015, pp.6-8) that depicts Asians and Asian Americans as incapable of being “American” because our cultures are cast as “backward, submissive, and inferior” (ibid). Such a racial landscape implies that Asians and Asian Americans belong in Asia. In these ways, race and notions of belonging in the United States are intimately intertwined. Issues of race and belonging aren’t left behind in the U.S. when students study abroad. In fact, they follow students to their host countries and can take on different meanings given the transnational and local contexts.

In this chapter, I examine the connections between education abroad, race, and belonging through a framework that is critical of U.S. empire. Drawing on my experience as a Thai American heritage-seeker and a former study abroad advisor at two public universities, I share stories about race and belonging that emerged in semi-structured interviews with fellow Asian American heritage-seekers. I connect these stories with the politically- and militaristically-driven development of U.S. education abroad programs and I demonstrate how these stories confront the ongoing and historical processes that racialize Asian Americans as “perpetually foreign,” as in belonging elsewhere—Asia. These stories illustrate a need for a critical and conscious education abroad curriculum that addresses issues of race for all students. I argue for an education abroad curriculum that covers topics such as U.S. empire, race, and belonging, and that this curriculum be developed in collaboration with ethnic and transnational feminist

programs and scholars, diversity and inclusion offices, mental and psychological health professionals, and other experts in these areas. I conclude with a list of action items that can move us toward a more critical and conscious education abroad curriculum.

Heritage Seeking: A History of U.S. Empire and Education Abroad

I first learned about heritage seeking by coincidence in 2014 after I returned from studying abroad in Thailand. I had recently graduated college and took my first job as a study abroad advisor at a public, metropolitan teaching university in the South where I worked for three years before transitioning to a study abroad office at a research university in the Northeast. A few months into my work, I was recruited to review applications for a federal study abroad scholarship program. Reviewers were trained to rank the applications. The organizers explained that the most important selection criteria was that the student proposed a study abroad program that “fit well” with their expressed academic and professional goals. “Fit well,” they admitted, was up to interpretation, but the program aimed to award scholarships to students with a clear understanding of how the study abroad experience might support their academic and professional goals rather than studying abroad “just” to travel. The organizers specified that we were not to penalize heritage seeking applicants for their desire to study abroad in a country of their heritage so long as the program also “fit well” with their academic and professional goals. They gave us an example of a Chinese American student who wants to study abroad in China to learn about business practices and to learn more about their heritage. I presume that the organizers told us not to penalize these applicants because reviewers might otherwise dismiss heritage seeking as an insignificant reason for studying abroad.

This was the first time that I heard the term heritage-seeker and that I realized my program in Thailand was an example of heritage seeking—that I had been a heritage-seeker. Until then, I was unaware there was language to talk about my experience. As a study abroad advisor, I wanted to support heritage seeking students and so I began searching for resources and literature pertaining to heritage-seekers. One of the few resources I found was Beatrice B. Szekely’s essay “Seeking Heritage in Study Abroad” in the 1997-1998 *Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange*. She charts when and under what conditions heritage seeking emerged in the history of study abroad. Szekely identifies two key factors that led to study abroad as a heritage seeking practice: 1) the commodification of higher education and 2) the emergence of U.S. post-World War II and Cold War foreign policy efforts involving sending students and young professionals abroad.

Study abroad in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Szekely explains, was limited almost exclusively to the privileged elite at top-ranked American universities who studied law, medicine, or art in England, Scotland, Germany, and Italy. Given that the great majority of these students were white, there was an assumption that study abroad students would have a “cultural kinship” (ibid, p. 107) with their host country—European descendants studying abroad in Europe. In other words, she says, “Study abroad for young [white] Americans to understand their European heritage laid the foundation for the junior year abroad model” (ibid). She implies that this was not marked as heritage seeking, but simply studying abroad. The notion of “heritage seeking” emerged in the twentieth century when students of color began studying abroad in places of their heritage, in places beyond Western Europe. Similarly, today, white students studying abroad in Europe are generally not marked as heritage-seekers. I suspect that white heritage-seekers go unmarked in the same way that whiteness is generally unremarkable in

academia (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Córdova, 1998; Matthew, 2016), and because their heritage seeking experiences are not propelled by a sense of not belonging in the United States the way that many Asian American and other students of color experiences are.

Likewise, in the second half of the twentieth-century, U.S. higher education emerged as a “mass enterprise” (Szekely, 1998, p. 124). With the influx of women, middle and working-class people, and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) attending colleges and universities across the United States, there was also a “sizeable group” (ibid) of BIPOC study abroad students. This was around the same time that the U.S. government began funding programs for students to study and work abroad in regions of national political interest. These programs were part of the nation’s post-World War II and Cold War foreign policy efforts. The Fulbright program, for instance, was established immediately after the end of World War II in 1946. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of State’s Fulbright Program Overview website, the first Fulbright scholars to go abroad in 1948 were funded by “war reparations and foreign loan repayments to the United States.” Similarly, the Peace Corps was established in 1961 and was justified by former President John F. Kennedy's belief “that the United States had ‘to do better’ in competing with Moscow for the allegiance of the newly independent countries of the Third World” (Cobbs, 1996, p. 79-80). Which is to say that the U.S. government used private citizens as diplomatic figures to improve the nation’s image abroad. Through programs like these students and young professionals became regional or area “specialists,” studied languages of strategic interest to the U.S. government, and represented the United States abroad as private citizens, making education abroad a foreign policy tool.

To use education abroad as a foreign policy tool is an act of U.S. imperialism— “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and

owned by others” (Said, 1994, p. 7). Imperialism is not only political and military control but also intellectual, cultural, economic, and migratory control, what Arundhati Roy refers to as an “obscene accumulation of power” (2003, p. 2). It is important to understand education abroad as a tool of U.S. empire because U.S. priorities and interests directly affect where students can and do study abroad, and regardless of whether students support U.S. foreign policy goals, their study abroad experiences perform a kind of diplomatic labor. This is why so many pre-departure orientations and advising sessions frame students as “representatives” of their campus and country. Students take on diplomatic roles, in what is referred to as soft power, an interpersonal political strategy for “getting others to want the same outcomes you want” (Nye, 2004, Ch. 1, Soft Power section). These outcomes span political and military interests as well as symbolic capital and “legitimizing American global primacy” (Baykurt and de Grazia, 2021, p. 2).

Over time, as U.S. foreign policy interests and priorities shift, so too do study abroad programs. When U.S. foreign policy shifted away from WWII reparations in Europe and toward postcolonial and decolonizing nations, for instance, colleges established area studies, such as Asian Studies, Slavic Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies, as well as study abroad programs in these regions. Today, there are several federally funded programs that prioritize sending U.S. citizens to locations that are of current strategic interest to the U.S. government. These federally funded education abroad programs are explicitly designed to benefit the United States, and the marketing for these programs makes that abundantly clear. For example, Fulbright has an expressed objective of “mutual understanding between the United States and other countries” (Fulbright, Program Overview section, para. 1). The Critical Language Scholarship Program likewise describes itself as “part of a wider government initiative to expand the number of Americans studying and mastering foreign languages that are critical to [U.S.] *national security*”

and *economic prosperity*” (emphasis in the original; CLS, Program Overview section, para. 2). Similarly, the Boren Awards are marketed as exclusively funding applicants who study or research “in world regions of critical interest to U.S. interests” (Boren, Programs section, scholarships and fellowships tagline). To ensure that the U.S. government benefits from the recipient’s educational experience abroad, as explained in the selection criteria, in exchange for funding, “Boren Awards recipients commit to working in the federal government for at least one year after graduation. Preference will be given to applicants who demonstrate a longer term commitment to government service” (Boren, Official Selection Criteria section, item no. 2). These key examples demonstrate that the U.S. government invests in education abroad programs to advance the national strategic interests.

While the U.S. government views education abroad as an opportunity and means to advance national interests, students of color, as Szekely points out, simultaneously use education abroad to learn about their heritage. She describes several different accounts of heritage seeking: African American Muslims studying in Egypt; Spanish language heritage learners studying in Mexico; and Korean American adoptees studying in South Korea, among others. The heritage-seekers that I interviewed all identify as Asian American. I intentionally center Asian American heritage seeking experiences because of the particular racial logics that mark Asians and Asian Americans as not belonging in the United States. I am also critical of how the U.S. government’s political interests shape where study abroad students can and cannot study, as this affects many countries across Asia. For instance, colleges and universities avoid sending students to countries that are not deemed “safe” by the U.S. Department of State as a matter of risk management. They also avoid locations that are unable to comfortably accommodate American students (read: white, middle-class, English-only-speaking). This means that very few of the Vietnamese,

Laotian, and Cambodian second- and third-generation migrants, whose families came to the United States during and after the War in Vietnam and who are coming of age and attending universities, can study abroad in a country of their heritage. The same can be said for Pakistani, Nepali, or Bangladeshi Americans, and even eighth-generation Filipina/o Americans, among others. It is not surprising then that only 12 percent of study abroad students study in Asia, while nearly 56 percent study abroad in Europe (Institute of International Education “IIE,” 2020, p. 2). There is no data available about how many students studying in Asia are heritage-seekers, but IIE reports that only 9 percent of all study abroad students are Asian, a very low number when compared to the 70 percent of white students (ibid). In these ways, the Asian American heritage seeking stories that I share here reveal how education abroad programs are entangled with and inseparable from race and U.S. empire.

Storytelling Methodologies

Personal narratives are not new or extraordinary. As performance scholars Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson argue, personal narrative “is performed everywhere: in conversation, in print, on radio, television, and stage, and over the Internet. As an elemental, ubiquitous, and consequential part of daily life, its pleasures and power reach far and deeply into our lives” (2005, p. 151). They also contend that all stories are performed by “some body” (ibid, p. 157). What they mean is that the act of performing narrative, what we might just call *storytelling*, occurs through the body—the listening and speaking body. This places the body and stories in context. Stories don’t appear out of thin air. They are always situated in and informed by social, cultural, and structural contexts, and power. Queer, feminist, working-class, scholars of color across multiple disciplines have articulated and practice a range of storytelling methodologies, such as personal narrative (Langellier, 1989; Madison, 1998), counter-

storytelling (Martinez, 2016), oral histories (Napoli et al., 2020; Madison, 1993), autoethnography (Alexander et al., 2019; Diversi and Moreira, 2018), testimonio (Castañeda et al., 2017), narrative analysis (Hemmings, 2011), and other critical and creative literary practices (Bell, 1995; Christian, 1987; Morrison, 1993). Together, these storytelling methodologies broadly connect stories (lived and literary) to operations of power in the social world.

Drawing upon Langellier and Peterson's (2005) storytelling as communication framework, I solicited stories about Asian American heritage seeking through semi-structured interviews with five Asian Americans. I conducted one interview with each participant in 2017, conducting three face-to-face and two via Skype (one heritage-seeker was studying abroad at the time of the interview and the other local participant was unable to travel for an interview). I audio-recorded the interviews which lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each. To recruit participants, I collaborated with the education abroad offices and the Asian/American studies programs in the local Five College Consortium to circulate a call for participants by email. The participants received and responded to my call, and from there we arranged an interview time. During the interview, I began with open-ended questions (such as, *tell me about a defining moment during your study abroad experience*) to cultivate a dialogue that participants were also interested and invested in, what Holstein and Gubrium call "active interviewing" (1997, p. 113).

Of the five participants, three participants identify as Chinese Americans, one as a multiethnic Korean and Vietnamese American, and another as a multiracial Thai American. Prior to the interviews, I had only previously interacted with one participant through campus activities. All participants identify as Asian American women in their early twenties who studied abroad in 2017, and all but one specifically asked me not to use pseudonyms when sharing their stories. Despite my attempt to recruit heritage-seekers from a range of Asian backgrounds, it is not

surprising that, even with such a small sample size, there is an overrepresentation of East Asian Americans (four of five participants). This underscores the role that U.S. empire and academic institutions play in crafting heritage seeking experiences. East Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, tick off two major boxes: 1) they are generally deemed safe for students visiting from U.S. colleges and universities and 2) the U.S. maintains political, economic, and militaristic interests in each of these countries. Across all five interviews, race and belonging emerged as major themes. These themes illustrate the effects of transnational racial politics on study abroad students and the need for a curriculum that prepares students for and supports them through racial encounters abroad.

Race and Belonging

Race is not a biological phenomenon, but a social one. This means that race evolves over time through the social world. Ethnic studies scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant define *race* as “a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to those differences” (2015, p. 111). In other words, race is both 1) the process through which particular bodies are marked as different as well as 2) an assignment of meaning to those differences. It is important to note that race in the United States is “tethered” to “the ideology of white supremacy that... [sic] has transformed into an increasingly complex system of dispossession and violence. The inequality at the center of racism and white supremacy is based on the enduring power of race as a flexible and shifting category” (Rana, 2015, p. 202). Omi and Winant theorize this shifting nature of race as *racial formation*: “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out,

transformed, and destroyed” (2015, p. 109). This process, they argue, occurs over time through multiple *racial projects*, which are “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines” (ibid, p. 125).

Asian American scholars often point to two contradictory racial projects that operate simultaneously to construct Asian American racial subjects: *inclusion* and *exclusion* (Hoang, 2015; Park, 2015; Lowe, 1996). “These [racial projects] have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere,” Lowe (1996) explains, “and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins” (p. 4). This means that, on the one hand, Asians in the U.S. are marked as models of assimilation—the “model minority”—and, on the other hand, they are marked as unassimilable “Orientals”—the “perpetual foreigner.” These two racial projects can be collapsed into what Park (2015) calls the “paradoxical nature of American citizenship, in which the state presents itself as a democratic, unified body where all subjects are granted equal access, while it also demands differences—of race, class, gender, and locality—be subordinated in order for those subjects to qualify for membership” (p. 17). That is, in order for Asians to be “American,” they must be and remain Othered, but not to the extent they are exotic, “Oriental,” or unassimilable—they must be able to perform both Otherness and Americanness.

The experience of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion informs the conditions of Asian American belonging and raises important questions about Asian American heritage-seekers. How do constructions of race and belonging affect Asian American heritage seeking before, during, and after studying abroad? How do Asian Americans experience race and belonging in the United States and abroad? And how can education abroad practitioners better support

heritage-seekers and other BIPOC study abroad students? The following stories offer insight into these questions and suggest that a critical and conscious education abroad curriculum can help prepare students to navigate transnational racial politics.

“Aren’t all Americans supposed to be blonde-haired and blue-eyed?”

It goes without saying that all study abroad students cross international borders—leaving the United States for another country, culture, and environment. What is less obvious, however, is how students encounter evolving transnational racial politics that are compounded by the ways they experience race in the United States. In my experience, study abroad advising and pre-departure orientations tend to either avoid the topic of race or only mention it without a serious engagement of how transnational racial politics may affect students’ experiences, especially BIPOC student experiences.

Every one of my interview participants shared that they experience some degree of exclusion in the United States like feelings of not belonging because of their race as Asian Americans. The participants all also indicated that this racialized sense of not belonging in the U.S. contributed, at least in part, to their rationale for studying abroad in a place of their heritage. Chan, who studied abroad in South Korea, for example, told me she thought she was “going to find everything that had been missing from her life in [Massachusetts.]” Another participant, Julia, who identifies as a multiracial Thai and Irish American, explained that she debated whether to study abroad in Thailand or Ireland. Ultimately, she decided to study abroad in Thailand because her family encouraged her to study abroad in Thailand so she could go “back to her roots,” despite also having “roots” in Ireland. The emphasis placed on Julia’s Thai “roots” implies that she is supposed to experience a sense of belonging and connection to the place, land, and people. In other words, Asian American heritage-seekers are seeking both heritage and a

place of belonging. Regardless of whether my participants consciously considered belonging as a reason for their heritage-seeking or not, all of them shared that belonging in their host country was not as simple as they had imagined. They reported having to navigate competing expectations from several directions—from their fellow study abroad students, local classmates, education abroad professionals at home and abroad, relatives at home and in the host country, and others they interacted with while abroad. For instance, fellow study abroad students often depended on heritage-seekers for cultural knowledge and translation, while local students sought out “English-buddy” relationships with heritage-seekers assuming that they could translate or otherwise understand where locals were coming from in their attempts to learn English. In these ways, Asian American heritage-seekers reported feeling like “betweeners,” people who experience life “in and between two cultures” (Diversi and Moreira, 2009, p. 19).

Emily, a Chinese American heritage-seeker who studied abroad in Beijing, told me about how “everyone” in China assumed she was Chinese and that she could speak Mandarin even though she couldn’t and went there specifically to learn Mandarin. She described these expectations as “awkward” particularly when these kinds of encounters involved white friends. For instance, she recalled, “Sometimes I would walk around with a white friend or something and then [local] people would go up to me and speak Chinese to me to try to relay information to the white person. But actually, when this would happen, sometimes, I would be with a white friend who spoke better Chinese than me.” While awkward, this experience wasn’t a surprise for Emily because, on her previous family trips to China, locals assumed she could speak Mandarin. Studying abroad was the first time Emily traveled to China without her family. What did surprise her was how local people doubted her when she told them that she was an “American” study abroad student.

“One thing I didn’t expect, though,” Emily began, “was this one guy on the street [in Beijing] who came up to [me and my roommate] and started talking [to us]. I told him that I’m from America and he asked, ‘Aren’t all Americans supposed to be blonde haired and blue eyed?’” We both froze when she shared this story with me. I was struck by how explicitly this man relied upon such specific markers of whiteness to characterize people from the U.S. and how he used it to preclude Emily from being an American as she had described herself. I could see Emily was physically holding her breath and I held mine. Oddly and perhaps out of discomfort, we burst into laughter at the absurdity of the question. The absurdity of the man’s question is a chilling revelation of how great an effect the dominance of white representation has beyond the United States. The assumption of Americans as white and the conflation of whiteness with U.S. citizenship get mapped onto study abroad students of color who come from American colleges and universities. The question for education abroad professionals is how to better prepare students to navigate these issues and support them as they encounter them. As Emily’s encounter with this stranger demonstrates, issues of race follow students to their host countries and can take on different meanings. Emily went to China in search of belonging or to find “her people,” and instead, “her people” expected her to have a specific language and cultural knowledge that she lacked and yet they also denied her American identity because she isn’t white, reinforcing the racial logics of belonging in the U.S. that mark Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Emily belonged neither in the United States nor China—an effect of empire, in which “American” is continually reproduced through and as whiteness on a global scale.

Emily finished her story by linking this encounter with the absence of Asian American content in secondary education in the United States. “I never really thought about my Asian

American identity until coming to college and studying abroad in China. I mean, you don't really read about Asian American history in textbooks. Literally, none of my middle school or high school teachers ever addressed that." This is another kind of exclusion that Asian Americans experience—an erasure of Asian America in education curriculum and more broadly in national memory (Nguyen, 2016). Her point was not that if she had learned more about the history and presence of Asian people in the United States, then she would not have encountered issues of race and belonging during her study abroad program, but that the education may have better prepared her for understanding and negotiating her diasporic identity while abroad. Her conclusion is instructive in that education about race can help students make sense of their study abroad experiences and help them connect their individual experiences with larger transnational histories and patterns.

Although extreme, Emily's story explicitly reveals the kind of race-based interactions and transnational racial politics and violence that students navigate and endure. The tendency to skirt issues of race in education abroad minimizes the very common experience of racial encounters abroad. I have attended more than twenty pre-departure orientations at multiple institutions and race is rarely mentioned except for in the occasional break out session where students learn from BIPOC study abroad alumni about what to "really" expect, how to care for their hair abroad, what to do when someone says something racist to you, etc. These breakout sessions are often powerful and empowering for BIPOC students, but when this is the only attempt to address race as students prepare to study abroad, it completely displaces the labor of educating and preparing study abroad students to encounter race abroad from education abroad professionals to BIPOC students. It also reinforces the erroneous assumption that race only pertains to BIPOC students. Instead, curriculum on transnational racial politics ought to be consciously built into education

abroad for all students at all phases of the education abroad process—program design, recruitment, pre-departure advising and orientations, while abroad, and re-entry advising and orientations.

“It’s almost like an illusion...”

The kind of racial encounters that study abroad students face, like the one Emily described, are in addition to the regularly cited social, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and developmental components of study abroad programs that make them the “high-impact programs” they are (Kinzie, 2012). Every one of my interview participants reported having difficulty juggling their study abroad program with the emotional weight of being a heritage-seeker. They also disclosed that they felt their experience was different from other study abroad students’ experiences because the other students did not encounter personal and family histories, confront imagined communities, or meet and interact with local relatives on top of the regularly scheduled program. Regardless of whether other study abroad students do actually engage with these issues, it is worth noting the perception that heritage seeking compounds the emotional weight and sometimes stress of studying abroad. Julia, for instance, who studied abroad in Thailand, noted that her classmates didn’t have “the extra push that [she] had” because of her Thai background. She also recounted having to repeatedly explain her mixed-race identity to Thais who “never think [she’s] a Thai citizen.” She recalled that one day six different strangers asked her about her race and she had to decide whether to respond to them and how to handle each situation. Since she raised this point, I assume it made a significant impact on Julia who didn’t name this experience as stressful, but as a “negative experience” that came with heritage seeking. The numerous racial encounters and repeated questions of belonging students may face can have a great emotional and psychological effect on study abroad students.

Very little research on the mental health of study abroad students exists (Bathke and Kim, 2015; Lucas, 2009), despite the American College Health Association consistently reporting that the large majority of U.S. undergraduate students experience moderate- to high-levels of stress. At the time of this writing, over 81 percent of students experienced moderate- to high-levels of stress in the last year (Spring 2021, p. 15).¹ Little is known about what mental health stressors or conditions students experience while abroad and little is known about what psychological and mental health resources and services are available to study abroad students. In my interviews, I did not plan to discuss mental health. In fact, I did not prepare or ask any questions related to mental health. However, mental health came up in every interview—implicitly in some, like with Julia, and very explicitly in others like Ludia, a Korean American who studied abroad in Seoul. She reported that her study abroad program “doesn’t do a good job of supporting students on an emotional basis. [She] really hope[s] and wish[es] that study abroad programs would create infrastructure for helping [heritage seeking] students like us understand our heritage because it impacts our experience in the program differently than others.” Ludia’s reflection points out that heritage seeking and studying abroad more broadly can make a significant emotional impact on students, and that there should be support in place to help students move through these emotional experiences.

Alicia most clearly illustrated the emotional impact that heritage seeking can have on students when she shared what it was like for her to learn about her parents’ life in China while studying abroad in Hong Kong. Alicia disclosed that she was unable to obtain a visa to enter China so her aunt met her in Hong Kong and showed her places where her parents used to visit.

¹ The Fall 2019 report also indicated that more than 76 percent of U.S. undergraduate students experienced moderate- to high-levels of stress in the year before the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrating that students regularly experience moderate- to high-levels of stress, which was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Alicia remembers that “at first it was kind of shocking and scary [to learn about how my parents’ life intersected with what I was learning from the local history museums that my program organized]. It’s almost like an illusion... is this true? Am I dreaming right now? It was all so sudden... or everything kind of happened at the same time and in a short time period. Meanwhile, I had two classes to keep up with and the program activities itself. I kept thinking to myself ‘Damn! This is how they lived.’ I couldn’t get it out of my head. It all came at once.” Alicia remarked on how her study abroad program and her heritage seeking experience competed for her mental energy. While she and her peers were visiting local museums to learn about Chinese migration patterns and the history of colonization and occupation in Hong Kong, she was simultaneously learning about her family’s relationship to and involvement in these histories. In other words, the intellectual component of the study abroad program wasn’t just a history lesson for Alicia, it was an emotionally-charged personal history lesson that linked her family with transnational racial politics, empire, and occupation.

While education abroad professionals cannot anticipate all the ways a study abroad program might impact students, it is important to recognize that international student mobility is part of a much longer, complex history of transnational migration patterns, and that when students study abroad they may confront challenges related to these histories. Heritage-seekers return to an ancestral hometown, country, region, or continent that their parents and ancestors left under particular conditions they may or may not have access to. My point is not that heritage-seekers lack the emotional or mental capacity to handle these experiences or that heritage seeking is more trouble than it’s worth. As Alicia says herself, “even though it was very difficult to experience, I still take this as a good opportunity for me to learn about myself and my parents,” and as other participants reported, heritage seeking prompts students to connect their

personal experience with larger discourses of race and belonging. My point here is that studying abroad is a particularly privileged type of mobility, in which young, predominately white and middle- to upper-class (Quang, 2018; Institute of International Education, 2020), students participate in short-term² international education programs. It is important to frame study abroad in this way, especially for BIPOC and heritage seeking students who will likely confront issues of race and class and personal histories of migration while abroad. As the stories from my interviews demonstrate, these histories are personal and often reference the painful and destructive discourses of race and belonging. In addition to situating study abroad within a larger context of transnational mobilities, education abroad programs ought to include resources and mental health services that support students through the emotional and psychological components of studying abroad. We wouldn't imagine sending students abroad without advising them to meet with health care professionals about how to prepare themselves physically to study abroad, and yet students often go abroad with little to no information about resources or services for their mental health while studying abroad. A critical and conscious education abroad curriculum includes mental health not only as an emergency, but as a central component of student wellbeing abroad.

Conclusion: Developing a Conscious Education Abroad Curriculum

The stoic Thai immigration officer handling my U.S. passport, on whom I projected my diasporic desire to belong, be seen, and recognized, did not welcome me “home” or even speak to me in Thai upon seeing my Thai name. He processed my documents and sent me on my way with a stamped passport and visa. This was the beginning of a heritage seeking study abroad

² I use “short-term” here to compare the length of study abroad programs with longer-term transnational mobilities like migration and immigration. In this way, I consider a semester and academic year study abroad programs “short-term” when compared to an immigrant or migrant’s resettlement.

experience that prompted me to reflect upon and confront how I'd internalized my racialized sense of not belonging in the United States. These are the kinds of experiences and considerations that Asian American heritage-seekers may encounter during their study abroad programs. We make plans to leave the United States, longing for a place where our faces, bodies, and names aren't othered, but are instead recognized and meaningful. In our host countries, we continue to confront questions of belonging from multiple directions, and sometimes to our surprise, the community we long for doesn't come as easily as imagined. Through repeated racial encounters abroad, it becomes clear that race is not left behind in the United States. Rather, the transnational racial politics and legacies of U.S. empire that inform a "return" to these places also operate abroad though in different ways.

A critical and conscious education abroad curriculum covers topics of empire, race, and belonging, not only for Asian American heritage-seekers or BIPOC students, but for all students including white students. As the stories from my interviews demonstrate, transnational configurations of race, including representations and logics of whiteness, are present and in effect while students are abroad. In fact, international student mobility taps into larger racialized histories of transnational migration and empire—spanning generations and millennia, from establishing national borders and the occupation and annexation of Indigenous lands around the world to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and from the resettlement of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese refugees to the United States to the U.S. government sending students and scholars abroad to further political and military interests, and so much more. Study abroad students will continue to encounter race abroad as they do on our campuses here in the United States. Students across the nation have been calling for U.S. colleges and universities to be more attentive to issues of race from an interdisciplinary and intersectional lens (Kamenetz et al, 2021;

Craig, 2021; Ruffer, 2021; Johnson, 2019). These calls should also extend to education abroad programming where the politics of race and belonging may be exacerbated.

It is for these reasons that I urge education abroad professionals to develop a critical and conscious study abroad curriculum in collaboration with cultural, ethnic, and transnational feminist programs and scholars, diversity, equity and inclusion offices, counseling and psychological health providers, and other experts in these areas. Education abroad offices at many institutions are already overworked and have too many responsibilities as it is. Where I worked, for example, I was running a one-person office and my only assistance was from a part-time graduate student. My suggestion is not to add more work to someone's always already too long to-do list. Instead, the work of developing a critical and conscious study abroad curriculum can be done collaboratively with experts in topics of transnational race. I have created a list of fifteen actions that orient us toward a critical and conscious study abroad curriculum. While this work will look different at various institutions depending on available resources and funding, and though this list isn't exhaustive, it is a place to start. It's a way forward and an opportunity to share the labor of developing a critical and conscious study abroad curriculum

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Actions Toward a Critical & Conscious Study Abroad Curriculum

In the Education Abroad Office

1. Invite study abroad alumni to speak about race, belonging, safety, etc. at peer advising/mentoring sessions, pre-departure, and re-entry orientations, and pay them for their work.
2. Hire graduate students from cultural, ethnic, and transnational feminist studies programs and other related departments to develop race-conscious curriculum and programs.

3. Hire more BIPOC study abroad advisors and other education abroad professionals.
4. Create a specific diversity, equity, and inclusion position in education abroad.
5. Conduct focus groups and ask race-focused questions. Focus groups may include study abroad alumni, students interested in studying abroad, as well as those who aren't (it can be just as important to understand why students choose not to study abroad), and ethnic student organizations.
6. Join education abroad networks that specialize in diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as Diversity Abroad.
7. Create a culture of care around mental and psychological health by emphasizing its significance and importance throughout the study abroad process from recruitment to re-entry. In other words, treat mental and psychological health as more than just an emergency.

In Partnership with Other Experts & Scholars

8. Develop relationships with cultural, ethnic, and transnational feminist programs and scholars and other experts on your campus and in your region around transnational issues of race.
9. Hire these experts to review your marketing materials, application, procedures, educational resources, advising practices, etc. with special attention to race and equity.
10. Invite them to attend and speak at pre-departure and re-entry orientations.
11. Develop a course that provides historical and cultural context for study abroad programs. Students should receive credit for this course. And when possible, graduate students, scholars, and experts in these areas should teach the course. For example, a Chinese historian can teach a 1-credit course for students studying abroad in East Asia.

12. Partner with minority-serving institutions across the U.S. to learn how they develop and operate race-conscious study abroad programs.
13. Develop strong relationships with your institution's center for counseling and psychological health.
14. Invite them to attend and speak at pre-departure and re-entry orientations.
15. Establish clear pathways for students to access mental health resources and support while abroad.

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