

African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 2
Spring 2005

Taking American Race Relations on the Road...to Africa

REBECCA GEARHART

Author's Note: I originally wrote this article in the summer of 2001, after returning from Kenya where I had spent the month of May with eighteen Illinois Wesleyan students enrolled in my travel course. Inspired by a series of articles devoted to study abroad programs in Africa (African Issues, volume XXVIII/1&2) in 2000, I hoped to contribute to the discussion by sharing the insights recorded in my students' travelogues. Then the September 11th terrorist attacks occurred, and soon thereafter the U.S. Department of State issued travel warnings against travel to several African nations including Kenya, which has prevented me from offering the course since. Although I have never underestimated the benefits of openly discussing sensitive issues as important as race relations, I was unsure of how to fit the discussion into a post 9/11 framework of analysis, so I put the article away.

The recent resurgence of American students studying abroad and the growing interest in programs in Africa among my own students is what motivates me to revisit the discussion again now. It is my hope that my colleagues who are experienced dealing with the issues raised in the journals my students kept while in Kenya in 2001 will add their expertise to the comments shared here. Such a dialogue can only enhance our strategies for preparing students for the varied experiences they have in Africa, and may even lead to a better understanding of the tension that sometimes characterizes the encounters between Africans and African Americans in the U.S.

Introduction

Americans seem relatively naive about anticipating the potential pitfalls associated with wearing the prismatic glasses we use to see members of our own society, when we travel and study in other parts of the world. As an anthropologist who leads undergraduates to East Africa, I am in hot pursuit of a way to help my students avoid taking the particular way in which Americans understand race with them to Africa. So far, I have been unsuccessful in prying my students loose from the color-coded framework that has organized race relations for them throughout their lives. As illustrated in the journal entries of two African American students who traveled to Kenya with me during May 2001, American notions of race often become obstacles to understanding how social relationships are negotiated outside of the

Rebecca Gearhart is an associate professor Department of Sociology & Anthropology at Illinois Wesleyan University.

American context. Moreover, such notions prevent Americans from figuring out how they might fit into social structures that do not operate the American way.

Racial division in the United States has primarily consisted of the separation of people into those with "white" skin and those with "black" skin. The degree to which skin tone shapes American social relationships is signified linguistically in the way we commonly identify each other as "White" or "Black" in everyday parlance. As Lee Artz outlines in his book *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, "In practice, race has regulated legal treatment, economic opportunity, and social status, and the most defining characteristic of race in the United States has been skin color."¹ While this statement might seem obvious to American readers, race does not work itself out the same way in all societies.

Relevant to this discussion is the fact that social relationships in Kenya are not defined by skin color the way they are in America. From a Kenyan perspective, "race" might be translated as: cultural heritage, first language, home district, family name, profession, and/or ethnic affiliation. While Kenyans do recognize physical attributes associated with people of different ethnic groups, learning a person's name is usually the best way to guess a fellow Kenyan's background. As budding anthropologists trained to look for the unique criteria with which people organize their societies, my students do not find the Kenyan basis of difference difficult to accept. What is difficult for them, however, is overriding their "default" mode of response to the interactions they have with people in Kenya, which they often explain in terms of the American race-power continuum.

Donal Carbaugh's study on social identity offers an explanation for why this framework is so difficult to let go. Carbaugh suggests that Americans' claims of identity are based on biological attributes that an individual makes part of the internal "self."² Said another way, Americans understand their racial identities to be something that is not just skin deep, but something that explains who they are as people. Seen in this light, it is difficult to imagine simply prying oneself free from or shedding such identity while travelling, even if the new society operates in a different way. Instead, Carbaugh proposes that identity be conceptualized as "something people 'do,' something invoked, interpreted, performed, and so on in particular social scenes."³

If we look at identity this way, the idea that one can learn how to reformulate one's identity or sense of oneself to better cope in new social settings becomes more plausible. Undoubtedly, reformulating a sense of self is a very challenging task for anyone who undertakes it. Most of the time it leads to an identity crisis, more popularly known to those who live and work outside of the cultural conditions under which they were raised as culture shock. By examining particular symptoms of the kind of culture shock that two African American students dealt with in Kenya, perhaps we can learn how to re-situate ourselves in social scenes that are not set against the same backdrop of racial politics that drives social dynamics in the United States.

Being Black and American in Kenya

As an undergraduate, I traveled to East Africa with an African American student named Cassandra (a pseudonym), who unexpectedly had a most tumultuous experience during her time abroad. Not blending in with the African people the way she had imagined she would was one of her greatest disappointments. On several occasions, Cassandra attempted to explain to the rest of us what wishing to be invisible was like, what wishing to fit in so completely that no one would even notice her was like. She had dreamed of such a camouflaged state of being all of her life, and was completely devastated to discover that she stuck out in Africa just as much as she did in the predominantly white community in which she lived back home. Cassandra could not figure out how, after discarding her western attire, braiding her hair, and learning to speak conversational Swahili, East Africans still recognized her as an American. This

was made even worse when she was continuously referred to as a *mzungu*, the Swahili term for "European," which literally means "someone who runs around in circles." Although irritating to the majority of our class, the term seemed to appropriately identify us with other white people. Not so for Cassandra, who was perpetually miffed by what she felt was an insulting misidentification.

Drawing from my memory of Cassandra's experience in Kenya, I delicately warned the two African Americans enrolled in my travel course of similar problems they might face there. I say "delicately" because I did not want to discourage them from participating in the trip while at the same time I wanted to help them psychologically prepare for the identity issues with which they might be forced to deal. I believed at the time that in order to truly learn about East African society, they would have to transcend the quagmire of U.S. race relations that had shaped their perceptions of themselves as black minorities in a white-dominated social landscape. I failed to consider that the racial makeup of the class itself - sixteen white students and two black students - recreated the race:power ratio they might be hoping to escape in Kenya.

The journal entries that appear in the appendix articulate this problem and others in the refreshingly honest way that seems to be the hallmark of undergraduate writing. The students have given me permission to share the thoughts and feelings they had while in Kenya here with the expectation that they might help others to better understand some of the identity issues that African Americans encounter when visiting Africa.

The first set of entries was written by a female anthropology major (Tami), who conducted ethnographic research on Swahili marriage customs while in Kenya. This student was raised in an African American community in an urban setting in the Midwest. The second set of entries was written by a female political science major (Lana) whose ethnographic research focused on the race relations between upper class Swahili families and their non-Muslim domestic servants. This student comes from a racially mixed family, and was also raised in a large Midwestern city. Pseudonyms have been used here at the students' request.

Since readers are unable to compare Tami and Lana's reflections with other students in the course, I will refer to other student journal entries to offer a comparative perspective. An important point of clarification is that Lana and Tami are not the only students in the course who were aware of racial tensions among classmates and between students and Kenyans. A white student's very first journal entry includes a racial analysis of an incident that happened in London, while we were in transit to Kenya. The students had divided themselves between an internet cafe and a pub about a block away. After checking to make sure there were no more students at the cafe, I walked to the pub to join the others. Meanwhile, Tami and Lana were finishing up on a level of the cafe I had not noticed, and when they realized they had been left behind became quite frantic. Although neither Lana nor Tami made a point of describing the scare in their journals, one of the other students did write about it:

At one point Tami and Lana, the two black women in the group, were left behind and because of the circumstances (the group had split up and reunited at separate times at a pub) it wasn't realized for fifteen minutes that they were missing. They felt that as "the two brown people" it should've been evident that they weren't with us. I really don't feel that they were/are considered expendable or anything by anyone in the group due to the fact of their color. However, I can accept that for them the fact that they are minorities in the group may make them anxious, and cause them to be particularly aware of each situation that singles them out. Or the rest of us may not be realizing the non-intellectual, subtle and insidious racist things we're doing. Or both.

An excerpt from each of the African American students illustrates their point of view on the subject of feeling different from their white American peers during the course. Tami writes:

I don't think anybody on this trip understands that my experience is different from theirs, and in what ways it's different. I'm looking at this society and culture through the experiences and eyes of a westerner, but I feel the need and the compulsion to identify with the people. I want to know them, I want to understand them, because I feel like this is my one opportunity to learn about/have a first hand experience with my roots. On the other hand, I'm afraid to let myself just relax and enjoy the trip and feel the culture because I'm afraid of being unaccepted and then really feeling like I don't belong anywhere. Because I'm certainly not fully accepted by these white kids and I know that I never will be. I will always be different, no matter how close or how friendly and understanding we may become with one another. There will always be this blatant, stark contrast that can not be denied or ignored. I guess what scares me most is the fear of not being accepted by my own people, even though in my mind the Kenyans aren't really my people because we share very different histories and lives. Yet, ancestrally they are my people and I've never been confronted with a situation of not blending in nor being welcomed by people who look like me. (Excerpt 4).

Lana writes:

I have seen so much poverty here. I wonder why it exists when there is so much wealth in places like America and Europe. There is no reason that poverty should exist in countries that others colonized. It gets me mad that a country could be poor simply because its people were forced to follow a system that they didn't create - only to be let loose and forced to act and thrive within the system that was imposed on them. It's hard to come to a country like Kenya and develop a hatred for western capitalism. I am so used to seeing the benefits of capitalism that I really had no idea what the negative side of capitalism could be. I've seen how harsh it has been on the Black American community, but now looking at how it has affected the entire population of Kenya, I wonder if capitalism was made to screw Blacks! All across the world, it seems, black people got messed over. I had a conversation with one of my suite mates before I left for Kenya about this topic. She told me not to be surprised to discover that white people are glorified everywhere. And that the "white standard" has taken over the world. This is very hard for me to accept because even though my mother is white, the white community has always resisted me. I have never been accepted in the white community and because of my experiences, I see many problems with the "white standard" taking over the world. It just seems like all traditions are lost or changed when they encounter the "white community" (Excerpt 1).

The Journal Entries in Perspective

When considering the journals as a collective body of texts, a common experience many students write of is their struggle to renegotiate their identities in a new cultural context. Within this pattern lies a divergent experience between white students and their black counterparts. Black students write about trying to map out their coordinates on a new racial landscape with no clear sign posts, while white

students write about being re-positioned as a racial minority for the first time. Statements made by white students in early journal entries: "I've never been so noticed," "I'm shocked at the lack of racial diversity here," "I feel like an intruder," "I feel like I'm in a television commercial for a relief agency," point to the unease with which they initially entered Kenyan society.

As students became more familiar with their surroundings, their journal entries focused on their observations of the apparent contradictions within Kenyan society itself. Some of the juxtapositions that students repeatedly mention include: slums and skyscrapers, taxicab drivers with Ph.D.s, "poverty in paradise," temptations of western culture, and the destruction of traditional values. The first major sign of divergence in experience between black and white students appears in journal entries from the second day of the course, the day after five students were robbed in the overnight train to Mombasa, an incident Lana discusses (Excerpt 5, Appendix).

As Lana explains, some of the students were very offended by the robbery, which seems to have exaggerated their sense of vulnerability. A few days after the train robbery, another student left his wallet by the pool at the hotel where we were staying, and although it eventually turned up, some cash and travelers' checks were missing. One student relates these two experiences by writing:

I have begun to gain a stronger sense of a trend I've observed here; a mix between hospitality and hostility in the attitude toward us. The sense of generosity and courtesy established when we arrived here was shattered when Alex's wallet was stolen a mere few hours later. Though some of his money was eventually returned, it nevertheless was reminiscent of the porter on the train, who was our best friend to our faces as he brought us drinks, yet turned around and stole our money when he had the chance.

The feeling of betrayal that students expressed after the robberies seems to stem from the students' longing for a degree of understanding and respect from the Kenyans they encountered that would make thievery and mistrust unimaginable. The thefts amplified the students' sense of being a misunderstood "other" in a place where being American meant being wealthy above all else. Both white and black students discuss their growing awareness of being a target for thieves and opportunists, which unified the class according to the conventional wisdom "safety in numbers." As the travel course progressed, the students became more comfortable sharing stories about their personal interactions with Kenyans in our nightly debriefings, which became therapeutic opportunities for them to normalize the sometimes-frightening revelations they were having about themselves and the society in which they were immersed. Yet, in spite of these sessions, which did seem to help the majority of students deal with the cross-cultural challenges they were facing, I was fully aware that a few of the students, and the African American students in particular, were uncomfortable articulating their struggles in the group setting. It is for this reason that I turned to the Tami and Lana's journals for insight into what they were going through. And for help deciphering what I found within the journals, I looked to Dorothy Holland's (1998) analysis of identity formation.

The Costs of Taking American Race Relations on the Road

Holland tells us that we are always involved in the formulation of our identities and the production of our self-understandings, and that we do so in an improvisational manner according to specific social situations.⁴ Pertinent to the present discussion is Holland's explanation that "persons and, to a less extent, groups are caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them."⁵ From Holland's point of

view, therefore, the dilemma Tami describes in her second journal entry may be a result of being suspended between her historical role as an African American, which explains her feeling of subordination vis a vis her white peers, and her present position in an African setting, which promotes a new sense of identification with her white American counterparts. Tami explains this tension when she writes:

I'm standing there feeling like a tourist viewing the exotic animals at the local zoo, yet I'm standing with a group of white people, but my skin tells me I blend in with the "attractions." And suddenly I feel the need to stay as much in the center of the whiteness as I possibly can. It's a comfort zone; for the first time in my life I feel comforted by the presence of that white skin all around me. I was hiding behind a wall of whiteness (Excerpt 2, Appendix).

Another symptom of the liminal state within which Tami feels suspended is the reaction she gets from the Kenyans she meets on a daily basis, who identify her as someone special because of her black skin, and often refer to her as a "sister," (see excerpt 6, Appendix) meaning someone who shares the same heritage. Making the situation more uncomfortable is Tami's inability to speak Swahili, which many of the Kenyans she encounters assume she knows. Tami articulately explains how awkward she feels under such circumstances in the following excerpt:

Then, as we were waiting for a representative of the Undugu Society, an older woman approached our group and went around and shook everyone's hand. As she clasped my hand, she began to say something individually to me in Swahili. And at the same time, I felt completely embarrassed and totally ignorant (Excerpt 2, Appendix).

Tami goes on to share a sense of guilt she feels for being in a privileged position in relation to her black counterparts in Kenya because of her membership in a group of wealthy, white Americans:

I guess what I'm really having trouble dealing with is feeling like I'm a traitor and that everyone here should have so much animosity towards me because I'm not experiencing or living the same life and the same history as the people here. I feel like such a hypocrite and such a phony walking around with a group of white people like I'm one of them, like I belong, like I've had the same history as they have, like I feel like I identify with them. And what makes it worse and makes it harder for me to deal with is it's true! I don't necessarily belong with the group, but I identify with their lifestyles and their histories (Excerpt 3, also see Excerpt 5, Appendix).

It is in excerpt 4, quoted above, that Tami expresses a fear that is at the heart of what causes identity crises when people are confronted with a sense of displacement and an inability to re-situate themselves within a social matrix that doesn't make sense to them. The strong feelings of alienation Tami shares here get at one of the most harmful consequences of growing up in a hegemonic system based almost solely on biological signifiers such as race. What is most striking about this entry is that Tami articulates the difference between herself and her white peers as one based on race, and the difference between herself and her Kenyan counterparts as one based on culture (history and life ways). Here, Tami succinctly identifies one of the major problems with taking the particularly American race-based social template on the road. Tami has learned through her life experiences in the U.S. that her skin tone is her

most important identifying feature and that people generally hesitate to fully accept people who do not look like they do. Tami's strong identification with fellow black people, whom she refers to as "my own people," leads her to believe that being integrated into Kenyan society will be a relatively easy process--at least easier than fitting into white American society, an event she doubts she will ever fully realize.

When Tami is confronted with cross-cultural barriers that separate Americans and Kenyans, namely language and economic status, a black-white racial matrix no longer explains her position relative to her fellow Americans. Tami discovers that in the Kenya setting, the cultural background she shares with her white American peers is more significant to her than the skin color she shares with the Africans she encounters. Tami's fear of not fully blending into the Kenya cultural landscape, as she hoped she might, is coupled with her fear of not ever truly feeling a part of the American cultural landscape she calls home. Discovering that she has re-aligned herself with white people and is now identified as one of them by people of her own race, turns the black and white world that Tami is familiar with, inside-out.

For Lana, the African setting seems to help her recast her feelings of being alienated by the white community in America within a larger framework of globalization. In excerpt 1, quoted above, Lana explains what she calls the "white standard" as the neocolonial hegemonic apparatus that subordinates those in the developing world while privileging those in the developed world. It is not surprising that Lana perceives Kenyan poverty to be a consequence of skin color in the same way it is among African Americans. This is largely a result of her unfamiliarity with the ways in which sociopolitical status and ethnic affiliation work to determine winners and losers in Kenya. In placing the American racial template onto Kenyan society, Lana assumes that "the entire population of Kenya" is equally victimized by the "white standard."

In another journal entry, Lana explains the link between what she considers to be white privilege in Kenya and the country's dependence on foreign tourism:

Now the country of Kenya is dependent upon the money from tourism, but that barely covers it. So it seems the locals glorify whites even more because they depend on them for money. At this point I am so torn between knowing what is right. Is it ok to visit here, pour my money into the country and reinforce the idea that Kenya citizens are simply dependent upon Americans / westerners? If I do that, people will get fed, the economy develops, and it really helps. But if tourism would stop, it might be possible for the people here to become self-sufficient. I really don't think it's possible to decide what is helpful and what is hurtful (Excerpt 2, Appendix).

Lana obviously finds it difficult to reconcile her dualistic role as both a wealthy western tourist in Kenya, and an African American student conducting ethnographic research on a group of disenfranchised fellow black people. This sense of displacement helps to explain Lana's reaction to an article in the Kenya Nation, which reported former President Moi's ban on all public opposition to him or his government policies in the interest of national security: "How can an African leader be so undemocratic to his own people?" she asked me, without taking into consideration that Moi's own people are generally considered to be members of his ethnic group--the Kalenjin, his political allies, and the wealthy African and non-African elites who have business interests in Kenya. Clouded by the American racial paradigm that suggests black leaders help their black constituents or they are not reelected, Lana found it difficult to understand how Moi got away with being so disinterested in the welfare of average Kenyan citizens.

Lana's illusions about racial harmony among Africans were shattered upon arrival in coastal Kenya, where she was confronted with the racial dynamics of Swahili social structure. The Swahili

generally believe that lighter skin tone signifies one's Arab bloodline and darker skin tone represents one's African heritage. Due to the political, economic, and religious dominance Arabs had on the East African coast in previous centuries, those who claim Arab ancestry have more social status in Swahili communities than those who cannot make such claims. The Swahili's use of skin color as a status marker was all too familiar to Lana, who writes:

The relationship between people here seems to be very similar to that between White and Black Americans. The people who have Arab lineage believe that they are purely Arab and that that makes them better than the black Africans. I have kept hearing people describe Africans as either Arab or Black African. The one place where I thought it would be good to be black has turned out to be bad for a black person. I really don't know what to feel or believe about the world. It seems that everywhere I go there is a conspiracy against Blacks (Excerpt 3, Appendix).

Both Tami and Lana understand how racism works in America and the specific ways in which being black has affected their daily lives there. What surprised Tami and Lana about being black in Africa was that rather than making them instant members of the privileged majority, their skin color became a liability in some ways. First of all, being black set them apart from their white peers in a way that made them more, rather than less conspicuous in Kenya. Being alienated by white Americans is a situation that both Tami and Lana seem to be used to. Being alienated by fellow black people made Tami want to disappear and Lana want to scream. It is not surprising that both students make sense of their experiences in Africa by juxtaposing them to similar experiences they and other African Americans have had in the United States. Taking American race relations on the road with them to Africa is their only point of reference.

Where Might We Go From Here?

After analyzing the emotional challenges that my African American students faced in Kenya, it is necessary for me to begin thinking of ways I can integrate the topic of race into the course curriculum more extensively. Developing such a component is especially pertinent because the study abroad experience my students have is collapsed into a time frame of just a few weeks, which does not allow them to fully integrate into any of the communities in which they visit or establish the kind of relationships with local people that might help them better adapt to the society in which they find themselves. A video that I plan to screen during one of the pre-departure orientation sessions that I require my students to attend, is produced by the National Consortium for Study in Africa (NCSA) titled, Study in Africa: New Opportunities for American Students. The video addresses many of the important issues that American students need to think about before studying in Africa, including the different ways in which race and other categories of difference are perceived in Africa. Laura DeLuca wrote a short article that recaps the content of the video in African Issues (Volume XXVIII/1&2, 2000), which is devoted entirely to the topic of study abroad in Africa.

Also in the volume are several articles that refer specifically to the particular challenges African American students face when living and traveling in Africa. Philip Peek, an anthropology professor at Drew University, hesitantly takes up this issue as one of the most challenging that he faces as the director of a summer abroad program to the Ivory Coast. He writes:

I find many African Americans have difficulty with the experience in West Africa, because they, even more than their fellow students, first interpret the situation in terms of American racism. One could hardly deny there is racism in West Africa, but I do believe most of us, Black and White, who have lived in Africa know that social relationships in Africa are not based on physical differences as noted in the United States. My understanding from talking with African colleagues is that West Africans themselves are troubled by Americans' initial insistence on a racial perspective. Thus, the lack of success of a racist frame of reference is problematic for U.S. students, especially for African Americans, already coping with so much in the encounter.⁶

A program that seems to be taking the psychological dimensions of dealing with race in Africa very seriously is DePaul University, which looks to clinical psychologist, Derise Tolliver, for help in developing and directing a three-week travel course to Ghana. In her contribution to the African Issues volume, Tolliver gets to the heart of why White and Black Americans have such different experiences in Africa. She explains:

Race, on some level, can be ignored as part of the personal identity of White students even in Ghana, in much the same way it often is in America. This provides for very intense discussions about the power dimension of racism in America. The positive experience for Black students of being a part of the racial majority in Ghana leads to discussion about the negative impact that racism has on the psychological, emotional, and spiritual development of people of African descent in America...People of African descent are often vigilant about race and the impact of racism in their lives, whereas people of European descent often deny or are ignorant of the impact of racial identity in their lives.⁷

A unique perspective on preparing African American students for study in Africa is offered by Nancy Dawson, a professor of Black American studies at Southern Illinois University, who takes a group of SIUC students to Ghana for six weeks each summer. In her article in African Issues, Dawson outlines how she helps her African American students overcome obstacles such as the "economic barriers associated with poverty and racism that limit African American students participation in study-abroad experiences."⁸ While Dawson does not ignore the identity issues raised by her African American students, she places them within a larger discussion of how their experiences in Africa help them get in touch with their cultural heritage. Dawson's positive message comes through loud and clear in the student essays she includes in her article, like this one by Christopher Rutledge:

I believe that all Blacks should take a trip to Ghana at least once in their lifetime. Although we African Americans have our own "culture" here in the United States, going to Ghana and learning about the African culture gives us a much, much deeper understanding of ourselves, our roots, and our spirituality...At the airport we saw all these people standing around the gates. This was my very first time seeing my African brothers and sisters and their first time seeing me. It was a very beautiful moment. There were drummers and dancers to welcome us back to our ancestral homeland. This was one of the most fascinating parts of the trip for me.⁹

Tolliver and Dawson offer programs designed specifically to help African American students deal with the kinds of identity crises Tami and Lana write about in their journals. Unlike my travel course, which

focused on teaching students to understand the complex social hierarchies that make up Swahili society on its own terms, the study abroad courses Tolliver and Dawson offer acknowledge that African American students are unable to simply ignore personal issues of racial identity as they explore the ways in which African social structures operate. Although American categories of race have developed within a particular set of historical dynamics and are not applicable in other cultural contexts, we cannot expect African Americans to "perform" their identities differently simply because they are in a different place, as Carbaugh would have us think possible. When African Americans travel to Africa with white Americans, the racial dynamics between Americans of different skin color come with them, whether we like to admit it or not.

For the benefit of all of the students we take abroad, travel leaders need to initiate a more frank and open dialogue about the identity issues that our students of all skin colors are forced to come to terms with before they leave for Africa, while in Africa, and after they come home. Programs that include race as a topic in each component of the course will better prepare American students for the experiences they will have in Africa. It is hubris to think we can so easily serve as cultural brokers between our students and the Africans with whom they meet and form relationships. I say this primarily with the final words of Tami's journal in mind, as they suggest that no form of mediation - neither good nor bad - can keep students from discovering the best that Africa has to offer:

I have a new found thirst for knowledge about life in Africa and my family's history and heritage, and I'm eager to learn more about other aspects of African culture and about other African societies. I hope to adopt certain African practices and integrate them into my family's life, and hopefully restore some of the African culture to the black community in America, to whatever degree I can (Excerpt 7, Appendix).

Appendix

Select excerpts from Tami's Journal

1. When we landed in Nairobi this morning and stepped through the airplane door, I was taken aback by the clarity through which I saw the world... Everyone who knew that I am traveling in Kenya constantly asked me questions based on the stereotypes and media depictions of life in Africa. My whole purpose for coming to Kenya is to see firsthand and dispel those myths. Unfortunately, my first impressions fail to prove everyone wrong. Rather than walking into a bustling airport surrounded by traffic jammed freeways, the view was more like a scene from a PBS special or a real life version of The Lion King. Surrounded by open fields lightly scattered with trees, there wasn't the slightest hint of a skyscraper or city life on the horizon... I observed people walking alongside of the road--many of them without shoes and seemingly without a destination because there was nothing in sight to walk to.

2. I've traveled several times throughout Europe, but I have never felt the extreme sense of culture shock that I felt as we drove down that dirt road and then twisted our way through those narrow pathways of the slum. I felt so uncomfortable, so out of place, so...unreal. If I have ever wanted to be invisible, to shrivel up into the tiniest, most indiscrete speck--that was the moment. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to feel. I was experiencing a double dilemma and double the discomfort: For one, I had just left the comfort of my air conditioned apartment, the convenience of my sports car, and all the other luxury amenities that I experience on a daily basis, yet take for granted. And now I was standing on the set of a Save the Children commercial. Secondly, I'm standing there feeling like a tourist viewing the

exotic animals at the local zoo, yet I'm standing with a group of white people, but my skin tells me I blend in with the "attractions." And suddenly I feel the need to stay as much in the center of the whiteness as I possibly can. It's a comfort zone; for the first time in my life I feel comforted by the presence of that white skin all around me. I was hiding behind a wall of whiteness. Then, as we were waiting for a representative of the Undugu Society, an older woman approached our group and went around and shook everyone's hand. As she clasped my hand, she began to say something individually to me in Swahili. And at the same time, I felt completely embarrassed and totally ignorant. As I starred back at her with a huge, phony grin and a dumbfounded look in my eye, I thought to myself "is this going to happen everywhere we go?" "Why did I come here?" "I'm in the wrong group!" "I'm with the wrong people!" "I look like a fool and I'm being a hypocrite." "This is the biggest mistake of my life." "I want to go home!" "How can I leave the trip early?"

3. Having just seen people walking miles in the boiling hot sun with heavy water containers on their heads while most of us are standing in a porcelain tub letting the water run freely without caring how much is being wasted or being unused is hard to deal with. Even though I appreciate and respect that I have been afforded the opportunity to enjoy such amenities, there's nothing to say that I couldn't be one of the people on the other side. There's nothing to say that my ancestors wouldn't have been stolen from their homeland and that some other black woman from America who knows so little about her history--both African American and African--would be standing with a group of white people staring at me like I'm some kind of exhibit. I guess what I'm really having trouble dealing with is feeling like I'm a trader and that everyone here should have so much animosity towards me because I'm not experiencing or living the same life and the same history as the people here. I feel like such a hypocrite and such a phony walking around with a group of white people like I'm one of them, like I belong, like I've had the same history as they have, like I feel like I identify with them. And what makes it worse and makes it harder for me to deal with is it's true! I don't necessarily belong with the group, but I identify with their lifestyles and their histories.

4. I don't think anybody on this trip understands that my experience is different from theirs, and in what ways it's different. I'm looking at this society and culture through the experiences and eyes of a westerner, but I feel the need and the compulsion to identify with the people. I want to know them, I want to understand them, because I feel like this is my one opportunity to learn about/have a first hand experience with my roots. On the other hand, I'm afraid to let myself just relax and enjoy the trip and feel the culture because I'm afraid of being unaccepted and then really feeling like I don't belong anywhere. Because I'm certainly not fully accepted by these white kids and I know that I never will be. I will always be different, no matter how close or how friendly and understanding we may become with one another. There will always be this blatant, stark contrast that can not be denied or ignored. I guess what scares me most is the fear of not being accepted by my own people, even though in my mind the Kenyans aren't really my people because we share very different histories and lives. Yet, ancestrally they are my people and I've never been confronted with a situation of not blending in nor being welcomed by people who look like me.

5. Yesterday we discovered that several people in the group had travelers checks stolen from them. We suspect this happened while we were on the train. There wasn't any concrete evidence to allow us to point to one person, but somehow some of the students seemed to think they could narrow it down to one man who cleaned our cabins. And that whole situation really pissed me off! Some were ready to basically prosecute this man who they weren't even sure was the culprit!...it could have been anyone - a

train employee or even another passenger. No one can know for sure. But to have a group of upper-middle class white people point the finger at one man without knowing for certain his guilt or innocence would automatically convict him. With whites having so much power and so much influence in Kenya, they could have permanently ruined this man's life and his family's life. And, once again, it blows my mind that the thought never crossed any of the students' minds. It's so amazing to me to see these students be so blind and ignorant to their power because of their whiteness. I've recognized it in the U.S., but it is so much more apparent and stark here because I'm in an environment where whites are the minority and still are the most powerful.

6. As we were exiting the Somali marketplace in Mombasa, a man called out to me asking if I am Marion Jones. Later I discovered that she is a famous African American track star. I'm not sure what she looks like or if she resembles me or not, but I never thought he would associate me with a black American with celebrity status. Throughout the day I was addressed as "sister" several times and I became less guarded in my attitude and more comfortable with my surroundings...As we passed one man, he asked me if I was his sister. And I smiled at him because I still haven't figured out a good response to that question. He proceeded to ask me where I am from and if anybody in my family is from Africa. I told him that my ancestors once lived in Africa before North American slavery and he asked me if I had any idea what part of Africa they came from. I told him that I am clueless. He told me that I look very Kenyan and that my ancestors were stolen from Kenya. This really intrigued me because it would be very fascinating and soul fulfilling to one day be able to construct a complete family tree. He went on to tell me that my features suggest that I am from the Kamba tribe (even though I have Native American and Irish ancestry, and I'm sure some slave master genes mixed in there as well), but I suppose my strongest features look Kenyan. He gave me a Kamba name - Tuku. He told me it means "born in the night" and "born into innocence." And I felt so honored and intrigued by what the man was telling me. I wanted to stay and spend more time talking with him, but was pushed along with the group.

7. I am so so so incredibly blessed to have had this 28-day cultural experience. Although a lot of my personal fears and assumptions may have kept me from fully immersing myself in the culture, overall I felt accepted and welcomed. I definitely plan to come back several times with family and friends so they all can know and feel the spirit that is Africa. I appreciate that we've had a unique perspective of each community we've visited, and I feel so lucky beyond what words can describe, to have been able to make this journey. I don't know if I still consider myself an African American anymore. Although I've always said I am an American, just as any white person is, why do I need to further classify myself as African American, when whites don't go as far to say French American or German American? Now, I feel even more strongly that I love and value and cherish my ancestral roots, but even more so, I understand my ignorance of African culture and how little of it is translated into Black American culture. My curiosity of Africa has been peaked. I have a new found thirst for knowledge about life in Africa and my family's history and heritage, and I'm eager to learn more about other aspects of African culture and about other African societies. I hope to adopt certain African practices and integrate them into my family's life, and hopefully restore some of the African culture to the black community in America, to whatever degree I can.

Select excerpts from Lana's Journal

1. I have seen so much poverty here. I wonder why it exists when there is so much wealth in places like America and Europe. There is no reason that poverty should exist in countries that others colonized. It

gets me mad that a country could be poor simply because its people were forced to follow a system that they didn't create--only to be let loose and forced to act and thrive within the system that was imposed on them. It's hard to come to a country like Kenya and develop a hatred for western capitalism. I am so used to seeing the benefits of capitalism that I really had no idea what the negative side of capitalism could be. I've seen how harsh it has been on the Black American community, but now looking at how it has affected the entire population of Kenya, I wonder if capitalism was made to screw Blacks! All across the world, it seems, black people got messed over. I had a conversation with one of my suite mates before I left for Kenya about this topic. She told me not to be surprised to discover that white people are glorified everywhere. And that the "white standard" has taken over the world. This is very hard for me to accept because even though my mother is white, the white community has always resisted me. I have never been accepted in the white community and because of my experiences, I see many problems with the "white standard" taking over the world. It just seems like all traditions are lost or changed when they encounter the "white community."

2. Today we took a tour of Gede ruins outside of Malindi. In the ruins we saw the remnants of a working air conditioning system, bathrooms and sinks. The people who lived in Kenya had such a fascinating system for keeping things clean, even while Europeans claimed that Africa was uncivilized! I haven't seen any examples of non-civilization. I just think about all of the lessons we have in European history, while never touching on any parts of African history other than Egypt. Being here is showing me how conditioned our schooling in America is. It seems that this trip only makes me angry. I see how much Europeans destroyed the land, taking Africans' natural resources, all of the good farming land and then telling the local citizens to follow their rules and eventually they would be equal. Seeing the ruins today taught me that the people of Kenya would have been fine without interference from outsiders. I'm sure that the society would have eventually traded with Europeans and that they would've been better off had they not been colonized. Now the country of Kenya is dependent upon the money from tourism, but that barely covers it. So it seems the locals glorify whites even more because they depend on them for money. At this point am so torn between knowing what is right. Is it ok to visit here, pour my money into the country and reinforce the idea that Kenya citizens are simply dependent upon Americans / westerners? If I do that, people will get fed, the economy develops, and it really helps. But if tourism would stop, it might be possible for the people here to become self-sufficient. I really don't think it's possible to decide what is helpful and what is hurtful.

3. I don't know what to actually write. I am very disturbed by what I keep hearing. The relationship between people here seems to be very similar to that between White and Black Americans. The people who have Arab lineage believe that they are purely Arab and that that makes them better than the black Africans. I have kept hearing people describe Africans as either Arab or Black African. The one place where I thought it would be good to be black has turned out to be bad for a black person. I really don't know what to feel or believe about the world. It seems that everywhere I go there is a conspiracy against Blacks.

4. I am surprised by the level of understanding John (pseudonym) has of his condition as a house-boy. During our last conversation he told me about the condition of the poor in Lamu. The situation he described is the same one that people in America deal with when faced with poverty. John said that if you are poor, then you have no time to think about why you are poor, you have to work to live. If you have no time to think about how you got into your situation, then you cannot think about how to change it and what the cause of it is. If you cannot identify the cause or figure a way to change your condition,

then you are bound to remain in the same condition for the rest of your life and accept it. I think the point that made me the happiest is that John sees the system isn't right and wants to change it. He is angry and vocal and has a network of friends who feel that the system is wrong. His group of fellow house-boys is not close to forming a union and he told me reasons why unions don't work. But people are mad and that is a start. Anger can cause people to do a lot of things and change is one of them. It took tired and angry southern Blacks and Whites to change the Jim Crow laws in our country, so I have a feeling that a change is coming to Lamu, and coming soon. If anything good can be said about western influence, it is acting as a catalyst for changing the house-boy system.

NOTES

1. Artz, pg. 72
2. Carbaugh, pg. 23
3. *ibid.*
4. Holland, pg. 4
5. *ibid.*
6. Peek, pg. 102
7. Tolliver, pg. 113
8. Dawson, pg. 124
9. Dawson, pg. 128.

REFERENCES

Artz, L. and B. O. Murphy. *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*. Sage Publications, 2000.

Carbaugh, D. *Situating Selves. The Communication of Social Identities in American Scenes*. State University of New York Press, 1996.

Dawson, Nancy. *Study Abroad and African American College Students at Southern Illinois University at Cabondale*. In *African Issues*. Volume XXVIII/1&2, 2000.

Holland, D. et. al. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Harvard University Press, 1998.

Peek, Philip. *Drew in West Africa: Some Observations*. In *African Issues*. Volume XXVIII/1&2, 2000.

Tolliver, Derise. *Study Abroad in Africa: Learning about Race, Racism, and the Racial Legacy of America*. In *African Issues*. Volume XXVIII/1&2, 2000.

Reference Style

The following is the suggested format for referencing this article: Rebecca Gearhart. " Taking American Race Relations on the Road...to Africa" *African Studies Quarterly* 8, no.2: (2005) [online] URL: <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v8/v8i2a4.htm>