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Living in a Black and White world: The value of reflexivity in social equity research

Though more than fifty years post segregation, the current political landscape in the U.S. suggests that many Americans are still living in a 'Black and White' world. Therefore, when two tourism scholars decided to take on the historically whitewashed tourism industry – it was not smooth sailing. This work uses the methodological approach of duoethnography to explore our reflexive journals studying and presenting on the Black Travel Movement. The narratives provide an examination of our experiences and link them to theoretical understandings of reflexivity and positionality. We unpack and discuss our personal feelings and experiences in relation to each other within a dialogue. Because there is a dearth of published duoethnographies in social science research in general, and within tourism studies in particular, we embarked on our own interpretation of duoethnography with the goal of highlighting the importance of reflexivity in social equity tourism research. We conclude that there is much work to be done around engaging in social and racial equity, both within and without academia.

Key words: reflexivity; social equity; duoethnography; Black Travel

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Introduction

Though more than fifty years post Jim Crow segregation, the landscape of global movements such as #BLACKlivesmatter vs. #ALLlivesmatter suggests that certain facets of society are still living in a 'Black and White' world. As two critical tourism scholars, we decided to take on the historically homogenous and whitewashed travel and tourism industry – knowing that it would not all be smooth sailing. Consequently, this paper utilizes a duoethography approach to explore our journeys of reflexivity throughout our research on the Black Travel Movement (BTM). Although reflexivity has been increasingly recognized as a vital strategy to conducting qualitative research (D'cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Tight, Blaxter, & Hughes, 2006), it is still underutilized in the qualitative travel and tourism literature (Feighery, 2006). While tourism studies does lag behind other fields of social science research in this area, there has been a shift towards exposing the cultural politics of creating knowledge through academic research (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005).

Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of continuously engaging in critical dialogue with the self as it pertains to evaluating your assumptions, perspectives and attitudes in relation to your research process (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Feighery, 2006). It challenges the view of knowledge creation as objective and independent from the researcher and asks us to take accountability for our position in the research process (Berger, 2015). Positionality relevant to research may include characteristics such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, linguistic skills, immigration status, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances (Berger, 2015). These characteristics and positions may impact research in different ways, including (in)accessibility to the field (De Tona, 2006), the researcher-participant relationship (Berger, 2015) and meaning making of the findings (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). Therefore, the goal of this work is to highlight the importance of reflexivity in social equity tourism research through our lived experiences using a duoethography methodology.

Background to the research: The Black Travel & Tourism Movement

Black people in the United States have been afflicted by racism, segregation, and discrimination for centuries (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Foster, 1999). As an industry, travel and tourism has not escaped these horrific and marginalizing inequalities (Buzinde, Santos, & Smith, 2006) like with leisure travel being depicted with all white faces (Burton & Klemm, 2011; Davis, 2018; Martin, 2004), resulting in deeply damaging and inaccurate representation who participates in travel. Over the years, attempts at righting these wrongs have been made – at one point, separate advertisements highlighting Black faces (Alderman, 2013) and another, a travel guide published specifically for African-Americans (Green, 1947). Unfortunately, these attempts only perpetuated the issue, rather than authentically representing and including Black people in the travel industry.

As a response to the on-going underrepresentation of Black people in the travel sphere, Black travelers have taken the industry by storm, creating their own presence in the market as the 'Black Travel Movement' (BTM). Although this movement has been steadily gaining momentum in the travel sphere, research on the phenomenon is scarce (Alderman, 2013; Alderman, Williams, & Bottone, 2019; Benjamin, Kline, Alderman, & Hoggard, 2016; Benjamin & Dillette, 2021; Dillette & Benjamin, 2021; Dillette, Benjamin, & Carpenter, 2018; Floyd, 1998; Foster, 1999; Gill, 2019; Holland, 2002; Lee & Scott, 2017; Philipp, 1994, 1998, 1999; Shinew, Floyd, & Parry, 2004). Therefore, we set out to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the movement through a myriad of ways including the analysis of social and digital media, qualitative interviews, a case study, and an auto-ethnography. The discussions in this paper are based on our reflexive journal entries (by two authors) throughout our experiences studying and presenting on the Black Travel Movement. These entries included post interview journals and blogs, as well as reflective writings and discussions after leading

presentations and workshops. These lived experiences provide a retrospective examination, linking to theoretical understandings of reflexivity and how our positionality impacted our research design and epistemological views using a duoethnography methodology.

Methodology

Building on autoethnography, duoethnography is a fairly novel form of autoethnography that involves co-constructing a narrative between two or more researchers. Researchers unpack and discuss their personal feelings and experiences in relation to each other within a dialogue (Denshire, 2014; Zazkis & Koichu, 2015). Gómez (2013) refers to duoethnography as a 'scholarly conversation' written up as a script allowing the authors to explore their hybrid identities thus, reflecting on how their lives are situated socially and culturally via a 'dialogic text' in their own voices. As such, the authors are both the researcher and the researched (Norris, 2008) and makes the "positivistic notion of truth and validity redundant" (Mair & Frew, 2018, p. 9). Norris and Sawyer (2012) posit that duoethographies provide knowledge that is in transition and is fluid. They outline four tenets critical to constructing a duoethnographic study: (a) the dialogic nature of the process, (b) the examination of life history as part of the conception of the work, (c) the importance of learning together and not aiming to profess to each other, and (d) to learn from each other's differences. Our study mirrors these values and we share our personal experiences through different racial lenses unpacked as reflexive journal entries first, then a scripted dialogue discussing our experiences. We use duoethnography to explore its potential as a critical, qualitative method through our discussions about race and privilege, related to research methods and interactions with academic and non-academic audiences.

There is a dearth of published duoethnographies in social science research in general,

and within tourism studies in particular (Benjamin & Schwab, 2021; Mair & Frew, 2018; Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, & Del Chiappa, 2019). Consequently, we decided to embark on our own interpretation of duoethnography informed by Norris and Sawyer (2017) who posited that duoethnographies provide knowledge that is in transition and is fluid, and as such, should be judged based on the rigor of the collaborative methodology. In addition to serving as part of the conceptual framework, duoethnography is also the central component to our methodology. We were influenced by Norris and Sawyer's (2017) four tenets critical to constructing a duoethnographic study:

> *1. It is dialogic, where the narratives of the researchers are positioned in juxtaposition to each other. It intentionally disrupts the typical nature of metanarratives that can emerge from solitary writing (including collaborative writing synthesized within a single authorial voice).*

> *2. It facilitates reconceptualization of past experiences and stories by allowing the other researcher to challenge the adequacy of the frames held in interpretation. It is not authoritative in stance, but rather positions the reader as an active Other in meaning making, and therefore as an implicit co-author.*

> *3. It positions differences as crucial to exploring a larger shared experience. Duoethnographies position differences between the writers' points of view as a strength and an opportunity to explore different meanings to a shared phenomenon.*

> *4. The methodology must remain open and flexible, to avoid becoming prescriptive. Duoethnographies do not need to adhere to a set procedure*

We offer duoethnographic conversations not as an accurate representation, nor as an attempt at one single text "where the 'complete' life is told", but rather we recognize that 'what we know about the world and what we know about ourselves are always intertwined, partial, and historical' (Richardson 2001, 36). These conversations allowed us to unpack our feelings and find solace and comfort in each other. This cathartic exchange of dialogue allows for deeper connections and the ability to unpack emotions and experiences not traditionally shared in a survey or in-depth interviews. We provided context first, unpacking who we are as scholars to help the reader understand our identities. Secondly, we reflected on our individual workshops

in addition to joint workshops we facilitated together. From our analytic memos, we started a discussion 'in real time' via a Google document that allowed for us to make comments, ask questions, and challenge perceptions about our research resulting in a scripted dialogue. Lastly, as Norris and Sawyer (2012) posited, "Duoethnographies, then, are a form of praxis writing in which theory and practice converse…duoethnographies do not end with conclusions, rather, they continue to be written by those who read them" (p. 21). Therefore, we leave this conversation open for the reader to digest.

Reflexivity from the inside

> **Alana's Reflection:** *Prior to conducting research on Black travel, I knew that I would have a sort of 'in' with the topic. However, at the same time, I also realized that my experience would be distinctly different from most of the participants I would study. Much of the Black travel movement is focused on African-Americans who have a distinct experience with race and segregation in a White dominated American society. I am Afro-Caribbean, or, more specifically, I am Bahamian-Canadian, Black and White, but identified as Black both personally and by society. I was an insider, and I knew it. In the literature, being a member of the group under study means simultaneously being an onlooker in the stalls and a member of the cast (Shaw, 2018). As a 'member of the cast', this allowed me easier entrée, background in knowing more about the topic and the advantage of understanding nuanced stories from participants.*

> **Journal excerpt:** *[After the interviews], I felt a sense of fulfillment and happiness that this (BTM) even exists. As I was listening to their stories, I felt a sense of "I get you", "I feel you", but also a sense of "I want to do more". I guess this is me "doing more". I felt a yearning to understand more about myself and my history and to pass this knowledge forward, not only through research, but through social media and representation.*

Though one may consider being an insider to be an advantage, it is not without its risks. As an insider, there are risks of blurring the boundaries and unknowingly imposing your own belief systems and values onto your participants (Drake, 2010). In fact, it has already been argued that when studying minority groups, a 'dual-identity' researcher does in fact significantly shape the research process (Berger, 2015). Therefore, the process of reflexivity is key to hopefully

identifying some of these biases or imposed values and finding a way to counter balance this

with other methods of checking trustworthiness.

Reflexivity from the outside: As a white scholar, do I have the right to explore this topic?

> ***Stefanie's Reflection:*** *Identifying as a white woman, I struggle with whether I have the 'right' to research within diversity and inclusion work – specifically when it focuses on Black travel. I sometimes feel like I can offer scholarly advancement within 'white-studies' or 'whiteness theory', which helps to inform my work within the landscape of tourism studies. However, I still question that right as I am a white person researching topics that I will never personally experience. Below is an excerpt from my reflexivity journal after our first round of interviews with Black Tourism Movement influencers:*

> ***Stefanie's excerpt:*** *I did question my authority, or right, to be in that space – a space where historically white people dominated the touristic landscape. As a white scholar, do I have the right to explore topics like the BTM? Or am I centering my whiteness?*

This project has resurfaced some of my feelings around race and race related-specific research

projects. I am the minority in the room with these interviews and this project. However, I do

feel honored to be able to be present in these conversations and hear their stories. Although I

can never and will never know what it feels like to be Black or a person of color, I can do my

best to listen, digest, and empathize. I don't want to play "the good white" either. However, I

feel like my sincerity and passion for social equity triumphs my personal discomforts.

Since my PhD in Education, I've devoted my energy toward social equity and feel like the

privileges I hold as a white scholar can potentially help with the unpacking and digesting of

difficult dialogues. However, these conversations still take an emotional toll, evident with

remarks from White scientists after a BTM research presentation:

- *I can't be racist ... I have Black friends*
- *Why should we care about Black people traveling when they only make up 13% of our population?*
- *I'm White and never cared about seeing other White people in marketing, so why should Black people feel the need to see themselves?*
- *Your research is biased – it seems like everything is based on race*

- *A Black woman didn't want me to go to a Black Caucasus … she said I didn't belong there. That was rude! I'm just trying to learn. Why is she so mean?*
- *I didn't get tenure because I am a Christian scientist. I know what discrimination feels like.*

I left this specific experience emotionally drained. Even though I realized my white privilege of leaving this presentation, getting into my car and never having the fear and anxiety of being pulled over by a police car and being murdered … I still questioned when will white people stop being on the defensive and start engaging in real conversations around race, history, and the current state of our country?

Growth through reflexivity: We are living in a Black and white world

In the tradition of duoethnographic research, using our academic selves as the research site via dialogic introspection, we explore the lived experiences on an array of our findings on two different occasions. On both occasions, we felt confident with the material, hoping the presentation would spark a lively discussion on how to improve the tourism industry for traditionally marginalized groups. We did get that lively discussion, but not the open-minded kind we were hoping for. We share our feelings within a scripted dialogue informed by duoethnography:

> *Stefanie: Now that we've had some time and distance to digest our experiences, what do you think we can do moving forward to navigate some of the push-back and resistance we faced with white audiences? Maybe we create some type of role-playing or scenarios that help white audience members understand what it feels like to be a minority in the U.S.?*
>
> *Alana: I fear that this would make some people uncomfortable, but, I guess that is what we are trying to do? I was also thinking it would be good to provide more hard data to back up what we are saying as this is a language most people can relate to.*
>
> *Stefanie: This reminds me of the quote I share with my students, "learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable". However, most white people don't want to talk about race as they find it 'rude'. The minute you start to have a discussion - it tends to shut the room down or lead into a discussion around being 'colorblind'- 'I don't see color' … I remember when I tried to bring in 'facts' with providing 'statistics' behind the economic benefits of the BTM, but I still received such push back… they then*

questioned …. "Well how much IN TOTAL does tourism contribute since $103 billion is not enough".

Alana: You are right, I remember that comment. What if we change the way we share the statistics? For example - if we highlight how much Black travelers have helped to grow travel expenditures at an exponential rate to show the future power, vs. focusing on one number. On another note… with the knowledge and experience we have now, I think in the future we should start all workshops with an 'explanatory pause' - essentially, taking time to prepare the room for the discussion we are about to have. This would allow the room to express their own opinions and experiences first before we begin. I think this would allow people to feel more in control and less attacked.

Stefanie: I like that … and maybe we have a slide of 'common questions/responses' generated from our past workshops/presentations to help them feel less alone.

Alana: I like that!

Stefanie: Our Black and audiences of color seemed to 'just get it.' This is somewhat of an obvious statement, but I feel like our white audiences, even though they may be educated or identify as anti-racist still have hesitation and anxiety discussing race and their potential contributions toward race issues… not really wanting to own their privilege. The act of talking about race, for so many folks, means that they can be seen as a racist. But perhaps framing it as the institution of whiteness – and not the individual? Additionally, many white people never learned how to talk about race since we never had to talk about it. Remember the one white man at our workshop? He was irate and started to comment on the Black Lives Matter movement. That if "Black folks just 'act right' then there won't be any issues."

Alana: Yes - I do unfortunately remember that very vividly. It's interesting that you bring up our audiences of color. I did two workshops last year with majority people of color and the experience was completely different. Naturally, each group was much more open, but I noticed that the experience contained much more of them sharing their own stories with me, it almost turned out to be a large group therapy session. However, at the end of one of the workshops, one person said "this is great and all, but we are not the people you need to be giving this presentation to".

Stefanie: It is like preaching to the choir, right?

Alana: Yep. I even had a corporate representative from a large hotel company ask me to draft her a proposal for leading one at her company. Eventually, she got back to me and told me that she just didn't think they were ready for this type of 'heavy' content yet.

Stefanie: Not ready to discuss the real issues … Oy, sounds similar to the past and current rhetoric of the U.S. … Maybe we collect some of the comments shared from audiences of color and compare them with the white audience comments?

Alana: I like that idea. I think the challenge moving forward will be to continue doing this work and sharing it across a wide range of audiences in a digestible way without losing authenticity. Another thought I have had is to try to expand the work into a

broader range of diversity and inclusion issues and share examples from different categories in order to create a more inclusive feeling at our workshops? I have thought before, is the topic itself "Travelling While Black" too polarizing? I mean - I get it, we are talking about it because of the systematic oppression and historical dominance of White supremacy in society, but I also get how this can come on a little strong for many people. It's a hard balance.

Stefanie: It is difficult ... however, this is a conversation and dialogue that needs to be unpacked. If we can find ways to try and lighten the conversation, perhaps infuse some comedic relief that can help with the discomfort. Or is that catering to white feelings and comfort? Also, I feel like as a white person, I will continue to disseminate this research as well as I can to predominantly white audiences, since they seem to be the group that doesn't see any problems around race and travel. I feel like sharing stories and experiences more than just tweets, could help to strike some type of empathetic nerve. Or not ... or we just continue to have a white nationalist mindset ... oh no, here comes my pessimistic voice!

Alana: You bring up a good point. I actually remember feeling extremely grateful that you were there during one of our workshops when we were being attacked by a White male audience member. I think it is definitely one of our strengths as a team that you are White and I am Black. Maybe we should discuss our own identities up front? I like the idea of stories instead of just tweets. Do you think there is grounds for another research project to collect more in-depth stories?

Stefanie: Yes! Perhaps the more vulnerable we can be in front of these audiences, the more comfortable they may feel about being uncomfortable. There is also a phrase in which I want to amplify, "Black lives matter more than white feelings." That continues to stick with me.

And yes, there is definitely room for more in-depth research and storytelling. I also feel like creating a documentary or short video as a way of showing in classrooms or with industry can help with this transition.

Alana: Yes, I think this combined with the role play/interaction up front that we talked about earlier should be included in all future workshops. I LOVE the documentary idea. People respond to stories, especially when they are first hand and visual. This is a way to move our research from theoretical to transformational! Let's take this show on the road!

Discussion: What can we learn from our narratives?

Researching, teaching, and discussing race, especially topics like white privilege and critical race theory, tend to amplify white fragility. When it comes to discussing or challenging racism, White people tend to feel shame, guilt, apathy, and an internalized sense of dominance (Singh, 2019). Currently, several states are trying to ban the teaching of critical race theory within K-

12 education (O'Kane, 2021). Nearly a dozen states have introduced similar bills that would direct what students can and cannot be taught about the role of slavery in American history and the ongoing effects of racism in the U.S. today. Evidenced in U.S. history textbooks about heritage tourism sites (Benjamin & Alderman, 2019), this narrative of whitewashing and romanticizing American history is nothing new.

Almost two years after we completed our duoethnography dialogue – we find ourselves living during two pandemics, one due to COVID-19 and the second, racial and civil unrest. This time has grounded and forced us to truly pause and reflect. We analyze our own behaviors and performances as critical tourism scholars since our last journal entry. Incorporating an epilogue within a duoethnographic style (Benjamin & Schwab, 2021), we used this format to help challenge, engage, and produce a richer analysis of who we are and our places within these larger movements:

> ***Stefanie****: As a white person, I continue to find that it is my responsibility to infiltrate the spaces in which my whiteness allows me access to certain folks that Black or people of color cannot speak to. However, the constant 'easing' of white people into these conversations is infuriating. Our country does not teach about our complicated and difficult history in schools, through our textbooks, or at most heritage tourism sites ... we rather 'not talk about race' since that can be seen as 'rude' or perpetuating 'racial unrest'. That narrative must die. I'm seeing some hope with Generation Z and their willingness to challenge and dismantle white supremacy - but the struggle continues with political and legislative resistance.*

> ***Alana****: Having been involved with this work for years now - I can say without hesitation that I am tired, but also grateful. When we began researching and presenting on Black travel - there was little discussion about the intersectionality between race and tourism. Today, there is a growing list of scholars discussing this topic - and, due to the horrific events that occurred during the Summer of 2020, a growing interest from industry professionals and organizations to finally face the issue of systemic racism. For this, I am grateful. However, with this wave of attention has come a heavy bag of emotional labor. Being some of the few researchers focused on this topic, we have been called on numerous times over the past 18 months to deliver presentations, workshops and training around the topic (most times for free). In these sessions, we are still often faced with some of the same issues of fragility discussed above. It often feels like we are walking a tightrope trying to balance the emotions of white audiences while delivering the authentic (oftentimes uncomfortable) stories about racism in the travel industry. Though the work has advanced, there is still a very long way to go.*

Dismantling whiteness within the tourism and academic landscape will take major strides, not only within our research paradigm, but within the politics and policies across society and in the tourism industry. Our hope is that by continuing to unpack and discuss the challenges around researching, teaching, and discussing difficult dialogues, we can offer several strategies that can help with starting these conversations and creating safe spaces for dialogue around this sensitive topic. Sustained attention to this topic from both scholars and industry professionals will be needed to continue momentum towards racial equity in the travel space. Specifically, special attention should be given to collaborative efforts between social equity scholars and the BTM as an avenue for moving discussions about race and travel forward in a tangible way. As researchers, incorporating deep reflexivity as a commonly accepted and publishable practice can aid in advancing learning around conducting research with sensitive populations. Methodologies like duoethnography assist with creating space for dialogue to discuss concerns and issues that inevitably come up while doing this type of research, ideally creating space for tangible ways to combat racism. Finally, as critical tourism scholars and educators, we must not ignore how our work interacts with and impacts the wider society. In our roles, we should find it one of our major responsibilities to incorporate the state of the world into our classrooms and research, thus creating safe spaces for the uncomfortable but important conversations about race and tourism that must be continued.

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