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# Embedded and exposed: exploring the lived experiences of African American tourists

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## ABSTRACT

The United States is experiencing a shift in racial demographics. Recent projections suggest that minority groups will make up over 40% of the country's population by 2050. Such increases have made the topics of race, ethnicity, and culture an important area of study for researchers and tourism professionals alike. Existing explanations of differences in African American travel suggest that decisions are made due to marginality or ethnicity. Because travel preferences may be a byproduct of learned behaviors passed down through generations, it is imperative to understand both current and historical aspects of leisure behavior. In this qualitative study, the narratives of 12 African American tourists provided information which suggests that marginality, ethnicity, and issues related to discrimination impact their tourism-related attitudes and behaviors. Capturing the voices of African American travelers offers a more inclusive understanding of their travel experiences and insights into the relationship between race and tourism.

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African Americans; tourists;  
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## Introduction

Changing demographics in the United States (U.S.) have led to an increase in research about race, leisure, and tourism (Stodolska, Shinew, Floyd, & Walker, 2014). Reports show that by 2050, 43% of the country's population will consist of people of color (Contrino & McGuckin, 2009). Comprised of 42 million consumers, the African American community is among the fastest growing racial-ethnic groups in the U.S. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012) and over the next 40 years this group is slated to grow to 61.4 million (Contrino & McGuckin, 2009).

African Americans have also grown in affluence (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). The number of African Americans joining the middle class has increased and, overall, households have experienced an increase in discretionary funds. Travel is one area in which African Americans are choosing to spend their extra income (Alderman, 2013).

## Purpose of the study

Previous research has suggested that the tourism industry has created a 'white male gaze' that ignores the experiences of minorities (Alderman, 2013, p. 375). In addition, natural

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environments, including the national parks in the U.S. have been described as 'white spaces' (Finney, 2014). Several explanations have been proposed to describe the travel patterns of African Americans including marginality, ethnicity, prejudice, discrimination, accessibility, and racialized space. However, as the number of African American tourists grows, additional studies are needed to better understand the travel experiences of this group. Moreover, studies on race and tourism need to listen to the voices of those experiencing travel (Stodolska et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the travel experiences of African Americans to provide new insights into their travel behaviors.

## Literature review

### *African American travel and leisure*

Research has been conducted on race and leisure, but very little exists about African American (also called Black in this paper) attitudes toward and behaviors related to tourism (Carter, 2008). In the 1970s, much of the scholarship related to leisure concentrated on activity participation by Blacks and Whites (Stodolska et al., 2014). Understandably, the research focused on issues of inequality and policies (Floyd, 2007). For example, Washburne (1978) surveyed California residents about their levels of participation in outdoor activities and found that Blacks participated in local and group events (e.g. basketball) at higher levels than White residents while Whites participated in travel and outdoor activities (e.g. camping) at higher rates than Blacks. West (1989) found that African Americans chose activities based on perceived 'Blackness' or 'Whiteness' associated with an activity. Floyd (2007) categorized the 1980s and 1990s as the second wave of leisure research at which time dependent variables expanded to include activity preferences, the use of parks, and the meanings associated with activity participation and environments among Blacks (Stodolska et al., 2014).

Within tourism, even less research has been conducted to adequately construct a profile of the African American tourist. Philipp (1994) surveyed 213 households about their travel behaviors and found that Blacks were more likely to agree with statements related to traveling in large groups, having a specific itinerary, and eating in well-known restaurants. Carter (2008) analyzed data from the 2001 National Household Travel Survey and also discovered differences between the travel behaviors of Black and White travelers. While the main reason for travel among both groups was to visit family and friends, over 60% of African Americans ranked this purpose as their motivation compared to only 48.4% of White travelers. This study also revealed the propensity for African Americans to travel in groups. In another study on African American travel, Agarwal and Yochum (1999) studied the spending patterns of Black and White overnight visitors to Virginia Beach and found that spending was virtually the same across different demographic groups, indicating that race was not a factor with regard to travel expenditures. Yet, Williams and Chacko (2008) studied Black and White tourists in New Orleans and their findings showed that Blacks ranked attractions related to African American heritage and sports or recreational activities as being more important than Whites and were more pleased with the family atmosphere of the city.

Additionally a more recent report, conducted by Neilsen (2013), found that African Americans tended to use friends and family as their main source of travel related information. Such descriptions of the African American traveler have been applied repeatedly, but there are limited empirical data to support the claims related to these behaviors.

### ***Historical context of African American travel***

The relationship between African Americans and travel has been strained to say the least. Critical eras in U.S. history that have had implications on African American travel attitudes include slavery and the Jim Crow segregation era. For many African Americans living during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, 'travel' meant being bought and sold to plantation owners in different geographical locations. Finally, on 31 January 1865, with the passing of the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, slavery was abolished. Subsequently, the passing of the 14th and 15th Amendments bestowed Blacks with the same basic rights as Whites (Klarman, 2004; Maltz, 1990). Despite these rulings, states began to enact their own versions of the laws and such actions would have powerful effects on the African American community for generations (Pilgrim, 2000). Acknowledging and understanding these experiences may help explain the minimal African American representation in various aspects of travel and leisure today (Alderman, 2013).

The inception of the 'Jim Crow' era has a few different scenarios, but the devastating discriminatory effects are the same. A white minstrel by the name of Thomas 'Daddy' Rice darkened his face to resemble an African American man and then set out to provide entertainment to anyone who would watch. His overly stereotypical performances included song, dance, and other actions commonly associated with the acts of African Americans. Ultimately, the show reinforced the negative thoughts of White audience members, leaving them with distorted images of African Americans (Litwack, 2010). Jim Crow soon became more than just a show; it became a way of life in the American south. Near the end of the nineteenth century it was the term used to define the laws, rules, and etiquette of the time period. During this era, Blacks were segregated from Whites in public establishments, barred from voting, and subjected to a great deal of abuse (Klarman, 2004).

In spite of the difficulties experienced during the Jim Crow era, African Americans who worked their way into successful careers began to seek opportunities to travel and enjoy leisure activities. Those who set out to travel quickly realized the increased amount of planning and preparation it took to ensure their safety. During this time, Blacks relied on various forms of public transportation that enforced segregated seating arrangements (Foster, 1999), and if restroom facilities were available, they were often dirty, small, and unkempt (Weingroff, 2013). When Blacks traveled they risked harassment, ridicule, and violence, and the threat of arrest had to be considered (Litwack, 2010).

Early in the twentieth century, the automobile became a welcomed mode of transportation for African Americans. No longer restricted to the assigned routes set forth by public transportation, the automobile allowed African Americans to explore various routes on their own timetables. However, Blacks quickly found that novice motorists could be at risk for the same types of discrimination they had been subjected to when they used other forms of transportation. Drivers had to become astute at figuring out the racial climate in unfamiliar towns. Obtaining the necessary items, such as gas, food, and

lodging continued to be problematic. Accounts from African American travelers reveal that traveling in the morning or early hours was when they felt the most free. As the day progressed, Black motorists worried about where they would stay because many facilities declined services. Prepared travelers arranged to stay with friends while others found themselves spending the night in their cars (Foster, 1999).

Situations like the ones mentioned in the previous paragraph prompted one man to take action. A Black postal worker began keeping a record of locations that accommodated African Americans. His collection was turned into *The Negro Motorists' Green Book* (later called *The Negro Travelers' Green Book*), a guide book for African Americans to navigate welcoming venues during trips, that was published from 1936 until 1964 (University of South Carolina, 2017). Initially, the book listed venues in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, but eventually the book expanded to include listings all over the U.S., as well as some international destinations (Mitchell & Collins, 2014).

During the Jim Crow era, businesses owned and operated by Blacks emerged to serve the developing needs of African American citizens. As Blacks increased their economic means to travel, the need for agencies to service them increased (Butler, Carter, & Brunn, 2002). For instance, the role of African American travel agents was very important because they could offer something others could not, the assurance of establishments that were friendly toward Black travelers. Due to the harsh racial treatment of Blacks while traveling, it was very common for African American travel agents to create trips that allowed people to travel in groups; therefore, bus trips, especially those organized for church groups, were extremely popular. For many, traveling in groups eased the fear of traveling during the Jim Crow era. Narratives from African American travel agents highlighted trips that included visits to large cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. There was no mention of trips to national parks, beaches, or other outdoor sites (Carter, 2008).

Now in a time when individuals can come and go as they please, evidence from previous studies confirms that some African American tourists remain deeply affected by the events of the past, not willing to expand beyond their comfort zone. As Finney (2014) observes, segregation remains even though segregation is illegal: for as she puts it, 'one does not need to see a "whites only" sign to feel that he or she is not welcome' (p. 62). Yet, the racial makeup of leisure activity participation is diversifying and therefore, it is especially important to uncover trends, motivations, and constraints to ensure equality is represented in all leisure activities, including travel. As Floyd (1998) and Philipp (2000) boldly stated approximately two decades ago, race matters.

### ***Explanations of racial differences in travel and leisure***

Two major themes have been used in an attempt to explain African American travel behaviors and leisure preferences: one of marginality and one of ethnicity (Carter, 2008). Other emerging themes include prejudice, discrimination, accessibility, and racialized space (e.g. Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Carter, 2008; Cavin & Scott, 2010; Finney, 2014; Philipp, 1994; Weber & Sultana, 2013; West, 1989).

The marginality theory links the leisure choices of African Americans to their socio-economic status. It suggests that Blacks do not participate in certain activities because they lack the financial resources needed to engage in tourism or certain leisure activities

(Carter, 2008; Washburne, 1978). Supporters of marginality argue that if economic constraints were removed, minorities would choose to participate in activities identified with higher levels of participation by Whites (West, 1989). Other studies (e.g. Floyd, Shinew, McGuire, & Noe, 1994; Philipp, 1994; Philipp, 1999) have shown that leisure differences are likely to be based on more than social class alone.

Limitations of marginality theory involve the lack of consideration for 'how historical racism and discrimination influence contemporary behaviors and preferences' (Floyd & Stodolska, 2014, p. 10). Additionally, the growth of the American population has caused an increase in gaps within the race, thus the marginality theory is not a clear indicator of in-group differences related to income.

Washburne's (1978) study on the lack of African American participation in wild land recreation, offered ethnicity as an alternative explanation. The ethnicity hypothesis suggests that 'cultural norms, values systems, and socialization practices within racial-ethnic groups' (Floyd & Stodolska, 2014, p. 11) serve as explanations for differences in leisure participation. Washburne (1978) asserted that the use of ethnicity as an explanation 'is an integral reflection of culture, and that characteristic preferences for leisure activities among Blacks may have been developed and maintained in the same fashion as those among Whites' (p. 177). As Philipp (1994) pointed out, as 'tourism preferences are likely learned behavior and may persist for decades, it becomes essential to understand how these preferences are created and maintained from one generation to another' (p. 486). Despite providing an alternative means for analyzing African American leisure participation, early studies did not identify specific cultural characteristics that may be associated with leisure (Stodolska et al., 2014).

Prejudice and discrimination are emerging themes used to explain differences in travel and leisure patterns. West (1989) is cited as conducting the first analysis of the effect discrimination has on leisure participation. Tourism research conducted by Philipp (1994) and Floyd (1998) suggested that past racial discrimination offers explanations as to whether one engages in or avoids certain locations and leisure activities. Cavin and Scott (2010) supported this theme by stating that African Americans have made great strides in many areas once stricken with oppression, but the effects of years of institutionalized injustice influence their actions today. Recently, examining race and tourism further by using prejudice and discrimination as the explanation for differences in leisure preferences has been encouraged (e.g. Finney, 2014; Shinew et al., 2006). The concept behind this push is that African Americans have maintained certain attitudes and behaviors once learned during the Jim Crow era. These have been passed down through generations; thus, affecting their attitudes and behaviors today (Floyd, 1998). Additionally, Philipp (1999) suggested that feelings related to acceptance influence tourism choices.

Carter (2008) added that African Americans differ from their White counterparts because of their racialized view of space. Through interviews with African American travel agents, he concluded that African Americans are guarded in terms of their views of certain spaces, whereas their White counterparts view most space as unracialized. Factors such as years of stereotyping and discrimination affect leisure experiences, thereby influencing future leisure choices (Floyd, 2007). Carter's (2008) theory of racialized space and its influence on African American travel relates to the historical context of travel. During the time of Jim Crow, rules related to segregation deeply affected the leisure of African Americans. He posited that

just as bodies are socially marked as being white or black ... spaces are socially marked by those who inhabit them, by those who claim them as their own, thus there is an expectation that certain people belong in certain places and not in others (Carter, 2008, p. 281).

In a recent study, Lee and Scott (2015, 2017) researched African Americans' travel behavior by applying Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 13 middle-class African Americans, via the vignette technique (Barter & Renold, 1999). Through their work they determined that fear of racism was an important factor in the interviewees' travel behavior and identified four important themes regarding African American travel: (1) racial discrimination during travel, (2) fear of racism, (3) storytelling and safety instructions: social reproduction of the fear of racism, and (4) race-related travel choices. The authors noted that tourism professionals and policy makers must make further efforts toward providing African American travelers with safe, comfortable experiences.

Accessibility, as an issue, has been investigated with regard to African Americans' low levels of visitation to national parks in the U.S (Weber & Sultana, 2013). In their research in the field of geography, Weber and Sultana (2013) computed accessibility to national parks as it related to the population, including African Americans. For the purposes of their work, they measured the degree to which particular populations or residential areas have access to the national parks in terms of the distance between their origins and destinations. The results of their study indicated that accessibility to the parks closely aligned with the population distribution of the minority population. For example, national parks in southeastern, northeastern, and midwestern metropolitan areas, and places such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, exhibited the highest accessibility measurements for African Americans (Weber & Sultana, 2013). Whereas, parks in the interior west, northern plains, and areas of Texas, demonstrated much lower levels of accessibility, and smaller parks, battlefields, and historic sites located in the eastern U.S. had higher accessibility measures for African Americans than the larger well-known western parks (Weber & Sultana, 2013). Although the geographic factor of accessibility was found to be related to park visitation, it is not the only factor involved for it did not explain the low levels of visitation at parks located along the Appalachian Mountains such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park or the Blue Ridge Parkway (Weber & Sultana, 2013).

In a recent study on the different visitation rates to U.S. national parks by Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic residents of New York City, Xiao et al. (2017) found safety, comfort, and cost (including the cost of transportation, food, entrance fees, and lodging) were major barriers, helping to account for lower visitation numbers to the parks, but that there were not differences in these areas between Black and White respondents. Therefore, Xiao et al. (2017) suggested that the lower visitation rates by Black residents could be associated with the subculture hypothesis, that notes that differences are due to subculture values (Krymkowski, Manning, & Valliere, 2014). This would imply that leisure opportunities need to be developed to coincide with the values of racial and ethnic minority groups such that they include facilities and programs that are more culturally inclusive (Krymkowski et al., 2014).

In a recent study on heritage site visitation, the results provide support for the need for attention to subculture values, and indicate that travel patterns continue to be influenced

by historical factors (Benjamin, Kline, Alderman, & Hoggard, 2016). For example, nonwhite tourists were more likely than expected to go to civil rights memorials, African American festivals, and Underground Railroad sites and less likely than expected to go to Civil War museums or southern plantations while White tourists were more likely than expected to visit Civil War museums or southern plantations and less likely to visit the sites visited more frequently by nonwhite visitors (Benjamin et al., 2016).

As noted by Weber and Sultana (2013) accessibility can be viewed as being related to more than proximity. For example, Alderman and Modlin (2008) found that tourism sites are often created and marketed in ways that reinforce old patterns of social power and inequality, limiting the accessibility to these tourism destinations in terms of how they are depicted in the information provided to potential visitors. In an analysis of the websites of 20 historic plantations in North Carolina, they observed that information about slaves' experiences was often invisible or very limited (Alderman & Modlin, 2008) and they found similar results in an analysis of tourism brochures (Alderman & Modlin, 2013). Further work into how tourism is depicted indicates that visual images, such as television shows, may also lack attention to the experiences of African Americans (Alderman, Benjamin, & Schneider, 2012).

Finney (2014), in her insightful analysis of African Americans' relationship with the outdoor environment in the U.S., observes that a frequent stereotype is that African Americans do not have an interest in the natural environment or in outdoor activities and that concern for the environment has been viewed as a topic of importance to White people. She also notes that African Americans display relatively low levels of visitation to the national parks. However, through her thoughtful research and examination of the issues, she explains that African Americans' relationship with the natural environment is complex, layered, and influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors.

The literature suggests that the travel and leisure behaviors of African Americans, as well as their interactions with and interpretation of certain locations and activities, are based on one of the aforementioned explanations (e.g. Carter, 2008; Cavin & Scott, 2010; Lee & Scott, 2015, 2017; Washburne, 1978; Weber & Sultana, 2013; West, 1989), but research on the experiences of current travelers is limited. Despite some attention to race and tourism, much still remains unknown about the African American traveler (Carter, 2008). Therefore, this study elicited narratives about the travel experiences of African Americans to increase the understanding of how issues of class, ethnicity, prejudice, discrimination, accessibility, and racialized space have shaped the travel experiences of African Americans.

### **Research questions**

This study explored the travel experiences of African Americans by examining the overarching question:

- How have African Americans experienced travel?

The following supporting inquiries also guided the study:

- Inquiry 1: What were their travel experiences while they were growing up?



- Inquiry 2: What are their current travel experiences?
- Inquiry 3: In what ways do the lived experiences of African Americans shape their tourism attitudes and behaviors?

## Methods

Much of the literature about African American leisure applied quantitative methods (e.g. Floyd et al., 1994; Washburne, 1978; West, 1989). After conducting a review of existing literature, Floyd, Bocarro, and Thompson (2008) found that only 20% of leisure studies involving race and ethnicity included the use of qualitative methods. Washburne (1978) argued that the use of qualitative approaches would be beneficial for understanding life circumstances of African Americans. Additionally, it has been said that humans are story tellers by nature (Bernard, 2011) and that the use of stories has been critical to the survival of African Americans (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Therefore, to gain further understanding of the lived experiences of African Americans as tourists and to address the gap in quantitative research, qualitative methods were employed in this study.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the chosen methodology for this work because of the distinct emphasis it places on one's ability to make sense of the life experiences of the participants. This method uses narratives from participants to explore various aspects of events or experiences (Stodolska et al., 2014). The method allowed for careful individualized examination and comprehension of individual interviews, or each participant's story, while also seeking similarities and differences between cases.

As is common in qualitative research, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to obtain participants (Bernard, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A collective review of studies using IPA indicated that the mean number of participants in studies using IPA was 15 (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). A total of 12 African American adults, who had taken at least one trip in the past year, participated in the interviews for this study. Eight participants emerged from what Smith et al. (2009) described as opportunities, meaning they were recruited through the use of social contacts. A combination of email and in-person conversations was used to recruit these participants. Four participants were unknown to the researcher. They were recruited at an academic conference, through a university website highlighting study abroad participants, and via email.

Twelve interviews were believed to be sufficient for this research project because the interviews conducted reached saturation and further interviews were leading to little additional new data of value to the study. Semi-structured interviews were deemed an appropriate method of data collection because of the ability to elicit 'stories, thoughts, and feelings' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56) about the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of African American tourists. An interview schedule was developed based on the literature, reviewed by three academic professionals, and revised accordingly. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and 10 of them were recorded (two interviewees chose not to have their interviews recorded).

Tape recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety and analyzed by three coders. The coders used the research questions to guide their analysis, applying an editing approach recommended by Miller and Crabtree (1999); in particular, they

employed systematic text condensation, a method suggested by Malterud (2012). Themes were identified through the analysis of the data.

Once the themes were identified, the final step was writing up the findings. In IPA, writing up the findings is viewed as an extension of the analysis; it is the process of explaining the themes in narrative form (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

## Results and discussion

A total of 12 African Americans (10 women and 2 men) who had taken at least one trip in the past year were interviewed about their lived travel experiences. The names used by the participants were Darlene, Nathan, Carrie, Christina, Carina, Tonya, Elsie, Shannon, Erica, Laura, Evelyn, and Grayson. Basic demographic information about the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

### *Inquiry 1: childhood experiences with travel*

#### *The mindset of travel*

The concept of travel differed among those interviewed. One participant in the study named Elsie shared that ‘growing up in the seventies, African Americans just didn’t think vacation. You’re thinking survival. You know just paying the bills. You know making sure your child had the essentials.’ This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee named Nathan who said that,

While we had all the necessities that we needed at home and could get to these places within a 10 to 100 mile radius, that’s all we did ... there was this embedded behavior where a trip to the next county seat was a vacation.

Baby Boomer and GenX participants commented that much of their leisure time was centered on their church.

The study participants called Erica and Laura (millenials), Carrie (a Baby Boomer), and Carina (from GenX) shared more travel-oriented experiences. For example, Erica described her family as a ‘traveling family’ and credited her family’s love of travel to her grandfather. She said he was very adventurous and even after his death the family continued to travel.

**Table 1.** Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Generation	Birth Year	Gender	Location of Last Vacation
Darlene	Baby Boomer 1	1952	F	Williamsburg & Virginia Beach, VA
Nathan	Baby Boomer 2	1958	M	Philadelphia, PA
Carrie	Baby Boomer 3	1962	F	Miami, FL
Christina	GenX1	1979	F	Raleigh, NC
Carina	GenX2	1973	F	Bahamas
Tonya	GenX3	1979	F	Puerto Rico
Elsie	GenX4	1967	F	Arizona
Shannon	GenY1	1991	F	Orlando, FL
Erica	GenY2	1989	F	Atlanta, GA
Laura	GenY3	1991	F	South Africa
Evelyn	GenY4	1984	F	Honduras
Grayson	GenY5	1984	M	Myrtle Beach, SC

### ***Why they traveled***

Eight of the twelve participants indicated that travel was not a priority in their families. For these individuals, travel consisted of the occasional trip to spend time with family members who resided in other states. They did not consider these trips as ‘vacations’; they were merely opportunities to see relatives. Four participants considered travel or vacationing to be a family priority, demonstrated by combinations of trips to see family, trips to visit special sites or landmarks, and short road trips.

### ***Barriers to travel***

Financial strain was often stated as a barrier to travel. When asked if travel was a priority for her family, the interviewee called Tonya immediately exclaimed, ‘Girl naw we ain’t have no money, we couldn’t afford it.’ Furthermore, the participant named Christina said, ‘our family wasn’t economically well off. Now we did have a nuclear family, which statistics would like to say that nuclear families were usually better off, but we were dirt poor.’ She continued by saying that the only time they traveled was to a funeral and they often had to borrow money or someone’s car to get there.

Participants also noted that many of their families lacked curiosity about travel. Tonya made this statement as a possible explanation for her lack of travel growing up, ‘I also think it’s like if you don’t know, if you don’t do it ... I don’t think my mom and her siblings traveled at all as children, so they wouldn’t know ...’ Her statement reflects the notion that because they had limited or no exposure to travel during their own upbringing, they (parents of interviewees) did not know how to transfer such desires to their children (the interviewees). Furthermore, those who did make travel a priority often visited the same locations or traveled for the same reason, to see family; thus, they also may have had a lack of curiosity about tourism. When asked to reflect on why her family never considered using the annual budget to travel to a different location, Shannon characterized her family as homebodies, noting that they did not want to explore anywhere else. For her family, going to Myrtle Beach was familiar and safe; thus, it became a reoccurring family trip.

## ***Inquiry 2: current travel experiences***

### ***The decision to travel***

Participants who did not consider travel a family priority when they were growing up were asked when their love for travel began; expanded social networks and changing life stages caused a shift in non-priority travelers. A representative comment made by Tonya included:

I think being exposed to people [in high school] who had traveled at young ages and then you know of course once I got to college there was a myriad of people who had traveled and saw places and I was like hey I think that’s something I want to do.

Travel requirements for employment and marriage were also influencing factors. Nathan described his travel during his youth as anywhere they could go to visit family who lived in close proximity, but once he got his first job he really began to travel. Grayson shared that his wife was fortunate to grow up traveling so vacationing and traveling became a

consideration for him after marriage. He said that travel is important to him now because it is a way to create memories with his family.

### ***Seizing the opportunity for travel***

Every participant indicated that seizing the opportunity to travel was an important aspect of making travel a priority. Shannon shared that this summer she would serve as a chaperone for a school sponsored trip to Italy. Darlene stated that church was a trusted avenue for encouraging her to travel and lately the church was responsible for planning her trips. She explained that, 'when these opportunities came up with the church I saved money to pay my part. I couldn't do it all on my own ... so that's why I took those trips.' Gen Y participant Lauren stated that she hopes to continue traveling by pursuing an advanced degree, working, or volunteering abroad.

### ***Current travel behaviors***

The broad statement 'describe your travel experiences now' was used to elicit responses that would provide first-hand information about African American travel behavior. Overall, descriptions of short getaways dominated the conversations. Travel by car was the most popular form of transportation. Travel surrounding popular events was also a frequent motivation for travel. For instance, Erica's last trip was a weekend getaway to Atlanta for the Battle of the Bands. Planning, primarily with respect to saving money or budgeting, was the most common factor mentioned with regard to one's ability to travel. A representative comment about current travel behaviors included the following from Grayson:

We decided ... every year on our anniversary, we're going to take a trip somewhere that we've never been. Every year we're setting aside a set amount of dollars ... to take that next trip, whether that's a cruise, that's going to get us to some of these places or a plane ride.

### ***Inquiry 3: race and tourism***

Understanding how and where African Americans choose their destinations or why they neglect certain destinations is important for comprehending African Americans' perceptions of the world as well as their attitudes toward and behaviors connected to travel. This understanding also provides evidence of the power race still has in this nation. When Erica reflected on traveling to visit family members, she said that they frequently took trips to visit relatives in New York and New Jersey. She noted the historical significance of these destinations by stating, 'Lots of my family moved away; it was thought to be safer in the north for Blacks than the south.' Her personal reflection references a time in the twentieth century when African Americans began making the decision to move from southern states to northern states. This movement was brought on by the treatment of African Americans in the south and the hope for better opportunities in the north (Tolnay, 2003).

Nathan and Grayson also voiced sentiments where race played a role in their past, current, and future travel. Nathan noted the following: 'I kind of sensed that there was this geographical presence between up north and down south, but nobody was out there in the west; there were no Black people out there. That's the sense I had.' Grayson admitted that this viewpoint may be somewhat stereotypical, but continued by saying '

... me being African American and understanding there's a lot of white people in Texas; there's a lot of white people in Arkansas; there's a lot of white people in Mississippi ... I just might not need to be around there.' Grayson and Nathan's statements align with the notion that certain places are assigned a 'color' and those who are not of a certain color do not belong in those spaces, giving credence to the theme of racialized space proposed by Carter (2008). This mindset limits the number of places that African Americans are willing to travel.

Those comments were particularly interesting because the first question in the race and tourism section of the interview was 'how does race impact your travel decisions?' To which everyone answered (in some form) 'it doesn't.' Grayson offered an insightful answer stating that, 'it does play into my mind, but I guess ... I would never think of going there to start with so it doesn't really affect me.' He went on to give the example that if he won a trip to Mississippi, he was not sure that he would go because he did not think that there would be anything for him to do in Mississippi. Nathan echoed the sentiments by offering the example of somebody asking him to go to Iowa; he stated he would probably go, but would need to do research about things to do there. This notion that certain states do not contain leisure activities of interest to African Americans provides support for Carter's (2008) racialized space theme.

Aside from not knowing what to do in certain states, the legacy of discrimination emerged in each of the interviews with Baby Boomers and Gen X participants. Carrie mentioned that places such as Utah and Iowa would not bother her because she was not aware of those states having a history of negative treatment toward African Americans; however, her awareness of the 'lynching of Black people ... and blatant mistreatment because of the color of their skin' limited her desire to travel to southern states. When asked about locations she would not visit, Tonya added to this theme by sharing that she recognized the historical value in visiting certain parts of the south, but the fear of lingering discrimination made her hesitant to add states such as Mississippi to her travel list.

Safety was also a common theme marking a location as an undesirable vacation destination. Evelyn said that she would not travel anywhere where there was civil unrest. Erica stated that the only reason she would not go anywhere was because of political safety. Africa was generally the example given of a place on a travel bucket list, but the interviewees noted that travel there would cause trepidation due to media coverage of recent events. Perceptions of safety could also help to explain the repetitious travel described in the childhood travel experiences of Shannon or the current experiences of Nathan whose bucket list consisted primarily of revisiting destinations rather than seeking new experiences.

### ***Racialized space and feeling welcome***

The statements presented in the section above provide support for Carter's (2008) theory of racialized space and its influence on African American travel. The African American interviewees presented conflicting statements about their perceptions of and visitation to certain locations. It was clear that the fear of possible discrimination, casually referred to as 'a feeling' prohibited travel to certain locations or participation in certain activities (e.g. golf, skiing, diving, etc.). Christina explained what was meant by the 'feeling' in the following way:

I felt tensed because a lot of times ... I started taking her (referring to her daughter) to the beach and the museums on the beach ... we were literally sometimes the only African Americans there. [I wondered] What are they thinking of us right now?

### ***Challenges: real and perceived***

#### ***Misunderstood***

A stereotype has existed that suggests that African Americans do not travel (Alderman, 2013). Dispelling that myth, Lauren said, 'A lot of people think we're not open to go places, but I'd have to say there's a lot of African Americans who are open to traveling ...' Evelyn felt as if no one understood her desire to travel so she turned to social media to find other Black people who shared her wanderlust. Now a prominent business woman specializing in travel for urban young professionals, she creates 'meet ups' for travel enthusiasts all over the world. She said, 'I love putting Black people in scenarios where they think we don't go. I love being the catalyst for putting people in situations where we're the only mass group of Black people. I love breaking the stereotypes.' Through social media pages on Instagram and Facebook and an upcoming web series, Evelyn wants the world to know that 'we are out here doing these things.'

Efforts such as Evelyn's have significant ramifications for the African American community. The promotion of African American travel can help to shift the social norms that exist not only within the culture, but also in terms of how others view behaviors and actions of African Americans. Christina shared that some of the biggest challenges facing African Americans are their own culture and biases. She often referred to the value African Americans place on materialistic items (e.g. expensive hair, cars, houses, etc.) instead of on doing something that will expose them to new things. She said that if you do certain things sometimes people think you're not a 'true African American.' She said that her family calls her 'White lady' because of the way she chooses to spend her leisure time. Erica commented that she feels that the travel and leisure limitations of African Americans are due to a fear of losing their cultural identity. Instead of shying away from places or participating in activities that are not assigned the Black label, she thinks that African Americans should educate themselves on their culture. She says 'you can always maintain your personal identify and cultural identity. I'm always cognizant of the fact that I'm Black, but I don't let it stop me.'

#### ***Equality, curiosity, and racism***

Another issue plaguing African Americans is the internal negotiation regarding the assessment of equality, curiosity, and racism. In this study, at some point during each interview, the narratives provided by the interviewees indicated connections among each of these themes. While discussing challenges facing African American travelers, Evelyn stated that people need to 'be open to understanding the difference between curiosity and racism.' She added that

You have to meet people where they are, from there you have to maneuver them to where you want them to be. We have to understand as a Black American those images of us being violent, cursing, and not getting along. We have to remember those are the same

images being shown across seas. If it's all they know that's what they expect. We should look at it as a teachable moment. We can represent our people in a different light.

Baby Boomer and Gen X participants more frequently alluded to the notion that during their childhood, travel, particularly for leisure, was simply not something most African Americans did. Further discussion illustrated that these reasons were based on financial barriers as opposed to the cultural explanation that Blacks do not travel. As one participant indicated, after ensuring that necessities were taken care of, there was not enough money left over to travel. The idea of racialized space was boldly discussed in the interview segment on destination choice. Negative social memory associated with southern states was attributed to information gained in school (e.g. lynching, segregation) or from stories passed down by family members. These stories speak directly to Carter's (2008) point that spaces are racially marked and such markings, whether spoken or not, indicate where one should or should not be. Activity selection also focused on a combination of theories, specifically discrimination and racialized space. While interviewees were open to participating in activities that were not socially labeled as things African Americans do, they were willing to try them, but they remained cognizant of the fact that they might be the only African Americans participating and they certainly were aware of how they might be treated.

With each interview it became clear that the explanations of African American travel behaviors cannot be viewed in isolation. Within each of these narratives are examples of marginalization, ethnicity, discrimination, and racialized space, indicating that there is not one sole reason for racial differences in travel behaviors. Stories of limited financial resources, feeling unwelcome, and the avoidance of activities and places all play a role in the decision making process for African American travelers. The interconnectivity of a theme such as racialized space speaks to political, economic, and social structures.

## Implications and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the travel experiences of African Americans. The stories shared by African American tourists not only provided information about their experiences, but shed light on implications that can benefit educators and hospitality and tourism industry professionals (see [Table 2](#)). The experiences shared by the 12 participants in this study illuminated both embedded behaviors transcending generations and exposed ideas that have not been addressed in the literature on African Americans and tourism. The overarching topic of this study was race and tourism.

The findings of this study indicate that African American travelers may have complex views regarding travel, and suggest that tourism organizations would do well to identify major stakeholders who could act as catalysts to influence leisure travel by African Americans in positive ways. Black churches or well-known national and local civic and social organizations are examples of resources that could be tapped as conduits to target future tourists. Working with travel providers, such organizations could potentially help provide travel information to their communities and serve as sponsors for travel to various locations.

A lack of financial resources was seen as barrier preventing African Americans from traveling. Yet, participants in this study demonstrated that with enough planning, travel is a

**Table 2.** Practical implications.

Areas of Improvement	Issue	Suggestions for Improvement	Relationship to Tourism
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning</li> </ul>	Financial Planning for community organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include sections on planning for vacations</li> <li>• Promote vacation savings accounts</li> </ul>
Tourism Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of tourism curiosity (awareness)</li> <li>• Invisibility in marketing</li> </ul>	Partner with trusted organizations in the African American community (e.g. churches and civic organizations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide group travel packages for organizations</li> <li>• Create a travel payment plan similar to the process used with a travel agent</li> </ul>

desirable activity in which they would like to participate. Travel providers who create programs that allow consumers to adequately plan and make payments toward upcoming trips will likely increase their African American clientele. Another potential partnership could be between banks, community organizations, and the hospitality and tourism industry. Again, using community outlets such as Black churches, programs could perhaps be developed and offered to impart important foundational financial planning information with a focus on tourism to groups who would benefit from information about topics related to financial planning and tourism (Ladika, 2013).

Lastly, through the narratives provided by the interviewees, it was clear that information was gained about the southeast region of the United States in school. Naturally, stories of popularized heroes such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks are included American History lessons; however, large parts of the lessons about African Americans use broad strokes, painting images of the marginalization of African Americans. It is evident that these lessons left a deep imprint on the minds of the participants, especially Baby Boomers and Gen Y participants. This serves as a considerable opportunity for educators, policy makers, and hospitality and tourism professionals to revamp the stories that are shared about African Americans in classrooms and at cultural heritage tourism sites. Providing students (or visitors) with more inclusive learning experiences about the lives of African Americans could potentially have a profound impact on the identity development of African American students and the manner in which they see themselves in the world.

Through the interview data regarding the participants' experiences with travel during their childhoods, it was apparent that travel was not a priority for the majority of the participants (67%), and a lack of discretionary income was often stated as the barrier prohibiting their travel experiences, which speaks directly to the marginality theme. However, in terms of their current travel behavior, participants were committed to planning and budgeting to ensure that they could travel annually. Family narratives about the experiences of African Americans passed down from generation to generation and information gained in school has led to some hesitancy toward visiting certain places because of their discriminatory past. This finding suggests that the social memory associated with these narratives adds to both the ethnicity theory and racialized space theory because of the manner in which cultural norms of African Americans continue to impact tourism and leisure decisions, as well as the view that African Americans are not welcome in those spaces.

In this study, exploring leisure and tourism within a racial context provided evidence of how issues of prejudice, discrimination, and inequality play out in social settings. This study suggests that regardless of the range of experience with travel, each participant



saw travel as a vital part of his or her life and planned to continue to travel. Despite where they fall on the travel spectrum, their experiences matter and deserve to be shared. This study may increase understanding of tourism attitudes and behaviors among African Americans by learning from the narratives of actual travelers, adding depth to the existing knowledge of a certain segment of travelers.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings from this study have potential significance for African American tourists. The African American participants had an opportunity to explore the dynamics of race as they pertained to their travel experiences and perceptions, and to share not only their travel experiences, but also how their feelings intersected between race, travel, discrimination, barriers, and benefits. In doing so, the experiences of these participants were acknowledged, something that has not been common in mainstream society.

### **Limitations and further research**

This study had several limitations. One was the female dominated narratives, for an equal number of male participants would have allowed for gender comparison. Because personal social networks were used it was easier to recruit female participants than males and a less personal method of recruitment might have yielded different narratives. Another limitation was the geographical focus of study participants. Participants were raised in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. A study that included individuals reared in or living in other parts of the U.S. would have been useful in determining if the themes were regionally motivated or persisted across the group.

The interviewer in this study is an African American woman in her thirties who enjoys traveling and has traveled extensively. She shares the same racial identity with the interviewees and therefore, probably allowed the interviewees to feel comfortable sharing their views. Given the racial background of the interviewer, it is likely that the interviewees were able to share openly about racial experiences and issues related to and tourism. However, she has a keen interest in traveling and therefore, that interest might influence the respondents in terms of the focus on travel.

The results of this study suggest several topics for further study. One limitation is that possibly stronger questions could have been asked of interviewees to elicit answers about how race influences their travel attitudes and behaviors and such questions could be the focus of further research. In this study the question 'how does race impact your travel decisions,' was asked of the interviewees; however, this might not fully capture the dynamic, lived experience of inhabiting and visiting racialized spaces. Future studies might do well to try to address the issue more precisely by asking people directly about their experiences with racism during their travel experiences and in life in general.

Additional research is also needed to determine if attitudes about destinations differ among generations. Studies focusing on generational specific aspects of travel would be helpful in furthering the conversation on racialized space and destination choice. Furthermore, while participation in leisure activities by those interviewed did not seem to be based on race as previous literature suggests, further studies examining participation in leisure activities while on vacation would be useful in determining current leisure interests of African Americans.

Moreover, while the vision that the interviewee Evelyn held of creating a social media platform for African Americans to share their travel stories consequently turned into a successful business, studies on African American travel entrepreneurship remain somewhat limited (Butler et al., 2002). It would be useful for tourism and business researchers alike to study the new wave of African American entrepreneurs within the tourism industry.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

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