

More American Than Ever: Constructing Identity & Discovering the Authentic Self in  
the Narratives of Black American Female Digital Nomads

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Jill Martin

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## ABSTRACT

### More American Than Ever: Constructing Identity & Discovering the Authentic Self in the Narratives of Black American Female Digital Nomads

A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Global Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
Brandeis University  
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Jill Martin

In an increasingly interconnected, borderless and technologically-advanced globalized world, new forms of work life are emerging through the use of technology. Digital nomads represent one such emergent group: professionals who utilize technology to circumvent conventional work environments by working remotely. These migratory workers generate new and innovative ways to maintain their work-life in a global context. Although digital native scholarship has largely focused on the white American male, a significant number of Black American females are found within the digital nomad ranks. These middle-class, college educated, Black women are intent on circumventing traditional American work environments and perceived racial and gendered hostility in favor of independence, travel, and a work-life lived abroad.

Through an ethnographic lens, this research project investigates the writings and blog posts of Black female digital natives in order to reveal how Black women negotiate concepts of nation, community, and belonging at home and abroad. Black women's narratives also reveal

how globalization, modernity and technology work together to reconstruct notions of identity and authenticity for themselves as well as their communities. This thesis argues that Black women's voices, which are often overlooked, are a critical addition to the literature within the fields of travel, work, and leisure. By illuminating the experiences of Black women, and more specifically, Black female digital nomads, this project aspires to provide new insights into the ways in which identity, race, gender, diaspora, citizenship, and class are constructed and reconstructed in new and divergent transnational contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the digital nomad represents a shift in how individuals construct notions of identity, citizenship, nation and belonging. Additionally, digital nomadism represents the emergence of a new type of worker that is disconnected from the traditional workplace and as a result unrestricted by the socialization and impositions on identity development that take place in the office. While some research and scholarship has been published about digital nomadism, there persists a gap in the field as well as literature on digital nomads. This thesis seeks to fill this gap. So while this thesis does begin with the examination of the curious emergence of digital nomads, paying special attention to their nuanced constructions of identity, citizenship, belonging and autonomy, this thesis ultimately, serves a far deeper purpose.

This thesis seeks to contribute to as well as radically reshape the field of digital nomad studies by incorporating and cementing the voices of Black women at the foundational level. This thesis will uncover, compile and examine the narratives written by Black female digital nomads to reveal the myriad of ways that globalization, self-employment and encounters with the ‘foreign other’ are experienced as well as articulated by Black American women. This thesis also investigates the peculiar and precarious nature of intersectionality, specifically among Black American female digital nomads who, while separated from their nation, begin to articulate distinctly new constructions of their own intersectionality. Upon closer examination, Black female digital nomads and their writings reveal uniquely new and not yet published insights on the ways in which marginalization, articulations of intersectionality, and relationships with their

own American citizenship are radically redefined as they enter new cultural contexts in the international arena. In this way, Black women reveal the ways in which modernity functions on both the personal and global level, showcasing how identities can be conceptualized in different context and how sociocultural positionings can be remarkably reconstructed.

Digital nomadism presents scholars with the rare opportunity to contribute scholarship that is foundational to this burgeoning field of study. Whereas many fields of study in academia have been calcified by the literature and conclusions of earlier scholars who have published their work decades or even centuries before new scholars enter the field. However, the topic of digital nomadism is relatively new. This gives younger, less established scholars, along with digital nomads, themselves, an opportunity to leave a mark on the field. More importantly, as this thesis argues, historically marginalized Black women have the opportunity to work on the foundational level of this academic field. This thesis seeks to radically shape the field of digital nomadism scholarship by centering its focus on the experiences and production of Black women within this fields' formative years. As there is no current scholarship addressing Black female digital nomads within the field of digital nomadism, this thesis boldly attempts to rectify this oversight. Even more importantly, this thesis seeks to exemplify as well as demarcate a crucial departure within the academic realm with its intentional and exclusive focus on Black women. This thesis will first expose the extent to which earlier scholars have failed to account for, produce, and construct comprehensive works of literature on digital nomads. More specifically, it reveals the astonishing degree of divergence between the narratives and experiences authored by those most marginalized and the accounts produced by white people, with the latter serving as the foundation upon which the literature is built.



This thesis' focus on Black women exemplifies the extent to which scholars have taken white narratives for granted, thereby ignoring the potentially powerful and radically redefining insights provided by Black females. This stark omission ultimately limits the trajectories of this and other fields of study. Finally, this thesis operates on a personal or individual level by working to include the 'self' which has yet to be found or accounted for in digital nomad research. So, while this thesis seeks to shed light on important narratives missing from the literature, and alludes to how the inclusion of Black women enriches the dialogue, this thesis is deeply intentional in its attempt to rectify the invisibility of Black women's narratives. By ending the erasure of Black women in digital nomad scholarship and travel/leisure academia, this thesis seeks to fundamentally and radically redefine the production of knowledge as well as the ownership and centralization of white people.

The centering of Black women in this thesis is a conscious and intentional decision for three reasons. First, it establishes and solidifies the visibility of Black women in digital nomad scholarship. Second, it protects the narratives written by Black female digital nomads from being co-opted by the white establishment, as well as by white scholars who seek to appropriate the voices of Black women for their own aims and agendas. Finally, it ensures that Black female digital nomads maintain distinct categorization from groupings with other minority peoples and communities. It is of utmost importance that Black women are distinctly separated from other minority women in the literature. Historically and currently, it has been shown that when Black women become defined as simply "women of color," they become indistinguishable from other minorities. Meanwhile their bodies, both physically and metaphorically, become the ladders upon which white and minority women alike climb in an attempt to further their own claims to equality. Black women--ranging from Harriet Tubman, to Kimberle Crenshaw and Tarana

Burke, the founder of the #MeToo Movement--have affirmed time and again how the language, intellectual property, and activism of Black women are appropriated by movements and protests in which they are not centrally involved. In order to rectify this gross exploitation, this thesis positions itself as a bold resistance against the miscategorization of Black women simply as 'minority women,' and staunchly refuses to use the term 'women of color' synonymously or interchangeably with the term 'Black women.'

Black female digitals truly are one of a kind. This thesis, which focuses specifically on Black American female digital nomads, reveals that the writings and insights this group produces are unique. Unlike other women of color, Black women occupy a distinctly unique location in the social fabric of America, which will forever separate Black women from others. They are both historically bound and firmly situated within an American context. They are descendants of slaves and second only to Native Americans in their physical presence and status as first inhabitants in the Colonies, arriving to the Americas a year before the Mayflower in 1620. Black women have a unique relationship with America and when these very women and their identities are deployed globally, their interactions and experiences with the international provide rare insight into the effects, implications and transformative powers of globalization on America's first and most marginalized non-indigenous population.

This must never be forgotten.

## CHAPTER I: DEFINING & CONTEXTUALIZING DIGITAL NOMADISM

### **Introduction**

This chapter will begin with a brief historical overview and literature review on the beginnings, transitions and understandings of the term ‘digital nomad’. Early scholarly works and research in the fields of business, technology, journalism, anthropology, and sociology will be investigated so that digital nomads and their lifestyle may be fully understood historically as well as contextually. This chapter will also provide a comprehensive demography of digital nomads in order to shed light on surprising similarities and points of divergence among digital nomads, particularly in terms of their professional backgrounds, education levels, gender ratios and ages. In addition to illuminating these mechanisms behind the surface that direct and drive digital nomadism, this chapter will examine, analyze, and critique the literature of academics, journalists, and digital nomads themselves, to provide insight into what digital nomadism means to the individuals who identify with this lifestyle choice.

### **Defining Digital Nomads: A Brief Literature Review**

The term “digital nomad” as we know it today, first appears in research conducted in 1997 by scholars Tsugio Makimoto and Davis Manners. In their study, Makimoto and Manners uses this term to describe future professionals who perform their tasks and job duties remotely

through the use of communication technologies while maintaining a migrating lifestyle with no particular place of residence.<sup>1</sup>

A more interesting definitive characterization of the term digital nomad can be found in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1986 research, which defines a 'nomad' conceptually as a form of a "new tribalism" characterized by its "eternal opposition between state power and individual freedom: and as resistant to the strictures of the nation-state and bourgeois society."<sup>2</sup> By this definition, digital nomads are not only in pursuit of a new way of living, they are also rebelling by acting in opposition to the state and its control over citizens. In addition to creating alternative ways of living, digital nomads are also redefining what it can mean to be a 'nomad'. While digital nomads are not motivated to be nomadic as a means of survival, which had been the case for nomadic peoples in early civilizations, the 'nomadic' aspect of digital nomad identity does bear similarities to early nomadic peoples in that both denote an inherent unsettledness. Besides this similarity, scholars such as Trimoldi, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that the 'nomadic' aspect of digital nomadism is a new interpretation of the idea of the nomad. This is because digital nomads are motivated by and share a different relationship with travel and being a traveler.

So while digital nomads might roam or maintain a degree of unsettledness, the digital nomads of today remain permanent citizens of a country. In this way, the nomad aspect of the digital nomad identity is meant to define those who share a new relationship to travel. Although they are fully nomadic, they are participating in a nomadic lifestyle by choice.<sup>3</sup> As a result,

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, "We Grab A Territory": The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, *European Group Of Organizational Studies*, 2018, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

digital nomads as well as the term, nomad, takes on new meaning, with nomadness in this context defined and characterized by an understanding of mobility as the physical dislocation from stasis and structure.<sup>4</sup> Whereas being a nomad or nomadic had previously been understood by scholars and researchers as an act born out of desperation and survival, within the last decade, scholars have begun to notice a new reinterpretation of what it means to be a ‘nomad’. This reinterpretation, as scholars discovered, was being expressed by a newly emerging group of individuals who called themselves digital nomads and articulated their idea of wanderlust in a completely new way.<sup>5</sup> Instead of act taken out of desperation, digital nomads articulated their wanderlust as a step towards self-realization, an expression of an innate desire to experience a new life, one less unsettled and predictable than the one currently being lived. For example, according to Giovanna Trimoldi, a scholar and author of, *We Grab A Territory : The Production of Digital Nomads*, digital nomads were attracted to the digital nomad lifestyle because it seemed to provide them with the chance to be adventurous, to dive into the uncertain and to explore the undiscovered.

But what exactly does it mean to be a digital nomad today? One answer to this question can be found in Giovanna Trimoldi’s article, *We Grab A Territory: The Production of Digital Nomads*. Trimoldi, discovered that a major defining characteristic of being a digital nomad is the consistency in which a person moves and switches their place of residence. According to Trimoldi, who interviewed twenty digital nomads living around the world, being a nomad, for many, is characterized by frequent travel.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many of the respondents surveyed in Trimoldi’s work cited the consistency of moving and switching up their residence as an integral

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 13

part of the life of a digital nomad. The consistency of movement has become such an integral part of the digital nomad label and characterization, not only because of definitions provided by digital nomads themselves, but also because of popular media's glamorization of international jet setting. Therefore, digital nomads and digital nomadism two terms now synonymous with international travel. The rising trend and popularity of digital nomadism has been observed in research by John Urry, in which he refers to the media portrayal of the digital nomad mindset as "nomadic madness" or "compulsion mobility," which characterizes and promotes the nomad lifestyle as an obsession with "life as art".<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between digital nomads and space is of considerable importance to researchers because it is a completely new pattern of human and social behavior. According to Trimoldi, "the relationship between Digital Nomads and space starts with the desire of disruption of places they want to escape from which range from houses, flats, offices and institutions. And to escape from stagnant routines and traditional lifestyles."<sup>8</sup> Here, Trimoldi seems to suggest then, that the allure of digital nomadism rests in its promise to grant participants with the opportunity to design one's life on their own terms, a claim, which is legitimized by digital nomads in her research. For example, one digital nomad, identified only as "#Nikita" asserts:

"I realized that I didn't want to have a traditional life with the house, with my boyfriend who wanted kids and I was 'no, I wanna work from the world, that's how I wanna live my life'. So yeah, that was the moment for me that I really realized that the way I was living it was not the way I wanted to keep living".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, another digital nomad, identified only as “#Jean” expresses displeasure with living the predictably traditional life saying,

“And then you move from institution to institution and you fall in love and get married and you have kids and you know the story right? So it’s like what life is. But then here I have seen other lifestyle and I can call my life the way I want and design it the way I want, to not be in this boxes anymore”.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, digital nomads like Nikita and Jean affirm Trimoldi’s observation that digital nomadism represents an opportunity to escape as well as redefine one’s life on one’s own terms. However it is essential to reveal the privilege inherent in one’s ability to actually become a digital nomad. By exposing and thus making visible this privilege of participation, scholars and researchers can begin to uncover the factors that allow some individuals to become digital nomads over others.

One such factor that speaks to the privilege and privileged backgrounds of digital nomad, can be seen in the homogeneity of educational backgrounds among digital nomads. To date, digital nomadism is comprised of individuals that are among the most educated in America and the West. For example, nineteen of the twenty digital nomads that Trimoldi interviewed possessed a college level education with six of those achieving graduate level degrees.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Katherine Conaway and Peter Knudson found that more than fifty-five percent of digital nomads surveyed possessed a bachelor’s degree, with an additional twenty-six percent obtaining masters and other graduate degrees.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that over eighty percent of digital

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Conaway, Workers of the World: Data on Digital Nomads, Medium, 15 May 2017, <https://medium.com/digital-nomad-survival-guide/digital-nomad-infographic-case-study-d30a3a646dac>.

nomads in their survey had obtained a college to higher level education degree. While these findings by Trimoldi, Conaway, and Knudson shed light on the correlation between education and digital nomads, which can suggest a hidden elitism within the digital nomad lifestyle, they also cause one to wonder whether these findings carry any negative implications. In these spaces abroad where digital nomads possess capital, high levels of education, and American citizenship, are digital nomads negatively reshaping the physical spaces and societies they inhabit abroad? Trimoldi asserts that negative impacts are made possible through the triadic production of knowledge, performances and relationships where dynamics of domination are naturally involved.<sup>13</sup>

### **Digital Nomads: By the Numbers**

#### A Comprehensive Look at the Demographics of Digital Nomads

In order to examine the unique characteristics and defining traits of individuals who identify as digital nomads, we must first illuminate and examine the current data on the demographics of digital nomads. This section utilizes four comprehensive case studies to explore the similarities and differences among various subgroups of the digital nomad community in order to reveal shared findings, ranging from age, occupation, quantity of countries traveled, and relationship status. After presenting the statistics and data from all four case studies, this section will work to uncover and investigate the latent factors that either drive or contribute to the successes, behaviors and overall longevity of individuals who identify as digital nomads. In conclusion, this section will analyze the data and findings from all four case studies to determine the benefits as well as downsides of digital nomadism.

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<sup>13</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, “We Grab A Territory”: The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, European Group Of Organizational Studies, 2018, 20..



The first case study, which is entitled, *Workers of the World: Data on Digital Nomads*, is an infographic published in 2017 by Katherine Conaway who is a digital nomad and the coauthor of *The Digital Nomad Survival Guide*. In summary, *The Digital Nomad Survival Guide*, according to Amazon, is a book that “provides useful and specific knowledge about travel, housing, work, and socializing to help” new digital nomads, “set up and manage their new lifestyle as a digital nomad”.<sup>14</sup> In order to offer new digital nomads the best and most relevant advice, Conaway and her co-author, Peter Knudson, decided to create a survey that would help them better identify who their target audience consisted of and what this audience might need.<sup>15</sup> With this goal in mind, along with over 152 responses from digital nomads across the globe, Conaway and Knudson were able to design the *Workers of the World* infographic.

In their survey, Conaway and Knudson discovered that ninety-nine of the 152 digital nomads surveyed were between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-four.<sup>16</sup> The two also found that of those 152 nomads, only twenty-four were between the ages of thirty-five to forty-four.<sup>17</sup> This surprising finding by Conaway and Knudson reveals that over sixty-five percent of digital nomads surveyed were from the millennial generation, meaning that these individuals were all born between 1981 and 1993—and some as late as 1996.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that individuals within the millennial generation are relatively young, with most just recently entering the workforce and their post-college adulthood. Additionally it is important to mention that the

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<sup>14</sup> The Digital Nomad Survival Guide: How to Successfully Travel the World While Working Remotely, Amazon, 17 May 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/Digital-Nomad-Survival-Guide-Successfully-ebook/dp/B06X6F7JF1>.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Conaway, “Workers of the World: Data on Digital Nomads”, Medium, 15 May 2017, <https://medium.com/digital-nomad-survival-guide/digital-nomad-infographic-case-study-d30a3a646dac>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Farrington, “What is the Millennial Age Range and What does that Mean Financially?”, 13 February 2019, <https://thecollegeinvestor.com/19793/millennial-age-range/>.

oldest millennial today is thirty-eight years of age, and the youngest millennial is only twenty-two years old. This suggests that a majority of digital nomads are also among the newest of entrants into the workforce and adulthood.

Similarly, the second case study, which is entitled simply, *The Digital Nomad Survey*, appears to affirm Conaway and Knudson's findings on the high levels of participation among millennials. The *Digital Nomad Survey* is the brainchild of Welance, a freelance collective that provides technical, social and digital support for clients that are looking for fresh and contemporary solutions for their business needs.<sup>19</sup> In 2016, Welance worked with at least six digital nomad service providers, all of which offer an array of services for digital nomads, such as workspace locators and logistical resources, to create a survey, specifically for digital nomads.<sup>20</sup> This survey which was comprised of over sixty questions, inquired about the backgrounds, ages professional titles, marital status and citizenships of over 500 digital nomads. As a result Welance was able to compile and later collaboratively publish the comprehensive 2016 *Digital Nomad Survey* used here.

Although Welance's survey is comprised mainly of data from European digital nomads from Germany, London and Italy, it is worth noting that Welance's findings confirm those found in Conaway's and Knudson's study. They found that millennials in the West, regardless of nationality or citizenship, still maintain the highest levels of participation in the digital nomad lifestyle.<sup>21</sup> According to Welance in 2016, millennials were also the group most accounted for, with thirty-three percent of digital nomads surveyed falling between the ages of thirty to thirty-

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<sup>19</sup> Welance - Freelancer Collective, 2017, <https://welance.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Elwes, "Our Trend Prediction: What The Digital Nomad Survey Told Us", Welance, 2016 , <https://welance.de/journal/digital-nomad-survey-results-infographic/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

three, and twenty-nine percent of nomads in their late twenties.<sup>22</sup> Here, once again, millennials are confirmed to have the highest level of participation among digital nomads, with millennials accounting for sixty-two percent of digital nomads surveyed. This high participation among millennials becomes even more obvious when compared to the level of participation among older digital nomads, namely those between the ages of thirty-eight and fifty-eight who fall into Generation X. This earlier generation of digital nomads from Generation X accounts for only eighteen percent of all digital nomads, according to Welance's 2016 *Digital Nomad Survey*.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to reporting the ages of the 500 digital nomads in their 2016 survey, Welance also reported on other factors or characteristics related to digital nomads. For example, Welance reports on the male to female ratio of digital nomads, their profession or industry of work, marital status, average number of countries traveled, as well as experience levels among those digital nomads surveyed.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Welance found that men accounted for higher numbers within digital nomadism, with over sixty-four percent of digital nomads identifying as male and only thirty-six percent identifying as female.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Welance found that over fifty-five percent of digital nomads reported being in a relationship, while the remaining forty-five percent identifying as being single.<sup>26</sup>

One surprising discovery from Welance's 2016 *Digital Nomad Survey* can be seen in the responses from digital nomads about their professional careers. While it appeared that digital nomads performed in a wide array of occupations, with twenty-nine percent identifying as marketers, thirty-three percent as programmers, and eighteen percent as designers, upon closer

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

examination, this heterogeneity in career choices proves to be merely superficial.<sup>27</sup> When analyzing these professions, namely the marketer, the programmer and the designer, it becomes apparent that despite having distinctly different titles and lines of work, all three of these occupations share one major similarity. Each career relies almost exclusively on the use of technology. Among all three professions, the ability to successfully complete job tasks and perform at the highest level of achievement requires access to the latest technological advancements in terms of digital systems, platforms and innovative products. For example, a social media marketer, or SM as it is simplified here, must possess a laptop, steady flow of Wi-Fi, and access to digital resources, such as SM blogs and publications, that provide recent developments pertinent to SM's.

Additionally, a social media marketer needs access to information that is happening in real time in order to stay on top of trends and discussions taking place online. Lastly, SM's must be able to communicate concisely and clearly online, through email and other digital communications, and quickly adapt to the latest technology and digital media innovations, such as Twitter and newly released updates to the iPhone and Android operating systems. From this example of the social media marketer, it becomes clear that the livelihood and professional success of those in this field are deeply intertwined with technology and its advancements. So while social media marketers, designers and programmers do represent different branches of work, they all rely heavily on technology. Furthermore when the percentages of three occupations (namely marketer, programmer, designer) are calculated together, this Welance finding reveals that a staggering eighty percent of digital nomads work in professions that rely

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

almost entirely on the proficient use of technology and consistent access to technological innovations and advancements.

The last insightful discovery made by Welance in their 2016 *Digital Nomad Survey* is their finding that thirty-two percent of digital nomads reported that they had traveled to at least five to ten countries and twenty percent reporting at least three to five countries.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps, unsurprisingly, only nine percent of digital nomads reported traveling to ten or more countries. According to these numbers, digital nomads are in fact traveling extensively, with sixty-one percent traveling to at least three to ten countries and seventy percent total if incorporating those with ten or more countries under their belt.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note these high numbers reported among this demographic of digital nomads because it reveals a striking contrast between Black female digital nomads and their travel frequency.

The third case study that best represents the demographic makeup and trends among digital nomads is the *And Co Anywhere Workers Study*. The *Anywhere Workers Study* or AWS, as it is simplified here, is the most recent of the three studies used in this research. The *Anywhere Workers Study* was published in 2018 and is a collaborative effort by And Co From Fiverr, an app that helps freelancers manage their business and Remote Year, a controversial company that helps individuals interested in remote work iron their logistical needs and travel accommodations while abroad.<sup>30</sup> The AWS is particularly interesting in its findings and final conclusions because it reveals the heterogeneity and complexity within the labeling and defining of digital nomads. Additionally, the biggest strength of the *Anywhere Workers Study* lies in its intentional decision

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Lenu Bienne, “Remote Year Is The Most Expensive Mistake I’ve Ever Made”, Medium, 8 Jan 2019, <https://medium.com/@lenubienne/remote-year-is-the-most-expensive-mistake-ive-ever-made-43fb0ebecf51>.

to focus on non-traditional workers instead of exclusively on digital nomads. What is most insightful about the *Anywhere Workers Study* is its use of the term ‘remote workers,’ which functions as an umbrella term, essentially encompassing all those who identify as non-traditional workers.<sup>31</sup>

While digital nomads do fall under this categorization of workers, other classifications begin to emerge, such as location-independent workers, expats and telecommuters.<sup>32</sup> By broadening its scope, the *Anywhere Workers Study* is able to reveal the shared similarities and motivations that connect these various working identities. And although research conducted in 2017 by management consulting firm Gallup reported that forty-three percent of American employees surveyed spent some time working remotely (outside of the office), there is a major difference between occasional remote workers and digital nomads.<sup>33</sup> One such finding that best represents the shared similarity among remote workers is AWS’s discovery of a new generation of workers that have refused to be permanently bound to one set environment, structure or workplace.

Similar to the Welance’s findings, the *Anywhere Workers Study* also found that men dominated the remote, non-traditional workspace, adding that the pay gap that persists in traditional workplaces is also significant among digital workers.<sup>34</sup> Welance found that within engineering professions that men who worked remotely were more likely to hold top earning positions than women, with an estimated sixteen percent of men holding top earning positions to

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<sup>31</sup> AndCo, “The Anywhere Workers”, And Co, 2018, <https://www.and.co/anywhere-workers>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Niraj Chokshi, “Out of the Office: More People Are Working Remotely, Survey Finds”, The New York Times, 15 Feb 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/us/remote-workers-work-from-home.html>.

<sup>34</sup> And Co, “The Anywhere Workers”, And Co, 2018, <https://www.and.co/anywhere-workers>.

just a meager 1.6 percent of females.<sup>35</sup> However women fared much better in marketing professions like public relations, with remote working women holding over eighteen percent of the top earning positions in comparison to only eleven percent of remote working men.<sup>36</sup> AWS confirmed Conaway and Knudson’s findings regarding digital nomad professions, reporting that creatives, such as engineers, marketing specialists and programmers, mainly dominated the remote working space.<sup>37</sup>

One particularly intriguing insight that separates AWS from the previously mentioned case studies is its attempt to identify and categorize the various meanings of freedom and flexibility among remote workers. AWS organized this set of data from remote workers according to profession as well as by responses from remote workers who could articulate the meaning of freedom and fluidity in their daily lives and work life balance. They discovered that,

[While] nine percent of respondents chose to go remote so they could live the nomad life. Marketing pros were most likely to cite the desire to travel more as a reason for becoming a remote worker (11%), and Creatives were most likely to cite freedom and the flexibility to work from wherever they choose (65%).<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, according to the AWS, “engineers were most likely to say they went remote to pursue a unique opportunity (10% vs. the 6% average), and also more likely to cite convenience as the number one benefit”.<sup>39</sup> This finding reveals that despite perceptions of digital nomads and in general remote workers as being rebellious outliers who boldly reject traditional work

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

environments, this group of workers is actually surprisingly varied in the motivations for choosing the non-traditional remote lifestyle.

The fourth and final case study in this section is from MBO Partners, one of the largest staffing firms that, according to Bloomberg, provides contractor engagement solutions for self-employed professionals and their clients, and enterprises.<sup>40</sup> In 2018, MBO Partners published its annual findings about digital nomads in their *State of Independence in America Report*. This 2018 report by MBO Partners is particularly pertinent to this thesis because it provides insights on the inner working of digital nomads while also presenting a powerful case for why academia should continue exploring and producing scholarship on digital nomads. For one, MBO Partners reports that there are, currently, over 4.8 million individuals that identify themselves as digital nomads, proving that not only are the numbers of digital nomads substantial but that these numbers are also steadily growing.<sup>41</sup>

Like the three previously mentioned case studies, MBO Partners also reported similar findings in the professions of digital nomads, confirming that digital nomads fell into four main categories: creative professionals, such as writers, designers, editors and content creators, IT professionals, like programmers and developers, marketing and communication professionals, and lastly those involved in ecommerce”.<sup>42</sup> While MBO does include the new category of e-commerce entrepreneurs, here again, it becomes evident that the common trait shared by all four of these professions is the integral role and sole reliance on technology in completing projects, as

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<sup>40</sup> Bloomberg, “Company Overview of MBO Partners, Inc”., Bloomberg, 1 May 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapId=8272731>.

<sup>41</sup> MBO Partners, “MBO Partners State of Independence In America 2018”, 2018, <https://www.mbopartners.com/state-of-independence/mbo-partners-state-of-independence-in-america-2018/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



well as communicating and collaborating with remote teams--all on online and regardless of time zone difference. This finding from MBO further aligns with and solidifies the idea that the professional success of digital nomads is dependent upon consistent access to as well as adaptability to technology advancements and cutting-edge information.

Upon closer examination however, the complete reliance of digital nomads on consistent access to digital mediums, new information, Wifi, and new technologies reveals a much more contradictory and limited reality of digital nomad life. While digital nomads abroad might be well-versed in the latest information and in possession of the most recent technology, these assets quickly become inoperative and useless in spaces that are not equipped for their usages. Take for example, an American digital nomad who chooses to work remotely in a small village in South India. Although this nomad may come equipped with the latest laptop, software and platforms, if the village in South India does not have the technological infrastructures to support such advancements, this nomad and his technologies are rendered virtually obsolete. Without the appropriate infrastructures to support international cellular service, Wifi or consistent electricity, digital nomads in some countries and communities abroad, risk missing out on vital information, important deadlines and potential opportunities. So despite the fact that digital nomads are portrayed as a lucky few who can travel to far away, exotic locations untouched by our fast paced world, in reality, digital nomads can never be completely off the grid.<sup>43</sup> Additionally the concentration of Western digital nomads in one location leads to far reaching ramifications for the local community and digital nomad coexisting in that space, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

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<sup>43</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, "We Grab A Territory": The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, European Group Of Organizational Studies, 2018, 12.

This finding reveals that technology actually functions as a double-edged sword for digital nomads, providing, on one hand, increased mobility for digital nomads to work remotely from anywhere in the world, while on the other hand, simultaneously limiting the physical spaces in which digital nomads can realistically and effectively work in foreign countries. Ultimately this means that digital nomads are not as free to live anywhere in the world and they must strategically choose cities and workspaces that are equipped with the technological infrastructure to support their digital needs. Later in this chapter, I will discuss, in more depth, the implications and limitations that technology have on the overall reality of digital nomad life in foreign countries. While MBO Partners did come to many of the same conclusions as the first three studies, they did diverge from the others in their estimations of participation among different generations. According to MBO's 2018 *State of Independence Report*, of the 4.8 million individuals who identify as digital nomads, fifty-four percent of those individuals reported being older than thirty-eight years old, which suggests that a majority of digital nomads are actually from Generation X instead of the Millennial generation.<sup>44</sup>

This finding by MBO is shocking because it challenges all three of the previous studies' assertions that digital nomadism and remote work were representative of a "new generation of workers." It also calls into question whether the digital nomad lifestyle is actually feasible for the average millennial, because if over half the digital nomads are in fact over thirty-eight, two things can be assumed about digital nomads.<sup>45</sup> One is that these individuals, who are over thirty-eight, have probably worked in their fields for a considerable amount of time, and as a result,

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<sup>44</sup> MBO Partners, "MBO Partners State of Independence In America 2018", 2018, <https://www.mbopartners.com/state-of-independence/mbo-partners-state-of-independence-in-america-2018/>.

<sup>45</sup> And Co, "The Anywhere Workers", And Co, 2018, <https://www.and.co/anywhere-workers>.

possess the professional expertise needed to translate their skills abroad and utilize them to acquire clients independently while transitioning into a new career. The second assumption that can be taken from this finding is that, if digital nomads are older than thirty-eight years of age, they also probably possess some level of financial stability as well considerable savings, thus lessening the blow if their new lives abroad do not come complete with a steady form of income. It would be interesting to see how different the discourse would be if scholars started with the belief that Generation X were the representation of the average digital nomad and constructed an argument in support of this finding.

Lastly, it is important to mention and make visible the negative aspects of digital nomad life, as reported by the four aforementioned case studies. For example the *Anywhere Workers Study* reveals that over thirty percent of respondents expressed that the lack of community abroad was the the main factor that negatively affected their happiness as remote workers.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, AWS found that working while roaming -- or in the case of digital nomads, traveling -- is not always easy, which perhaps explains why at least eighty-three percent of remote workers still choose to work in their home country.<sup>47</sup> This finding reveals, as well as suggests, that digital nomads that live and work abroad are in fact a small minority within the remote workers category that are able to successfully balance constant movement with work life structure. Another negative finding among remote workers, which will become important later in this chapter, is AWS's finding that "a third of remote workers say their top productivity blocker is having trouble shutting down at the end of a work day".<sup>48</sup> These feelings result in remote

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

workers' feeling overworked and unwittingly working for longer hours than their traditionally employed counterparts.

What is inspiring, however, is that across all three of these studies, digital nomadism and by extension, remote work, is gaining in popularity and cementing its place as a viable and sustainable alternative to the traditional workplace and work life balance. Additionally when combining AWS's findings " [that] 73 percent of remote workers are relatively new to the game, having gone remote in the last 4 years" with their discovery that at least eighty percent of workers "will work remotely for as long as they possibly can," the future of remote work and digital nomadism begins to look ever more promising.<sup>49</sup> While these four studies do provide a comprehensive screenshot of digital nomadism and its place within the discourse surrounding remote workers and non-traditional lifestyle choices, all four fail to fully encompass the diversity that actually exists within this emerging trend. Remarkably, upon closer examination of the statistical data and demographic makeup of digital nomads surveyed in these case studies, it becomes glaringly obvious that not one of these case studies felt the need or had the awareness to account for, as well as shed light on, the racial backgrounds of the digital nomads in their surveys. This astonishing oversight reveals as much about the research as the data itself.

It appears that, despite being labeled a "new generation of workers," digital nomadism and remote work are, in reality, being constructed, analyzed, and defined once again by and about the white majority.<sup>50</sup> This white majority, historically and throughout academia, has rooted itself in the foundations of scholarship, first by prioritizing whiteness and white traits as the normative model, and second by establishing whiteness as the set norm and center of debate in

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., The "Anywhere Workers" Study refers to remote workers as a "new generation of workers".

academic research and literature. In this way, the normalization of whiteness and of white people and their narratives is once again reproduced in a new field of study, ultimately functioning as the foundation for which digital nomadism is constructed and calcified.

In addition to their expressed desire to explore and live in the unknown, Trimoldi discovered that digital nomads in interviews were also driven by the prospective discovery of a sort of ‘newness’ and the unknown. This was expressed as the potential to experience a completely new life from the current one, a life not yet marred or restricted by boundaries and relationships.<sup>51</sup> While this finding by Trimoldi does reveal a key insight into why individuals are often attracted to the digital nomad lifestyle, this finding particularly sheds light on why Black American women are attracted to the digital nomad lifestyle and, more specifically, to life abroad. Although this notion of newness, as it relates to Black American women, is discussed and examined in greater depth later in Chapter Three: Black Female Digital Nomads, it is important to mention here that the meaning of this ‘newness’ takes on a different meaning for Black women. It represents the possibility for a new life. A new self. A clean slate, where the pervasiveness of racism and weight of stereotypes branded on them at birth can be wiped away. This ‘newness’ for Black women represents a radical expression of freedom, of agency, and of choice.

In addition to the expressions of ‘newness’ among digital nomads, Trimoldi also found that the notion of freedom was consistently expressed and articulated throughout all of her interviews with nomads. Freedom, according to this group of digital nomads, was defined as the ability to navigate one’s life with full autonomy, having full control and authority over how one

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<sup>51</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, “We Grab A Territory”: The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, *European Group Of Organizational Studies*, 2018, 15.

chooses to spend one's time as well as when one chooses to move or remain in one location. Similarly, Trimoldi affirms the importance of freedom in terms of time and space for digital nomads, because it represents having agency and power to essentially work without the boundaries of a physical work space or geographical territory.<sup>52</sup> For example, in Trimoldi's article, *We Grab A Territory*, one digital nomad respondent named Silvia states that being a digital nomad allows one to "have the freedom to move whenever you want and wherever you want. You don't have boundaries. You can be literally anywhere in the world when you want".<sup>53</sup>

However, further investigation into the validity of Silvia's claim that digital nomads can be "literally anywhere in the world" reveals a much more complicated reality that contradicts, as well as contrasts with, Silvia's assertion. Scholars and digital nomads alike have largely understood digital nomadism as the newest offspring birthed from the combined effects of globalization and technological advancements. It is, as Trimoldi writes, an extension of "the postcapitalist promise," providing individuals with increased autonomy in terms of time management and movement.<sup>54</sup> While it is true that technology and globalization have made it possible for the digital nomad to exist in the world today, gifting nomads with their newfound freedom of time, of movement, and from the workplace, there is a downside to this blessing. Technology and globalization function as both double edged swords and invisible hands, subconsciously guiding, restricting and dictating the countries and communities that digital nomads live in, work in as well as travel to. So in reality, digital nomads possess only a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13.

superficial freedom, a freedom predicated upon and subliminally controlled by the very same mechanisms that created it.

An example of this invisible hand can be seen in the process of moving abroad, as American digital nomads decide where exactly they should go. The logistical planning that goes into creating this new digital nomad lifestyle abroad requires that digital nomads consider a multitude of factors in their desired prospective countries. A few of these factors include the costs of transportation for things such as flights, trains and cabs, the daily costs of living in terms of housing, groceries and extracurricular activities, and the overall safety and average temperature of the location where they will live. In addition to considering these factors when deciding to move abroad, digital nomads must also ensure that living in their country of choice will be financially feasible throughout their time abroad. The need for a country to be ‘affordable’ is of utmost importance to those digital nomads who are self-employed and are earning an income through freelancing, the Gig Economy, or small businesses. While MBO Partners estimates that thirty-eight percent of digital nomads earn less than 10,000 USD per year and Welance reports that forty percent of digital nomads make less than 3,000 USD a month, both of these statistics reveal that it is essential that nomads choose to live in countries which they can afford.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, despite the discrepancies in the statistics, these findings by MBO Partners and Welance reveal that for a large portion of digital nomads, the countries which they ultimately select must either have weaker currencies than the U.S dollar or a considerably lower cost of living than that found in America. As a conclusion, these findings could serve to further explain why large numbers of digital nomads flock to developing nations.

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<sup>55</sup> See MBO Partners, *State of Independence in America Report 2018*; And Co, *Anywhere Workers Study 2018*.

While reports on digital nomads, like FlexJobs' 2018 *Digital Nomad Survey*, claim “[that] 40% of people who work remotely from any location make more than \$50,000 in salary” it must be noted that FlexJobs is talking about individuals that are working remotely for a company located in the West.<sup>56</sup> And while these digital nomads do enjoy a high and stable salary in addition to location independence, there is some controversy with regard to whether these individuals can make legitimate claims to digital nomadism. The controversy stems from the fact that, while these remote-working digital nomads do enjoy location independence, which has become synonymous with digital nomadism, their employment status reveals that they are still “technically” employed by a corporation. This places them at odds with digital nomads, who consider this type of technicality in employment as being inauthentic to digital nomadism. So, while FlexJobs claims that eighteen percent of digital nomads make more than 100,000 USD a year and another twenty percent earn between 50,000 USD and 90,000 USD a year, these statistics must be contextualized and thus understood as a statistic that reflects a specific type of ‘digital nomad’.<sup>57</sup> This statistic reflects only a small minority of digital nomads who are from Gen X, forty to fifty-four years of age, and operating abroad more like expats than digital nomads. These individuals do not need to consider factors such as costs of living, housing, transportation and day to day expenses, which further proves their questionable status as quintessential digital nomads. However, because of their financial freedom, these questionable digital nomads are less guilty of participating in the inherently exploitative and ethically debatable behaviors of the ‘more authentic’ and rogue digital nomads.

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<sup>56</sup> Brie Reynolds, “FlexJobs Digital Nomad Survey: Insights into the Remote Lifestyle”, 22 Oct 2018, <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexjobs-digital-nomad-survey-insights-remote-lifestyle/>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



Although a majority of digital nomads are somewhere on the spectrum between self-employed, freelancers or entrepreneurs, all are guilty of promoting the concept of geoarbitrage. Geoarbitrage, or “lifestyle design” is a concept that came to prominence in one of New York Times best sellers, *The Four Hour Work Week*, written by Tim Ferriss (2017), which is considered one of the original books publicly defining and promoting what would eventually become known as digital nomadism and the digital nomad lifestyle. Marketed as a self-help book, *The Four Hour Work Week* provides individuals with a way to “escape the 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich” mentality. It is both autobiographical and anecdotal, as Ferriss weaves through his stories specific ‘truths’ and tips as he explains how readers can maximize their efficiency, increase their profits and enjoy more of what life has to offer. Soon after its release, *The Four Work Week* became an international success, gaining critical acclaim and notoriety among those interested in his ideas. Digital nomads and location independent workers later cemented Ferriss’ ideas of geoarbitrage as the foundation from which nomads made business and travel decisions.

In reality however, geoarbitrage, at least in this context, is nothing more than the newest rearticulation of Western imperialism and it’s vapid exploitation of the vulnerable. While the ugly truth of geoarbitrage is insidiously obscured by the more popular use of it’s moniker “lifestyle design,” upon closer examination, it becomes glaringly obvious that *The Four Hour Work Week* is in fact using the concept of geoarbitrage to teach its readers various ways in which they can “utilize” low wage, international labor and a lower cost of living to minimize their work time and load while maximizing their profits and free time.<sup>58</sup> Geoarbitrage begins by

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<sup>58</sup> Alex Vuchnich, “Introduction to Geoarbitrage”, Alt Lifhack, 15 June 2009, <https://altlifhack.wordpress.com/2009/06/15/introduction-to-geoarbitrage/>.

instructing individuals from the West who are entrepreneurs, self-employed, or location independent and have a regular or established clientele, to identify countries with low-value currencies that equate to considerably less than the US dollar.<sup>59</sup> Once such countries are identified, Ferriss reveals that all work that is tedious, undesirable, or no longer of interest should be outsourced to people who live in those countries initially identified. By outsourcing to countries with low-value currencies, digital nomads are able to employ workers in the local currency, which is considerably less than the acceptable rates demanded by American workers.<sup>60</sup> In addition to employing cheap labor, digital nomads are advised to sell their services, accepting payment only in Western currencies.<sup>61</sup>

This four-step strategy allows digital nomads to work fewer hours and enjoy more free time while simultaneously maximizing profits.<sup>62</sup> In the final step, Ferriss once again instructs readers to identify a selection of countries, although this time readers are encouraged to choose countries where they would like to travel or live.<sup>63</sup> From that selection, readers should determine which countries have relatively low costs of living in addition to high qualities of life. This narrowed down list of countries represents the potential locations that digital nomads should choose to relocate in order to spend less, save more and safely as well as peacefully enjoy their newfound free time. It is this strategy, popularized by Tim Ferriss, that sits at the foundation of digital nomad thinking, serving as the inspirational blueprint for digital nomads' attempting to "design their lifestyles."

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

While the appeal of geoarbitrage's mantra of "less work, more money and more freedom" is obvious and understandable, especially to those individuals who seek to escape feelings of powerlessness in their current workplaces, by using geoarbitrage as a means to gain more control and autonomy in one's life, one also becomes complicit in reinforcing the same hierarchies and mechanisms these individuals seek to escape. And those mechanisms are problematic as well as inherently exploitative, ultimately reproducing the same dynamics found in the Western imperialist agenda. In Chapter Two, this reproduction of imperialism among digital nomadism will be discussed in greater detail.

### **Digital Nomadism: An Extension Of The Postcapitalist Promise**

To understand the emergence and steady rise in popularity of digital nomadism, one can refer to Trimoldi's articulation of the 'postcapitalist promise,' which she attributes to the rise and popular reception of digital nomadism.<sup>64</sup> According to Trimoldi, digital nomads are simply another step in the gradual shift, articulation and expression of the 'postcapitalist promise,' which she defines as a radically new way of working and organizing one's social life.<sup>65</sup> According to Trimoldi, this new way of working and living is predicated upon the perception of complete autonomy, freedom and control over one's own time and movements.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the promise of postcapitalism is also the result of a massive shift in societal structure and operation, in which individuals will ultimately desire, and as a result, search for alternative ways of working and living that allow them to work and live whenever and wherever they choose. Looking at Trimoldi's definition of the postcapitalist promise, it becomes clear why digital

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<sup>64</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, "We Grab A Territory": The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, *European Group Of Organizational Studies*, 2018, 15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

nomadism excites researchers, because it represents a potentially radical restructuring of society and human behaviors.

Additionally digital nomadism is the newest creation birthed out of the Gig Economy movement, which emboldened individuals not only to take part in non-traditional working styles, but also to create new understandings of themselves and the role of working identities.<sup>67</sup> In this definition, the main focus of the digital nomad characterization is grounded in the type of work they do within the emerging and increasingly popular ‘Gig Economy’ which is an economic system that allows individuals to make money by completing jobs for clients and companies without being traditionally contracted or employed workers.

Because of the success and freedom that many experienced as a result of Gig economy, Americans both young and old have discovered a newfound appreciation and admiration for the non-traditional and unchained worker. This is how digital nomadism became solidified and glamorized as the most recent and desirable newly added feature of Western societies.<sup>68</sup>

Unfortunately, however, this glamorization of digital nomadism by the media and digital nomads online has led to the pervasiveness of blindly reproduced positive narratives about the digital nomad lifestyle.<sup>69</sup> These narratives speak at length about the many benefits of the digital nomad lifestyle but are deafeningly silent on the negative personal costs and social risks associated with this lifestyle.<sup>70</sup>

### **Digital Nomads: Harder Workers Or Overworked**

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 7.

American journalist Rosie Spinks observes that digital nomads are also termed ‘citizens of the world’ because of their ability to traverse territorial boundaries, thus rendering themselves borderless.<sup>71</sup> They are also “citizens of the world” because of their impact as quasi-citizens on foreign economies, and social presence, which has the possibility of altering foreign communities, international politics, and local day-to-day social inner-workings. To explain further, Trimoldi asserts that the meaning of Digital Nomads is rooted in and emphasized by their inscription within the system of the flexible and on demand gig economy, where they “leverage a multitude of digital platforms and services to innovate and carry out practices for finding work, developing skills and conducting transactions”.<sup>72</sup>

However travel is an integral and defining aspect of the digital nomad identity and lifestyle. This is because traveling provides digital nomads with more than just an escape from the day-to-day monotony of a traditional lifestyle; it creates within them better workers. According to digital nomads surveyed by MBO, it was precisely because of their location, and by extension, presence in these foreign countries along with their desire to explore and experience the cultures around them, that they felt more motivated to efficiently complete their job tasks.<sup>73</sup> By completing their tasks more quickly, they had more time to explore and enjoy free time.

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<sup>71</sup> Rosie Spinks, “Meet the ‘Digital Nomads’ Who Travel the World in Search of Fast Wi-Fi”, The Guardian, 18 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/16/digital-nomads-travel-world-search-fast-wi-fi>.

<sup>72</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, “We Grab A Territory”: The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, European Group Of Organizational Studies, 2018, 4.

<sup>73</sup> MBO Partners, “*State of Independence in America*”, 2018, <https://www.mbopartners.com/blog/independent-workforce-trends/digital-nomads-who-they-are-what-they-want-are-they-growing/>.

Additionally, digital nomads assert that working abroad and traveling to new places helps foster more breakthrough ideas in their work. In his article, *What is A Digital Nomad and How Do You Become One*, Clifford Chi asserts that this breakthrough idea is made possible through nomads' extensive use of the synopsis. "Creativity happens when you mash seemingly unrelated concepts together to form a new idea."<sup>74</sup> Neuroscientists call this synaptic play, and the more incongruent the concepts are, the more synapses occur in your brain," Chi explains.<sup>75</sup> According to Chi and neurologists, it appears that traveling provides digital nomads with an unparalleled type of knowledge that allows them to contribute fresh perspectives and insights, professionally in terms of the work they produce, as well as conversationally in various discourses. And this contribution from digital nomads is made possible through their newfound ability to draw connections between unrelated concepts and to create new ones.<sup>76</sup> While Chi does not suggest those traditionally employed cannot also learn and expand their minds by traveling, this finding by neurologists reveals that it is distinctly *because* of their length and frequency of traveling as well as their interactions with various cultures that digital nomads are able to conceptualization new ideas.<sup>77</sup>

Alongside the digital nomad's increased ability to utilize abroad experiences in their work tasks and projects, traveling also strengthens their desire to learn new skills and information. According to Chi, scientists have found that the stress of navigating and surviving in a foreign land helps strengthen and grow dendrites in the brain, which "increase your brain's

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<sup>74</sup> Clifford Chi, "What Is a Digital Nomad and How Do You Become One?", HubSpot, 22 Jun 2018, <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/digital-nomad>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

capacity and attentiveness during new and challenging situations in the future”.<sup>78</sup> One interesting claim that digital nomads also cite as a benefit is the motivation of freedom, which drives them to complete their work faster. Chi seconds this claim made by digital nomads in his article, *What Is a Digital Nomad and How Do You Become One?* In this article, he explains that one of the five benefits of being a digital nomad is that “You’ll have more time to do the things you love”.<sup>79</sup> This statement by Chi seems to suggest that, unlike those traditionally employed, digital nomads are driven by a new promise not yet seen in the traditional workplace. To elaborate, digital nomads are driven by the promise that, once work is completed, they can utilize their newfound free time to explore their new surroundings abroad or pursue those things which they are passionate about. This possibility serves as motivation for digital nomads to quickly and efficiently finish their work more quickly. So, while work, “can be great” for both the traditionally employed and digital nomads, the latter are unique in their masterful creation and utilization of free time. This, according to Chi, is what ultimately proves that nomads actually “work to live [and] not the other way around”.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to their skillful acquiring of free time, digital nomads also contend that they have more ownership of their time and can choose when to begin and stop working unlike those who have to be in the office for a required exact length of time. Some digital nomads however disagree with this statement and contend that this perceived ownership of time can, at times, work to their disadvantage, by making it difficult to create hard lines between work and personal life. As a result of these blurred lines and lack of separation, some digital nomads express that it

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

becomes increasingly difficult to shut off their work brain which leads to them being overworked and ‘burning out’ quickly.<sup>81</sup>

### **Digital Nomads: Nomadic But Not Necessarily Global**

Although digital nomadism has been constructed as a glamorous lifestyle filled with jet-setting adventures and international travel, this popular perception is not necessarily reflective of reality. Digital nomads are a heterogeneous group of individuals whose lifestyles exist on a spectrum, which means that although the digital nomad lifestyle has become synonymous with transnational border crossings and constant movement, the reality is that these individuals are merely representations of the extreme side of the digital nomad spectrum. In fact, a rarely mentioned but growing body of research focuses on a more nuanced understanding of digital nomads that challenges popular perceptions by asserting that nomads do not have to necessarily live, work or even travel internationally. These nomads posit that consistent movement is the defining characteristic, regardless of distance and internationality.

MBO Partners, in their 2018 *State of Independence in America Report*, sheds light on this sparsely mentioned group of individuals that identifies as digital nomads in a way that differs from the glamorized digital nomad image. While these digital nomads do satisfy the requirement of actively moving while working remotely, they are more localized, opting to stay within the borders of their home country.<sup>82</sup> An example of this alternative style of digital nomad can be found in MBO’s 2018 Report in which married couple, Justin and Ariele Champion, are highlighted for their nuanced take on digital nomadism. For Justin and Ariele, who are both

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<sup>81</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, “We Grab A Territory”: The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, *European Group Of Organizational Studies*, 2018, 15.

<sup>82</sup> MBO Partners, *State of Independence in American*, 2018, <https://www.mbopartners.com/blog/independent-workforce-trends/digital-nomads-who-they-are-what-they-want-are-they-growing/>.



digital nomads, working remotely while road-tripping across the country was their definition of what it means to be a digital nomad.<sup>83</sup> While they do not cross oceans or territories, they do satisfy the travel requirement established by many digital nomads and scholars, through their frequent travel, working conditions, and shared wanderlust.

The decision to remain in the United States as a digital nomad, however, creates a radically different experience and relationship to citizenship and nation for both Justin and Ariele. For one, Justin and Ariele are able to be reached and influenced by American marketing campaigns. This is a particularly interesting discovery because it reveals a stark contrast in treatment between local digital nomads, who are included in mainstream American pop culture, and the global digital nomads, who are known primarily because of their presence on social media. The reason for this omission of internationally located digital nomads among the mainstream media can be understood as a subconscious decision, cultivated mainly by our capitalist society that places little value on those individuals who fall outside of consumer society. In short, because they are physically separated from America, global digital nomads are largely excluded and rendered invisible in mainstream marketing campaigns, unlike local digital nomads who, because of their physical presence *in* America, are perceived as potential buyers of American goods and services. MBO Partners best illustrates this finding in its 2018 *State of the Independence Report* which highlighted the marketing campaigns of Volkswagen and Nissan—two companies actively promoting a new line of vans.<sup>84</sup> These vans, however, were not marketed towards the average consumer. American-based Digital nomads and other location independent workers who travel across the country in campers were the target audience. Each brands’

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

messaging played specifically to those notions of wanderlust found among local digital nomads. These marketing campaigns were largely successful and resulted in a new term coined for local digital nomads –‘Van Lifers’.<sup>85</sup> This term was ultimately just a marketing ploy to play up the “road trip” aspect of the American digital nomad lifestyle in order to sell more vehicles.<sup>86</sup>

In addition to representing the local digital nomad, Justin and Ariele are representations of alternative digital nomad identities. Bloggers and fellow digital nomads, Jedd and Michelle, also provide readers with a comprehensive list of working identities that can also be classified as digital nomads. In their article, “What is a Digital Nomad?”, which was published on their blog, *International Travelers*, Michelle and Jedd identify more than six different categories into which digital nomads can fall, thus highlighting the fact that digital nomads are not a monolithic or homogenous group. These six groups are:

- Freelancers who write, code, coach, run social media campaigns, etc. for their clients online
- Professionals who provide online/remote services, such as legal assistance, accounting and counseling
- Entrepreneurs who manage their teams using online tools
- Employees who work remotely within a more traditional company
- People who create and sell digital products like e-books, guide and online subscription services
- And sometime it’s a combination of the above<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Michelle C, “What is a Digital Nomad”, *International Travelers*, 5 Jan 2018, <https://intentionaltravelers.com/what-is-a-digital-nomad>.

Along with identifying as a digital nomad, a large number of individuals were discovered on digital nomads platforms, as well as in MBO's 2018 research, to be location-independent workers. This term, cited by Jedd and Michelle as the most commonly used label among digital nomads, gained its popularity because it encompasses the most important facet of digital nomadism -- the freedom to complete all job responsibilities independent of the workplace and regardless of where one is located.<sup>88</sup>

This examination as well as critique of digital nomadism and the current literature surrounding digital nomads will help in comparing the experiences as well as narratives written by Black female digital nomads. While white and Black digital nomads express a desire for freedom from the workplace as well as the desire to own their own time and ability to move, the articulation of these desires are expressed and are derived from different perspectives. The next chapter will explore how identities are constructed for American citizens, the traditionally employed, Black women and digital nomads as a whole. This review on identity development processes will ultimately set the foundation for the final chapter's contextualization of Black female digital nomads as well as their narratives which will ultimately help in establishing a new framework for scholars to understand how race and gender work together to create the unique experiences of Black female digital nomads.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY & RACILIZAING DIGITAL NOMADS

### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the identity development processes of both Black and white digital nomads. It specifically explores the racial and gendered identity development of Black women as a foundation to understanding the various processes and ways that Black female digital nomads diverge from and reshape previous facets of their identity development in America. This chapter will provide background into the origins of how work became integrated into the American identity and the effect this integration has had on the identity development of individuals in the traditional work sector. By providing this background and short literature review, readers will gain an understanding of the ways that non-traditional workers cultivate and develop alternative identity development strategies.

Additionally, this chapter will provide insight into the early stages of Black American women's identity development processes and the roles these processes have played in their performative behaviors and internalization of events in the workplace. Black digital nomads embody multiple identities, including their identities as millennials, Americans, Blacks and females. This chapter works at the foundational level to root the readers' understanding in the identity politics of Black women and the identity development process that precedes Black female digital nomads as they travel and live abroad.

## Work, Worth & The American Identity

The fragmentation inherent in digital nomad identities did not happen as the result of a singular moment or spontaneous event, instead emerging as a byproduct of a series of events happening on the national and international levels.<sup>89</sup> This process has most notably been found in individuals who are members of the millennial generation and have entered the workforce as it was being reshaped by the emerging Gig Economy and increasingly unstable workforce.<sup>90</sup> This shift in our understanding of what it means to “work” and “be working” has led to a reinterpretation of the meaning of work and its impact on the American identity.

In their article, *Checking Your Identities at the Door*, organizational management scholars Nancy Rothbard and Lakshmi Ramarajan, assert that one of the ways that American identities have become increasingly fragmented is from the changing relationship Americans have with the work sector. According to Rothbard and Ramarajan, since the period of industrialization and up until recently, scholarly and public perceptions have persisted in portraying individuals as maintaining and presenting two separate work and non-work identities.<sup>91</sup> This belief was at its core a myth, however it became reality and has calcified throughout the decades. However, after the 2004 recession, it became clear that this perceived truth was only a myth because of the revelation of three emerging workforce changes: decreasing job security, increasing workforce diversity, and the spread of communication technology.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> David Collinson, “Identities & Insecurities: Selves at Work”, SAGE Publications, 2010

<sup>90</sup> Gillian B. White, “Millennials in Search of a Different Kind of Career”, The Atlantic, 12 June 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/millennials-job-search-career-boomers/395663/>

<sup>91</sup> Joy E. Beatty & William R. Torbert, “The False Duality of Work and Leisure, Journal of Management Inquiry, 2003, 29

<sup>92</sup> Lakshmi Ramarajan & Erin Reid, “Shattering the Myth of Separate Worlds: Negotiating Nonwork Identities at Work”, Academy of Management Review, 2013, 622

These three factors led to the emergence of a more realistic understanding of how identities and their relationship to work have shifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>93</sup>

### **Constructing New Identities: The Rise of Gig Economy**

The 2004 recession, which was marked by widespread national unemployment and job instability, made way for a new trend that became known as the “Gig Economy.” The Gig Economy represented a new type of employment that became popular because it was online centric and provided those currently seeking work or additional income with access to short and long term odd jobs that could be completed quickly and while juggling other jobs.<sup>94</sup> This style of employment gained popularity particularly among millennials, who were most affected by unemployment because their relative inexperience and lack of professional skills made entry into the workforce more difficult than for those of the earlier generations. As a result, according to Rothbard and Ramarajan, participants in the Gig Economy -- both employee and employer -- increased in number.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the American economy’s eventual steadying and more jobs becoming available, the gig economy’s popularity and its growing number of participants remained on the rise, working to ultimately reshape the workforce. Additionally, the growth of the Gig Economy led scholars in the field of organizational structure and employment to reevaluate previously held notions about the role of work on an individual’s identity construction. One of Rothbard and Ramarajan’s main discoveries about the relationship between the Gig Economy and identity

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 622-623.

development is that the work identity has been moving from an organizational affiliation to an occupational one, with a focus placed on the type of work in which the individual engages.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Millennial Identity**

An important facet of the Black female digital nomad identity is its association with the millennial generation. Millennials, regardless of race and gender, seem to be well suited and predisposed to the digital nomad lifestyle. For one, millennials are constantly looking for alternative ways to define themselves and relate to the world which many researchers attribute to the millennials traveling more than all previous generations<sup>97</sup>. By traveling millennials are exposed them to alternative ways of living which not only inspire them to explore alternative career choices both at home and abroad but also reveal new ways for millennials to identify themselves and relate to the world. According to Bohan Qiu, one such example of an alternative millennial identity is what he terms the ‘slashers.’ In his article, “Millennial Perspectives From The ‘Slasher’ Generation Redefine Youth Identity”, Bohan Qiu defines a ‘slasher’ – not as someone who slays people in horror movies – but as someone who has multiple talents, which they have turned into professional careers – each separated by a “slash” in their job title.<sup>98</sup> For example, one single millennial can identify with many different careers and incorporate them all into a singular identity, telling others, “I am known as an artist / personal trainer/ yoga instructor / writer / activist”.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 623

<sup>97</sup> Doree Lewak, “Burned-out Millennials Are Quitting Lucrative Jobs”, NY Post, 25 July 2018 <https://nypost.com/2018/07/25/millennials-are-bailing-on-their-high-paying-jobs-to-travel/>

<sup>98</sup> Bohan Qiu, “Millennial Perspectives From The ‘Slasher’ Generation Redefine Youth Identity”, South China Morning Post, 20 Oct 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/fashion-beauty/article/2116262/millennials-perspectives-slasher-generation-redefine>

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

This new, multifaceted construction of one's identity allows for a duality previously not seen in older generations. In his article, Qiu introduces us to Gedvile Bunikyte, who has the paradigmatic identity of a slasher. Bunikyte is an artist, and like many artists she has a day job to financially support herself. However working two jobs instilled in Bunikyte a sort of duality that ultimately allowed her to become a slasher. She realized that with this duality, instead of choosing a regular job, she could make money working multiple jobs based on her passions and hobbies.<sup>100</sup>

Although Qiu claims that slashers have infiltrated every professional industry, it is clear that all slashers express an element of creativity. Examples of slasher combinations include the "financial consultant / music label owner" "architect / fashion blogger" or "creative director/menswear designer/musician stylist/brand consultant /musician" all of which have a creative element. The combination of the internet and the Gig Economy have allowed people to create new career opportunities from their hobbies, which wasn't possible in the past. As a result, creating your own successful work-life balance through online platforms can be accomplished with more ease than in previous generations. Slasher millennials are redefining not only themselves but also the workforce and the role it has on one's identity construction.

For example, Sonia Boonphen, one of the slashers interviewed by Qiu, mentioned that she used to feel like her desire to do many things rather than focus on one profession was a weakness. Traditionally, it was thought to illustrate more stability if individuals pursued one career pathway and stuck to it faithfully throughout their lifetime. However, when the internet and the rising Gig Economy were introduced, millennials began to realize that this perceived

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



weakness was actually a strength, and that one could thrive from the monetary pursuit of multiple interests.<sup>101</sup> Sonia P Boonphen elaborating on this idea, stating, “There are those who think that millennials just can’t make up their minds and stick to one thing. It is rooted in the previous generation’s mindsets to do one thing [well] in one’s life, and to be recognized for that”.<sup>102</sup> Qiu’s interviews with slashers demonstrate how millennials are shattering the parabolic myth, which warns that any attempt to master multiple interests makes one a “jack of all trades but a master of none.” Millennials are proving they can be successful in multiple fields of interest and also become more multi-dimensional people who are defined by more than one career. So, while one’s sole focus on a single activity can allow for mastery, millennials are more interested in exploring as well choosing alternative, or previously undiscovered paths to identity and employment.<sup>103</sup>

Qiu’s findings about millennials are consistent with Jake Elson’s conclusions about the unique construction of the millennial identity. In his article, “Millennials and The Quest For Personal Identity,” Elson, who is an Australian journalist and also a millennial, explores how millennials diverge from previous generations in their quest for personal identity. Identity construction, as well as the incorporation of various societal aspects that define that identity, have shifted with each generation, Elson who explains.

“For previous generations, it was by social class. You were rich or poor, Protestant or Catholic, Carlton or Collingwood. You had to fit the mould or be considered, as Mr. Burns would do, a ‘free thinking anarchist’. Millennials in contrast have thrown the mould into a

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

pool of molten steel. The rigid identity constructs of the past to them are anachronistic, as they prevent personal expression.<sup>104</sup>

While identities in previous generations were comprised of various societal factors, such as financial status, social class, religion, millennials appear to openly reject the construction of their identities around these same notions. Instead, they seek identities firmly rooted in the desire for freedom, personal expression, individual decisions and life paths.<sup>105</sup> The millennials' instance on freedom can be understood as a response to the current state of the American economy, which has irrevocably destroyed any chance that the younger generation will construct similar notions of identity as those found among their parents' and grandparents' generations. Although millennials differ from earlier generations in their understanding that a college education is a standard requirement for upward mobility, they, too, were sold on that mythic ideal of the American dream.<sup>106</sup> The American dream concept promotes the myth of meritocracy, which suggests that, irrespective of one's socioeconomic background, upward mobility and professional success can be obtained by performing well in school, securing a job, building a career, and buying a home. In addition to being attained through four steps, the American dream is measured by one's financial stability, material accumulation, professional success, and status as a homeowner.

While Black people have historically had a contentious relationship with the American dream, as they have been denied equal opportunity and access to upward mobility, only recently

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<sup>104</sup> Jake Elson, "Millennials and the quest for personal identity", The Commonwealth Youth Programme, 19 April 2017, <http://www.yourcommonwealth.org/editors-pick/millennials-and-the-quest-for-personal-identity/>

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Doree Lewak, "Burned-out Millennials Are Quitting Lucrative Jobs", NY Post, 25 July 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/07/25/millennials-are-bailing-on-their-high-paying-jobs-to-travel/>

have white people found themselves at odds with the American dream. It began with the 2008 recession, an economic crisis that sent the American economy into a sharp downward spiral and led to massive layoffs and widespread unemployment in every professional industry and at every level of employment. Simultaneously, the first wave of millennials was graduating from college and searching for jobs in an oversaturated market, with even the most highly skilled of professionals unable to find work. Left disillusioned, unemployed and burdened by high student loans, millennials were incapable of completing the four-step process required of the American dream. Thus, they were unable to measure themselves by the previous standards expected by the American dream, such as education, employment stability, and homeownership.<sup>107</sup> Elson affirms this statement writing,

“When I went to school, the mantra of the establishment was ‘You must do well at school and get into University to get a good job or you will be a failure for life!’ With high student debt, an ever decreasing quality of university education churning out more students than jobs available and, consequently, lack of employment prospects, many Millennials have considered this scare campaign as such.”<sup>108</sup>

Elson highlights that millennials are unique from previous generations because, for the first time in American history, white people were denied upward mobility and forced to face the fact that opportunities in America are uneven. Witnessing their parents lose jobs and homes during the financial crisis, white millennials were the first generation of white Americans to realize that meritocracy is a myth, and this disillusionment ultimately led to the reshaping of the American workforce and identity. This new context in which millennials have risen to adulthood

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<sup>107</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

clarifies how the identity construction of millennials emerged as a result of a growing cynicism toward the promises of upward mobility and financial stability embodied by the American dream. Elson asserts that millennials have sought out new conceptions of work and personal identity shaped by their desire for freedom of choice.<sup>109</sup> Millennials are fully aware that they are not necessarily guaranteed the American dream and its four step promise of upward mobility and financial stability.

Elson's writings reveal that digital nomads are an example of the millennial quest for an identity shaped by choices that developed in opposition to the American dream and its emphasis on a steady workforce. Elson reveals that, regardless of race, Black and white millennials and digital nomads alike indicate a new breed of American citizen that is not interested in participating in the old system, established order, or traditional workforce. This shift, according to Elson, has occurred not only because the American establishment is perceived as having failed millennials, but also because millennials no longer wish to spend their lives attempting to achieve a mythic dream that is not fully achievable, and therefore of no real interest to them. The old system cannot be trusted to work effectively, and does not have their best interests in mind.<sup>110</sup>

### **Merit, Work and Success: Constructing the American Identity**

Digital nomads represent a major shift through their rejection of the American myth of meritocracy and its foundational role in the construction of American identities. However it is important to reveal the history of the American identity in order to understand the significance of the remarkable construction of the digital nomad identity and lifestyle. The American identity is

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

unique in its divergence from previously held identities in the West, primarily in its valuation and inclusion of work as a feature of the identity development process, which began only after the establishment of America as a nation. This divergence represents a remarkable societal shift from previous civilizations, according to organizational scholar David Collinson. In his article, *Identities and Insecurities: Selves at Work*, Collinson points out that in pre-modern civilizations, such as the European feudal system, society functioned and was structured according to a strict hierarchical caste system that organized individuals according to their assigned fields of work. Based on one's religious affiliation and social standing, an individual's caste placement and subsequent field of work were predetermined at birth and dictated one's individual identity. This caste system tremendously narrowed the possibilities for individuals to personalize or rework their identities.<sup>111</sup> Because their work identity also determined their role and social standing, upward mobility was rare. As a result, individual identities were largely stable and left unquestioned.<sup>112</sup>

But the new era of Modernization brought with it Western philosophy and American idealism, forever changing the identity construction and development process. However in Western societies and particularly in the U.S., identities became grounded in and based on the idea of the "success ethic," which placed the value of one's identity on upward mobility, meritocracy and materialistic accumulation.<sup>113</sup> So, whereas pre-modern identities were ascribed upon individuals and dictated their social status, in post modernization societies, individuals appeared to have more control over their social status. As a result, identities started to become

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<sup>111</sup> David Collinson, *Identities and Insecurities: Selves at Work*, SAGE Publications, 2003

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.,530

constructed and validated through an individual's achievements and actions.<sup>114</sup> However because of this new achievement model, self validation and self worth began to be determined by professional success, material accumulation, and outsider approval of career choice. Collinson points out, in this way, career success became the new and highly influential religion of modern Western societies.<sup>115</sup>

It is important to note that, while identity construction shifted from an ascriptive to an achievement model, more fluidity in social status emerged, along with more possibilities for self-achievement. However, the achievement model fails to account for and excludes two main groups within American society: Black Americans and lifestyle-career seekers. The insistence in this thesis on categorizing Black Americans as distinctly separate from other communities of color is intentional, because Black Americans have never benefited academically or professionally from their characterization in society. The same cannot be said for Hispanic and Caribbean Americans, who have benefited from their characterizations as hardworking producers, or Indian and Asian Americans, who have benefited from their perception as being highly intelligent. So, while all minorities in American do face varying degrees of racism and discrimination, none have the historical legacy, nor the degree of exclusion from society and access to opportunity, as Black Americans. As a result the predicament of non-white persons of color it is not comparable to that of Black Americans, nor should it qualify as similar enough to be categorized alongside Black Americans. Most importantly, it must be made visible that despite being classified as minorities, non-Black people of color are positioned -- and actively position themselves -- in close proximity to whiteness.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

For Black Americans, their historical exclusion from white American society was intentional and made possible by an inherent and racially encoded nature of the achievement model, which equates success with the achievement of white standards. As a result, success has become synonymous with the overvaluation and normalization of whiteness and traditional white values, with both intentionally and specifically constructed to exclude Black people. Similarly, individuals who fail to behave or perform according to the standards set in the workplace, also face exclusion from upward mobility. What is clear, however, is that these two groups, Black Americans and rebellious employees, or as I coined them, lifestyle-career outliers, who fail to ‘fit in’, are forced to employ alternative identity construction strategies in order to make meaning and attach worth to their sense of self.

The first group, African-Americans, whom I identify as descendants of African slaves and American slavery, faced significant social, political and economic disadvantages that excluded them from accessing opportunities to achieve upward mobility. These disadvantages, which are woven into the historical and social fabric of America, have operated through discrimination and exclusion at the institutional and structural levels of America’s economy, through government and political systems in order to generationally disenfranchise African-Americans. Take for example a Black student, living and attending school in one of Chicago’s urban communities. This student’s school system often lacks access to the educational resources and opportunities needed to academically compete with white and Asian students in more affluent or well funded districts. Additionally, structural inequalities created by government initiatives such as Chicago’s illegal displacement and rezoning of Black families, or police task force efforts to criminalize Black people, students like the one described above, begin life with a series of factors already working to his disadvantage. Incredibly disempowered from the

beginning, It is only through extreme resilience and a stroke of luck that a student, like the one exemplified here, is able to measure up to the standardized test scores and application requirements required to be a competitive college applicant.

Unfortunately America's conceptualization of meritocracy fails to account for and rectify these pervasive historical inequalities that make merit-based success attainable, instead choosing to consciously ignore the structural implications that inherently stigmatize Black labor and make it harder, and at times impossible, for Black Americans to compete and succeed alongside their white counterparts. Collinson highlights the fact that "meritocratic ideologies are typically espoused in societies that are also characterized by deep-seated class and status inequalities".<sup>116</sup> Black Americans who have encountered the falsehoods of the meritocracy and achievement systems, find their identities grounded in a level of inferiority that leaves little room for self-confidence or optimism. Furthermore, individuals who have been programmed by society to attach self worth and identity to material success, feel a sense of responsibility for their failure to be upwardly mobile through merit-based achievements. In this way the meritocratic ideology functions punitively on two levels.

On the first level, this ideology places a weight on an individual's meritorious accomplishments by using them to measure their sense of achieved self. Failure on the first level meets with economic loss and social disapproval, illuminating the ways in which the ideology and reinforcement of "meritocracy can destroy that person's sense of self as well as their mental well-being."<sup>117</sup> And on the second level, it becomes clear that the America's achievement model and its assertion that one's identity is grounded in individual merit, materialistic accumulation,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 531

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



and upward mobility excludes, and at times punishes those who fail to achieve a certain level of success. Digital nomads uproot these identity outcomes by operating outside of the traditional workplace and constructing new meanings around their valuations and measurements of self.

### **Organizational Control & The Construction of the Work Identity**

French philosopher Michel Foucault's scholarship on the workforce and its role in dictating identity in modern society provides an essential foundation to our understanding of digital natives. The non-traditional sector diverges from the traditional work-identity model and cultivates new paths for identity development. David Collinson's academic work on identities and selves in organizational behavior and management relies heavily on Foucault's scholarship and findings. One important finding from Foucault about the role of work in Western societies, is that employers are able to exercise social control over their employees through the production and consequent exposure of 'the gaze'.<sup>118</sup> Foucault asserts that an individual's exposure to the gaze within the workplace is created and sustained by the forced acceptance of employees to surveillance systems, job assessments, and career evaluations. These measurements are utilized by power regimes to exemplify employee practices that ultimately lead to their own subordination.<sup>119</sup> This 'gaze' then functions as a magnifying glass and as a disciplinarian tool that makes employees feel exposed. This hypervisibility results in employees' performing certain approved behavior while under the careful watch of their employer. As a result, the 'self' that is created at work is constructed through the performance of specific behaviors that also

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 538.

function as survival strategies that individuals must perform successfully in order secure their achievement-fed upward mobility.<sup>120</sup>

Additional research conducted by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott in 2002 found that ‘identity regulation’ functioned as a central feature of organizational control in contemporary ‘post-bureaucratic’ organizations.<sup>121</sup> Alvesson and Willmott’s conclusions follow the findings of Foucault by illustrating various ways that power and discipline are used in the workforce to exert control and construct the conformist self in the workplace.<sup>122</sup> So, according to Collinson, Willmott and Alvesson, employees within the traditional employment sector represent a group of individuals that place heavy meaning on career success as a valued aspect of their identity. These individuals subconsciously consent to the methods of control employed by employers and the construction of a conformist self within the highly surveilled and disciplinary workplace. However, career driven individuals like those mentioned above who hyperfocus on their career advancement become more prone to the negative impacts of the achievement model on their identity.<sup>123</sup> This is especially true, according to Collinson, for those within a workplace that treats all social, professional or relational interactions as tools to increase their career advancement and professional upward mobility.

Unfortunately, further research reveals that career obsessed individuals inherently utilize manipulation tactics to pander to higher management and increase their work reputation. And if one should find success by implementing these strategies, the conformist self that helped gain career advancement and upward mobility becomes calcified and reinforced.<sup>124</sup> Alternatively,

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 537

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

individuals in the conformist workplace who do not experience opportunities to advance careers or gain upward mobility go through a process of splitting. Here, they conform to instrumental roles needed to survive or become indifferent and do just enough to get by. Both of these roles involve the individual's effort to split their identities into the public work self and private self. These two sides of the self, as Collinson writes, "try to build a psychological wall between 'public' and 'private' selves, privileging the latter and (trying to) de-emphasize the former".<sup>125</sup>

Collinson's research into work identities and their construction highlight the ways in which working individuals can become skilled manipulators of self, reputation and image having a tendency, as behavioral scholar Goffman suggests, "to present self in a favourable light, using information politically to conceal, mystify, overstate and/or understate".<sup>126</sup>

### **Worth & Work: Problematizing Identity Construction in the Workplace**

Collinson's assertion that American identity inherently prioritizes success and achievement clarifies how paid employment becomes an indicator and source of value within one's identity.<sup>127</sup> However before the emergence of the Gig Economy, digital nomads, or location-independent workers, scholars had little insight into the alternative identities that could be constructed. What impact does this emphasis on paid employment have on the mental well-being, self-valuation and identity development process of those less successful? Furthermore, what impact does it have for those who refuse or opt out of paid employment as a measure of personal value?

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 538.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 531.

Individuals in the traditional work sector construct elements of their identities while at the workplace and through their interactions with those in the workplace. A large portion of a person's life in America is spent in the workforce, which means that a tremendous amount of their identity development process happens while in that workplace. According to Collinson, those who succeed in this environment have a more positive integration of their workplace identity development, but for those who fear or reject professional authority, the workplace has a profoundly negative impact on their subconscious identity development process. Furthermore individuals who fail to perform to the behavioral and work production standards at the workplace face professional repercussions and alienation that have additional detrimental impacts on the individual's identity.<sup>128</sup>

Most notably, Collinson's research and analysis highlights the role of fear and its function as a motivator and restrictor in the workplace identity development process. As Collinson notes, it is the fear of losing one's job because of poor performance, or of experiencing negative reactions to one's self presentation, that ultimately dictate one's projection and cultivation of sense of self and identity at work.<sup>129</sup> But it is precisely these fears that work to disadvantage those traditionally employed, subconsciously dictating and controlling their behavior and mindset while at the workplace. This according to Collinson, ultimately erodes an individual's autonomy and self respect.<sup>130</sup>

Academia's current understanding of identity and its construction within society is rooted in the assertion that an individual's sense of self, and by extension their subjectivity, is

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 537.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 532.

characterized by the existence of a dual sense of self. This duality, according to Collinson, is divided into two halves with one half of the ‘self’ acting as a subject or active agent in the world. The other half operates as an object or objectively, encompassing an individual’s reflection of themselves within the world and an understanding of how they are perceived by those around them. Ideally the first half, or subjectivity, of an individual's dual sense of self, would have provided a clear and solid understanding of one’s identity that could defend against anxieties, like those found in the workplace, however in reality individuals often find themselves grappling with how to balance subjectivity and objectivity and respond to the anxieties from in the workplace and society.<sup>131</sup> This balancing act according to Collinson prevents individuals from maintaining a stable and concrete grasp on their identity.

Behavioral scholars such as David Knights and Hugh Willmott point out that in order to achieve self-identification, individuals attempting to stabilizing their identity will typically seek to overcome or deny the subject or object half of their subjectivity.<sup>132</sup> To do this, individuals will either position themselves as a separate subject that dominates or is indifferent to the social value systems, *or* they will largely associate themselves with the object side of their selectivity by choosing to be subordinate to the system and superiors within that system.

This never-ending process, according to Knights and Willmott, is “most prominent in modern competitive and unequal societies subjectivities which are often characterized by this narcissistic preoccupation with attempts to secure identity”.<sup>133</sup> Knights’ and Willmott's claim is confirmed in studies on millennials that observe the millennial generation’s heavy preoccupation

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 537-538.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 532.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 533.

with identity. This claim is confirmed in this thesis and its analysis of Black female digital nomads. The millennial generation seems to be in search of the “holy grail” that unlocks meaning or purpose in life.<sup>134</sup> Further examination however reveals that for both white and Black digital nomads, the purpose of life remains elusive.

### **Black Women in the Workplace: Performing Identity & Creating the Inauthentic Self**

Danielle Dickens and Ernest Chavez examine the various strategies and struggles that Black women face in the workplace in their article, “Navigating the Workplace: The Costs and Benefits of Shifting Identities at Work among Early Career U.S. Black Women”.<sup>135</sup> It must first be noted that Black women are uniquely situated within America because they experience discrimination based on both racial and gendered hierarchies. Due to the long history of sexism and racism in America, Black women face double marginalization, which means they often deal with people negatively perceiving them through the lenses of skin color and gender.<sup>136</sup> This is a distinctly different experience from those of white women and Black men, who are both singularly subjugated and as a result of discrimination based largely on one factor, either race or gender. These historically negative perceptions have led to the pervasiveness and calcification within American culture of certain stereotypes about Black women, such as Black women as unnecessarily difficult to deal with or inappropriately loud, sneaky, lazy, ghetto or conniving.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 532.

<sup>135</sup> Danielle Dickens & Ernest Chavez, *Navigating the Workplace: The Costs and Benefits of Shifting Identities at Work among Early Career U.S. Black Women*, Sex Roles, 2018.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 768.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 770

For example, in Thomas, Hacker and Hoxha's article, "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Women",<sup>138</sup> one respondent, Gabriella, who is a 22 year old Black female, said in response to the authors questions about Black women and stereotypes:

"(N)ot only are we women, but then we have to be Black women. And, it's hard. It's hard 'cause women already make less than men anyway but then you have to be Black and have to enter the workforce. And all the stereotypes we have to face as Black women. We're loud, we're welfare queens, you know. All we do is have kids, we can't take care of our kids, we mistreat our men. So, yeah, it's hard."<sup>139</sup>

Gabriella's response sheds light on ways in which Black women face discrimination on both racial and gendered levels. Additionally, she explains how stereotypes of Black women precede them in their interactions and encounters with non-Black people. It is these stereotypes that pervade Black women's lives, ultimately shaping how Black women believe they are perceived and how they feel they must behave in response to this perception. Two such places that are filled with these stereotypes are the workplace and academia where Black women, as a result of these negative perceptions, face double marginalization. This marginalization creates, for Black women, barriers to educational and professional opportunities or advancements, which exclude Black women from access to upward mobility and self esteem.<sup>140</sup>

Dickens and Chavez interviewed and analyzed the responses of Black women in the workplace and found that they faced certain obstacles and burdens as a result of their race and gender. One main finding discovered by Dickens and Chavez was that the weight of perceived

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<sup>138</sup> Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker & Denada Hoxha, *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women, Sex Roles*, 2011.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 535

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 760

and real negative stereotyping by the outside world was both psychologically taxing on Black women's mental health and demoralizing to their self image. To combat and defend against and in theory change these negative perceptions, Dickens and Chavez found that Black women in the workplace actively tried to present themselves in ways that they believed would be accepted by those in the workplace. Over time, they believed that these portrayals would eventually replace the popular perceptions that negatively characterized Black women.<sup>141</sup> This reshaping of identity was observed among Black women who had access to elite, white majority educational and professional spaces, yet felt compelled to code-switch or recast themselves in order to gain and maintain respect from their colleagues.

Code-switching, which is also known as identity shifting, is both a defense mechanism and survival strategy used by Black men and women, as well as other minority groups, to gain approval and acceptance into spaces predominantly controlled and populated by dominant social groups.<sup>142</sup> This process of code-switching, which can happen consciously or unconsciously, involves the altering of speech, behavior, appearance and interactions with individuals in a new environment. Black woman who fail or refuse to code-switch risk criticism, scrutiny and professional advancement.<sup>143</sup> Black women's failure or refusal to code-switch can also, according to Dickens and Chavez, work to undermine and make invisible the Black women's work ethic, contributions, intelligence, credibility and authority within the workplace and among their colleagues. In addition to the pressure to code-switch in the workplace, Black women are also expected to be fluid in this shifting identity, switching from the workplace identity which is done for the approval of their colleagues, to their cultural identity, which is meant to satisfy their

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 767.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 761.



expectations within the Black community.<sup>144</sup> Dickens and Chavez found that Black women, more than their Black male or white female counterparts, felt the pressure and responsibility to be representatives of their race, when they are the only, or token, Black person in the office.<sup>145</sup>

This responsibility further burdens Black women, who believe that their work and behavior in the workplace has to be perfect, because in their mind, they are the sole representation of their races' competency and intelligence. These pressures not only burden Black women, but also also ensure greater self handicapping than is seen among their white counterparts, who felt no such responsibilities to their race.

### **Black First, Women Second: Identity Construction Among Black Women**

While women have, historically, felt the pressure of being the carriers of as well as barriers to culture, Black American women occupy a unique position within their communities and in America. The intertwining and inseparability of race and gender in the Black female identity are found not only among Black women in America, but also among Black female digital nomads who are living abroad. In order to understand this phenomenon among Black women, scholars Anita Thomas, Jason Hacker and Denada Hoxha's examined the identity development processes of Black female adolescents in their article, "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women." Through interviewing and observing Black females between the ages of fifteen to twenty-one, Thomas, Hacker and Hoxha discovered important themes that were foundational to a Black woman's sense of self. Their focus on Black females between the ages of fifteen to twenty-one is particularly relevant to this thesis because it sets the stage for understanding the inner workings of Black female digital nomads, many of whom are between

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 769

twenty-one to thirty-five years of age- signifying that they have just recently left the female adolescent stage. Additionally, the findings of these three authors reveal that Black female digital nomads cultivate certain strengths throughout their adolescent identity development processes, which ultimately help them cope with their experiences abroad.<sup>146</sup> By using the findings in these authors work, we will establish a point of comparison that will help to further analyze how Black women’s identities are reshaped, shifted or reworked while living and traveling abroad.

One of the first themes that appeared in discussions among Black females was the tremendous role that stereotypes played in their identity development—particularly in their desire to actively push back and defend against negative stereotypes, which ranged from sexually promiscuous and loud to domineering and uneducated. These images of Black women were promoted and reinforced by numerous sources, including but not limited to the media, teachers, peers and family members. By adhering to these stereotypes, Black girls ran the risk of internalizing these stigmas into their sense of self and degrading their perceptions of their own beauty and attractiveness, and their interactions in male-female relationships.<sup>147</sup> These stereotypes additionally acted as a dark cloud hovering over Black girls, who were burdened by a “sense of heaviness’ whenever conversations surrounding these stereotypes appeared.<sup>148</sup>

It is precisely this sense of heaviness from the weight of stereotypes that compels Black women to move abroad. So, for Black women, traveling internationally and creating a new life abroad represents a chance to break free from the racism and discrimination Blacks faced in America. This new life also represents an opportunity to be themselves in ways that they are not

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<sup>146</sup> *Navigating the Workplace: The Costs and Benefits of Shifting Identities at Work among Early Career U.S. Black Women*, 2018, 531.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 534

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

allowed to be in America. In their travelogues, many Black women write about how they are better perceived and welcomed in their country of choice, but also have a much more positive experience compared to life in the United States.

However, while Black American women can remove themselves from the chaos of America, as members of the Black community and as women, they cannot close their eyes to the fate of their home communities. In their article, the authors note how Black girls could not separate their experiences nor articulate their thoughts without infusing gender and race into their statements. In both group and individual discussions, and even when talking about racism, gender oppression and sexism, Black girls were always thinking and articulating themselves as racial and gendered people living within gendered and racial constructs.

For example, when discussing being treated as sex objects, women spoke from the perspective of the African American women, who is a highly sexualized persona in the media and in music videos.<sup>149</sup> This finding reveals just how important race is in Black women's articulation of self. Race, as researchers have discovered, is so important to Americans and especially Black Americans, because it is the grounds for which Black people have been grossly mistreated. Race, itself, serves as the main identity marker for Black men and women alike. As a result, Black women see themselves first as Black and second as women. For example, when asked to describe what it means to be an African American, approximately forty-two percent of young women's responses included the importance of racial pride, heritage, family, and community connections.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 534

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

In their analysis, Hacker and his fellow authors, found that the importance of self-determination, rising above stereotypical images, and negative perceptions of others were the main themes emerging from the focus groups.<sup>151</sup> For these women, life abroad represented untapped potential to accomplish a new way of life and move out from under negative stereotypes. In many ways, the push to overcome stereotypes can serve as a coping mechanism among Black American women both at home and abroad. For example, Black female participants in Thomas, Hacker and Hoxha's research felt strengthened by their attempts to project an image that both rejected and countered the negative stereotypes and perceptions that they faced in their daily lives.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Black female digital nomads, like Gloria Atanmo also express satisfaction in rising above negative stereotypes. Atanmo, who is a travel blogger currently living in Mata, writes in her article, "Prague: My Least Favorite City", that she smiled frequently as an act of rising above people's nasty stares and comments while in Budapest.

Like the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> century Black women travelers, literature written by Black female digital nomads also reveals how race has continued to serve as the main lens through which Black women perceive themselves and the world around them, both at home and abroad.<sup>153</sup> Quantitative studies and research conducted by sociologists Robert Carter and Elizabeth Parks revealed that for Black American women, racial identity was formed before their gendered identity merged, and maintained priority over their gender.<sup>154</sup> These findings suggests that when Black women are abroad, they perceive and respond to local attitudes about Black

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 537

<sup>153</sup> Cheryl Fish, *Voices of Restless (Dis)continuity: The Significance of Travel for Free Black Women in the Antebellum Americas*, *Women's Studies*, 1997, 476.

<sup>154</sup> *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women*, 2011, 538.

people as a whole, instead of simply responding as a woman or a Black woman. Atanmo, who also runs the popular website, *The Blog Abroad*, writes about how she saw herself as a Black ambassador for the locals she encountered abroad and felt pride in taking on this role. However, Atanmo's decision to serve as a Black Ambassador is one that she chooses, which stands in contrast to the feeling many Black women have in the workplace, who are confined by the role of Black Ambassador. Additionally, Atanmo believes that most of the international communities she encounters have had little interaction with Black people outside of the popular media. This gives Atanmo hope that encountering an actual Black person like herself can change their shallowly constructed perceptions about Black people.<sup>155</sup> In other words, in many transnational contexts, the slate is clean for Black women to construct and articulate new meanings and perceptions of themselves and their people, unlike life in America, where perceptions are woven into the fabric and consciousness of American culture. Atanmo suggests that a Black woman's identity can be erased and rewritten abroad, which is an option that simply cannot exist at home.

Although Atanmo and other digital nomads portray a sense of agency in taking on the role of Black Ambassador, further analysis in the next chapter will problematize the motivations, performances and outcomes related to taking on such a role. For example, Atanmo talks about her conscious decision to smile and project kindness to locals who show disgust or contempt for her. In her article, "Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe," Atanmo writes,

Leaving town, the last person that stared at me (in disgust), I made sure I smiled back.

Because whatever preconceived notions western media and culture had convinced them into thinking I'm not deserving of any reciprocation of the smiles and kindness I give

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<sup>155</sup> Gloria Atanmo, "Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe", *The Blog Abroad*, 4 Aug 2015, [theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/](http://theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/).

first, then I'll make sure that if I'm the only black person they ever encounter, that their experience is a pleasant one."<sup>156</sup>

At first glance, this statement portrays Atanmo as the moral superior to those who reject her, opting to take the high road despite the negativity she receives, which she believes is due to sentiments of anti-Blackness. However Atanmo is also an advocate for leaving America because Black people cannot be their authentic selves in their own homeland. Why then does Atanmo choose to take on the performative Ambassador role? Isn't this the very role that Black women inside and outside the workplace resent? Why then do many of Black digital nomads talk at length and with pride about their conscious decision to perform for locals abroad? Why do they actively present themselves as both the normal person and the perfect African- American, which they perceive as being a polite, well-educated, modest, conservatively dressed, well-spoken and friendly individual? This decision by Black female digital nomads raises interesting questions about why Black women choose to project this type of identity ideal, and presents interesting parallels to the performative behaviors of Black women travelers in the 19th and early 20th century.<sup>157</sup> One parallel that will be discussed later in the Historical Overview of Travelin' Black Women is the similar usage of tropes, such as white female fragility related to white womanhood as depicted in the writings of both Free Black women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and modern Black digital nomads.

Another theme that Thomas and her fellow authors found in their study of young Black girls' identity development was the prevalence of strength in Black girls' narratives. Black girls

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Cheryl Fish, *Voices of Restless (Dis)continuity: The Significance of Travel for Free Black Women in the Antebellum Americas*, *Women's Studies*, 1997, 478.

spoke often about the need to be tough and strong in order to get what they wanted out of life, while also rising above stereotypes. However, this is a difficult burden for African American girls and young women to bear alone.<sup>158</sup>

In terms of identity development, researchers have discovered that the realization of difference in discovering who one is happens earlier for poor and working girls and minorities than it does for rich or upper class women, particularly those who are white.<sup>159</sup> This is because Black and poor women face negative reactions to their race and class status from the outside world at an earlier age than upper class and white women do. The intersectionality of race, gender, and class creates layers of discrimination for poor, Black females. Additionally, Black women's identity development processes in America are framed by the context of reception within American society, with the Black community's arrival in the colonies taking the form of slavery. Marshae Sylvester, a Black female scholar, asserts that "Before black women can label and identify themselves, the world has decided for them. Instead of self-discovery, life becomes concerned with dismantling and disproving labels".<sup>160</sup> These labels and their implications symbolize the struggles that Black female digital nomads are trying to escape as they flee America in search of their life as digital nomads.

Black women travel abroad to break away from the stereotypes and archetypes, while also tapping into those archetype to cope, survive and respond to challenges, such as the racism, sexism, prejudice and discrimination they may face while traveling abroad. Additionally, liberation takes on different meanings for Black and white digital nomads. Whereas both groups

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<sup>158</sup> Thomas, *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women*, 2018, 539.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Marshae Sylvester, *In Search of our Authentic Selves: The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Image on Black Millennial Women's Relationships, Coping and Authenticity*, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018, 48.

seek to be liberated from the workplace, Black women more adamantly seek liberation from stereotypes that confine them in America. But in order for Black women to gain liberation, they must free themselves from the burdens that embody the Strong Black Woman archetype according to Walker-Barnes. For the Strong Black Woman, liberation encompasses two possibilities.<sup>161</sup> While in the process of discovering “who they are, African-American women must be free not to be the Strong Black Woman. They must be free to reject the demands for unyielding strength, constant caregiving, and radical independence, and freed to embrace self-definition that is based on authenticity, giving and receiving hospitality and mutual interdependence”.<sup>162</sup>

So for Black women, true freedom can be understood as the ability to simply be one’s authentic self without being confined to the stereotypes and perceptions of community of society. This means that life abroad symbolizes the opportunity for Black women to no longer feel the need to embody tropes, such as the Strong Black Woman or the Black Ambassador abroad, nor do they have to protect themselves from negative stereotypes like the Loud, Angry Black Woman.

The Strong Black Woman archetype is particularly damaging to the Black woman’s sense of self, because the projection of being strong prohibits Black women from dealing with their true feelings.<sup>163</sup> It also renders Black women unable to access their authentic self. This finding will be examined further in the following chapter on Black female digital nomads, specifically in the subchapter, Ambassadorship, which explores and examines the experiences of Black women

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 37.



who talk about feeling the weight from being a locally or self appointed ambassador of Black American culture. It additionally reveals how the Strong Black Woman archetype transitions across borders and ultimately remains detrimental to Black women as it compels them to endure, and at times to suffer silently through, situations that are uncomfortable or untenable.

In the next chapter, Black female digital nomads and their narratives reveal the possibilities and complications for Black women in their identity construction abroad. In order for Black women to discover themselves, they must erase past constructions of formed in previous situations at work and in American society. Additionally, narratives in the following chapter will reveal how the failure to erase previous ascribed stereotypes result once again in the Black women's projecting of inauthentic self to locals abroad. This can further distance, disrupt and even prolong the self-discovery process of Black female digital nomads in their new transnational lives.

CHAPTER III:  
BLACK FEMALE DIGITAL NOMADS

**Introduction**

This chapter takes an in-depth look at the voices of Black female digital nomads through their own written work. By accessing blog sites and online resources geared towards the Black traveler and digital nomad, this chapter presents ten various ways in which Black women's lives intersect with globalized work and a hypermobile, digital work lifestyle. Although Black female digital nomads appear to come from fairly homogenous class and educational backgrounds, the motivations and narrative writings of these middle-class, highly educated Black women, vary significantly. While some cite frustration with racial injustices and discrimination as their reasons for choosing the digital nomad lifestyle, others mention the pursuit of discovering a self that is no longer defined by American labels and ideals. What becomes clear, however, is that these Black female digital nomads express a type of agency that has just recently been made possible by an increasingly globalized world. And it is this agency, birthed from globalization, that is helping Black women take charge of their lives and construct their own meanings of self, citizenship and community.

In order to examine these women's narratives and their intricacies, analytical categories have been created to frame the various motivations and perspectives that cause Black women to seek a globalized work life and rearticulate their identities. These categories, to name a few,

include: Deploying Strategies to Deflect “The Gaze”, Shifting Intersectionalities: Passport and American Privilege, Self-care: Individual Interests Vs The Collective, All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk: Black Or Black American? and Sisterhood: Findings One's Tribe Abroad. It must be noted that analytical categories are simply constructed ways to organize data and should not be considered to be mutually exclusive of one another. Some subjects inhabit more than once category simultaneously while others present contradicting perspectives when introduced to different categories. However, the objective of these categories is to illuminate various points of view that emerge from the voices of Black female digital natives.

### **Deploying Strategies to Deflect “The Gaze”**

Being hypervisible and under the ‘others’ gaze is mentioned by Black women in the workplace, and this conversation extends to the experiences of Black female digital nomads, albeit in different contexts. Whereas the gaze in American workplaces is associated with White authority and negative consequences, the gaze takes on new meaning in new contexts, and Black women devise different strategies for handling it while living abroad. First, Black female nomads equate the gaze with looks of curiosity and ignorance, unlike their Black counterparts in the workplace in the United States, who view the gaze as representing a hypervigilant presence of authority.

Gloria Atanmo, a Black digital nomad and travel blogger currently living abroad, specifies four types of gazes--ranging from harmless to threatening--that Black women encounter while traveling abroad. In her article, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, Atanmo elaborates on each of the four gazes: the first (1) is “the look of curiosity” associated with people

who have never seen or encountered a Black person before.<sup>164</sup> The second (2) is “the look of approval,” which Atanmo attributes to people who are satisfied or impressed by the presentation of Blackness before them and thus “come to the acknowledgement that you’re exactly how they imagined your kind” to be.<sup>165</sup> Of the four gazes, “the look of approval” according to Atanmo is the most welcoming and least harmless.<sup>166</sup> The third gaze (3) is “the look of disgust” which not only expresses the disdain of the gazer but is purposely made obvious.<sup>167</sup> This gaze is considered the most hurtful to Atanmo because, “It’s like they’re saying they’re not okay with my presence, but instead of keeping that pleasant thought to themselves, they want to make sure I’m aware of it too.”<sup>168</sup>

Although Atanmo states that she experienced the third gaze in great abundance while in Prague, she makes sure to mention that this gaze was deployed almost exclusively by older people. Atanmo generally attributes this disapproving gaze to older generations that grew up in more homogenous racial and ethnic communities with little access to the outside world.<sup>169</sup> This ignorance persist until the fall of Communism, when globalization brought the presence of multiculturalism as well as tourists of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, many in the older generations simply have not been able to accommodate or adapt to this rapid change in spaces that were previously homogeneous. The fourth (4) and final gaze is “the look of objectification/sexualization” which appears to be the most upsetting of the gazes. While Atanmo does not discount the fact that all traveling women, regardless of race, have probably

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<sup>164</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, The Blog Abroad, 4 Aug 2015, [theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/](http://theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

experienced or encountered the fourth gaze, she makes sure to stress that she “knows that Black women specifically get objectifying stares in certain regions much more than anyone else”.<sup>170</sup>

Atanmo attributes the deployment of this gaze “to the increasing amount of African migrant women who turn to prostitution when it’s the only work they can find outside of their native country”. She goes on to point out, “The local culture then accepts this as the norm and they associate anyone resembling a woman of African descent to follow suit”.<sup>171</sup> Here, Atanmo reveals how Black women’s encounters with the fourth gaze is more frequent and thus a point of separation between White digital nomads and Black female digital nomads abroad. Although the fourth gaze is not new for Black women in Europe, with Black American heroines like Josephine Baker, a well known African American dancer who became famous in Europe. Baker serves as a celebrated example of the Black woman abroad who was hypersexualized, filled with agency, and yet welcomed with positive reception. Since that time, Black women’s experience with the fourth has become increasingly negative, especially in the past decade.

This more recent shift in the meaning of the gaze, with its negative response toward Black women, is attributed to the influx of African migrants in Europe, along with latent racism and increasing xenophobia sweeping across the Continent.<sup>172</sup> More specifically, many African women who migrate illegally to Europe lack legal citizenship and become increasingly desperate for money to survive. These women who are barred from obtaining legal jobs are often faced with making a living through illegal and underground avenues, such as prostitution. Although prostitution is often the last resort, African women may view it as the only work they can find

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, The Blog Abroad, 4 Aug 2015, [theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/](http://theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/).

outside of their native country.<sup>173</sup> Europeans see this type of work as a matter of choice and an indicator of these women's moral compass. The visibility of African women as prostitutes ultimately leads the local people to associate African women with sex workers.<sup>174</sup> This normalization, however, leads the local community and police to profile Black women sex workers.<sup>175</sup>

One of the ways that Black American women respond to the third and fourth gaze is by deploying strategies similar to those learned back at home. One such strategy deployed by Black female digital nomads is to actively smile in public spaces, which becomes a way to guard against being perceived as the angry, anti-social Black woman. Additionally Black female digital nomads, like Atanmo, explained that smiling allows them to morally rise above the negative reactions they encounter abroad. For example, in her blog post, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, Atanmo concludes the article with an account of her final experience in Prague:

“Leaving town, the last person that stared at me (in disgust), I made sure I smiled back. Because whatever preconceived notions western media and culture had convinced them into thinking I'm not deserving of any reciprocation of the smiles and kindness I give first, then I'll make sure that if I'm the only Black person they ever encounter, that their experience is a pleasant one”.<sup>176</sup>

In this encounter, Atanmo essentially proves herself to be morally superior to those who negatively receive her through the presentation of a smile. However, however her use of the smile to disarm would-be opponents carries some hidden negative implications.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

Here, Atanmo is unwittingly reproducing the mythical Strong Black Woman persona, who refuses to show vulnerability and buries her emotions. Although the Strong Black Woman is akin to Super Woman, who presents only strength to the outside world, the Strong Black Woman is also not human in an authentic sense. Within the Strong Black Woman there are no traces of emotion or weakness, both of which make up the human condition.<sup>177</sup> In addition to deploying the Strong Black Woman archetype abroad, Atanmo unknowing reinforces the idea that Black women can never experience or express their emotions with the same freedom as other women. It is important to note that regardless of race and throughout various countries around the world, many cultures force women to project themselves as the stereotypical “accommodating woman”, whose femininity is predicated on never complaining, being compliant and presenting themselves as very nice. This stereotype also prevents these women from expressing those emotions deemed unsavory and undesirable in women, like anger, aggression or boldness, however the difference between these women and Black women lies in society’s portrayal of them. While the former group of women are attempting to satisfy the standards set by society which dictate how women should behave and present themselves, the latter group, Black women, are actively fighting against their perceptions in society. This means that Black women are beginning from a different position, a negative position, unlike their counterparts, who are only required to satisfy those standards instead of trying to prove to society that they possess those desirable traits of femininity. Thus Black women must always be in performance mode, constantly proving and adapting their presentation of ‘the self’ which changes with each new context and environment.

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<sup>177</sup> Marshaé Sylvester, “In Search of Our Authentic Selves: The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Image on Black Millennial Women’s Relationships, Coping and Authenticity”, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018, 25.

Judy Ford, a Black female traveler and self-identified digital nomad, affirms the danger in this restrictive performance in her articles, *5 Ways the Black Girl Introvert Finds Freedom in Solo Travel*. Black Girl Introverts, or BGIs, according to Ford, carry “an enormous weight of entrenched stereotypes and expectations” in America which make it difficult to express themselves even when removed from that context and resituated abroad.<sup>178</sup> Ford explains:

“Since the expectations of Black Girls in America are given such a severely limited range, it’s not hard to imagine the challenges BGIs experience in being who we naturally are. BGIs feel all kinds of pressure to explain ourselves; make others comfortable around us; act in ways contradictory to our nature; and be held accountable to peoples’ misinterpretations of our attitudes/behaviors/thoughts whenever they don’t fit the stereotypes of their expectations”.<sup>179</sup>

So, while Atanmo deployed the strategy of a smile to morally rise above ‘the haters’ around her, she ultimately reinvented the age-old societal norm that reinforces the idea that Black women must perform when under the gaze. The only difference is that the gazer shifts from being white people in the American establishment to ‘others’ who turn the gaze on Black American travelers abroad.

A surprising finding in the narratives written by Black female digital nomads is their willingness to take on the role of the Black Ambassador. This role seems to emerge from the belief that the racism and negative stereotypes encountered abroad against Black women are based on ignorance stemming from a lack of knowledge and exposure--or perhaps the

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<sup>178</sup> Judy Ford, *5 Ways the Black Girl Introvert Finds Freedom in Solo Travel*, Las Morenas De España, 21 Dec 2016. <https://www.lasmorenasdeespana.com/blog/black-girl-introvert-solo-travel>.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.



internationalization of negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media.<sup>180</sup> So it appears that Black women are operating on the assumption that anti-Blackness in some international contexts can be erased by their performance as a ‘good’ and respectable Black person. It is within this context, under the guise of educating those who lack exposure to Black people, that Black women take on the role of the Black ambassador while abroad.<sup>181</sup> Atanmo writes extensively about the motivations behind her choice to take on the role of Black ambassador. In her article, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, Atanmo contends that most of the locals she meets or encounters in Prague do not know much about Black people, so they base their judgment on skewed media stereotypes about what it means to be Black. Atanmo therefore works to actively present herself, not just as another “normal” person, but as the embodiment and personification of the “perfect” African-American who is polite, educated, modest, well-spoken and friendly in nature.

Similarly, Kisha Hugh, writes about the satisfaction she gains as a Black ambassador when she witnesses the global impact her presence has on local communities abroad. In her article, *From the Outside*, Hugh writes, "By waking up each morning and going to work, I was conquering stereotypes about black people in so many ways. My daily interactions with the Chinese continued to show them that we are more than just athletes or singers".<sup>182</sup> Both women take on the ambassador role with pride, which suggests that they embrace the role as spokespersons for Black Americans. However, they want to have choice or agency in deciding

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<sup>180</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Prague: My Least Favorite City in Europe*, The Blog Abroad, 4 Aug 2015, <https://theblogabroad.com/2015/08/04/prague-my-least-favorite-city-in-europe/>

<sup>181</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.

<sup>182</sup> Mekisha Hugh, *From the Outside*, The Black Expat, 30 Jan 2016, <https://www.theblackexpat.com/from-the-outside/>.

when and where they take on this role. In her article, *The Sad Truth About Racism in Every Country*, Gloria Atanmo observes, “While it’s unfair that we have this burden of tiptoeing around people’s ignorance, knowing we’re not only representing ourselves, but the entire African diaspora no matter where we are, many of us have taken on that role with pride”.<sup>183</sup>

The trope of “Black women as ambassadors” is a new example of the ways country and culture can engender women as symbolic carriers of Black American culture. It is interesting to note that Black women have consciously chosen to articulate their propagation of this role as ambassadors, becoming physical embodiments of Black people and Black culture. However taking on the role of African-American ambassador is draining and ultimately works against the healing and self-care narrative that ultimately motivated Black women to travel abroad.<sup>184</sup> It also undermines Black women’s expressed desires to leave white workplaces that prevented them from being their authentic selves. And for those Black women in the latter group, taking on the role of ambassador can be just as draining as their ambassador role in their previous nine-to-five workplace. In this context of ambassadorship, however Black women abroad are choosing to redefine the code-switching behavior in an international context. Perhaps this is a step in the right direction. Whereas they were forced to code-switch as a survival strategy in the American workplace, within this new context abroad, code-switching is done with seemingly more agency. The use of code-switching however presents a more complex and challenging layer to understanding Black female digital nomad’s freedom of self discovery abroad. Can these women

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<sup>183</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *The Sad Truth About Racism in Every Country*, The Blog Abroad, 18 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/18/the-sad-truth-about-racism-in-every-country/>.

<sup>184</sup> Marshaé Sylvester, “In Search of Our Authentic Selves: The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Image on Black Millennial Women’s Relationships, Coping and Authenticity”, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018, 29.

discover and define themselves on their own terms if they insist on serving as Black ambassadors?

In her article, *Why I Decided to Leave America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, Atanmo asserts that her decision to leave America began when she “started losing patience and energy to constantly educate and inform people on some of the most basic concepts around humanity,” a process which to her, “felt like a daily existential crisis that I couldn’t win”.<sup>185</sup> Her new role as Black ambassador seems eerily similar. However Atanmo redeems herself in her article, *The Worst Part About My Travels As a Solo Black Woman*, provide a more realistic and less stressful point of view for Black female travelers and digital nomads. Here, instead of implying that Black women should be ambassadors, Atanmo cautions:

“It’s important to remember that while we can’t change the perception of Black women in these countries overnight, we can do our best to increase our presence, as everyday tourists, worthy of respect and not lazy assumptions about how we afforded to get there in the first place”.<sup>186</sup>

Atanmo claims that she writes about her experiences to warn other travelers of the possibility that this could be their experience. These blog posts, Atanmo continues, are written as an act of solidarity and understanding for the girl who goes to Europe and experiences similar treatment. Atanmo hopes that these writings reach this hypothetical girl and comfort her in knowing that

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<sup>185</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.

<sup>186</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *The Worst Part About My Travels As a Solo Black Woman*, The Blog Abroad, 20 April 2016, <https://theblogabroad.com/2016/04/20/the-worst-part-about-my-travels-as-a-solo-black-woman/>.

she is not alone in her feelings of hopelessness and that situations like the one mentioned above are completely out of her control.

### **Shifting Intersectionalities: Passport and American Privilege**

The shifting of intersectionalities is one of the most interesting occurrences that happens to Black American women that are living and working independently while abroad. In America, Black women are located at the intersections of race, gender and most often class, meaning that the oppression they face is multi-faceted. While abroad however citizenship becomes a facet of their intersectional identities and tremendously shifts them. As Americans, Black American women abroad gain access to citizenship and class privileges that cause them to question their newfound identity and societal status in a new location. Although race and gender were still a part of these identities abroad, their meanings shift.

For example, while abroad, Amirah Cook realized that her intersectionalities have shifted, explaining that while she did understand that racism and colorism persists in cultures across the world, she found she did not fall into the same categories while abroad. Cook who is a Black female digital nomad currently living in Bali with her husband, writes that she discovered she has a new identity, which she had never considered or knew existed before going abroad. Once abroad she began to see the American aspect of her identity which before traveling abroad was of no use to her. Cook admits that the discovery of American privilege,

“Was a strange realization for me, as privilege was commonly used in America to describe an intangible characteristic only white people possessed, due to an unfair and unjust society. However, as my perspective was broadened, I learned that I was

considered privileged on a global scale, and that fact alone superseded the color of my skin, and the connection I thought it would lend me around the world”.<sup>187</sup>

Here, Cook reveals the power in her American privilege and its ability to shift her intersectionalities and previous marginalization. So when physically relocated abroad, Black female digital nomads begin to discover aspects of their identity that previously had no value, such as their nationality and societal location. And it is upon this discovery that Black female travelers like Cook undergo an identity reconstruction that reshapes the ways they experience the world around them.<sup>188</sup> For Cook, this reshaping reveals that her previous construction of Blackness, as the primary aspect of her identity that connected her to the world was no longer the main source of her identity within the context of this new world. Instead, her nationality and social class became the main identity markers of significance to those in host communities.<sup>189</sup>

Similarly, Black female digital nomad, Dana Saxon also realizes her newfound privilege abroad. In her article, *The Paradox of Passport Privilege*, Saxon highlights the benefits that Black Americans can tap into because of their American citizenship while abroad.<sup>190</sup> Saxon discovered that, whereas her race closes doors in America, with one quick flash of her passport, doors abroad are opened with welcoming arms. Saxon further explains how American passport privilege works writing that:

“Unlike the U.S., where my skin color is a key identifier of my place in society, outside of my native country it’s my nationality that appears to matter far more than my

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<sup>187</sup> Amirah Cook, *Traveling While Black: Too Native To Be Foreign, Too Foreign To Be Native*, Cool Young History, 6 July 2016, <https://coolyounghistory.com/traveling-while-black/>.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Dana Saxon, *The Paradox of Privilege*, The Black Expat, 22 Sep 2016, <http://www.theblackexpat.com/the-paradox-of-privilege/>.

blackness, my natural hair, and even my (occasionally vocal) anti-European sentiments”.<sup>191</sup>

Unlike their Black and Brown counterparts in the southern hemisphere who face immigration discrimination as they are considered "undesirables," Black Americans are fortunate beneficiaries of U.S. citizenship when it comes to crossing borders. Additionally Saxon observes that American citizenship can absolve Black Americans from experiencing the negative stigma of race and prejudice attached to their skin color.<sup>192</sup> And in those moments when Black Americans are misidentified as Africans and treated with suspicion by authorities or locals, Black Americans need only to make clear to authorities that, “while we are Black, we are not the “undesirable Black”.<sup>193</sup> Holding an American passport, according to Saxon, changes the tone authorities take and restores the same treatment allotted to other American citizens. In these situations, Saxon highlights the importance of playing up the American citizenship, going so far as to recommend dropping the African in identifying oneself as African American. She goes so far as to say,

“We can be mistaken for Africans without American nationality and asked for justification for walking freely on the street, we need only to clarify to the authorities that, while we are Black, we are not the “undesirable Black.” We’re American in this situation. (You might want to drop the African American). Said authorities might then say, “oh, you’re American? Okay then”.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

In this statement, Saxon reveals that even when Black Americans are abroad and miscategorized as African, they can regain their American privilege by a quick showing of their passport. Even more, the ability to avoid the status of “unwanted” or “undesired” in a foreign society brings Saxon palpable joy in her writings, however, her tendency to dismiss and Africans as “undesirable Blacks” is troubling. Her tendency to distance herself from African may help her to avoid stigmatization, however, she fails to sympathize with those who are facing discrimination abroad. It is also an example of how the Pan-African transnational solidarity is a theoretical concept that is more feasible in rhetoric than it is in reality.

Saxon views this newfound passport privilege as a form of reparation for the discrimination she has felt at on behalf of her heritage. She enjoys this privilege on behalf of her ancestors, American slaves, who were unable to experience freedom of movement. So her use of this privilege is understood as her “cashing in the reparations checks that are long overdue”.<sup>195</sup>

Like many Americans traveling abroad Cook didn’t appreciate having American citizenship until she was out of the country. While abroad, however, her experiences of facing discrimination as an “African,” combined with her newfound American privilege, ultimately reshape and give meaning to her American identity. Cook’s new attachment to her American identity challenges the widely held belief that contact with the international world negatively reinforces Black American relationships with the United States. It seems that for many Black female digital nomads, their Americanness becomes integrated into their identity while traveling abroad.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> See Amirah Cook, *Traveling While Black: Too Native To Be Foreign, Too Foreign To Be Native*, Cool Young History, 6 July 2016, <https://coolyounghistory.com/traveling-while-black/>. ; Dana Saxon, *The Paradox of Passport Privilege*, 2016.

## **Sisterhood: Findings One's Tribe Abroad**

Although the desire to find one's identity in relation to a relatable "tribe" abroad is a theme present in both White and Black digital nomad narratives, it varies significantly between Black and white digital narratives. For white men and women, the only requirement for entry into the tribe is identifying as a digital nomad. White digital nomads express the sentiment that only those who are part of this unique lifestyle could possibly understand, advise and empathize with their experiences and frustrations.<sup>197</sup> Black digital nomads, however, seek out fellow travelers who are also Black because they imagine a shared perspective or experience. Many Black digital nomads had conducted their daily lives in environments where they were the only Black person in the room. For many, this sense of singularity persists for long periods of time. So instead of considering their imagined "tribe" to be the group of digital nomads worldwide, Black nomads seek out individuals who also identify as Black.<sup>198</sup> For these global travelers, racial identity shifts to become more tangible while traveling. This is because Black digital nomads are interested in creating spaces similar to those back home, spaces that are comprised of individuals with the same shared history of the Black American experience.<sup>199</sup> The reconstruction of African-American majority groups abroad works for Black digital nomads on two levels.

First, it ensures that members of the group already understand the background context could empathize with feelings of loneliness as the only Black person in the room, and can resonate with the frustrations about experiences with racism. Additionally, this new kinship group provides members with feelings of acceptance and a space where frustrations and anxieties

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<sup>197</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, "We Grab A Territory": The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility, *European Group Of Organizational Studies*, 2018, 17.

<sup>198</sup> Naomi Tené Austin, *How I Found My Tribe in Paris*, Blavity, 2019, <https://blavity.com/making-new-friends-in-a-foreign-country>.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*



can be unloaded and members are inspired and recharged.<sup>200</sup> On the second level, this foundation of a shared racial and national history also suggests a shared understanding of Black culture and today's pop culture references, such as music, news and events happening in Black America. This foundation ensures a base level of understanding and provides members with a space where they can talk about things that matter to them and already know the cultural context in which topics are situated.

In her article, *How I Found My Tribe in Paris*, Naomi Tené Austin, a Black American expat and traveler living in Paris, provides us with a fantastic example of the motivations that drive Black expat women abroad to seek out or form communities with other Black people. Furthermore Austin's experience shows us how these connections with others are initiated, legitimized, and calcified.<sup>201</sup> Austin begins her narration by detailing of the fabulous sites she has seen along with other adventures in Paris. However the weight of traveling and experiencing everything alone was starting to weigh on her and she found herself feeling lonely and craving the company of others. However, a fortunate encounter at a Starbucks changed Austin's time in Paris dramatically.<sup>202</sup> As she went to buy coffee one morning in Paris, Austin, who did not speak French, found herself unable to communicate with the barista. Feeling slightly embarrassed about the language barrier, Austin almost turned to leave when a Black American woman named Tasha stepped in to help. Realizing that they were both American, the two women spoke at length, when Austin eventually expressed her feelings of loneliness and her original fears that

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

Tasha might not understand her plight. However Tasha completely understands, telling Austin, “When I see’d you in line at that Starbucks, I know’d there is a God”.<sup>203</sup>

At first glance Tasha’s statement seems to just be a case of poor grammar, but it is actually a rephrasing of a quote from the film *The Color Purple*, based on a novel written in 1982 by renown Black author, Alice Walker.<sup>204</sup> The film has become a cultural icon, complete with an all-star cast with Black stars such as Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg and Donald Glover in 1985. It is a cultural staple well known to Black Americans. Tasha’s humorous rephrasing of a quote from *The Color Purple* allows her to foster a bond and sense of camaraderie between the two women. It also gives Tasha a symbolically meaningful way to articulate her understanding of and empathy for Austin’s expressed anxieties, ultimately alleviating them. Tasha introduces Austin to other Black expats and, because of this chance encounter, Austin was able to find in this group a community away from home.

Austin and Tasha’s story is just one example among many that illuminates how motivations and constructions of Black digital nomad circles differ from those of white digital nomads. As a point of comparison, white digital nomads seek communities based on professional affiliations, which in many ways runs counter to the idea of digital nomadism.<sup>205</sup> Thus, while many white digital nomads seek a life that is not defined by their career or job position, but by their interests, hobbies and personalities, the desire to reconnect with co-professionals seems counterintuitive.<sup>206</sup> So, it seems that White digital nomads, despite their rejection of the

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Georgios Mouratidis, “*Digital Nomads: Travel, Remote Work and Alternative Lifestyles*”, Lund University, 2018, [lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8948916](http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8948916).

<sup>206</sup> Giovanna Trimoldi, “We Grab A Territory”: The Production of Digital Nomads Worldwide Space in the Era of Postcapitalism and Hypermobility”, European Group Of Organizational Studies, 2018, 16.

traditional workplace, find themselves drawn to those with similar professional affiliations who share a work identity rather than simply a set of shared interests, apart, of course, their burning desire to roam the globe.

### **All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk: Black Or Black American?**

However for Black Americans abroad, the establishment of individual and group connections related to race suggests a belief that an inherent shared history naturally exists. This shared history is believed to serve as the foundation on which solidarity is achieved between all racially Black people. However, this conception has proven to be both challenging and problematic. In fact, there is no real shared history among people who are Black. Unlike Austin and Tasha, many of the narratives written by Black female digital nomads reveals that there are very few contexts abroad in which non-American Blacks and Black Americans as social equals, in so far as Africans experience harsher treatment, and live in more impoverished environments.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore the treatment, economic status and social position of Africans in many of foreign countries shines an even brighter light on just how separated the experience and histories of these two groups are. This realization among Black women is not found in writings by and about white and non-Black digital nomads.

In her article, *We are not the Same: My View on the Barcelona Black Community*, Awarebi, a Black American digital nomad, details the initial moment and subsequent realizations that followed after her encounters with African migrants while living and working in Spain. Like Austin, Awarebi too felt nostalgic for the Black community left behind in America and not yet discovered while abroad. However Awarebi is able to articulate what she missed and meant

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<sup>207</sup> Awarebi, *We are not the Same: My View on the Barcelona Black Community*, Blavity, 17 Mar 2017, <https://blavity.com/we-are-not-the-same-my-view-on-the-barcelona-black-community>.

when talking about the Black community.<sup>208</sup> For Awarebi, her daily experiences and encounters with other Black people were comprised not only of their participation as consumers doing ordinary activities like shopping at the mall or perusing store aisles but also as service providers, working at the banks and in upscale establishments that she frequents. Furthermore, this environment was filled with frequent positive representations of Black people thriving financially as well as professionally, occupying positions that ranged from public facing to high level.<sup>209</sup> As a result, Awarebi's construction of her Black American identity and sense of normalcy became subconsciously predicated on the visibility, positive representation and consistent presence of Black people. Abroad however, the interactions that Awarebi had with racially Black people as well as the representations of Black people that she encountered in her daily life worked to directly contradict the world she'd left behind and as a result rearticulate/rework her understanding of Blackness.

There are two interactions that seem to have acted as a catalyst for Awarebi's rethinking of her Blackness and connection to Africa and Africans.<sup>210</sup> Awarebi's first questionable experience was of a West African man stealing Awarebi's purse. To Awarebi this act of thievery showcased a complete lack of solidarity, trust and bond of kinship. This is because Awarebi assumed that a shared heritage with Africa would ensure some degree of unity with the West African and with her being away from America, her blackness and this "African" heritage would protect her from criminal acts perpetuated by other Black people.<sup>211</sup> However this experience showed Awarebi that Black skin was in all actuality the only commonality that she and the West

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

African man shared. So in this new environment and context, Awarebi's previous assumptions and understandings of Blackness and who classifies as "Black" had to be rearticulated. Awarebi discovered that for the African man, not only was she not seen as his kinfolk, in reality a shared historic or continental connection did not exist between them despite their shared Black skin.<sup>212</sup> She was not African but African-American.

In America, while Black people do commit crimes against each other there is an unspoken rule that in spaces where Black representation or presence is minimal, Black people that are in that space automatically become an alliance and essentially protect and look out for one another. Another unspoken rule within Black American culture is the use of the 'nod' which is a performative, informal and non-verbal sign of acknowledgement between Black people in a public space. Although the nod is informal and can take on many forms, such as a hand wave, smile or a simple meeting of the eyes, participation in this call and response activity is of utmost important. This is because, on a deeper level, the nod signifies that both parties, despite not knowing each other previously, share in not only an understanding of the nod's historical significance but also show in an unspoken solidarity that confirms and legitimizes each other's Blackness. So despite it's perceived informality, the use, recognition of and response to the nod is in reality a confirmation of one's Black identity. A Black American's failure as well as refusal to engage in the performative, call and response, nod signifies to the Blacks present that the individual either lacks a connection to the culture or is purposefully attempting to distance themselves from the culture and by extension their Black identity thus becoming a despised "sell out".

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

It is within this cultural and historical context as well as adherence to a set of performative generationally passed down behaviors, that Awarebi's Black identity was cultivated, reaffirmed and legitimized. However her encounters with African migrants in Spain, shed light on the immense role one's geographical location has on the construction of a racial or ethnic identity. Furthermore, Awarebi's interactions with African migrants made her realize that the disconnect between herself and the African migrants stemmed from their location and contextualization within very different histories and borders.<sup>213</sup> As a result, African and Black Americans have diverged in their understandings of what it means to be Black and what it means to show solidarity and membership within the context of Blackness. It was within this new context on foreign soil and in conversation with African migrants that Awarebi realized the extent to which her Blackness and Black identity had been profoundly shaped by the historical context within America's borders of America.

The realization of the differences separating African and Black Americans can also be seen in Awarebi's conversations with African migrants selling illegal fake goods a market she frequented in Spain. Unlike Awarebi, who came to Spain for graduate school and was able to secure a high paying au pair position, these African migrants came to Spain as teenagers desperate for a better life. Once in Spain, however, the migrants found no paths towards upward mobility; instead they were forced to earn meager wages as street vendors selling illegal goods. As illegal street vendors, they faced constant suspicion from law enforcement officers and were often subject to police harassment and unannounced raids. Their predicament in Spain was

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

further worsened by their living arrangements, which consisted of a tiny overcrowded apartment that lacked basic utilities like, electricity and heat.

From these conversations it became glaringly obvious that their lives bear no resemblance with Awarebi asserting, “I do not share the same spaces as the black people here -- we are not in the same classes and we are not at the same events”.<sup>214</sup> Although Awarebi’s feelings in this moment are valid and fair, the undertone of classism and elitism warrant further investigation perhaps outside of the scope of this paper. Nevertheless it was ultimately these conversations with African migrants that brought Awarebi to the conclusion that despite her initial refusal to believe that she and African migrants were not the same, a belief that was formed back in America and in the absence of actual African migrant voices - reality couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Writings, like Atanmo and Awarebi’s, provide tremendous insight into the specific contexts and subsequent conversations that take place between Black Americans and the ‘other’ Black on the international stage thus illuminating how the Black American identity, when deployed and in conversation with the ‘other,’ is subconsciously reworked. And the final outcome of this reworking process points to a deeper and less tumultuous relationship to the American aspect of the Black American identity. From these narratives and analysis from Black American women, it becomes clear that these encounters literally force Black Americans to accept that their sense of self has been produced and throughout generations constructed and rearticulated within the borders and historical context of America. This realization makes it harder to assert one’s identity only as Black, void in connection or association to American

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

citizenship which ultimately pushes Black Americans toward a closer attachment as well as acceptance to America and their American identity -- a connection that potentially would not have been made without contact with the 'othered' African. So although African and Black Americans do share in a consumer and creative based cultural exchange, with the transnational sharing of music in genres such as Hip-Hop and Soca, clothing and African fabrics, in reality and practice their lives and identities aren't as intertwined.

In Europe, due to the influx of immigrants, a shortage of job opportunities for migrants and negative perception of Brown and Black migrants, many immigrants have resorted to illegal or underground ventures. Many African women in particular have taken to sex work as a means of earning a living and surviving in Europe. But because of this African women have become synonymous with sex work and as a result stigmatized.<sup>215</sup> This stigmatization has impacted Black women traveling in Europe because they often times are perceived as African and as result subjected to street as well as police harassment and negative reactions from locals.<sup>216</sup>

Atanmo also writes about her experience with this stigmatization in Europe. In her article, *The Worst Part About My Travels as a Solo Black Woman*, Atanmo talks about the inescapability of being misidentified as African and the treatment she experienced as a result. Before detailing her experience, Atanmo makes sure to preface her article by ensuring readers that she was "properly" dressed in clothing that covered her arms and legs. However despite her conscious efforts to distinguish herself, through style of dress, from the prostitutes and by extensive African women, Atanmo, who is with a male friend from Germany, is nevertheless

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<sup>215</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *The Worst Part About My Travels As a Solo Black Woman*, The Blog Abroad, 20 April 2016, <https://theblogabroad.com/2016/04/20/the-worst-part-about-my-travels-as-a-solo-black-woman/>

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.



subjected to the negative gaze and leering of locals and police. In Atanmo's words, "We pass police officers who mutter something along the lines of "good job" in Catalan, while looking towards my German friend, and seemingly scaling me up and down as if imagining what Nicki Minaj moves I had in my repertoire".<sup>217</sup>

In addition to stares of objectification and disapproval/disgust from white people Atanmo is also judged by people who look like her, writing,

"And then I lock eyes with what looked like a West-African (specifically, Nigerian) woman. She stares me up and down, then looks at my German friend, eyeballs his crotch area, then looks at me again and mutters something to her friend nearby." However instead of looks of disgust, Atanmo later realizes that, "It's now clear they were prostitutes, and they've mistaken me as their "competition" and crossing into their territory".<sup>218</sup>

Atanmo's story highlights the limitations of American passport privilege, showing that despite her best efforts and public persona, she not only still faces discrimination because of her skin color but that she can easily be misidentified and stripped of her privilege at a moment's notice. Because as Atanmo writes, "Regardless of what Black women wear, there are just some regions of the world who see black skin on a woman, and assume that the only way I was able to afford to get there and stay there, was by way of selling my body to a local".<sup>219</sup> This realization reinforces the idea that Black women ultimately can be stripped of their newfound agency regardless of their physical location thus fostering a sense of hopelessness among Black digital

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

nomads like Atanmo. Atanmo's response to this reappearance of lost agency however is problematic and in need of further investigation. Following this experience, Atanmo attempts to grapple with how she should feel musing,

“I don't walk around flashing my college degree, credentials, or achievements on my arms, but the fact that I couldn't and didn't really know how to defend myself, was something new. I was embarrassed. A type of embarrassed that leaves you speechless and unsure how to vent or open up about it with friends”.<sup>220</sup>

It is interesting that in the face of racial mistreatment, Atanmo relies on class indicators to restore her lost sense of dignity because it shows how class is integral to her understanding of self and identity. It illuminates that Black female digital nomads are not actually representative of all Black women, they are, in reality, members of an elite group, and a subset of Black Americans. This elite group consists of Black women who have a certain level of educational and financial achievement, both of which give them a sense of pride and dignity in America. However the inability to showcase these accolades reveals how shifting intersectionalities can work both ways. Some intersectionalities are replaced with better ones, such as access to better treatment while living abroad; other traits can be lost while abroad when educational achievement and professional status are overlooked when these women are misidentified as African migrants.

Her story also shows that regardless of her attempts to distinguish oneself as an upstanding and respectable woman, her efforts ultimately prove unsuccessful so long as she can be racially grouped with African migrants.<sup>221</sup> Most importantly however, Atanmo's writings give us a real life example of how Black American women's, blackness is reinforced and cannot be

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

transcended while abroad thus canceling out the benefits of their American privilege. I believe that because of the negative reinforcements on race, Black American women and men end up gaining a tighter connection to their American identity because in situations like Gloria Atanmo's it is the only thing that can restore the dignity stripped through race politics. So although Black American women were more likely than their male counterparts to attempt connections and solidarity with African migrants abroad, a level of dismissiveness persisted in many of the narratives.<sup>222</sup> Ultimately however it is clear that these experiences with Africans abroad led Black women rethink and ultimately rearticulate their identity as Americans and as Black women.

### **Self-care: Individual Interests Vs The Collective**

“Just like a toxic relationship - The U.S. is my abusive and mentally unstable boyfriend that I need a break from. An indefinite one”<sup>223</sup> - Gloria Atanmo

Many Black digital nomads are citing self care as one of the main reasons for deciding to leave America and travel live abroad.<sup>224</sup> Whereas Black women in the early 19th century articulated their dissatisfaction with America's racial treatment of Blacks and inability to live freely as their motivations for going abroad, Black women today have rearticulated the same

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<sup>222</sup> See Jamal Bradley, “As A Black American Living Abroad, Here's Why I Think Black People Should Start Exploring Other Countries To Live In”, Blavity, 2018. [blavity.com/as-a-black-american-living-abroad-heres-why-i-think-black-people-should-start-exploring-other-countries-to-live-in](https://blavity.com/as-a-black-american-living-abroad-heres-why-i-think-black-people-should-start-exploring-other-countries-to-live-in). ; referring to African-American men physically fighting African men who try to portray themselves as Black American men in Japan and Korea in Asia, "The Seoul of Black Folks" African-American Women's Experiences with the "Gaze" in Korea and Japan", University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2013.

<sup>223</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.

<sup>224</sup> Marshaé Sylvester, “In Search of Our Authentic Selves: The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Image on Black Millennial Women's Relationships, Coping and Authenticity”, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018, 46

sentiments through the use of self-care language.<sup>225</sup> The importance of self-care is a trend started by the millennial generation which focuses on the conscious practicing of self-care activities.<sup>226</sup> This trend focuses on the conscious stepping away from or breaking from activities that take away from one's mental health, wellbeing and overall quality of life. It is a trend that demands individuals, whether through pampering, traveling or meditating, take care of themselves and their mental health. For Black millennials today, traveling abroad has been called an act of self-care and step towards healing the wounds formed from viewing, enduring and experiencing the race-based police violence and harassment of Black people.<sup>227</sup>

There is also a healing competent within this understanding of travel as self care which Black digital nomad Danielle Pointdujour points out writing that,

“The more Black women travel, the more healing will come into our lives because we start to love ourselves in a different way and then we can pay it forward to our children, our children's children as well as uplift our men”.<sup>228</sup>

So not only does traveling have the power to heal past traumas it also has the ability to equip women with the strength to uplift Black women and rewrite the paths for future generations.

Pointdujour's writings show her belief that Black women are the backbone of the Black

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Antonia Hylton, “Trump Is Making Black Americans Want to Travel Abroad More, Business Owners Say”, VICE News, 27 Feb 2018, [news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3k74nj/trump-is-making-black-americans-want-to-travel-abroad-more-business-owners-say](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3k74nj/trump-is-making-black-americans-want-to-travel-abroad-more-business-owners-say).

<sup>228</sup> Danielle Pointdujour, What I've Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman, Ebony Magazine, 11 Oct 2016  
<https://www.ebony.com/life/black-abroad-women/>.

community and it is only through their well-being that the Black community and Black men can be uplifted in hopes of creating a better future.

So although the crisis is articulated differently from that of Blacks who were traveling abroad during the antebellum period to escape racism and hate in America, Black Americans today also seem to be fleeing America to escape racial persecution and the political chaos that has marked and continued through Trump's presidency.<sup>229</sup> This recent uptake in Black international travel has been noted by American researchers with MMGY Global, one of the largest travel research firms, affirming that within the last two years, African Americans have been more likely to travel abroad than the average person.<sup>230</sup>

Kent Johnson, cofounder of Black and Abroad, a resource for Black Americans interested in international travel also contributes the increased interest in travel to a widespread desire to escape Trump's dystopia and exercise healing through self-care.<sup>231</sup> In an interview with Vice News, Johnson reported seeing, "an increase in people looking for safe spaces, looking for ways to be unapologetically themselves".<sup>232</sup> I also believe that the millennial trend of self-care and their insistence on it as a necessity of self-care has played a large role on the increase in global travel mentioned by Johnson, MMGY Global and Digital Nomad authors. However I believe that this uptake in international travel is not just about fleeing persecution or chaos of Trump but is a bold act of refusal to live anywhere that exploits and profits from the Black body and culture while simultaneously risking the lives and mental and emotional well-being of its citizens.

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<sup>229</sup> Antonia Hylton, "Trump Is Making Black Americans Want to Travel Abroad More, Business Owners Say", VICE News, 27 Feb 2018, [news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3k74nj/trump-is-making-black-americans-want-to-travel-abroad-more-business-owners-say](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/3k74nj/trump-is-making-black-americans-want-to-travel-abroad-more-business-owners-say).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

It is important to point out however that this act of traveling self-care is only accessible to a privileged few within the Black community. Only those with regular jobs, financial stability and a surplus of income have access to this option. Black Americans who are dependent on their jobs for day to day survival and are cannot take time off because of company policies or fear of job loss do not have the privilege (or access to the privilege) of picking up and leaving for an undisclosed amount of time. So the ability to actually practice in this form of self care, is accessible only to those like Black digital nomads, who are financially and professionally able to travel freely and autonomously around the globe. So being abroad isn't just about the fact that it provides a clean slate but that Black women can actually have agency in how they are perceived.

### **Reworking Black Identity & It's Meaning**

“If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive”. - Audre Lorde<sup>233</sup>

In what countries do Black women come to this understanding of their identities being constructed around race? Do experiences abroad reaffirm Blackness or reshape it? In order to answer these questions it must first be noted that Black girls are limited in their self expression because of the stereotypes placed on them in America which creates a very small box for what a Black Girl can be and how a Black Girl can act. However being abroad gives Black girls the privilege of 'being' as well as discovering themselves.

An example of the power travel can have for Black women's identity development and self esteem can be found in Danielle Pointdujour's article, *What I Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman*, where she quotes another Black female digital nomad 29 year old Ashley Jones. Jones highlights the role that international travel can have in reshaping Black women's

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<sup>233</sup> Black Past, “(1982) Audre Lorde, “Learning From The 60's”, Black Past, 12 Aug 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/>.

identity and sense of self, stating that “For Black women particularly, we get to see how the world can really be our oyster and accept us, as well as, how we can accept ourselves. We start shedding away more of the oppressor’s teachings and limiting beliefs”.<sup>234</sup> Here, Jones reveals not only the long lasting impact that racism has on the psyche and construction of Black women’s identity but also the extent to which it racism is infused into Black women’s identity development process. Black women, throughout their adolescence, have been brought up with a hyper focus on strategies that protect, help cope and defend against encounters with an oppression that operates as well as discriminates at the intersections of race and gender.<sup>235</sup> This centering of racism unfortunately leads to the internalization of, as Ashley Jones writes, “the teachings and limitations of the oppressor in Black women”.<sup>236</sup>

For Black female digital nomads the process of reworking or redefining the meaning of their Blackness begins with the realization that the makeup of their Blackness was constructed based on America’s historical obsession with race.<sup>237</sup> This process continues with Black female digital nomad’s voicing their frustrations with America’s negative portrayal and stereotyping about Black women and the ripple effects it has had on their lives and identity development process. Black female digital nomad’s across the board all cite the impact this stereotyping has had on their lives. However as Black women continue to live and thrive abroad, digital nomads like Carolyn Vines begin to realize that, “Bit by bit, with each journey, I expelled all remnants of a

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<sup>234</sup> Danielle Pointdujour, What I’ve Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman, *Ebony Magazine*, 11 Oct 2016

<https://www.ebony.com/life/black-abroad-women/>.

<sup>235</sup> Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker & Denada Hoxha, *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women*, Sex Roles, 2011, 532.

<sup>236</sup> Danielle Pointdujour, What I’ve Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman, *Ebony Magazine*, 11 Oct 2016

<https://www.ebony.com/life/black-abroad-women/>.

<sup>237</sup> Carolyn Vines, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Expatica, 2018, <https://www.expatica.com/about/basics/being-a-black-woman-abroad-105572/>.

racist ideology that, unwittingly, I had internalized”.<sup>238</sup> As a result Vines comes to the final conclusion that, “Being abroad has taught me that my brown body is just that: a brown body. I get to tell the world exactly what that brown body stands for, not vice versa”.<sup>239</sup>

Black female digital nomad, Judy Ford also talks about the impact negative stereotypes have on Black women’s projection and perception of self. In her article, *5 Ways to Find Freedom in Solo Travel as a Black Girl Introvert*, Judy states that in America:

“Black Girls are seen as assertive, aggressive, and angry. We’re expected to be confident, engaging, outwardly strong/expressive, and always willing to help without ever needing a rest/break. We’re supposed to be outgoing, loud, always have something to say about anything in every moment. If we’re not expected to be the life of the party, we’re certainly expected to add to it because don’t we love the attention and spotlight? Black Girls are expected to entertain”.<sup>240</sup>

Because of these stereotypes, Black women’s self-making and identity development process begins with the centering of white people and media’s perceptions of who they are. So Black women’s sense of self and development begins with being taught at home, in school and in the general community, how to conduct oneself in public in order to defend against and not add to the negative stereotypes already working against them.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Judy Ford, *5 Ways the Black Girl Introvert Finds Freedom in Solo Travel*, Las Morenas De España, 21 Dec 2016. <https://www.lasmorenasdeespana.com/blog/black-girl-introvert-solo-travel>.

<sup>241</sup> Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker & Denada Hoxha, *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women*, Sex Roles, 2011, 532.



Once abroad however it becomes painfully obvious that the ability to form ideas of their own sense and understanding of ‘self’ have been taken away from them at the very beginning of their lives as children. And while abroad Black women as Ford writes are, “Free of the constant stream of messaging about how you’re supposed to be, you’ll be able to experience the freedom of being you, as you naturally are, in ways that allow you to not only realize there is nothing wrong with you but also to discover, embrace, experience and ultimately love all of who you are as a BGI (quirks, imperfections, wisdom, beauty, strengths and all)”<sup>242</sup>

In her article, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Black female digital nomad Carolyn Vines writes about the role travel played in shedding light on the impact of America’s obsession with race in her life. While abroad Vines discovered that America’s construct of Black women had convinced her not only that her Blackness was her most defining aspect of her identity but that in addition to not being ‘relationship material’ she was also “loud and otherwise ignorant, socially inept, and that if I’m financially successful, I’m an anomaly”.<sup>243</sup> She writes that as her journey continued, day by day and moment by moment, she “expelled all remnants of a racist ideology that, unwittingly, I had internalized”.<sup>244</sup> After traveling extensively, Carolyn decided to settle in Netherlands and it is in the Netherlands where she believed that her identity slate of America’s previous inscriptions about her as Black woman were wiped clean enough to begin defining her identity (who she is) on her terms and measurements/standards.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Judy Ford, *5 Ways the Black Girl Introvert Finds Freedom in Solo Travel*, Las Morenas De España, 21 Dec 2016. <https://www.lasmorenasdeespana.com/blog/black-girl-introvert-solo-travel>.

<sup>243</sup> Carolyn Vines, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Expatica, 2018, <https://www.expatica.com/about/basics/being-a-black-woman-abroad-105572/>.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

And the rewards from this as Danielle Pointdujour eloquently asserts are not just that Black women free themselves from restrictions placed on them by the ‘oppressor’s limiting beliefs, but that they also begin to, “snuggle into an unhinged spirituality, a more aware and alive Black culture, a deeper sense of self”.<sup>246</sup> So while abroad, Black women become aware not only of the limitations placed on them by American society and the Black community, but as Danielle Pointdujour points out, “you also become a student of your own self-reflection. You sit more comfortably in your skin amongst the crazy, exhilarating, sometimes tiring every day expat life.” And ultimately according to digital nomad Carolyn Vines, Black women are given the opportunity to shift their focus, “Venturing internally towards a definition of my black womanhood expressed in my own terms and on my own terms. These journeys have empowered me to successfully live beyond the limitations of my comfort zone, beyond the limitations of my identity”.<sup>247</sup>

Like white digital nomads, Black female digital nomads also find it refreshing that they are able to construct new meaning to their identity and value systems. Danielle Pointdujour, talks about the potential/possibilities for discovering a new take on self is in her article, *What I’ve Learned From Being Black, Woman and a Abroad*, writing that, “For me, the opportunity to just be, to not attach my worth solely to my work. To honor myself, my God and my ancestors in a way that calls me closer to my own culture and identity”.<sup>248</sup> So Pointdujour expresses her hopes that her new identity will be centered around which shows how the despite being abroad,

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Danielle Pointdujour, *What I’ve Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman*, Ebony Magazine, 11 Oct 2016  
<https://www.ebony.com/life/black-abroad-women/>.

Danielle still plans to incorporate her Black American identity albeit through a new understanding of it from this new environment abroad.

Additionally while abroad hypervisibility becomes is recontextualized as a positive force through which Black women can further define themselves and their identity.<sup>249</sup> This is particularly interesting because it reveals a surprising shift in Black women's perceptions as well as feelings about hypervisibility. In the workplace where Black women are easily distinguishable because of their singular presence in white majority office, hypervisibility becomes negatively associated with the gaze of white authority which severely restricts and represses Black women's self-expression.<sup>250</sup> As a result Black women find themselves unable to reveal their authentic self because of the risk it could potentially have on their professional advancement and treatment in the workplace.<sup>251</sup> According to Gillian B. White's article, *Black Workers Do Need to Be Twice as Good*, research from Harvard Business Review reports that Black women statistically experience more scrutiny from their employer.<sup>252</sup>

This ultimately works to hinder Black women's identity development and path towards self discovery. However life abroad for Black digital nomads reveals an alternative understanding and use of hypervisibility. In this new context, hypervisibility can operate as a guiding hand that leads Black woman into a deeper understanding of themselves which digital nomad Pointdujour points out in her article, *What I've Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a*

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Danielle Dickens & Ernest Chavez, *Navigating the Workplace: The Costs and Benefits of Shifting Identities at Work among Early Career U.S. Black Women, Sex Roles*, 2018, 764.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Gillian B. White, "Black Workers Really Do Need to Be Twice as Good", *The Atlantic*, 7 Oct 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/10/why-black-workers-really-do-need-to-be-twice-as-good/409276/>.

*Woman*.<sup>253</sup> She asserts that although she is hypervisible in most of the countries that she visits abroad, which makes it harder to hide in the crowd, it ultimately works to her advantage benefit because it forces her to make meaning and to articulate seek out who she is. Her identity.<sup>254</sup> The comparison between the American workplace and life abroad shows how hypervisibility and the gaze can be reinterpreted in terms of its' meaning as well as its; impact for Black women's identity development and constructions.

### **Racism As Reality- Home & Abroad**

However many Black female digital nomad's caution Black women interested in the digital nomad lifestyle to really think about their motivations for doing so. And if their main motivation for choosing the global digital nomad lifestyle is to escape America's racial and political tensions, this lifestyle will, in reality, provide no such haven for them. This is because as Gloria Atanmo plainly and boldly asserts in her blog article, *The Sad Truth About Racism in Every Country*, "every country is racist against Blacks".<sup>255</sup> Which means that for Black women, regardless of the country or culture they encounter, will experience some form of racism or anti-Blackness.<sup>256</sup> Atanmo's intent is not to discourage, instead, her bold proclamation functions as an act of love, which she hopes will protect Black women from viewing life outside of America through rose colored lens. Just like America, the globalized world also struggles with fully accepting Blackness and Black people despite it's greedy consumption and imitation of Black cultures' vernacular, fashion, sense of style and music. However Atanmo provides a silver lining,

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Danielle Pointdujour, What I've Learned From Being Black, Abroad and a Woman, *Ebony Magazine*, 11 Oct 2016.

<https://www.ebony.com/life/black-abroad-women/>.

<sup>255</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *The Sad Truth About Racism in Every Country*, *The Blog Abroad*, 18 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/18/the-sad-truth-about-racism-in-every-country/>.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

one that can be found only within international communities. Unlike the United States which has racism and anti-Blackness historically woven into its social fabric, Atanmo contends that the negative perceptions of Black people abroad stems from their consumption of media that degrades and vilanizes Black people. This type of media which can be seen as a Western export, is frequently consumed and shared on a global scale leading Atanmo to the conclusion that, "Since there's always a surplus of negative portrayals of black people in the global media, there will always be a lingering ignorance around our existence".<sup>257</sup>

Amirah Cook furthers Atanmo's assertion that traveling is not an escape from America's problems. In her article, *Traveling While Black II: No Escape*, Cook writes that, "Traveling while black does not lift any burden, or disconnect you from the social structure your family and friends deal with daily. It is not an escape route or exemption".<sup>258</sup> So while Black female digital nomads seem to consistently critique America and it's inherently racist society, they do not "keep the same energy" when it comes to racism and colorism while they are abroad. Black women in the early 19th and 20th century appear in their writings to enjoy more acceptance and so their so it is understandable that their writings from abroad solely consist of damning critiques of America and it's mistreatment of its own citizens.<sup>259</sup> Mary Suzanne Schriber best illustrates the differences between white and Black travelers in terms of constructing identity around the nation in her ethnographic work *Writing Home: American Women Abroad: 1830- 1920*. Schriber explains that for white Americans, international travel and contact with 'the other', served as a mirror to construct and define their American identity. To elaborate Schriber suggests

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Amirah Cook, *Traveling While Black II: No Escape*, Cool Young History, 10 Jul 2016, <https://coolyounghistory.com/traveling-while-black-ii-no-escape/>.

<sup>259</sup> Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Writing Home: American Women Abroad: 1830-1920*, University Press of Virginia, 1997

that by observing other lands and peoples, white Americans were able to construct their American identity through the comparison of ‘the other’. As a result, white Americans were able to form meaning around their relationship to the nation while simultaneously beginning to define themselves as distinctly ‘American’.<sup>260</sup>

For Black women like Ida B. Wells and Nancy Prince however the opposite was true. For example, Nancy Prince, a Free Black woman traveler in the early 19th century, utilized her contact and experiences with the other, to measure their courtesy, treatment and social advancements regarding race. This is also how Prince was able to articulate the mistreatment of Black Americans back in the U.S. Similarly, Ida B. Wells, was also able to launch damning critiques about America from her experiences abroad, ultimately calling Europe, America’s civilized superior.<sup>261</sup> So whereas white travelers construct and legitimize their American identities and notions of “home”, Black female travelers, criticized and created distance between their own American identities.<sup>262</sup> However Gloria Atanmo’s present day attempts to launch similarly damning critiques appear flimsy and cheap upon further inspection of her writings. In her article, *The Sad Part about Racism in Every Country*, Atanmo tries unsuccessfully to encourage Black women to not let racism affect them, dismissively stating that "Racism exists in varying levels while traveling, and you just have to choose how much of it you can handle".<sup>263</sup> This problematic statement by Atanmo is as disappointing as it is revealing because it illuminates not only Atanmo’s shallow investment in dismantling racism but also the destructive and divisive impacts that passport privilege can have on this elite group of a small few.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.,21.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *The Sad Truth About Racism in Every Country*, The Blog Abroad, 18 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/18/the-sad-truth-about-racism-in-every-country/>.

Atanmo's advice that Black women should simply ignore or pay no mind to instances of racism and colorism in these foreign countries shows the problem with both old and new found privileges.<sup>264</sup>

The problem is that, inherently, White and American passport privilege equips its' chosen few with an exclusive lens through which surrounding suffering is automatically filtered out and replaced by a world where both possibilities and access are unlimited. Blissfully unaware and empowered with possibilities, privilege functions as a visor, ultimately blinding those who wear it to the plight of people around them while simultaneously desensitizing them from the overwhelming glare of their shared similarities with non-American Black women. This finding is disturbing because it shows that despite this privilege only recently being accessible to Black female digital nomads and travelers not soon thereafter, these same Black women have grossly encouraged other Black women to follow suit in this type of usage.<sup>265</sup> These women, like Atanmo, advocate for Black women to consciously ignore anti-Blackness abroad and instead enjoy the perks of their newfound American citizenship, because this citizenship affords Black women the privilege to occupy a space never available before. A space where they too could move beyond race and like White Americans simply 'be'.

It is both humorous and perplexing that Atanmo can write an article like, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely*, without noticing the hypocritical irony with which she is deeply entrenched? Take for example Atanmo's assertion to her readers that one cannot control whether they encounter racism or racist people about. Instead she says, "It's all a matter of whether the

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

universe does its part in keeping these people in hiding until you leave".<sup>266</sup> Although I do not discount or downplay the presence or power of the spiritual world, it is troubling that a Black American woman would promote this type of coping strategy. It again illuminates the shallowness of Atanmo's outrage against the plight of Black Americans. Surely one who damningly critiques America's police force, its systematic discrimination and historical violence so acutely while at home could also identify, sympathize and condemn the same behaviors while abroad? Or maybe Atanmo should get over these so called "issues" at home and simply accept that she nor Black people have any agency in whether or not these injustices persist or happen to her in America? There is no sense in protesting or any sort of activism because police brutality, institutional racism and racial discrimination cannot be stopped after all regardless of the tiny and revolutionary steps those in a community take to prevent and eradicate them- tiny steps like Rosa Parks sitting down on a bus, that snowball into enormous steps like the Civil Rights and eventual integration of Black Americans into the opportunity rich mainstream. Atanmo's words absolve both immigrants and travelers of any responsibility to those already in America because like she says one cannot control these situations, and that which one cannot control one should simply ignore. According to Atanmo humans have had it wrong all these years. Who knew that this entire time, only the universe could decide on such matters?

Lastly Atanmo's advice to ignoring and insisting that Black women not let racial encounters and people affect their trip can have a more dangerous and damaging impact on Black women travelers. Advice that encourages Black women to ignore hurt and keep trucking works to reinforce the harmful strategies that Black women learn during their adolescent identity

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<sup>266</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.



development process.<sup>267</sup> This is because choosing to ignore these encounters is not synonymous with the refusal to let these experiences control you. The former which Atanmo and many others' suggest only result in Black women internalizing their feelings about racist encounters which not only denies them the chance to express themselves but also reinforces the Strong Black Woman archetype, which dubiously correlates and measures a Black woman's strength and mental toughness with how many pain she is able to withstand and still persist without breaking down. Even further, the Strong Black Woman archetype discourages vulnerability and suggests that Black women who cannot manage to either survive or find their own little piece of happiness despite external factors are somehow weaker.<sup>268</sup>

### **Black Women as Role Models**

In the writings of Black female digital nomads there is also a consistent theme of expressing how their travel positively impacts and reshapes the narrative and understanding of Black women. Carolyn Vines, a Black digital nomad living in The Netherlands, writes in her article, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, that her act of traveling, "speaks volumes to the multi-dimensional identity of black women in general".<sup>269</sup> This multi-dimensional identity has been denied to Black women because of America's narrow portrayal and obsession with race which in turn makes the Black community and Black parents train their girls to cope, defend and behave in ways to combat the negativity they face outside of the home and community.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> See Focus Group: Four Key Findings Section from Marshaé Sylvester, "In Search of Our Authentic Selves: The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Image on Black Millennial Women's Relationships, Coping and Authenticity", Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018, 14.

<sup>269</sup> Carolyn Vines, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Expatica, 2018, <https://www.expatica.com/about/basics/being-a-black-woman-abroad-105572/>.

<sup>270</sup> Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker & Denada Hoxha, *Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women*, Sex Roles, 2011, 532.

But Vines's words point to a identity for Black women, one that is multi-dimensional and rooted in the belief that Black women's identity and possibilities in life are confined and burdened with limitations when constructed solely within American borders and context. Atanmo reinforces this opinion in her writings, saying that the countries and cultures that she's visited have shaped her into the woman that she is today.<sup>271</sup> These narratives from Black female digital nomads affirm, that traveling abroad is tremendously empowering for Black women because it equips them with a newfound agency with which they can rearticulate and redefine themselves and their Black womanhood. And unlike before, Vines writes, this discovery can be constructed, "in my own terms and on my own terms".<sup>272</sup>

### **Critiquing Black Female Digital Nomads**

It is important to point out that Black female digital nomads are not representative of all Black women. Black female digital nomads are generally college educated and sophisticated. There are over 50 million Black Americans currently in the U.S., but according to the National Center for Education Statistics' 2016 "Digest of Education Statics Report", only 60,000 of those who held Master's Degrees were Black women, and a paltry 8,800 had earned PhDs.<sup>273</sup> Among those with Master's and PhDs, Black women led Black men in their obtainment of these degrees.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.

<sup>272</sup> Carolyn Vines, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Expatica, 2018, <https://www.expatica.com/about/basics/being-a-black-woman-abroad-105572/>.

<sup>273</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Degrees and Other Formal Awards Conferred" surveys, 1976-77 and 1980-81; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Completions Survey" (IPEDS-C:90-99); and IPEDS Fall 2000 through Fall 2016, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_323.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_323.20.asp).

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

After discovering that Black female digital nomads represent an elite minority within the Black community, it becomes harder to agree with some of the conclusions they reach in their writings. For example Elizabeth Adetiba's statement in her article, *Is The Black Travel Movement Ignoring Passport Privilege & Classism?*, about Black travel being a radical act.<sup>275</sup>

Adetiba who is only 23, is enrolled at an elite Ivy league where she is pursuing a PhD in Sociology.<sup>276</sup> Although traveling while Black cannot be discounted as a radical act, it is important to point out that it is an act largely inaccessible to majority of Black Americans. Most of the Black female digital nomads seem to be able to maintain the lifestyle because of an added affiliation with an international academic institution, like Awareibi who is pursuing a graduate degree in Spain or because they have an established career that provides them with professional leverage or financial stability to transition abroad.<sup>277</sup>

How radical can Black travel and digital nomadism actually be if it is mostly inaccessible and exclusionary to the majority of Black Americans? Maybe it is a radical act for the self but the idea that travel is a radical act is not exclusive to Black women travelers and digital nomads. Travel deepens our understanding of the people and humbles us with its vastness. It helps us define who we are and heal in ways that are unimaginable. Travel is transformational and this is what makes it radical. So while I agree, with Adetiba, that traveling is a radical act for both Black people, the same is true for white digital nomads and really all peoples. The only difference is in how white and Black travelers articulate what makes it radical. For white digital nomads, traveling and digital nomadism free them from the confines of the American dream. It

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<sup>275</sup> Elizabeth Adetiba, *Is The Black Travel Movement Ignoring Passport Privilege & Classism?*, The Melanin Majority, 19, Jun 2017, <https://www.melaninmajority.com/stories/black-travel-movement-ignoring-passport-privilege-classism/>.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> See Awareibi, *We Are Not The Same: My View On The Barcelona Black Community*, 17 March 2017.

symbolizes their rebellion and a refusal to buy into that dream. For many Black Americans, it represents their appreciation for the sacrifices of their ancestors, chained and bound forever to America. It symbolises an unwillingness to forget that reparations can be taken in forms other than payment.<sup>278</sup> For Adetiba, to travel is to honor, to pay homage.<sup>279</sup> But it is a privilege nonetheless which Black travelers and the Black Travel movement must not forget this as they write articles chastising the poor for not traveling. Inherent in these accusations is the lack of further what they their inability to travel. Poor Black people deserve to participate in the radical act of being Black and traveling without sacrificing a heat bill or even the opportunity to upgrade their smartphone. To truly decolonize travel, poor Black people must be centered within this movement—not pushed to the fringes

## Conclusions

The digital nomad lifestyle provides Black American women with the opportunity to not only discover new ways of thinking about their identities but also new spaces to wipe clean the identities that were forcibly constructed for them by American society and the Black community.<sup>280</sup> Although Black female digital nomads do represent a rare and unique insight into the role globalization plays on those most marginalized in America, it also reveals how those within this group are not necessarily the most oppressed within their group. This group of women represent an elite subgroup within the Black community which as a result may speak to

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<sup>278</sup> See statement on page 2 of this chapter from Dana Saxon, *The Paradox of Paradox Privilege*, 2016 , about her American privilege while traveling is her way of “cashing in the reparations checks that are long overdue”.

<sup>279</sup> Elizabeth Adetiba, *Is The Black Travel Movement Ignoring Passport Privilege & Classism?* , The Melanin Majority, 19 Jun 2017, <https://www.melaninmajority.com/stories/black-travel-movement-ignoring-passport-privilege-classism/>.

<sup>280</sup> Carolyn Vines, *Being A Black Woman Abroad*, Expatica, 2018, <https://www.expatica.com/about/basics/being-a-black-woman-abroad-105572/>.

their conclusions in their online writings.<sup>281</sup> Only one Black female digital nomad found herself completely done and unwilling to live in America again.<sup>282</sup> The rest found new meaning and attachment to their American identity which they surprisingly discovered after being in contact with Black migrants abroad.

This was the most interesting finding from this group of women, because it completely debunks the idea hovering in the African-American imagination that a transnational solidarity exists between Black people regardless of citizenship. In reality, this idea of transnational solidarity, also known as ‘Pan-Africanism’ was discovered to be impossible for two reasons. First, because Africans and those in the African diaspora come from two completely different foundations that result in radically different constructions of racial identity<sup>283</sup> and two very different outlooks on the world and their role in it. Second, when in contact with Black migrants, Black Americans realized how different they were from African migrants, and just how differently they are treated by foreign governments and local populations because of their nationality and passport privilege.<sup>284</sup>

Although some Black female digital nomads, like Awareibi, searched for a deeper answer for the cause of this gap in affinity, most Black Americans found themselves actively trying to separate themselves and their Americanness from African migrants. This finding shows how

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<sup>281</sup> See Gloria Atanmo’s statement of ignoring racism in, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely, 2017 and What Happens Next*; Elizabeth Adetiba, *Is The Black Travel Movement Ignoring Passport Privilege & Classism?*, 2017.

<sup>282</sup> Gloria Atanmo, *Why I Am Leaving America Indefinitely and What Happens Next*, The Blog Abroad, 8 Feb 2017, <https://theblogabroad.com/2017/02/08/why-im-leaving-america-indefinitely-what-happens-next/>.

<sup>283</sup> To elaborate African people living in Africa are contextualized within countries where they are the majority unlike Black Americans who are in the minority in America and constantly at odds with the state.

<sup>284</sup> See Dana Saxon, *The Paradox of Passport Privilege, 2016*; ; Awareibi, *We are Not the Same: My View on the Barcelona Black Community*, 2017.

Black female digital nomads are comprised of an elite group within the Black community and want to be treated as middle-class, educated Americans. While in America, race has prevented them from receiving equal treatment as whites, however, while living abroad, their citizenship provides symbolic status that affords special treatment in the eyes of state authorities.<sup>285</sup> These women weren't interested in denying themselves these privileges or taking on the maternal activist role left behind in America. Instead, they sought to free themselves completely from the sort of marginalization they see Africans receive and that they encountered in the U.S. Although they sympathized with the treatment of Black migrants, they further embraced their Americanness out of a newfound gratitude for the power of their nationality.

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<sup>285</sup> In reference to, Black female digital nomad, Dana Saxon mentioning that she can flash her passport and have American privilege granted in her article, *The Paradox of Passport Privilege*, 2016.

## CONCLUSIONS

At first glance, Black female digital nomads seem to be grappling with what it means to be their “authentic selves” when those selves are developed and situated within a particular cultural and social framework. Just like in a house of mirrors, these women see their reflections through various lenses--their mother’s eyes, thick thighs inherited from their grandmother, an awareness imprinted upon them by ancestors long since passed, and a history of troubled racial relations in the land of their birth. Their self-images often over-emphasize certain aspects of the self, such as the history of race in which they are situated, while diminishing other qualities, such as their socioeconomic status and educational attainment. Before traveling abroad, these distortions crystalized and impact the way these women perceive themselves and their place in their homeland.

While Black American women’s constructions of self and identity are established within an American context, they are carried abroad and re-formed and re-contextualized in new ways. Working independently abroad and no longer situated in the American context, Black female digital nomads see themselves reflected through the eyes of others, and this new reflection may feel unfamiliar. While this reflection of self remains grounded in a troubled racial history, within new cultural contexts, this history no longer obscures their personhood. They are free now to explore the self without the burden of that history framing each encounter.

However, the narratives of Black female digital nomads reveal something much more remarkable. While many Americans search for the authentic self in a globalized world in hopes

of finding the key to life and purpose, Black female digital nomad narratives suggest that no such Eden exists. They eventually realize that escaping their homeland through the pursuit of a digital lifestyle reveals no further answers than may have been found at home. In many cases, Black female digital natives come to the understanding that the answers they seek have always been available inside themselves, even when distorted through the mirror of history. Perhaps even more profoundly, Black women who travel abroad learn to view themselves in more complex ways than simply through the lens of the African American people and its problematic racial history in America. Instead, they are able to see themselves contextualized through the multifarious lenses of the cultures and peoples they encounter abroad.

Thus, one thing becomes clear through the narratives and writings of Black female digital nomads. No matter where they go or whom they encounter, they recognize they are distinctly American and yet have a calling that connects them to the broader world. As a Black female who once participated in a digital nomad lifestyle before attending graduate school at Brandeis – traveling to India, Europe, and other regions of the world-- I too remember feeling completely out of my depth in some places, and yet something continued to call me to a life lived abroad. Something internal demanded that I step outside of my comfort zone and situate myself outside of the American context. Perhaps it is through these shifting contexts that one's multidimensional self is reflected in a more varied and well-rounded way.

Although I began this thesis with the belief that I, like other Black women, was in search of the 'authentic self', in the end, I was actually trying to reconcile an internal duality. This duality is one that can only be fully understood by those who are born free from slavery and contextualized within the American nation. While the United States is home to Black Americans, and is a home that should be fully claimed by Black Americans, this ideal does not always



transpire. Living as citizens in a homeland that often denies us the agency enjoyed by other citizens, mars the connection to home until it is viewed through a new, globalized lens.

Years ago, Black Americans were forced to migrate from Africa, and those imagined communities and geographies have been etched into our memories through the chain of memory bequeathed by our great-grandparents. Perhaps only a few of us have been lucky enough to return to the Africa of our ancestors. We are a diasporic community, scattered across the world, from the Caribbean to the Americas, including the United States. Although we will never fully know the horrors of being stripped irrevocably of our humanity through the institution of slavery and forced on a journey across the seas, the full extent of that journey still whispers to us, begging us never to forget. Black female digital nomads are reclaiming those memories and attempting to reconcile their Black American selves that, through resilience and adventure, are constructed in new and more holistic ways while abroad. Yet, a surprising outcome is revealed through BFDN's encounters with Africans and other African heritage people. Simply sharing a similar African heritage and skin color does not automatically engender kinship. Instead, when traveling abroad, Black female digital natives realize that nationality, social class, culture and education supersede this imagined connection to African "kinfolk" and cause these women to feel more American.

How do Black female digital nomads ethically and responsibly reclaim fragments of that American history that is so problematic, yet part of their taken for granted selves? How do we reconcile what it means to be born and constructed out of oppression, to be strengthened by it, and now to benefit from citizenship in the same nation that once oppressed our people? While our history and collective memory remembers those chains, how do we reconcile those memories with this new hypermobility and agency to respond to the winds of history calling us to travel?

This thesis, along with the Black female digital nomads featured within, grapples with the reality of Blackness, an identity that connects us to the diasporic world and also to our citizenship as Americans. It is the American passport that opens doors and allows us to explore the world abroad. In retrospect, perhaps Black female digital nomads are not simply constructing new identities abroad. Instead, digital nomadism gives Black female digital nomads the bandwidth to move through a process of re-remembering the troubled journey that is long forgotten yet still a whispered memory. Thus, living life abroad is not so much about seeing someone new in the mirror; instead, it is about finding a new familiarity with the self. Our reflections are familiar, yet, upon closer examination, the image changes, like reflections in water.

They ripple.

And maybe those ripples represent the true meaning and the purpose of this journey. Perhaps the ultimate lesson learned is not to stare too deeply at the reflections of self, but to be comforted and to reach out to touch it. To create our own ripples is to leave behind our very own discoveries and whispered winds for others to faintly hear in the passing breeze. Hopefully, more Black American women will be called to live abroad as digital nomads, and hopefully, they too will find joy in the freedom of travel, along with the reclaiming of ancestral memories, which generations before us could only access through the imagination or capture as if grasping the wind.

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