Black Travel: More than just a Movement

TTRA 2019 Extended Abstract

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Introduction

Over a century ago, in June of 1870, Frederick Douglas, one of the United States most famous ex-slaves and abolitionist wrote *"Heretofore, colored Americans have thought little of adorning their parlours with pictures. They have had to do with the stern, and I must say, the ugly realities of life. Pictures come not with slavery and oppression and destitution, but with liberty, fair place, leisure and refinement."* At the time these words were written, most ex-slaves had only experienced freedom for five years (Foster, 1999). Substantial thoughts of equal accessibility to recreation, leisure or travel were still over a century away. Moving into the 20th century, Blacks in the United States continued to be plagued with racial inequalities, segregation and discrimination. The consistent struggles between Blacks and Whites gave way to the Supreme Court decision of 1896 institutionalizing segregation in public accommodations until 1954. This law, in particular, affected the way Blacks were able to travel around the United States, and, in 1936, the first ever travel guidebook for Black travelers *'The Negro Motorist Green Book'* was published by Victor Green. This guidebook remained in print for 30 years and allowed Black people in the United States to safely navigate racialized places and spaces. Today, more than 50 years post segregation, African-American/Black travelers account for 63 billion dollars across the tourism industry worldwide (Mandala Research, 2018). In response to these ongoing issues, Black travelers have taken things into their own hands, creating companies and organizations *'for us, by us'* – Black men and women organizing and leading trips and tours around the world. This collective of Black travelers has morphed into what is now known in the industry as 'The Black Travel Movement' (BTM). Despite the growing popularity of these groups, academic research in this area remains sparse, with only a few studies published to date (Alderman, 2013; Butler, Carter & Brunn, 2002; Carter, 2008; Dillette et. al., 2018; Duffy, Pickney, Benjamin, & Mowatt, 2018; and Kee & Scott, 2017). Therefore, we thought it important to explore the roots of this BTM through the eyes of its leaders for several reasons: the rise of white nationalism since President Trump took office (Thompson, 2016); violence in Charlottesville, Virginia (Duffy et. al, 2018); protests and fighting over Confederate monuments (Duffy et. al, 2018); and the first NAACP travel advisory for a U.S. state for Missouri (Ballentine, 2017); the Black Travel Movement is as germane as ever.

Using social movement theory (McGehee, 2012) as a theoretical lens, an analysis of nine in depth interviews was conducted to answer the following overarching research question, *What are the lived experiences of leaders in the Black Travel Movement?* Essentially, we wanted to glean insight as to what were the motivations that led BTM leaders to start their organization, the successes and/or challenges that BTM leaders experienced with their organizations, and in what ways have they been included or excluded within the historically white dominated travel and tourism industry.

Literature Review

Amid the small collection of work published thus far concerning Black travel, (Alderman, 2013; Butler et. al, 2002; Carter, 2008; Dillette et. al., 2018), and most closely related to the goals of this study, Butler et. al. (2002) revealed the stories of six Black travel agents, exposing their histories, successes and failures, suggesting futures for the Black travel agent. The authors found that Black travel agents faced issues of segregation, government regulations, expensive technological innovations and access to capital (Butler, et. al., 2002). Since the publication of this study, not only has it been almost two decades, the climate of travel has also changed significantly. Travelers are no longer seeking out a travel agent to guide them towards the best deals or lowest prices. Rather, they are searching for a travel influencer, an agent of change, a leader to walk alongside them on a transformative travel journey.

Other important work to note is that of Carter (2008) who conducted a study to understand the differences between Black and White travelers. Results from this study highlighted that, despite living in a post-segregation society, Black travelers continued to travel, and make decisions about travelling grounded in the mindset of a segregated world. Almost a decade later in 2017, Lee and Scott explored themes that impacted African-American travel behaviors. The authors found that racial discrimination during travel, fear of racism, storytelling and safety instructions, social reproduction of the fear of racism, and race-related travel choices were all still major players for African-Americans regarding their travel behaviors. Most recently in the literature, Dillette et. al. (2018), explored the lived experiences of Black travelers as expressed through a popular social media sharing platform. In this study, the authors found that, although issues of racism, micro-aggressions, and fetishism of Black people are still pronounced, a hopeful tone of meaningful experiences, transformation and wanderlust was also evident. During the time that these articles were being published, the wider travel and tourism industry also started experiencing a change. In 2011, the very first Black travel and lifestyle brand, NOMADNESS Travel Tribe, was launched. What began as one woman's vision to shape shift the landscape and representations of people of color in the travel industry, has grown exponentially and is now represented by numerous organizations, bloggers and social influencers driving Black Travel as a Movement. Though the current consortium of literature provides a solid platform for understanding issues that are still pervasive for Black travelers, an exploration into the rise of this movement has not been done. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to take a deeper look into the Black race and leisure travel. It examines the evolution of Black travel as a social movement through illuminating the lived experiences of leaders in the Black travel movement. Narratives of these African-American leaders shed light on ongoing issues in the travel and tourism sphere concerning diverse, authentic representation of Black travelers in predominantly White spaces.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to conduct this study due to the lack of research in this area. A qualitative approach allowed us to explore, in depth, the underlying themes and nuances within the data, and make connections across different participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We reached out to connect with and interview major 'influencers' within the Black Travel

Movement. Our initial list included seventeen different companies that were identified through an overview of industry publications, podcasts and blog postings across the digital travel and tourism media sphere. Additional companies were added to the list as we conducted interviews using the snowball sampling technique. Overall, we contacted twenty companies – all located and positioned in the United States, and were able to interview nine via Skype video conferencing. We are unsure as to why the other leaders did not return our email invitations. However, we can speculate that perhaps our email went to their spam/junk folder or they were unwilling to participate due to time restraints or uneasiness sharing their experiences – for a variety of reasons (i.e. mistrust of academia/general, issues around interpretation, etc.).

Our semi-structured in-depth interviews ranged from 60 – 90 minutes, audio recorded, and transcribed. Transcriptions of interviews were returned to each participant to review for necessary edits or corrections for member checking (Saldaña, 2015). Lastly, we are using pseudonyms for the participants and travel groups in this study to maintain confidentiality.

Theoretical Lens & Data Analysis

Informed by social movement theory, we are exploring modern social movements that are defined as "an organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspects of society" (Marshall, 1994, p. 489). Well known social movements range from the Civil Rights movement in the United States during the 50s and 60s to the more recent Black Lives Matter movement, which originated in 2013 through social media, in addition to movements of women's empowerment including #MeToo, #TimesUp, and the Women's March. Social movements can start from anywhere, for any reason and have far-reaching influence, travel and tourism being no exception. Recent anti-tourism movements originating in cities like Barcelona came to a head in the Summer of 2017 after long term manifestation of frustrations with social and cultural dislocation brought on by mass tourism overtaking the city (Hughes, 2018). On a more positive note, forms of alternative tourism such as volunteer and eco-tourism gained significant momentum through social movements disrupting some of the traditional experiences associated with tourist hotspots, leading to a slew of certifications released by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (McGehee, 2002; Kummerer, 2018). However, as McGehee (2002) questioned with her research around alternative tourism and social movements – "who participates in social movements and why?" (p. 125). Thus, social movement theory focuses on how *networks* organize within movements, and more importantly, examines what "networks social movement organizations obtain economic, political, and human resources" (McGehee, 2012, p. 92). Furthermore, as McGehee and Santos (2005) posited, social movement theory is working on finding potential *solutions* around power, privilege, and oppression. Thus, we are exploring how social movement theory can potentially be used as a foundation for a holistic study of the Black travel movement in order to advocate for social equity within the tourism sphere.

Our semi-structured in-depth interviews ranged from 60 – 90 minutes, were audio recorded, and transcribed. Transcribed interviews were coded separately by all researchers using NVivo, a qualitative text software, prior to analyzing the data in a combined fashion. Additionally, transcriptions of interviews, along with the researchers' initial themes and interpretations were returned to each participant to review and gain consensus for member checking (Saldaña, 2015).

No edits or changes were deemed necessary by any of the participants through this member checking process.

Currently, we are working on a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015) to create several major themes explaining the Black travel movement leaders' lived experiences using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants and their travel organizations. As this is a work in progress, we will explain our initial findings and understanding of the movement thus far, informed by social movement theory. Currently, we have four major themes emerging including: Catalysts for, Creation of, Impacts of, and the Future of the BTM.

Understanding the BTM

Catalysts for the BTM

Black Travel has grown to be more than just a new age representation of the traditional travel agent, they are a community of movers and shakers that believe in supporting each other. Groups are forming organically and provide support not only for travelers, but also for Black business owners and suppliers. One 'influencer' whom founded a global group stated:

> African-American businesses are able to be vendors at my events for free. I don't charge them to be a vendor at the event because I really want their business to grow and I want them to meet other people. The Black Travel Movement is more than just Black people traveling and taking cool pictures for Instagram. You're really building a stronger network of family, friends, and people that can actually go into business together and build relationships.

Another participant reflected on his business blossoming out of sheer necessity for safer options for travelers of color, and how, in some ways, his platform has evolved as a sort of 'Green Book 2.0.'[1] He shared hopes of his platform growing into a full-fledged community of like-minded individuals in support of the Black community:

> In a lot of ways 'New Life' is The Green Book part two. When we started, that really wasn't something that we planned to do. However, after we started gaining traction, a lot of people came to us saying, 'Hey, you guys are really like a new version of The Green Book.' And then, the light immediately went off in my head and I was like, 'Wow, we really are.'

He goes on to say,

> Although it's a shame that something like our company is necessary right now, it's also a beautiful thing because it provides us an opportunity to serve our community. We want "New Life" to be that central, global, Black community where not only travelers, but

[1] Victor Green (1936) wrote and published the very first edition of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, meant to give Black travelers information about places that were safe to visit while on the road (Dillette, et. al. 2018).

> Black business owners, service providers, inventors, creatives and artists can have a home base where they feel safe and comfortable connecting and building genuine relationships.

The BTM is growing into a network of community members seeking authentic relationships and connections. This theme of empowerment and support intersected with travel for women. The nexus of transformation and female empowerment was an additional catalyst of the BTM. Transformation through travel has long been a sought-out experience. Two organizations focused on empowering Black female travelers are offering experiences specific to the modern day independent Black woman. These groups provide a unique experience for women to give back to communities while traveling and, where one group provides the opportunity to travel with a life coach who will help travelers 'escape', but also face life's very real struggles while experiencing a new destination. The leader of 'Black Ladies Unite' shared:

> Through my own travels, I discovered that there's healing power in travel. While we're traveling, we're exploring the pores of who we are, and are open to receive new culture, we're also opening ourselves up to healing. So that's what the mission is for the Black Girl Travel Movement – to empower women to find healing through travel.

Creation of the BTM

The impact of social media in regards to travel and tourism is not novel. However, the BTM is cultivating the power of social media to influence and empower Black people to travel. For instance, one participant posited, "I think there's a lot of learning to get done, but social media is a tool that we didn't have ten years ago, I mean we had social media, but it wasn't this new version of social media. So we're really trying to use that to change the narrative."

The power of social media created a platform for the BTM that allowed a space for Black people to engage in dialogue around travel. They were able to share their lived experiences, both positive and negative, around travelling while Black. Thus, Black travelers' narratives and voices were being seen and heard – their stories were now influencing other people of color. One leader shared:

> But now if we have some semblance of power, some semblance of our own voices and being able to do something and millions of people around the world can instantly see what it is. You can put a video out there and it will go viral right now. You don't have to wait for somebody to prove it, and this and that, blah, blah, blah. Well, for the most part, I mean Mark Zuckerberg could take it down or whatever. But you know. We can get our voices out there. So yeah, I definitely love social media in that aspect and being able to get our voices out there more.

Impacts of the BTM

This push to support Black owned businesses by Black people is not new within the United States. Within the current political climate under President Trump, international arrivals to the U.S. decreased 3.8% in 2017 (U.S. Travel, 2018), and at certain points, some countries even put out travel advisories for Black people traveling into the U.S. due to a reported uptick in police

brutality against Black men (Ansari, 2016). The Trump era of U.S. politics has been correlated with an increase in travel by African-Americans to African nations. Coupled with the popularity of DNA testing through companies like Ancestry and 23 and Me, more and more African-Americans are choosing to take their vacations and visit the homeland. For instance, some companies have even started advertising trips back to Africa in unison with the popular 2018 Marvel film, Black Panther, offering travelers a chance to experience 'WAKANDA for real'. Thus, another emergent theme was surrounded in 'roots tourism'. Larry, leader of 'Travelling African-Americans', reflected on the recent uptake for trips to Africa within his company:

> When we started to promote this 'Home for the Holidays' trip, in order to drive people to register sooner rather than later, the coupon code for this particular trip was Wakanda For Real, because, I think people really started to realize that a real-life version of Wakanda does exist. It's certainly driving African-Americans back home, and will for some time to come.

Future of the BTM

There seems to be a divide amongst the leaders that we interviewed. Some leaders shared that there needs to be more collaboration between the groups of the BTM, whereas, some felt like there was too much tension for that to happen:

> You're seeing people become a lot more protected because it's not just hosting a group. These are businesses and people are setting them up as businesses, as formal legal entities. The work that we put into it, we're protecting that now. That's a change that has evolved I think from when Black Travel kind of first started. People are protecting their interests now.

However, there were some participants who believed that working together truly benefited their business and the movement:

> If somebody's doing something you like to do, hey, find a way to partner with them, make it a positive thing where you can get your groups together, which also increases the membership in your group or it increase the membership in their group because you're working together, you're partnering together.

Discussion

As we continue to work through the coded transcripts, we will begin to have a better understanding of the motivations, challenges, barriers, and opportunities with the Black Travel Movement. However, one thing these leaders all had in common was their belief that through collaboration, partnerships and opportunities for more investment – it is only just the beginning for the Black Travel Movement.

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