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#GHANAUGHTME: GRADUATE STUDY ABROAD SHIFTING TWO BLACK AMERICAN EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ACHIEVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Using collaborative autoethnography, this study explored how graduate study abroad contributed to the growth and development of two Black U.S. educator's development.
Background	The centrality of whiteness in U.S. education influences the learning and unlearning processes of Black U.S. graduate students. Black American writers and Civil Rights icons alike positioned Ghana as a country of promise and a potential model for centering African ways of knowing absent a focus on whiteness and white people. As such, we understood Ghana as a space to re-envision who we are and could be as student affairs and counselor educators when afforded opportunities to learn about and employ African ways of knowing in U.S. educational spaces. The re-centering of Ghanaian practices specifically, and African traditions broadly, can serve to validate the shared communal and cultural customs of Black students in U.S. education and allow Black educators and practitioners greater freedom to facilitate student success in U.S. education.
Methodology	Using collaborative autoethnography, we explored how a shared Ghanaian study abroad experience reshaped two U.S. first-generation Black women doctoral students approaches to and understanding of teaching, learning, and academic achievement.
Contribution	This study nuances the ways of knowing and expectations around learning and accomplishment for Black students. This is done through following the journey of two Black women doctoral students in counselor education and student affairs

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who are deeply aware of the ways their classroom and educative practices contribute to the socialization and learning of Black children. This paper offers strategies for operationalizing more culturally responsive ways of engaging students and of enacting student affairs and counselor educator practices.

Findings	The findings from this study have been synthesized into two major themes: (1) The reimagining of professional preparation; and (2) student and teacher socialization. Together, they reveal ways in which inherently Ghanaian practices and techniques of teaching and learning can contribute to increased student engagement, educational attainment, and success.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Higher education practitioners should consider how to apply Ghanaian principles of success and inclusion to ensure students can participate in campus programs and initiatives with minimal barriers (financial, social, and emotional). Through a collective commitment to inclusion and centering non-western constructs of time so that students have flexibility with institutional engagement, campuses can design support systems for student leaders where collective rather than individual accomplishments are centered.
Recommendations for Researchers	Researchers should consider shifting the centrality of positivist notions of scholarship in publication and research pipelines so that inherently African ways of knowing and being are included in the construction of knowledge. Moreover, an examination of the classroom and scholarly preparation practices that decenter whiteness in the U.S. and their implications for Black students' higher education deserve further study.
Impact on Society	This study has societal implications for the P-20 educational pipeline as it pertains to Black students and Black education. Specifically, there are implications for the many ways that we can affirm Black brilliance in U.S. public school settings, by acknowledging what and how they come to know things about the world around them (e.g., via singing, dancing, poetry, questioning). In terms of higher education in the U.S., this study calls into question how we, as educators and practitioners, position Black students' ancestral knowledges as being both valid and valuable in the classroom.
Future Research	Future researchers may wish to examine: (1) the direct suggestions for what inclusive education can look like from Ghanaians themselves as outsiders looking into U.S. education; (2) exploration of Black American and Ghanaian student perspectives and perceptions on teaching and learning in their respective countries, and (3) exploration of a broader range of Black people's voices including those of Black LGBT people, Black trans women, and non-millennial Black educators for insight into making educational spaces more inclusive, transformative, and affirming.
Keywords	Ghana, study abroad, graduate preparation, higher education, student affairs, African American students, counselor education

INTRODUCTION

Show off your talent...

Your skills are a blessing; you should always share them!

Be proud of what you can do.

-Unnamed Montessori teacher to students

The room was warm. Every student in the class beamed with excitement at the thought of being able to engage with us. After making contact with each student around the room, we looked at each other--breathless. The pride, support, and somewhat challenging nature the teacher in the Grade 8 classroom at the Ghanaian Montessori school spoke to his students with caught our attention as much as the students themselves got our minds going. As the students went around the room sharing portions of who they were with us, and asking challenging yet engaging questions, we realized there were both passive and active forms of teaching and learning taking place... That a natural and seemingly intuitive way to engage student to student, student to teacher, and teacher to student manifested without the bells and whistles, we have deemed required for learning in the West--shocking. We looked at each other. We had an entire conversation, yet we vocalized nothing at all.

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United States higher education research and practice does not exist outside of the norms, expectations, and ultimately human conditions that create the problems that researchers study (Hooks, 1994; Quaye 2007; Stanley, 2007; Tatum, 2000; Wells, Kolek, Williams, & Saunders, 2015). Accordingly, researchers play a crucial role in shaping what is known and what is accepted as valuable by contextualizing the paradigmatic framework from which an author writes, the pedagogical framework from which a teacher teaches, and the campus cultural climates that students ultimately endure. The opportunity to construct knowledge and define individuals' experiences depends heavily upon the discursive communities with which an individual identifies: tenure status, white, male, cisgender, etc. (Harper, 2012; Hooks, 1994; Quaye 2007; Stanley, 2007). These individuals gain positions of authority through mentorship and other forms of unwritten access that allow them to more fully and unquestionably explore academic research in ways not afforded to other colleagues (Quaye, 2007; Stanley, 2007).

Given the permeation of journal publications, opportunities for research, and the theoretical underpinnings from which course content and application of practice are developed that revolve heavily around standards set forth by this small group of the academic ruling elite, we must begin to question what other ways of knowing may look like and places from which they may come (Dillard, 2006; Quaye, 2007; Stanley, 2007). We must also contend with what it means to have been taught to write academically in manners such as this very article while doing research and work with communities that engage learning differently, understand knowledge more broadly, and are the places we call home. We maintain that operationalizing more culturally relevant approaches benefits students and teachers in the classroom but is especially vital for those in preparation for teaching professions. As Black women researching, counseling, and teaching for the communities from which we come and for students who look like us, counter-narratives and alternative practice are critical to our success. However, these understandings function simultaneously with our existence as ascendants of those colonized, teaching in institutions designed by colonizers (Dillard, 2006).

Beyond the questions of who participates in knowledge construction and what ways of knowing are considered knowledge, research shows that Black doctoral students, particularly those enrolled at historically white institutions, encounter numerous barriers to doctoral degree attainment. These barriers may include experiences of discrimination via racial microaggressions and other forms of oppression, or social and cultural isolation via mono-culturalism (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Felder & Barker, 2013; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Black doctoral students also report

experiences of individual and institutional racism, which may manifest itself as tokenism (Gay, 2004; Gusa, 2010). The lack of African-centered epistemologies and theoretical approaches in higher education compounds the doctoral experience for Black students, leaving them to often feel invalidated and invisible in academe (Gusa, 2010). The white institutional presence of higher education further reifies the centrality of whiteness in the understanding of teaching, learning, and achievement in student affairs and counselor education and thus decreases the number of available doctoral degree holding Black educators due to problems of attrition and retention. These issues, then, further widen the gap between Black and white educators in the U.S. and the centrality of non-western and non-white ways of learning and pedagogical practice. To disrupt this divide, we seek to improve the operationalization of culturally relevant practices in the academy based upon our shared and individual experiences as Black graduate students studying abroad in Ghana.

THE PROMISE OF GHANA

Black American writers and Civil Rights icons alike, have honored and situated Ghana as being a country of immense promise. Furthermore, these thinkers (Angelou, 1986; Armah, 2002; Dillard, 2006; King Jr., 1957) position Ghana as a model for centering African ways of knowing and being that can translate to and have positive implications for Black people in U.S. contexts. Ghana, then, offers a particular experience for African ascendant people, as it positions our experiences in ways that are not centered on the existence of whiteness and white people. As such, we have come to understand and honor Ghana as a sacred place for re-envisioning ourselves and our work, as student affairs professionals and counselor educators, when allowed to encounter and employ African ways of knowing in U.S. educational contexts. By re-centering Ghanaian practices specifically, and African practices broadly, we intentionally validate the shared communal and innate cultural customs of Black students who are educated in U.S. settings. In doing so, we can allow Black educators the freedom to cultivate student success in U.S. education better and encourage Black learners to hold on to their diasporic ways of being.

This promise of Ghana, then, became clear for us in preparation for study abroad when examining required class readings. These texts included Martin Luther King Jr.'s *The Birth of a New Nation* (1957), Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and Cynthia Dillard's *On Spiritual Strivings* (2006). These writings gave voice to how the promise of Ghana as a new and free country and inherently Ghanaian ways of being and notions of learning could offer Black Americans a window into decolonized practices of self and knowledge. They allowed us to envision Ghana as a place that can inform how the U.S. academy can look for us as U.S. Black women when respect is paid to global understandings, ways of being, and authentic ways of knowing. We positioned Ghanaian study abroad as an opportunity to both reflect and to shift our practices. The culmination of these changes and through advancing the knowledge we gained would, then, contribute to a new standard of professional practice where the evaluation of Black students is done in a way that disrupts the accepted social positioning of Blackness as opposite whiteness.

Accordingly, we illuminate, here, a (re)imagining of higher education and education more broadly as spaces where achievement does not equate to one person "getting it" and instead, operationalize from a space where "if one person is not doing well, no one is doing well." Moreover, in seeking to understand our role as Black educators outside of our opposition to whiteness, white people, and the pervasive nature of white supremacy in U.S. contexts, learning with, from, and about a Ghanaian praxis of teaching and learning has provided us with the necessary tools to engage in counseling, teaching, and learning in a culturally relevant and diasporic manners. Moreover, usurping dominant U.S. customs around education and replacing them with African cultural practices is not only a form of critically approaching student engagement but is also a measure that can contribute to a more positive learning environment for Black students.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The centrality of whiteness in education contributes to the learning and unlearning processes of people of Color broadly, and Black U.S. folks specifically. For those of us who may have limited ways of finding (our ancestral) “home,” we have sometimes forgotten things we have always known inherently and are forced to contend with tensions between accepted knowledge in U.S. schools and intrinsic knowledge that is core to our cultural beings (Dillard, 2012). To attend to this tension, we utilized a Ghanaian study abroad experience as a space for reimagining who we are personally, professionally, and socially and what this can mean for us and our understandings as educators in U.S. contexts. The purpose, then, of this collaborative auto-ethnographic research study was to explore how a shared Ghanaian study abroad experience would (re)shape how two U.S. first-generation Black women doctoral students understood teaching, learning, and academic achievement. Through our experiences, we reflected on what a reimagining U.S. higher education could look like to facilitate a cultural shift in educational norms. Three questions framed this reflexive collaborative autoethnography: (1) How do Black women studying higher education make meaning of a Ghanaian study abroad trip?; (2) How do Black women higher education professionals understand their training and socialization when taken out of U.S. context?; and, (3) How can adopting or operationalizing a Ghanaian framework for learning, teaching, and achievement be used to disrupt the ways in which the U.S. academy socializes Black women students and professionals?

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITIES: WHY GHANA, WHY THIS

As critical qualitative scholars employing auto-ethnographic techniques, we believe it pivotal to name our positionalities as they influence how we understand and interpret the world around us. We enter this project as two Black, cisgender women with additional salient identities including, Childfree, Christian, heterosexual, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation (degree attainment), able-bodied, from inner-city communities, and as members of a historically Black middle-class Greek Letter organization. We understood going to Ghana as a chance to engage in research of selves and to do so without centering objectivity as scholars are socialized to do in the United States. However, we recognize being able to visit Ghana, let alone with intentional learning opportunities, is an enormous privilege of educational access and opportunity. As such, we engaged this experience in a manner that was reflexive, intentional, and authentic so that Black Americans and student affairs and counselor educators who may never personally make the trip can experience Ghana through the two of us. Essentially, this *research* project is about redefinition, self-education, and the process of collaborative (*re*)membering (Dillard, 2012).

Brittany’s why

Upon arriving in Ghana, I journaled, “We. Can. Trace. Back. Six. Generations. And. Cannot. Identify. ANYONE. Who? Went. To. College... And now I’m in Ghana to redefine what even that conception of knowledge, learning, and schooling means. Crazy. [sic]” When I reflect on my primary school and higher education journeys, I know that they are the impetus for my decision to study abroad. Though I was a first-generation college student from a low-income community, I can be considered what scholars term *privileged poor*, given the associated social capital my parents possessed (Jack, 2016). I knew that college was an expectation and not an option and that it would be the avenue through which my parents, and I, engaged the world beyond our home community. Ghana, and study abroad I thought would for me become an opportunity to do the same. Though I had started to travel outside of the United States after receiving my bachelor’s degree, I often did so for pleasure rather than further education. Ghana, then, was an opportunity to flashback to teachings and understandings of world history, to see close up how the Ghanaian quest for independence shaped the country, and what Black liberation could look like and continues to promise Black people.

Before traveling to Ghana, I had never studied abroad and considered it my gravest mistake as an undergraduate student. My time in college was spent enrolling in courses across disciplines, serving as

a student trustee, as the equivalent of president for more than five organizations, and even a role on a student government. My time was spent doing what was expected of me from my teachers and mentors, but not necessarily engaging the academy as was best for me. When I think back on this, I am reminded of Armah's (2002) *KMT* novel. Armah (2002) utilizes *KMT* to describe what it might look like to preserve and center African consciousness and ways of knowing, versus what this looks like when we overly-embrace, privilege, and center white methods of education. As a student who spent much of her academic career tip-toeing the line between brilliant and disruptive, I never considered study abroad an option for students like me. Instead, I was to be a good and engaged student by remaining on campus and laboring for the good of my collegiate community. None of this engagement, though, gave me what Ghana did. Though I had experienced paradigm shifts through exposure to texts and teachers espousing African ways of knowing and learning experiencing them first-hand offered me new ways to engage student affairs education.

Raven's why

Upon graduating from high school in 2009, I chose to attend the university that stood for *opportunity*; the University of Central Florida. As an undergraduate student, I had access to any and every opportunity that I could think of, including becoming a McNair Scholar. With the support of McNair, I embarked on my first study abroad experience in Croatia. While I shared more identities with this group (Black and non-Black people of Color, lower-income students, first-generation backgrounds), we were still entering an excruciatingly white space. I will never forget being stopped by local townspeople and being asked to have pictures taken of me (not with me) because many folks in the cities that we visited had never seen a Black person before. While I will always be grateful for the access and opportunities that McNair offered me, this cultural experience did not ease my feelings of *aleness*. The culture that we were being exposed to wasn't mine, and not just because it had been ripped away from my ancestor's centuries ago; it just didn't belong to me. The food, people, and places did not reflect *my home*. As Dr. Angelou stated in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), I did not know what awaited me in this place that I longed for, but my desire to be in a place that resembled me far exceeded any doubt about my expectations. I needed to go home. I was ready.

Studying abroad in Ghana afforded me the opportunity to engage and challenge my ways of thinking and being, without the juxtapositioning of a white learning environment. I hoped that Ghana would bring me a different kind of revelation...an endarkenment...of things that I both already knew and needed to *(re)member* (Dillard, 2006, 2012). I hoped that I would be challenged, affirmed, comforted, and inspired to create lasting, systemic change for Black people in America. I hoped to reconnect to a place that I both have never known and know ancestrally, to a place that my ancestors called home before they were stolen from their land...a place that held my history and my ancestral truth. I wanted to study in Ghana in hopes of setting myself, my dreams, and my fears free. I hoped that engaging with the food, people, culture, and places of a familiar place that I had never known, would make me feel like I belonged. As Dillard stated, "When any person of African ascendant chooses to return to the knowledge and motherland of Africa, we have, in that brave act, come full circle" (Dillard, 2006).

METHODS

Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) served as the methodology for this study. CAE is a collaborative means of self-engagement (Chang, 2008; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013; Chang, 2013). It is an interplay between collaboration, autobiography, and ethnography among researchers (Chang, 2008; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013), where researchers' experiences, memories, and autobiographical materials are gathered, analyzed, and interpreted to gain insight into a particular experience (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013; Chang, 2013). In higher education administration, student affairs, and counseling, CAE is utilized by graduate and professional scholars endeavoring to interweave the personal with the academic, those who are willing to take methodological practices and apply them towards oneself (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Given the purpose of this study was to explore how a shared Ghanaian study abroad experience would in-

fluence, us, two Black women doctoral students' approaches to and understandings of teaching, learning, and academic achievement CAE allowed us to engage our study abroad journals, reflections, and memories to understand how our perceptions of Ghana's education system could inform our practices in the U.S. This made CAE a sound methodological choice.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Before our arrival in Ghana, we discussed the ways in which we were coming to know Ghana both through our research as well as the structure of the monthly course meetings designed to prepare us for the study abroad trip. Thus, the first step in our data collection process included peer debriefing between course meetings to talk through how we perceived shifts in our thoughts and ideas while still on the ground in the U.S. This peer debriefing process often co-occurred during class meetings via messaging, as we found new insights in the assigned readings (e.g., Angelou, 1986; Armah, 2002; King Jr., 1957).

The second step in the data collection process included deciding upon a shared group of methods to ensure data integrity, while on the ground in Ghana and upon our return to the states. After this conversation, we decided that keeping individual journals (whether spiral-bound, on an iPhone notes app, on notecards, or via the digital platform, Twitter), would be the most useful method for monitoring our thoughts, reflections, and questions. In our journaling processes, we detailed our perceptions and beliefs regarding the promise of Ghanaian education practices and norms. Ultimately, our individual journals were informed by the course readings and pre-departure group discussions for the study abroad program.

The third step in data collection on the ground consisted of individual reflection, duo and group discussions, and informal peer debriefing about our shared perceptions of Ghana and Ghanaian customs. Given the nature of the trip, some discussions and debriefing took place with peers--experiences we recognize to have informed how we understand both Ghana and our research project. We also engaged in informal nightly debriefing sessions, as we were roommates throughout the study abroad experience. During these nightly sessions, we asked each other questions, such as, "what are your thoughts about the day?" and "how are you feeling?" if the day's activities were particularly emotionally-intense.

Once formal data collection on the ground was complete, we added a fourth layer for analysis upon returning to the United States. This included additional debriefing through messaging, and conversation, the culmination of which was joined with the findings collected earlier in the process (via pre-departure discussions, individual journaling, and shared debriefing sessions). This portion of the data analysis and interpretation consisted of *brain dumping* and dialogue around meaningful experiences, people, and places, as well as the answering of specific questions. For us, the process of brain dumping consisted of spending 20 minutes writing out every- and anything that came to mind related to the trip. To help contextualize our data, we discussed with one another the following reflection questions: (1) What were your biggest takeaways from the trip or things you believe you will carry with you from the journey; and, (2) what does a student affairs or counselor educator practice look like after learning about Ghanaian education practices?

Within the context of the steps outlined above, we use the term journaling loosely as many of our thoughts and perceptions were captured through the social media app *Twitter* by utilizing the hashtag *#GhanaTaughtMe*. This practice aligns with shifts in the communicative practices of Black Americans through digital and social media (Clark, 2014, 2015). Other traditional forms of journaling were also used through online notes and handwritten messages. The culmination of these artifacts (journals, memos, and tweets) and memories resulted in the findings presented in this study.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Multiple techniques were employed to facilitate trustworthiness in this study. We sought to triangulate our findings by examining points of convergence and divergence between our individual and shared narratives as participants. As researchers whose experiences also served as data, this examination process included posing clarifying questions to further illustrate and expound on our lived experiences in Ghana. Peer debriefing also played an essential role in the development of this study. As two researchers participating in a group study abroad experience, we engaged in peer review with our colleagues to confirm our preliminary findings. This led us to develop the final findings for this research study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The scholarly and interpersonal results presented below are the culmination of our individual and shared experiences in Ghana. We offer two major highlights that are interwoven with a discussion of our individual and shared understanding of what Ghana represented and how it contributed to shifts within us. These findings do not represent the totality of our journey; instead, they offer insight into the ways in which Ghana impacted our understandings as students and professionals. Moreover, these findings reveal how study abroad became the impetus from which we developed research and practitioner suggestions for classroom changes. The conclusions of this study have been synthesized into two major themes: (1) The reimagining of professional preparation; and, (2) student and teacher socialization. The decolonized methodological approaches we took to this project enabled us to engage Ghana, one another, and our internal senses of self, most authentically. It is, for this reason, they are interwoven with our discussion--as the sites of study and data under examination, separation the two would do a disservice not only to the ways of knowing we saw but also those that we have come to practice.

“I JUST DON’T KNOW”: UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION IN NEW CONTEXTS

As we thought about learning and things we knew to be true, our perceptions were often wrought with contention. Between our visit to the Cape Coast slave dungeons and the journey we took to get there, the two of us battled to make sense of the world and of our teachings. For years, we have talked as educators, Black women, and most recently as friends, about the brutalities of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and of the ways in which this ultimately altered not only the plight of Black people but also our perceptions of the world around us.

In Armah’s (2002) epistemic novel *KMT*, he connected in one sentence a thought that permeated our minds: “Until I turned 14, it did not occur to me to wonder about the whiteness of the prison, the church, and the school. I was not in the habit of bringing those three places together in my mind...” (Armah, 2002). As Black American women, we expect whiteness to manifest itself in U.S. and Western contexts, because these countries were founded on the genocide and dehumanization of Black and Brown people. But Ghana? In our minds, Ghana was a liberated country-- that though the people had to fight and die for their freedom, to hide their treasures as a means of thwarting additional white violence (e.g., the chair of the Asantehene), we did not expect to see the overwhelming presence of a white and western understanding of God and religiosity. On several occasions, Raven would orally comment on how disorienting it was to encounter life-size statues of a white Jesus throughout the country-- “*white Jesus? In Ghana...really?*” It was further disorienting as Black Americans who saw the ways in which our Black American culture had been exported to Ghana through music and T.V. only to land outside storefronts and shops. But our understandings of God, of a Black Christian aesthetic, of a Black Christmas practice, did not translate. More than this, we found ourselves shocked by the visible disparities in wealth, leading us to question how many Ghanaian leaders bought into Western conceptualizations of consumption. A home befitting of a king should be just that, but it should not exist at the expense over which a King rules. Ghana is beautiful, and we

do not debate this fact nor seek to negate it. However, we find it difficult to describe how we (as Black people in diaspora) have bought into capitalism and consumption, which indelibly contributes to the systemic issues we face.

It was similarly disorienting for us to see the powerful connections between teachers and students (a tension teased out in subsequent sections). This discomfort was not challenging as much as it was heartbreaking, as we reflected on the conditions of schooling we experienced in the U.S. Many of the students at the schools we visited expressed themselves freely, moving about in ways that would lead to the criminalization of Black students in the U.S. Being in Ghana gave us a glimpse into a classroom setting that honors and rewards students' strengths and capabilities, rather than coercing students into behaving in a manner that is privileged by western norms of behavior and expression. A lot of this tension, we thought, could be eased by utilizing a mix of practices we have been socialized to employ at home with those that resonated with us in Ghana. Nevertheless, we understand that shifting from a perspective that says, *I Don't Know*, to one that acknowledges, *I Can Do This*, in a way that affirms African (specifically, Ghanaian) teaching—will take practice.

(Dis)Orientation

Before ever arriving at the dungeons, we were challenged by the narratives around them. In the books we read (See: Briggs, 2014), the dungeons were often referred to as *castles*. Upon our arrival, we were reminded of conversations we'd had that questioned, "*Who* are the castles for?" This process of questioning contributed to shifts in how we understood ourselves as beings who are both Black and American. For Raven, the tipping point was the *cell of condemnation*. For Brittany, it was the existence of untroubled white people on *tour*. When thinking back on our experience, Raven journaled:

My purpose for journeying to Ghana was realized in the *cell of condemnation*. I had a public reaction to an experience that I had only been processing privately since we arrived on the ground. Everything that I thought I knew about what it meant to be Black, and (formally) educated, and liberated, and *free*...came to a halt. As I listened to the brilliant tour guide (our instructor for this lesson), describe how African ascendant people clawed, scratched, bit, and fought to be free from the shackles of white supremacy, the weight of what it means to be born Black in America fell on my chest. Literally.

The cell of condemnation is where African people (men in particular) were held in darkness and captivity by white overseers, for resisting their enslavement. Having passed through the *cell for rebellious women* only moments before, I became overwhelmed with thoughts of the pain, agony, grief, and rage that my ancestors must have felt in those moments of torture; the anguish of being separated from their families, the grief in losing children to enslavement or murder, and their unheard cries for freedom and peace. It was like it all came back to me, as if I were there when it happened. I *remembered* the intergenerational teachings of my ancestors' resistance. In that (re)membering, I wept. And I wept. And I wept. Right there, in the middle of the dungeon, with only a sliver of light seeping through the "overseer's hole". Surrounded by my professor and my sister scholars who watched me weep (Angelou, 1986), I wept for centuries of pain that I could both never know and know inherently. For a while, I was not sure if I would ever stop weeping. And screaming. And panicking. But eventually, as the dust settled, and with the help of my professor, I began to process my physical reaction to the generations of torture of my ancestors. And slowly, I remembered how to breathe. Essentially, *Ghana taught me how to breathe*.

What I carried away from this process of (re)membering, is that my existence as a Black woman in higher education is not random and neither is my resistance. Black folks...my folks...have been resisting and fighting for freedom since the transatlantic slave trade. As such, my demands for an affirmation of my humanity in my research, teaching, and practice, cannot be taken lightly. This is who I am because of who we are as African ascendant peo-

ple. Ghana reaffirmed that for me. It reaffirmed that I am not a random being, but rather a being of purpose, pride, and power.

This visceral response impacted Brittany as she watched from afar as Raven struggled to make sense of what happened. She lamented to another classmate by text about her frustrations with white supremacy and how white people enacted what we know to be whiteness. Where Raven had a more visible and physical response to the dungeons, Brittany was faced with frustrations around whether there was any *good* in white people--and why this goodness was not more pervasive. When we synthesized Brittany's journals, tweets, and messages regarding this moment in the trip, it culminated in her acknowledging her struggles around how white people continue to go on as if enslavement never happened and doesn't impact them--

To do this, to be this, to enact this, you can't have a soul. You can't know love. You can't believe in humanity. White people literally kill(ed) us and spend every minute of their lives worrying about what we are doing back home now that we are "free." They killed each *other* over the right to enslave us. I just fail to see how there can be a good white person to allow this--even if the cost of interference is death. Back home, everyone's worried about how Black people talk about slavery, react to slavery, etc. When [will] anyone ask what's wrong with some white people's DNA? To question how some may have passed down their inhumanity? I mean, clearly, if folks can fix their mouths to say *get over* slavery? Get over? Get over inhumane conditions, genocide, and harm that happened to us at the expense of you and continues to happen today? Look at Libya...

The ways Brittany individually experienced this moment reminded us collectively of how we understood King's (1957) *The Birth of a New Nation*. King argued that freedom is never truly free or given by those who oppress; instead, it is taken through persistence and the unrelenting commitment (King, 1957). More than this he writes, "Freedom only comes through persistent revolt, [agitation], [and] rising up against the system of evil" (King, 1957, p. 30). In talking through Brittany's frustration, we agreed together that there are ways to channel her frustrations, one of which includes her developing a course on the connections between higher education and the transatlantic slave trade as a means of building greater individual memories of the collectivist struggle the institution of slavery caused. While Brittany's experience takes us to a darker deeper question, albeit laced with righteous frustration, Raven reminded us that re(membering) and weeping are important. Her experience took us back to Angelou's (1986) assertion, "Sister, you have need of a Sister friend because you need to weep, and you need someone to watch you while you weep" (p. 12). In Angelou's recounting the devastation, bitterness, and self-pity that she experienced after her son's accident in Ghana, she recalls her sister friend comforting and encouraging her to weep. She had been busy caring for her son and had not allowed herself space and time to fall apart so that she could put herself back together. In a similar fashion, Raven recalls feeling rushed and unable to fall apart during her times of grief and frustration in western contexts; but, at that moment in the dungeons, she was finally able to *weep*.

That we came to say, "*I just don't know*," when tasked with thinking of ways to contend with the differences between home and Ghana is based in a set of realizations. Together, we realized that we had a lack of words to process how new information about Blackness as a global identity would ultimately change our professional practice, not a lack of knowledge. It was a full circle experience that enabled us to talk about the ways in which we go through, withstand, and ultimately persist. But Brittany's anger and frustration left us questioning, "what next?" In our conversations about her frustrations, we expressed feeling grateful that Brittany did not engage white people negatively on the trip (beyond death stares, anyway). But now that we are back stateside, what does this mean? When students back home or clients in counseling bring up what they know about enslavement from U.S. contexts, we are challenged with what we have seen and experienced in Ghana. We often attempt to suppress or address the emotions we associate with this brutality, for the good of our students, clients, and careers, but we still lack the totality of the answers to these questions and believe that pursuit will be a lifelong journey.

Overall, we expressed, together, our dissonance with the persuasive nature of colonization (discussed further below), gaining a fuller education and insight into the experiences of our people, frustrations with wealth disparities paralleling U.S. and western contexts, and found ourselves seeking to reimagine what education may look like when students are free. Our work as practitioners is informed by this newfound knowledge: We have taken it upon ourselves to commit to the integration of West African histories in the ways we engage, teach, and learn.

ON LESSON(S) LEARNED (KNOWLEDGE GAINED)

U.S. students are often socialized to navigate education from a largely white and upper middle-class framework of success and achievement. This automatically places Black students at a disadvantage, whether in the K-12 or collegiate educational environment. As we have previously stated, research shows that Black doctoral students are frequently met with a white institutional presence (WIP) that provides a pervasive backdrop for their graduate school experience (Gay, 2004; Gusa, 2010). This WIP, which is the foundation of historically white institutions in the U.S., sends messages to Black graduate students that they are not free to learn, ask questions, or to have their needs adequately met. However, Ghana awoke in us an awareness of learning as a process by which students are not only believed when they ask for what they want, but they are encouraged to do so. Though we met several brilliant children during our time in Ghana, two, in particular, stuck with us. Dora was a “class 2” student at the Cynthia B. Dillard school who connected with Brittany instantaneously (class 2 students are considered second graders in the U.S.). Throughout our visit, Dora sat with Brittany, read with her, told her about her family, and only left her side when tasked with performing as part of the school's welcome ceremony. Towards the end of our visit to the school, Dora explicitly told Brittany: “I need for you to email me sometimes and be my friend.” Brittany was shocked. In the U.S., directly asking someone for support and friendship, particularly an adult, is often seen as being out of line. Dora, however, approached her education like Biko (a main character) in Armah's *KMT*. In his writings on Ghana, King (1957) spoke of the political and social ways Ghana could teach us when he argued, “If we wait for it to work itself out, it will never be worked out” (King, 1957, p. 30). In our minds, Dora did just that. By finding a way to connect with Brittany and create opportunities for herself, Dora displayed a degree of empowerment from which many of us as adults could learn.

In a similar vein, Raven was struck by an 8th-grade student at the Montessori school with a bright smile and a thirst for knowledge. He asked critical questions of us that many professors struggle to ask and answer themselves. When prompted by his instructor, this brilliant Black boy shot his hand up in the air and asked, “what does it feel like to be excluded in America?”. The few of us who were visiting the eighth-grade room paused, made eye contact with each other, smiled, and elected someone to share an answer. Brittany led the discussion, and we all chimed in. To our knowledge, no one had prompted this young scholar to ask *this particular* question. But he had an inquiry, and he acted on it.

That both the students we found ourselves drawn to were those willing to ask for what they want was no longer surprising after some reflection. In this sense, Ghana and the students in Ghana, more specifically, taught us to avoid being afraid or ashamed to ask for what you want (and need). How many times do we (as educators, counselors, advisors, etc.), discourage students/clients from asking the really tough questions? What would our systems of education look like if we created space for students, Black students, in particular, to challenge the world as they see fit? Moreover, as noted on Raven's notecards from December 14, we questioned, “What could we achieve if we dared to let [Black] children be free?” *What if?*

“We just know”: On Black student achievement & educating the gifted

As high-achieving Black women, one from a single-parent family and another from a two-parent household where neither parent attended college, much of our own educational experiences have been based on what other people (usually middle-class white people) felt or believed we deserved or

could achieve. No one ever *asked* us-- what do you need? As scholars, we seek to disrupt this in our research and praxis. Together, our research centers on the experiences of high achieving Black professional women, on Black students, particularly Black girls and women from lower-income socioeconomic backgrounds, who identify as gifted and/or high-achieving, and on the ways in which Black women navigate western contexts to contribute to a more nuanced historical record, theory on Black women and girls' success, and to contribute to institutional change around how we treat Black women and girls.

During one of the course meetings in preparation for the study abroad trip, Raven tweeted a statement made by Dr. Dillard, "sometimes we don't think; we just know" (Raven, 2017). This was her first encounter with the idea of just knowing and what it might mean for the ways that we, as counselors and practitioners, offer support and affirmation to Black students. While in Ghana, Raven frequently journaled about the concept of *just knowing*, and how, without naming it, it served as a necessary practice in her academic and everyday life. In a journal entry from December 11, she wrote, "I'm also learning that my skills and abilities are innate to Black survival. What I know has always been known...I am just now coming to know it [in this way]" ...

As we reflected on the norms around student learning in desperate need of student learning at home, we realized a model for applying intrinsic knowledge already existed in Ghana. During our visit to the Montessori school, Raven asked the headmistress how they identified students as gifted, accelerated, or high-achieving. She responded with, "We just know". This concept of *just knowing* led us to believe that there is something inherent about the ways in which Ghanaian educators identify, cultivate, and challenge Black students' brilliance. They do not succumb to western ways of recruitment in determining which students are eligible for gifted education. There is a breadth of research that supports that IQ testing and other measurements of intelligence are not adequate for recruiting Black students for accelerated learning classes, as many of these instruments are culturally and socially biased (Ford, 1998). In Ghana, identifying giftedness in Black students occurs through getting to know the child, a concept U.S. education could desperately benefit from.

Raven's exchange with the headmistress made her wonder: What would education look like if Black students were perceived as inherently brilliant? Moreover, together, we questioned how we could fundamentally transform systems of education (and undoubtedly, paths to higher education), by adopting Ghanaian approaches to understanding academic achievement and excellence. How, then, could we, as counselors, educators, and practitioners, better meet the needs of gifted Black students from lower-income families, if we just *asked them what they needed*? Despite being selected for advanced placement classes in primary school, Raven's teachers (middle-class white women) never asked her what she needed. In fact, she was only placed on the advanced placement team because she had a Black woman principal who questioned why she was not already taking advanced classes. This Black woman, who knew her family's history in their small, lower-income, Black community, saw her brilliance as a second-grade student and advocated for her. She questioned the systems and structures that had *overlooked* (read: whited out) her academic abilities and capabilities as a high-achieving Black girl from a lower-income family. Essentially, she knew that Raven was capable and that she could accomplish more if placed in the proper learning environment.

Alternatively, Brittany had been placed in advanced classes from the beginning. Most of her teachers were Black and understood that she could quickly grasp difficult concepts. She completed lessons that differed from her peers well before the concept of differentiated instruction became part of the P-16 lexicon. Where Brittany struggled and thus aligned with the students in Ghana was in her commitment to being direct. She would often come home with high praise on report cards and other educational documents but would find herself reprimanded for challenging teachers and school administrators. It wasn't until college that Brittany experienced a learning environment where she was encouraged to ask difficult questions and where instructors would admit they did not know *everything*. After all, we and the Black students we serve are children of God, as Dillard (2006) articulates, "[our] playing small doesn't serve the world" (Dillard, 2006, p.115). As our respective stories reveal, trusting

in what we see, know, and allowing room for multiplicity in student success standards can create more racially diverse advanced classrooms in the U.S. and allow us as Black educators to better support Black students. Moreover, they can allow us to share this knowledge with non-Black educators so that they might come to recognize Black brilliance better.

OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPLICATIONS

“Stand up. They want to hear you sing”. This was one of the first exchanges that stuck out to us when visiting the Montessori school. The eighth graders, full of promise, talent, insight, and inquiry, were eager to learn how we, the visitors in their learning space, spent our free time. We discussed athletic interests, favorite cultural festivals, and even our favorite music artists. At this point, the 8th-grade teacher, *knowing* the talent that filled his classroom, invited his students to sing for us. This moment was one of my favorite highlights from my time in Ghana. We heard versions of holiday songs (wishing us a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year), a welcome song (called Akwuaaba), and a medley of spiritual songs, including the most beautiful rendition of Hallelujah that Raven believes she has ever heard. In addition to being in awe of the inherent talent that filled this small room, a room that only held the teacher’s chair, a long chalkboard at the front of the room, and one desk and chair per student, we were even more amazed at how well this educator knew his students.

As reflected in the quote shared at the beginning of this essay, this educator *knew* who could sing and who could dance, and he encouraged them to share those gifts and blessings with us. That was a moment that taught me that the adage is true- "students don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care." There was no lecturing happening at this moment; no "formal teaching" occurred. However, there was room for authentic learning to take place. This shifted the meaning of education and learning for us. When the only instrument that a brilliant Ghanaian educator needed in that moment was what he already had- an unapologetic knowledge and valuing of his students, their talents, and their brilliance, it served as a reminder of the ways in which we, too, can channel who we are and what we know, to best support our students in the classroom. As we try to make sense of our study abroad experiences, the retelling of this story is but one way we endeavor to provide insights for educators seeking to apply Ghanaian lessons and norms in Western educational contexts. To remind Black educators especially that the tools we need to teach are already inside of us. The same is true of the findings and discussions presented above.

The findings from this study suggest there are modes of teaching and student development that run counter to U.S. norms that can facilitate continued classroom engagement. Students need not minimize how they are disruptive (Armah, 2002). Moreover, it is acceptable for Black teachers and those invested in Black student development to engage students in ways that allow centering their strengths and makes room from improving areas of growth. That students in the U.S. are socialized to ask questions in a way that shows inquisition rather than challenges are another way Ghanaian educators made room for reimagining engaging student push back and feedback. The totality of these findings reveals the decentralization of whiteness in U.S. education, the creation of space for multiple understandings of expertise, multimodal and differentiated instruction, and reduced lecturing can improve the learning of Black American students as a majority of them are descendants of cultures where such practices are not the norm.

APPLYING GHANAIAN LESSONS IN WESTERN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

There are several implications for research and practice associated with applying Ghanaian lessons. Upon reflecting on our experiences, we believe there are four ways educators can apply Ghanaian principles in western contexts: (1) decentralizing whiteness in education; (2) re-conceptualizing expertise; (3) selective lecturing; and, (4) differentiating instruction to aid student success. As a student affairs educator and counselor, respectively, we utilize the sections below to explicitly name how Ghana can influence counseling and student affairs practice.

Decentralizing whiteness

We believe effective instructors should approach the learning process as one of co-construction and that allows room for multiple truths and student-centered learning. This means allowing African ways of knowing into the educational environment. An example of this would be the recent internet storm regarding a student named King Johnson, whose mother posted his journal online. The student posited that the teacher incorrectly explained Christopher Columbus' relationship to U.S. history and thus challenged what the teacher considered to be correct. Rather than engaging, the teacher expressed disappointment with the student's entry. Incorporating a Ghanaian practice of education would have allowed this student to express his critique of the curriculum, while also challenging the student to support their ideals and describe a way to translate this information for other peers. Additionally, through our experiences in Ghana, we reflected on how we have come to know and understand Blackness. Prior to this experience, we had not thought (collectively) about how Blackness shows up, without the permeation of whiteness, as it does within a U.S. context. This reconceptualization of coming to know one's Black identity in this context provides opportunities for counselors and educators to broach issues of race and racial identity development through transnational lenses and approaches.

Re-conceptualizing expertise

In western contexts, students are often expected to take what the instructor offers them as truth, without challenging or questioning the validity, utility, and saliency of the information provided. However, in Ghanaian learning environments, students are encouraged to pursue their inquiries in a supportive, nurturing space. In thinking about expertise and the role of educators in Ghanaian contexts, we contribute the following questions for reflection: Can we (counselors and educators) envision a learning environment where students of Color, Black students in particular, are able to challenge and question things, ideas, and practices that do not serve them (well)? How often do we tell Black children that they want to know too much, are being too grown in their questioning of the world, or too womanish in their inquiries (Walker, 1983)? What would spaces of collaborative learning look like if Black students were encouraged and supported in asking questions that we (counselors and educators) may not know the answers to? To be bold and unapologetic enough to raise their hands with authority and pride? To assert their brilliance in a space that will affirm who they already know themselves to be? While there may not be concrete answers to these thought-provoking questions at the moment, they can serve as catalysts for re-conceptualizing expertise in educational settings. Additionally, for higher education and student affairs practitioners, engaging and affirming students can encourage greater buy in into campus culture and lead Black students to feel more connected to their institutions-- a practice that can influence retention and overall student success. All of these things can contribute to classroom and campus norms where *expertise* is not limited to one person and is instead shared within the learning community.

Selective lecturing and differentiated instruction

In Ghanaian learning environments, lecturing is but one way to engage students with the world around them. While there will always be room for lecturing to occur in academic spaces, we must also trouble how this very western approach to educating does not innately reflect Afrocentric ways of knowing and being in a classroom. Specifically, in terms of counselor education practices, Raven was left with this question: how can more collaborative learning environments be fostered for Black students in white learning spaces? Should instructors wish to disrupt the ways they operationalize success in the classroom, they should do more than stand in front of the classroom and speak to students as if they are all learning at the same levels. Part of this comes through engaging learning beyond Socratic methods of teaching. Scholars and practitioners may wish to ask better reflective questions that allow room for a more global understanding of identity, particularly given both Black people and anti-blackness are both global. Should we approach advising student groups and engaging students in these differentiated manners, we can account for disparities that exist despite their sharing

status as students on the same campus. By this I mean, access to wealth, connections, and resources that make it possible for some organizations to flourish while others falter. In counselor training programs, a common practice is that students with marginalized identities are left to educate their counterparts with dominant identities (and even their professors) on what it means to be Black, first-generation, lower-income, etc. When applying Ghanaian principles to learning, this burden does not fall on one or a few students; rather, every student is affirmed in their brilliance to *make learning happen together*; this practice reflects a Ghanaian value of achievement that was addressed earlier in this paper, “if one person doesn’t get it, we all don’t get it”.

STUDY BOUNDS

Lacy (2017) suggests critical scholars discard the post positivist and deficit based language of limitations as such verbiage dishonors the realities of narratives shared. As self-described transformative scholars utilizing our own life-shifting experiences for study, we operationalize the *study bounds* language here out of respect to our research paradigms as well as the knowledge we’ve always known to be true (Dillard, 2012). We also recognize this study does not represent the totality of what Ghana has to offer and what can be learned from Ghana for counselor and student affairs educators and instead present one glimpse of a larger narrative. We offer the following acknowledgments for ways to improve upon this auto-ethnographic study: (1) greater reflection on how our perceptions of Ghana might have changed with a lengthier stay; (2) increased exploration of the Ghanaian system of education’s design and sustainability in larger contexts; and (3) stronger examination of how our dominant identities influenced the takeaways developed from our findings.

CONCLUSION

Ghana taught us many things, and it ultimately reminded us that we belonged there, (Angelou, 1986), as our ancestors once called Ghanaian land home. That Dillard (2006) professed that, “When any person of African ascendant chooses to return to the knowledge and motherland of Africa, we have, in that brave act, come full circle,” takes on new meaning as we have a stronger more intentional connection to Ghana. For us, Ghana crystallized the fact that we have all of the tools and skills necessary to engage the work that we do in meaningful and inherently African ways. Moreover, our status as Black graduate students who were often engaged in ongoing battles against the imposter phenomenon, this opportunity for reaffirming and thus aligning ourselves with practices we needed to learn to remember (Dillard, 2006), has proven critical to our success socially, emotionally, and academically. As a Student Affairs professional, Ghana reminded Brittany that while whiteness is pervasive, it manifests differently. These differences require minimizing western concepts of race to understand the ways in which race shows up within that specific space. Where Brittany reflected that “Yes, I’m in Ghana...now what? White folks are everywhere... What does this (identity) mean without a U.S. border”, as a future Counselor Educator, Raven may wish to ask Brittany to explain identity more broadly. Follow up questions could include, for example: how is being Black in Ghana different from being Black in America? What does my Black (American)ness mean without the backdrop of (American) whiteness?

This study has societal implications for the P-20 educational pipeline as it pertains to Black students and Black education. Specifically, there are implications for the many ways that we can affirm Black brilliance in U.S. public school settings, by acknowledging what and how they come to know things about the world around them (e.g., via singing, dancing, poetry, questioning). In terms of higher education in the U.S., this study calls into question how we, as educators and practitioners, position Black students’ ancestral knowledges as being both valid and valuable in the classroom. As research has shown, Black doctoral students commonly feel ignored and excluded in graduate education; re-centering African knowledges in the classroom is an intentional practice to help combat this reality (Felder & Freeman, 2016). Similarly, researchers should consider shifting the centrality of positivist notions of scholarship in publication and research pipelines so that inherently African ways of know-

ing and being are included in the construction of knowledge. Moreover, future researchers may wish to examine: (1) the direct suggestions for what inclusive education can look like from Ghanaians themselves as outsiders looking into U.S. education; (2) exploration of Black American and Ghanaian student perspectives and perceptions on teaching and learning in their respective countries, and (3) exploration of a wider range of Black people's voices including those of Black LGBT people, Black trans women, and non-millennial Black educators, for insight into making educational spaces more inclusive, transformative, and affirming. Higher education practitioners should consider how to apply Ghanaian principles of success and inclusion to ensure students are able to participate in campus programs and initiatives with minimal barriers (financial, social, and emotional) through collective commitment to inclusion, centering non-western constructs of time so that students have flexibility with institutional engagement, and design support systems for student leaders where collective rather than individual accomplishments are centered.

Across higher education, it is essential that we, as practitioners and scholars, continue to interrogate the meanings and makings of social identities, within and outside of the context of whiteness. Accordingly, we envision these findings as a form of information sharing with others, as hoarding knowledge will only harm the next generation of students, educators, and counselors. Ghana taught us how to breathe, trust in ourselves, and hold each other and those around us accountable for contributing to a stronger, better, more prosperous U.S. education system for Black children—knowledge every person reading should carry with them.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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Raven K. Cokley, M.Ed., NCC is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at the University of Georgia. Her dissertation uses Sista Circles to explore the experiences of giftedness among Black girls in Ghana, West Africa. Broadly, her research explores experiences of high-achieving Black girls and women, global contexts of counselor education and training, and the role of counselors and counselor educators in the Movement for Black Lives. As a board-certified counselor, Raven also provides individual and group counseling services to members of the local community.