Aboubacar Bakayoko

Work and Play

12/01/2019

Trinity College

**Stages of Study Abroad for Two Semesters: A Personal Reflection**

I can picture my life after the study away program. I will be returning to America to complete my undergraduate program at Trinity College. It will indeed be very hard to readjust to the emptiness and emotional hellhole that Trinity College inflicts upon its students (mostly, those students of color).

Where to begin with the story behind my arrival to Trinidad and ultimately my decision to come back for a second semester? There are quite a few conditions that brought me to choose Trinidad as a space for my study away experience. The first one being my interactions with people from different Caribbean nations such as Jamaica, St Lucia, Guyana, and ultimately Trinidad and Tobago. I have always had a desire to go to Jamaica due to my love for Reggae, and the need for me to spend time in the birthplace of my favorite genre of music. However, after coming to college, I realized that my school had no program specifically intended for Jamaica, but instead they had Trinidad and Tobago.

Although I was a bit disappointed in hearing that Jamaica was not part of the different locations for study away, I realized that Trinidad was an option, and still a part of the Caribbean. During my freshman year, I had no intention of going abroad for a semester, and not to any location that was not Jamaica. Life circumstances, as well as the campus atmosphere, will soon teach me that a study away program would be necessary for me to keep my sanity and sense of self.

After my sophomore year, I realized that I was going through what is most commonly referred to as “depression”. It was evident that I was highly depressed while at Trinity College, and that depression would follow me every time I would return home for holidays. At first, I tried to convince myself that Trinity College was not a toxic environment but rather that my personality was the issue. I tried to smile more, talk less, and dress a certain type of way hoping that those things would change how people treated or view me on campus. It was safe to say that those things were useless as I was never the issue, but the racist and elitist campus culture that's been harbored in this hellish environment called Trinity College.

After interacting with other Black students staying on campus on a more personal level, I realized that we all shared the same experience when it came to how we were treated in this environment. It was pointless for me to deny the real issue anymore. I was trapped in a hostile environment that did not reflect my expectations of a college experience. I had always hoped that when I make it to college, I would be able to make endless memories, lifelong friends and connections. However, I got the harshest wake-up call and reality check of my life. After going through so many emotionally challenging events at Trinity College, it was time to find an outlet that would help me escape from it. Transferring nor dropping out were any options in my book. I was financially supported by the institution (full-ride scholarship) and could not let such an opportunity go to waste.

During my sophomore year, I befriended people who would end up becoming close friends. Those people included Darius (A New Jersey native), Syed (Another Posse recipient, the scholarship I got), Deshawn (a kid from Chicago), Valentino (a student of Italian descent who is from Chelmsford), and Kimani (a Trinidadian who studied at Trinity College). The last person to be mentioned played a big role in my decision to consider Trinidad as a study abroad destination. As time went by, Kimani and I became very close friends and my curiosity about his background grew as well. I used to always ask him how was Trinidad, its culture and people. We both found a lot of similarities between the two cultures we came from. My West African background made me somewhat of an extremely familiar person to Kimani as he used to feel like he could be himself around me because I reminded him of people from his homeland. I have had a similar experience with people from other Caribbean nations such as Jamaica, St Lucia, and Guyana.

I remember the first time he told me about carnival and how the Trinidadian carnival was the most popular around the world. I knew of Carnival, but not that Trinidad was so well-known for it. In all honesty, my interest in Trinidad as a place grew tremendously as I always wanted to experience carnival. Kimani's sense of familiarity grew on me as well, and I wanted to go to his country to experience the culture around carnival time. After learning that Trinity had a study abroad program that takes students to Trinidad, my mind was already made up. I had to go to Trinidad during my Junior year (Spring semester most preferably). I was able to convince my friends Deshawn to come along as I realized a change of scenery would help us keep our sanity.

With the help of the office of study away at Trinity, we were able to fill our application and got accepted for the 2019 Spring Trinity in Trinidad program. I was extremely delighted to be part of the crew that would to Trinidad for our new experience. After everything was done and accounted for, we all embarked on our flights and arrived in Trinidad on January 14th, 2019. That was a historic day for me as it was my first leaving the states in over 5 years. I was extremely excited to have arrived at Piarco International Airport in Port of Spain. I was the first to arrive on a Friday and was welcome by Uncle Tony. Immediately, we bonded quickly as he was extremely nice and welcoming. I remember my conversation with him, and how he told me that I was not the first person who is of direct African descent to have been part of the program. He told me about a guy from Zimbabwe who was there the previous semester. He spoke on his experience, and how he could see me having a great time as that latter individual did.

Was Uncle Tony right in his assessment? I can safely say that he was spot on as I went to have one of the best semesters of my life while studying in Trinidad during the Spring. It was better than all the years combined that I spent in this hellhole called Trinity College. I always say that I was able to regain my humanity back during my Spring semester in Trinidad every time I speak about it to someone. It was amazing how warm the country was towards me (weather-wise and culture/people). It had a sense of home and belonging that I never felt at Trinity College nor in America, during all these years I spent there.

I remember the first day I arrived on Freedom Hall (formerly Milner Hall). People I never met would take time out of their day to say their greetings to a stranger. It is something I have not experienced for a long time after moving to the East Coast of the U.S. where the culture and environment push people to be distant from one another. There wasn't a day that passed by without us (myself and the other students of the program) would not be involved in some activities, either in the hall or outside.

The program had organized so many field trips for us to learn about Trinidad that I have lost counts of them half-way through the semester. There was no room for boredom during the Spring semester because we were always out on the weekends to a party or "fete" as Trinidadians call it. I can recall fetes like “Pump Yuh Flag” "UWI Splash" along with many others that had a memorable impact on my humble self. I learned to enjoy Soca music as it is a really "happy" people genre. Every Soca song I would hear at the parties would stay stuck in my head for days. I learned to dig more Grenadian Soca than anything else. The beats and bass in songs like "Get in your Section" "Run Wid It" brought out a part of me I was unaware of; I just wanted to jump and let loose of everything anytime those two specific songs would be played by the DJ. I appreciated the genre even more once we got into Carnival week. I was able to see artists like Mr. Killa, Machel Montano, Nailah Blackman, and others perform live on stage.

Speaking of Carnival, it’s safe to say that it was the best time of my stay during the Spring semester. I had the privilege of playing both Jouvay and Mas, and those two days were the most exciting and fun I have had in a long time. I remember Roannta (The program director in Trinidad) advising us about carnival and the precautions we should take to get the most out of our experiences. The first day of the carnival had us wake up at 3 a.m to head to Port of Spain to join our band and play Jouvay. We were among hundreds of people in the band to walk the streets of Port of Spain dancing to the music played by the trucks that lead us. There were so many things that happened to my spiritual being during Jouvay. I could feel myself being lifted to so many heights and inexplicable emotions. It was like being part of a ritual while surrounded by hundreds of individuals who seemed to share the same feelings.

The second day was even better than the first one. We had on full custom made outfits also known as costumes. Our costumes were reflective of the band we joined for mas. That band was called “Lost Tribes”, and it is known nationally for the expensive fees it charges people who are part of its band. As I spent more time in Trinidad, I realized that the wealthy/privileged were the ones who would be part of this band. I had this conversation with Professor Hall (A Professor from Trinidad affiliated with the Trinity in Trinidad program), and he spoke on the ways carnival has turned into a money-making machine that the average Trinidadian could not afford. Regardless, it is safe for me to admit that I had a blast during mas. It was more lively and enjoyable music-wise compared to jouvay where the band played more local songs that I did not know.

After the carnival, my experience of Trinidad picked up a slower pace, and I spent the remaining month and a half focusing on my school work as well as other things that I cultivated while here in Trinidad. Finally, the last day of my stay had arrived, and I had to say goodbye to everyone with the thought that I was not coming back to Trinidad for an extra semester. I remember being overwhelmed with emotions when Roannta came to visit me the day before my departure from Hall. I was then carried by Uncle Tony to the airport and boarded the plane that would take me back to NYC. I was filled with a feeling of defeat and loss during the whole flight because I felt like I was leaving so many precious things behind, and I won’t have the opportunity to get them back again.

After I landed in the States, my friend came to welcome me at the airport, and I remember the silence and awkwardness of the ride back home because he could tell that I was not fully present, mentally. I arrived home and saw my family (mom, dad, sister, and brother) sitting in the living room. Although I was happy to see them, it was undeniable that I felt a deep sadness from leaving Trinidad. I spent three weeks home before heading to L.A. for the summer. I had to go for an internship with an insurance company called Lockton.

During my time in LA, all I could think about was Trinidad and how free and happy I was to be part of the exchange program. I did think about it so many times that I could see myself changing my mind to go for an extra semester. Deep down inside my heart, I knew there was something that was calling me back to this place. What was that thing? Even as I am writing this essay I would not be able to describe it. After my internship, I headed back to Trinity College to spend my final year there. Needless to say, Trinity was just as hellish I have left it. It took me a day to make up my mind about returning to Trinidad if the program would allow me to send in a late application.

I could not stand the idea of having to spend another full year in this miserable environment and realized that it will be best to split that time in half. I had two choices to make: either spend a whole year dealing with the abominable culture of Trinity College for a full year, or head to Trinidad, finish my Fall semester there, and only come back for Spring and graduate. The choice made itself clear the minute Eleanor (The director of study away office at Trinity College) allowed me to send in a late application for the semester. I had to get out of Trinity College by all means, and a last-minute decision was one of them. The culture shock was too great to bear. I had to get out of that environment, and knew Trinidad would be my solace.

After the successful completion of my late application, I was able to book a flight and return to Trinidad for a whole new semester. I remember telling everyone I met here that I was coming back, and they were very excited to hear this news. The reaction I got from people on hall when they saw me back around was touching, to say the least. I was welcomed back with open arms by those whom I had cultivated somewhat of a relationship. They each wanted to hear about the crazy process I went through before making it back to Trinidad once again. I eventually shared the story and reasons that pushed me to head back to this place.

As of now, it is clear the fall semester in Trinidad is very different from the Spring. Spring semester was busier and animated than this one. The music played on the radio was different. The pre-carnival season had Soca music blasted all over the place during Spring. Meanwhile, this fall semester has more of a variety of songs from different genres. If I have to describe the fall semester, I would say that it is an extension of the post-carnival season of the Spring semester. I remember how things started slowing down after the carnival was done, and life seemed to have gained a slower pace. It has been the same for most of the Fall semester. There have been occasional parties and events I went to, but none of them had the intensity of last semester’s.

The course load is also different this semester. I have two courses I take from Trinity as well as an internship, and a Sociology course with UWI. This semester from an academic standpoint is more relaxed than last semester for me. I have mostly projects to work on instead of a bunch of assignments as opposed to the previous one. I have more time to observe the space I occupy as well as understanding the education system in Trinidad. As hard of a school UWI can be, it is to my standards a school that can compete with the majority of universities around the world. I have plenty of resources to draw from whenever I need help and support.

One major difference that needs to be pointed out is the group dynamic this semester among the students in my program. I am the only guy in the group, and I have been having a positive experience with females who came this time around. We hang out together, go to events, and do fun stuff that brings a sense of familiarity. It is great to have that dynamic considering that last semester was a bit chaotic due to the differences that folks had with one another. I have been extremely happy to hang around the girls as they are laid back and mature. The energy this group has put out is making this semester an amazing one. There are still a few weeks left before the program ends, and I am trying to make the best out of them.

I will be extremely sad to leave Trinidad as I have gotten accustomed to the lifestyle and culture which has given me more fulfillment in just eight months compared to the States which has been and continue to be a struggle for the past six years I spent there.

If I could spend my last semester away and come back to Trinidad, I would not think twice about this decision. However, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. I would have loved to come work in Trinidad after graduating from Trinity, but I can’t be selfish as I have responsibilities and people depending on me back in the States.

I have to fulfill my duty and make sure I take care of my family in the States. My mom and dad have come to an understanding that I have no interest in spending the rest of my life in the U.S. nor do I intend to have a family there. I don’t judge them for seeing the U.S. as their golden tickets as it has allowed them to provide for their loved ones back in our home country.

All my travels and life experiences have shown me that I do not want to follow in their footsteps and spend my life under constant stress and worries. No amount of money or “success” can provide anyone with a peace of mind.

After I graduate from Trinity, I plan to take a year off, and then travel around the states and go back to my home country. I also want to get my U.S. citizenship, more so out of necessity than anything else. I couldn't care less about being able to vote as it is nothing but a sham to my eyes.

I then would like to go for my master's program, and preferably at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica. Spending a week in that space was a very eye-opening experience as it showed me that I along many other people have been fed that only the U.S. can make one happy. I know that is not true (my humble opinion).

My home country, Trinidad and Jamaica are definitely among the top countries where I see myself spending the rest of my life and starting a family. I am more so sold on Trinidad than Jamaica because I have spent more time here and understand this space better. I would like to spend some more time in Jamaica to see if it will truly be a perfect match for me.

Why do I keep talking about these places? It’s because I want to relocate out of the U.S. before my mid-thirties. By then, my siblings will be grown enough to not have to rely on neither me nor my parents. It will be only then that I will be able to start a life where I won’t have to make decisions based on others. I look forward to the future and all the challenges it will bring my way.