32. ‘The World is Ours, Too’: Millennial Women and the New Black Travel Movement

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After you’ve been perusing black-related websites for a while, you notice something: A lot of them are created, written and run by women. Many are travelogues, recounting journeys taken all over the world, but a growing number also are travel businesses catering directly — and in many instances, exclusively — to women.¹

In a bustling city of eight million people, New York City’s Penn Station on a fall afternoon feels like the town square. If you spend enough time there, you are bound to run into someone you know, or at the very least someone you recognize. On a beautiful fall afternoon in 2016, after spending the day at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture examining the archival record left by Black international travelers, I had the rare luxury of a few spare minutes before I boarded Amtrak’s Keystoner home to Philadelphia. Thirsty and battling mid-afternoon fatigue, I stopped into Pret a Manger to buy an iced green tea to keep me awake on the ride home. As I stepped into the line, I noticed

¹ ‘SISTERS Are TRAVELING for Themselves, I’m Black and I Travel!, 24 January 2010.
a young Black woman standing in front of me. Well, actually, I noticed her bag — an exquisite satchel with a bold yet tasteful print. To my untrained eye, the pattern looked South African and the woman carrying it exuded an air of effortless cosmopolitanism. Just as I was prepared to compliment her on the bag and give her some ‘game recognizes game’ Black girl love, I noticed that she looked tired and did not seem to be in the mood to engage a stranger. As I approached her, I realized that she looked familiar and within a few seconds, I let out an audible gasp of disbelief. I had realized that the woman with the exquisite bag was none other than Evita Robinson, the founder and creator of the Nomadness Travel Tribe, an award-winning travel group representing young adult travelers of color. As a historian of Black leisure and international travel, I had been watching Robinson’s meteoric rise as a travel entrepreneur since she came on the scene in 2011. I recognized Robinson because she was an integral part of the Nomadness brand; her innovative use of social and digital media made her instantly recognizable. As we chatted, I was impressed not only with her style, but her calm yet piercing manner and hands-on approach to running ‘the Tribe’ as Nomadness is called.

This essay examines the ways that Black millennial women travel entrepreneurs and influencers, like Evita Robinson, use social and digital media to launch and sustain what has been called the New Black Travel Movement. Despite an overall downward trend in international travel expenditures for Americans more generally, African Americans have experienced a dramatic increase in their international travel since 2013. While only three per cent of African Americans intended to travel abroad in 2013, the number doubled to six per cent in 2014, and by 2016 the number exploded to 37 per cent.

Most of this growth is occurring among Black women between the ages of 18 and 35.

The new Black Travel Movement of the early twenty-first century was born from a generation of young women who inherited an economic downturn and an unstable job market, and were forced to reconcile the dissonance of celebrating America’s first Black president in an era of intensifying anti-Black violence. Robinson and the cadre of Black women travel influencers who emerged in this era saw themselves as providing opportunities for millennials of color to escape, albeit temporarily,

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the trauma of being Black in the US. In so doing, they join in a much longer historical tradition of African Americans employing mobility as a mechanism of freedom. Whether enslaved runaways fleeing plantations, Black abolitionists traveling to Europe to expose the evils of slavery, southerners desiring to escape Jim Crow by migrating to northern and midwestern cities, or the descendants of those southern migrants returning to the south in search of economic opportunities, African Americans have often used travel as a liberation strategy. This essay interrogates the ways that Black women travel influencers in the era of digital media link their global travels to their desire to reclaim the dignity and pleasures they are often denied within the United States. However, as they seek to provide Black women with opportunities to see the world, they contend with the notion that promoting international leisure travel is nothing more than elitist escapism. As such, they are rooting their travel ventures in more noble goals — breaking down global anti-Black stereotypes, building community, and linking to social justice movements.

Black Travel Movements: A Historical Perspective

Major media outlets including CNN, the New York Times, MSNBC, and the Huffington Post as well as those focusing on the African-American market like Essence and Ebony have tried to make sense of the New Black Travel Movement. Much of the coverage marvels in disbelief at what they perceive as the novelty of Black folks unapologetically embracing their right to travel the globe. Indeed, despite substantial archival

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evidence to the contrary, there are still doubts as to whether African Americans have engaged in international leisure travel in significant ways. For example, in the only essay addressing African Americans in the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, Virginia Whatley Smith found it necessary to pose the question: ‘Do African Americans ever travel as leisure class tourists?’ Smith found that while the archival record demonstrates that Africans Americans have traveled internationally for various purposes, the scholarly record highlights travel for political purposes and virtually ignores leisure travel.\(^5\)

In fact, African Americans have unabashedly promoted international leisure travel and developed entrepreneurial infrastructures to make the dream of traveling abroad a reality since the dawn of the twentieth century. In other words, they did many of the things now celebrated in the ‘new Black travel movement,’ revealing that while this twenty-first century iteration may be innovative, it is not unprecedented. Earlier travel movements emerged in times of class anxiety as a result of a rapid growth in the Black middle class, as evidenced in the years after the Second World War, or when a social or political movement opened up new possibilities and expectations of leisure, as in the decades after the civil rights movement. In other words, the ‘new Black travel movement’ is part of a much longer history of Black travelers and travel entrepreneurs embracing the globe as a way to express their desires to be free.\(^6\) However, the contemporary Black travel movement is the first to emerge within the era of digital media, and Black women entrepreneurs have used the tools at their disposal to create vibrant counter-narratives

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6 Most of the scholarship on Black leisure travel has been focused on domestic travel during the Jim Crow period and the indignities experienced by Black travelers; see Andrew W. Kahrl, ‘“The Slightest Semblance of Unruliness”: Steamboat Excursions, Pleasure Resorts, and the Emergence of Segregation Culture on the Potomac River’, *Journal of American History*, 94 (March 2008), 1108–36; Mark S. Foster, ‘In the Face of “Jim Crow”: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890–1945’, *Journal of Negro History*, 84 (Spring 1999), 130–49; Cotton Seiler, ‘“So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By”: African American Automobile and Cold War Liberalism’, *American Quarterly*, 58 (2006), 1091–117.

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about Black women’s place in the world.\textsuperscript{7} Among the most important innovators in this movement is Evita Robinson, whom I ran into on that auspicious fall afternoon in Penn Station.

The Tribe That Evie Built

The Nomadness Travel Tribe began just as Evita Turquoise Robinson (called Evie by her close friends) embarked on the excitement and uncertainty of adulthood. In the summer after her 2006 graduation from Iona College where she majored in Film and Television, the upstate-New-York-born Robinson traveled to Europe. In a moment that sounds like a scene from a movie, she describes sitting on the Grand Lawn in Paris staring at the Eiffel Tower and coming to the realization that her life’s trajectory would be different than many of her peers. ‘I had graduated college less than three months prior and as everyone else was looking for a job, I looked for the world.’\textsuperscript{8} After living and traveling throughout Europe and Asia on her own for almost four years, she decided to combine her background in communication and her love of travel by creating a blog and web series. At the time, she was living and teaching English in Nigata, Japan, feeling isolated and longing to see more people who looked like her as she traversed Asia. She also wanted to demystify travel for her friends and family back home who she realized were never coming to visit her.\textsuperscript{9}

The web series gained a small but strong following early on and gained the attention of a producer of a web-based reality show called \textit{Jet Set Zero} who invited Robinson to join the cast. The premise of the show was simple — invite three strangers on a trip to Thailand and record their experiences. In many ways, the show suited Robinson well. Her larger-than-life personality and natural comfort in front of the camera had her on track to become a breakout star in the series.

\textsuperscript{7} For more on Black counterpublics in the blogosphere see Catherine Knight Steele, ‘Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online’, \textit{Television and New Media}, 19:2 (May 2017), 1–16.


However, a bout of Dengue fever forced her to leave the show and return home to the US to recuperate. Shortly after settling back home for what she thought would be a short respite, one of her close friends was killed in an accident. As she processed her grief, Robinson realized that as much as she loved exploring the world on her own, she missed being a part of a community — a community even larger than the one that was forced on her by *Jet Set Zero*. This desire is what ultimately led to the creation of the Nomadness Travel Tribe in 2011, a community for ‘the edgy, world-educated, under-represented demographic’ who want to see the world in a group of what Robinson likes to call ‘chosen family’ or ‘tribe’.

The process to join the tribe is relatively simple. Members must have at least one passport stamp, watch a short video that describes the mission of Nomadness, and then pass a ten-question Newbie Bootcamp Quiz based on what they watched. In an attempt to mitigate against criticisms that the passport stamp requirement is elitist, Nomadness added NMDN Black Box, a six month online course designed to help potential tribe members navigate the psychological, physical, or economic barriers to travel. Membership of the Tribe allows you access to a closed Facebook group where you can connect with members around the globe, be the first to hear about airline fare glitches for inexpensive travel, and learn about trips and events planned by Nomadness. While the Facebook group is robust and active, the trips and events are where the community that Robinson was craving when she created the group comes to fruition. In the six years since Nomadness began, Robinson has sponsored and led over thirty international group trips, three major conferences and BBQs, and multiple global meetups everywhere from Dubai to Johannesburg.

However, Robinson is quick to remind people that she is not a travel agent. Instead, she considers herself a curator of international experiences for an underserved travel market. Despite all the changes in the travel industry, namely the role of the travel agent in the internet age, as well as in Black life, one thing has remained — the role of women as leaders in the Black travel industry as well the dominance of Black

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11 ‘NMDN Black Box | Our Mission: To Eradicate Any Barriers of Entry You Have into the World of Travel. (seriously.)’, http://nmdnblackbox.com/
women as travelers. Nomadness, estimates that 85% of their Tribe members are Black women.12

As Evita Robinson was filming in Thailand, Zim Ugochukwu was a college student traveling through India. While in Delhi, she saw an advertisement for a skin lightener. ‘As the woman’s skin got lighter,’ Ugochukwu explained, ‘her smile got wider. It seemed to say that being as dark as I am is something to be ashamed of.’13 Not only did this trip open Zim’s eyes to the global dimensions of anti-Blackness, but it caused her to think more deeply about her own experience as a Minnesota-born woman of Nigerian descent traveling abroad. She realized that she never saw images of people who looked like her in depictions of travelers. ‘If you skim through the travel section at Barnes & Noble, you’ll find blonde women gallivanting across Iceland or Italy, but that’s not me. I set out to

13 Donaldson, ‘This Blogger’s Mission’.
change that narrative.’ She created Travel Noire in 2013 in an attempt to not only change the public discourse about who travels, but to provide young Black globetrotters like herself with resources on how to navigate the world, and like Nomadness cultivate a global family by choice.

Unlike Robinson who sees herself as a creative before an entrepreneur, Ugochukwu approaches Travel Noire first and foremost as a business. She used the money she saved working in the biotech industry to launch Travel Noire first as a digital platform with instructional and user-generated content. After building an audience over eighteen months, Travel Noire began offering trips and bringing groups of strangers together on excursions. Unlike the Nomadness model where one must first become a member of the Tribe before joining any international trips, anyone with a passport, and $2000-$4000 (the average price for an excursion) can participate. While the ticket price is more expensive than the itineraries offered by Nomadness, Ugochukwu contends that the added perks are well worth the cost. Every Travel Noire trip includes airfare, accommodation, meals, personal tour guides, and most activities.

One of the amenities that sets Travel Noire apart is the professional photographer that accompanies every group trip. While the capturing and curation of images has been central to the experience of the modern

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Ibid.
traveler for well over half a century, the ubiquity of smartphones in the last decade empowers amateurs and professionals alike to capture memorable images, while social media provides a global canvas on which to exhibit them. The increasingly popular video- and photo-sharing site Instagram, established in 2010, was acquired by social media giant Facebook in 2012, just as Nomadness and Travel Noire came on the scene. By 2017, Instagram had over 800 million users and a devoted following in the Black travel world.\(^{15}\) While Nomadness’ Instagram feed shows a preference for a more vernacular photographic style, the images circulated on Travel Noire’s Instagram account are usually polished, staged, and sophisticated, with carefully adorned Black bodies flanked by breathtaking landscapes and architecture.\(^{16}\) The stunning images, which amalgamate the exoticism of *National Geographic* with the fashion sensibilities of *Vogue*, have drawn almost a half a billion followers to Travel Noire’s Instagram page.

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\(^{15}\) For the history of Instagram, see Ben Woods, ‘Instagram: A Brief History’, *Magazine*, 21 June 2013, https://thenextweb.com/magazine/2013/06/21/instagram-a-brief-history/  
\(^{16}\) For more on the evolving role of travel photography, see Deepthi Ruth Azariah, *Tourism, Travel, and Blogging: A Discursive Analysis of Online Travel Narratives* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).
While the twenty-first-century Black press is a shadow of its former glory, visual social media outlets like Instagram have in many ways taken on its role in allowing Black traveling millennials to self-represent. For Zim Ugochukwu, the visual representations of Black travelers is not superfluous, but critical to Travel Noire’s overall mission: ‘if you see somebody who looks like you in a certain destination, on a billboard doing things you never thought you could do, then that thing becomes a possibility.’ Robinson concurs and highlights the ways that social media has enabled Black millennials, ‘to own our own narrative and create platforms where we can showcase ourselves.’ "Ebony" writer

17 Southall, ‘Black Travel Groups Find Kindred Spirits on Social Networks’.
Tracey Coleman explained that for Black travelers of her generation, there is a deeper meaning to these visual self-performances than merely showing off. She explains, ‘when we post that selfie in front of the Eiffel Tower or at the peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro, we make a statement far more powerful than the photo caption. Our collective journey has been a long one, and those photos are badges of pride that carry more weight than we realize.’

Writing for the popular digital platform Blavity, an author identified only as HeyitsKarla went a step further, inviting Black travelers to flood their social media timelines ‘with pics and videos of Black individuals and Black women who travel, so much to the point where it isn’t something we view as extraordinarily unimaginable.’ In other words, these images are not simply about showcasing beautiful locales or projecting an idealized self. Instead they become a vehicle for promoting ‘the idea that the world is ours, too,’ according to millennial travel writer Kyla McMillan. For many young Black Americans, consuming and curating these photographs is a radical act of self-discovery and a political declaration.

However, not everyone is convinced that these travel groups should be celebrated. Some writers and bloggers have questioned what they consider the elitism and ‘divisive snobbery of wanderlust,’ promoted by Travel Noire and Nomadness. An article on Ebony went so far as to ask if ‘passport stamps are the new paper bag test,’ likening the desire among millennials to see the world to those institutions and organizations in the early twentieth century that excluded people based on color and status. ‘One look at the Travel Noire Instagram account,’ the article continued, ‘could have you all up in your feelings wondering why you’re not on a camel in some desert you can’t pronounce.’ In response to such criticisms, Nomadness and Travel Noire prefer to highlight the ways they save travelers money. In recent years, both organizations have been focusing less on extravagant group trips and more on helping to connect their members through global meetups, BBQs in cities like Philadelphia.

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22 Coleman, ‘Are Passport Stamps the New Paper Bag Test?’
and Detroit, and helping them to find and book significantly discounted tickets through airline computer glitches. For example, early in the morning on Christmas Day in 2015, Eithad Airlines had a fare glitch that lowered prices to places like Abu Dhabi and Johannesburg to as low as $250 round trip. So many Travel Noire and Nomadness Tribe members, 1000 and 400 respectively bought tickets under the hashtag #bookdatish, that it caught the attention of Eithad Airlines as well as AirBnB, which began offering discount codes and seeking partnerships with both groups.

After years of failed attempts to expand the travel market, airline companies and travel-based corporations are also noticing the power of what Robinson and Ugochukwu have built. In an interview, Zim Ugochukwu explained that ‘brands have been struggling to figure out how to reach Black travelers in ways that are authentic and inoffensive,’ and are turning to her to for help. She continued, ‘this isn’t a trend, it’s something that’s here to stay. And brands are realizing that if they don’t jump in on that, then they will lose out.’ When reflecting on the role of Nomadness in spearheading the new Black travel movement, Robinson declared, ‘for years, we were ahead of our time. I think the industry thought it was a fad or something that was going to subside with time. But we’re still here and kicking, and now that the movement itself has grown, they’re finally paying attention.’ For good or ill, the innovative use of digital and social media by Black millennial women has now placed Black international travelers on the radar not only of the media, but of travel-related companies.

Increased corporate attention, however, has not simplified the complications of traveling Black while carrying the blue US passport. For example, travelers in these organizations have extensive online discussions about the ways their presence as Black Americans abroad impacts the power dynamics around race and racism in the places where they travel. Online forums warn travelers about the perils of turning other people’s misery into our fun. They also help one another navigate the complex reality of feeling liberated from American racial constraints while traveling abroad, but also encountering the global circulation of damaging stereotypes about Black Americans that have

23 Southall, ‘Black Travel Groups Find Kindred Spirits on Social Networks’.
reached the most remote places of the world. Evita Robinson explained the uncertainty of being a Black international traveler in an article in 2015: ‘three years and over twenty Nomadness trips later, the truth is, I never know how we are going to be received when we walk through the door. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that some countries worry me more than others. There are nuances to being a Black traveler.’

The challenges are especially acute for Black women. They mention being denied reservations with home share companies based on their profile pictures, having cops called by neighbors who did not think they belonged in the neighborhoods where they rented apartments and homes, as well as the pressure to alter their behavior so as not to fuel narratives about loud Black women in public spaces.

Furthermore, the intersectional political economy of race, gender, and sexuality is such that African-American women are often mistaken for sex workers abroad and receive aggressive and unwanted attention. Popular travel blogger Oneika Raymond recounted a harrowing experience while in Ireland: ‘I was accosted by some Irish men as I walked down the street — they heckled me and told me that I had a big, fat ass, and could I wiggle it even more as I walked, telling me as well to “show them what I was working with.”’ On the other hand, many Black millennial women described the joy of feeling more beautiful and desired when traveling outside of the US. Tyra Seldon, a self-described writer and motivational speaker, explained, ‘I used to tell my girlfriends that if they ever needed a self-esteem pick-me-up then to go to Italy or Southern France. Black women of all hues, sizes, and

shapes are considered *muy bella*. As both of these examples elucidate, Black women’s bodies and perceived sexual availability have an impact on their experiences abroad, either affirming ideas about their alleged promiscuity or subverting notions of beauty that often render them undesirable in the US.

Despite the uncertainties, many are willing to take on the risks associated with international travel, because as African-American women they recognized that their lives were often devalued back home. Blogging under the group name, ‘Las Morenas of Espana,’ an author who decided to expatriate after years of traveling abroad writes:

> I’ve come to the conclusion that the United States of America wants me to die; or at the very least, is indifferent to my survival. Now, don’t get me wrong, I love the US. I love my country. It’s where I was born, it’s where I grew up. It gave me Jazz, southern BBQ, Sam Cooke and New York City. What I am saying is, the US just doesn’t love me back. If it did, it would try harder to keep me alive.

As the assault on Black life was becoming more and more evident to her and her millennial peers, Evita Robinson explained, ‘many of our Black American travelers are more comfortable (and statistically speaking, safer) in countries other than our own at the moment. It’s a reality we bear, take with us, and try to seek refuge from anytime we can.’ Indeed, the Black travel movement was maturing alongside another social movement— the Black Lives Matter movement. In the same article, Robinson spoke eloquently of the pain she felt returning from traveling abroad only to be welcomed home with news of another killing of an African American at the hands of police:

> In 2015, every single time I left the United States, I came back to news of a black killing or unlawful arrest of some kind. Landing home from a personal getaway to Honduras, I was greeted with the tragic story of Tony Terrell Robinson’s killing. Completion of my birthday trip to South Africa left me inundated with unavoidable playback footage of the Walter Scott shooting.


30 Robinson, ‘From India to Augill Castle’.
A week later was Freddie Gray.

It seems endless. I am more frequently left questioning myself: Are these shootings happening more often? Or, are we just more aware because of social media? Who knows? The one thing I can answer is that it’s made the Nomadness Travel Tribe’s mission all the more evident: We need a balance to how Black Americans are represented to the rest of the world.  

Robinson soon realized that Nomadness not only had an obligation to help Black Americans travel globally, something she hoped would change perceptions of Black people abroad, but that they needed to take a more visible role to advocating for Black life at home in the US. As such, the Nomadness social media team created the slogan ‘We Travel and We Care about Home.’

More than just a branding technique, the slogan was designed to highlight that many of the Tribe members, including those on the High Council, the organization’s leadership team, were already involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. The Nomadness Tribe’s second annual travel conference in New York in Fall 2016 featured a panel with BLM activists who were also Tribe members. In addition to encouraging other Tribe members to become involved in the struggle for Black life in their communities, they discussed the problem with normalizing Black Death on social media where videos of Black people being killed and assaulted by the police are in constant rotation. International travel, the panelists contend, is a way celebrate joy in the midst of pain, a powerful form of self-care as well as a politicized act of resistance.

A writer on the website Blavity proclaimed that ‘Traveling as a black woman is resistance [...] It’s a clear message to young boys and girls & anyone of color, telling them that they can take up as much space as they want to in this world because the world is just as much theirs as it is anyone else’s.’ Black women travelers and travel entrepreneurs in the twenty-first century are claiming their place in the world without apology by expanding the contours and geography of freedom movements through their creative use of visual and digital media. While they are certainly not the first African Americans to create a travel movement, they are among the youngest and the boldest.

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 heyitsKarla, ‘Why Traveling While Black Is a Form of Resistance’.
More importantly, they are unapologetic in their insistence that young African-American women have the right to claim the world on their own terms. While it is still too soon to judge their full impact, their role in transforming the international travel industry and promoting the complexities of Black pleasure and pain is undeniable.
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