

## Transcript

**Episode Title: “Earning a M.F.A in Qatar” with Nia Alexander Campbell**

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**NIA** [00:00:00] But it's interesting because like, the growth that I've had in this year, is unlike anything that I've had in terms of like my growth as an artist. And as a designer, like almost all of my art projects this semester were about Blackness or Black womanhood or Black culture, these things that I had tried to make paintings about in the US. But it wasn't received the same because of the environment. Here. It's completely different, where people seem to be more open to learning and understanding and empathizing with the kind of statements that I'm making with my art.

**CHRISTINE** [00:00:49] Hey, everyone, welcome back to "*Flourish in the Foreign*", the podcast that elevates and affirms the voices and stories of Black women living and thriving abroad, while also examining living abroad as a pathway to wellness. Yes, we're talking about financial, talking about emotional, physical, mental, professional, all of the illnesses. We're talking about them all. Welcome back to the show. If you're new, thank you so much for checking the podcast out if you've been here for a while. Thank you so much, just for your love and support. I appreciate you. I am of course Christine Job, the host of this here Podcast. I am a Black American woman currently living in Barcelona, Spain. And I am a business strategist that helps Black women and women of color leverage their talents and their skills into a viable and sustainable online businesses so that they can pursue a thriving life abroad, while they are professionally fulfilled, and of course, financially abundant. Yes, dolla dolla bills, y'all, or euros or yen or whatever. Okay, that is who I am. Thank you again for tuning in. This is my podcast, and it is a labor of love. But y'all know it's labor. Nonetheless, it is labor. And that's why I asked each and every week for all of you to please support this black woman podcast by becoming a *Patreon* supporter of this podcast at <http://www.patreon.com/flourishforeign>, or *CashApp* in the podcast at *\$flourishforeign*. *CashApp* is basically like a tip jar. So go ahead, throw some bucks or some euros in my tip jar, thank you *\$flourishforeign* if you would love to contribute to the upgrade of our production equipment here. Here at the *Flourish In The Foreign* headquarters which is just my house, he can do so by purchasing an item off our Amazon wishlist at <http://www.flourishintheforeign.com/support>. Yes, yes, you can. And also please be sure that you are following the podcast on Instagram at *@flourishforeign* is where I have a whole little library of Instagram lives where I've talked to our past podcast guests and had just really interesting in depth conversations where we are just talking about everything under the sun about living abroad. And we just have a bit Kiki so you know check it out. Also, be sure to be following *Flourish in The Foreign* on Twitter, on Twitter at *@flourishforeign* and Facebook at *@flourishforeign*. If you're on clubhouse you can follow me at Christine Job. And now that I've mentioned clubhouse, I am doing a survey for the podcast. Some of you have already filled out the survey. Thank you so much. And if you have included your information, you are already included in the clubhouse invitation giveaway. So if you've already filled out the survey once, no worries, but thank you so much. And you'll be included in the drawing. I have four clubhouse

invitations that I'm going to be giving to you audience members that fill out the survey that I have about *Flourish in The Foreign*. So if you haven't done that yet, please be sure to do that. You can find that in the bio section of all of our social media channels or on the website. You can find that as well. So please fill that out. And then enter to win. You can win an invitation to clubhouse. All right. I have given you so many different ways to support this your podcast, and I'm hoping you have decided to at least support the podcast in a way. Way, today. All right, on to the next episode. Today we have Nia, I really, really enjoyed speaking with Nia, I think she is just so incredible. And I also feel like her story is a testament to how your life can really be transformed by living abroad. If you decide to live abroad, as a younger person, I am super inspired and super jealous that I didn't do this when I was 20 when I was in my early 20s, but I'm gonna let me tell you all about it.

**NIA** [00:05:44] My name is Nia, Alexander Campbell. I am 23. And I currently live in Doha, Qatar. I am from Richmond, Virginia in the US. And I first came to Qatar when I was 20, about to turn 21. And I stayed here for four months. And then I went back home. And I came back here when I was 22. Nothing stands out in my childhood that I think contributed to my desire to live abroad. I think most of that desire came much later in life around the time I turned 20. And from what I remember, I do know that my father went to Amsterdam when I was a toddler, and he brought me back this bear with like a painting on it like a T-shirt. And my mom went to Italy when she was an undergrad, again when I was like a toddler. So I kind of had those things in the back of my mind. But I saw them as like study abroad or business ventures, not as like a life abroad. That didn't really cross my mind until like I said before, I was like 20, my undergrad, I went to Virginia Commonwealth University, which is in Richmond. And I majored in painting and printmaking with a minor in art history. And it was in undergrad that I first started studying abroad. First I studied for a week in Morocco, and sort of this like, test trip where we as the students were guinea pigs, because they wanted to see if the trip would work. And could they make it into a class. So it was kind of strange in a lot of ways, but it was fantastic. That definitely changed my life. And then an undergrad was also when I came to Qatar for the first time, which was my junior senior year, because like I awkwardly graduated early. So I'm not sure what to call that year of my life. But that's when I came here to Qatar for a semester abroad. And then while I was here, studying at university in Qatar, I traveled to Athens with the university here. I feel like I've just been hopping between like both of these universities traveling abroad at different points,

**CHRISTINE** [00:08:01] I asked me to tell me about her undergraduate experience and her study abroad experience.

**NIA** [00:08:08] When I went to Morocco, I know that before going on the trip, I had a really bad panic attack, a couple of them, because I've never been anywhere before. I hadn't even left the East Coast before that point. And everyone is on an airplane. I mean, it was a lot. But I did the trip. And I did it because it was affordable. And it was really unique, because the trip was actually hosted by the design departments at my undergrad University. So like fashion design, interior design, that kind of thing. But it was open to all art students. And me as a painting major. I was the only fine artist who attended the trip. I was the only one who was interested,

apparently. And it was very affordable, which was kind of why I gravitated toward it. And it was a really wonderful experience. At times, it was overwhelming. Because like I said, I've never, you know, done anything been, anywhere before. I freaked out with how fast airplanes were. I mean, it was stuff like that. And then when I get to Morocco, it was beautiful. It was colorful. And the group of people I was with were genuinely fantastic people, the students and the faculty and stuff that we did. Again, I mentioned it was kind of like a test trip. We did some stuff that made sense and some stuff that didn't like stuff that made sense. We saw the Art Museum, we toured all these craft centers and we practice making like little Moroccan buttons like for sure it's you know, stuff like that. Other things were sort of weird like we were in like this meeting with this other university that thought that we were about like on a liberal arts and there was this like really terrible like gap in communication and we were like why are we here? So was ups and downs but overall fantastic. I know that I was flirted with a lot, which had never happened before in the US. And I found out later that like, one stereotype of Moroccan men is that they're very flirtatious. And I'm like, "Okay, well, that's interesting, because I found that out later." And what was really interesting was the way that the different women in the group retreated. So me, I look young, I don't look my age, people still think I'm in high school. And I'm dark skin, but I guess I'm cute. They say I have a nice smile or whatever. And I was getting a lot of very, like complimentary flirtations, I guess. But other people in the group like there was a girl who is not very tall, she stands out in the crowd, she's got like a nice full figured she was giving just like sexually harass. She was black as well. And then other people in the group, like the Muslim girls that wear hijab, you know, and mess with them. But then the White students would sometimes just get like, insulted to their face. And I'm like, this is quite the dynamic when it comes to this idea of flirting, right, because some of it is just evil and disrespectful. That was Morocco. It was a lot, all in all fabulous. But a lot. But one of the things about it was that on this trip is when I met faculty from my current University in Qatar, and they were the ones that encouraged me to apply to the semester exchange program. I'm like, "Wow, if I hadn't done Morocco, I may not have even come to Qatar in the first place as an undergrad. And it was here as an undergrad," when I was able to see the university and meet the faculty and see the artwork from the master students at that time. And I was like, wow, I want to go to school here. I don't want to just stay here for a semester, I want to get a degree from here. And that's how I ended up here. The environment is much more familiar than I think people from the US would expect. Because of course, it's in the Middle East. And the US has all kinds of notions and stereotypes and mono dimensional definitions of the Middle East, right. But here, it's got every amenity that you could ask for in the US probably a lot more the way I've been treated as a person here, nothing to really report just like on a daily basis. Because the thing is, I feel like as a woman, I actually get respected more here than what I've experienced back home in the US. And then as a Black person. As soon as people hear my accent, you know, nobody like shopkeepers, like as soon as like people hear that, like I have an American accent, my Blackness disappears. Suddenly, I become dislike like whitewashed American, I have money on this on that. I mean, but that doesn't happen. Often. It happens once in a blue moon, like for the most part, being here as a Black person. And as a woman, these two big things that define my identity. It's really neutral at times, which is really incredible compared to what I was used to in the US where I grew up. And it was kind of a norm to be oppressed one way or another being Black or being a woman here. It's not the same. There's of course, still a lot of like. problematic social disparities, but they're

just different than the US they're not worse or better. It's just different. And in this environment, it just so happens that I fit a mold that doesn't garner the same kind of oppression as it does back home.

**CHRISTINE** [00:14:04] So I asked me to tell me, when did she decide to go to grad school? And what was her journey like to attending grad school and attending grad school in Qatar.

**NIA** [00:15:17] I decided that I wanted to go to grad school pretty early, like I always had an inkling that I wanted to attend a graduate program. Because me, as an artist, we don't really need degrees to do what we do. My type of art, it's paintings and illustrations. We don't need a degree to get certified in what we do. But having a degree in theory is supposed to offer you more opportunities, more exposure, you get to learn from masters, that kind of thing. Well, I didn't entirely get that in my undergrad experience for a number of reasons that I'm now kind of coming to terms with just in the way my undergrad program was set up, and the way that it marginalizes students. And at that point in my undergrad, I'm like, I want another degree because I want to learn more. Like it's not about necessarily getting certified, like, yeah, sure, with a master's degree, I can teach. That's what everybody always says, Okay, great. But I just felt like I needed to develop my skills more as an artist. And I wanted to learn from people who had done this before, I didn't want to try and teach myself at this point, I flourish in like, a university environment. And I feed off, with like that student teacher dynamic, and to see what other artists are doing, like that type of thing. That's how I knew I wanted to go to grad school. I applied to grad school in 2019. I only applied to two schools, I applied to this one, which is Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar, which is typically shortened to VCU, and I applied to a school in New York that I didn't get in, which was fine, because I got into this school, which was my top choice. And I started the program in August of 2019. It's a two year program. And it's really, it's really unique. It's a design program. But it's not limited to any one type of design. And it really makes a point to tailor its curriculum to each individual students background. In my particular class, for example, there's me who has a background in painting, writing and art history. And then we have someone with a background in graphic design, interior design, architecture, jewelry design, and fashion design, very different fields, all of them. But the program allows all of us to explore the sorts of themes that we're interested in. And a source of mediums that we are versed in, the program wants you to play to your strengths, and the things that they teach you are just incredible, like, teaching you about everything, your writing, business stuff, of course, how to think and develop your projects, how to push the limits of design, which sounds like a sort of TV promo commercial. But really, it is a skilled and devoted faculty and university environment that creates students who are just phenomenal, like the work that the students output here is incredible. And that was really what inspired me to want to come here because I saw the work from past students in the program. And I'm like, wow, this is diverse. I remember when I saw their senior showcase like it was yesterday. I mean, there's a guy that did this illustration with this kind of abstract commercial video. And you could use your app to make the illustration do things like just all this interdisciplinary hybridization of different mediums and fields. In fact, I think that's like the word of the program. They create interdisciplinary designers, that's like their thing. That's the buzzword. And it's really true, which at times can make it difficult to explain to people like what I'm studying, because the reality is

that yeah, it's called design. But it has 100 different definitions within the context of the university.

**CHRISTINE** [00:18:44] I asked Nia to describe the cost of her studies.

**NIA** [00:18:48] Attending school here is much more affordable than what I was planning to do in New York, like the one in New York. I didn't know how I was going to afford it. I did not have a plan. It was a private school. It was, I'm like, "Wow, I'm going to be deep in debt for the next 100 years if I go to the school in New York," but it was my second choice. And I'm just like, there's nothing else in the country right now that interest me. So shoot my shot. Here, this program. It's inherently a little cheaper. Because its Parent University is a government school in the US. It's a public school. That in itself kind of made it a little bit more feasible. But what's even better is that the program, I'll quote what they said, "they said that they are known for generously funding students. If you ask, do you get a full ride? The answer technically is No. But at the same time, know that there is money available that the program sets aside and they often offer full or Partial scholarships to their students."

**CHRISTINE** [00:20:03] Nia has decided to earn her MFA abroad in Qatar. And I asked her, What was it like that day when she left the United States and landed in Qatar,

**NIA** [00:20:16] I felt excited. I felt excited to go because I'd already been here before. And I kind of knew what I was getting into. And I knew that I was going to pursue something that I really wanted. And it was familiar. I mean, I had all these reasons to be excited. That's how I felt when I left. And when I arrived here, it was a very satisfying feeling. I just felt like I had really accomplished something. I felt like I did it. This is the start, or I'm back. This is the continuation, it felt it was everything all at once. Especially because I remember the first time I came here and undergrad, it was such a vivid memory I have of landing here in Qatar, because it's like we get here we go through this really nice airport, we all pile onto a van. And the road from the airport is lined with these really tall, colorful lights with all this the Arabic calligraphy and metal that shines through the lights. And that's the first memory I have of Qatar as an undergrad. But when I came here again, as a master student, it was like reliving that all over again, to an extent. It was just feeling of exhilaration of energy, just all through me.

**CHRISTINE** [00:20:37] I was really interested in hearing what Nia's family thought about getting her her graduate degree abroad.

**NIA** [00:21:43] I think they were excited for me. No one said anything that was adamantly against my decision. Some of my family said I was brave. I'm like, "Oh, that's nice." Yeah, but I think for the most part, the support that I got from my family was sort of subtle, it was subdued. I'm not sure. But I can say that my grandmother, at the beginning, when I first started studying abroad, she was really nervous about it. Like when I first went to Morocco, which was three years ago. All right. And every time I studied abroad, since then she's gotten a little bit more comfortable. And now that I'm here in Qatar, she is by far my biggest cheerleader, she texts me every single day since I've been here. She wants to know what I'm doing. She wants to know

how I am. She wants to know if I need anything. She wants to know about my art projects. I mean, and that is something that I've never had before. Especially not with her. So I feel like that since I've left the US and our relationship with her has gotten stronger, it's gotten closer. And that's really satisfying. It's really beautiful. It's something I value a lot.

**CHRISTINE** [00:23:03] I asked Nia to tell me what her first year of studying was like

**NIA** [00:23:09] This first year was, it was, good. But it's kind of hard to reflect on because of course, the second half of it is 2020 which is just a nightmare of a year. And of course with COVID that affected the way that my grad studies played out. But I can say if I were to go in order, you know, from when I came here and started August 2019, I definitely had my period of culture shock, because I was trying to, you know, settle in. So for example, right, I had to get a local bank account. And the process of getting a bank account here. It's similar in a lot of ways, but they use different language. And I don't mean like literal language, everything is in English. But it's just like the way that they refer to certain things like a synonym in the US versus here. And that would be like those little things that are like little tiny bits of culture shock that build up over time, it was things like that little things and making a bank account little things and how to unlock a door. The lock is on the opposite side than most doors in the US. How to turn on the light switch. Because here the outlets have buttons. And the US they don't, I definitely had a couple months of sort of trying to balance but to get used to all these new things that were kind of building up. Because like the big culture shock stuff, I didn't have a really a problem with food, dress, language, whatever. It wasn't that stuff that really affected me as much as these little everyday things that I was being exposed to. And then after that, I really started to get into the swing of my studies here. But it's interesting because like the growth that I've had in this year is unlike anything that I've had in terms of like my growth as an artist. And as a designer, like, I didn't consider myself a designer before this program, I didn't think I had any skill set that fit the definition of a designer. But I slowly realized that I do that the skill set I currently have is applicable to design. And I remember in the beginning, I was really kind of nervous, I felt inadequate, because here I was in a class full of people with some kind of design background. And my background was in prose writing, and oil painting. And I remember some moments where I was trying to force this definition of design that I had, that didn't quite fit with what my actual art practice was. And eventually, I had to let that go. And it was really through this process of learning myself in terms of my art, and getting a voice and having the support from teachers who could say that what you do is applicable to this, you can do this for this project, there really is no limitations, as long as you kind of acknowledge the topic that we're trying to address. And even then it's not even about topics. It's more about, I don't know, these really abstract themes, like make a machine. What does that even mean? What does that mean to anyone, but I figured out a way that worked with my art practice. But it's those little things where the program is so open ended. But in that open endedness, there is a very niche spot. For me as an artist to do what I want, do what I love, make the statements, I want to say, like almost all of my art projects, this semester that just ended in the spring, were about Blackness or Black womanhood or Black culture, these things that I had tried to make topics about in the US, you know, paintings about in the US, but it wasn't received the same because of the environment that my predominantly white art program was. Here, it's completely different, where people are

more, or seem to be more open to learning and understanding and empathizing with the kind of statements that I'm making with my art. And to me that it means so much. Because now I'm like, wow, like I do have something to say that is of value. It just so happened that an undergrad the people I was talking to didn't value it. But that's not on me. It's just a really nourishing environment to be here. And I feel like here is where I've been able to really find my voice with my art. And within myself,

**CHRISTINE** [00:27:58] I asked Nia what her university life was like, and how it was similar and different to her undergraduate experience.

**NIA** [00:28:06] Well, when it comes to the university, overall, a unique ID is a unique ID like no matter where you are in the world. You've got students here who are still pulling all-nighters, you have students here who still love certain teachers and complain about others. You have students here who are napping in the Majlis, which is like this sort of tense. And my university here VCU Q, they have this like, big match list set up in like, the common area, when you first walk in, students take naps in their houses, how students might fall asleep in the library here and back home, too. There's a lot of similarities in that regard. But you're not going to get the things like freshmen parties, I used to see those a lot when I was an undergrad, you're not going to get a lot of the foolishness that I think is associated with being in undergrad, we know what being a college student, just because there's sort of not really access to that kind of thing here. For example, alcohol is, for the most part illegal, you can get it, it's just like highly regulated, and you have to have a special permit. And you have to like drive out to the middle of this dead desert to like their one facility that houses all the alcohol as a whole process. It's not readily available. And there's certain places where if you're hijabi, they won't let you in like a bar or a club, for example. Those little things like that, I suppose that make it sort of a different vibe than the US. And of course, I'm not trying to paint the US as this place full of drugs and wild party kids. It's not like that. But just because hear those things aren't at all, even an option. And so that really paints the picture of like, what do people do to hang out to have fun And there's become this really big culture surrounding shopping, surrounding malls and eating out. That kind of thing. Like, I have never seen so many malls in my life Qatar has so many moles. All right, I'm from Richmond, and I can think of five malls. All right, one of which is slowly dying, bless its heart, okay, here, there's over a dozen. And there's always something to do. There's even like, amusement parks inside malls and movie theaters inside malls. And I'm like, this is quite different than what I was used to.

**CHRISTINE** [00:30:41] I asked Nia if she had any advice for all of you about going to school abroad. And this is what she said.

**NIA** [00:30:49] I would say that, if possible, go see the environment first, travel to the country, or the city or the university if you can. Because I know for me here, if I had just read about my current program just on paper, I was not feeling it. I felt like it didn't apply to me, I felt like it would be a waste of my time if like, it didn't make sense. I thought it was for someone else. All right, but because I was here, and I was able to experience the art from the program itself, the students in the program, meet some of the faculty, because I was able to see the living situation

in the dorms because I was able to see the overall community in education city, I was able to see the city, Doha and some of you know what's further out in Qatar, other things to do outside of school, because I was able to expose myself to that. That was what really informed my decision to apply to grad school here. I feel like if I had just read the description, like I said before, I wouldn't have gotten any of this, not not a single thing. So if possible, try to see the environment before you apply. Because you never know, there could be something here that you absolutely fall in love with. Or there could be something here that you're like, I can't, I cannot do this. I know for me, that actually happened with a school in the US, there was a really interesting program that was a hybrid between, like an art practice and a curatorial education thing. It was a brand new program. And I'm like, wow, this is incredible. But the more I researched its location in the US, the more I said, this environment looks like it runs the risk of being toxic to me. I'm like, I'm not even gonna worry about it. All right. And that's just, was me researching stuff in another state. And at the time, I couldn't travel there. So all I had was the internet. But that's just me researching another state in my own country. I think that it definitely applies to researching a program in another country.

**CHRISTINE** [00:33:07] I asked Nia, What is her vision for herself and her art career,

**NIA** [00:33:13] I saw a quote recently on social media that said, my art is my social justice. And I was like, Yes, exactly. Because the things that I want to do with my art are things that, you know, I want to change the world, like, which at first, when I say that out loud, it sounds like this over the top dreamy, kind of unrealistic goal. But really, I think that like, art has this really unique power to communicate. It can communicate without language barriers, it can communicate without, without any of the restrictions that a lot of sort of social interactions or written stuff can have. Alright, art can communicate ideas and messages and emotions. And I think it can do a really good job at conveying empathy, which is something that I think our society often lacks. And I feel like with my art, I want my art to function as a teaching tool, as a way of connecting people, as a way of helping someone understand maybe a community that they're unfamiliar with. And I guess like, especially, I'm interested in children and adolescents in terms of an audience. So I've designed and illustrated these books for children to young adults. And same thing with like, movies. Like I was working on a screenplay recently. That's all sort of circles around the same idea of me wanting to communicate these kind of grand understandings or these grand ideas of the world in a issues that can get really complicated, and really overwhelming, and to simplify them and to communicate them to, especially a young audience, because they're the future, which also sounds corny, but it's so true. Like, yeah, it's important for us as adults and those, you know, our elders to also be educated. But at the end of the day, like, it's going to be the young people that are going to grow into the next wave of adults that become policymakers that become game changers in some way, shape, or form. And I think I'm inspired a lot by my brother, I have a little brother, he's nine. And he, he is a light in my life. And I'm like, I want this beautiful little black boy, to grow up in a world that is more connected, and empathetic and loving, and emotionally mature than the world that I grew up in. And we're only what, 14 years apart, but there's already such a clear difference in our upbringings, just in the nature of the world.



**CHRISTINE** [00:36:17] Hey, everyone, I hope you're enjoying this episode of *Flourish in The Foreign*. And if you are, please be sure to take a screenshot, tag [@fourishforeign](https://twitter.com/fourishforeign) and share it across your social media networks. It's really important to share these stories. Since you are enjoying this episode, be sure to support this podcast by becoming a *Patreon* supporter at <http://www.patreon.com/flourishforeign>, tipping the podcast via *CashApp* at *\$flourishforeign* or purchasing an item off of the podcast Amazon wishlist which you can find at <http://www.flourishintheforeign.com/support>. All right on to the rest of the show. So Qatar is in the Middle East and it is a Muslim country. So the, you know, social norms and especially dating norms are typically not similar to what we experienced in the west or in the United States. And so I asked me what was dating like for her in Qatar,

**NIA** [00:37:36] When I asked a local Qatari girl I'm like, "What is dating like?" she's like, "it just isn't like dating is not a thing here." And so over time, I've come to understand that, of course, like traditionally, in the community and like the Kyra community, no dating is not a thing. You might have a quote unquote, dating period, once you get engaged to your fiancée, like that's when you get to know them really. Not all the time, for sure. But that's like traditionally and doesn't happen often in that way. Otherwise, of course, there's a really big expat community here. In fact, most of the population is expatriate. with that comes a lot of different dating norms, and all of them and all their differences, no matter what they all become subdued. So you're not going to see couples out, cuddling, you're not going to see PDA, you're not gonna see things that are like clearly romantic dates. Everything is very subdued. Because culturally, it is still a Muslim country. And it's conservative in that respect. And the people here want, like the people here don't want to disrespect the customs of their home country is not necessarily a thing that's like, that stems from fear, you're not going to get arrested for holding hands. It's just something that I think more comes from respect, not wanting to draw attention to yourself. Although to be fair, sometimes you don't want to draw attention to yourself because of fear. Because if you do come across the wrong person at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and they report you it can become a much bigger issue than you anticipated. But it's my understanding that instances like that are few and far between. When it comes to me personally, I actually met my current partner when I was here studying abroad and undergrad. We met in 2018. And we started dating and we had this really vibrant whirlwind romance. I mean, it was something that I did not anticipate. I know that we met at like a university event and two weeks later I was in a different country, he was in a different country, then we came back and we had like our first month anniversary date. I mean, everything just moves fast. But it moves at a pace that we were comfortable with. And then, of course, I had to leave the country to go back to the United States. But we kept in touch the whole time. And having a long distance relationship. At that point, it was taxing, we were long distance for a year and a half. And then when I came back, now, we've really been able to continue to get to know each other. And that's been really good. He's a beautiful addition to my life right now, especially being in the country and not really knowing that many people anyway,

**CHRISTINE** [00:40:434] I asked Nia, if there was a Black community in Qatar.

**NIA** [00:40:47] It feels like the Black community here exists in pockets. And it can be hard to find the pockets. But once you do, you got it, you have a community, I know that for me, this past

year has felt much more lonely than the first time I came as a Black American. Because just generally speaking, I think that I am the only Black American in my university, and maybe one of six Black people, students and faculty combined. Since my university is my primary, you know, place where I hang out, I'm there for 10 hours every day, it can be a little isolating. But outside of this bubble, outside of my university bubble, and the larger bubble that is education city, which is where my university is, along with other American universities, that's where I think people will be able to find more black communities. Here. I know that there is a lot of Nigerians and Sudanese people. And I think finding those pockets can be really, really helpful in forming a community. Because in a lot of ways, like, yeah, there's different cultural things, because I'm American, and they're not. But there's a lot of similar cultural things, because we're all black. And that type of camaraderie is really, really refreshing in this environment where you can feel really isolated.

**CHRISTINE** [00:42:24] I asked Nia, if the politics of Qatar ever affect her experience, living and studying there

**NIA** [00:42:32] is very subtle. So for example, there is no freedom of speech thing here, like how we have in the US, as a result, any news that I get here, is automatically going to be different. And so it's like you don't know what's missing, or if anything is missing. But it's kind of in the back of your head. So that's something that I keep in mind. Another thing, like, in the US right now, and a lot of other countries protests are happening. And the US, of course, has a long history of that. Here. It's not a thing. And it's like, if there is some kind of injustice, there's no public statement about it, not even like on a T-shirt. And that is one of those things that I think sort of affects me in the background. It's just like the way that the environment, sort of a structured, sometimes it feels like I'm living in a bubble. In fact, I've felt like that a lot. When I was here in undergrad, I was finding out stuff on the news, like a month later. And I'm like, how did I not hear about this? And it wasn't because the news here was emitting information. But they weren't necessarily highlighting it either in the way that the US does. Its things like that, where I feel like I'm being affected, but I don't always notice how it's affecting me.

**CHRISTINE** [00:44:01] I was curious to know more about the Qatari response to COVID-19. And Nia's thoughts on their response.

**NIA** [00:44:10] Their response here, I think, has been really, really good. I remember here at university, we're on spring break, that's like the first week in March. And then we came back for two days. And by the third day, school was over. Alright, they said remote learning, you're not coming back. That's it. And at the time, we may have had like 15 Corona cases. It wasn't anything to necessarily freak out about, but the country was like We're shutting everything down now. And they did. And that early response changes everything. Okay. I even remember they started installing hand sanitizers everywhere in school and in my apartments, and like on like the ATMs like they came in hard and fast with the response before things got out of hand. And I remember we had this one night where cases really peaked. I mean, it skipped from maybe like 20 to 400. It was this intense spike. And when that happened, we were all kind of freaked out. But we were already at home, we hadn't been out, things have been closed. It was nerve wracking, especially because we're all still in school and had to give a presentation the next day.

But it was also a little bit of comfort, because you kind of knew that you were at low risk at this point. And continuing on over the next months, only recently did they start lifting restrictions. And when they lifted restrictions, they were very strategic about what could open when, and they were very strict about the rules, everything is still a very social distance, you can't go anywhere without a mask. I remember the grocery stores, some of them had this sort of sanitizing contraption where like you, like roll the cart through, and it sprays a mist that, like sanitizes, the grocery cart. I mean, it's wild, how fast these things came up. I can't complain about the response that the country had to Corona, especially something really, really cool. All right. So of course, there was, like a shortage of PPE all over the world right? Here, my university, they put together this initiative where they were 3D printing and laser cutting, like face shields for the first responders and things. And I'm just like, that is so dope, like, my university is just the best. I'm so excited about this. And it felt like that overall, the community here in the entire country was for the most part on the same page. Like, there were some people who did get sick. And sometimes they got sick because they were hard headed. Right? They went and they threw a party when they shouldn't have. And other times, you know, you notice that there is an issue with like, the the migrant workers here, there have been a lot of reports, and a lot of attempts to sort of snuff out these reports when it comes to the condition of migrant workers here in Qatar, and in the Middle East overall, like there's clearly an issue. And I know a lot of the reported cases where amongst migrant workers because of their living conditions, they just don't have access to the things that would be necessary to prevent COVID in one's community. In that regard, I'm like, well, Qatar could have done better. But at the same time, this was an issue that existed before COVID. It's just that COVID highlighted it more, which is I think what's happening around the world.

**CHRISTINE** [00:47:56] As an American pursuing her graduate degree abroad. I asked if the politics the United States affect her while she is in Qatar.

**NIA** [00:48:07] Sometimes, sometimes, but not often. Especially not here. Here. I've gotten like, for example, one time, an Uber driver asked me why I voted for Trump. And I'm like, "I didn't." But there's this like, weird understanding of annalena like an understandable interpretation of just like, oh, like you were American. And this is your President, like, this is what happens. And I'm just like, that's not how it works. Please don't associate me with that man. Like, it's so sometimes it's things like that, where someone might have an idea or an understanding of me as an American, that isn't entirely accurate. The same with, for example, like being a Black American, people sometimes forget that that's, in a lot of ways a completely different culture than "mainstream" America. Because you know, Black people were so separated from White America, for so much of our history, we did develop a different culture. We have different traditions, different language, different food, different ways of dress. And so of course, we overlap with mainstream American culture, but a lot of ways we don't. And that's not quite, you know, the politics of America affecting me abroad. But it is sort of the, the social construct where the image America presents itself as is exclusively white, able bodied, middle class wealth, when that's not really American American looks 1000 different ways. And being a Black American is just one way that being American looks when I've been here and traveled abroad. Sometimes I get surprised comments or sometimes people forget that I've had a different

upbringing than what they've seen when, you know, television with all of the. their white celebrities and adolescence is different.

**CHRISTINE** [00:50:00] Nia has a wonderful, wonderful platform called Black Girls abroad. And I asked her to tell me why she created it and what it's all about.

**NIA** [00:50:26] I started Black GirlsAabroad in, I think 2018. And I started it after my experience in Morocco. I mentioned before, that was my first study abroad experience. And I remember researching a lot about Morocco, I wanted to know exactly what to expect, the food, the people, the plumbing, anything I could find, like, what would my experience be? And so I researched a lot. And I read a lot of blogs, and vlogs, and videos from all these travelers that had things to say about Morocco. And then I get there, and I have a completely different experience. And I'm like, "What happened? How did everything I researched not apply? To me, that makes no sense." And then I realized that the people I was watching and researching and reading about, they weren't like me, a lot of them weren't Black, a lot of them weren't women, a lot of them were doing solo trips, I was traveling with a group with all of these little differences are even things like I'm an artist. And so my trip is tailored in a different way than there's all of these little things that are actually much bigger and have a much larger effect on one's experience. And I realized at the time, and unlike man, that really sucks that here I am reading all these things, and even stuff to you know, be worried about, like, "Oh, like, Don't show your knees, people are gonna harass you this, that." And the third. And I'm like, it functions entirely different based on who you are, what you look like, what you're doing, where you're doing it at. And I'm like, this needs to be addressed. Like, it sucks. For me, as a Black woman, these two big things that identify myself and so many other people in the US. They aren't represented when it comes to travel experiences. And we all know that being Black and being a woman carries so much weight in different parts of the world. Every culture interprets that differently. They treat those people differently. And that's something that should be acknowledged, these differences about individuals should be acknowledged when we are traveling abroad. All right, what can we expect the good and the bad? Because that's like, on the flip side, in the US, I was accustomed to being oppressed. I didn't realize it at the time how much it was weighing on me. But that was my norm. All right. And then when you leave the US to so many other countries, you are me as a Black woman, I felt liberated in comparison. And I'm like, wow, this needs to be documented to, like, there's so much for us as black women outside the US, there's so much that we can experience that we're not even aware of. And then, on top of that, me as an artist and as a student, those are things that also really define who I am right now at this point in my life. And, for example, I would read these blogs that will talk about how affordable their trip was for \$10,000. And I'm like, "What? That's nowhere near affordable, especially not for a student. What do you mean?" And so I want to talk about what my experience was like traveling as a student, like I was able to travel to what maybe five countries, I think right now as a student, like I have yet to have a full time job, because I've been a student for my entire life. But it is doable. It's possible we can figure it out. There's ways about it. And I want other students, especially Black students to know that they can do this like they don't have to have all the money that a private BWI has to be able to have the same resources as them like it can be done. Because there was even stuff that I found out in the process that I had no idea existed. Like, when I came here for a

semester abroad. I didn't realize that my federal financial aid would change if they knew that I was studying abroad. So essentially long story short, the government gave me more money for my financial aid because I knew I was studying abroad. It wasn't alone. It wasn't anything, they just added more to what they would usually give me. And I'm like, this is so important for students to know that this is a possibility. Like, man, I just want, I want students and I want Black students to not feel limited by the confines of their of their life of the United States of their university of their finances, like, I want there to be solutions, I want them to know that solutions exist.

**CHRISTINE** [00:55:37] I was curious to know more about Nia and where she saw herself in the foreseeable future.

**NIA** [00:55:43] For the time being, I see myself here in Qatar, for hopefully the next couple of years. Like if I had to outline my master plan, right, I want to get my degree here, I would like to work here for a couple of years, maybe two or three, just enough to really, hopefully get some teaching experience, I have some student loans from undergrad that I would like to pay off as well. So that's where I see myself in the near future as some kind of instructor or some kind of teacher for art, I get to connect with young people. And then after that, I am interested in getting a PhD. And I've been looking at different programs around and most of them are in Europe, I could see myself kind of transitioning to that environment at some point within the next decade. And from there, I'm not sure. And that's really okay with me, because something that I've learned from being here is that my art practice can have so many applications, things that I am not even imagining at this point. I don't know what could come next. And I look forward to hopefully being surprised, but not too surprised. You know, right now I take it a little bit, you know, step by step, right now, get the degree, hopefully Teach for a while.

**CHRISTINE** [00:57:15] I asked Nia, What was her personal definition of wellness, and how had living abroad transformed not only her life, but also her definition and practice of wellness.

**NIA** [00:57:31] Before coming abroad, I don't think I had a definition of wellness, I did not start to give myself attention until I came into this environment. And now the way I would define wellness is stability. Its emotional stability, financial stability, stability, in your relationships, in your career, your academics, your spirituality, like its stability, everything is out of balance. And at the center of it no matter what it is, is always you. It's what you want and what you need. Like even if you care for others, you have to care for yourself first, otherwise, you won't be able to care for them how you want. And so, living abroad has helped me shape this, really just by introducing the concept, the idea that I can put myself first in all of these different categories. And that that's okay. When I was an undergrad, one of the only teachers I had that I feel like actually learned something from when it came to art. She said that there's not enough paint in the world that can fix a bad drawing. And at first, I'm like, "What, what does that even mean? You can just paint over anything." But the reality is that you can't, like you need to have a plan, you need to have a technical drawing or whatever it is you're going to do you have to sketch it out. Because if you just start putting paint on it, it might just look like a muddy hot mess. And of course, I think about that, in regard to some of my art, right? I try to have a nice, neat plan

before I go in. But sometimes I feel like it comments on my life. I feel like that in everything I do. I have to have some kind of plan, some kind of outline some kind of structure. And it doesn't have to be tight. It can just be like a sketch of what I think I'm going to do for myself or someone else next. Because I found that if I just jump into something, there's a higher chance that it may turn out worse than what you thought it would. And I know that's not applicable to everyone. But to me, it really does help sort of keep a sense of calm and balance and understanding this idea of a process. Everything is a process and everything happens in its own time. me as a person, I'm in the middle of growing. I'm a sketch of myself, I can't rush it, things will happen in time. So there's that.

**CHRISTINE** [01:00:11] Thank you so, so much, Nia. It was such a pleasure just speaking with you. Thank you so much for sharing your story. And if you want to keep up with Nia, you can via social media.

**NIA** [01:00:25] You can find me at Black Girls Abroad. My handle is B-L-K, black. That's how you spell black. All right, it's BLK Girls Abroad, Black Girls Abroad. I'm on Instagram, Twitter. I'm on Pinterest, and I'm on Facebook. And then if you want to see any of my art practice, and to learn more about what has been for me studying in MFA at VCUQ. I am on the internet as Nia Alexander or Nia Alexander Art. Again at Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook.

**CHRISTINE** [00:01:05] Thank you again, Nia. And thank you all for listening to this week's episode. If you love this podcast and if you loved this episode, please support this Black woman podcast by becoming a *Patreon* subscriber at <http://www.patreon.com/flourishforeign>, *CashApping* the podcast at *\$flourishforeign* or purchasing an item off our Amazon wishlist at <http://www.flourishintheforeign.com/support>. Yes, be sure to share this podcast far and wide. Follow the podcast on Instagram *@flourishforeign* for YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, all of that we got you covered. Thank you. Thank you so much for your support. And if you would like to be in the running for clubhouse invitations, be sure to fill out the Flourish in the Foreign survey which you can find in the bio section across all social media platforms. Check it out. And on the website, of course, submit your name today. And as always, thank you to Zachary Higgs who produced the music of this year podcast. Zach is an incredible producer. And if you need music for your next creative endeavor, he is your guy. You can check out all of his information in the show notes. Alright, that's it for this episode. Thank you so much for tuning in. Please take care of yourself for real. And of course, go abroad and cultivate a life well lived. See you next time. On the next episode of *Flourish In The Foreign*.

**KORY** [01:03:00] I mean, our ancestors have been doing this like you think of Mary McLeod Bethune, you think of Josephine Baker, you think, W. Dubois, you think of James Baldwin, like you think of all of our elders, those that people know about that have been written in history books, and those that people don't know about that have not been written in history books that have done this. So that whole we don't do this is so so untrue.

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