# II Traveling Black—Traveling Back

> [T]he history of black people has been a history of movement—real and imagined. Repatriation to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Flight to Canada. Escape to Haiti. The great Kansas Exodus. The back-to-Africa movements of Bishop Henry McNeil Turner and Marcus Garvey. The 49th State movement. The Republic of New Africa. The Rastafarian settlement of Shashamane, Ethiopia.
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> —*Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

> To travel, I must always move through fear, confront terror.
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> —*bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation*

I have suggested in the introduction that the journeys to Africa undertaken by African-descended people today are part of a larger tradition of Black travel to Africa, which dates back to the eighteenth-century repatriation of formerly enslaved people from America, the Caribbean, and Britain. Since then, innumerable travelers have made the journey from various parts of the world across the Atlantic Ocean. Past and present journeys reflect the diaspora's perennial preoccupation with Africa that arises from historical experiences and memories of displacement, dispossession, and exile. As Kelley notes in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), travel and movement, whether coerced or volitional, have shaped the history and experiences of the Black diaspora (16). I therefore posit that understanding past forms of travel and the meanings attached to them is crucial for the analysis of contemporary (return) journeys.

The connection between past travels of large collectives and personal travel experiences is made explicit by feminist scholar bell hooks. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), hooks considers the implications of travel for a person of color. She recalls incidents when she was interrogated and strip-searched by White officials upon her departure from Europe—an experience

of travel that she describes as an encounter with "the terrorizing force of white supremacy" (174). Importantly, hooks connects this experience to the historical movements of the African diaspora when she writes, "It helps to be able to link this individual experience to the collective journeying of black people, to the Middle Passage, to the mass migration of southern black folks to northern cities in the early part of the 20th century" (174). Situating her individual experience within the larger context of "the collective journeying of black people" (174), hooks underscores that her experience is not singular in this respect. It is indeed encompassed by the history of the Black diaspora, a history that is marked by dislocation, exploitation, and exclusion but also—and this seems to be even more important to hooks—by resistance, perseverance, and renewal.

Maintaining that contemporary experiences of travel as well as their literary representations must be considered within a historical and cultural context, this chapter elaborates on the meaning and history of Black mobility in the United States. Accordingly, it draws on historical scholarship, cultural studies, and mobility studies, an interdisciplinary research field that emerged in the early 2000s out of the social sciences and was spearheaded by scholars such as John Urry, Mimi Sheller, and Tim Cresswell. The field's broad conception of mobility—it encompasses "embodied and material practices of movement" as well as "the representations, ideologies, and meanings attached to both movement and stillness" (Sheller, "New Mobilities Paradigm" 789)—is particularly fruitful when examining the history of Black travel. This complex understanding of mobility opens new perspectives on the diversity of movements and modes of mobility, highlighting their multiple and complex meanings for Black subjects.

This chapter is divided into two sections and focuses on the diverse movements of Black diasporic subjects. The goal of the first section is to carve out different forms of travel that inform the history of the African diaspora. In particular, my focus will be on the African American experience and the significance of mobility as well as the different meanings associated with it. It will demonstrate that, as Griffin and Fish underscore, Black "mobility is often connected to the impulse for increased opportunities and the desire to find a home or homeland as well as for the purpose of pilgrimage, exile, and pleasure" (xiii). Moreover, this section provides an account of the ways that Black mobility has been limited and how the fight for the right to move freely is intertwined with struggles for freedom and equality. The second section of the chapter examines the diverse engagements of the Black diaspora with Africa,

highlighting the significance of the continent in the Black imagination. The fact that African-descended people persistently turn their gaze toward Africa reveals its centrality as a site of identification. The section explores the idea of return and outlines different repatriation efforts. In this context, return refers not just to realized returns (that is, actual journeys back to Africa) but encompasses imagined returns as well (these may include efforts to establish and maintain links to an originary homeland as well as political or intellectual engagement with it—a 'turn to' Africa, so to speak).[1] Examining these diverse returns to Africa, it becomes apparent that the relationship to the African continent and the meanings projected onto it vary according to Black travelers' relationship with their home country and are contingent on the historical, social, and political context. Accordingly, the chapter illustrates how Africa has been imagined and scrutinizes Black Americans' different attitudes and competing impulses toward the continent.

## 1. Black Im/Mobilities Past and Present

Scholars have alerted us to the significance of movement and travel, both real and metaphorical,[2] for the history of the diaspora by drawing on the narrative arc of travel as a key trope of the African American experience: The argument that Black American history is profoundly shaped by movements is a central idea in the works of Ira Berlin (2010) as well as those of Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf (2004), who argue that African American "culture and history are the products of black peoples' various movements, coerced and voluntary" (9). The range of movements they describe and explore encompasses large-scale movements, such as migrations, as well as the small-scale movements of individuals, including journeys of escape and bodily moves.[3]

1 The editors of *Coming Home? Refugees, Migrants, and Those Who Stayed Behind* (2004) expound that in diaspora literature, returns take on different forms. They understand return not just as the physical act of transport and the journey back to the originary homeland but also as a process over time, revealing that returns can be "*imagined*, *provisional*, and *repatriated*" (Long and Oxfeld 6).

2 For a detailed survey of travel metaphors in cultural criticism and theory see Janet Wolff (1993) and Caren Kaplan (1996).

3 While Berlin's *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (2010) focuses on four different migratory movements, or passages, Dodson and Diouf's *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (2004) identifies thirteen different movements

Two forms of movements are of particular importance. As Youngs asserts, African American history "rests on two archetypes of travel: the forced journey into slavery, signified by the middle passage; and the willed flight to freedom" ("Pushing" 72). These movements persistently shape Black travel and demonstrate that mobility bears different meanings. While the forced journey across the Atlantic Ocean denotes domination and oppression, free and self-regulated movements are associated with agency and resistance and are central aspects of liberty and emancipation.

Before considering the various forms of travel and the meanings attached to them in more detail, some remarks on the conceptualization of the term travel are necessary. One could certainly object to the idea of understanding the forced path into enslavement as a form of travel. Historically and in the original sense of the term, the Middle Passage describes the second, or middle, leg of the three-part voyage from Europe to Africa to the Americas and back to Europe. The triangular routes took European traders to Africa to exchange goods for enslaved Africans, then across the Atlantic Ocean to sell captives in the West Indies and North America, and finally back to Europe. The violent Atlantic crossing of an estimated 12.5 million captives, two million of whom died during the journey,[4] stands for a history of dehumanization and racialized terror that lies at the heart of Black diasporic culture. In the face of unimaginable human suffering, the Middle Passage presents as a rupture from cultural and geographical roots. For this reason, hooks cautions that "[t]ravel is not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage" (173) and other forms of coerced mobility. Her hesitation to use travel in this context is based on the notion that the term, in a conventional sense, is layered with European histories of imperialism and

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that are seen as significant to understand the African American experience. These include, for example, the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved people's emancipatory journeys from bondage to freedom, the colonization movements, the migration movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the more recent relocation of African-born people to the US. The focus on migration as a key aspect of Black American history and culture illuminates the diverse experiences of Black people in the United States. Moreover, reading African American history as a history of migrations, Berlin offers new perspectives that complicate the linearity of the "old master narrative" from slavery to freedom and demonstrates the ongoing struggle for full equality and freedom (11).

4 The website *Slave Voyages* (slavevoyages.org) provides the most comprehensive database documenting the transatlantic slave trade.

tied up with images of the leisurely travel of the White bourgeois male. The Middle Passage as well as hooks's own travel experiences and her "encounter with terrorism" (174) surely do not fit such received understandings of travel. Forced and restricted movements disrupt established connections between travel and freedom. Acknowledging what James Clifford aptly summarizes as travel's "historical taintedness, its association with gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, specific means of conveyance, beaten paths, agents, frontiers, documents, and the like" (39), it is necessary to theorize travel "outside conventional borders" so as to produce associations "with different headings—rites of passage, immigration, enforced migration, relocation, enslavement, and homelessness" (hooks 173). Furthermore, this requires us to recognize the dominance of some travel experiences and narratives over others, and with it the difficulty of articulating experiences such as those of hooks (173). Therefore, deconstructing the term in its historical context and reconfiguring conventional conceptions of travel allows for the inclusion of more diverse experiences of travel.[5]

In the afterword to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing*, Pratt compels us to consider this argument from a literary studies point of view. Echoing the concern of hooks, Pratt poses the question of whether we should think about the Middle Passage as travel and proposes that there might be a difference in the way we approach this question: "is this a conceptual, a political, or a moral question?" ("Afterword" 226). Considering that forms of involuntary and forced mobility, such as coerced displacement, the flight of refugees, human trafficking, and economic migrancy "also generate corpuses of stories and texts" (226), it can be argued that conceptualizing the forced journey across the Atlantic as travel and its literary representation as travel writing presents an opportunity for travel writing studies' sustained engagement with different forms of mobility (for example, forced, voluntary, leisurely, professional, and tourist). To view disparate journeys through the lens of travel writing, as this study does, facilitates an understanding of how

5 Forsdick and colleagues identify "a paradigm shift in the understanding of cultures of travel" that was introduced with works by scholars such as Said, Clifford, Pratt, hooks, and Kaplan in the late twentieth century. Their works attempt to liberate and decolonize the signification of travel, an effort that also entails a critical engagement with the concepts of culture and identity as autonomous entities. Forsdick et al. assert that "[t]he questioning of these concepts challenges the stability of the traveller's identity, and calls for a recovery of neglected journeys as well as a reexamination of what it means to travel in the postcolonial era" (61).

these representations counter, connect, and respond to more traditional accounts of travel and travel writing. Moreover, seeing that "[i]nvoluntary migration generates a literature where the equation of mobility and freedom breaks down" (227), it seems that a redefinition of the genre and the terms at large is imperative for entangling conceptual, narrative, and metaphorical connotations of travel writing. Renegotiating the parameters of travel, then, influences our perception of the genre; textual representations of mobility, in turn, shape our visions of travel. A more capacious understanding of the term travel thus facilitates an exploration, connection, and contrast of literary and cultural narratives produced by such different forms of mobility.

The Middle Passage undoubtedly persists as one of the most significant journeys in the travel writings of African diasporic authors. In line with Pratt, other travel writing scholars have also confirmed that "[t]he experience continues to generate narratives of travel, both imaginative and factual" (Youngs, "African American Travel" 112) and emphasized that "African American travel writing remains haunted by the ancestral memory of the Middle Passage […]. Every subsequent journey is liable to be measured against it" (Pettinger, "At Least One" 81). The reason why the memory of the Middle Passage continues to figure prominently in travel writings might simply be the fact that it represents "the defining moment" of the Black diasporic experience (Pedersen 225). This also holds true for travel narratives written by authors who do not have historical ties to the displacement caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, narrative accounts of self-directed, independent travel, including professional and tourist trips to Africa, pit themselves most obviously against the Middle Passage, the quintessential form of involuntary movement. In many Black travel narratives, the autonomous journey of the narrator is juxtaposed, explicitly or implicitly, with the 'initial journey' and the oppression, dehumanization, and violence it denotes, demonstrating that the memory of the Middle Passage is a stable reference in these texts. Tracing the slave ships' routes in the opposite direction, for example, from the United States to Africa, transatlantic crossings by Black individuals, such as those recounted in the narratives that will be discussed in the second part of this study, can be perceived as a symbolic reversal of the Middle Passage. The reversal of historically produced routes may be read as a response to the historic oppression and victimization, and traveling can be understood as a form of agency that had historically been denied to Black subjects. The images created by such reversed journeys counter those lasting images of African-descended people

being carried across the ocean in the holds of ships that are evoked by the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

The Middle Passage stands for the extreme violence of the slave trade and, as historian David Eltis underscores, is "probably the purest form of domination in the history of slavery as an institution" (117). The domination of African captives is epitomized by their profound immobilization.[6] This immobilization is strikingly visualized by the familiar images of the cross-section of a slave ship: Chained together and densely stacked in the hold, the captives were rendered immobile even as the ship sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. Cresswell describes the Middle Passage as "an illustration of both transnational mobility […] and extreme enforced immobility" ("Black Moves" 19-20). The forced journey across the Atlantic thus embodies im/mobility[7]—"a paradox that runs through African-American culture" (Seiler, "Racing Mobility" 101). The African diasporic experience is indeed informed by involuntary and willed movement, imposed immobilization, as well as by efforts to create roots and claim places. As Berlin asserts, the dialectics of mobility and immobility—of movement and place, routes and roots, fluidity and fixity—create a "contrapuntal narrative" that "ripped across some four centuries of black life in mainland North America, the alternating and often overlapping impact of massive movement and deep rootedness touched all aspects of the experience of black people" (18).[8]

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6 Despite the physical immobility and containment, enslaved Africans were by no means passive and resisted their capture whenever possible by jumping overboard and into the ocean or staging revolts, among the most memorable being the *Amistad* rebellion in 1839. The story of enslaved Africans seizing control over the ship under the lead of Sengbe Pieh (also known as Joseph Cinqué), the ensuing capture, and legal battle before the Supreme Court that resulted in the restoration of their freedom has captured the popular imagination and accentuates the resistance, courage, and agency of the captive Africans (see Rediker, *Amistad Rebellion*).

7 Mimi Sheller, in her important study *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (2018), reminds us of the interdependency of mobilities and immobilities: "The use of '(im)mobilities' is meant to signal that mobility and immobility are always connected, relational, and co-dependent, such that we should always think of them together, not as binary opposites but as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices, and relational meaning" (19).

8 Along similar lines, Harvey Young argues that "*stillness*, like movement […], is an integral and defining part of the Black Diaspora" (42). He points out that "[c]ontrary to popular belief, movement was not the primary feature of the Middle Passage. Captives were not always *running* from captors, *marching* (as captives) to loading docks, *sailing* on boats to the Americas, and *marching* (yet again) to auctions to be auctioned. Within and

Berlin describes the various meanings attached to movement and place when he writes,

> Movement—forced and free—sometimes meant material loss, social dislocation, and spiritual fragmentation, yet sometimes signaled material gain, social improvement, and spiritual renewal. In slavery and freedom, black people twisted the meaning of movement and place, transforming places of repression into places of liberation and places of confinement into routes of escape. (20)

The 'initial journey' across the Atlantic that forced millions of Africans into slavery stands for involuntary mobility and is connected to displacement, subjugation, and oppression mobility. In Black American history and culture, however, mobility is also linked to liberation: Travel—to escape from slavery, in the form of migration and repatriation movements, and as a means to protest injustice and claim rights—connotes freedom, agency, and resistance.

Importantly, the Middle Passage does not only refer to a past moment in history but is also employed as a wide-ranging concept. The editors of *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (2007) explain that "the middle passage is not merely a maritime phrase to describe one part of an oceanic voyage; it can, rather, be utilized as a concept—the structuring link between expropriation in one geographical setting and exploitation in another" (Rediker et al. 2). They further state that "the concept of the middle passage has relevance to a range of migrations involving the coerced movement of people, sometimes simultaneously with the slave trade, as part of a worldwide process of capitalist development that spanned centuries and continues to this day" (2). They argue that current inequalities and injustices, for example, the disproportionate number of people of color imprisoned in the United States, can be understood as corrosive legacies of the Middle Passage and the system of slavery.

Sheller emphasizes that "[t]he history of bodily freedom of mobility is perpetually accompanied by unfreedoms, limitations, and impairments—but

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betwixt these movements, there was a lot of stillness. The captives, confined within holding cells, spent more time waiting to travel the Atlantic than it took them to sail across the ocean. Once loaded on the boats, the shackled captives continued to have limited spatial options. They remained immobile even as they moved" (42). Harvey's finding underscores the importance of considering the different meanings and implications of mobility and immobility in the context of Black diasporic experiences.

also intertwined with resistances, counter-movements, and subaltern moves" (*Mobility Justice* 64). The transatlantic slave trade and enslavement in the Americas destroyed the ability of African-descended people to move freely and determine their own bodily movements (58). The control over enslaved peoples' mobility was a method for governing Black labor and the key to domination upon which the exploitative, capitalist system of slavery was built. On plantations, enslavers asserted their power over the people held in slavery by controlling their spatial mobility. Black peoples' movements were monitored and controlled through laws and social practices; for instance, overseers watched the movements of enslaved laborers working on plantations; slave patrols enforced curfews and checked Black people for a pass that gave them permission to move outside the boundaries of their enslavers' property; slave catchers chased self-emancipated individuals and returned them to their enslavers. Therefore, White people's concerted effort to control enslaved people's mobility was in fact a form of immobilization. Writing on slavery in the antebellum South and the relationship between space, gender, and power, historian Stephanie Camp succinctly notes that slavery "entailed the strictest control of the physical and social mobility of enslaved people, as some of the institution's most resonant accouterments—shackles, chains, passes, slave patrols, and hounds—suggest" (12). As Camp notes, "laws, customs, and ideals had come together into a systematic constriction of slave movement that helped establish slaveholders' sense of mastery" (6). However, despite these fundamental impairments, people held in slavery persistently struggled to alter their conditions. They found ways to resist what Camp calls the "geography of containment," that is, the combination of different forces employed by enslavers to systematically monitor the behaviors of enslaved populations and control their movements through space and time (6). Pushing the limits of their physical and spatial confinement, enslaved people carved out ways to challenge or destroy the constrictions imposed on them by systems of control. Under the constant threat of violence, they clandestinely moved according to their own wishes and needs whenever possible. In both revolutionary and everyday ways, they defied the efforts of their enslavers to control, dehumanize, and immobilize them.

Regardless of the systems of control that limited their mobility, Black people sought out ways to move and even escape their confinement. Importantly, for enslaved African Americans, self-emancipation from slavery was predicated on their ability to move: to escape from the enslaver's control and the physical and psychological confinements of the plantation zone, to hide and

prevent recapture, and to survive in hostile and unfamiliar terrain (Sheller, *Mobility Justice* 59). Through travel, freedom seekers transgressed the laws of bondage and took control over their mobility. Michelle Commander stresses the gravity of this act when she states, "Mobility—a person's control over his or her place in the world—is central to subjectivity and to one's sense of self" (8). The journey from bondage to freedom, therefore, signifies resistance to the dehumanization and objectification of Black people during chattel slavery and presents a quest for dignity and selfhood that they had been denied. For enslaved people, travel evolved into a means to assert their humanity, their psychic and bodily liberty. Such emancipatory journeys illuminate that "travel demonstrates agency, even if circumstances have left its actors with little choice. It provides a space for a degree of self-determination" (Youngs, "African American Travel" 117). Breaking free from bondage and liberating themselves from slavery's physical and psychological shackles allowed enslaved people to resurrect themselves from "social death," that is, the "imprintable" and "disposable" status imposed on them by the system of slavery (Patterson 7). The interconnection of travel and selfhood is also a central aspect in the writings of formerly enslaved and self-emancipated individuals, which I discuss in detail in Chapter III.

Narratives of freedom in African American history revolve around stories of flight and travel. An example is the Underground Railroad, the informal network of people who assisted freedom seekers in their perilous flight from slavery in the South to the free states of the North and Canada by guiding them along secret routes and providing hiding spaces and refuge along the way. In the American cultural imagination, the Underground Railroad has evolved into a myth that connects physical mobility to liberation. Like other means of transport, the train advanced into a symbol of freedom and is an imagery that figures prominently in Black literature, music, and art. Importantly, "as vessels of modern mobility and embodiments of freedom," these means of transport "served as the very antithesis to the ownership, confinement to land and shackles to place that defined the experience of enslavement in the antebellum South" (M. Hall 91). Yet, historical experiences of racial segregation and discrimination complicated such conceptions of freedom, giving paradoxical significations to images of the train and the railroad (91, 101).

The fight for the freedom of mobility is persistent throughout the history of African Americans. Since the pre-Civil War era, the importance of self-initiated and unrestricted movement has been an essential aspect of Black peoples' struggles for justice and equality. Although free travel was perceived as a basic

civil right, it was withheld from African Americans. For free Black people in the antebellum North, the ability to travel without constrictions advanced into a core value in their quest for equality and citizenship, as Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor's insightful *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship Before the Civil War* (2016) shows. They understood travel, and by extension equitable access to transportation systems and public spaces, as a quintessential aspect of social citizenship. Black travelers sought to exercise their rights as free citizens but found their mobility thwarted by the formal segregation on public transport (which was not yet institutionalized), racialized violence, and the denial of United States passports for international travel. In response, activist travelers transformed the cars and compartments of public conveyances into "critical sites for equal rights protests" (2). They protested the obstruction of their mobility by physically resisting their confinement to the Jim Crow car, arguing with White fellow passengers and railroad personnel, writing letters of complaint to state representatives, and suing railroad companies (2-3). For instance, journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells famously resisted a conductor who tried to force her to move from the ladies' car to the 'colored car' (even though she had purchased a first-class ticket) by biting his hand.[9] Like Wells, countless other Black travelers challenged racial segregation and the discriminatory policies on public transportation in the nineteenth century, initiating a protest tradition that informed the subsequent struggles for civil rights. Therefore, the protests against transportation restrictions of the 1950s and 1960s must be understood "as the culmination of a long and sustained history of Black protest against segregated transportation" (Bay, *Traveling Black* 12).

Laws and regulations—such as the Fugitive Slave Act (passed by Congress in 1793 and further strengthened in 1850) that required Northerners to aid in the seizure and return of self-emancipated freedom seekers—most obviously prevented African Americans from traveling freely. However, social customs and practices as well as popular culture played an equally crucial role in curbing the opportunities for movement. Slave advertisements created stereotypical images of self-emancipated individuals that were circulated through

9 Demonstrating her commitment to fight for her rights, Wells recounts the incident with the conductor as follows: "He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front and was holding to the back, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself" (18-19).

newspapers calling for the capture of the so-called 'fugitive' (a term that perpetuates the stereotype of Black criminality). The Black body in motion—previously immobilized by chains and confined to slave ships, auction blocks, and plantations—was equated with criminal and unlawful movement. As Pryor underlines, White Americans "criminalized black travel by making it appear illegal, suspicious, unconscionable, inappropriate, and anathema to American identity" (45). As a result, anti-Black vigilantism was fostered as White people were encouraged to monitor and curtail Black movements in public spaces (46). In popular culture, too, Black mobilities were presented as dangerous and criminal. The figure of Jim Crow, a nineteenth-century minstrel show character played by a White performer in blackface, portrayed a violent, drunk, and lecherous Black traveler (91-92). This criminalization of Black mobile bodies was in effect another way to immobilize African Americans and limit their spatial mobility.

The limitations on travel and mobility that existed before the Civil War continued in the post-emancipation period and beyond, albeit in different forms, even though the passing of the Civil War Amendments (also known as Reconstruction Amendments) formally abolished slavery and granted African Americans the rights of citizenship. Reversing many of the gains of Reconstruction, the 1896 Supreme Court decision of the case *Plessy v. Ferguson*—which was itself a fight over the right to travel freely[10]—made racial segregation in public spaces constitutional on the condition that 'equal' facilities and public accommodations were provided for Black Americans. While the system of racial segregation decisively influenced all aspects of life, its effects were particularly palpable in forms of transportation (Sheller, *Mobility Justice* 61): Black passengers were relegated to the back of the buses and confined to separate compartments on trains with the purpose of 'keeping them in their place' and making autonomous movement difficult, if not impossible. In addition to the discomfort and the humiliation they experienced in the 'colored section,' they were also exposed to harassment and

10 In 1892, Homer Plessy deliberately challenged the segregation in the public transportation system in Louisiana when he refused to leave his seat in the "Whites-only" passenger car. The ensuing legal battle went to the Supreme Court and ultimately granted constitutional permission to state laws that enforced racial segregation in public accommodations and services for Black and White Americans. It was not until 1954, when the Supreme court overturned its former decision in the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, that racial segregation was outlawed (Duignan).

physical violence. The circumscription of travel was a denial of the freedom of mobility as well as of citizens' rights and privileges that was upheld until the mid-twentieth century.

Along with the efforts to desegregate public schools and secure voting rights, mobility was an essential issue in the struggle for civil rights in the twentieth century. Seeing that autonomous mobility epitomized freedom and resistance to oppression and inequality, it is indeed difficult to overestimate its significance. As the bus boycotts and Freedom Rides demonstrate, the fight for the right to travel without discrimination has been at the center of Black people's quest for justice. Cresswell confirms that "the politics of race and the politics of mobility (particularly public transit provision) have moved side by side through the civil rights movement" (*On the Move* 261). Trains and buses became notorious sites of political protest as Black activists challenged their spatial confinement and status as second-class citizens. Among the most popular figures in the fight for citizens' rights on public transportation is certainly Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat for a White passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. The fight against racial discrimination was also conducted in airports. Battling the desegregation of airport terminals, African Americans turned them into "territories of confrontation over the renegotiation of racial identities in postwar America," as the 2017 study *Jim Crow Terminals* reveals (Ortlepp 10). Black people's persistent and tireless opposition to travel segregation, therefore, was a crucial part of the struggle for equality.[11]

As an instrument "of defiance and dignity in the journey to full equality" (Sorin 12), the automobile played a crucial role in the mobilization of Black travelers.[12] African Americans with the financial means to purchase a car were able to take part in the early twentieth-century American dream of unbound spatial mobility, independence, and autonomy that was encapsulated by the

11 See Mia Bay's important study *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance* (2021) for an in-depth account of the history of Black mobility and resistance.

12 In the landmark study *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (2008), historian Cotten Seiler examines the racial politics of automobility and shows that automobility evolved into a powerful source for African Americans seeking access to the public sphere. See also Gretchen Sorin's *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (2020) for a detailed study on African American travel during segregation, the role of the automobile, and the significance of Black travel guides. Sorin provides a remarkable exploration of (auto)mobility in relation to race that intertwines historical scholarship and personal accounts and experiences.

open highway, while simultaneously avoiding the humiliation and discrimination they often faced on public transport. At the same time, however, they were confronted with different obstacles as they drove through the segregated nation: The fact that hotels, restaurants, gas and service stations, and many other roadside establishments discriminated against Black customers and refused to serve them curbed the travel options and turned road trips into difficult endeavors. On the open road, Black motorists often experienced harassment and threats of violence. Traveling, therefore, required careful planning and minutiae preparation (see Bay, "Traveling Black" 22-24).

A number of travel guides catered specifically to African American motorists and travelers and provided invaluable information on hospitable businesses and accommodations across the United States. Victor H. Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936-1966) is probably the best-known travel guide.[13] Its existence and the fact that it was published for three decades testify to the perils and dangers that Black travelers faced. Heralded as the "Bible of black travel" (Taylor, "Roots"), it aimed to make traveling safer and more convenient for African Americans. It had other significant functions as well: Through its descriptions of popular travel destinations it encouraged African Americans to travel and explore the nation—"There is much to be seen and more to learn, of this our land which offers everything of beauty, wonder and history" (Schomburg, "1950" 3)—and thereby claim access to public spaces. Its depictions of "African Americans as upwardly and outwardly mobile vacationers [and] habitually mobile business travelers" (Seiler, *Republic of Drivers* 118) functioned to demonstrate that Black travelers, too, belonged on highways, trains, and airplanes, inscribing them into discourses of tourism from which they had been excluded. Importantly, the *Green Book* promoted the idea that travel could dismantle prejudice and stereotypes by facilitating interracial encounters and creating a better understanding between Black and White Americans. Quoting Mark Twain on the cover of its 1949 edition, the *Green Book* pronounced, "Travel Is Fatal to Prejudice" (Schomburg, "1949"). In the editors' view, the practice of traveling paved the way to equality. Expressing their unwavering optimism and belief in progress, the editors asserted, "There will be

13 For a comprehensive account of the *Green Book*, see the study by cultural historian Candacy Taylor with the programmatic title *Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America* (2020). In addition to Taylor's work, Sorin's recent book presents the most in-depth study of the travel guide.

a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States" (Schomburg, "1948" 1). From this perspective, tourist and vacation travel gained social and political relevance and was an act of both pleasure and defiance. The *Green Book* mobilized African Americans and encouraged them to move forward: literally, by traveling through the United States, and figuratively, by moving forward on the road to justice and equality.

African Americans traveled despite the dangers and the many constrictions they encountered. Historian Gretchen Sorin stresses the weight of such travel when she remarks that "with each mile they traveled, ordinary African Americans challenged prohibitions that prevented them from traveling and from entering segregated spaces;" travel, therefore, was a way "to claim the rights of citizenship and push the boundaries of racism" (17). To put it differently, not just activists pushed for the rights of unrestricted travel and equal access to public spaces; the leisurely journeys of tourists and the professional journeys of business travelers also challenged the status quo. Through travel, Black Americans defied the racialized spatial order and fought segregation in landscapes of travel and beyond. Segregation eventually became unconstitutional with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Two years later the *Green Book* ended publication.

While the opportunities for travel have increased in the post-civil-rights period, Black people's mobility is still circumscribed. Travel continues to be bound up with considerable risks for Black Americans as evidenced by the two travel alerts that were issued by *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) in 2017: One advised them to exercise caution when traveling through the state of Missouri due to the high number of race-based incidents; the other warned travelers about American Airlines' discriminatory and disrespectful treatment of Black passengers.[14] The issuing of these nationwide travel alerts was a novelty in the history of the civil rights organization. This and other examples, such as the reports on racial discrimination on Airbnb and the controversial screening programs of the Transportation Security Administration agents at US airports, illuminate the impairment of Black travel in the twenty-first century.

The immobilization of Black bodies continues today in different forms. For instance, the stop-and-frisk practice, which allows law enforcement officials to stop, question, search, and detain suspect passengers and drivers

14 The travel advisory for American Airlines was lifted after nine months.

without probable cause, affects people of color disproportionally. In 2013, this was brought to light by the federal class-action lawsuit *Floyd v. City of New York*, which revealed disparities in the pattern of who was stopped and interrogated by the New York Police Department. One reason for the stopping of predominantly young Black men was what the official police forms called "furtive movements," which were described as suspicious bodily moves or behavior that could, however, not be further specified (Cresswell, "Black Moves" 15). Obviously, this strikingly exposed the sustained and disturbing disparities in the treatment of different racial groups. The racial profiling and the harassment of Black drivers by the police have introduced the phrase 'Driving While Black' that has been adopted to other quotidian activities that people of color practice under the risk of being assaulted or intimidated.[15] The criminalization of Black movements is also linked to the police shootings of Black people and constitutes a key concern of the Black Lives Matter Movement formed in recent years. Rod Clare underscores that the issue of mobility is central in this struggle for equality and justice when he states, "Implicit in the rise of the BLM and its attendant demands and concerns is the long-standing issue of black mobility. That is, *where* can black people go and *when* can they go there?" (123).

Recent scholarship has brought attention to the historical roots of these forms of immobilization and shown how the criminalization of Black mobility and corporeal movements is tied to a history of constructing and perceiving Black bodies in racialized ways. Scholars have emphasized that the impairment of mobility by way of stops and interrogation, which have become commonplace for people of color, resonates with different forms of monitoring Black mobilities that are prefigured by earlier episodes in African American history. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), Simone Browne

15 The term 'Driving While Black' developed in public discourses of the 1990s and is an expression that plays on the phrase 'driving while intoxicated,' which describes the criminal offense of driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs. 'Driving While Black' refers to the disproportional risk of Black drivers being stopped, searched, or arrested by law enforcement officials for minor infractions or without apparent reason at all and is associated with racial profiling. Similar phrases have spun off—such as 'Walking While Black,' 'Shopping While Black,' and 'Living While Black'—that draw attention to the racial harassment people of color experience during quotidian activities. This issue has taken on new urgency as media reports of racial profiling sum up. See also A. Davis (1997) and Gilroy ("Driving While Black").

exposes how modern surveillance technologies and practices (such as biometric technologies and security practices at airports) descend from slavery, in particular the methods used to surveil, control, and subjugate (enslaved) Black people (for example, slave patrols, lantern laws, the requirement of identity papers and slave passes, slave tags, and the branding of bodies as a means of identification).[16] Moreover, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2020 [2012]), legal scholar Michelle Alexander outlines the immobilization of people of color in the United States through mass incarceration. Prisons represent sites where Black bodies are kept immobile. Alexander posits that the criminal justice system bears similarities to the racial caste system in the Jim Crow era when African Americans were treated as second-class citizens. Although Black im/mobility is not the focal point of her important study, she effectively illustrates how different forms of immobility are intertwined; in particular, the physical confinement and immobilization of people and the limited opportunities for upward social and economic mobility. Alexander explains that "the major institutions with which [African Americans] come into contact are designed to prevent their mobility. To put the matter starkly: The current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy" (16). Along these lines, Sheller argues that "[r]acialized mobility systems in the United States originate in the system of slavery and its coercive and violent controls over black bodies and mobilities" (*Mobility Justice* 60); these systems influence Black mobility to this day. In other words, the slave trade and enslavement continuously inform the lives of Black people and determine their options for movement and travel.

Thus far, I have outlined the diversity of different forms of travel that have played a crucial role in the African American experience. I have highlighted

16 Browne writes, "Current biometric technologies and slave branding, of course, are not one and the same; however, when we think of our contemporary moment when 'suspect' citizens, trusted travelers, prisoners, welfare recipients, and others are having their bodies informationalized by way of biometric surveillance, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes without consent or awareness, and then stored in large-scale, automated databases, some managed by the state and some owned by private interests, we can find histories of these accountings of the body in, for example, the inventory that is the *Book of Negroes*, slave ship manifests that served maritime insurance purposes, banks that issued insurance policies to slave owners against the loss of enslaved laborers, and branding as a technology of tracking blackness that sought to make certain bodies legible as property" (128).

how spatial movements are connected to freedom, liberation, justice, and citizenship, as is the case with the journeys of the enslaved to pursue their freedom, the nineteenth-century transit justice struggles, and the significance of mobility during the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, the travels of Black people are also associated with oppression, dehumanization, and immobilization. By considering various forms of travel and the meanings attached to them, it is possible to define travel in broader terms to include experiences of travel that have often gone unnoticed. In line with Cresswell's assertion that "[w]e cannot understand new mobilities […] without understanding old mobilities" ("Towards" 29), I maintain that it is indispensable to consider the above-presented implications of travel when analyzing contemporary narratives of travel. To be certain, the journeys of Black travelers that are analyzed in this study reflect a particular privilege, financially, if nothing else; however, their mobility should not be simply understood as a given. In the context of the cultural history of Black im/mobility, their physical mobility underscores the significance of travel for people of color, which is certainly not lost on these travelers. The associations of travel with limitation and confinement on one side, and freedom, self-determination, resistance, and citizenship on the other, are crucial for understanding the underlying connotations of journeys and movements that inform Black travel and its representation in literary production.

## 2. Diasporic Return and the Significance of Africa in the Black Imagination

> To the heirs of those uprooted people, Africa quickly became a distant, intangible entity, yet for many it also remained a pivotal constituent in their search for identity, a quest for cultural roots.
>
> —*Daria Tunca and Bénédicte Ledent, "The Power of a Singular Story: Narrating Africa and Its Diasporas"*

> What is Africa to me?
>
> —*Countee Cullen, "Heritage"*

Throughout American history, the continued denial of citizens' rights and privileges and the devaluation of Black lives have led African Americans to gravitate toward Africa in a variety of ways. For instance, they have traveled