

rope, and Asia began in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> While highly diverse, diasporic communities share certain characteristics, including “an emotional attachment to their ancestral land,” a community consciousness or sense of “identity that transcends geographic boundaries,” an awareness of their displacement, and an awareness of “their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside” that may incite the wish to return to the ancestral homeland (Palmer 29). In this study, I use the concept of the Black or African diaspora as an umbrella term to refer to Black or African American and Black British writers.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. On the Current State of Research

Considering that “[t]he traveller’s tale is as old as fiction itself” (Hulme and Youngs 2), it may come as a surprise that it was not until the 1980s that the study of travel writing began to develop from a niche area of study to an established research field. Sceptically eyed by literary scholars as a “middle-brow form” (Thompson, *Travel Writing* 3), it had long been dismissed as a genre of low esteem due to its mainstream popularity. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a boom in texts produced under the label of travel writing as well as the reissuing of classics and intensification of research on the topic. An impulse for the formation of the discipline of travel writing studies was generated by a shift that occurred in the humanities in the 1980s, designated as a theory revolution; literary scholars directed their attention away from established canons of dominant narratives and toward small narratives and texts from the margins to recover alternative voices that had previously been disregarded (Kuehn and Smethurst 1). Providing an expansive reservoir of texts, travel writing proved to be a rich resource for study, inspiring research across different fields, bridging literature, history, cultural studies, geography, and anthropology. Scholars such as Tim Youngs, Alasdair Pettinger, Carl Thompson, and Peter Hulme have spearheaded the research on travel writing over the past three decades and contributed immensely to

---

4 See also Robin Cohen (2008) for an introduction to the theory of diaspora and an overview of global diaspora studies. Cohen provides an analysis of different types of diaspora and the changing meaning of the concept in the twenty-first century.

5 Importantly, the labels ‘African American,’ ‘Black American,’ and ‘Black British’ are historically constructed categories that have been subject to change.

an ever-growing body of critical and historical analyses, journals, and series on this strikingly interdisciplinary field of research. Since then, numerous introductory works, companions, handbooks, article collections, and keyword collections are being published on a yearly basis.<sup>6</sup> That travel writing studies have developed into a prolific and burgeoning academic research area is also demonstrated by the establishment of academic journals and book series on the topic as well as its institutionalization at universities (for example, the *Centre for Travel Writing Studies* at Nottingham Trent University was founded in 2002).

The proliferation of travel writing studies since the 1980s is related to the rise of postcolonial studies, which has facilitated our understanding of the power dynamics between mobility, identity, and representation that are at work in travel writing. In particular, the works of Edward W. Said and Mary Louise Pratt are credited with providing the impetus to study travel writing as well as generating invaluable insights for the analysis of travel narratives that incited much of the subsequent scholarship in the field. Said's seminal 1978 publication *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* is a foundational text of postcolonial studies that introduced the genre into scholarly debates by making travel writing an essential part of the corpus. Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and his approaches to literary and cultural analysis, *Orientalism* brings the pivotal role of travel literature in European imperial projects to the fore and illustrates the mechanism at work between travel, discursive representation, knowledge, and power. The years following Said's publication saw a rapid growth of scholarship about travel writing and post-colonialism. Subsequent scholarship on travel writing predominantly focused on the works of European and North American explorers, colonizers, and missionaries to uncover the strategies used to legitimize colonization, revealing how travel writing was employed as an imperialist tool. Focusing on the literature of travel and exploration about South America and Africa from the mid-eighteenth century onward, Pratt's 1992 *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, a pathbreaking work on the connection between imperialism

---

6 For an introduction to the field of travel writing studies see *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), edited by Hulme and Youngs; *Travel Writing* (2011) by Carl Thompson, the four-volume publication *Travel Writing* (2012), edited by Youngs and Forsdick; for American travel writing, see *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009), edited by Bendixen and Hamera; for keywords, see *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies* (2019), edited by Forsdick et al.

and travel writing, extends Said's analyses and exposes the role of European travel writing in the production and dissemination of knowledge about what was pejoratively perceived as "the rest of the world" (5). Pratt's study is an important postcolonial critique of travel writing that highlights the connection between ideology and aesthetics. Since its publication, it has had a significant influence on ensuing works of travel studies, not least because it introduced new theoretical vocabulary that has been taken up in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Said's and Pratt's foundational work remains highly important within the field of travel writing studies and continues to energize and inspire new research.

Successive generations of critics have illuminated the ways in which the genre worked in colonial contexts and examined travel writing's suffusion with racial and imperial ideologies. For example, David Spurr (1993) outlines rhetorical strategies in travel narratives—a rhetoric of Empire—that define Western conceptions of the non-Western world. His and other works illustrate how travel writing, while claiming to depict other places, people, and cultures authentically, creates discourses that define a Western self in contrast to a non-Western Other. Traditionally, travel writing (re)affirms the supposed superiority and authority of the travel writer's own culture, values, and beliefs, while devaluing others. Representations of Africa in nineteenth-century Western travel writing are particularly potent examples of the discursive denigration, demonization, and exoticization of the continent and its people, aiming to highlight the superiority of the West and justify Western expansion, civilization, and intervention. A central tenet in critical works such as Tim Youngs's *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900* (1994) is that colonial travelogues tell us less about the places they purport to depict objectively and far more about the traveler-writer's own perspectives, ideologies, and assumptions. In light of these inquiries into the topic, it comes as no surprise that for quite some time the genre of travel writing has been "demonized" (Edwards and Graulund, "Introduction" 1) and considered a "cultural by-product of imperialism" (Iverson 201). This contestation is also connected to the fact that travel, and by extension travel writing, is often equated with "European(ized) travel" (Edwards and Graulund, "Introduction" 2). As a result, less attention has been paid to writers of non-European descent. Moreover, many scholars tend to focus on travel texts that feature voyages of exploration or leisurely and tourist journeys, neglecting involuntary movements and journeys undertaken out of necessity. As John D. Cox rightly cautions, "this restrictive focus defines the genre too narrowly, however, for people have long traveled and

written about their experiences for myriad reasons” (13). Importantly, focusing on diverse accounts of travel provides a more complicated and nuanced picture of the genre and its historical roles and purposes.

Postcolonial criticism, however, also enticed a reevaluation of perspectives and voices that had been silenced in traditional accounts of travel. Research on travel literature partly shifted its focus from revealing the colonial gaze and illustrating the imperial impulses in Westernized travelogues to narratives produced by (formerly) colonized people. This recuperative strand of critical work centers on the transgressive and liberatory potential of travel writing by marginalized authors and texts. For example, in their important work *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998), Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan stress the genre’s potential to articulate cultural critique and progressive political positions—an aspect that is also explored in Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund’s edited collection of essays *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations* (2011) and in their aforementioned study *Mobility at Large* (2012). While early scholarship in the field focused predominantly on pre-twentieth-century narratives of European travel and mobility, the scope has broadened and diversified. This is exemplified by publications such as *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* (2018), edited by Robert Clarke, which explores travel narratives by writers from formerly colonized nations, examining diverse topics such as the legacies of colonization, globalization, migration, gender, and race.

An increase in critical attention to travel writing by authors of African descent was motivated by the enormous influence of Paul Gilroy’s seminal work on cultural studies: *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) was an early intervention into discourses on travel that proposed seeing travel as a framework for thinking about the experiences of enslaved and free Black people in the Atlantic world. Gilroy warns against the creation of categories of different forms or types of travel, seeing that the experiences are far too complex. Pointing to the literary productions of Black intellectuals and writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, he stresses that their work illuminates “the folly of assigning uncoerced or recreational travel experiences only to whites while viewing black people’s experiences of displacement and relocation exclusively through the very different types of travelling undergone by refugees, migrants, and slaves” (133). Importantly, his work conceptualizes travel as a means to understand the experiences of Black subjects. With his examination of transatlantic biographies of artists, authors, and intellectuals, Gilroy presents a history of the Black Atlantic in which people of the African

diaspora are not perceived as victims and human commodities, but as autonomous individuals who participated in the making of a modern world. Furthermore, the significance of his work derives from its emphasis on the meaning of Africa in the creation of Black diasporic identity and the transnational and transcultural connections between people from different shores.

With these foundational contributions made by literary, postcolonial, and cultural studies scholars, the late 1990s witnessed an upsurge in interest in the travel writing by Black authors, as is demonstrated by three collections of primary texts: *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (1997), edited by Elaine Lee; *Always Elsewhere: Travel of the Black Atlantic* (1998), edited by Alasdair Pettinger; and *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (1998), edited by Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish. They deserve to be mentioned because they made significant contributions to the emergent interest in Black travel writing, which had, until then, rarely drawn scholarly attention. Lee's edited collection presents a multitude of extracts from female-authored travel writings—including, for example, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Audre Lorde—aiming to inspire and encourage other Black women to travel (for this purpose, the book also offers trip planning advice and includes a resource guide). Pettinger's compilation of travel texts is international in scope and covers the period from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century, presenting an abundance of literary forms of travel writing, including diaries, letters, autobiographies, memoirs, anthropology, poetry, and fictional accounts that reflect the diverse forms of mobility. Gilroy's Black Atlantic model provides the historical and geographical frame for *Always Elsewhere* because, as Pettinger writes, it "encourages us to think of the diaspora not as a river, gathering its tributaries in a relentless voyage to a final destination, but a vast ocean that touches many shores—Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, the Americas (North, Central and South)—criss-crossed in all directions by people, goods and ideas" ("Introduction" ix). Accordingly, the collection of primary texts underscores the diversity of diasporic travel experiences and their literary representation. Importantly, it incorporates accounts of the violent Atlantic crossing of captive Africans and narratives of formerly enslaved individuals, thus broadening the understanding of travel writing.

In a similar manner but with a somewhat narrower focus on African American travel writing, Griffin and Fish's anthology assembles a variety of travel narratives produced between the early nineteenth and the late twentieth century. The anthology's structure, which organizes the texts according to

geographical regions (Africa, France, and Russia) and types of travelers (such as adventurers, missionaries and activists, statesmen, scholars, journalists, and tourists) highlights the multiplicity of travel destinations as well as the different motives and forces that have compelled African Americans to travel around the world. All three anthologies celebrate the myriad narrative accounts of Black travel and fulfill a meaningful function with regard to “the broader project of ‘decolonizing’ or ‘democratizing’ travel literature” by “challenging the way the canon of ‘great works’ of travel writing has tended to automatically privilege white men” (Pettinger, “Introduction” xi-xii). Significantly, these works help to correct the notion that Black people have traveled less, or only for specific purposes, and produced fewer accounts of their travels compared with White travelers.

Another noteworthy publication is the 2003 special issue of the *BMA: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, edited by R. Victoria Arana. This is the first book-length collection of research articles about Black travel writing. Moreover, it includes a selection of short travel accounts, poems, and a resource guide listing books, Black professional organizations related to travel, festivals, and other resources for Black travelers. Adopting a transnational perspective, the contributions to this issue examine a host of Anglophone travel narratives and travel poems from different periods and geographies: for example, the eighteenth-century travel poems by Phillis Wheatley, the accounts of travel to Africa by twentieth-century intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, and postcolonial travel narratives by Caryl Phillips and Jamaica Kincaid. Equally diverse are the approaches to the texts and themes that are analyzed in the collection. However, while this special issue effectively sketches the breadth of Black travel writing and illustrates various approaches to study the texts, it lacks a conceptual focus and a systematization of travel writing.

More focused designs are presented in studies focusing on singular Black traveler-writers (such as Virginia Whatley Smith’s 2001 edited collection of essays on Richard Wright’s travel writing) as well as those that scrutinize particular regions (such as Maria Christina Ramos’s *Mapping the World Differently: African American Travel Writing About Spain*, 2015). For instance, in *Black and White Women’s Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations* (2004), Cheryl J. Fish considers the connection between travel, gender, and race and examines nineteenth-century travel narratives by African Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole and African American Nancy Prince, among others. Her analyses demonstrate how travel writing allowed women to represent themselves outside of dominant cultural narratives, opening up discursive spaces to articulate criticism

and speak with authority on private and public issues such as slavery and women's rights. The potential of travel writing as a venue for criticism is also a topic that Gary Totten tackles in his *African American Travel Narratives from Abroad: Mobility and Cultural Work in the Age of Jim Crow* (2015). Totten's discussion of the interrelation between identity and mobility is an important contribution to the study of Black travel writing. He examines different African American travelers, including Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, and Zora Neale Hurston, and their literary productions during the era of segregation. Totten's thesis resides in the argument that these writers accomplished cultural work through their mobility and writing as they challenged prevailing assumptions about the experience and history of African Americans, countering racial denigration and marginalization. *African American Travel Narratives from Abroad* is particularly relevant for the study at hand because it examines the ways travel writing has been strategically employed by African Americans; for instance, to protest segregation and discrimination, to articulate progressive political positions, to participate in transatlantic debates, to underscore (female) agency and professionalism, and to challenge stereotypes pertaining to Black mobility and representations thereof. My outline of the genre's trajectories and developments draws on Totten's findings.

The increasing attention devoted to Black travel writing is also reflected by a number of articles and the topic's inclusion in companions, introductions, and collections of travel literature (see, for example, Youngs, "Pushing" and "African American Travel;" Pettinger, "At Least One;" V. W. Smith, "African American Travel"; Shaw-Thornburg, 2011). Such chapter entries and articles focus exclusively on African American travel writing; nevertheless, they provide extremely helpful introductions to the topic as they highlight the significance of travel and travel writing for African Americans and identify recurring themes in travel writing (for example, the preoccupation with the meaning of home). Crucially, these scholars do not view African American travel narratives as a subgenre of the Anglo-American literary tradition of travel writing. Rather, they suggest reading these narratives as texts that emerged from and draw on the tradition of the slave narrative—that is, autobiographical accounts by formerly enslaved people that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As V. W. Smith writes, "African American travel writing draws its expression from the slave experience and the genre known as the slave narrative" ("African American Travel" 213). Similarly, Angela Shaw-Thornburg asserts that when the African American travel narrative is seen as a revision of the slave narrative genre, the important connection between au-

thority, mobility, and narrative comes to the fore (51). My study builds on this proposition and delineates how Black travel writing developed from the slave narrative.

Notwithstanding the increasing diversification of the field of travel writing studies, the accounts of Black travelers remain an understudied aspect of the genre. As scholars in the field have speculated, this neglect may be due to the classificatory challenges that this hybrid form of writing presents. However, classifying these texts not as travel writing but, for example, as autobiography, results in a lack of critical attention to “the significance of mobility and its relationship to subjectivity” (Griffin and Fish xiv). Other reasons for the scarcity of research on the subject are, as Youngs specifies, the persistent tendency to focus on coerced journeys of Black subjects rather than on the free and self-initiated forms of mobility, such as tourist journeys and professional travel; but also, postcolonial scholarship’s insufficient attention to African American travel writing—which addresses many of the prevalent themes that can be found in postcolonial literature (“Pushing,” 72).

Although there is a scarcity of critical investigations of the genre of Black travel writing in general, especially with regard to contemporary works, a significant amount of scholarship exists that focuses on African American travel to Africa. The majority of this scholarship is situated within historical frameworks and is concerned with the biographies of Black individuals and the historical, cultural, and political circumstances under which they traveled. Such studies, however, are often not text-based studies. In *Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa* (1999), Robert Coles examines nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American writers who left the United States and analyzes their reasons for leaving and the impact it had upon the writers’ lives, careers, and work as well as upon the Black American literary tradition. The study presents astute observations on the concept of exile and the phenomenon of expatriation that is prefigured in slave narratives. Still, it does not offer an in-depth literary analysis of the travel narratives nor does it conceptualize Black travel writing as a genre. Likewise, historian Kevin Kelley Gaines’s *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (2006) is first and foremost a historical study of transnational intellectual and social movements during a significant period in American and Ghanaian history.

Published in 2006, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* by historian James T. Campbell provides a comprehensive survey of the transnational voyages of African Americans over the course of two centuries.

Campbell situates the journeys of enslaved Africans, Black colonists, missionaries, political leaders, intellectuals, writers, and journalists within their historical and cultural contexts and skillfully reveals the motivation and reasons underlying their travels to Africa. Focusing on a variety of Black American travelers, Campbell reveals the significance of Africa for Black Americans and shows that, while travelers explored their relationship to Africa, their journeys also incited reflections on their relationship to the United States. His argument that Africa has served as an important terrain on which African-descended people have explored their relationship to American society and reflected on broader cultural developments is one of the major theses on which this study elaborates (xxiv). Along similar lines, Nemata Amelia I. Blyden's *African Americans and Africa: A New History* (2019) offers a detailed survey of African Americans' relation to the African continent, spanning from the era of slavery to the present and covering different, overlapping diasporas. Blyden lucidly illustrates how African Americans have engaged with the continent in different ways, examines their diverse and often conflicting attitudes toward Africa, and demonstrates how Black Americans' relationship to the continent has influenced the way they have identified and described themselves.

The studies by Campbell and Blyden touch on another area of interest upon which the present study builds, namely, the representations of Africa in the literature of Black writers. Marion Berghahn was among the first to explore African American writing about Africa in *The Image of Africa in Black American Literature* (1977). Her work is an important demonstration of how the White image of Africa—formed over centuries in the Western imagination and predicated on the alleged cultural superiority of the West while simultaneously degrading Africa—shapes Black Americans' perceptions of the continent. Tracing the images of Africa in the works of Black American writers from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, she reveals a range of attitudes toward the continents; these span from a complete disregard of Africa and an emphasis on their 'Americanness' to a radical identification with Africa that could even incite the writers' journey to the continent. John Cullen Gruesser has expanded on this topic: Building on his earlier work *White on Black: Contemporary Literature About Africa* (1992), in which he carves out conventions of Africanist writings by Anglo-American writers, *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (2000) highlights the different ways Black Americans engage with Africa in their literary productions. This study and his article "Afro-American Travel Literature and Africanist Discourse" (1990) detail how both fictional texts and nonfictional travel narratives

draw on established discourses about Africa that represent the continent either as a dream or nightmare. According to Gruesser, the fundamental impact of Africanist discourse has prevented African American writers from depicting a more nuanced picture of the African continent compared with that of their White counterparts ("Afro-American" 5; *Black on Black* 137-38). Considering the range of works analyzed, Gruesser's study is in need of updating to evaluate whether contemporary Black travel writers remain tied up in Africanist discourse or succeed in creating a more complex image of Africa.

Based on this survey of the current state of research on Black travel writing and African American journeys to Africa, the achievements, shortcomings, and remaining desiderata can be summarized as follows: Over the past two decades, travel writing studies have increasingly paid attention to texts produced by writers who depart from conventional notions of the (White, Western) traveler-explorer. African American travel writing in particular has come to be seen as a rich source for studying and understanding the Black diasporic experience in the United States. Scholars have pointed to the significance of travel in African American literature, the relationship between mobility and identity, and the influence of the accounts of formerly enslaved individuals on subsequent forms of travel writing. Yet, the existing scholarly contributions to the topic tend to offer only a limited overview of African American travel writing and its key themes. In many instances, these studies only refer to texts from the postbellum era or the narratives by Black Americans in the mid-twentieth century (established and well-known authors such as Wright, Du Bois, and Angelou are most often in the focus). Often, travel narratives are treated as a source for extracting the biographical and background information of the author, rather than being analyzed as texts with unique literary qualities. Another shortcoming is the insufficient connection drawn between the notion of mobility in these narratives and the construction of a traveling subjectivity. Moreover, although it has been asserted that geographical, imagined, spiritual, and emotional travel are of key importance to the diasporic experience in general and the literary output in particular, studies that treat the subject at a broad textual level are lacking. It is therefore unsurprising that no systematic study of the conventions and forms of Black travel writing exists. Another central deficit is the lack of analyses of contemporary Black travel narratives through a transnational lens. An exclusive focus on African American travelers fails to acknowledge the overarching themes and concerns that connect seemingly disparate Black travel texts and ignores the transnational dimension of the genre. Therefore, adopting

a transnational perspective, as this study does, makes it possible to discover breaks and continuities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In essence, no in-depth textual analysis and interpretation of the travel trope in Black travel narratives has been provided thus far. Therefore, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by providing a close textual analysis of Black travel narratives. It is my aim to extend and expand reflections on the trope of travel and exemplify the significance of volitional movement for the African American and Black British experience. By bringing together travel narratives by Black American and Black British authors, my aim is not to provide a comparison based on different national literary traditions, but rather to highlight recurring concerns, motifs, and forms in order to carve out the genre traits of the Black travel narrative.

### **3. Route Map: Theoretical Premises, Methods, and Objectives of this Study**

My interrogation of Black travel narratives builds on the premise that travel, as a lived reality and cultural practice, shapes literary traditions and that reciprocally, narrative representations of travel inspire and inform the actual journeys of individuals. Literary works are not removed from reality; they are not aesthetic objects or entities to be studied in isolation. Neither does literature simply respond to or reflect an extra-literary world, that is, experiences, events, and phenomena. Instead, literary texts generate, form, and shape our realities and cultures (Nünning and Nünning 16). Scholars such as Nelson Goodman (1978) and Jerome Bruner (1991) have drawn attention to the ways that our realities are constructed in and through language, emphasizing the significance of studying the intersections between narratives and cultures. The genre of travel writing in particular shows that there is a connection between text and travel: literature reflects these journeys and shapes them into narratives, while also being shaped by them. In this way, literary journeys influence actual journeys by informing collective assumptions and knowledge about places and by outlining travel paths.

The interplay between literary journeys in travel narratives and extra-literary journeys can be captured by the threefold concept of mimesis developed by Paul Ricœur (1984 [1983]), which facilitates our understanding of the transformation and representation of experience and social reality through narration. Taking his lead from Ricœur's concept, Ansgar Nünning productively