

back to the eighteenth-century slave narratives. A close examination of the crucial role that mobility and its intertwinement with ideas of freedom and the narrative creation of subjectivity play in the slave narrative will show that these are topics taken up in succeeding travel narratives. It further sketches out some of the most important and prevalent themes in Black travel writings and looks at the ways in which they are formally presented in the narratives. Approaching the eclectic texts that comprise the corpus of this study from the perspective of travel writing shows how these works draw on the formal and thematic traits of earlier travel writings by critically examining, responding to, and engaging with their predecessors.

2. The Transnational Slave Narrative and the Roots of Black Travel Writing

Travel—and mobility more broadly—is a key element in the literature of the Black diaspora. The earliest texts that foreground the centrality of mobility, physically and metaphorically, are the slave narratives. These “tales of escapes” produced by formerly enslaved people can indeed be read as the first Black travel narratives (Youngs, “African American Travel” 113). Emerging in the 1770s and 1780s, the primary purpose of the autobiographical accounts by self-emancipated individuals was to bring an end to the exploitation of enslaved Africans—first, by ending the transatlantic slave trade and later, by abolishing slavery altogether (Gould 11). Slave narratives developed into “popular and effective means of fighting slavery” (12) that exposed the horrors of enslavement and testified to the humanity of the enslaved, thus encouraging readers to support the cause of abolition. The texts gave rise to the African American literary tradition, but their influence on American literature in general and other national literary traditions can also not be overestimated. Virginia Whatley Smith expounds that early Black travelers “embarked upon unauthorized liberatory initiatives for the purposes of emancipation, re-identification, regeneration, or self-reliance” and “inaugurated an eclectic genre of domestic and transnational travel writing” (“African American Travel” 197). Importantly, despite traditional perceptions of the genre as a distinct African American literary form, I wish to stress the transnational dimension of the slave narrative. The assertion that this early form of Black travel writing is transnational in nature is based on the fact that the slave narrative genre did not just develop in an American context; instead, its genesis can be lo-

cated within the Atlantic world of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries. Accordingly, I conceptualize the slave narrative as a transnational genre and outline the thematic and narrative conventions it established, which shaped succeeding narratives of travel considerably.

In his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narrative* (1987), Gates emphasizes the exclusiveness of the slave narrative as an African American genre: “In the long history of human bondage, it was only the black slaves in the United States who [...] created a *genre* of literature that at once testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate” (“Introduction” ix). While Gates’s 1980s study remains relevant, its preoccupation with claiming the genre as an African American literary tradition and situating it within a specific national context must be challenged. Indeed, many definitions of and approaches to the slave narrative emanate from studies that locate the genre in an (African) American context. And, while it is certainly appropriate to frame the slave narrative as a particularly American literary form that engages with distinctively American issues (that is, slavery and the condition of Black people in America), it is important to note that the genre, like the system of slavery itself, is a transnational rather than an American one. Therefore, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature reflects the cultural exchanges between America, Africa, and Europe. Gates’s meditation on the exclusiveness of the genre as African American has thus been debated by scholars. Defying the idea that the slave narrative belongs to just one national literary tradition, George Elliott Clarke has disputed Gates’s claim and argued that the texts should not be understood as exclusive to the literature of the United States. In his article “‘This Is No Hearsay’: Reading the Canadian Slave Narratives” (2005), he describes a distinct Black Canadian literary tradition of the slave narrative—which is an equally tricky proposition—but also advocates for an international approach to slave narratives that recognizes their mobility across national and cultural borders. Helen Thomas identifies a “historical tendency to classify the slave narratives as either ‘African-American,’ ‘Afro-English,’ ‘Black,’ ‘Black-British,’ rather than prioritise their transatlantic characteristics and contexts” (374). However, when dealing with travel-themed literature written by highly mobile subjects, a persistent emphasis on its rootedness in particular national and cultural geographies may be counterproductive. Scholarship, therefore, has shifted its focus to the genre’s transnational character. Reflecting critical trends that reevaluate American literature in a global context, researchers have proposed approaches that consider the multiple locales in which slave

narratives were produced and that employ diverse theoretical paradigms to interpret them in order to acknowledge the genre's complexity (R. Thomas, "Locating Slave Narratives" 329; see also H. Thomas, 2016; Siemerling, 2015).

Declarations of a transnational turn gained currency over the last three decades, and such debates point to a transnational reassessment that has occurred in North American and literary studies, heralded by scholars like Donald E. Pease. Multiple approaches and concepts have developed that challenge established spatial conventions and call for a transcendence of the boundaries of nations as an analytical paradigm, which are considered inadequate when examining the complexities inherent in historical, cultural, and social bonds and interactions. Calling nation-centered approaches into question, scholars have proposed a 'worlding' of American studies, by which they mean the locating of American studies within transnational or global contexts (Scheiding and Seidl 2014).¹¹ This has propelled a rethinking of geographical dimensions from which the Atlantic world as a distinct field of study emerged.

Accordingly, transatlantic literary studies zoomed in on the cultural and historical ties between English and North American literature and stimulated discussions of a transatlantic literary history, canon formation, and new approaches to literature. Drawing attention to the connections and reciprocal relations between texts and de-emphasizing national literary traditions, transatlantic literary studies defy the premise that national "literature is a self-contained sphere, cut off from aesthetic developments, intellectual discourses and literary practices happening elsewhere" (Straub 3). In this regard, a transatlantic and transnational literary studies perspective aims to bring different national literatures together or even challenge the very notion of national literature. Furthermore, it emphasizes the connection that results from shared historical experiences, cultural exchanges, circulation of ideas and theories, as well as transatlantic interdependencies (these relations become especially apparent when focusing on the period of colonization when the routes

11 In their 2014 anthology *Worlding America*, Oliver Scheiding and Martin Seidl propose an approach to early American literature—based on the work of philosopher Martin Heidegger—that reexamines this literature in a global context. The authors focus not on the origination or the birthplace of a genre or of a national culture, but on "the constant movements of stories, writers, and themes from the seventeenth into the nineteenth centuries" (1). Capitalizing on circulation instead of origin, they move away from traditional categorizations of literature according to nation, authors, periods, or genres (8-11).

of commerce brought continents closer together). Such an approach facilitates an exploration of how literary movements and genres such as the slave narrative developed in parallel on both sides of the Atlantic (1-2).

In this context, Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic paradigm provides a productive approach to the study of transnational and transatlantic slave narratives, because it puts into focus the Atlantic Ocean as the space of cultural flows in which a Black cultural tradition took shape beyond the confines of nation and essentialist racial identities. *The Black Atlantic* illuminates a path to explore this tradition and theorize the Black diaspora. Transcending national and ethnic boundaries, slave narratives can be seen as literary expressions of the "transcultural, international formation" (4)—the Black Atlantic—that is characterized by the forced and voluntary journeys of people crossing the ocean, an ongoing cultural exchange generated by the transatlantic slave trade. The dispersal of African-descended people and the experience of trauma and displacement are central to the formation of a Black Atlantic culture. According to Gilroy, this shared history of slavery and racialized terror lies at the heart of a Black diasporic culture and has given rise to a distinct consciousness that finds expression in cultural and literary productions. Examining the transatlantic biographies of artists, writers, and intellectuals, Gilroy renders a history in which African-descended people figure not as victims and human commodities but as autonomous individuals "engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship" (*Black Atlantic* 17). Slave narratives are expressions of these struggles and products of the cultural exchanges of the early Atlantic world, constituting part of a transnational literary archive. As Kerry Sinanan argues, they "reflect the transatlantic relationships, histories, cultures and ideologies, and need to be approached as nexuses where these congruences and conflicts are manifest. Crucially, this dialectical history of the slave narrative demands that the genre itself be read as fluid and heterogeneous" (62).

Framing the slave narrative in transatlantic and transnational terms directs attention to the multiple ways in which people, ideas, political movements, and genres cross and transcend national boundaries. The biographies and works of African-descended people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveal the difficulty, or even inadequacy, of trying to create and confine mobile Black writers to rigid ethnic and national categorizations. Vincent Carretta reminds us that "[t]he anachronistic term 'African American' is not a category capacious enough to cover eighteenth-century English-speaking authors of African descent" ("Back" 11). Indeed, a glance at the lives and

works of prominent Black writers, travelers, and abolitionists demonstrates this assertion: for example, Ignatius Sancho (c. 1729–1780) was born aboard a slave ship sailing toward the West Indies and later taken to London, where he became a composer and an abolitionist writer. His letters, which were published shortly after his death, are among the earliest accounts of slavery written in English by a formerly enslaved person. Poet Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784), who is credited with figure-heading the African American literary tradition, was taken from her native home in West Africa to America, where she worked as an enslaved servant in the household of the Boston commercialist Wheatley. Unconventionally at the time, she was educated by the Wheatleys and later traveled in their son's company to London, where she published her first collection of poems. She gained transatlantic recognition both in Britain and America. Ottobah Cugoano (c. 1757–after 1791)—who was sold into slavery from present-day Ghana and shipped to Grenada, where he experienced first-hand the horrors of the slave plantations—became a prominent figure in eighteenth-century London, where he published an account that demanded the total and immediate abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of all enslaved Black people. Mary Prince (c. 1788–c. 1833), born into enslavement in Bermuda, seized her freedom while traveling to England with her enslaver. There, she published her book titled *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831), the first account of the life of a Black woman published in Britain.¹²

And then there is Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797), “the quintessential transatlantic African” (Carretta, “Back” 18) and an outstanding example of a transnational, Black Atlantic author. His 1789 slave narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* is considered one of the most significant literary productions of its time.¹³ The narrative is a recollection of his extensive travels, both in chains and free:

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- 12 The biographical information on Sancho, Wheatley, Cugoano, and Prince derives from the following sources: Fisch (2007), Carretta (“Introduction;” “Back”), and Carretta and Gould (2014).
 - 13 Carretta’s biographical research on Equiano has called the account’s veracity into question. Carretta discovered historical documents that indicate that Equiano was born in South Carolina, not in West Africa, and thus creatively reimagined his life in Africa and the Middle Passage (see Carretta, *Equiano the African*). This information certainly does not diminish the significance of Equiano’s testimony; rather, it serves as a reminder that in autobiographical (travel) writing the boundaries between factual and fictional writing are fluid.

As an enslaved subject, a servant to a naval officer, cabin boy, and finally as a free man, Equiano's travel routes crisscrossed the Atlantic and took him from North and Middle America to the West Indies and beyond. Eventually he settled in Britain, where he became an outspoken opponent of slavery and where his narrative was first published, making him a widely recognized individual. The title of Equiano's work hints at the fluid and shifting conceptions of self: 'Olaudah Equiano,' 'Gustavus Vassa,' 'the African.' These identity concepts defy easy national and racial categorization. In the text, the narrator Equiano defines himself in geographical and national terms as African and later as Black Briton, as well as in more diasporic terms as traveler, sailor, and abolitionist. As Elizabeth A. Bohls notes in *Slavery and the Politics of Place* (2014), geographical movement is a catalyst for personal transformation. She argues that Equiano's "narrative method, setting his earlier and later selves in dialogue, loosens or relativizes their spatial affiliations to produce a narrating consciousness that passes through diverse places, without becoming exclusively identified with one or another" (139). Equiano's self-conception expresses a plurality of cultural backgrounds and is representative of the complex identities of eighteenth-century Black travelers in the Atlantic world.

Examining Black writers and travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it becomes apparent that they should be understood as transatlantic writers and citizens because perceiving them simply as Black or African American and Black British authors diminishes their cultural impact. Together, the works of writers such as Sancho, Wheatley, Prince, and Equiano reveal their complex sense of self as Black Atlantic subjects, Africans, and, respectively, Black Americans and Black Britons. The letters, poems, and narratives produced by these early Black writers and travelers reflect their authors' heightened transnational mobility and foreground issues of migration, identity, and citizenship that are negotiated against the backdrop of varying land- and seascapes. Furthermore, they highlight the ways in which their ideological and abolitionist agendas developed as they traveled across the ocean. These writers transcended national borders in geographical, literary, and imaginative terms. This underscores the assertion that neither they nor their literary productions can be contained within rigid categories of nation, geography, and ethnicity. For this reason, their work is best characterized as a "literature of diasporic movement and cultural encounter" (Carretta and Gould 2). Slave narratives reflect the writers' mobility and the cultural encounters that took place in the early Atlantic world. Therefore, they should not be tied to only

one specific cultural, national, or geographic origin, but be perceived as a genre that took shape and was formed in the transnational space of the Black Atlantic.

A careful examination of the slave narrative genre reveals the importance of the travel trope and the multiple ways it permeates this literary form. However, while the constitutive elements of the genre have been insightfully discussed by many literary scholars, the aspect of mobility in all its myriad forms has received less sustained attention.¹⁴ In Chapter II, I have described the manifold implications of travel and mobility in the history of the African diaspora. Turning to the meaning of travel in the slave narrative, I outline how the concept of mobility presents an important paradigm for analysis. The principle aim I wish to achieve is to conceptualize the transnational slave narrative as a form of travel writing. Although several scholars have already made the connection and affirmed that contemporary Black travel writing is rooted in the slave narrative tradition, very few have explicitly treated slave narratives as travel narratives and explored the theme of travel at the thematic and aesthetic levels of the text in detail (a noteworthy exception is the 2005 study by John D. Cox). Reading slave narratives as travel writing highlights the significant role of mobility both in the journey from slavery to freedom and in the metaphorical journeys (that is, emotional and intellectual) represented in the texts.

The fact that the subject's journey from slavery to freedom is at the heart of the slave narrative supports the argument that the writings of the formerly enslaved represent an early form of Black travel writing. In addition, movement, both in terms of physical travel as well as metaphorical and figurative mobility and its imbrication with the writing of the self, are the defining aspects of slave narratives and are examined in the following. The link between narrative subjectivity and literacy (and/as freedom) has been a pivotal focal point in the study of the slave narrative. Scholars highlight the connection between physical freedom and intellectual striving by linking the development from enslaved to free individual to the acquisition of literacy. In their introduction to *The Slave's Narrative* (1985), Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contend that the genre "arose as a response to and refutation of claims that

14 For a concise overview of the conventions of the slave narrative, see James Olney's important article "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" (1984), especially 49-51.

blacks *could* not write” (xv). Referring to this statement, Pettinger adds that these texts also reflect the writers’ refutation of “the assumption that they could not *travel*” (“At Least One” 80). His remark points to the essential function of mobility in and for the slave narrative. Slave narratives attest to the mobility of Black people by depicting their travels as enslaved and as free people. What is more, they often foreground and celebrate their transcendence of the spatial and physical confinements imposed on them by depicting the pleasures of self-determined movement (80).

In *Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (2005), John D. Cox stresses the crucial role of mobility in the creation of these texts when he argues that for the authors of slave narratives, travel was a “precondition” to the writing and publication of their narratives (65). Slavery, Cox posits, “could not be simultaneously experienced and written” (65). Moreover, slave narratives “suggest that travel and slavery are mutually exclusive, so travel transforms the slave’s movements into self-directed action and consequently destroys slavery” (66). On the level of the text, free and autonomous mobility reflects the writers’ ability to take control over their lives, free themselves from slavery, and construct textual identities for themselves. Equiano’s *Narrative* offers an exemplary account of how the narrator evolves from an enslaved subject to an independent transatlantic traveler who directs his own movements. As his narrative effectively illustrates, for the writers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enslavement and freedom narratives the construction of identity and subjectivity “relies on the reclamation of travel and the progress from travelee to traveler, from object to subject, from property to propertied citizen” (Lucasi 523).

Stressing the connection between slavery and immobility, slave narratives often portray slavery as a condition that profoundly immobilizes people. By contrast, self-determined movements and autonomous travel signify emancipation, liberation, and freedom. Analyzing the function of the rhetoric of travel in antebellum slave narratives, Pettinger likewise asserts that “[i]f the voyage is figured as a journey from oppression to freedom, oppression and freedom themselves are defined in terms of the ability (or not) to move freely” (“What a Difference” 139). Escape, flight, and subversive bodily movements also represent resistance to the immobility imposed on Black people under slavery. Moreover, even when Black people emancipated themselves and acquired their freedom, the discrimination and injustices they experienced are represented as obstacles that limit their opportunities for movement. Referring to the mid-nineteenth-century narratives of Frederick Douglass and

William Wells Brown, Pettinger observes that “their oppression in America is most readily symbolized, not by the threat of kidnappers or the laws preventing them from voting or holding public office or the difficulty of getting a job or furthering their education, but by the restrictions on movement in public places” (“What a Difference” 139). For them, self-initiated and autonomous movement is tied to the acquisition of agency and with it the control over their own lives. In this way, their wish to move freely reflects their desire for empowerment and resistance to oppression.

Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* provides a preeminent example of how narrative connects freedom and mobility: Douglass’s yearning for freedom conflates with his desire for independent movement in his apostrophe to the ships sailing down the Chesapeake Bay toward the sea. This eloquent and emotionally charged passage may be read as one of the most powerful and memorable moments in Douglass’s narrative:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! [...] O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! [...] God, deliver me! Let me be free! [...] I will run away. I will not stand it. [...] Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! [...] I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. The steamboats steered in a north-east course from North Point. I will do the same; and when I get to the head of the bay, I will turn my canoe adrift, and walk straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania. When I get there, I shall not be required to have a pass; I can travel without being disturbed. (71-72)

The passage foregrounds different modes of movement—walking, running, swimming, flying—and emphasizes the importance of self-initiated mobility for the narrator. Notably, the narrative associates Douglass’s enslavement, his ‘unfreedom,’ with immobility and imprisonment, which is signified by the chains and shackles that tie him down. By contrast, the mobility of the ships, which are loosed from the moorings and free to sail around the world, emerges as an emblem of freedom and liberty. Douglass envies the mobility of the sailing ships and contrasts their movements to his own: The ships’ movements are supported by “the gentle gale” so that they “move merrily” and without force; Douglass’s movements, however, are not only limited but also

determined by “the bloody whip” of his vicious enslavers (Cox 76; see also V. W. Smith, “African American Travel” 198-99). The passage reveals that the narrator’s vision of freedom is one of undisturbed travel, of mobility unlimited by confinements such as slave passes. His own physical mobility is therefore perceived as an essential step for acquiring his freedom. Thus, the narrative links freedom from slavery, domination, and oppression to the ability to physically move according to one’s wishes.

Douglass’s address to the sailboats takes place at a time during which he experiences an extreme form of enslavement, being tamed and “broken in body, soul, and spirit” (*Narrative* 70) by a vicious overseer. The sight of the mobile, outward-bound sailboats has a powerful effect on the narrator and inspires and renews his will to escape. Revitalized by the sight, he regains his determination to liberate himself. While he initially juxtaposes their mobility with his own immobility, as the passage progresses he increasingly aligns himself with their movements. The passage then moves from the narrator’s contemplation of his current condition (immobilized or forced to move against his will) to his rising desire for mobility, his desperate pleading with God (“Let me be free”), and finally to his assertive resolution to escape (“I will run away”). It illustrates how the narrator increasingly takes control over his life. What begins as an address to the vessels turns into Douglass’s “personal Declaration of Independence” (Cox 75). This excerpt anticipates his subsequent fight with the enslaver who broke him, which follows shortly after the above scene, and which eventually leads to his attainment of emotional, spiritual, and physical freedom.

The slave narrative represents the transformation of the enslaved subject into an individual able to exert control over their own movements, which can be described as a “transformation from bound slave to free traveler” (Cox 16). The titles of many slave narratives underline the transformation of the formerly enslaved subject. Furthermore, the use of phrases such as ‘ex-slaves,’ ‘escaped slaves,’ ‘runaway slaves,’ and ‘fugitive slaves’ shows that the experience of slavery could only be narrated and retold for others “from a space at least partially removed from the institution itself” (65). This signals a profound break between the identity of an enslaved subject and that of a free one. As Cox emphasizes, “The significance and power of these different phrases used to describe slaves who have effected self-directed travel highlight the centrality of movement to the very definition of slavery” (65). The successful escape and the attainment of freedom are also frequently accompanied by the re-naming of the subject. In literary representations of slavery, travel advances

into a means of resistance and subversion of the statutes of slavery because it defies the immobility imposed on the subject as well as the forced movements determined by the enslavers.

In the narratives produced by Black Americans, the thematic trajectory from bondage to freedom is reflected by the subject's pursuit of agency and control over their mobility and their geographical journey from the slaveholding states of the South to the free states in the North and Canada. Analyzing canonical stories and myths in African American literature, Robert Stepto conceptualizes the narratives of self-emancipated individuals as narratives of ascent. The vertical trope, up from slavery, is mirrored in the narrative pattern and the subject's spatial journey from South to North. Illuminating the significance of the representation of space, Stepto draws attention to the ways geography and landscape are imbued with special meaning: The "symbolic geography" in the slave narrative is often an expression and manifestation of social structures (167-68). For example, the American South and the North emerge as significant geographical and symbolic entities. The narrative space of the American South represents racial terror, dispossession, injustice, and economic exploitation. However, as a highly complex and ambiguous literary spatial formation, the South also represents a homeland for African Americans that encompasses their histories and experiences. By contrast, the North—including Canada, or 'Canaan Land'—figures as a realm of relative freedom, which is imagined as 'the free soil,' the 'Promised Land,' and the destination of the freedom seekers of the Underground Railroad. The imagery of the spatial divide between the South and the North figures prominently in many slave narratives. Yet, it has also been inverted when the narrative trajectory does not follow the South to North trajectory or when the freedom associated with the North is revealed to be elusive. For example, Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) exposes the pervasive forms of racial discrimination and segregation in the supposedly free northern states. The narrator's experiences betray the image of the North as a safe refuge for formerly enslaved and self-emancipated people who feel a constant threat of recapture and re-enslavement—a result of the Fugitive Slave Act.¹⁵

15 There are other examples of slave narratives that do not follow the established course from bondage to freedom, from the South to the North, from enslaved subject to independent traveler, and from illiteracy to literacy. Solomon Northup's 1853 slave nar-

The slave narrative links the liberatory journey from bondage to freedom, mirrored in the narrator's physical and geographical mobility, to the metaphorical journey of intellectual development and the acquisition of literacy. Like self-determined, autonomous mobility, the pursuit of literacy is presented in the slave narrative as an emancipatory act of defiance and resistance against the laws of enslavement. During the antebellum period, anti-literacy laws served as means of controlling the enslaved population and Black people violated these laws at great risk.¹⁶ The thematic significance of literacy to the humanity of the enslaved has long been recognized in scholarly interrogations of the slave narrative genre. As Davis and Gates phrase it, autobiographical writing allowed formerly enslaved people to write themselves "into the human community through the action of first-person narration" (xiii). Obtaining a public voice and writerly authority is represented as a pathway to freedom. The self-emancipated individual becomes the author of their own story through the creation of a textual identity—the act of writing oneself into being—and claims selfhood, humanity, and authority in a world that had persistently denied them the status of a free individual and human being. Douglass masterfully depicts the inextricable connection between literacy, freedom, and identity by evoking the image of a pen that could be placed in the cracks on his feet stemming from the frostbite wounds he suffered as a child: "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes" (*Narrative* 39). Douglass links the physical body, which has been violated by his enslavers, to the act of writing. The pen—a symbolic instrument with which he attends to the wounds afflicted by slavery—is used as a tool to write himself into existence. Through the textual creation of a self, he attains psychological freedom (see also Olney 55). The quest for freedom, therefore, is coupled with corporeal mobility and with the development of an authorial voice.

rative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, is a case in point; it tells the story of Solomon, a freeborn New Yorker, who is kidnapped in Washington, DC, and sold into slavery.

- 16 Anti-literacy laws forbade enslaved people to learn how to read and write. They were established by Whites out of the fear that literacy and education would endanger the institution of slavery. Especially southern plantation owners feared that when enslaved people were able to communicate via written messages, they would plan escapes and incite revolts and insurrections. Moreover, the education of Black people challenged Whites' racist belief in Black inferiority, which served as an argument to justify slavery.

Crucially, the act of writing is an act of self-creation and a textual assertion of the subject's existence. This claim to existence—pronounced straightforwardly by the words “I was born”—can be found in the works of Douglass, Jacobs, Brown, and many others. Such affirmation of subjecthood together with the portraits of the authors, their signatures, and authenticating documents, contribute to the authors' existential claims of being in the world (Olney 52). The self-authored narrative thus emerged as a corrective to the externally imposed identity constructs created by a racially oppressive society. As the authors of slave narratives wrote themselves into being, they became mobile in the sense that they could escape and shed the fixed and limiting definitions that had been forced upon them and articulate new Black subjectivities. Furthermore, slave narratives highlight the acquisition of literacy because it is through writing that their authors were able to fashion a public persona. While they had been literally and metaphorically confined to a place and position in society, in their writing they were able to assume different roles. Moreover, authors of slave narratives wrote against White perceptions of Blackness as inferior, asserting their intellectual and moral authority to write about issues of personal and public relevance (see also Davis and Gates xxvi). This attests to the contestation that, while “[f]irst and foremost, the slave narrative is a text with a purpose: the end of slavery” (Fisch 2), it also fulfilled crucial functions relating to identity formation: Therefore, these texts were both political documents and literary records concerned with the creation and expression of Black identities.

In an insightful analysis of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Cox makes a convincing case for the significance of physical mobility in the attainment of literacy and brings to the fore once again the importance of travel in the slave narrative. Cox places Douglass's metaphorical journey from illiteracy to authorship into the context of physical and spatial movements that permeate the text (71). It is thus worth citing at length his astute analysis of a passage of Douglass's text in which the narrator relates his method of acquiring reading skills. Douglass expounds how, while running errands and moving according to the commands and instructions of his enslaver, he befriended children on the street, making them his teachers and exchanging bread for knowledge and reading lessons. Emphasizing the significance of mobility and its connection to literacy in Douglass's description of how he learned to read, Cox explains,

Douglass performs the movement his master has demanded but alters the purpose to his own advantage. Thus, Douglass is able to perform several types of movement simultaneously, not only geographical but also social, racial, and intellectual. In the streets, where the rigid strictures (and structures) of the slave household are in some flux, Douglass crosses social and racial boundaries, by befriending white children [...]. [T]hese children are teachers even before they begin to instruct Douglass in reading, for their ability to wander these urban streets at will exemplifies for Douglass the paradigmatic freedom of travel he seeks eventually to attain. [...] Douglass learns to read 'at different times and in different places' [...], in those spatial and temporal spaces that existed on the margins of slave ideology. (72-73)

As Cox demonstrates, it is the narrator's ability to move and transcend social and racial boundaries that enables his intellectual and educational journey. Like the physical flight from slavery that transforms an enslaved person into an autonomous mobile subject, the acquisition of literacy facilitates textual self-creation and demonstrates agency and empowerment.

Once they were free from the immobilizing forces of slavery, many Black people traveled extensively to campaign for abolition and to make their messages read and heard. Through travel and writing, Black abolitionists and activists were able to participate in transnational political and social discourses. For them, domestic and overseas travel was a way to advocate for the anti-slavery cause and to find support for the fight against slavery. Black activist travelers such as Equiano and Douglass presented arguments against slavery to the public by demonstrating that they themselves were examples that challenged the widespread belief in Black inferiority. Importantly, they also illustrated that an African American culture had developed despite devastating circumstances. In addition to relating personal experiences of suffering, narrators spoke on behalf of other enslaved people, expressing a collective voice and identity. With the goal to alleviate Black people's collective suffering and pain, Black abolitionist writers sought to reveal to the public the evils of the system of slavery. Relating the horrors of slavery in painstakingly vivid descriptions, their testimonies documented and exposed the injustices of the systems and the wrongdoings of enslavers. For example, Jacobs's *Incidents*, the first female-authored slave narrative published in the United States, raised awareness of Black suffering, in particular how slavery affected women. The

narrative testified to the interlocking system of oppression and exploitation,¹⁷ while defying the assumption that enslaved women were mere victims. Fighting “against oppressive sexual and racial authority,” it depicts the “gendered transformation” of Linda Brent, the pseudonym under which Jacobs wrote, “from helpless slave girl to woman with some control over her life” (McKay 97).

On the other side of the Atlantic, Mary Prince sought to educate the English reading public who had been oblivious to the appalling conditions under which enslaved people worked as domestic or field laborers in the Turks Islands salt ponds (Williamson 1). Prince, who traveled with her enslaver from Bermuda to England, where she seized her freedom, exposed in her 1831 slave narrative the horrors of enslavement she experienced in the West Indies. Her writing illustrates how the slave narrative served as a venue to formally articulate critique. In her narrative, Prince addresses her readers with a sentimental appeal:

Oh the horrors of slavery!—How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave—I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free. (*History* 25)

To persuade readers to join the fight against slavery, Prince stresses the authority of experience, specifically her experience as an enslaved subject in the British colonies. Prince’s mobile Black body bears testimony to the horrors of slavery and her narrative is emotional, moral, and political in its appeal to the reader. Like Prince, others also presented themselves as eyewitnesses to the sufferings of enslaved people and thereby established credibility, making it possible to enter debates concerning the humanity of African-descended people and discourses on race and freedom. Their mobility, both enforced and voluntary, was a source of knowledge on which they drew to educate people about the horrors of slavery and to persuade them that slavery was harmful for all members of society, both enslaved and free.

17 In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991), sociologist Patricia Hill Collins coined the phrase “interlocking system of oppression” (44) in her depiction of Black American women’s oppression that results from the imbrication of categories such as race, gender, and class.

As the above meditation on the slave narrative has shown, the intertwining of movement and travel, subjectivity, agency, resistance, and freedom plays a crucial role in the narratives of formerly enslaved subjects. In these narratives, which can be read as early forms of Black travel writing, the escape from slavery is coupled with the quest for freedom and self-assertion. For the authors of slave narratives, the act of writing was a way to assert their humanity and create a textual identity for themselves. Travel as well as travel writing advanced to means of resistance and the narrative became a vehicle to voice criticism and call for social action. The slave narrative's thematic complexes, narrative patterns, and modes of writing provided literary templates for other texts. Robert Coles underscores that the narratives produced by these early travelers and freedom seekers “created a model that future black writers built upon or extended” (11). For example, African American novels of the 1960s and 1970s revisited elements of the slave narrative and reconfigured its generic conventions. Black British and Black Canadian authors also took up developing and expanding the genre (see, for example, Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*, 1991; Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, 2007; Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*, 2010). These neo-slave narratives are concerned with slavery and its effects in the Atlantic world and beyond and testify to the significance and vitality of the slave narrative's legacy.¹⁸ In many contemporary novels on the subject, travel is a ubiquitous motif—metaphorically (as time travel in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, 1979) and as a major theme and structural element, determining the plot and narrative design (for example, the violent journey across the Atlantic in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, 1990 and the travels of the protagonists in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, 2016 and Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*, 2018).

3. Developments and Trajectories

Thus far, I have outlined the formation of Black travel writing and traced back its roots to the slave narratives that emerged in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The slave narrative, I have argued, should be understood as a transnational, rather than a national, literary tradition that

18 See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) for a detailed account of the genre of the neo-slave narrative.