

3. Searching for Home

Home, the place you know, the place that knows you, the place you leave, the place to which you return, that place filled with memories and dreams, a place of ties and connections, that special hearth.

—Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate*

Black travel writing has traditionally been a genre used to explore personal conflicts and deeply personal questions of home, belonging, and displacement. The previous chapter demonstrated that travel abroad yields reflections on the place called 'home.' For Harris and Richburg, there is no doubt that their home is the United States, both as a material and symbolic space, to which they gladly return once their time in Africa comes to an end. In *Native Stranger* and *Out of America*, therefore, home and abroad are easily distinguished. Likewise, traditional travel accounts by White European or Western travelers conceptualize the journey in opposition to home, the point of origin. However, in many Black travel narratives, the boundaries or binary spatial divisions between home/familiar and away/foreign are fluid, often disrupting the spatial encoding of home and abroad that underpins much travel writing. Arguably, the destabilization of a sense of home that is tied to a particular place, a stable point of reference, is something that is found in a wide range of modern and postmodern travel narratives. It results from that fact that, as Thompson aptly remarks, “[w]e live, after all, in an era of increasing globalisation, in which mobility, travel and cross-cultural contact are facts of life, and an everyday reality, for many people” (*Travel Writing* 2).¹³ The conception of home as a fixed, private, and safe place, as well as a shelter and refuge to which the traveling subject can always return, has not only been called into question but has been deemed illusory when considering how many present-day lives are shaped by migration, exile, dislocation, and displacement.¹⁴ As Elizabeth Houston Jones asserts in *Spaces of Belonging* (2007), “Interlinked with

13 Despite the emphasis on the increasing global interconnectedness and the heightened global mobility that is said to characterize the contemporary era, it has to be acknowledged that nationalizing forces continue to persist and even increase.

14 The notion of home as stable, safe, and secure reveals specific cultural and historical assumptions and values that have long been contested, especially in feminist scholarship, which has countered positive ascriptions to home and instead conceptualized it as a site of patriarchal oppression, confinement, abuse, and violence (Blunt and Dowling 14-21).

this search for a personal space of emotional investment that can be labelled 'home' is often a desire to establish a sense of belonging in cultural or national space" (56-57) that is informed by nostalgic ideas of cultural homogeneity (58). Such stable or naturalized notions of home and belonging may only, if at all, apply to a privileged minority (56).

"Home is *both* a place/physical location *and* a set of feelings" (Blunt and Dowling 22), and therefore must be understood in literal as well as metaphorical terms. Because feelings of home and belonging are highly personalized, home is "difficult to define, let alone theorize, *precisely because it is so very specific*, so subjective and contextual" (Graulund 118). The contestation that home is elusive, complex, ambiguous, and therefore difficult to define pertains to diasporic populations in particular. For diasporic subjects, home can be a distant, unknown place such as Africa, which figures as the originary homeland in the Black cultural imagination (see ch. II, sec. 2). However, it also refers to the place that travelers leave behind, namely their country of birth and residency. Contemporary Black travel writing, like other diasporic and migrant literatures, reveals a preoccupation with questions of home and belonging. Pettinger observes that while "[h]ome' rarely features in conventional travel writing, for its certainties (safe but boring) can usually be taken for granted" ("Introduction" xvii), it is much more difficult for Black travel writers to locate and define it. Therefore, home "is the subject of a much wider range of emotions—nostalgia, indifference, exasperation, perplexity, embarrassment" (xvii). The desire to make sense of these emotions and the longing for an understanding of where or what home is are among the prevalent concerns of many Black travel narratives, especially those focused on the journey of a postcolonial subject. As Korte underscores, "To many postcolonial travellers, then, the question of defining one's home still seems to be more urgent than for other travellers, and the search for a home may even be their primary motive for travel" (170). This certainly holds true for a number of works by British writers of Caribbean descent, such as Ferdinand Dennis, V. S. Naipaul, Caryl Phillips, and Charlotte Williams, to name but a few. A potent example is Williams's 2003 travel narrative *Sugar and Slate* that examines and negotiates the narrators varying attachment to her native Wales, her father's country of birth, Guyana, and the symbolic connection she has to Africa as a diasporic subject. In the preface to *Sugar and Slate*, Williams explains that "what began as an account of a journey became an account of a confrontation with myself and with the idea of Wales and Welshness."

The two travel narratives on which this chapter focuses—Ekow Eshun’s *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in Africa and Beyond* (2005) and Emily Raboteau’s *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013)—signal already in the titles that home, or more precisely the search for home, is a central theme of the texts. For both travelers, an uneasy relationship with and estrangement from their ‘home country,’ Britain and the United States, respectively, incite their journeys: Eshun, a British-born journalist, author, broadcaster, and former director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, travels across his parents’ native Ghana in the hope of finding an alternative home that frees him from the confinements of racism and discrimination he experiences in London. For Raboteau, a professor of creative writing, it is her biracial ancestry and the rootlessness that arises as a result of her family’s history of displacement that prompt her search for a home, inciting her exploration of the idea of a Promised Land and the exodus movements throughout the African diaspora. In *Black Gold of the Sun* and *Searching for Zion* the individual journey of the narrator and the search for home are related to other people’s quests, both historical and contemporary. What further characterizes the travelogues is the high degree of introspection and the focus on the travel writers’ personal lives unraveling against the backdrop of the journey. Travel abroad thus encourages the narrators to rethink their previous conceptions of home and belonging.

3.1 Ekow Eshun’s *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in Africa and Beyond* (2005)

The question “Where are you from?” (1) opens *Black Gold of the Sun*.¹⁵ On a British Airways flight from London to Accra, the question is fired at Eshun by his seatmate, a businessman from Ghana. Eshun responds with “the usual line,” informing him that his parents are Ghanaian but that he was born in Britain (2). “Then you are coming home, my brother,” “Akwaba,” “Welcome home” (2), exclaims his seatmate. The address of welcome that is extended

15 It should be mentioned that the book was initially published with a slightly different subtitle, namely ‘Searching for Home in England and Africa.’ What inspired the title change from ‘England and Africa’ to ‘Africa and Beyond’ for later editions of the book is not addressed in the text and leaves room for interpretation. Read as a travel narrative that places its subject within a transnational context of Black travel and travel writing, the more capacious title of later editions seems well fitted.

to Eshun elicits notions of homecoming that are immediately countered by the narrator's evocative reflections on home and belonging that follow in the form of an internal dialogue:

As we drained the whisky I thought of all the other ways I could have answered his question.
 Where are you from?
 I don't know.
 That's why I'm on this plane.
 That's why I'm going to Ghana.
 Because I have no home. (*Black Gold* 2)

The question, 'Where are you from?,' has followed Eshun since his childhood and it reappears throughout the narrative, retaining a sense of urgency.¹⁶ This vexed question and Eshun's inability to respond with an adequate answer—one that encompasses the full complexity of his life—confronts the narrator with his feelings of homelessness and displacement: "I have no home" (2). As this passage shows, homelessness and the search for home in Ghana are the key themes of the travel narrative.¹⁷ The quest motif is fittingly underscored by the highly symbolic setting in which this opening scene takes place—on the airplane in motion, suspended between continents and detached from a fixed point of reference. This setting not only evokes the key locations in Eshun's life, namely Britain and Ghana, between which the story alternates. It also affords the narrator a vantage point from which he surveys the ocean beneath him and introduces the other central topics of the

16 For instance, the narrator recalls a conversation he had with the mother of his schoolmate: "And what tribe are you from, dear?" 'I live on Beverly Drive, Mrs O'Rourke.' 'Yes, dear, but where are you *really* from?'" (*Black Gold* 65-66).

17 An astonishingly similar incident is narrated in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*: While on the plane from London to Accra, Phillips is asked where he is from by the Ghanaian businessman sitting next to him. The narrator contemplates, "The question. The problem question for those of us who have grown up in societies which define themselves by excluding others. Usually us. A coded question. Are you one of us? Are you one of ours? Where are you from? Where are you *really* from? [...] Does he mean, who am I? Does he mean, do I belong? I make the familiar flustered attempt to answer *the question*" (*Atlantic Sound* 98). In contrast to Eshun's very personal response to the question, Phillips's contemplation refers to a larger context and suggests that feelings of unbelonging are a consequence of the Black diaspora's history of movement and migration that is characterized by displacement and exclusion.

text. Looking out the window at the Atlantic, he imagines the paths of ships that have once crossed the sea, connecting Africa, Europe, America, and the Caribbean, thereby conjuring a Black Atlantic imagery: “It was impossible to tell where the connections began or ended. The shape of the continents themselves seemed to blur, as a result of centuries of commerce and migration, both voluntary and forced. [...] The past is not history [...]. It beats against the present like the tide” (*Black Gold* 7). In this passage, the narrative’s concern with the history of the Black diaspora and the slave trade are anticipated and connected to personal explorations of the traveling and writing self, on which my analysis focuses.

This short episode placed at the very beginning of this richly layered narrative serves to frame *Black Gold of the Sun* as a quest narrative that foregrounds the narrator’s preoccupation with questions of belonging and his desire to find a place he can call home. The search for home is not simply a quest for home in the material sense but involves Eshun’s longing for a place where he is not made to feel like an outsider. Having grown up in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, Eshun found himself subject to pervasive racism and prejudice. “Even though my roots were in Britain it was a white country, and I’d felt like an outsider there all my life” (*Black Gold* 5), writes the narrator. He desperately hopes that “[i]n Ghana [he]’d be another face in the crowd. Anonymity meant the freedom to be yourself, not the product of someone else’s prejudice” (5). The belief that Ghana will allow him to truly be who he is without the societal confinements and limited conceptions of self that are available for a Black person in Britain echoes the sentiment of earlier travelers. Many hoped to discover themselves anew in a place where their appearance would not make them outsiders. The hope of finding the freedom to be himself in Ghana points to Eshun’s desire to discover who he is and who he can be without the limitations imposed on him in Britain. Thus, the narrator’s forceful declaration that he wants to claim Africa as his home—“I wanted to discover the whole country. I wanted to call it home” (5)—introduces another purpose of his journey, which he recognizes only much later: That the search for “[h]ome was only part of it. [...] I was also searching for me” (128-29). In this regard, *Black Gold of the Sun* addresses the prevailing themes that characterize much Black travel writing, including the exploration of the Black mobile subject, the marginalization in the country of birth, and the (re)turn to Africa in search of an alternative homeland.

It has already been emphasized that a truism of travel writing is that it interweaves the traveler’s literal journey with an interior exploration (see, for

example, Birkett and Wheeler viii). This ‘inner journey’ is prominently foregrounded in *Black Gold of the Sun* and highlights how travel writing “involve[s] a dimension of ‘life writing’ (that is, a form of autobiographical and/or biographical writing)” (Cooke 15).¹⁸ Eshun’s journey to Ghana and his search for home are inextricably intertwined with the writing of his own life story. The narrative is composed of alternating sections—one focuses on the actual journey and the other on a symbolic journey into the narrator’s past. The two major narrative threads, the journey across Ghana and the story of Eshun’s coming-of-age, are interwoven, making the narrative structure more complex compared with those of the previously analyzed works. In the narrative, travel does not merely figure at a thematic level and as a driving force of the story; the journey motif also functions as the organizing principle of the text. The narrative’s very composition, its aesthetic, is structured as a form of travel that generates an ongoing passing between times and locations.

The narrative thread focusing on Eshun’s journey develops chronologically, beginning with the narrator’s flight to Accra, followed by his travels along the Atlantic coast and to Kumasi and Bolgatanga in the sub-Saharan North of Ghana, and finally ends with his return to London. The journey through Ghana follows the planned itinerary that the narrator spells out before his arrival in Accra:

I’d spend the first two [weeks] exploring Accra, the capital. After that I’d travel west along the shoreline of Elmina, the town where Europeans first settled on African land in 1482. Then I could visit the neighbouring town of Cape Coast, Ghana’s former capital, where my parents grew up. [...] I’d go to Kumasi, capital of the old Asante empire, in Ghana’s central region. Then I’d keep going all the way through the arid northern plains until I reached the border with Burkina Faso. (*Black Gold* 5)

Eshun travels to various locations and cultural sites that are imbued with historical significance—such as Elmina Castle, a slave camp in Bolgatanga, and the former home of Du Bois in Accra, now turned into a museum—and associated with the history of Ghana, especially the history of the slave trade.

18 See also Youngs’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, especially chapter 7 titled “Inner Journeys.” He argues that in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British travel writing, self-investigation and introspection, which are mediated through the inner journey, are responses to “modern political and cultural developments” connected to the end of formal empire and Britain’s post-imperial role (103).

That the narrative is not confined to Eshun's personal journey but also involves a journey into the collective past becomes apparent in his outlining of the planned itinerary. Thus, embedded within this narrative thread are accounts of Ghanaian history, in particular the history of the trading of enslaved Africans, the "Black gold," to which the title refers. The description further signals the importance of personal and collective memory that is bound to place. As I will show, the journey unearths not only Eshun's personal memory of his childhood and young adulthood years that he has tried to forget but also stories of the Eshun family (for example, his parents' story is reimagined and retold), as well as cultural memories of the slave trade and more recent Ghanaian history. Through the braided structure of the narrative, the personal and historical are interwoven with the purpose of recovering suppressed memories and silenced stories of the past and exploring the effects of political and economic exploitation and oppression.

The autobiographical thread bears resemblance to a coming-of-age story but does not unfold in a strictly chronological fashion. Rather, the structure affords an arrangement and rearrangement of key moments and turning points in Eshun's life: his painful experiences with racism, the resulting psychological crisis with which he struggled, as well as the displacement of the Eshun family during Ghana's 1979 coup. Because Eshun's father worked as a Ghanaian diplomat, holding a post at the Ghana High Commission in London, the family temporarily resided in England but was unable to return to their home country once the previous regime in Ghana was overthrown. While the coup is only briefly addressed in the narrative, its impact and dire consequences are powerfully described as the moment when Eshun's "childhood ended" and family photo albums "go blank" (*Black Gold* 71). This event, which turned the family's temporary stay in Britain into a permanent one, substantially influenced them by transforming them first into exiles and later into immigrants. The repression of the memories of the coup, the family's detainment in London, and the narrator's experiences of racism, all of which are imbricated with feelings "of shame and anger and regret" (124), is Eshun's response to this personal trauma. His journey to Ghana, then, becomes a way of excavating the memories of his past and working through them. By integrating these painful memories into the larger story of self-discovery, travel writing evolves into a means of working through personal trauma and conflict. Together with the explorations of Ghana's past, the book maps an internal journey of coming to terms with traumatic histories, both personal and collective.

The piecing together of Eshun's life story is introduced with the following words:

My name is Ekow Eshun. That's a story in itself. Ekow means 'born on a Thursday'. The Ghanaian pronunciation of it is *Eh-kor* and that would be fine if I'd grown up there instead of London where, to the ears of friends, Eshun became Echo. Throughout my childhood I was pestered by schoolyard wags who thought it hilarious to call after me in descending volume: 'Echo, echo, echo.' It was my first lesson in duality. Who you are is determined by *where* you are. (*Black Gold* 3)

As the quote demonstrates, reflections on identity, the significance of place and social context, marginalization, and racism are central concerns of the narrative. Through Eshun's coming-of-age story, the narrative illustrates the difficulties of growing up Black in Britain during a time when the term 'Black British' had only started to be actively sought out as a category for a distinct political, cultural, or ethnic identity (see S. Hall, "Old" and "Frontlines").¹⁹ Eshun's duality arises from simultaneously being inside and outside British society. His outsider status stems from the position ascribed to him by his predominantly White friends at school, for whom Eshun's appearance presented a source of curiosity and fascination that had to be examined and tested: "They patted my hair for springiness," "fingers pinched at my arms to see if I carried an extra layer of fat," and speculated that "[o]nly my eyes and teeth would be visible in the dark" (*Black Gold* 65). Subject to derogatory and racist verbal abuses, Eshun witnessed similar degradation in distorted representations of Blackness in popular media. By exposing the racism Eshun encountered, the narrative draws attention to the social climate in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s when the words 'Black' and 'British' appeared somewhat irreconcilable. Whiteness was a defining attribute of Britishness, and a national identity was predicated on the exclusion of those who were not perceived as British (see Gilroy, *There*).

What is referred to as "duality" in the narrative resonates strongly with the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness, which is not only implied in the above passage but also explicitly discussed in a later part of the text when Eshun visits Du Bois's former home in Ghana: "To be black in America meant always being a stranger—even in your home town" (*Black Gold* 214),

19 Stuart Hall describes the formation of a new Black British identity in the 2000 article "Frontlines/Backyards."

notes Eshun when reflecting on Du Bois's experiences with racism that are delineated in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Eshun aligns himself with African Americans and expresses his solidarity with their struggle for equality. In doing so, the narrative emphasizes commonalities in the experiences of Black subjects who live in societies where they are marginalized, instead of focusing on the differences that stem from disparate historical and national particularities. In trying to understand Eshun's feelings of homelessness and notions of unbelonging in a hostile society by considering the Black American experience, *Black Gold of the Sun* adopts Du Bois's double consciousness into a British context. Eshun parallels his experiences of racism with those made by Du Bois and draws on the rhetoric of American racial oppression to make sense of the lived conditions of Blackness in Britain.

In contrast to most of the other travelers of this study (with the exception of Obama), Eshun's personal story does not lead into an anonymous past of slavery because his family story is rooted in Ghana. His notions of displacement are not connected to a distant moment in history but to a comparatively recent experience of migration, the "toing and froing" (*Black Gold* 5) between London and Accra. Although Eshun's connection to Ghana is arguably more tangible than those of other Black travelers, the narrative frames his journey as a continuation of the tradition of Black diasporic travel to Africa and the search for roots and home. His journey, as well as the record thereof, is connected by way of reference to that of Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Du Bois, and Richard Wright. This underscores the impact and formative power of earlier travelers and their literary texts on contemporary traveler-writers.

Eshun's uneasy relationship with Britain drives the narrator's search for a home. In contrast to the travel narratives that have been examined thus far, Eshun's narrative differs in its critical reflection on the narrator's country of residence. London and its people are branded as particularly hostile and racist, causing anxiety in the narrator: "The bigotries of the city weighed down on me. I saw condescension in the eyes of bank clerks and malign intent in the store detectives watching me from the end of an aisle. Lynch mobs chased me through my dreams" (*Black Gold* 4-5). The trauma inflicted by racist encounters with schoolmates as well as the distorted and degrading depictions of Blackness in popular culture, especially in television shows, culminates in the narrator's "fantasiz[ing] about taking a machine gun to the streets" (5). *Black Gold of the Sun* illustrates the workings of racism in the daily lives of Black people and problematizes Eshun's sense of unbelonging and his coming to terms with being Black in a predominantly White society, employing duality as a

recurring motif to describe the tension of being both inside and outside of British society. The effects of the endemic anti-Black racism have left psychological marks, expressed in nightmares and violent phantasies of vengeance (4-5, 175). Seeking a respite from the racism that he experiences in Britain, Eshun hopes that Ghana, as “an antidote to London” (6), could become home for him.

However, instead of an antidote to London, Ghana is described as an unwelcoming place and Eshun’s position as the perpetual outsider is further manifested. Considering that Eshun had briefly lived in Ghana with his family and thus has memories of the place, which for his parents remains home even while they continuously live in London, the journey might have been an easy homecoming. However, the narrative disappoints such expectations. Eshun’s arrival in Accra is marked by the absence of feelings of attachment to and familiarity with the place. The Accra he encounters is a city with modern technology that has few things in common with the images of the city he carried with him, the “mental picture of Ghana frozen in the early 1970s” (*Black Gold* 16). Ghana presents itself to Eshun as wholly transformed, a foreign and unfamiliar place, betraying his memories. The vision of Ghana that figured in his imagination as a place of the past exposes the nostalgic emotions that are often tied to the idea of home and return. But home, the narrative suggests, cannot be found in a place that is confined to the past and preserved in the imagination. The inability to return to the Ghana he remembered forces the narrator to admit that “[t]he transformation made my memories seem false. I felt like an interloper” (17). In contrast to his parents, who kept Ghana alive by cultivating Ghanaian traditions in London and who “knew where they were from” (64), Ghana is unavailable to Eshun as a site for identification and belonging. Having been born and raised in Britain, Eshun has not inherited his parents’ connection to Ghana. Countering diasporic discourses of idyllic returns to an imagined homeland, the travelogue defies the possibility of an easy, unproblematic homecoming for the narrator. In this regard, *Black Gold of the Sun* accords with Avtar Brah’s suggestive notion of home that is outlined in the influential book *Cartographies of Diaspora*. She contends that for diasporic people “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (188).

That Eshun returns to Ghana as a stranger, a mere tourist, and a temporary visitor, is underscored by his limited ability to communicate in Fante with the people of the neighborhood where he stays. Far from being bid welcome,

people speculate about his identity, eliciting again the narrator's reflection about his sense of self: "I was an African-American tourist; Mrs Hagan's retarded grandson; a Ghanaian who'd been to Abora Kyir (England) and come back with a swelled head and a phony accent. And who was I really? Even if I'd been able to answer in Fante, what would I have said?" (*Black Gold* 26). Contrary to the belief voiced prior to his arrival that he would be just another face in the crowd, Eshun is now seen as a *Burenyi*, a White man (27, 28). His cultural background, economic standing, and his communication difficulties create a division between him and the Ghanaians. This fixates him permanently in the position of the outsider and, like so many Black travelers before him, Eshun finds himself "alone in a strange country" (28)—a feeling that chimes with how he is perceived in England. By presenting Eshun's journey to Ghana as a travel experience in an unfamiliar country and not as a 'return' to a former home, the narrative reveals the author's skepticism toward an ideology of return.

Ghana presents itself to the narrator as a contradictory and illegible place that he attempts to decipher and understand. In the course of Eshun's journey across the country, the narrator's effort to make sense of Ghana and understand his relationship to his parents' home is reflected both in his exploration of the physical landscape and his attempt to familiarize himself with Ghanaian history. Accordingly, by visiting various places—the city of Accra, the infamous Elmina Castle with its Door of No Return, a slave camp in the North of Ghana—and studying the guidebook that he carries with him, Eshun acquires new knowledge about Ghana's slave past and its more recent history. The interdependence of history, narrative, place, and experience is particularly palpable in Eshun's account of his visit to Elmina Castle and the slave dungeon, which differs decisively from the visits to Gorée Island recounted, for example, by Harris and Richburg. Whereas Harris and Richburg present accounts of their visits to the slave forts in a detached manner, for Eshun this experience is highly emotional as he attempts to reimagine the experience of the captives: "Alone in the cell I felt the air press upon me like a physical weight. I pictured what it was like for a slave to be herded into the courtyard after spending months in the dungeon" (*Black Gold* 108). Leaving the dungeon, "gulping air, until the weight of the dungeon had left [his] shoulders" (109), Eshun has to recover from this experience that affects him on a corporeal level. The narrator evokes the conditions of the Middle Passage by rewriting a short, intimate account of cruelties that he imagined the captives must have suffered as they were loaded onto the slave ships, thereby retracing their paths both textually and metaphorically, as well as by actually stepping through the

Door of No Return “as the slaves had done, to the shoreline and the waves” (110). In this sense, the narrator physically and imaginatively travels to the place that marks the beginning of Black diasporic history. Although Eshun’s personal history does not lead into the anonymous history of enslavement and dispossession, like that of many other Black travelers, his feelings of displacement and marginalization, which result from his experiences as a Black man in a society informed by histories of colonization, are aligned with those of post-slavery subjects.

Eshun discovers that Ghana is a place with a complex and complicated history that does not yield easy interpretations. Moreover, he states, “Every time I thought I had Ghana figured out I discovered another contradiction” (*Black Gold* 187). For instance, learning that domestic slavery had existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans and that Africans were also complicit in the transatlantic slave trade, his certainties are thrown into question: “Before going to Ghana, I was sure the story of the slave trade was one of white brutality and African victimhood” (140). However, the new knowledge he acquires undermines the simplistic narrative. The feelings of confusion, alienation, and disorientation culminate when Eshun discovers that his ancestor participated in the slave trade. Specifically, he learns that his mother’s family line is connected to the slave trade because his great-great-great-great-grandfather, Joseph Degraft, a White man from Holland, came to Ghana in the mid-eighteenth century to trade enslaved Africans (132-133). The realization that his ancestors were complicit in the slave trade shakes the foundation of his beliefs: “You imagine that the events of history take place in some nebulous ‘other time’ unrelated to your own life. Yet I feel the consequences of Joseph’s actions every day in Britain. It was partly because of the pervasiveness of racism there that I’d come to Ghana—only to find my ancestor had collaborated in establishing its tenets” (141). The legacies of this past are felt by the narrator in contemporary Britain.²⁰ The text illuminates how individual and collective pasts are inextricably linked and explores the legacies of the

20 The pervasiveness of slavery’s remnants is described by Eshun as follows: “It is present in galleries such as Tate Britain and in Bristol’s Theatre Royal, both of which were built from Caribbean sugar money. It is remembered in the streets of Liverpool named after eighteenth-century plantation aristocrats, such as Earle Street, Cunliffe Street and Bold Street. And it lives in the collective memory of the black people who have arrived in Britain since the mass immigrations of the 1950s” (*Black Gold* 147).

slave past on Eshun's life. The weight and effects of the new insights are strikingly manifested in his bodily reaction to the information as a lump under his eyelid appears. Eshun interprets this partial loss of vision as his body's "protest at the dualities [he]'d found in Ghana" (147).

In an effort to come to terms with, if not resolve, the contradictions and "dualities" that inform Eshun's sense of self and the way he sees Ghana, the narrator turns to the stories and perspectives of other transnational travelers, both historical and contemporary, including, for instance, the stories of his parents, well-known Black intellectuals and writers, an English-educated Ghanaian lawyer of the twentieth century, and a Ghanaian-born Dutch Christian minister. These shorter narratives are interspersed throughout the book and are not limited to the events of Eshun's life but venture beyond the immediate experience of the narrator. Some of the stories are pieces drawn together from historical records and Eshun's imagination. While the stories are set apart by time and space and may seem unconnected at first, they are linked by the themes they share, which are experiences of leaving and returning home, the negotiation of different cultures, the meaning of Blackness, marginalization, exile, and dislocation. In all of these stories, the theme of the journey serves as the element that interlinks them. The stories function in the narrative as a supplement to Eshun's own quest as they parallel, echo, undermine, and contradict his journey, as I will show in the following.

One such story is that of William Essuman-Gwira Sekyi, a nationalist lawyer, politician, and writer, about whom Eshun first learned from his grandfather. Born in Ghana in 1892, Sekyi attended university in England and returned to Ghana in 1915 to become a lawyer. The short, three-page account of Sekyi's life presented by the narrator goes beyond a mere recital of biographical information. In fact, the story of Sekyi is reimagined in *Black Gold of the Sun* not so much, as I argue, for the purpose of preserving and creating a historical record of a man whose astonishing life, political career, and literary works are relatively unknown. Rather, the story of Sekyi—the Ghanaian with the "[a]nglicized name of William Sackey" who "wore a high collar and frock coat" (*Black Gold* 21) but who came to reject the name William Sackey and refrained from speaking English in public after his experiences in London (23)—serves as a means for the narrator to reflect upon issues of identity and notions of belonging. Eshun imposes his own feelings onto the character of Sekyi and interprets and rewrites his story. Switching from the first-person narration of his travel account to third-person narration, the narrator envisions Sekyi's excitement and anticipation when first traveling to

London: “He imagined his journey as a royal progress, the land itself bowing in his presence” (22). Later, Sekyi became aware of the racist attitudes people in England displayed toward him, and Eshun imagines that “with rising horror Sekyi was also realizing how England saw him” (22). After Sekyi’s return to Ghana, he discarded what connected him to England, his Anglicized name, the English language, and dress. However, the narrator notes that for Sekyi, “embracing Africa didn’t necessarily mean rejecting the West. At home Sekyi could be found with a cigar and a glass of wine listening to Wagner on his phonograph. His critics were perplexed by this apparent dichotomy” (24). Apparently, this “dichotomy” was only perceived by others. For Eshun, the historical figure serves as a contrastive foil. While having similar experiences of racism in London, in contrast to Eshun, Sekyi did not seem to be at odds with his duality and the contradictions he supposedly embodied. Instead of presenting an “example of a tragic and unresolved conflict” (24), as his critics proclaimed, the narrative suggests that Sekyi himself embraced an identity free from rigid understandings of cultural and national categories. The retelling of this story opens up a possibility for the narrator to seize an alternative perspective on the politics of identity. He concludes, “Identity, [Sekyi] believed, was fluid not fixed, and I can see his shadow on men such as my grandfather and my cousin Kobby, both of whom understand Ghana to be a place of shifting possibilities” (24).

Employing a similar narrative strategy to examine ideas of home, homelessness, and homecoming, the narrative recounts the story of Jacobus Capitein, a Ghanaian boy who was abducted by slave traders at the age of eight in 1725 and later adopted by a Dutch official of the West India Company who took him to Holland. Capitein received a degree in theology and gained public attention when he published a thesis that argued in defense of slavery. Eventually he, too, returned to Ghana as the vicar of Elmina Castle where he, ostracized by the European workers at the castle and crestfallen by the disinterest of the local people, accumulated debt that led him to participate in the slave trade. Capitein died in 1747 and the narrator speculates that he committed suicide (*Black Gold* 110-13). Capitein’s story is placed in the narrative immediately after Eshun has stepped through the Door of No Return of Elmina Castle, a site that epitomizes the finality of leaving home. At the same time, the Door of No Return has developed into an important site of pilgrimage for people from the African diaspora who come to the place to emphasize indeed the possibility of return and, in this sense, to perform a symbolic homecoming. The brief account of Capitein’s life evokes

similarities to Eshun's own: Both men lived in Ghana for only a short period of time; according to the narrator, Capitein "insisted he had no memory of his early childhood" (112) and similarly, Eshun concedes at a different point in the narrative, "I used to say I couldn't remember my childhood. It was a surprisingly convincing lie. I even believed it myself" (124). The question that arises from both Eshun's and Capitein's stories is why they returned to Ghana. Eshun connects Capitein's story to his own when he states the following:

Leaning beside the Door of No Return, the memory of Capitein prompted me to ask why I'd returned to Ghana. If I was looking for somewhere I belonged, why come to a country where I'd lived for only a few years as a kid? Perhaps because the truth of a place doesn't lie in the minutiae of childhood so much as in understanding the hold that the past maintains over the present. *Going home is easy. The hard part is what happens after you arrive.* (117)

Interweaving yet another memory into his meditations on home and return, Eshun remembers how he paid the former home of his family in Kingsbury a visit after years of absence. He did not recognize much of what had once been his home, and his visit did not stir his emotions, causing Eshun to suggest that "the act of departure affects the nature of the place you leave behind. Between leaving and coming back, you change. And because you don't stay the same, neither does the place to which you return" (114). Through the example of Capitein's return to Ghana as a stranger who was met with hostility from both the local Africans and Europeans, and Eshun's visit to the Door of No Return and his unsentimental recognition that home and the self continuously transform so that one is never able to return to the same place, the narrative endorses what has already been anticipated at the very beginning—that return to a place fixated in the past and in the imagination is impossible.

The precarious consequences of holding on to the idea of an idealized place that is home, are made tangible by the incorporation of another story of diasporic return. Richard Wright's travelogue *Black Power* appears as an intertext that bears similarities to Eshun's narrative in some respects. Eshun parallels his own journey to Ghana and his motivation to that of Wright when he notes, "The search for a place beyond discrimination led Wright to Ghana. I formed the same goal the morning I woke up and found I'd shot myself dead in a dream" (*Black Gold* 176). The narrator endorses that he, like Wright, suffered from "spiritual exhaustion" (174) due to the racism they both experienced in their home countries. Moreover, Eshun is empathetic to Wright's

portrayal of his Ghanaian journey, which is characterized by disillusionment and disappointment. Eshun interprets Wright's disillusionment with Ghana and his disappointed hopes in the nation as a place where he could belong as the reason for Wright's death, which occurred seven years after his journey. He reads Wright's death from heart failure as a metaphor for a broken heart, assuming that "[t]he Gold Coast was not the idyll he'd imagined, and perhaps on returning to Paris he abandoned any hope of paradise. [...] Stripped of hope after returning from Ghana, did his heart give out having endured all it could bear?" (174-75). The insertion of Wright's story, as well as Eshun's interpretation of it, serves as a warning for the narrator not to give in to despair as his own journey to Ghana has turned out differently than he had hoped.

By recounting and rewriting the stories of other Black travelers such as Sekyi, Capitein, and Wright, the narrative frames Eshun's travel story and his feelings of homelessness, unbelonging, and exclusion as characteristics of the condition of Black diasporic subjects. Moreover, the narrative reveals the complex experiences of transnational mobile subjects with diverse cultural affiliations. Eshun traces the unexpected links between people across different centuries and locations and carves out how experiences that have been engendered by a history of slavery and its aftermath are connected. The narrator claims these stories and imposes his experiences onto the historical figures, trying to reimagine what they have felt, with the purpose of understanding his own quest. In this way, Eshun places his journey within the larger context of the diasporic search for home and identity when he states,

By coming to Ghana I'd hoped to find something of myself that was lost. How was I different from Capitein or Richard Wright or any of the other travellers who arrived seeking certainties only to discover more questions? Instead of a singular place I'd discovered a country making and remaking itself under the gaze of its elective gods. (*Black Gold* 200)

Eshun's journey is placed within a tradition of Black diasporic travel and travel writing. This is further underscored by the references to African American writers and intellectuals that permeate Eshun's travel narrative. These references also function to inscribe Eshun in a community of transnational Black travelers who have spent time in Africa, connecting his journey to those of Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Du Bois, and Wright. These travelers and writers examined their relationship to the continent intellectually, and they are counted among the preeminent authors of African American autobiographies dealing with racial (in)justice and the formation and affirmation of the sub-

ject amidst dehumanization. Displaying the author's intimate knowledge of what can be described as African American literary, rhetorical, and intellectual traditions, *Black Gold of the Sun* forges thematic and narrative continuities with the travel narratives of said authors, most obviously through references to and engagement with the intellectuals and writers Du Bois and Wright, and also through his exploration of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and their effects on contemporary lives.

These transatlantic linkages reveal the continuities between Black travel writers from US-American and British backgrounds and show that transnational and diasporic influences may be equally—if not more—important to their writing. Eshun's travel narrative engages with distinct national discourses of racism and marginalization, while simultaneously reaching far beyond the British national context for its thematic and literary inspiration. It comes as no surprise, then, that *Black Gold of the Sun* complies with many of the characteristics that Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger ascribes to contemporary US-American diasporic return narratives. She expounds that these return narratives

are both spatial and temporal journeys. In all of them, narrating return to the country of origin involves narrating a return to the past and to the impact of historical events that caused exile, migration, and a diasporic consciousness marked by exclusion here and there, as well as by the often conflictive relationship between the receiving country and the country left behind. [...] Their accounts dramatize the desire to find a lost home as well as the realization that return is a painful encounter with the memories of the living and the dead, and a failed attempt at the reconstruction of wholeness and coherence. (8-9)

Eshun's journey to Ghana is accompanied by his textual travel, a revelatory introspective process, into his own past and a way of understanding and working through the painful memories he had buried. This also entails an exploration of the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its consequences on the contemporary lives of diasporic people.

Eshun recognizes the impossibility of reclaiming Ghana as home and admits that "I'd crossed the whole of Ghana and I still couldn't say where I was from" (*Black Gold* 205). Having reached the end of his journey, and with this the end of his narrative, Eshun returns to London with a renewed attention to the place. His experiences in Ghana have ostensibly refigured his view of Britain. Whereas Britain had initially been associated with racism, hostility, and his

sense of unbelonging, at the end of the narrative, Eshun foregrounds a modified image of Britain, acknowledging the transformations that have taken place in British culture and society. He attests that over the past decades, Britain had changed to become “more open and less fearful of change. Each person of colour living there had helped to create that shift. By doing nothing more nor less than being ourselves each of us had altered the nature of Britain” (197). Tentatively, Eshun formulates a new sense of belonging that is tied to the place where he spent most of his life. As he returns to his apartment in London, he thinks about the slave camp he visited in Bolgatanga, a place that for Eshun encapsulates both a history of abject terror and dehumanization as well as a history of resistance, dignity, and perseverance:²¹

In their sudden emptiness, the streets made me think of the slave camp in Bolgatanga. What did it take to survive in a place like that? Maybe nothing more than ordinary will. The same spirit that enabled the descendants of slaves to build a future for themselves in the New World. In both cases the refusal to believe you were anything less than human. (225)

In this passage, an associative connection between the slave camp in Bolgatanga and the streets of London is established. Britain can be read as the “New World” in which Eshun finds himself, a seemingly unwelcome, foreign, and hostile place. Yet, like the descendants of enslaved and displaced Africans who built a future for themselves in the West, forging their roots into the foreign ground to make the place their home, Eshun, it is suggested, will also survive in Britain as long as he defies the denial of his humanity. Eshun understands that he has to claim Britain and make it his home to further the transformation of the country that people of color have initiated.²² In this sense, Eshun inscribes himself in the history of the Black diaspora and its ongoing struggle against oppression, marginalization, and dehumanization.

21 Eshun notes that “[l]ike the dungeons of Elmina castle, this camp was a factory for the braking of the soul. Yet the evidence of resistance was scratched into its rocks. Each time they sang the slaves asserted their freedom. Every time they shared food they held on to their humanity” (*Black Gold* 209).

22 This idea is also articulated in the narrative through the figure of Eshun's brother Kodwo who tells him: “I'm not interested in trying to reclaim some idea of the past. Africa's not this idyllic place. It's a mistake to assume that you can go back to some kind of motherland. That doesn't exist. The only thing is to *create a place of your own where you feel at home*” (*Black Gold* 220; emphasis added).

3.2 Emily Raboteau's *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013)

And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which *are* in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.

—*The Bible, Exodus*

Exodus, the Promised Land, and Canaan were inextricably linked in the slaves' minds with the idea of freedom. Canaan referred not only to the condition of freedom but also to the territory of freedom—the North or Canada.

—Albert J. Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel"

Emily Raboteau's travelogue *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* records the writer's multiple journeys to various locations around the globe. These decade-long travels represent Raboteau's quest to find a place to belong. Like Eshun's journey to Ghana in *Black Gold of the Sun*, Raboteau's extensive travels are propelled by her estrangement and alienation from her native country. As the daughter of a White mother and an African American professor of religious history, Albert J. Raboteau, whose work on slave religion noticeably influences Raboteau's writing, she feels a distance from the United States—a nation that remains strictly divided along racial lines (*Searching* 6). At the center of *Searching for Zion*, therefore, is the exploration of the meaning of home. The narrator's journey as well as her narrative testify to the prevailing longing for a home free from discrimination, which pervades much of Black travel writing. That the concept of home is difficult to grasp is anticipated by the epigraph that frames the travelogue: "you don't have a home until you leave it..." Taken from James Baldwin's landmark text *Giovanni's Room* (1956), this quote speaks to the conundrum and elusiveness of home while simultaneously invoking notions of exile. Examining the desire for a place to belong and contemplating the nature of home, the travel narrative ventures beyond Raboteau's personal quest and scrutinizes diasporic people's attempts at finding and creating a home for themselves. In particular, it connects the narrator's search with the Black diaspora's historical search for the Promised Land.

The Black diaspora's desire for a homeland is expressed in the faith in a mythical Zion, the Promised Land, which has long played a central role in the Black imagination. As the title announces, *Searching for Zion* explores the idea of Zion, tracing it back to its emergence in the era of slavery when Black Christians discovered hope and meaning in the story of Exodus. Exodus became an allegory for the displacement of African-descended people in the diaspora and Zion became the symbolic homeland, a metaphor for liberation and freedom. Thus, Raboteau's travel narrative frames her journeys and quest for home as part of a long tradition of a Black diasporic longing for home. Exploring her own feelings of homelessness and displacement in relation to her African American heritage, Raboteau is preoccupied with the following questions: Is Zion a physical place and, if so, where is it located? Have those who left their home nation and created places for themselves in foreign countries found the Zion they desired and dreamed of? What happens after their arrival in the Promised Land? As my analysis illustrates, *Searching for Zion* critically scrutinizes the Black diaspora's vision of a Promised Land as well as Raboteau's own. It examines the underlying ideologies that have led people to claim territory and establish communities far from their native countries and interrogates them on the terms and costs of belonging. The book, I argue, draws attention to the conflicting impulses that inform many Black travel narratives, that is, the persistent yearning for an elsewhere—a better place—and the realization that this place is not just there to be recovered but has to be made.

Structured along the narrator's multiple travel destinations, the travel narrative is split into five parts, with each focusing on a specific locale, namely Israel, Jamaica, Ethiopia, Ghana, and the Black Belt of the American South, and reflects the narrative's coverage of an expansive geographical and thematic terrain. Against the backdrop of Raboteau's journeys and the visits she pays to various Black communities in each locale, the narrative contextualizes peoples' past and contemporary attempts to establish their home in the Promised Land with historical writing. Raboteau's travels and her writing trace the paths of people who claim to have returned to their homeland, the mythical Zion; among them are two groups of Black Jews in Israel, Rastafarians in Ethiopia, and African American expatriates in Ghana. Foregrounding different forms of dispersal, displacement, and dispossession that characterize Black diasporic communities around the world, the narrative presents a collection of intimate portraits of people and communities. Their perspectives on home and belonging supplement Raboteau's meditations on the questions

of home, exile, and the mysteries surrounding return to an ancestral homeland that she tries to unravel. Combining personal narration, memoir writing, anthropological observations, cultural criticism, and historical writing, *Searching for Zion* captures an array of personal stories of people in various locales who reinvented themselves as they created new homes for themselves. The polyphony of voices and perspectives that the narrative assembles accounts for the diverse and intricate experiences of mobility and placemaking of Black diasporic communities.

The narrator's actual and literary journey is inscribed in the century-long tradition of traveling in search for a Promised Land and is linked to the journeys of other travelers both historical and contemporary. For example, the narrator aligns her journey with those of the people she visits, noting that "[i]t wasn't unlike the quests that had Ethiopian Jews and African Hebrew Israelites making their exoduses to Israel, and Rastas trying to get 'home' to Africa" (*Searching* 67). The boldness of those who sought to alter their realities and to find a new home in a foreign place provides inspiration for Raboteau's quest. By providing historical sketches of her Zion-seeking predecessors and Black emigrationists (such as Paul Cuffee and Martin Delany) and by incorporating intertextual references to other narratives of travel to Africa (for example, Obama's *Dreams from My Father* and Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*), the narrative stresses that Raboteau's quest is not singular but exemplary for Black diasporic subjects' search for a place to belong.

Both Raboteau's journey and her travel narrative begin at Newark Airport, where she is about to board a plane to Jerusalem to visit her childhood friend. But instead of opening the narrative with an image of mobility and of the traveling subject in motion, *Searching for Zion* relates how Raboteau is stopped and vigorously questioned by the security personnel of El Al Airlines who misidentify her as Arab. Similar to the opening scene in *Black Gold of the Sun* where the narrator is confronted with the loathed question 'Where are you from?,' with which he has persistently struggled, Raboteau is confronted with the insulting and offensive question, "What are you?" (*Searching* 3). Raboteau, too, relates that this question has followed her all her life. She notes, "I was prepared for the initial question, 'What are you?,' which I've been asked my entire life, and, though it chafed me, I knew the canned answer that would satisfy. 'I look the way I do because my mother is white and my father is black'" (3). This time, however, the reply she has prepared does not satisfy the security guards. The ensuing dialogue between them and Raboteau, the reiteration of the question of what her origins are, and finally her irritated answer "[a]

sperm and an egg" (5) are rendered as a tragic yet comic scene. As a result of her resistance to provide easy answers to her interrogators, she is eventually taken to the basement and strip-searched.

On one side, the incident points to the discriminatory practices of racial profiling and the humiliating procedures of airport security that circumscribe Black mobility. On the other side, it draws attention to the narrator's apparent indeterminate status as a biracial, diasporic subject, whose body is perceived as illegible and threatening by the security personnel. The narrator contends, "There was no place for me inside their rhetoric. I didn't have the right vocabulary. I didn't have the right pedigree. My mixed race had made me a perpetual unanswered question. The Atlantic slave trade had made me a mongrel and a threat" (*Searching* 5). The narrative represents Raboteau as a mobile diasporic subject, foregrounding "her racial ambiguity and her inability to make herself understood—her linguistic and linguistically constituted position" (Stamant 125). The detainment and inspection of the narrator's naked body by the security force represents an attempt to classify, contain, and fix her identity (127). Right from the beginning, the narrative centers on Raboteau's feelings of unbelonging, homelessness, and alienation that result from the collective displacement of people caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Her distinct sense of unbelonging is further underscored by the security staff's disbelief that she is an American citizen. Naked, vulnerable, and fully exposed, the narrator reveals that the security personnel's inquisition "shoved my face into my own rootlessness," which is a consequence of growing up "half black" and "half white in a nation divided along racial lines" (*Searching* 6). As a self-identified (biracial) African American whose outer appearance does not fit in the binary racial categories, she feels disconnected from the United States, so much so that she does not openly identify as an American, but as a New Yorker instead (21).

The narrative evokes the classic scripts of Black identity by, for example, drawing on the well-known literary trope of the "tragic mulatto/a," a mixed-race character who suffers under their racial ambiguity and whose life comes to a tragic end, that evolved in nineteenth-century American literature (see Sollors 220-45). Although the narrator rejects this role, she struggles against it nevertheless.²³ Moreover, through intertextual references to Ralph Ellison's

23 Raboteau writes that "I didn't think of myself as the 'tragic mulatto,' straight out of central casting. The role was an embarrassing cliché from a dusty, bygone era, but I struggled against it all the same" (*Searching* 69).

acclaimed *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrative presents a gendered variation of the trope of the invisible Black subject when the narrator writes, “I was an invisible woman” (*Searching* 19). Adopting the metaphor of invisibility, Raboteau highlights the misrecognition of Black subjects and their marginalization in the dominant society. Simultaneously, her account of being racially profiled at the airport underscores the hypervisibility of the Black body that is criminalized and perceived as a suspect and potential threat in White or racialized spaces.²⁴ The incident at the airport, where the narrator is misidentified, temporarily detained, and immobilized, also foregrounds “how her subject position is frequently defined by external forces” and demonstrates “that this is not an uncommon situation” for Black subjects (Stamant 126). However, Raboteau’s narrative shows how she struggles against the imposition of identity categories and racial stereotypes and challenges attempts that try to label and fix her in place.

Connecting her alienation to the condition of African-descended people in America and the legacies of slavery, she expounds, “I inherited my sense of displacement from my father. It had something to do with the legacy of our slave past. [...] [T]he general Kunta Kinte rap of the uprooted” (*Searching* 6). Gesturing to Haley’s triumphal historical journey and discovery of his ancestor, Raboteau frames her own journey as part of the Black diasporic (literary) tradition of the quest for identity and home. Her sense of displacement and homelessness is both personal and historical; it is the consequence of her father’s experience of losing home and it is connected to histories of forced and involuntary movement, migration, and dislocation of African-descended people. In particular, her paternal family line is tied to the history of slavery as well as to the history of migration within the United States. The murder of Raboteau’s grandfather by a White man in 1943 caused her grandmother to abandon the family home in Mississippi and flee with her children to the North, the Promised Land, where they hoped to find refuge from the racism and violence of the South. This forced migration greatly impacted her father, who bequeathed a history of loss, displacement, and exile to his daughter (6). The displacement and homelessness experienced by the Raboteau family is

24 For illuminating studies on invisibility/hypervisibility and Blackness, see, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff’s *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (2006), Lena Hill’s *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (2014), and Françoise Král’s *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture: The Fractal Gaze* (2014).

a consequence of “the psychic trauma of racism throughout American history—the ‘emotional toll’ along with its financial, social, and geographic consequences” (Stamant 135). As *Searching for Zion* demonstrates, it is this trauma that sustains the persistent yearning for a homeland free from oppression and discrimination. In an evocative passage, which is rendered in the latter part of the narrative when Raboteau visits a slave fort in Ghana, the narrator elucidates the origins of the trauma that incites the Black diaspora’s longing for an elsewhere:

You passed through it [the door of the slave dungeon] and onto a ship for Suriname or Curaçao, or through similar doorways for Cuba or Jamaica, Savannah or New Orleans. You passed through it, lost everything, and became something else. [...] You were a slave. Your children inherited your condition. You lost your children. You lost your gods, as you had known them. You slaved. You suffered, like Christ, the new God you learned of. You learned of the Hebrew slaves of old. In the field, you sang about Moses and Pharaoh. You built a church, different from your masters’. You prayed for freedom. You wondered about the Promised Land, where the place might be. (*Searching* 227)

The passage powerfully narrates the experience of enslavement: the dislocation from Africa and the ensuing transformation from people into enslaved subjects who passed their status on to their children together with the longing for and belief in a Promised Land. Rooted in the historical displacement from Africa and the trauma of slavery, the search for a Promised Land persists as Black diasporic people continue to experience oppression, exclusion, and discrimination. Having inherited the histories and experiences of unbelonging, the narrator’s body figures as a site that contains the displacement caused by slavery (Stamant 126).

Raboteau’s sense of homelessness becomes even more pronounced during her journey to Jerusalem, where she reconnects with her childhood friend Tamar, a Jewish American woman who has left the United States and claimed her birthright to move to Israel. The narrator’s feelings of displacement and unbelonging stand in contrast to the apparent ease with which Tamar has settled into Jerusalem. Envyng her friend who has found a home in a country that welcomed her, the narrator remarks, “While I continued to feel unsettled, Tamar now had a divine Promised Land, a place to belong, and a people who embraced her. [...] [S]he was in Zion” (*Searching* 13). Driven by her friend’s migration to the Promised Land, Raboteau begins her own search for Zion.

Within the course of her journey, she explores different notions of home—material and spiritual. Noting how home materializes into a geographical place for Jews and is connected to the northern states of the US, Canada, and Africa in the Black cultural imagination, she also points to the spiritual home invoked in the songs sung by enslaved people, in the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., and in the Reggae music of Bob Marley. While her personal experience has proven the assertion wrong that Zion is located in the North, she wonders what has happened to all those who left their native countries for the Promised Land. In reference to early Black freedom seekers, she asks what happened “once they had reached the North, realized its shortcoming, rubbed their eyes, and asked each other, ‘Where de milk an’ honey at? An’ de streets all paved wit gold?” (13). And what happens, she wonders, if the Promised Land does not live up to the dreams of the diasporic returnees?

To find answers to her questions, Raboteau embarks on a journey that leads her from New York to Israel, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and Ghana to speak with Black communities about their visions of Zion. The journeys to different countries reveal the narrator’s efforts to arrive at a better understanding of her own as well as of others’ experiences of displacement. Scrutinizing the efforts of Black communities to create a home in a foreign land, the narrative reflects her criticism of the idea of return and the way that this effort may lead to exclusion, separation, and intolerance. For instance, Raboteau visits Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israelites, who immigrated to Israel under the Right of Return, in an Absorption Center in the city of Haifa. In the cramped and crowded space of the temporary housing arrangements, the newly arrived Beta Israelites receive lessons in Orthodox Judaism so as to facilitate their integration into Israeli society and obtain Israeli citizenship. Forced to leave their former cultural and religious identities behind, the narrative highlights how their right to belong is predicated on assimilation. The location and the center resonate with feelings of separation, exclusion, disorientation, and disillusionment that present a stark contrast to the idea of Zion that the migrants must have envisioned prior to their departure from Ethiopia. Highlighting the elusive nature of Zion, the narrator remarks, “‘The Promised Land.’ It seems always out of reach, somewhere on the other side of the planet” (*Searching* 33).

Moving from one disheartened attempt to find the Promised Land to the next, Raboteau registers a similar sense of placelessness and exclusion when she visits the desert settlement of the Black Hebrew Israelites, an Afrocentrist community of Black Americans who created a home and spiritual oasis in the Negev desert. Like the Beta Israelites in the Absorption Center, the

community exists at the fringes of society. Believing to have returned to the homeland of their biblical ancestors, they understand themselves to be original Jews, though they are not perceived as such by Israeli society. The narrator approaches the Hebrew Israelites with skepticism, doubting their claims that they live free from social and medical ills—including diabetes, cancer, and depression—that characterize the life in Babylon from which they fled (*Searching* 50–51). As the narrator remarks, “Where the Beta Israel represent the bitterness, disorientation, and disillusionment of Zionism’s dream deferred, members of the African Hebrew Israelite community believe, or are indoctrinated to believe, that they have fully arrived in Canaan” (52). However, from Raboteau’s perspective, the settlement looks nothing like home; a shantytown settlement in the desert near a nuclear reactor, where the state of Israel tolerates them but does not extend the rights of citizenship to them, they have settled in a hostile and unwelcoming space. The narrative points to the limitations of creating a viable diasporic community and incisively illustrates the underlying difficulties and problems of such a community, which rests on separation and exclusion.

Tracing the routes of Rastafarians from Jamaica to Ethiopia, Raboteau visits Jamaica Town, a settlement created by Jamaican transplants in Shashemene, south of the nation’s capital Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie, the controversial Emperor of Ethiopia, had once issued a repatriation invitation to Black people of the West and offered them land; many devoted Rastas accepted. The narrator’s personal observations and encounters in Jamaica Town are interspersed with an examination of the centrality of Ethiopia in the Black cultural imagination and diasporic engagement with the nation. The expatriate Rastafarians built a community there, worshipping their leader Selassie. This community is mostly separated from the Ethiopians. And while the Rastas understand their repatriation to Ethiopia as a return of the Ethiopian diaspora to their African homeland, Ethiopians, on the other side, view them as privileged and well-situated migrants who take away their land. Accordingly, the place is described as dispiriting: “The relentless rain combined with the obvious poverty made this Zion appear despairing.” Her observations leave the narrator musing, “*This was the Promised Land the Rastas dreamed of?*” (*Searching* 118). Shashemene is represented as a divided space with comparatively well-situated Jamaican Rastas who dwell there seemingly without a sense of purpose. They do not appear to be integrated in the community, nor do they help to develop the country, as the narrator learns from an Ethiopian schoolteacher (170–71), for whom the Rastas rep-

resent “an invading poison,” claiming land they do not own (172). Separated from the Ethiopians who live there, Jamaican migrants are seen as intruders. Raboteau draws connections between the Rastas’ appropriative claim to the place and another seeker, Rita Marley, whom she meets later during her trip to Ghana. The widow of Bob Marley thinks of herself as “a true African child” (236) and therefore feels entitled to settle anywhere in Africa. According to the narrator, such forms of appropriation resonate with British colonialists speaking of the Gold Coast, with pioneers speaking of the American West, or with right-wing Israelis speaking of Palestine (236). Raboteau’s investigation of the community of Rastas in Ethiopia illuminates that when the newcomers ‘return’ to the Promised Land, they fail to take into consideration the people who already live there. By settling on land that does not belong to them and refusing to integrate with the Ethiopian people, they are unable to create the foundations necessary for unity. Notably, the narrative reflects a critical stance toward return, contemplates questions of privilege, and observes how the creation of home in an imagined Zion is a practice that includes placemaking and dispossession.

Throughout her journey, she finds that Zion is neither a nation, a geographical locale, nor a religion or ideology. Wherever she travels, the returnees and seekers who have supposedly reached their Zion are imbued with a persistent yearning and confronted with questions of belonging—who belongs to which place or community and who has the right to return? Still, Raboteau continues her exploration of the Black diasporic communities who see Africa as a spiritual home, a place to which they are destined to return. Aware of the difficulties inherent in her endeavor to find the Promised Land, she wonders, “How many times had people tried to find Zion in Africa and failed? I was almost afraid to look back in black history and count” (*Searching* 145). Yet, she does look back into history, considers the motivations of Black emigrationists, and insists on highlighting the frequently failed attempts to return, the disappointed hopes, and the unrealized dreams of diasporic seekers. Raboteau’s narrative thus reflects both the desire to find the Promised Land as well as the knowledge that it may not be found in Africa or any other geographical or material location. Instead, she discovers that “Zion is within” (291)—a spiritual and psychic realm.

When Eshun travels to Ghana, he initially has the hope of finding a home and a place where he feels like he belongs; however, Raboteau’s journey to Ghana—her “vexed pilgrimage” (*Searching* 208)—is not framed as a homecoming or return. Visiting Elmina and the slave dungeon, she does not feel

overly emotional and she cannot cry because the history of slavery in this place remains abstract. Without the names of the captives or marks that were left, without any maps to explain where they were from or personal accounts of the prisoners, there is nothing that she can mourn (228). Countering the stereotype of the Black diasporic returnee who cries upon return to the ancestral homeland, Raboteau notes instead, “I wanted to cry but I could not. I couldn’t buy the idea that we had closed some broken circle by returning” (229). Raboteau does not give in to nostalgic feelings of diasporic return and rejects the notion that Ghana could be home for her. The previous encounters with the different Black communities have proven to her that there is no unity based solely on a shared past and experience of displacement. When warned by Black American friends who had traveled to Ghana and were called *obruni*, denoting something close to the term “*falasha*: stranger, outsider, foreigner” (183), the narrator remarks,

I wouldn’t have minded being called by that name. If I’d left Jamaica with any lingering sense of belonging to a black family unified by the memory of slavery, then East Africa had knocked it out of me for good. I was white in Jamaica, *farengi* in Ethiopia, and *obruni* here. How could I claim to be of a place I had never been? (194-95)

Rather than exploring her own abstract connection to Ghana, the narrator seeks out African Americans who have repatriated to the country.

Raboteau is curious to talk to American expatriates, those “African diasporans drawn back to Ghana by the myth of return” (*Searching* 189) who are enticed by the Right of Abode. She meets with Black Americans who expatriated to Ghana in the 1960s when an invitation was issued by Nkrumah, inviting skilled expatriates to come to the newly independent nation. These were the golden years of the 1950s and 1960s, when Ghana, with its Black leadership, “appeared to be a black Utopia, a New Jerusalem” (199). If she had a gleam of hope to feel that Ghana could be Black Americans’ Zion, the emigrés Mary Ellen and John Ray, who have lived there since 1976, surely convince her of the contrary. The Rays’ house, as she remarks, feels “claustrophobic” (210), “like a tomb” (213). Mary Ellen Ray tells her that “Ghana attracts a lot of dreamers. Funny thing, since this country is so inhospitable to dreams” (208). After so many years of living in the Promised Land, Mary Ellen states that her hope of finding family in Ghana has been disappointed and that she no longer calls herself African American (208). She notes that “I realized I’m not African. Four hundred years made me something else. I’m black. My neighbors here

don't think of me as family at all" (209). The reality of living in Ghana does not match the dreams harbored by so many Black Americans seeking to repatriate. Mary Ellen concedes that "for the last twenty years I've had strong urgings tugging at me saying, 'Go Home,' but where was home?" (205). Expressing the wish to return to the United States, she senses a "shapeless, persistent, intrusive longing..." (206). As the narrative exposes, the seekers of Zion, those who returned to and are now dwelling in their lands of promise, often feel an overwhelming sense of homelessness and exclusion in the places they have settled. Even after their arrival in the Promised Land, they find that they still do not belong.

In a similar vein, a Rasta woman who migrated to Ghana from Paris tells Raboteau about the disillusionment she sometimes feels: "It was a milk and honey vision. I don't see no honey and milk when I land at the airport. No milk coming from the tap. It's not like that sweet dream. On bad days really and truly it's not easy living here" (*Searching* 242). Raboteau addresses the Black emigrés' realization that they remain outsiders in Ghana, that hopes of kinship are most often disappointed, and that economic differences between Ghanaians and Black returnees complicate their relationship, revealing their disconnection. Many of the repatriates she meets appear disillusioned, tired, and frustrated. These observations together with the narrator's realization that contemporary forms of slavery exist in Ghana—a fact that alters the image of the country as a symbol of Black freedom and home—undermine the utopian vision of Ghana as a homeland for the Black diaspora.

Raboteau realizes that in each locale she has visited there are different forms of discrimination, racism, and exclusion similar to what she has experienced in the United States. This realization prompts the narrator to turn her critical gaze back to the country she left. Over the time span of a decade, Raboteau records political changes occurring in the United States as the first Black president is elected. Simultaneously, she registers changes within herself, namely the wish to settle down. Therefore, at the end of her stay in Ghana, the narrator resolves that she is ready to return to her partner, her family, and her country:

The United States had an unexpected present and a mysterious future that I increasingly wanted to be part of. Most of the pilgrims I'd met on my travels through Israel, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and Ghana seemed as focused on the past as on the present. Very rarely on the future. They were shackled by the old

stories, as if there weren't any others to tell. I was ready to go back to America, my nation. (*Searching* 246)

Having departed on her quest when she was in her early twenties, Raboteau's extensive travels span through the Bush presidency and into the Obama era, chronicling social and political changes within the United States. In particular, *Searching for Zion* is clearly a product of the Obama era. In the run-up to the 2008 election, the public discourse on the significance and meaning of a Black president for the United States comprised notions of a post-racial America. The election of President Obama was perceived as a transformative moment in (African) American history and, according to Gates, represented "the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle, the grand achievement of a great, collective dream" ("In Our Lifetime"). However, it has been pointed out that the belief that the election of President Obama signified a "triumph over race" is gravely misleading (Alexander 14). Nothing revealed more clearly that the vision of a post-racial America was a myth than the election of Donald J. Trump. Still, written and published during the Obama years, *Searching for Zion* reflects the optimism that characterized this period. The above-cited passage resonates with the tentative hope regarding the future of the United States. It also highlights a shift in the narrator's relation to the nation with which she once refused to identify but that she now claims. The appropriative claim "my nation" in the above passage signals that the narrator envisions a life that is entangled with the future of the country—an assumption that is also underscored by the fact that Raboteau is expecting a child at the end of the book. Although this reflects her faith in the future, she is far more skeptical about the possibility of change than, for example, Richburg, who perceived the election of the first Black president as the ultimate proof of a colorblind society.

The last part of *Searching for Zion* is set in the United States, where Raboteau continues her journeying. She takes a Civil Rights Tour through the American South and visits her extended relatives in Atlanta who fled from Mississippi when their homes were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Raboteau's trips to the South are framed by her delving into the more recent history of African Americans in the United States. This demonstrates that travels to the South signify for many Black Americans a return to "the earth and to roots, to a 'homeland' and to a past. These roots are merged in various pasts which connect individuals to Africa; the South is the home of the ancestors, immediate (parents and grandparents) and remote (African

slaves)" (Cohn qtd. in Commander 190). Like Africa, the American South figures as a symbolic homeland for Black Americans, whether they have a direct connection to the region or not (Commander 193). Raboteau's journeys to the South thus can be read as her return to the symbolic homeland of Black Americans whose histories are ingrained in its landscape. At the same time, the journey represents a homecoming to family and community. The narrator explains her connection to the South when she writes:

I am drawn to this place because my father is. It is our Africa, our Israel, the home that never was, the Zion that never will be, a dream place. It is also our Egypt, our Dixie, our black bottom, the land where we were beaten, the place we were delivered, a nightmare place. We cleave to it. (*Searching* 290)

The American South, Raboteau's symbolic home, is endowed with conflicting significations, figuring both as a site of violence and oppression that is connected to slavery and segregation and as a site of resistance and perseverance. Coming home, therefore, is always ambiguous and never easy.

Portraying several trips to the South, Raboteau incorporates into her story the trajectory of what Stepto has called the narrative of immersion. It is one of two narrative patterns he identifies in Black writing, both of which require physical and spiritual movement and mobility. One is the narrative of ascent that figures a questing protagonist who transcends the confines of slavery and racism by acquiring literacy and progressing toward freedom (the slave narrative represents an example of this pattern). This progression is mirrored in the spatial structure, the ascent from the South to the North. While the narrative of ascent entails a possible loss of cultural identity, the narrative of immersion, in contrast, depicts a narrator who returns to and integrates with the Black community, reconnecting with their cultural roots. In the process, the protagonist obtains "tribal literacy" and a group identity. Typically, this trajectory is mirrored in the narrator's journey into the South (167). The 'journey of immersion' traveled by Raboteau leads her not just to her family but also to a better understanding of who she is. As she visits her relatives, she encounters yet another story of displacement, but also one of survival and persistence. Resolving to document the story of her family members, who think of themselves as survivors and transplants rather than victims and refugees (*Searching* 279), Raboteau finds her purpose in life and her place in the family: she is the 'scribe.' As such, she records the family's story of displacement and hope and by extension also memorializes the Black southern experience. By discovering her purpose and her destiny as a writer and keeper of stories, she

is able to define herself and finds an answer to the question thrown at her at the beginning of the book: “What are you?” (284). Instead of identifying in ethnic or national terms, the narrator chooses to represent herself as a writer and locates home not just in geographical terms but in terms of having found a purpose.

The return journey is accompanied by the narrator’s realization that for her Zion is not a physical location she can recover and claim, but that it is an emotional state. The realization does not come unexpectedly but is anticipated throughout the narrative. It is an idea already introduced in the beginning by her father, who reminded her of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s understanding of Zion as a state of mind, not a place (*Searching* 65). However, whether one thinks of Zion as the former or the latter, the narrative stresses that it remains a utopia, something that one never fully reaches. Therefore, Raboteau concludes, “The Promised Land is never arrived at. A black president is not the end of race. One man does not rule a nation. No country is what it should be, just as no man is perfect” (292). The remark complicates notions of an easy homecoming that resolves the narrator’s quest journey and it challenges the belief in a future in which race will no longer matter. The end of *Searching for Zion*, however, conveys tentative optimism regarding the narrator’s future and that of the nation. Together with her father, the narrator travels to Bay St. Louis for another family gathering. Raboteau remarks the following about the imminent arrival: “We don’t know what we’ll find at the homecoming. We’ll be there soon. / We’re not there yet” (294). The ambiguous statement can be interpreted as the narrator’s journeying toward an uncertain, yet hopeful future as a mother-to-be. Ending on the road, the last image offered by the travel narrative is of the narrator in a car. This image of mobility presents a powerful contrast to the image of immobility evoked in the opening scene of the book when the narrator was detained and confined to a room in the airport’s basement. Defying external efforts to define and label her (as the security staff has tried), her mobility demonstrates a refusal to be fixed. Over the course of the (narrative) journey, then, the narrator has become increasingly mobile, both literally through her travels and also figuratively, in the sense that she is able to articulate a new subjectivity and refuse to adhere to identity categories that would immobilize her.

Searching for Zion and *Black Gold of the Sun* reflect a preoccupation with the issues of home and homelessness that are key themes in contemporary Black travel narratives. Both narrators investigate their notions of unbelonging and

estrangement that result from the denial of full equality and acceptance as well as the continuing discrimination of people of color in their native countries. While writers such as Harris and Richburg rather uncritically embrace the United States as their home, Eshun and Raboteau resume a more critical stance toward Britain and the United States, respectively. During their journeys, both narrators turn their gaze back to the countries from which they departed, discovering that in other locales they feel similar notions of unbelonging. The journeys depicted in the travel narratives end with the writers' return to their home countries; a return that entails the narrators' realization that home is not a mythical place located far away. Instead, it can be created, and it can be discovered in human relationships and community. The writers' change of attitude toward Britain and the United States illustrates how their explorations of different places are used to rethink the ever-evolving nature of home. By going away and exploring alternative homes in different locales, both are able to reimagine and reenvision the places they left behind as home.

The idea that being away from home can offer new perspectives on the place left behind, is central to a host of literary productions by Black writers. Already early Black travel narratives written by nineteenth-century activists and intellectuals underscore that traveling abroad provides new vantage points from which to reflect on the situation at home (see ch. III, sec. 1). The travel narratives by Eshun and Raboteau echo the sentiment that travel facilitates a better understanding of home—a belief that was also articulated by one of the most famous Black expatriates of the twentieth century: James Baldwin. In the 1970 film *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, he states in reference to the United States, “One sees it better from a distance... from another place, from another country” (qtd. in Field 13).