

I Introduction

1. Points of Departure: Tracing Roots/Routes to Africa

The year 2019 marked four hundred years since the first enslaved Africans arrived on North American shores.¹ Having been violently uprooted from their native land, transported across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold to colonists, their arrival in the British colony of Virginia is generally seen as the beginning of slavery in North America. Ghana commemorated the quatercentenary of this historical moment by declaring 2019 as the Year of Return. A massive marketing campaign launched by the Ghanaian Tourism Authority invited “the Global African family” to visit Ghana and celebrate “the cumulative resilience of all the victims of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade who were scattered and displaced through the world” (“Year of Return”). African-descended people from around the world accepted this invitation and over the course of the Year of Return, thousands of international visitors made their way to the country. Though Ghana has been particularly popular, other West African countries too have long been prime destinations for Black travelers. Historical sites of the slave trade, such as the Elmina and Cape Coast castles, have attracted large numbers of tourists. An interest in the history of slavery, the idea of returning to an ancestral homeland, and the desire to engage with questions of identity and cultural heritage have also inspired so-called “roots travel,” a term denoting that the travel destination is chosen based on the traveler’s ancestry (Dillette 2). Historian Ana Lucia Araujo recently compared the Black diaspora’s current attraction to Africa to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, a period

1 Historians point out that “the history of black people in the United States is usually dated from the first arrival of a sizable number in territory that would become the United States.” However, free and enslaved “Africans were already present in the Western Hemisphere before 1619” (Painter 21; see also Guasco).

during which African American arts and culture were celebrated. Araujo explains that “the diaspora wants to experience their culture and feel accepted in a place where racism is not so engrained as in many parts of the West” (qtd. in Adamu).

For many Black travelers, the journey to Africa is often an extremely emotional experience that elicits complex and ambivalent feelings. African American novelist Jacqueline Woodson, who visited Ghana in the Year of Return, expresses her emotions eloquently in an essay published in the *New York Times* in which she recounts her travel experience:

I feel something deep and old and terrifying. [...]
 I had never been to Africa. But stepping out of that airport the first morning, it felt as though I had always known Ghana. [...]
 [...] Can I belong here? Has this country truly called me home?
 [...] A feeling as old as my body itself overcomes me—that I have never felt whole in one place. In Africa, like America, I am only halfway home. My body belonging to both and neither place. (Woodson)

Woodson's mediations on her stay in Ghana are exemplary of the perception of Africa by Black travelers. She addresses many of the prevalent themes and concerns that preoccupy travelers, including questions of identity, home, and belonging as well as the tension between familiarity and strangeness. For travelers like Woodson, a journey to Africa incites an exploration of their personal connections to the continent, which often presents a necessary step toward a better self-understanding.

This study examines the phenomenon of Black travel to Africa through the lens of travel writing. It brings together a range of contemporary autobiographical travel narratives published between the 1990s and early 2010s by African American and Black British authors. Their narratives are accounts of a personal journey undertaken by the traveler-writer. Among the selected texts are, for example, Eddy L. Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992), Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), Keith Richburg's *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (1997), 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). While the travel narratives differ in tone and style, already their titles point to the writers' shared interests in issues of cultural and national identity, heritage, race, belonging, and home. Taken together, these texts reflect the Black diaspora's continuing interest in Africa. The travel

narratives also demonstrate that the writers' engagement with Africa is not only theoretical and imaginative but entails actual journeys to the continent. In other words, questions pertaining to identity in relation to Africa are not contemplated in an abstract space but are explored in specific geographies.

Considering that a truism of travel writing is that the physical journey of the traveling and narrating subject is mirrored in an interior journey (Roberson 221), it is apparent that the travel narratives under scrutiny represent both a journey to Africa and an exploration of the self. This self-exploration occurs while the subject is in motion—that is, traveling to and across Africa—but also during the subsequent act of writing about the experience. As the excerpt from Woodson's essay demonstrates, her trip prompts an engagement with deeply personal questions. The editors of *Mobility at Large: Globalization, Textuality and Innovative Travel Writing* (2012) underscore, travel writing can “challeng[e] the unified sense of the self in motion” (Edwards and Graulund 199), engendering processes of self-exploration in relation to space. For the traveler-writers who are in the focus of this study, “travel and its textual representation combine to create a space in which identity can be affirmed, discovered, or renegotiated” (Youngs, “Pushing” 71). These observations stimulate a set of intriguing questions that are central to this study: What is the role of travel writing in the processes of examining questions of identity, origin, belonging, and home? How is the motif of the journey represented in the narratives thematically and formally? What are the functions of this literary form for Black travelers? What can contemporary travel narratives tell us about the importance of Africa for the Black diaspora? Which concerns and themes are predominant in the writings of travel to Africa? How is Africa represented in these narratives and which functions do specific representations have? How do premediated images and attitudes toward the continent influence the depiction of Africa? To answer these and related questions, the present study combines research from the fields of literature, African American studies, diaspora studies, cultural studies, cultural mobility studies, and history and delves into the topic of Black travel and the literary representation thereof.

The books that constitute the corpus of this study are oftentimes labeled as autobiography, memoir, or creative nonfiction. In productive contrast to research that categorizes the texts in this way, my study conceptualizes them as travel narratives. This approach illustrates how these narratives can be fruitfully read within the generic frame of travel writing and draws attention to the production, reinvention, and performance of the self in relation to different

cultural, social, and political contexts as well as in relation to spatial locations. Moreover, it prompts an examination of how the genre of travel writing—a literary form that is traditionally associated with White² (European) travel and criticized for the role it played in imperial endeavors—has been shaped in the hands of Black writers. Along with an exploration of contemporary Black travel narratives, the present study also examines the literary history of the genre of Black travel writing, illuminating its development, prevalent themes, and trajectories. I thereby seek to contribute to the study of travel writing and its manifold forms. Scholars have attested that travel—or, more broadly, movements both forced and voluntary—is a defining characteristic of the history and experience of the Black diaspora. For example, historian Robin D. G. Kelley contends that “the history of black people has been a history of movement—real and imagined” (16) and these movements also pervade their literary and cultural productions. Travel is thus a key theme in the literature of the Black diaspora. Yet, Black travel writing has received limited scholarly attention to date, despite the upsurge of publications in the field over the past decades. Drawing on research in travel writing studies as well as on scholarship from the areas of transnational African American studies, cultural studies, and history, this study seeks to correct this oversight.

The practice of journeying to Africa in an effort to discover more about oneself is not a twenty-first-century phenomenon (Dillette 1). Questions of identity, home, and belonging such as those contemplated by Woodson have indeed preoccupied people for as long as they have been displaced from Africa: Since the beginning of the slave trade, Black people have returned to the continent from various parts of the globe to explore its meaning for their sense of

2 While it has become a common practice to capitalize ‘Black’ to denote an ethnic identity, the capitalization of ‘White’ is currently debated (see, for example, the article “Why We Capitalize ‘Black’ (and Not ‘White’)” by Mike Laws). In this study, I choose to capitalize ‘White’ because I agree with the argument put forth by Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton from *The Center for the Study of Social Policy* that “[t]o not name ‘White’ as a race is, in fact, an anti-Black act which frames Whiteness as both neutral and the standard” (Nguyễn and Pendleton). They reason that “the detachment of ‘White’ as a proper noun allows White people to sit out of conversations about race and removes accountability from White people’s and White institutions’ involvement in racism” (Nguyễn and Pendleton). While being aware of and condemning the capitalization of ‘White’ by White supremacists, the intentional use of the uppercase ‘W’ is meant to prompt White people, like myself, to reflect on issues of equality and privilege. Direct quotes, however, have not been changed.

self. From the American Colonization Society's repatriation efforts in Liberia in the nineteenth century to Markus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement in the twentieth century and the roots trips to the slave forts, Black people have traveled as individuals and as part of formally organized groups, as emigrants, repatriates, settlers, missionaries, and tourists for reasons as diverse as the travelers themselves. Literary and cultural productions contributed to the allure of Africa and popularized journeys to recover ancestral relationships. The boom in genealogy research, which is fueled by the genetic testing industry, has also spurred engagement with African history and has motivated diasporic travelers to make the journey to the continent. The travelers analyzed in this study thus follow in the footsteps of other travelers, historical and contemporary, who have made the journey to Africa.

In the cultural imagination of the African diaspora, Africa has played a key role ever since enslaved Africans,³ who had survived the violent journey across the Atlantic Ocean, arrived in foreign lands. Various cultural and political meanings have been projected onto the African continent and its people. In the Black diasporic imagination, Africa functions as an identity-constituting space and a symbolic homeland. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, African diaspora writers from the United States and Britain traveled to the continent and recounted their experiences in travel narratives. Although their transatlantic travels had different motivations and agendas, what they have in common is their desire to explore the meanings of Africa for their conceptions of self, reiterating the question that Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen poses repeatedly in his poem "Heritage" (1925): "What is Africa to me?" While this question reverberates through their travel narratives, their literary journeys initiate an engagement with broader themes related to diasporic identification and belonging, displacement, contested memories of the past, and legacies of slavery that continue to affect Black people in the present. Traveling abroad, then, is a way for people to (re)examine possible connections and affiliations to the African continent as well as

3 I use the term 'enslaved' and not 'slave' to emphasize that slavery was forced upon people and not intrinsic to their identity. As Katy Waldman writes in a 2015 *Slate* essay on the subject, "To reduce the people involved to a nonhuman noun [is] to reproduce the violence of slavery on a linguistic level; to dispense with it amount[s] to a form of emancipation" (Waldman). Likewise, I use 'enslaver' instead of 'owner,' 'master,' or 'slaveholder' because these terms reduce the enslaved person to a commodity and empower the enslaver.

to explore their often-troubled relationship with their home nation. As James T. Campbell notes in his extensive study of African American travelers, their journeys to Africa “cast fresh and unexpected light on their relationship to the United States” and illustrate that “Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society” (xxiv). Campbell’s statement applies to other diasporic travelers too, as my analyses of the narratives by Black British authors demonstrate.

However, while the journey to the imagined ancestral homeland is for some travelers a way to discover and form direct relations with it, others are highly skeptical of the act of recovering a lost homeland and reconnecting with lost kin. Others still are driven by a quest for roots while simultaneously criticizing such an endeavor. Such accounts reveal ambivalent conclusions about the meaning of Africa as homeland but also about the mobile subject’s motive for traveling. These accounts show that travel narratives are often characterized by opposing impulses and underscore the assertion that “[m]utual imbrication rather than clear opposition between a desire for roots and an embrace of diasporic existence is symptomatic of our post-millennial moment” (Hirsch and Miller 2).

When speaking of the Black or African diaspora, it is necessary to underline that this term does not denote a homogenous collective, but instead refers to different groups of people with an African heritage who are highly diverse in terms of their geographical, social, economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and therefore can be better thought of as a transnational “imagined community” (Anderson). In the words of historian Colin Palmer, “diasporas are not actual but imaginary and symbolic communities and political constructs” (29). Africans and their descendants moved to different parts of the world, voluntarily or involuntarily, during different periods in time, forming a diaspora with a global presence (Raphael-Hernandez). Scholarship has drawn distinctions between different African diasporas, such as the old or historic African diaspora and the new African diaspora. The old African diaspora refers to Africans who were dispersed throughout the Americas and the Caribbean from the 1500s to the 1800s as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and who shared the collective memory of slavery, segregation, and racism; the new African diaspora refers to those whose voluntary movements to America, Eu-

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

2. On the Current State of Research

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

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

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