

### III An Invisible/Kaleidoscopic Genre: Black Travel Writing

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That the genre of Black travel writing offers an immensely rich reservoir for scholarly inquiry is not at all surprising. After all, the variety of travel experiences discussed in the last chapter stress the fact that Black people have traveled for centuries—as enslaved laborers and also as repatriates, missionaries, professionals, and tourists. For just as long, these travelers have produced written accounts of their experiences. Yet, despite the emphasis on the longevity, literary viability, and exuberant diversity of Black travel writing that is amply demonstrated in the primary source collections *A Stranger in the Village* (1998) and *Always Elsewhere* (1998), Black travel writing remains an almost “invisible genre” (Arana, “The Invisible Genre”) and research into the topic is scarce. For the most part, scholarly contributions to Black travel writing center on singular works or concentrate on African American travel writing as a closed unit of analysis. It is therefore the aim of the present chapter to bring narratives of travel by Black writers into focus and thereby address the research lacuna that was outlined in detail in the introductory part of this study.

I begin this chapter with an introduction to the genre of travel writing in general, which, as multiple scholars in the field attest, is a diverse literary form that stretches across many genres. The chapter provides a definition of how travel writing is understood and employed in this study and entails a discussion of the relationship between fictional and factual modes of narration and their implications for reading accounts of travel. In the next step, the chapter zooms in and contours the diverse and eclectic genre of Black travel writing. Whereas inquiries of Black travel writing focus almost exclusively on African American literary productions, I seek to highlight the transnational character of Black travel writing and show that neither authors of travel writings nor the prevalent themes of their narratives can, or should, be confined

to one national literary tradition, as both writers and works transcend national borders literally and metaphorically. I use the contested term 'Black' as a terminological umbrella to account for the writings of African American and Black British authors to underline the transnational nature of this form of travel writing. However, my choice to use 'Black' to denote literary works produced by authors with different national and ethnic affiliations certainly risks the danger of oversimplification, essentialization, and homogenization.<sup>1</sup> It implies a homogeneity within Black communities and groups which obviously does not exist. Recognizing the shortcoming of the signifier 'Black,' Pettinger states, "Unfortunately it seems that—if only in the immediate short term—Black travel writers will not be more widely known unless they are explicitly and primarily identified as such, even though this runs the risk [...] of seeming to make essential claims about 'race'" ("Introduction" xii). I recognize the danger of imposing an essentialist paradigm on the literary works by writers identified as Black and of reducing their complexity, but I also believe that the distinctiveness of these texts cannot be brushed aside (as will be demonstrated in my outlining of the features of the genre).

Finally, I trace the emergence and literary history of Black travel writing and locate early forms of the genre within the realm of slave narratives—the writings of formerly enslaved individuals of African descent that emerged in the eighteenth century in the Atlantic world. Here again, my focus lies on the transatlantic and transnational nature of a genre that has traditionally been associated with the African American literary tradition. Situating these early Black travel narratives within a transatlantic framework, instead of tying it to one national literary tradition, makes visible how travel writers with diverse national affiliations—as well as those with no clear national affiliations at all, such as Caryl Phillips, who has been described as the Black Atlantic writer par excellence with "multiple cultural allegiances" (Ledent, "Black British Literature" 17)—draw on the formal and thematic traits of canonical travel texts and how they respond to, expand, revise, or repudiate the ideas

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1 In his study *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), Mark Stein offers an insightful discussion of 'Blackness' in relation to literary works. With regard to the term Black British literature, he notes that "[d]ifferentiations of this sort are not uncontested; it is vital to consider, however, that differentiations need not be absolute. Categories always leak. Grouping 'black' texts together, and defining what is meant by 'black texts,' is possible if it is conceded that the same texts could be grouped differently, according to distinct parameters such as gender or genre, theme or style" (9).

of their predecessors. Analyzing the characteristics of slave narratives, the context of their production, their agendas, and purposes underlines their transnational character. These early forms of Black travel writing anticipate subsequent travel-themed literature. I look at the developments, trajectories, and prevalent themes that occur in Black travel writing, an account that is selective rather than exhaustive. The outline of the genre's themes and developments in the chapter creates the basis for later analysis.

## 1. Defining the Terms: Genre and Genealogy

What is not a journey?

—Tzvetan Todorov, *The Journey and Its Narratives*

Colleen J. McElroy's *A Long Way from St. Louie: Travel Memoirs* (1997) is a beautifully written account of her experiences traveling the world. Particularly noteworthy are the narrative's poetic quality and its unique textual form—frequently, the text on the page is arranged in the shape of an object that corresponds to the theme of the respective passage. Significantly, in the essays and poetry that comprise her travel narrative, McElroy addresses the invisibility and marginalization of Black people in discourses of travel and tourism:

I wasn't raised with images of black explorers. In history books, my past was connected to the vast diaspora of slavery, race riots, and a few expatriate artists who fled this country. Accounts of great travels never included black people, so I had no role models. [...] I have found no stalwart African American ladies, fresh from climbing the Himalayas or surviving the swelter of tropical heat, romanticism intact. I have only my own wanderlust—and my grandmother's belief that there are black folks everywhere on this earth. (*Long Way* iv-v)

The images of Black female travel that McElroy invokes in this passage are typically absent in discourses on Black travel and travel writing. As noted earlier, Black travel is often linked to involuntary movement and displacement. In addition, conventional perceptions of travel and travel writing connect both practice and genre to “white, male, Euro-American, middle-class” cultures (Holland and Huggan xiii), thus excluding the perspectives and experiences of Black travelers. A remarkable account of a woman's extensive travels across the globe, *A Long Way from St. Louie* challenges stereotypical representations

of travel. The narrative reveals “a sense of writing back against the dominant traditions of the genre” as “McElroy seeks [...] to reclaim a genre often strongly associated with racism and imperialism, and to make a space in that genre for voices and perspectives that have historically been marginalized or suppressed” (Thompson, “Travel Writing Now” 211). McElroy also combines her clear-eyed observations on the racial and gendered dynamics of travel and mobility with her personal history as an African American woman.

Unfortunately, McElroy’s travel narrative has not yet received the attention it deserves as very few literary scholars have studied her work.<sup>2</sup> There is also a research gap concerning Black travelers in the study of travel writing in general, despite the fact that already two decades ago “the amount of scholarly work on travel writing [had] reached unprecedented levels” (Hulme and Youngs 1). What are the reasons for this scholarly neglect of Black travel narratives? In his article “Pushing against the Black/White Limits of Maps: African American Writings of Travel” (2010), Youngs makes an important observation concerning the lack of scholarly attention paid to African American travel writing. He argues that both readers and critics have focused on narratives of forced mobility (for example, the Middle Passage), necessary movements (for example, the escape from slavery), and journeys that were undertaken because of social and economic disadvantages (for example, the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban centers of the North, Midwest, and West in the twentieth century). Leisurely journeys with deliberately chosen destinations by well-situated, independent Black travelers—such as the one presented by avid world traveler McElroy—“do not fit with the dominant conception of African American writing arising from coercion and suffering” (72). Despite changes in the perception of travel and travel writing, people of color are frequently excluded from discourses surrounding travel. The conventional definition of travel writing continues to be “too closely tied to the image of a particular kind of travel: it neglects others, or at least forgets that other kinds of travel also find their way into print” (Pettinger, “Introduction” ix). Trying to overcome this restrictive focus, Pettinger has suggested a redefinition of categories and a change in critical reading practices that entail a regrouping of texts that would not be classified as travel writing according to established generic conventions (ix). In reference to Pettinger’s contestation, Angela Shaw-Thornburg endorses the assumption that “[i]f African-American

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2 The articles by Pettinger (“African American”) and Youngs (“Pushing”) are an exception.

literature of travel is to become more visible, critical readers must ultimately examine their reading practices" (53).

At issue is also the difficult relationship between African American literary criticism and postcolonial studies. Youngs contends that although postcolonial theory has spurred travel writing studies for decades, it has not adequately accommodated African American travel writing ("Pushing" 72), which may be surprising when considering the otherwise inclusive nature of postcolonial studies and the obvious thematic and formal similarities that African American writing shares with texts labeled as postcolonial ("African American Travel" 110).<sup>3</sup> Griffin and Fish, the editors of one of the early anthologies dedicated solely to African American travel writing, identify the genre's hybridity as another possible reason for this lack of scholarly attention. They conclude that the diversity of texts subsumed under the label of travel writing—ranging from autobiographical accounts to diaries, letters, guidebooks, ethnographical material, and much more—explains why this rich literary form "tends to fall between the cracks or get classified as autobiography" (xiv). In other words, due to its diversity and generic indeterminacy, it may be challenging to sketch the outlines of a distinct genre.

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3 While Youngs argues that African American writing should be included in postcolonial frameworks, considering that the United States can be seen both as a formerly colonized and neocolonial nation with its continuing legacies of slavery and the oppression of Native Americans ("African American Travel" 109-10), Pettinger cautions that "the situation of slaves and their descendants in the United States is not readily amendable to a colonial or post-colonial analysis. As an oppressed minority, their travel writing might be expected to be oppositional in some way; yet, when describing journeys overseas, it would not be surprising if they began to resemble those of white Americans visiting those parts of the worlds over which the United States exerts formidable economic, political and cultural influence" ("At Least One" 79). However, Pettinger argues that the growing body of critical approaches to the genre of travel writing, in particular postcolonial frameworks, has to be reconfigured and adapted to account for the "cultural significance of geographical mobility in the African American (literary) tradition" (81). John Cullen Gruesser agrees that the experiences and the literal and cultural productions of African-descended people in the United States differ from those created by people from (formerly) colonized countries. Noting that African American literary criticism tends to be "resistant to postcolonial theoretical concepts," he nevertheless argues for the inclusion of African American writing in postcolonial theory (*Confluences* 2). To employ postcolonial approaches to the study of African American cultural productions seems adequate given "the long history of African American engagement with issues such as colonialism, displacement, and syncretism" (3).

The primary works that constitute the corpus of this study reflect the diversity that Griffin and Fish ascribe to the genre of Black travel writing. It is possible to find these narratives shelved under labels such as (presidential) autobiography, memoir, journalistic account, neo-slave narrative, historical writing, creative writing, or simply creative nonfiction. All of these generic categorizations entail various possibilities for analysis and reveal distinct aspects of the texts, perhaps even yielding different interpretative insights. As Ralph Cohen asserts, “Genres are open systems; they are groupings of texts by critics to fulfill certain ends” (210); therefore, the generic categorization of works is contingent on the decisions of critics. The classification of a work also frames readerly expectations and, even before that, the literary and aesthetic choices made by the author are shaped by generic traditions and conventions. The same text can thus be embedded and read in different literary traditions. For this reason, assigning a specific genre to a text is already an act of interpretation (Reinhart 133-34).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, approaching the works that will be discussed in the analysis through the lens of travel writing, itself a composite literary form that includes rather than excludes the genres named above, is particularly fruitful for a sustained engagement with the intertwinement of subjectivity and mobility presented in the narratives. It draws attention to the aesthetic forms of works that can be overlooked when the texts are read as nonfiction or autobiographies, which may result in a reading of the text that is simply concerned with excavating biographical information of the author’s life rather than the literary qualities of the text. Moreover, the theories and discourses produced within the academic field of travel writing provide avenues for analysis: These include, for example, theorizations on the intertwinement of writing and the construction of (national) identity, conceptualizations of self and otherness (including the inherent power dynamics), as well as an exploration of the generic conventions and standardizations of travel writing.

Genres, as scholars have shown, are subject to transformation.<sup>5</sup> In the case of travel writing, this assertion holds particularly true. The genre of travel writing is characterized by instability, shifting boundaries, and definitions

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4 On the formation and transformation of genres, see Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982). Fowler argues that genre categories are modified continuously even by texts that seemingly represent their established configurations and conventions.

5 For analyses of the factors that incite change within a genre, see Basseler et al. (2013).

contingent on cultural dynamics, historical events and developments, socio-cultural contexts, and critical genre theorization. Multiple scholars have highlighted the difficulties of outlining this rather nebulous genre:

Travel writing [...] is hard to define, not least because it is a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines. Travel narratives run from picaresque adventure to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable, and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology, and social science, often demonstrating great erudition, but without seeing fit to respect the rules that govern conventional scholarship. (Holland and Huggan 8-9)

Scholars contend that as a form that “has always defied definition and demarcation” (4) it is best characterized by its “fluidity” (Hamera and Bendixen 3). The complicated relationship between travel writing and genre may also be the reason for the “few sustained applications of theory to travel text” and the lack of a “general travel theory as such” (Youngs, *Cambridge* 166). Its complex nature, blurring boundaries, and shifting borders are partly a result of the fact that, as Carl Thompson observes, “the term ‘travel writing’ encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries” (*Travel Writing*, 1-2). But what complicates it is also what makes it appealing to literary scholars, namely the genre’s historical breadths (including texts from antiquity to the present), the expansive spaces and geographies covered in the texts, the travel writers’ various purposes and motivations for traveling, the diverse types of travelers, and the multifaceted modes of writing. Furthermore, travel writing’s inclusiveness allows for the pairing and comparing of highly disparate texts and multiple overlapping forms of writing. Without question, the genre’s “seemingly competing strands of the empirical and the rhetorical, the scientific and the literary, the documentary and the artful, the objective and the subjective, are in fact among the main elements that continue to generate scholarly inquiry and debate” (Pettinger and Youngs 1).

Open definitions of travel writing can include almost all texts dealing with travel—whether it is treated as a topic, metaphor, or underlying structural pattern of the narrative. Going further, the genre can accommodate virtually every text if one agrees with the idea that narrative itself can be understood as a journey. According to Michel de Certeau, stories “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (115). One could therefore conclude that “[e]very story is a travel story” (115). However, such an inclusive and overtly

expansive definition is not always productive. When every story can be considered a form of travel, the possibilities for application come at the expense of theoretical specificity. Due to travel writing's generic flexibility, some scholars have argued that literature about travel is too diverse to be fitted within the boundaries of a literary genre. The possibility to subsume almost all kinds of texts under the term has prompted Jan Borm to question the adequacy of calling travel writing a genre at all. In Borm's view, "It is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fiction and non-fiction whose main theme is travel" (13). Borm's skepticism is not misplaced. When travel writing is considered to include literally every text that is formally or thematically informed by travel, it is difficult to define the parameters that make a sustained analysis of travel narratives possible.<sup>6</sup> For this reason and in the context of this study, I seek out a more precise definition of the genre in my analysis of Black travel writing.

Many scholars agree that travel writing is characterized by specific thematic elements and modes of writing. These narrower definitions of travel writing<sup>7</sup> describe it as predominantly nonfictional texts (in the sense that nonfiction is the dominant mode of narration) written from the first-person point of view that describes the narrator's journey(s) and the spaces they have passed through or temporarily dwelled in (Pettinger and Youngs 4). The travels presented also shape the structure and plot of the narrative, although the extent to which the structure of a work is influenced by the process of travel varies greatly. A travel narrative is an account of a presumably 'real' journey undertaken by the narrator who identifies as the author of the book. In this sense, the travel narrative complies with the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1989) that puts forth the assumption of a nominal identity between protagonist or principal character, narrator, and author of the text. This premise, however, does not imply that a differentiation between these instances is unnecessary; instead, the contrary is true. When analyzing travel narratives (and this also pertains to the autobiographies) one must remember to distinguish between the author (the historical-biographical person who has written the

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6 See also Youngs's *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, chapter 1, for a discussion of the question of genre.

7 I use travel narrative and travelogue interchangeably and subsume these terms under the umbrella of travel writing; however, some literary scholars object to this usage of terminology and distinguish between the different terms (see Borm 18-19).

text), the narrator or travel writer (the narrating I who remembers and recounts the travel experience), and the traveler (the experiencing I or principal character who undertakes the journey) (Nünning 141-42). There are obvious overlaps with the traditional autobiography, but in contrast to the autobiography, which has as its main theme a person's development and retrospectively retells a substantial part of an individual's life, the travel narrative focuses on select experiences of the traveling persona.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the elements of this definition—nonfiction, first-person perspective, real journey—are certainly ambiguous and by no means absolutely definite. In particular, the assumption that travel writing is nonfiction or factual writing is an aspect that demands closer investigation. It is important to note that the border between nonfiction and fiction writing is blurry because travel writing also employs features that are ascribed to the novelistic genre. In their traditional form, travel narratives purport to describe the traveler's experiences accurately and represent places and people visited by them in an objective manner. Because of the genre's implicit truth claim and its association with authenticity and objectivity, “[m]any readers still hope for a literal truthfulness from travel writing that they would not expect to find in the novel” (Hulme and Youngs 6). They typically expect these accounts to be realistic records of what the traveler—an eyewitness who presents documentary evidence—has experienced during the journey. However, Barbara Korte stresses that “accounts of travel are never objective; they invariably reveal the culture-specific and individual patterns of perception and knowledge which every traveller brings to the travelled world” (6). This interwovenness of factual and fictional writing raises questions not only about genre that extend beyond the travel narrative but also about the ethical implications of

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8 Simon Cooke provides a useful definition of (autobiographical) travel writing, distinguishing it from autobiographical writing: “While autobiographies and biographies are often presented figuratively in terms of travel (‘life is a journey’, as the cliché has it), travel writing rarely presents a cradle-to-grave (or rather, cradle-to-the-present) account, at least not in a linear fashion. Rather, it usually focuses on a portion of life. [...] [I]t is a genre which, almost by definition, documents experiences away from the trappings of one’s ‘normal’ life. [...] [T]ravel writing often does present more transformative episodes and experiences. The journey of self-discovery or self-transformation is perhaps the most powerful form such resonant episodes can take” (19). See also chapter 5, “Revealing the Self,” in Thompson’s *Travel Writing* for an account of autobiographical aspects in the travel narrative.

travel writing, which have long been topics of debate (C. Fowler 57-58; see also Hulme, “Patagonian Cases”).

Like other literary narratives, the travel narrative is discursively transmitted and constructed. It is in the act of writing that the experience of travel is endowed with meaning. Thompson remarks that “[t]ravel *experience* is thus crafted into travel *text*, and this crafting process must inevitably introduce into the text, to a greater or lesser degree, a fictive dimension” (*Travel Writing* 27-28). These considerations have significant implications for the literary analysis of travel narratives, especially with regard to the relationship between the actual journey and its literary representation. To present their journeys, writers transform the actual experiences into narrative. This act of transferring travel experiences into written text entails different steps of (re)organizing the remembered material, including the selection and arrangement of events and occurrences that are considered meaningful and are thus imbued with significance that is neither inherent nor given. Furthermore, for the discursive representation of the journey, travel writers employ literary techniques that are contingent upon the generic conventions of travel writing (Nünning 137). Crucial roles in the process of configuration are played by intertexts, cultural memory, and genre conventions. The representation of reality in travel narratives is therefore “premediated and prefigured in manifold ways by a number of cultural models, genres, schemata and texts” (129). Travelogues are influenced by their predecessors, which established themes and forms of narration. A journey to an unknown place is also influenced by the traveler’s cultural attitudes, presupposed visions, desires, anxieties, and expectations of the place, which in turn determine what is selected and represented in the texts that are written about it. While some narratives self-reflexively address the subjectivity that informs the process, others do not. Travel writers carry ideological baggage that informs their experiences and later also the writing produced about the journey.<sup>9</sup> Such prefiguration and premediation can also be found in the pilgrimage travels of diasporic Africans to the African continent, or roots trips, that are discussed in this study.

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9 “The Grand Tour” is a preeminent example of how travel routes, both physical and textual, are premediated and prefigured. As Pfister specifies, “The Grand Tour of Continental Europe constituted for the English travellers of the 17th and 18th centuries one of those canonized travel programmes, which in countless, variously interconnected ways ‘pre-scripted’ routes, schemata of perception and evaluation, main points of interest and sights-to-be-seen” (qtd. in Nünning 131).

Travel writing follows in the traces of its literary predecessors—geographically along well-trodden paths and figuratively along textual and rhetorical conventions of earlier travel narratives (Pfister 1). This traveling in traces is most obviously performed in so-called ‘second journeys,’ a term coined by Maria Lindgren Leavenworth in her study *The Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps* (2010). These are travel accounts of journeys where the traveler-writer follows the path of their (literary) predecessors, seeking to reproduce and even relive the experiences of earlier travelers (Leavenworth 11-12). Yet, even those traveler-writers who set out to discover new trails, both in the physical sense as well as in their writing, follow somehow in their predecessors’ footsteps. In the same vein, Pfister points to the impossibility of escaping prefigured routes, plots, and aesthetics and emphasizes that travel writers are unable to liberate themselves from the constitutive impact and formative power of established narratives and pretexts. He explains,

Even if there have always been travellers who have insisted on not following traces and on relying for their accounts on autopsy alone, only on what they have seen with their own eyes, at a closer look it becomes evident—be it only in their forceful gestures of negating intertextuality and erasing traces—that they, as all travellers, have always tapped the achieves of the cultural memory of both their own and the other culture. (“Travellers” 1-2)

As the analyses of contemporary travel narratives in Chapter IV will show, the travelers follow well-trodden routes to Africa that are both geographical and textual. More often than not, these texts take the accounts of travelers who have made the journey before them as their reference points.

Having examined the genre of travel writing in general terms, the remainder of this section zooms in on Black travel writing in particular to carve out what accounts for its distinctiveness. Arana describes Black travel writing as a “kaleidoscopic” genre with a longstanding history: “Black travelers have been producing consciousness-raising, world-shaking travel writing for ages” (“A Kaleidoscopic Genre” 3). She goes on, saying, “The wide array of travel destinations and traveling experiences, authorial purposes, narrative styles, and cultural implications of the writing we bundle into the generic category *black travel writing* is staggering” (4). The aforementioned anthologies by Griffin and Fish (1998) and Pettinger (1998) testify to the variety that Arana addresses and illustrate the range of writings by Black authors and the manifold types of travelers and mobilities depicted in these narratives. These include the writings of formerly enslaved subjects, travel accounts by missionaries, intellectu-

als, political leaders, philanthropists, artists, exiles, expatriates, and tourists. This variety, however, is hardly surprising when considering that “[f]or over two centuries black travelers have journeyed to the seven continents and beyond” (Griffin and Fish xiii). Illuminate the diversity of this genre is important because it corrects the notion that Black people have traveled less and produced fewer accounts of their journeys compared with their White counterparts.

Despite the high degree of eclecticism and the wealth of forms that can be found in travel narratives by Black authors, Arana, in her introduction to the special issue of the *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* identifies an important feature that characterizes Black travel writing: that is, the attention paid to issues surrounding race (“A Kaleidoscopic Genre” 4). While she cautions that easy generalizations and homogenization must be avoided when referring to the genre, a preoccupation with the topic of race and an emphasis on the distinct perspectives of Black travelers can indeed be found in numerous travel-themed texts by authors of African descent.<sup>10</sup> I return to McElroy’s travel memoir as a preeminent example of a traveler-writer who self-reflexively addresses her particular perspective, or vision, which emanates from her personal history and her subject position:

I carry my past with me. I know that my perceptions are shaped by that past, the bags and baggage of America [...]. I am the great-granddaughter of a slave, a member of the sixth generation of African descendents who have survived diaspora on American soil. [...] I am a Western woman, and I must always be aware of how that life has affected my vision, my ability to see myself as akin to and different from the people I meet. (*Long Way* vi)

In this passage, McElroy mentions several aspects that influenced her perspective and her perceptions of the people and places she visits: As a descendant of enslaved people, a woman, and a Westernized individual, she carries

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10 The subtitles of the travel narratives by Eddy L. Harris, Keith Richburg, and Barack Obama, ‘A Black American’s Journey into the Heart of Africa,’ ‘A Black Man Confronts Africa,’ and ‘A Story of Race and Inheritance,’ respectively, gesture to the texts’ engagement with questions pertaining to race and to racial and national identification. Especially the titles of Harris’s and Richburg’s works signal to readers their author’s unique perspectives as Black American—not *African* American—traveler-writers. In a similar vein, journalist Lynne Duke, who wrote about her time in Africa in *Mandela, Mobutu, and Me* (2003), notes at the beginning of her narrative that she looked at Africa through the eyes “of an African American and a woman” (ix).

a particular story and history with her. She suggests that her identity and experiences as an African American create a distinct vision, noting that “I am always aware that my vision of the world will differ from that of my usual travel companions” (224). These ‘usual’ companions that accompany her on trips are predominantly White. During a journey to Australia, McElroy’s specific vision makes her attentive and empathetic to the Aboriginal people’s invisibility in the major cities of Australia, which she compares to the absence of Black people in filmic depictions of downtown New York (Youngs, “Daughter” 58-59). It is this perspective that distinguishes McElroy from her fellow (White) travel companions and that, arguably, sets her writing and that of many other Black authors of travel narratives apart from the literature authored by White travel writers. Moreover, it is not only the particular way McElroy *looks at* the world, but also the way that she *is looked at* by others—“Overseas, I am always the sight to see” (*Long Way* 7)—that draws attention to her position as a Black subject, a woman, a world traveler, and a professional writer. Importantly, for Black travelers, it is not only about *seeing things* differently while abroad but also about *being seen* differently, a topic that is often addressed in their texts.

A preoccupation with issues of race and Blackness is a recurrent theme in many works of Black travel writers who, as Dorothy Lazard contends, “take their readers on parallel journeys into the known physical world as well as the internally perceived world of race” (“Reading” 180). She observes, “Unlike their white counterparts, Black travel writers, as racialized people, bring a strong sense of race consciousness to their work” (180). For example, they often reveal a particular interest in the racial climate of the places they visit and identify with people who are marginalized; as a result of the close identification, the Black travel writer becomes “the subject of the piece as well as its narrator/conscience” (180). Their travel experiences are also shaped by their experiences as Black subjects whose “bags and baggage” (*Long Way* vi), to use McElroy’s words, are the histories and legacies of displacement, oppression, and exclusion. Topics such as race, racism, racial and national identification, and racial solidarity often surface in the travel narratives of writers of African descent. However, this certainly is not the sole concern of the texts. To confine Black travel narratives to these themes would not do justice to the hybridity of the genre.

Having scrutinized the characteristics of the genre of travel writing in general and of Black travel writing more specifically, the following section outlines its development and trajectories. In particular, it traces the genre’s roots

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

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

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