DREAM OF AN ELSEWHERE: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

African American literature is infused with travel. Experiences of physical journeying have been pivotal to the story of men and women of African descent in the United States for hundreds of years, since the original traumatic forced displacement of the Middle Passage that generated a diasporic subjectivity intertwined with corporeal motion. The subsequent emancipatory journey to freedom, as recited in slave narratives, decentred the coercive migrations of the slave trade by coupling the subversive act of self-directed movement through geographical space with a collective understanding of liberty. Wanderings in the period after the Civil War, followed by the momentous collective Great Migratory journeys of the twentieth century, as well as the countless and ongoing voyages to the ancestral continent of Africa spanning four centuries, has only deepened the criticality of travel to African American history and cultural production. However, African American travel writing has received only a small amount of scholarly attention. Moreover, of that scant consideration, the focus has tended to be on narratives of involuntary or economically necessitated movement. Thorough academic study of the contemporary literature of African American travel beyond these domains is rare, despite the potential rewards of such an endeavour for researchers interested in the contemporary (re)construction of African American subjectivity and in the continuing artistic evolution of the changeable and indeterminate travel book form. This thesis argues that the travel text is a highly appropriate

vehicle for mobile African Americans journeying in defiance of the imposed classifications of identity and of the constraints of taxonomic and hierarchical genre systems.

Chapter One considers contemporary African American travel writing as a performance of genre, in relation to memoir, ethnography and imaginative fiction, fruitfully testing the already elastic boundaries of a form of writing wrongly dismissed as sub-literary. Chapter Two addresses recent narratives of journeys to Africa, considering in particular the contrasting responses of Keith B. Richburg and Saidiya Hartman. Chapter Three attends to the neglected area of domestic or intranational travel literature by examining the work of African Americans journeying within and across the United States. Chapter Four centres upon Natasha Tarpley's lyrical memoir *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* to assess the changing generational experiences of mobile African American women in the United States. The thesis concludes by reflecting on these texts in relation to postcolonial and Black Atlantic theoretical frameworks.

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INTRODUCTION

<u>'To Take my Question on the Road'</u>

<u>Literary African American Journeys</u>

"Chile, they got some of us everywhere," she'd say. "Wearing all manner of clothes and speaking in every kind of tongue." And thus began my wanderlust.

– Colleen J. McElroy[1]

I needed to set out, to see for myself, as I wondered about the nature of my own blackness, to take my question on the road. For, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, African Americans live all over this country. I wanted to know what they thought, what they felt …

– Randall Kenan[2]

It's hard to imagine any African American-authored text not somehow steeped in travel, writing about travel, and writing while travelling.

– Beth A. McCoy[3]

With 'Wonderful Ambiguity' and 'Indiscriminate Hospitality': A Defence of Travel Writing

In *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs note with some elation that 'the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has reached unprecedented levels'[4] and 'the range and ethos of the genre are growing in exciting and vital ways'.[5] However, they also acknowledge that much work remains to be done, admitting that 'our volume offers only a tentative map of this vast, little explored area'.[6] Similarly, Carl Thompson asserts that 'travel writing is currently a flourishing and highly popular literary genre' and that 'academic interest in travel writing has also increased dramatically' (although

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[1] Colleen J. McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie: Travel Memoirs* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), p. iii.

[2] Randall Kenan, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p.17.

[3] Beth A. McCoy, 'Walking the 5: Octavia Butler's 'Parable of the Sower'', *Black Travel Writing*, Special Issue of *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9. 1 (Fall 2003), 223-34; quotation at 223.

[4] Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, 'Introduction', in Hulme and Youngs, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

[5] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 10.

[6] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 1.

scholarly curiosity certainly does not automatically equal endorsement or celebration)[7] but, in the vein of Hulme and Youngs, he notes the genre's 'bewilderingly diverse' formal, thematic and tonal range,[8] which presents the critic of the literature of travel with an immense and somewhat indistinct field to survey. As a 'formally promiscuous'[9] literary genre, travel writing is in a continuous state of flux, consistently open to fresh mutation according to the changing exigencies of travellers, authors and readers. As a framed or fixed textual model, the travel book form is thus not sharply defined and the 'complex history'[10] of its always-incomplete development – from the ancient, classical and medieval stories of symbolic and literal voyages to the more self-conscious, autobiographical and commercially successful narrative style popular today (from the epic tales of Homer, the Bible and Marco Polo to the bestsellers of Bill Bryson, Michael Palin and Paul Theroux) – is yet to be fully understood.[11] Indeed, as modes of travel, communication and technology continue to transform, this affinity with instability is set to continue well into the present century and beyond. It is perhaps, in part, a combination of its perpetually indeterminate, slippery form and currently profitable, celebrity-endorsed success that has resulted in a peculiar snobbishness towards travel writing as a 'low' or 'middle-brow' form when compared to more prestigious and established 'high' literary art forms such as the novel, poetry or drama. Indeed, Thompson has noted that the 'loss in intellectual status and cultural prestige' suffered by travel writing in the twentieth century has 'firmly relegated' it 'to the status of a 'minor' genre',[12] while Youngs links this loss of rank with the travelogue's 'kinship with other lowly regarded forms: autobiography, journalism and the travel guide'.[13] Such a system of qualitatively ranking or

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[7] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-5.

[8] Thompson, p. 11.

[9] John Frow, *Genre* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 143.

[10] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 10.

[11] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 10.

[12] Thompson, pp. 60-1.

[13] Tim Youngs, 'The Importance of Travel Writing', *The European English Messenger* 13. 2 (Autumn 2004), 55-62; quotation at 55.

ordering text types – of 'hierarchies of value'[14] – reflects a strict, traditional conception of genre theory that is usefully resisted by John Frow, who posits a more reflexive understanding of genre as a dynamic process of intertextuality, participation and performance[15] that is highly pertinent to the task of rejuvenating scholarly appreciation of the literature of travel. As a remedy for the 'literary prejudice' suffered by travel writing, Youngs calls upon critics to address a lack of attention to the 'formal creative properties' of peripatetic narratives as a corrective to this sad disregard for the genre's long tradition of imaginative artistry.[16] Such a strategy could also reverse negative understandings of the 'hybridity' of travel writing, which Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish suggest has caused the genre to 'fall between the cracks'[17] of academic research. By appraising travel writing as a literary object worthy of serious academic study this thesis seeks to correct this untenable disregard.

In truth, the aptly nebulous, itinerant condition of travel writing when viewed through a long historical lens should be encountered as an advantageous quality rather than a defect, a feature of an ongoing, fluctuating and innovative process of evolutionary genre (re)formation rather than an indicator of unrefined non-literary banality. Far from prosaic, travel writing possesses an admirable degree of artistic merit as a direct result of its pleasing 'generic androgyny', as Bill Buford argues in reference to the renowned 1970s travelogues of Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux:

> They are all informed by the sheer glee of storytelling, a narrative eloquence that situates them, with *wonderful ambiguity*, somewhere between fiction and fact. There is of course nothing new in this kind of ambiguity, although travel writing seems to be its purest expression ... . Travel writing is the beggar of literary forms.[18]

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[14] Frow, p. 125.

[15] See Frow, pp. 24-5.

[16] Youngs, 'The Importance of Travel Writing', 55-6.

[17] Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, Introduction, *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii; quotation at p. xiv.

[18] Bill Buford [1984], quoted in Ian Jack, 'Introduction', in Bill Buford, ed., *The Granta Book of Travel* [1991] (London: Granta Books, 1998), p. x (emphasis added).

The travel text thus benefits from a permeable genre frame capable of absorbing a multiplicity of forms, modes and styles, from the social sciences, the ethnographic or the anthropological to the political or the philosophical essay, as well as those features associated with more overtly literary works of the imagination, such as prose fiction, the romantic adventure quest, or poetry. Not a fortified, closed system of paradigmatic conventions to which writers must adhere, then, travel writing is, as Jonathan Raban reinforces, quirkily and playfully uninhibited:

> Travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality.[19]

Yet despite the convivial inclusivity suggested by Raban's metaphor of the jauntily free dwelling-space, and the welcome growth of academic interest in the genre, there remain omissions and silences yet to be properly registered and cultural perspectives that are still largely overlooked. In a special issue of *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* devoted to 'black travel writing', R. Victoria Arana is justly appreciative of the 'ancient pedigree' of the 'pivotal' and 'venerable' tradition of travel writing, although she has witnessed a perplexing inattention to journey narratives authored by black travellers, even within institutions 'with recognised sensitivity to issues relating to the African diaspora' (such as her own).[20] Admittedly, the fruitful 'recovery and analysis' of texts inaugurated by the 'generative' engagement of postcolonial theory with travel writing since the 1970s has been valuable, 'helping to open up the field of literary studies to an apparently endless supply of new and socially salient texts', as Mary Baine Campbell has stated.[21] Edward Said's seminal work

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[19] Jonathan Raban, *For Love and Money: Writing – Reading – Travelling 1968-1987* (London: Picador, 1998), pp. 253-4.
[20] R. Victoria Arana, 'Black Travel Writing, A Kaleidoscopic Genre', in Arana, ed., *Black Travel Writing*. Special Issue of *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9, 1 (Fall 2003), 1-7.
[21] Mary Baine Campbell, 'Travel Writing and its Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, pp. 261-78.

Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (1978)[22] launched a scheme of reading travel writing according to its relationship with the rhetoric of empire, initially reading the travel text as a legitimising 'servant' of imperialism caught within the 'inescapable' binds of a 'monolithic' colonial discourse.[23] Subsequent excavations of travel narratives that challenge 'the Eurocentric legacy of the genre', including those authored by men and women from ex-colonies 'writing back' – as well as travelling back – to the imperial centre have helped to redress the balance, particularly with regard to those 'contemporary, self-consciously post-colonial travel narratives of Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid, Pico Iyer, Amitav Ghosh and others', as noted by Alasdair Pettinger.[24] However, Pettinger goes on to add that, in spite of the surge of interest in travel writing fed by postcolonial studies, 'African American travel writing has been largely ignored by the developments'.[25] Indeed, even within the more precise category of 'black' travel writing that Arana identifies, there is a further 'wide array of travel destinations and travel experiences, authorial purposes [and] narrative styles', a veritable 'kaleidoscope' that immediately undercuts any attempt to anthologise writing together under this particular sub-generic category.[26] The racial modifier, with its attendant homogenising tendencies and discernibly problematic status as an essentialist signifier of being, remains inadequate (imagine the overwhelming heterogeneity that would exist in an anthology of 'white' travel writing). Acknowledging the risk of 'seeming to make essential claims about 'race'' that problematises such categorisation, Pettinger has fairly argued that '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'.[27]

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[22] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).
[23] See Alasdair Pettinger, ''At Least One Negro Everywhere': African American Travel Writing', in Deborah L. Madsen, ed., *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Pluto, 2003), pp. 77-91; quotation at p. 77.
[24] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', pp. 78.
[25] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', pp. 78-9.
[26] Arana, 'Black Travel Writing', in *BMa*, 4.
[27] Pettinger, *Always Elsewhere*, p. xii.

However, over a decade on from these remarks, I choose to specify further here, examining the often overlooked writings of African American travellers in the contemporary era.

'All the Movement Didn't Stop with the Emancipation': The Evolution of African American Travel Writing

As may be expected at this point, even within the specific category of African American travel writing there is yet more substantial variation. Arana is accurate in her description of African American travel writing as a 'grand tradition',[28] for African Americans have been writing about a substantive range of travelling experiences – including but not exclusively relating to the central trauma of the Middle Passage, the slave trade and coerced migration – since the arrival of people of African descent in the United States of America. Indeed, the vast literature of African American motion chronicles a remarkable history of journeying 'to the seven continents and beyond' for 'over two centuries', as stated by Griffin and Fish in their landmark anthology *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing* (1998),[29] a rare exception of attentiveness to a largely neglected body of literature. Keen to assert that 'there are few places where African Americans have not ventured',[30] the editors draw attention to a range of travelogues that vary 'greatly in style, length and purpose',[31] being authored by 'tourists, emigrants, expatriates, sailors, educators, missionaries, philanthropists, artists, and leaders of political or nationalistic movements'.[32] Gathering together brief extracts from such noteworthy works as Nancy Prince's *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs Nancy Prince* (1850), Matthew A. Henson's *A Negro Explorer to the South Pole* (1908) and seafaring 'early pan-Africanist'[33] Harry Dean's *The Pedro Gorino*

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[28] Arana, 'Black Travel Writing', 5.

[29] Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, 'Introduction', in Griffin and Fish, eds., *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii; quotation at pp. xiii-xvii.

[30] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. xiii.

[31] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. xiv.

[32] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village*, p. xiii.

[33] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village*, p. 32.

(1929), as well as paying tribute to pioneering women 'explorers and adventurers' who 'did not leave any written documentation of their travels'[34] – such as Biddy Mason, who migrated during the California Gold Rush of 1848, and Bessie Coleman, the first licensed African American woman pilot – Griffin and Fish's collection not only addresses the absence of the literature of African American travel within the wider canon but also begins to remodel the limited terrain of a symbolic 'black' geography that would erroneously locate mobile men and particularly women of colour only within certain terrains and as only accessing particular modes of travel, for particular purposes. Inspired by the work of Griffin and Fish and other notable exceptions – Richard Wright's fascinating travel writings have been re-examined in a collection of critical essays edited by Virginia Whatley Smith,[35] for example – this thesis undertakes the task of correcting scholarly oversight by further exploring the literature of African American travel, which includes (but is not limited to) journeys undertaken in relation to slavery or related traumatic experiences of physical mobility, and includes (but is not limited to) the oppositional perspectives of peripatetic African Americans resistant to the neoimperial interventions of Western nation states and other institutional powers in so-called 'third world' regions. To misclassify or impose upon African American travel writing only certain themes, locations and travelling impulses would be to perpetuate the restrictive sort of editorial view that claims 'Black people don't go to Iceland',[36] or mistakenly impose certain viewpoints upon 'minority' writers, regimenting and homogenising texts according to race. The opening chapter of this thesis in particular seeks to shift the focus to the aforementioned 'glee of storytelling' as an aspect of a more joyous notion of physical mobility. As the solo internationally mobile African American woman Elaine Lee remarks in *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (1997):

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[34] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village*, p. 4.
[35] Virginia Whatley Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001)
[36] A response received by one African American author from an editor 'with pity in his voice', as noted in Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', p. 81.

> It's when I'm travelling that I most deeply celebrate life. ... Perhaps the biggest surprise about travelling internationally was to discover that in many parts of the world it is an asset to be a black woman, unlike in North America, where it is often a liability. When I am abroad, I am usually afforded a level of respect and appreciation that I do not get in my own country. ... For a couple of days, weeks, or months a year, I kinda like the idea of being consistently treated like a human being.[37]

The utilisation of autonomous, freely chosen geographical motion on a global scale as a method of curative subjective renewal is a strategy shared by Colleen J. McElroy, who states in her travel memoir *A Long Way From St Louie* (1997) that:

> I want to see myself. To traverse the globe ... to give myself the vision of what it is like to be black and female on an unknown landscape.[38]

Signalling a willed departure from a history of only traumatic or coerced motion, from inherited or imposed conceptions of racial and gendered subjectivity, and also refusing to settle for her ersatz freedom as a woman of colour in the United States, McElroy resolves to maintain her wanderlust, declaring that 'all that movement didn't stop with the emancipation'.[39] This thesis will go on to consider the mobile subjectivities of African American travellers in more detail – Chapter Four addresses the experiences of mobile African American women in particular – but for the moment I will further situate my object of study within the history of literary African American travels.

Offering a taste of the longevity and variety of African American travel and methods of writing travel, *A Stranger in the Village* anthologises extracts of journey writing ranging from the sensational early Western frontier narrative of James P. Beckworth, published in 1856, to the more familiar, introspective contemporary register of McElroy. A momentary comparative glance at the style and content of these two narratives, which are separated by well over a century, demonstrates the shift that has occurred in the genre over this

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[37] Elaine Lee, 'Introduction', Lee, ed., *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (The Eighth Mountain Press: Portland, Oregon, 1997), pp. 11-5; quotation at pp. 12-3.

[38] Colleen J. McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), p. v.

[39] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 2.

considerable time period. By coincidence, Beckworth lived as a youth in McElroy's birthplace of St. Louis, where he was also 'soon overcome by a desire to travel'.[40] His narrative, 'part truth, part myth',[41] recalls his eventual adoption by a migratory Native American tribe, where he is eventually promoted to the status of chief and thus 'had many Native American wives, according to the narrative'.[42] The text combines the tropes and narrative mode of orthodox exploration narratives with the 'fantasies of heroic exploits' that characterised many popular travelogues and imaginative adventure stories of the nineteenth century.[43] As the following extract demonstrates, events are recounted retrospectively and move chronologically, often with haste, being expressed in a plain narrative 'telling'[44] mode (although later on there are also moments of dramatic re-enactment, with dialogue between 'characters', which is geared more towards a 'showing' mode):

> We pushed off, and after a slow and tedious trip of about twenty days, arrived at our place of destination (Galena of the present day). We found Indians in great numbers awaiting our disembarkation, who were already acquainted with the object of our expedition. The two tribes, Sacs and Foxes, received us peaceably, but, all being armed, they presented a very formidable appearance. … After nine days' parleying, a treaty was affected with them…
>
> I remained in that region for a space of eighteen months, occupying my leisure time by working in the mines. During this time I accumulated seven hundred dollars in cash, and, feeling myself to be quite a wealthy personage, I determined upon a return home.
>
> My visit paid, I felt a disposition to roam farther…[45]

Shortly after this brisk passage, Beckworth is captured but subsequently hailed by the Crow tribe as 'the great brave' or long-lost son, and thus commences 'my Indian life with the Crows'.[46] As the full title – *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckworth, Mountaineer, Scout and Pioneer and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians* – suggests, the text is an

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[40] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. 6.
[41] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. 6.
[42] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. 6.
[43] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 53.
[44] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 205-6.
[45] James P. Beckworth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckworth, Mountaineer, Scout and Pioneer and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians* [1856], in Griffin and Fish, eds., *A Stranger in the Village,* pp. 7-14; quotation at pp. 7-8.
[46] Beckworth in *A Stranger in the Village,* p. 14.

entertaining, self-aggrandising tale of masculine adventure, endurance and bravery that presents the traveller-narrator as a successful and 'fearless warrior' of the old West.[47] Unsurprisingly, McElroy's 1997 collection of travel memoirs is formally and thematically a substantive departure from Beckworth's mode of writing travel and methods of self-presentation. Representative of the 'inward turn'[48] that has since been established in the contemporary, more literary and personalised style of travel writing that we may recognise today, McElroy's primary concern in *A Long Way From St Louie* is the interior, psychological journey of the traveller-narrator subject. Her self-presentation is more modest – that of an appropriately distanced and respectful visitor travelling to learn rather than to conquer or assimilate – and her narrative style is overtly artistic, with material organised thematically rather than chronologically and even, as in the chapter from which the extract below is taken, in the form of concrete poetry:

> In the street lamps of the night market, skin tones seemed / burnished even browner. In that flickering light, everyone / assumed varying shades of brown. My own complexion / was tinted a darker shade … . / Tourists wandered past, / seemingly dazed by the colours. … /
>
> "And where you be keeping deese theengs?" I asked, falling / into the lilting accent I'd learned for high school / theatre – an Island-girl accent I now used in a pinch, / one I'd adopted … .[49]

We get a sense in this passage of McElroy's lyrical (re)presentation of her travelling experiences (where in this instance stanzas on the page visually resemble the shapes of items for sale at a market in Lima, such as a drinking cup, which McElroy purchases at the close of the chapter) alongside her overarching thematic concern with the fluctuation and evolution of her itinerant subjectivity as a self-described 'Westernised' woman of colour 'shaped by … the bags and baggage of America ... .'[50] The gradual fruition of her sense of self in relation to the prominent triad of race, nation and gender – as well as against and (reluctantly) beside the

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[47] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village,* p. 6.
[48] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 108-18.
[49] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. 90-2.
[50] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. v-vi.

clichéd figure of the 'ugly American' or Western tourist, configured in opposition to the rarefied figure of the 'traveller' – reflects contemporary concerns, anxieties and patterns of travel. What does remain constant, however, is the author's wanderlust: Beckworth's restless 'disposition to roam farther' after a brief visit home chimes with McElroy's own depiction of 'touching base' in St. Louis before resuming her seemingly endless travelling in search of 'something out there beckoning me ... . And I don't plan to stop until I find it'.[51] These words end the book, but note that they do not signal the end of her journey.

Evidently, the genre has travelled a considerable distance between the publications of Beckworth's frontier tale and McElroy's expressive memoir. Bookended by these two texts in *A Stranger in the Village* is a vast history of motion and writing in motion, which incorporates the peripatetic missionaries, activists and explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the pan-Africanists, journalists and statesmen of the pre and post civil rights era, and the tourists (or perhaps post- or anti-tourists) and wanderers that followed in the twentieth century and will continue into the twenty-first. The types of writing adopted and adapted by travellers include 'autobiographical materials … pamphlets, personal letters, notes, diaries, dispatches, travel guides, official reports, lectures, and ethnographies' and, of course, travel books.[52] In a partial reprise of Buford's aforementioned praise of the form's pleasing heterogeneity, Griffin and Fish regard such generic admixture as a fruitful boon rather than a sign of crude mongrelisation, asserting that 'the genre of travel writing is *blessed* with a hybridity that incorporates and employs many other sources'.[53] Their impressive collection offers only a glimpse of a tradition that has engendered such an array of texts that utilise and modify numerous forms, from the doubtful legends of the adventurous frontier hero of the old West to the memoirist storytelling of an itinerant poet travelling in the self-conscious epoch of postmodernism, globalisation and ubiquitous tourism. It is difficult to

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[51] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 241.
[52] Griffin and Fish, p. xiv.
[53] Griffin and Fish, p. Xiv (emphasis added).

imagine an archetypal model of the travel book form or of an *a priori* understanding of how to write about travelling experiences when the genre is evidently capable of such considerable mutation. Nor is it adequate to refer to 'the African American travel book' or 'African American travel writing' without further specificity.

To fully research the entire corpus of African American travel writing in its full historical complexity is therefore beyond the remit of this project. Once more sharpening the optic, then, this thesis consequently centres on the most recent time period, reading 'contemporary' African American narratives of travel, from the late twentieth century to the present day. The earliest book considered in this thesis is Eddy L. Harris' 1988 narrative of his ambitious canoe voyage along the Mississippi River, *Mississippi Solo*,[54] while the most recent is *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007),[55] Saidiya Hartman's account of her journey to Africa. Both books are published immediately prior to two major historical events that frame the body of texts studied here, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall and the election of Barack Obama, which neatly bookends a body of work that exhibits (generally but certainly not without exception) a tonal shift towards an introspective, gently progressive optimism and also, in some cases, a stylistic movement in favour of literary experimentation, as discussed in Chapter One.

A 'Predicament of Terminology': Approaching African American Writings of Travel

Virginia Whatley Smith's remark that 'defining the genre of African American travel writing is more complex than it may seem'[56] is therefore accurate, doubly so once the concept of defining 'genre' as a systematic set of rules of conventions has been problematised. Nonetheless, on the matter of classification, it may be fruitful here to pause and focus on the

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[54] Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo* (New York: Owl Books, 1988).

[55] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 234.

[56] Virginia Whatley Smith, "African American Travel Literature", in Alfred Benidixen and Judith Hamera, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 197-243; quotation at p. 197.

relationship of terminology to the critical reading – and neglect – of African American travelogues. The tendency of contemporary African American travel writing to defy easy categorisation as singular 'types' of text is partly a consequence of the aforementioned ambiguity of travel writing in general, indicated by the fragility of the term 'travel writing' as a consistent and wholly accurate descriptor of the text to which it refers. Indeed, the multiplicity of terms used to describe the forms of writing in question evidences a 'predicament of terminology'[57] that complicates my attempt to gather and bring into focus a particular body of texts here. My use of the elastic descriptor 'travel writing' embraces the travel book, travel narrative, travel poem, exploration narrative, travel memoir, narrative of travel, travelogue, journey book, journey quest, or any nomenclature that refers to a piece of writing that is preoccupied with, or has been inaugurated by, actual physical journeying across geographical space. So as to avoid making the definition of travel writing 'nugatory' via sheer inclusivity, as Peter Hulme warns against,[58] I am here mindful of the pervasiveness of travel within literature in general. So, to delimit a space for what may count as an example of travel writing, I do place special foundational importance on the veracity of the journey or journeys represented in the text, even if those events are narrated in a palpably artistic or experimental manner typical of imaginative writing or, furthermore, even if embellished or altered according to the whims of the author, as indeed purportedly non-fictional travel stories have always been. Advocating an inclusivist[59] definition of travel writing as literature – that is, a more artistic process than the earnest but somewhat robotic work of faithfully reproducing fieldnotes – I argue that the presence of the deliberately heterogeneous collection of contemporary African American travel books discussed here in the wider scholarly reading

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[57] Jam Borm, 'In-Betweeners? On the Travel Book and Ethnographies', in *Studies in Travel Writing* 4 (2000), 78-105; quotation at 78.

[58] Peter Hulme in 'Talking About Travel Writing: A Conversation Between Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs', *English Association Issues No. 8* (March 2007), pp. 1-7; quotation at pp. 1-4.

[59] As opposed to 'exclusivist', which is less comfortable with the idea of including travel writing under the rubric of literature. The 'inclusivist' tends to equate 'literature' with 'writing'. See Hulme in 'Talking About Travel Writing', pp. 1-4.

of this 'broad and ever-shifting genre'[60] can only be fruitful. Indeed, to exclude such unorthodox travel texts as McElroy's *A Long Way From St Louie* or Natasha Tarpley's *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (1998)[61] from our field of study would be somewhat illogical and counterproductive, given the capacity of the works in question to further stretch generic boundaries and open new horizons for travel writing and its theory.

Just as travel writing as a literary genre is not rigidly defined or securely framed and so pleasingly open ended, so critical attention to the literature of African American travel may likewise be regarded as agreeably unattached to particular critical practices or theoretical dogmas. Due in part to the immense magnitude of spatially, temporally and formally disparate texts that may be gathered together under the rubric of 'travel writing', as a scholarly object of research the travel text in general need not be fastened to a definitive critical methodology or capitalised Theory. Nevertheless, it is true that much of the recent upsurge of interest in the genre has been propelled by the abovementioned valuable Saidean or postcolonial programme of archaeological and restorative work on the rhetoric of empire and on instances of resistance to colonial discourse in travel writings by authors from colonised or formerly colonised countries. It is true that themes closely associated with (but not exclusive to) postcolonial studies do appear in many African American narratives of travel – such as diaspora, displacement, migration, nationhood and hybridity – although, as Pettinger has astutely observed, 'the situation of slaves and their descendants in the United States is not readily amenable to a colonial or post-colonial analysis'.[62] Despite the subjugation suffered and fought against as an oppressed minority at home, African American travellers are not uniformly or straightforwardly oppositional or hostile to contemporary U.S.

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[60] Hulme and Youngs, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 10.
[61] Natasha Tarpley, *Girl in The Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (Boston: Beacon press, 1998).
[62] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 79.

political, economic or cultural imperialism when itinerant on a global scale, as will become clearer in Chapter Two of this thesis on narratives of journeys to Africa (Pettinger observes that perspectives may even begin 'to resemble those of white Americans' when on foreign soil).[63] African American travel writing thus 'doesn't easily fit the categories' created during the contemporary upsurge of scholarly interest in the literature of travel that was largely 'informed by a 'post-colonial' sensibility'.[64] In accord, Tim Youngs also notes that much of the renewed fascination with travel writing has been 'fed by work on colonial discourse'[65] and that African American travel writing has been largely neglected during this revival, due in part to 'the uneasy relationship between African American and postcolonial studies', with the latter doubting the subversive anti-colonial promise of the former.[66] Griffin and Fish also note with regret that African American travel writing 'tends to fall between the cracks' of academic study or 'get classified as autobiography, which may fail to account for the significance of mobility [that is, I would emphasise, the act of physical travel through geographical space, rather than displacement] and its relationship to subjectivity' in the African American literary tradition,[67] since the slave narrative. Within the confines of a metropole/colony or centre/periphery model, African American travel texts may appear as a disruptive glitch that destabilises an otherwise fairly stable theoretical paradigm. Regrettably, the result of this problematical 'anomalous status'[68] – only problematic and anomalous, it should be noted, if placed within a particular and somewhat incompatible methodological frame – has been critical neglect.

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[63] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 79.
[64] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 77.
[65] Tim Youngs, 'Foreword', *Studies in Travel Writing* 1 (1997), v-vi; quotation at v.
[66] Youngs, 'Pushing Against the Black/White Limits of Maps', 72. See also John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and The Black Atlantic* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005).
[67] Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, Introduction to *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), p. xiv.
[68] Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', p. 79.

Moreover, an unintended consequence of the fruitful process of reading colonial and postcolonial travel literature from within the particular framework of Saidean discourse analysis is that the general intellectual disregard for travel writing – already thought of as sub-literary or low-brow – has been intensified by its association with colonialism, leaving the travel book unfairly contaminated as a toxic, inherently corrupt propaganda tool of white, male, Western imperialism. Yet, rather than operating furtively as a key institutional instrument of empire, producing the rest of the world in print to rouse and induce a domestic Western audience in the service of imperial and economic expansion,[69] travel writing in the African American frame may instead become a curative source of liberty and a creative act of literary invention steeped in the African American cultural tradition of artistic innovation that adopts and adapts inherited forms. Travel thus becomes 'a form of empowerment, survival and renewal' to be celebrated and encouraged, a task Lee undertakes in her exultant anthology *Go Girl!*[70] Academic focus on formally ambiguous, more experimental texts may also help to bring greater critical attention to travel writing as a crafted form of imaginative (but not straightforwardly fictive) literature to be studied as such, rather than inspected only in terms of its hidden complicity with, or resistance to, power and imperial domination.

Furthermore, with regard to the significance of journeying within national boundaries to American travel writing, which is the concern of Chapter Three of this thesis, John D. Cox has noted that 'the emphasis within the larger field of postcolonialism on relations between rather than *within* nations' has contributed to a lack of scholarly reading of *intra*national travel texts,[71] which furthers the exclusion of potentially enlightening African American narratives of travelling experiences within the United States of America from rigorous academic study. Perhaps, then, the overarching Saidean concern with the discourse of empire

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[69] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Taylor and Francis, 2007), pp. 4-5 http://lib.myilibrary.com?ID=145715 (last accessed 09/11/2012).

[70] Lee, *Go Girl!*, p.14.

[71] John D. Cox, *Travelling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 13 (emphasis added).

and the corrective counter-discursive strategy of 'writing back' should be displaced here in favour of an approach that is more attentive to the specific and unique historical, sociocultural and politico-economic conditions of production that surround African American travel texts. As mentioned earlier, in advocating a specialised and inclusivist understanding of their object of study, Griffin and Fish are able to turn the formal hybridity of African American travel writing – and, by extension, of travel writing in general – into a blessing rather than a curse, thus incorporating a pleasingly heterogeneous range of texts into the salutary anthology *A Stranger in the Village*. Cox also seeks to define travel literature 'in the broadest terms' and modifies Mary Louise Pratt's endorsement of the genre's accessible, democratised polyphony to assert that travel literature is best understood not as a set of conventions but rather 'in the sense of a discursive space which, like a street corner, is continually crisscrossed by all manner of people and by all manner of texts'.[72] This unrestricted, fluid configuration of the genre is highly appropriate for my purposes here, as discussed above.

My focus on contemporary African American travel writing further necessitates this methodological shift. New generations of African American travellers and writers are situated at an increasing temporal and ideological distance from the long era of European colonisation and the subsequent tumultuous period of decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century – a period of greater transnational solidarity between subjugated black citizens of the United States and oppressed indigenous people fighting for independence from the old European powers – towards instead a phase of neoliberal political and economic restructuring on a global scale at a time of capitalist triumphalism and 'end of history' rhetoric that haughtily positioned the United States as the successful exemplar of multicultural nationhood and

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[72] Cox, *Travelling South*, p. 14. See also Mary Louise Pratt, 'Travel Narrative and Imperialist Vision' in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *Understanding Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), pp. 199-221.

political economic management.[73] During this most recent phase, the rapid growth and integration of an influential, moneyed, patriotic black middle class and political elite since the 1990s has profoundly fractured the increasingly contested notion of an 'African American community' and has concurrently undermined the concept of an internationalist, essentialist 'black' or 'minority' movement against 'white' Western rule as endorsed by Richard Wright in the 1950s,[74] a situation deepened since the election of Barack Obama, who has done little to reverse an aggressive U.S. foreign policy. For the literary critic, any unitary concept of 'black travel writing' or 'African American travel writing' as an inherently radical, subversive and counter-discursive form of literature is thus profoundly destabilised or even invalidated by these developments. Yet, of course, this does not justify the scholarly neglect of such texts. If anything, the anomalous status of African American travel writing vis-à-vis postcolonial studies should prompt greater critical scrutiny in order to properly engage with, rather than negate, the texts and theoretical models in question

In short, by adopting an approach that is more attentive to the specificity of African American history, literature and conditions of production, it may be possible to find particular thematic, formal, or rhetorical consistencies and qualities that illuminate contemporary African American writings of travel. It may subsequently be desirable to compliment a Saidean programme of thought or method – notably evolved in the work of Hulme, Sara Mills and Mary Louise Pratt[75] – of exposing discursive nuances and authorial complicity with prevailing colonial and patriarchal ideology, with an appreciation for the kinetic craft of travel writing in conjunction with a specialised understanding of the distinct literary and cultural traditions that shape this particular group of travellers and texts. In the conclusion to

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[73] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: OUP, 2005). On the usefulness of (re)engaging postcolonial studies with Marxism, see Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds., *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).
[74] See Richard Wright's travel writings, three of which are collected in *Black Power: Three Books From Exile* (HarperCollins: New York, 2008).
[75] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (1992)

this thesis, following my reading of this new corpus of texts, I will return to such questions of method and theory.

'Suddenly Being Black Took on New Meaning': Race, Mobility and the African American Gaze

Aside from the imperative to recount instances of physical mobility across topographical space, one other meaningful minimum consistency to be expected from contemporary African American travel writing would be a racially specific gaze that is, to paraphrase McElroy, shaped by 'the bags and baggage'[76] of the constantly evolving experience of people of African descent in the United States of America. This racially and nationally specific vision generates a frequent preoccupation with race or kinship that most palpably distinguishes the body of texts gathered together here from mainstream, white-authored narratives of travel. A glance at the titles of a number of travelogues evidences the frequency of this inward-looking gaze: *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa*,[77] *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*,[78] *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion*, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, *Brother in the Bush: An African American's search for Self in East Africa*.[79] The variance of terms utilised to designate the author's desired subject position – 'Blackamerican', 'A Black Man', 'Black Women', 'Black American', 'Brother', 'African American' – reflects the contested and appropriately moveable subjective terrain upon which each traveller writes themselves into being. Consequently, these particularly self-conscious narratives commonly 'feature, as a central experience, the way that travel to distant

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[76] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. vi. I have here modified R. Victoria Arana's two 'minimum … meaningful consistencies' for 'black travel writing' in her introduction to *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review (Black Travel Writing)* 9, 1 (Fall 2003), 1-7; quotation at 4.

[77] Eddy L. Harris, *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa* [1992] (London: Viking, 1993).

[78] Keith B. Richburg, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (London: Harcourt, 1998).

[79] John Slaughter, *Brother in the Bush: An African American's Search for Self in East Africa* (Chicago: Agate 2005).

[and, I would add, proximate] places stimulates self-examination',[80] but in a manner that reflects the particular concerns of African Americans at a particular historical moment (it is perhaps this intense concentration on the selfhood of the individual traveller-author that contributes to the aforementioned hasty classification of many African American travel texts as autobiography).

The common themes of race and kinship continue to be most palpable in narratives of travel to Africa, for obvious reasons, as I discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis. However, as Randall Kenan's *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*[81] demonstrates, the thematic concern with 'blackness' is also apparent when recounting journeys undertaken on North American soil. Indeed, even if the traveller is somewhat blithe about skin colour and fairly reluctant to foreground the question of 'being black' in his or her writing, the issue is to some degree unavoidable. As Harris confesses in his intranational travel memoir *Mississippi Solo*:

> And I thought about being black.
> For me, being black has never been such a big deal, more a physical characteristic rather like being tall … . *But suddenly being black ... took on new meaning*.
> … Where are all the black folks? You don't find many blacks canoeing down the Mississippi River and camping out every night. Why not?[82]

Harris is keen to emphasise that the elevation of travel writing to the status of literature must entail a tripartite revealing or 'clarifying' of author, reader and reality, which thus 'touches … a certain universality'[83] beyond race, but even he admits that 'I promised myself early on that I would not make race an issue out here. … *And yet, how could race not mean a little something extra out here*?'[84] Travel 'out there' to the South along the Mississippi River alters

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[80] Arana, *BMa*, 6.
[81] Randall Kenan, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).
[82] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 13-4 (emphasis added).
[83] Harris, personal communication, May 2011.
[84] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 67-8 (emphasis added).

Harris' social topography and draws attention to his status as a 'black' person in the United States in unfamiliar ways. Quotidian stasis allows him to conceive of race as a mere 'physical characteristic rather like being tall'; yet, when travelling along the Mississippi, the act of freely chosen, adventurous motion makes him a subversive figure via the previously relatively unremarkable trait of skin colour. This prompts a brief consideration of the social, economic and psychological conditions that configure the voluntary, pleasure-seeking black traveller as a strange figure, a disruptive pockmark on an otherwise whitewashed scene of touristic privilege. Moreover, this unanticipated singularity does not only manifest itself in encounters with white people, such as the insurance broker who, in a bizarre but ultimately cordial exchange in a diner, calls Harris 'River Nigger',[85] or, more disturbingly, the 'two greasy rednecks' who approach Harris' campfire with shotguns.[86] Later, the strangeness persists as Harris catches sight of 'a black man' in the largely white city of Dubuque, Iowa:

> I stopped to sit in the sun for a minute. A black man passed. He waved exuberantly at me, too much to be just a friendly wave. He was actually happy to see me, the way Americans get after weeks in a foreign land when they finally hear English spoken. The man waved and kept going. I said to myself again, *Dubuque, Iowa*. It felt really strange.[87]

The sincerely exultant gesture of the passing stranger here is an indicator of the solidarity – one that is 'national as much as racial', says Pettinger, with anticlimactic journeys to Africa in mind[88] – that is often exhibited in chance encounters between African Americans on the road, even if the encounter is only fleeting, or in this instance non-verbal. Still, for Harris, to be in the city of Dubuque, Iowa is to be something of a foreigner on native soil. This contradictory sense of native alterity reverberates again upon his arrival in Caruthersville, Missouri, where Harris discloses that 'I felt like a visitor from another planet. … No one said

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[85] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 70-3.
[86] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 206-8.
[87] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 76 (emphasis in original).
[88] Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', pp. 86-8.

anything to me, but everyone stared.'[89] However, this is not to say that he does not appreciate

the sincere inquisitiveness of local white people who may have never seen a black person

before. As he reflects upon the 'stares as I roll up the street' in Walker, Minnesota:

> Being stared at is a spooky feeling. But it's not too bad … . When I wave
> at them, they wave back. Cordially.
>   Luckily the staring is not hostile. Only curious, which is natural. …
> These men are not staring at a freak, just a stranger.[90]

With characteristic humour, professional travel writer Elliot Neal Hester echoes Harris'

optimistic apprehension, reconfiguring what could be negatively understood as evidence of

estrangement or even prejudice as in fact proof of our shared humanity:

> I've been gawked at in Argentina, contemplated by disbelieving Thais,
> surrounded by 100 wide-eyed Balinese children who stared, slack-jawed,
> as if I just walked out of a dream. Although I've been the unsuspecting
> object of interest in some 30 countries since my first trip to France in
> 1982, I have always been treated with kindness … . Being different
> attracts attention. Always has and always will. The gawkers will gawk,
> but usually it's not out of hostility. Experience has taught me that interest
> is the common denominator. It's not every day a Nepalese Sherpa runs
> into a black dude from Chicago.
>   ... Instead of looking at the negatives, I look out of airplane
> windows.[91]

Likewise, McElroy acknowledges that 'overseas, I am always the sight to see. … This

strange black woman in Western clothing'.[92] For McElroy, the process of writing her

memoirs redoubled this self-consciousness and 'made me take a second look at myself while

I thought I was about the business of exploring someone else's country.'[93] It is this

fundamental element of self-inspection that for Harris enables travel writing 'to elevate to

literature'.[94] The conventional contradistinction of exotic native peoples or landscapes and

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[89] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 171.
[90] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 43-4.
[91] Elliot Neal Hester, 'Blackpacking', in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003), 245-9; quotation at 249.
[92] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. 7-8.
[93] Colleen J. McElroy, 'Rewriting the Past Perfect: A Memoirist's Approach' in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003), 237-44; quotation at 237.
[94] Harris, personal communication, May 2011.

familiar travelling (white) chronicler is swiftly reversed, as the focus of the travelogue turns back to the narrator as a (racialised) subject in and of their own writing.

African American travelling experiences – and therefore, travel narratives – are thus unavoidably shaped to some degree by questions of race and identity. Dorothy Lazard has noted the formal consequences of the fact that black travel writers not only journey to 'the known physical world' but also to 'the internally perceived world of race':

> Unlike their white counterparts, Black travel writers, as racialised people, bring a strong sense of race consciousness to their work. So it is not unusual to find an essay about a trip to France or Holland also offering commentary on the racial climate of those countries. … By identifying with marginalised peoples … the Black travel writer gives readers new and usually unreported perspectives on the country observed. Their emphasis is not only on the activity of observance and documentation, but on the state of being in the context of place. This close identification leads the writer of travel narratives to become the subject of the piece as well as its narrator/conscience.[95]

White American traveller P. J. O'Rourke, author of *Holidays in Hell*, declares that 'people are all exactly alike. There's no such thing as race and barely such a thing as an ethnic group … People are all the same, though their circumstances differ terribly.'[96] While some of the African American travellers documented here may express some dissatisfaction towards race as a category of being – Kenan discards racial essentialism as 'one part propaganda, one part mysticism',[97] Harris views 'being black' as no 'big deal'[98] and via her autonomous mobility McElroy refuses to 'fall into that big, simple, overwhelmingly inaccurate category: black'[99] – their peripatetic encounters with other people, of all hues, invariably provokes a response to the empirical, lived experience of race, which cannot be dismissed so effortlessly as 'no such thing'. Ultimately, McElroy offers a more nuanced awareness of 'shades of difference

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[95] Dorothy Lazard, 'Reading Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* as a Coming-of-Age Narrative' in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, 179-90; quotation at 180.
[96] P. J. O'Rourke, *Holidays in Hell* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), p. 14.
[97] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, pp. 8-9.
[98] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 13-4.
[99] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 11.

dependent on history, ancestry and boundaries of land',[100] Harris concedes that race 'took on new meaning'[101] as a wanderer suddenly aware of the absence of fellow black travellers, while Kenan ultimately understands 'the ongoing political necessity for some unity among black folks'.[102] Indeed, it is explicitly race that motivates both Kenan and McElroy to travel in the first place; Kenan to interrogate the nature of blackness by interviewing people of African descent across North America, and McElroy to test her grandmother's claim that 'chile, they got some of us everywhere'.[103] The mobile racial subjectivity that is constructed by contemporary African American travellers in their writing is a concern that runs throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapters Two and Three, which address travel to Africa and travel within North America respectively. Incidentally, the inevitable interiority of the travelogue as a result of this subjectivist agenda brings the African American-authored journey narrative closer to the more pensive style of the memoir or autobiography, which again is a concern in Chapter One, which addresses genre formation.

Lazard's claim that identification with marginalised peoples is observable in the work of black travel writers is most accurately demonstrated for the contemporary African American traveller in the work of McElroy. Exhibiting an attentive gaze in her travel memoir *A Long Way From St Louie*, McElroy repeats Harris' wonderment at the lack of 'black folks' whilst on the road and brings a racialised perspective to the place visited. In the following passage, her attentiveness to the invisibility of aborigines in Australian cities, as well as the invisibility of African Americans in the movies, demonstrates the alertness of her vision to the absence of people of colour from particular sites, both real and imagined:

> Always I am aware that my vision of the world will differ from that of my usual travel companions. … I cannot understand how a contemporary film director can make a movie on the streets of downtown New York without having any black people on the scene. "What happened to all the black

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[100] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 240.
[101] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 13-4.
[102] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 638.
[103] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. iii.

folks?" I say. … But my friends, those who haven't lived in big cities or have never found themselves excluded on the basis of colour, give me puzzled looks. *They haven't noticed* that black people were missing … .

Everywhere I went, in big cities like Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, there were references to Aboriginal culture. But if I hadn't been looking for them, I could have left the country thinking there were very few Aborigines living in Australia. … In the cities, Aboriginals were only symbols. Their country has been turned into a world of white faces where they'd become, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, conspicuous by their absence.[104]

Note too McElroy's strategy of self-distancing from 'my friends' and 'my usual travel companions', which stresses not only her self-awareness that 'I see the world differently'[105] as an mobile woman of colour but also underlines the distinct quality of her book as the literary expression of this atypical travelling optic. Youngs has documented the value of McElroy's 'different vision' in this regard.[106] Pettinger has noted the 'rhetoric of contrast between white and black travellers' in McElroy's memoirs as a distinguishing feature of black travel writing in general.[107] In McElroy's ethnographic travel text *Over The Lip of The World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar* (1999)[108] this contrast is manifested at the level of form. McElroy utilises her distinct vision to craft an unconventional work that presents the Malagasy storytelling tradition as akin to but different from her own oral culture as an African American.[109] It is fair to say that a conventional (white, male) ethnographer would not have approached her object of study in the same way, may not have gained such intimate access to local storytellers (particularly women storytellers), and would have produced a quite different book as a result. Indeed, McElroy recalls with admirable humour

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[104] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. 224-5 (emphasis added).

[105] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. 224.

[106] See Tim Youngs, ''A Daughter Come Home?' The Travel Writings of Colleen J. McElroy', *New Literatures Review* 42 (Oct 2004) 57-74; quotation at 57 and Tim Youngs, 'Pushing Against the Black/White Limits of Maps: African American Writings of Travel', *English Studies in Africa* 53:2 (2010), 71-85. I have previously discussed McElroy's travel literature in Glen Winfield, 'Black/White Limits': Colleen J. McElroy Writes Travel, Unpublished MA Thesis (September 2007).

[107] Alasdair Pettinger, 'What a Difference A Border Makes' in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, 137-52; quotation at 144-5.

[108] Colleen J. McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999).

[109] See Winfield, 'Black/White Limits'.

the negative response to *Over the Lip of the World* from some white male academics, as will be discussed further in Chapter One. Furthermore, complementing the tendency to draw attention to absence is the determination to assert presence; Kenan's travelogue functions as validation of African American rootedness across North America, defying a symbolic geography that would confine blackness to certain regions or spaces. Significantly, Kenan acknowledges the fundamental role that travel plays as the enlightening and enabling act that inspires his subsequent sense of duty:

> All during my travelling, I had become more and more struck by the vast amount of African American history that either lay gathering dust in hundreds of libraries or had gone unrecorded.[110]

Harris repeats this sentiment, while McElroy expands the affirmation of black presence to a global scale ('they got some of us everywhere'). Like numerous North American wanderers before him, Kenan utilises the ability to travel freely across state lines as a means to come to a fuller understanding of the nation of his birth.[111] As a text 'it is not just a thing said but also an act of enunciation' and its significance is determined not only by its content but also by the fact of its existence,[112] the travel book itself functions as a defiant proclamation of the often negated contribution of people of African descent to the whole of the United States.

Harris' familiar association of physical motion with freedom – 'there is no place on earth where I can't go, where I don't belong, and nothing I can't do'[113] – exhibits another distinguishing and common feature of African American travel writing. Undoubtedly, travel has long been synonymous with freedom in the popular imagination for people of all hues. However, for the African American travel writer the link between corporeal mobility and autonomy conjures a specific history of struggle against bondage, which has in turn produced a specific African American literary tradition that has been successfully institutionalised

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[110] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 347.
[111] See John D. Cox, *Travelling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 5.
[112] Frow, p. 115.
[113] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 14.

within the academy. Yet the fundamental role that travel and the literature of travel have played in the formation of this tradition is only inadequately acknowledged in the African American canon. Youngs has already highlighted[114] the under-representation of travel writing in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997)[115] and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998).[116] With reference to the study of antebellum slave narratives, Alasdair Pettinger has noticed that:

> Much has been made of the way these [slave] narratives 'arose as a response to and refutation of claims that black *could* not write' (Gates 1985: xv). Less attention has been paid to the way they also challenged the assumption that they could not *travel*. … Their narratives herald the emergence of African American travel writing.[117]

Subsequent narratives of travel authored by African Americans have, continues Pettinger, inherited the frame of reference of the slave narrative – itself a form of proto-travel text, arguably – in that they function as literal repudiations of racist representations of African Americans as static and thus celebrate mobility as the overcoming and negating of such representations, which were of course brutally enforced by laws restricting free movement (today such restrictions remain at the levels of culture and the economy). Indeed, Smith argues that the slave narrative form 'birthed specialised subject matter and a discourse emphasising the embodied experience of a dehumanising captivity. … The slave narrative thus generated its own sub-genre of travel writing'.[118] Elsewhere, Smith has noted the roots of this dovetailing of genres with reference to the travel writings of Richard Wright:

> Richard Wright's travel books of the 1950s recapitulate a body of concerns about emancipation from oppressive colonial rule and freedom of religious or gender expression resonating similar cries for human rights by African/African American slaves through their own genre, the slave

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[114] Youngs, ''Pushing Against the Black/White Limits of Maps', 72.

[115] Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, (London: Norton, 1997).

[116] Patricia Liggins Hill, ed., *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

[117] Pettinger, '"At Least One Negro Everywhere": African American Travel Writing', p. 80. See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Introduction: The Language of Slavery', in Charles T. Davis and Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. xxxiv.

[118] Smith, African American Literature', p. 197.

> narrative. Its classic model is that of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. African Americans have also seen the advantage of how this cultural genre with its socio-political message of freedom from enslavement adapts to travel writing. Its earliest expression was inaugurated by William Wells Brown, a slave narrativist, who, in 1852, published *Three Years in Europe, or Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met*.[119]

The tendency to underline and revel in the empirical fact of free movement across state or national borders as a validation of the traveller's autonomous ownership of self and world establishes continuity with those founding antebellum slave narratives that also foreground the accomplishment of geographical mobility, alongside the subsequent subversive act of writing that accomplishment into being as a work of literature for a wider audience.

Taking inspiration from Lean'tin L. Bracks, who has stressed the socio-psychological importance of examining the slave narrative as a method of reconstructing and reconnecting with a lost past for African Americans, Raymond Hedin extends this strategy to the realm of literary form in 'later black fiction':

> The relationship between form and social focus is important not only for the slave narrative but for later black fiction as well. … The formal qualities of black writing should not be judged simply by the criteria derived from mainstream varieties of literature, but by the particular problems the black writer was confronting.[120]

Obstacles to corporeal mobility should thus be considered by the scholar of African American travel writing, as a feature that further distinguishes the field from 'mainstream' (white, male) examples of the travel narrative. The story of surmounting barriers to mobility, which often also prompts a comparison of the author's own journeying with the travails of pervious generations of itinerant African American men and women, is a frequent thematic concern within contemporary African American travelogues. Once again, this reroutes the focus of the journey narrative inwards, to the formative experiences of the traveller-narrator subject/character and to the interrelated historical, collective memory of the struggle of

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[119] Virginia Whatley Smith, 'Introduction', in Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, pp. xi-xv; quotation at p. xii.

[120] Raymond Hedin, 'Strategies of form in the American Slave Narrative', in J. Sekora and Durwin T. Turner eds., *The Art of the Slave Narrative* (Essays in Literature, 1989), pp. 25-35; quotation at p. 33.

people of African descent in the United States for the right to free movement. The post-travel reflections of the author on the implications of their journeying in terms of the ongoing historical progress of 'the race', as well as the evolution of his or her own altered subject position following new experiences of 'being black' (as well as 'American', 'Western', a woman, a man, etc.) in foreign spaces outside of the particular racial coding of the United States, invokes the genres of autobiography, memoir (and history) as methods of fulfilling the social and private imperative of self-definition and racial uplift. The utilisation of autobiography is certainly not unique to the African American travel text – Helen Carr contends that 'all travel writing is a form of autobiography'[121] – and, furthermore, nor is the union of writing and travel an exclusive feature of the African American tradition – as Hulme and Youngs note, 'writing and travel have always been intimately connected. The traveller's tale is as old as fiction itself'[122] – but these universal traits may be articulated in particular ways by the African American travel writer and for particular reasons, having overcome particular obstacles.

The 'centrality of the self' – as well as, in many cases, 'a concern with empirical detail', sequential movement through time and space and first-person narration[123] – in most of the texts studied in this thesis is also noteworthy for its harmony with the novel, or with prose fiction, despite the ostensible non-fictional status of the travel book form. Hulme and Youngs argue that prose fiction in its modern form 'built its house' on the 'disputed territory' of travellers' tales, with early modern European novelists such as Daniel Defoe fruitfully 'exploiting the uncertain boundary between travel writing and the fiction which copied its form' in his imaginative work (if not in his own more conventional travel writing).[124] This historical framing of the process of genre formation in relation to the travel book's productive

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[121] Helen Carr, 'Modernism and Travel (1880-1940)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, pp. 70-86; quotation at p. 79.
[122] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 2.
[123] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 6.
[124] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 6.

relationship with other genre-classes, including fiction (that is alleged to have mimicked travel writing), is important for the analysis of Tarpley's memoir *Girl in the Mirror* in the opening chapter of this thesis. Writing on the fruitful boundaries between genre classes – her text participates in but does not belong to memoir, life writing, travel writing, poetry, historical fiction, prose fiction – to produce a book that is difficult to categorise and therefore undercuts the imposition of rigid genre classification. Although, regrettably, this satisfying refusal to be pigeonholed may be a contributory factor to the lack of scholarly research on such texts, which are often misclassified or 'fall between the cracks'[125] of established boundaries as a result the hierarchical nature of such taxonomic literary value systems. Chapter One will argue that to include *Girl in The Mirror* (and, to a lesser extent, McElroy's lyrical travel memoir *A Long Way From St Louie*) as participants in the sphere of travel literature requires a broadening of critical space that is more amenable to the inclusivist definition of the travel book as a fluid, polyphonic forum of genres, at odds with the model of a fixed scheme of conventions that must be adhered to in order for a text to acquire the label of a particular genre-class. Although her text undoubtedly touches the fictive, as she writes in the first person as other real-life characters (her mother and grandmother), Tarpley underscores the fact that reference to 'geography or place' is key to the interior journey of self-discovery that occupies her narrative and intersects with real-world physical passages across geographical space.[126] A fundamental link with the traditional travelogue (the necessity of real world travel that actually happened) is preserved but decentred. The shift to foregrounding what she describes as the 'psychological and emotional'[127] journey of the traveller-narrator subject enables the author to engage with a more poetic mode of expression that brings the narrative closer to memoir, poetry or the novel.

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[125] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village*, p. xiv.
[126] Tarpley, personal communication (April 2011).
[127] Tarpley, personal communication (April 2011).

CHAPTER ONE

'It is not a Travel Book'

African American Travel Writing as a Performance of Genre

The book becomes an artifice. You can arrange and rearrange as a composer does with a piece of music.

– Colleen J. McElroy[128]

Travel *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.

– Carl Thompson[129]

'A Book About Me': Subjectivism, Fictionality and Literary Travel Writing

For an emergent generation of internationally mobile African Americans, the 'new relevance' of travel writing as a genre capable of providing valuable insights into the mutable and multiple subjectivities of a 'globalising world'[130] chimes with the preoccupation with the always-unfinished process of identity formation that, says Tim Youngs, characterises many African American texts.[131] The contemporary 'general critical assumption that travel writing is usually, or properly, a highly autobiographical form'[132] thus accords with the concern with selfhood that characterises African American narratives of motion – this is why, as Alasdair Pettinger notes, African American travelogues are 'typically set in an autobiographical frame, in which the validation of 'self' is of central importance' and the physical act of travel takes on a special significance in the context of the collectively remembered experience of people of African descent in the United States.[133] As a freely mobile self is revealed and assembled on the road as part of a gradual, transformative process towards a more profound understanding of the author's being in the world, the narrative of that journey – which is also

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[128] McElroy in Glen Winfield, 'Interview with Colleen J. McElroy', *Studies in Travel Writing* 16, 1 (February 2012), 65-77; quotation at 68.
[129] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 27-8 (emphasis in original).
[130] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.2.
[131] Youngs, 'Pushing Against the Black/White Limits', 80.
[132] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 97.
[133] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 81.

a narrative of self-actualisation – may also begin to cut loose from its presumed generic anchorage as a non-literary report or journal and wander instead towards the more aesthetic and experimental field of imaginative literature. The prioritisation of itinerant identity articulation as a strategy of rejecting stasis and containment in pursuit of freedom *qua* mobility, in conjunction with the need to resist and expand imposed generic boundaries in pursuit of an appropriately intergeneric, 'African American' form of writing travel – in short, the desire for both subjective and textual autonomy – harvests a corpus of travelogues that are in many ways distinctive, when compared to traditional, orthodox, usually white male-authored, examples of travel writing.[134] Accordingly, the principal concern of this chapter is to frame and situate contemporary travel texts authored by mobile African American men and women, taking special consideration firstly of the prioritisation of the interior journey in such writing before subsequently assessing the impact of such work from within the context of the ongoing process of genre formation with regard to travel writing and the travel book form, as organised or 'performed' in relation to other, likewise mutable, genres such as ethnography and memoir.

For African American memoirist and travel writer (an apt combination) Eddy L. Harris, the process of subjectivism is central to the literature of travel. Furthermore, he argues that this overarching concern with revelatory introspection moves the genre of travel writing closer to the realm of the artistic and even the fictive:

> I definitely consider the genre a literary art form. … For travel writing to elevate to literature there needs to be an element of interior reflection that transforms the journey into more than a mere physical voyage and reveals the author – and via the author, reveals the reader and touches therefore a certain universality. And since the writer first of all can never be objective and enters into the subjective, it certainly touches the fiction.[135]

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[134] See Youngs, 'Pushing Against the Black/White Limits'.
[135] Harris, personal communication, May 2011.

The positioning of an elevated form of travel 'literature', as opposed to mere writing, is interesting here and evidences the imposition of hierarchies of value in genre systems, specifically the distinction between utilitarian and aesthetic texts, with the latter in this instance outranking the former, from the perspective of a professional author. This preference for self-absorption contradicts the 'objectivism in style and structure' that was once prevalent in earlier modes of travel writing (where authoritative scientific discourse modulated the eyewitness perspectivism of 'naïve empiricism')[136] and prefers instead to underscore and appreciate the productive significance of subjectivist artistry in a genre popularly categorised as non-fictional. That this admission of craft may undermine 'the explicit or implicit truth claim' that Hulme detects in 'all travel writing'[137] does not deter Harris from embracing the travel book as a suitable form for his style of writing and subjective thematic agenda. Indeed, Harris' disclosure that the travel book 'touches the fiction' as a product of the mobile author's capricious imagination is rearticulated in the opening chapter of his travelogue *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1993):

> The Africa of my dreams and the Africa I remember, now that I have been there, come together and diverge to form crisscrossing patterns of texture and colour, light and shadow, like a haunting abstract work of art that dominates corners of the imagination, *a tapestry weaving itself out of what is real and what is pure imagination*, a tapestry whose colours and cultures collide and overlap, changing from country to country, religion to religion, from place to place and village to village.[138]

In this early passage, Harris signals the inescapably subjective aspect of his representation of Africa that will follow, signposting for the reader that the book will be knowingly situated on the margins of fictional writing and therefore resemble imaginative literature, woven from hazy reminiscence and fantasy as much as (if not more than) precise, factual reportage of real world travel experiences. Unusually, the travel book is therefore announced by the traveller-narrator as a transparent, constructed projection or estimation of reality rather than a direct

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[136] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 81-5.
[137] Hulme in 'Talking About Travel Writing', 3.
[138] Harris, *Native Stranger*, p. 18 (emphasis added).

effect or reflection of the world 'out there' and of a particular place 'as it is'. A 'degree of fictionality' is 'inherent in all travel accounts',[139] as Thompson has noted, yet Harris goes even further by extending that sentiment to 'all writing':

> I happen to think that all writing is fiction, even the writing of history ... in the sense that the writer manipulates time and importance, what to leave in and what to highlight and what to ignore.[140]

Since, according to this view, the precision of absolute objectivity is always-already undercut by the presence of the author, who translates or crafts 'travel *experience* into travel *text*',[141] the claim to empirical verisimilitude in all non-fictional texts, which traditionally includes travel writing, is wilfully and openly undermined.

This open acknowledgement that the 'generic world'[142] rendered in the travel narrative is filtered through – and, crucially, bounded by – the capricious memories and dreams of the traveller-narrator would be unusual in orthodox travel writing but reflects a contemporary, broadly postmodern, shift that is intensified in this instance by the special foundational importance of the travel destination for Harris as a member of the African diaspora. It is interesting to note the resemblance of this view to that of fellow African American memoirist and travel writer (again, an appropriate blend) Colleen J. McElroy, author of *A Long Way From St. Louie: Travel Memoirs* (1997), a poetic example of the travel narrative performing as a type of life writing, chronicling the itinerant author's lifelong international experiences. Not unlike Harris, who introduces his representation of Africa in *Native Stranger* 'as abstract work of art', McElroy compares the process of writing about her travelling experiences to a method of 'abstract expressionism' that artistically rearranges 'pieces of memory' in order to 'transcend the dull minute-by-minute details and sense the

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[139] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 28.
[140] Harris, personal communication, May 2011 (emphasis added).
[141] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 28.
[142] Frow, *Genre*, p. 86. The term was originally used by Peter Seitel in 'Theorising Genres – Interpreting Works', *New Literary History* 34:2 (2003), 275-97; quotation at 279.

peaks and valleys'.[143] Here, she echoes Harris' prioritisation of creativity and self-reflexivity in the process of writing about journeying:

> I think it has to be creative. … You need to pull people into the series of events. … You can arrange and rearrange as a composer does with a piece of music.[144]

> … I want people to see what you have to do with your image of yourself as you are moving about the world. It cannot stay stagnant. At the same time, the world also changes you.[145]

Once again, the kinetic developmental project of self-knowledge and self-realisation is given precedence and the imaginative aspect of writing about journeying is not only acknowledged but valorised as an inventive process of orchestrated memorising. According to this schema, travel writing should transcend the dull utility of the guidebook or fieldnotes and occupy a more retrospective, literary space that entertains and enlightens both reader and author. Furthermore, and again echoing Harris, this strategy for writing travel is openly alluded to within the travelogue itself, as McElroy informs the reader in the opening pages of *A Long Way From St. Louie* that the book they are holding is made up of

> ... Impressions of journeys, memories held in fragments ... . These impressions are interwoven, one linked to and dependent upon the other. One memory distinct, the other blurred.

> ... The [travel] accounts were only one part entertainment but three parts revelation, what I had learned about the world and how the experience had caused me to see myself in another way. ... Partly, I travel to discover more about myself. [146]

Travel writing is thus conceptualised by both Harris and McElroy as a deftly woven, sequenced and dramatized series of often 'blurry' and dreamlike half-remembered events, which functions simultaneously as a meditative articulation and discovery of self that utilises

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[143] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 68.
[144] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 68.
[145] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 74.
[146] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, pp. i-ii.

physical mobility in order to serve a predominantly 'subjectivist agenda'.[147] Also writing

about motion to satisfy a desire for self-understanding, Natasha Tarpley likewise concedes in

the published narrative of her memoir *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women*

in Motion (1998) that the narrative is 'not really *about* the family, it's actually more about

me'[148] (I will return to this particular text in the final section of this chapter).

African American novelist Randall Kenan discloses the fundamentally subjectivist

agenda of his ostensibly objective, sociological travelogue *Walking on Water: Black*

American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (1999) immediately. A collection of

oral histories (interviews transcribed as prose narratives with extended quotations) that also

narrates the author's long journey across North America (including, briefly, Canada) *Walking*

on Water is a vast and fascinating semi-ethnographic work that operates concurrently as an

existential interior voyage, thus blending the Romantic literary/autobiographical trip with the

Enlightenment scientific/intellectual expedition.[149] Like McElroy, Harris and Tarpley, Kenan

explicitly declares that the book serves a subjectivist agenda, yet, in a departure from the

abovementioned authors, the primacy of 'my 'sojourn in myself' is configured as a fault:

> I must say, before I even begin, that this work – in the end – is a failure.
> … My sojourn in North America had more to do with my sojourn in
> myself … . More than a book of answers, this is a book of questions.
> More than a book of analysis, this is a book of soul-searching. I am
> asking who am I perhaps more than who are we, where do I belong more
> than where do we belong. From the beginning to the end, this is more *a*
> *book about me* than anyone else, and I beg tolerance and understanding
> in this chronicle.[150]

The humble, apologetic tenor of this preface is intriguing and quite possibly strategic in its

self-effacement, an example of careful self-presentation intended to soften the tone of the

narratorial self in order to strike the preferred balance between Kenan's dual role as

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[147] For more on the autobiographical aspects of travel writing in general, see Thompson, 'Chapter 5: Revealing the Self', pp. 96-129.
[148] Tarpley, *Girl in The Mirror*, p. 177 (emphasis in original).
[149] I borrow terminology here from Thompson, p. 118.
[150] Kenan, 'Preface', *Walking on Water*, pp. xi-xii (emphasis added).

(scientific/intellectual) academic researcher and (literary/autobiographical) vernacular soul-searcher. In a work that requires no contrition, Kenan skilfully meshes memoir, autobiography, sociology, ethnography, cultural and oral history, interview, storytelling and travel writing in a manner that upholds the 'inter-generic nature'[151] of African American literature and the 'intrinsic heterogeneity'[152] of travel writing. However, against the sometimes prohibitive backdrop of genre systems – policed by 'the institutional forces that govern the determination and distribution of classification and value'[153] – this inaugural rueful declaration of 'failure' may be intended to pre-empt accusations of breaching 'generic decorum' by producing a 'formally promiscuous' text that deviates from a supposedly prototypical 'pure' ideal form.[154] Mindful of the potential constraints of 'the norms of rhetorical appropriateness',[155] Kenan therefore warns his audience that the balance between the discourses of Romantic soul-searching and Enlightenment analysis may be titled towards the former mode in the quite personalised, semi-autobiographical, sometimes episodic, sometimes digressive, prose that follows. As Kenan's ethnographic 'field' – geographically North America, methodologically Black America – is at the same time his home, the 'participant observation' of the ethnographer is amalgamated with the self-observation of the memoirist. Not unlike Richard Wright's unifying narratorial role in *The Colour Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), as read by Virginia Whatley Smith, the rhetorical work of the author as 'travel writer/narrator, central intelligence, and participant/observer' generates a text that integrates multiple genres and – as the collected data is unavoidably and

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151 Youngs, 'Black/White Limits', 78.
152 Thompson, p.11.
153 Frow, p. 137.
154 See Frow, pp. 124-44.
155 Frow, p. 124.

explicitly filtered through the consciousness of the author – is particularly indebted to autobiography and 'self-life-writing'.[156]

Assuming a Derridean model of genre theory, which argues that 'every text *participates* in one or several genres' rather than 'belonging' to a particular genre,[157] John Frow stresses 'the importance of edges and margins' – 'that is, the open-endedness of generic frames'[158] – and proposes that 'genres have no essence: they have historically changing use values'.[159] Endorsing this understanding of genre as a reflexive process, participation and performance, rather than a fixed and pre-given taxonomic hierarchy, this chapter attempts to frame, historicise and bring into focus my object of study, which I have termed 'contemporary African American travel writing'. What is partly being addressed in Kenan's abovementioned preface is the organisation of genre systems that generates a 'horizon of expectations' against which any text is read at a certain historical period.[160] Along this horizon, a tension is generated between the 'high' scientific or ethnographic and the 'low' autobiographical or life writing form, with the modern travel book situated somewhere between the two as, 'in some respects,' says Arnold Rampersad, 'a shallow form of serious literature'.[161] The preamble to *Walking on Water* governs the reader's expectations of the book by introducing the author's intimate tone and explicitly signposting the often subjective, emotive and allusive content that will follow. Certainly, *Walking on Water* exhibits a reflexivity that would be unusual in conventional ethnographic texts. Rather than making a common sense claim to authoritatively represent or imitate an external, primary reality, Kenan self-consciously crafts a personal response to an ontological problem; that is to say,

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[156] Virginia Whatley Smith, 'Richard Wright's Passage to Indonesia: The Travel Writer as Participant/Observer of Anti-Colonial Imperatives in *The Colour Curtain*' in Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 78-115; quotations at pp. 100-2 and p. 115.

[157] See Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre' [1980] in Frow, p. 25.

[158] Frow, p. 3.

[159] Frow, p. 134.

[160] Frow, p.71.

[161] Arnold Rampersad, "V.S. Naipaul: Turning in the South", *Raritan* (Summer 1990) 24-27, quoted in Kenan, *Walking on Water*, pp. 634-5.

Kenan's own 'soul' is inscribed as a valid testifying force constitutive of a private response to the initially more distanced, systematic task of travelling across North America to interview numerous people in order to precisely capture the lives of 36 million people at the turn of the twenty-first century ('a physical and intellectual impossibility', he admits).[162] *Walking on Water* is thus modestly introduced as one flawed human being's proclamation, an individual expression of peripatetic witnessing and reflection rather than a sober submission of conclusions following a period of distanced investigation and data collection. To employ Derridean terminology,[163] the text participates in and is shaped by the conventions of ethnography, travel writing, memoir, and so on, yet also occupies a position outside of these generic frames, productively transforming the rules of each set by operating at the margins in (albeit apologetic) defiance of the 'injunction of purity' that forbids the 'miscegenation' or 'mixing' of genres.

It is interesting to note the similarity here of Harris' tone towards the end of *Native Stranger*. In the final chapter, reflecting on his journey across the vast continent, Harris concedes that:

> After almost a year in Africa, I have no answers. Only one question remains: *Who am I?*
>
> …If you cannot know yourself, how can you expect to know a place like Africa? You can't. You cannot know this place in such a short time, such a short passing through – or should I say, these *places*.[164]

Native Stranger is akin to *Walking on Water* and *A Long Way From St. Louie* in that it is deliberately presented as a book of soul-searching rather than analysis. Harris does not wish to present a comprehensive account of Africa and underscores the heterogeneity of a whole continent that has regularly been homogenised and distorted in Western narratives of travel to the region. He learns through his journeying that 'Africa is a myriad of peoples and their

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[162] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. xi.
[163] See Frow, pp. 25-8.
[164] Harris, *Native Stranger*, pp. 311-2 (emphasis in original).

ways'[165] – 'these places' rather than 'a place' – and, as Youngs notes, he is therefore less inclined to make 'crass generalisations'[166] about Africa or Africans. Turning away from the impractical task of writing a wholly dispassionate representation of a vast continent and its people into being, *Native Stranger* is instead a self-consciously introspective narrative of the traveller-narrator's own gradual, epiphanic understanding of his evolving self-identification as a 'Blackamerican' (no longer 'African' American after his travelling experiences).[167] The acknowledgment that it is impossible to 'know' his travel destination, followed by an inward turn to 'discover the truth'[168] of his own subjectivity rather than the objective truth of the place visited, again repeats McElroy's tendency to 'take a second look at myself while I thought I was about the business of exploring some else's country'[169] and further echoes Kenan's prioritisation of 'my sojourn in myself' in *Walking on Water*. Collectively, these trends evidence Pettinger's claim that African American travel writing is 'typically set in an autobiographical frame', places 'central importance' on 'the validation of self' and tends not to 'claim to offer authoritative observations of the people and customs of a single country or community'.[170]

'It Couldn't be Done': Postmodern Doubt and the Contested Processes of Genre Reshaping

The abovementioned travelogues may also be read as expressions of a certain postmodern sensibility in the contemporary, self-conscious African American literary travelogue. This would mark an inward turn away from the overtly political agenda that shaped the radical writings of previous generations of African American travellers explicitly engaged in emancipatory struggle. Instead, what emerges is a more meditative, self-absorbed mode

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[165] Harris, *Native Stranger*, p. 18.
[166] Tim Youngs, 'Africa/The Congo: The Politics of Darkness' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, pp. 156-73; quotation at p. 169.
[167] I will discuss 'African/Black American' identity formation in chapter two, on narratives of travel to Africa.
[168] Harris, *Native Stranger*, p. 14.
[169] McElroy, 'Rewriting the Past Perfect', 237.
[170] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 81.

preoccupied with race, identity and the place of the individual as a United States citizen of African descent in a changing international space, undergoing the social, cultural, political and economic transferences associated with the phenomenon of 'globalisation'. For these travellers, the urgent appeal of the radical, activist travelogue (which could, for example, utilise the comparative tendencies of journey writing as a strategy of exposing and challenging the normalised subjugation experienced at home) has been subverted by the wish to 'create a space in which identity can be affirmed, discovered, or renegotiated', a shift towards introspection that the 'vast and highly protean' modern travel book form can usefully accommodate, as Youngs and Thompson have observed.[171] Within this more pensive discursive space, a 'monarch-of-all-I-survey'[172] style of narration is avoided, being further tainted by historical association with authoritative, 'self-aggrandising' travel writings that empowered the narratorial self 'at the expense of a denigrated other'[173] and thus helped to advance the 'mercantile, colonial and imperial expansion' of Western empires.[174] The authority of the traveller-narrator may therefore be strategically undermined by occasional expressions of self-doubt and even self-mocking, or perhaps by inserting self-effacing reflections on the writing process itself within the text. In *Walking on Water*, for example, Kenan recalls the moment when, after finally completing his journey, he settles down to write. At this moment he professes that:

> I looked at a mound of over 5,000 pages of stuff, words upon words, undigested, needing digestion – and I panicked. The manuscript-to-be was my bone; I had to chew on it. ... It couldn't be done, this task I had set for myself. ... I looked upon what I had done, and all I could see was what I had not done.[175]

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[171] See Youngs, 'Black/White Limits', 71 and Thompson, pp. 96-129.
[172] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 197-204.
[173] Thompson, pp. 120-1.
[174] Youngs, in 'Talking About Travel Writing', p. 8.
[175] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 635.

The somewhat bathetic tone – 'bathos' defined as 'the rhetorical technique of deflation or 'failing''[176] (which recalls Kenan's earlier introductory announcement that 'this work – in the end – is a failure') – is characteristically postmodern. Moreover, Kenan's mounting realisation during his journey that 'I would never know the truth. … The men and women I encountered as I travelled around North America were equally and completely unknowable'[177] reinforces a sense of bathetic detachment that undermines the possibility of discovering a totalising, hegemonic 'truth' system, a perspective that may again be associated with a postmodern condition. His claim that 'the truth is there are over thirty-six million ways to be black'[178] buttresses this with a perspectivist conception of knowledge that, to paraphrase Jean François Lyotard's notorious expression,[179] is incredulous towards the explanatory power of metanarrative truth and, as Caren Kaplan notes in her examination of 'postmodernisms', places greater importance on 'multiplicity' and 'fragmentation'.[180] Positioning himself as merely one among 36 million, with the text therefore representing merely one of 36 million truths, Kenan elevates the polyphonic 'we' above 'the imperious 'I'' in a reversal of the 'sublime and transcendent persona'[181] of orthodox, monarch-of-all-I-survey travelogues, constructing a 'history-from-below' that prioritises 'multiperspectival viewpoints'.[182]

The allusive, fragmented narrative style of *Walking on Water*, which comprises many extended quotations from other speakers and sources (mostly the numerous interviewees but also excerpts from academic texts, historical records, newspaper articles, even other

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[176] Thompson, p. 199.
[177] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 340.
[178] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 636.
[179] 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.' Jean François Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 509-13; quotation at 509 (emphasis in original).
[180] Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 12.
[181] Thompson, p. 118.
[182] I borrow terminology here from Kobena Mercer, 'Cosmopolitan Contact Zones' in Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, eds., *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Tate, 2010), pp. 40-7.

travelogues) exhibits a dialogic polyphony that further undercuts the authoritative optic of the narrator in a postmodern fashion that concurrently endorses Paul Gilroy's depiction of 'the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression'[183] as part of a broader questioning of modernity through the lens of the Black Atlantic.[184] Thompson's examination of 'a postmodern sensibility or tendency in travel writing' is particularly relevant here, with *Walking on Water* in mind:

> In the literary travel book especially, there is a long tradition of self-deprecation and playful self-ironising, in which writers mock their own belated or feeble travel efforts in comparison with those of more obviously accomplished or courageous travellers … . This self-ironising tendency seems to have become more pronounced in recent years.
> … Postmodernism is notoriously hard to define, but in the present context it can be defined as a tendency to playfulness and parody, born of a desire to subvert both the conventions and the authority traditionally associated with many Western genres, disciplines and discourses.[185]

Kenan's abovementioned bathetic apology for writing a 'failed' account of an 'impossible' assignment; the inclusion of the above '5,000 pages of stuff' passage – or 'scene', perhaps – that brings to mind the postmodernist narrative strategy of metafiction (the text calls attention to its own constructedness); the concession that 'the end result' of his journeying was always going to be 'inconclusive'[186] (the lack of a triumphant and fully comprehensive conclusion being a further trait of postmodern travel texts);[187] the deferential consideration of courageous peripatetic African Americans who were active during previous, more arduous eras (referencing especially John A. Williams' 1963 travelogue *This is My Country Too* as a 'spiritual guide'[188] that both awes and terrifies);[189] the blurring of distinctions between genres (thus undermining binaries of fact/fiction, high/low or popular/scientific writing): all of this demonstrates aspects of a postmodern sensibility in the context of contemporary, literary

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[183] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 32.
[184] See Barson and Gorschlüter, eds., *Afro Modern*, pp. 22-3 and Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.
[185] Thompson, pp. 126-7.
[186] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 637.
[187] Thompson, p. 127.
[188] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 212.
[189] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 17.

travel writing. The parallels with the aforesaid narrative strategies and thematic priorities of Harris and especially McElroy are clear. Renowned African American author Ishmael Reed also gives over much of his 2003 travelogue *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* to the residents of the city that he meets during his journey, a strategy to undercut the 'frequent tendency' of the traditional travel book to display 'a monolithic imperiousness of vision [by] incorporating into the text other voices'.[190] Reed presents autobiographical information, personal opinion and data (general historical facts, statistics, a timeline) as he recalls and presents his trip largely in a diary format, choosing then to pause and step back from his formal role as traveller-narrator upon meeting interviewees, reporting long passages of speech without quotation marks and with minimal interruption, often ending a chapter with the italicised words of another speaker.[191]

It may be useful at this point to reflect on Thompson's abovementioned use of the term 'the literary travel book'. With a generally more emotive and expressive register, *Walking on Water* broadly corresponds with Thompson's definition of the contemporary literary travel book in that it is structured as:

> … A combination of narrative sections, in which the narrator describes the events of the journey and his or her personal travel experiences, and more descriptive sections of commentary and reflection, in which the traveller offers an interpretation of those experiences, and essays some broader conclusions about the people and places that have been visited.[192]

To utilise the terminology of Frow, *Walking on Water* is 'a dynamic member of a broader economy of genres'.[193] It is both like and unlike those forms to which it is related, both like and unlike the ethnography, the autobiography, the memoir and the travel book. Historically each of these genres have been different kinds of things at different times – thus problematizing the notion of an *a priori* 'core function' that generates a 'fixed set of

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[190] Thompson, p. 127.
[191] I compare Reed's travelogue with the work of Harris and Kenan in chapter three, on narratives of travel within North America.
[192] Thompson, p. 87.
[193] Frow, p. 132.

characteristics'[194] for a particular literary genre. Kenan's text is part of an always-incomplete and fluctuating process of genre reshaping. The 'use value' of ethnography – of rather, the ethnographic mode – has, in this instance, mutated into a more reflexive method of exploring the changing relationship between the self-conscious individual travelling author-researcher (Kenan) and the endlessly fluctuating collective ('Black America') at a particular historical period (the turn of the twenty-first century) in a particular space (North America), incorporating elements of imaginative and memoirist writing associated with the contemporary 'literary' travelogue (a crafted 'narrative of personal development and inner voyaging').[195]

In considering the ways in which modern travel writing often functions as form of life writing, Thompson describes the intent to situate a journey within a larger personal history of the author as a 'self-historicising, or self-narrativising, project' that 'becomes a record not just of a literal journey, but also of a metaphorical interior 'voyage'', a plotted, developmental narrative of self-realisation quite distinct from earlier historical examples of travel writing.[196] The journey, in this mode of writing, often functions as a rite of passage or a process of self-realisation, in accordance with the 'inward turn' of travel literature inaugurated by Romantic itinerants of the late eighteenth century before evolving into the more familiar self-consciously 'literary' popular travelogues of a postmodern, postcolonial phase in the twentieth century.[197] Poet, folklorist, linguist and traveller Colleen J. McElroy's travel memoir *A Long Way From St Louie* is more formally experimental. Reflecting upon the process of writing the book – which is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, does not have a single destination as a 'goal' (the purpose seems to be to maintain a peripatetic status) and foregrounds travelling to the extent that mobility appears as central to

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[194] Frow, p. 133.
[195] Thompson, p. 116.
[196] Thompson, pp. 113-6.
[197] Thompson, p. 111-7.

the author's concurrently mobile sense of self[198] – McElroy puts into practice her rule that 'the book becomes an artifice' of fragments of memories to be arranged and rearranged 'as a composer does with a piece of music'.[199] Her choice of the word 'artifice' is noteworthy here, as it is synonymous with deceit, pretence, craft, artfulness, trickery, and so on, with etymological roots in skilful, artistic professional trade or employment. The disclosure that the book is a crafted – or perhaps crafty – representation of what McElroy terms 'the thing that happens' on the journey (of the reality of actual events 'out there' in the real world), akin to but separate from the book, which is at root a bespoke product of the whims of the author's imagination, amplified by unreliable memory (of the private 'in there' of the mind), is merely to acknowledge the methodical process of narrating a journey that confronts every author of travel writing. However, rather than view this process as necessarily covert and contradictory to the authenticating prestige of the non-fictional form, McElroy cheerily confronts and embraces the fictive aspect of writing travel. Her writing is thus qualitatively distinct from more traditional or orthodox examples of travel writing. She acknowledges that the procedure of writing *A Long Way From St Louie* was an in large part an act of remembrance, but suggests that the ability to creatively and artfully 'hook' recollections together is more valuable than purely factual, chronological accuracy, which can be 'absolutely boring' (she also describes her unpublished fieldnotes as 'excruciatingly boring').[200] Rather than casting herself as a reporter in the purest sense, with an obligation to relay unalloyed facts, McElroy prefers the metaphor of the composer or the artist (that is, the artist of abstract expressionism rather than landscape or portraiture).[201] The end result, she declares, is a text that is 'made of tougher stuff than any collection of facts'.[202]

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[198] See Winfield, 'Black/White Limits: Colleen J. McElroy Writes Travel' for a more detailed reading of McElroy's travel texts.
[199] McElroy in Winfield 'Interview', 68.
[200] McElroy in Winfield 'Interview', 68.
[201] McElroy in Winfield 'Interview', 68.
[202] McElroy, 'Rewriting the Past Perfect', 243.

Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar (1999) is an account of McElroy's journey to Madagascar for a Fulbright research project studying Malagasy myths and oral traditions. As well as narrating the author's voyage across the country in a style close to the familiar, more intimate register of modern, memoirist literary travel writing – the published fieldnotes are intended to be read 'as memoirs, narratives'[203] that depict the events of the journey – with numerous photographs included, the book reproduces in print the many vernacular folktales gathered by McElroy as part of her research. *Over the Lip of the World* attentively begins by presenting a brief practical introduction to the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the Malagasy language in order to clarify the linguistic task of translating material from oral to written forms, thus 'assist[ing] readers in understanding the nuances of language used in these stories and poems'.[204] The variegated tone and structure of the text reflects McElroy's fluid role as traveller, 'great-granddaughter of African descendants',[205] memoirist, poet (self-consciously a product of her own comparable oral storytelling tradition as an African American woman of letters), Fulbright researcher, professor, ethnographer and linguist. *Over the Lip of the World* artfully and carefully fulfils its task of 'bringing Madagascar into perspective from its distant location' for an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with the 'ancestral aesthetics' of the Malagasy oral tradition.[206] Deftly criss-crossing disciplinary modes, McElroy's lack of fixity as a travelling subject – 'a stranger in a world that was at once both familiar and foreign'[207] – is aptly mirrored by the inter-generic structure of her work, being at once ethnography, linguistic analysis, anthology, memoir and travel book. The strategic application of 'generic admixture' as a conveyance of ongoing self-(re)construction has historically been a common

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[203] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. xviii.
[204] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. xxii.
[205] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. xi.
[206] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. xviii.
[207] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. 158.

trait of African American writing as a method of empowerment, as Youngs has noted.[208] The

fact that the project centres upon the shared orally-communicated and communal tradition of

vernacular storytelling also enables McElroy to generate a polyphonic text that transcribes

multiple indigenous voices – both as storytellers and also as speaking 'characters' within the

prose fieldnotes – alongside her own, which echoes the dialogic character of Kenan's

collection of local oral histories in *Walking on Water*.

However, upon penetrating the community of practice of ethnographers and

anthropologists with the advent of *Over the Lip of the World*, McElroy encounters the

obstacle of hierarchal literary value systems, not unlike the tension between 'high' and 'low'

forms that disturbed Kenan. Policing the boundary between these modes of writing are fellow

researchers schooled in academic custom, which may not permit entry for the peripatetic

poet-memoirist. Here, McElroy recalls criticism of her work from those gatekeepers

patrolling the discursive threshold of genre classification:

> I got letters from a couple of male researchers who said that I didn't
> know what I was talking about in *Over the Lip of the World*, that *I didn't
> present it right*, and so on…
> They were ethnographers and anthropologists. They were trying to
> pigeon-hole everything. 'This sits in that drawer and this fits in that slot'.
> They were all males, all white males. They were quite put off.[209]

This evidences the persistence of a 'strained relationship' between ethnography and the travel

book as detected by Thompson, who urges a rethink of the connections between the two

modes in order to calm an enduring 'disciplinary turf war':

> Rethinking ethnography's relationship with the travel book … brings
> with it the implication that travel books may sometimes be a valid source
> of ethnographic information, even if that information is not couched in
> the specialised idiom of the professional anthropologist.
>
> … Some travel writers really are the experts they claim to be … . At their
> best, moreover, travel writers in this tradition turn the genre's freedom
> from formal academic methodologies into an advantage rather than a
> limitation, using the form to cut across conventional disciplinary

[208] Youngs, 'Black/White Limits', 78.
[209] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 70 (emphasis added).

boundaries and engage with their theme in a variety of different modes.[210]

It would be naïve to overlook the intrusion of an African American woman into an overwhelmingly white male field as a factor in the negative reaction to McElroy's Madagascan project. However, within the present context of scholarly taxonomical debates around travel writing as a performance of genre, which is my concern here, it is important to also acknowledge the significance of McElroy's ambiguous tripartite role as traveller-narrator-ethnographer, which precipitates a mutable narrative style combining detached ethnographic analysis with a more emotive, self-absorbed mode of literary subjectivism. Thompson's final point above is especially relevant here, as McElroy is indeed an expert in her field – a self-described 'writer and folklorist',[211] Speech Pathologist and 'linguist who deals with the oral tradition'[212] – who chooses to balance the specialist idiom of the academic text with the popular prose of the modern travelogue.

If McElroy's unorthodox travel memoir *A Long Way From St Louie* utilised the process of writing about one's travelling experiences as 'a pretext or prompt to narratorial introspection and self-analysis', then *Over the Lip of the World* retains a measure of this memoirist subjectivism that is concerned with 'an inner terrain of thought and feeling, memory and imagination' rather than purely objective factual description.[213] The aspiration to rigidly categorise or pigeonhole *Over the Lip of the World* as a certain type of book – to 'present it right' according to the diktats of academic and industrial classification – reflects a prescriptive calculation of texts as unitary 'types' that 'belong' to genre,[214] which is at odds with the aforementioned Derridean model of a dynamic and interrelated constellation of shifting textual performances in constant evolutionary motion. *Over the Lip of the World*

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[210] Thompson, pp. 93-4.
[211] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. vi.
[212] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 70.
[213] Thompson, pp. 98-9.
[214] See Frow, pp. 10-2, 142-3.

triggers something of a short-circuit in such a mechanical construct of textuality that traditionally understands genre as 'a fixed and law-like taxonomy'[215] and thus seeks to irrevocably divorce the scientific from the memoirist mode. As a 'textual event', *Over the lip of the World*, like *Walking on Water* and indeed like a great deal of literature authored by African Americans – for African American literature has historically relied upon creative strategies of literary innovation and fusion – is not a member of a single genre class as such, but rather a 'productive elaboration' that may 'perform' any number of genres at once.[216]

McElroy responds to charges of formal impropriety by affirming the value of her subject position as an African American woman of letters, highlighting the significance of her specific expertise as a linguist researching vernacular folktales and myths and by underlining the fact of the democratisation of travel that has opened up the practice of journey writing to new generations with new perspectives:

> My response to them was to say that one of the things about travel is that more than one person does it. … I don't think I lay claim to anything other than my status as a linguist who deals with the oral tradition. The book narrates my experience.[217]
>
> Gender lets me into certain places that males would not enter. … Most often I have to get around the men to get to the women, and the men tell me that the women have nothing important to say.
>
> … When I presented my poems, I felt part of a larger, universal group. Poetry is irrevocably tied to the oral tradition. My first task when I began travelling extensively was to memorise my poems. Memorisation is itself a political act. Some women learn to 'speak out' through poetry.[218]

Shared cultural experiences of oral storytelling traditions, poetic methods of memorisation and of the coercion of patriarchy enables her to connect with Madagascan women storytellers in ways distinct from white male researchers. A nuanced political edge is also revealed through the creative and potentially radical acts of uniting poetic traditions. McElroy is able to visit the home of Mme. Victoria and record tales that carry her 'along some familiar path

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[215] Frow, p. 143.
[216] See Frow, pp. 23-4.
[217] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 70.
[218] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 70, 73.

where home and families dwelled'[219] and, later on, listen to Mme. Alphonsisme's 'shy narration' of 'grandmother stories' on 'a perfect night for storytelling' that evokes memories of her childhood in St Louis.[220] The familiarity of aspects of her experience in Madagascar inevitably affects McElroy and prompts a tonal shift in her narrative towards that of a memoir. The following excerpts from her attendance at a *famadihana* (a ceremonial visit to the ancestors' tomb) are representative of the book's tone:

> Perhaps it was the scent of flowers that made the unfamiliar seem familiar; but whatever the reason, I began to feel that I was indeed a part of what was going on around me.

> More than once while I was in Madagascar, I found myself measuring the thin line between family and stranger, especially when I was mistaken for Malagasy … .

> That was how I felt on the morning of the *famadihana* – a stranger in a world that was at once both familiar and foreign, a *vahiny* who was as moved by this gathering as I would have been by a wake held by my own family. I remembered my grandmother's wake, the relatives who had journeyed to St Louis from all over the United States … .

> The family elder, M. Razanatsimba, with his salt and pepper hair and neatly trimmed moustache, reminded me of one of my father's army buddies who had served with him in World War II. In the summers, after my father retired from the military, they would come to our house and help him fill the backyard with stories of their army days.[221]

Perpetually during her travels McElroy finds that 'the lens points back at me'[222] and time becomes fluid as the narration tangentially shifts away from the primary scene in a suburb of Antananarivo, Madagascar to autobiographical reflection upon a childhood in St Louis, Missouri. The ethnographic field or dwelling space in which the professional researcher operates is thus blended with the remembered, innate space of home and childhood to which the journey is consistently anchored. Pondering her journey in the final pages of the book, she concedes that 'much of what I saw seemed as familiar as places I had called home' and, in

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[219] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, pp. 65-7.
[220] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, pp. 98-103.
[221] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, pp. 157-9.
[222] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 69.

reference to the consistent shifting of time in the narrative, she confesses that 'instead of months, I felt as if my visit had taken years'.[223] Nevertheless, she is always aware of her status as a *vahiny* (a stranger) and able to connect and detect commonalities without pretending to 'pass' as one of the locals. Indeed, in *A long Way From St. Louie* McElroy rejects 'New Age' attempts to 'try to become one of the people. ... I refuse to see the rest of the world as a place where I can escape myself'.[224] Her access to the tomb of the ancestors during the *famadihana* neatly exhibits the effectiveness of this deft measurement of the line between visitor and visited during her time in Madagascar:

> I realised a few people were looking my way, not staring but rather checking my reaction. I smiled. They smiled back. I was measuring that line between friend and stranger again, but at the unspoken invitation of several people, I moved forward and looked into the tomb. … I sensed a kind of peacefulness, as if I had been invited into the parlour of a house reserved for special guests.[225]

In stark contrast to the classic monarch-of-call-I-survey scene in Henry Morton Stanley's infamous 1878 travelogue *Through the Dark Continent*, where Stanley crudely evaluates the local African population from atop a hill,[226] McElroy situates herself, politely and only with permission, amongst the local Malagasy men and women as a respectful visitor who has travelled to learn. This ethos enables *Over the Lip of the World* to render the character and endurance of the storytelling tradition of the Malagasy folk in an insightful and personal manner that derives form the unique identification of the traveller-narrator as a 'special' but appropriately distanced guest.

Despite this contented tone, the texts discussed in this chapter have not arrived at the terminus of genre. As Frow reminds, us, genre is 'not the permanent *product* of a singular origin, but the temporary *by-product* of an ongoing process'.[227] Textual change and

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[223] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. 208.
[224] McElroy, *A Long Way From St. Louie*, p. vi.
[225] McElroy, *Over the Lip of the World*, p. 160.
[226] See Thompson's reading of this scene in *Travel Writing*, pp. 120-1.
[227] Thompson, p. 138.

transformation does not end with the emergence of an identifiable, named 'set' or 'class' of writing. More accurately, these works are read as participants in the ongoing process of genre, situated at the margins of genre-classes and productively elaborating upon a number of 'raw materials' associated with those 'sets' to which the text is productively connected but not docilely possessed by – in short, these texts 'work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them'. [228] In McElroy's work, this incessantly mobile textual process is mirrored by a flexible narratorial self that is 'constantly changing',[229] being further reinforced in *A Long Way From St. Louie* by an ending that is not a return home but a pledge to keep travelling ('I don't plan to stop').[230] This final statement of ending-in-motion is comparable with Kenan's conclusion to *Walking on Water*, which optimistically connects the individual consciousness of subjective flux to the broader progress of race and nation:

> Oddly enough, to finally understand – like the rest of black folks, like the rest of America – that I am a work in progress brings me a strange peace.[231]

This strangely epiphanic statement of tranquillity-in-instability aptly parallels the nourishing volatility of genre formation. That this fondness for kinesis is shared by some contemporary African American travellers is perhaps unsurprising given the historical significance of motion as a fundamental aspect of the struggle for emancipation for people of African descent in the United States. Beth A. McCoy has even suggested that 'the entire canon' of African American literature seems to be 'moving', such has been the prominence of travel 'in countless different contexts' in African American writing.[232]

For contemporary African American journey writers, the collectively remembered – and, in many instances, lived – experiences of obstructed or barred mobility are often directly

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[228] Frow, pp. 23-8.
[229] McElroy, 'Rewriting the Past Perfect', 242.
[230] McElroy, *A Long Way From St. Louie*, p. 241.
[231] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 639.
[232] Beth A. McCoy, 'Walking the 5: Octavia Butler's 'Parable of the Sower'' in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003), 223-34; quotation at 223.

addressed in the published narrative, as individual writers articulate and situate their journeys against a progressive backdrop of racial uplift signified by the struggle for the right to move freely. However, while the act of travel is associated in African American history and writing with the emancipatory flight to freedom – this is especially evident in slave narratives – voluntary leisurely wandering and its creative, literary recitation – allusive, self-absorbed – may also be negatively associated with the self-indulgent whims of orthodox white privilege. This misleading and mistaken whitewashing of the act and the literature of self-directed mobility creates particular problems for the aspiring contemporary African American travel writer, who may be restricted by essentialist conceptions of geography and genre that fails to recognise the long history of black travel writing[233] and the elasticity of travel writing as an ongoing, shifting performance of genre constantly open to transformation by the reading of new or overlooked voices.

'I Had No Role Models': Obstacles to Travel and Writing Travel

Tracing 'the black narrative tradition' in the United States, Raymond Hedin locates a 'tradition of formal strategy' that begins with the slave narrative,[234] which is itself an example of the ways in which African American writers have, from the outset, operated within the constraints of conventional 'white' literary forms that have been adopted and adapted to fit the purposes of the author. In a contemporary echo of those foundational constraints, the absence of a literary paradigm that is easily identifiable as 'the' contemporary African American travel book – that is to say, a form of writing about autonomous, spontaneous or unrestricted travelling experiences that is detached from the explicit emancipatory drive of the slave narrative or the writings of a figure in exile – compels the modern day peripatetic African American to adopt and adapt the raw materials of existing

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[233] See *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003).
[234] Raymond Hedin, 'Strategies of form in the American Slave Narrative', in J. Sekora and Durwin T. Turner eds., *The Art of the Slave Narrative* (Essays in Literature, 1989), pp. 25-35; quotation at p. 26.

forms that may be associated with writing about independent geographical motion. Introducing *A Long Way From St Louie*, McElroy expresses a certain isolation in this regard as a black female journey writer:

> 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. … My travelling companions more than likely will be white.[235]

To travel freely as an 'explorer' with a passion for sheer motion – rather than as a diasporic subject anchored to models of postcolonialism or the Black Atlantic, thus only undertaking travel in relation to past trauma, displacement and exile – is to fraternise with whiteness (indeed, the working title of McElroy's next collection of memoirs is 'Travelling With White People').[236] Of course, a joyous notion of travel need not be reserved only for white people, but the cultural obstacle of essentialist understandings of race and motion can inhibit the African American traveller. Upon returning home to what Elaine Lee potently describes as the 'pigmentocracy'[237] of the United States (McElroy endorses this term and also uses the idiom 'colour struck'),[238] these travelling experiences may be toxic for the African American traveller. Here McElroy recalls the 'hostile indifference' with which she is greeted, having been lost as an African American subject amongst the touristic pleasure-seeking activities of her 'pink' travelling companions:

> Your aging cousins show you their fur coats. They have traded them for men. Mink as mean as their eyes. Your aunt, their mother, greets you as always with hostile indifference. *She thinks you've passed over. Not dead but just as well could be in a sea of pink faces*.[239]
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> ... Why you got to go to all those places? Mama asks.[240]

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[235] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. iv.
[236] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 74.
[237] Daiyyah A. Edwards Abdullah, 'Interview with Elaine Lee', *Studies in Travel Writing* 10, 1 (2006), 57-70; quotation at 60.
[238] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 75.
[239] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 5 (emphasis added).
[240] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 12.

According to the stifling logic of this pigmentocracy, geographical mobility is racially coded, as well as gendered. Worse than mere association with whiteness, to travel internationally for pleasure is to 'pass over' from black to pink and thus suffer a form of social death upon returning home.

Correspondingly, when on an aeroplane, fellow African American travel writer Elliot Neal Hester noted with some surprise that 'this was the first time I found myself in a social setting completely devoid of blacks'.[241]Although at liberty to entertain his 'testosterone travel fantasy' as a male adventurer inspired by 'celluloid action heroes' such as James Bond, Hester has also encountered the stunting impact of what he terms 'African American travel myopia' on home soil.[242] He recalls an emblematic scene from his youth to reinforce this point. While flicking through a fashion magazine with his 'fraternity brothers' in his university dorm room, Hester remembers his excitement upon seeing photographs of white male models, dressed in French designer business suits, 'tackling a set of kick-ass runs somewhere in the Austrian Alps':

> Page after page of high-energy photographs exposed me to a new world of mountain peaks and conifers … . My frat brothers, all of whom were black, must have noticed the excitement in my eyes. Having never been near a ski slope, or a foreign country (or, for that matter, a Daniel Hechter business suit), I percolated with enthusiasm.
> "Check this out!" I said, holding up the layout so that everyone could see. "Is this slick or what?"
> My statement was met with an explosion of laughter. Derisive laughter. Amid the cackling, one of the brothers shook his head and sighed. "Why do you want to go and do that white-boy shit?" he said.[243]

Once again, the simple act of travelling for pleasure (or engaging in touristic pleasure-seeking activity beyond the bounds of a symbolic black geography) is associated with whiteness and hence, according to a certain petrifying racial logic, contamination or even betrayal. Hester is indeed 'colour struck'. The above derision also betrays the expectations of the travel and

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[241] Hester, 'Blackpacking', 246.
[242] See Hester, 'Blackpacking', 248.
[243] Hester, 'Blackpacking', 248-9.

outdoor adventure industry, which, as Harris has remarked, 'does not expect blacks to travel' and so does not tend to advertise with African Americans in mind.[244]

Alasdair Pettinger is therefore right to remark that barriers to travel for contemporary African Americans 'continue to exist at the level of cultural expectations',[245] although it should be added that these expectations can operate from both within and outside of African American communities. Indeed, Hester regretfully – and perhaps controversially – argues that 'blacks share half the blame' when it comes to the psychological association of 'far-flung travel' only with 'whites who are predisposed to live that kind of life'.[246] Such residual and potentially immobilising cultural convictions, the product of a long history of subjugation and forced stasis, do not exist for those privileged, usually white male, travellers for whom leisurely mobility is a naturalised given not yoked with an arduous collective history of emancipatory struggle. The effect of an embedded, assumed right to free leisurely mobility is starkly outlined by English travel writer Colin Thubron, who candidly divulges that his advantaged upbringing propagated a distasteful nonchalance, even arrogance, endowing the upper-class white male traveller with:

> … A kind of confidence to your going, a sort of self-confidence which in certain respects is rather unpleasant. … I was at public school and it was edged into your consciousness somehow that you were superior to everything.[247]

Tim Youngs has usefully juxtaposed Thubron's 'sense of superiority and transcendent personality' with McElroy's self-consciously malleable subjectivity and polite advocacy of a certain distance between visitor and visited when on foreign soil.[248] To contrast with a figure born in the United States, Paul Theroux's comments on Iran and Iranians in his renowned 1975 travelogue *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* – a text that

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[244] Harris, personal communication (May 2011).
[245] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 80.
[246] Hester, 'Blackpacking', 248.
[247] Susan Bassnett, 'Interview with Colin Thubron', *Studies in Travel Writing* 3 (1999), 148-71.
[248] Tim Youngs, '"A Daughter Come Home?" The Travel Writings of Colleen J. McElroy', *New Literatures Review* 42 (October 2004), 57-74.

'reinvigorated rather than reformulated the genre'[249] – demonstrates the endurance of that self-confidence outlined by Thubron, even if Theroux is less patrician and more 'hard-bitten'[250] by an older, commonplace mode of travel:

> In spite of its size and apparent newness [Teheran] retains the most obnoxious features of a bazaar, as Dallas does … . There is about this decadence a peculiar absence of the physical that begins to look uncivilised in the most limiting way. … Money pulls the Iranian in one direction, religion drags him in another, and the result is a stupid starved creature for whom woman is only meat.[251]

Theroux's persona, argues Hulme, is that of the rough-edged but learned North American traveller influenced by his erudite European counterparts.[252] In the above passage he is positioned at an authoritative distance form his scorned and pitied object of inquiry, which begets an acerbic judgement of Teheran and 'the Iranian' (and indeed of Dallas). Less likely to exhibit an imperious or misanthropic tone, some African American journey writers may emphasise the joys rather than the tribulations of travel as a strategic choice that forms part of the sociocultural mission to combat the abovementioned 'travel myopia' amongst African Americans as detected by Hester, McElroy and Harris. From a mobile woman's perspective, Elaine Lee is unambiguous about her mission to 'light the way' by 'sharing stories' in her anthology *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure*:

> By lighting the way, by sharing our stories, we can inspire and encourage one another. It is my fervent hope that after reading *Go Girl!*, you will be as buoyed up as I have been by these sisters' courage, ingenuity, and adventuresome spirits, and realising that you, too, can take the trip you've been dreaming of.[253]

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[249] Peter Hulme 'Travelling to Write (1940-2000)' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, pp. 87-101; quotation at p. 90.
[250] Hulme, 'Travelling to Write', p. 90.
[251] Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar* (Penguin: London, 1975), pp.76-7.
[252] Hulme, 'Travelling to Write', p. 90.
[253] Lee, *Go Girl!*, p. 15.

This sense of collective uplift via travel, to be promoted in travel narratives, evidences the bond between geographical mobility, self-determination and racialised consciousness that is a key distinguishing characteristic of many African American travelogues.

However, the abovementioned sociocultural or psychological barriers to travel can materialise at a more palpable level for the travel *writer* with regard to the self-fulfilling expectations of the publishing industry, as McElroy elucidates here:

> Publishing is a bit dicey for African American writers. The more you fall outside of the stereotyped expectation the more difficult it is for you to find a publisher. … Publishers talk about 'placing' – 'where can we place this book?' – and if they can't envisage someone wanting to read the book then they have difficulty 'placing' it.
> … In terms of the choices of publishers that I had for *A Long Way From St Louie*, those choices were restricted. They said they would have trouble marketing the book, so it forced me into another group of publishers. … It's frustrating.[254]

Driven by the coercive principles of competition in the marketplace and the correlated desire to 'place' certain texts on the shelf, publishers restrict African Americans who travel to write in ways unfamiliar to white authors, whose desire to journey to any corner of the globe is normalised and thus undisputed. Concurrently, the travel industry, likewise compelled chiefly by the profit motive in a competitive economy, has also conventionally projected an image of mobility that excludes people of colour – and particularly women of colour – from freely-chosen leisurely mobility, or perhaps confined African Americans to synthetic 'back to Africa' tours (such as the deeply anticlimactic trip made by Natasha Tarpley and her mother, as recalled in *Girl in the Mirror*).[255] As Harris remarks in *Mississippi Solo*:

> Blacks aren't often found cruising the bazaars in Bankok, or sliding down the ski slopes. Finances could be a problem, but the travel magazines seem not to want blacks to travel, or think that blacks don't travel, or maybe just don't care. The advertisement photos rarely – extremely rarely – show blacks enjoying exotic holiday destinations. Why?[256]

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[254] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 65.
[255] See Tarpley, *Girl in The Mirror*, pp. 147-60. More on this in Chapter Two.
[256] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 14.

Harris' subsequent assertion of his right to travel anywhere and thus claim ownership of a mobile, planetary subjectivity is something of a refrain in contemporary African American travelogues:

> I never thought the things I did were so remarkable. My getting to travel and see so much of the world I pinned on restlessness and good fortune. Good fortune, yes, but maybe more. Maybe a quiet statement that this world has too much to offer for me not to want to reach out with arms wide, that there is too much good music and good food and scenic beauty and I want to sample it all, that *there is no place on earth where I can't go, where I don't belong, and nothing I can't do.*[257]

McElroy makes a comparable statement, although with a more explicit embrace of the communal and the familial:

> Home is what you find when you get there. Home is anyplace on this planet. … They got some of us everywhere, Grandma said.[258]

Hester joins this chorus, bridging Harris' masculine individuality as a quiet modern-day pioneer and McElroy's support for collective uplift via the memory of her grandmother:

> I've learned that I do belong. My father belonged. So too does anyone who chooses.[259]

The fact of travel, as Pettinger notes, is thus foregrounded in African American journey writing, which proceeds with 'a gauge of how much 'the race' has progressed' in mind,[260] as well as with the memory of ancestors or family members whose experience of travel was quite different. Where possible, the journey may also be undertaken with the memory of other African American travel writers in mind, perhaps 'in the footsteps of'. This is the case with Kenan, who positions his ambitious voyage across North America for his book *Walking on Water* as following in the footsteps of Williams' similarly ambitious 1960s east-west-east trip across the United States in *This is My Country Too* (1966). The effect is to again evoke the

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[257] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 14 (emphasis added).
[258] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 7.
[259] Hester, 'Blackpacking', 248.
[260] Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', p. 81.

gauge of racial progress, which openly invites a comparison between what Kenan calls the 'different world' of Williams' time with his own less restrictive mobility decades later.[261]

For any US citizen, to claim one's right to unrestricted motion is to demand fulfilment of the ideal founding promise of the United States, while for those who are – or those whose precursors were – denied this right, the act of travelling becomes an act or a sign of subversion, as Cox explains:

> Perhaps the central, even defining, freedom promised to citizens of the United States has been the freedom of movement. Certainly movement is the first freedom denied those sold into slavery. … [Slaves] could be moved as objects, according to this ideological system, but they could not direct themselves as subjects. … For American slaves, participation in movement forbidden by their owners was one of the most common and significant forms of subverting the ideology. … Travel – the ability to move in a self-directed fashion towards a specific goal – defined their subversion.[262]

Travel is fundamental to the process of emancipation from object to subject. No longer 'objects to be moved', the rebellious free slaves who migrated north were transformed into 'subjects who travelled'.[263] Although long after the abolition of slavery, Williams' journey demonstrated the endurance of the ideological shackling of African Americans by the fact that he felt compelled to travel incognito as a white person, thus restricting his ability to fully direct himself as a free subject while on the road in the middle of the twentieth century. For the contemporary local or global African American traveller with greater opportunity to freely direct his or her own selfhood, a history of denial of freedom of movement nonetheless reverberates at a cultural level, a psychological level, or on the border at customs, varying from region to region. Pressure to remain static is exerted from within, at the level of community and culture, and without, at systemic institutional levels (and this is not to mention the broader question of economic status in an increasingly unequal society, which at the present moment is mired in a deep crisis that has hit non-whites and women hardest. A

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[261] Kenan, *Walking on Water*, p. 17.
[262] Cox, *Travelling South*, pp. 64-5.
[263] Cox, *Travelling South*, p. 64.

passport, like a car or a plane ticket, is after all a commodity for purchase only to those with the monetary means). By removing the requirement to have 'a specific goal' to the journey, McElroy goes even further than her forbearers by travelling with a wanderlust that requires no geographical destination as such, and thus instead situates mobility itself as the goal or the object of her self-fashioned travelling subjectivity.[264] This movement from *a* flight *to* freedom to flight *itself as* freedom is fundamental to the understanding of contemporary African American travel writing as an expression of the liberty of the subject.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the figure of the independent leisurely black traveller thus remains a subversive one that destabilises a persistent and potent discriminatory ideology of travel and tourism that petrifies blackness at the expense of the apparently limitless icon of the celebrated white explorer. For travel literature, the consequence of this is the whitewashing of a genre which has historically had a black presence, as R. Victoria Arana's short collection of black travel writing demonstrates.[265] To publish a book-length travelogue, or even to engage in leisurely travel in the first place, is therefore something of a little revolution in itself, given the enduring constraints that evoke a distinct history of struggle for both textual and corporeal mobility dating back to the slave narrative for African Americans. Such deeply embedded concerns are not registered by those orthodox white male travel writers who are able to express a certain degree of self-confidence on the road and consequently adopt the travel book form without misgivings about a perceived lack of literary paradigms or peripatetic role models. For the would-be contemporary African American travel writer, this situation is further compounded by the association of travel writing with imperialism, as well as the stigma attached to 'a form regarded as less literary than others'.[266] Certainly, writers of African descent – indeed, writers in general – would be understandably reluctant to embrace a form tainted by historical function as an agent of empire, however

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[264] As discussed in Winfield, 'Black/White Limits'.
[265] See *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003).
[266] See Hulme and Youngs, 'Talking About Travel Writing', p. 5.

unfair this besmirching of a complex and heterogeneous literary form may be. The persistent association of travel writing with literary banality, which is again unfair, may also dissuade African American authors in particular from becoming or being labelled as a 'travel writer', as their work springs from a rich literary and artistic tradition of innovation, vernacular expression and musicality that has often sought to distinguish itself from orthodox (white) forms of creative expression. Indeed, McElroy is quick to separate *A Long Way From St Louie* from the conventional travel or guide book. The opening lines of the book's introduction clarifies for the audience that this is a more artistic rendering of remembered journeys than would apparently be permitted by the nomenclature of mere 'travel book':

> This is a book about my travels, but *it is not a travel book*, not a description or tour guide, but rather impressions of journeys, memories held in fragments … . One memory distinct, the other blurred.[267]

The reader is assured that they are not reading a travel book. Rather, they are reading a fragmented, literary, poetic representation of personal memories of travelling experiences. The subtitle 'Travel *Memoirs*' reinforces the authorial desire to position her work closer to the artistic practice of lyrically rendering memories than would be allowed from within the constraints of a formulaic style and sequential ordering of events typically associated with the functional travel book, which for McElroy is akin to the tour guide. Her immediate recognition that some memories are 'blurred' buttresses a willed definition of the text as a creative work of art before the reader has reached chapter one. Comparing her travel memoirs to autobiography, she elaborates on the significance of memory to her narrative style in a recent interview:

> One of the reasons I prefer memoir instead of autobiography is that autobiography is closer to the clock time but with memoir you have so much flexibility. You can move in and out of time. You can rearrange events in accordance with their significance and impact. In a memoir I'm trying to construct those moments when time skips or is frozen.[268]

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[267] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. i (emphasis added).
[268] McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 68

McElroy does indeed expand the boundaries of travel writing as a poetic memoirist, even subverting orthodox representations of time as she simultaneously narrates a life in motion that refuses subjective fixity. However, I will now turn to a text saturated with memory that goes even further in testing the generic frame of 'travel writing'.

'It is a Story of Journeys': *Girl in the Mirror* **as Travel Writing 'in the Space Between'**

If, following Hulme, we should be sceptical of the exclusivist belief that 'some forms of travel writing are just too utilitarian'[269] to be included under the rubric of 'literature', then it would be reasonable, likewise, to doubt the equally inhibiting proposal that other texts are just too aesthetic, too close to works of the imagination, to be defined as examples of travel writing. However, as the unfettered wills of style and authorial sensibility endow the writer of the more literary contemporary travel book with greater artistic licence, this raises the key question of verisimilitude that is fundamental to the 'contract' between authors and readers of travel writing[270] (specifically the injunction that the journeys narrated in the text must have actually happened). Although it is true that a naïve conflation of fiction with falsehood is as misguided as the similarly unworldly equation of non-fiction with truth-telling, at what point does the contractual claim to actuality become undermined by the problematic fondness for embellishment or even invention in the literature of travel? It is to this question that I now turn to close this chapter by considering Natasha Tarpley's *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (1998) as an example of contemporary African American travel writing, despite its ambiguous semi-fictional, poetic style.

Tarpley's memoir takes the form of an extended prose narrative that is divided into three chapters and punctuated by poetry or lyrical passages of writing, as well as letters, told in a range of voices. Each chapter is narrated in the first person by a number of different speakers, but principally follows the lives of the three women referred to in the book's

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[269] Hulme in 'Talking About Travel Writing', p. 2.
[270] See Thompson, p. 15.

subtitle. The opening chapter is entitled 'Anna: Movement and Rest' (Anna is Natasha's grandmother), which is followed by 'Marlene: Resurrection' (Marlene is Natasha's mother) and the final section is named 'Natasha: Evolution of Love', where Tarpley speaks as herself. Set in the years 1942-58, the first and most expressive of the three chapters begins with the sub-section 'Anna 1942' and the words 'Dear Jack' as Anna addresses her absent husband in a poetic mixture of candidly troubled interior monologue and falsely jovial penned correspondence. This is followed by 'Jack 1942', narrated by Jack, (Marlene's father, Natasha's grandfather), who has left Alabama with a group of men on the promise of employment in Chicago as part of the Great Migration of African Americans to the urban industrial regions of the North. Speaking from the back of a moving truck, surrounded by men full of the masculine spirit of adventure on the road, Jack narrates what he would later recall as the 'best night of my life. So clear and dark':[271]

> Folks keep getting up to spit out of the back of the truck. It's the South coming up. All the stuff we kept inside … . The air is moving though my body. … Anna, I wish you could know this freedom.
>
> … It is the idea that saves us; keeps us hanging together, leaning on one another, here in the darkness. The idea that we all have destiny locked up in our suitcases … . The idea that our hands can build a new life … .
>
> Maybe it is a funeral of sorts, because some of us are dead now to the South, and the South is dead in us.[272]

'Iona 1942' is then voiced by Anna's friend Iona Jackson, whose husband has likewise left the rural South for the metropolitan North, but with unfulfilled promises to write to his wife. As Anna, Jack and Iona share the role of speaker, we learn that Jack becomes a runaway in 1944, unable 'to reconcile the dream and the work'[273] in the misery of life as an impoverished urbanised black labourer. Iona is murdered in Tennessee after resolving to travel to Chicago, where Anna has now relocated with her sisters after growing tired of waiting for Jack (Anna

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[271] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 14-6.
[272] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 14-5.
[273] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 51.

also echoes Jack's earlier brief moment of remorse as he was leaving the South, as she remarks that 'it's like being at your own funeral … it's like putting part of your life in the ground').[274] Shifting forwards in time to 1958, Iona's fate is revealed using a reprinted newspaper clipping from the Bronzeville Daily, which follows a short piece of irregular, fragmented, vernacular narration from Iona at the moment of her decision to go North ('his seed/ was yeast in me/ gave me my little girl/ but he don't want neither of us/ Anna say there's room in Chicago/ so *I pack up my life and take it away*).[275] Anna's sister, Agnes, then briefly narrates, contrasting her own decision to leave the South in search of 'my own life, something that I could shape as I saw fit' with Iona's tragic mobility in search of unrequited love.[276] Anna, reunited with Jack, finally returns as narrator to conclude the chapter, echoing Agnes' feeling of 'drifting apart from the custom and routine in which my parents' lives were mired.'[277] The palpable centrality of geographical movement to their lives is reinforced in this closing section:

> We had stuck to the old ways, but we were no longer old-way people. Life had changed. People were moving away from the neighbourhoods, out of the city. My youngest sister, Mabel, and her family had moved to California. Jack and I had moved to the house on Drexel.[278]

> Agnes was about to lose her house to the City, for the second time, so that a new highway could be built. … There was no way back, I thought. We had lost our land in Louisiana. Mama and Daddy couldn't stand being so far away from their children after all of us moved North.[279]

> When I left Warrior and moved to Chicago, I left a lot of my life behind. … We blended into the tall buildings and sidewalks, letting go of who we were at home in order to survive here, reinventing ourselves with each new day.[280]

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[274] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 41.
[275] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 55 (emphasis in original).
[276] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 58.
[277] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 58.
[278] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 66.
[279] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 62-3.
[280] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 66-7.

This is also set against the backdrop of a burgeoning New Great Migration of African Americans back to the Southern States, which gathered pace during the mid-late twentieth century. Indeed, demographic shifts of this sort continue to be a feature of life in the United States today, as African Americans are presently leaving metropolitan centres once more due to high rent and exponentially rising living costs at a time of capitalist crisis that further disenfranchises the already impoverished poor and disproportionately affects African Americans and women (calling for more affordable housing, Glen Ford exclaims that 'gentrification has been brutal, has been emptying Harlem, of all places, of black folks').[281] The mandate for subjective reinvention as a result of travelling experiences is a familiar feature of African American narratives of motion and, thus far, the mobile authors considered in this chapter have configured the necessarily flexible interior selfhood of the traveller-narrator in an optimistic fashion. However, in a period of economically enforced movement – motivated by the idea that 'they got all kinds a jobs up North', perhaps, or to make way for a new highway at the behest of 'the City'[282] – the potentially joyful process of ongoing subjective reinvention is contaminated with a sense of loss borne of an absence of authentic physical liberty that has generated the fragmentation of a close-knit 'old-way' community transported to an atomising urban space.

The second chapter similarly drifts back and forth in time but is principally narrated by Anna's daughter, Marlene, in a style reminiscent of interior monologue. It is now 1995 and Marlene is travelling to visit her mother, Anna, in hospital, having travelled back to Chicago from Cambridge, Boston, upon hearing that 'Mama's taken a turn'.[283] Themes of unremitting motion, of departure and return, continue to permeate the narration, as physical mobility triggers interior reflection and autobiographical recollection – 'thinking about my

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[281] Glen Ford, 'Census Shows Blacks Leaving Big Cities' (12/04/12) http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?Itemid=74&id=31&jumival=6562&option=com_content&task=view last accessed 29/09/12.

[282] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 23.

[283] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 79.

children,' she recalls while driving to the airport, 'scattered in three different states, reminds me too much of what I have been trying to forget: *motion, leavings, loss*'.[284] In the following passage, the narrative present and a stream of consciousness style of narration are once more utilised, in this instance to dramatize Marlene's homecoming:

> I always thought I would be the one who stayed. *Forgive me, Mama. Could there have been any other way? … Could I have stayed? Mama, I'm sorry.* I could've stayed. … All the so-called freedom and independence wasn't worth the pain of leaving. *I never forgave myself, Mama, even after you did.* I left when Mama's health was beginning to deteriorate. I pulled my kids out of school, and we became nomads, all of us. How unthinkable must it have been, my leaving, when Mama and Daddy had moved their entire lives so that we could rest.
>
> As the plane nears the ground, the city where I was born opens up to welcome me into its embrace once again. After all this time, I still don't think of Boston as home. … Each time I return, I see that the city has grown and expanded without me.
>
> *… Forgive me, Mama. Forgive me.*
>
> Outside the airport, my sister-in-law is waiting for me in her car.[285]

Loss and detachment from familial roots, as well as the experience of urban flux, are loci as Marlene remembers and records a life of motion in the shadow of her parents' peripatetic histories, which also heralds the mobility of her own children (including Natasha, the book's author). Marlene's 'nomad' wandering is configured as a 'betrayal' of the perilous journeying of her parents, as she grows to crave fixity and finality rather than ephemeral liminality, confessing to feeling 'sick of things in transition and beginnings, I hunger for summer, that moment when everything finishes growing, blossoming, changing, and stands still'.[286] Jack, her father, also exasperated and regretful after travelling away from his family in search of greater prosperity, wished for 'quiet, dreams that stop off somewhere'[287] as he fled the factories to return to the South. Inviting a comparison with the Great Migratory experiences

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[284] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 75 (emphasis added).
[285] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 95-6 (emphasis in original).
[286] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 82.
[287] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 52.

of the previous generation, Marlene's geographical motion is associated only with an anticlimactic 'so-called' liberty, which is ultimately rendered as a painful, inhibiting force that breaks apart family and community. Recounting her childhood in Chicago, a time when 'entire families squeezed into … single rooms'[288] and 'the roads [were] still a dangerous place for people like us',[289] Marlene simply says that:

> We had loved each other then. Black folks. Maybe because we had to in those close quarters. All of us packed together on the South Side and more coming from down South. … In those cramped black neighbourhoods of the forties and fifties, thrown together as we were … you could feel it in the energy of crowded streets, wide with possibility, bodies still so close.[290]

As the surrounding urban space continues to expand and grow taller with time, the unrelentingly transitory existence of the mobile metropolitan individual, torn from an underprivileged but nonetheless communal past, forecloses subjective completion or fulfilment. The 'love' that Marlene recalls in the black neighbourhoods of her youth is 'undergirded by *rest*'.[291] It is therefore stasis, not mobility, which is the enabling force and the desired end, as Marlene mourns the loss of connectivity and harmony as part of a once networked community. This quotidian, rather than touristic, understanding of motion sharply contrasts with the celebratory, optimistic individualism that we might expect from those narratives concerned primarily with leisurely travel. It is, incidentally, a sentiment shared by McElroy, who, despite her evident joy as a solo international traveller, also regrets the gradual de-communalisation of African American life in increasingly 'modular', 'personal' cities where it is easy for the individual to 'disappear', in contrast with the black neighbourhoods of her past where the 'cross-current' of human interaction maintained a

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[288] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 83.
[289] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 78.
[290] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 83.
[291] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 83 (emphasis added).

greater degree of collective concern for one another and propagated a networked interdependence.[292]

In the final chapter, Natasha – Anna's granddaughter, Marlene's daughter and, of course, the author of the book – speaks as herself. Early narration is once again set in transit, where, in an initial address to 'Mom' dated April 1994, Natasha transcribes 'what I could not say when we were face to face':

> Today, as I have done now many times since my freshman year of college, I am leaving home…
>
> I am tempted to say, to think, that we have grown accustomed to these mornings. But I know "accustomed" is the wrong word. I don't believe anyone can become accustomed to pain. As much as we're used to it. As much as it's expected. *Our black lives are living testimony to this.* We walk on tenuous ground…
>
> I write to you now, from my seat on this slow-moving train…[293]

Overlapping with the previous chapters, Natasha participates in a collective discourse of mobility, of both interior and exterior self, which involves recurring, painful departures from 'home' and from each other. Positioning her journeying within a wider, cyclical and ongoing process of 'movement and rest', Natasha's vision is one of gradual, personal enlightenment but not straightforward societal progress or uncomplicated racial uplift. Ambivalence towards the contemporary milieu is manifested in her indifference to the increasingly cold and distant metropolitan, urbanised living space:

> I, like this train, am a fleeting presence, a small break in the circle of air, of breath, surrounding a place, which mends itself and closes as soon as we have passed through, as if we were never there.
>
> … I have long since stopped loving cities, relying on a place to make me a home. … I learned to put my faith in the living, marking my travels by the people rather than the place.
>
> … Many have walked before me and are walking beside me even now. I am convinced that history is a cycle of movement and rest and we, the ones of here and now, keep it going.[294]

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[292] See McElroy in Winfield, 'Interview', 70-71. Chapter Four returns to this topic.
[293] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 119-20 (emphasis added).

The city is rendered as an imperious, self-perpetuating and dehistoricised – or perhaps dehistoricising – site that absorbs and recycles humanity with ease and is thus incapable of providing fulfilment in and of itself (this also recalls the closing pages of the opening chapter, in which Anna says that 'we blended into the tall buildings and sidewalks, letting go of who we were back home',[295] and Marlene's remark in chapter two that 'the city has grown and expanded without me').[296] Moving from the topography of a place to its people, Natasha chooses to embark on a more personal, interior journey by researching and writing *Girl in the Mirror,* 'a search not only for who I am to become, but also for who I have been'.[297] Positioning herself along a racially coded timeline as one whose 'back would remain smooth',[298] she thus travels with one eye on the past as the descendent and inheritor of sometimes traumatic, peripatetic histories, and with one eye towards an unknown future that is cautiously and ambivalently envisioned as an ongoing process of class ascendance towards greater material prosperity, albeit in a lonelier, more individualistic age, with communality fading with the passing of each generation:

> The path was already worn and marred, full of pockmarks from the countless stops and starts, the movement and brief periods of rest of a changing society and black community. … During the migration of black Southerners to the North, the movement seemed to be toward one another … . [But] as the heavy print of the "I" of integration began to stamp out the "we," the direction of the wind began to change. People were blowing out of the neighbourhoods instead of in. We were born in this wind, part of the long trail of black folks climbing the ladder towards middle class, towards better, towards more.[299]

African American history in relation to travel has not readily contributed to a 'joyous notion' of motion, as Elaine Lee has argued,[300] and *Girl in the Mirror* evidences this. However,

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[294] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 120-1.
[295] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 67.
[296] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 96.
[297] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 120.
[298] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 121.
[299] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 138.
[300] See Elaine Lee, 'African American Travel Trends' in *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9.1 (Fall 2003), 251-4; quotation at 251.

Natasha's cautious optimism that 'black folks' are 'climbing the ladder towards middle class' also supports Lee's observation that 'the picture has changed remarkably in recent times'[301] (although this process is reversing at the present moment of writing, as capitalist crisis imposes itself upon the aspirations of working class communities). The tendency of Tarpley's text to invite a comparison between the movements of each generation is a commonality detected by Pettinger in African American travel writing in general, as mentioned earlier.[302] Pettinger's claim that African American travel texts typically exhibit an autobiographical framework that prioritises self-confirmation also applies to *Girl in the Mirror*, which journeys into the past of the geographically mobile narrator(s) in order to reach a more profound understanding of the author's identity as 'the daughter of women rescuers'.[303]

Although not a conventional travel book, *Girl in the Mirror* does exhibit certain commonalities with other African American journey narratives. Another trope detected by Pettinger is that of the anticlimactic journey or, more precisely, the anticlimactic arrival, in Africa. This emerges in Natasha's section of the book in the form of a trip to Ghana with her mother, where the wistful construct of Africa as 'the wish, our greatest hope' is tainted by the imposition of commoditised, touristic exchange, which figures the two visitors from the United States as 'black tourists' on a 'preposterous journey'.[304] Upon arrival at the airport in Accra, Natasha admits that 'I had come to feel at home, hoping for an alternative to the home I had left', yet the grand hope that 'this day would be more important than any other day' is immediately undercut by the mundane process of being ushered into a shuttle bus to collect baggage ('there were no welcome signs, no drums beating the news of our arrival, only the disgruntled and sleepy ground crew') and the lack of recognition from 'far away,

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[301] Lee 'African American Travel Trends', 253.
[302] Pettinger, '"At Least One Negro Everywhere"', p. 81.
[303] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 175.
[304] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 149.

untouchable' locals whose 'eyes would not meet mine'.[305] As she travels to the hotel in a silver VW minivan with her Ghanaian tour guides, the 'comfortable' air-conditioned vehicle is surrounded by 'the throbbing crowd outside' – an impoverished, hungry 'mob … . Hands reaching, teeth bared', with one man 'pounding on our windows begging for money' – and she begins to grasp 'the reawakening realisation that we were far from home'.[306] The imagery of the alluring, maternal African drumbeat immediately begins to recede. Although deeply anticlimactic, travel to Africa facilitates a more accurate elucidation of place (and therefore self) that discredits superficial displays of Afrocentric fashion back home, where 'we had constructed our own Africa as we needed it to be'.[307] Indeed, in each chapter of *Girl in Mirror* travel functions in part as a 'reawakening', revelatory practice that dislocates idealised phantasmagorias of particular sites: the awful understanding of a laborious existence in the workhouses for Jack, which is irreconcilable with the (American) 'dream' that initially motivated his journey to the illusory terminus of 'up North';[308] Marlene's recognition of a familiar form of racism in Cambridge, Harvard Square in particular, which punctures her 'idealised vision' of the place, turning 'my fantasy [of] quaint cobblestone sidewalks and street musicians' into the reality of 'professors dismissing your ideas and/or stealing them' and 'a beggar, a fixture in "the Square," who would call every black person 'nigger' as they passed;[309] and finally, for Natasha, travel demystifies the imagined African 'Motherland' from which the figurative 'drum'[310] had beckoned.

To posit a poetic memoir such as *Girl in the Mirror* as an example of travel writing may be considered provocative. However, I argue that this text, infused as it is with motion, could be fruitfully anthologised alongside the impressive range of travelogues gathered

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[305] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 148.
[306] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 150-1.
[307] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 148.
[308] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, pp. 47-52, p. 107.
[309] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 94.
[310] Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror*, p. 147. Chapter Two, on African journeys, will return to this.

together by Griffin and Fish in *A Stranger in the Village*. As travel writing endures and evolves, as part of the dynamic process of genre (re)shaping, *Girl in the Mirror* evidences contemporary experimentation with forms and methods of writing about mobility, extending the possibilities of the travel text by utilising memoirist and novelistic modes, speaking from the specific and often overlooked perspective of African American women to poetically record a familial history of movement across geographical space. That the real world travelling experiences of the 'characters' (including the author) in the book are recorded in a creative manner should not deter us from including the narrative as part of a wider corpus of travel writing. Indeed, the case may be made that the naïve objective, or requirement, of absolute factual accuracy in explicitly 'non-fictional' travelogues – texts that are inevitably filtered through the author and through the written word – should give way to a more nuanced acknowledgment of the epistemological challenges of writing travel. An expressive, literary recitation of travel such as crafted in *Girl in Mirror* may point to a more intricate human experience of reality than is represented in straightforwardly factual forms of reportage that strive for unattainable absolute accuracy and objectivity. Moving beyond the epistemological anxieties associated with the orthodox travel book, Tarpley's memoirist turn to the subjective interior operates in cohesion with a poetic translation of travelling experiences into a textual form.

It is true that Tarpley's narrative does not accord with the 'traditional and old fashioned' definition of the travel book and 'travel writing as it is commonly construed' as outlined by Pettinger in the introduction to *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (1998).[311] Noting the almost exclusive focus on white-authored travel writing, Pettinger defines the orthodox conception of travel writing as follows:

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[311] Alasdair Pettinger, 'Introduction', in Pettinger, ed., *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (London and New York: Cassell, 1998), pp. viii-ix; quotation at p. viii.

> There are quite strict conditions that the text must meet [to count as travel writing]. … The authors are most likely to be professional writers who travel at least partly in order to write about it: 'adventure' is the key word here, conjuring up a journey planned to be *interesting*. They typically have no strong link (such as work or family) with the place.[312]

Tarpley's text clearly does not meet such outmoded conditions. However, just as the selections of black travel writing that Pettinger rewardingly gathers together in *Always Elsewhere* invalidate these 'strict conditions' by not fully conforming to such a narrow model, *Girl in Mirror* also departs from and challenges conventional understandings of what may count as travel writing. Moreover, to consider *Girl in Mirror* as a travel book also signals a further departure from the vast Black Atlantic network that underpins *Always Elsewhere*, shifting focus from an immense intercontinental diaspora network to a more intimate, precise optic concerned with the development of mobile, local, familial networks across three generations of women of African descent in the twentieth century United States of America. Tarpley's narrative may not be a story of epic journeying across Gilroy's oceanic trajectory – notwithstanding Natasha's brief (anticlimactic) trip to Africa with her mother – but it is a potent example of particularly African American memories of motion, a personal yet collective history of migratory experiences within the nation that fruitfully stretches the concept of travel writing in general and, furthermore, extends the category of 'black' travel writing in particular to include the voices of three generations of African American women that did not travel internationally, yet whose lives were filled with travelling experiences.

Significantly, when asked if her work could be categorised as a travel book, Tarpley answers positively, although she is careful to extricate her text from the 'traditional travel book', which repeats Pettinger's move to situate the writings collected in *Always Elsewhere* as distinct, boundary- stretching examples of the genre:

> *Girl in the Mirror* is not a traditional travel book in that it focuses on a particular place. But it is a travel book in that it is a story of journeys; of

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[312] Pettinger, *Always Elsewhere*, pp. viii-ix.

> how we get from one stage of our lives to the next psychologically and
> emotionally. Geography or place definitely fits into this process, because it
> is often a physical place that propels us into motion within ourselves.
>
> For example, *Girl in the Mirror* traces the geographical migrations
> of three women – my grandmother, my mother and myself – from the South
> to the North and beyond. It looks at how each woman's search for 'home' in
> a physical or geographical sense mirrored her growth and search for
> satisfaction and peace within herself.[313]

If, following Cox, we 'question less what exactly travel literature *is* or what it *describes* but,
rather, what travel literature *does*',[314] then, for the purposes of this study, Tarpley's more
explicitly interior and imaginative (but still dealing with non-fictional, real world journeys)
writing shares comparable and interrelated thematic concerns with many other African
American travel books. Journeying and migration across geographical space, a search for
'home' or belonging, autobiographical or memoirist retrospection, a consideration of
collective racial progress and inheritance, and a personal concern with identity and the
renegotiation of self, are key foci in the contemporary African American literature of travel.
Given these thematic associations, *Girl in the Mirror* is thus justifiably considered as an
example of a narrative of travel in the African American tradition of telling 'stories of
journeys'. Furthermore, beyond theme and at the level of form, the experimental, intergeneric
and vernacular foundations of the text as an example of transcribed oral history (strategically
comparable with McElroy's collection of Malagasy folk tales and Kenan's ethnographic
travelogue, which also utilised the process of interviewing, as Tarpley interviewed her mother
and grandmother) reinforce its location within this incessantly mobile tradition of letters, of a
historically peripatetic people. Just as Pettinger incites a re-examination of generic labelling
with the inclusion of slave narratives in an anthology of travel writing, I aim here to prompt a
reconsideration of the usefulness and effect of orthodox generic categorisation that would
exclude texts such as *Girl in the Mirror* from being grouped together with other travelogues
authored by African American men and women.

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[313] Natasha Tarpley, personal communication (April 2011).
[314] See Cox, *Travelling South*.

Tarpley's part-fictional travel memoir opens up the discussion to consider the (re)definition of travel writing as 'non-fiction' in the light of her creative narrative of mobility. Travel writing is certainly not to be read naively as a transparent window on the world, as Thompson has noted,[315] and *Girl in the Mirror* certainly aims to present a reflection of interior soul as much as, if not more than, exterior space. Tarpley's creative memoir reconnects us with Harris' earlier portrayal of *Native Stranger* as 'a tapestry weaving itself out of what is real and what is pure imagination' and also augments McElroy's disclosure that 'memoirs occupy *the space between* what really happened and how you remember what happened'[316] (which also recalls Griffin and Fish's acknowledgment that travel narratives are 'generic in-betweeners that fall between the cracks').[317] The blurring of the fiction/non-fiction boundary is bound up with a disruption of the conventional distinction between narrator(s), character(s) and author(s) of *Girl in the Mirror*. Rather than a strict wall between fiction and non-fiction, imagine instead a well-worn bridge that connects the fictive and the factual, a conduit usefully traversed by Tarpley in her lyrical memoir of motion.

[315] Thompson, p. 30.
[316] McElroy in *BMa*, 243 (emphasis added).
[317] Griffin and Fish, *A Stranger in the Village*, p. xiv.

CHAPTER TWO

'The Aftermath of Disenchantment'

African American Narratives of Travel to Africa

> They were used to Americans with identity problems.
>
> – Saidiya Hartman[318]

> When an African American asks 'what is Africa to me?' he or she is also asking 'what is America to me?'
>
> – James T. Campbell[319]

'The Spell of Africa is Upon Me': Transatlantic Journeys to the Diasporic Centre

W. E. B. Du Bois' 1924 travelogue 'Little Portraits of Africa' eloquently expresses the historical mystique of the continent for many African American travellers whose mobility has been motivated by the desire to find, or even build, a homeland:

> The spell of Africa is upon me. The ancient witchery of her medicine is burning my drowsy, dreamy blood. This is not a country, it is a world – a universe of itself and for itself, a thing Different, Immense, Menacing, Alluring. It is a great black bosom where the spirit longs to die.[320]

Fellow Pan-Africanist[321] travellers in the colonial era would echo this reaction to the continent as the mysterious, maternal, welcoming 'Mother' to which displaced members of the diaspora, stranded and subjugated in the New World, could return forever. Adekeye Adebajo notes the appeal of such an idealised apparition of the continent for the many suffering and subjugated African Americans who shared Du Bois' yearning for an elsewhere:

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[318] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 154.

[319] James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. xxiv.

[320] W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Little Portraits of Africa' [1924], in Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish (eds.), *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), pp.146-49; quotation at p.149.

[321] Griffin and Fish define Pan-Africanism as an ideology and a movement 'based on the assertion that a unified Africa is in the best interest of all members of the African diaspora.' Early pan-Africanist African Americans in the nineteenth century were proponents of emigration or colonisation plans to relocate Americans to Africa. See *A Stranger in the Village*, pp.97-99.

> Africa had always been a cultural shield behind which African Americans sought refuge in an idealised past, free of slavery and xenophobia. … The idealised vision of Africa held by many of Du Bois' descendants was a nostalgic longing for return to an invented past, a therapeutic balm to soothe the pains of racism and powerlessness in their adopted homeland.[322]

Later, during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, this vision was nurtured by Du Bois' descendants, with strong transatlantic cultural and political ties made in a period of shared social struggle against racist and colonialist oppression.[323]

However, as the twentieth century advanced into the post-civil rights and post-independence era, the African American traveller's characteristic 'longing to connect'[324] with African people would more often than not result in what Alasdair Pettinger describes as an 'anticlimactic recognition of how little common ground they share.'[325] Gwendolyn Brooks' exasperated and despairing tone as she recounts her experience in 1970s Africa – which itself is militantly portrayed as 'this land that belongs to *blacks*'[326] – is especially illustrative:

> The people here carry on their lives with – it seems –scarcely a thought for their stolen brothers and sisters over the way there, *far* over the way. ... When I go to bed ... I am cold. Cold in Africa! In my ignorance of my mother-home, this seems odd.[327]

To her bewilderment, Brooks travels to discover that '*I* am the oddity' as the camera-wielding tourist, a Western(ised) visitor from '*far* over the way' that is 'taking *their* pictures.'[328] Recognised as a fleeting American consumer, Brooks is offered the *New York Times* rather than the 'great black bosom' envisioned by Du Bois half a century earlier.[329] Rather than confirm or deepen the centrality of Africa for Brooks' diasporic subjectivity,

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[322] Adekeye Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', *Africa Today* 50, 3 (Spring 2004), 93-110; quotation at 96-7.

[323] See *A Stranger in the Village*, pp. 97-166; Alasdair Pettinger (ed.) *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (London: Cassell, 1998); and Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam'.

[324] Say Griffin and Fish in *A Stranger in the Village*, p. 299.

[325] Alasdair Pettinger ''At Least One Negro Everywhere': African American Travel Writing' in *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (London: Pluto, 2003), pp.77-91; quotation at p. 88.

[326] Gwendolyn Brooks, 'African Fragment' [1972], in *A Stranger in the Village*, pp.301-10; quotation at p.303.

[327] Brooks, 'African Fragment', pp. 303-5.

[328] Brooks, 'African Fragment', p. 303.

[329] Brooks, 'African Fragment', p. 304.

travel to the ancestral homeland has in fact resulted in the contestation of this centrality, prompting a re-evaluation of the author's self on the site of the travel narrative.

It is in the deep literary-historical footsteps of innumerable journeys such as these across the Black Atlantic (a contested term in itself)[330] that Americans of African descent in the contemporary era travel, carrying a baggage of cultural expectations, myths, history, desires and fears that are at once personal and collectively understood. Yet, in addition to such enduring questions of home, identity and belonging, those that travel and write in the post-Cold War era of 'globalisation' (another contested term)[331] exist within a specific historical context of their own quite apart from the epochs of Du Bois or Brooks, for example. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, political and economic relations within and between Africa and the United States – indeed, across the world – changed considerably. If Africa is imagined as the collectively remembered ancestral homeland for these travellers it is also fixed within the popular Western imagination as a frightful land of war, famine and disease, designated according to a hegemonic teleological model of 'development' as a laggard of modernity to be 'democratised' and 'reformed'. If Africa was 'another world' for Du Bois, by the end of the century this world had a name and a rank of 'Third' – far beneath the booming 'First'. Simultaneously, the neoliberal economic order promulgated by the

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[330] Pettinger defines this term in a helpfully practical manner as 'simply a collective noun embracing the intercontinental movements of Black Africans and their descendants since the late eighteenth century' in *Always Elsewhere*, p.x. Study of the Black Atlantic was inaugurated by Paul Gilroy's seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). *Beyond the Black Atlantic: Relocating Modernisation and Technology*, ed. by Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) attends to the wide debate in this field, usefully expanding upon the ideas put forth by Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*.

[331] As will become clearer in this chapter, I view this term as primarily referring to a particular phase of capital accumulation – a specific (neoliberal) form of international economic integration inaugurated by the advanced capitalist powers – which gathered considerable pace in the immediate period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. I am also sympathetic to Goebel and Schabio's striking opening claim that 'the last surviving great narrative of the West may be the idea of inescapable, ubiquitous globalisation' and that this idea loses momentum 'when the West cannot prevent many of the so-called 'developing' countries from becoming increasingly impoverished' (*Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p.1). This may seem contradictory, as Marxism (certainly a contested term) is often wrongly understood to be one of those Eurocentric or 'Western grand narratives' to be done away with. However, I argue that the Marxist and the Postcolonial critic can find numerous points of accord, especially with regard to 'globalisation' and resistance to its effects in the so-called 'developing' world. For more on the value of dialogue between Marxism and Postcolonialism, see Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds.), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002). On the myth that Marxism is Eurocentric, see August Nimtz, 'The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and other related myths', *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 65-80.

United States was seemingly entering its *Belle Époque*, with gratifying results for a growing number of well-heeled property-owning African Americans. The soothing 'therapeutic balm' or mythical 'cultural shield' of an invented and idealised Africa was beginning to lose its pertinence. This chapter considers three particular travel narratives composed at this time, either side of the century's turn: *Washington Post* journalist Keith B. Richburg's *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (1998)[332] – an account of the author's experience as the *Post*'s Africa bureau chief from 1991 to 1994 – and Professor Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008),[333] which recounts the author's journey along a slave route in Ghana as part of her research into the history of the Atlantic slave trade. As I outline my methodology in the next section, I will also refer to *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992),[334] Eddy L. Harris' narrative of his extensive travel across the continent from Tunisia to South Africa.

Before leaving the United States, both Hartman and Richburg feel their own private foreboding 'spell' of Africa, although both travellers deviate from the hypnotic imagery of Du Bois' dreamy bosom. Richburg admits that he fears the prospect of 'being black' in Africa, of being 'just another face in the crowd' in his ancestral home and 'losing my identity' as a 'special' (21) type of American:

> But to be black in Africa?
>
> Would they be able to tell that I was not from that place? Would I still be accorded that preferential treatment that foreigners abroad enjoy? ... The essence of my anxiety [was] the fear of being one in the crowd. Losing my identity. My individuality. (21)

Rather than shun the status of 'oddity,' as Brooks was desperate to do two decades earlier, Richburg would in fact welcome this distinction as confirmation of his singularity, which is

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[332] Keith B. Richburg, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (London: Harcourt, 1998). All subsequent page references included in this chapter are taken from this edition.

[333] Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). All subsequent page references included in this chapter are taken from this edition.

[334] Eddy L. Harris, *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (London: Viking, 1992). All subsequent page references included in in this chapter are taken from this edition.

evidently rooted in his sense of national selfhood, or at least his discernible, experiential knowledge of his selfhood as a black citizen of the United States. Hartman also expresses anxiety over issues of identity loss from the onset of her travelogue, but rather than dreading the disappearance of her individuality in a sea of black faces, she fears the loss of the collective. Concerned that the African visages of the past have been forever lost in the Atlantic, that the deep oceanic 'breach' (9, 39) will be so wide as to leave her facing 'an encounter with nothing' along the slave route, Hartman confesses that:

> I realised too late that the breach of the Atlantic could not be remedied by a name [Hartman adopted the name Saidiya in her sophomore year in college] and that the routes travelled by strangers would be as close to a *mother country* as I could come. ... Unlike my grandparents, I thought the past was a country to which I could return. ... So I embarked on my journey, no doubt as blindly as they had on theirs, and in search of people who left no traces. ... How does one write a story about an encounter with nothing? (9-16, emphasis in original)

Upon departure, Hartman fears the loss of the (mythologised) past of African solidarity, a comforting communal narrative that was previously secure but is now under threat because of the empirical actuality of travel to Africa. Richburg, conversely, fears the loss of the present, specifically his individual, discrete and 'lived' identity in the United States. From the outset, both travellers configure themselves in their narratives as being vulnerable to the transformative effects of African travel. Du Bois' remark that 'the spirit longs to die' in Africa has certainly retained its pertinence for these particular travellers, who equally fear a kind of subjective 'death' following the revelatory experience of their African sojourns.

Recalling the wider political and economic situation that surrounds these texts, the above introductory remarks may give us some clue as to the ultimate ideological position of each traveller upon their return to the United States. Taken together, I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that *Out of America* and *Lose Your Mother* represent distinct possible futures for the relationship of Americans of African descent – and indeed the world – to Africa in the

twenty-first century. However, before going further, I will first here outline my methodological approach.

Culture, Identity, Marxism

Speaking in the late 1990s, at the peak of an extraordinary period of capitalist triumphalism typified by Francis Fukuyama's declaration that we had reached 'the end of history,'[335] African American philosopher and activist Angela Y. Davis makes the case for the persistent relevance of Marxism:

> Well, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the European socialist countries, I have become even more convinced of the importance of studying the work of Karl Marx and developing the kinds of anticapitalist analyses that will hopefully push us beyond this historical period during which capitalism is assumed to be hegemonic. Because the socialist experiment in countries like the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic did not work, this does not mean that socialism is no longer a part of the historical agenda, and *it certainly does not imply the historical triumph of capitalism*. As a matter of fact, I would argue that in the aftermath of the collapse of the socialist countries, the expansive globalisation of capital has led to a predicament in which the everyday lives of people are even more directly and intimately affected by capital than, say, twenty years ago. *The project of developing explicitly anticapitalist theories and practices is of greater importance now than ever before*.[336]

In the same volume – namely *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (1998) – and in a similar vein, a number of other African American philosophers make reference to the stubborn significance of Marxism: Albert Mosely turns to Marx as he draws equivalences between the black underclass in the United States and the global *lumpenproletariat* that Marx predicted would grow as a result of capitalist development;[337] Leonard Harris, editor of *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (1983), notes the value of Marx in 'provid[ing] a way of seeing the world as a certain kind of world of change

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[335] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' (1989)
http://66.102.9.132/search?q=cache%3AnRETt8hwRg0J%3Awww.unc.edu%2Fhome%2Frlstev%2FText%2FF ukuyama%2520End%2520of%2520History.pdf+The+End+of+History&hl=en&gl=uk
(last accessed 25/03/2010)

[336] Angela Y. Davis in George Yancy, (ed.), *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 28 (emphasis added).

[337] Albert Mosely in *African-American Philosophers*, pp. 155-6.

through conflict ... . It is through that conflict that we arrive at more radical social change';[338]

Joy James questions the postmodern notion of incredulity towards – or 'fleeing from' – metanarratives, affirming that 'Marxian thought is still a useful tool';[339] and Cornel West calls for a philosophical method that is able to relate with 'history, struggle [and] suffering, how we cope with suffering, how we overcome social misery.'[340] For West, Marxism remains vital to such an intellectual project and therefore remains vital to African Americans:

> I think that *the Marxist intellectual tradition remains indispensible* in order to keep track of certain forms of social misery, especially these days in terms of oligopolies and monopolies ... . I don't see how, in fact, we can understand the market forces around the world and the fundamental role of transnational corporations, the subordination of working people, the tremendous class conflicts going on around the world ... without understanding some of the insights of the Marxist tradition.[341]

Absolutely concurring with the above statements – but writing today at a time when capitalism is no longer triumphal but once again in a crisis of accumulation, signalled by financialisation[342] – I will thus approach contemporary African American narratives of travel to Africa with a conceptual framework synchronous with the Marxist tradition, or, to use Joy James' term, with Marxian thought. As United States citizens of African descent travel the world it must surely be acknowledged that this world is increasingly ordered according to the imperatives of the international market – of global capital – which, says Ellen Meiksins Wood, is itself 'manipulated in the interests of a few imperial powers, and one in particular.'[343] The appellation 'African American' signifies the unique and potentially contradictory situation of this particular category of traveller within this politico-economic context. Incongruously located within the history of capitalist development, the African American traveller is as at once a moneyed touristic citizen of the globally hegemonic

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[338] Leonard Harris in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 220.
[339] Joy James in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 259.
[340] Cornel West interview in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 38.
[341] West, *African American Philosophers*, p.41 (emphasis added).
[342] See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); also David Harvey, ''The Winding Paths of Capital': Interview with Giovanni Arrighi', *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009) 61-94.
[343] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 156.

capitalist superpower and a living descendent of dispossessed slaves forcibly stolen at, says

Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, the 'dawn of the era of capitalist production'[344] that

transformed their African homeland into a site of labour reserves on a continental scale, as

capitalism aggressively entered and shaped colonial worlds.[345]

The ambivalence engendered by this singularly traumatising genealogy is exhibited in

the separation of Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* from Richburg's *Out of America*. Hartman

endorses the Marxist characterisation of capitalism as violent, exploitative and, at birth − in a

direct quote of Marx's infamous line in *Capital*[346] − 'dripping from head to toe, from every

pore, with blood and dirt' (47). She seeks to define the 'African' aspect of her selfhood by

inscribing a usable history of 'struggle' and '*autonomy* rather than nationhood' (234,

emphasis added), thus entering her text into the abovementioned tradition of African

American Marxian thought concerned with history, struggle and overcoming of social

misery. By contrast, as I will discuss below, Richburg extols the virtues of the International

Monetary Fund and World Bank for 'finally getting tough' (24) with corrupt African states,

depicts Africans generally as self-destructive and regressively tribal and thanks God that his

ancestor 'got out' of the continent so that he could today be an American (xvii). The work of

Hartman and Richburg demonstrates that narratives of travel authored by African Americans

can be of particular interest when placed within the realm of the political economy

(traditionally an enclave for the Marxist literary critic) as well as the broadly 'culturalist'

fields of identity studies and discourse analysis, which, following Edward Said's *Orientalism*

(1978) and the subsequent advent of postcolonial literary criticism, have become the more

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[344] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (last accessed 10/03/10); also quoted in Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 208.
[345] See Benita Parry, 'The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities' in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, pp. 13-28.
[346] 'Capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt', Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (last accessed 10/03/10)

conventional spheres within which travel writing is considered.[347] By engaging a contemporary and singular strand of the vast corpus of travel literature in such a fashion, I hope that this critical approach will answer Mary Baine Campbell's call for 'new and powerful theoretical work to replace, rather than merely supplement' the present 'polemics and models' that are commonly applied to the genre.[348] Furthermore, I wish to build upon John Cullen Gruesser's *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (2005) – which sought to 'establish conduits'[349] across theoretical boundaries on the site of African American literature – by providing a timely Marxist intervention into the debate, in tune with the position of Bartolovich, Lazarus *et al* in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (2002), a book that attempts to reactivate a disavowed Marxist heritage[350] of anti-imperialist, anticapitalist critique in a mutually enriching fashion.

Tania Friedel's *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (2008)[351] is a recent book-length study of the broader genre of African American literature, but it does also demonstrate Bartolovich's point that much of contemporary ('post') theory prioritises the cultural at the expense of the political economy, even leading to 'wholesale flight' from the latter.[352] In a project concerned primarily with cultural and racial identity and discourse, the critical position that Friedel adopts and espouses is a 'cosmopolitanism [that] is primarily cultural but with moral and political

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[347] See Mary Baine Campbell, 'Travel Writing and its Theory' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 261-78.

[348] Mary Baine Campbell, 'Travel Writing and its Theory', p. 262.

[349] John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 2.

[350] Bartolovich, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 3-4; on the disavowed Marxist heritage of postcolonialism see Timothy Brennan, 'Postcolonial Studies between the European Wars: An Intellectual History', pp. 185-203.

[351] Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (London: Routledge, 2008)

[352] Bartolovich, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, p.5. Although Bartolovich refers specifically to postcolonial theory, I have expanded the definition in order to embrace Friedel's study. Terry Eagleton refers to the depoliticised phenomenon of cultural studies and the concurrent dismissal of class analysis in Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004).

implications.'[353] In order to flesh out these 'political implications' one may glean more from her later endorsement of 'the cosmopolitan practice of aesthetic politics' and the assumption of a 'pragmatist' position that 'shuns absolutes' and rejects 'already established truths.'[354] This critical outlook, argues Friedel, 'holds possibilities for our political lives.'[355] Clearly, culture, identity and discursive practice are at the centre of this mode of thinking; the political and the economic are reduced to the margins, restricted to the status of an implied 'possibility' deferred to some future, supra-textual terrain. Friedel acknowledges (more than once) that we are living in a 'rapidly, *yet unevenly*, globalising world'[356] but no further comment is made on the substance of this unevenness, and unsurprisingly the word 'capitalism' is absent from the book, quite possibility because, as Bartolovich notes, to make reference to the economic often leads to accusations of unsophisticated determinism,[357] which is anathema to the sophisticated critic of culture, identity and discourse (it is also noteworthy that the common-sense 'truth' that we live in a 'globalising' world is accepted, despite the clear rejection of totalising metanarratives. The paradoxical mantra of this aesthetic thus appears to be that 'the absolute truth is that all absolute truths should be shunned, especially in this rapidly globalising era').

A fundamental impediment to this progressive cosmopolitan stance is that, for all its undeniable virtues in the culturalist sphere as a vehicle against oversimplified black/white delineation on the one hand and bland abstract universalism on the other (in other words, as neatly observing 'the dialectic between the particular and the universal'),[358] when it is distinguished in the *political* realm as merely pragmatic and flexible, and silent on capitalism, it is effortlessly integrated into the dominant hegemonic ideology that it claims to stand in

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[353] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 5.
[354] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 5.
[355] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, pp. 9-10.
[356] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 1, 18.
[357] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 5.
[358] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 9.

opposition to (the mystifying logic of 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' that is tied to neoliberal economic policy).[359] To put it another way, the problem with this enlightened aesthetic of cosmopolitanism is that it is easily mobilised to campaign for Barack Obama, outspoken champion of cross-cultural dialogue, yet friend of Wall Street and purveyor of war in Afghanistan (Tariq Ali goes as far as to call him 'just another steward of the American Empire … but with more emollient rhetoric'),[360] rather than for genuinely radical, authentically transformative societal change at the level of the political economy. After all, who would disagree with undeniably accurate statements such as 'we should imagine positions other than our own' or 'we should try to understand one another'?[361] Consider instead who would take issue – and who on the globe would empathise – with a statement like 'capitalism has failed to meet the needs of the masses'.[362] There is something to be said for the polemical and even, occasionally, for the expression of absolute truths. It is an absolute truth that capitalism has failed to meet the needs of humanity. It is not vulgar to say this; it is vulgar to ignore it. Here, Bartolovich makes the case for materialist crudity:

> 80 per cent of the world's wealth circulates among 20 per cent of its people, with the use of resources similarly unbalanced. To point this out – and, further, to recognise that these imbalances have real effects on intellectual and cultural (as well as other kinds) of production – is not 'crude'. On the contrary, it is crude to attempt to ignore, or treat as insignificant, the continuing existence – even expansion – of such levels of inequality.[363]

The naturalised and seemingly perpetual situation of global inequity must be confronted. I subscribe here to Eagleton's claim that we 'cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race and gender, indispensible as these topics are'.[364] I also concur with

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[359] See Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review* (Sep-Oct 1997), 28-51; and Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity', *New Left Review* 52 (July-Aug 2008) 33-6.

[360] Tariq Ali, 'President of Cant', *New Left Review* 61 (Jan-Feb 2010) 99-116; quotation at 108.

[361] Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 18.

[362] Martin Luther King Jr., 'Notes on American Capitalism' [1951], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume One), pp. 435-6; See also King, 'Will Capitalism Survive?' [1950], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Six), pp. 104-5.

[363] Bartolovich in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, p. 12.

[364] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 222.

Walter Benn Michaels' related contention in 'Against Diversity' that exploitative neoliberalism is at the heart of today's levels of inequality, not discrimination,[365] and thus for me to focus *exclusively* on racial identity in this project would in truth be another way of avoiding the thorny topic of capitalism, which would itself be a tacit form of capitulation.

Marx's materialist inversion of Hegel – broadly speaking the argument that our consciousness is a product of our material world, not the other way around – carries a great deal of weight when we consider the often anticlimactic nature of cultural encounters between African Americans and local people of colour on African soil. Effectively, a member of the wealthy 20 per cent is meeting a member of the other 80 per cent. It is this material social relation to one another, borne of unequal global politico-economic conditions, which so often impedes the latent diasporic connection. The inevitable lack of 'common cultural ground' between African Americans and people of colour from other countries (especially in Africa) that Pettinger identifies[366] is thus the result of a blockage that is at once cultural and economic. To amplify this straightforward but significant point I will briefly turn to Benita Parry, who utilises the Marxist theory of combined and uneven development – the coexistence and overlapping of 'stages' of historical development – to explain 'the persistence of earlier social practices and older psychic dispositions' in rural societies on the 'periphery' of modernity:

> The 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' was structural to colonised societies and continues to be so in post-independence nation-states. For here vast rural populations living in village communities provided *and continue to provide the material ground* for the persistence of earlier social practices and older psychic dispositions.[367]

Parry refuses to see modernity as 'a wholly cultural event'[368] and affirms the centrality of the mode of production, in conjunction with the cultural, as at the root of the phenomenon.

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[365] See Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity' 34, 36.
[366] Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 88.
[367] Parry, 'The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities' in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p. 13.
[368] Parry, 'The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities' in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p. 19.

Likewise, I contest here that the unevenness of our ostensibly 'globalised' mode of production deeply impinges upon the socio-cultural relationship between indigenous African local and foreign African American traveller – indeed determining who does and does not have the means to travel in the first place, and subsequently write about it professionally – even if both of these individuals self-identify as fellow members of a collective transnational diasporic community. Heeding the message of Bartolovich's introduction to *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (2002), in which she argues against an *exclusive* focus on questions of culture and subjectivity and regrets 'the '*wholesale flight* from political economy [that is] so characteristic of postcolonial studies in general today', I concur that 'there are (irreducibly) *relations* between 'the economic' and 'the cultural''[369] and that this is a fundamental truth to be acknowledged by anyone who endeavours to research travel literature. Academic study of travel writing would, I believe, be deepened and enriched by the adoption and inclusion of the conceptual tools provided by the Marxist tradition, to be utilised alongside the more commonplace and familiar – and of course fruitful – frameworks of postcolonial and black identity studies. I will thus employ in this chapter a range of ideas from such Marxist, or at least 'marxian' or left-radical, thinkers as Terry Eagleton, Crystal Bartolovich, David Harvey, Benita Parry, Fredric Jameson (cognitive mapping), Jacques Derrida (*Spectres of Marx*), John S. Saul (Africa within capitalism), Noam Chomsky (ideology and the mass media), Giovanni Arrighi (world systems theory) and Etienne Balibar (Marx's theory of the subject as practice).

The fact that the books studied in this chapter are travellers' tales from the continent of Africa makes it all the more pertinent to utilise a conceptual framework appreciative of the significance of the political economy. John S. Saul notes in his introduction to *Millennial Africa: Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (2001) that 'the destiny of Africa under

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[369] Bartolovich in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, p. 5.

actually existing global capitalism is stark'[370] and the 'fundamental truth from which any honest analysis must begin [is that] Africa south of the Sahara exists in a capitalist world, which marks and constrains the lives of its inhabitants at every turn, but is not of it'.[371] Accepting this basic truth, it is striking to note that the African American traveller shares little of this sub-Saharan experience. Departing from the heart of the world economic superpower, the contemporary African American journeying to Africa emerges from a world of multicultural capitalist progress – civil rights have been won, black men and women are increasingly taking up powerful political positions and a propertied black middle class has emerged with the material means with which to travel the world. It is from this privileged site of apparent socio-economic growth ('apparent' because the income gap in the United States is in fact growing[372] and progress has predictably given way to another economic crisis)[373] that s/he will then leave to visit those dispossessed and disenfranchised peoples on the margins of the global economy and of modernity, often propertyless and unable to enjoy the pleasures of foreign travel, denied the relative luxury of the Western tourist. Chance everyday encounters between the travelling American and the local African are thus underpinned by this relationship, as I will now briefly demonstrate with regard to Eddy L. Harris' *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa*.

'You Americans, You Have Everything': Harris and the Distant Mirror.

Taken from Harris' *Native Stranger*, the following fleeting scene of misrecognition between Harris and a 'weathered' local man is bluntly emblematic of the importance of the economic in cross-cultural encounters between Africans and African Americans:

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[370] John S. Saul, *Millennial Africa: Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2001), p. 30.
[371] Saul, *Millennial Africa*, p. 17.
[372] In 1947 the top fifth of American wage-earners made 43 per cent of the money earned in the US. In 2008 that same quintile gets 50.5 per cent. During the same period, the bottom fifth has seen a decline from an already-impalpable 5 per cent to just 3.4 per cent. See Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity', 33.
[373] As Terry Eagleton wrote in 2000, it is not very likely that a system as 'perilously unstable' as capitalism will escape without major periodic crises. See Terry Eagleton, 'Defending Utopia', *New Left Review* 4 (July-Aug 2000), 173-6.

> I wished I had something to give him, but I was travelling light. I hadn't packed anything inessential.
> "I'm Sorry," I said. "I can't help you."
> "I'm sorry too," he said. "You Americans, you have everything." His eyes filled with wonder and then squinted with dissatisfaction. I could not tell where the dissatisfaction lay, with me or with himself and *the two places we represented.*
> "You have everything," he said, "but you share nothing."
> "Perhaps that is why we have so much," I said. I was half joking when I said it, but only just. (65, my emphasis)

The sardonic nature of Harris' humour here seems appropriate given the marginalising and contradictory demands of what Parry calls an 'expansionist capitalism that installed and perpetuated an international division of labour and a grossly inequitable distribution of economic resources, political power and social agency'[374] upon the global South (the 'night side' or 'underbelly' of modernity, says Cornel West).[375] The truth behind this half-joke is further developed later on when Harris, growing angry at the poverty, the begging and his image as 'a can opener' (he admits that 'I was tired of being seen as some saviour' by poor locals) confesses that 'in many ways the world I come from has created this world' (177). He also later acknowledges that the colonial powers 'never really went away' after decolonisation; 'they only moved aside and never left Africa alone, never allowed Africa to be what it was, what it could have been, what it ought to be' (212-3). Furthermore, when in the Ivory Coast, he concludes that 'colonialism has changed its name, but not its stripes. The Ivory Coast remains in the control of the French' (223). Crucially, the country is also evidently at the mercy of the market: Harris writes that 'the Ivory Coast miracle is over. World market prices for coffee and cocoa have fallen. Unemployment is rampant. The government talks of austerity measures' (231).

It is this understanding of the situation of post-independence African states in relation to the self-interest of Western powers (past and present), the fluctuations of the international marketplace and the 'austerity' demands of global financial institutions such as the

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[374] Parry, 'The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities' in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p. 15.
[375] West, *African American Philosophers*, p. 39.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) that distinguishes Harris' travelogue from Richburg's *Out of America*, a text which, as I discuss later, articulates a more orthodox geo-political cognitive map. It is also important to note that although Harris does describe Africa in a clichéd sense as 'another world' (285), he does also make some brief but passing equivalences between ghettoised or jobless regions in the United States and comparable African sites of deprivation. When in Sowetto, the infamous South African slum, he says that 'I've seen worse neighbourhoods in Chicago' (311), and while in Guinea-Bissau, as he observes the many jobless young men, 'fit and robust' but 'just standing around', he says that 'it could have been a street corner in Detroit' (185), which is of course an emblematic American site of post-industrial capitalist breakdown.[376] Such piteous similarities between First and Third Worlds suggest a shared existence in a single world-system of production that is capable of leaving American and African alike unemployed and mired in poverty. We may also here read poignant echoes of Richard Wright's travelogue *Black Power: Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), in which Wright, travelling at the dawn of decolonisation, prophetically warns that:

> The pathos of Africa would be doubled if, out of her dark past, her people were plunged into a dark future, *a future that smacked of Chicago or Detroit*.[377]

It is a grim coincidence that Harris detects resemblances of those very same cities as he journeys across that obscure future African landscape.

However, for Harris, despite the potential for interchange based upon such shared experiences of dispossession and joblessness, 'the rumour that all Americans are rich' (205) was frustratingly endemic and often an impediment to authentic dialogue and cultural or political exchange. But this is not to say that Harris was not equally prone to the stereotype of the suppliant African, as he admits by including in *Native Stranger* his encounter with a local

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[376] See Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Damiani Editore, 2010)

[377] Richard Wright, Black Power Wright, *Black Power: Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), repr. in *Black Power: Three Books From Exile* (New York: Harper, 2008), p. 275.

man called Gabeu in Abidjan. Gabeu, recalls Harris, embodied for a moment 'all that was right about Africa, the warmth, the generosity, the laughter' (230), but this was surely another con-trick, an attempt to 'seduce me with his hospitality' (226) in order to acquire sponsorship for a visa from the affluent African American tourist or 'brother'. Such a request was in fact never forthcoming (224-31). If the distorted rumour of universal American affluence was pervasive, so was the equally misleading rumour of the insincere supplicant African.

Gabeu did however disclose his ardent desire to leave Africa and settle in France, even asking Harris to call him 'Denis' because 'it sounded more French' (224). During his African sojourn, via such chance everyday encounters with locals such as Gabeu/Denis, the nameless weathered beggar and Keita (see below), Harris begins to comprehend the United States and the rest of the Western world as viewed from the 'distant mirror'[378] of the African underbelly of modernity. He and 'the place he represents' is at once wondrous and wicked, a 'developed' and mythical horizon of luxury and security that remains inaccessible to the great majority of African people. Critically, Harris also begins to understand himself when reflected in this mirror as not merely a wealthy American tourist but also as a representative of *inequity*, as 'you American' who 'has everything' but 'shares nothing' and bears a certain responsibility for the plight of the disenfranchised local African. A particularly cutting moment occurs as Harris listens to Keita, a resident of Mali, on the topic of foreign 'aid' as veiled neocolonialism:

> 'What [the Europeans] left us with,' he [Keita] said, 'perpetuates our poverty also. What they have done and continue to do, and the Americans too, makes beggars of us all and does nothing to ease our poverty.'
> Aid money and grain, he said, gets dumped like loads of sand.
> 'Your government doesn't really care where it goes,' he said, 'and doesn't watch where it ends up. You send us aid not to help us develop, but to appease your conscience, and the aid gets corrupted. The money finds its way into Swiss banks. Everyone knows it. And you send us aid workers, but they only keep us reliant. … And always we are forced to look up to white men who seem to know more about everything than we do. It is another form of imperialism.'

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[378] A term used by F. E. De Lancey following her meeting with Aboriginal Australians in *BMa, The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review (Black Travel Writing)* 9, 1 (Fall 2003), 296.

And when he said 'they,' he meant me too. (213, emphasis added)

Within this frame of reference, Harris' ethnic identity gives way to his status as a citizen of the United States of America. He is they. They are rebranded imperialists. For a traveller of African descent who is in Africa, he says, 'searching to discover who I am' (35), this wounding scene thus solidifies Harris' own othering as a strange and scorned representative of the moneyed neocolonial powers.

The accumulation of such encounters finally prompts Harris to confess that he cannot bridge the cultural-economic gap (hence his self-delineation as 'Blackamerican' rather than 'African American' in the book's subtitle):

> I am sitting alone, surrounded by dark strangers who call me brother, but I don't feel a part of them *anymore*. I am isolated, not really one of them. ... We share little more than the colour of our skin and the fact of our humanness. The world where I belong is another world far from this one. (285, emphasis added)

Far from being an idyllic pilgrimage 'home' to the heart of the diaspora, travel to Africa for Harris has left 'scars that will mark my soul and my memory for as long as memory lasts' (285). He has gotten 'too close' to Africa and observed 'the disillusioning reality' (288) that 'I have more in common, it sometimes seems, with the Dutch Afrikaner, the Boer' (311) than the 'dark strangers' who call him brother. 'I could never live in Africa' (299), he admits, because 'Africa is not home. I hardly know this place at all' (311). This terrible enlightenment severs Harris from his pre-travel imagining of Africa as 'a place of wonder, a place of return, rumoured since childhood and seen as a place filled with promises of black dignity and rich with a sense of belonging' (106). Describing his journey as 'interesting,' 'agonising' and 'not fun' (313), Harris' empirical observation has demystified the continent of wonder, return, and belonging. He has travelled to discover that 'up close, the mystery dissolves' (289).

However, *Native Stranger* does hint at a possible next step beyond the Black Atlantic, after the spell of Mother Africa has been broken. Harris speaks of 'the fact of our humanness'

in the above passage and, as noted above, laments the fact that 'colonialism continues' (294) in the form of self-interested foreign interference that disrupts African sovereignty (he also cites the Western-sponsored suppression of a coup attempt against the dictator Mobutu Sesse Seko, who at the time Harris was travelling was still in power in Zaire and building his thirteenth palace, as an example of such selfish meddling (293-4). This is just one instance of what Adebajo terms 'a cantankerous warlords gallery' supported by the United States).[379] In the end, despite the aforementioned expressions of detachment, the concluding sentiment of *Native Stranger* conveys a new-found humanism that ties the future of actually existing Africa to his own as a 'Blackamerican':

> Although I am not one of them, I really am one of them, the Arab and the Berber, the Bassar and the Bantu and the Boer. There is a connection *now*, *a real one* – a racial one, to be sure, but *more important, a human one*. ... There is always hope. ... Africa's work remains. And ours too. (314-5, emphasis added)

Harris' ambivalence in *Native Stranger* is certainly discernible, but as a concluding sentiment this evidences his desire for a renewed dialogue with the continent that is beyond Afrocentrism, which for him is no longer viable. His determined internationalist posture suggests that the post-Afrocentric African American (or Blackamerican) does not necessarily have to be a purely Americentric individualist; there is a further option, based on the shared obligation to 'work' for a better future, although the details of this proposed labour remain frustratingly tacit. As we will see, in *Lose Your Mother* Saidiya Hartman sharpens this anti-colonial transnationalism by imbuing her travelogue with subtle anti-capitalist critique, filling the space left by the demystified Mother with a fresh connection based upon a shared heritage, or useable past, of struggle against slavery, in all its forms. Keith Richburg, however, perceives a wholly different diasporic relationship in *Out of America*. Reflecting upon his own traumatic African travelling experience, Richburg comprehends no such connection with the continent of his ancestors:

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[379] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 100.

> Talk to me about Africa and my black roots and my kinship with my African brothers and I'll throw it back in your face, and then I'll rub your nose in the images of the rotting flesh. (xvi)

> Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now, I am not one of them. (xviii)

Upon encountering such a belligerent declaration of distance, Adebajo denigrates *Out of America* as 'disturbing', 'simplistic' and 'simply awful, in substance and style'.[380] It is to this provocative travelogue that I will now turn.

What Lies Beyond the Colour Line? Rejecting the 'Black Box'.

In a notably sympathetic review of *Out of America*, Tunde Adeleke analyses the book from 'within the context of the colour line construct'[381] as most famously and prophetically defined by early pan-Africanist pioneer W.E.B Du Bois in 1903.[382] Viewing the line as 'a confining and restraining paradigm' that 'mandates racial harmony' within the African diaspora to the point of 'censorship,'[383] Adeleke commends Richburg for refusing to follow the example of certain African American leaders who 'subscribe to the colour line dictum and would not condemn and publicly criticise African leaders, however despotic and repugnant their personalities and policies.'[384] In Adeleke's view, by 'de-emphasising' Africa and instead asserting a 'slavocentric' and 'Americentric' selfhood that firmly anchors black American subjectivity to the New World experience, Richburg frees himself from the enduring constricts of Afrocentrism and is thus able to meet the intellectual demand for 'honest and open self-criticism [that] runs counter to the colour line injunction.'[385]

As a resolutely individualist North American subject who admits that 'I myself was not any more into the African mind than were my expat friends or colleagues' (37), Richburg

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[380] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 99.
[381] Tunde Adeleke, 'The Colour Line as a Confining and Restraining Paradigm: Keith Richburg and his Critiques Analysed', *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23, 2 (1999), 97-110; quotation at 99.
[382] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., (London: Norton, 1997), pp. 613-740.
[383] Adeleke, 99.
[384] Adeleke, 104.
[385] Adeleke, 104.

is thus able to think outside of what he terms the 'moral and intellectual black box' (141) that black Americans often enter into upon travel to Africa. Writing as a visiting citizen of the New World rather than a returning lost child of the Old Mother – a culturally remote American with no special insight into the 'African mind' – Richburg is thus able to condemn the likes of Ibrahim Babangida (138-41) and Valentine Strasser (136-8) in the same way as his white colleagues at the *Washington Post*, without feeling a sense of racial betrayal. Furthermore, his rejection of the overtures (or, in Adeleke's terms, diktats) of essentialist 'colour line' Afrocentrism permits Richburg to denounce influential black leaders in the United States. Noting 'the complete ignorance about Africa among America's so-called black elite', he saves particular scorn for the 'farcical' and 'neauseating' spectacle of Jesse Jackson's 'fulsome tribute' to Babangida (138) as a stark example of the shortcomings of crude, unquestioning, essentialist solidarity. Here Richburg is also in accord with one of his harshest critics, Adekeye Adebajo, who likewise scorns 'the ignorance and insensitivity of some members of the African American leadership in embracing African autocrats who brutalise Africans', noting in particular the 'spectacularly ineffectual' efforts of the African American lobby with regard to Nigeria.[386] Rallying against the 'black box' elite, then, Richburg is keen to remind his readers that repression does not only come in white (141) and that the need for racial unity need not prohibit proper critique.

If one approaches African American travel writing from within the critical framework of black identity studies, as Adeleke does, then one may fairly claim that Richburg's forthright Americentric turn coalesces in a progressive fashion with the narrative identity formation of a number of other travel writers, not least the three studied in this chapter. Like Richburg, both Saidiya Hartman and Eddy L. Harris travel to and subsequently de-emphasise or de-centre Africa in their writing as they construct a turn-of-the-century Americentric

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[386] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 97-8.

subjectivity at odds with the Old Mother Pan-Africanist sentiments, which were most prominent when the romance of return to a mythologized elsewhere, remembered but unknown, interweaved with the reality of brutal racist oppression and segregation in the actually existing United States and across the still largely colonised world (the foundation of Liberia by the American Colonization Society evidenced the tangible reality of this old Pan-Africanist sentiment). Faced with such a shared situation, transnational racial unity on the part of the oppressed global black community, particularly between black people in America and Africa, thus appeared mandatory, as Adeleke observes.[387] The 'cultural shield' of an idealised Africa, defined earlier by Adebajo, was also germane. For Richburg, Harris and Hartman, however, the situation has changed considerably, not least in the United States, where a black middle class was burgeoning, a black political class was emerging and, unbeknownst to them, a black President was to be elected. The New World has shaped these travellers far more than the Old. There are also further examples beyond the trio considered here. Traveller and poet Colleen McElroy, for example, is conscious that 'I am a Western woman' and in her travel narration often, says Tim Youngs, 'undercuts expectations (including her own) that she will have an automatic affinity with and innate knowledge of other black people'.[388] Randall Kenan, although never setting foot in Africa, provides another example as he asserts his own measured nationalistic sensibility during his journey across North America in *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (1999). Kenan affirms a material 'blood and sweat' connection to the 'soil' of the United States that is more tangible and observable (literally in the laborious construction of national monuments such as the White House, the railways and much of the infrastructure of

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[387] Adeleke, 94.

[388] Tim Youngs, 'A Daughter Come Home? The Travel Writings of Colleen J. McElroy', *New Literatures Review* 42 (2004), 57-74. McElroy's works include *A Long Way From St Louie* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999) and *Travelling Music* (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1998).

the country) than the concurrent ethereal 'mystical, mythical connection to Mother Africa'.[389]

As relatively privileged US citizens, tourists and professionals, many contemporary African American travellers possess the material means to transgress the ubiquitous colour line that has often preoccupied and, says Adeleke, prohibited those who feel compelled to faithfully 'toe the line' and preserve the 'veneer' of racial homogeneity that Afrocentrism demands by painting a misleading and excessively positive image of the continent.[390] Richburg, especially comfortable with his status as a Westerner and markedly hostile to Africa in his travel book, willingly discards the once useful but now apparently outdated trope of the maternal homeland as he anticipates a brighter future in the United States.

   Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa is certainly consciously demonstrative of the falsity of renditions of universal racial homogeneity and accord within the African diaspora, but this is nothing new and in itself does not explain the vehement criticism of the book since its publication in 1997. Adeleke even claims that Richburg's rejection of Mother Africa and concurrent slavocentric embrace of the United States as the authentic homeland can be traced back through black diaspora history as far back as to the African American nationalists of the nineteenth century.[391] One can certainly find equivalences in the mid-twentieth century with James Baldwin, for example, who said in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) that 'the value placed on the colour of the skin is always and everywhere and for ever a delusion'[392] and asserted that 'the Negro has been formed by this nation [the United States], for better or worse, and does not belong to any other – not to Africa'[393]. Richburg himself is well aware that his Americentric subjective self-fashioning has been well rehearsed, and wonders then why his travelogue has been so singularly ill-received, concluding in the later afterward to the paperback edition of *Out of America* that it must be a problem of tone rather

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[389] Randall Kenan, *Walking on Water* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p 4, 639.
[390] Adeleke, 98.
[391] Adeleke, 107.
[392] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), p.111.
[393] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 90.

than content, that he has been 'too emotional, too harsh in my critiques' (251). Adeleke agrees, bemoaning Richburg's tendency to yield to emotion and regretting that 'the hatred and anger felt seem to have induced a state of *historical* amnesia'[394] (Adeleke even proposes that 'the tone and language of [Richburg's] analysis suggest someone on the brink of mental degeneration').[395] Ultimately, however, Adeleke puts this to one side and affirms the truth-value of *Out of America*:

> *Everything he said is true*. To some readers, his contentions sound exaggerated. But they are not. As an African who has lived through the conditions he describes, I can vouch for the authenticity of much of his observations ... [but] the tone of anger and emotionalism tends to erode the strength and conviction of his *ideas*.[396]

No one can doubt that Richburg is recalling events that actually happened and places that actually existed, and still exist, in all their squalor and horror, but I argue that it is in the realm of *ideas* – beyond identity politics and towards the political economy – that Richburg's 'truth' becomes more contested. By asserting that 'everything he said is true', the suggestion Adeleke appears to be making is that if only Richburg had not made 'erroneous and silly statements that made him seem racist'[397] then the projected 'reality' of his travel narrative – not simply his eyewitness recollection of traumatic events that surely happened but also his cognitive mapping of the contemporary geopolitical relationship between Africa and the West – would be fully appreciated. This, I argue, is where we reach the limit of Adeleke's conceptual framework, stated earlier as being 'within the context of the colour line framework' or, more broadly speaking, within black identity studies. For me, this is where the Marxist tradition of critique of the political economy of a text can interject in a productive fashion to shed further light on a hitherto only partially evaluated travel book.

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[394] Adeleke, 101-2 (emphasis added).
[395] Adeleke, 106.
[396] Adeleke, 102.
[397] Adeleke, 109.

Are we to accept the validity of Richburg's portrayal of the IMF, his sweeping comparative analysis of East Asian and African economic development, or his partial rendering of the Detroit riot of 1967, simply because of his candid and forthright expressions of racial and national subjectivity? This would, I claim, be a mistake. Adeleke rightly declares that it is 'the responsibility of an informed and intelligent reader to separate the anger and emotionalism from the historical substance'[398] and with this in mind I will resist the temptation to denigrate what may be erroneously interpreted as Richburg's 'racism' and now analyse the 'historical substance' of *Out of America*, asking to what end his travelogue is mobilised, if any. Firstly, to shed further light on this critical intent, I will compare Richburg's text with renowned African American author Richard Wright's similarly controversial mid-century African travelogue *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954).[399]

From *Black Power* to *Out of America*: Pathos to Distance

In *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilisations* (2010), Tzvetan Todorov makes the salient point that:

> These days, in Western countries, collective identity no longer enjoys a good press. It is viewed with suspicion: the suspicion that it is a sort of conspiracy against individual freedom. ... People prefer to lay the emphasis on the capacity that each person has of opposing all definition-from-outside, all physical or cultural heredity.[400]

Richburg's expression of his undeniable right to individually define his selfhood, made in explicit, even aggressive, opposition to collectively understood notions of racial or cultural inheritance, is a clear example of this general trend (with of course particular inflections

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[398] Adeleke, 102.

[399] Wright's travel literature has been collected into a single volume entitled *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008). For a collection of essays responding to Richard Wright's travel writings, see Virginia Whatley Smith (ed.), *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*, (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2001).

[400] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilisations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 52.

unique to the African American context). Moreover, the immediate situation in which Richburg finds himself – reporting on violence amongst Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda – will only further supplement his distaste for ethnic identities, providing catastrophic contemporary evidence of the potential destructiveness of such apparently uncompromising conceptions of Selfhood.

Decades earlier, however, Richard Wright expressed a comparable scepticism of the romantic skinship of Afrocentrism in his travel literature, particularly *Black Power*, the account of his voyage to Ghana (then the Gold Coast) on the eve of independence. In a particularly representative passage, says S. Shankar,[401] Wright confesses that 'I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me'[402] (Wright also admits that 'I knew that I'd never feel an identification with Africans on a 'racial basis'').[403] This confession of incomprehension and frank disclosure of the futility of race alone as an interpretative tool is one that Richburg would no doubt identify with. Some equivalences may indeed be drawn between *Black Power* and *Out of America*: both books have been controversial and heavily criticised, both books reveal as much, if not more, about the travellers themselves as they do about the places visited, both travellers are prone to stereotypes and clichés in their narrative portrayal of local people, and both travellers profoundly and candidly reject the romance of diasporic racial rhetoric. However, there is one key difference. Wright did indeed feel a 'pathos of distance' between himself and the African people, often expressing his bewilderment at local traditions and customs, but this is tempered by his fervent embrace of national liberation and African political and economic sovereignty, in direct and explicit opposition to the edicts of Western (and Eastern) superpowers.

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[401] S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative' in *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, pp. 3-19; quotation at p. 11.
[402] Wright, *Black Power* (1954), in S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power', p. 11.
[403] Wright, *Black Power* (1954), in S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power', p. 10.

In assessing 'the full ambivalent complexity' of *Black Power*, S. Shankar concludes that Wright 'simultaneously assimilates Africa into a colonial discourse of alterity and liberates it from such a discourse by enthusiastically applauding the cause of national liberation'.[404] Wright is culturally baffled by Africa (Cornel West notes that Wright was prone in his travel literature to alarming 'moments of Western condescension and modern revulsion at African bodies and religion'),[405] but he does remain determined to politically engage with the Ghanaian and wider African independence movement. West observes that 'despite his [Wright's] claim and preference for rootlessness and aloneness, he never disavows *his own experience* of Black oppression and resistance'[406] that underpins his justifiable suspicion of (white) Western motives in Africa and later fortifies his broader humanist plea in *White Man, Listen!* (1957).[407] Richburg, on the other hand, as an African American born in the late 1950s whose childhood was 'not what you might call a particularly 'black' childhood – just a childhood, an average American childhood' in a racially mixed area (10), does not experience quite the same extremity of racial subjugation in the United States (Wright's Mississippi childhood was, in contrast, marked by poverty and Jim Crow). Any sense that collectively remembered experiences of black suffering and struggle should tie Richburg's own present position with that of actually existing Africa is aggressively dismissed by this resolute American individualist, who betrays here that characteristically Western 'suspicion of physical or cultural heredity' identified earlier by Todorov:

> I'm leaving Africa now, so I don't care anymore … . I feel no attachment to the place or the people.
> And why should I feel anything more? Because my skin is black? Because some ancestor of mine, four centuries ago, was wrenched from this place and sent to America, and because I now look like those others whose ancestors were left behind? (247)

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[404] S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power', p. 19.
[405] Cornel West, Introduction to *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, p. x.
[406] Cornel West, Introduction to *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, p. ix, xii (emphasis added).
[407] *White Man, Listen!* [1957], in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*.

The 'odd kind of at-homeness' and 'solidarity that stemmed *not* from ties of blood or race …
but from the quality of deep hope and suffering … from *the hard facts* of oppression'[408] that
Wright claims to have felt in Ghana is completely absent from *Out of America* because for
Richburg such 'hard facts' no longer ring true. Accordingly, 'the strange soil of the Western
world'[409] identified by Wright is now not so strange for Richburg, who instead willingly and
enthusiastically 'wraps himself around the stars and stripes', says Adebajo,[410] in a patriotic
display of distance from the continent of his long-forgotten ancestors. 'The pathos of
Africa'[411] felt in *Black Power* has by the end of *Out of America* disintegrated. All that
remains is distance.

For the *Washington Post* Africa bureau chief in the last decade of the twentieth century,
the world is therefore a very different place. Whereas Wright journeyed to Africa amidst a
climate of social protest at home and anti-colonial revolution abroad, Richburg travels to the
continent following a period of resurgent American Republicanism in the 1980s, a decade in
which 'a cohort of black conservatives emerged.'[412] In Wright's era of segregation and
protest, black American writers 'were certain of one fundamental thing: America was not
always ready to make good on its democratic claims.'[413] However, by the time Richburg set
foot in Kenya in 1991, world-historical conditions had changed. The initial wave of African
optimism that followed decolonisation had faded considerably, with 'independence'
generating widespread corruption, malnutrition and violence, while back home in the United
States, the Western model of multicultural democracy appeared to be making considerable
progress. Richburg proudly reminds his readers that whilst Africa suffers from the 'corrosive,
debilitating' effects of 'tribalism', 'a black American can be elected mayor of Denver, a city

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[408] Wright, *Black Power: Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* [1954], in *Black Power: Three Books From
Exile* (New York: Harper, 2008), p.409-10. Hereafter in this chapter BP (emphasis always in original).
[409] BP, p. 288.
[410] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 99.
[411] BP, p. 275.
[412] James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York:
Penguin, 2006), p.369. Hereafter in this chapter MP.
[413] *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 1327

with a minimal black population' (241-2), and this during the long Republican reign of Reagan and Bush. His faith in the fruition of the United States' system of governance is in sharp contrast to Wright's prophetic suspicion of 'words about democracy' and 'development'[414] in the middle of the century. Wright elucidates his misgivings about the value of the Western state model in his letter to Ghanaian independence leader Kwame Nkrumah, which concludes *Black Power*:

> I cannot, as a man of African descent brought up in the West, recommend with good faith the doctrines and promises of the hard-faced men of the West. Kwame, until they have set their own houses in order with their own restless populations, until they have solved their racial and economic problems, they can never − no matter *what* they may say to you at any *given* moment! – deal honestly with you.[415]

He then calls on Nkrumah to follow 'an *African* path'[416] beyond the First and Second Worlds: 'find your own paths, your own values. … Above all, feel free to *improvise!* The political cat can be skinned in many fashions'.[417] Yet in the same book Wright is also well aware that 'Western time today is being judged by another time: *Communist* time!'[418] He consequently utilises the superpower rivalry of his age by challenging the West to 'nobly save' rather than 'meanly lose' Africa, asserting that 'THE WEST IS BEING JUDGED BY THE EVENTS THAT TRANSPIRE IN AFRICA!'[419]

In the immediate post-Cold War ferment of *Out of America* the sentiment is quite the reverse. For Richburg, the American house *is* in order and the old racial and economic problems are on their way to being solved:

> If there's a precedent for a federal system that works, it's America. America also has its "tribes" … . It's tribal politics – but the American version is not typically associated with violence. It's also changing. A black American can be elected mayor of Denver … . Maybe there's a chance that the old dream of a multiracial,

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[414] 'Make no mistake, Kwame, they are going to come at you with words about democracy; you are going to be pinned to the wall and warned about decency; plump-faced men will mumble academic phrases about 'sound' development', BP, p. 414.
[415] BP, p. 413.
[416] BP, p. 418.
[417] BP, p. 414.
[418] BP, p. 416.
[419] BP, pp. 13-4.

colour-blind society is slowly being realised. It had better be, because I've been
here and seen the alternative. (242)

The choice manufactured here is stark. It is a case of embracing the American system or
stagnating in the perpetual 'darkness' (238) of Africa, 'a strange and forbidding place' (237)
where 'things stay the same until they fall apart' (244). There is no espousal of an
experimental, Third Worldist system 'beyond left and right' as envisaged by Wright decades
earlier. Less ambivalent about the merits of Western political models, less chary of the
interventionist motives of Western-controlled mechanisms of politico-economic power and
less supportive of sovereign African political improvisation than Wright, Richburg travels
across the Atlantic sure of the superiority of liberal American-style capitalism and thus
confident in the mutually-beneficial objectives of the IMF, World Bank, United States and
European Union. No longer bound to the ticking of a Communist clock, historical time itself
now appeared to have stopped, as famously declared by Francis Fukuyama:

> What we may be witnessing is not the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a
> particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the
> endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and *the universalisation of Western
> liberal democracy as the final form of human government*.[420]

Here we may recall Marx's renowned supposition in *The German Ideology* that 'the ideas of
the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas'.[421] Also pertinent is Etienne Balibar's
remark (paraphrasing Althusser and no doubt with Fukuyama in mind) that 'just as there is no
end of history, so there cannot be any end of ideology'.[422] In Fukuyama's grossly premature
and erroneous statement above we of course do not read the end of history, but only heavy
ideology, and the same could be said of Richburg's travelogue. Richburg presents Africa as
being 'caught up in the global sweep towards democratisation and reform,' a necessary
worldwide evolution policed by Western states and international lending institutions that are
'finally getting tough' with corrupt African governments (24-5). Far from being judged *by* the

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[420] Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' (emphasis added).
[421] Marx, in Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 45.
[422] Balibar, p. 31.

events in Africa, as Wright's earlier exclamation affirmed, the victorious, triumphalist Western powers have hence become the sole, chief adjudicators required to (fiscally) discipline the corrupt Africans (corruption is presented as endemic within African culture, as I will discuss later). Unlike Wright, who despite his discursive oscillation[423] as a travel writer remained as an activist deeply committed to African political and economic autonomy, Richburg therefore situates himself firmly on the side of the Western powers.

Richburg himself exists as evidence of the diversifying socio-economic circumstances and political affiliations of African Americans in the latter period of the twentieth century. He has little in common with Cross Damon, the disillusioned central character of Wright's existentialist novel *The Outsider* (1953), which for S. Shankar prefigures the author's later exilic, rootless subjectivity in his travel writing.[424] Far from being an itinerant 'outsider' of history, born on a plantation and son of an illiterate sharecropper, Richburg is, as James T. Campbell notes, 'a product of the African American middle class in the post-civil rights era'.[425] He does express feelings akin to what Du Bois notably termed 'double consciousness'[426] – recalling, for example, that 'I've often felt trapped between two worlds' (16) as a member of the burgeoning privately educated black bourgeoisie and working for a white-owned newspaper – but ultimately his race consciousness is markedly distinct from that of the earlier pan-Africanist and *négritude* writers. He would no doubt agree with Du Bois' assertion in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that 'the American Negro … would not Africanise America, for America has much to teach the world and Africa' but he would at the same time dismiss the very next sentence asserting 'the message of Negro blood'[427] as, if applied almost a century later, romantic racial parochialism. This candid rejection of

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[423] S. Shankar notes 'the play between the twin discursive economies of the colonial and anti-colonial travel narrative' in *Black Power*. See S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power', p. 18.
[424] S. Shankar, 'Richard Wright's Black Power', pp. 6-7.
[425] MP, p. 372.
[426] 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness … one ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls', W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Norton*, p. 615.
[427] *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 615.

'Mother' Africa is shared by Wright, who employed a frank rhetoric of distance in *Black Power* that for Cornel West 'blind[s] him to the rich complexity of Ghanaian culture and society'.[428] However, whereas Wright sought a resolution to this cultural chasm in his enthusiasm for a joint political project opposed to white-supremacist capitalism, Richburg assumes the Atlantic abyss to be insurmountable.

If *Black Power* ends with an attempt to engage the author's own struggle as an American with the struggle of the Ghanaian people ('your fight has been fought before,' says Wright, before citing Walt Whitman's poetic praise of the slave revolt),[429] then *Out of America* could not be more different in its concluding statement of profound indifference:

> I don't care anymore about the turmoil in Rwanda and have no interest in this latest tragic development. … The outside world can do nothing, until Africa is ready to save itself. … None of it affects me … . I have been here, and I have seen – and frankly, I want no part of it. … I am a black man born in America. (247-8)

Campbell notes that this 'determinedly indifferent' relationship to Africa and its people (and, I would add, to the idea of racial affinity in general) was prefigured in the earlier, more autobiographical pages of Richburg's travel account.[430] In the opening chapter 'On Native Ground' (3-22) Richburg recalls 'a typical American boyhood' that was 'racially mixed' and apparently tranquil – Mr O'Neill would sit out on his porch and wave, Fred ran the local store 'and the church was packed for all three masses full every Sunday' (10-1). However, the 1967 Detroit riot would abruptly interrupt this harmonious scene:

> That was it, mostly a typical American boyhood.
> Than the riot happened.
> I didn't really know what a riot was – I was only nine years old in 1967. I remember my father taking me up the road … . The whole block was on fire.
> "I want you to see this," my father said. "I want you to see what black people are doing to their own neighbourhood." (12)

This portrayal of the riot as a sudden, inexplicable interruption into a hitherto cordial urban scene deeply troubles Campbell, who offers his own correction to Richburg's

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[428] Cornel West, Introduction to *Black Power: Three Books From Exile* (2008), p. x.
[429] BP, p. 420.
[430] MP, pp. 374.

decontextualised rendering of the event, referring to the historical facts of segregation,

poverty and rapid deindustrialisation as contributing factors to the unrest:

> *Presented without explanation or historical context*, the 1967 riot appears as unaccountable as a thunderclap, a senseless act of self-destruction that gutted a functioning, comfortably integrated city. In fact, Detroit was one of the most segregated cities in America, with a long history of racial conflict. … The decades of Richburg's childhood also saw an accelerating process of deindustrialisation. … Inevitably, the layoffs bore hardest on African Americans. … The deepening poverty of black neighbourhoods, in turn, exacerbated tensions … . The riot, and the baleful consequences that followed, flowed from something more than black people's own violent irresponsibility.[431]

To acknowledge that the Detroit riot was in no small part the product of a crisis of capitalism

– a systemic crisis of falling profit due to intensifying capitalist competition, supposedly to be

remedied by socially destructive neoliberal financialization and deindustrialisation[432] – would

be anathema to Richburg, especially as he is writing at a time when 'the matter [of

capitalism's historical viability] was supposedly resolved'[433] and a US-led New World Order

was on the march. Yet it is undeniable that 'the movement of industry out of the big cities

devastated the living conditions for the black minority' and that from 1967 until 1987 Detroit

lost more than 50% of its industrial jobs,[434] which would naturally lead to civil unrest

whatever the colour of the civilian's skin (The ruinous and lasting effects of post-industrial

breakdown in Detroit have been strikingly documented in Andrew Moore's recent book of

photography *Detroit Disassembled*).[435] However, rather than present the riots as a predictable

and comprehensible effect of a systemic crisis within the global financial system, exacerbated

of course by very real racist segregation and endemic poverty, Richburg completely erases

the fundamental role of the political economy and instead presents a highly reductionist

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[431] MP, p. 374 (emphasis added).

[432] See David Harvey, ''The Winding Paths of Capital': Interview with Giovanni Arrighi', *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009) 61-94 and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[433] Gopal Balakrishnan, 'Speculations on the Stationary State', *New Left Review* 59 (Sep-Oct 2009) 5-26; quotation at 8.

[434] Goran M., 'Public Enemy: Power to the People and the Beats' (Sep 2003) http://www.marxist.com/ArtAndLiterature-old/public_enemy_art.html (last accessed 04/07/10)

[435] Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Damaini Editore, 2010)

portrayal of inexcusable and inexplicable black mob violence that disrupts a previously harmonious scene. What follows in his portrayal of Africa and Africans thus comes as no surprise.

In the course of *Out of America* a correspondingly decontextualised portrayal of black self-destruction is re-presented on African soil. Offered without adequate explanation or historical background, Africans are presented as 'destroying their own neighbourhood' in a similarly inexplicable and irresponsible way as his Detroit rioters. Richburg, like his father teaching a harsh lesson, wants us to walk and see with him as he travels across sub-Saharan Africa: 'come with me', he says, 'it won't be pretty, but that's my point. I want you to feel it like I did. Touch it, smell it' (*xvi*). It is a gripping invocation, but also a precarious one. We do indeed 'see' the horrors of Africa with Richburg, who graphically narrates the numerous scenes of bloodshed witnessed during his stay on the continent, but what is missing is the cognitive mapping behind this horrific image.

'It's an ugly Truth': Richburg's Cognitive Mapping

Fredric Jameson defines the cognitive map as 'that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms'.[436] This imaginative aesthetic process is necessary to properly historicise the present in the *longue durée* and to (re)situate the individual subject within a greater (global, social, human) whole. For Jameson, the incapacity to do either of these things – to 'map socially' – is 'crippling to political experience'. Without a 'philosophical conception of totality' Jameson argues that we are left with a dehistoricised 'rubble of autonomous instances' detrimental to the very concept of anything like history. This pedagogical concept of 'mapping' may be fruitfully applied to *Out of America*, a text which, I argue, fails to adequately situate the eye-witnessed events recalled

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[436] See Frederic Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping' (1990)
http://www.rainer-rilling.de/gs-villa07-Dateien/JamesonF86a_CognitiveMapping.pdf
(last accessed 12/08/2010)

in the travelogue within the wider realms of history or the political economy. The consequences of this botched cognitive mapping are, as Jameson warns, politically crippling.

As we have already seen, Richburg's failure to adequately map the Detroit riot of 1967 empties the event of its historical content (segregation, poverty, deindustrialisation, redundancies, economic crisis) and reduces it to an unaccountable, senseless thunderclap – or, in Jameson's terms, an 'autonomous instance' outside of history – that renders the rioters themselves entirely culpable. Following this, a similarly defunct cognitive mapping of Africa is charted that likewise empties events of their historical, systemic context and thus renders the African people as defective, self-destructive masters of their own tragic autonomy. Kathy Hytten is wary of Richburg's partial portrayal of Africa, noting that 'there is little systemic exploration into why conditions are as they are, nor much analysis of the history or politics of Africa'[437] in *Out of America*. Campbell (who describes Richburg as neoconservative)[438] goes further, suggesting that there might be a political edge to this ahistorical optic, noting that 'neglect of history is hardly unusual among journalists … but Richburg elevated this occupational hazard into something like a political principle'.[439] He consequently goes on to fill in the considerable gaps in Richburg's cognitive map of Somalia,[440] and later points out that he also overlooked the political wrangling and 'out of control' violence going on at the time in South Africa, 'the only nation to escape Richburg's all-pervading scorn'.[441] 'The country bled', says Campbell, but 'very little of this found its way into Richburg's book'.[442]

The inadequacy of Richburg's cognitive mapping and the crippling political consequences of this become particularly clear when he addresses the phenomenon of East Asian economic success compared to African fiscal stagnation. Adopting a typically haughty,

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[437] Kathy Hytten, Review, *Educational Studies* [no.] 19-23; quotation at 21-2
[438] Referring to 'Richburg's own neoconservative beliefs about individual responsibility' MP, p. 391.
[439] MP, p. 376.
[440] MP, pp. 376-9.
[441] MP, p. 383.
[442] MP, p. 383.

fractious tone (using direct address to 'throw' various arguments back at his readers), Richburg suggests an equivalence between the two regions from decolonisation onwards:

> There was nothing inevitable about Asia's success and Africa's despair. Both regions emerged from colonialism at about the same time and faced many of the same obstacles. ... It's an ugly truth, but it needs to be laid out here, because for too long now Africa's failings have been hidden behind a veil of excuses and apologies. (170-1)

According to Richburg, behind this apologetic veil is corruption, or more specifically the 'cancer' of African corruption – possibly central to a 'flawed' African culture (175) – as opposed to the less malignant but 'similarly rife' (173) corruption that exists in Asia (one wonders at this point how to assess the undeniable corruption that exists in American politics, and Western politics in general). For him, this is 'about as good an explanation as any' for the growth of the latter region and the 'despair' of the former:

> It's this problem of corruption, from the president all the way down to the customs officials at the border posts, that seems to me about as good an explanation as any for Africa's plight. But it still begs the question: Why? Is there something in the nature of Africans that makes them more prone to corruption?
>
> …Is there some flaw in African culture? (175)

Compounding this provocative, speculative summation of African nature, culture and politics is Richburg's semi-comic portrayal of his unreliable and duplicitous Kenyan office assistant George. Functioning almost as a literary device, as an allegorical character in a work of fiction, George's apparently archetypal 'African way of thinking' is opposed to Richburg's own 'Western' mode of reasoning that 'just wanted to pay him [George] a fair wage for a fair day's work' and not also be a *bwana* (patron or sir) responsible for the wellbeing of his office assistant's large and deprived family (35). Becoming increasingly exacerbated – or 'boiling mad' – with George's 'pattern of lies and deceit', Richburg humorously recalls that 'like the World Bank and the IMF, I was about to start my own campaign for financial accountability' (34) to investigate George's petty thefts. He confesses that only 'guilt' prevented him from firing George, but nonetheless admits that 'I was angry at being put into a role that I never

expected or asked for. … His family problems were not my responsibility. I resented being made to feel guilty' (35). One can quite easily discern a disquieting geopolitical discourse behind this initially comic scene, particularly with regard to Richburg's perceived 'role' and 'way of thinking' as a 'fair' Westerner, his anger over questions of 'responsibility' and 'guilt' for another's socio-economic situation, his comparison of his own position as *bwana* with that of the IMF and World Bank, and of course the inadequacies of George, which are presented as perpetual. When the two part at the end of the narrative, Richburg says that 'George promises me that he'll clean up his act and become more responsible – but of course I know he's lying' (246). It seems that George, like Africa (242-4), will never change.

Returning to the East Asian question, as if to reinforce the above image of the flawed African versus the skilled Asian, Richburg adds that upon the arrival of 'true independence' in the post-war era (a questionable and somewhat swift assertion in itself), Africans 'didn't know what to do with it' whereas 'the Asians' did (172). Hytten has criticised the shallow nature of this analysis, arguing that 'in not deeply developing the contrast between these two regions, Richburg almost seems to single out Africans in a particularly contemptuous way, and in a way that, even written by a black man, is *tinged with racism*'.[443] Richburg, self-aware, can see such accusations coming, prefacing his ruminations on Africa and East Asia by saying 'I realise that I'm on explosive ground here, and so I'll tread carefully. … But I am black, though not an African, and so I am going to push ahead' (171). 'Push ahead' he does, and although Hytten is certainly justified in pointing out the troubling sentiment that lies behind Richburg's 'ugly truth' tale of East Asian productivity versus African stagnation, I argue that there is a deeper problem here beyond the obvious 'explosive ground' of racial stereotyping that Richburg is well aware of treading upon (as well as his use of race – he is 'black, though not an African' after all – to sanction such stereotyping). More disconcerting

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[443] Hytten, 'Review', 22 (emphasis added).

for me is the complicity of Richburg's travelogue with the hegemonic 'common sense' logic of Western neoliberalism, at a time when Africa was entering a new phase of (re)subordination to the needs of stronger economic centres beyond the continent's borders.[444] It is to this political, rather than Africanist/Orientalist, discourse that I will now turn in more detail.

'Neoliberalism' in this context refers to the reorientation of economic policy in an age of 'structural adjustment' that enforced the winding down of the developmental state in Africa – in other words, Africa's devastating insertion into the destructive 'reforms' of capitalist globalisation. Mel van Elteren, drawing upon the work of David Harvey,[445] defines neoliberalism in a more general sense as 'the updated version of classical economic liberalism that became increasingly important from the 1970s onwards. … Neoliberals favour 'deregulation' and privatisation over direct government intervention'.[446] Harvey characterises the neoliberal era of 'financial innovation' (the unsustainable pumping up of the credit economy as a response to the 1970s labour crisis and subsequent wage depression, which effectively reduced consumer demand) as the latest example of a 'creative fiction' of capitalism designed to absorb a surplus that can no longer be soaked up by real production.[447] Susan Watkins also usefully draws attention to the 'Americanness' of neoliberalism.[448] Today, at a time when the legitimacy of neoliberal ideology is in question, one can justifiably demonstrate the misguided and erroneous nature of this strategy and quite reasonably argue that African states should reject such doctrines in the new century. Paul Nugent, for example, persuasively argues that 'abandoning many of the neoliberal orthodoxies about the inherent

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[444] See John S. Saul, *Millennial Africa: Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2001), p.25 (hereafter MA). The following discussion is in accord with Saul's evaluation of the history of, and future prospects for, capitalist development in Africa.

[445] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

[446] Mel van Elteren, 'Neoliberalisation and Transnational Capitalism', *Journal of American Studies* 43, 2 (August 2009), 177-197; quotation at 177.

[447] David Harvey, 'Crises of Capitalism', The RSA, London, 26/04/10. Available at http://davidharvey.org (last accessed 07/08/2010)

[448] Susan Watkins, 'Shifting Sands', *New Left Review* 61 (Jan-Feb 2010), 1-27; quotation at 8.

evils of the state will be essential' if Africa is to prosper in the twenty-first century.[449] *Out of America*, however, was composed at a time when such orthodoxies were not only desirable but assumed to be superior to all alternatives. Richburg's accord with the neoliberal consensus of the time becomes clearer as he turns his travelogue back home to the United States to remark upon the societal role of governmental support for the poor. In the course of the abovementioned comparison of Africa and East Asia, he goes on to bemoan the 'aid-dollar dole' (178) that, he says, promotes a 'backward-looking attitude' (180) in Africa. Tellingly, he believes that this has parallels in the 'wallowing' black community back home:

> Black African leaders talk about foreign aid as if they're entitled to it – it's something that is *due* to Africa, with no strings attached – *the same way many American blacks see government assistance programs as a kind of entitlement of birth*. In both cases, you're left with black people wallowing in a safety net of dependency. (180, emphasis added)

To further embellish this portrayal, Richburg adds that 'if the race is ever going to progress, we might start by admitting that the enemy is within' (179). Once again he then returns to his childhood and invokes the memory of his straight-talking father, recalling the moment during Thanksgiving dinner when Richburg Sr. tells his son that 'those black folks you see out there on the streets think the white man owes them something' (179-80). Once again, *Out of America* returns home to the United States and to the troubled interior of its author, echoing the earlier hazy portrayal of the 1967 riot and reinforcing the image of mass black self-destruction which haunts the text, shapes Richburg's *Weltanschauung* and clouds his perception of sub-Saharan Africa, its people and the world in which they live.

According to the discourse of *Out of America*, Africans – and by explicit extension African Americans – are their own worst enemy ('enemies within') and must be fiscally disciplined from above with 'strings attached' because they aren't 'due' or 'entitled' to economic support. This fits in neatly with the orthodox neoliberal diktat that requires a

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[449] Paul Nugent, 'States and Social Contracts in Africa', *New Left Review* 63 (May-June 2010) 35-68; quotation at 68.

minimal welfare system and demands that 'developing' economies be run – 'opened up' –

according to the demands of the global marketplace, under the tutelage of the IMF. Within

this narrative the IMF thus appears in Richburg's travelogue as a benign patron that is finally

'getting tough' (24) with shady African states for the good of its corruption-prone, tribal

people, contributing to what he genteelly labels 'the global sweep towards democratisation

and reform' (25) gathering pace at the time. In truth, 'getting tough' equals IMF 'Structural

Adjustment Programmes' (SAPs), which for Colin Leys (writing at the same time as

Richburg was travelling Africa) enforce the drive 'to weaken the African state in the name of

market efficiency' – with devastating results for local people.[450] In a similar vein, Nugent has

noted, roughly one and a half decades after Richburg's enthusiastic embrace of market-

friendly, anti-state wisdom, that the imposition of neoliberalism has actually had an adverse

effect on African democracy, sovereignty and governmental accountability (governments

have been more interested in satisfying the needs of international institutions than in listening

to the electorate),[451] as well as, amongst other things, African agriculture (SAPs 'killed off'

internal African agricultural extension services that are now desperately needed in an era of

soaring food prices and unabated poverty).[452] Richburg can foresee no such problems, as he

recommends that Africa follows the new politico-economic chic sweeping the globe:

> Africa also needs to try a little bit more decentralisation, more 'devolution,' to
> borrow a phrase from the American political lexicon. … The Africans might want
> to take a lesson from the former Soviet Union, which did break up into its
> component parts. (239)

In short, African states should imitate their Eastern European counterparts by acquiescing to

the new post-Cold War US-led globalist world order. An alternative, corrective perspective

such as Peter Osborne's would instead portray 'the rigged auctions privatising state assets in

Russia in the 1990s' as reflective of the 'basic principles of expropriation, illegality and

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[450] Colin Leys, 'Confronting the African Tragedy' *New Left Review* 204 (March-April 1994) 33-47; quotation at 46.

[451] Nugent, 'States and Social Contracts in Africa', 62.

[452] Nugent, 'States and Social Contracts in Africa', 66.

violence' that marks a renewed phase of capital accumulation.[453] But Richburg instead imparts a characteristically confident, sanguine and particularly American vision of the New World Order model of political and economic restructuring dominant – or trendy – at the time.

This could legitimately be branded as a common failure of the imagination, or the inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to take up the task, set by Jameson in 'Cognitive Mapping', of imagining 'a society that has at once repudiated the economic mechanisms of the market'.[454] Accepting the Fukuyamaist frame that Western liberal democracy is 'the final form of human government'[455] and observing 'an eternal capitalist landscape as far as the eye can see',[456] Richburg is thus unable to articulate a vision beyond the hegemonic one of a benign, victorious and universally beneficial global capitalism to which the only alternative is 'more darkness' (238). Going further, *Out of America* may also be read in a Chomskyan sense as a travelogue authored by a mainstream African American journalist that could be effectively utilised to 'manufacture consent' via its dissemination of a certain perception of the world (filtering historical information, omitting particular perspectives, espousing favoured truths), or a certain cognitive mapping of the world, which has the effect of mobilising popular support for the (self)interests of powerful elites and global economic institutions whose largely invasive and exploitative activity is wrapped in the benign and altruistic cloak of 'development'.[457] For Chomsky and Herman, the attainment of popular assent and acquiescence to such institutions is the primary societal function of agenda-setting mass media organisations in the United States, such as the *Washington Post* for whom

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[453] Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx* (London: Granta, 2005), p. 110.
[454] Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping'
[455] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?'
[456] Jameson 'Cognitive Mapping'
[457] See Saul, *Millennial Africa*; Leys, 'Confronting the African Tragedy'; Nugent, 'States and Social Contracts in Africa'; and Bade Onimode, *A Future for Africa: Beyond the Politics of Adjustment* (London: Earthscan, 1992).

Richburg reports. [458] Whatever the author's intention, *Out of America* is entirely suitable for the extension of this function.

For the formation of a more thoroughgoing cognitive map, Richburg could have turned to African expertise for instruction. Nigerian economist Bade Onimode, for example, concludes that IMF and World Bank Stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Programmes 'have generated and exacerbated a serious decline in the African economy, and created the catastrophe of suffering facing the rural and urban poor, women, children, workers, peasants, and other vulnerable social groups'.[459] Tanzanian author and scholar Issa Shivji presents a corrective assessment of Western liberal democracy (and its tacit travelling companion, economic liberalisation, the expansion of the free market) as viewed from the perspective of the global South. Writing at the same time as Richburg travels Africa, Shivji remains committed to a critique of the function of capitalism in Africa and is sceptical of claims about the global spread of 'this particular historical form' of democracy.[460] Shivji thus seeks to retain and revive a 'thoroughly anti-imperialist' popular perspective from the standpoint of the lower classes[461] that is quite different from Richburg's profoundly American political sensibility. Here, Shivji calls for a discussion of pioneering African alternatives to the Western individualist model of political and economic organisation, in a fashion that recalls the earlier sentiment of Wright's open letter to Nkrumah in *Black Power*, which demanded a politically innovative and authentically sovereign '*African* path'[462] that would willingly deviate from Euro-American models of governance:

> We rarely let loose of the apron strings that bind us to imperialism or the African state or both, we rarely deviate from liberalism; and in our case therefore

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[458] See Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994)
[459] Onimode in Saul, *Millennial Africa*, pp. 24-5 (emphasis added).
[460] See Saul, pp. 54-6.
[461] Issa Shivji (ed.), *State and Constitutionalism: An African Debate on Democracy* (Harare: SAPES, 1991), p. 255.
[462] BP, p. 418.

compradorialism. [This demonstrates] a total lack of faith in the African people.[463]

Complicating the prevalent and limiting Western definition of democracy, Shivji accordingly posits 'liberal' democracy ('part of the ideology of domination') against 'popular' democracy, which aims to bring capital under social control for the benefit of the hitherto powerless majority.[464] From Richburg's perspective in the global North as an African American yearning for a sense of belonging in his home country, writing and travelling at a time of unparalleled American capitalist triumphalism, this palpably socialist definition of democratisation is, unsurprisingly, not on the agenda. The political ethos of *Out of America* therefore epitomises what John S. Saul sees as a prevailing mood: 'socialism has failed and capitalism is, literally, both out of sight and (largely) out of mind.'[465]

The application of world-systems analysis, a method that 'like the capitalist world-economy, has deep African roots,'[466] would have been particularly edifying for the aforementioned analysis of the divergence of East Asian and African development. One of the foremost proponents of this method is Giovanni Arrighi,[467] for whom travel to Africa engendered 'a true intellectual rebirth'[468] in sharp contrast to Richburg's Dark Continent-style despair into what Saul has named 'the abyss of Afro-pessimism'[469] (Arrighi also recalls having 'excellent relations' with liberation movements in Southern Africa in an atmosphere of mutually-enriching reciprocal exchange,[470] quite unlike the largely one-way engagement of *Out of America*). Whereas Richburg, as Campbell observes, refuses to rehash history

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[463] Issa Shivji, 'The Democracy Debate in Africa: Tanzania,' *Review of African Political Economy* 50 (March 1991), 81-2. See also MA pp. 154-5.

[464] See Saul, pp. 154-5.

[465] Saul, p. 45.

[466] William Martin, Africa and World-Systems Analysis' in John Edwards Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester: New York, 2005), p.381.

[467] Former pupil Tom Reifer offers a useful overview of Arrighi's work in 'Capital's Cartographer: Giovanni Arrighi 1937-2009', New Left Review 60 (Nov-Dec 2009), 119-130. See also Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* and Harvey, 'The Winding Paths of Capital'.

[468] Says Reifer, 60.

[469] Saul, *Millennial Africa*, p. 243.

[470] Arrighi in Harvey, 'The Winding Paths of Capital', 67.

(when discussing Zaire, for example, 'he said nothing about the slave trade or King Leopold, and mentioned the coup that bought Mobutu to power only in order to dismiss it')[471] – a perspective encapsulated when he exclaims 'but that was thirty years ago!' (182)[472] – Arrighi attempts to analyse the present in the *longue durée*. Arrighi's former pupil Tom Reifer believes that this vital perspective is virtually disappearing 'in the maelstrom of 21st century life'.[473] Here, Reifer offers a succinct précis of Arrighi's comparative analysis of sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia, referring in particular to the key role of labour supplies:

> The combination of white settler colonialism, agriculture, mineral wealth and labour shortages led to the full dispossession of much of the African peasantry, so as to provide low-cost migrant labour for the mines and manufacturing industry; but over time this ended up raising labour costs. In marked contrast … was the accumulation without dispossession and associated 'rural development and industrialisation' that took place throughout much of East Asia. … *Differing trajectories of accumulation*, with or without dispossession, and associated policies of racial exclusion, thus underpin the radical divergence in development experiences in East Asia and Southern Africa.[474]

This materialist framework of comparative long-term analysis charts a methodological course unavailable to Richburg, who can only compare the two regions via his own highly subjective psychological prism as an American of African descent in Africa, which is in turn overshadowed by the hegemonic, triumphal discourse of end of the century (end of *history*) 1990s neoliberalism. Arrighi's reference to the contradictory paths of capital accumulation (occurring with dispossession in Africa but without dispossession and with rural development and industrialisation in East Asia) clears the space for a different intellectual route into Africa.[475] Arrighi thus positions the long-term procedure of capitalist development

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[471] MP, p. 391.
[472] In reference to 'the history of the CIA's complicity in the overthrow and assassination of Zaire's independence hero, Patrice Lumumba', Richburg, *Out of America*, p. 182.
[473] Reifer, 129.
[474] Reifer, 127 (emphasis added).
[475] Moreover, this is done in a reciprocal fashion that develops the 'high' theory being applied to empirical realities 'on the ground'. According to the 'classical' Marxist model, successful capital accumulation occurs with the complete proletarianization (full dispossession) of the peasantry, but this paradigm must be modified to adequately account for the bifurcation of East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

(specifically the distinct processes of proletarianization)[476] at the centre, displacing Richburg's troubling fixation with questions of racial identity and apparently inherent African cultural deficiency. Arrighi also makes the important point − 'often forgotten in the West' − that East Asian nations have a long history of 'predominantly economic' relations to one another that pre-dates the existence of nation-states in Europe, contributing to a general picture in which economic interests supersede nationalist (or, if applied to Africa, 'tribal') dispositions.[477] No such history is discussed in *Out Of America*, which refuses *longue durée* systemic analysis of the political economy.

In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin wrote that 'the American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling'.[478] Thirty years later, Richburg's African travelogue, which negates the political economy of so-called 'democratisation and reform', evidences a certain shift of consciousness amongst that burgeoning 'cohort of black conservatives'[479] identified earlier by Campbell. Condoleezza Rice is a notable and powerful emblem of this modified black American sensibility, of which Adebajo is deeply critical. Here, Adebajo recalls that:

> During the debate on the Race conference in Durban in September 2001, she [Rice] insensitively dismissed reparations for Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora as an irrelevance of the past, revealing a stunning ignorance by many conservative African Americans … . Many members of this group steadfastly refuse to acknowledge any sort of African identity.[480]

Richburg's synchronously steadfast refusal of the past and related denigration of fiscal entitlement for Africans (and indeed African Americans) repeats many of Rice's conservative mantras. As Paul Gilroy has noted, in the present era 'black people are defending the status quo'[481] − such a statement would have been unthinkable for James Baldwin. Likewise, the

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[476] Reifer, 78-9.
[477] Arrighi in Harvey, 'The Winding Paths of Capital', 89-90.
[478] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 108.
[479] MP, p. 369.
[480] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 105.
[481] See 'What Ended Slavery? Paul Gilroy and Weyman Bennett', available at

following observation from Weyman Bennett indicates the remarkable shift that has occurred

since Baldwin commented that 'it is extremely unlikely that Negroes will ever rise to power

in the United States':[482]

> The soundtrack to globalisation, to American power … it comes from black America. We have to deal with that. We have to deal with the Condoleezza Rice problem. We have to be open about the fact that the descendent of slaves is the most powerful woman on the planet. We have to deal with the shift that that represents.[483]

Obama today represents a further intensification of this shift, although he is not a descendant

of slaves. Max Paul Friedman has usefully coined the term '*simulacrobama*' – a modification

of Baudrillard's simulacrum – to refer to the 'practically hegemonic' and 'triumphalist'

image of American exceptionalism and 'celebratory self-congratulation' that surrounded

Obama's election, an event which, I add, places a sugary layer of multiracial utopia on top of

an already illusory narrative of progress in an age of increasing income disparity.[484] Richburg

was certainly not immune to this prevailing mood of patriotic back-slapping, as evidenced in

his October 2008 article entitled 'America is showing Europe the Way Again'.[485] However,

beneath the intoxicating *simulacrobama* is in truth the *status quo*, as noted by Benn Michaels:

> The ability of the Obama campaign to make us feel pretty good about ourselves while at the same time leaving our wealth untouched, is striking – as emblematised in his tax proposals which [are] asking the 40 per cent of Americans who live on under $42,000 to believe that they belong to the same middle class as the approximately 15 per cent who make $100,000 - $250,000. … It is, however, what the Democratic party has been asking them to believe for the last twenty years.[486]

Likewise, on foreign policy, Tariq Ali condemns Obama's 'self-interested mythology'[487] and

argues that:

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7Eg6VRRzbU&feature=related (last accessed 12/08/2010)

[482] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 92.

[483] See 'What Ended Slavery? Paul Gilroy and Weyman Bennett'.

[484] See Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity', 33.

[485] Keith B. Richburg, 'America is Showing Europe the Way Again', *The Observer*, 26/10/08.

[486] Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity', 35.

[487] Ali, 'President of Cant', 99, 115.

> From Palestine through to Iraq to Iran, Obama has acted as just another steward of the American Empire, pursuing the same aims as his predecessors, with the same means, but with more emollient rhetoric. In Afghanistan, he has gone further, widening the front of imperial aggression with a major escalation of violence. … Sonorous banality and armour-plated hypocrisy are the hallmarks of this Presidential style.[488]

According to the constraining logic of the 'black box' that Richburg endeavours to escape from in *Out of America*, Obama is indeed unique as a Western world leader of colour. But beyond skin colour, this President is simply more of the same. Perhaps it is unsurprising that during the Obama campaign Richburg is swept up in what Ali describes as 'a wave of ideological euphoria not seen since the days of Kennedy',[489] given that in *Out of America* he was clearly also taken in by an analogous surge of nationalistic triumphalism in the 1990s. Belief in American myths is no longer, as Baldwin proposed, the preserve of white Americans.

'A Discovery of Myself': Just a Travel Book?

But perhaps it would be unfair to condemn *Out of America* in this manner. In the book's afterward, added a year later to the second edition, Richburg makes the case that his travelogue was merely a private journal and therefore should not be studied as an academic text:

> [*Out of America*] was never intended as an academic tome or a work of political science. It is a personal memoir, a first person diary, if you will … . There is of course room for other books to take a broader scope. (251)

> *Out of America* stands as a testament to a particular time … three tumultuous years beginning in 1991, that I was able to witness firsthand as a journalist travelling to the worst of the trouble spots. (254)

In his role as a *Washington Post* reporter for those three years, Richburg inevitably sees the 'worst' of Africa – indeed, the worst of humanity – and his response to such events is understandably visceral. Moreover, during his stay he dwells not with the local community

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[488] Ali, 'President of Cant', 108.
[489] Ali, 'President of Cant', 99.

(perfectly reasonable given the situation of 'chaos and violence and rule by gun' (49) in Somalia at the time) but among fellow journalists, walled off in 'the universe of the Africa correspondent'.[490] Accordingly, his dwelling space in Africa is markedly distinct from that of Harris, who travelled independently across the whole continent, eating, drinking and chatting in cafés, public spaces and even the homes of local people. Hartman too had a less treacherous and potentially more edifying route, travelling as a professional researcher rather than a reporter despatched to sites of 'chaos and violence'. *Out of America* was therefore unlikely to be anything other than a partial, journalistic eyewitness chronicle of catastrophic events, made more complex and more poignant because of the author's race. To expect optimism or objective scientific analysis to spring from such an experience would perhaps be unwarranted. When Richburg says that 'to have written anything other than the book I wrote would not have been true to my own experiences' (251) he is repeating Jean-Paul Sartre's note that to 'correct' his war diary before delivering it for public consumption would be 'a form of trickery' – for, says Sartre, 'isn't improving the syntax a betrayal of the very spirit of the diary?'[491] In a similar way, Richburg's afterward makes an appeal for 'front-line seat' (251) heat-of-the-moment authenticity over distant, considered, revised academic dissection.

With this in mind we may therefore invite a more delicate reading of *Out of America* and excuse the author's apparent exhaustion after, in his own words, 'three years – three long years … . Three years of watching pretty much the worst that human beings can do to one another. And three years of watching bodies' (xiv). Campbell has noted the problematic role of Africa in the global imagination[492] and the 'kind of moral fatigue that comes from having seen too much mass death, particularly of the African kind'[493] and *Out of America* certainly reflects this weariness. Perhaps, then, the book tells us more about this Western problem of

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[490] MP, p. 381.
[491] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'War Diary: September-October 1939', New Left Review 59 (Sep-Oct 2009), 89-120; quotation at 102.
[492] MP, p. 396.
[493] MP, p. 404.

'boredom' with African suffering that Campbell identifies.[494] This again returns us to the United States, which is the ultimate reference point of Richburg's travel narrative. Furthermore, as Richburg reminds us that his travelogue 'was never intended to be an encyclopaedic catalogue of all the African countries or even of all the countries I visited' (251), he also affirms in the afterward that the hypothesis of *Out of America* actually had less to do with presenting a complete picture of Africa than it did with his own nationalism, or more specifically his own desire as a American of African descent to be fully accepted in his home country:

> For those of us born on American soil, our commonality transcends the differences of our origin. … The underlying premise of my book [is] that Africa showed me how our very Americanness makes us one. (249-50)

Out of America is in this sense a typical African American travel book – that is to say, it is ultimately about the validation of self and the location of African Americans within the United States.[495] Africa thus functions in the narrative as a terrain upon which to negotiate the author's relationship to American society,[496] a literary device of self-inscription rather than a precise empirical rendering of an actually-existing location. As Hytten surmises, *Out of America* is 'as much a book about what it means to be an American as it is an exploration into Africa'.[497] Richburg is indeed aware of this when he admits that his journey 'would end up being an exploration, and a discovery, of myself' (39). Certainly, his critique of the 'mirage' of 'Mother' Africa (169) and condemnation of 'the complete ignorance about Africa among America's so-called black elite' – recalling with sorrow Jesse Jackson's 'fulsome tribute' to Nigerian military ruler Ibrahim Babangida (138-9) – demonstrates a candid individualism very much at home in the United States, and far more relevant to 'the tortured

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[494] MP, p. 404.
[495] Alasdair Pettinger considers the common features of African American travel writing in 'At Least One Negro Everywhere'.
[496] Campbell notes that this is often the case in African American travel literature, MP, pp. xxi-xxiv.
[497] Hytten 22.

quest of the African American personality for self-definition'[498] than to any deep critical consideration of African political, social or economic history. *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* is in the end a confrontation of the author with himself, one that seeks an answer to the renowned question posed by Countee Cullen in 1925 – 'what is Africa *to me*?'[499] – that simultaneously asks 'What is *America* to me?'[500]

With this subjective, Americentric intent in mind, we could therefore also understand the graphic content of Richburg's gruesome African travelogue as a tactic to rouse his Western audience. Indeed, he makes the pertinent point that while Bosnia was given blanket coverage in the American news media, the 'humanitarian catastrophe' in Somalia remained largely ignored: 'the world, and Washington policy makers specifically, may not have cared about Somalia in early 1992. But *I could force them to care* by rubbing their faces in it every day' (52, emphasis added) in his professional role with the *Washington Post*. Attentive to this compassionate mission statement, we may read the severity of *Out of America* as more than straightforward revulsion. In the disturbing opening pages of the text, which recalls the flow of bloated corpses (one of them a baby) down a river in Tanzania and refers to 'archetypal stories' of 'babies being tossed onto spears' and 'pregnant women being disembowelled' (xiii), Richburg directly addresses the reader to say that:

> If I'm disgusting you, good, because that's my point. … Is this depressing you, all this talk of death and dead bodies? Do you want to put the book down? No, please, press on. I have more to say, and I want to put it all right out here, right in your face. (xiv)

This tactic of intentional in-your-face disgust upon arrival followed by brutal disconnection upon departure – 'I'm leaving now so I don't care anymore' (247) – could certainly be construed as an implicit call to the reader to do the very opposite and, put simply, *care* about Africa. The troubling, horrific portrayal of Africa does make it easier for the author to deny

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[498] MP, p. xii.
[499] Countee Cullen, 'Heritage' (1927)
http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/heritage/ (last accessed 12/08/2010), emphasis added.
[500] A point made by Campbell in MP, p. xxiv (emphasis added).

any relationship to the continent, the better to advance his claim as a full American citizen (which thus returns us to the 'underlying premise' of this inward-looking text – 'that Africa showed me how *our* very Americanness makes *us* one'), but nonetheless there remains the intent to 'force them to care by rubbing it in their faces'. Humanitarianism may be masquerading as revulsion and apathy.

However, what formal, institutional forms would this humanitarian compassion take, at the level of the political economy? This returns us to Richburg's ideology, which, despite his attempts to claim his text as a humble eyewitness diary, repeatedly comes to the fore. Although Richburg evades the authoritative authorial position of the political scientist (he is writing a 'first-person diary' rather than an encyclopaedic, academic 'tome'), he does ultimately lay claim to the privileged optic of the traveller who has 'seen' the Real Africa, claiming to 'understand *now* the complexities behind the conflicts' because 'I have been here, and I have seen' (247, emphasis added). Campbell is suspicious of what lurks behind this 'standard defence' of the supposedly enlightened (and in this case apparently politically innocent) traveller:

> Richburg adopted the standard defence of the traveller: "I've been there … I've seen it." …It is a compelling technique. Yet if attending to two centuries of African journeys had taught us anything, it is that *seeing is not so simple a thing*, that even 'open minded' travellers (as Richburg claimed to be) view the world through specific cultural and historical lenses.[501]

Moreover, says Campbell, *Out of America* contains 'statements that would fit easily in even the most lurid nineteenth-century Dark Continent travelogue'.[502] In a similar vein, Adebajo remarks that 'Richburg's book provided cover to many white analysts to peddle their own prejudices about Africa, and added to distorted stereotypes of the continent'.[503] I would add that *Out of America* is a book authored by a mainstream African American journalist that could be used to justify the continued exploitation of Africa by those who defend the

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[501] MP, p. 385 (emphasis added).
[502] MP, p. 385.
[503] Adebajo, 'Africa, African Americans, and the Avuncular Sam', 99.

interests of the invasive capitalist powers largely located in the West and shrouded in the benign cloak of 'development'. When Richburg demands that Washington should 'care' about Africa, he concurrently demands that the IMF should also 'care' in the guise of 'getting tough' just as Washington should presumably 'get tough' with African Americans 'wallowing' on welfare. Wittingly or not, this avowedly well-intentioned and merely personal travel book contributes to the required illusion of the economic orthodoxy of our age – the nightmarish logic of neoliberalism – which advances the latest stage of capitalism that took root in the 1970s and has accelerated since, with devastating consequences for the masses of Africa and indeed the world.[504] *Out of America* is more than 'just' a travel book or 'a personal memoir, a first-person diary, if you will' (251) and more too than a psychosomatic encounter of the traveller with himself.

Hartman and Richburg: Autonomy versus Nationhood

Any attempt to neatly define or firmly categorise African American travel writing would be stymied by a comparison of Richburg's African travelogue with Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007). Just as both books are formally dissimilar – one a journalistic first-person account of events, the other a blend of scholarly historical research and introspection – both authors also articulate distinct identities that gradually take shape throughout their texts, identities that are in turn tethered to distinct conceptions of possible futures for the Black Atlantic. If writing is to be understood as a site of constant identity (re)production, 'a technology of the self, which brings about identity instead of expressing it'[505] then it follows that the imposition of any kind of monolithic, supra-textual African American identity seems specious upon reading such discrete voices.

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[504] See David Cromwell and David Edwards, 'Creative Destruction: The Madness of the Global Economy' (2008) http://medialens.org/alerts/08/080205_creative_destruction_the.php (last accessed 12/08/2010). See also Saul, *Millennial Africa*; Leys, 'Confronting the African Tragedy'; and Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
[505] Annette Bühler-Dietrich, 'Technologies in Hanif Kureishi's 'The Body', in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, pp. 168-83; quotation at p. 178.

At the root of their dissonance is the opposition between nationhood and autonomy, and the distinct subjects that are tethered to these positions. While Richburg, as discussed earlier, commits himself to a patriotic project of national uplift at the expense of solidarity with Africa – 'far better that we put our energies into making America work better', he argues, than to attach oneself to a 'strange and forbidding place' like Africa (237) – Hartman by contrast is more concerned with 'what we might become together' or 'the possibility of solidarity' (231) with Africa and its people:

> I came to realise that it mattered whether the 'we' was called *we who become together* or *African people* or *slaves*, because those identities were tethered to conflicting narratives of our past, and, as well, these names conjured different futures. (231, emphasis in original)

Africa and its people are not only part of Hartman's past but also her future. In *Out of America*, by contrast, the possibility of a shared future is stifled by the distant subjectivities that emerge in the text. Richburg's pitiful and deeply flawed African subjects (George being the archetype) remain tethered to a narrative of stasis, submission and darkness, contrasted with the progressive dream of the United States to which he binds his own mobile Self. His 'we' is a Western one and the future conjured in *Out of America* is one of US-led progress opposed to African chaos. His dream is one of Western liberal multiculturalism, to which Africa is the nightmarish 'alternative' to be avoided:

> [The Unites States is] changing. A black American can be elected mayor of Denver … . Maybe there's a chance that the old dream of a multiracial, colour-blind society is slowly being realised. It had better be, because I've been here and seen the alternative. (242)

The possibility of diasporic solidarity is foreclosed. There is no 'we who become together': Africa is the fallen, hellish alternative rather than a potential source of future cohesion. The United States, meanwhile, is slowly approaching a dreamlike state of colour-blindness. Hartman disputes such claims.

Lose Your Mother presents the reader with a transnational vision of societal change operating in harmony with – or 'tethered to' – a more subversive configuration of African American identity that simultaneously abjures US patriotism and endeavours to 'disenchant that myth … of a glorious perfect Mother Africa'.[506] While Richburg almost dares to dream of a black face in the White House, Hartman demands something more:

> The legacy that I chose to claim was articulated in *the ongoing struggle* to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy. … It wasn't the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. *It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood.* It was the dream of an elsewhere. (234, emphasis added)

The inference here that freedom is not to be gained via the White House is salutary. The terrain of authentic autonomy for Hartman is 'elsewhere' and yet to be realised in an age of myriad slaveries. It is in statements such as this that we begin to read what Micol Siegel accurately describes as Hartman's 'nuanced Marxism'.[507] This radical perspective is intimately tied to the identity of the narrator as expressed in her travel narrative, a subject position which prudently acknowledges the realities of citizenship and cultural distance across the Black Atlantic, but nonetheless manages to blend mobility and malleability with materialist rootedness. Accepting that 'a black face doesn't make me kin' she rapidly 'learned to accept' her *Obruni* (stranger) status as 'a foreigner from across the sea' (1-2) before setting to the task of researching and inscribing a more authentic connection that is 'better than a myth and much more promising for our future'[508] than the soothing old illusion of 'Afrotopia' (19). Not only does Hartman creatively observe 'the dialectic between the particular and the universal' identified earlier by Friedel,[509] but this is injected with a healthy dose of utopian thinking alongside economistic critique that utilises the conceptual tools of Marxism. For

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[506] Saidiya Hartman, interview with Farai Chideya, National Public Radio (2007) http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6955366. (last accessed 12/08/2010)
[507] Micol Siegel, Review, http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-52/siegel (last accessed 12/08/2010)
[508] Interview with Farai Chideya, (emphasis added).
[509] See Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 9. Adopting Friedel's terminology, it may be possible to oppose Hartman's 'rooted cosmopolitanism' to Harris' occasionally 'untethered universalism'.

example, in the chapter entitled 'Blood Cowries' Hartman refers to 'commodity exchange in a pre-capitalist [African] society' (207) and employs a Marxist schema to frame her historical analysis of the slave trade, of which the following passage is representative:

> The destruction of life gave birth to capitalism in the West, but what is staggering is that the enormous losses suffered in Africa were without any lasting gains. African traders had no incentives to 'maximise value', since the plundered societies bearing the losses were not the same societies profiting from the trade, which only serves to *demonstrate the emptiness and irrelevance of an African identity in making sense of the slave trade*. … War and predation enabled Africa to produce slaves and purchase luxury goods, and permitted Europe to accumulate the capital necessary for economic development. As Marx wrote, the conversion of Africa into a preserve for captives was one of those idyllic moments 'which characterise the dawn of the era of capitalist development' in the West. (208, emphasis added)

Any sweeping concept of 'African' identity withers into irrelevance when faced with the destructive power of capitalist relations at the time of the Atlantic slave trade. Hartman narrates a history of primitive accumulation, of commodity exchange, dispossession and expropriation in an 'economy of theft' (208), in a manner that complicates any totalising notion of 'African people', elaborating upon her earlier class-conscious separation of the continent into 'the Africa of royals and great states' and 'the Africa of disposable commoners' (30). Her paraphrasing of chapter thirty-one of *Capital* ('Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist')[510] is a significant indicator of this materialist 'nuanced Marxist' methodology that rethinks diasporic and national identity and underscores the relevance of capitalism in shaping social relations and identity formation.

On Hartman's nuanced Marxism, it may be helpful at this point to return to African American philosopher and activist Angela Y. Davis, a figure with whom I believe Hartman shares a certain sensibility. Davis recalls that the *Communist Manifesto* 'hit her like a bolt of

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[510] 'The turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation'. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One* [1857] http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (last accessed 12/08/2010)

lightning' because it allowed her to move beyond a totalising racial framework and consider the impact of 'intersectionality' (the relationship between race and class):

> From a very early age I was struggling with a way of thinking about white people that did not universally demonise whiteness. My exposure to the *Communist Manifesto* gave me some fundamental conceptual tools with which to think about societal change in a way that moved beyond an exclusive focus on race.[511]

Hartman too utilises such fundamental interpretative tools to interrogate her 'African' Selfhood in a way that moves beyond the 'black box' of racial exclusivity. Davis was subsequently drawn to critical theory as formulated by the Frankfurt School, which for her 'has as its goal the transformation of society ... and thus the reduction and elimination of human misery'.[512] Perceiving her identity in a nonhierarchical sense, Davis thus views her Marxist self as interconnected with her other identities as an African American woman, refusing to place one aspect of her Self above the other.[513] Moving beyond race but not rejecting its socio-political force, Davis elucidates further:

> I've never been able to figure out how one goes about making those decisions about which part of one's identity should take precedence. Marxism has assisted me in developing clarity regarding the relationship between race, class and gender. So I see these identities as very much interconnected and wouldn't want to develop a hierarchical approach to them. ... I see myself and my work as connected with a collective effort to bring about radical social change ... . I see myself, along with many other people, as *part of a tradition of struggle* ... . I am most concerned with how my ideas and experiences can be productively used within *collective* contexts. I'm far less interested in claiming ownership of my ideas and experiences than I am in ensuring that this tradition remains a vital one.[514]

It is this desire to make her Self and her work practically useful as part of a communal inheritance of resistance that most explicitly unites Hartman with Davis. For Hartman, the desire to claim ownership of a pre-ontological 'African' selfhood or indeed any form of strictly bounded nationalistic identity – '*Obruni* forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace' (2), she claims – is subordinated to the need to retain and revive a tradition

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[511] Angela Y. Davis in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 19.
[512] Angela Y. Davis in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 22.
[513] Angela Y. Davis in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 24.
[514] Angela Y. Davis in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 24, 29 (emphasis added).

of collective struggle, which forms the terrain of the 'elusive *elsewhere*' (2) to which her identity as a 'stranger' is attached. 'If an African identity was to be meaningful at all, at least to me', she says, 'then what it meant or was to mean could only be elaborated in the fight against slavery' (234). Hartman does not wish to grab or purchase a static, totalising, mythological and ultimately meaningless 'African' or 'American' identity; she aspires instead to articulate a practical Selfhood – a 'fugitive's legacy' – through her participation in 'the ongoing struggle to … defeat slavery in all its myriad forms' (234). *Lose Your Mother* can thus be usefully entered into this active tradition of struggle shared also by Davis. I will elaborate further upon Hartman's configuration of this struggle as 'ongoing', as well as the specifics of the 'myriad forms' of bondage, below. However, before going further, as we consider the interrelationship between race and class, the value and heritage of Marxism within African American culture, and interrogate this question of 'dreaming' of possible futures, it may prove useful to make a brief excursion onto the topic of Martin Luther King Jr., whose late turn towards anticapitalist, class-based activism is often 'obliterated' in the popular imagination, says Slavoj Žižek.[515]

'Capitalism has Failed': The Forgotten Anticapitalist Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.
Martin Luther King Jr., although dismissive of communism, both read and historical,[516] nonetheless asserted his belief that 'capitalism has seen its best days ... it has outlived its usefulness ... it has failed to meet the needs of the masses.'[517] He is also critical of Marx, but reasonably responds to *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* with 'a partial 'yes' and a

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[515] Slavoj Žižek, 'Democracy Now!' interview (11/03/2008)
http://www.democracynow.org/2008/3/11/everybody_in_the_world_except_us
(last accessed 12/08/2010).
[516] See Martin Luther King Jr., 'Can a Christian be a Communist?' [1962], in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Six) (London: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 445-54 and Martin Luther King Jr., 'My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence' [1958], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Four), pp. 473-81.
[517] Martin Luther King Jr., 'Notes on American Capitalism' [1951], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume One), pp. 435-6; See also King, 'Will Capitalism Survive?' [1950], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Six), pp. 104-5.

partial 'no''.[518] Acknowledging that 'Marx reveals the danger of the profit motive as the sole basis for an economic system',[519] King subsequently sought to align his Christianity with the anticapitalist struggle for 'social justice',[520] arguing that 'the Christian ought always to be challenged by any protest against unfair treatment of the poor, for Christianity is itself such a protest'.[521] In a passage illustrative of a peculiarly Marx-inflected Christian class consciousness, King states his concern that 'religion can so easily become a tool of the middle class to keep the proletariat oppressed' and proclaimed that 'I will try to avoid making religion what Marx calls 'the opiate of the people''.[522] Going further, King was convinced that 'there is a definite move away from capitalism' and characterised capitalism as 'like a losing football team in the last quarter trying all types of tactics to survive'.[523] In this underestimation of the capacity of capitalism to confront crises and reinvent itself, he was of course premature, and not alone.[524] Nonetheless, it remains pertinent to note here King's partial accord with Marx and the 'increasingly anticapitalist sentiments' of his youth,[525] which prefigure his clear turn towards radical class-based social activism just before his assassination.

Against a common cultural backdrop in which King's leftist and anticapitalist sensibilities are watered down, allowing him to be summarily integrated into a state-

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[518] King, 'My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence', p. 475.

[519] King, 'Can A Christian be a Communist?', p. 451.

[520] 'With [Communism's] passionate concern for social justice Christians are bound to be in accord': Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Communism's Challenge to Christianity' [1953], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Six), pp. 146-50; quotation at p. 148.

[521] King, 'My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence', p. 476-7.

[522] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Letter to Coretta Scott' [1952], in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume Six), pp. 123-6; quotation at p. 125. King also notes the crucial role of the Church in sanctioning the slave trade and racial segregation and discrimination, concluding that, given this rather tainted history, 'who can blame Karl Marx for calling such a religion an opiati?' for 'we've identified the name of Christ with so many evil things'. See King, 'Communism's Challenge to Christianity', p. 149; and King, 'Can A Christian be a Communist?', p. 450.

[523] King, 'Notes on American Capitalism', p. 436.

[524] King foretells a period when, says Peter Osborne, it was 'fashionable' to speak of 'late' capitalism. Osborne argues in 2005 that 'it is more likely that we are in the latter stages of early capitalism'. See Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, p. 2.

[525] Introduction, Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Volume One), pp. 1-57; quotation at p. 41.

sponsored ideology of diversity, multiculturalism and 'tolerance' that disavows the fundamentality of the material and the economic, Žižek is keen to preserve the legacy of King's 1967-8 Poor People's Campaign.[526] Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon also seek to draw attention to 'the Martin Luther King you don't see on TV' and note that King's internationalist class perspective is airbrushed out of popular portrayals of his life and his legacy - they draw particular attention to King's complaint that '*capitalists* of the West [are] investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries.'[527] This complaint could indeed be made today.

King's 1962 sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church entitled 'Can a Christian be a Communist?' is illustrative of his clear class perspective, which would later infuse his activism. Here King speaks not of 'tolerance' but more concretely of the material realities of property, money, food, education, income and profit.[528] He wants the Christian church to have 'a social gospel':

> We've got to deal with these *social conditions* that corrupt the soul ... the *economic conditions* that corrupt the soul, the *slum conditions* ... I would say to you this morning that one-tenth of one per cent of the population of this nation controls almost fifty per cent of the wealth, and I don't mind saying that there's something wrong with that. I don't mind saying that too often in capitalism we've taken necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. *I* will never be content, I will never rest until all of God's children can have the basic necessities of life.[529]

King says that 'Marx arouses our conscience',[530] he gives Marx a 'partial yes' and claims that 'capitalism has failed to meet the needs of the masses'. It takes no great leap of faith to imagine that he would be equally candid today in his critique of the dominant world

[526] Slavoj Žižek, *Democracy Now!* interview.
[527] Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, 'The Martin Luther King you don't see on TV' (01/04/1995), http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2269 (last accessed 12/08/2010).
[528] King, 'Can a Christian be a Communist?', pp. 449-52 (emphasis added).
[529] King, 'Can a Christian be a Communist?', p. 451.
[530] King, 'Can a Christian be a Communist?', p. 449.

economic system, where we are witnessing the growth of the slum[531] and wealth is ever more unequally distributed. For many, accustomed to the safe simulation of a benign multiculturalist concerned with racial tolerance rather than revolutionary socio-economic reform, the idea of Martin Luther King Jr. joining an anticapitalist rally at a G20 meeting seems absurd. But it should not be. The future that King envisages is not only post-racist but also post-capitalist.

David L. Lewis notes the intensity of King's 'conviction that Marx had constructed a valid schema for assaying the defects of capitalism'[532] and that towards the end of his life King 'began to speak more of the class struggle in addition to the racial'.[533] After the ambitious Chicago Freedom Movement of 1966-67 (intended to end slums) King dropped his previous pragmatic progressivism − which he sardonically recalls as requesting 'a little change here, a little change there' − and instead called for 'a reconstruction of the *entire society*' that should implement the nationalisation of 'some' industries and a guaranteed annual income.[534] He publicly declared that 'something is wrong with the economic system of our nation ... something is wrong with capitalism'[535] and thus demanded a movement that would 'address itself to the restructuring of *the whole of American society*'.[536] Hartman repeats this call in *Lose Your Mother,* in which she argues that 'making good the promise of abolition … entails *much more* than the end of the property in slaves. *It requires the reconstruction of society*' (170, emphasis added). At the core of King's Poor People's Campaign was 'a $12 billion 'economic bill of rights' guaranteeing employment to all the able bodied, viable incomes to those unable to work, an end to housing discrimination, and

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[531] See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

[532] David L. Lewis, *Martin Luther King: A Critical Biography* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 36.

[533] Lewis, *Martin Luther King*, p. 375.

[534] Lewis, *Martin Luther King*, p. 354 (emphasis added).

[535] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Leadership Conference* (Perennial Classics: New York, 2004), p. 537.

[536] King in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 708 (footnote 13) (emphasis added).

the vigorous enforcement of integrated education'.[537] King believed that the United States government had 'a debt to the poor' and with this class-orientated, transracial march – which embraced thousands of poor white Americans, Native Americans and Americans of Mexican descent, as well as African Americans[538] – he was determined that 'we will place the problems of the poor at the seat of government of the wealthiest nation in the history of mankind'.[539] He called for 'massive civil disobedience and nonviolent sabotage' that, on top of his fierce opposition to the Vietnam War, alienated him from the political establishment, alarming and angering various power elites.[540] King joined striking refuse workers in Memphis, seeking, in Lewis V. Baldwin's view, 'more radical solutions' to the problems of grinding poverty and urban riots.[541] Tellingly, King decried 'our irrational, obsessive anti-Communism' and praised Du Bois for 'confronting the establishment,' noting that 'so many would like to ignore the fact that Du Bois was a Communist in his last years'.[542] It is fitting that the *Washington Post*, for whom Richburg reports, then decried King's project of intentional disruption as 'an appeal to anarchy'[543] rather than an appeal to justice. King was keen to stress that these economic goals did not make this movement Marxist, but at the same time he was certainly, undeniably, contemptuous of capitalism. In Hartman's travel book, the reader may sense an analogous, if more nuanced, form of radical, utopian thinking that demands wholesale societal change that transcends 'the limited emancipation against which we now struggle' (170).

'The Cradle of Life Bore an Uncanny Resemblance to the Grave': Life after Matricide

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[537] Lewis, *Martin Luther King*, p. 373.
[538] Lewis V. Baldwin in *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), p.368.
[539] Baldwin, *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 373.
[540] Baldwin, *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 147.
[541] Baldwin, *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 94.
[542] Lewis, *Martin Luther King*, p. 376.
[543] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 579.

Returning now to Hartman and *Lose Your Mother*, it is important to underscore her belief that 'I never felt as much of an American as I did when I was in Ghana'.[544] Her transnational, universal vision is certainly not the same as what Eagleton denigrates as the free-floating 'postmodern cult of the migrant' that remains blissfully ignorant of the fact that 'the rich have mobility while the poor have locality'.[545] It is instead a solemn, demystifying voice rooted in earthly materialism at the same time as it is concerned with the presence and absence of the dead. In the chapter entitled 'So Many Dungeons' we get a sense of this lyrical combination of candid materiality and ancestral aesthetics as she enters the Cape Coast Castle Dungeon:

> Every tale of creation I had ever read began in a place like this … . The cradle of life bore an uncanny resemblance to the grave, making plain the fact that the living eventually would assume their station among the ranks of the dead. Human life sprang from a black abyss, and from dust and muck we traced our beginning. Base elements were the substrate of life. Blood and shit ushered us into the world. … Adam and Eve were created in this filthy pit. (110)

Mother Africa is indeed lost in this cradle/cemetery, and in her place is the paradoxically productive 'black abyss' of subjectivity and the strangely fertile soil of the dungeon pit. Yet Hartman prefers to utilise the dirt of the dungeon, rather than the myth of the Mother, as the clay with which to mould her slavocentric subjectivity. Eschewing romance, she recognises the need for demystification to 'disenchant the myth' of 'a glorious perfect Mother Africa' in order to open up the space for a renewed, more authentic transatlantic connection:

> I don't feel like I'm destroying it [the myth of the motherland]. I feel like I'm definitely disenchanting that myth. And I guess I'm disenchanting the myth to say: but *there's the possibility of a connection that's even better* that awaits us in *the aftermath of that disenchantment*. So that we don't need a kind of a myth of a glorious perfect Mother Africa, and that there are commonalities and *there are certain sorts of experiences that can connect us*. And that that's actually better than a myth and much more promising for our future.[546]

If demystification is the first step, then it is a step taken too by Richburg. But it is in the critical second step, after the loss of the Mother and 'in the aftermath of that disenchantment',

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[544] Hartman, interview with Farai Chideya.
[545] Eagleton, *After Theory*, pp. 21-2.
[546] Interview with Farai Chideya, (emphasis added).

that the two diverge. In his rejection of the ancestral aesthetic, Richburg can see no value in metaphysical travel back in time to the dust and muck of the past, or forwards in time towards the speculative terrain of 'becoming together' with Africa in the future, preferring instead to make the literal journey back across the ocean to the tangible security of the United States. In truth, this is merely a leap from the myth of Mother Africa to the fable of Uncle Sam, replacing the old cultural shield of an idealised vision of Africa with a new stars and stripes model. Hartman, however, is able to perceive in the 'blood and shit' of the African dungeon the traumatic but transcendental nativity of her people, her 'tribe of the Middle Passage' that can be invoked in the service of future connections made on an experiential, rather than mystical, basis. It is to this tribe that she tethers her mobile identity as a travelling subject imbued with the fugitive's legacy of emancipatory struggle, a bequest that she feels duty-bound to carry forth into the contemporary fight against slavery 'in all its myriad forms'. This is, in essence, Hartman's usable past, which is interlinked with her rebellious, struggling subjectivity that informs the nuanced Marxism of her travel book.

In what has become a rare and rather retrograde move, Hartman articulates her desire for wholesale societal transformation alongside her desire to (re)assemble her interior self. In the following key passage, She discloses a yearning for a more 'capacious' vision of social justice that is above and beyond the narrow appeals for mere 'back wages' or 'debt relief' that have been 'recycled' thus far:

> The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails *much more* than the end of the property in slaves. *It requires the reconstruction of society*, which is the only way to honour our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs – an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present? Given this, I refuse to believe that the slave's most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief. There are too many lives at peril to recycle the forms of appeal that, at best, have delivered the limited emancipation against which we now struggle. (170, emphasis added)

Again, her intimacy with the dead is rooted in the rebellious activism of their lives. Moreover, this activism demands genuine and authentic reconstruction at the level of social relations, not simply administrative gestures of fiscal compensation. Hartman's premise here hints at the projection of a truly radical future and reveals her fondness for politically 'wild imaginings' – an unfashionable[547] defence of the utopian impulse that is in complete contrast to Richburg's limited Afro-pessimist vision. In addition, this wildly imagined possible future is to be actively fought for in the same recalcitrant spirit as the enslaved spectres of the past. Immediately prior to the above statement, Hartman had asserted that:

> The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken; it was not the kind of thing that could ever be given to you. The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back. Freedom is the kind of thing that required you to leave your bones on the hills at Brimsbay, or to burn cane fields, or to live in a garret for seven years, or to stage a general strike, or to create a new republic. It is won and lost, again and again. It is a glimpse of a possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished. (169-70)

Freedom for Hartman is so much more than the act of passing a law, or of ticking a box in periodic decorative elections – freedom is 'a practice' (233), it is precarious, it is something that has been and continues to be actively fought for by utilising defiant methods of noncompliance (such as mass strike action) that function *alongside* the internal practice of subjective reinvention, or 'the capacity for self-fashioning' upon which 'your life might just depend' (233). Her contemplation of Josiah Wedgwood's popular antislavery medallion (bearing the inscription 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?') provides further proof of this ferocious, rebellious spirit that refuses the supplicant posture of the bended knee:

> When I envisioned the slave I didn't think of this fellow on bended knee … . Once you have assumed the position of supplicant and find yourself genuflecting before the court or the bar of public opinion, then, like the strapping man on the medallion, you have conceded the battle. *It is hard to demand anything when you are on bended knee* or even to keep your head raised. And you can forget *trying to*

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[547] Terry Eagleton defends 'unfashionable' utopian thinking in his review of Russell Jacoby's *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (Basic Books: New York, 1999) in 'Defending Utopia', *New Left Review* 4 (July-Aug 2000), 173-6. Mike Davis also calls for 'a return to explicitly utopian thinking' in 'Who Will Build the Ark?', *New Left Review* 61 (Jan-Feb 2010), 29-46.

> *counter the violence* that has landed you on your knee in the first place. Being so low to the ground, it is difficult not think of freedom as gift. (169, emphasis added)

The slaves that Hartman writes into being in her travel narrative did not 'genuflect' on bended knee as Wedgwood's emblem suggests; they revolted, they countered violence, they struggled. Freedom was not requested; it was demanded. Moreover, Hartman asserts that any 'plea for recognition' of black suffering that is made today is 'the contemporary analogue to the defeated posture of Wedgewood's pet Negro' (169). She believes that 'the enslaved are our contemporaries [and] we share their aspirations and defeats' (169) and, therefore, 'to acknowledge that they accompany our every effort to fight against domination' (169) is to acknowledge their potent historical and spiritual presence amongst, or perhaps within, the living who struggle today.

In her evocative journey along the Atlantic slave route, Hartman immerses herself in the rebellious activity of these remembered/forgotten spectres of the past to inspire this manifesto in the present. According to Hartman's ocular model, gazing inwards and backwards unavoidably involves gazing outwards and forwards. *Lose Your Mother* espouses a pertinent politics of memory opposed to the historical amnesia of *Out of America*. The politics of amnesia, as Eagleton notes[548] in a way that resonates with Jacques Derrida's depiction of 'the amnesiac order of capitalist bourgeoisie (the one that lives, like an animal, on the forgetting of ghosts)',[549] habitually forgets this. As memories of collective and effective political action fade for present generations, Hartman's considered sense of duty and legacy endorses Eagleton's claim that 'if men and women need freedom and mobility, they also need a sense of tradition and belonging. There is nothing retrograde about roots'.[550] It is to these radical roots, disavowed by Richburg, that Hartman turns.

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[548] See 'The Politics of Amnesia', chapter one of Eagleton, *After Theory*.
[549] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 111.
[550] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 21.

'Honouring our Debt to the Dead': Spectres of Radicalism and the Politics of Memory.

Interspersing their own voice with that of Lucius C. Matlock circa 1845, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay note in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* that 'the soil of slavery' proved to be a 'fertile ground for the creation of a new literature, a literature indicting oppression, a literature created by the oppressed'.[551] Despite her position many generations after Matlock's era, and her privileged status as a relatively wealthy and relatively 'free' citizen of the global neoimperial superpower, Hartman pens a travelogue that upholds and updates this oppositional tradition. *Lose Your Mother* also maintains the radical tradition of travel writing in general – R. Victoria Arana accurately describes travel writing as 'oftentimes a revolutionary act'. [552] Furthermore, Hartman travels in the spirit of Toni Morrison's 'rememory' that compels the African American writer to recuperate the ancestor in order to (re)construct a people.[553] Whereas Richburg bluntly severs this generational link, unable to perceive a sense of duty founded upon collectively remembered experiences of oppression, Hartman registers this spectral voice, travelling to discover that the unfinished struggle against slavery 'in all its myriad forms' endures.

The fact that Hartman's voice springs from a traumatic but prolific literary earth is fundamental to her subjective position as something more than an academic researcher, writing something more than an objective scientific study. Drawing upon the African American traditions of autobiography, vernacular history, counter-cultural correction and political activism, *Lose Your Mother* manages to operate effectively as a mix of memoir and history with a nuanced Marxism beneath the surface that narrates a usable past rather than a maudlin myth. This is one reason for the author's autobiographical focus in the opening sections of the book. Without these 'precious details' (11) and 'fragments of stories and names that repeated themselves across generations' (13), the text loses a vital link between

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[551] *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. xxvii.
[552] R. Victoria Arana in *BMa, The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, 1.
[553] See the introduction to Morrison's work in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 2014.

the photographed, documented or vernacular familial past and the 'slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive' (17). Without this bond between remembered/forgotten mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers and the equally obscure 'lost tribe' (235) of the Middle Passage, the lucid temporality of the text that prompts the reader to acknowledge the endurance of slavery and the presence of, and responsibility to, the past, would be lost.

In this temporal lucidity and related sense of responsibility for the legacy of the dead, one may read in *Lose Your Mother* echoes of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994). Here, Derrida voices a call to 'certain others who are not present' that would not look out of place in the pages of Hartman's travelogue:

> If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice*. … No justice … seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.[554]

Lose Your Mother speaks with the same lexicon of ghosts, inheritance and generational responsibility. Hartman answers Derrida's call for the 'non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present'. The text could be usefully read alongside *Spectres of Marx* as an appeal to 'learn to live *with* ghosts' in an authentic, future-directed sense. When Derrida speaks of the necessity of 'being-with spectres', of 'inheritance, and of generations', he is advocating 'a *politics* of memory' akin to Hartman's task of remembrance, which in her own words 'requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honour our debt to the dead' (170). In exorcising the ghosts of the Middle Passage and subsequent African and African American struggles against oppression that Hartman so desperately seeks to evoke in the

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[554] All quotations on this page taken from Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. xix, emphases in original.

course of her narrative, Richburg defaults on this debt. Inevitably, this takes him down the path of conservatism, of the politics of forgetting.

Eagleton's concluding sentiments in *After Theory*, from the final chapter entitled 'Death, Evil and Non-Being',[555] may provide further clarity here. His dry remark that 'a society that is shy of death is also likely to be rattled by foreigners' is worth bearing in mind when we consider Richburg's reaction to the floating dead in the opening pages of *Out of America* and his ultimate detachment from Africa by the end of his travelogue. Richburg begins his text with a horrifying image of the fragility and iniquity of humanity – the corpses of the victims of the Rwandan genocide, most naked, some missing limbs and one of them a baby, feebly 'flapping against the current' as they drift down Rusumo Falls (xv). What Richburg observes in that moment, magnified by the fact that the black faces of the nameless dead 'look like me', is what Eagleton describes as the 'nauseously empty' nature of non-being.[556] The 'perverse purity' of 'absolute destruction' that Eagleton recognises in the idea of the Holocaust is repeated in the Rwandan genocide witnessed by Richburg in 1994, and witnessed first-hand by Richburg, who observes such malevolence during 'three years walking around amid the corpses' (xvi) in Africa, where poets are hanged and killers don Donald Duck masks. However, his response to this unimaginable horror is deeply troubling. Immediately after describing the floating corpses, he aggressively confronts the reader, threatening to 'rub your nose in the images of the rotting flesh' if you 'talk to me about Africa and my black roots and my kinship' (xvi). Hartman's glossary of ancestors, history, spirits and reawakening is replaced with the corporeal imagery of bodily decay. The ruinous narrative of non-sense and non-being observed in the images of dead bodies and rotting flesh is turned inward to the point of self-destruction. Richburg wishes to expunge from his mind

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[555] Eagleton, *After Theory*, pp. 208-222.
[556] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 216.

the anonymous black non-beings of Africa because they represent a threat to his reinforced sense of selfhood as a black American citizen.

But how can we then live in the Derridean sense of living 'finally', ethically, 'without a tutelary present… *with* ghosts'[557]? Hartman willingly travels to make the 'encounter with nothing', acknowledges the fragility of humanity and then seeks to create something of value from the vestiges of the past in the service of the future. She sees the strangeness in the African but she also sees it in herself, and she is able to do so because her more nuanced relationship to the ancestor (and therefore to death) allows her to acknowledge the inescapability of non-being. Hartman's self-configuration as stranger encapsulates the intimacy between the living and the dead and simultaneously between ourselves and other human beings. In *The Fire Next Time* (a book cited by Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (169), and also referred to by Angela Davis as one of the most influential she has ever read)[558] – James Baldwin writes too of the obligation that comes with human finitude:

> It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death – ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. On is responsible to life: it is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.[559]

It is for the sake of those who come after, in the service of those who have been before, that Hartman seeks to open up the space for an 'elusive elsewhere' of authentic emancipation from slavery 'in all its myriad forms'. This slavocentric struggle is indispensable If Hartman is to retain her identity as an *African* American, which is something neither Richburg nor Harris can do. But what 'myriad forms' does slavery take, exactly? Marx distinguished (and asserted the relationship) between wage slavery and 'slavery pure and simple' in *Capital*.[560] Paul Gilroy is unambiguous in his endorsement of this historical model:

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[557] Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. xviii.
[558] Davis in *African American Philosophers*, p. 20.
[559] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 99 (emphasis in original).
[560] Marx, *Capital* http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (last accessed 12/08/2010)

> We abolished formal slavery but we didn't abolish wage slavery. To abolish wage slavery we need something more. Part of the answer is the rebuilding of a socialist and left tradition that involves both black and white. That is the tradition we need to join with – black and white – *an unbroken tradition of the fight against slavery*, in order to fight against racism and division today. That's our history and we ought to take it on again.[561]

Hartman similarly calls for something more than 'the limited emancipation against which we now struggle' and argues that 'making good the promise of abolition … entails much more than the end of the property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society' (170). Yet in her reluctance to explicitly refer to the tradition of the political left, she falls short of Gilroy's explicitly socialist fervour. Perhaps this brings her travel writing closer to that of Richard Wright, whose exilic, outsider consciousness (that is itself not unlike Hartman's self-depiction as a lost member of the liminal 'tribe of the Middle Passage' who 'doesn't belong anywhere') enacted 'a humanist tradition that builds on the best of the West and East' without unequivocally endorsing either.[562]

'Potential Unleashed': Hartman's Reinvented Struggling Subject

Tracing 'the invention of the subject as the central category of philosophy,' Etienne Balibar describes Marx's materialist recognition that 'the subject is practice' as 'the most accomplished form of the idealist tradition.'[563] Subjectivity in the modern period, says Balibar, is closely linked to the idea that the subject of activity 'liberates itself,' and therefore one can read Marx's 'true practical subject' (the proletariat) in contra-conjunction with the Kantian 'human' subject, Fichte's subject of 'the people' and Hegel's evolutionary subject of 'world-spirit' or 'historical peoples.'[564] Hartman's subject as expressed in *Lose Your Mother* could, I argue, be incorporated into this philosophical tradition of materialist emancipatory practice that for Balibar is the pinnacle of philosophical idealism and subjective invention.

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[561] See 'What Ended Slavery? Paul Gilroy and Weyman Bennett'
[562] Cornel West, Introduction to *Black Power*, p. xiii.
[563] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, pp. 26-7.
[564] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, pp. 26-7.

While Richburg ultimately expresses exclusionary subjective nationalism – the 'irrefutable truth' that he is on the right path as an American and thus 'feels no attachment' to the 'darkness' of Africa or its people (247-8) – and in Harris we read a more humanist sensibility that appeals to a universal essence of 'love' or 'what you carry inside' (314), Hartman instead identifies the subject within the ensemble of rebellious direct action. Specifically, her subjectivity can only be made anew on the site of social activism and on the side of the subjugated, as part of the 'struggle for autonomy' that 'exceeds borders' and 'dreams of a world house' rather than a White House (233-4). Although she does not specify precisely what 'myriad forms' slavery might take in the present ongoing struggle, one may infer, given her economist conception of the slave trade (205-10), her stress on resistance as central to a practical subjectivity (233-4), her denigration of capitalism (47, 160, 207), her description of IMF 'structural adjustment' as 'the new slavery' (45) and indeed her references to Marx (47, 60, 114, 208), that slavery to capital may in fact be one of them (also, in the penultimate paragraph to the 'blood and dirt' passage from *Capital* quoted by Hartman in *Lose Your Mother*, Marx refers to 'the veiled slavery of the wage workers').[565] Or, at the very least, we may understand her 'becoming together' (234) with Africans as being predicated upon the on-going fight against neoimperialism, which therefore entails the denunciation of a global political and economic order that, to repeat Ellen Meiksins Wood, is 'manipulated in the interests of a few imperial powers, and one in particular.'[566]

Hartman's precise understanding of her African American identity is deeply intertwined with this ideological position. She is not 'not African' simply because she is culturally 'American' and nor on the other hand is she 'African' merely because she is 'human'. Rather, she suggests the possibility of 'naming oneself anew' as part of 'the practice of freedom' that moves beyond such straightforward definitions:

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[565] Marx, *Capital* http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (last accessed 12/08/2010)
[566] Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, p. 156.

> If I learned anything in Gwolu, it was that old identities sometimes had to be jettisoned in order to invent new ones. Your life might just depend on this capacity for self-fashioning. *Naming oneself anew was sometimes the price exacted by the practice of freedom*. Maybe this was what the priest had intended to suggest by the words 'African people,' that is, they referred not to the past or to an extant collectivity but to *a potential unleashed by struggles for autonomy and democracy*. The priest might have said 'fugitives' or 'migrants' or 'commoners' or 'dreamers'. As circumstances changes, so did the ways we imagined ourselves. (233-4, emphasis added)

In her journey along the Atlantic slave route, both in empirical terms (via frustrating cross-cultural encounters and observation) and as part of her historical research, Hartman interrogates the appellation 'African' before resolving that it must be reinvented in order to have any meaning in the present to her as an African American. 'Thinking hard' about 'the Africa in African American,' Hartman asks:

> Was it the Africa of royals and great states or the Africa of disposable commoners? Which Africa was it that we claimed? (30)

Later, at the end of her narrative, she concludes that 'Africa was never one identity, but plural and contested ones' (231), and likewise the term 'African people':

> 'African people' represented no unanimity of sentiment or common purpose or recognisable collectivity but rather heterogeneous and embattled social groups. The identity unravelled as it was projected back in time. ... *African people* crossed the lines of raider and captive, broker and commodity, master and slave, kin and stranger. … Africa was never one identity, but plural and contested ones. (230-1)

Believing in an explicitly Foucauldian sense that the past is never 'given' (133), Hartman thus comes to understand the slipperiness of the term 'African' within different communities according to material conditions of existence and conflicting narratives of a shared history of slavery. For Africans, the history of the slave trade is a history of resolve, escape and precolonial purity – which Hartman's very presence 'tainted' (214) – while for Hartman it is a story of dispossession, defeat and loneliness. The identities that are tethered to these narratives of the past are vital because, says Hartman, 'names conjure different futures' (231). Perhaps this is why Richburg can only see darkness in Africa's future.

Finally, in *Lose Your Mother* Hartman loses the loss. There was no 'Afrotopia.' Her African Eden, the mythical diasporan Motherland from which she was dispossessed, was in fact the bloody, messy, iniquitous birthplace of both capitalism and the African American subject. But this is not the end of the story. Following this loss of the loss, Hartman resolves to fill the subjective void with a newly-articulated African selfhood that is based upon common experiences, the consequence of a shared historical understanding of subjugation under an imperialist economic order that continues to enslave those people who are, to use Cornel West's phrase, 'on the underside of modernity'[567] today. Hartman's subjective strategy adheres to the Marxist theory of the subject as practice, concretely located within history and actually-existing social relations. Diametrically opposed to Richburg and more explicitly radical than Harris, Hartman's thoughtful travel narrative articulates a contemporary call to action that resonates with Marx's declaration to his German readers in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, effectively modified here 'for those of us who live in the 'advanced' capitalist countries today' by Colin Leys:

> If ... the [British or American] reader pharisaically shrugs his shoulders at the condition of the [African populations], or optimistically comforts himself with the thought that in [Britain or the USA] things are not nearly so bad, I must plainly tell him: '*De te fabula narrator*!'[568]

Furthermore, *Lose Your Mother* resonates with West's call for a philosophical method that is able to relate with 'history, struggle [and] suffering, how we cope with suffering, how we overcome social misery'.[569] In his introduction to Richard Wright's *Black Power*, West also justifiably argues that 'the time is ripe to return to his [Wright's] vision and voice in the face

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[567] Cornel West in *African American Philosophers*, p. 39.
[568] 'This story is about you.' Leys, 'Confronting the African Tragedy' 47. See also Karl Marx, *Preface to the First German Edition of Capital* (1867)   http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm (last accessed 12/08/2010)
[569] Cornel West interview in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 38.

of our contemporary catastrophes'.[570] Hartman's compelling travelogue is a potent response

to this call.

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[570] West, Introduction to *Black Power*, p. xiii.

CHAPTER THREE

'A Strange Peace'

Intranational African American Travel Writing

> But wait a minute. This is still America I'm running through. These people are still *my* people. I'm one of their own ... . They won't harm me. They won't disappoint me.
>
> – Eddy L. Harris[571]

> It is worth noting that whilst many travel writers set off for far-flung regions, there is also a well-established literature of 'home travels'.
> – Carl Thompson[572]

Within the African American tradition, the familiar and 'intricate entwining of travel and identity'[573] continues to make the travel text a particularly suitable literary vehicle for the affirmation, discovery or renegotiation of rebellious selfhoods that, to paraphrase Colleen J. McElroy, allows the author 'to push against the black/white limits of anyone's map'.[574] The transformative and enabling practice of travel has allowed Americans of African descent to fully imagine themselves as recognised citizens of their country of birth, journeying and writing in defiance of processes of racialised exclusion, operative at both institutional and cultural (and psychological) levels, which have often prohibited travel and writing about travel. Antebellum slave narratives such as William Wells Brown's, as Pettinger[575] and Youngs[576] have noted, became founding texts for the African American literary tradition, establishing a profound association between geographical mobility and conceptions of freedom – a frame of reference that was to be inherited by subsequent travel writers seeking to claim the liberty of a nation by travelling freely and spontaneously within its borders. The desire to claim the contested national space as one's own persists for the contemporary

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[571] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 142.
[572] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 17.
[573] Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, (eds.), *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), p. 10.
[574] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 21.
[575] See Pettinger 'One Negro Everywhere'.
[576] See Youngs, 'Black/White Limits'.

authors considered in this chapter, who likewise adopt geographical mobility as a limit-breaking gesture of the right to belong. By turning an authoritative gaze inward to examine and assess the condition of their nation-state, these writers also stake a claim for the right to condemn, to critique and to study North America without needing to call upon the stylistic device of the greener grass of foreign soil as an embellished and ultimately illusory alternative Eden.

This chapter will examine three African American narratives of travel within and across North America: Eddy L. Harris' *Mississippi Solo: A Memoir* (1988),[577] which documents the author's madcap quest to canoe the length of the Mississippi River from Minnesota to New Orleans; Ishmael Reed's *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* (2003),[578] an Oakland resident's devoted account of the history and frustrating contemporary politics of the town, consisting of diary narration, photographs and interviews; and Randall Kenan's *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (1999),[579] an ambitious combination of ethnography, autobiography and travel narrative that attempts to chronicle the nature of blackness in contemporary North America. The fact that both Harris and Kenan ultimately feel a sense of 'strangeness' in their literal and subjective location 'at home' in the United States – Kenan feels 'a strange kind of peace' (639) while Harris senses 'a strange kind of cleft, one that strangely unites' (66) – testifies to a hesitancy, perhaps a lingering ambivalence, a residue of W. E. B. Du Bois' infamous 'double-consciousness'[580] modified for the contemporary era. The overtly politically engaged Reed augments this ambivalence with an unflinching radical activist sentiment attentive to the destructive force of neoliberal economic policies upon the exploited poor of Oakland.

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[577] Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo* (New York: Owl Books, 1988). All subsequent references in this chapter are included in parenthesis.

[578] Ishmael Reed, *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* (Crown, 2003). All subsequent references in this chapter are included in parenthesis.

[579] Randall Kenan, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999). All subsequent references in this chapter are included in parenthesis.

[580] See *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *The Norton Anthology*.

Utilising the political potential of the travel book form, Reed circumvents the pensive contemplation of elusive and strange national or racial identities and turns to a solidarity based on urgent political and economic interests, praising a multi-ethnic union-led protest rally – described as 'a textbook proletariat march' (170) – and also documenting police brutality at an anti-Iraq war march on 'Black Monday', April 7 2003 (168). Rather than merely cultural, then, Reed's subjectivity is inextricably linked to his political worldview and opens possible future horizons for cross-racial solidarity according to shared class concerns within the United States.

Before developing these themes further, I will first consider Harris' quest to canoe along the mighty Mississippi River in *Mississippi Solo*, a text that exhibits a robust desire to claim a particularly masculine and adventurist American selfhood, demonstrated in the author's deeply symbolic choice of setting, daring mode of transport and traditional formal literary style.

'Damn Right, I'll Make It!': Harris' American Adventure

The narrative current of *Mississippi Solo* meanders largely in accordance with the conventional structure of what Thomas Ruys Smith terms 'the modern canoe narrative'.[581] In 'The Mississippi River as Site and Symbol', Smith identifies a 'litany' of familiar ritualistic tropes common to these contemporary adventurist, usually white-authored, travel books:

> Incompetence gives way to growing expertise; the river's mysteries are slowly revealed; initial enthusiasm wanes; disaster – the threat of drowning or violence – steels the will; finally, the destination is reached. The Mississippi is respectfully conquered. Emphasis is placed upon individual effort and self-improvement.[582]

At the onset of his journey, Harris is avowedly a callow canoeist. The first three miles 'take forever', rapids throw him into a rock, he becomes stuck downstream and admits to having

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[581] Thomas Ruys Smith, 'The Mississippi River as Site and Symbol', in Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 74.
[582] Smith, p. 74.

'no canoeing skill' (24-26). Waning, feeling that 'the river has become an adversary' (26), he promptly ponders the wisdom of this arduous solitary adventure – '*I can give up, get out right now and just die. It'll be easier. ... What in the world am I doing here?* (27-8, emphasis in original). Such fatalism is in stark contrast to the book's opening pages, full of defiant optimism and enthusiasm, where Harris asserts that '*Damn right, I'll make it!*' (10, emphasis in original) and marvels – 'My God!' – at 'the greatest river in the world' (16).

But 'make it' he does. Following Smith's formal model, difficulty and disaster only steels the will of this dogged daredevil undertaking 'this dance of death, this ritual where a man sets out to test himself' (138-9) on the great Mississippi, that paradigmatic site of all-American adventurism. Harris enters into a 'marriage' with the river – '*till death do us part*' – and embraces 'an adventure, a challenge … . *Just put in and see if you can handle it, see how far you can get*' (32, emphasis in original). The most palpable potential disaster – the threat of drowning – is ever-apparent on treacherous waters. Even in the final furlong, by which time Harris has morphed into 'a river man, more comfortable on water than land' (155), he faces a daunting encounter with 'big waves … the threat of death … . I've got to go. I've got to make it. … There death is, staring me right in the face … . The last twenty yards are as hard as the first twenty' (248-9). That other disaster – the threat of violence – takes both human and animal forms, be it the 'redneck crackers with shotguns' (217) who emerge from the woods 'like goons out of a chain saw-chop 'em up movie' (208-9), the bee 'with a sweet bee face' that stings him in the head (192) or wild dogs surrounding his tent (166-8). None of these perils deter Harris the (almost) archetypical earnest canoeist-hero, who repeatedly refuses to yield: 'you'll not quit. You'll never quit' (37), 'I don't want to fail' (46), 'I knew what I had to do. Or else I could never look at the river again (139), 'I would not be quitting today' (217), 'to hell with death' (248). Ultimately, the Mississippi – or 'this damned river' (249) – is conquered – 'what a triumph' (249) – but in accordance with the rituals of

the modern American canoe narrative, this consecrated site is accorded due respect, with Harris assuming the voice of the Mississippi to tell himself that 'you've done a good thing and come a long way. But don't forget that it was me who brought you here, me who helped you, me who allowed you to do this thing. I'm stopping you here' (250). At the Huey P. Long Bridge Harris finally concedes that 'it's time to quit' (249). He regretfully hitchhikes on 'a funny looking aluminium boat' (250) to New Orleans, with his canoe on board. The river is thus configured as the ultimate authority and by extension nature is portrayed as a greater force than humanity. In what is evidently a personal quest of self-improvement, self-testing and self-definition, Harries is a 'better man' for undertaking this pilgrimage, 'a stronger man … . The river has helped me to improve my soul (243). To paraphrase the well-known Langston Hughes poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (1921),[583] Harris' soul becomes deep like the river. For an African American to achieve synergy with such a mythical site – 'I look at the Mississippi and I see a symbol of America, the spine of the nation, a symbol of strength and freedom and pride, wanderlust and history and imagination' (30) – the cavernous depths of which contain 'the spirits of the men and women who had used this river before me and carved out this country … . I couldn't forget them' (139), this sense of solidarity is deeply significant. If he is the river; he is American.

'I'm Totally Alone. This is Wilderness': B(l)ackpacking, Experience, Death Value

At first glance, Harris may appear to be caught up in the triumphal late-twentieth century 'rush' to 'discover' and 'experience' 'rugged ravines away from signs of civilisation' on the part of the enabled classes of the Western world.[584] What could be described as 'backpacker sentiment' does filter in and out of *Mississippi Solo*, and there are some parallels to be drawn between Harris the 'city fellow' (118) turned 'river man' (90), and the familiar stereotypical

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[583] *The Cambridge Companion to African American Literature*, p. 1254.
[584] Kaur and Hutnyk, *Travel Worlds*, pp. 2-3.

figure of the Western middle-class cultural backpacker tourist who ventures in search of authentic, pure Experience, as defined here by Peter Phipps:

> 'Experience' is an elusive quality which, regardless of its intangibility, is a powerful rationale for some of the otherwise inexplicably strange and dangerous pursuits of contemporary tourism. … First World tourists share the modernist concern about the loss of a realm of authentic experience beleaguered by the extension of the market.[585]

Sharing these modernist concerns, Harris denigrates the saturation of the inauthenticity of American mediascapes and touristic consumption, positing his own life-threatening adventure as the palpable inversion of this safe virtual 'zoo':

> Now life is a media event. … Is this what we've become? Mere spectators at a zoo? With real living removed from us and kept safely behind bars?
> … Computerised, mechanised, itemised, formalised, and most dangerously, standardised. Laws hemming us in and fencing us out … . Hotel chains and fast food joints standardise travel and eating. Dallas looks like Denver looks like Tacoma looks like Tallahassee. Travelling is truly home away from home. No surprises … .
> Taking chances. Isn't that what life is all about? … Without the risk of defeat, where is the triumph? Without death hanging over the head, what value is life? (29-30)

It is interesting that Harris also summons the image of Disneyland, Baudrillard's archetypical example of simulacra, the function of which is to make the surrounding area, i.e. the adult 'real world' of Los Angeles, appear authentic in order to save the reality principle. Harris recognises the tenuous veracity of both Disneyland and 'the real world', but holds firm to the 'creamy centre' of being, a centre sustained by the threat of its very erasure, namely death:

> My thoughts strangely turned towards Disneyland.
>
> This riding of the river is not unlike a ride at Disneyland. … The difference, however, is that while the spine tingles and the blood rushes through the body at a furious pace during the excitement of Disneyland, you know that you are never in any real danger. When the day is done you pack up the car and head back to the real world. Back to your cares and woes, the distractions that heap layer upon layer of enamel coating that keep us from getting at the sweetness – or the yuk – that is our warm and creamy centre.
> … Each day on the river I shed more and more of my eternal self until I find eventually that I'm left totally alone with the core. (33-4)

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[585] See Peter Phipps 'Tourists, Terrorists, Death and Value', in *Travel Worlds*.

The value of death and danger invoked here by Harris is another key component of backpacker logic. For Harris, the dual artifices of Disneyland and 'the real world' are no match for his hazardous canoe adventure to the core of his being to face death, which he does in the book's final triumphal pages (248). The reason for his dangerous sojourn thus accords with the logic of the contemporary tourist's 'otherwise inexplicably dangerous pursuits'[586]:

> Like the backpacker, then, Harris seeks to (re)assemble a connection between self and world that can only be achieved in a state of sublime solitude, located at the primordial site of the old Mississippi River as far away from the technologically advanced bureaucracy and routine of the metropolitan centre as possible. Struck by the fact that 'I'm totally alone. This is wilderness' (23), Harris rejoices at his new-found liminal status while on the river, far away from the restrictive cartography of humanity:

> I wasn't sure where I was anymore, Arkansas or Mississippi. Even the map called them indefinite boundaries. I didn't know where I was, and I didn't care. The river had become a sanctuary once more, tranquil, a haven far from the world of man. … The solitude becomes the norm, a haven. … The serenity bathes you in peace … . You're not fit for the company of men because they make you angry and restless. They don't understand you and you no longer understand them. (203)

Both Harris and Phipps' touristic backpacker are engaged in an escapist search for this transformative and tranquil haven of authenticity away from the intrusive hoards of the metropole. Harris' gratification at morphing into a wild river man unsuitable for humanity is also palpable. His very choice of the canoe as his mode of transport, with a tent to sleep in at night, could also certainly be read as an attempt to escape the safety and commercialism – and thus inauthenticity – of comfortable cruise trips, or even the less comfortable but certainly more convenient car. Indeed, every time he has to leave his canoe and hitchhike, he feels as if he is cheating, the implication being that there are certain rules to follow, rules which correspond partially with the backpacker's code of austerity that attaches

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[586] Phipps, p. 79.

'disproportionate value' on psychical sufferings, danger, and 'the austerities of 'authentic' travel' on the cheap.[587]

However, *Mississippi Solo* does not in the end reproduce what Phipps criticises as 'the banalities of the romanticist travelogue'.[588] Rather than backpacking, it may be more accurate to describe Harris as 'blackpacking'.[589] The very act of making this journey defies the practices of racialised exclusion and 'orientalist ideological work' that hinders access to travel for so many and 'continue[s] today as the underbelly of the tourist industry.'[590] Although Harris does not want to make race an issue, his status as a solitary black male traveller inevitably results in a different travelling experience. He is aware before the journey of his anomalous status and, in an echo of McElroy, he is determined to defy attempts to pin him down because of his race:

> The travel magazines seem not to want blacks to travel … . The advertisement photos rarely – extremely rarely – show blacks enjoying exotic holiday destinations. Why?
> … You don't fund many blacks going solo down the Mississippi River and camping out every night. Why not? Are there evils out there to greet them if they do?
> … There is no place on earth where I can't go, where I don't belong, and nothing I can't do. (14)

(A cursory comparison of the above passage with Harris' later African travelogue *Native Stranger* reveals a more pessimistic modification of this sentiment, as Harris feels no such sense of belonging in the ancestral homeland). Travel, as noted earlier, is foregrounded for the African American traveller, or blackpacker, in specific ways. Moreover, certain dangers are not actively sought out by Harris. He encounters racism and even has a shootout. The blackpacker cannot enjoy the austerities of travel with quite the same hedonism as his white counterpart. Furthermore, Harris in no way occludes inequalities or engages in the voyeuristic consumption of poverty (I will discuss this further later). Yet there are certainly crossovers,

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[587] Phipps p. 81
[588] Phipps p. 81.
[589] Hester in *BMa*.
[590] Kaur and Hutnyk, p. 4.

certainly for the male blackpacker. Like the adventure tourist Harris' sense of self-improvement is bathed in masculinity and risk taking. He seeks to transform his urban, civilised self by injecting a large dose of survivalist 'tough-guy' activity. His escapism is not simply racially codified; alongside the defiant limit-breaking that asserts his right to travel as a black person, he also desires the authentic 'Experience' that transcends race.

'Now I am a Man and my Parents Can't Stop me': *Mississippi Super-Ego*

This modernist escapist sentiment may be supplemented with a measure of psychoanalytical interpretation here. *Mississippi Solo* seems to support Freud's famous assertion that 'a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfilment of early wishes to escape the family and especially the father'. [591] That the motivation for canoeing the length of the Mississippi is the fulfilment of childhood cravings is immediately explicated in the opening pages of the book. A recurring adolescent nightmare of crashing into the river on a family car journey is recalled (1), as Harris discloses his inner drive to conquer the mighty river in defiance of parental parameters:

> As a child I feared this river and respected it more than I feared God. … The river captured my imagination when I was young and has never let go. … I wanted to go … . I just wanted to go. But my parents wouldn't let me.
> But now I am a man and my parents can't stop me. I stand at that magical age, thirty, when a man stops to take stock of his life and he reflects on all the young-man's dreams that won't come true. No climbs up Everest, no try-out with the Yankees, no great American novel. Instead, reality. (1-2)

A somewhat prosaic Freudian analysis could proceed here by reading *Mississippi Solo* as simply a symptom of Harris' neuroses. The overt content of the travelogue – a classic canoe adventure, authored by a young black man (re)claiming America as his own – could be extricated in this fashion from the more covert concerns of the traveller's psyche, with the psychological phenomenon of transference exhibited in Harris' bond with the river. Indeed, the somewhat clichéd symbol of the river – especially the great Mississippi – is tailor-made

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[591] There are manifest masculinist leanings associated with this methodology, as well at the threats of imposing a violent reading upon the text, so I approach with caution here.

for such devices as transference, condensation and displacement. As contemporary African American travel writing is characteristically primarily concerned with identity and the ongoing journey of the self – an unavoidably psychic sojourn – the adoption of such metaphorical devices seems appropriate in the self-reflexive travel text. It is true that Harris' Mississippi is rendered as paternal and masculine, 'a strong, fathering kind of river' (1), it is 'brown and heavy and slow … always working – like my father – always travelling, always awesome and intimidating' (1), and it even goads him with fatherly superego injunctions:

> That's what the river said to me in the night, daring me to succeed the same as my father used to bait me when I was a kid, daring me to try something new, pushing me to be strong and courageous, preparing me for life. I accepted his challenges; I accepted the river's.
> But I was still scared. (32)

That 'to succeed' can also mean to supplant or usurp gives this watery dare an oedipal edge. Moreover, at one point the frightful psycho-historical 'old man river' of the South – 'filled with nightmares of slavery and lynchings' (142) as well as the aforementioned childhood nightmares of family tragedy (1) – fills Harris with such dread that the protective symbol of the mother is invoked to soothe the anxious traveller wary of 'father's fury':

> The beast in the river still frightened me – the submerged creatures, the animals down below, the spooky noises on shore at night. But the old man river raging would give me strength and old mom river was protecting me from father's fury and teaching me to read his moods. (142)

Harris' fearful admiration of the primordial paternal authority of the Mississippi eventually leads to a contest, as he meets its challenge with physical endurance and sheer 'toughness':

> You crusty old river, crafty dog. You're tough, but I'm tougher. I'm not going to let you beat me. Not after all this, all we've been through together. You've taught me so much. Now I'm going to show you just how much. (247)

After doing just that, the voice of the still-mighty river enters the text to offer validation, telling Harris that 'Eddy, you're all right' (250). To properly complete the quest, Eddy finally

has 'a cold beer, a bath, a Dominican cigar and dinner' (25) before one final overtly macho ritual:

> Something was not quite right, not completely finished. Not until I ordered two brandies in Styrofoam cups that I could take along with me. I went down to the river, drank one, and poured the other one in. (250)

The young man's psychopilgrimage is complete. Harris the frightened child has undergone a transformative journey to a fuller selfhood, a fuller manhood, a fuller nationhood, under the guiding hand of the old man river. He declares that 'I am the river' (124) and experiences 'some sort of synergy with the river' (169). This reassuring sense of unity with an ancient, archetypical symbol of American manhood is a soothing antidote at a time when gendered and national identities are becoming increasingly blurred, with Harris' anxiety over the former disclosed as he jokes that 'the modern life is turning us into sissies' (137). Certainly, canoeing the length of the Mississippi River is no job for a 'sissy'.

The lexicon of dreams, nightmares, the nation, childhood, the father, God and, most intriguingly, 'reality', may invite a brief Lacanian intervention here. The Mississippi is employed metonymically in the text, as a glut of forms is submerged beneath its surface, which complicates any straightforward designation of the river as simply the father. The river is also 'God' or 'the river god' (36), it is 'big hearted like your grandmother… a great-grandfather, a church elder, an old man' (66), 'my best friend' (113), 'an adversary' (26), and of course it is himself (124). Harris' Mississippi is, to use Lacanian terminology, 'the big Other'. This becomes clearer in the following passage:

> The river. Big hearted like your grandmother. Stern like those stories of your best friend's father. Double edged like a broadsword and sharp as a razor carving its way through the terrain even as it snakes its way into my being, *creating a deep rift and even filling in the void as it goes.* A strange kind of cleft, one that strangely unites instead of dividing. … A great-grandfather, a church elder, an old man sitting day after day on the same bench in a small town. *You might never have paid much attention to him. But he has his effect.*
> The river can't help but connect, like the old man touching lives however subtly. Or like a national purpose. Like a favourite baseball team.

> Like poverty. Something shared. *A common understanding. … A common language that holds together like a delicate infrastructure. No nails, no glue, just some sort of mysteriously strong bond.* Like baptism. (66-7, emphasis added)

If the Lacanian big Other is 'the symbolic order that regulates social life'[592] then its omnipresence is marked here, both figuratively, institutionally and linguistically, in the form of the unnoticed elderly man on a park bench, patriotism, religion, sport, in language itself. It the symbolic gaze of this absolute big Other that joins Harris in his canoe, scrutinising him throughout *Mississippi Solo*. This gaze is not only evident in the aforementioned superego injunction to accept the challenge of making the arduous pilgrimage in the first place; there is also the impossible ethical Call to immortality, to 'do one's duty' by adequately honouring 'the spirits of the men and women who used this river before me and carved out this country' (139).

Taking this methodology further (perhaps too far), one may conclude that Harris' rendition of this heavily condensed Mississippi River symbol serves in an obscurantist but therapeutic fashion to remedy the traumatic core of the subjective abyss. He does indeed admit that:

> Each day on the river I shed more and more of my external self until I find eventually that I'm left totally alone with the core, facing myself as angry and aggressive, often afraid, no physical superman. Just a man and nothing special. (34)

Along this journey to the lonely core of subjectivity, it is interesting to note in the previous passage that the river 'snakes its way into my being, creating a deep rift and even *filling in the void* as it goes' to produce 'a strange kind of *cleft, one that strangely unites* instead of dividing'. The strange unity of this interior fissure may disclose the Lacanian dialectical gaze between the ideal ego (Harris as the river) and the ego ideal (the Real river assessing his success or failure to attain this ideal self-image). That this unsettling but constructive snake-

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[592] See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001).

like gaze plugs 'the void' may divulge a latent anxiety that – to borrow from Žižek – the big Other does not exist (as the efficient symbolic fiction).[593] To remedy this disquieting and disorientating suggestion, Harris turns on the one hand to the mythological subjective anchors of the American Mississippi 'river man' and the symbolic sense of commonality that stems from this, and then on the other hand to the 'violence in the Real of the body itself',[594] or rather to the arduous physical exertion and mortal danger of the solo canoe adventure, with the direct intervention of bodily pain expressed as the self-affirming masculine pleasure of self-testing.

'The Real South … Dirty and Poor like the Third World': Real America

Before one is drowned under the seemingly endless subterranean significations of the symbolic fiction of the Real Mississippi River, Harris momentarily drags the reader back into the more urgent and tangible truth of crippling poverty in the wealthiest nation on earth. It is worth noting that alongside such wistful associations as the old man on the bench, a national purpose and a favourite baseball team, Harris also listed poverty as a more malign unifying force ('The river can't help but connect … . Like poverty. Something shared. A common understanding'). Yet even he struggles to comprehend the poverty he encounters in the South along the Mississippi:

> I felt really and truly and finally in the South and this was the South I had always heard about. Dirty and poor like the Third World. (170)

> Dirt and squalor all around, It looked like Mexico. … I had thought even the most impoverished parts of this country were a zillion steps ahead of Third World poverty. I was wrong. This *was* the Third World. (200)

Harris is not your traditional romantic tourist. Although he 'sees' the mythical Mississippi River God, he also sees the reality of North American poverty. This brings him closer to Dickens, who also travelled along the Mississippi (although Dickens hated the river). This

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[593] Žižek, *On Belief.*
[594] Žižek, *On Belief.*

destitute Southern scene punctures for a moment Harris' virile bravado as the narrative's river man-hero. He admits that:

> I wanted to leave. I was much more comfortable and at peace on the river
> … . I can't take it, I guess. … I'm not as tough as I thought. I can't look
> at people so poor, so dead-ended and not want to cry. (200)

Desiring a return to his Mississippi haven, Harris struggles to stomach this version of American reality. In these fleeting visits to the underclass of America, *Mississippi Solo* momentarily departs from the escapist adventurism of the modern canoe narrative, and the subjective contemplation of the contemporary African American travelogue, and hints instead at the political potentiality of the travel book form. Ishmael Reed takes this further in his American travelogue *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland.* Before briefly attending to Reed's book, I will now move on to Randal Kenan's intriguing home travels.

'Abroad in my Own Land': Randall Kenan Travels to Black America

Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (1999) is a narrative of six years of extensive travel across North America in search of African Americans and the meaning of blackness, authored by novelist Randall Kenan. Part ethnography, part travelogue, partly a collection of essays or musings, partly a record of historical research, this ample and ambitious book is emblematic of a tradition that thrives on indeterminacy, invention and self-reflexivity. Composed chiefly of the author's personal reflections and transcripts, or recollections, of interviews (themselves written in novelistic prose but with extended passages of speech from the interviewee) with almost two hundred people, *Walking on Water* sets out on an audacious undertaking, both empirically and ontologically. This self-appointed task, as Kenan outlines below, is to interrogate the meaning and the existence of 'Black America' at the turn of the twenty-first century:

> Before I could affirm or identify, I had to go beyond my narrow world and
> see Black America. … To calm my soul, I needed to set out, to see for
> myself, as I wondered about the nature of my own blackness, to take my

question on the road. For, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, African Americans live all over this country. I wanted to know what they thought … I wanted to understand, in Alaska and Arizona, how black folk defined themselves, what they felt their culture was. If, indeed, they felt they had a culture. If 'we' were 'we.' (16-7)

Kenan's travel book thus enters into the ethnographic realm of the social explorer narrative, following in the footsteps of Booker T. Washington's *The Man Furthest Down* – but with a greater emphasis on the past and a penchant for the romantic – in the sense that the African American people he meets are presented as dynamic subjects who respond to their conditions[595]: they are community organisers, activists, politicians, artists, small businessmen, bankers, estate agents, blue collar workers, white collar workers, unemployed, retired, students, heterosexual, homosexual, even white. The guiding 'demographic topography'[596] of the census is invoked in the above passage as an early retort to what Kenan later calls the contemporary 'deluge of images' removed from 'the reality of day-to-day existence' (14) that mistakenly situates 'blackness' in the wider American imagination as being exclusively positioned within certain geographical sites, namely 'the urban North and the rural South'.[597] The scope of fellow contemporary African American travel writer Colleen J. McElroy's motif – namely her grandmother's admonition that 'they got some of us everywhere',[598] which is itself an echo of Langston Hughes' assertion in *I Wander as I Wonder* (1956) that 'there is at least one Negro everywhere'[599] – is transposed onto a North American rather than a global map. The analogous intention in Kenan's travelogue is to shatter racial stereotypes, raise consciousness and instil confidence by demonstrating the proliferation of black voices and histories across American space and time.

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[595] See Pettinger on Washington's travel book in 'One Negro Everywhere', p. 83-4.

[596] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 169.

[597] Kenan in V. Hunt, 'An Interview with Randall Kenan', *African American Review* 29 3 (Autumn 1995), 411-420; quotation at 419.

[598] Colleen McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), p. 7.

[599] Langston Hughes, *I Wander as I Wonder* (1956) in Pettinger, 'At Least One Negro Everywhere', p. 86

'Time' indeed, because Kenan unearths a number of historical personages on his travels, inscribing living and dead African American voices alongside his own to further this objective. To take one section as an example, when Kenan reaches Alaska he learns that 'most of the Alaska-Canadian Highway had been built by black men', an overlooked historical fact – in written, photographic and video records – that deepens his earlier 'spiritual connection' with the 'magisterial' landscape (268-9) and also propels his sense of duty to the collective memorisation of such forgotten personages: 'It pains me to think that any of these men should go to their graves in relative obscurity. They deserve to be as famous as the road they built' (271). As he determinedly makes the virtually erased black visages of Alaska reappear in his travel writing – going as far back as 1868 (281) – he also interviews a range of African Americans who call Alaska home in the present (268-96): Walter Furnace (a Republican congressman), Mahalah Ashley Dickerson (an eighty year-old lawyer), Evelyn Bailey (a beauty parlour owner), Jasmine Pennywell (Mrs Baily's fourteen year old granddaughter, who incidentally required a police guard at her school after suffering from racist abuse) and Eugene Heflin (Jasmine's older brother), who rejects the media-driven 'gangsta mentality' of Californian rapper stereotypes, is consequently called 'white boy' and tried to then 'prove' his blackness by stealing and carrying a knife, an example of the debilitating effects of the aforementioned market and media-driven 'deluge of images, largely negative, of violence. … Images of glorified gangsterism' (14). The catalogue of Alaskan African American voices, past and present, goes on:

> And on and on. The list is quite voluminous – but the message is quite clear:
> Black people have been in Alaska as long as white people, and they don't
> seem inclined to leave anytime soon. (283)

The broad structure of this sub-section on Alaska is repeated throughout *Walking on Water* for each state, city and town visited on the traveller's long journey across the continent of his birth. Whereas McElroy yearns to remain as physically mobile as her subjectivity in order to

transcend 'the simple black-and-white limits of state lines and borders'[600] and so affirm that 'home is anyplace on this planet',[601] Kenan's concern is with claiming a venerable 'blood-and-sweat connection' (4) to the vast landscapes of North America, 'from Arizona to Alaska' (17). Perhaps this is why, in the end, he decides not to travel to New York City, a decision that baffled his editor – 'You're writing a book about African America, and you are going to leave out New York City?' (636) – but makes sense when considering the intention of Kenan's travel book:

> What I hope is novel about this project is that I'm applying geography in a way that I don't think it has been applied before.
> When people think about African Americans, they think of the urban North and the rural South. … That's the way the American imagination deals with black folk. What I'm saying is: Look, there are black folks in New England, Martha's Vineyard, and Vermont. … There are black people all over: Alaska, the Great Basin, everywhere.[602]

For Kenan, home is America and America is Black America, from Arizona all the way to Alaska.

'Searching for this Thing called Blackness': Race and Nation as Willed Affirmation

The authorial decision to begin part one of *Walking on Water* with a heated argument between Kenan and an Ethiopian friend over the nature of Black America is significant here, as are Kenan's remarks (It is also noteworthy that he appears as a speaking character within the text, which I will discuss further with reference to ethnographic conventions below):

> "Look," I said, "we've become a part of this country in a way that no other black group has become a part of their country. I mean, we made this country. We still do. … Moreover, we've contributed to every aspect of American life, scientifically, legislatively, militarily, artistically … . Hell, we are America. … We've been here for over three hundred years, for Christ's sake. … How can we ignore our blood-and-sweat connection to this land? This very land here?"

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[600] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. ii.

[601] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 7. See also Tim Youngs, 'A Daughter Come Home?' and Glen Winfield, 'Black/White Limits' It should be noted that McElroy acknowledges her unavoidable status as 'a Western Woman' who has been 'shaped' by 'the bags and baggage of America', p. vi.

[602] Kenan in V. Hunt, 'An Interview with Randall Kenan', *African American Review* 29 3 (Autumn 1995), 411-420; quotation at 419.

> … The discussion haunted me for years afterwards … because I had not
> realised how deeply I felt about being an American, an African American.
> (4)

The preference inferred here is for a black American identity derived from action – be it the historical accomplishments of the past or the present, including the dual vocation of writing and travelling of Kenan himself – rather than solely from essence; for a less mystical (but not completely devoid of mystique) and more materialist combination of the blood of ancestry that delimits racial identity with the sweat of labour that has literally built a nation. It is through this evolutionary process of 'blood-and-sweat' becoming that Kenan is able to see the perhaps surprising potential for love in the imagined concept of the nation, as outlined by Benedict Anderson:

> In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals
> (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of
> nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with
> racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love.[603]

> The fact is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while
> racism dreams of eternal contaminations.[604]

Kenan's subscription to the utopian fraternity of American dreams – '… Once upon a dream …' (392) – would have been far more difficult for earlier generations of African American travellers who were themselves more familiar with the 'near-pathological character' of the United States. In preparation for the *Walking on Water* project, Kenan reads fellow African American novelist John A. Williams' travel book *This Is My Country Too* (1965). Like Kenan, Williams confesses that 'I set out in search of an old dream … the search for my America'[605] but, as Kenan notes with some alarm:

> I – so much the product of integration, affirmative action, the 'New South',
> a Child of the Dream – could not help but be awed and terrified by how he,
> a man of African descent, was viewed and in turn viewed the United States

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[603] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 141.
[604] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 149.
[605] Williams in *Walking on Water*, p. 17.

> of America; how he was treated miserably … . Reading his account, for me, was like reading about another planet … .(17)

Struck by the alterity of Williams' America, Kenan consciously situates his book within African American literary and sociocultural history as being the product of a markedly distinct world, three decades after Williams and 'ninety years after Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*'.[606] The multifaceted portrait of Black America that emerges in *Walking on Water* is a significant and overdue reimagination of the meaning of blackness in the United States for Kenan's generation.

Treading the uncertain landscape of the postmodern condition in the post-Civil Rights era, in the decade immediately before Barack Obama's election that was both latent with possibility and fraught with communal fissure, Kenan cannot but express scepticism towards the subjective category of 'black' that has been inherited from within and assigned from without as a hyperreal deluge of images removed from day-to-day reality. Sensing the aforementioned 'dreams of eternal contaminations' that characterises crude racial essentialism, Kenan recalls that, before he embarked on his journey, he did not feel black enough:

> I was struggling to be a 'real' black person. I feared that so much contact with white folk, studying so much European culture, living with, eating with, and sometimes sleeping with, white people, would in some way put my Negro 'soul' in danger. … The unspoken fear that the farther I lived from black folk, the farther I lived from my own blackness; that, ultimately, I was assimilating. (11)

Hence, when visiting 'cyberspace', Kenan allows himself to be 'ruffled' by an anonymous 'cyberNegro' who implies that Kenan is not a 'real nigga' (623). (Incidentally, this 'silly incident' (623), as Kenan recalls it, is being replayed today on the singular stage of US

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[606] Kenan in *African American Review*, 148.

politics, with potential Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain positing himself as 'a real black man' against Barack Obama).[607]

In an interview shortly before the publication of *Walking on Water*, Kenan muses that 'after a decade of travelling too much, the only thing I've learned is that you don't really escape anything.' Elaborating upon this in his book, it becomes clear that the one thing Kenan can't escape from is himself, or more precisely those questions of belonging and racial authenticity that haunt 'my own dark soul' (xi). The grandson of a successful businessman, a country boy, a homosexual (although he does not refer to his sexuality in his travel narrative), an unashamed fan of *Star Trek* and a bad basketball player, Kenan felt 'inauthentic' in comparison with poor urban African Americans such as James Baldwin, or, closer to home, his brother-in-law who had, like Baldwin, grown up in Harlem (15). But the therapeutic and empowering enlightenment of travel, and the reflection upon it in the process of writing travel, enables Kenan 'to understand, intellectually, how wrongheaded and stupid I had been' (15). He discovers that he is one member of a vast, heterogeneous and mutable collective that is loosely and often thoughtlessly categorised as the 'black' community in the United States.

One interviewee that I'll focus on for moment here is Jack. Jack is white, or, more specifically, a 'white black man', (71) as Kenan calls him. Their first encounter is narrated in a characteristically semi-comic style:

> "Yo, homie, what's up?" He [Jack] looked enormously happy to see me. …
> "You looking sharp homie, where you heading? … I miss my brothers and sisters, man. I'm from the city."
> "Oh, really."
> "Yeah, man. I grew up in Brooklyn and shit."
> "That's nice."
> "Ain't many of us here, man."
> He kept talking, but I had stopped listening, latching onto that word: *us*: looking at his unmistakably yellow hair and reddish white translucent skin and profoundly Teutonic features; he could have been a Viking.
> I Interrupted him, trying hard not to sound offended. "Waitwaitwait – what do you mean 'us'?"

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[607] 'Cain: Media afraid of a Real Black man' (31/03/11) http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/31/cain-media-afraid-of-a-real-black-man/ (last accessed 02/04/2011)

> Without a pause, he said "I'm black, man."
> "Oh really? Do tell."
> He told me. (58)

After this awkward opening, Kenan learns that Jack had run away from home when he was five years old. He stayed with his friend in Brooklyn, New York, and his friend's parents allowed him to remain and eventually adopted him as their son. Jack's new family was black and also members of the Nation of Islam. Kenan is fascinated and spends a great deal of time with Jack, conceding in the end that Jack 'had a depth of culture I had never encountered in one who looked like this man' (59). He confesses that:

> [Jack was] one of the "blackest" people I had ever met. … Whether I wanted to admit it or not, thanks to Jack, my idea of a black man has been rearranged and broadened. … He was a timely messenger for me; he got me thinking more and more of how being an African American was larger and deeper than skin colour … . There was more to being black than nappy hair. (72)

> Was Jack black? (59)

Jack left Kenan with 'mind twisting questions on the nature of authenticity' (72). Kenan's preoccupation throughout his long journey across North America is race – he says that he travels 'in search of this thing called blackness' – and Jack profoundly destabilised previously held notions of black identity and authenticity.

'This work … is a failure': the (im)possibility of *Walking on Water*

At first glance Kenan appears weary, frustrated and even defeated following his seven-year long sojourn across North America. Lacking the superiority of conventional, usually white travellers and ethnographers, Kenan 'beg[s] tolerance and understanding' in his preface, which opens with the following frank admission:

> I must say, before I even begin, that this work – in the end – is a failure. Its seed – to chronicle, chart, eviscerate, enumerate, analyse and explain the nature of blackness – was, and is, an arrogant proposal, honest and sincere in its origins but doomed at its inception by the physical and intellectual impossibility of capturing successfully 36 million souls (to borrow heavily from W. E. B. Du Bois, as I do throughout this book). (xi)

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Ultimately, Kenan travels to discover that 'I need only one soul, and my soul is a witness' (637). To interview thirty-six million people was as unfeasible as it was unnecessary, for in truth Kenan was, like so many literary travellers before him, writing about himself as much as about the people and places he visited:

> In the end, my sojourn in North America had more to do with my sojourn in myself, into my own dark soul … . I am asking who am I perhaps more than who are we, where do I belong more than where do we belong. From the beginning to the end, this is a more a book about me than anyone else. (xi-ii)

This is a familiar refrain in the literature of travel, particularly in African American texts. Pettinger has noted the self-conscious subject position of African American travel writers, and indeed Kenan's embrace of the subjective and the autobiographical, which strategically positions his book away from the avowed exactness of the scientific study, and his acknowledgement of the unavoidable partiality of his account that results, is shared by Harris, Hartman, Richburg, McElroy, and of course by Tarpley in the very form of her semi-fictional narrative. Unlike these texts, however, *Walking on Water* could be categorised as ethnography, and it is with regard to the ethnographic that I will now briefly turn.

By inscribing herself as an image in writing in *Mules and Men* (1935) – 'a significant achievement in American anthology', says D. A. Boxwell – Zora Neale Hurston broke the constraints of socio-scientific discourse in anthropological texts, writing against the suppression of authorial images that characterises traditional ethnographic discourse.[608] *Walking on Water* comes into view from a space cleared long ago by Hurston's radical ethnographic work, in that it offers an intimate depiction of the authorial self in a book that (at the point of inception at least) proposes to study, document and even explain the nature of a collective of people in a scholarly manner. Moreover, Kenan, like Hurston, can also lay claim to 'insider' status as a member of the very community that is under scientific scrutiny;

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[608] See D. A. Boxwell, ''Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*', *African American Review* 26, 4 (Winter 1992), 605-18; quotation at 605. See also Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

he therefore functions in the text as at once (academic, elite) subject and (vernacular, folk) object, transcending – or perhaps even synthesising and thus negating, in a pseudo-Hegelian sense – the binary opposition. Recalling in the preface that 'this book changed from what I wanted it to be into what it wanted to become' (xi), Kenan experiences this shift from the 'scientific' to the 'spiritual' as an ultimately productive one:

> My earliest years were spent in training to become a scientist, and scientists are bewitched by those things called 'facts'. Facts are fetishes for a scientist: a firm belief that the world can be expressed in numbers and relations. However, over time, I came to understand that the central question I was asking – What does it mean to be black? – cannot be expressed in numbers or equations. In the end, this is an essentially spiritual question … . This volume has become a personal response to all the people and places I have met over the years of my travels across North America. *It has become a subjective response to a subjective question*: an existential answer to a query about being. … More than a book of analysis, this is my book of soul-searching. … *From the beginning to the end, this is more a book about me than anyone else* … (xi-xii, emphasis added)

The failure of *Walking on Water* – namely, to accomplish the 'intellectually impossible' and 'arrogant proposal' (xi) of ethnographically recording, elucidating and therefore defining the nature of blackness in North America – thus precedes its ultimate success as a subjective narrative of travel. Rather than see the self as a pesky obstacle to be transcended by the properly distanced and depersonalised ethnographer in search of objective 'truth', Kenan accepts that, in order to reach a fuller understanding of African American life at the turn of the twenty-first century, he must also – or perhaps only – journey inwards 'into my own dark soul' (xi). Normative de-emphasis of the free play of the authorial spirit in scientific discourse is thus subverted by a more humanist conception of truth, enabling the author to blend literary prose with historical and sociological research, intertwining his own voice with that of the many interviewees.

However, whereas Hurston prefigured later debates over the fictive and literary nature of ethnographic texts (chiefly in the work of Clifford Geertz), Kenan's book emerges very much after the event and is thus explicitly reflexive and severely self-conscious of the

essentially constructed, imagined and – by guilty association – artificial nature of ethnographic truth. Hence his 'failure' of analysis in a novelistic, autobiographical work of interior 'soul-searching' that fails to fully account for the lives of tens of millions of people. But of course this is an impossible feat, as Kenan well knows. Dialectically speaking, inherent in his failure is a pertinent success – Kenan has achieved the strange peace of imagining himself as a part of the 'blackness' that he seeks to define, part of the 'America' he seeks to traverse, and thus part of a reimagined Black America. The task for all of us, then, is clear and characteristically daunting:

> We – black, white, indifferent, but American – must now disentangle
> ourselves from the garbage of the information age; we must pioneer a new
> way of seeing ourselves; we must reinvent humanity. (625)

The certainty with which Kenan holds to his American identity in the above passage is surprising, given his earlier confession as being a postmodern admirer of Baudrillard. Adopting an 'anthropological spirit', Benedict Anderson offered the following definition of the nation in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*:

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political
> community – and imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign.
>   It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will
> never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them.
> … [It] is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them,
> encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic
> boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.[609]

The nation is imagined as sovereign, he adds, because of the state's founding historical disassociation from hierarchical dynasties; it is thus finally imagined as a horizontal community of comradeship, regardless of actual discriminations within its borders. While African American travellers to Africa will often interrogate the centripetal force of globally dispersed or displaced diasporic identities, Kenan instead considers if a cohesive national identity (that is to say, a communal self that is 'boundary-orientated and horizontal')[610] can

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[609] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 5-7.
[610] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 15.

be configured for people of African descent in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. The reimagining of the inherited frame of the 'nation-within-a-nation' – Kenan's attempted conceptual widening of 'Black America' that embraces the sheer variety and diffusion of people of colour encountered on his journey (not to mention those unearthed in his archival research) – that results in *Walking on Water* rearticulates the (still inherently limited) concept of the institutionally imagined community of the nation-state, i.e. of 'Americanness'. For Kenan, the two are inextricably linked:

> I had not realised how deeply I felt about being an American, an African American. … To be an American is to be shaped by the "device" of "race". Whether one believes it to be reality or mythology … (4-6)

Journeying across and subsequently documenting the observable daily reality of African American life is thus for Kenan a strategy of testing and evaluating the validity of those *a priori* categories of being – 'black' and 'American' – and also of interrogating their compatibility in the light of these new travelling experiences. However, the subjective dance of racial and national identity here remains in constant tension with Kenan's persistent universalism, humanism, pluralism and related suspicion of fixed categories of subjectivity, itself spurred by the broader deconstructionalist theoretical milieu of postmodern thought that surrounds the text, and also by specifically African American socio-political anxieties regarding 'integration versus assimilation' in a 'globalised' age of porous national borders and increasing economic disparity (and therefore unequal access to mobility) between African Americans (most starkly exemplified today by the chasm between the Black Belt and the White House).

Kenan's dual subject position here validates Pettinger's assertion (which I now apply to domestic travel) that the perspective of the African American traveller cuts across the guises of the elite and vernacular cosmopolitan:

> African Americans are unlikely to share the insouciance of cosmopolitan elites who can boast their world citizenship and scorn patriotism … On the

other hand, they would not normally belong with those vernacular cosmopolitans – migrants, refugees, exiles – who must 'make a tryst with cultural translation as an act of survival'… . As such they might be better described as occasional cosmopolitans – travelling in defiance of those forces that would keep them at home, and yet unwilling to risk surrendering the right to belong.[611]

A slight adjustment is necessary to this formulation for Kenan, who does not depart from North America but nonetheless travels extensively. Kenan travels in defiance of those local forces that would fix him in a particular subjective and geographical space within the home nation state, yet he is reluctant to relinquish the right to belong (and thus to imagine) that national community and his place within it.

'A Strange Peace': The Identity of identity and non-identity

This is not to say that this is a uniquely African American or contemporary sensibility – Orwell too expresses his own ambivalence regarding England. Indeed, Kenan's perplexity could be read as a turn of the twenty-first century African American reaffirmation of Orwell's Second World War English bewilderment at the apparently contradictory and muddled diversity of the national collective. As Kenan performs a tricky negotiation across overlapping conceptions of national, racial and individual selfhood, apparently swamped under the incongruous enormity of humanity that confronts and constructs him as he travels through North America, his awestricken tone in *Walking on Water* repeats that of Orwell in 'England Your England':

> Then the vastness of England swallows you up, and you lose for a while your feeling that the whole nation has a single identifiable character. Are there really such things as nations? Are we not 46 million individuals, all different? And the diversity of it, the chaos!
>
> How can one make a pattern out of this muddle?[612]

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[611] Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', pp. 89.
[612] George Orwell, 'England Your England' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (1941, repr. Middlesex: Penguin, 1957), pp.63-90; quotation at p. 64.

Yet, Orwell cannot fully extricate himself from *his* 'civilisation' as a subject of England, for his individuality as a human subject is forever bound up with the chaos of his nation, for better or worse:

> And above all, it is *your* civilisation, it is *you*. However much you hate it or laugh at it, you will never be happy away from it for any length of time. … Good or evil, it is yours, you belong to it.[613]

Likewise Kenan asserts that 'I contain multitudes' (639) and thus cannot fully affirm his individuality, his racial self, his gendered self – even his humanity – without recourse to his particular 'civilisation' in the United States of America. If he conceives of his selfhood in a particularised fashion as 'Randall', as 'black', as 'human', and so on, it is always-already contiguous with his lifelong experience as a born-and-raised citizen of the United States of America. This is not to say that a fundamental and foundational national identity essentially underpins and overrides every aspect of the complex makeup of human subjectivity, and nor is it to suggest that there is a fixed, secure and reliable national (or racial, or individual, or human) identity to which one can refer in order to buttress a properly authentic impression of self. Rather, it is to say that no single particularised subjective category can be formulated in isolation from the milieu that surrounds it; that each of these specific categories is mutable and in a constant state of renegotiation; and, most importantly, that *it is this constant renegotiation itself* that forms the basis of the subject, rather than there being an essential 'true' foundational self at the core of being.

At the risk of lapsing into tautology, it may be said therefore that for Kenan the particular functions in conjunction with the universal, while the universal is experienced through the particular. Particularity – the quality of being black or American – is experienced at that point where Kenan comprehends the difference of the other who does not share the same worldview. Recall the coffee shop argument with an African friend (3-4) – 'You North

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[613] Orwell, 'England Your England', pp. 64-5.

American blacks, you make me so angry' (1) – over the nature of black America, after which Kenan is struck by 'how deeply I felt about being an American, an African American'. This exchange opens *Walking on Water* and sets the parameters of the particularised subject that Kenan would later attempt to transcend. Universality – the quality of being human – is experienced at the point of departure from (or, rather, transcendence of) the particular, where 'black' becomes coterminous with 'human'. It is here that Kenan ultimately wishes to dwell. The following comments made by Kenan on the 'tangled knot' of the relationship between sexuality, race and humanity in his writing may add clarity here, and can be read usefully alongside his later travel book:

> For me, I approach my sexuality in my writing in the same way I would approach my being black. I think it is a choice one makes. … Where do you write from? Do you write out of being a black person? Do you write out of being gay? Or do you write out of your experience as a human being? For instance, take Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* – and he wrote extensively about this – was written from Ellison's vision as a human being. … In [*Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*] I think [Richard Wright] was writing about being a human – which, if we stop and think about it, is what is at the very basis of the Civil Rights struggle, going back to the Abolitionist movement. Wright was so very close to that vulnerability and *ultimate truth* when he wrote those stories and his autobiography. … There's no doubt in my mind, that Toni Morrison wrote the *Bluest Eye* first as a human being, not only as a black person.
> … All of which is to say that *you cannot be a black human being*.[614]

It is safe to infer that he aspires to follow in the footsteps of such canonical figures of African American letters by also striving for the 'ultimate truth' of being human first, to never forget his species-being (he does refer to our universal membership of a 'species'),[615] and 'to think of oneself as a human being, *formed by* this broader spectrum of other people'.[616]

It is this construction of the self *qua* other that is crucial to Kenan's humanistic decentring of race. Whether the sublime 'vulnerability and ultimate truth' of humanity exists or not is not really important here; it is simply the strategic subjective space where Kenan

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[614] Kenan in Charles H. Rowell, 'An Interview with Randall Kenan', *Callaloo* 21, 1 (Winter 1998), 133-48; quotation at 143-4 (emphasis added).
[615] Kenan in *Callaloo*, 144.
[616] Kenan in *Callaloo*, 143 (emphasis added).

locates those aspects of his identity that surpass the particular (the merely racial or national, which are ontologically suspect), thus clearing the territorial space for a renegotiated subjectivity that modifies those inherited categories of being – 'black' in particular – that have hitherto proved unsatisfactory, simplistic, rigid, out of date. It is this negotiation between identity and difference, between the particular and the universal, self and other, that sustains and evolves these categories and simultaneously coordinates Kenan's own experience of his selfhood in a reflexive movement from something akin to Orwell's collective 'chaos' to the strangely peaceful order of the renewed authorial self-in-possession-of-multitudes that narrates *Walking on Water* – the open-ended subject that embraces, modifies and negotiates, rather than merely accepts or rejects, inherited particularities of being. Travel is the essential and enabling act that spurs this interior evolution for Kenan, even if – or perhaps because – the original objective behind the journey was doomed to 'failure'.

Finally, then, it may be possible to situate Kenan's travelogue in a certain idealist tradition, distinct from Ishmael Reed's more politically-engaged and pessimistic materialist *Weltanschauung* in his travel book (which I will consider below). Kenan's ultimate optimism – his final dwelling in the serenity of subjective flux and constant becoming, itself held together by the transcendent unity of One soul as a 'witness' or representative of millions – is expressed in a fashion analogous to Hegel's idealistic exploration of the categories of Identity and Difference, here précised by Frederic Jameson:

> In the most famous chapter of the *Greater Logic*, Hegel tells us how to handle such potentially troublesome categories as those of Identity and Difference. You begin with Identity, he says, only to find that it is always defined in terms of its Difference from something else; you turn to Difference and find out that any thoughts about that involve thoughts about the 'identity' of this particular category. As you begin to watch Identity turn into Difference and Difference back into Identity, then you grasp both as an inseparable Opposition, you learn that they must always be thought together. But after learning that, you find out that they are not in opposition; you find rather, that in some other sense, they are one and the same as each

other. At that point you have approached the Identity of identity and non-identity, and in the most momentous single reversal in Hegel's entire system suddenly Opposition stands unveiled as Contradiction.[617]

Kenan's travails across the landscape of blackness in North America eventually carry him towards this dialectical juncture, where categories relocate and evolve 'into ever new viewpoints',[618] with the implication being that one can never absolutely capture 'blackness' because any definition is always-already obsolete, or at least in the process of becoming anew. The ability to rest in motion is thus acquired for the newly-enlightened traveller who once erroneously assented to the impositions of essentialist subjective fixity and thus feared that he was not 'a 'real' black person' whose 'Negro 'soul' was in danger' (11).

For Hegel, Jameson goes on to say, the unveiling of Contradiction in the Identity of identity and non-identity 'passes over into its Ground … [which is] the map of the totality in which things happen and History takes place'.[619] Frustratingly (but understandably), it is at this moment of approach with the cognitive map of the totality – a map that I would take to include reference to the overarching domain of the political economy – that Kenan ends his travelogue. At this point it may therefore be fruitful to turn to Ishmael Reed's travelogue *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* (2003), which assumes a direct confrontation with the neoliberal world order that envelops the turn of the twenty-first century African American – and, indeed, human – subject.

'A Callaloo of Cultures': Oakland's Advocate

Blues City: A Walk in Oakland (2003) is novelist and poet Ishmael Reed's devoted account of a seven-month journey through the city in which he has lived since 1979, a city that, says one reviewer, 'lives in the shadow of its more glamorous sister across the bay',[620] San Francisco. Assuming the role of advocate for Oakland, Reed offers a corrective vision of this

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[617] Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 454-5.

[618] Jameson, *Valences*, p. 455.

[619] Jameson, *Valences*, p. 455.

[620] Nancy R. Ives, Audio Review, *Library Journal* 129, 9 (May 2004), 132.

stereotypically leaden Californian city as demographically, culturally and topographically beautiful:

> Oakland still hosts one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the country, a callaloo of cultures. In the winter of 2001, in preparation for writing this book, I attended a black cowboy parade, a Kwanzaa celebration, and a powwow. … Oakland is a city where identities blur. Where one encounters hip-hop dancers at a festival in Chinatown; where the mistress of ceremonies at a Kwanzaa celebration is a white woman in a Yoruba dress … . Writing this book has convinced me that among American cities, Oakland is unique. It combines the beauty of the West, the mountains, the rivers, and forests, with the gritty naturalism of old northeastern industrial towns. (26-7)

For Reed, the majesty of Oakland rests on this enduring, vigorous heritage of ethnic diversity, conveyed most vividly at cultural festivals and through artistic expression (and of course this includes, but is not limited to, the blues). The book also includes interviews, although Reed reports the speech of these interviewees without novelistic prose or quotation marks, thus stepping further back than Kenan.

One factor that immediately distinguishes *Blues City* from conventional travelogues is that, in this instance, the traveller-narrator is in fact a long-time resident of the relatively small space through which he journeys. Yet the power of the journey to broaden the mind and endow the traveller with new knowledge is in no way assuaged by the apparent familiarity of residence. Indeed, Reed concedes that, despite his habitation, he had much to learn about the place he calls home:

> Before writing this book, my knowledge of Oakland was like that of the early astronomers of the universe. The universe was a small neighbourhood of my concerns, and I had very little knowledge of the goings-on outside of the centre of the block in which I live. … If I hadn't written this book, I would not have become acquainted with Oakland's many worlds. (184)

Locality, of course, does not automatically equal deep understanding, and many worlds can exist within one American city, particularly at a major port such as Oakland. This is a lesson also learned by Kenan, whose knowledge of his North American home was considerably

enriched by his journey across its vast landscape. Formally, though, Reed is closer to the traditional travel narrator than Kenan or Harris, whose travelogues have a greater affinity with the pensive format of the memoir or autobiography. Indeed, Reed's unambiguous self-positioning as the explorer of exterior space, along with his adoption of a clear, chronological journal or diary format, with entries under particular dates, lends *Blues City* a conventional, functional appearance away from the formal experimentation and interior reflection that characterises other contemporary African American travel narratives.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude from the above that *Blues City* is merely a predictable pamphlet of multicultural celebration or a complacent exaltation of travelling identities devoid of any subversive edge. Held within its plain format is a belligerent political energy that rallies against conventional orthodoxy, inserting the logic of real-world practice into its sensibly practical form. We begin to get a sense of this in the remarks that follow the abovementioned passage on Oakland's cultural heterogeneity:

> If I hadn't written this book, I would not have become acquainted with Oakland's many worlds. Nor would I have met the many volunteers, the true heroes and heroines of the city who strive to keep the heritage of Oakland alive in the face of fierce and often malevolent forces of development. (184)

Such anonymous virtue is posited in contradistinction with the gaudy visibility of 'the ambitious politicians who use the city like a woman for a one night stand only to forget about her the next day' (188), themselves contemporary reincarnations of the short-sighted and voracious 'gold-crazed hordes who came crashing into Oakland in the mid-1800s' (22). If Oakland has 'many worlds' then one of those spheres is a domain of social struggle against the malign intrusions of urban 'development' that cares little for unprofitable sites of cultural heritage. For Reed, the quiet daily labour of Oakland's 'true heroes and heroines', from Salvation Army volunteers to musicians and artists striving to keep heritage alive 'refute[s] the upscale Social Darwinists by showing that there is as much cooperation in life as there is

competition' (189). The dominant images of violence and decay amongst Oakland's poor and largely non-white communities is therefore decentred (but not dishonestly airbrushed out of the scene) by a traveller who intends to write 'a certain class and dignity' (189) into being that represents 'the true spirit of Oakland' (189). This fervently communal spirit is rendered as a disproof of the competitive individualism that pervades the dominant pro-market philosophy of American-led urban expansion.

Less concerned with existential questions of identity, Reed is instead in citizen-journalist mode, politically engaged and genuinely concerned for the future of Oakland in an era of neoliberal 'development'. *A Walk in Oakland* is also a walk through the spoiled landscape of boom-and-bust neoliberalism. The Oakland through which Reed walks at the onset of this century is one scarred by the now-familiar footprints of economic neoliberalisation in the post-industrial Western states, namely 'financial frenzy, degraded public services, stagnant wages and deepening class and race inequality.'[621] Moreover, such wounds are worsened by California's unique position 'at the forefront of the neoliberal turn in global capitalism. … In the 1990s it was the heartland of the largest stock bubble in history, as investment in the marvels of Silicon Valley pushed the NASDAQ to uncharted heights' and 'mortgage mania' drastically inflated the housing bubble in the Golden State.[622] The grotesqueness of this boom was to be matched by its eventual bust, which has today left the state 'in permanent fiscal crisis' with 'unprecedented levels' of childhood poverty, high unemployment, overcrowded prisons, underfunded schools, increasingly elitist universities with inexorably rising fees, swathes of vacant houses and dilapidated highways – as Richard Walker puts it, 'the signs of decay are everywhere.'[623]

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[621] Richard Walker lists these as the 'trademark features' of the neoliberal era in 'The Golden State Adrift', *New Left Review* 66 (Nov-Dec 2010), 5-30; quotation at 5.
[622] Walker, 'The Golden State Adrift', 5-7.
[623] Walker, 'The Golden State Adrift, 12.

For Reed, Oakland 'has the feel of labour cities in the Northeast such as Detroit, Cleveland and Buffalo' (28) and his characterisation of Oakland as 'Blues City' stems from this historical association with blue-collar employment, for 'Blues is the music of the working class, of the brawling and husky' (28). In a state in which 'the working class … bears a clear racial stamp'[624] this also means that Reed's sojourn through Blues City will inevitably involve an encounter with the 'cultural stew' (27) of the town, idealistically rendered in a moment as Reed watches 'the crowds of blacks, Asians and Hispanics coexisting peacefully in the late afternoon … you get a glimpse of what the world could look like' (27). Yet while drawn to the countercultural resourcefulness and creativity of the multi-ethnic working class of Oakland, Reed is careful not to sentimentalise the dire situation in which they find themselves. In a later chapter entitled 'The Killing Comes to My Neighbourhood…Again' Reed solemnly records the death of an elderly man who 'had been murdered by his own son, just as he had murdered one of his sons', and it was upon learning of this tragedy that 'it dawned on me why Oakland really is Blues City' (164). As he recalls 'the killing that was breaking out all over town' Reed presents a grim reality of falling living standards that functions as a counterweight to teleological narratives of multicultural and socioeconomic progress in the advanced capitalist economies of the West. Lifting the macroeconomic veil to peer at the everyday reality, Reed narrates the faults of his Oakland neighbourhood:

> Like many neighbourhoods in the flats and increasingly even in the safety of the white sections ... the quality of life [has] deteriorate[d]. … Some of my neighbours hadn't slept in months because of what hip-hoppers call "the beat" … . Dangerous dogs roam through the streets and young women offer their bodies to the residents for money. (164-5)

> On May 10, gunshots could be heard in the street in front of our house, which meant that a neighbourhood crack house was experiencing internal dissension. … We were used to it. (173)

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[624] Walker, 'The Golden State Adrift', 11.

This is the empirical truth that the euphemistic vocabulary of 'urban renewal' attempts to conceal. The aforementioned fleeting glimpse of a future utopia of peaceful coexistence is under threat in an age of epochal socioeconomic change determined by the ebbs and flows of capital accumulation on an international scale. In a globalised economy that, via the encouragement of immigrant labour and the exporting of jobs offshore to low-wage regions, has 'dragged down incomes among blue-collar workers' (meaning that 'California's average income grew at only half the rate of the rest of the country')[625] the local is subsumed by the coercive laws of capitalist competition on a planetary scale.

The incumbent architect (for his policies changed not only the economy but also the topography of the city) of Oakland's neoliberal transmutation during Reed's visit was Jerry Brown, elected for what would be an eight-year term as mayor in 1999. Noting Brown's 'main contribution' in Oakland to be 'massive condo development in the midst of the housing boom', Walker characterises Brown as a 'rhetorical precursor to neoliberalism' due to 'his harping on the theme of an 'era of limits''[626] that would also come to irk Reed. Wary of Brown's self-styled 'elegant density' plan – a 'fantasy' (164) intended to bring ten thousand new residents into downtown Oakland – Reed attacks Brown's proposal for pricing 'poor residents and residents of modest means' out of the city (21). The clear consequence of this policy, given the aforementioned racial stamp of the working class, is a 'black drain' (28) that forces African Americans to leave their homes in a twenty-first century version of racial segregation. Indeed, Reed sardonically notes that 'Brown's tough-love posture towards blacks and the poor has earned him an award from the far-right Manhattan Institute' as well as 'kudos' from a white supremacist columnist (26). Developing on such themes of race and class marginalisation and cultural annexation, Reed depicts those wealthier new residents

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[625] Walker, 'The Golden State Adrift', 13.
[626] Walker, 'The Golden State Adrift', 19. Walker also attributes Brown's 'blunders with a budget surplus' to the eventual success of the infamous Proposition 13, a 'bridgehead for American neoliberalism', the immediate impact of which was to cut the income of local governments by half, 14-5.

beckoned by Brown – unwisely, for the hi-tech bubble was about to burst and white-collar electronics jobs were soon to be shipped abroad in the same fashion as blue-collar manufacturing occupations – as frenzied, destructive invaders akin to past intruders who arrived during the gold rush of the 1840s:

> For some, the invasion of the hi-techers, the '99ers, from San Francisco and elsewhere, can be regarded as the worst disaster to happen to Oakland since the invasion of the '49ers, the gold crazed hoards who came crashing into Oakland in the mid-1800s. Classical buildings and traditional landmarks are being levelled and replaced by virtual trailer parks that seem to go up overnight. … Now, because of Brown's blindness, the ugly, boxlike condominiums are vacant in a slumping market. (22)

Taking this equivalence further, he notes that the '99ers, like the '49ers, uproot non-white locals in their rampant pursuit to 'get rich quick' from a bubble that was destined to burst (24-5). Later, in reference to the burgeoning violence of the drugs trade – which literally materialised in front of Reeds house (173), as noted earlier – Reed makes a further telling correspondence with the violence of the gold rush:

> Just as the enormous profits from gold made for hazardous living in northern California, the profits of crack capitalism will cause the crime rate to peak and fall cyclically. (189)

Departing from the existential serenity of Kenan and the interiority of Harris, Reed is indeed unashamedly political as he employs the travel book as a practical vehicle with which to promote his leftist perspective. Perhaps it is because of this leftism that *Blues City* received mixed reviews (the book 'doesn't live up to the 'husky and brawling' swagger of the city Reed describes',[627] says one review; 'Oakland awaits a better tribute' says another).[628] Reed does not pander to the neoliberal mantra of multiculturalist progress that bemoans racial discrimination but tacitly naturalises economic inequality. Almost mischievously, he does momentarily open up the possibility of peaceful multiracial co-existence – the fleeting

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[627] 'Review', *Publishers Weekly* (2003)
http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4000-4540-2 (last accessed 26/06/2013).
[628] 'Review', Kirkus (2003)
https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ishmael-reed/blues-city/ (last accessed 26/06/2013).

'glimpse of what the word could look like' – only to hastily slam the door shut and turn instead back to the cold reality of rising inequality and falling living standards. The potential for harmony is certainly there, but as long as poor white, black, Latino and Asian Americans are being disenfranchised, Reed knows that the multicultural dream is not possible. No doubt, it would have been far easier for Reed to have written *Diversity City* rather than *Blues City*, to have gushed over Oakland's vibrant patchwork of creeds and colours rather than to launch into a tirade against the neoliberal elites that are bulldozing classical buildings and traditional landmarks and raising rents to gentrify and divide the city, but such a book would be a betrayal of both Reed's politics and his adopted home. Writing from within that tradition of 'practicality and struggle' identified by African American philosopher Leonard Harris,[629] Reed is unambiguously labouring with those who wish to shrink the blues condition, while simultaneously reviving the blues tradition as relevant for new generations.

'Rediscovery is Always Possible': Reed's Blues Revival

The blues have been pronounced dead since at least as long ago as the 1950s. Yet, as Richard Wright noted even then, such proclamations will always be premature as long as those social, cultural and economic conditions that gave rise to the blues endure:

> But can anyone or anything hand down an edict stating when the blues will or should be dead? Ought not the contraction or enlargement of the environment in which the blues were cradled be the calendar by which the death of the blues can be predicted?
> The environment which produced the blues is still with us, though we all labour to render it progressively smaller. The total elimination of that area might take longer than we now suspect, hence it is well that we examine the meaning of the blues while they are still falling upon us.[630]

This speculative conception of the blues' future prospects – particularly with regard to the necessarily utopian conditions required for its eventual extinction – has certain Marxist nuances, minus the self-confident teleology. To be more specific, Wright's proposal can be

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[629] Harris in *African-American Philosophers*, p. 214.
[630] Richard Wright [1959], 'Foreword', in Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* [1960] (Cambridge: Canto, 1994), p. xvii.

read alongside the famous passage from *Capital* in which Marx explains the 'negation of the negation'; that is, the theory that 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation' (the revolutionary working class). According to this somewhat determinist schema, this class will then cease to exist following the sublime moment of 'the expropriation of the expropriators', for no class can exist in the classless society that follows this moment. Similarly, for Wright, the blues as an artistic form of collective cultural expression will cease to exist only when those upon whom the blues are falling totally eliminate the environment that begot them. In this sense, the death of the blues is strangely welcomed although, implicitly, forever delayed on an uncertain calendar.

Almost half a century later, those conditions under which African Americans struggled in the middle of the twentieth century have undergone seismic changes. Yet, despite the gains of the Civil Rights era, the growth of a black middle class, the apparent triumph of capitalism following the Cold War, and the deindustrialisation of the Western economies that shipped blue-collar jobs offshore and thus becalmed a once-vigorous industrial labour force, Reed journeys through a city that is still, somehow, singing the blues:

> Of all the events I attended in connection with the writing of this book, those that drew the biggest audiences were those in which the legendary Oakland blues singers sang, preached and shouted the blues. Oakland is Blues City, and one of the reasons I like it here is because it has the feel of labour cities in the Northeast such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. (27-8)

The very survival of the 'Blues City' in the contemporary United States discloses a larger feature of economic development since the death of the blues was announced in the middle of the twentieth century. That is, the failure to eradicate those conditions that continue to give rise to blues expression and to the audience of blues expression. Paul Oliver has previously outlined these conditions for early generations of blues listeners:

> The music had meaning for every African American who listened. In the blues were reflected the effect of economic stress on the depleted plantations and the urban centres, where conditions of living still did not improve. In the blues were to be found the major catastrophes both personal

and national, the triumphs and miseries that were shared by all, yet private to one. In the blues were reflected the family disputes, the violence and the bitterness, the tears and the upheavals caused by poverty and migration. In the blues an unsettled, unwanted people during these periods of social unrest found the security, the unity, and the strength it so desperately desired.[631]

Social unrest, stagnant living conditions, migration in search of work, strikes and protests; to repeat Wright in 1959, 'the American environment which produced the blues is still with us, though we all labour to render it progressively smaller.'[632] Yet, the blues are still falling in the twenty-first century.

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[631] Oliver, p. 11.
[632] Wright, 'Foreword', in Oliver, p. xvii.

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CHAPTER FOUR

<u>Natasha Tarpley's 'Women Rescuers'</u>

<u>Movement and Rest in *Girl in the Mirror*</u>

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> As a young girl, entering my grandmothers' and aunts' houses was like visiting a foreign country.
> – Natasha Tarpley[633]

> And the dark-faced child, listening,
> Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
> He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
> Out of any book at all,
> But that they came
> Right out of her own life.
> – Langston Hughes, 'Aunt Sue's Stories' (1921)

'A History of Motion Swirled at my Feet': *Girl in the Mirror* as African American Travel Memoir

'In my writing I try to explain how African Americans lean on one another and what keeps us moving through trauma and joy'[634] says Natasha Tarpley, author of *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (1998). The persistent motion to which she refers is both literal and figurative, an allusion not only to the communally-buttressed interior strength to 'move' through life or to the interior sojourn into the realm of the self that characterises the travel memoir, but also to the actual and innumerable journeys that have shaped the lives of African American people for generations. *Girl in the Mirror* affirms Beth A. McCoy's observation that 'it's hard to imagine any African American-authored text not somehow steeped in travel, writing about travel, and writing while travelling. … African American literature features travel in countless different contexts and treatments.'[635] Tarpley's book lyrically recounts her imaginative and transformative voyage to the remembered 'foreign

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[633] Natasha Tarpley, *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), p. 171. All subsequent page references in this chapter are taken from this edition and included in parenthesis.
[634] Natasha Tarpley, interview with Maitefa Angaza, 'Great Black Hopes', *Black Issues* Jan/Feb 2000 Volume 2 Issue 1, 40.
[635] Beth A. McCoy, 'Walking the 5: Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower' in *BMa*, 223-34; 223.

country' of her foremothers' lives, which were themselves tinted with experiences of travel. The potential for subjective reform during this journey is intimated in the book's epigraph, namely Lucille Clifton's poem 'I am Not Done Yet'. Clifton is 'as possible as yeast/ … a changed changer' and, like Tarpley, approaches the future armed with a usable past(s): 'I continue to continue/ where I have been/ most of my lives is/ where I'm going'.

Assuming the voice of her grandmother in the opening chapter that bears her name – entitled 'Anna: Movement and Rest' – Tarpley acknowledges the nurturing genealogy of mobility to which her memoir testifies:

> But sooner than I think, my children and my children's children will come knocking at my skin, their fingernails trying to make a mark, searching for a place that gives, opens like bread. And the hunger I see crusting at the corners of their mouths, hunger dry as cotton, will crystallize into questions about the past, about my life long ago. I will tell them that it was like a slow ship pulling away from the shore; how we learned to build our homes on water, and shed all heavy things in our wake. (67)

Girl in the Mirror is the product of that grandchild's inquisitive appetite, a poetic narrative of the lives of Anna (Tarpley's grandmother), Marlene (her mother) and Natasha (herself), chronologically arranged into three chapters and written in the first-person throughout. The first chapter traces Anna's motion, following her impulsive husband Jack's migration 'up North' to Chicago where 'they got all kinds a jobs' (23); chapter two tracks Marlene's troubled (dis)location 'in the long stretch in between … between the place you come from and where you think you're going' (79), including her anguished departure away from Anna to Cambridge, Boston, for which 'I never forgave myself' (95); and lastly chapter three recounts Natasha's own migration away to law school in Washington DC and finally back again to her dying grandmother in Chicago (as well as briefly recalling her 'preposterous' and anticlimactic trip to Ghana with Marlene (149-51), where they understood themselves as 'black tourists … far from home'). In learning, assuming and re-enacting the voices of these women, Tarpley excavates, recuperates and validates as she narrates, dovetailing her own

familial tale with the larger historical narrative of black women in the United States, inscribing 'the braiding of strands of my stories into those of my mother, my grandmothers, the women before us. Our stories crisscross, one continuing another' (183).

The 'history of motion' that swirls around Tarpley's feet (139) is thus a gendered as well as a racial one. *Girl in the Mirror* is not penned by the traditional Euro-American traveller prototype – usually male, usually white – that purportedly operates in solitude both as voyager and writer, roaming the world alone before returning to craft an ostensibly factual account of the event. Rather, African American women appear as active historical presences and speaking subjects within a narrative of the *intra*national and intercommunal mobility of emblematic everyday lives, in a text that fits Susan Bassnett's definition of the 'other kind of narrative' distinct from 'the myths of the heroic explorer' that have historically dominated a largely androcentric genre.[636] Pointing to a comparable exclusion within the overlapping field of African American literary studies, Valerie Smith has also lamented 'the legacy of oversights and condescension' within 'the androcentric Afro-American literary tradition and establishment [that has] privileged the solitary, literate adventurers found in texts by male authors … and ignored the more muted achievements of the female protagonists featured in the work of women writers'.[637] Bassnett persuasively argues that in the contemporary era of writing travel 'the role of women in adjusting perspectives is immense'[638] and in crafting a narrative that gives voice to 'muted' female struggle Tarpley confirms this socio-literary feminist function. *Girl in the Mirror* is evidence of what Bassnett sees as a progressively self-reflexive body of literature 'that [defies] easy categorisation as autobiography, memoir, or travel account',[639] with 'the increasing use of dialogue … making the travel text resemble the

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[636] Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, pp. 225-41; quotation at p. 225.
[637] Valerie Smith, 'Black Feminist Theory' [1989], in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, pp. 369-84; p. 370.
[638] Bassnett, p. 241.
[639] Bassnett p. 225.

novel much more closely'.[640] Tarpley's memoir is indeed an 'unquestionably poetic'[641] collaborative work of dialogue between related yet distinct women with whom the author's voice is stylistically interweaved. Accurately described as 'experimental … lyrical and strongly imaginative',[642] its fictionality and creativity is thus less covert than the typical travelogue, which is able to lay claim to the consecrated category of 'non-fiction' that automatically endows a text with an ersatz authenticity. In surveying the 'kaleidoscopic genre' of black travel writing, R. Victoria Arana argues that 'good travel writing – because it represents an authentic experience of witnessing – takes on the qualities of a historical chronicle, of a social record, and of a geopolitical report. The best travel writing does this on a human scale'.[643] Although not eye-witnessed in the conventional sense, *Girl in the Mirror* meets Arana's qualitative standards as an authentic, human socio-historical record of real 'Aunt Sue stories', orally communicated and artistically crafted and reimagined in a novelistic, poetic fashion. The inclusive genre of travel writing would be considerably enriched if stretched to accommodate such a willingly 'author-saturated' or 'hyperauthorial'[644] narrative of overlooked histories of motion.

Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs have noted the historical similarities between travel writing and the novel, particularly with regard to the reflective and subjective concerns with the self of those texts written in the first-person.[645] In the modern era (since the 1970s), growing experimentation with the structural conventions of travel writing – novel formal innovation that arouses re-classification of the genre as travel *literature* – has expanded the scope of what Hulme and Youngs describe as an 'exciting… broad and ever-shifting'[646] field and furthered its resemblance with the novel as a mode of creative writing self-consciously

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[640] Bassnett, p. 235.
[641] Kierna Mayo, *Emerge*, (blurb of *Girl in the Mirror*).
[642] 'Review', Publishers Weekly, 11 May 1998.
[643] Arana, in *BMa*, 1.
[644] See Geertz.
[645] Hulme and Youngs, Introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing, p. 6.
[646] Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 8-11.

predicated on the fertile boundary between fact and fiction. Surveying the 'subversions' and 'renewals' of this vast genre, Hulme observes that 'the parameters of travel are almost impossible to set'[647] – citing Xavier de Maistre's eccentric *A Nocturnal Expedition Round My Room* (1794) as supportive evidence – and asserts that travel writing can combine with autobiography, personal memoir, and also function as cultural history. Noting this heterogeneous historical trajectory, *Girl in the Mirror* can be usefully planted within this fecund field as an example of contemporary travel literature – overlapping with personal memoir, autobiography, poetry and the novel – which is explicitly concerned with tracing the cultural history of African Americans (specifically three generations of women), a community whose experience is itself permeated with migration, relocation, mobility.

'What is the Meaning of Silence?': Generational Fissures

Tarpley's poem 'To Alabama'[648] prefigures some of the concerns and tropes of the author's later memoir. Evidently illustrative of the centrality of travel to everyday African American lives during the time of Tarpley's childhood, the poem also demonstrates that liminal, unnamed spaces between points of departure and destination – the setting is 'halfway between Chicago and Alabama' – could function as sites of rest and relief for a mobile, networked and threatened black community in the United States. In this 'halfway' space there is a place where a tight travelling community can enjoy momentary rest and relief, 'a place where Negroes can/ stretch their bones and open their baskets/ …where a man named Slim sits by/ the only colored indoor toilet 'til Alabama'. Despite the apparent impoverishment – Slim was 'counting out sheets of toilet paper/ (a nickel for ten) – Tarpley fondly remembers that 'this was the stop where we didn't worry', the stop where, once Slim lit a fire, 'all of the families gathered around,/ most of us from the North headed back South/ to visit our people'. That this

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[647] Hulme, 'Travelling to Write (1940-2000)', in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 87-101; quotation at p. 97.
[648] Natasha Tarpley, 'To Alabama', *African American Review* 26. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 270-1

was a time of peril as well as paucity for necessarily networked travelling African American communities is alluded to around Slim's fire, where 'the adults would talk about the problems/ of the Black man, and how to spot the klan at night'. In *Girl in the Mirror*, Henry, Tarpley's great uncle, reprises this anxiety as he worries en route to Chicago that 'too much happens to colored people on these roads. There was a lynching around here just a couple a months ago' (43). Yet despite this danger, the tone of 'To Alabama' is one of nostalgia – not only for the 'peppermints' and 'strawberry pop' of childhood but also for the comforting kinship and co-operation of 'all the families' driving to 'visit our people'. In her travel memoir, published six years later, Tarpley refines and vocalises this sentiment as she considers the complexities of her own position as an adult in relation to the close-knit families of her grandparents' generation.

Girl in the Mirror rests on a dialectical relationship of deep immersion in African American life that operates in productive tension with the author's simultaneous status as a temporal outsider who 'visits' the remembered geography of her mother's and grandmother's discrete histories. Tarpley is thus in the contradictory position of being both within and outside of the community whose historical experience she is chronicling. In the process of excavating those narratives of the past, of attempting to grasp 'the silence … that shrouded the lives of the adults around me with mystery and created a seemingly impassable gulf of secrecy between us' (166), she must confront those generational fissures that separate her from 'the grown folks' (175) of antecedent eras. Her yearning to properly comprehend this congenital taciturnity – she asserts that 'I was born out of this silence and into it' (166) – is fundamental to the process of self-realisation as an African American 'daughter of women rescuers' (175) that is perhaps the ultimate task of the book. History, memory and identity are held within this muteness:

> It was this silence that I encountered in the slave narratives, in the loud
> shouts and protests of the writings from the Civil Rights movement, in my

> grandmother's house, each time I asked, Who are we? Who am I? What is the meaning of silence? It was a closed window, a veil falling; a train rolling away from a station into the night. It was not remembering and never forgetting. I was born out of this silence and into it. But I was also born into a generation that demanded that everything be explained. (165-6)

Her literary undertaking is to speak this silence but not explain it, to journey to a place that no longer exists, to not remember and never forget – in short, 'to make peace with contradiction' (183). Yet her distance from the closeness of her elder family, from those who hold the key to the secrets of this silence, is evident even in the very language of 'the grown folks', recalled here from childhood memory:

> How different their language was from mine, which had been pressed out stiff and flat over the years spent at predominantly white schools; how it seemed to exist in a time and space separate from my own. (176)

In 'The Problems with Silence and Exclusiveness in the African American Literary Community' Joyce A. Joyce expressed a similar anxiety with regard to the modern black voice, warning that 'we must understand what happens to a Black psyche when it has been educated in predominantly white schools. … The reward of exclusiveness estranges us from our origins and our community'.[649] Tarpley again articulates her anxiety over this estrangement as she remembers her youth in 'a changing society and black community' at a time when 'the heavy print of the "I" of integration began to stamp out the "we," the direction of the wind began to change' (138). When writing in her mother Marlene's voice, she discloses further nostalgia for a departed communal past in the simple utterance 'We loved each other then. Black folks' (83), an echo perhaps of Alice Walker's poem 'Women', which begins with the line 'They were women then/ My mama's generation' (the poem was also included in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*).[650] For Natasha, this breach between her own

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[649] Joyce A. Joyce, in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, pp. 475-81; p. 481.
[650] Alice Walker, 'Women' [1970], in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 2377-8.

era of individualism and the bygone age of 'black folks' intensifies as she revisits her grandmother's home at the end of the narrative:

> Returning to Nana's house as an adult, I found the dichotomies between my life and the life she made … . The house was so complete, so full of her, even when she was no longer there. In my apartment in DC, nothing interrupted the whiteness of the walls. … My closets were crammed with unpacked boxes. My life felt tenuous. I wanted certainty. I wanted pieces of me to linger in rooms, in hearts, even when I wasn't there. (171-2)

Rooted familial sanctuary has given way to transient metropolitan solitude, signified by the dichotomy between the 'full' and 'complete' home of Nana as opposed to Tarpley's minimalist and anonymous apartment. As a child of the post-Civil Rights era of increasing interracial integration and class mobility (for some), Tarpley regrets that the whiteness of her walls matches the aforementioned 'whiteness' of her tongue, an accent that betrays her stable 'middle class' privately-educated upbringing away from 'the territory of the big boys' whose faces are seen 'flashing across the screen on the evening news, flickering past me on the street' (129-30), and away too from 'the old ways' (62) of her Southern foremothers. Blackness, in this instance, is stereotypically equalised with paucity, a lack of formal education and a certain vernacular, with whiteness functioning as its wealthy and erudite reflection (Eddy L. Harris' experience when travelling across Africa – where his nationality often endowed him with a false aura of affluence, even though his skin was black – reveals that such stereotypes do not always translate and are of course context-dependent).

Toni Morrison's novels often depict middle class African American life as alienated from the cultural heritage of the black rural South, says Susan Willis, with certain characters requiring rescue from 'the upper reaches of bourgeois reification' by, in the words of Valerie Smith, 'characters or experiences that invoke the characters' cultural past and repressed

emotional lives.'[651] Just as 'the energy of the text' in Morrison's work lies with those characters capable of such invocation,[652] so in Tarpley's memoir does the spirit of her grandmother invigorate the narrative and enable the alienated young metropolitan narrator to recouple with her past – and in the spirit of Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), it is in the home that this forgotten heritage dwells. Nana's 'full' house functions as a scene of reawakening for Natasha, who remarks before 'we rummaged through Nana's things' that '*sometimes the house was a womb that gave birth to us again and again*' (170, emphasis in original). Tarpley confesses that she was 'looking to be born again' (176) by making the journey back to see Nana, to swing together on the emblematic site of the front porch – as a jazz soundtrack 'sweet and brimming with nostalgia' plays from across the street – where they first spoke of the memoir to be written (176-7). As a product of intimate conversation and, as I will discuss below, of shared, workaday graft with her grandmother, the practical, vernacular method of research for the book also reconnects Tarpley with the oral tradition from which she felt estranged in her relatively privileged youth. It is worth noting here that Tarpley cites Morrison as a 'major influence' and refers to her by name in the text – specifically Morrison's remark that when a river floods it is 'remembering where it used to be' (163). The symbolic site of the porch also registers a further harmony with Alice Walker, who 'declared herself an African American woman writer committed to exploring the lives of black women'[653] and dedicated *Everyday Use* (1973) 'for your grandmama'.[654] It is to Tarpley's conception of the everyday in *Girl in the Mirror* that I will now turn.

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[651] Valerie Smith, 'Black Feminist Theory' p. 379; see also Susan Willis, 'Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison' in *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 83-109.

[652] See Smith, p. 379 and Willis, 'Eruptions of Funk'.

[653] *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 2375.

[654] *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 2389-94.

'People Lived Their Lives, That's All': The (Extra)Ordinary Everyday

Although Natasha is the formal author of *Girl in the Mirror*, imaginatively assuming the voice of Marlene and Anna, the collaborative composition of the text is wilfully foregrounded. On the acknowledgements page Natasha gives thanks to, amongst others, sisters, aunts, her grandmother Anna 'for the valley of wisdom beneath my tongue' and mother Marlene 'for reading the entire manuscript – several times – with loving criticism and input that expanded my vision. I couldn't have done it without you.' Moreover, in the final chapter the commencement of the process of research for the book – specifically the task of interviewing Anna – is narrated within the text itself. Tarpley's project is one of dialogue between generations of women, of memorising, inscribing and traversing that 'valley of wisdom beneath my tongue' – also referred to in Anna's chapter (36) and again in Natasha's (121) – transmitted from elder to fledgling.

As Natasha's chapter, and the text itself, draws to a close, we read of the encounter between grandmother Anna (Nana) and granddaughter at the onset of this literary endeavour (176-181). However, as Natasha 'prepared to ask Nana about her life' and 'bombard[ed] her with questions', she admits that 'this book' was in truth 'this thing that I didn't completely understand' (177-8). As a child, as referenced earlier, Natasha 'longed to know better' the language of 'the grown folks' that 'seemed to exist in a time and space separate from my own' but when the task of learning that otherworldly language begins in adulthood, she instead learns that 'the secrets that seemed to inform and hold solid the lives I had witnessed growing up' (176) were in fact deeply worldly and rooted in the earthly routine of everyday life. In the face of her granddaughter's intense inquisitiveness and nostalgic yearning for mythologised chronicles of the past, Anna insisted on the nondescript nature of her life:

> "I don't know what I can tell you," Nana said. "You know, we had some good times. People lived their lives, that's all. Just like you're doing now. Wasn't any different." (178)

Frustrated in her search for the romance of the past, Natasha recalls that 'she [Anna] told me again and again that her life was not special … . I felt like I was running up against a wall with every question' (178). It is only when she relinquishes the formal investigative role of interrogator and instead assumes the intimate daily exertion of living, struggling and working together with Anna that Natasha is able to finally receive that unspoken message – that 'something else that I did not or would not hear' (178) – of (extra)ordinary everyday strength, the unpretentious day-to-day labour that lies beneath grand historical metanarratives:

> During the next few days, my grandmother and I began to work together. I helped her complete her chores around the house, things she had put off doing because they were too much work for her alone. We washed the linens, reorganised the pantry shelves, vacuumed the carpet, turned the mattress on her bed, worked in the basement.
> … I closed my notebook, let go of the questions that I had come to ask, and opened myself up, spread what little of the life I had lived before her for Nana to see, to touch, to criticise, to admire. In turn, Nana showed me a wound that was still fresh and painful, one which she allowed me, in the small ways that I could, nurse. (178-9)

The lesson of this nourishing period of exchange is encapsulated in a moment, as Natasha helps her increasingly ill grandmother up the stairs:

> I held out my arm to her. She hedged for a moment and then looped her arm around mine. As we moved on to the next step, I could feel her muscles tighten and was surprised at how strong her grip was. It was this strength, this refusal to stop even in the face of severe pain that had enabled Nana to do the things that needed to be done, as she had told me, to make the best life for herself and for her family that she could. (180)

In asserting the unyielding strength beneath the deceptive frailty of an elderly woman close to death, Natasha remoulds the image of black power, struggle and freedom away from masculinist tropes of combat and adventure. This womanist recognition of the daily strength of black women and the significance of hearing, absorbing and telling the stories of those largely anonymous heroines is likewise espoused by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*:

> No song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. … Her stories – like her life – must be recorded. … For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time.[655]

As Walker observes her mother 'working in the flowers', digging, uprooting, pruning 'until night came and it was too dark to see', she recognises 'a legacy of respect … my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength'[656] that is also discernible in Tarpley's reflection upon and celebration of her grandmother's instructive legacy of love and labour, her secreted 'vital gift' (181) hidden beneath the tongue that informs Tarpley's sense of 'duty' as 'the daughter of women rescuers' (175).

Discussing the founding significance of Frederick Douglass' physical confrontation with slave breaker Covey in his 1845 *Narrative* – a scene explicitly rendered as a defence of manhood along with a lesson in the possibilities of freedom – Angela Y. Davis makes the pertinent point that 'historically, the conceptualisation of freedom has been linked to manhood, the conceptualisation of black freedom to black manhood'.[657] As she calls for greater recognition of the contributions of black feminism to the struggle of people of colour in the United States, Davis justifiably asks 'what about women? What is the trajectory of freedom for women?' By testifying to the emblematic contribution of Anna Mae Dudley to the daily struggle for the betterment of the condition of African American lives, *Girl in the Mirror* answers Davis' call. This is further explicated in the subsequent passage, as Natasha recalls Nikki Giovanni's statement that those in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s 'wanted magic' and admits that she too was 'looking for magic, for a flash of light, a sign

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[655] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Legacy of Southern Black Women* [1974], in *The Norton Anthology*, pp. 2380-87; quotation at pp. 2385-6.
[656] Walker in *Norton*, pp. 2386-7.
[657] Angela Y. Davis, Interview, *Democracy Now!*
 http://www.democracynow.org/2010/10/19/angela_davis_on_the_prison_abolishment
(Last accessed 14/01/2013)

from God' (180). However, instead of spectacular ethereal divinity, from a god implicitly understood as male, she discovers earthly female fortitude:

> I learned from my grandmother that struggle and freedom do not come only in grand and romantic pronouncements, but are as natural as breathing, as ordinary as making sure there are fresh-smelling sheets on the bed, cooking a hot meal, embracing and talking to one another, looking at each other and saying "good morning," acknowledging one another's presence and significance both in the small world of our home, and in the world surrounding it that often threatened its existence. … Nana taught me something about what it means to struggle, to take the life that you're given and make something. (181-2)

Natasha gleans from her grandmother that the practice of struggle and freedom can be akin to the rhythmic, organic and often unnoticed – but of course vital – process of breathing. Moreover, history itself is rendered as similarly somatic. For Natasha, history is not motored by distanced, deific messiah figures (even if they make it to the White House) and merely watched from afar by the common herd. Rather, history is the collaborative handiwork of 'human hands, human bodies, working together':

> She made me understand that history is not witnessed, but is *made* by human hands, human bodies, working together to survive the circumstances in which they find themselves, and to imagine, to try to create better ones. (182, emphasis in original)

The 'small world' of Anna's home is thus portrayed as a scene of history pregnant with utopian potentiality that garners its power from the cooperative daily exertion of those human beings – or, more precisely in this instance, those women – living and breathing within. By actively labouring with her grandmother in this tangible domestic space rather than passively recording in her notebook a vast and quasi-mythologised past, Natasha is thus able to perceive history and struggle in the grounded terms of the everyday, in lexis distinct from the often exclusionary, embellished and masculinist rhetoric of the historical chronicle.

'I like you Best when you are Sleeping': Tarpley's Mourning Stories

In 'Cultural Narratives Passed On: African American Mourning Stories', Karla F. C. Holloway notes that the communal reflection on death in African American literature often entails the incorporation of real life fatality in the fictive realm of storytelling, noting in particular that 'in African American families, recollections of Emmett Till's death are known across generations'.[658] Tarpley was also touched by Till's death, as evidenced in the affecting poem 'Slow Dance', about a young girl who goes dancing on the night of Till's murder.[659] Set in 'the summer they dragged/ Emmett Till's almost body out of the Tallahatchie', the concluding couplet demonstrates Tarpley's aforementioned literary mission statement to 'try to explain how African Americans lean on one another' in her writing:

> That summer
> a boy held out his hand to me
> on the last slow number …
> I didn't swoon and couldn't faint,
> cause me and that boy was holding each other up,
> finding our rhythm in those blues

In her reading of African American 'mourning stories', Holloway discovers a transgression of narrative borders – 'fact and fiction edge into each other's territory' – that is also clear in Tarpley's work, which is likewise informed by death, bereavement, and the meditative, nurturing practice of remembrance. The performative African American aesthetic of mourning, accomplished through storytelling, is for Holloway a vital act of communal sustenance to be nurtured as a creative strategy of intergenerational communication, in which lies 'the promise of culture'.[660] It is in the reflexivity of death, functioning in the 'carefully collected' mourning stories that are 'passed on' to the new generation as a commentary on the

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[658] Karla F. C. Holloway, 'Cultural Narratives Passed On: African American Mourning Stories' [1997], in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 653-9; quotation at p. 655.

[659] Natasha Tarpley, 'Slow Dance', *Callaloo* 15.4 (1992), 928. Tarpley recalls writing this poem in the *Black Issues* interview with Angaza.

[660] Holloway, p. 658.

life that preceded it, that the memorial of the last century of the millennium will be accomplished, says Holloway:

> When we look back and wonder how we got over the hump of these millennial times, I think our mourning stories, carefully collected, will tell one way that the last century of the millennium was lived. Whether lynched like Emmett or lovingly relinquished, how we have died reflexively comments on how we have lived. … The promise of culture, I'm sure, is the certainty of our stories in its midst.[661]

For its power to strengthen and solidify oppressed communities, this literary mourning is profoundly formative.

Three deaths are key to *Girl in the Mirror*: Anna (Tarpley's grandmother), Herman (her father), and Anna's friend and neighbour Iona. Having already discussed Anna above, I will now focus on Herman and Iona. The fact that Herman and Iona are momentary first person narrators in Anna's chapter evidences the importance of their lives and deaths to the text. Here, in a short vignette entitled 'Yearning for Daddy', published four years before *Girl in the Mirror*, Tarpley considers the nature of her grief as she stands at her father's graveside:

> I am grieving for more than his loss. I am also grieving for those of us who are left behind: the aunts and mothers and grandmothers whose husbands are gone, the daughters who grew up without the benefit of a father's wisdom or support.[662]

She goes on to 'give thanks for being blessed with a family whose love is a bridge across rough waters, *especially for the women and the places of sustenance and support we've created for one another*'.[663] Her anguish is at once solitary and communal, a specific, gendered experience of loss and abandonment shared by countless other African American women. In embryonic form we may read here the therapeutic women-centred sentiment that would eventually find creative expression in the author's later memoir, for it is to those gendered spaces of spiritual nourishment that Tarpley later travels in her historical narrative

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[661] Holloway, p. 658.
[662] Natasha Tarpley, 'Yearning for Daddy', *Essence* 25, 7 (November 1994), 54.
[663] Tarpley, 'Yearning for Daddy'.

of three women's lives. Yet, as the title 'Yearning for Daddy' implies, there is also for Tarpley a longing for male companionship, an 'ache of loneliness and doubt'[664] that haunts those grieving women. So while she mourns for the father and, beyond, for 'those women left behind', she confesses that 'I am grieving also for what I have not found: a strong and lasting relationship with *a man, someone with whom I can share my whole self*'.[665] Although she asserts that 'I have learned from the women in my house that life does not revolve around a man', there nonetheless remains a gap, an ultimate absence of males that can never be fully equipoised in a wholly female space:

> We are not made of stone. We break, falter, feel lonely. There is a space in our hearts carved out for all the fathers, uncles, cousins, sons and lovers who are gone too soon from our lives, but whose deep notes still flow through us, whose songs we remember every day. In memory of them we keep holding on.[666]

Tarpley's memoir is thus not only imbued with the bridge-building love of women but also composed in remembrance of those absent males 'who are gone too soon' and whose otherly presence – especially, for Tarpley, as a lover – is necessary for whole self-realisation. Here she perhaps begins to depart from Audre Lorde, who also expressed a shared affection for the radical possibilities of 'women-identified-women' as potentially 'reorder[ing] our whole concept of social relationships'.[667]

In *Girl in the Mirror*, Tarpley's candid recollection of her father acquires a poignancy not expressed in the above article. She confesses in her memoir that 'I used to get so angry at Daddy, even as a young child, because I never perceived him as giving her the love she needed or deserved' (168). A parallel is drawn between her father (Herman) and her mother's father as men incapable of supplying their daughters with subjective completion:

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[664] Tarpley, 'Yearning for Daddy'.
[665] Tarpley, 'Yearning for Daddy' (emphasis added).
[666] Tarpley, 'Yearning for Daddy'.
[667] Audre Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' [1980], in Cheryl Clarke, (ed.), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, Toronto: Crossing Press, 2004), pp. 114-23; quotation at p. 121.

> I remembered her [Natasha's mother Marlene] telling me that sometimes she felt that her father didn't love her. I had that same ache when I thought about Daddy. … Mom and I were still searching for completion, resolution of hunger. Both of us seeking this resolution from men who weren't capable of giving us what we needed. (167)

Wahneema Lubiano detects a 'strategic will' within African American literature and studies to constitute a new institutional and ontological object of knowledge, an undertaking yoked with the drive to revise, rewrite and reclaim history, to affirm, elevate and continually reconstitute a marginalised subjectivity and, ultimately, to transform the material conditions of African American life.[668] However, mindful of the dangers of exclusive engagement with the 'dominant domain' – of monolithically existing within the academy 'only to oppose or resist the dominant discourse' – Lubiano expresses an interest in those texts that 'showcase the nexus of Afro-American material life' in a properly intricate manner.[669] *Girl in the Mirror* performs this function as an endeavour to claim and control the history of self, family and community. Furthermore, in an age when travel and fluidity is celebrated as empowering, progressive and subversive, *Girl in the Mirror* delivers a useful retort, validating Terry Eagleton's claim – also a rejection of 'the postmodern cult of the migrant' – that rooted communality (rest) can be as revolutionary as itinerant dislocation (movement):

> If men and women need freedom and mobility, they also need a sense of tradition and belonging. There is nothing retrograde about roots.[670]

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[668] Wahneema Lubiano, 'Mapping the Interstices Between Afro-American Cultural Discourse and Cultural Studies: A Prolegomenon', *Callaloo* 19. 1 (Winter 1996), 68-77; quotation at 72.
[669] Lubiano, 75.
[670] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* [2003] (London: Verso, 2004), p. 23.

CONCLUSION

'Dream of an Elsewhere'

There's something out there beckoning me – I don't know what; I don't know where. But I can hardly wait for my ticket to get there. And I don't plan to stop until I find it.

– Colleen J. McElroy[671]

There was a horrible psychological terror involved with bringing this project to a close. … Already I was aware of all the lacunae in my travels. … All I could see was what I had not done.

– Randall Kenan[672]

For an African American, that long ago journey from the enslavement of the physical self to the ersatz freedom is an ongoing one.

– F. E. De Lancey[673]

'The World is White No Longer': Democratising Travel Literature

In drawing attention to a heterogeneous range of contemporary and often overlooked texts authored by peripatetic African American men and women, this thesis has made a distinct contribution to the ongoing scholarly exploration of the vast field of travel writing. Just as Alasdair Pettinger strategically interleaves his valuable anthology *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (1998) with the 'the broader project of 'decolonising' or 'democratising' travel literature', so I combine this research with an ongoing effort to 'redress the balance'.[674]

Over half a century ago, following his travelling experiences as a conspicuous 'stranger' in a tiny Swiss village unaccustomed to African Americans – not unlike Colleen J. McElroy, who as a solo African American woman traveller is often 'the sight to see'[675] when on foreign soil – James Baldwin was moved to affirm that any attempt by white Americans to recover 'the European innocence … long after that innocence is dead' by negating people of colour in the

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[671] Colleen J. McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie: Travel Memoirs* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), p. iii.

[672] Randall Kenan, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 635.

[673] F. E. De Lancey 'Afterword: Negotiating the Lacunae', *Black Travel Writing*, Special Issue of *BMa: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 9. 1 (Fall 2003), 295-303; quotation at 302.

[674] Alasdair Pettinger, *Always Elsewhere*, p. 241.

[675] McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. 7.

United States would be a monstrous error, for the inescapable 'interracial drama' of that nation is indicative of our shared global destiny:

> No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. … It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. *This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.*[676]

Baldwin's prophetic statement, which inspires the notable anthology *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing* (1998), should be appropriately registered by scholars concerned with the continuing nourishment of the literature of travel. To paraphrase, one could add here that travel writing is white no longer, and it will never be white again. The indefensible fact that, as Pettinger has noted, most of the critical work on travel writing has 'focused almost exclusively on *white* authors'[677] must be corrected by the continued study of an inclusive assortment of texts, heeding new voices and identifying new styles of writing travel. As we advance further into a new century that continues to confirm Baldwin's proclamation, it remains illusory to consider the travel writings of white European or North American men as the standard model of the genre. Furthermore, in departing from 'the predominance in the African American canon of narratives of forced or economically determined movement',[678] or of journeys 'back' to Africa, this research has also incorporated narratives of voluntary international and intranational travel beyond the restrictive and essentialist paradigms of a 'black geography'. The readings of domestic travelogues authored by African Americans journeying across the United States, particularly in Chapter Three, is also intended to register the tradition of home travels, as a reminder that travel writing does not have to be international in its scope. Moreover, by arguing in the final chapter that Tarpley's *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Woman in Motion* (1998) is a form

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[676] James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village' [1953], in *The Norton Anthology to African American Literature*, pp. 1678-9 (emphasis added).
[677] Pettinger, 'Introduction', *Always Elsewhere*, p. xii.
[678] Tim Youngs, 'Black/White Limits', 71

of travel writing, despite its position on the boundary of fiction and non-fiction, genre boundaries have been tested, potentially widening the already vast field of travel literature further for future scholarly activity in travel writing studies.

In the light of the various foci of this thesis – the process of genre and literary categorisation, the politics of travel, travelling subjectivity and identity formation, the remembrance of ancestral and generational mobility – I will now conclude, as stated in the introduction, by briefly re-examining the question of theory and its possible future evolution on the site of travel writing.

Contemporary African American Travel Writing and 'Theory': Reflections and New Directions

It is hoped that this thesis has charted new territory by gathering together a corpus of contemporary texts from a largely neglected literary sub-genre for critical scrutiny. The task of the scholar of such an overlooked collection of texts is made more taxing by the lack of a clear and proven theoretical model, although, as mentioned in the introduction, this could also be viewed as an advantage, as the valuable process of examining generic 'inbetweeners' may assist in the development of new methodologies and thus new theoretical ground could be broken (indeed, Edward Said and Paul Gilroy make productive use of travel writing to this effect, as discussed below). It is hoped that in the light of this thesis, future research in this field will likewise positively receive the absence of a standard 'T/theory' as an opportunity to cross theoretical as well as genre boundaries.

John Cullen Gruesser has argued in *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (2005) that there are 'formidable similarities between postcolonial and African American literary criticism' and has thus sought to 'identify points of correspondence and build bridges between them',[679] utilising Paul Gilroy's

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[679] Gruesser, pp. 2-3.

'pathbreaking'[680] model of the 'Black Atlantic' as a reconciliatory conduit. Inserting *Confluences* into a broader interdisciplinary project concerned with 'the globalisation of literary study',[681] Gruesser is eager to correct the troubling exclusion of African American writing and theory from 'the seemingly all-inclusive realm of postcolonialism',[682] a neglect that defies reason given the palpable crossovers between the two theoretical domains. He notes, for example, that the key postcolonial concepts of 'hybridity' or 'syncretism' and 'double vision' intersect with the critical concern of African American studies with an ambivalent subjective 'twoness' (as famously articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois), and that Henry Louis Gates Jnr's theory of Signifyin(g) is comparable to the postcolonial model of counter-discourse, in that both focus on those intertextual rhetorical strategies of authors that defy or revise hegemonic discourse (of 'the Orient' for Said; of 'the black' for Gates).[683] Vital for Gruesser's project is Gilroy's utilisation of African American literature – particularly travel writing – to illustrate the development of a 'counterculture of modernity' as the dissenting cultural expression of Black Atlantic peoples (that is, a diasporic counter-narrative that exposed the violence of modernity, attaching the barbarity of slavery to hegemonic Enlightenment ideals of civility, modernity and progress), as Gilroy effectively demonstrates the usefulness of applying postcolonial theoretical terminology to African American literature.[684]

Gruesser's aspiration to tackle the surprising lack of attentiveness towards African American writing from a major branch of literary theory is certainly laudable. Also worthy of note in *Confluences* is an alertness to the criticality of 'movement through space', rather than only place and displacement, to Gilroy's Black Atlantic model.[685] Like Said's *Orientalism*,

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[680] Gruesser, p. 17.
[681] Gruesser, pp. 2-3.
[682] Gruesser, p. 8.
[683] Gruesser, pp. 12-6.
[684] Gruesser, p. 18.
[685] Gruesser, p. 18.

which was 'the first work of contemporary criticism to take travel writing as a major part of its corpus',[686] Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is dependent upon the literature of travel to illustrate what would become an influential and pioneering major theoretical model, although Gilroy crucially elevates the significance of geographical mobility itself as a subversive, transformative act in the service of a cross-cultural network that expounds 'a diasporic global perspective on the politics of racism and its overcoming'.[687] Postcolonial theory's consistent 'preoccupation with nationhood in relation to globalisation and its effects',[688] with the reformulations of cultural identity, with the breakdown of boundaries and cross-cultural interaction, with diaspora, multiculturalism and transnationalism – many of these concerns dovetail neatly with the interests and experiences of peripatetic black authors, thus making black travel writing a particularly suitable object of study for scholars absorbed with such topics today (although, as Arana points out, 'one would not want to invite over-facile generalisations about the black travel experience').[689] However, my precise focus here on contemporary African American travel writing has demanded a modified critical framework in order to more appropriately acknowledge that 'the experiences and cultural productions of people of African descent in the United States differ markedly and profoundly from those of persons from colonised or formerly colonised lands'.[690] This crucial distinction mandates an appreciation of the unique centrality of geographical mobility – physical movement itself rather than displacement – to African American history and cultural production, as well as an awareness of the significance of the contemporary epoch within which a new generation of authors are travelling and writing (that is, at a substantial temporal distance from many of the travellers and writers whose work predominantly occupies *The Black Atlantic*, such as Martin

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[686] Hulme and Youngs, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 8.
[687] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 120.
[688] Madsen, 'Introduction', in *Beyond the Borders*, p. 3.
[689] Arana in *BMa*, 4
[690] Gruesser, p. 2.

Delany, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B Du Bois and Richard Wright).[691] This confirms Alasdair Pettinger's claim that 'postcolonial approaches to travel writing may need to be reconfigured' in order to 'make sense of' peripatetic African American narratives.[692]

Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio's *Beyond the Black Atlantic: Relocating Modernisation and Technology* (2006) is salutary in this regard. Concentrating upon 'intercultural contact zones'[693] – note again that such zones are dependent upon journeying and so feature heavily in the literature of travel – *Beyond the Black Atlantic* seeks to extend the scope of Gilroy's model by:

> … Specifying the heterogeneity of Black Atlantic experiences, whether national or transnational, by looking beyond the Atlantic to the Indian ocean and the Indian diaspora … and by emphasising exchanges and parallel developments between 'black' and 'white' cultural networks.[694]

In addition, Goebel and Schabio also attest that 'Gilroy's narrative … does not sufficiently acknowledge Caribbean and South American precursors', while in the same volume Laura Chrisman warns against a 'new diasporic vanguardism' or 'diasporic exclusionism' that positions 'black diasporans' as the 'elite' and mistakenly sets 'the uncritical emulation of black America' as the goal along an 'evolutionary … ladder of modernity'.[695] Although it clearly has not been the task of this thesis to rework and reroute Gilroy's model away from its Atlantic and African American anchorage, the incorporation of a fresh corpus of contemporary texts has renewed and further underscored the living heterogeneity of black travelling experiences and, significantly from the perspective of literary studies, also called attention to the range of creative methods of writing about those experiences from within the pleasingly loose genre frame of the travel book form. Future study of the literature of travel from across the globe, in languages other than English and from points of departure other

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[691] See Gruesser, p. 97.
[692] Pettinger, 'One Negro Everywhere', p. 81.
[693] *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p. 7.
[694] *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, p. 4.
[695] See Laura Chrisman, 'Black Modernity, Nationalism and Transnationalism: The Challenge of Black South African Poetry', in *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, pp. 29-46.

than the United States or Europe, has the potential to advance this operation further. Goebel and Schabio's emphasis on 'exchanges and parallel developments between 'black' and 'white' cultural networks' also holds the welcome promise of remedying the somewhat clumsy requirement to 'explicitly and primarily' identify '*black* travel writers' as such in order to increase the visibility of their work, a constraint that inevitably 'runs the risk … of seeming to make essential claims about 'race'.[696] As Pettinger has noted, this taxonomic requirement is due to an 'almost exclusive' focus on white travellers in anthologies and studies of travel writing,[697] a bias that this thesis has sought to counter.

It is perhaps on the terrain of the political that such obstacles can be overcome. In registering 'the political aesthetic' of black South African poetry, Chrisman proposes the following remedy for what she views as the flawed and now outdated Black Atlanticism propelled in the 1990s by Gilroy's model:

> Gilroy's schematic segregation of diasporic from nationalist and Marxist critical perspectives needs to be rethought, and historicised as a metropolitan and ideological reflex of the globalising 1990s.[698]

On the matter of the historicity of the Black Atlantic model of 'black cultural modernity' (which Chrisman correlates with the dubious neoliberal 'freedom' of the transnational individual consumer in the global marketplace)[699] and its aforementioned interactions with postcolonial theory (similarly coinciding 'suspiciously with the anarchic 'free market' and the vicissitudes of finance capital on a global scale', argues E. San Juan, Jr.)[700] it is worth noting the valuable intervention of *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (2002), a collection of essays edited by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus.[701] Introducing the book,

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[696] Pettinger, *Always Elsewhere*, p. xii.
[697] Pettinger, *Always Elsewhere*, p. xiii
[698] Chrisman, p. 41.
[699] Chrisman, p. 30.
[700] E. San Juan, Jr., 'Postcolonialism and The Problematic of Uneven Development', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 221-39; quotation at p. 229.
[701] Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds., *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Bartolovich rallies against the disavowal of the economic in 'much postcolonial analysis'[702] and defines internationalist, anticolonial Marxism as distinct in this regard:

> What distinguishes a specifically Marxist critique, however, from a more general anticolonialism, is the insistence that cultural analysis of the everyday (and the extraordinary alike) is inseparable from questions of the political economy, in and outside the metropole; and that the critique of colonialism, and of the social order that has followed formal decolonisation, is inextricable from the critique of capitalism.[703]

The inextricability of capitalism from the analysis of narratives of travel to Africa in Chapter Two thus prompted reference to the work of Giovanni Arrighi, Etienne Balibar, Noam Chomsky, Angela Davis, Terry Eagleton, David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek and others. My reading of intranational travel texts in Chapter Three also involved an explication of the impact of neoliberalisation in the United States, particularly with regard to Ishmael Reed's journey to Oakland, and psychoanalytical theory, including Lacanian terminology, was cautiously employed in the reading of Eddy L. Harris' *Mississippi Solo* (1988). Given that institutionalised (and hegemonic) postcolonial theoretical approaches have been conventionally applied to the academic study of travel writing, it may have been expected that this thesis would adopt a similar critical framework to that of Gruesser, perhaps combining the discourse analysis of Said (who, incidentally, failed to acknowledge Marx's 'unequivocal solidarity with Indians who struggled against British rule')[704] with the Black Atlanticism of Gilroy, the Signifyin(g) of Gates and Toni Morrison's Africanism as part of a counter-discursive project of globalist interdisciplinarianism. However, in approaching the contemporary literature of African American travel, my methodological agenda has sought to establish possible points of departure from this somewhat predictable, voguish theoretical model. This aspiration is not only the result of my need to comprehend the particularities of African American (rather than 'black' or 'postcolonial') travelling experiences in this thesis

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[702] Bartolovich, p. 6.
[703] Bartolovich, p. 6.
[704] August Nimtz, 'The Eurocentric Marx and Other Related Myths', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 65-80; quotations at pp. 68, 80.

but is also an attempt to probe for new theoretical models capable of illuminating the wider literature of travel today, a necessity already recognised by Mary Baine Campbell:

> Much is left to be done in the realm of engaged criticism and theory. Recent attention to globalisation, diaspora, 'nomadism', and cyberspace is showing us the need for new and powerful theoretical work to replace, rather than simply supplement, the polemics and models produced by an academic collectivity concerned mostly with locatable cultures, bounded nations and the imperial past.[705]

As a tool for understanding the contemporary world order, Marxism has the potential to offer new insights into travel writing authored in the age of 'globalisation' and, going forward, the still-to-come period that will follow our present historical moment of transition to a new phase of accumulation. Reintegrating radical materialism may enable the emancipatory drive of contemporary travel writing to be shifted back from the 'properly 'cultural' task of intervention in the 'subject'-forming play of discourse(s)' to 'the process of objective societal transformation'.[706] Troubled by a lack of consideration of the political economy and radical struggle in methodologies that lay claim to 'the political responsibility of the critic', as did Gruesser,[707] I ventured in chapter two of this thesis to reintroduce Marxism to the study of travel writing[708] and African American literature. Just as, says Gruesser, 'the rapprochement of poststructuralist theory and African American studies bore fruit' for Gates and the application of postcolonial concepts to African American (travel) literature was 'extremely productive' for Gilroy,[709] so I argue here that a renewal of the relationship between African American studies, postcolonialism and Marxism may likewise be rewarding for future scholars working in these fields, particularly at a time when a hyperactive and absurdly destructive neoliberal capitalism threatens to further embed class inequality. At the time of

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[705] Mary Baine Campbell, p. 264.

[706] Neil Larsen, *Reading North by South: On Latin American Literature, Culture and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 201. Quoted in E. San Juan, Jnr., p. 237.

[707] Gruesser, p. 3.

[708] Campbell notes the 'helpful work' of 'literary Marxists' who include (historical) travel writing in their work in 'Travel Writing and its Theory', p. 270.

[709] See Gruesser, pp. 1-22.

writing in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, Bartolovich argued that 'at this moment of capitalist triumphalism, a Marxist critique is unforgoable'.[710] Today, following a fresh systemic disaster that exhibits the enduring and intrinsic instability of the present world system, thus bringing the political back into the foreground, her statement could be amended to read that 'at this moment of capitalist crisis, a Marxist critique remains unforgoable'. In the concomitant and ongoing struggle against racism – defined as 'the systematic oppression of groups on the basis of supposedly biological, inherent qualities readable in external characteristics'[711] – it would be a mistake to ignore the developmental links between racism and capitalist modernity, as elucidated by Helen Scott.[712]

Within the context of African American literary studies, travel writing and its theory, one wonders if scholars have travelled too far along the meandering road of 'discourses of 'the post'.[713] The poststructuralism of Signifyin(g), the postcolonial reflexes of the Black Atlantic and the overarching weight of postmodernism prompts a 'fashionable dismissal' of a caricatured, Eurocentric Marxism, one that also ignores postcolonialism's 'archaeological relation'[714] to Marx. The attendant prioritisation of clearly vital questions of culture, identity and textuality erroneously leaves any consideration of the political economy too far behind as an antiquated, unsophisticated concern of crude materialist determinism that predates the evolution of the supposedly sophisticated, 'large and dominant space'[715] of 'Theory'. With reference to the mobility of theory versus the mobility of large swathes of humanity, Terry Eagleton has cautioned against an 'obsession'[716] with the fluctuations of culture and identity

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[710] Bartolovich, p. 10.

[711] Helen Scott, 'Was There a Time Before Race? Capitalist Modernity and the Origins of Racism', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 167-82; quotation at p. 167.

[712] See Scott and also Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery* (London: Verso, 1997).

[713] A term used by Stuart Hall in 'When was the 'Post-colonial? Thinking at the Limit', in Iain Chambers and Linda Curtis, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 242-60; quotation at p. 258.

[714] Larsen, pp. 204-220; quotation at p. 205.

[715] Brennan, p. 185.

[716] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* [2003] (London: Penguin, 2004), p.12.

in the West – a symptom of 'post-political pessimism'[717] – if it is at the expense of class

politics:

> Instability of identity is 'subversive' – a claim which it would be interesting to test out among the socially dumped and disregarded.[718]

> The problem at the moment is that the rich have mobility while the poor have locality.[719]

This last point is critical for the future of travel writing and its theory. A return to the political

economy as a viable avenue of scholarly analysis could enrich future research into the

literature of travel and widen its relevance beyond the increasingly cosy walls of liberal

academia. This process would inevitably include the retrieval of materialist epistemology and

the reintegration of Marxism, a heterogeneous, 'living philosophy' that has always belonged

to the whole world.[720] It would be reckless to disavow a school of thought and political

practice that has been so influential to African American and postcolonial history, activism

and cultural production.[721] After all, what is the point of literary studies if not to inspire

genuine societal change, less the study of writing become once again the minor preserve of

the wealthy, detached and becalmed scholar?

There is not the time here to delve deeper into this matter, although it could yet prove

to be a fruitful topic of study for academics concerned with a renewed dialogue between

these interrelated emancipatory schools of thought. The highly fertile site of travel writing –

unfairly derided as an intellectually and artistically inferior form of writing for too long –

seems to be a particularly apt literary staging ground for such a theoretical reconciliation,

given the capacity of the travelogue to uncover or communicate hidden social practices or

conditions of life, inspire comparisons between regions or nation states, initiate cross-cultural

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[717] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 30.
[718] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 16.
[719] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 21-2.
[720] Bartolovich, pp. 10-1. For more on the global perspective of Marx, see Nimtz, 'The Eurocentric Marx and Other Related Myths'.
[721] On the developmental links between Marxism, anticolonial liberation movements and postcolonial studies, see Timothy Brennan, 'Postcolonial Studies between the European Wars: an Intellectual History', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp. 185-203.

and transnational solidarity and thus inspire visions of possible future worlds. Continued expansion of the texts, topics and theories that constitute our collective field will aid the evolution of our critical engagement with the literature of travel.

'Bring Them All': Reading, Dreaming, Struggling

In a robust espousal of literary inclusivity undeterred by exclusivist conceptions of value and the contemporary rise of sales-orientated 'commercial black fiction', Farah J. Griffin has forcefully made the case for the reading of *all* forms of African American writing, regardless of perceived intellectual or literary status:

> Romance novels, mysteries, speculative fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction essays, memoirs, letters, biographies, poetry, experimental writing, spoken word; self-published, internet published, commercial houses – the more the better, not one at the expense of the other, but *bring them all*. There are readers for all of them[722]

Travel Writing, as this thesis has shown, criss-crosses and interacts with many of the above genres and could comfortably be added to this heterogeneous literary inventory. Griffin persuasively argues that the dissemination and study of such texts – including those forms wrongly held in low esteem and dismissed as sub-literary – has the potential to change young lives as powerfully as her own 'in a black working class/working poor neighbourhood', where she and her friends would read black literature after school and practice 'our own black girl brand of literary criticism'.[723] In making what Arana accurately describes as the 'kaleidoscopic' yet overlooked genre of black travel writing[724] more discernible to a wider audience, the continued scholarly analysis of consciousness-raising texts such as those considered in this thesis has the potential to provide literary sustenance to new generations of readers who, like Griffin, may utilise literature as a channel towards visions of a brighter future:

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[722] Farah J. Griffin, 'Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review, *Journal of Black Studies* 35, 2 (November 2004), 165-174; quotation at 171-2. (emphasis added).
[723] Griffin, 172.
[724] Arana in *BMa*.

> The books we read facilitated our dreams, gave us visions, sparked our imagination. Perhaps this is the greatest gift of the reading we did. It encouraged the imagination. … Black writing at its best has allowed us to imagine a past unrecorded in history books … and a future … worth struggling for or struggling against.[725]

The causal chain of reading, dreaming and struggling is germane to much of the travel writing I have examined here, writing that could bear analogous gifts to a contemporary audience being raised in comparably underprivileged conditions, who may be inspired into motion by narratives that configure travel 'as a form of empowerment, survival and renewal', as Elaine Lee argues in *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (1997).[726] The ethnographic work of Randall Kenan as he journeys across North America to uncover and narrate the untold and unfinished history of African American life in *Walking On Water*; the curative and imaginative engagement of Natasha Tarpley with the mobile lives of her mother and grandmother in *Girl in the Mirror*; the resolute determination of Colleen J. McElroy to assess her grandmother's declaration that 'they got some of us everywhere'[727] by travelling independently across the planet in *A Long Way from St. Louie* (1997); Saidiya Hartman's contemplation of the traumatic memory of slavery and hopeful expressions of future solidarity as she journeys to Africa in *Lose Your Mother* (2007) – these peripatetic narratives enable the reader to imagine a corrective, more comprehensive chronicle of a shared past in the service of the struggle for a healthier, collective future. The potentially revolutionary act of travel, the creative process of writing about travel and the enlightening reception of the literature of travel by new audiences could in this manner help to initiate broader aspirations for societal change.

Far from a simplistic, banal form of writing, wedded to the hegemonic agendas of the powerful and the privileged, the literature of travel thus has a latent potential capable of transforming lives and inspiring radical action as forcefully as more esteemed literary forms

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[725] Griffin, 172.
[726] Elaine Lee, *Go Girl!*, p. 13.
[727] Colleen J. McElroy, *A Long Way From St Louie*, p. iii.

such as the novel. A contemporary reengagement with the need for radical struggle is indeed vital today, at a time of capitalist crisis that is engendering widespread pauperisation, dismantling social programmes, disproportionately degrading the living standards of ethnic minorities and women, feeding anti-immigrant hatred and even renewing fascism. Contemporary travel writing has a role to play in the struggle to reverse this austere and regressive course by raising awareness of hidden suffering and by connecting communities, domestically and internationally, in order to fulfil Arana's aspiration as a responsible cultural researcher to raise awareness 'on a human scale of the real nature of our so-called global community'.[728] To take a small example of the revelatory potential of travel, recall here the moment in *Mississippi Solo* when Eddy L. Harris briefly glimpses the hidden and extreme poverty of the United States during a pause along his dramatic river quest, as he momentarily writes from within what Youngs terms 'the minor tradition of domestic travel that uncovers the socially excluded',[729] observing 'dirty run-down shotgun shacks as flimsy as cardboard'[730] in Helena, Arkansas:

> Dirt and squalor all around, it looked like Mexico. I had thought out-houses had all been replaced by indoor toilets a long time ago. I had thought even the most impoverished parts of this country were a zillion steps ahead of Third World poverty. I was wrong. This *was* the Third World. … I can't look at people so poor, so dead-ended and not want to cry.[731]

Over two decades after the publication of *Mississippi Solo*, journalist Chris Hedges and cartoonist Joe Sacco have recently collaborated to produce *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (2012),[732] an unapologetically polemic text that combines political manifesto, journalistic reportage, storytelling, graphic art and the radical tradition of socially-conscious intranational travel referred to above in order to innovatively portray the harrowing and largely concealed poverty that persists in the United States today. Thematically and formally

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[728] Arana, *BMa*, 6.
[729] See Tim Youngs, 'Where are we Going?', 178.
[730] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 199.
[731] Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 200.
[732] Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation Books, 2003)

– as a fresh example of fruitful genre mutation, utilising elements of another popular form unfairly regarded as lowbrow or sub-literary (the graphic novel) – *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* may herald a radical new direction for the literature of travel, worthy of future scholarly attention.

Politically engaged forms of journeying, especially if innovatively crafted as an inter-generic work of art, can offer a powerful antidote to misleading celebratory conceptualisations of a borderless, networked, interconnected world (and, in the case of *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, compensate for the journalistic inadequacy of a corporate news media that underreports or misrepresents penury in the so-called 'First World'). In a valuable corrective to what Bartolovich terms 'the idealist and dematerialising tendencies' of 'discourses of 'the post'',[733] Tim Youngs has already noted the ominous underbelly of the idealised image of a kinetic, borderless global village:

> The background to academic celebrations of fluidity, movement, intermixing, and the collapse of borders is the racially and politically-motivated reinforcement of borders – in Europe, Australia and the US – against those who would enter.[734]

This also raises the point that, for a great portion of humanity, freely chosen mobility remains a costly and unattainable luxury that is out reach, while coerced or economically necessitated migration is the standard experience of movement through space for our species. In contrast, boundary-breaking movement across borders that suits the interests of globally hegemonic political and economic power (the free movement of capital, goods, labour, military might) is vigorously imposed and, moreover, normalised or even celebrated. It is worth considering the neologism 'AfPak' as part of the increasingly institutionalised programme of devastating US drone attacks in the region of Afghanistan and Pakistan here, as sovereign state boundaries are wilfully disregarded according to the strategic objectives of the dominant, heavily armed and therefore freely mobile superpower, to deadly effect (this also undercuts the notion that

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[733] Bartolovich, p. 15.
[734] Tim Youngs, 'Where are we Going?', 178.

the breakdown and porosity of borders is a uniformly positive phenomenon). The fact that such violent and invasive cross-border destruction occurs under the stewardship of the first African American President of the United States also poses a profound challenge for African American politics, studies and travel writers. Although she has 'not agreed with everything he has done', McElroy's gentle description of Obama as patient, diplomatic, 'genuine' and 'a president with good intentions' will continue to be undermined by the President's embrace and extension of the authoritarian policies of previous administrations, both domestically and abroad[735] (with reference to the problems facing Oakland, Ishmael Reed's equivalence of the 'alliances' of the United States government with 'narcotics dealers' in both the United States and Afghanistan is also instructive).[736]

Hartman's potent vision of autonomy – which was compared in chapter two with Keith B. Richburg's disturbing patriotism – is significant here as an indicator of possible future horizons for peripatetic African Americans and for renewed visions of diasporic transnationalism. Connecting her diasporic subjectivity as a woman of African descent with the continuing 'fight against slavery' and 'dream of the world house' that 'exceeded the borders of the continent',[737] Hartman's radical vision has maturely recognised the limits of pan-Africanism yet also outgrown the confines of progressive and triumphalist United States neoliberalism and thus rejected the corrupted prize of US electoral politics. In the below excerpt, which references Lincoln, Hartman refuses to house liberty in a messianic 'great emancipator' or saviour figure. Read today, the presence of Obama haunts the passage:

> The legacy that I chose to claim was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy. It didn't require me to wait on bended knee for a great emancipator. It wasn't the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than

[735] McElroy, in Winfield, 'Interview', 67.
[736] Ishmael Reed, in 'Jerry Jazz Musician, Interview with Ishmael Reed' (February 2004), http://www.jerryjazzmusician.com/linernotes/ishmael_reed.html (last accessed 14/01/2013).
[737] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 233.

nationhood. It was the dream of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive.[738]

The inherited struggle to overcome 'the one world of relations between exploiters and exploited'[739] is at the heart of Hartman's 'stateless' mobile subjectivity as a 'fugitive' unwilling to settle for mere nationhood as a United States citizen and unable to adopt an illusory African selfhood. The centrality of emancipation to her chosen legacy underscores the truth that, as Bartolovich argues, it will only be possible 'to think globally' as a sovereign, nationless global subject 'when the current global asymmetries, economic, political, institutional, ideological, have been eliminated'.[740] Hartman's grand dream of 'a free territory', motivated by the physical act of travel and elaborated in the imaginative process of composing a narrative of the journey, connects the active, unfinished struggles of the so-called 'First' and 'Third' Worlds for genuine autonomy, negating both domains in favour of a communal 'world house'.[741] This single house is our mutual starting point, our shared route and our collective terminus.

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[738] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 234.
[739] Bartolovich, p. 14.
[740] Bartolovich, p. 14.
[741] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 233.

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