

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS:
TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK AMERICAN
TRAVEL NARRATIVES ABOUT AFRICA

Kenyatta Albeny, Doctor of Philosophy, 2015

Dissertation directed by: Professor Carla Peterson
Department of English

This dissertation argues that black American travel narratives about Africa reflect the authors' perception of their identity at particular moments in history. It suggests that these perceptions are informed by historical, political, economic, and social circumstances. Specifically, it demonstrates how associations with Africa—real and imagined—have evolved over time due to black Americans' shifting social and political status in the United States.

Black American travel narratives about Africa written during the second half of the twentieth century are the focus of this study. This period is marked by drastic political and social changes taking place both in Africa and the United States including

decolonization, independence, and the aftermath of apartheid and the Cold War in Africa as well as the Civil Rights movement, desegregation, and integration in the United States. Although Africa and the politics therein are the narratives' purported theme, I argue that their primary focus is black American identity.

My dissertation demonstrates how black American travel writers have used their narratives about Africa to define black American identity and to clarify the relationship between black Americans and Africa. At the heart of this dissertation is an interest in these relationships and a concern about the "baggage" that black Americans bring to perceptions of their identity and relationship with Africa, particularly their historical experiences as Americans, their knowledge and understanding of Africa and its history and how that "baggage" colors their perceptions of their relationship to the continent and its people. This "baggage" includes many factors including class, gender, personal history, as well as notions of race and nationalism. Texts in this study include Richard Wright's Black Power (1954), Era Bell Thompson's Africa, Land of My Fathers (1954), Maya Angelou's The Heart of a Woman (1981) and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986), Marita Golden's Migrations of the Heart (1983), Eddy L. Harris's Native Stranger (1992), Keith Richburg's Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa (1997) and Lynne Duke's Mandela, Mobutu, and Me (2003).

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS: TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK AMERICAN
TRAVEL NARRATIVES ABOUT AFRICA

by

Kenyatta Albeny

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Carla Peterson, Chair
Associate Professor Zita Nunes
Professor Merle Collins
Associate Professor Randy Ontiveros
Professor Barbara Finkelstein

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Introduction:

The Return: Black American Travel Narratives about Africa

Our social lives endow us with the full richness of our resources available for self-creation: for even when we are constructing new and counter normative identities, it is the old and the normative that provide the language and the background. Kwame Anthony Appiah (“Cosmopolitan Patriots” 625)

This dissertation argues that black American travel narratives about Africa reflect the authors’ perception of their identity at particular moments in history. It suggests that these perceptions are informed by historical, political, economic, and social circumstances. Specifically, it demonstrates how associations with Africa—real and imagined—have evolved over time due to black Americans’ shifting social and political status in the United States. Finally, it illustrates how black American travel narratives epitomize how Africa is an enduring, but ever changing, signifier in black American culture.

Black American travel narratives about Africa written during the second half of the twentieth century are the focus of this study.¹ This period is marked by drastic political and social changes taking place both in Africa and in the United States. These include decolonization, independence, the aftermath of apartheid and the Cold War in Africa, as well as the Civil Rights Movement, desegregation, and integration in the United States. Although Africa and the politics therein are the narratives’ purported theme, I argue that their primary focus is black American identity. Using them as case studies, I highlight the effect that domestic and international movements had on black Americans’ perceptions of their identities and their relationship with Africa.

¹ Lynn Duke’s *Mandela Mobutu and Me* was published in 2003 though it was written about her experiences as an Africa Bureau reporter for the *Washington Post* in the 1990s.

In the process, this dissertation examines factors such as audience and critical reception in order to understand how these travel narratives were read, misread, or overlooked. Analysis of critical reception is important because it brings to light the audiences for whom these authors wrote and their disparate assumptions about Africa, gender, and black American identity that the narratives sought to affirm or disrupt. Critical reception of Richard Wright's Black Power (1954), for instance, was bolstered by his reputation and the fact that his narrative was directed towards Western intellectuals. Conversely, Era Bell Thompson's Africa, Land of My Fathers (1954) has remained obscure because she primarily wrote for black audiences and her depiction of Africa differed from more conventional notions. Thompson's text, along with Maya Angelou's The Heart of a Woman (1981) and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986), and Marita Golden's Migrations of the Heart (1983), all consider the gendered experiences of female travelers, wives, and mothers in Africa. As a result, they were often misread by critics who disregarded their important commentaries about African politics, pan-Africanism, and black nationalism. Eddy L. Harris's Native Stranger (1992), Keith Richburg's Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa (1997) and Lynne Duke's Mandela, Mobutu, and Me (2003) were published at the turn of the twenty-first century. An examination of the critical reception of these millennial travel narratives exposes the continuing racially divided expectations between black writers and mainstream audiences.

Cultural Baggage

The travel narratives in this dissertation exemplify the enduring interest in Africa that exists among Africans in the diaspora, and focus specifically on black Americans

from the United States. Authors' depictions of their experiences in Africa expose the nuances of the ever-evolving and often problematic relationship between Africa and its diaspora. In her essay, "What Is Africa to Me?": Reading the African Cultural Base of (African) American Literary History" (2003), Gay Alden Wilentz places this relationship in its historical context:

From the first enslaved African brought to Barbados in 1509, initiating the largest forced migration of people in human history as well as the emergence of the African diaspora, the relationship between the African continent and the Americas has been a profound and complicated one. (639)

Black American literature provides fertile ground for examining this relationship, especially because Africa continues to be an enduring fascination in fiction and non-fiction. Travel narratives, in particular, make many of the nuances that underpin political and personal relationships among black Americans and Africans transparent.

At the heart of this dissertation is an interest in these relationships and a concern about the "baggage" that black Americans bring to them—most especially their historical experiences as Americans and their knowledge of Africa and its history—and how that baggage colors their perceptions of their relationship to the continent and its people. This baggage includes many factors, including class, gender, and personal history, as well as notions of race and nationalism. My dissertation demonstrates how black American travel writers have used their narratives to define their identity and to clarify the relationship between themselves and Africa. In doing so, I highlight the impact of their own cultural baggage on these perceptions.²

² Although many of the authors discussed in this dissertation traveled to several African countries spanning several regions, it should be noted that Anglophone countries like Ghana and Nigeria were popular among

The Roots of the Return Narrative

The black American travel narratives explored in this dissertation engage the idea of African return. Each of the writers, for professional or personal reasons, traveled to Africa, and in the process had to come to terms with their relationship to the continent. In addressing the African return, the writers address directly the physical return and the emotional impact of that has long held symbolic importance. It is important, however, to locate these travel narratives within a greater cultural context: the long tradition of black Americans longing for Africa.

Black Americans have been fascinated by the idea that they could one day return to their African homeland ever since their arrival as African slaves to Jamestown in 1619. The earliest black American folktales express the belief that enslaved Africans could, upon death, return to their homeland. Lawrence W. Levine, author of Black Culture and Black Consciousness (1978), writes that slaves “frequently told stories of Africans who put up with the treatment accorded to them by whites in America as long as they could and then simply rose up and flew back to Africa” (87). In Mary Granger’s Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes (1940), early twentieth-century researchers examined the notion of “flying Africans,” in which African-born slaves could escape slavery in the Americas and fly back to Africa. The idea of flying Africans persisted among black Americans living in the Georgia coastal islands. Since the publication of that study, several contemporary adaptations of these tales have emerged, including Julius Lester’s “People Who Could Fly” (1969) and Virginia

black American settlers. Ghana, which continues to be a popular destination for black travelers and settlers, is the only African country that recognizes people of African descent by offering an indefinite residence permit.

Hamilton's similarly titled The People Could Fly (2000). Other versions of flying Africans appear in novels by such authors as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. In her book Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora (1992), Wilentz highlights the use of flying Africans as a trope in contemporary black American literature paying particular attention to black American writers' fascination with the idea:

Many legends abound throughout the Americas of Africans who either flew or jumped off slave ships as well as those who saw the horrors of slavery when they landed in the Americas, and 'in their anguish, sought to fly back to Africa.' For Morrison, as for Paule Marshall (whose *Igbo's* walk back) and Ishmael Reed (whose slave Quickskill flies Air Canada) the notion of using the supernatural, especially this most exalted form of freedom, to overcome a catastrophe captivated her. (83)

Wilentz explains that notions of a spiritual return to Africa served as a form of psychological resistance to the racial oppression waged against African slaves and black Americans in the United States. Such a belief helped these uprooted peoples maintain a cultural and psychological connection to Africa after they arrived in the New World, and gave them hope for future liberation. The notion of flying Africans firmly established the idea of spiritual and psychological return as a theme within black American culture.

Black Americans And Physical Return To Africa

Black interest in the possibility of a physical return to Africa can be traced as far back as the American Revolution when African slaves petitioned the colonial legislature, asking to be emancipated so that they might return to Africa. According to Dickson

Bruce Jr., author of “National Identity and African-American Colonization 1773-1817” (1995), groups such as the African Union Society of Newport, Rhode Island, and the Masonic African Lodge of Boston were among the black organizations that sought support and assistance from colonial governments for their African repatriation efforts during the eighteenth century. The black Masons, for example, petitioned the Massachusetts General Court in 1787 proposing to “return to [their] native country ... where [they could] live among [their] equals, be more comfortable and happy, than [they were] in [their] present situation” (Bruce 22). That same year, the Sierra Leone Company, which was led by anti-slavery activists, founded the first black American colony in Africa in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Among its first settlers were runaway slaves from the New World who had sought asylum in England and fought on behalf of the British during the Revolutionary War.

Although there was great interest among black leaders in establishing a colony on the coast of West Africa, lack of funding kept most of these efforts from coming to fruition. Wealthy entrepreneur Paul Cuffee changed this trend, however, by becoming the leader of the first black-initiated “back to Africa” movement in 1816. With the support of the British government, U.S. Congress, and other free blacks, he successfully settled thirty-eight black colonists in Sierra Leone.³ Hoping to reduce the dependence on British and American support, Cuffee sought and received money from other free blacks who “had little interest in going to Africa but saw the commercial possibilities of [his] endeavors” (Bruce 24-25).

³ Although he intended on taking a group each year, he died one year later in 1817.

Free blacks were divided on the issue of emigration. For those who did return, there was a high mortality rate in the first years after their arrival, and those who survived often had difficulty adjusting to the climate and to the Africans who already lived there. But not all blacks viewed Africa as a panacea for their troubled lives in the United States. Some viewed physical return to Africa as impractical and had no desire to leave America, the place of their birth. Others were opposed to overseas colonization because of the sheer risk of adaptation to a new and unfamiliar environment. Still others were suspicious of resettlement schemes funded by whites—even white abolitionists—because they viewed these colonization schemes as a means of ridding the United States of black people. They viewed the efforts of the white-led American Colonization Society (ACS) to resettle them with great skepticism. After meeting with the ACS in 1817, members of Philadelphia’s African Institution, a black organization initially formed to assist Cuffee, concluded that “all of the free people would be compelled to go to Africa and that the slaveholders wanted to get rid of them, so as to make their property more secure” (Bruce 27).

Despite such fears, other free blacks saw repatriation to Africa as an opportunity, gladly accepting the help of the ACS. In 1819, the ACS established Liberia as a colony for the relocation of free blacks. Assisted by the ACS, Methodist missionary and co-founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Daniel Coker led eighty-six colonists to this region in 1821. The first black missionary in Africa, Coker settled in Sierra Leone with his family where he remained until his death. Another member of this group, Lott Carey, became the first American Baptist missionary in Liberia. There he established the colony’s first church and founded a school. Many, like Coker and Carey, viewed

returning to Africa as an opportunity to redeem the black race and gave rise to black American missionary activity in Africa.

Black missionaries promoted Western education, founded vocational schools, and served in leadership roles. Unfortunately, many carried with them negative stereotypes and ethnocentric ideas about Africans. In his book, Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal in the United States and South Africa (1995), James Campbell points out that throughout their history, black American missionaries often viewed Africans in much the same way as many white Americans did: as childish, brutish, and oversexed (87). In addition, many other black colonists maintained their difference and distance from Africans in the region despite the fact that they elected to emigrate to Africa. In the following passage Catherine Roth describes the behavior of black American settlers in Liberia, referred to as “Americo-Liberians”:

The Americo-Liberian settlers were, from the beginning, essentially American rather than African in outlook and orientation. They retained preferences for Western modes of dress, Southern plantation-style homes, American food, Christianity, the English language, and monogamous kinship practices. The settlers held land individually in contrast to the communal ownership of the African population, and their political institutions were modeled on those of the United States with an elected president, a legislature made up of a Senate and a House of Representatives, and a supreme court. They seldom intermarried with indigenous Africans and tried to influence the interior inhabitants primarily through evangelization and trade. (Roth)

The ACS continued to resettle blacks in Liberia long after Coker and Cary. By 1838, approximately 2,500 free blacks had emigrated there. Even after the colony was formally established as an independent nation in 1847, the ACS continued to send emigrants through the end of the Civil War. By 1867, the society had sent more than 13,000 emigrants.⁴

Black interest in emigration diminished somewhat after the Civil War. In The Ties that Bind (1987), Bernard Magubane points out that black interest in emigration was at its height when the “heel of oppression descended heavily upon them” (77). It is no surprise, then, that immediately after the Civil War, black Americans exhibited less interest in emigration. During this period, known as Reconstruction, many were hopeful about their future in the United States given the federal government’s efforts to integrate them into American society. The Freedman’s Bureau, created in 1865, was designed to assist newly freed slaves in the South. Unfortunately, these efforts were short lived, and by 1870 the objectives of this government agency had been undercut by numerous restrictive laws enacted in the southern states, known as “Black Codes.” As a result, many blacks concluded that they would never gain full rights in the United States, rekindling blacks’ interest in African repatriation.

Free blacks formed organizations such as the American Emigration Society, which in 1886 petitioned the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives for funds to support its efforts. The resolution it presented before Congress acknowledged not only the large numbers of free blacks already settled in Liberia and Sierra Leone, but also the interest in emigration to Africa among black Americans buoyed by recent racial

⁴ Americo-Liberians dominated leadership in Liberia for 133 years until a political coup resulting in the assassination of Americo-Liberian president William Tolbert in 1980.

experiences in the United States:

Whereas we the Negroes of the United States were brought from Africa and sold as slaves in this country and served as such from 1620-1865, and whereas we were set free without a penny, and left to the late mercy of our masters, and their brothers, who owned all this country from Atlantic to Pacific; and who, for over 200 years regarded us as inferior, and slaves, and whereas there are sixteen thousand of us who have already returned to Africa; and whereas there are thousands of us in humble circumstances; who yet wish to return to Africa ... (81)

Blacks continued to emigrate through the close of the nineteenth century, though the numbers of emigrants never again reached the peak that they did in the 1820s and 1830s.

The correlation between black interest in Africa and racial tension in the United States was once again confirmed during the 1920s, just as the American economy began to take a downturn. Through his “Back to Africa” movement of the 1920s, Jamaican-born entrepreneur Marcus Garvey had a vision to improve the economic conditions of African people both on and off of the African continent. Although it is unclear how many black Americans actually emigrated as a result of his efforts, the mass appeal of his campaign briefly revived black American interest in the notion of emigration to Africa. In “Marcus Garvey: The Remapping Of Africa And Its Diaspora” (2011), Rupert Lewis suggests that what distinguished the Garvey movement was its broad popular appeal and sophisticated communications strategies, which included newspapers, public meetings, and face-to-face communication—all of which heightened the consciousness of Africans in the diaspora (477).

Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) established businesses that employed more than 1,000 people, including the Black Star Line, a shipping company that transported both people and goods to Africa. Garvey was also the publisher of the weekly *Negro World*, which was the largest black newspaper of its time. His mass appeal was undeniable. When he organized the first UNIA conference in New York in 1920, more than 20,000 people attended. In his "Marcus Garvey, the Harlem Years," John Henrik Clarke suggests it was at this historic conference that Garvey's cry for "Africa for Africans"—those at home and abroad—became part of the folklore of black Americans (21). William Ackah, author of Pan-Africanism: Exploring the Contradictions, Politics, Identity and Development in Africa and the African Diaspora (1999), argues that much of Garvey's success in recruiting blacks from America to join UNIA was due to the historical moment. He cites in particular the effects of the Great Depression and the influx of European migrants that resulted in heightened racism against black Americans. In his view, class also greatly influenced black Americans' interest in African emigration. He writes:

Lower class African-Americans viewed Africa as a new start, seeing no hope in the empty promises of the American dream ... Close analysis of why people in the twentieth century wanted to return to Africa suggests that they were either running from racism, or that they had a vision of Africa that was a far cry from the reality of life on the continent. (21)

Unfortunately the UNIA lacked the funds necessary to execute many of its objectives. Likewise, most black Americans, especially the middle class, were uninterested in going "back to Africa." Garvey's radical views put him at odds with

other black leaders including pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois. Sylvia Jacobs, author of The African Nexus (1981), argues “middle-class blacks, their leaders, and spokesmen were consistently anti-emigrationist and instead suggested missionary activity and developmental projects as their contribution to the continent” (7). Garvey’s militant goals also made him a target for U.S. government investigation. In 1923, just a few years after his arrival in the United States, he was convicted of mail fraud and imprisoned. In 1927, he was deported to Jamaica.

The 1950s and 1960s marked an important turning point in black Americans’ interest in emigration to Africa, as well as in their vision of Africa. A particularly turbulent time in the United States, it was marked by black dissatisfaction with political and social life, social protest, and civil unrest. Independence movements in Africa, coupled with the Civil Rights struggle in the United States, helped foster a strong sense of pan-Africanism that heightened black Americans’ interest in Africa’s emerging governments. In the 1960s, an unprecedented number of black Americans, among them many writers, left the United States for Africa, Europe, and many other countries for a myriad of personal and political reasons. According to Robert Coles, author of Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa (1999), the most pronounced reason was dissatisfaction with American racial politics and their effects (125). Many chose Africa based upon ancestry and racial identification.

Ghana was particularly attractive because of its progressive politics and charismatic leader, Kwame Nkrumah, who had been educated in the United States at Lincoln University, an historically black college in Pennsylvania. He encouraged Africans in the diaspora to return to Africa and participate in a “New Africa.” The most

notable of all black American expatriates was W.E.B Du Bois, who emigrated to Ghana in 1958 at the personal invitation of Kwame Nkrumah. Disillusioned with the state of race relations and politics in the United States, Du Bois remained in Ghana with his family until his death in 1963. Writer Maya Angelou, who lived in Ghana and Egypt in the 1960s, depicts her experiences in her memoir, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986).

Gradual social progress at home necessarily transformed black Americans' orientation towards Africa. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, turned black American attention homeward giving hope that they would finally achieve equality in the United States.⁵

In "In the Shadow of the Castle (Trans) Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Goree Island" (2009), Salamishah Tillet describes the shift that took place in the mid-1970s as the "Back to Africa" discourse transitioned from a movement primarily concerned with repatriation to an effort characterized by tourism. The period between the 1970s and the mid-1990s was marked by a big marketing wave of heritage tourism that targeted black American interests in their African history as well as leisure activities like shopping and relaxation. Tillet characterizes these "coming home" tours as speaking to black Americans' need to reconcile their past and present history:

⁵ Notable exception: The newly formed U.S. government-run Peace Corps actively sought black volunteers in 1960s, especially to Africa, as a badge of America's commitment to equality. The numbers of black volunteers who actually served, however, was quite low.

The advent of contemporary African American heritage tourism is the product of an attempt to reconcile what I describe as a fundamental paradox of racial politics in the post-Civil Rights U.S.: an emergent African American legal citizenship that is complicated coupled with a persistent sense of civic estrangement from the rights and privileges of the contemporary public sphere. Because there are so few formal symbols of the lives and contributions of African Americans in their immediate national landscape, post-Civil Rights African heritage tourists re-appropriate sites and symbols of their forgotten history ... Through this process of recuperation, these heritage tourists acquire ... symbolic possession over the historical narratives of American slavery. (125)

Tillet's analysis acknowledges the important role that Africa continues to play in black American conceptions of identity. Though relatively few black Americans consider permanent emigration to Africa, a considerable number elect to travel to Africa not only to learn about their history, but also as a form of redemption from the aftermath of slavery. Such a trend attests to Africa's ongoing relevance in the public imagination of black Americans. While large-scale emigration interests have all but disappeared, black Americans continue to visit Africa as tourists, missionaries, volunteers, teachers, and in other professional capacities.

The narratives in this dissertation are comprised of émigrés, tourists, and professionals. Traveling at different moments in history and with different motives, each author engages the notion of black Americans' ideological and physical return to Africa. In depicting the possibilities and problems of an African return, each in his or her own

way offers readers insight on what it means to be a black American at specific moments in history.

Critical Influences

My research is shaped by the work of V.Y. Mudimbe and Christopher L. Miller who have examined the significance of Africa as a trope in Western literature. Theorists like Mudimbe have attempted to historicize the Western image of Africa. In The Idea of Africa (1988), Mudimbe advances the notion of “alterity” to explain how the negative conception of Africa was a European invention defined by Europe’s history and interaction with the continent. Miller’s notion of “Africanist discourse” in which Africa is the foil to, or negation of, European culture, also helps us to understand how Africa functions not as a particular physical location, but rather as an ideological one. His Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French (1985) identifies Africa as a “blank slate” in Western literature on which the hopes, desires, and fears of Western writers are inscribed.

Enchanting Darkness: The American Vision of Africa in the Twentieth Century (1993) by Dennis Hickey and Kenneth C. Wylie relies heavily on Miller’s work, extending his discussion of the European image of Africa to its influence on American depictions of Africa. The authors persuasively argue for more balanced portrayals of Africa, acknowledging the important role that black American writers have played in trying to amend negative images of Africa in American literature. They point out, however, that in responding to negative stereotypes of Africa, black Americans often revert to the same Western stereotypes they seek to denounce. Kwame Anthony Appiah makes a similar observation in his book, In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy

of culture (1992). Citing the inherent flaws of early black American nationalist thinking about Africa, Appiah writes:

Ethnocentrism, however much it distresses us, can no longer surprise us.

We can trace its ugly path through Africa's own recent history. Still, it is, at least initially, surprising that even those black Americans like [Alexander Crummell] who initiated the nationalist discourse on Africa in Africa, inherited a set of conceptual blinders that made them unable to see virtue in Africa, even though they needed Africa above all else as a source or validation. (5)

By recognizing the strong influence of Africanist discourse on black Americans' conceptions of Africa, Appiah's comments attest to the complicated relationship they have historically had with Africa.

Marion Berghahn's Images of Africa in Black American Literature (1977) is one of the first critical studies fully to engage Africa as a consistent theme in black American literature. Beginning with the image of Africa in the poetry of black American slaves in the eighteenth century through its appearance in the creative fiction of black American writers of the 1960s, Berghahn highlights the fact that Africa has never ceased to occupy a tangible place in black American life and literature (188). She observes that many black American writers who consciously rejected the image of Africa imposed on them by whites, still found it difficult to write outside of existing stereotypes. In her view, very few black American writers have succeeded in emancipating themselves from the impact of what she refers to as the "white image" of Africa, a concept similar to "Africanist discourse" that assumes that Africa was uncivilized and that Africans are socially and psychologically inferior.

A counter narrative of black Americans' views of Africa is also evident, however. In order to redeem themselves from the shame associated with their slave history, black Americans often idealized historical versions of Africa. Such is the case with Ethiopianism, Egyptology, and Afrocentrism. These modes of thinking about Africa tend to treat it as an idealized mythical place—an African Zion—for people of African descent. Pride in Africa's past becomes therapeutic, offering black Americans the dignity denied to them in the United States.

Ethiopia has always held special significance as a site of black power and resilience for black Americans. In Proudly We Can Be Africans (2002), James Meriwether acknowledges its importance:

For black America, Ethiopia stood as a lonely symbol of black achievement, resistance, freedom, power, and ultimately the last, best hope of black independence. Indeed, the nation's 7,000-year tradition of independence held a special symbolism for all those interested in black pride and freedom. (30)

In "The Ethiopian Ethos in African American Thought" (2004), William Scott traces the biblical roots of Ethiopianism, citing the prophecy found in Psalms as its principal inspiration: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (44). In this belief system, Ethiopia stands for all of Africa. Its history is cyclical. Ethiopia was once great, but now has fallen. Black Americans, in particular, will play a central role in helping to redeem Africa and restore it to its ancient greatness.

Like Ethiopianism, Egyptology was an important source of pride for black Americans because of the country's reputation as the birthplace of Western civilization. Black proponents of Egyptology promoted the notion that Egyptian culture is African,

and that Western civilization flowed from its African birthplace to Europe. As early as the nineteenth century, black American historians offered accounts of history that connected them to African achievements. In his article “Ancient Africa and the Early Black American Historians, 1883- 1915” (1984), Dickson Bruce Jr. describes how black historians used knowledge of ancient African civilizations such as Egypt during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to respond to white racism and to versions of American history that excluded or debased blacks. “In those civilizations they found powerful arguments against the belief in black inferiority that dominated white American thinking in the late nineteenth century,” wrote Bruce (685). Bruce focused, in particular, on the work of George Washington Williams, who in 1883 published the History of the Negro Race in America, one of the earliest histories of black Americans by a black author. His book affirmed the significance of Egypt as a powerful symbol for black Americans. It claimed that Egyptians were the ancestors of blacks in Africa, thereby highlighting black achievement and, more importantly, affirming that blacks had once been equal to other races. According to Williams, Egyptians “laid the foundation of every other great civilization known to history” (Bruce 687).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop published his research findings that further supported the contention that ancient Egyptians were black. More recently, in “The Meaning of KMT (Ancient Egyptian) History for Contemporary African American Experience” (1992), Asa Hilliard argued that because Egypt is often presented as alien to the rest of Africa, recognizing it as a part of Africa proves that “African Americans, African diasporans throughout the world, as well as African continentals are the legitimate heirs of the world’s oldest classical tradition” (16-17).

In recent years, Afrocentrism has continued to emphasize black Americans' affinity to Africa. This mode of thinking not only celebrates the African past, it also seeks to appropriate an African-centered perspective for black people in the United States. In Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements (1993), Ronald Walters attributes the concept of Afrocentrism to the African Heritage Studies Association, which was formed as an outgrowth of the African Studies Association in 1969 (369). Made popular by Molefi Asante, author of Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change (1980), Afrocentrism "recognizes the importance of developing a counter discourse" to white supremacy by placing Africans and their interests at the center (White 141). This uniquely black American nationalist belief system is pan-Africanist in that it assumes that all blacks are African-descended peoples and downplays geographic boundaries. It is rooted in the belief that Africans have constructed a culture that stands in opposition to the Eurocentric culture that has oppressed them. Black American liberation, then, must be based on the adoption of so-called African cultural values and history. Though widely criticized, Afrocentric ideas have impacted popular culture as well as approaches to education and community development models in black American communities.

As these modes of thinking about Africa demonstrate, black Americans' engagement with Africa has often focused on the African past or cultural heritage rather than African people and its present day. Thinking about Africa is meant to be a tool to help black Americans survive racism and oppression in the United States.

In Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair (2001), Hilde Lindemann Nelson uses the idea of the "counterstory" or counter narrative to suggest how marginalized groups

“resist an oppressive identity and attempt to replace it with one that commands respect” (6). She argues that black American writers construct counterstories to redeem Africa, but in so doing tend to romanticize it by focusing mostly on the African past. As this dissertation will demonstrate, when black Americans visit Africa, these narratives are challenged, forcing them to devise new ways of engaging Africa.

Review of Travel Narrative Literature

This dissertation contributes to the fairly limited scholarship on black American travel writing about Africa. According to Michael Kowaleski, author of Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel (1992), criticism of travel writing, especially by Americans, has been scanty. Kowaleski, however, fails to mention how this dearth of critical attention has further marginalized black American travel writing in general. A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing (1998) by Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish is one of the few texts that attests to the rich tradition of black American travel writing. Yet it fails to provide a strong critical lens for reading black American narratives.

Robert Coles’ Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa (1999) focuses on black American writers who traveled, although not specifically on travel writers. Employing an anthropological approach, he examines the social and political realities that necessitated travel and exile among black American writers who left America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This methodology offers a way for readers to look outside of the text for clues that inform elements within the text. I adopt a similar approach, looking at such factors as audience,

biographical background, and the social and political backdrop against which the texts were written.

James T. Campbell's Middle Passages (2006) encompasses more than 220 years of black American travel to Africa. His attention to travel patterns helps illuminate black American history and highlight Africa's abiding presence in black political, intellectual, and imaginative life. Like Campbell, I hope that by looking closely at travel writing by black Americans, I can better understand their relationship to the United States. By limiting my scope to the period just before the Civil Rights era through desegregation and integration, I analyze how the monumental changes in black Americans' status informed and transformed the way that black Americans viewed themselves as Americans in relationship to Africa.

In the process, I also rely heavily on the recent work of historians James H. Meriwether and Kevin Gaines, who have examined the historical factors that influenced relations between black Americans and Africa. Recognizing that political events in Africa caused shifts in black American attitudes toward the continent, for example, Meriwether, author of Proudly We Can Be Africans (2002), argues that we may advance our understanding of black American identity by examining the relationship between Africa and black Americans. Looking specifically at the 1950s and 1960s, Meriwether affirms that attention to black American engagement with Africa offers "a powerful way to search into the issues and concerns of black America" (10). My own work looks at this relationship in order to gain insight into how black Americans view their identity.

In order to assess this relationship, I analyze travel narratives by black Americans who lived, worked, and traveled in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century.

My approach borrows from that of Kevin Gaines who, in his American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era (2006), links the biographies of prominent black American émigrés in Ghana during the 1960s to the social and political backdrop there in order to discuss notions of pan-Africanism. He looks specifically at the symbolic and historic role that Ghana played in the development of pan-Africanist ideology during that era. My research extends beyond this time period to the turn of the twenty-first century in order to recognize the nuances of black American identity that were the result of the later shifting social and political landscape in the United States.

I pay close attention to the role of gender in travel narratives about Africa produced by black American women writers. In Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing (2001), Sidonie Smith argues that women travel writers assert their gendered identity through their narratives. My work builds on this theme as well as on the ideas advanced by black feminist theorists like Patricia Hill Collins who argue for the recognition of black American women's subjectivity, based on their particular experiences as black and female. In Collins' view, black women challenge race, gender, and class oppression by "naming their history and telling their story" (Collins 152-175). The women writers in my study use their gendered experiences to critique the oppression of women both in Africa and the United States as well as male-dominated ideologies like pan-Africanism, thereby reconfiguring existing notions of pan-Africanism, nationalism, and black American identity.

Throughout my dissertation I argue that travel narratives about Africa produced by black Americans during the second half of the twentieth century highlight how black American definitions of identity have been produced and revised in their writings. I view

these narratives as participating in the production of black American identity that the cultural critic Stuart Hall has asserted is always “in process.” According to Hall, “instead of thinking [of] identity as an already accomplished fact, which new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity, as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Mostern 8). In my view, the travel narrative, like other autobiographical forms, is a powerful act of self-definition. Employing a critical lens to examine these narratives will help readers understand how factors such as gender, class, and nationalism intersect with race to reproduce and revise notions of black American identity.

Approach

This dissertation turns to literary texts to answer the following questions: What are the historical, cultural, social, and political factors that influence the relationship between black Americans and Africa? How have these factors influenced perceptions of black American identity? How have black Americans viewed Africa and how have their attitudes shifted over time? Acknowledging that many of the writers discussed are journalists or academics and have contributed to the public discourse about African development and U.S. foreign policy, this dissertation explores these writers’ perceptions play out in their professional lives, particularly with regards to their articulated opinions about African development and U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy.

In each of my four chapters, I look outside of the primary texts for evidence to support my analysis. This includes biographical information about the writers as well as information about the historical backdrop against which the texts were written and produced. Each chapter demonstrates how the authors’ portrayals of Africa and

relationships with Africans are reflective of a specific historical moment, either in the United States or Africa or both. In most cases, their narratives were published within the time frame of this historical moment. The one exception is Maya Angelou, who wrote about the 1960s, but did not publish her two texts until nearly two decades later.

Each chapter considers how the writer's motivation for travel, the audiences for whom they were writing, and notions of race, gender, or nationalism influence their portrayals of Africa and their relationships with Africans. The writers were not uniformly motivated. Angelou and Golden went to Africa because of their relationships with African men. Eddy L. Harris was a professional travel writer and Wright was a well-known novelist. Meanwhile Duke, Richburg, and Thompson traveled to Africa as journalists. Yet there is a great deal of thematic consistency among the texts.

All of the travel writers, I discuss interrogate the notion of black American identity, questioning whether or not it is based on ancestry, race, or historical experience. Their narratives engage Du Bois' notion of double consciousness, demonstrating the twoness of "Africanness" and "Americanness" they grapple with while traveling in Africa. The writers acknowledge the social alienation they experience as cultural outsiders in Africa. This leads them to challenge the romantic and idealist notions propagated by black nationalists and pan-Africanists while forcing them to recognize how class and American privilege often alienated them from the African people with whom they interacted. This was especially true for many of the black American female journalists discussed for whom mobility was a privilege that set them apart from African women who were not afforded the same freedom in society. Indeed, these texts underscore how gender informs black American experiences in Africa. They illuminate how black

American women—because of their gender socialization and the social parameters placed on women, especially as wives and mothers—experience Africa differently than black men. For them Africa offered access to political power not available to them in the United States.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One focuses on two travel narratives, Richard Wright's Black Power (1954) and Era Bell Thompson's Africa, Land of my Fathers (1954), to explore how black Americans read and interpreted African decolonization in the 1950s. I analyze why Wright's representation of decolonization, though denigrating of Africa and African people, was accepted and celebrated, particularly among Western critics, while Era Bell Thompson's narrative was marginalized and remains all but forgotten. I argue that Thompson's attention to gender and complex characterization of Africa rendered her work unpopular because it challenged the status quo. I discuss what these representations of Africa reveal about the writers and the disparate audiences for whom they wrote. Finally, I illustrate how we can use a comparison of these texts to better understand the travel narratives about Africa by black Americans that follow. In so doing, I hope to restore the literary merit of the forgotten text, Africa, Land of my Fathers, by illustrating its relevance to contemporary scholarship and criticism of black American travel narratives about Africa.

Chapter Two argues that Maya Angelou's travel narrative about Africa—which begins in the Heart of a Woman (1981) and concludes in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986)—should be read as a “text within a text” as it is situated within her larger autobiographical canon. I demonstrate how Angelou uses motherhood as a

trope to interrogate the relationship between black Americans and Africa during the Civil Rights era. I also discuss how Angelou's representation of personal and romantic relationships among black Americans and Africans brings to light issues of gender, particularly the unique socialization of black American women in the United States and the role that it plays in those relationships. Finally, I explore how Angelou's discussion of pan-Africanism and the notion of "home" among black American expatriates in Africa defines and celebrates black American's unique cultural identity.

Chapter Three demonstrates how Marita Golden's Migrations of the Heart (1983) expands Era Bell Thompson's exploration of the roles of women in African societies by examining what it means to be wives to African men, mothers in African families, and female members of African communities. I argue that Migrations, like Africa, Land of My Fathers, has been misread and overlooked by critics because of its focus on women. I analyze how Golden employs the dual lenses of black nationalism and black feminism to critique popular ways of thinking about Africa, womanhood, and black American identity. Finally, I demonstrate how Golden's representation of Africa challenges many of the essentialist, racial renderings of Africa and offers a powerful critique of black nationalist ideologies.

Chapter Four explores millennial authors' assessments of the roles and responsibility of Africa's "development" and "underdevelopment," their shifting ideas about pan-Africanism, and their notions of black American identity. Through an exploration of Eddy L Harris's Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa (1992), Keith Richburg's Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa (1997), and Lynne Duke's Mandela, Mobutu and Me: A Newswoman's African Journey

(2002), I argue that these narratives bring to light the ways that integration, desegregation, and shifting class status have influenced black American sentiment towards Africa, informed more recent understandings of black American identity, and produced new conceptions of black nationalism.

Chapter One:
A Tale of Two Texts at the Moment of Decolonization

In 1953, Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright embarked on separate trips to Africa with the hope of answering one of the most critical questions of the day: What does decolonization in Africa look like? By September of the next year, their respective literary responses to this question had ushered in a new epoch of black American travel writing about Africa. The publication of Era Bell Thompson's Africa, Land of My Fathers (1954) and Richard Wright's Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos (1954) demonstrated black Americans' interest in a realistic accounting of politics and social life in Africa as opposed to sentimental visions about the African past. The impact of these two travel narratives needs to be examined in the context of the wave of independence movements unfolding across the continent through the arduous process of decolonization—arguably the most significant event in twentieth-century African history.

The Moment of Decolonization

Efforts to decolonize Africa were neither uniform nor synchronized. In most cases, the transition to independence was rocky and contentious. In some regions, the transfer of power was so violent that it resulted in the heavy bloodshed of both Africans and colonizers. African leaders and citizens held widely divergent ideas about solutions to the challenges of liberation and self-rule.

Although 1960 is generally considered the “year of African independence” when seventeen countries gained self-rule, the forerunners of change marking a shift towards decolonization appeared decades earlier.⁶ At least three key factors precipitated the rise

⁶ Wilson, H.S. *African Decolonization*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
Chazan, Naomi, Robert Mortimer, John Ravenhill and Donald Rothchild. *The Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992.

of decolonization in Africa. The first was the end of World War II. Following the war, African leaders gained greater political power under the rule, of colonial powers like France and England, although Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal also had colonies. A second factor was the formation of the United Nations, meant to be an intergovernmental organization designed to foster international cooperation. The development of new states was an important element in changing the balance of power in the early United Nations. The third factor was the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The development of new nations in Africa was fueled by the competition for power and control between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States generally supported independence of Africa states, and feared that as European allies lost their control of colonies, Soviet-supported communist movements might achieve power in the new nations. As a result, competition with the Soviet Union came to dominate U.S. foreign policy concerns.

Western observers paid close attention to Africa's transforming political and social landscape. They viewed African independence movements narrowly through the lens of the Cold War, where leaders had to choose sides, either pro-West (democratic) or pro-East (communist). Numerous essays, books, and articles were published about the significance of this critical moment in history, among them historical, political, and economic analyses, as well as first-person accounts. Americans looked to Africa with renewed interest as the process of decolonization offered new opportunities for economic and political influence in the region.

Black Americans were arguably more vested in writing about these events than other Americans, for the African struggle against colonialism resonated with them even

more powerfully. Decolonization in Africa refocused black Americans' attention on the social, political, and economic conditions of African nations, while raising questions about their own relationship with Africa. Moreover, engaged in their own battles for equal rights at home, they identified with the African struggle against the racial, economic, and political oppression imposed by European colonizers. Black Americans found similarities between their own battle to overcome white oppression in America and the struggles of Africans to escape European domination.

Black Americans' interest in decolonization and contemporary Africa is reflected in the literature they produced at this time. Prior to decolonization, black American writing about the continent was dominated by romantic notions of Africa before the trans-Atlantic slave trade, European invasion, and geopolitical partitioning. When writers did comment on contemporary Africa, they tended to focus on two of its independent states: Ethiopia and Liberia.⁷ During decolonization, however, the focus of black American writing moved away from the African past to emphasize engagement with contemporary Africa and hopes for a "New Africa."⁸ These visions centered on African independence and the roles that Africans in the diaspora could play in the post-colonial Africa. Decolonization provided a unique opportunity for black Americans to reassess their social, political, and psychological connections with Africa and African people, bringing to light critical questions about their own identity. Like other onlookers in the West, Richard Wright and Era Bell Thompson wanted to make sense of

⁷ Notable exceptions include the chapters about contemporary Africa appearing in Langston Hughes' autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and W.E. B. DuBois' *Darkwater: Voices within the Veil* (Gruesser, 136).

⁸ John Gruesser uses the term "New Africa" to refer to the writing by black Americans that occurred in the 1950s in the chapter "Movement Away from Ethiopianism" in book *Black on Black*.

decolonization and its impact on the African political and social landscape. As black Americans, they also wanted to make sense of their connection to Africa.

Travel narratives about Africa by Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright are emblematic of this thematic focus on the realities of contemporary Africa as opposed to an idealized African past. Wright wrote about his brief stay in the Gold Coast (present day Ghana), where he closely observed the political actions of Kwame Nkrumah. Thompson, on the other hand, wrote about her experiences in more than a dozen countries. Wright used broad strokes to depict Africa, theorizing about decolonization and Africans in painfully sweeping terms. In contrast, Thompson depicted the interactions of African people at the grassroots level, using decolonization on the continent as a backdrop. These disparate renderings reflected differences in motivation, perspective, and intended audiences. Ultimately, Wright's Black Power garnered critical acclaim for its literary value, while Thompson's narrative received a lukewarm reception.

Focusing on these two travel narratives, this chapter explores how black Americans read and interpreted works describing decolonization during the mid-1950s. It analyzes why critics accepted Wright's representation of African decolonization, even though it denigrates Africa and Africans, while Thompson's more positive rendering remains marginalized and all but forgotten. Exploring what these representations reveal about the writers and the audiences they addressed, this chapter illustrates how these texts provide a framework for understanding the travel narratives about Africa that follow. In so doing, I hope to restore the literary merit of Thompson's Africa, Land of My Fathers, establishing its relevance to contemporary scholarship and criticism of black American travel narratives about Africa.

Critical Reception

A comparison of the critical reception of Africa, Land of My Fathers with that of Black Power brings to light why Wright's text remains salient in contemporary discussions of black American literary representations of Africa, while Thompson's is largely ignored. Among the most important reasons for these disparate responses to the two texts were the reputations of each author, their perceived audiences, and the scope and focus of each text.

Wright's reputation among Western intellectuals was well established long before he wrote Black Power. Already the author of several essays, short stories, and longer works of fiction and non-fiction, Wright was considered a key figure in racial and political writing by the time he published Black Power. In contrast, Thompson had published only one autobiographical text, American Daughter (1946), when she wrote Africa, Land of My Fathers. However, she had served as editor of *Negro Digest* and was co-managing editor of *Ebony* in 1954, when her text was published. Thus, Thompson was less well known among critics than Wright despite the fact that her previously published autobiography had received notable critical attention. Aware of the difference in their literary status, many critics alluded to Thompson's lack of prestige as compared to Wright. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a *San Antonio News* review written shortly after both narratives were published:

This week sees the publication of two books—possibly the first of their kind—reporting the experiences of American Negro writers who recently visited Africa to study the lives and problems of their distant relatives. The books are Black Power by Richard Wright, the novelist, who made a fairly intensive though short

study of the semi-independent Gold Coast, and Africa, Land of My Fathers, by Era Bell Thompson, a staff writer for the Negro magazine, *Ebony*, who traveled over a large part of the continent in about ten weeks. (Reilly 245)

Underlying this description of Thompson and Wright are implications about their status. Wright is called a “novelist” while Thompson is referred to dismissively as a “staff writer.” This contrast signaled to readers that Thompson lacked Wright’s high status, hence, her book should be regarded as less significant than Wright’s.

Critical commentary about Africa, Land of My Fathers is limited. The coincidence that Thompson’s text was published at the same time as Wright’s worked to her disadvantage since critics refused to afford her the same respect they afforded Wright. Critics today, as in the past, take the significance of Wright’s narrative for granted because of his reputation as an “important” race writer. In contrast, Thompson’s critical reception among her contemporaries was dismissive and current criticism ignores her work. Her reception among her primarily black audience from *Ebony* has never been analyzed. Hence, a reconsideration of her literary value that places her relationship with her diverse black audience at the center is necessary. Whereas Wright’s work was written for mainstream intellectuals in the West, Thompson engaged a diverse black audience that spanned several continents and many walks of life. Responses to her *Ebony* articles about Africa produced at the same time that she was writing her manuscript sheds light on the disparity of her critical reception among her mainstream, scholarly, and *Ebony* readership.

Criticism of Africa, Land of My Fathers compares it to Black Power, favoring the latter. Wright’s reputation among critics sustained the literary reception of his book,

viewing it not merely as one man's travel narrative but rather as an intellectual consideration of African politics at this moment in history. The *San Antonio News* review called Wright's narrative an "intensive though short study" without mentioning, however, the brevity of his visit to Africa. The same critic belittled Thompson's investigation of eighteen countries, saying only that she traveled over a "large part" of Africa in a period of "ten weeks" (Reilly 245). By only specifying the period of time that Thompson spent in Africa, the critic downplayed her role as a foreign correspondent, the official capacity in which she traveled, and the fact that she spent about as much time in Africa as Wright. Moreover, the description of Black Power as "intensive" indirectly discredited Thompson by refusing to acknowledge her ability to analyze the social and political reality of Africa. In this case, the perceived status of each writer was a major factor influencing critics' attitudes toward the texts.

Critics also contrasted Thompson's and Wright's narratives in terms of their analytical depth and significance. According to the same *San Antonio News* review, "these books are similar in many ways, although Wright's is better written, more analytical, and strikes deeper" (Reilly 245). In addition, a book review written in the *Providence Journal* asserted that: "In some respects Miss Bell Thompson's book is more interesting than Wright's, but it does not have the same weighty significance" (Reilly 251). It further suggested that the texts should not be given equal consideration since "Miss Thompson was not trying to be significant. Recognizing her limitations, she did not write a book about Africa, but about her experiences there" (Reilly 251). Such commentary is remarkable for at least two other reasons. The first is the implication that by writing about "her experiences" in Africa, Thompson cannot provide the same kind of

weighty social and political commentary expected of Wright. Secondly, and perhaps more telling, is the suggestion that Thompson was not qualified to write commentary about social and political events in Africa because she was less talented than Wright. Finally, readers are left to wonder whether the comments made by these two critics are the consequence of Thompson's gendered and class perspective, since she focused a great deal of her time on women and people at the grassroots rather than on politics and key political figures. Certainly, gender was a factor in Thompson's narrative choices. Not only did she highlight her experience as a female journalist in Africa, she also foregrounded the perspectives of women that she met. The result is a rendering of the social and political reality in Africa that engages difference.

Critics' perception of each writer's intended audiences was also a major factor. Wright used Black Power as a tool to position himself among Western intellectuals whom he viewed as significant thinkers. He referenced scholars and historians such as Eric Williams, Caribbean historian and author of Capitalism and Slavery (1944), and Sir Alan Burns, who was a British colonial administrator in the Gold Coast and author of Colour Prejudice: With Particular Reference to the Relationship Between Whites and Negroes (1948). Wright also mentioned prominent African thinkers such K.A. Busia, who had conducted extensive research on the Ashanti culture in the Gold Coast, in order to demonstrate his breadth of knowledge about his topic (9). The objective of these references was twofold. First, it allowed Wright to situate his text among other well-reputed literary and scholarly works. Second, it gave him a way of identifying his audience: the intellectual elite in the West.

Few, if any, contemporary articles discuss Thompson's audience. However, a reexamination of the popular reception of several Africa-focused articles that Thompson wrote concurrently with her narrative establishes the identities of her readers and their appreciation of her perspective. Thompson published a number of articles on Africa in *Ebony* between the fall of 1953 and the summer of 1954 while she was living in Africa and working on the Africa, Land of My Fathers manuscript. A lifestyle magazine that focused on the black American middle class and its social issues, *Ebony* also printed some political news articles. Thompson's essays ranged in subject from Africa's current political climate to public interest stories. They included "Is there a Garden of Eden in Africa," "Liberian Rubber King," "What Africans Think about Us," "A Girl without a Race," and "The Lies They Tell about Haile Selassie."⁹ Responses generated by Thompson's articles indicate that her audience was broad, spanning several continents and including individuals from various walks of life.

Among her articles that received the greatest audience response were "What Africans Think about Us" and "The Lies They Tell about Haile Selassie." The first focused on the misconceptions that some Africans held about black Americans. The second addressed black Americans' relative lack of knowledge about the Ethiopian leader, Haile Selassie. Respondents included Africans and black Americans living in the United States, black Americans abroad, as well as Africans and other non-Europeans living in Africa and Europe.¹⁰ These articles and the conversation they ignited

⁹ "Is there a Garden of Eden in Africa? (09/1953); "Liberian Rubber King" (12/1953); "What Africans Think About Us" (02/1954); "A Girl without a Race" (04/1954); and "The Lies they Tell about Haile Selassie" (06/1954)

demonstrate that Thompson engaged a diverse audience, raised their level of knowledge about Africa and African people, and created a space for dialogue among members of the African diaspora.

In her articles, Thompson acknowledged the cultural and ethnic diversity that exists among people of African descent, a theme she would go on to highlight in her travel narrative. Her stories addressed the need for better dialogue among people of African descent, acknowledging the high level of ignorance and misinformation about Africa and African people among her readers. Njoku Malafa, an African student living in Iowa City, Iowa, commended her article “What Africans think About Us,” claiming that it “came as a relief to the pent up feelings of many African students in the United States.”¹¹ African readers also appreciated Thompson’s efforts to dispel myths and to foster a sense of community among members of the African diaspora. Isaiah A. Bajomo of Lagos, Nigeria, admitted, “it is hard for anybody to know about a place and its inhabitants unless there is mutual dealing by way of correspondence with people or by reading books or magazines about the place... .If history is retold, light may be thrown on the close relationship between Africans and American Negroes (especially in West Africa).”¹² Such comments underscore the lack of cultural awareness among members of the African diaspora. In yet another example referring to the dearth of information about Africa in the West, John J. Akar of London, England, wrote: “it is exceedingly encouraging to note that a magazine of as high repute as *EBONY* should pioneer the need

¹⁰ Respondents included black American living in Africa; G.I. living in Korea; a West African man from Lagos, Nigeria; a Nigerian student living in Edinburgh, Scotland; and a non-white* citizen of Cape Province, South Africa

¹¹ Ebony Letters to the Editor, January 1954.

¹² Ebony Letters to the Editor, January 1955.

to unveil what one might easily [sic] call the IGNORANCE CURTAIN.”¹³ Comments like Akar’s recognized the important role that *Ebony* played in addressing knowledge gaps about Africa among its target audience. Through her articles about Africa, Thompson broadened the depth of *Ebony* by expanding beyond its social commentary to address political concerns.

Although comparative criticism of Thompson’s and Wright’s narratives favored the latter over the former, some reviews of Black Power in popular periodicals and journals took issue with Wright’s overgeneralizations. Roy Thompson of the *Winston-Salem Sentinel* lamented that Wright’s book was based on knowledge gained from a brief visit to the Gold Coast. “Before the book is half completed,” he said, “the author is making noises like a lifetime resident” (Reilly 270). Similarly, a reviewer for the *Minneapolis Star* contended “the sum effect of Wright’s book is no more than ‘a slice of African life’—a very small slice considering all that Wright did not see” (Reilly 247). Finally, Luther Jackson of the *Newark News* complained that Wright’s message “falls flat because it is based on the presumption that Wright qualifies as a social analyst of the Gold Coast after spending only a few months there” (Reilly 264). These critics were extremely disturbed that Wright’s sweeping conclusions were based on such limited experience.

Other critics complained about Wright’s lack of objectivity. For example, a review in *The New York Times Book Review* published in September 1954 wondered “to what extent [has] Mr. Wright projected into the Gold Coast situation his own hidden and sublimated desires?” (Reilly 244) Another review in the *Winston-Salem Sentinel* proclaimed that Wright “is a writer with a chip on his shoulder, and the chip has grown so

¹³ *Ebony* Letters to the Editor, February 1955.

large that he is apparently unable to see anything else” (Reilly 270). Writing in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, fellow author J. Saunders Redding said that Black Power “is almost as tortured and tortuous as The Outsider, and one can only hope that this is a final purging of confusion” (Reilly 266). Finally, R.T. Horchler, who reviewed Wright’s book for *Best Sellers*, complained that “the materialistic bias of Wright’s mind makes him sincerely incapable, it seems, of comprehending non-materialistic considerations” (Reilly 250).

Wright’s critics recognized the obvious shortfalls of Black Power, yet the overall critical response remained positive. For example, Horchler softened his critique by writing, “Despite all this, Black Power is a moving and valuable reading experience” (Reilly 250). Charles E. Moran was another reviewer willing to overlook the obvious shortfalls of Black Power. In his *Richmond News-Leader* review he wrote, “in spite of its biases, the book is a genuinely valuable document” (Reilly 266). In his *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, Walter White launched a number of serious criticisms against Wright’s Black Power, including the fact that Wright wrote about “African psychology and practices, although he has visited only the Gold Coast, as though all Africans react and think identically” (Reilly 243). Yet White concluded that these criticisms “do not detract from my sincere admiration for the objective-subjective job of superlative reporting Wright has done on what is almost the sole hopeful development which may save Africa from the ghastly evils of Mau Mauism or communism” (Reilly 242). In White’s view, “Black Power is the most up-to-date, hopeful and valuable picture yet written of the most important experiment in democratic living which is taking place in the

world” (Reilly 242). Comments such as these promoted the literary merit of Wright’s narrative.

Wright’s book was regarded as a viable representation of the social and political reality in all of Africa both because of his well-established reputation and because of the weighty significance of the Gold Coast among American audiences. The Gold Coast was at the forefront of decolonization efforts in “black Africa.”¹⁴ It was viewed by many as exemplary of the entire African continent and decolonization. In Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa (2002), historian James H. Meriwether reiterates the symbolic role that the Gold Coast had in the minds of black Americans:

Ghana’s movement to independence pushed it to the vanguard of all liberation struggles. For Black Americans, Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the independence movement and the nation’s first head of state, became powerful symbols that pushed Black Americans to reconstruct their images of contemporary Africa and the terms of their relationship with it. (150)

Wright’s decision to use the Gold Coast as a lens for his discussion about African decolonization bolstered his book’s popularity.

While Thompson did not ignore the Gold Coast entirely, she challenged the Western tendency to oversimplify African culture and politics by focusing on the politics and social life of more than one country. Thompson’s and Wright’s renderings of Africa place them on opposite ends of an ideological spectrum about how Africa should be represented. Wright’s assessment of decolonization focused on one country and summarized the entire continent of Africa in conventional and simplified terms. In

¹⁴ Black Africa or sub-Saharan Africa is consistently viewed by Westerners as different than Arab/Muslim countries in North Africa.

contrast, Thompson described a complex continent where cultural diversity could be found among countries and regions as well as among the various people she encountered at the grassroots level.

Despite its flaws, critics favored Wright's essentialist characterization of Africa, praising his portrayal. At the same time, they remained largely silent about Thompson's narrative and its non-essentialist perspectives that acknowledged the vast cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity that existed across the continent. Given the increased knowledge of ethnic and cultural strife in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, one imagines that today's readers would have a better understanding and appreciation of Thompson's representation of Africa.

The following analysis is a reconsideration of Wright's and Thompson's travel narratives. At the time of publication, critics were willing to overlook the obvious flaws of Wright's narrative and to accept his commentary about decolonization. I argue, however, that Black Power is as much about Wright's own identity crisis as it is about the politics of decolonization in Africa. In contrast, although Era Bell Thompson's Africa, Land of My Fathers was dismissed by critics as insignificant, her characterization of Africa offers readers valuable knowledge about Africa, decolonization, and black American identity. A reconsideration of these two texts provides an important frame for understanding black American travel narratives about Africa that followed, including those by black American women.

Richard Wright's Black Power

One does not react to Africa as Africa is, and this is so because few can react to life as life is. One reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives; one's reaction to Africa is one's life, one's sense of things. (175)

Author Richard Wright was born in 1908, the son of sharecroppers in Roxie, Mississippi. A black boy from the rural, segregated south, he grew up with the harsh realities of American racism and poverty as a backdrop. Moving frequently among several southern towns and the homes of various family members after his father abandoned their family, he saw the horrors that institutionalized racism and oppression wreaked on the black community as a whole and on the members of his family in particular.

An inquisitive child, Wright took a keen interest in understanding how the world around him worked. Such thinking often put him at odds with family members like his grandmother who relied on strict adherence to religious rules to make sense of their lives. Nevertheless, Wright was encouraged to go to school, where his natural curiosity and intelligence helped him excel in his studies. By the time he graduated from ninth grade, he was valedictorian of his class. Unfortunately, he was forced to leave school after that year in order to help support his family.

Though poverty may have thwarted Wright's opportunities for formal education at that time, the spark of interest in learning and writing had already been lit when he began working as a delivery boy and dishwasher in Memphis, Tennessee. He published his first story there and began an intellectual journey that would continue for the rest of his life. Biographer Jennifer Jensen Wallach describes this period in the following way:

Mercifully his continued racial initiation was accompanied by a

growing intellectual awakening that gave him the tools to better cope with the trauma of racism. Away from his grandmother's censorship, Wright began a period of intensive self-education. (37)

During this time, Wright was introduced to the public library where he had to get a white patron to reserve books for him since blacks were not permitted to hold library cards. In The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (1973), Michael Fabre writes:

Thus, during the crucial Memphis period, which is poorly documented, Wright did not suddenly discover his literary talents so much as he discovered good literature ... this transformation of literary tastes, of course, corresponds to his new freedom, both psychological and physical. (66)

If Memphis was the place where his intellectual journey began, then Chicago was the place where his aspirations to become a writer came into full bloom. Fed up with racism in the South and bleak job prospects, Wright left Memphis for Chicago at age nineteen, in search of greater economic opportunities. There he held a number of low-paying jobs, including at the U.S. Postal Service. These positions, however menial, offered him the stability and flexibility to continue reading and exploring his craft as a writer. According to Hazel Rowley, author of Richard Wright (2001):

Writing had become his single aim in life. Without the slightest encouragement from anyone, he devoured books. He studied the writer's craft, sentence-by-sentence, paragraph by paragraph.

Then he covered sheets of his paper with his own efforts. Imitating the masters, he tried to construct sentences like theirs. (59)

Wright's development as a writer and intellectual coincided with his growing interest in politics. In Chicago, he actively sought the company of other writers, white and black. They introduced him to new ideas, among them Marxism and Communism, and he became a member of the Communist party at age twenty-four. He believed Marxist Communism would provide new tools to overcome the inequality and oppression he had experienced as a black American in the United States. It also helped him to find his place as a writer and thinker. Fabre writes:

Wright had long yearned to participate in American intellectual life, to become part of the Western culture in which he lived, but the strangeness and hostility of the white world had discouraged him. Now he concretely realized that the oppressed classes of all colors were united by a common suffering, and that as a writer, he could play a particular role. (97)

In Chicago, Wright wrote poetry, completed his first novel, and contributed essays to Communist magazines and other left-wing publications. Eventually, however, he began to find himself at odds with other Communists as his desire for intellectual independence caused him to question party doctrine and practices. He characterized this shift in his thinking in the introductory chapter of Black Power: "Marxist Communism, though it was changing the world, was changing the world in a manner that granted [him] even less freedom than [he] possessed before" (xxxvi). Within the party he was discriminated against by white members because of his race and shunned by black members who referred to him as a "bastard intellectual" (Rowley 99). Ultimately, his experience as a Communist party member exposed Marxism's shortcomings, leaving him disheartened.

Not yet totally divorced from the Communist party, Wright decided to relocate to New York at age twenty-nine. There, he immersed himself into his writing and participated in the lively intellectual and literary community the city had to offer. While in New York, he worked as a writer and editor of several publications and published the books that earned him widespread acclaim. These included Uncle Tom's Children (1938), Native Son (1940), which became a best seller, and the semi autobiographical Black Boy (1945). These books openly challenged racism in the United States, showing how the inhumanity of racial discrimination affected black Americans. Eventually, Wright became fed up with racism in the United States and, a year after Black Boy was published, he opted to go to France to pursue the artistic and intellectual freedom he felt it had to offer. Other than periodic travel, he remained there in self-imposed exile until his death.

In France, Wright befriended other expatriates and writers living there. Among his friends were George Padmore, a Trinidadian writer, Communist, and pan-Africanist who had studied in the United States. Padmore and his wife, Dorothy, were good friends of Kwame Nkrumah, whom they had met in the United States. They encouraged Wright to visit the Gold Coast, and through them he received a personal invitation from Kwame Nkrumah, who was spearheading decolonization efforts there. According to the letter of introduction written on his behalf by Nkrumah, "Mr. Wright would like to come to the Gold Coast to do some research into the social and historical aspects of the country" (Black Power). Indeed, Wright was eager to take advantage of the opportunity to do research and discuss Africa's progress towards development with Western audiences. In his introduction, he wrote:

The purpose of [this] book is to pose a problem anew in an area of the world where the issue had not been decided, an area that is proving a decisive example for an entire continent. The Western world has one last opportunity in Africa to determine if its ideals can be generously shared, if it dares to act upon its deepest convictions. (xxxvii)

The Gold Coast provided a perfect case study for an analysis of decolonization. Wright hoped to “provide Western readers with some insight into what [was] going to happen in Africa, so that, when it [happened] they [would] be able to understand it” (xxxviii). Imagining that his audience would be one of intellectuals, he structured Black Power in the format of academic analysis, using prominent thinkers to frame his examination of decolonization.

The initial chapters of Black Power include numerous references to prominent writers and scholars. The purpose of these textual references was two-fold. First, they allowed Wright to situate his text among other well-reputed scholarly works. Second, they gave him a way of identifying his intended audience: the intellectual elite in the West. These references made apparent the individuals who influenced his thinking. For example, the epigraph for Part One was taken from Eric Williams’ Capitalism and Slavery (1944), a text that, after its publication, became the foundation for many studies of imperialism and economic development. Wright let his readers know that in preparation for his visit to the Gold Coast, then a British colony, he “purposely confined [his] reading to the historical facts presented by the British themselves, many of whom, like Sir Alan Burns, Eric Williams, W.E. Ward, and K. A. Busia, etc., [were] still living and active” (9). Sir Alan Burns was a British colonial who held several posts in the

Colonial Service, particularly in Nigeria. W.E. Ward had written a history of the Gold Coast. K.A. Busia, who was from the Gold Coast, was a well-known African sociologist and political opponent of Kwame Nkrumah. With these references, Wright hoped to shore up his authority and demonstrate his breadth and depth of knowledge about political activities in Africa to his Western audience.

Wright's political agenda was at the forefront of his mind. A self-proclaimed former "Marxist Communist," he wanted to demonstrate that this ideology was not the appropriate tool for African decolonization. He used his narrative to express his doubts that Communism could be effective for Africans as they sought to decolonize and catapult the continent into a state of development. He urged African leaders, particularly Kwame Nkrumah, to devise their own approaches. In an open letter to the then Prime Minister, Wright implored Africa to develop its own political theories:

You've got to find your *own* paths; your *own* values ... Above all, feel free to *improvise*! The political cat can be skinned in many fashions; the building of that bridge between tribal man and the twentieth century can be done in a score of ways. (389)

Yet, despite the fact that Wright hoped to make an intellectual assessment of decolonization, he was unable to succeed because of his own racial biases. He went to the Gold Coast with preconceived ideas and an agenda. Although he "genuinely wanted to know about the political situation in the Gold Coast," he admitted that "yet another and far more important question was trying to shape itself in [him]" (4). He was referring to the notion of race. Expressing skepticism, he said, "According to popular notions of 'race' there ought to be something of me down in Africa" (4). Yet, his beliefs were quite

the reverse: he did not believe in the legitimacy of race, and he hoped that his depiction of his experiences in the Gold Coast would prove that.

Indeed, race was an all-consuming idea for Wright. Although Black Power did not focus directly on racial politics in the United States, as did many of his other writings, it showcased his ambivalence about the concept of race. On the one hand, Wright argued that black Americans' racial connections to Africa were exaggerated, expressing doubt about the legitimacy of African survivals and cultural retentions. On the other hand, he was unable completely to deny the concept of race and his cultural connection to Africans. This problem remains unresolved in his narrative.

Wright's commentary about race exposed his inability or unwillingness to see beyond his preconceived assumptions. For example, he argued that certain human behaviors that were not racially specific had been falsely attributed to black Americans as racial qualities, especially by social scientists whom he believed conflated skin color with culture, thus creating false connections between Africans and black Americans. He was critical of how Americans invoked such notions, suggesting that black Americans used them to invoke their humanity in the face of white racism, while white Americans used them to explain black Americans' differences from (and inferiority to) them. Wright had formed these ideas long before he visited the Gold Coast and was unwilling to compromise these beliefs. "While in the presence of those who talked confidently of racial qualities, I would listen and mull over their phrases," he admitted, "but no sooner had they gone then my mind would revert to my habitual kind of thinking that had no race in it, a kind of thinking that was conditioned by the reaction of human beings to a concrete social environment" (6).

Wright felt that American anthropologists and social scientists had been wrong in their assumptions about race. Addressing them directly, he cast doubt on their theories. “In America anthropologists have long debated what is in academic circles referred to as ‘African survivals,’ but when one sits in Africa and observes African people, the problem of ‘African survivals’ takes on a new dimension,” Wright wrote (294). He was alluding to the complicated experience that he had in Africa, where he felt like an outsider and found few similarities—outside of color—between himself and the African people he met. But ultimately, Wright was unable to deny the existence of some cultural similarities between black Americans and Africans.

Despite his rejection of the notions of race and African survivals, Wright was forced to acknowledge the presence of some cultural connections between black Americans and Africans. He observed, for example, the obvious similarity between religious worship among black Americans in the United States and certain forms of African dance. In describing the movements of a group of African women dancing, he was astonished to discover their movements mirrored those he’d seen at religious ceremonies in the United States:

I’d long contended that the American Negro, because of what he’d undergone in the United States, had been basically altered, that his racial consciousness had been filled with new content, that “racial” qualities were but myths of prejudiced minds. Then if that were true, how could I account for what I now saw? (62)

This example highlights the incongruity between Wright’s long-held beliefs and the new knowledge thrust upon him in the Gold Coast. Wright’s inflexibility made him reluctant

to investigate any cultural connection between black Americans and Africans. “That there was some kind of link between the native African and the American Negro was undoubtedly true,” said Wright, “but what did it mean?” (73) Ultimately, Wright refused to address this dilemma directly, leaving it unresolved in the narrative.

Rather than address the obvious cultural connections between black Americans and Africans, Wright chose to emphasize their differences. He wanted his readers to acknowledge that slavery had made black Americans Western, and therefore, more culturally similar to white Americans than to Africans. He argued that his personal norms inhibited his understanding of African culture and social life, and insisted that his own thinking and behavior were Western. For example, he referenced the concept of time suggesting that “It was quite obvious that Africans’ time sense was not like our own,” and explaining how such differences in worldview left him confused by much of what he witnessed in the Gold Coast (192). Wright portrayed himself as someone who, outside of his Western element, could not trust his instincts or make an accurate assessment of what he saw. He admitted, for example, that he “was never able to tell the wealth or social position of an African by his dress” (335). As a result, he took an educated man for an indigent in one episode, and believed that a fellow bank patron was a thief in another.

Wright emphasized his struggle to remain objective in his assessment of Africa and its culture in order to reinforce the cultural similarities he shared with his Western readers rather than with the Africans he met. According to Wright: “A Westerner must make an effort to banish the feeling that what he is observing in Africa is irrational and unless he is able to understand the underlying assumptions of the African’s beliefs, the

African will always seem a savage” (129). Although his comments were meant to prove his own cultural tie to Western readers, they also revealed his deep concern about what he perceived were his readers’ thoughts about Africa. He referred indirectly to these judgments of Africa by others throughout his narrative. In his letter to Kwame Nkrumah, for example, he spoke about the “hard sayings” against Africa that had been uttered by “Western lay and academic circles” (385), most especially the idea that Africa was unsophisticated and that its people primitive.

Although Wright purported not to share these views, his depiction of Africans was consistent with them. He made the point repeatedly that although they “looked alike,” he was nothing like the Africans he encountered. Wright listed his differences from Africans to illustrate how black Americans and Africans were distinct. He provided numerous examples of the ways that his physical similarity with African people was overshadowed by his cultural difference. “Being obviously of African descent,” said Wright, “I looked like Africans, but I had only to walk upon the scene and my difference at once declared itself without a word being spoken” (152).

Convinced that slavery had destroyed black Americans’ “Africanness,” he emphasized the vast differences between himself and the Africans he met to prove that black Americans’ identity was shaped mostly by their experiences in the United States. Wright offered many examples of the ways in which slavery had stripped him (and all black Americans) of knowledge about his African ancestry. Unlike the Africans he met, for example, he could not trace his family origins, which left him feeling “uneasy” (39). He pointed out that slavery robbed him not only of self-knowledge, but also of the security that came with it. His encounter with a man who seemed to him to be without a

home or resources demonstrated how Africans still enjoyed a sense of kinship and protection he had never known. Describing the man, he said:

He hadn't seemed worried. He had brothers, not the sons of his mother, but men to whom he felt a blood relationship, brothers who fed him when he was hungry, let him sleep when he was tired, consoled him when he was sad ... He had a large "family" that stretched for miles and miles ... I tried to visualize it and I could not. (374)

With this depiction, Wright revealed how his deep sense of loss was the result of slavery. Although he vehemently argued otherwise, he was frustrated by the lack of connection between himself and the Africans he encountered. "I'm of African descent and I am in the midst of Africans," complained Wright, "but I cannot tell what they are thinking and feeling. And without the help of the British or the Africans I am completely immobilized" (151).

Wright repeatedly demanded that readers regard him as Western, but he was incensed when Africans did just that. He was treated as an outsider and was looked on with suspicion by most of the people he met, including his host, Kwame Nkrumah. Wright lamented:

This fear, this suspicion of nothing in particular came to be the most predictable hallmark of the African mentality that I met in all the Gold Coast from the Prime Minister down to the humblest 'mammy' selling kenke on the street corners. (112)

Wright often referred to something he described as "the African laugh," which characterized Africans' suspicion of him. "It was not caused by mirth; it was a way of

indicating that they were not going to take you into their confidence,” he said (57). Here Wright revealed his ambivalence about his connections to Africans by simultaneously downplaying any cultural connections between them and hoping desperately to be granted insider status because of his African heritage.

Wright treated Africans’ suspicion of him as a betrayal, and he punished them with his denigrating portrayals. He attacked African culture to illustrate how Africans were culturally inferior. He used physical descriptions to depict Africans as primitive and unsophisticated. He seemed to be obsessed with their bodies, making numerous references to their lack of clothing. Consider his description of a group of old men:

I came upon a group of old men sitting upon their wooden stools, their naked backs resting against a stone wall; they were talking and their bony bodies reminded me of those wooden carvings now so rare in Africa and which can be seen only in the drawing rooms of rich Europeans. (90)

In this reference, Wright not only draws the readers’ attention to the naked bodies of these men, but also implies that, as a Westerner, he belongs among cultured Europeans. To Wright, nakedness was equated with primitiveness. For example, his numerous descriptions of the “naked, illiterate masses” who were among Nkrumah’s greatest supporters were meant to emphasize their lower class status and lack of education (95, 227). Wright’s depiction of African bodies ultimately exposed his own cultural arrogance. When he encountered traditional practices such as tribal scarification, he observed: “though it was being done less and less, it still occurred among the more backward elements of the population” (45). Wright’s representation of African bodies illuminates his belief that Africans ought to be ashamed of their culture. It also

underscored his overall unwillingness to accept Africa on its own terms, a predicament that left him confused and frustrated by his travel experience.

In Wright's view, African culture hindered its development. According to him, African culture made African people less sophisticated:

African culture has not developed the personalities of the people to a degree that their egos are stout, hard and sharply defined: there is too much cloudiness in the African's mentality, a kind of sodden vagueness that makes for lack of confidence, an absence of focus that renders that mentality incapable of grasping the workaday world. And until confidence is established at the center of African personality, until there is an inner reorganization of that personality, there can be no question of marching from tribal order to the twentieth century. (385)

For Wright, Africa's inability to participate in the "workaday world" was evidence of the fact that African culture had not enabled its people to develop economically or to manage the machinations of outsiders, specifically Western colonizers. He set up a dichotomy between the "tribal" or primitive man and the modern man, whom he favored. In his opinion, most Africans were inherently "tribal," rendering them ill equipped for social and political advancement.

Wright portrayed Africans as naïve, childlike, and gullible to illustrate how they could easily be taken advantage of by more sophisticated outsiders. His best example of this was Africans' initial interactions with European explorers in the fifteenth century. He referred to the origins of colonialism as "a kind of coy and furtive bargaining between the predatory Europeans and the frightened but gullible natives" (41). He argued that Europeans' initial interest in Africa had not been for slavery but for gold and other

natural resources. With this example and others, he conveyed his belief in Africans' intellectual inferiority and indicted African people and their culture for the continent's problems.

Although Wright claimed not to regard cultural differences as wrong, his narrative exhibited his cultural biases. He came to the sweeping conclusion, for example, that "there had been no literature in the Gold Coast," because people did not "thirst to explore experience" as did those in the West (192). As a writer, he looked disparagingly upon what he perceived to be a dearth of creative writing among the people he encountered, though his knowledge of their culture was very limited. He was careful, however, to emphasize that Africans' presumed "inferiority" was not based on biology. In other words, it was learned—the result of cultural attitudes. Characterizing religious beliefs in the Gold Coast as "bizarre," he said, "I can't conceive of myself ever believing any of it; but still I don't agree that people who do believe in such ought to be declared biologically inferior" (378). For Wright, this was an important distinction because any suggestion of the biological inferiority of black people to a Western audience might discredit him and undermine his intellectual authority among Western readers who assumed his racial similarity to Africans.

In Black Power, Wright repeatedly exhibited a blatant lack of respect for African culture. But he was equally critical of the cultural hybridity that he encountered, an obvious legacy of European colonization. His reactions to Africans' use of pidgin English, which he referred to as "a frightful kind of baby talk," were indicative of his disapproval (211). Upon encountering pidgin English for the first time he complained, "That pidgin English. I shuddered. I resented it and I vowed that I'd never speak it"

(48). What is clear, however, is that without it he would have been completely unable to communicate with many of the African people he encountered.

For Wright, pidgin English was emblematic of the influence of European missionaries. He was fascinated by the dichotomous role played by missionaries in Africa's development. Wright acknowledged that without literacy—the basic skill imparted by missionary schools—Africans would have been unable to infiltrate the colonial system of oppression. Africans, Wright asserted, were all too well aware of their ambivalence toward the missionaries:

The Gold Coast African loved white missionaries as long as he thought of them in the category of their teaching him to read and write, but when the same reading and writing brought home to him a knowledge of what the British had done to him, a knowledge of how his country and his culture had been shattered and exploited, he felt a rising twinge of resentment toward the missionaries. (165)

Wright himself critiqued the missionaries' complicity in the dual systems of colonialism and imperialism: "However synchronized or not were the motives of the missionaries with those of imperial financial interests, their actions could not have been more efficient in inflicting lasting psychological damage upon the personalities of the Africans ..."

(153). In his view, missionaries played a critical role in the process of detribalization and deculturalization of African people. The "exhortation of the missionaries had slowly destroyed the African's faith in his own religion and customs," said Wright, "thereby creating millions of psychologically detribalized Africans living uneasily and frustratedly in two worlds and really believing in neither of them" (72).

Wright's analysis of Western educated Africans was equally ambivalent. He insisted that they were unable to integrate their Western intellectual education with their African cultural knowledge, although he was unable to provide convincing evidence for this conclusion. In fact, his portrayal of the African scholars Drs. Danquah and Busia illustrated that it was Wright himself who was frustrated and unable to reconcile his Western knowledge with his newly acquired African cultural insights. Wright portrayed Danquah and Busia as having achieved a comfortable synthesis of their African and Western cultural values. The following conversation between Danquah and Wright epitomizes this idea:

“You are a Christian?” I asked him, switching the subject.

“Yes,” he said.

I was dumbfounded.

“But I've read your book, The Akan Doctrine of God. You are a pagan too?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Don't you find a conflict in the two religions?”

“No. Not at all. I go to church and serve God, and then I go to the Stool House and worship my ancestors,” he explained. He was on familiar ground now and he grew expansive. “You see, the Christian worships the Son. We worship the Father. It's the same thing.” (245)

Similarly, Dr. Busia, whom Wright referred to as “a British trained social scientist,” described how many Africans educated in the West still adhered to tribal or “pagan” customs despite what appeared to be their Western lifestyles and Christian religion (254). Dr. Busia argued, “Such mixtures go right through the whole of our society. It's not

simple”⁽²²⁹⁾. Wright’s unwillingness to accept African culture as equal to Western culture, and to be adhered to at the same time, caused him to make misguided judgments about the people and phenomena he encountered.

Wright’s discomfort with the unique melding of African and Western elements seemed to reveal more about his own insecurity than it did about African society. Consider his description of Westernized Africans as an “oddity,” with “one foot in both worlds” (353). The implication here is that Westernized Africans could never really fit in the West or in Africa. Wright’s comments reflect his own experience as an African-descended American, projecting the dual sense of rejection he felt about both his American and African identities. He described his cultural alienation in the following terms: “There was nothing [in the Gold Coast] that I could predict, anticipate or rely upon,” he said, “And, in spite of myself, a mild sense of anxiety began to fill me” (42).

Wright’s aversion to hybridity also impacted his ability to assess the political activities he witnessed. His preconceived notions about politics, African values, and the melding of African and Western cultures, ultimately hindered his understanding of decolonization politics in the Gold Coast. For example, Wright argued that political activities in the Gold Coast were based on what Nkrumah had learned as a student in the West, crediting his political ideas to his experiences in the United States and Europe. According to Wright, “In New York, in Chicago, in Detroit, and in London, he [Nkrumah] saw men organizing and he studied their methods. Then he came to Africa and applied them ...” (243). Wright even insisted that Communism was taught to Africans by Westerners, despite the fact that Africans told him plainly that what he

interpreted as evidence of “Communism” were indigenous characteristics of African culture. One of his young drivers explained it to him in this way:

African society is tightly, tightly organized ... No one is outside the bounds and claims of the clan. You may never get rich, but you'll never starve, at least not as long as someone who is akin to you has something to eat. It's Communism, but without any of the ideas of Marx or Lenin. It has a sacred origin. (111)

Wright rejected this truth about African culture because he refused to accept Africans as intellectually equal to those from the West. He chose to believe, instead, that the Africans he met were not sophisticated enough to understand political concepts.

Wright openly questioned African people's understanding of what he perceived to be complicated Western political concepts. Nkrumah's advisors who had never left the Gold Coast baffled him. “One could argue that Nkrumah had learned such tactics from observing Communist activities in London and New York, but there was a problem of determining how his aides, in five short years, had developed such a high degree of political dexterity with the masses,” he said (99). He assessed Nkrumah's followers in the same way. Following a speech given by Nkrumah, Wright questioned how they understood “such concepts” and wondered, “Could such sophisticated language be grasped by men so new to party struggles?” (86). Such comments underscored Wright's negative assumptions about the intelligence and sophistication of Africans. He even suggested that Nkrumah and his team had not achieved political success by logic or reasoning, but had “fumbled and found how to organize their people,” thereby implying that decolonization was a fluke (100).

Even in the face of strong evidence, Wright was unwilling to let go of his preconceived notions about Africa and its politics. His bias made it impossible for him to write an objective analysis of decolonization in the Gold Coast. Ultimately, his refusal to accept the melding of what he perceived was African culture and Western culture, blinded him to Nkrumah's politics. Consider his descriptions of politics in the Gold Coast:

Here was religion melting into politics; prayers were becoming pledges; hope was translating into organization; devotion was becoming obedience; trust was turning itself into discipline; and reverence was being converted into vigilance ... (85)

Ironically, Wright encouraged Africans to find their own political paths but he failed to recognize the unique path that African leaders like Nkrumah had forged. His depiction of Nkrumah's politics was less than flattering. At best, he painted them as haphazard and, at worst, as comical:

What a bewildering unity Nkrumah had forged. Christianity, tribalism, paganism, sex, nationalism, socialism, housing, health, and industrial schemes...! Could this sweep Africa? I could well understand why the British, when they first saw it, thought it was a joke (71).

This comment, like the rest of the narrative, was less indicative of Nkrumah's decolonization politics than it was of Wright's overall misunderstanding and of bias against Africans and their culture.

Ultimately, Wright's attempt to write an objective analysis of decolonization fell flat, revealing his insecurities about his identity. In this way, Wright's title, Black Power,

proved to be far less appropriate than his subtitle, “A Record of Reactions in the Land of Pathos.” While Wright may have intended to evoke pity or compassion for Africa or its people, his narrative suggested that the true “land of pathos” was not in Africa at all, but inside of his own mind.

The idea that travel narratives about Africa reveal more about the identities of the writers than they do about Africa provides an excellent analytical frame for examining Wright’s narrative and the black American travel narratives about Africa that followed. In Black Power, Wright admitted that “one reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives; one’s reaction to Africa is one’s life, one’s sense of things” (175). His narrative demonstrates how travel writing can bring a writer’s ideological crises into view. It also recognizes how a writer’s intellectual and emotional baggage inevitably colors what he or she depicts. Although decolonization in Africa was his topic, it only served as a pretext for Wright’s true obsession: his own identity.

Africa, Land of My Fathers

“You say that you have been all over Africa—all right, in many parts of Africa—tell me, what is it really like?”

“There is no answer to that question because Africa is many countries under many rulers. Each country and its people are completely different from the other. For instance, Africa is not all steaming jungle. There is snow on the equator. There are forests and bush as well as jungle, mountains and deserts as well as swamps.”

(277)

In Africa, Land of My Fathers, Era Bell Thompson examined the spectrum of social and political realities that existed in Africa, illuminating the complex character of its social

and political landscape during decolonization. Focusing on human social interactions rather than the larger political forces at work within a continent beleaguered by anti-colonial struggle, Thompson was able to reveal a great deal about the politics of decolonization and its impact on African social life. Unfortunately, critics past and present have overlooked her narrative. Africa, Land of My Fathers not only advances our understanding of decolonization in Africa, but also sheds light on the black American travel narratives about post-colonial Africa that followed.

When Thompson departed for Africa, her desire was to speak to African people from all walks of life, “from presidents and prime ministers” to “just plain people” (10). Thompson acknowledged that her journey was as personal as it was professional. She admitted in the introduction to her narrative that her trip was co-sponsored by Doubleday and the Johnson Publishing Company, the parent company of *Ebony*. But she also stated that she “wanted to return to the land of my forefathers, to see if it is as dark and hopeless as it has been painted and to find out how it would receive a prodigal daughter who had not been home for three hundred years” (10). This notion of a black American woman returning to Africa as a prodigal daughter arises again in travel narratives by black American women that followed, including Marita Golden’s Migrations of the Heart (1983), Maya Angelou’s All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986), and Lynne Duke’s Mandela, Mobutu and Me (2003).

Thompson was honest about her ambivalence towards Africa, particularly at the moment of decolonization, admitting that her affinity for the continent was newly born out of an interest in the political activities occurring there. “Africa moved into the headlines,” she wrote, “Big-time newspaper and magazine correspondents, trekking

through the bush, soon outnumbered anthropologists and men of God, for there was a sudden urgency to shed new light on the Dark Continent” (18). Unlike Wright, who boasted about his intellectual knowledge of politics, Thompson did not mask her ignorance, confessing that her knowledge of the continent, like that of most other Americans, was limited to popular literary characterizations and racist historical and anthropological texts. Thompson even acknowledged that “until a few months before, Africa had been the last place on earth I wanted to visit ... I tried to put it out of my mind, but it kept cropping up in the news ...” (17).

Thompson revealed that all she had been taught about Africa in the United States had made her detest the continent and any connection to it. “Had anyone called me African,” said Thompson, “I would have been indignant. Only race fanatics flaunted their jungle ancestry or formed back-to-Africa movements and they were usually motivated more by a king complex than by any loyalty to black genes” (16). As this comment demonstrates, Thompson distanced herself from the aspirations of black nationalists, whom she viewed as extremists.

Situating herself among other American journalists interested in Africa, Thompson admitted that she “followed somewhat the same route used by other American correspondents and authors” (10). She differed from them, however, because she sought to know the continent on its own terms, visiting decolonizing nations such as Kenya and the Gold Coast, as well as independent nations such as Ethiopia. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Thompson approached Africa with an eye toward racial, ethnic, and social diversity and complexity:

During my travels I talked with Europeans, Asians, and Americans as well as

Africans. I talked with a president and prime minister, with a governor and a governor-general, merchants and teachers, kings and chiefs, with houseboys and housewives, with clerks and farmers, politicians, policemen, and just plain people. I lived in first-class hotels, in third-rate rooming houses, in African homes, in an American mission, and a government rest house. (11)

Thompson's depiction of Africa calls her readers' attention to the full spectrum of realities co-existing in Africa. Describing Egypt, for example, she said she could find "Arabs, Egyptians, Jews, Nubians, Indians—they were all colors from black to blond. The term 'Negro' did not set well here ..." (271). Although she celebrated the "Africa for Africans" rhetoric of African political leaders, she also shed light on the plight of many classes, races, and ethnicities of people living on the continent.

Thompson drew a sharp distinction between her own approach and that of other black American travelers like Wright who thought more highly of themselves than the Africans with whom they interacted. Refuting the notion that Ethiopians "feel themselves superior to the American Negro," for example, she shared a discussion that she had with John Robinson, a black American who had emigrated to Ethiopia and served as a leader in the Haile Selassie military. According to Robinson:

Ethiopians do not call themselves Negroes because they object to the term 'Negro,' not to the race. They do not think themselves better than us, for was it not the Emperor himself who called us his 'brother'? The first thing the average Negro wants to do after he lands is to tell the Emperor how to run his country. He comes here expecting to be honored because he is American. He lives in an ivory tower and makes no attempt to mix with and to know the people. (263)

Robinson's criticism reflects the attitude and actions of Richard Wright. Both Wright and Thompson were traveling at the same time and writing about some of the same topics. And yet, it was only Wright who felt entitled to offer advice to Kwame Nkrumah. In fact, the final chapter of Black Power constitutes an open letter written to Nkrumah advising him on the direction that his leadership should take. In contrast, Thompson's inclusion of her conversation with Robinson in her narrative, as well as her stated objective to speak to as many different kinds of people as possible, underscores the idea that she wanted to see Africa depicted on its own terms. This was an important distinction as some black nationalists refused to regard contemporary Africa at all, relying instead on its legacy of past kings and queens as a way to bolster their self-esteem and status in the West. Thompson did not elaborate on this theme, but it is one that resonates in later travel narratives about Africa in which the authors take black nationalists to task for their obsession with the past and their inability to deal with Africa's contemporary social and political realities.

Thompson did not presuppose a personal connection to Africa or its people. Indeed, without downplaying the significance that race played in her desire to travel to the continent, Thompson constructed her desire to visit Africa as indicative of her Americanness. Thus, she did not regard her affinity for Africa as any different from other Americans' desire to know more about their heritage. She wrote: "My African safari was prompted by the same desire that prompts other Americans to return to Europe and Asia to visit their 'Old Country,' or that of their parents or grandparents. I, too, wanted to return to the land of my forefathers ..." (10). By making the lens through which she viewed Africa transparent, Thompson revealed not only a wealth of

information about the continent, but a great deal about herself as well. Through her self-reflective approach she made the limitations of her assessment of African social life apparent to her readers.

Thompson's narrative engaged decolonization in a way that brought to light several important issues, including gender, race, nationality, and ethnicity as well as her own quest for self-awareness. Gender roles were part and parcel of her exploration of decolonization, in part because she traveled alone, but also because she had greater access to African women who were often segregated socially. As a woman exploring cultures different from her own, Thompson was acutely aware of the possibilities and challenges African women faced. Her text underscores the way in which gender complicates the experience of black American women travelers. In so doing, it anticipates the later narratives of Marita Golden, Maya Angelou, and Lynne Duke.

Although Thompson interviewed several prominent African male leaders, she was determined to represent African social life from the vantage point of women. In addition to her interviews with leaders, scholars, and businessmen, Thompson made it a point to interact with African women—wives, mothers, hairdressers, secretaries, market women, and professionals. She also spoke to women who were close to prominent African men. Sometimes her opportunity to speak to these women came as the result of being ignored by the men. She looked favorably on these opportunities, leveraging her interest in the opinions of women. Such was the case when she was introduced to an Ashanti king in the Gold Coast.

They were telling me about the Ashanti Native Authority when a door opened to my right and in walked the Asantehene ... He wore his toga with the dignity of an

emperor, as indeed he was. As we shook hands, he greeted me pleasantly in easy English. Unfortunately he had to attend an important meeting that afternoon. ... I would have been pleased to have spent the intervening hours with the King's wives, but settled for a visit with the Queen Mother, sister of the King. (87)

Unlike Wright, who drew his conclusions after speaking primarily to dignitaries and scholars, Thompson also valued meeting with women of different classes and social status. She clearly recognized the bias that could result from speaking only to men or only to elite women. In interacting with as many different kinds of women as possible, Thompson used them as informants about the African societies she visited. With each interaction she seemed to have one question on her mind. What are the roles that women play in this particular society?

Thompson's inclusion of women bolstered her representation of Africa at the moment of decolonization. For example, her observations of the social activities of white-collar housewives in Liberia informed her commentary about that country's unprecedented economic growth. In the following example, Thompson demonstrated the impact of Liberia's new wealth on the white-collar women:

With servants to do practically everything for her, even carry minor purchases from the drug store to the car at the curb, the housewife had little to occupy her time. Most white-collar workers were home by four in the afternoon. With few diversions, entertaining became a major function, and dressing up a means of escaping into a half forgotten world. Nearly every afternoon and night I was entertained or attended some social or civic affair, and before I left Liberia, all of the women's clubs combined to give a luncheon for me. (24)

Thompson acknowledged the fact that these “high society” women embraced her, but her attitude toward them was ambivalent. Although they too were well educated, she was more interested in the Mandingo bush women, whose life experiences differed so greatly from her own. Her discussion of these women revealed her esteem for their informal education. She described the rigorous rites of passage that young women participated in at the bush school, a six-month informal training session that prepared them for tribal life, sex, and marriage. Impressed by these activities, Thompson remarked “After the commencement exercises . . . they are ready for marriage—more ready and better informed, I dare say, than girls in our highly organized society” (31).

In other examples, Thompson recognized how her American citizenship and social privilege complicated her attempts to connect with African women. Thompson wanted to make personal connections with African women and lamented the occasions when her nationality and social privilege isolated her or afforded her special treatment. In Nairobi, Kenya, for instance, she found that she was marginalized because of the fact that she was a black woman traveling alone throughout Africa. A group of college women with whom she identified pointed out her differences from them saying: “The African woman here gets little attention. She does not travel around the world alone as you do. She is not treated with such deference by white men” (227). As a result of the special treatment granted her, particularly by whites, African women often rejected her. Thompson’s inability to fit into prescribed gender roles reinforced her social isolation. Her experience in a Nigerian post office illustrates this point. “Immediately I was conscious of being out of place,” she said, “I could not understand the voices around me,

and slowly I realized that I was the only woman there. Obviously a Nigerian woman did not stand in line at the post offices” (58).

The complex and confusing role that race played is a major theme in Thompson’s assessment of social and political life in Africa. She used her narrative to illustrate how movement within and beyond cultural borders changed the meaning of race. Thompson learned this lesson firsthand as the significance of her own race changed depending upon her physical location and the individuals with whom she interacted. Such a rendering of the complexity of racial politics in Africa redefined the simplistic black-white narratives of anti-colonial struggle popular in the West.

Prior to visiting Africa, Thompson assumed that she might be accepted in African society because of her race. What she actually experienced, however, was a dual alienation as both a woman and a black outsider. Thompson expressed a sense of double displacement that resulted from not fitting in racially in the United States, and then not fitting in socially in Africa. Like Wright, she was considered an outsider, but this did not cause her to feel bitter. Although initially disillusioned, Thompson recognized how her ignorance about Africa was matched by the many Africans she encountered who knew very little about black Americans— “Yes, I had traversed the length and breadth of Africa, seeking a bond between the American Negro and his African brother,” she said, “but the African, I found, knows even less about us than we do about him” (280).

Implicit in her complex characterizations of African social life was the idea that blackness was not necessarily akin to Africanness. This notion would later be used by authors like Keith Richburg and Eddy L. Harris as the basis for their rejection of their African heritage and their promotion of black American identity.

Thompson explored further cultural complexities by commenting on the presence of whites in Africa. She was intrigued and frustrated by the fact that there were white people in Africa who did not seem to share her difficulties in being accepted in African society. She complained:

I had been warned that to the Nigerian masses I would be considered “white,” meaning foreign, but I was more annoyed than surprised when they paid no attention to Europeans but stared at me. There were a few Nigerian women on the streets who were dressed the same as I. Surely my color meant something to them. All through childhood I lived in towns where a dark face was a novelty and because of it I was a marked person. I did not expect to find myself in the same category here. (58)

For her part, Thompson did not always know how to make sense of the presence of Europeans in Africa. On the one hand, they served as a reminder of the colonial system of oppression, but on the other hand many of the Europeans she encountered were advocates of the anti-colonial struggle and did not treat her as poorly as some of the black African people did. She admitted, “I was resentful of the superior attitude Europeans displayed toward ‘My People’ but I was also flattered by the deference shown me because of my American citizenship” (64).

In addition, Thompson highlighted the mistreatment she received from some Africans who readily deferred to whites as examples of the complicated nature of race relationships in Africa. She described instances when Africans excluded black Americans from participating socially. In Ethiopia, Thompson and a group she characterized as “American Negro professionals and leaders back in the United States”

were excluded from social events despite the fact that whites and other non-white foreigners were invited. The black Americans, wounded by what they perceived to be a racial assault, were said to have “smarted doubly under the exclusion from the top social functions given by Ethiopian elites and embassy white brass” (262). Thompson described other instances when her American privilege was invalidated because of the fact that she was black. In South Africa and Zanzibar, for example, she was deemed a prohibited immigrant and denied entrance because of her race.

Using examples such as these, Thompson illustrated the tenuous and inconsistent role that race played in the everyday lives of African people. She did not stop with this revelation, however, but complicated accepted Western notions of race further in her analysis of the presence of Indians, Asians, and other non-blacks. She demonstrated how, in a place as multicultural as Africa, racial identities were more difficult to identify. The following description of a reception she attended illustrated this idea: “Because they were dressed the same and because many of the Asians in Tanganyika were dark-skinned, it was difficult to determine who was African and who was not. And between the brown and the black there were few apparent barriers” (193). That blackness was not akin to Africanness was reinforced when she, a light-skinned black American woman, was mistaken for an Indian woman. She was annoyed by this racial mistake and complained, “All I had gone through to ‘come home’ to visit ‘my people,’ and this one takes me for an Indian!” (239) In examples such as these, Thompson shed light on the ways in which the politics of skin color complicates what in the West might have seemed like clear racial distinctions.

Thompson also illustrated how subjective the determination of race could be when she was accused of being prejudiced against Africans by an Asian proprietor:

“You think my boys steal. All Europeans think African boys steal.”

I reminded him that I am an American, not a European. “American too?”

He accused, getting angrier. “Every time something is lost you blame black boys! You are all alike!” (44)

The fact that Thompson was black was secondary to the fact that she was a foreigner and, more importantly, an American. She acknowledged that some of the responses that people had to her had to do with the status and privilege that her American citizenship afforded her. For her core audience, primarily black American readers of *Ebony*, such revelations challenged simplistic black/white assumptions about power and privilege.

Thompson’s overall experiences resulted in an assessment of the anti-colonial struggle and African social life that reflected the diversity and complexity of life at the grassroots-level. Unlike Wright, Thompson sought to give voice to the multiple perspectives of Africa’s inhabitants. In doing so, she refuted the notion that Africans, Indians, and Europeans could not exist peacefully in Africa. While in Kenya, “Mau Mau country” as she called it, Thompson remarked, “Nairobi was disappointingly peaceful. Africans, Asians, and Europeans went about their business without friction. The tension headlined in newspapers all over the world was certainly not apparent on the surface” (210). This harmony flew directly in the face of other Western representations of Kenya, home to one of the bloodiest anti-colonial struggles of the era.

Certainly Thompson was not disputing the existence of violent anti-colonial struggle. However, her portrayal of life at the grassroots insisted that it was not the only story to be told.

Despite her emphasis on Africa's diversity, Thompson celebrated the "Africa for Africans" rhetoric of many of Africa's political leaders. In the closing chapter of her narrative she offered some explanations as to why anti-colonial struggles in Africa were heightening:

Africa ... is a country of 175 million blacks, all of whom, with the exception of those living in Liberia, Ethiopia, Libya, now Egypt, are ruled by five million Europeans. It is a continent of rich resources and cheap labor, or vast wealth and much poverty. Everywhere in Africa that the white man has settled in large numbers, he has taken the best land and all of the natural resources. The African wants return of his land from the European and the control of his business from the Asian. He is demanding the right to rule himself, or to at least have a proportionate representation in his country's government. He wants equal pay for equal work. He wants an end to the color bar. (278)

Although Thompson strongly identified with the struggle of black Africans to overcome white oppression, she nevertheless acknowledged how her own identity and her interests were firmly rooted in her American identity:

I am proud of the African blood in my veins and proud of my black heritage ... Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race. But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home. I am an American—an American by nationality, a

citizen of the United States by birth. I owe my loyalty and my allegiance to one flag. I have but one country. (281)

Conclusion

Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright visited Africa at the moment of decolonization to better understand its meaning not only for themselves, but also for their respective audiences. Using broad strokes, Wright reached conclusions about the entire continent based upon his brief stay in one region. Resisting this tendency, Thompson visited several regions and was unwilling to make sweeping conclusions. Yet, both Black Power and Africa, Land of My Fathers presented visions of Africa during its critical transition to independence that illustrate the complicated nature of black Americans' sentiment toward the continent. The significance that Africa played in their quests was two-fold. The first was that Africa held symbolic status as the imagined homeland for members of the diaspora, of which both were a part. The second was that Africa provided a location outside of the physical and ideological boundaries of the United States where their worldviews could be tested.

In Africa, Wright's reputation and gender afforded him privileges not given to Thompson. As a well-known writer with connections to Nkrumah, Wright was able to speak directly to political leaders and respected intellectuals who were driving the political discourse in the region he visited. Yet, he misunderstood or misinterpreted much of what he witnessed. His own internal struggles and inability to accept Africa on its own terms ultimately resulted in a flawed analysis of African politics.

Traveling as a lesser-known writer and as a woman, Thompson had access to aspects of African social and political life of which Wright remained totally ignorant:

African women. What set Thompson's text apart from Wright's was not only her awareness of the significance of gender, but also her self-awareness. She made a conscious decision to direct her efforts to gaining knowledge at the grassroots. Likewise, she was willing to acknowledge her own complicated allegiances and emotions in Africa.

Both texts illuminate how Thompson's and Wright's perspectives colored their assessments of African social and political life. Moreover, they confirm the idea that black American travel narratives about Africa are less the products of what authors see when traveling than of who they are. Although Wright tried to be objective, his own personal biases—against race and cultural hybridity—made it impossible for him to accurately and objectively assess what he witnessed. Conversely, Era Bell Thompson adopted a self-reflective and complex approach to Africa. In so doing, she acknowledged its ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity at the moment of decolonization and depicted an African social and political reality steeped in cultural complexities and contradictions. Rather than focus broadly on social and political events, Africa, Land of My Fathers studied the human networks of association in the everyday lives of African people, many of them women. The themes Thompson broached in her narrative—Africa's diversity, the instability of notions of race, black American identity, and the impact of gender—remain salient themes in later twentieth-century black American travel narratives.

Wright's top down approach ignored the nuances of African culture, disrespecting the intelligence of Nkrumah and his followers. Unlike her male counterpart, Thompson recognized that decolonization was not comprehensible without experiential and grassroots knowledge of African people. She also realized that knowledge of Africa was

very much dependent on the social position of each individual. As she illustrated through her complicated presentation of various peoples, cultures, and countries, the experience of decolonization was dependent on one's particular vantage point in society. Moreover, she insisted that women's perspectives were no less important than men's. For this reason, Thompson presented an Africa that was complex and contentious, reflecting the multitude of complications of social and political life including race, gender, class, and nationality.

**Chapter Two: “Home” Is Where the Heart Is:
Maya Angelou’s *The Heart of a Woman* and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes***

We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination. (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 19)

Maya Angelou is one of America’s most visible black autobiographers. Her first autobiographical text, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), garnered enormous critical and popular acclaim following its publication in 1970. Since then, she has published five more autobiographical volumes, including the two texts that comprise her travel narrative about Africa: *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). Together these two works encompass one of the most complex explorations of the relationship between black Americans and Africa. Read as a single narrative, they encompass Angelou’s experiences as a black American woman married to an African man; as a divorcee and single mother living in Africa; and as a member of a diverse community of black American expatriates in Ghana during the 1960s. Angelou’s narrative moves forward the conversation that Richard Wright and Era Bell Thompson had about the relationship between black Americans and Africa, delving into various aspects of black Americans’ relationship with Africa during the Civil Rights era.

The Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by violent and nonviolent protest and civil disobedience in an effort to draw attention to the racism and inequality faced by black Americans in the United States. At the same time, a symbiotic relationship arose between the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the anti-colonial movements elsewhere, especially in Africa. For black Americans, this era was

marked by a heightened awareness of Africa and the struggles of other oppressed black people. A commitment to pan-Africanism was common among black leaders and activists. Aware of the struggle of other oppressed black people in the world, they looked outside of the United States for allies and recognized the significance of their own struggle on a world stage.

This sense of pan-Africanism and the idea of a common struggle is a theme that Maya Angelou interrogates in her depiction of personal and political relationships on and off of the continent during this historical moment. Her narrative provides readers a window into the complicated nature of pan-Africanism and the precarious role that Africa played in the public imagination and personal aspirations of black American people at that time. It is also one of few records of a significant aspect of the Civil Rights era: the voluntary exile and resettlement of black American artists, scholars, and activists in Africa. Thus the value of Angelou's writing is both literary and historical. Scholars such as political scientist Ronald Walters have used her narrative as a primary source for their scholarship on the black American presence in Africa during the 1960s.¹⁵

Angelou's Narrative Style

Angelou's autobiographical narratives, published over the course of several decades, are episodic and marked by her distinctive practice of revisiting and revising her perspective on personal and historical events that occurred during her lifetime. Her narrative style mirrors the evolutionary nature of human development and maturation, reflecting the ways in which people reassess events that have shaped their lives. The

¹⁵ Walters discusses Angelou in his book, Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements. His chapter, "Black American Pan Africanism in Africa: Going Home to Ghana, uses Angelou's portrayals of black Americans in Ghana to support his discussion of black Americans' political consciousness in the 1960s.

Heart of a Woman and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes offer examples of this revisionist approach. The final chapters of The Heart of a Woman contain events that she explores again in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, published five years later. The Heart of a Woman ponders the challenges of marriage, motherhood, and womanhood. In contrast, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes addresses various notions of "home" among black American expatriates living in Africa.

The Heart of a Woman focuses primarily on the political relationships between black Americans and Africa within the United States, while All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes looks at those relationships in an African context. Given the disparate centers of attention, thematic consistency seems unlikely; however, prominent themes unify these two texts. Both include the ways that Africa plays into the imagination, identity formulation, and politics of black Americans. In addition, they discuss how black Americans' desire to be connected to Africa, and to be accepted by Africans, influences their personal and political relationships, both on and away from the continent. Each emphasizes how gender is brought to bear in those relationships. Many of these themes echo in Marita Golden's Migration of the Heart, published just two years after The Heart of a Woman. With attention to issues of the "heart," both women discuss in their own way the politics of personal relationships, particularly romantic, among black Americans and Africans. Both recognize how the political backdrop in the United States, the Civil Rights era, impacts these relationships and black Americans' conceptions of identity at the time.

My dissertation argues that black American travel narratives about Africa reflect the identity politics of the writers and the historical moment in which they were written.

In this chapter, I suggest that Angelou's narrative similarly explores the relationship between black Americans and Africa in order to reveal the nuances of black American identity and pan-Africanism during the Civil Rights era. I show how Angelou's representation of interpersonal relationships among black Americans and Africans brings to light gender roles and the unique socialization of black American women. Finally, I examine how Angelou's depiction of various notions of home help her to define and celebrate black Americans' distinct cultural identity.

My reading of Angelou's The Heart of a Woman and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes emphasizes that events therein are not singular episodes, but instead are equally important elements of a single travel narrative that is embedded within Angelou's larger autobiographical canon. In their discussion of Angelou's characterization of Africa, critics have focused specifically on the events in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, overlooking the fact that her journey to and her relationship with Africa began and was motivated by events that occur in The Heart of a Woman.¹⁶ By keeping Angelou's narrative unified, I highlight the overarching themes in both narratives.

My approach is indebted to scholars Lyman Hagen, author of Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou (1996), and Mary Jane Lupton, author of Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion (1998), both of whom recognize the need for a unique interpretative method for Angelou's autobiographical work. Like Hagen and Lupton, I resist the superficial "beginnings" and "endings" in her canon by recognizing that her travel narrative about

¹⁶ John Cullen Gruesser, author of Black on Black: Twentieth Century Black American Writing About Africa does not mention Angelou's The Heart of a Woman.

Africa is embedded in the body of her work and forms the basis of two of its volumes. Focusing specifically on Angelou's use of the motherhood trope, I expand Lupton's scholarship by exploring the ways in which it characterizes black Americans' complicated relationship with Africa.

Critics like Lyman Hagen understand the value of viewing Angelou's texts alongside one another in order to identify patterns and dominant themes across texts that will add to readers' fundamental understanding. Because of the thematic complexity, varying plots, and sheer magnitude of Angelou's autobiographical canon, many literary scholars have chosen to evaluate her texts individually rather than as a whole. In fact, most of the critical attention has been given to her inaugural text, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. But Hagen has observed that "Angelou writes not just of what has happened to her but its effect upon her. Her books unfold what she has learned, how she has grown, and how she has moved along the trail of self-discovery ... Angelou's dedication to growth and self-evaluation comes up repeatedly" (7). He arrives at this conclusion after having examined the entire body of Angelou's work with an eye towards differences and similarities.

Mary Jane Lupton puts forth an interpretative method for studying Angelou's work that requires readers to "move back and forth between the texts" (141). In her view, this approach provides readers with a better understanding of the narrator's motivation and the main action taking place within each text. According to Lupton, this type of analysis is better suited to Angelou's narrative style, which she believes embodies an inherent rejection of a sense of an ending. Lupton argues that what distinguishes Angelou's autobiographical method from more conventional autobiographical forms is

the denial of closure. Readers expect a beginning, middle, and end. By recreating and re-centering her perspective, however, Angelou expands and complicates her autobiographical canon and transforms the way we read autobiography.

Certain themes in Angelou's autobiographical body of work are more pronounced when viewed across texts. In her article, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," Lupton identifies motherhood as the most dominant theme in Angelou's autobiographical work and demonstrates how her form reinforces this overarching theme. According to Lupton, "Stretching the autobiographical canon, she moves forward from being a child; to being a mother, to leaving the child, to having the child, in the fifth volume, achieve his independence ... Moreover, in extending the traditional one-volume form, Angelou has metaphorically mothered another book" (131). Notably, Angelou's final episode in her autobiographical canon, Mom & Me & Mom (2013), is a reexamination of the complicated relationship she had with her mother up until her death.

As Lupton rightly observes, all of Angelou's volumes explore, both literally and metaphorically, some aspect of motherhood. Lupton's examination focuses primarily on two of her maternal relationships: Angelou's bonds with her mother and mother substitutes, such as her grandmother, and her connection with her own son, Guy. This chapter explores the attention Angelou pays to motherhood in her travel narrative. Looking specifically at her depiction of womanhood, marriage, and motherhood in an African context, I illustrate how Angelou's narrative illuminates how culture is brought to bear in black Americans' relationships with "Mother" Africa and Africans.

The Romance of Africa

Angelou's narrative about Africa started long before she traveled there. Her social and political engagement with the continent began while she was living in New York and working as the Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Her geographic location was as significant as her position. At SCLC she was at the forefront of the civil rights struggle, and living in New York City placed her in close proximity to the United Nations, which offered her firsthand access to international politics. "Because of the United Nations," wrote Angelou, "Africans and oppressed people from all over the world were making New York the arena where they fought for justice" (115). Sheer physical proximity helped to foster a deep sense of unity among oppressed people, not only among black political activists, but also among a diverse community of international activists working with the United Nations.

The Civil Rights movement was an important catalyst for international cooperation and activism. Angelou viewed black Americans' struggle for equality as a facilitator for both domestic and global change. Her narrative brought to light the important role that the Civil Rights movement and its leaders played in the iconography of black political struggles abroad. For example, she depicted the ways that African activists idealized many of the American leaders and organizations that were at the forefront of the civil rights struggle. According to Angelou, "They had been inspired by Martin Luther King and the SCLC ... They had been encouraged by Malcolm X and the Muslims to set themselves apart from their oppressors" (108). She highlighted the depth of many African activists' knowledge of black American history in the United States. In the following passage, Angelou described a speech given by Vuzumi Make, the South

African freedom fighter who would later become her partner, as a source of hope and inspiration for Africans:

First, he spoke of the black American struggle. He knew the history better than most black Americans. He talked about Denmark Vesey and Gabriel, and all the known leaders of slave rebellions. He quoted Frederick Douglass and Marcus Garvey. He said that Dr. Du Bois was the father of pan-Africanism, having attended the pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919, where he stated clearly the idea of a free and united Africa. Make then, systematically, explained how Africa was bludgeoned by slavery, having her strongest sons and daughters stolen and brought to build the country of the slaves. He spoke of colonialism, the second blow that brought the continent to abjection. He said the spirit of Africa lives, but it is most vital in its descendants who have been struggling away from the motherland. At home, in South Africa, the people needed help and encouragement from those of us who, knowing slavery firsthand, had found the oppressor to be a formidable but opposable foe. (106)

These comments accentuated Angelou's view that black Americans' domestic struggles strongly influenced (and were influenced by) the efforts of other oppressed people, especially Africans. They also made evident her sense that shared oppression among black people was what drove pan-African cooperation at that time.

William Ackah, author of Pan-Africanism: Exploring the Contradictions (1999), concurs that throughout history, shared pain and oppression brought a willingness among members of the African diaspora to assist in the freedom struggles of their fellow black brothers and sisters. He cites African support for the black American Civil Rights

movement and black American interest in African liberation struggles as examples (¹⁶). Angelou's narrative epitomized how pan-African identification with African efforts to attain independence was heightened during the Civil Rights era. It shows how black Americans, especially those exposed to the plight of other oppressed people, began to see themselves in a broader international context. According to Angelou, "All black struggles were one with one enemy and one goal" (115). She perceived, however, that the broad racial characterizations of African political struggles were often reductive and essentialist. She was cautious about glossing over significant cultural and national differences between African and black American struggles, viewing this tendency as dangerous. She believed that in order for pan-African cooperation to thrive, each entity must understand the nuances of the other's situation. She compared the struggle of black Americans and South Africans, pointing out how certain successful approaches employed by black American activists proved unsuitable outside of the United States. She made the distinction that although racism had marginalized black Americans, their citizenship still offered them protection not afforded to many Africans in their respective countries. She used Vuzumi Make's voice to emphasize this idea:

That which works for your Reverend King cannot work in South Africa. Here, whether it is honored or not, there is a Constitution. You at least have laws which say, liberty and justice for all. You can go to courts and exact an amount of success. Witness your Supreme Court ruling of 1954. In South Africa, we Africans are written out of all tenets dealing with justice. We are not considered in the written laws dealing with fair play. We are not only brutalized and oppressed; *de facto*, we are ignored *de jure*. (109)

Make's comments acknowledged black Americans' privilege relative to many other oppressed people. His was an important distinction that often blinded black Americans to the concerns of others. Angelou recognized that black Americans' experience with racism in the United States and their limited exposure to the political struggles of others sometimes led them to draw oversimplified and misguided conclusions. She showed how their narrow focus on their own domestic struggles diminished their pan-African sentiment and their interest in the equality struggles of black people outside of the United States.

Angelou portrayed a spectrum of black American characters to make this point. They included others like herself who were politically active and socially engaged in international politics, as well as people like Thomas, a working-class man with very limited engagement with politics and black people outside of the United States, who was her fiancé before she met Make. His comments about African people helped illustrate a common lack of interest in their plight. "I haven't lost anything in Africa and they [Africans] haven't lost anything in our country," Thomas said, "They can all go back to where they came from as far as I'm concerned" (115). His emphasis on "our country" typified the distance between their worldviews. Whereas Angelou's career as an activist and artist heightened her sense of pan-Africanism and attention to struggles beyond the borders of the United States, Thomas epitomized how black Americans' indifference to the plight of Africans complicated the possibility of pan-African cooperation.

Angelou regarded indifference as a major threat to pan-Africanism. Her characterization of one organization in particular, the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH), showed how black American members within pan-African

groups were often unsure about the role of Africans in the diaspora in African struggles. She voiced their anxiety in her account of a discussion among CAWAH members about the suspicious death of Congolese Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, in which they questioned their involvement in African liberation struggles:

Some members said they thought our organization had been formed to support the black American civil rights struggle. Weren't we trying to swallow too much, biting into Africa? Except for Sekou Toure and Tom Mboya, when had the Africans backed us? (147)

With this analysis, Angelou recognized the self-serving nature of some black Americans' pan-Africanist involvement. She also identified two of their major insecurities in that regard: first, that black Americans did not trust that Africans fully supported them and, second, that they thought that attention to their own struggle would be diminished if they became advocates for others. These concerns were among the many present in the political relationships between black Americans and Africans. Angelou's narrative illustrates that although the Civil Rights era provided an important window of opportunity for pan-African cooperation, the political relationships that evolved in that context were often complicated and unstable.

The Heart of a Woman not only placed black Americans' political relationships with Africa and Africans under a microscope, it also explored their romantic associations. Using her relationship with Make and her interactions with several other women of the African diaspora as examples, Angelou illustrated the way that gender informed these connections and brought both cultural similarities and differences into view. Angelou recognized how, in an effort to forge connections to Africa, many black Americans

romanticized and idealized Africa, especially the African past. Her narrative unmasked the correlation between black Americans' romantic affinity for Africans and their strong desire to be attached to Africa. To that end, she presented her relationship with Make as a case study, explaining how connections to Africa, both literal and figurative, afforded black Americans a sense of dignity that had been stripped by the legacy of slavery and racism. Historian Ali Mazrui suggests that the African cultural nationalism of black Americans is "firmly established in romantic gloriana," the idealization or glorification of Africa's past achievements (98). It helped them hold on to a mental image of Africa that they believed existed prior to the transatlantic slave trade and provided them with an opportunity to connect to a history that was independent of the tumultuous slave experience in the New World. The romantic glorification of an "Africa" that may or may not have existed in reality offered black Americans redemption from their history of slavery, segregation, and racial oppression in the United States.

Angelou's depiction of her whirlwind courtship and common-law marriage to Make personifies Mazrui's theory. She presented her romantic attraction to Make as heightened by her desire for an African connection that would legitimize her existence as an African-descended person from the United States. Her description of her first date with Make made the association between her romantic attraction and her idealization of African history and culture evident:

At the dining table he spread before me the lights and shadows of Africa. Glories stood in thrilling array. Warrior queens, in necklaces of blue and white beads, led armies against marauding Europeans ... The actual earth of Africa was 'black and strong like girls back home' and glinted with gold and diamonds. African men

covered their betrothed with precious stones and woven cloth. He asked me to forgive the paucity of the gift he had for me and understand that when we returned to Mother Africa, he would adorn me with riches the likes of which I had never imagined ... I looked into the mirror and saw exactly what I wanted him to see: a young African virgin, made beautiful for her chief. (151)

For young Maya Angelou, this relationship was more than romantic, it was also redemptive. It actualized her yearning to return physically to Africa where she could be transformed, at least in her own mind, from being a “daughter of African slaves” to African royalty. Such a transformation would offer her the legitimacy she believed had been stripped from her and her ancestors during the horrific experience of slavery. Yet, Angelou’s depiction also exposed a paradox: that black Americans’ quest for legitimacy often included a desire to obliterate the legacy of slavery, thus discounting the value of their unique American socialization—the very experiences that she believed defined their identity.

Angelou’s portrayal of her relationship with Make also exemplified how marriage brought to light cultural differences and disparate assumptions about gender roles. For example, the independence and success that she had achieved as a single mother and artist prior to her involvement with Make made the limited gender role that he prescribed for her seem oppressive. As a single mother of a teenage son who had been head of her family since she herself was a teen, Angelou was accustomed to holding the primary financial and decision-making responsibilities for her family. “For years before I had met Vus,” Angelou wrote, “my rent had been paid and my son and I had eaten and been clothed by money I made working on stages” (175). Once they were together, however,

Vus assumed that her primary occupation would be taking care of their home and the family. Angelou expressed her dissatisfaction saying, “When I gave Vus my body and my loyalty,” she said, “I hadn’t included all the rights to my life” (175). Her sense of independence flew in the face of Make’s assumptions about gender roles, causing major problems in their relationship. Her depiction of her marriage to Make demonstrated how gender socialization became a barrier that they ultimately could not overcome.

Angelou’s presumably unfeminine behavior was a recurrent theme in her depiction of her relationship with Make. For example, when she decided to seek employment while they were living in Egypt, he accused her of acting “like a man.” He scolded her, saying, “You took a job without consulting me? Are you a man?” (226). Although Angelou admitted that her independence and employment posed a threat to Make’s manhood, she was careful to clarify that Make’s insecurity did not stem solely from his African identity. “Even an American black man would have found such a headstrong wife unsuitable, and how much more an African husband, steeped in the tradition of at least the appearance of male authority,” she wrote (227). Although Angelou contended that the issues in her marriage were not entirely cultural, she presented other examples of the ways in which Make called into question her American socialization. When she applied for the job in Egypt, Make mocked her, saying, “Black and American. You think you can come to Egypt and just go get a job? That’s foolish. It shows the very nerve of the black woman and the arrogance of the American” (225). Using this example and others, Angelou demonstrated how her behavior made her unable to meet Make’s expectations. She admitted, “Vus was African and his values were different from mine” (247).

In order to highlight how such nuances came into play, Angelou described the confusion and anxiety she experienced about not meeting Make's expectations of acceptable social behavior. Describing a party she attended with several of her husband's colleagues, for example, she expressed her ignorance about how to properly interact with other African men. "I would have known what to do if the party had been given by Afro-Americans, or even if there had been a few Afro-American guests. Or if the African guests had been all female. But Vus was successfully teaching me that there was a particular and absolute way for a woman to approach an African man," wrote Angelou (201). These depictions exposed Angelou's socialization as a black American woman, recognizing how it left her ignorant about the cultural cues and acceptable social behaviors for a wife of an African man.

Angelou's romantic relationships with men brought to light how black Americans' experiences in the United States had affected gender socialization. In The Heart of a Woman, for example, Angelou gave voice to the idea that slavery had stripped black American men of their manhood and been detrimental to the community as a whole. Using the voice of her friend Abbey, Angelou raised the idea that because of slavery black women had taken on roles of authority filled traditionally by black men. According to Abbey, "the worst injury of slavery was that the white man took away the black man's chance to be in charge of himself, his wife, and his family. Vus is teaching you that you're not a man. No matter how strong you are. He's going to make you into an African woman. Just watch it" (143). In this instance, Abbey is reproaching Angelou for her fierce independence and upholding what she feels are the traditional roles for black men and black women that were destroyed by the slave experience. Through

Abbey, Angelou voices the idea that because of historical experiences in the United States, the black American community had lost its social order, particularly its sense of gender roles. Abbey's comments, which echo the ideas of some black nationalists at the time, infer that African women were accepting of the patriarchal roles prescribed for them by African men, an idea that Angelou later refutes.

Angelou rejects Abbey's indictment of black women's socialization, although she acknowledged that their historical circumstances affected black American women's behavior and assumptions about gender roles. She also recognizes how it enabled their survival. These sentiments were reiterated in her portrayal of the brief relationship she had with another African man, Sheikali, in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes. She concluded that, "My upbringing had not fitted me for even a pretended reticence. As a Black American woman, I could not sit with easy hands and an impassive face and have my future planned. Life in my country had demanded that I act for myself or face terrible consequences" (69). Angelou's critique of the limited gender role for women prescribed by Make and Sheikali may have implied a broad indictment not only of these two men, but also of the African cultures they stood for. However, closer inspection clarifies that her commentary is above all a discussion about black American women's socialization. Decades before, Era Bell Thompson had alluded to her own unique socialization as compared to that of African women when she talked about how they responded to her traveling as a woman alone through Africa. The African women she encountered admitted that they did not do so because they did not enjoy the freedom or respect she commanded as a foreign woman journalist. Neither Thompson nor Angelou, however,

implied that African women were satisfied with the gender roles prescribed for them in African societies.

Even as Angelou portrayed her independence as a major factor in the failure of her romantic relationships with African men, she was careful to combat certain misconceptions about African women that could alienate them from black American women. These included the notion that African women, particularly wives, were not politically engaged. She argued that a sisterhood based upon mutual understanding of lived experiences existed among all women of the African diaspora. Her description of a luncheon with the wives of African dignitaries made this point clear. Held during an international conference in London, the occasion was attended by African women and women of African descent from the Caribbean and the United States. Although these women were eager to participate, they had been excluded from the conference dialogue. Angelou's portrayal of them as freethinking, intelligent, and politically aware challenged myths suggesting that African women were submissive in the liberation struggles of their respective countries. It underscored their dissatisfaction with the superficial and inactive roles to which their husbands had relegated them. They questioned their attendance at an international conference if they could not make their voices heard:

What are we here for? Why are African women sitting, eating,
trying to act cute while African men are discussing serious questions
and African children are starving? Have we come to London just to convenience
our husbands? Have we been brought here only as portable pussy?" (135)

Angelou's depiction illustrated how women's gendered experiences often cut across cultural barriers. In this case, she recognized a pattern of marginalization apparent not

only in the context of a single conference, but also in the broader political struggle. She addressed major misconceptions about submissiveness and power, while shedding light on the significant political contributions of women to the African liberation struggles. A sense of shared marginalization gave the women space to exchange stories about how each had contributed to the liberation of their people. “The African women responded with tales of queens and princesses, young girls and market women who outwitted the British or French or Boers,” said Angelou and, “I countered with the history of Harriet Tubman, called Moses...” (136). Angelou’s portrayal demonstrated that interpersonal relationships lay at the root of pan-African connections and required a mutual understanding of their particular histories.

Black American expatriates in Africa and notions of “Home”

Angelou’s breakup with Make is the catalyst for the action that takes place in All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes. In it she continued to explore the relationship between black Americans and Africa, describing her experiences as a member of a diverse black American expatriate community living in Ghana during the 1960s. The narrative was not merely a depiction of her personal journey, it was also a public record of the collective experiences of a specific group of black American expatriates. Outside of Angelou’s body of work, few first-hand accounts of this community exist. Her text is also a consideration of various notions of “home.” Among these was the idea of Africa as a literal homeland for black Americans; the concept of “home” as a black American identity rooted in their experiences in the United States; and the notion of “home” as rooted in familial bonds, particularly between mothers and children.

Literary scholar Dolly McPherson recognized the important historical legacy of Angelou's narrative. In her view:

Angelou not only [related] the personal journey of a Black American woman in search of a home, but she also [touched] upon the personal journeys of other black American expatriates searching for an African home as well. In doing so, she [recorded] the history of a generation of American expatriates in no less a way than Ernest Hemingway and Henry James record the history of American expatriates in Europe. (104)

By presenting Africa from the vantage point of black American expatriates, Angelou exposed their desires and fears, not the least of which was about acceptance both in their literal home, the United States, and their idealized home, Africa.

Angelou's narrative made an important contribution to black American literary history. Literary scholars such as Robert Coles have noted the prominent role that artists and writers played in the expatriate community of All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes. In his book, Black Writers Abroad, Coles declared that it was, "the most comprehensive and revealing record of what it was like to be living as a black writer in Ghana from about 1963-1965. This autobiography is therefore significant in that it provides a documented, subjective history of an important movement in black American literature and culture" (13). Largely unexplored, this unique experience of black American expatriates in Africa during the Civil Rights era captured a moment of unprecedented interaction between black American artists and Africans on the African continent.

For a myriad of personal and political reasons, not the least of which was the tumultuous experience of American racism and oppression, an unprecedented number of black Americans, among them many writers, left the United States during the 1960s. According to Coles, “There are many reasons why black writers left the United States for Africa in the 1960’s (also to Europe and other countries). The most pronounced reason was their dissatisfaction with American racial policies and their effects” (125). Many chose Africa based upon the feeling of racial and ancestry identification. Ghana, with its progressive politics and charismatic leader, Kwame Nkrumah, was particularly attractive to many black Americans because, according to Angelou, Nkrumah “let it be known that American Negroes would be welcome in Ghana” (20). Richard Wright’s visit to the Gold Coast prior to Ghana’s independence resulted from an invitation from Nkrumah, who not only knew of Wright’s reputation, but also of his friendship with pan-Africanists George and Dorothy Padmore. The most notable of all black Americans expatriates, however, was W.E.B. Du Bois, who, disillusioned with the state of race relations and politics in the United States, went to Ghana in 1958 also at the personal invitation of Nkrumah. He remained there with his family until his death in 1963.

Black American visitors and expatriates to Ghana, however, were not uniformly motivated. Angelou’s characterization of them recognized how their individual motivations influenced their experiences and relationships, real and perceived, in Africa. According to Angelou:

There were over forty families, some with children who had come and as simply moved into the countryside hoping to melt onto the old landscape. They were teachers and farmers. The second group had come under the aegis of the

American government and were viewed with suspicion by Ghanaians, and Black Americans stayed apart from them as well. Too often they mimicked the manners of their former lords and ladies, trying to treat the Africans as Whites had treated them ... There was a miniscule business community which had found a slight but unsure footing in Accra. Julian [Mayfield]'s circle had stupendous ambitions and thought of itself as a cadre of political émigrés. Its members were impassioned and volatile, dedicated to Africa, and black Americans at home and abroad. We, for I counted myself in that company, felt that we would be the first accepted and once taken in and truly adopted, we would hold the doors open until all Black Americans could step over our feet and enter through the hallowed portals and come home at last. (23)

Angelou's portrayal of the multiple social and political vantage points of the black Americans who belonged to the expatriate community acknowledged how these differences affected their expectations and behavior in Africa. The Foreign Service officials, for example, touted their employment-related status, elevated social position, and allegiance to the United States by maintaining social distance and acting with condescension towards Africans. Black Americans' experiences in Africa were, indeed, often affected, if not governed by, the circumstances of their travel, a theme that will play prominently into the narratives that were produced at the end of the twentieth century.

Although it acknowledged the diversity within Ghana's black American expatriate community, Angelou's narrative focused specifically on the group whom she referred to as "Revolutionist Returnees." She distinguished them from the other expatriates, recognizing their political activism and interest in the politics of both the

United States and Ghana. They were characterized by their simultaneous longing for social acceptance and legitimization in both places. According to her, “Each person brought to Africa varying talents, energies, vigor, youth and terrible yearnings to be accepted” (18). Dissatisfied with their experiences in the United States, they hoped to escape American racism and become full participants in African social and political life. The group was composed mainly of writers, scholars, artists and activists who viewed themselves as self-exiles and political émigrés. Its informal leader, Julian Mayfield, had come to Africa with his family as a political fugitive. “He had three books published in the United States,” said Angelou, “had acted in a Broadway play, and was a respected American-based intellectual before an encounter with the CIA and FBI caused him to flee his country for Africa” (18). Mayfield had come to Ghana because of his involvement in U.S. politics, but he remained committed to the cause of civil rights in the United States.

Angelou asserted her own distinctiveness, even among the Returnees. Like them, she hoped to realize the dream of Africa as her homeland. However, unlike the Returnees who went to Ghana “because of its progressive posture and its brilliant president Kwame Nkrumah,” she was in Ghana, “by accident, literally” (20). Originally Angelou had relocated to Egypt with her husband Make, and then moved to Liberia after they separated. She ended up in Ghana because her son Guy, who had chosen to attend university in Ghana, was involved in a car accident.

Many of the Returnees who had chosen to relocate to Africa remained interested in the domestic struggles of the United States. They were excellent examples of what scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as “cosmopolitan patriots,” who perceive themselves as being rooted in one place even as they live and contribute to another.

Angelou's portrayal highlighted their dual allegiances. They publicly displayed solidarity with the black American struggle in the United States, for example, by organizing a political rally in Accra, Ghana, which took place on the eve of the famous March on Washington in 1963 (121).

Yet, the Returnees' political ties to the United States did not diminish their hopes for full assimilation in Ghana. Their desire for acceptance there was borne out of their sense of homelessness and rejection in the United States. Angelou emphasized how their notion of home, particularly the notion of Africa as a literal homeland for black Americans, was tied to their feelings about themselves. She demonstrated how skin color prejudice, or the lack thereof, was a major factor fueling their affinity for Africa and willingness to view it as their homeland. "We were Black Americans in West Africa where for the first time in our lives the color of our skin was accepted as correct and normal," wrote Angelou (3). For many Returnees, Africa was psychologically affirming because it restored the sense of dignity that was stripped from them by American racism. Assimilation in Africa, therefore, was designed to increase their sense of self-worth, which had been damaged by their experiences with racism in the United States.

Recognizing how black Americans were constantly engaged in a psychological battle against racism, Angelou suggested that the visible evidence of "black power" in Africa had profound psychological significance. She described how witnessing Africans as powerbrokers and as officials commanding important roles in government made them "tremble with an awe" and feel vindicated because it undermined myths of black inferiority that they had learned in the United States. "Their authority on the marble steps," said Angelou, "again proved that Whites had been wrong all along. Black and

brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority” (16). Such experiences fueled the Returnees’ idealism and heightened their desire to be fully accepted in Africa.

In her narrative, Angelou explored how black Americans’ idealism about Africa as a literal and figurative homeland was a longstanding cultural tradition. “For centuries we had sung about a place not built with hands where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk ...” she said, “In the yearning, heaven and Africa were inextricably combined” (20). Such allusions aligning Africa with heaven had been passed on among black Americans since slavery. Because they viewed Africa as both heaven and the “promised land,” it is easy to see how, in their collective imagination, Africa was the one place on earth where they could escape racism and oppression. To disfranchised black Americans who could not enjoy the social and economic opportunities afforded to other members of American society, Africa was an attractive alternative. Africa, as they idealized it, provided black Americans with legitimacy, dignity, and access to full social participation.

Angelou drew a parallel between individual romantic relationships and black Americans’ affinity for Africa. She characterized her own feelings about Africa by comparing them to the way “a young girl falls in love, heedless with slight chance of finding the emotion requited” (19). By comparing black Americans’ sentimental attachment to Africa as a homeland to the kind of euphoria and carelessness experienced by individuals in new romantic relationships, she suggested that black Americans’ notions about Africa as their homeland were often idealistic and distorted.

Angelou's depiction of the Returnees showcased the obstacles that many of them faced as they sought to realize the goal of making Africa their home. She acknowledged how black Americans' passion for Africa often went unreciprocated, and she also illuminated how the Returnees, for a number of psychological and emotional reasons, sought to deny or downplay such challenges. Homesickness, for example, was never mentioned:

Who would dare admit a longing for a white nation so full of hate that it drove its citizens of color to madness, to death or to exile? How to confess even to one's own self, that our eyes, historically accustomed to granite buildings, wide paved avenues, chromed cars, and brown, black, beige, pink and white-skinned people, often ached for those familiar sights. (120)

In order to prove to themselves—if not to Africans as well—that Africa was truly “home,” the Returnees suppressed their homesickness. Likewise, they willfully ignored or denied the unpleasant aspects of their experience in Africa despite the obvious disparity between the ways that they idealized their experiences and the actual realities:

We did not discuss the open gutters along the streets of Accra, the shacks of corrugated iron in certain neighborhoods, dirty beaches and voracious mosquitoes. And under no circumstances did we mention our disillusionment at being overlooked by the Ghanaians. We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind. Our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination. (19)

Comments such as these underscored the sense of disillusionment that many of the expatriates felt, as well as the bittersweet irony of their unwillingness to express it.

The social alienation that black Americans endured as they attempted to participate in African societies is a common theme in the travel narratives of both Richard Wright and Era Bell Thompson. Angelou's narrative broached this topic as well. For example, despite having marketable skills and training, many Returnees struggled to find employment in their areas of expertise. Angelou's depiction of Vicki highlighted this predicament:

She [Vicki] had a Bachelor's degree in English, a Master's degree in economics and years of experience. She had gone first to Nigeria, but after a bitter reception, or rather, a bitter rejection, had been encouraged to believe that she would easily find creative work in the progressive country of Ghana. For months she carried her qualifications as burnt offerings to labor and trade union offices, and when not ignored outright she was told, "the big man," meaning boss, "is traveling. Come again." When Vicki found work it was as a typist in a foreign embassy. (30)

Though Angelou attributed Vicki's rejection to her American status rather than to her race, she provided other examples of the racial discrimination that the Returnees experienced. For example, she was told that "American Negroes are always so crude" by a receptionist who did not want to assist her (34). Angelou's references to incidents like these were not meant to disparage the Africans who rejected them. On the contrary, she used these incidents to suggest how the Returnees' experiences of rejection in Africa brought to bear all of the racial baggage and cultural insecurities they already had as outcasts in the United States. According to Angelou, "The incidents brought me closer to

another facet of Ghana, Africa, and my own mania” (35). This mania was the fear of homelessness that came from her marginalization in both the United States and Africa. She often wondered “whether in looking for a home I, and all the émigrés, were running from a bitter truth that rode lightly but forever at home on our shoulders . . . I would not admit that if I couldn’t be comfortable in Africa, I had no place else to go” (35-36).

Black Americans’ anxiety, Angelou concluded, was driven by the fear that if they could not find “home” in Africa and were “homeless” in America, they would never achieve a sense of belonging. “If we were not welcome in Ghana,” wondered Angelou, “the most progressively black nation in Africa, where would we find harbor?” (80). Although social rejection in Africa may not have driven the expatriates to return physically “home” to the United States, it drove them closer to a sense of “home” that was rooted in their U.S. experience and history.

Black Americans’ social experiences in Africa proved the degree to which their cultural identity was indeed unique. Angelou introduced the notion of “beentoo” to epitomize the way that Africans regarded her and other black Americans living in Ghana. “Beentoo,” she explained, “[was] a derisive word used for a person who had studied abroad and returned to Ghana with European airs” (52). Although in an African context, the notion of “beentoo” had a negative connotation, it was applied somewhat differently to black Americans. “In a way you are ‘beentoo’ too,” one steward at a YMCA in Ghana explained, “your people . . . they are from this place and if this place claims you or if it does not claim you, here you belong” (53). In this episode, Angelou affirmed her cultural identity as a “beentoo” and offered the hope that black Americans could still accept Africa as a figurative homeland even if they were not fully accepted socially.

Angelou ultimately rejected the notion of Africa as a literal homeland for black Americans, however, saying that she “doubted if [she], or any Black from the diaspora, could really return to Africa. We wore skeletons of old despair like necklaces heralding our arrival, and we were branded with cynicism” (76). She concluded that black Americans could never really find the sense of “home” that they sought in Africa. Referring to their historical experience in the United States, she resolved that home for black Americans could only be found in their sense of community. Yet, she understood that this required them to own the American heritage that so many of them sought to dismiss or downplay. It also required them to be truthful about the fact that they could never fully assimilate socially in Africa. Angelou articulated how this revelation was both painful and liberating for many of the expatriates:

Many of us had only begun to realize in Africa that the Stars and Stripes was our flag and our only flag and that knowledge was almost too painful. We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, even marry and remain on African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States and it was the United States, which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, and then denied us. (127)

Angelou celebrated black Americans’ unique heritage by highlighting those aspects of identity that were the product of their experience in America. She paid homage to Negro spirituals, for example, as a form of musical religious worship that originated during slavery. “I was raised on the spirituals which ached to ‘See my old mother in glory’ or ‘Meet with my dear children in heaven,’” Angelou admitted (5). Evoking yet another musical allusion, she described the hope of African slaves in America who would, after death, “study war no more” (20). These allusions confirmed

that black American culture was born out of its peoples' tumultuous history. Describing the Returnees, she wrote:

There [was] a kinship among wanderers, as operative as the bond between bishops or tie between thieves: We knew each other instantly and exchanged anecdotes, contact, and even addresses within the first hours ... there was no need to tell them that I hungered for security and would have accepted nearly any promised permanence in Africa. (8)

To draw attention to black Americans' particular identity, Angelou contrasted the social behavior of black Americans and Africans. Indeed, living in Africa forced the expatriates to recognize previously taken for granted characteristics that distinguished their cultural identity. For example, she explained how in reaction to slavery and oppression, black Americans had developed a culture of humor that was distinct from that of both white Americans and Africans. Her descriptions of the social interactions among the black American expatriates revealed how greatly they found comfort in it. "The fast talk and jokes were packages from home and I was delighted to show the group that I still knew how to act in Black company. I laughed as hard as the teasers and enjoyed the camaraderie" (9). As narrator, Angelou commented frequently on these differences:

Over centuries of oppression we had developed a doctrine of resistance, which included false docility and sarcasm. We also had a most un-African trait: we were nearly always ready and willing to fight ... my people had been unable to guard against intrusions of any sort, so we had developed audacious defenses which lay just under the skin. At any moment they might seep through the pores and show themselves without regard to propriety, manners or even physical

safety. I had missed those thrilling attitudes without being aware of their absence (158-159).

Angelou's narrative recognized how black Americans' historical experiences distinguished them from Africans. To demonstrate these cultural differences, Angelou discusses how she believed she had been negatively "creolized" by her experience in Africa. Decades earlier Richard Wright had alluded to the concept of creolization in his critique of Africans who had come in contact with Western culture and were influenced or "creolized" by it. Because he did not believe that Western and African cultures could coexist, Wright also viewed creolization negatively and rejected the comingling of these two cultures that he witnessed in the Gold Coast. Yet, his response was directly related to his insecurity about his black American identity, which was itself the result of the creolization of enslaved Africans in America whereas Angelou's black American identity was a source of pride.

Angelou used the term creolization to describe how some black Americans, like herself, willfully abandoned their black American sensibilities in their efforts to become "African." She viewed this behavior as negative because she believed that black Americans' cultural identity had helped them to survive in America and had given them a cultural identity that was distinct from that of Africans. To underscore this idea, Angelou described numerous scenarios when other black Americans warned her "not to become creolized by Africa." They complained that she had become "too African" or "un-black American" and instructed her not to "forget her background" (11). During a trip to Germany while still living in Africa, for example, she was told, "You went to Africa to

get something, but remember you did not go empty handed” (176). Angelou reinforced this idea when she described her own creolization:

I knew Africa had creolized me. I was neither meat nor fowl nor good red herring. My native sassiness, which had brought me from under the heels of brutes, had been softened by contact with the respectfulness of Ghanaians, yet unlike them I did not belong to a place from which I could not be dislodged. I had put on just learned airs along with my African cloth, and paraded, pretending to an exotic foreign poise I had not earned nor directly inherited. (174)

Angelou’s description of her own behavior was similar to her description of African “beentoos” who “had studied abroad and returned to Ghana with European airs” (52). Although there was a parallel between Angelou’s behavior and Westernized Africans, what distinguishes Angelou from Wright was her pride in her black American identity.

Angelou’s discussion of creolization underscored her idea that black American culture is valuable. It also demonstrated how black Americans’ experiences in Africa make their distinctiveness from Africans apparent. Most importantly, it affirmed that “home” is rooted in their experiences in the United States, despite their strong emotional and cultural ties to Africa.

Motherhood as Fact and Metaphor

Testifying to the significance that motherhood plays in her autobiographical canon, Angelou used this concept in order further to discuss notions of home and black American identity. She did this by depicting her actual relationship with her son, Guy, and her metaphorical relationship with “Mother Africa.”

Angelou demonstrated that for mothers a sense of home is most often found in their relationship with children and family. In The Heart of a Woman, she depicted the close relationship she had with her son during his childhood. She described their frequent moves around the country saying, “in his nine years of schooling, we had lived in five areas of San Francisco, three townships in Los Angeles, New York City, Hawaii and Cleveland, Ohio” (29). By demonstrating how often they moved geographically, Angelou recognized how her sense of home was not rooted in a physical place but in the relationship she shared with her son. She reinforced this idea in All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes saying “We had been each other’s home and center for seventeen years” (5). In so doing, she affirmed that her self-esteem and personal identity were bound to family. Thus, when Guy is critically injured in a car accident in Ghana, Angelou admitted that his death would have left her “without a home” (5). After his recovery, she lamented because he no longer needed her special attention. When he wanted to return to his life at the university, she illustrated how his personal development challenged her sense of selfhood. “How could his life be separate from my life?” she asked, acknowledging that “I had been a mother of a child so long I had no preparation for life on any other level” (149). Angelou was forced to face the challenge of maintaining her identity and sense of purpose in the face of her son’s personal development and independence:

Nature was guiding his hands to loosen the maternal bonds, and although I felt if I was freed from the stay of motherhood, I might fly away like a feather in the wind, with trepidation I too tried to let my child become his own man. (136)

Her depiction of their relationship underscores the extent to which mother-son relationship defined her.

Angelou drew a parallel between her relationship with Guy and her relationship, as a black American, with “Mother Africa.” According to a Ghanaian chief she met, “Africa is herself a mother. The mother of mankind” (112). Though she did not dispute that Africa was the mother of humankind, Angelou was most interested in the continent’s relationship with Africans in the diaspora. She evoked the motherhood metaphor in narrative in order to talk explicitly about black American identity. Told, for example, that “Africans take motherhood as the most sacred condition human beings can achieve,” she emphasized this reverence for mothers to illustrate the cultural link between black Americans and Africans (112). “It [confirmed] my belief that in America we have retained more Africanisms than we know. For also among Black Americans motherhood is sacred. We have strong mothers and we love them dearly,” she wrote (113). Her argument here is directly opposed to that of writers like Wright, who sought to downplay black Americans’ connection to Africa and refute the idea of African carryovers.

Not only did Angelou invoke the idea of motherhood to affirm the relationship between black Americans and Africa, she also used it to discuss what she believed that relationship offered. Characterizing her own physical and psychological journey to Africa, she wrote:

So I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her mother’s gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters had at last arisen and directed herself back to the

welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment, and seated at the welcoming table. (21)

With this example, Angelou recognized how she and other black Americans idealized their return to Africa, because they felt it offered them redemption from their painful history. She and many of her contemporaries in Ghana yearned to become active members of that society in order to overcome years of social alienation in the United States. Describing the aspirations of other Returnees, she wrote, “We would work and produce, then snuggle down into Africa as a baby nuzzles in a mother's arms” (19).

This way of thinking, however, was unrealistic as it assumed that metaphorically the Returnees were still babies. Angelou undermined such idealistic notions by recognizing how black Americans’ social and historical experiences in the U.S. had matured them and deeply affected the relationships they forged with Africa (and Africans). She made this point clear in an exchange between one of the Returnees, Alice, and a newly arrived and painfully idealistic black American who had, by his own description, “come to Mother Africa to suckle from her breasts” (39). Alice’s reactions amplified Angelou’s conclusions. “Hell man,” said Alice, “you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Talking about sucking from Africa’s breasts. When you were born Black in America, you were born weaned” (39). With this commentary, Angelou foregrounded the black experience in America as a central factor in the identity of black Americans suggesting that it had loosened their ties to Africa. These allusions not only bolstered Angelou’s characterization of the relationship between black Americans and Africa, they helped Angelou to articulate the idea that “home” for black Americans can only be found in their acceptance of their unique black American cultural identity. Ultimately then,

Angelou used the motherhood metaphor to once again bring attention to black Americans' identity.

Read as a single narrative, The Heart of a Woman and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes encompass one of the most complex explorations of the relationship between black Americans and Africa. Using her unique vantage point as an artist, activist, wife, and mother in Africa, against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era, Angelou advanced Richard Wright's and Era Bell Thompson's conversation about connections between Africa and black Americans. Using the personal and political relationships black Americans had with Africa and Africans on and off of the continent as examples, she examined the complicated nature of pan-Africanism and the precarious role that Africa played in the public imagination and personal aspirations of black American people at that time. She also used her own experiences and the perspectives of other women in the African diaspora to highlight the role that gender played in these relationships. Finally, she offered one of only a few existing records of a significant but commonly overlooked aspect of the Civil Rights era: the voluntary migration of hundreds of black Americans professionals, artists, and scholars to Ghana during the 1960s.

Chapter Three:
“What’s Love Got to Do with it?”: Marita Golden’s Migrations of the Heart

Migrations of the Heart (1983) is emblematic of rising feminist sentiment among black American women during the late 1960s and 1970s. This historical moment is marked by the simultaneous rise of the Black Power/Black Arts and Women’s movements, both of which ignored the experiences of black women. In response to the sexism of the Black Power movement and the racism of the Women’s movement, Black feminism emerged to force recognition of the unique perspective of black women.

A major theme of Migrations of the Heart (1983) was the idea that black American women who traveled and settled in Africa experienced it differently from their male counterparts. Golden’s narrative built upon the conversation that Era Bell Thompson had begun over thirty years earlier in Africa, Land of My Fathers (1954), in which she explored how gender affects such travel. It went a step further than Thompson’s narrative, however, in demonstrating how racial and gender socialization in America shape black American responses to Africa.

Although similar in their attention to gender, Golden’s and Thompson’s narratives diverge in terms of their motives and circumstances of travel. Thompson visited eighteen countries over the span of a few months, while Golden stayed in Nigeria for more than two years. Thompson visited Africa as a journalist in order to complete a series about Africa for the black American press, while Golden, also a journalist, moved there as the wife of an African man, a similarity she shares with author Maya Angelou.

Indeed, Golden’s narrative shares thematic similarities with those of Angelou, who initially relocated to Africa because of her marriage to a South African man. As the word “heart” in their titles suggest, Golden’s Migrations of the Heart and Angelou’s

travel narrative, which comprises The Heart of a Woman and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, are both concerned with love and relationships. The two authors came to understand Africa as wives and mothers within African communities. Their narratives pay close attention to gender roles, recognizing the ways in which their unique socialization as black American women exposed their cultural difference, particularly among African women and in relationships with African men. Both explore African cultural expectations about marriage and motherhood, introducing readers to a spectrum of women from Africa and the diaspora.

Marriage and motherhood, however, were not Golden's and Angelou's only concerns. They were also interested in depicting how the political landscape during the Civil Rights era informed their relationship with Africa and Africans. Their texts examine black Americans' affinity for, and pan-African identification with, Africa, highlighting their idealization of Africa on and off the continent.

Africa is not merely the stage on which author Marita Golden's life unfolds—it is also the canvas on which she explores issues of gender and black nationalism. Golden's memoir traces her experiences of coming of age as a young black woman in the United States during the tumultuous Civil Rights era, as well as her later life as a young adult in Africa. While the book is primarily an autobiography about her personal journey towards maturity and independence, it is equally a travel narrative about black American experiences in Africa, demonstrating how such writings can shed light on both an author's personal history and the collective experience of black Americans at particular moments in U.S. history. Following in the footsteps of other black American travel

writers, Golden explores the many ways in which their experiences in the United States influence their assessments of Africa.

Golden hoped her narrative would offer commentary about the social and political climate for black Americans, particularly women, during the Civil Rights era. Her goal was to “meditate on what it meant to grow up in the ‘60s, what it meant to go to Africa for the first time, and what it meant to be a modern black American woman living in that milieu” (Trescott 2). It describes her feminist and nationalist awakening as well as her quest to explore her racial identity in Africa.

Golden’s Migrations of the Heart appeared just two years after Angelou’s The Heart of a Woman. Both books include romantic relationships between black American women and African men. Angelou’s relationships with African men, however, are less the focus of her narrative than the Civil Rights movement and the politics that attracted black Americans to Africa at that time. To the contrary, Golden places her relationship with an African man at the center of her narrative, using it as the basis of her feminist critique of Africa and black nationalism. Consequently, her feminist critique is much stronger than Angelou’s. This chapter illustrates how Golden interrogates what it means for women to be wives to African men, mothers in African families, and female members of African communities. Looking beyond gender, it also addresses how Golden engages political issues of nationalism that have been largely overlooked by her critics.

Because Golden’s text focuses on gender, scholarship has not recognized the broader political implications of the text, assuming that it is non-political. Such reactions have not surprised those scholars who have noted that women’s texts that focus on gender and domesticity are often deemed non-political. In her article “Manifest

Domesticity” (1998), Amy Kaplan has argued persuasively that critics who describe a private (domestic) sphere/public sphere dichotomy incorrectly assume that nationalism and foreign policy lie outside the concerns of women (583). This chapter argues that Golden’s critics have been guilty of this tendency and, as a result, have overlooked the book’s political dimensions.

One of the central themes of Golden’s Migrations of the Heart is her recognition of the multiple layers of black women’s identity. It recognizes that in addition to gender, race, class, and nationality impact their lives and worldview. Like Era Bell Thompson and Maya Angelou, Golden highlights the intersection of race and gender throughout her narrative, challenging the notion that her experiences as a woman living in Africa are less significant than her experiences as a black American traveler.

Many reviews of Migrations of the Heart displayed discomfort with Golden’s depiction of the intersection of race and gender and the inherent challenges that African and black American women face in their attempts to negotiate multiple and sometimes conflicting roles. Malcolm Boyd of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the book was fraught with too many disparate themes. His dissatisfaction with her decision not to foreground any one aspect of her multi-layered identity was thinly veiled:

There are strands of at least three different books: a black American’s memoir about life experiences in the United States and Africa; a creative person’s struggle to find expression; and a woman’s story about her dual search for intimate relationship and personal freedom. The book, filled with promise and brilliance, is divided against itself. (4)

Juxtaposing Golden's perspectives as a black American, a woman, and an artist, Boyd argued that her representation of identity fragmented her narrative. In reasoning that her experiences as an artist and as a woman were somehow disconnected from her experience as a black American in Africa, Boyd failed to grasp Golden's efforts to portray the complexity of black American women's lived experiences.

The idea that race should be more significant than gender—both in the text and in the lives of black women—was a theme that dominated criticism of Migrations of the Heart. In a May 1983 issue of the *New York Times*, Diane McWhorter accused Golden of missing the point of her own experience because it was colored by her unhappy marriage. Such a view suggests that Golden was somehow disconnected from the African culture she was a part of (16-17). In fact, Golden's narrative proved the contrary, illustrating how black American women lived in Africa as women inside the culture and adhered to its social mores, as opposed to existing at the margins or outside of it. In her review, McWhorter argued that Golden's personal isolation blinded her to the cultural implications of her own experience:

[Golden's] handling of the native culture is less assured. She seems insulated from the African experience that is supposedly changing her life; her overwrought self-scrutiny sometimes has the odor of adolescent self-regard. (16)

Still other critics ignored political concerns that were among the central themes of Migrations of the Heart, focusing instead on those elements that resonated in the work of other black American women writers of the time. A review by Gerald D. Kendrick published in the *College Language Association Journal* illustrates this point:

Afro-Americans can glean jewels of information about how Golden's life confirms and articulates their own quest for identity and love as blacks in America. Nigerians can bask in the intensity of her desire not only to learn their culture but also to master fully its intricate nuances. Just as Maya Angelou, Golden mines the hidden passages of life for the black woman. (363)

Critics like Kendrick acknowledged the contribution that Golden, like Angelou, made to the ongoing dialogue about black American women's perspectives, but ignored her discussions of contemporary politics. For example, Carole Bovosco of *Ms.* wrote:

Golden's real-life insights curiously resonate against Claudia Tate's description—in her introduction to Black Women Writers at Work—of the distinctive quality of the black heroine and her emerging consciousness in contemporary fiction: Her [the black woman's] journey is an internal one and seldom taken on land. (37)

Such criticism was useful because it placed Migrations of the Heart in conversation with the work of other contemporary black American women writers. In doing so, however, it ignored other valuable elements of Golden's narrative and was problematic for a number of reasons. First, it implied that gender was somehow disconnected from issues of politics and cultural difference. Second, it suggested that because Golden placed her marriage at the center of her travel narrative about Africa, she could not offer social and political commentaries that were as valuable as travel narratives about Africa written by black American men.

Criticism of Migrations of the Heart reinforced what black feminists Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and others have identified as one of the most pervasive

myths about black female subjectivity: that [black] women's issues are narrow and apolitical, and that people of color need address the larger sociopolitical struggle. As Collins has argued, texts by black women necessitate a critical lens that could accommodate the "simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression" (Collins 221).

The analysis that follows explores Golden's use of the dual lenses of black nationalism and black feminism to critique conventional ways of thinking about African social life. It illustrates how Golden used her experience in Africa to critique popular black nationalist ideologies about Africa of the time, and how she employed a feminist lens to critique gender roles in Africa. Her account challenged many of the essentialist racial renderings about Africa advanced by black nationalists, including their uncritical acceptance of a self-styled African cultural value system.

The Age of Nationalism, The Rise of Feminism

Black American travel narratives about Africa reflect the wider social and political backdrop against which they are produced. Migrations of the Heart was emblematic of the tension between the black nationalist ideologies of the Black Arts/Black Power movements and the black feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This historical period leading up to and encompassing the publication of Golden's narrative provides an important framework for understanding her text.

Migrations of the Heart appeared in 1983 during the emergence of black feminist literature and scholarship as well as a publishing boom for black women writers in the United States. Golden's book describes events that took place in the 1960s and 1970s at the height of the Black Arts/Black Power movements. In the tradition of other black

American women's texts of this era, she examined the questions and contradictions that race, sex, class, and nationality present in the lives of black American women.

Black feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s validated black women's perspectives by creating an ideological space for them. In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), Barbara Smith argued that one of the goals of black feminist writing was to explore new ways of understanding the particular subjectivity of black women and their creative expression. "The politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of black women's literature," she wrote, "A viable, autonomous black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of black women's lives and the creation of consciously black woman-identified art" (Mitchell 411).

Smith's hopes were vindicated by a publishing boom for scholarly texts by black feminists and creative works by established and emerging black women writers. In her 1983 article, Jane Trescott characterized this increased appreciation for black women's writings as a "technicolor burst of attention" (K2). The overall popularity of these works coupled with an increased attention to notions of feminism made new perspectives about black women's experiences like Migrations of the Heart possible.

However, black feminist approaches were not merely a call for new ways of understanding the perspectives and creative expression of black women; they were also a direct response to social and political factors. Scholar Selwyn Cudjoe describes the influence of the social and political landscape on black women's literary expression:

It was the culmination of a number of factors at the end of the sixties that led to an outpouring of writings by Afro-American women.

First, the inherent shortcomings of the nationalism of the Black Power

movement; second, the increased social and economic pressures that led to the rapid deterioration of urban centers of America; third, the rise of the feminist movement that made Afro-American women more conscious of their particularity; and fourth, the increasing tensions in black male-female relations ... All of these factors led to a special kind of problematic to which the black American woman had to address herself, adding a new dynamic dimension to American literature. (284)

One of the key factors to which Cudjoe alludes is the lack of agency and invisibility of black women in the Black Arts/Black Power movements. Among feminist scholars in particular, the Black Arts movement was known for its marginalization of the concerns of black American women in the male-oriented nationalist politics that it advanced.

Golden's Migrations of the Heart spoke to many of the issues raised by Cudjoe. First, it depicted her rising feminist consciousness against the backdrop of the turbulent Civil Rights era. Then, it placed black male-female relationships under a microscope, using her marriage to a Nigerian husband, Femi, as an example. In so doing, it analyzed the tenuous relationships between black Americans and Africans. Finally, it explored the challenges faced by black women who, in their attempts to find success in their multiple and often competing roles, confronted black nationalist ideologies about both Africa and black women.

The black feminist movement's influence on Golden was undeniable. Fully to understand Migrations of the Heart, however, also requires examining her response to black nationalist ideologies of the period. The Black Power movement and its literary counterpart, the Black Arts movement, were characterized by a self-conscious celebration

of “blackness,” an essentialized racial consciousness, and a renewed interest in Africa. Writers Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, considered leaders of the Black Arts movement, encouraged fellow artists to look away from their “Euro-American cultural sensibilities” and toward their African cultural heritage for artistic inspiration (Mitchell 186). Neal and Baraka were critical of what they perceived to be the strong influence of Western culture on black Americans. They were among a cadre of artists, scholars, and activists who believed that through their art they could liberate black Americans psychologically, socially, and spiritually from the oppressive American culture in which they lived.

Despite the fact that these writers were critical of the influence that mainstream American culture had on black people in the United States, they readily condoned patriarchal and oppressive views about black women. For example, in his essay “Black Woman,” published in 1970 in *Negro Digest*, Amiri Baraka discusses the role that he believed black women should play in the black nationalist struggle for liberation and empowerment:

We must erase the separateness [of black men and women] by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is to her man. For instance we do not believe in “equality” of men and women. We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals...nature has not provided thus. (7-12)

According to Baraka, the ideal union between the black man and black woman calls for an alternative to the Western value system that he felt oppressed black people and

brought about the deterioration of the black community. Implicit in this view, however, was a condemnation of the feminist notion of equality between women and men. Baraka hoped to combat the racial oppression experienced by black people in America through a reversion to what he and other nationalists believed were traditional African gender roles. His rhetoric, which was highly popular during the civil rights struggle, was grounded in the view that the relationship between black men and women would be the primary basis for Afrocentric nation building. Claiming to be based on a so-called traditional African family structure, this worldview asserted that the strength of the clan (the black community) was predicated on the strength of the family (the relationship between black men and women in which men were the primary force).

The problem with such rhetoric, as Golden illustrated, was that it refused to consider women's perspectives in the collective experience of black people. For black nationalists, the perspectives of individuals were unimportant. Such a worldview required the silencing of women's perspectives, ultimately alienating them from black men. Golden recounted a conversation she had with a black nationalist boyfriend in college to underscore this point:

‘Is there a place for love?’ I asked, watching him hurriedly pull on his shorts, wondering why his body turned corpse cold when I cradled him in moments after his frantic release.

‘Only of black people as a whole. Not as individuals,’ he answered in the voice that a man uses with a woman that he secretly hates. (22-23)

Through this example, Golden challenged the ways in which black nationalism oppressed black women by ignoring their needs.

Scholars E. White and Madhu Dubey have discussed how black nationalist models of nation building failed to acknowledge the gendered perspective of black women. E. Frances White, author of the article “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism,” explains how black Americans developed black nationalism as an oppositional discourse to counter racist ideologies. She illustrated how this nationalism drew on the ideology of respectability to develop a cohesive political movement. But she then proceeded to critique the gender oppression in black nationalist rhetoric and the traditional African cultural systems that it celebrated: The black American ideology of respectability does not always share

the same moral code as Western nationalism ... It is the lack of access to state power and black American nationalists’ advocacy of an oppressed people that gives Afrocentric ideology its progressive, radical edge and ultimately distinguishes it from European and European bourgeois nationalism...

Yet I find too narrow the black nationalist efforts to define what the community or nation should be. In particular many nationalists attempt to construct sexist and heterosexist models for appropriate behavior. (134)

In her book Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic (1994), literary scholar Madhu Dubey agreed that black nationalist rhetoric is often narrow and confining, particularly in its formulations of gender roles. She identified how these often conform to, rather than challenge, those of the larger white mainstream society. She argued that black nationalist constructions of gender “belied not only the black nationalists’ claim of absolute difference from the white middle class standard, but also their claim of liberating a new, revolutionary black consciousness” (18). She further demonstrated how these

constructions found support in contemporary government discourse, especially as propagated by the Moynihan Report, which attributed the pathology of “ghetto blacks” to their “deviant” matriarchal family structures. In her view, the restrictive roles many black nationalists allotted black women were “an effort to contain the supposed power of the matriarch” (18).

Both White and Dubey understood that although “Africa” was the source of much inspiration and fascination for black thinkers of the period, it functioned primarily as a symbolic point of reference in black nationalist iconography. For her part, Golden recognized that black Americans were largely ignorant of the cultural history and diversity that existed among African people, as well as between Africans and black Americans.

The purpose of evoking Africa within black nationalist ideology was to bolster black Americans’ sense of dignity as they advocated for equal rights and full membership in American society. In his book, Is It Nation Time? : Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism (2001), Eddie S. Glaude Jr. wrote:

When black nationalists of the sixties and seventies spoke of a black revolution, when they donned the garb of Africa, when they indicted and convicted white America, somehow black America’s suffering was to be alleviated, the evil of white supremacy was to be no more, and black Americans were to be made whole again—saved, in effect. . . . It was assumed that black people could only reach freedom by cultivating their peculiar national identity. (10-11)

Glaude suggested that the celebration of an African cultural heritage was considered a necessary component of black American social and political advancement.

In Migrations of the Heart, Golden affirmed Glaude's assertion by describing how knowledge of her African cultural heritage motivated her social activism. Consider, for example, this passage about how her social maturation coincided with her intellectual enlightenment about Africa:

Page after page put flesh and blood on the bones of the past ... This was all mine. This wealth. This panorama of genius and endurance. And they had kept it from me. Now I knew why. Invincibility swelled my mind into a hard, gleaming muscle ... Because they told me I was a slave but never said that once I'd been a king. I became a true believer. I wrote a biweekly column for the *Eagle*, the campus newspaper, in which I spread the gospel of black consciousness, sat on a committee to implement a black studies program at A.U., tutored black high school students, and wrote bristling black poetry that sizzled on the page. (23)

In this passage, Golden suggested that appreciation of African cultural history was what motivated many black Americans' social activism. It fueled a determination to gain greater access to social and political power in the United States and, by extension, abroad. Yet, Golden's use of "king" instead of "queen" was consistent with the male-dominated perspective of black nationalist discourse that marginalized, suppressed, and erased feminist concerns.

Travel narratives about Africa produced by black American male writers during the Black Arts movement focused on political and social power both in the United States and abroad. Hoyt Fuller, a well-known journalist and publisher, traveled extensively in Africa during the 1960s and published his Journey to Africa in 1971. Journey to Africa focused mostly on African leaders such as Sékou Touré, then Guinea's leader. Another

writer, Lesley Alexander Lacy, author of The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro (1971), lived in Ghana among a number of other expatriates who were students, artists, and activists in the 1960s. He was among the “Returnees” described by Angelou, though his text predates hers by more than a decade. She appears in his text as a “singer, dancer, and poet” named Maya Maka, her married name at the time (Griffin and Fish 154). Both writers make reference to some of the same people and events, among them Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X’s famous visit to Ghana.

Lacy’s narrative emphasized African politics and the black American struggle for equality, but it was also introspective. Africa represented the culmination of his psychological journey towards his black self, which he believed had been lost through his American socialization. Yet, Lacy also described the social alienation and rejection that black Americans often experienced when living in Africa, much as Richard Wright had. According to Lacy, their experience made them critical of the myths underlying black American sentiment toward the continent:

Our concept of Africa was formed in America, an Afro-American Africa based primarily on a reaction to a white man’s Africa and what we thought Africa would be like. Now the white man’s Africa never existed. He went to the African land mass and carved up subdivisions, named them and created beliefs about them. By extension, our concept of Africa never existed either. (220)

Lacy’s text presaged Golden’s and Angelou’s narratives. Their approaches complicated simplistic and romantic notions of Africa held by black Americans by examining their difficulties assimilating into African society; Golden’s feminist lens,

however, provided a stronger critique. Lacy and Fuller each responded to the question posed by Countee Cullen— “What is Africa to me?” —by illustrating its political value in the lives of black Americans. Golden refined the question by examining the limitations of what Africa could mean to black American women. Grounding herself in black feminism, she enacted a critique of both black nationalist ideology about Africa and the oppression of women in African social life.

A Text within a Text

Golden’s Migrations of the Heart is an autobiography that features a travel narrative. Gender is at the forefront. The travel narrative “Journeys” is embedded within the larger story of Golden’s emerging feminist consciousness and her journey as both a woman and an artist. It comprises the middle and longest section of the autobiography, chronicling Golden’s experiences as a young woman, wife, and mother living in Africa. The sections before “Journeys” describe the life lessons she learned not only from her mother and father, but also as a black woman coming of age during the Civil Rights era.

Golden’s focus on her childhood in “Beginnings,” the first section of the autobiography, provides the reader with insight into the woman she would become in “Journeys.” It describes formative moments that contributed to her development, and highlights her relationship with her parents, their unique connection to one another, and the socio-political climate for black Americans living in the United States at that time. In this way, “Beginnings” is like the first part of Angelou’s narrative in The Heart of a Woman, which offered readers context for Angelou’s orientation and move to Africa while providing a valuable description of the social and political backdrop: black American’s civil rights struggle and black struggles for independence in Africa.

Golden's views—both of herself as a woman and of Africa—were informed by the dual lenses of her father's black nationalism and her mother's black feminism. Her description of her mother as a fiercely independent woman helped her frame the critique she would later launch about the narrow opportunities afforded to women both in and outside of Africa. Through this depiction, Golden brought to light the gender oppression that was a part of many African cultures, as well as the black American nationalist rhetoric that idealized it. Similarly, Golden used her father's lessons to illustrate how black nationalist modes of thinking about Africa popular among black Americans at the time were inconsistent with the realities of contemporary African life. Though disparate, the feminist and nationalist vantage points of Golden's mother and father lay the foundation for her later assessment of African social life. Her narrative reflected the black nationalist and feminist ideals of her parents in an international context.

Gender and The Image of African Womanhood

Golden's descriptions of her mother in "Beginnings" are the foundation of her feminist critique of the roles of African women. She attributed her own personal and professional successes to her mother's strong influence: "My mother had scripted me to soar where she glided ... To migrate where she had chosen to nest" (29). Golden's emerging feminist consciousness was sparked by her mother's insistence that her daughter be independent and self-determined.

Golden depicted the narrow social parameters for black American women of her mother's era by describing her mother's difference from other women. She highlighted her mother's financial independence and entrepreneurial prowess as a landlady at a time when many women, especially black women, did not command that kind of autonomy.

“My mother achieved a material affluence which at the time equaled a virtual empire for a black woman. Indeed my mother was blessed, for she had her own,” said Golden (6).

Golden was keen to point out how such independence posed a threat to her mother’s relationships with men, particularly her husband. She portrayed the tenuous relationship and ongoing power struggle between her parents by emphasizing the significant impact of her mother’s independence on the relationship:

Sculpted like hot wax around the dry bones of their unyielding wills was a love that joined them and informed them of each other in ways that were unbearable and soothing. They fought over my father’s women. But mostly, with special viciousness, over power, symbolized by my mother’s property. (8)

Golden’s portrayal of the power struggle between her mother and father foreshadows the strained relationship to come between her husband Femi and herself. Likewise, this power struggle is echoed in her depiction of the marriages of several other women, African and black American. Golden created such parallels to highlight the ways in which black women’s independence can threaten their marriages.

This is another similarity that Golden shares with Maya Angelou, when she broached this topic in her descriptions of the conflicts between herself and the African men with whom she was involved, Vuzumi Make in The Heart of a Woman and Sheikali in All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes. Angelou also alluded to the inherent challenges she faced in trying to act in a way that was socially acceptable among African men. Like Golden, Angelou concluded that her personal history as a single mother and her independence often posed a threat in her relationships.

Missing from Angelou's narrative, however, is a discussion of what she believes African womanhood to be. In contrast, Golden directly addressed the notion of how African women should behave, exploring the topic with her representation of a range of African and black American women who married into African families. By comparing and contrasting her situation to that of other "African" wives, Golden exposed readers to the tremendous pressures and responsibilities that marriage and motherhood placed on them.

Golden's "image of African womanhood" looms large in her description of her own experiences. She presents a constellation of women who are either Nigerian or married to Nigerian men, in order to epitomize the expectations and challenges women faced to be deemed successful in the Nigerian community. Among the overarching standards were the ability not only to have children, but also to successfully manage the responsibilities of home and family. In addition, women were expected to maintain an appearance of dependence on their husbands even if they were financially or professionally successful outside of the home. Independence was shunned. Golden's presentation of four women, Anita, Bisi, Nike, and Sara allowed her to elaborate on the complicated and often contradictory standards for mothers and wives in African communities.

In portraying herself as a wife who struggled to meet the expectations of her African family and community members, Golden insisted that her lack of success was not only the result of cultural differences. With her portrayal of Sara, another black American woman married to an African man, Golden invalidated the notion that black American socialization alone rendered black American

women unable to live up to the standards of African womanhood. Golden depicted Sara as an example of a woman who was able to negotiate Western and African cultural expectations in marriage. As a result, Sara was deemed a good wife in the eyes of their African community. According to Golden, “Nigerian men adored her, for she acquiesced to the image of African womanhood while maintaining her Americanness” (111). Sara earned the respect and admiration of the community because of her seeming dependence despite her obvious willfulness. She appeared to obey the socially acceptable standards for African womanhood while maintaining a certain degree of independence. Golden describes her behavior as follows:

Bowling ostentatiously as a mock sign of respect to one of Wole’s friends, just as a Yoruba woman would do she rose and stabbed the man with a remark that drew blood, flirted, yielded herself up to him and denied him all at the same time. ⁽¹¹¹⁾

Golden observed that an inevitable duality existed between dependence in the home and independence outside of the home. African wives were applauded for their independence outside of the home while they were simultaneously expected to be subservient at home. Golden described this dichotomy in detail, saying:

The other women were born to be wives—obsequious and coy in the presence of their men. Their voices were ever respectful, begging, it seemed, for forgiveness of their womanhood. Independent and fearless away from their men, in the presence of husbands they made themselves

small and unobtrusive. (64)

Wives deemed successful in her Nigerian community were able to strike this necessary balance between dependence and independence by managing their competing allegiances inside and outside of the home. Bisi, for example, was an African woman who managed the demands of her in-home and out-of-home responsibilities according to acceptable social standards:

Bisi ran her home and business with demon-like efficiency.

Yet Jide inherited total control over her life when he entered the house at ten minutes to five. The voice that barked—ordering the children to begin their homework, Iyabo to fry plantains—became a whimper. (107)

Although Bisi was considered successful by her community, Golden's depiction was less celebratory. Her portrayal of Bisi as a successful businesswoman recalls that of her own mother, except for the fact that Bisi's independence was contradicted by her submissive behavior at home. Golden's presentation of Bisi's dilemma revealed her own discomfort with the socially-mandated behavior of African wives.

In her narrative, Golden described less successful negotiations of female independence in African marriages. Nike, for example, a young newly married African woman who had recently immigrated to United States, exposed the differences between her own expectations of marriage and those of the African community. Community members in the United States shunned Nike because of her independence, which they

perceived as a lack of commitment to home and family. Golden described Nike's willfulness and the adverse reaction she received as follows:

When the babies were six months old Nike decided to go to school.

She did well in school, got a part-time secretarial job and soon bought her own car. Nike's independence sparked a loud and persistent chorus of disapproval from the others. (66)

Nike's independence and her refusal to acquiesce to a standard that required total dependence on her husband was a threat to her marriage. Golden's descriptions of Nike's marriage indicate the degree to which she herself identified with Nike's independence and drive.

In her depiction of the constellation of wives Golden critiqued another important aspect of women's lives: motherhood. This theme was also prominent in Angelou's work, where the author focused on her own experience as a single mother and on the idea of Africa as a mother to black Americans but spoke less about the experience of being a mother in an African society. In contrast, Golden highlighted the pressures placed on women to become mothers in African societies. She did so through her presentation of another black American wife, Anita, who would later help Golden escape her own difficult marriage. Golden presented Anita's marriage as one that was threatened by the fact that she was unable to have children. Because of her condition, Anita agreed to let her husband take a second wife so that she could remain honorable in the eyes of her husband's family.

Above all, Golden relied on her own example to launch a powerful critique of motherhood. Her apprehension about becoming a mother placed her at odds with the

standards of the African community in which she lived. Although the community affirmed that motherhood would validate her marital success, Golden worried that it could threaten other important aspects of her life. In the passage that follows, she described a nightmare that illustrated her fears about motherhood. In the dream, various aspects of her life are personified as being at war with one another. Significantly, the mother takes the other personalities hostage, holding them at gunpoint:

That night I had a dream. All the people I am went on a rampage. One of my selves calmly surveyed the rest of me—bickering and hungry, banging tin cups against the bar. The writer stood along the edge of the disturbance, taking notes, camouflaging her true identity. The teacher called the riot to order, clapped her hands, shouting “Ladies, please.” The wife reached for her husband’s hand while squirreling away morsels of her soul for the hard times. Suddenly the mother burst through the bathroom door. Thin ribbons of smoke slithered from the mouth of the two pistols held in the air. ‘Everyone against the wall!’ she screamed. All my other selves scrambled for cover but were hunted down beneath tables, dragged from behind locked bathroom doors, and caught holding our breath in slender corners. Mother lassoed each one, dragged us across the splintered floor, and tossed us into a heap in a corner. ‘Now y’all stay there till I say you can move...’ (176)

Golden’s nightmare epitomizes the pressures felt by mothers. The fact that in her dream “the mother” violently holds the other personas hostage demonstrated Golden’s view that motherhood required women to sacrifice important aspects of their lives for others, often forcing them to compromise their autonomy and independence.

Golden's discussion of the ideals of African womanhood underscored how her American socialization was an important factor that isolated her from the African society she married into. Using cultural expectations about marriage as a measuring stick, Golden demonstrated just how disparate assumptions about marriage could be. To do this, she recounted a conversation between herself and her husband:

'You have to work at marriage.'

'It's only you Americans who work at marriage,' he sneered.

'Africans don't have to.'

I stood up, wobbly, and shaken, my confidence ambushed by the demons of doubts he had let loose. (203)

Yet, Golden acknowledged that her failure to acquiesce to the image of African womanhood was also the result of her individual upbringing. Benefiting from her mother's example, she critiqued its narrow standards and demonstrated how her own need for independence, more than her cultural difference, made marriage and the ideals of African womanhood difficult.

In their respective narratives, both Golden and Angelou were careful not to present African women as a monolith. Each author introduced us to a spectrum of women in order to avoid stereotyping African women as a whole. In so doing, they presented the challenges that are common among women as well as the personal and cultural factors that separated them.

Black American Nationalism: History and Myth

Golden adopted her father's lens to discuss and critique black nationalism, especially as it related to black Americans' relationship to Africa. She highlighted the

special significance of her childhood interactions with her father that laid the foundation for her understanding of black nationalism. She emphasized how her father's historical lessons about Africa instilled in her popular beliefs about Africa and black American nationalist communities. Unfortunately, many of these idealized views were simplistic, essentialist, and concerned with the African past rather than the present. The following description points to the way her father conceived of Africa and built it up in her mind:

He bequeathed to me gold nuggets of fact, myth, and legend dropped in the lap of my mind, shiny new pennies meant to be saved. By his own definition he was 'a black man and proud of it.' Admiring me with a measure of this conviction, he unfolded a richly colored tapestry, savored its silken treasure and warned me never to forget its worth.

Africa: 'It wasn't dark until the white man got there.'

Cleopatra: 'I don't care what they tell you in school, she was a black woman.'

Hannibal: 'He crossed the Alps with an army of five hundred elephants.'

The Sphinx: (pointing with a tobacco-stained index finger to a page in the encyclopedia):

'Look at that nose, see how broad it is? That's your nose too.' (4)

Golden revealed how myth and history converged in black Americans' imaginary renderings of Africa. As in this example, many black Americans characterized Africa in terms of its historical legacy: independent of, and resisting, white racism and oppression in the United States. Hence, Golden's travels to Africa in "Journeys" are a response to her father's characterization of the continent and to the widely accepted romantic ideas

about it popular among black Americans. By prefacing “Journeys” with the image of “Africa” that she learned about from her father, Golden challenged such notions in her depiction of her personal experiences in Nigeria.

Golden acknowledged that much of what was known and disseminated about Africa among black Americans was myth rather than fact. She did not simply dismiss these misconceptions however. Like Angelou, Golden explored the many psychological reasons behind them, arguing that for many black Americans the desire to learn about Africa was a response to the racism that was a part of their daily lives. Her own father taught her about Africa in order to instill racial pride by constructing a counter narrative to the messages she was given by the larger society, and providing her with a sense of dignity. Many black people, not only black nationalists, deemed this kind of cultural indoctrination as necessary for psychological survival in the United States.

Outside of black nationalist descriptions like those of her father, most black Americans were completely ignorant about Africa. Golden underscored this idea in “Journeys” with an account of a conversation between herself and Femi’s cousin Tope, in which she admitted her own limited knowledge about Africa. “I told him about Tarzan movies, Africa jokes, slavery, and a past I’d dug to find like a determined driven prospector” (55). In this interaction, Golden acknowledged the disparaging messages, limited knowledge, and overall lack of interest that resulted in black Americans’ narrow vision of contemporary Africa. Tope responded:

Most of the blacks I have met show no interest at all or are totally ignorant of the facts. One man at my job asked me if we still eat people in Africa. Another wondered if we lived in trees.

It's the whites who invite me into their homes, who are eager to know about my country and not make fun of it. (55)

Such questions revealed the extent to which many black Americans remained ignorant about Africa and, as a result, harbored contempt for the continent. Black Americans' ignorance about black people outside the United States is another theme Angelou and Golden both broach in their narratives. Like Angelou, Golden also sheds light on the ways in which cultural perceptions and misunderstandings complicated relationships among black American and African peoples.

Angelou's and Golden's narratives demonstrated how Africa was an important symbol for black Americans during the Civil Rights era. Golden insisted that for many black Americans like herself, who came of age during that time, Africa was a great source of inspiration, dignity and resistance:

In the sixties, Africa was a symbol and source of pride and regeneration.

Renouncing the horrors of our slave past in America, we psychologically leapt past cotton fields and auction blocks back to the empires of Timbuktu and Mali, village life, Swahili, noble kings and tribal tongues ... So those of us who became women and men in the late sixties sojourned to Africa in the seventies because peace of mind and self definition required nothing less. (69)

In this passage, Golden demonstrated the necessity of black nationalism to the emotional survival of black Americans in the United States.

In "Journeys," however, Golden came to recognize the limitations of black nationalist ideas about Africa. Among her conclusions was the belief that many nationalist assumptions about Africa essentialized and overlooked key differences

between black American and African cultures. Golden acknowledged that many of the beliefs she had learned about Africa were simplistic, valid only in an American context, and left her unprepared for the experience of living there. Just as Angelou had done in her narrative, Golden illustrated the ways in which black nationalist and other essentialist rhetoric about Africa collapsed when black Americans arrived in Africa, giving way to disillusionment. Both authors recognized how such travel in Africa forced black Americans to see beyond the romantic notions and simplistic ideas they held about Africa.

Golden also made the point that when black Americans imagined Africa as their literal and figurative homeland, they often failed to take into account the social challenges that living in Africa could present. In a humorous example, she illustrated how even the most enthusiastic of black American travelers in Africa could be quickly disillusioned by their experience. She described the reaction of one black American woman during her initial week in Africa:

One evening a rotund young woman—who, as the first person off the plane, fell dramatically to her knees, kissing the ground—burst into the room I shared with a girl from Philadelphia.

‘Can you believe this shit?’ she asked, exasperated.

‘There’s no toilet paper in the bathrooms.’

Extending her arms, she said ‘And look at these damn mosquito bites. No wonder they call this place the white man’s grave. I don’t know about you two, but as for me, I’m checking into a hotel.’ (72)

This comical passage alluded indirectly to the adjustments—some superficial—that black American travelers to Africa needed to make. But, Golden explored in greater depth the emotional reactions of other travelers. She revealed the disillusionment that occurred when beliefs based on myth, legend, and misinformation were challenged and debunked. For example, Golden recounted a conversation between herself and an African student at the University of Ghana, riding back from a visit to the slave forts at Cape Coast:

Driving back to Accra, I was mute, pensive.

‘You are sad?’ Prince asked quietly.

‘Yes, I had read books about it. But until today I couldn’t realize how it really was.’

‘Not many Afro-Americans come this far into the country, you know.

They do not want to see this monument.’

‘Perhaps it’s just as well.’

‘Do you think so?’ he asked, surprised.

‘Many would feel betrayed by Africa. Would love her even less.’

‘Is that your feeling?’

‘No.’ (79)

In this example, Golden acknowledged that many black Americans were ignorant of many aspects of African history, and that much of the knowledge they did hold was symbolic and useful only in an American context. As a result, they were often resistant to the truth about Africa and its contemporary reality.

In line with Era Bell Thompson’s and Maya Angelou’s arguments, Golden discussed how gender played into black nationalist rhetoric and beliefs about Africa. She

theorized about the reasons why some black Americans, particularly men like her father, possessed a blind idealism about Africa. She concluded that in their eyes, to be men meant being able to enjoy the same social and political status as white men in America. Though not speaking specifically about black American men, Angelou made a similar observation when she described black Americans' fascination with black leadership and political power in Ghana, and the great self-esteem they gained by seeing blacks in power in every aspect of society. This fascination is among the reasons that black American male writers like Richard Wright were drawn to Africa; indeed, the very title of his book, Black Power, affirms this point.

Africa afforded black men unlimited opportunities. Thus, black male idealism of Africa was derived at least in part from their perceived access to greater social power. Golden broached this idea early in her narrative when she recounted Femi's own desire to return to his home in Nigeria after having lived and worked in the United States. "I must go home," said Femi, "To my country. Where I can be a man. I cannot do that here" (94).

Golden reinforced the connection between Africa and manhood when she recounted some of her interactions with black American men in Ghana. She conducted a number of interviews while working on a magazine article about black Americans' impressions of African life and culture. In it, she highlighted the disparate impressions of black American men and women:

For an article I interviewed foreign wives, students and businessmen.

Talking to them, the contradictions of my own experience began to gel...

From anecdote and revelation, we revealed a wonderful collage. When I

interviewed the men, no matter what their status (single or married) or occupation, no matter how long they had been in the country, much of their idealism remained intact. They spoke to me of power, of being unable to find it in America but finding it in Nigeria. Because they were men, the society did not ask as much of them. Their options were greater and allowed them to improvise their destinies. But foreign wives were forced to bend to the collective will of clan, family and custom; or if brave enough, to stake out an emotional territory of their own that acknowledged the conflicting claims of who they were and where they lived. (192)

As Golden pointed out, black American responses to Africa were clearly divided along gender lines. In this passage and countless others, she confirmed the notion that because of the social standards placed on women in African societies, black American women experienced Africa differently than did black American men. Women were forced to acknowledge the cultural challenges in African/black American relationships in ways that men did not need to because the social parameters drawn for wives and mothers in African societies dictated that they would inevitably be evaluated by African cultural standards. Golden recognized that it was impossible for women to maintain the same level of idealism as men, because men lived “inside of” as opposed to “on the margins” of African societies.

Golden felt, for example, that language acquisition would be a critical first step towards her own social acceptance as a black American wife entering an African family and community. To make this point, she drew attention to the obstacle that language posed for her in her community, and described her own frustration at being socially

rejected because she could not communicate effectively in the language spoken by her husband's friends and family:

Animation and laughter stamped the others' faces in response to the cascade of words I could not understand. The words became an iron door creaking in my imagination. I heard it slam shut, locking me out of their world. (60)

In contrast, through several interviews with black American men living in Ghana, she pointed out that though the men agreed that language was a barrier, it did not have the same weighty significance as it did in the lives of black women married to African men. When she asked one of the men, "Do you speak the language?" they acknowledged that though they spoke a few words of the Ghanaian language, they had been "too lazy to learn" (81). Unlike the wives, for whom language acquisition was an expectation, the black men that she met did not view it as a necessary for their daily lives. This example helped her to make the point that undergirds her entire narrative: that black American women who traveled and settled in Africa experienced it differently than their male counterparts. In this way, Golden's autobiography echoed both Era Bell Thompson's and Maya Angelou's. Golden, however, went a step further than either Thompson or Angelou, shedding light on the inherent challenges that black American women faced in Africa as they negotiated their multiple, competing, and sometimes conflicting roles.

There are many obvious correlations between Migrations of the Heart and Angelou's The Heart of a Woman, especially their focus on marriage and motherhood. A number of distinguishing features set them apart however. Golden published her narrative within five years of living in Nigeria and Ghana, while Angelou produced Heart

and Traveling Shoes more than twenty years after her experiences living in Egypt and Ghana. Although the two authors published their narratives during the same decade, the 1980s, they wrote at very different moments in their personal lives. When their narratives appeared, Golden was in her thirties and the mother of a young child, while Angelou was in her fifties with a grown son. Golden was only recently removed from the situation characterized in Migrations; in contrast Angelou was distant from the events that made up her travel narrative. This may account for the difference in their tone. Golden's overall attitude towards Africa reflected the disappointment and disillusionment about her failed marriage. Perhaps because of the passage of time, Angelou's tone towards Africa was nostalgic and overwhelmingly positive. Just as they were in different moments in their lives, the two authors were also in different stages of their professional careers. Although she was a journalist, Golden was a first-time author when Migrations of the Heart was published. In contrast, Angelou had authored three other highly acclaimed autobiographical narratives by the time The Heart of a Woman appeared in 1981.

Another seeming difference is Angelou's broader perspective. Golden's narrative was characterized by her marriage and imminent divorce in Africa, while Angelou's marriage and divorce comprised less than one fourth of her total narrative. Angelou narrative considered her personal experiences in Africa, but also attempted to characterize the collective experiences of the larger community of black American expatriates living in Ghana at that time. Golden's narrative also offered insight into the collective experience of black Americans at a particular moment in history—the Civil Rights era.

Likewise, both offered political critiques of black nationalism and women's roles in Africa. Golden offered a stronger feminist critique however. Her critics overlooked her powerful political critique of black nationalism because of her narrative's focus on marriage and motherhood. By presenting her experiences as wife and mother, Golden called into question assumptions about Africa and about women's roles popular among black nationalists at the time. Embedded within a larger coming of age story about her life, her travel narrative epitomized how the personal and gendered experiences of black Americans in the United States influenced their representations and interpretations of Africa.

Chapter Four: Romancing America, De-romanticizing Africa: Narratives about Africa by Black American Writers at the End of the Twentieth Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, a number of black American travel narratives about Africa were produced, including Eddy L. Harris's Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa (1992), Keith Richburg's Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa (1997), and Lynne Duke's Mandela, Mobutu and Me: A Newswoman's African Journey (2002). These writers were emblematic of the social and economic changes experienced by many black Americans following the Civil Rights era. Their narratives reflected new horizons and opportunities including integration, black middle-class upward mobility, and social privilege. Thus they were part of a generation of black Americans who achieved unprecedented levels of interdependence with white Americans and participation in the American socioeconomic mainstream.

The status of these writers as authors and journalists supported by major publishing houses and media outlets attests to this reality. Although were not the first American journalists to publish travel narratives about Africa, previous writers such as Era Bell Thompson and Hoyt Fuller had traveled on behalf of black periodicals and not mainstream publications such as *The Washington Post*.

As professionals, these three writers came face to face with Africa's social and political reality. On the one hand, they were witnesses to glimmers of hope such as the fall of apartheid in South Africa. On the other hand, they also observed the consequences of the Cold War, post-colonial maneuvering, and poor governance had left Africa in a precarious state, raising questions about its future.

Many black American travel narratives produced during the euphoria of decolonization idealized the prospect of black political power in Africa's independent nations. They expressed hope about the promise and possibilities of post-colonial leadership. In contrast, narratives produced at the turn of the twenty-first century placed more emphasis on Africa's inability to live up to those possibilities than on its promise and potential by focusing on the problems, questions, and contradictions plaguing post-colonial Africa. They were characterized by a sense of realism and informed awareness of Africa's social, economic, and political challenges. At its worst, the new realism unveiled cynicism and hopelessness about Africa.

The titles of Eddy L. Harris's narrative, Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa, and Keith Richburg's narrative, Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa, are curious, calling to mind other well-known literary titles. Harris's text is an obvious play on the titles of two black American classics, Native Son, by Richard Wright, and Notes of a Native Son, by James Baldwin. These two literary offerings—the novel Native Son and the book of essays Notes of a Native Son—take what it means to be black and “native” in the United States as their central theme. The works draw attention to both the irony and injustice experienced by black Americans—namely men as “natives” of the United States—who are, however, rejected as “sons.” As a twist on this theme, Harris explores his identity in an African context, demonstrating how his black Americanness renders him a “stranger” in the place where, because of blackness, he is seemingly “native.”

Out of America, on the other hand, is a play on Isak Dinesen's Out of Africa, published in 1937. At the time of publication of Richburg's novel, mainstream American

audiences were familiar with the film based on the book, which garnered enormous popularity among American and international audiences. Both the book and the film are based on the memoirs of Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke (Isak Dinesen), who spent nearly two decades in colonial East Africa (now Kenya). In both, the protagonist is nostalgic about her experiences and the many people—Africans and colonials alike—she met during her time in Africa. After returning to Europe, Dinesen longed to return to that time and place in her life. The tone of Richburg’s memoir could not have been more different. In fact, his Out of America is a rejection of Dinesen’s sentiments. His subtitle, “A Black Man Confronts Africa,” was not only meant to remind readers of his unique perspective as a black man, but also alludes indirectly to Dinesen’s whiteness and the privilege it afforded her in colonial Africa. If the phrase “out of America” is not indication enough of his overall tone, the fact that he uses the term “confronts” in the title underscores his uneasy relationship with Africa. Writing some sixty years after Dinesen’s memoir was published, Richburg, as a journalist, challenged her nostalgia by presenting the aftermath of colonialism, particularly in East Africa. Rather than look on what he witnessed in Africa with nostalgia, he presents the full horror of what he sees, reminding readers that his affinity and allegiance are firmly with the United States.

Richburg’s text and the other black American travel narratives that appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s are emblematic of black Americans’ shifting sentiments towards Africa. They reveal alternative conceptions of black American identity. The most striking of these dismiss blackness and “Africanness” as central elements. Collectively, these texts challenge the ostensible nexus between black American identity and Africa.

Notably, Richburg's and Harris's titles suggest that each author had a precarious relationship with Africa. Both used their narratives to demonstrate their psychological distance from Africa and Africans. Like Richard Wright, they struggled with the so-called connections linking black Americans to Africa. Each advocated for a black American identity that was not rooted in an African heritage. In this way they differ from Maya Angelou, who claimed an African heritage while recognizing that black American identity was firmly rooted in the experience of being black in the United States. In addition, another similarity Richburg shared with Richard Wright was that he clearly demonstrated that as a well-respected writer for the *Washington Post*, his first concern was acceptance by his mainstream American audience.

Fellow *Washington Post* correspondent Lynne Duke proudly affirmed both her American identity and her affinity for Africa, but she too admitted that her relationship with Africa was complicated by factors including politics, nationality, race, gender, and class. While recognizing her American privilege, Duke also acknowledged her cultural connection to Africa. Like Era Bell Thompson, she refused to rely on generalizations of Africa, instead presenting its nuances. Her characterization of Africa and its leaders was complex and sometimes contradictory, reflecting her own inconsistent feelings about Africa.

Duke's narrative was a powerful critique of black American travel narratives by writers like Richburg and Harris, who used their texts to absolve themselves of any responsibility toward the continent. Duke used her identity to discuss how her black American experience shaped her perspective on Africa, especially her views on African politics and social life. Harris was more ambivalent about his identity, seeing his

blackness in Africa as either advantage or disadvantage depending on the situation.

Richburg, on the other hand, treated his black identity as though it was a burden that he did not want to carry. In particular, he wanted his readers to pay less attention to his race.

Although Duke's perspective may seem quite distinct from that of Richburg and Harris, their narratives shared a number of thematic similarities. First, they all de-emphasized black Americans' personal and collective engagement with Africa in favor of an examination of the relationships, political influence, and economic responsibility of the West to Africa. Second, they celebrated black Americans' "Americanness" and embraced Western privilege. Third, they revealed a rising ambivalence among black Americans about pan-Africanism. Finally, they reassessed black American subjectivity with consideration of the validity of "blackness" and "Africanness" as central elements, and offered alternatives to prevailing assumptions.

All three authors discussed in this chapter criticized the influence of colonial and neo-colonial entities on African governance. They examined the impact of past European colonial nations, the United States, specific multinational corporations, and international banking institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet Harris and Richburg were eager to blame Africa for its dependency. Their narratives focused almost entirely on Africa's problems, crises, and failures: corrupt and flawed governance structures, ongoing ethnic and political conflicts, a lack of material resources (despite a wealth of natural resources in some cases), and widespread dependence on financial assistance and military intervention from the West. The overarching conclusion of their narratives was that Africa—and to a lesser extent Africans themselves—was hopeless. They used their depiction of Africa's problems as justification for their

disconnection from it, hoping that by proving their cultural and emotional distance, they could affirm their identities as Americans. Duke shared many of the same experiences as Harris and Richburg, and was as critical of poor governance, corruption, and politics as they were, but she did not allow her dissatisfaction with the existing post-colonial leadership to color her relationship with Africa. She used her narrative to not only critique Africa, but also to critique conclusions like those reached by Harris and Richburg.

With particular attention to Duke's analysis, this chapter explores the three authors' assessments of the role and responsibility of the West and Africa in its development and underdevelopment, their shifting ideas about pan-Africanism, and their concept of black American identity. An exploration of these narratives will help us understand the ways that black Americans' shifting status in the United States influenced their sentiment towards Africa and informed the various understandings of black American identity at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Quandary of Progress: Black and American Nationalists or Black American Nationalists

After the Civil Rights movement, black Americans experienced a number of social changes including an exponential growth of the black middle class and considerable social progress in the areas of education and employment. According to A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society (1989), authored by social science researchers interested in the status of black Americans during the second half of the twentieth century:

The civil rights movement, blacks' more proximate location near centers of industrial activity, and high economic growth enabled those blacks best prepared

to take advantage of new opportunities to respond with initiative and success. Increases in educational opportunities were seized by many blacks who were then able to translate better educations into higher status occupations than most blacks ever enjoyed. Black incomes and earning rose generally, with many individuals and families reaching middle class and even upper middle income status. The new black middle class moved into better housing, frequently in the suburbs, and sometimes in desegregated neighborhoods. Despite much confrontation between whites and blacks as blacks abandoned traditional approaches to black-white relations, race relations eventually advanced close to equal treatment. (7)

Despite these positive trends, the 1980s and 1990s still found more black Americans in the lowest socioeconomic strata than ever before. This paradox of success and retrogression frustrated social scientists and other scholars, marring the impressive record of social achievements described in A Common Destiny. Scholars Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates explored this quandary in their text The Future of the Race (1996) by characterizing blacks' social progress in relationship to the hopes and aspirations of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They posit:

More than a quarter of a century later, since that dreadful day in 1968 when Dr. King was so brutally murdered, the size of the black middle class—again, primarily because of affirmative action—has quadrupled, doubling in the 1980s alone. Simultaneously—and paradoxically—the size of the black underclass has grown disproportionately as well: in 1995, 45 percent of all black children are born at, or beneath, the poverty line. Economists have shown that fully one-third

of the members of the African-American community are worse off economically today than they were the day that King was killed. (xii)

The authors discussed in this chapter were not among the one third of black Americans in the lowest economic strata. To suggest that their narratives represent the gamut of class perspectives that existed within the black American community at the end of the twentieth century would deny the realities described by Gates and West. However, these authors do speak for that portion of the black community that experienced unprecedented levels of social advancement in terms of status, education, and opportunity.

Black progress was accompanied by greater social engagement among black and white Americans. Desegregation of mainstream institutions, improvements in educational achievement for black Americans, and increased access to a range of employment sectors meant that the two communities were becoming more interdependent. Some scholars have suggested that this interaction greatly affected black nationalist sentiments. According to A Common Destiny:

In the past, segregation and discrimination helped to create strong currents of so-called “black nationalism,” illustrated in separatist politics as well as in cultural autonomy movements. But blacks’ political and economic interdependence with white Americans is very great and growing. Our data show that black separatism is not a dominant orientation. (30)

As black Americans found some degree of social acceptance and assimilated into mainstream American society, many found it less necessary to claim an identity that was oppositional to that of white Americans. Whereas in the past, racism and segregation had

necessitated a black nationalist rhetoric that asserted racial difference, desegregation and new forms of racial interaction gave birth to new forms of black nationalism.

One important hallmark of U.S. black nationalist movements had been an interest in Africa. During periods when disfranchised black Americans could only dream of full participation in American society, many longed for Africa, the place that had given birth to their ancestors, and the place that they could always call home. Even as black Americans fought for their civil rights in the United States, many felt that their blackness and their experience of subjugation connected them to other black, oppressed people throughout the world. As a result, pan-Africanist movements flourished in the twentieth century. In his book Speaking Truth to Power: Essays on Race, Resistance, and Radicalism (1996), Manning Marable attributes these movements to a unique set of common experiences, including colonization, white racism, imperialism, and disfranchisement:

Our forced dispersal through the transatlantic slave trade, our common oppression under colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, and under Jim Crow segregation in the United States, through the exploitation of our labor power under capitalism, and the denial of political rights, had created parallel contours for struggle. Our kinship was also cultural, social and historical, and we found within ourselves the genius and grace of being which was denied us by the racist standards of the white world. (206)

The necessity of black separatist ideology and pan-Africanist sentiment as a black nationalist strategy weakened as a result of the achievements of the Civil Rights movement. Richburg's and Harris's narratives exhibit a diminished pan-African

sentiment and an uncertain interest in engagement with Africa. Given their commitment to their identities as Westerners and as Americans, one could make the reasonable argument that they should not be considered black nationalists at all. My view, however, is that such an assertion ignores the obvious traces of black nationalism in their approaches. Tunde Adeleke, author of UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission (1998), argues that traditional conceptions of black nationalism are unrealistic, wrongly restricting them to black radicals and separatists. Using the perspective of black Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as his premise, Adeleke concludes:

In essence, black Americans combined a strong affection for Africa with an equally strong, perhaps even stronger commitment to becoming fully and beneficially American. Black American nationalism was thus characterized by a dual national consciousness, by ambivalence on the question of identity. America was never completely out of the equation, even in the calculations of those who embraced Africa. There were frequent shifts between demands for American and African nationalities. This dual character or ambivalence has provoked controversy among scholars on the true nature of black nationalism. (6)

Harris's, Richburg's, and Duke's considerations of Africa and black American identity fall in line with the conceptions of black nationalists described by Adeleke. Despite displaying ambivalence about their connection to Africa, all were fully committed to their identity as Americans, explicitly seeking acceptance from their mainstream American audiences. Their versions of black nationalism necessarily

encompassed not only their dual consciousness as hyphenated Americans, but their new class status as well. If nothing else, their new black nationalism was pragmatic.

In Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth Century (2005), Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwanko examined the work of black writers who published nearly one hundred years before the authors of this chapter. Using the uprising of the first black republic in the Americas, the Haitian Revolution, as an example, she argues that black writers used references to the Revolution in their writing to either name or disclaim their relationships with other people of African descent. She offers examples of black writers who, because of white fear, either remained silent about the revolution or viewed it as a threat to white readers. According to Nwanko:

People of African descent had to decide where to position themselves, especially in print, and decide whether and how to embrace both national/local and transnational/global affinities. Within this context of white fear and potential recrimination, of which they were profoundly aware, they had to decide whether and how to express their connection both to their country of residence and to the world of people of African descent beyond that country. (8)

Millennial writers like Harris, Richburg, and Duke were not writing against the backdrop of a historical event like the Haitian Revolution. They were, however, concerned with the fears of their white audiences. That major mainstream publishing houses took up their travel narratives was a testament to broader interest in black Americans' opinions about and reactions to Africa. Nevertheless, the three authors faced a similar quandary as their predecessors. Millennial travel writers did not need to address whites' fears of revolution, but they hoped to ensure that black Americans would be fully accepted by

American society. Recognizing that their community's pathway to socioeconomic advancement was still precarious, they sought to ensure that progress would continue. For this reason, their texts celebrate their American identity at the expense of Africanness, seeking new ways to define both black American subjectivity and black nationalism.

Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa

Africa is a myriad of people and ways. And Africa is more than that. Africa is change. Africa is contradiction. And Africa brings out the contradictions in the traveler. (312)

Native Stranger chronicles Eddy L. Harris's journey from Paris to Africa and throughout more than twenty countries in northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Harris was already a screen writer, journalist, and author of Mississippi Solo (1988) when he financed his own journey across the continent. There he walked, sailed, flew, and hitchhiked across several countries without an escort or a roadmap, witnessing firsthand abject poverty, government corruption, deteriorating infrastructures, and the lasting effects of colonialism and neocolonialism. As Harris tried to make sense of Africa's complexities and contradictions, he became more aware of the nuances of his own identity. Like many of his black American predecessors, he concluded that he was more American than African, and that his connections to Africa were more superficial than real. This determination became the driving force of his narrative; in it, he de-emphasized his Africanness in order to celebrate a distinctive black American identity.

Native Stranger was as much about Harris's own complicated cultural identity as it was about Africa. An experienced traveler, he argued that knowing about one's place in the world was both a necessity and a consequence of travel. "If you cannot know yourself," he wrote, "how can you expect to know a place like Africa? You can't" (311).

His comments echoed those of Richard Wright, who had concluded nearly forty years before in Black Power that “one reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives” (175). Both narratives affirmed the notion that travel narratives often reveal more about the authors than the place about which they are writing. Despite this thematic similarity, however, Harris was more self-aware than Wright. He readily admitted that Africa “[brought] out the contradictions in the traveler” and used his narrative to examine the inconsistencies in his own identity brought out by his travel experience: those of being black and American in the United States, as well as while traveling in Africa (312). With particular attention to the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, pan-Africanism, and of race, the following section explores how Harris exemplified the contradictions inherent in Africa and his own identity.

Harris framed Native Stranger within the legacy of European colonialism in order to epitomize the complicated relationship that Africa retained with its former colonizers. A resident of France at the time he was writing, Harris used it as the central frame of reference. He described the nature of post-colonial political and economic engagement between the two worlds. According to Harris, “France and Africa have become strange bedfellows, and the destiny of one seems to revolve around the destiny of the other” (16). To underscore this idea, he set his initial chapter, “Into Africa Through the Back Door,” in Paris rather than in Africa. He did so for two reasons. First, his own introduction to Africa took place in Paris, where he was introduced to African culture through his friendship with a Senegalese immigrant, and second, to emphasize the contribution that Africa made to the social and economic dominance of countries like France. His

depiction of Paris highlighted the strong presence of Africans from France's various former colonies:

In the same sense that Latin America begins in Chicago or New York, or that India and Pakistan begin in London, Africa's outer edges reach all the way to Paris, where you can stand like a colossus with one foot in each world, one foot among the French and one among the Africans. (15)

Harris even attributed Paris' cultural richness to the presence of immigrants, particularly Africans, describing it as "the end of a long African road" (16).

Although Harris focused attention on the presence and contribution of Africans in Paris, he was most concerned with the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa. As a black American traveler whose personal history was entangled in the legacy of slavery, he had a heightened awareness of how African nations remained ensnared by their relationships with their former colonizers. Harris was passionate in his condemnation of European colonizers, arguing that their presence hindered Africa's overall advancement:

The colonial conquest of Africa didn't begin when the Europeans first arrived and didn't end when they finally granted emancipation and left. Fact is, they never really went away. 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. (213)

He bemoaned the constant interference of colonial powers before and after decolonization, implying that if left alone, Africa might have been able to set itself on a path toward advancement. Despite such comments, however, Harris was unsure if Africa

could sustain itself without Western intervention. He recognized that without outside assistance, some African countries might be worse off. His representation of French military intervention and financial involvement in African governance, for example, revealed his belief that the stability of many African governments could be attributed to the assistance received from countries like France:

There are French military advisers and, in many African countries, French troops. There have been seventeen French military interventions in Africa since 1960. Many African heads of state owe their existence, their survival, and their allegiance to France. In 1987 alone, France donated \$2.5 billion in African aid. (123)

Harris cited numerous examples of how African heads of state had relinquished economic and political control in exchange for financial support. He sought to show that the so-called generosity of former colonizers was yet another means for them to retain power after decolonization. He presented the Ivory Coast as an example of the unbalanced power dynamics in the relationships between African countries and their former colonizers:

Although the agriculture is firmly in the control of the Ivorians, investment in industry is 40 percent French. Nearly 80 percent of the jobs that require education are performed by the French. Everywhere in Africa foreigners are not allowed to hold jobs that Africans are capable of doing, but in the Ivory Coast there are French waiters and vendors. (223)

Harris believed that the Ivory Coast's relationship with the French limited Ivorians' access to power and inhibited their country's independence. He concluded that such

relationships both aided African governments and paralyzed them, almost always favoring the interests of former colonizers.

Harris was equally critical of Africa's relationships with new imperialists such as the Soviet Union and the United States. He suggested that their development assistance and intervention, particularly during the Cold War, had been less about assisting Africa than about serving their own needs. He argued that humanitarian efforts and imperialist interests often worked in tandem to undermine Africa's progress. He cited the Soviet Union's aid to Guinea-Bissau during its war for independence from the Portuguese as an example of its strategic efforts to advance its Cold War agenda. According to Harris, "The Soviet Union is a loyal friend to many bankrupt African nations it has supplied with arms and Marxist doctrine" (169). Harris was no less skeptical of U.S. assistance. His suspicions about the ulterior motives of the United States were exposed in his depiction of an encounter with American Peace Corps volunteers in Mali:

The Peace Corps volunteers that I met in Segou were kind to me and very friendly. They were young and purposeful and all of them were white, brimming with ideals of hope and charity, saving the world in the name of humanity, for God and country. But ultimately I came to see them in a light no less ambivalent than the light that fell upon Africa itself and affected my eyesight. (213)

Harris recognized that though the volunteers' personal intentions may have been altruistic, they were not separated in his mind from the motives of the United States government that supported them. His reference to the volunteers' race was meant to remind readers of his own race and perspective. As a black American, he could not overlook the obvious white/black power dynamic between foreign donors and African

recipients. He acknowledged that in those relationships, the Westerners, mostly white, almost always wielded all of the power and resources.

Harris' self-awareness was a key component of his discussion about Western responsibility for Africa's problems. Though he was repulsed by the poverty and desperation that he found, he was ever aware that the West, the place where he believed his identity was firmly rooted, was largely responsible for what he witnessed. The result was an overriding sense of disillusionment:

I was tired of being seen as some savior. The African poverty was at last getting to me. I was trying not to say things to myself like: How can people live like this? I was trying merely to see and feel, but what I was feeling wasn't leaving me happy and uplifted, or even grateful to live in the world I come from, for in many ways, the world I come from had created this world. I was becoming angry.
(177)

Harris's consideration of Africa's problems also revealed the ways he believed its nations had hindered their own progress towards development. He cited the role of African governments in their own oppression, using an extended slave metaphor to express his disapproval of the relationships that many African governments maintained with their former colonizers. He stated "If there is a complicity, a tacit alliance between slave and slave owner, there is an even unholy one between former slave and former slave owner" (122). Harris was especially critical of African leaders, insinuating that they were responsible for making African countries into willing beggars to Western governments. He described the use of the French franc for currency as a "...begging [in a way] for continued colonial or neocolonial ties to the old slave master" (122). He used

these portrayals to draw a clear line of distinction between himself and Africans. Using multiple slave references, he implied that in contrast to black Americans, Africans had been unable to break the chains of slavery.

Harris's criticism was directed not only at African leadership, but at Africans themselves. **In this way, he was similar to Richard Wright who was critical of what he characterized as the African personality.** With Harris's depiction of "the African character," he implied that their culture had made them predisposed to dependence or, at the very least, submission:

And Africans readily submit to authority. They have no tradition of democracy and self-assertion, but of a central authority figure who is a leader and a father at the same time ... Their tradition is to trust, to surrender to authority, and to submit to the will of God, submission to power. The colonials had the power. Now the demagogues and the despots hold the power. The new colonials are black, and somehow it seems atrocity and indignity at the hands of black men is seen as more acceptable than the same atrocity and indignity at the hands of white men. (174)

Harris was incensed by the attitude of indifference he observed among African people about the poor leadership and government corruption in their countries. He made his contempt apparent, insisting that in some cases current African leaders had inflicted as much damage on African countries as former colonizers and suggesting that it was accepted because the leaders were now black. This critique was most biting with regard to the ethnic violence he witnessed. He noted Africans' indifference to genocide in countries like Zaire, Burundi, Rwanda, and Mauritania. While he acknowledged that "no

one outside of Africa seems to care,” he also readily admitted that “those in Africa care only when it happens to them” (175).

Harris’s narrative never fully resolved his questions about who should be held most accountable for the continent’s problems: Africa itself, with its indifference, corruption and apathy, or the West, with its colonizers, corporations, and development schemes. His critique of African indifference, however, was not only about poor leadership, corruption, and violence, it was also personal. He blamed African indifference for its role in the transatlantic slave trade, suggesting that it had enabled Europeans to extract people and resources from all over the continent. Harris concluded that although European imperialists held some responsibility for slavery, Africans were equally to blame for their complicity and participation in the slave trade. He theorized that Africa’s current problems were the result of its own greed:

If Africa is Eden, isn’t it also Original Sin as well? And perhaps the disaster that is Africa somehow is a penance for man’s greatest sin, not just slavery but the willing participation in it, the selling of one’s brothers and tribesmen. (211)

The underlying idea here was that Harris’s own personal history was not merely the result of Western imperialism or racism, but also of African complicity in slavery. For Harris, a descendant of slaves whose “brothers” and “tribesmen” had sold them into bondage, African involvement in colonialism and the enslavement of its own people was reprehensible. This perspective necessarily colored his assessment of Africa.

Harris was not only concerned with Africa’s economic and political relationships with Western countries, he was equally interested in the complicated relationship that black Americans had with Africa. Ambivalent about his own connection to Africa,

Harris used his narrative as an opportunity to question it and to promote the distinctiveness of black American identity. By reiterating his un-Africanness and by rejecting the notion of Africa as a homeland, Harris indicated that only the most superficial connection existed between himself and Africa. He hoped that “by going to Africa [he] could see the past and then get rid of it, shed [himself] of this roots business once and for all, those invisible shackles that chain us too often to the past” (28). Black Americans needed to break the “chain” linking them with Africa, which he viewed as a burden. By making this admission early in the narrative, Harris signaled to the reader that his travel chronicle was his own attempt to do the same.

Harris challenged assumptions about his identity, demonstrating that although he was black and racially similar to Africans, they were culturally disparate. “From a distance I might look African,” he said, “but my internal and my external don’t match” (35). Repeatedly stating that he was “not African,” Harris insisted that his differences as a black American in Africa were “more than apparent, [and] the similarities only slight and superficial” (21). Instead, he emphasized his cultural similarity to white Americans and other Western travelers saying, “My skin is black, my culture is not ... I have more in common, it sometimes seems, with the Dutch Afrikaner, the Boer” (311). With such comments, Harris disputed the notion of a racial bond between black Americans and Africans. Yet, his feelings about Africa remained contradictory. For example, though he claimed that he was “not African,” he admitted “somewhere deep in the hidden reaches of my being, Africa beats in my blood and shows itself in my hair, my skin, and my eyes. Africa’s rhythms are somehow my rhythms, and Africa speaks to me in its languages of love and laughter” (27). These words echo those

of Richard Wright who witnessed cultural similarities between black American and African religious worship, but nevertheless denied that a cultural connection existed.

As his title suggested, Harris often felt like both a “native” and a “stranger” in Africa. His attitudes changed as often as he visited different regions and interacted with different people. Many of these interactions underscored the significance of the role that race played in his assessment of his travel experiences. He explained, for example, how encountering a group of white Americans made him feel protective of Africa. “I refused to see Africa as my homeland,” he said, “and yet I was suddenly very possessive, as if I, like Keita, wanted the foreigners to go home” (215). While he rejected Africa as his homeland and wanted to disclaim a racial connection to it, Harris still evoked a sense of racial solidarity with Africans like his friend, Keita, and was possessive and protective of the continent.

Furthermore, Harris recognized the complicated nature of race in Africa. His own feelings about race shifted as he moved throughout various regions. Although he spent at least three chapters discussing his travels to North Africa, Harris explained that his sense of connection to North Africa, which was largely Arab, for example, was completely different than in sub-Saharan Africa, where he shared physical racial similarities with the people. Titling his first chapter about the sub-Saharan region, “The Beginnings of Brotherhood,” he revealed his belief that “Africa” and “blackness” were aligned. He made the point, however, that in Africa “blackness” was not akin to “Africanness.” While in North Africa, both his blackness and his un-Africanness alienated him from the people he met. Yet, in sub-Saharan Africa, his cultural difference was evident. Harris was surprised, for example, when he was denied a visa by an embassy official in Guinea

because he was an American. The official cited racism and the difficulty that Africans experienced getting visas to the United States. According to Harris, “He made no distinction between colors. It was cultural racism he referred to” (173).

Harris’s experiences brought to light not only his cultural differences, but also the particularity of his racial experience in both Africa and the United States. From this perspective, he worked to define an identity for black Americans that would be rooted not in their African heritage, but in their specific sociocultural and historical experiences in the United States. Notably, it excluded other members of the diaspora. He differentiated between “blackamericans,” for example, and black people from other parts of the Americas. According to Harris, “Just as white Americans tend to forget that Mexicans and Colombians are Americans too, so blackamericans forget that there are other black Americans besides those who live in the United States (47).

Harris acknowledged that racial differences gave black U.S. citizens a unique perspective among Americans. He underscored the fact that black Americans were “native strangers” both in America and in Africa. Africa made his “un-Africanness” apparent, often alienating him and making him a cultural outsider. His U.S. citizenship made him “native” in America, but his blackness rendered him a “stranger.” He described his identity in this way:

I am American. And I am black. I live and travel with two cultural passports, the one very much stamped with European culture and sensibilities and history. The other was issued from the uniquely black experience, which is like no other, born of slavery and hardship and tied to a land we might call home but that we blacks do not know, and most have never seen—Africa. (28)

In this explanation, Harris identified “blackness,” rather than Africanness, as one of the two main components of his identity. Although he mentioned Africa as a cultural origin, it functioned only as a reference point in order to emphasize black Americans’ lack of knowledge about the continent and their consequent cultural difference and distance from it. Harris attributed black Americans’ ideological distance from Africa to their American socialization. “Africa is far away and expensive to reach,” said Harris. “More than that, our education tends to be as European as the education of any white kid. We do not know about Africa; we only learn about it in geography class” (28). Harris repeatedly drives home his belief that he is not culturally African. Some critics, however, were not convinced of Harris’s claim.

The critical reception of Native Stranger was mixed. Critics like Kwame Anthony Appiah, who accepted Harris’s claim that he was not African, pointed to inconsistencies in the narrative. According to his 1992 *New York Times Book Review*:

Mr. Harris is sure from the start that he is not African. He says so in the second sentence of the book and says again pages later and again on the next page, and so he tells us in direct and in-direct ways again and again ... Mr. Harris begins by rejecting the racial fiction and ends up having to fend off the possibility that he is more African than he thought. (18)

In his *Black Enterprise* review, Herb Boyd characterized Harris as having an identity crisis that he never resolves, attributing Harris’s inconsistencies to his struggle “to bridge a cultural chasm, to overcome the anxiety of being of African descent but alienated from Africa” (14). Other critics alluded to his inner conflict in their reviews. In *New York Times Magazine*, author Gloria Naylor portrayed him as “...another African American

coming to terms with the meaning of that hyphen—the bittersweetness of connection/disconnection—as he straddled horses to ride across the Sahara” (12).

Other reviewers accused Harris of making sweeping generalizations, yet nevertheless accepted his perspective, respecting the details that he was able to capture about Africa and accepting his conclusions, both about Africa and about his own identity. As the 1992 *Publisher's Weekly* review demonstrated, many critics regarded Harris's narrative highly. They hailed it as a “magnificent book ... an adventurous cry from the heart, a political dissection of oppressive regimes and a lyrical love song to a continent” (40). Yet, it did not receive nearly as much attention as the book that followed a few years later, Out of America, by Keith Richburg.

Keith Richburg: Out of America

So am I a coldhearted cynic? An Africa hater? A racist, maybe, or perhaps a lost and lonely self-hating black man who has forgotten his African roots? Maybe I am, all that and more. But by an accident of birth, I am a black man born in America, and everything I am today—my culture and attitudes, my sensibilities, loves, and desires—derives from that one and simple irrefutable truth. (248)

Keith Richburg traveled to Africa as a seasoned foreign correspondent on a professional assignment. He published Out of America in 1997, just three years after returning from his post as Africa Bureau Chief for *The Washington Post*. The book covered the three years that he spent living and working in Africa in the 1990s. While there, Richburg reported on the AIDS pandemic, war in Somalia, genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, political corruption in Kenya, and the demise of apartheid in South Africa. He viewed himself as an American reporter who happened to be black. Like many black American travel writers before him, he questioned the presumed racial connection between black Americans and Africa, and was critical of what he saw as black

Americans' misguided fascination with Africa, especially its post-colonial leadership. In his narrative, Richburg wore his un-Africanness as a badge. In so doing, he sought to prove his Americanness, drawing a parallel between his behavior towards his African employees and that of Western countries and international banking institutions towards African governments.

It is not surprising that Out of America sparked a contentious debate—particularly among African and black American scholars, academics, and activists, who were all concerned about Richburg's representation of Africa and black American identity. Africanists and Afrocentrists attacked him for what they perceived to be his negative portrayal of Africa. They rejected his vivid characterizations of war, genocide, and political corruption, claiming that his views were exaggerated and his conclusions oversimplified. Moreover, they disapproved of his assertions about his identity, especially those about race.

Black readers' responses to Out of America were particularly harsh. Although some critics questioned the validity of Richburg's assertions about Africa's sociopolitical realities, the majority focused on his character. Their disapproval was aimed at him, rather than his text. His negative portrayal of Africa seemed to be less disturbing to black readers than his assertions about race. After all, Eddy L. Harris had drawn similar conclusions about African governance and political corruption in his Native Stranger, but had not evoked the same level of backlash. The difference between the two authors was that Harris embraced his "blackness" even as he may have been ambivalent about his "Africanness." As his title "Out of America" attests, Richburg prioritized his citizenship, disclaiming his African heritage.

Whereas black readers of Native Stranger may have been critical of Harris's narrative, criticism about Out of America was particularly damning to Richburg himself. Afrocentric scholar Molefi Asante wrote in his 1999 review of the book that Out of America was, "a sad testimony of an individual who is caught in the spiral of psychic pain produced by what Frantz Fanon and Robert C. Smith called internal inferiorization" (129). Richburg's identification with his mainstream (white) audience was particularly troubling to Asante, who complained that the author "has not written a meaningful book; he has written a book for the white mass market and because of that he is at once intent on explaining that he is happy to have had an ancestor on the slave ship" (130). Other black journalists like Kwame Okoampa-Ahoofe of the *New York Amsterdam News* also cited what they believed was Richburg's insecurity about his black identity:

It is not clear whether Richburg would have indeed witnessed the "revulsion" that the *Washington Post* hack recounts if things had been different during the last half-millennium of Africa's massive blundering and blistering invasion by Western Europe. But obviously, this is not what our careerist pen pusher is concerned about, and so he revs into high dudgeon, blaming Africa for everything that is wrong with Richburg himself that is, his pathological self-hatred and terminal inferiority complex. (32)

Criticism of Richburg's character and challenges to his ethos were not limited to black American readers. African writers such as Nuruddin Farah dispensed equally blistering criticism. According to Farah, a Somali writer obviously bothered by Richburg's negative portrayal of his country, Richburg "gives up mere ephemera, hackneyed interpretations of what is happening in Africa, as he casts about in his massive

self-promotion” (10). In Farah’s view, Richburg used his portrayal of Africa to advance his career and achieve greater popularity among white American readers. Furthermore, Farah believed that Richburg was “a slave singing the eulogies of his master. As an adult he glorifies his Americanness; as a child he runs from his blackness” (10). Farah’s comment clearly identified the root of many black readers’ disdain for Richburg and his text: They were uncomfortable with his rejection of the notion of race or blackness in favor of celebrating his “Americanness.”

Adekeye Adebajo echoed this sentiment in his Spring 2004 *Africa Today* essay about U.S. foreign policy towards Africa, which highlighted the role of black Americans in influencing U.S. foreign policy:

Richburg thanks God that his slave ancestors made it across the Atlantic, wraps himself around the stars and stripes, and launches into a simplistic tirade about Africa ... It is hard to believe that a Balkan-American journalist covering the savage wars of secession in the Balkans of the 1990s would have rendered such a silly account and linked the brutality of the war to some inherent cultural flaw in his ancestors. (99)

Non-black critics of Richburg’s narrative sought to capture the disparity between his mainstream acclaim and his damnation by black readers. Journalist Clay Waters drew a parallel between the critical assault on Richburg by the black press and the attacks directed at Daniel Patrick Moynihan by black journalists and intellectuals following the 1965 publication of the Moynihan report, which highlighted a number of issues that he believed had helped cause poverty in black America. According to Waters:

When Richburg discusses domestic policy, he speaks like an emerging neocon praising Moynihan for being the first to warn of the coming disintegration of the black family while being branded a racist for his pains. Richburg is drawing similar fire. For the pro-African black press in America, better a (white) pagan than a (black) heretic. (403)

This analogy was not lost on Richburg, who referred to Moynihan in his narrative. Certainly he understood the inflammatory nature of his positions, but believed that in the end dissenting readers would acquiesce to his opinions. Richburg viewed Moynihan as a visionary. As he argued, “Daniel Patrick Moynihan tried, a long time ago, before he was a senator, when he warned about the disintegration of black families. And he did get trounced—branded a racist and worse. But go back and look now at what he said; sounds to me like Pat had that one just about right, and way before such talk was fashionable” (178).

Waters’ analogy may have demonstrated the furor of the black press against Richburg’s work; however, it did not articulate the specific aspects of his text that angered black readers. Author Tunde Adeleke was much better at this task, suggesting in his 1999 review in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* that black readers’ negative reactions were largely provoked by Richburg’s perceived violation of the color line:

In an age distinguished by deepening crises of alienation and identity among black Americans and onslaughts on their rights and privileges (strong indications, to many, of the potency of the color line), Richburg embraces and espouses the American identity, disregarding indices suggestive of black rejection and alienation ... He affirms the reality of a melting pot America. (97)

In other words, the biggest gripe of black readers was his representation of race and his American identity—not his representation of Africa.

The most scathing of Richburg's black critics accused him of pandering to a mainstream (white) American audience by offering a bleak and hopeless vision of Africa. Still, others suggested that his assessment of Africa overlooked the pervasive impact that racism, under the guise of Western imperialism, had on African development. Perhaps most disturbing to many black readers were his rejection of notions of race and his actual denial of racism. In their view, Richburg's characterization of Africa was an effort to disprove his own identity and bolster assimilationist notions about black Americans in mainstream American society.

While most criticism of Out of America discussed Richburg's social position, its political impact cannot be understated. Few critics acknowledged the potential influence that Richburg's narrative could and would have on debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy and aid to Africa, largely due to his position at a major mainstream media outlet. Salih Booker, an activist then employed by the Council on Foreign Relations, was the only one of Richburg's critics to place Out of America in this context. In a March 1997 interview with journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault on *PBS News Hour*, Booker suggested:

When you paint such a bleak picture of Africa's prospects ... what you do is you undermine the will of the legislators in the United States and the U.S. government to be engaged in Africa, to provide the kind of assistance to Africa, et cetera.

Africa—assistance to Africa and U.S. engagement in Africa—has been declining precisely at a time when there's great potential, where there has been greater

economic growth contrary to what Mr. Richburg said, in the last several years.

(Hunter-Gault)

Booker's criticism was significant because it recognized the political import of Richburg's narrative—not merely because he was a black American representing and responding to Africa's reality, but also because of his status as a highly visible member of the American mainstream media. Booker's criticism underscored the privilege, respect, and influence that Richburg commanded as Africa bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, in spite of—not because of—his race. Booker argued that because of Richburg's position and the fact that he was a black American, his white American mainstream audiences, particularly legislators and decision-makers, might feel more obligated to listen. Most significantly, they had the power to act on his views.

Indeed, Booker's concerns about Richburg's influence on U.S foreign policy toward Africa were in fact realized. It might be argued that the Out of America narrative changed the course of U.S. interventions. Washington D.C. public policy consultant Christopher Gray "Humanitarian Intervention," published in *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, expressed his views about the ills of overseas development assistance and the misguidedness of U.S. development efforts in the third world. In it, he also admitted that commentary by Richburg and former development officials heavily influenced his conclusions. His article called for the elimination, or at least the serious limitation, of overseas development assistance. Furthermore, Gray's references to Richburg's text were designed to influence policy makers by disparaging the U.S. government's approach to aid and foreign policy. Gray compared the conclusions made by Richburg to the approach of the Clinton Administration's foreign policy team, stating:

Unlike Richburg, the Clinton foreign policy team refuses to recognize that the world is simply beyond the abilities of America and the United Nations and that the American public, which puts up the money and soldiers for the failed crusades, will not stand for the consequent humiliations and failures. (143)

Gray's comments demonstrated how Richburg's opinions were highly regarded among policy analysts and policy makers, confirming Booker's fears about their potential political impact. Stephen R. Weissman, another foreign policy analyst writing in *Foreign Policy Magazine* hoped to dissuade readers like Gray from using Out of America as the justification for new or revised foreign policy:

The heart of Richburg's passionate account lies in his political analysis.

Unfortunately, this analysis lacks sufficient balance and depth and is likely to feed an unwarranted cynicism about the continent ... The book's fundamental problem is common to most Western journalism (black or white) on Africa. It fails to take into account adequately specific historical processes (domestic and foreign) that helped to produce Africa's current political pathologies. Richburg tends to fall back on traditional, white, Western stereotypes of Africans' enduring tribalism and passivity. (167)

Weissman believed that Richburg's flaw as an author was his excessive reliance on negative Western stereotypes of Africa.

Richburg's approach, however, may have been far more deliberate: a narrative strategy that he adopted in order to divorce himself from Africa and affirm his identity as an American. Although Richburg was interested in the colonial legacy in Africa, it was not the prism through which he viewed the continent. He used the war-ravaged and

politically unstable country of Somalia to frame his analysis. In his words, “Somalia became the prism through which I came to view the rest of Africa. It was to become the metaphor for my own disillusionment” (53). Richburg admitted that he was “fixated on the Somalia story because of what Somalia symbolized about Africa and the world Somalia to me became post-Cold War Africa writ large, with all of the problems and pitfalls magnified on grand scale...” (53). The country had been home to one of the greatest U.S. intervention blunders in recent history, the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu (Black Hawk Down). Richburg expressed his disappointment with the United States (and by extension the West) for their botched attempts at intervention. He argued that the West was ill-equipped to address Somalia’s problems. His conclusion, as signified by the title of his fourth chapter, “The Wrong Place,” was that Americans should not be in Somalia, and, by extension, Africa. He used the Somalian crisis to substantiate his belief that Africa was hopeless and could not be saved. “I didn’t fully grasp it at the time,” he said, “but the bloody attacks of June 5 marked the turning point in my own mind, the start of the bitter wakeup call that would forever alter my view of Africa and how the continent could—or could not—be saved from itself” (64).

Although he attributed some of Africa’s political and social instability to the legacy of colonialism, Richburg believed the responsibility for Africa’s crisis fell on African governments. Like Harris, he discussed the lack of good governance to illustrate how corruption had inhibited Africa’s political and social development. His portrayal highlighted the way it had pervaded other aspects of African social life. For example, he described how one of his own employees regularly attempted to scam him by stealing money or using the money Richburg gave him to pay his various debts, including

newspaper bills. He drew an analogy between himself and Western banking institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, suggesting that he was representative of white donor countries while his employees were like African leaders:

He played on that, constantly leaving me notes telling me how kind I was after the latest raise, wishing me all God's blessing for being so understanding, pouring it on thick. Using me. Just like an African potentate plays the guilt strings of white aid donor countries. Now, after I found out about the newspaper scam, I was boiling mad. Like the World Bank and the IMF, I was about to start my own campaign for financial accountability. (33)

In citing his employees' lack of trustworthiness, Richburg referred indirectly to Western banking institutions' highly controversial use of structural adjustment programs in Africa that emphasized economic and political "discipline" in the region. He aligned himself with the West in order to demonstrate to his readers his emotional distance from the continent's problems.

Like other black American travel writers, Richburg demonstrated how his cultural differences limited his acceptance by Africans. To prove his point, he acknowledged how "In Africa, you belong to a tribe; without a tribe you don't belong" (110). As a black American, of course, he did not have a tribal affiliation. With this example, Richburg attempted to prove to his readers that he was as much an outsider as any other American. Furthermore, he noted the obvious economic and social privilege he wielded among Africans. His comments, however, seemed to be a response to the unstated assumption that as a black reporter in Africa, he would have more insight into, or a better understanding of, African people: "...the truth is that I myself was not any

more into the African mind than were my expat [expatriate] friends and colleagues. I, too, was living sheltered and shielded from Africa and from Africans, because I couldn't see them across the great cultural divide" (37).

Richburg viewed himself as exceptional not only in Africa, but among black Americans as well. His narrative attempted to undermine the validity and significance of race on his identity in at least two ways. By emphasizing the similarity of his experience in America to that of whites, he hoped to prove that Americans, regardless of race and color, shared certain fundamental experiences. His life in the United States, Richburg argued, had not been marked by race. He referred to his childhood as a "typical American boyhood," saying that, "mine was not what you might call a particularly 'black' childhood—just a childhood, an average American childhood. My neighborhood as I remember it growing up was racially mixed, if anything mostly white, Irish, and Polish" (10-11). Throughout his narrative, he referred to the experience of integration that was characteristic of many other black Americans who came of age in the years during and just after the Civil Rights era and denying that black Americans' racial experience was distinct from other Americans.

Richburg's efforts to downplay the significance of race were undermined, however, by his obsession with racial choice, or what he referred to as "choosing sides." He wrote about his own inner conflict of having to "choose sides" between black and white. From his perspective, he had two "sides," a black side and a white side, which competed for his allegiance. According to him, "All my life, growing up as a black kid in a white country I've always resisted and resented the notion that I was supposed to take sides. I had always tried to avoid being defined by the color of my skin, remembering, I

suppose, Martin Luther King's vision that it was supposed to be the content of your character that mattered" (194). Though he argued otherwise, Richburg demonstrated that in having to "choose sides," his experiences in the United States were still greatly impacted by race. For instance, he described how in his integrated school setting he "had to decide whether to sit at the black table with my black friends or to integrate the white table so I could sit with my white friends. This for the kid coming out of a predominantly white high school, the one who hates having to take sides" (17). Later, as a black reporter, Richburg felt that he was often forced to choose sides. As he pointed out, white reporters were not required to make such decisions. "White reporters are never forced to choose sides," he said, "I thought, but being black, I was told I had no choice. All my life, I had managed pretty well to escape just that kind of forced choice" (147).

In emphasizing his reluctance to choose sides, Richburg sought to disprove his racial similarity from black Americans and show how he did not share their pan-Africanist sentiments. His reactions to Goree Island in Senegal were emblematic of this difference. Goree Island had symbolic significance for Africans in the diaspora because slaves were known to have been processed and transported from there during the transatlantic slave trade. For Richburg, the experience was disconcerting, making him feel even less affinity for and connection to Africa and its people:

For many black Americans who had come across the Atlantic, this trip was clearly a near religious pilgrimage. I felt disturbed as I stood there. I shuddered slightly, reading the various comments in the inscription book. I, too, had come to Goree hoping to feel that same kind of spiritual connect, to find some emotional frame

of reference. And I tried to make myself feel something that simply wouldn't come. I felt distant, apart. (161)

With examples like this one, Richburg challenged the pan-African sentiments of black American icons in order to refute the presumption that African descendants all shared an equal affinity for Africa. He said, for example, that "Malcolm X said we black people in America are more African than American—"You're nothing but Africans," he said, but I don't feel it ... I don't want to be from this place. In my darkest heart here on this pitch black Africa night, I am quietly celebrating the passage of my ancestor who made it out" (233).

Richburg's desire to be viewed by his audience as different from "other blacks" was made evident when he described his fears about going to Africa. He asked, "Would they be able to tell that I was not from the place?" and then later he made the significant comment, "Yes, that's it. Without intending to, [this] captured the essence of my anxiety: the fear of being one in the crowd. Losing my identity, my individuality" (21). By exposing his own "fear," Richburg hoped to further substantiate his difference from both Africans, and black Americans, and beyond that, his cultural similarity to his white American readers. He believed that through this example, they would look beyond his race, identify with him, and view him in the same light as themselves.

Richburg's hope for white mainstream readers to see beyond his race caused him to spend much of the narrative posturing about his distinctiveness from other black Americans, thus alienating many. Their venomous response was not unwarranted, because Richburg did not merely draw attention to his difference, he ridiculed them in the process. He felt that in their desire to be connected to Africa, black Americans were

guilty of making ill-informed judgments about African leadership. He attributed their ignorance to their blind affinity for the continent, stating that they “seem to enter a kind of moral and intellectual black box when they get to Africa” (141). To prove his own superiority, he adopted a tone of condescension, insinuating, for example, that black Americans were more interested in the image of African leaders than their performance:

These black Americans were obviously more impressed with the macho military image Strasser cut than with the fact that he represents all that is wrong with Africa-military thugs who take power and thwart the continent’s fledgling efforts to move toward democracy. The chanting and hooting was a disgusting display, and to me it highlighted the complete ignorance about Africa among America’s so-called black elite. (138)

The implication here was that Richburg’s race did not connect him to black people. He regarded himself as an outsider to the black American community, holding views that were independent of, and often in opposition to, the status quo. Such attitudes lent themselves to his overall argument that his identity was derived from his “typically American” upbringing in the United States, which had not encumbered by race. He portrayed himself in this way in order to appear objective, especially when making judgments about the perceived missteps of other black people from United States and Africa.

Like other black American travel narratives about Africa, Richburg’s Out of America was less about Africa than about the identity and experience of its author. As such, his book demonstrated how millennial narratives about Africa offered alternative ways of thinking about black American identity. A critic from *The Economist* argued

that, “like Mr. Harris, Mr. Richburg often seems less interested in Africa than in scoring points in a domestic battle between the black Americans (multiculturalists) and those who much prefer to see themselves as Americans (assimilationists)” (5).

Richburg resented being stereotyped according to essentialist racial notions put forth by mainstream America. He wanted to present himself as one who wished not to be confined by notions of race. To advance his overall argument, he attempted, but ultimately failed, to present himself as an American minimally impacted by race. In expressing his ambivalence about “choosing sides,” which for Richburg meant “choosing white” or looking for acceptance from the white American mainstream, he reaffirmed the weighty significance of race for black Americans.

Although he downplayed the impact of race on his political assessment of Africa, it remained evident in his narrative, especially to black readers from the United States and elsewhere. They objected to his characterizations of war, genocide, and political corruption, claiming that his views were exaggerated and oversimplified. The contentious debate sparked by Out of America, particularly among African and black American scholars, academics, and activists, however, was less about Richburg’s depiction of Africa than about his racial attitudes and representation of his black American identity. His black readers criticized what they perceived to be his negative portrayal of Africa, but they also attacked his character for what they felt were his misguided assertions about his identity.

As a seasoned foreign correspondent who had reported on the AIDS pandemic, war in Somalia, genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, political corruption in Kenya, and the demise of apartheid in South Africa, Richburg rightly questioned poor leadership,

corruption, and the viability of U.S. government intervention in Africa. In so doing, however, he exposed the racial attitudes that informed his assessments. The disparate criticism that his book received, both among black and non-black readers, demonstrated that Richburg's characterization of Africa and his identity, although acceptable to some whites, did not hold for blacks.

Lynne Duke: Mandela, Mobutu, and Me

The past and whatever it may have meant to me seemed not to matter. In that wretched palace of suffering, the present was choking me. But this, too, was my Africa. My affinity, I realized, resided not just in the hazy past to which I traced my ancestry, but in the ugly struggles of daily life that were as heartbreaking as a dusty child peeing on the ground. (245)

Like Richburg, Lynne Duke traveled to Africa as a foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*. Her narrative, Mandela, Mobutu, and Me, was based on her reporting from South Africa in 1995-1999, when she served as Johannesburg bureau chief. Like Richburg and Harris, Duke struggled with her own disillusionment about the state of African politics and poverty, the role and complicity of the West in Africa's development and underdevelopment, as well as her own relationship with Africa and its people. Her overall perspective, however, placed her narrative in drastic contrast to those of her two male contemporaries. In the section that follows, I explore Duke's assessment of Africa, which included her views on Africa's development, pan-Africanism, and black American identity. In so doing, I demonstrate how her text was a response to other portrayals of Africa by Eddy L. Harris, Keith Richburg, and other contemporary writers.

As seen in other millennial texts, the frames adopted by their authors helped reinforce their overarching themes. For Harris, viewing Africa through its relationship to its former colonizers and the new superpowers, specifically France and the United States,

helped demonstrate how Africa's future was inextricably and tragically tied to the machinations of the West. In contrast, Richburg's portrayal of Africa as "Somalia" on grand scale was the basis for his critique of African governance and Western intervention. It also provided him with a justification for his rejection of the cultural and racial ties linking him to Africa. In each case, Africa was characterized as hopeless, leaving readers little room to believe that there could be any change in its apparently bleak future prospects. Most significantly, these narratives belied the notion that black Americans had real connections to Africa, cultural or otherwise.

In comparison to her contemporaries, however, Duke was hopeful. Her affinity for Africa was neither racial nor cultural. It was personal. The framework that she adopted for her narrative of Africa speaks to her convictions. She chose two prominent leaders whom she characterized as "Africa's archetypes" to frame her text. They were, in Duke's words, "symbols of what Africa had been and what it yet could be" (9). These leaders, Nelson Mandela and Mobutu Sese Seko, embodied "the hope and horrors" of Africa (9). In her view, these leaders represented the opposing ways in which Western media often characterized Africa: Mandela was celebrated, and Mobutu was demonized. Duke, however, did not rely on the existing stereotypes of either leader. On the contrary, she revisited the Western portrayals of each in order to demonstrate their complexity and, to a greater extent, to illustrate the complexities of African reality. Her framework allowed her to present more rounded views of both Mandela and Mobutu and a more balanced representation of Africa itself, which she felt had been poorly and unfairly portrayed by her contemporaries.

Perspective was the key to Duke's analysis. In making her assessment of Africa, she considered at least two vantage points: that of the Western media and that of the African people. Duke was able to present African politics and social life in a way that gave voice to her own perspective as well as those of the Africans she met while working throughout southern Africa. According to Duke, "... I am neither an Afro-pessimist nor an Afro-optimist. If you must call me anything, call me an Afro-realist ... I am guided by the legions of African people whose lives are built on extraordinary fortitude, unwavering hope, and profound humanity, despite immense odds" (x). Such an approach provided Duke with the ideological space to be equally critical of Africa and the West with an eye towards the roles that each played in Africa's development and underdevelopment.

Duke's depiction of Mandela and Mobutu was emblematic of this perspective. While she did not celebrate Mobutu, she did elaborate on the more simplistic treatments of his leadership, rejecting the idea that he was solely responsible for Zaire's collapse in 1996-1997. In fact, Duke indicted the ruling Zairian class for its complicity in Mobutu's corruption. She critiqued representations of African politics by demonstrating that the assumptions on which some Western journalists based their conclusions were incorrect. In making this point, she hoped to revise the ways of thinking about African leadership and African politics. The following passage typifies her method:

Whose fault was this mess? It seemed too simple just to blame Mobutu. Surely, one man couldn't create such a chaos alone. It was easy to demonize Mobutu, but the fact remained that a host of others benefited from the corrupt system that the

point of politics was not power. It was wealth. And the entire political class around Mobutu had grown filthy rich. (82)

Duke's reference to "others" was a condemnation not only of Mobutu's political class but also of the United States, which she characterized in other parts of her text as a financial supporter of Mobutu's corrupt regime. Such representations of Mobutu forced Duke's readers to think about his actions in relationship to his own people in a wider political context. Likewise, she pushed past the typically simplistic and overly idealistic Western representation of Nelson Mandela as the "messiah" of South Africa. In doing this, she placed him within a broad context just as she had with Mobutu, thereby making him deserving of the same degree of scrutiny. In this way, Duke made it possible for readers to consider the positive and negative attributes of both figures.

Oversimplified portrayals of Mandela in the media often overlooked his humanity. In their celebration of him, they ignored his flaws, downplayed his mistakes, and were reluctant to compare him with other African leaders. Duke refused to follow in this trend. Consider her commentary on his new government:

Each time I drove the Golden Highway south from Jo'burg and saw the miles of shanties spread out before, the new South Africa confounded me. What on earth was Mandela's government doing? The two years since apartheid's end wasn't very much time in which to replace all these shacks with proper housing, but surely the government ought to have been attacking the problem more urgently ... I'd seen enough of the continent by 1996 to know that South Africa's level of impoverishment—though not as deep as elsewhere—fit a continental pattern. I'd learned enough of postindependence Africa to realize that the promises of

Mandela's new government were the same kinds of promises once made—and broken—by a host of other leaders in newly liberated African nations. And I'd seen elsewhere in Africa how the unifying vision of liberation struggles often splintered once liberation was achieved, with the agenda of the ruling elite not necessarily the same agenda as the ordinary people they claimed to represent. (87)

The latter part of this passage made indirect reference to leaders like Mobutu who were now demonized, but who at one point had been celebrated and revered by their nations and the world. This passage was meant to remind readers of Mandela's African predecessors, many of whom who were initially regarded as reformers. Placing him in this context, recognized how, despite their best efforts, both Mandela and other leaders failed in their efforts to advance their respective countries.

Instead of deifying Mandela, Duke exposed some of his flaws and mistakes. For example, she recounted an incident where Mandela, as African National Congress (ANC) leader, had given an order to “shoot-to-kill” protesters who were marching towards the ANC headquarters. Though Mandela acknowledged his misstep before Parliament, it outraged his political opponents and cast a shadow on his reputation as a peacemaker. “Mandela, the great reconciler, the man of peace,” she said, “had given an order that left people dead” (36). Her rounded portrayal of Mandela also included the voices of his critics. She pointed out, for instance, that some black South Africans were suspicious of his relationships with the white South Africans who had formerly oppressed them. Consider her inclusion of the criticism of black South African columnist, Jon Qwelane:

He is bending over backward at the expense of the black masses to appease whites ... And those whites ... are the same people who once

labeled Mandela a “terrorist” and “communist” until they realized he had no intention to change their traditional South African way of life. (52)

Duke’s admiration for Mandela did not diminish her own criticism of him. At the very least, she too was suspicious of his so-called pandering to white South Africans, admitting “the one-sidedness of the reconciliation drive would become glaringly apparent later as it became clear that Mandela was reaching out to people who rarely reached back” (52).

Duke’s efforts to paint a realistic portrayal of African leaders were meant to recognize their responsibility for Africa’s current state. She shared her concern for Africa’s development and underdevelopment with contemporaries like Harris and Richburg, who struggled to place the blame for Africa’s crises squarely in the hands of either former colonialists or the Africans themselves. All three authors wrestled with the belief that the United States, through its Cold War political maneuvering, influenced and facilitated many of Africa’s crises. Duke’s comments about Angola exemplified this idea:

I believe that Angola would have had a chance at normalcy if the superpowers had not transformed its conflict into something larger and more lethal than it probably would have been. Perhaps UNITA, without outside help, would have petered out into nothing. . . . And that always struck me as the real tragedy—not only for Angola but also for other countries where superpower manipulation drastically changed the course of history. (69)

Duke recognized the significant role that other countries played in African politics, demonstrating how some African people, particularly leaders, undermined development

in Africa by acting with the same reckless disregard for the best interests of African people as former colonizers and imperialists. Like her contemporaries, she acknowledged how the co-complicity of African leadership, colonialists, and Cold War imperialists worked together to undermine Africa's development:

In the old days, the troika of powers that manipulated Zaire was Western: the United States, Belgium, and France. But now, with the West having largely lost strategic interest, Africans took up the mantle of the troika. Kagame, Museveni, and dos Santos would reshape middle Africa through firepower, not through a well-intentioned notion called an African renaissance. (163)

Like her contemporaries, Duke placed blame and responsibility on both Africa and its manipulators. She departed from her contemporaries, however, in that she personalized the discussion of African complicity in its underdevelopment by holding herself to the same standard as Africans. Whereas Harris wondered if Africa could move forward without further Western intervention, and Richburg wondered why Western governments and banking institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF should continue to bother with corrupt African governments, Duke asked how she, as an American, a Western journalist, and a traveler in Africa might also be complicit in Africa's ills. In this way, she aligned herself with Africans who also scrutinized their own behavior. Her attention to her own complicity and personal responsibility in Africa's problems was evident when she depicted how commonplace the culture of corruption was, even at the grassroots. She explained, for example, that she had to use bribery in her daily life. "I knew it would happen sooner or later," she lamented, "based on all I'd read and heard about getting things done in some of Africa's unstable and

chaotic countries. Still I felt guilty. In the blink of an eye, I'd become complicit in a practice that was eating away at African society" (56). Duke's sensitivity to her own participation in corrupt practices that she felt undermined Africa's development illustrated her feeling of personal responsibility towards Africa.

Duke's sense of responsibility was evident in the way that she viewed her own writing about Africa. She grieved over the fact that she, as a reporter, could not do more to bring about change in Africa. Undoubtedly, as a result of the firestorm over Richburg's book, Duke was fully aware of her position and the impact that her views about Africa would have on mainstream opinions about Africa:

Writing Africa just didn't seem enough. Part of me wanted to do more, not just to smuggle words out of people's lives and write them onto the front pages in the hope they would have an impact on an American public that did not care enough and whose view of Africa was too often the voyeur's. I cringed at the thought that somewhere back in Washington, readers had consumed my dispatches as confirmation of their straits. I'd wanted those readers to be moved, to care, to question, not turn away. (173)

Duke's comments not only highlighted her passion about Africa, they also recognized the limitations that she faced in her role as foreign journalist. On the one hand, she realized that as a foreign correspondent for a major media news outlet she would be able to reach a broad audience. On the other hand, she also understood that her audience was not invested in these issues and was often ready to use her analyses as justification for Africa's problems.

Unlike Richburg, who used his negative portrayal of Africa to legitimize his difference, Duke used her narrative to remind her audience of Africa's humanity. Her motivation and her approach resulted from her affinity for Africa, which she was not afraid to claim. For Duke, pan-Africanism was not contingent upon Africa's successes or failures. Whereas Harris and Richburg exemplified black Americans who were much more ambivalent about Africa and the "so-called" pan-African bond linking them to Africa and African people, Duke celebrated "blackness" and "Africanness," critiquing those who did not. Although she accepted her Americanness, she chose not to draw a line of distinction between Africanness and black Americanness. Like other pan-Africanists, she recognized the similarities of the historical struggles. "I claim Africa as a political act, as an act of affirmation," she said. "It is my private way of staying true to the legacy of struggles that link black people on both sides of the Atlantic. In our blackness, the Africans and the Americans are bound by a common experience" (246). With this comment, Duke affirmed the racial connection that Harris and Richburg questioned. Likewise, she boldly proclaimed her conviction that she was culturally connected to Africa:

My connection to Africa is a genealogic fact. I don't need regal African chiefs and legends of past greatness to make the connection; I don't need for history to be rewritten to make Africa seem more palatable, more worthy of my embrace. In all its splendor, its struggle, its horror, Africa is in me ... I could recoil from its maddening ways and say the place of my forefathers has nothing to do with me. I could say that the ties that once bound black people in Africa and the Americas have been severed by time and mean nothing now. Others have made that case.

That is not where I stand. (246)

These comments were, unquestionably, a direct response to the narratives of Harris and Richburg. In many ways they seemed to be aimed at Richburg in particular, because he so vehemently argued that many black Americans were unrealistic in their affinity for Africa. Recognizing the ways that black Americans, because of shame and idealism, evoked an African past when asserting their cultural connection to Africa, Duke presented herself as a realist who was able to accept both the positive and negative aspects of Africa.

Duke was also realistic about the challenges of pan-Africanism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Her travel chronicle bears many thematic similarities to the work of Maya Angelou. Like Angelou, Duke used her narrative to bring attention to the social factors that threatened pan-African connections between black Americans and African people. In her view, social privilege was chief among these. She fully understood her fortunate status in both Africa and America, admitting that she “embraced the new and privileged perch” on which she sat (30). She had a keen sense of how black Americans’ social position impacted the way they related to Africa. As she illustrated through her characterization of the black American expatriate community in South Africa, social privilege kept many black Americans, even those who lived in Africa, isolated from African people. By making this claim, Duke gestured toward other black American writers who, because of their own social privilege, found themselves totally isolated in Africa:

A whole social set developed between some black South Africans and their black friends from America in a comfortable social cocoon, like the group of black

women from both sides of the Atlantic who hosted regular “Gumbo Society” lunches, which I enjoyed immensely the one time I was able to attend ... I went for braais in the homes of friends in Soweto, but I got the sense that few of the black Americans spent much time in the black townships. The township world was quite different from the world of the affluent northern suburbs, where the Americans were quite taken with the very comfortable standard of living they could enjoy amid swimming pools and tennis courts. (252)

Her comments acknowledged the wealth and privilege of black Americans who chose to live in Africa. This social advantage often afforded them more benefits than they could enjoy in the United States.

Duke also made a powerful comparison between herself and other black American visitors by demonstrating how she was more willing to foster relationships with Africans at the grassroots level. Her commitment to the grassroots was similar to that of Era Bell Thompson. She described her difference from other black American travelers by saying,

In a lot of ways, my life in South Africa was quite different from that of most of the other black Americans on the scene ... My purpose was to be a chronicler and analyst of the big issues and broad dynamics unfolding in the new country, and in so doing I had to keep my fingers in different worlds, not just the narrow social niche of the expatriate community. (252)

Because of her dual perspective as both insider and observer of the black American community in South Africa, Duke recognized other limitations to pan-Africanist sentiment among black Americans. She noticed how many of those she encountered

experienced the overwhelming and sometimes condescending urge to “fix” Africa’s problems themselves. Armed with this knowledge, she identified the roles she felt that black Americans, as insiders/outsideers, could play in Africa’s struggles. Her explanation exposed her conception of black American identity:

We could assist in the fight. We could give it our blessing. We could hold a sense of camaraderie in the struggle. But at the end of the day, I found that many black Americans in South Africa had to realize: it was someone else’s battle. Our color and culture did not give up the right to claim ownership of someone else’s victory, of someone else’s society. What I learned, and what made my experience in South Africa all the richer, was the extent to which I could look African, feel loyal to the African struggle, and remain an anomaly because I was American. It is similar for me in America, where I can look American, feel American, but remain an anomaly in many circumstances because I am black. That is my composite identity, my inheritance from the Middle Passage. It is a special way of being, and with it I am at peace. (257)

Understanding the precarious situation of insiders/outsideers, Duke insisted that although they could be supportive, black Americans could not be the driving force of Africa’s social struggles, precisely because they were Americans. With this determination, she embraced the fact that in both Africa and America, she held a unique position. Unlike Richburg and Harris, she was neither uncomfortable nor ambivalent about that fact.

Duke’s approach to black American identity marks the greatest difference between herself and her contemporaries. She viewed her blackness in Africa as an advantage rather than as a disadvantage. She even illustrated how it gave her a distinct

advantage over a white female reporter who was nearly attacked because of her race. According to Duke, “I had no such incidents. I could easily blend in crowds. I wanted to keep it that way” (4). In this way, she differed greatly from Richburg, who commented that being black in Africa was “a distinct disadvantage” (85).

Despite the fact that she viewed her blackness as an advantage, Duke conceded that being a black American in Africa presented unique challenges. For example, her own conception of her identity did not necessarily coincide with those of Africans:

The way I saw myself wasn't necessarily how Africans perceived me to be. And being an African American in Africa could, at times, be downright strange. Odd wedges and strange misperceptions kept cropping up, hitting me over the head unexpectedly in some of my encounters with Africans. Not that I expected everyone to rush up to me, arms outstretched, and call me “sister.” But the level of dissonance I encountered did take me by surprise. (247)

Such reception helped Duke to accept her insider/outsider perspective. Whereas Harris and Richburg resented their African heritage, Duke thrived on it, admitting that she loved living in Africa, “... the way it felt, so foreign but familiar; so much another world, and yet a world that was my heritage. I was, after all, rare: a black American woman foreign correspondent” (8). Duke’s narrative recalls Era Bell Thompson, who embraced her role and the privilege she had in Africa, using her unique perspective as an advantage.

Duke shares other thematic similarities with black female authors writing about Africa. Like Angelou and Golden, she used her narrative about Africa to validate the multi-facetedness of her identity. By emphasizing its diverse aspects—her blackness, her African heritage, her Americanness, her gender, and her social status—Duke was able to

refute the idea that being American and of African descent rendered her dysfunctional, a view epitomized by Wright, Richburg, and Harris. Although she did not name Richburg and Harris, her comments speak directly to their narratives. In the following passage, for instance, she easily reconciled the inner conflict that afflicted both Richburg and Harris:

Others, who perhaps know more of Africa, have been so repulsed by Africa's starving children, its murderous mobs, and its thieving dictators that they have decided that they simply cannot claim the African part of their identity. Whole books have been written on the subject, mostly built on the false notion that Americanness and Africanness are somehow mutually exclusive, as if we are to make a choice. For me it is not that complicated. My people became American because of what was done to Africa. The histories of both lands inhabit my consciousness and course through my veins. (246)

With this declaration, Duke launched her final attack on Harris, Richburg, and other black Americans who adopted such views.

Duke's perspective, though notably different from that of Richburg and Harris, still shared many thematic similarities. In their own ways, each de-emphasized black Americans' personal and collective engagement with Africa in favor of an examination of the relationships, political influence, and economic responsibility of the West toward Africa. They also celebrated black Americans' "Americanness," reassessing the validity of "blackness" and "Africanness" as central elements of black American identity. All three narratives were reflective of the new horizons and opportunities for black Americans made possible by integration and desegregation in the United States. They emerged at a moment when black Americans were achieving unprecedented levels of

participation in American society. As a result, the writers' conceptions of themselves as Americans were necessarily affected. In the tradition of other travel narratives about Africa produced by black Americans, their assessments of Africa were as informative about Africa as they were emblematic of black Americans' sense of their identity at specific moments in history.

Conclusion:
Black American Travel Narratives about Africa

For a myriad of personal and professional reasons, a significant number of black Americans traveled to Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, producing numerous narratives about their experiences there. Although Africa and its politics are the purported themes of the narratives, central to all of them is a concern with black American identity as well as the racial and cultural connections between black Americans and Africa. In other words, although the authors discuss Africa, they do so in the service of discussing black American identity.

This dissertation argues that black American travel narratives about Africa reveal more about the writers' perceptions of their black American identity than they do about Africa or its politics. Using eight books produced by black writers during the second half of the twentieth century as case studies, it demonstrates how the historical, political, economic, and social backdrop informed writers' perceptions of Africa and their identities.

The second half of the twentieth century was a transformative moment in history, both in the United States and in Africa. Among the changes taking place in Africa were the large-scale independence movements occurring simultaneously in several countries, the formation of new republics, and, toward the end of the century, the fall of apartheid in South Africa and the aftermath of the Cold War. During this same period, black Americans experienced radical social changes in the United States, resulting from the passage of Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation and the periods of desegregation and integration that followed. These changes offered black Americans new privileges as U.S. citizens and greater access to social and economic opportunities. I contend that

these factors deeply influenced black American conceptions of identity and perceptions of their relationship with Africa.

My dissertation considers how a select group of writers used their travel narratives to interrogate existing notions of Africa and black American identity. It examines the critical reception of these texts in order to understand how they were read, misread, or overlooked by their intended and unintended audiences. In so doing, the dissertation highlights important factors about the writers' backgrounds and the diverse audiences for whom they wrote, as well as popular assumptions about Africa, gender, and black American identity that they sought to affirm or disrupt. Black American travel narratives epitomize how Africa has been an enduring, but ever changing, signifier in conceptions of black American identity and reflect how black Americans' associations with Africa—real and imagined—have been influenced by a number of social, political, cultural, and personal factors.

New Narratives

Whether motivated by love, money, or the desire to rekindle a long-lost connection, black repatriation to Africa remains alive and well, even if it never quite became the high-volume, emotional return to African roots that initially captured the imagination of black intellectuals and celebrities like boxer Mohammad Ali decades ago.

– Chris Stein, “Back to Africa? For some African-Americans, the answer is yes”

According to a 2014 *Christian Science Monitor* article, “Back to Africa? For some African-Americans, the answer is yes,” reporter Chris Stein wrote that more than 3,000 black Americans currently reside in Ghana. Among them are a sizable number of retirees who have chosen to live out their golden years in the motherland. Their motivations are diverse: Some come to rediscover their roots, others start charitable organizations, and still other come to “simply relax” (Stein).

Indeed, Ghana has had a long history of black American residents that dates back to the early days of its independence, when Kwame Nkrumah encouraged members of the African diaspora to come to Ghana. Among those who heeded his call were students, scholars, activists, and artists, and most notably W.E. B. Du Bois, who died there.

Chris Stein interviewed several black American expatriates and found that despite some social challenges most were happy with their decision to relocate. Many complained, however, that they were still viewed by Ghanaians as “obronis,” a word meaning white person or foreigner. Others were frustrated because although Ghana has an indefinite residence permit for people of African descent, it is virtually impossible to obtain. And yet, Ghana continues to attract visitors and permanent residents from the diaspora. According to the country’s diaspora bureau, more than 5,000 persons of African descent live in Ghana. This includes many from the United States and the Caribbean (Stein).

Among those interviewed for the article was Imahkus Okofu (Seestah Imahkus), a woman from New York City who has been living in Ghana for 24 years. In 1999, Okofu published a narrative about her repatriation experience. Appropriately titled Returning Home Ain’t Easy But it Sure Is a Blessing, the book chronicles her decision to leave her children and grandchildren in the United States in order to make a new life in Ghana with her American husband, Ben. Both were retired; she had been an assistant personnel director with a travel business, while he was a retired New York fireman. Like other travel narratives by black Americans, Okofu discussed the social challenges of returning “home.” She wrote that the Ghanaians she met knew very little about black Americans. They questioned her decision to relocate more than two decades ago , especially since so

many of them want to move to the United States. This alone made it initially difficult to form connections. Like other female travelers, Okofu described the challenging cultural adjustments to African languages and customs. She wrote about her experiences as a wife, emphasizing the tremendous strain that moving to Ghana put on her marriage. For her, however, all of these adjustments and challenges were worth it. In Ghana, Okofu found a sense of security that she did not enjoy in the United States. Ultimately, she saw her decision as a blessing, one that in her mind outweighed any of the challenges she faced. She wrote

Returning home ain't easy but it sure is a blessing. People often ask, “What are those blessings?” First of all I have returned home after five hundred years in captivity. Now I live where I have always wanted to live, on the oceanfront of our historical homeland with a partner that wants the same things I want. We own our home, without a thirty year mortgage to pay or the payment of rent, we pay low taxes and live a basically stress free lifestyle. I walk the streets of my town after dark without fear. (292)

Both Okofu’s narrative and Stein’s article acknowledge that many black Americans do not choose to relocate permanently; there remains a persistent interest among them which still motivates thousands to travel to Africa each year.

Black American narratives about Africa continue to emerge in the twenty-first century. The most interesting of these narratives are those not published by journalists or professional writers, but by students, missionaries, backpackers, volunteers, vacationers, and other black folks who “just up and decided to move” to Africa. Some, like Imahkus

Okofu have self-published their narratives, while others exist in the form of diaries, journals, letters, and audio recordings.

In addition, new social mediums have emerged chronicling the thoughts, hopes, fears, and desires of black American travelers in Africa. These include articles and blogs published on the Internet, podcasts, vlogs (video logs), as well as footage from reality television shows. While narratives published on social media are not necessarily viewed as literary and are different from the “stamp and letter” narratives discussed previously, they are nevertheless valid texts for discussion because of their thematic similarity.

Among the reoccurring themes are an attention to black American identity and a concern with the relationship between Africans and Africans in the diaspora. In “Where I’m From,” an online article published in 2014 on TheSlate.com, black American blogger Aisha Harris discussed how her recent trip to Kenya changed the way she thought about her identity:

Having never lived in the land of my ancestors, I will never truly understand what it means to be Kenyan, Nigerian, or, more generally, African. But my recent travels ... gave me my first immersive understanding of an African country, and I did feel a kinship with the people I met: It was fascinating to spend time in a country where the majority of the population was not white, and to interact with such a wide range of social classes and cultures ... Finally, after years of learning from afar, I got to understand a small slice of African culture for myself. I’m eager to experience even more in the future, even if it’s only as a tourist and not as a long- lost family member returning “home.” (Harris)

Similarly, in his “5 Lessons Traveling to Africa Taught Me About Being Black in America,” Ernest Owens, blogger for *The Huffington Post*, discussed how his brief visit to Ghana in 2014 provided him with a fresh perspective on both his African American identity and his relationship with blacks across the diaspora. His travel experience confirmed the need for better dialogue and understanding among Africans in the diaspora:

When I attended college, it often aggravated me how black Americans felt Africans were another foreign group of people they could not identify with. And it was also troubling to see some native Africans look down on blacks in the country [the United States] for not feeling as self-confident and culturally strong about their heritage. At this very moment in our present history, we now more than ever need to put down our media-driven stereotypes about one another and have real conversations about it. (Owens)

Among other significant lessons Owens learned while in Africa was the significance of privilege. Earlier texts by Era Bell Thompson, Lynne Duke, and others discussed how travel to Africa forced them to acknowledge their American privilege. Like them, Owens recognized the benefits of his American citizenship. But he also acknowledged another kind of privilege: the ability to live in a society where his race was not a burden. He wrote:

During my stay in Ghana, for the first time in my life I felt what it was like to be in the majority. Most of the population is black and the experience of seeing my skin color on nearly every television station, public arena, and facet of society gave me a psychological gratification and confidence. A sense of pride that

allowed me to walk in the street without feeling targeted ... My time in Africa gave me a first-hand look at what it feels like to not be a second-class citizen in society. (Owens)

This sense of self is what seems to keep drawing black Americans like Owens and others to Africa.

The notion of privilege and the meaning of race that Owens addressed are among the topics discussed on websites dedicated specifically to black American travel. Sites such as www.imblacknittravel.com do not focus specifically on Africa, but provide virtual spaces for black American travelers to dialogue about their experiences as travelers in countries where their perceptions of race and identity are often complicated.

Technology offers new, broader forms to share discourse. An important feature that distinguishes these new social media narratives from earlier texts is that the technology invites immediate audience engagement. Online posts about Africa by black American travelers have the ability to spark instant dialogue. Consider the vlog “Afro American in Africa,” which is hosted by YouTube.com. In it, a twenty-nine year old black American woman from New York chronicles her experiences living and working in Namibia. Using her video postings, she seeks to dispel stereotypes about Africa and encourage more black Americans to visit and relocate to Africa. She hopes to use her vlog to create a platform for discussion among black Americans who live in Africa, as well as and among those who want to visit. The comments generated by her blog attest to her achievement of both of these goals. Consider Sherese Thompson’s response to, “The Reasoning,” a vlog entry about experiences living in Africa:

Hi Sister, brave move ... I too live in Africa ... however would like to

travel to [others] places in Africa for historical reasons. My experiences have been nothing but peace and a sense of belonging ... Plus it [is] cheaper for food, housing and utilities and no GMO's in your food ... I have more questions for you ... let's see if we can connect somehow.

(“Afro American in Africa”)

In addition to the “Afro American in Africa” vlog on Youtube.com, author Kaylan Reid Shipanga has a blog, “African American in Africa” featuring other black Americans living and working in Africa. Overall, the feedback that she receives from other black Americans is positive, though some are skeptical about building relationships with Africans. One commentator, “Jae Millz” wrote, for example, that he believed “most Africans don't want [you] in [their country]” and that “African Americans need to wake up and learn America is our true identity” (“Afro American in Africa”). Notably, his comments generated hundreds of replies from dissenting Africans and black Americans.

A sampling of the written responses generated by her vlog and blog postings demonstrates that her audience is broad and includes both black Americans and Africans living on and off of the continent. They also give voice to some of the tensions that exist between black Americans and Africans:

Commentator CzarJuliusIII wrote:

I think it's great that you have created this channel. However, one suggestion: don't confuse these people. The majority of Americans already think that Africa is a country. So when you are talking about your life there, remain specific in the “Life as an African-American in Namibia” sense. You want to educate people and remove them out of the “Africa is a country” mentality. Again, I love your

channel and I think what you are doing is very helpful to those who have not yet been to the continent.

Commentator Oriolori89 wrote:

Yeah that's truth I don't know what it is with Americans and their "AFRICA IS A COUNTRY" mentality is annoying.

Commentator Melinda Kalenga wrote:

Wow I was amazed when I found your channel well I'm African, and I'm from Congo Kinshasa, but I'm currently living in USA I left my country in 2008 ...

When it comes to African-Americans they were asking me questions about

Africa that [were] so unthinkable, some of the questions I didn't have

answers to ... At some point I realized it was my job to educate them

about my continent, and I have done just that, but I must say that

you're amazing to take a trip to Africa experiencing beauty of our

motherland. I'm proud of you. I'm looking forward to going back home soon.

("Afro American in Africa")

The comments generated by the "Afro American in Africa" vlog expose the great social and cultural divide that can exist between black Americans and Africans. It also underscores the ignorance and misperceptions that still exists among both groups.

Thematic Shifts: African-AMERICAN or AFRICAN-American

The troubled relationship between black Americans and Africans has been highly publicized in traditional and social media. In August 2014, Gene Demby, a lead blogger for National Public Radio's "Code Switch," published "Are You, Like, African-AMERICAN or AFRICAN-American?" Demby reiterates the claims made by journalist

Donovan X. Ramsey who pointed to the differences in tone between how President Obama addressed a group of graduating seniors from Morehouse College and how he spoke to young leaders from Africa, who had come to Washington for the African Summit. Ramsey alleges that Obama took on a “finger-wagging, pull-up-your-pants approach that he often takes with African-Americans” with the first group, while adopting a laudatory tone with the second group (Demby). Ramsey viewed Obama’s shift in tones as evidence of the difference in his perception of blacks from America and from elsewhere. While the merit of Ramsey’s argument may be questionable, it sheds light on the sentiments of some black Americans who feel that Africans are treated better than black Americans. Demby sums up Ramsey’s argument:

This bifurcation ... is illustrated in how folks see and treat native-born blacks and how they perceive and interact with blacks from elsewhere. One often-cited data point is this: While first- and second-generation black immigrants compose a tiny percentage of the American black population, they’re overrepresented at top universities and annals of commerce. So, the thinking goes, blacks who aren’t ‘from here’ are harder-working and less entitled than American-born black folks. (Demby)

Here, Demby alludes to what many have characterized as the widening rift between black Americans and Africans, particularly in the United States.

Discussions of this rift underscore how the recent histories of black Americans and African immigrants have shaped both groups’ perspectives on America, race, and identity. In “How Africans differ from African Americans,” Sierra Leonean-born Jacob Conteh, cites the different ways in which black Americans and Africans respond to

racism and discrimination as an example of how their histories inform their differing outlooks:

African Americans usually see racism as the main cause of poverty among their people. They are also quick to point out instances of perceived racism, even in circumstances where it is ambiguous, unclear or more complex than simple racial bigotry or discrimination ... For Africans, after suffering many years in civil wars, military coups and other problems, they are happy to be in a country that offers them freedom. They are ready to integrate into the American culture without getting involved in the lingering racial conflicts. They do not typically get involved in the ongoing civil rights struggle—and that has angered many African-Americans. (Conteh)

The impact of the growing numbers of African immigrants in the United States on the complicated relationship that they have with black Americans remains to be seen. As with other societal shifts that have occurred in the United States and Africa, these shifts are bound to have an effect on black Americans' conceptions of their identities, especially as it relates to Africa. As new print and digital narratives emerge, we will see how these shifts generate new discussions and new narratives about black American identity, Africa, and relationships among members of the African diaspora both in Africa and in the United States.

Selected Travel Narratives

The Big Sea by Langston Hughes (1940)

African Journey by Eslanda Goode Robeson (1945)

Black Power: A Record of Reaction in the Land of Pathos by Richard Wright (1954)

Africa, Land of My Fathers by Era Bell Thompson (1954)

Journey to Africa by Hoyt Fuller (1971)

The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro by Lesley Alexander Lacy (1971)

Report from Part One by Gwendolyn Brooks (1972)

Migrations of the Heart by Marita Golden (1983)

All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes by Maya Angelou (1986)

Native Stranger by Eddy L. Harris (1992)

Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa by Keith Richburg (1997)

Not Yet African by Kevin Gordon (1998)

Returning Home Ain't Easy but it sure is a Blessing by Imahkus Nzingah Okufu (1999)

Mandela, Mobutu, and Me by Lynne Duke (2003)

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