

Writing Travel, Writing Resistance: African American Narratives of Travel in the Age of Segregation

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Abstract:

In *African American Travel Narratives from Abroad: Mobility and Cultural Work in the Age of Jim Crow*, Gary Totten sheds new light on black writers' journeys, reading their travel texts as means to perform 'cultural work' and resist Jim Crow policies. His insightful analysis of the texts highlights their potential to construct new narratives of African American mobility and identity in the face of racial violence and discrimination.

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From the end of Reconstruction Era in the late 1870s until the beginning of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the so-called Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in the United States – mostly, but not exclusively, in Southern states. These segregation laws made Americans of African descent into second-class citizens, denying them civil rights and civil liberties. Despite the increasing numbers of African Americans traveling within the United States as well as beyond its national boundaries, violence and segregationist policies continued to physically and socially limit their mobility. In *African American Travel Narratives from Abroad: Mobility and Cultural Work in the Age of Jim Crow* (2015), Gary Totten examines the travel texts of selected African American authors that emerged during this period of oppression and racial violence. His analysis of the texts centers on the relation of mobility and identity, with Totten arguing that “[t]he cultural work that the genre undertakes in order to understand and represent African American mobility generates specific discursive spaces for the construction of identity” (p. 5).

The focus of Totten’s study is travel narratives by Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, Matthew Henson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston. Creating a cross-generic corpus that includes autobiographies, magazine articles and pamphlets by well-established writers as well as by those yet to undergo extensive investigation, Totten demonstrates the variety and heterogeneity of African American travel writing. Each of the book’s chapters is devoted to one of the five writers, providing biographical information and placing the texts within a larger historical framework, which makes following his analysis easy, even for readers less familiar with the genre or the historical period.

As Totten states, his reading of the travelogues is informed by Stephen Greenblatt’s “ideas about resonance and cultural boundaries” (p. 4); Totten thus approaches the travel texts as discursive objects that perform cultural work. He argues that the writers’ cultural work is manifested in their textual output that challenges prevailing presuppositions about the experience and history of African Americans during Jim Crow, as well as in the texts’ probing and testing of genre conventions. In this sense, the writers perform cultural work in a threefold

way: “literally, through their cultural interventions abroad; aesthetically, through their negotiation of tensions that characterize travel writing as a genre; and rhetorically, through their arguments about the complex relationship between mobility and identity in African American travel” (p. 15). Totten puts the writers center stage but keeps the outline of his theoretical framework relatively brief. It would have been beneficial for readers and subsequent research, if he had elaborated on his conception of cultural work and provided a more thorough theoretical framework.

The value of Totten’s book lies in his insightful observation of the significance of mobility for the literary creation and assertion of black subjectivity in a hostile environment. He presents and juxtaposes different strategies employed by the writers to voice their cultural critique and ultimately find ways to challenge or resist the violence of Jim Crow policy. For example, scrutinizing Ida B. Wells’s transatlantic journey to the United Kingdom to promote her anti-lynching campaigns, Totten highlights the narrative strategies she employed to claim authority over her story and her mobility. Totten emphasizes that “[i]n her transatlantic writing, speaking, and traveling, Wells’s mobile black body becomes corporeal proof of the potentially empowering aspects of physical and cultural mobility” (p. 17). By presenting herself as an eyewitness to the horrors of lynching in the South, Wells’s body and narrative serve as a testimony to the disastrous absurdity of racial segregation and violence against black bodies. In the following chapter, Totten contrasts Wells’s outspoken critique of racial violence to the rhetoric in Booker T. Washington’s *The Man Farthest Down* (1912), which chronicles his journey to Europe where he studied the working conditions of the laboring poor. Washington’s text promotes industrial education in order to improve the economic situation for African Americans in the South and thus gain equality, rather than calling for enfranchisement and radical activism.

In the chapter on Matthew Hensons’s travel account *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), Totten focuses on yet another narrative strategy for voicing cultural critique: He points out how Hensons’s expedition travelogue incorporates genre traits both of the slave narrative and also the European exploration narrative. This creates a tension that Totten interprets as the author pushing against narrative constraints and an assertion of his identity as an autonomous traveling subject. As Totten concludes, Hensons’s text challenges preconceived notions about the positions of black and white travelers and questions the limitations of the social and racial restrictions for African Americans during Jim Crow.

By uncovering the writers’ different agendas that inspired their itineraries and analyzing how these experiences informed their writing, Totten’s innovative work casts new light on late 19th and early 20th century travel texts in which black mobility and identity are negotiated, while the prevailing ideologies that represent African American travelers are called into question. Totten shows how travel texts served as expressions of mobile black identities and asserted the travelers’ autonomy in a time when African Americans stood on the margins of citizenship. Totten’s work is certainly a valuable addition to research on African American travel writing, a genre that has attracted increasing critical attention in recent decades. His insightful observations, the book’s concise structure, and the clear and straightforward writing style make

African American Travel Narratives from Abroad a worthwhile read for both experts and newcomers to this literary field.