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**Book Review: Africa Is Not My Home**

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Reviewed Work:

In the context of Multiculturalism and Globalization, Oana Cogeanu’s book makes a unique and valuable contribution to the study of African-American literature and to the study of travel literature in general.

As the author herself states in the “Introduction”, this study proposes to discuss several examples of works written by the descendants of black slaves in America, focusing “exclusively on the self-identification criterion” (Cogeanu 7).

In order to achieve her purpose, Oana Cogeanu organizes the book in six parts: an Introduction, two chapters with two subchapters each, a Conclusion, a Bibliography and an Annex with “African-American Autotaxidigraphies 18th – 20th Century”. She approaches the texts semiotically, from a ‘textcult’ point of view, and arranges her study thematically. As she argues: “It were, of course, utopian to aim at an exhaustive coverage of the itineraries in time and space of African-American travel literature, and I only propose here a general critical description of African-American autotaxidigraphy and a specific analysis of several selected texts that will serve at best as exemplary models and at least as examples” (Cogeanu 8).


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1 *Introduction into African-American Travel-Writing*
2 autotaxidigraphy: ‘autos’ plus ‘taxidi’ plus graphein – the writing of one’s own travels; both fiction and non-fiction, the authority of truth plus the power of non-truth; external autotaxidigraphy: travels abroad – Africa.
3 travelogue: travel narrative – itineraries, places, monuments, customs, artifacts, characters.
4 text: ethic product, identical with the reality given; or aesthetic product, different from the reality given; consubstantial with that which is before it and with that which is behind it.
5 pretext: before the text; its elements derive from the literary discourse and from cultural intertextuality.
6 metatext: with the text, the world in/of the text.
7 transtext: beyond the text; the effects of the text on the discourses of experience and imagination; the function of the text to highlight and even to reform discourse itself.
8 autobiography: ‘auto’ plus ‘bio’ plus ‘graphein’ – the self writes his life; something is transformed into something else.
10 the talking book: the master reads from it > it speaks to the master (the Bible); the great religious code used to maintain an economic mission; the sacred Sacrament of the Occidental world; ‘writing’ plus ‘travel’ liberation through text; ‘I’m writing, therefore I exist’
11 the perlocutionary act: it privileges what is accomplished through its writing; it certifies the author ontologically.
12 autointertextuality: any reference to the experiential world is always already a reference to its transcription in previous or subsequent texts.
Although, for some, it might seem a little difficult to read, due to its abundant theoretical analysis, there are several major points which strongly recommend this book to your attention.

Firstly, the author starts the definition of travel literature with a comparison between a contemporary travel guidebook from the *Lonely Planet* series and Marco Polo’s 13th century travel-book *Il Milione*. Seen from the perspective of comparative formalist analysis, travel writings share the ‘leave-travel-return’ structure with the epic genre. The definition continues with the difference between fact and fiction, Oana Cogeanu’s conclusion being that travel literature is neither pure fact, nor pure fiction; it is inspired by places and people as well as by imaginary frames and characters.

Secondly, African-American travel literature in particular is seen as belonging to several genres such as essay, report, journal, memoir and travelogue, with the ‘Middle Passage’ as its main theme, even when hidden, a “permanent hypotext” (Cogeanu 42), in the author’s words. Major themes in this chapter are: ‘destinations’, ‘boundaries’, ‘landmarks’, ‘directions’ and the ‘home’.

The ‘destinations’ are ideologically marked countries and continents. Africa, defined as Ghana and Liberia, means pan-Africanism and the black cradle of civilization, it means the ancestral home and the “building of a national home” (Cogeanu 43). Europe is modernism and refinement, art and the meeting place, in Paris, of blacks from all over the world. Russia means Communism, that is, social justice and no racism. Finally, the Middle East means Islamism and Mecca, the centre of colored people’s spiritual liberty.

The ‘boundaries’ show African-Americans as ‘strangers’ both home and abroad, while their ‘landmarks’ are ‘the tourist embarked in the Grand Tour’ (Cogeanu 50) and the ‘journey’ itself, during which the black traveler discovers the so-called ‘talking book’ mentioned above. These ‘landmarks’, the last of which will be “Africa as the impossibility of coming back home” (Cogeanu 54), are perceived by the author as the American dream uprooted, the first meaning of the Middle Passage being a “denial of the self” (Cogeanu 54).

The ‘directions’ are the attempts of the traveller to negotiate between slavery and freedom, with the ‘black sailor’ and the ‘ocean’ as the first prevailing motifs since the beginnings of this kind of African-American literature. America is always ‘home’, Africa is mostly viewed through western-made images in degrading terms. Self-discovery is the main purpose when visiting Russia, Europe or Jamaica in the case of feminine African-American voices.

The third and final major point in this book are the two examples on which our author compellingly applies her theories: Richard Wright – *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954) and Maya Angelou – *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986).

The ‘pretext’ for the very controversial African-American Richard Wright is his critique of Africa in terms of ideology, lack of realistic ideals and his distance towards the so-called cradle of blacks in the US. The ‘text’ is his main question – “What is Africa for me?” (Wright 4, qtd. in Cogeanu 98), which is not easy to answer. He is the author, the narrator and the main character of the story at the same time, and a subjective one, always wondering “But, am I African?” (Wright 4, qtd. in Cogeanu 98). Africa is primitive and irrational, it is his ‘alterity’, it is slave trade, exoticism, heathenism, sickness, maimed and grotesque bodies, sexuality, infantilism, instinct, myths instead of progress and animals-like behavior. Its cultural inheritance is very doubtful and Wright’s intellectual curiosity makes him wonder whether this so-called ancestors had not actually sold their own relatives to the white people. Their language means inferiority, their journalism is superficial, therefore they cannot be understood and need to be silenced, like characters in a silent movie. Color becomes meaningless, Wright has no race, no home, no feeling of origin or destination. He is, in Oana Cogeanu’s view, the ‘ideal tourist’. He wants himself an Occidental, he sees no similarities between African-Americans and Africans, whom he sees through the eyes of the colonizer. He is the ‘universal man’, yet he is black for the Occident and Occidental for the blacks, free but marginalized in Paris, and he needs to escape from Africa. Finally, the ‘transtext’ here is the combination between the colonialist texts of the white travellers and his continuous negotiation/debate of the African-American identity beyond

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13 with the clear purpose to improve his/her culture/education and get a better view on his/her current home.
race and ethnicity. In his own words: “I’m a rootless man... I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness... It seems to me the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it. I can make myself at home almost anywhere on this earth” (Wright 17, qtd. in Oana Cogeanu 129). And, in Oana Cogeanu’s words: “it is not a geographical, racial or ethnic home that Wright finds in his travels, but an ideal home built in Western letters” (Cogeanu 129).

The ‘pretext’ in Maya Angelou’s case are her previous writings, which turned her personal life into a bestseller in which she is the ‘exemplary figure’. The ‘text’ is her ‘egowriting project’ that once started can never reach its end. All through her works, she refuses to be identified with either the positive or the negative traditional images of black femininity. The temporary home for her, this time, is Ghana. She also suspects Africans of having been involved in the infamous slave trade and redefines ‘home’ through the relationships she builds with people there and at work, turning a concrete term into the product of her own imagination. Even when she becomes truly involved in their specific rituals, she feels like a ‘diaspora’, not like a native, she feels misunderstood and discriminated, although also accepted sometimes and she cannot translate herself to the Africans.

When her son becomes independent, she can find no more reasons to stay there and returns to America, because, as Oana Cogeanu argues: “As Maya has learned the relativity of home, she leaves us to suspect, as a critic says, that her traveling shoes are never really out of sight (Neubauer 1990:114). In many ways, one needs to put on his/her travelling shoes in order to find a home” (146). As with Richard Wright, the conclusion is that home is nowhere and everywhere, on no specific country or continent, it is only circumstantially determined.

Or, shorty put: ‘Africa is not my home’.

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14 The ‘transtext’ here is a ‘trick’, the ‘signifying monkey’, as Oana Cogeanu calls it, quoting Henry Louis Gates Jr.
Works Cited:


Author

Sorina GEORGESCU is Ph.D. student at the University of Bucharest, with a thesis on slavery and abolitionism in America and Romania. She is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism at the Hyperion University, where she teaches English. She also teaches English for the Faculties of Physics and Mathematics at the same University. She published in English and Romanian, on themes related to multiculturalism, American and Romanian literature and culture, history, national myths, racism, Ethnic Studies. She is a member of the “Romanian American Studies Association” (RAAS), and of the “European American Studies Association” (EAAS). Currently, she is editorial-assistant at *Hypercultura*.

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