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Literary journeys - travel literature

[Black Issues Book Review, March-April, 2003 by Suzanne Rust](#)

Travel. It calms and soothes the body, moves the spirit and stimulates the mind. There is perhaps no better way to broaden your view of the world, discover personal truths and shatter myths. Once you step outside your day-to-day existence, whether on a Greyhound bus trip through the American South, a stroll down a Paris boulevard, or a trek through the Serengeti plains of southern Africa, you will never be quite the same. As a former expatriate who lived in Italy for ten years, I am fascinated by the transformative nature of travel and the new dimensions it can bring to your life.

Good travel writing can have the same effect. It takes you to places that you may never see. It introduces you to cultures unknown, and allows you to view people and geography in a new light, perhaps even a different time. From the mid-19th century to the present, black authors have written about their journeys, and through their travelogues anyone can be transported around the world.

Edwidge Danticat's *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* takes us to Carnival in Haiti. Despite having lived in Haiti until the age of 12, Danticat had never been to Carnival, the festivities celebrating the period just before Lent. Her family had warned her that Carnival was too dangerous and too "wanton" for a young girl. But Danticat decided she was finally ready to exorcise her demons. "I was aching for a baptism by crowd, here among my own people," she writes of her first Carnival in 2001. "I wanted to confront the dual carnival demons, which I had been so carefully taught to fear: the earsplitting music and the unbridled dancing amid a large group of people, whose inhibitions were sometimes veiled by costumes and masks."

During the week before Carnival, Danticat explored the area in and around Jacmel, a place considered by many to be the "Riviera" of Haiti. Through her lively narrative, she takes us from the local cemetery to the lush rain forests and the rolling hills; she visits artists who have lived in various places from Colombia to New York, but who have returned to Jacmel for Carnival. We learn about Hadriana Siloe, Jacmel's "resident goddess," a beautiful woman

turned into a zombie on her wedding day. And we learn what it is to be a zombie: "Zombification is a state of deterioration based on the loss of one's ti bonanj, one's good angel, which turns one into a vacuous shell of one's former self."

The weekend of Carnival brings on the fireworks and a cast of colorful characters, costumes and masks that play a role in both Haitian history and folklore: the devilish Mathurians; the terrible Chaloska, a military-like figure with clawlike teeth (one that especially frightened Danticat as a child); the Yawe, an oxlike creature; plus an array of zombies, ghosts, Arawak natives, colonists, slaves and masks of figures such as Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and Che Guevara dance alongside apes, dragons, lions, parrots and a man masquerading as the AIDS virus who is followed by health workers distributing free condoms.

The music is pulsating, people are losing themselves to the rhythms, and Danticat's gradual but inevitable release is part of the collective joy. She can no longer resist the contagious revelry: "At last my body is a tiny fragment of a much larger being. I am part of a group possession, a massive stream of joy ... my head is spinning but I don't care ... In that brief space and time, the carnival offers all the paradoxical elements I value in life: anonymity, jubilant community, and belonging."

One of the great rewards of travel is freedom from our inhibitions. Who can we become in a new place? With no one back home to judge us, we can finally become our real selves? For African Americans of the 19th century, being away from the U.S. and its systemic racism sometimes offered a new lease on life. Author Pagan Kennedy's *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Century Congo* recounts the life of William Sheppard, an African-American missionary who traveled to the Belgian Congo in 1890 and eventually became the first Westerner to gain significant access to the elusive Kuba kingdom, one of Africa's last dynasties. Later, it was Sheppard's accounts and photographs of the Belgian regime's genocidal treatment of native tribes that sparked the first human rights campaign helping free the Congo.

As a young, southern Presbyterian minister, Sheppard longed for a missionary post in Africa, but the church's white-led foreign mission would send him only if he were accompanied by a white missionary, and that was hard to come by. Eventually, the right partner was found in Sam Lapsley, and the two men, both in their early twenties, set sail for what was then the Belgian Congo. Once onboard ship, the men were on equal footing. And in Africa, they would share a tent and develop a strong bond, something unheard of at the time for both blacks and whites.

Kennedy artfully chronicles Sheppard's adventures: the trials and tribulations of traveling during the 1890s, the fevers, the initial sense of emotional distance that Sheppard felt towards the Africans, and the challenge of finding suitable converts to Christianity. Despite it all, Sheppard falls in love with Africa and begins to identify with the Congolese culture and its people.

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Sheppard and Lapsley decide to investigate the forbidden kingdom of Kuba, for they have heard how extraordinary the people are. But when Lapsley suddenly dies from blackwater fever, a potent form of malaria, a devastated Sheppard goes it alone to become the leader of one of the only all-black missions in Africa. Sheppard manages to navigate until he finally arrives at the Kuba region. When Kuba's King Kot aMweky discovers that Sheppard speaks their language, he decides to strengthen his reign by creating the "ghost of a dead king" and introduces Sheppard as the reincarnation of a great king named "Bope Mekabe." Sheppard, as spirit king "Bope Makabe," lived amongst the Kuba, learning about the sophisticated yet often-cruel tribe, and eventually brought home a trove of artifacts as proof of the grandeur of the Kuba kingdom.

Sheppard would return to America periodically to raise funds for his explorations. An animated orator, he was billed as the "Black Livingstone" and drew huge crowds to his lectures about his adventures. But in America, he suffered under the oppressiveness of Jim Crow, which forced his oversized personality into a more humble version for his white colleagues. Sheppard was a dynamic figure. He was missionary, an explorer (he discovered a lake that still bears his name), an anthropologist, a big-game hunter, an activist and a "king." Living in Africa, he was free to be all of these things and more. One of his dreams was to build a haven for black Americans in Africa. It never came to pass. But the life he lived in Africa was the full, rich life he deserved though at that time, he never could have experienced it in America. Kennedy's book is a loving and thorough tribute to an early black explorer.

A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing reveals the world of travel through the eyes of adventurers, artists, expatriates, missionaries and tourists. With some 47 entries, this dazzling anthology, skillfully edited by Farah J. Griffith and Cheryl J. Fish, is proof that there are very few places on Earth where African Americans have not ventured.

We are treated to the tales of Nat Love, the Tennessee-born cowboy who headed out West to Kansas in 1869 in search of adventure. "I gloried in the danger, and the wild and free life of the plains, the new country I was continually traversing and the many new scenes and incidents continually arising in the life of a rough rider." His memoirs don't touch on the kind of racial discrimination prevalent during Reconstruction. It appears that Love was a cowboy who herded cattle and horses for ranches throughout Wyoming, Texas and the Dakotas. He won shooting, roping and riding competitions, earning him the nickname "Deadwood Dick." He met Buffalo Bill, fought against Indians and, it appears, lived the life he wanted. His accounts of the "boundless plains" and sense of adventure are captivating.

In another part of the world, Matthew Henson made his mark. Henson, the personal servant to Lieutenant Robert E. Peary, was part of the first team to ever reach the North Pole in 1886. His diary entries of encounters with Eskimos, a brush with death in icy waters and life at sea let readers experience what it was like to be part of the expedition, as well as Henson's own sense of pride. "... I felt a savage joy and exultation. Another world's accomplishment was done and finished, and as in the past, from the beginning of history, wherever the world's work was done by a white man, he had been accompanied by a colored man" wrote Henson.

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The book contains writings from Pan-Africanist like Paul Cuffe and W.E.B. Du Bois, as they explore different countries of Africa in search of an alternative homeland that would embrace African Americans with economic opportunities and brotherly love. Meanwhile, France, a "tamer" part of the globe, attracted artists and writers such as Harlem Renaissance painter and poet Gwendolyn Bennett who visited Paris in 1925. Her journals capture Paris evenings of dancing and drinking champagne at Bricktop's nightclub, and the unexpected emotions that can occur when one is far from home.

On spending the Fourth of July in Paris, she wrote: "A strange new patriotism has sprung up in me since I've been here in France ... there are times that I'd give half my remaining years to hear the "Star Spangled Banner" played. And yet even as I feel that way I know that it has nothing to do with the same `home' feeling I have when I see crowds of American white people jostling each other about...."

There are other essays in *Stranger in the Village* from pianist Hazel Scott, who hung out with Billie Holiday and Lester Young while living in Paris, as well as Countee Cullen who finds a great politeness in the French, and of course James Baldwin.

In addition, there are articles and essays from Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde and Andrea Lee in Russia; Booker T. Washington in the ghettos of Naples, Italy; Angela Davis' years in Germany as a philosophy student under Theodor Adorno; Ntozake Shange's trip to Nicaragua during the Sandinistas rule; Martin Luther King's voyage to India; and Richard Wright's experiences in Ghana.

More in-depth accounts of Richard Wright's travels may be found in *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Edited by Virginia Whatley Smith, various scholars and professors critique Wright's travelogues and depictions of the countries he visits and the people he encounters. "Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos" (1953) recounts his trip to the Gold Coast (Ghana); "The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung

Conference" (1956), tells of his Jakarta, Indonesia travels; and "Pagan Spain" (1957), his thoughts on Spanish life, are all carefully scrutinized. While Wright's actual travelogues give fascinating insight to the writer and the places he journeyed, Whatley Smith's collection of essays is probably best suited for Wright scholars and academics.

On a more contemporary side, a refreshing and insightful take on the American South comes from British journalist Gary Younge in his travelogue *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South*. A writer for England's *Guardian* newspaper, Younge grew up in a small town in England. Raised by a proud, pro-black Bajan mother, Younge writes about his struggle with identity and finding the proper balance between being Brit and his Bajan heritage.

As a child, he was intrigued by all things American and developed a particular curiosity for the South. A photograph of the Freedom Riders caught his attention. Retracing the journey of the Freedom Riders, who traveled by bus from Washington, D.C., through the South to challenge racial segregation, were the impetus for the book. In 1997, armed with an Ameripass and curiosity, Younge hopped a Greyhound bus and followed the path that the Freedom Riders did in 1961.

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The American South through the eyes of a black Brit produces interesting social commentary and a fresh perspective. Of Richmond Virginia's Monument Avenue, with its statues of Robert E. Lee, Jeb Stuart and Jefferson Davis, Younge writes: "I had spent an hour walking along a road in which four men who fought to enslave me (in the midst of this rage, the slight geographical fact that I am from England and not the American South felt like irrelevance--they stole my ancestors and just took them somewhere else) have been honoured and exalted." He is intrigued by the commitment of African Americans in the military; has a humorous moment trying to decipher haircut terminology at the black barbershop; and finally gets a chance to meet James Farmer, the organizer of the Freedom Riders; and hears about his experience firsthand.

What surprised Younge most about United States: "The extent of the poverty in places like Mississippi and the degree of wealth in places like Atlanta and Charlotte, among African Americans shocked me," he explains. "It suggested just how careful one has to be when referring to the black American experience since it was so fractured--particularly compared with Black Britain where the vast majority are working class."

There is a poignant moment when Younge finds himself in Mississippi, apparently the only place his fellow colleagues advised him that they couldn't vouch for his safety, the place where 14-year-old Emmett Till was murdered: "The next evening, once night had fallen, I drove up the Delta, stopped by the Tallahatchie River and stood for as long as I dared ... I was motivated by that perverse element of human nature that finds some primordial satisfaction in being terrified. I knew what had happened there, and I wanted to taste the fear ... the only thing scarier than the sights and sounds of rural Mississippi at night is its history." After six months, his homecoming to the U.K. brought about different challenges. "Trips to the United States make me bold and sassy," he writes. "Until the confidence of the New World has been drained from my system, I talk louder, walk faster.... Black Southerners might have been confused by my accent, but they were keen to embrace my blackness ... They gave me access to another dimension." And isn't that what we want from our travels.

Sometimes you need to leave home to create the world you desire, and sometimes it's enough to bring back new experiences that enrich what you already have. These travelogues are a testament to the legacy of African Americans and our journeys and adventures in the world.

THE GULLAH ISLANDS

My first true introduction to the Gullah Islands was n Julie Dash's hauntingly beautiful film *Daughters of the Dust*. I remember the gorgeous surroundings and the people holding fast to their traditions. The Gullah are a distinctive group of African Americans from communities on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, who for many years were isolated from the mainland. Because of their isolation in the small fishing and farming villages where they live, the Gullah people have been able to preserve their African cultural heritage. Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* is set in the Gullah Islands and cultural critic and culinary anthropologist Vertamae Grosvenor, a native, writes extensively about the region.

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When the American colonists of South Carolina and Georgia discovered how rice could thrive along the coastline, they immediately imported slaves who knew how to cultivate the crop. Those best suited for the task were West Africans, from Sierra Leone to Senegal, that part of West Africa also known as the "Rice Coast." The Gullah people are direct descendents of these slaves and their language, a mix of African dialects and Elizabethan English, is considered to be the only surviving English-based patois in North America.

Places of interest include Hilton Head, St. Helena, Beaufort and Penn Center. Listed below are some local agencies that offer tours: Gullah & Geechie Mahn Tours, (843) 838-7516, offers tours around St. Helena. Gullah Tours, (843) 763-7551, covers the Charleston area. Gullah Heritage Trail Tours (843) 681-7066 offers tours around Hilton Head.

Festivals are also a wonderful way of experiencing the Gullah culture: The Penn Center, one of the foremost institutions of education for former slaves and their descendents, offers informational courses in Gullah Culture, (843) 838-2432. Each November, they also host an annual festival, The Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration, where you can sample Gullah cuisine and music. Hilton Head offers The Native Gullah Celebration each winter. Contact their Chamber of Commerce for more information (843) 785-3673.

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[Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues](#) by Steve Cheseborough is a jewel of a book. An historical guide as well as a practical one, Cheseborough follows the birth and evolution of the blues and takes us to the places where it all happened--the Mississippi Delta.

He starts out in Memphis, although located in Tennessee, it functions as the economic and cultural capital of North Mississippi. Memphis is famous for Beale Street, once considered the focal point of black America in terms of musical culture. He quotes soul singer Rufus

Thomas: "If you were black for one Saturday night and on Beale Street, never would you want to be white again."

Musicians such as Furry Lewis, Jim Jackson and duo Frank Stokes and Dan Sain reigned supreme. Cheseborough lists blues clubs, including B.B. King's and the Black Diamond and attractions, including the home of W.C. Handy, the musician who helped commercialize the blues. Graceland, home to America's first white "soul brother" Elvis Presley, is also mentioned in this section.

Cheseborough visits Clarksville and the famed "Crossroads," the intersection of the Delta's two main blues highways--49 and 61--"the roads on which countless blues singers and other Delta folks walked or rode as the sought work, migrated north, or just rambled."

We learn that Clarksville is where Junior Parker and Ike Turner made their names and are walked through the Delta Blues Museum, which apparently has a small but interesting collection.

Over in Greenville, the Delta's largest city, Cheseborough suggests that readers check out local blues singer-harpist Willie Foster, and Eddie Cusic, a singer-acoustic guitarist. Greenville also hosts the region's oldest and largest blues festivals.

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The book is full of information regarding musicians such as Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith and an array of others. And Cheseborough gives us the lowdown on moonshine and barbecue, and details how to plan a blues tour of your own. This book is a must read for blues lovers or anyone wanting to enrich their knowledge of the musical legacy of the Mississippi Delta.--Suzanne Rust

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Having lived in Italy for ten years, I'm probably somewhat biased. But to me, Italy is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. It offers everything you could possibly want: the majestic mountains of Cortina, up north, vibrant cities such as Rome and Florence, and breathtaking seaside areas like the Amalfi Coast and the island of Sicily. It has a wealth of cultural and historical treasures. Then there is the shopping--Prada, Fendi, Gucci and others --as well as beautiful hand-painted ceramics. And of course, there is food and wine to die for.

It is a place where people are warm and welcoming, and with a little patience--leave that "gotta have it now" American attitude at home--Italy is a fairly easy country to navigate.

It does help to have a good guidebook, and a little help in finding the perfect place to stay. Margo Classe, an African-American travel writer, has an excellent hotel guide: [Hello Italy! Best Budget Hotels in Italy](#). Classe has personally visited each and every one, and offers a detailed account of what each hotel has to offer, from the size of the beds to which rooms have the best view. She also lists several restaurant selections for each city along with addresses for supermarkets and bookstores, as well as transportation tips. Her introduction offers practical travel advice and a listing of useful websites. She has also written [Hello hotel guides for France, Spain, Britain and Ireland](#).

It is interesting to note the personal details in Classe's biography. We are told that she was raised in orphanages until her late teens where she was often abused, however, "through a

resilient spirit [she] managed to escape by reading about far away places, educating herself in the process." Ah, the healing power of travel.

To visit Italy through the eyes of author Andrea Lee, an African-American expatriate living in Italy, her collection *Interesting Women* contains in sightful, witty well-written short stories of women living and traveling abroad, many set in Italian cities.

The *African-American Travel Guide: To Hot, Exotic, and Fun-Filled Places* by Jon Haggins takes readers to far away places such as Brazil, Ecuador, Fiji, Morocco and Senegal; Haggins, a sort of "travel guru" with his own television show, syndicated column and travel agency, offers journal entry-like descriptions of exotic locales. Clearly a seasoned traveler, his introduction gives detailed pre-vacation advice on everything from basic passport advice and how to avoid digestive problem from eating foreign food, to how to barter in craft markets and bazaars. His personalized approach is informative, and often amusing and fearless.

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Of his trip to Morocco, strolling through Marrakech's Main Square, the Place Djemaa el Fna, he writes: "Filled with an eclectic group of animated performers, snake charmers blowing wind instruments ... street performers. drag queens, acrobats, fortune tellers"; while the next minute, he is sampling grilled freshly killed lamb and a cup of sweet, mint tea at a roadside stand. His journey to Senegal "was a culture shock and an enlightening experience," adding that he felt like he was home. He describes an emotional tour of Goree Island, the point of embarkation for many African slaves headed to the New World, and a visit to another of Senegal's main attractions, Pink Lake. Haggins also explains various cultural customs--men holding hands for instance: "At first I thought it was a sexual thing. One afternoon, our guide grabbed my hand; I reacted uncomfortably for a few moments. Then I realized that he was complimenting me ... it was a sign of friendship."

The author writes of Brazil's African heritage while visiting Salvador, Bahia, and goes beyond Rio's beaches, exploring the Sao Bento Monastery and the Carmen Miranda museum. Haggins has put together an interesting and culturally aware guide to the world.--Suzanne Rust

Suzanne Rust is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Variety, Italian Elle and on various websites; she has also worked in radio. Rust, a native New Yorker, lived the expatriate life in Rome, Italy, for ten years where she wrote and worked in film production. The travel piece, "Literary Journeys" beginning on page 48, has special meaning for Rust. "I read some wonderful books for the article. I could really connect with all the emotions one feels living abroad. The novelty of it all, the sense of possibility and adventure and, of course, those moments of breathtaking loneliness when you hunger for anything American, anything familiar"

A frequent contributor to Black Issues Book Review, she is currently working on a series of books for children.

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