

“A daughter come home?” The Travel Writings of Colleen J. McElroy

A different vision

The US has been a postcolonial nation in one sense for more than two-and-a-quarter centuries now, but its literature is not what scholars and students of postcolonialism normally have in mind when they conduct their studies. The reasons for this are several and complicated. One is the history and legacy of slavery in the US. Another is the attention of postcolonialists to countries that gained their independence more recently, in the twentieth century. A larger reason is the conduct of the US as the new imperium, exercising its power over actual and aspirational postcolonial states. As a consequence, postcolonial (as distinct from multicultural) studies have rarely embraced African-American writing. This is despite the eminence of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African-American postcolonial theorists such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois and despite the fact that “in institutional terms (though not in terms of political practice) postcolonial critique is most visibly conducted from the universities of the contemporary imperial power, the USA” (Young 61). (The parenthesis underscores the point.) Writers from the African diaspora in the Caribbean are the subject of postcolonial commentaries; writers from the African diaspora in the US are generally not. Notwithstanding the long tradition of pan-Africanism and the identification of black American radicals with the political struggles of liberation movements in the “third world,” African-Americans (though not Asian-Americans or Hispanic Americans) tend to be disregarded by postcolonialists for whom the US is a target rather than a focus. Barbara Korte’s discussion of “‘postcolonial’ travel writing,” for example, proceeds on the understanding that “it comprises travelogues by writers originating from former British colonies (apart from the United States)” (Korte 153).

In 1903 DuBois published his now famous diagnosis of double-consciousness:

One always feels his two-ness,—American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body ... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American ... (qtd. in Gates and McKay 615)

For fugitive slaves the sense of ambivalence was reinforced by their experiences of travel in Europe. Frederick Douglass, seeking in 1845, after the publication of his *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, “a refuge from republican slavery in monarchical England,” undergoes a transformation in Britain: “the chattel becomes a man.” Douglass finds himself admitted to public places “on equal terms with people as white as any I ever saw in the United States” and is “regarded and treated at every turn with the kindness and deference paid to white people” (365, 171).

For African-Americans travelling and writing more recently than Douglass, their hyphenated identity has continued to produce tensions and contradictions but for some different reasons. First, the status of the US as the only global superpower has meant that the focus is now on the second part of the term: African-Americans are viewed as Americans. Second, African-Americans who travel now do so, by and large, because they choose and can afford to. Third, their narratives of travel excite less attention and approval, both because of the prejudice against travel writing as a literary form (Youngs, “Importance” 55-56) and because accounts of voluntary travel are less prominent in the African-American canon than those of involuntary travel. Travel writing is not the most readily received form of African-American literature, and African-American travel writers are conscious of the comparative lack of critical attention given to their genre of choice (McElroy E-mail 12 Feb. 2005).

One of those whose works have been understudied and undervalued and whose writings about travel reflect and express the ambivalence and contradictions outlined above is Colleen J. McElroy. “[A]lways I am aware that my vision of the world will differ from that of my usual travel companions,” McElroy has written in a volume of her travel memoirs (*Long Way* 224). The difference is largely due to the fact that McElroy is the great-granddaughter of a slave (vi), and most of her travelling companions are not. Indeed, McElroy’s experiences in the United States mean that she does not even “need to travel to be reminded that I see the world differently” (224). She notices, for example, the absence of black people from films shot by whites in areas in which ordinary blacks live. But her travels seem to deepen her awareness of her different perspective. In Australia, for instance, she sees beneath the superficial acknowledgment of Aboriginal history:

Everywhere I went, in big cities like Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, there were references to Aboriginal culture. But if I hadn’t really been looking for them, I could have left the country believing that there were

very few Aborigines living in Australia. I don't mean in the Outback ... [b]ut in the cities, Aborigines were only symbols. (225)

McElroy compares the Aborigines' lack of visibility in urban centres with the condition of African-Americans symbolised by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a comparison that invites attention to the similarities in the postcolonial condition of black people around the world. McElroy's travels encourage this scrutiny anyway but are complicated and left unresolved by her recognition that her status and experiences as an African-American prevent any straightforward identification from being made with more impoverished black people in societies elsewhere. A parallel may be drawn with Eddy L. Harris's comment, in *Native Stranger: A Blackamerican's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992), his narrative of a year-long journey through several African countries, in which he underscores the primacy of culture in identity-formation, that he feels trapped between the "blackness of my skin and the whiteness of my culture" (108). Like Harris, McElroy knows that the US has contributed to her identity no less than, and probably more than, has Africa: she is "a member of the sixth generation of African descendents [sic] who have survived diaspora on American soil with a little bit of this, a little bit of that" (*Long Way* vi). It is clear that these little bits are an important part of her makeup.

This essay examines McElroy's travelling identity as she navigates between the poles of group representation in African-American writing—"[t]he self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self" (Butterfield 3)—and the individualism of much contemporary Western travel writing (Youngs, "Punctuating").

Self-searching

McElroy's awareness of her different vision is often manifested in a distancing of herself from the thoughtless visitors around her. Being a tourist rather than a traveller dissatisfies her. Her poem "Trompe L'oeil: Slovenia," one of a number to disparage tourists, describes how

... Before me the usual castle dungeon awaits.

Below, a postcard town. I sigh, hurry in, hustled along by
another tourist wearing a zoom lens camera like a penis.

(*Travelling* 24)

Not looking properly is not to respect. In Australia, at Uluru, she knows that the rock is held sacred by the Anangu, who “take a dim view of tourists who climb it, but that doesn’t stop the tourists.” Her reply, when asked if she made the ascent, is: “No, but I didn’t climb Notre Dame, either” (*Long Way* 227). Her solidarity with the Aborigines seems to be strengthened when she is asked by one Aboriginal woman whom she has watched, in a desert village west of Yulara, decorating bowls with ancient designs: “You a daughter come home?” Yet at moments such as these, when affiliation suggests itself, a gap opens up between McElroy and indigenous blacks, limiting her identification with them:

Her voice, in a gravelly overlay of Australian English and her own language, startles me. For a second, I’m not sure I understand her. I cup my hand behind my ear. This time, her question is more distinct. “You from Oz?” she asks. “Oz?” I repeat before I remember that Oz is a shortened way of saying Australia. “No,” I say. Several other women enter the lean-to. They inspect me. Will I pass for a daughter come home? I wonder. But my nose is not flat enough, my hair not straight enough, my brow not strong enough. (*Long Way* 229-30)

This scene is emblematic of McElroy’s travel writing: a potential identification based on skin colour (and, elsewhere, on a common African descent) is interrupted by linguistic and cultural differences (and in this case, physical differences also) to be replaced by a more nuanced empathy. In the process McElroy becomes more conscious of her US citizenship. A gap opens up between her and those whom she encounters. The affirmation of McElroy’s individuality within this space appears to be achieved in ways similar to those in which other, white, travel writers confirm theirs, although, unlike several Western travellers who claim to find themselves by losing themselves, McElroy “refuse[s] to see the rest of the world as a place where I can escape myself, ... intent on viewing what is strange and exotic” (*Long Way* vi). The reason McElroy gives for travelling—“Partly, ... to discover more about myself” (*Long Way* ii)—applies to countless travellers across the globe. Yet the motivation for that discovery arises from the circumstances of the African diaspora in the New World. Her predicament is an African-American one: “The identification of myself and my country has not been an easy task” (ii). It is an Afro-Caribbean one, too. Black Briton, Gary Younge, the son of an immigrant from Barbados, admits of his journey to the southern United States to retrace the route taken

by the Freedom Riders: “I went half way across the world and actually I found out more about myself than I did about where I was going” (Youngs, “Interview” 104; Youngs, “Personal” 327).

Whether this shared trait of self-investigation makes black travel writing repeat or subvert the conventions of white-authored writing is a difficult question to answer (Youngs, “Personal”), and indeed to put it in these terms is to posit the essentialism that McElroy discards. Additionally, there is the matter of the relationship of African-American travel writing to US travel writing in general. McElroy’s own remarks underline rather than answer the question: “I tend to lean toward Robert Butler’s notion that ‘a central quest to American life is for . . . movement either for its own sake or as a means of freeing oneself from a prior mode of existence,’ and that African Americans were set on this migratory path by the institution of slavery, most evident in the ceaseless journeys of African American literature” (E-mail 28 Jan. 2005). The implication here is that African-American travel is a distinct part of US travel, and one infers that that is how McElroy sees her own travel stories in relation to travel narratives in the main. Some may see the self-searching as a feature of much modern travel writing anyway. McElroy insists that apart from only a few examples, including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Paul Theroux, and the anthology *Go Girl!*, “I am not conscious of other travel writing [and] then more as an afterthought,” adding that “This is probably because my travel writing is more exploration than accounting—how the journey changed my perceptions of myself and the world” (E-mail 28 Jan. 2005). But McElroy is writing as an African-American and, so long as they have written, African-Americans have had to work with existing literary forms and shape them for their own purposes. Introducing a reissue of *Our Nig*, the first African-American novel published in the US, R.J. Ellis writes of

the problem, one facing all African American writers, of how to discover a workable genre within which to explore [the] dilemmas encountered by African Americans in the United States—a process . . . resulting in the creation of writing residing in no single literary genre (novel, autobiography, documentary, popular fiction), but bridging between several genres. (viii)

McElroy’s travel writing, which spans genres including poetry, memoir, and ethnography, has to be seen within this tradition. Travel writing has long been a narrative mode of life-writing, this function existing alongside

the descriptive mode that lies at its surface, but McElroy's combination of these elements and her treatment of them in verse and prose forms is not evidence of the "double nature" of travel narratives that "provid[e] both an inventory of familiar spatial images and a means toward those images' revision and critique" (Holland and Huggan 65). Rather, it is, in line with African-American literary practice, a more complicated reworking of the structures of travel narratives to allow for an exploration of the dilemmas encountered by an African-American travelling outside the United States in the late twentieth century.

Home?

McElroy's narration frequently draws attention to its author and actor through address—"I told myself: McElroy, ease up" (*Long Way* 122)—and through performance—"better / make the accent / Jamaican in case he / hates / Americans" (*Travelling* 78). This extends beyond her admission that: "I talk to myself quite a bit when I'm traveling. It eases the tension and helps me check my expectations" (*Travelling* 232). Rather, it positions her as a character in her own writing. In particular, her ability to adopt a Jamaican accent is practised on several occasions, allowing her to step out of her US identity when to retain it would be awkward or dangerous. Role-play pulls her away from a single identity. "My journeys have taught me that a definition of who I am cannot be mapped on the simple black-and-white limits of state lines and borders" (*Long Way* ii), she exclaims. No single place has made or can claim her.

Unlike many travel writers who know no frontiers, however, McElroy is quick to confess ignorance. Walking around the museum at the Queensland Cultural Centre with archaeologist Sloan Baybury, she finds that "Every room reminded me of how little I knew of the connection between Aboriginal and Pacific cultures" (*Long Way* 230). Baybury comments that: "You know more than the average bloke who comes here to give a talk on folk culture" (230-31) and, when McElroy replies that she has her reasons, he brushes his hand against her cheek and adds: "That's pretty obvious. But it takes more than color to make a match, luv" (231). The episode is characteristic: McElroy undercuts expectations (including her own) that she will have an automatic affinity with and innate knowledge of other black people, while her openness about this fact conveys a sensitivity and empathy, and yet it is her colour and its history that have motivated her to find out more. When the woman who has been decorating bowls and has asked if she is a daughter who has come home offers her grubs to

eat, McElroy, feigning illness, declines and finds “I’m no longer thought of as daughter, just outsider” (232). The cultural distance reinforces the geographical one evident when she tells the women that she is not from Western Australia or even Queensland but from the US, a disclosure that results in a look “that is both sad and disappointed. Home doesn’t stretch that far, they seem to say” (231).

Since McElroy’s travel writing repeatedly places her at the meeting point of cultures, she frequently feels caught between strangeness and familiarity. She refers to the importance of her preserving “my ability to see myself as akin to and different from the people I meet. In short, I must follow the Malagasy proverb: *Enjoy yourself to the fullest but remain the perfect stranger*” (vi). The phrase chimes with the title of Griffin and Fish’s anthology of African-American travel writing, *Stranger in the Village*, borrowed from the title of a 1955 essay by James Baldwin. Griffin and Fish take as the epigraph to their book Baldwin’s remark that: “No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. ... This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” (qtd. in Griffin and Fish vii). But they note that African-American travellers have found themselves a “stranger in the village” even when “the inhabitants of the village share skin color and ancestral lineage with the African-American visitor” (xiii).

Although McElroy’s destinations often represent a kind of homecoming, she is careful not to have racial essentialism overcome cultural difference. So:

More than once while I was in Madagascar, I found myself measuring the thin line between family and stranger, especially when I was mistaken for Malagasy, my facial features reminding someone of a Betsileo or Bara friend, or a Sakalava neighbor. Of course, I only needed to attempt a few words in Malagasy, laminated by my Midwestern accent, for anyone to recognize that I was a *vahiny*, a stranger. ... And always, even when I was asked how far I had traveled and how long would I stay, I was an outsider made to feel welcome. (*Over* 157-58)

Being mistaken on her travels for an indigenous black woman or for a black woman from outside the US is something that happens to McElroy often. For example: “I thought, if I could be mistaken for Ethiopian in Italy,

Tuareg in Morocco, and Garifuna in Belize, I could certainly be Nubian in Egypt” (*Long Way* 219). The resulting sense of kinship is so heavily underscored by references to occasions on which local blacks remind her of her family in the US that a tension builds up between this misidentification and the implicit discovery of common roots. Near Aswan, for instance, “one of the women ... looked somewhat like my cousin, Loveta” (219), and in Madagascar McElroy is asked if she and her interpreter are related to each other:

Tiana and I looked at each other. There was a similarity in the shape of the face, the nose, the complexion. Could we have had common ancestors? Teddy, the handsome concierge, could have been the brother of one of my classmates at Summer High School in St. Louis. And surely, someone who looked like Mme. Arianne had sat next to me in a university class in Pennsylvania or Kansas.

“It is possible,” Tiana smiled. “Perhaps,” I added. (*Over* 8)

Yet when she asks Tiana if she really does think that she looks Malagasy and seems to receive confirmation in the reply that her hair is braided like some of the women in Tiana’s village but that she also looks like someone from the South, McElroy steps away:

I laughed. “I am from the South,” I said. “Only the South that I know is thirty thousand miles away from this land.” I stared out of the window. (8)

McElroy’s break from laughter to pensive observation marks the disjunctive shift from engagement to watchfulness.

The movement towards identification and back again occurs in McElroy’s poetry as well as in her prose. “The Sight to See” begins:

another country and faces that carry
reflections of cousins speaking
languages I’ve only imagined
another set of women with hips
legs eyes like my mother’s mother
skin polished by the same old sun

and goes on to:

another mirror surprised as I am
to find me here ignoring passing
comments on the verge of my origins (*Travelling* 19)

McElroy's sensitivity to linguistic and cultural difference has her recognising gaps between herself and her family on the one hand and the physically similar black people she encounters on her travels on the other. So, the last stanza of the poem depicts

another moment where I grin
 in the face of another meal
 with too much or too little
 another polite bowl of soup strong
 bread identified by salt or the hot
 bite of peppers

Her politeness, as visitor, confronted by food that is not quite right, not quite familiar, gives a taste of her wish to integrate but an indication of the impediments she encounters. The last lines of the poem

... another:
 so long kiddo welcome home sister—
 girl, where've you been? (19)

posit, spatially as well as linguistically, the closeness and the distance between home and away. The poem's echoes of African-American titles—Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1963)—deepen the air of multiple and shifting identities. Similarly in "Square Dancing the Adriatic," McElroy refers to "a hint of Black / descendants in a town / called Ulcinj" and to "some / guy who's a caramel / replica of your 2nd / cousin's husband" (76, 78).

McElroy negotiates the cultural spaces between her departure and arrival points by describing herself as "a stranger in a world that was at once both familiar and foreign" (*Over* 158). (The specific reference here is to how she feels on the morning of a "*famadihana*, a visit to the ancestors" [154], but it typifies her sense of her position on her journeys more generally.) She yearns for and sometimes implies greater contact. Told of the importance to the Malagasy of being buried in their own country, she sees this for herself on her arrival as the body of a Malagasy who died overseas in Europe or the US, carried on the same plane that has brought her to Toliara, is welcomed by grieving relatives. She echoes her translator's "Someone is coming home" with her own portentous: "'Yes. Someone has come home,' I said, and walked toward the exit where our day was about to begin" (166). Tiana has told her that: "Sometimes the family must wait

for years to have the money to bring them home. But it doesn't matter where you die ... because for the Malagasy, you must come home and take your place among the ancestors. Only then can your family mourn you" (166). McElroy's ambiguous repetition of the phrase, "Someone has come home," which implies her own symbolic as well as actual return also, is a ghost of the comment she has made in the Introduction to her book:

As the great-granddaughter of African descendants who survived diaspora on American soil, the similarity of appearance between myself and a population bound by Africa on one side, and by migrations of people crossing the vast Pacific and Indian Oceans on the other, worked in my favor. In fact, I was often mistaken for Malagasy (Bara or Sakalava). This sense of commonality gained me entry to villages and meeting places of folklorists and storytellers, and added a new dimension to my understanding of a country that Westerners think of as isolated, a country facing Africa across Mozambique Channel, the infamous route taken by pirates, slavers, and seafaring traders. (xi-xii)

The subtitle of the book from which this quotation is taken, *Over the Lip of the World*, conveys this: *Among the Storytellers of Madagascar*. The preposition positions her with the storytellers but distinct from them: she is with but not of them. The unnamed someone who has come home may be her, taking her place among her African ancestors.

McElroy's ambivalence about home is not, of course, unique to black people—"part of the impulse of travel can be not so much to *leave* home as to *find* home" (Cronin 33)—but it has a deep resonance for many members of the African diaspora. Alasdair Pettinger's anthology of black travel writing takes its title, *Always Elsewhere*, from a 1993 poem by Fred D'Aguiar in which the speaker returns from abroad to an unwelcoming London. In that poem, "Home," the speaker is resigned to the "usual inquisition" by Customs officers at Heathrow; to being told "home is always elsewhere" (qtd. in Pettinger 280). After a visit to the southern US, another Black Briton, Gary Younge, is likewise obstructed by a customs officer at Heathrow (who of course denies that he is racist). Younge, too, finds himself "back home, to a bigotry I understand" (277). These, in the final chapter called inquiringly, if not ironically, "Homecoming," are the last words of his book (Youngs, "Personal" 336). In keeping with D'Aguiar's and Younge's experiences of return, McElroy reports that her "greatest hassles with customs agents

have always been stateside” (*Long Way* 8) and gives a number of instances, including the trouble caused her by a black woman agent, whose attitude makes McElroy “see that sisterhood died when she put on that custom officer’s uniform” (141). When the woman’s supervisor takes over and hands back McElroy’s passport, he says, perhaps not noticing her anger, “Welcome home” (143). The words close the essay.

Writing travel

Travel and travel writing are two different things. McElroy knows this well and has experimented with forms suitable for her purposes. Her poem “Under Skies with No Views” compares a book read by an insomniac with travel:

Remember: all memory is dicey at the border and despite
some writer’s claim of well-measured beginnings and endings
not every turn of events is artsy or quaint. (*Travelling* 13)

Introducing *A Long Way from St Louie*, her collection of travel essays and memoirs, she writes that:

This is a book about my travels, but it is not a travel book, not a description or tour guide, but rather impressions of journeys, memories held in fragments ... This book, like my travels, was not planned ... (1)

Her essay “Mississippi Montage,” one of the pieces in that collection, conveys this especially effectively, moving around in time and space from one paragraph to another, and the lines in her poems “Square Dancing the Adriatic” (*Travelling* 76-78) and “Paris Subway Tango” (79-80) are set so that the eye dances across them. Travel books, those generic “in-betweeners” (Borm “In-Betweeners”; “Step”), which tend “to fall between the cracks” (Griffin and Fish xiv), would seem to be a highly appropriate vehicle for McElroy, who has spoken of the feeling that she has been writing in a void (E-mail 12 Feb. 2005). She does not rest on a fixed notion of identity. Like Gary Younge, who believes that “identities are fluid rather than fixed” (Younge, “Interview” 104), she emphasises the importance of change:

I love a map that is constantly changing, and that constantly changes me, that forces me to rethink where I am and who I am. That is the map I draw upon when I am writing a memoir. (“Rewriting” 242)

So even within this indeterminate or composite form, McElroy's writing slips between extra gaps: she professes to be writing a different sort of book, just as she aspires to be a different kind of traveller, one that can't easily be classified. In a sense, such a stance might be taken to replicate the outsider individualism of the contemporary travel writer, who is still largely white, middle-class, and male (Bassnett 157). McElroy's comment that "Overseas, I am always the sight to see" (*Long Way* 7) turns the gaze back on herself as much as white, middle-class travel writers (Redmond O'Hanlon, Paul Theroux, Colin Thubron) do by keeping their personalities at the centre of their narratives. However, whereas those travellers are settled in their identities (whether in life or as literary personae), McElroy accepts that travel may change her. She is quite unlike the middle-class English travel writers whose training, in the words of Colin Thubron (numbering himself among them),

has been in something ... that gives a kind of confidence to your going, a sort of self-confidence which in certain respects is rather unpleasant. ... I was at public school and it was edged into your consciousness somehow that you were superior to everything, whether it was world poverty, or your own problems, whatever it was. In some way your personality was above it all ... (qtd. in Bassnett 157)

McElroy lacks their sense of superiority. She is conscious that "I am a Western woman, and I must always, always be aware of how that life has affected my vision" (*Long Way* vi). Confidence has not been instilled into her. She has had to find her way: "Accounts of great travels never included black people, so I had no role models" (iv). That might be true of her writing as well as of her travelling, as it was for Gary Younge: "When you're looking round for genres to do something with, you do end up slightly making it up as you go along because the number of travel books written by black people in Britain is actually quite small so there's a limited pool to draw from" (Youngs, "Interview" 104).

McElroy's writing method complements her movement between worlds. *Over the Lip* combines her memoir of travel with the folktales and other oral narratives she collects while on a Fulbright research project in Madagascar. The combination of voices provides her text with a dialogism that prevents her narrative assuming the single authorship characteristic of most, though not all, travel writing (see for example Benterrak et al).

McElroy's fieldnotes—which precede each story and relate her travels within a regional context and recount how she came to the storyteller—are

“not intended as explanations of the stories, but as memoirs, narratives that bring the reader closer to the cultural context of the stories and poems.” The photographs in the books are “offered as a way of strengthening the landscape of the Malagasy legends, and ... of showing my appreciation to those storytellers and poets who so kindly allowed me to walk with them for a brief time” (xviii). But for all McElroy’s concern to present without intrusion or distortion and to describe rather than analyse, she cannot help but intervene in a way that unavoidably pulls the Malagasy out of place. That is an inevitable function of literary representation. For all her careful attention to the nuances of folkloric translation (xxxix), her assertion that “all the material is a way of bringing Madagascar into perspective from its distant location, a way to offer an additional connection between the teller of the tale and English-language readers’ intellectual involvement with Malagasy oral tradition” (viii), only underlines the role of the travel writer as translator. As Michael Cronin has observed, “[travel] accounts themselves are active interpreters of the cultures through which they travel” (23). McElroy seems as unobtrusive as she can, however, and her admission that “I had much to learn” (15) stands for her attitude to the many other countries she visits besides Madagascar. Of Japan, for instance, she writes that what she knew of the country was what she had gleaned from popular books published in the US: “Any real information could have been put in a thimble and I would still have had enough room left over for my thumb. I didn’t always know what I was seeing, but I kept looking” (*Long Way* 162). Such an attitude is not exclusive to McElroy or even to African-Americans, as the very title of Peter Carey’s *Wrong about Japan* (2004), his slim memoir of travels with his young son, reveals. True, these confessions of ignorance may risk hardening stereotypes of Japanese inscrutability, but McElroy carries into Japan the same curiosity and open-mindedness that accompanies her elsewhere: “I can say with confidence: the more I venture out into the world, the more I find I have yet to learn” (“Rewriting” 242).

It is a sign of McElroy’s open-mindedness that she questions national and cultural stereotypes. In an interesting exchange, she reveals her discomfort at the Malagasy appetite for US film: their apparent measurement of US culture by Hollywood exports disturbs her, especially since it obscures African-Americans. Her response to their preference, however, causes her to reflect on her own take on their culture:

I had come to Madagascar ... to collect stories that reflected the culture and myths of the country. But I knew that the lives of most of the Malagasy people could not be measured in folktales where shape-changers rose from the sea and elephant birds darkened the sky with their great wings, any more than the lives of most Americans were modeled after the movies. (*Over* 98)

Her knowledge of this is underlined by her meetings with poets who were jailed during French rule, before the revolution, many of them destroying their writings because of the danger of possessing them; and by her inclusion of a poem by one of them, Rado, protesting against the Vietnam War (145-48)—a poem that had led the US to refuse him permission to enter the country. So, despite her interest in “traditional stories that are still being told, stories that are passed from one generation to the next” (98), McElroy confronts the modern and the contemporary, and in so doing escapes the possible charge that she presents herself as changing and her subjects as fixed. It is clear, though, that to her the modern cannot be viewed alone: “That’s the way it was in Madagascar—the past meeting the present in unexpected places” (35). That sense of the immediacy of the past is reflected in the fact that “At no time are the ancestors excluded from Malagasy life.” This is illustrated at a dinner party at a home of a university professor where the host “included the ancestors in the first toast of the evening by offering the first few drops of wine in the north-eastern corner of the house.” Feeling their presence, “not unpleasantly but understandably, throughout the evening” (165), McElroy experiences this as one of the occasions on which “I found myself considering how far I was from home. In the United States the dead are locked in memory and beseeched to ‘rest in peace.’ They have ‘passed over,’ ‘passed away.’ They are out of our lives” (165).

The statement of distance from the ancestors might surprise one. After all, the most celebrated of African-American writers, Toni Morrison, has based much of her work on the rooted sense of ancestry, remarking that “it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor” and that “When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (343, 344). But that it is a surprise makes us notice once more the difference between the observer and the observed. We may be reminded here of Zora Neale Hurston, whose biographer has described how, having trained as an anthropologist at Barnard College, Columbia University,

under Franz Boas in the 1920s, Hurston developed a dual consciousness as she travelled back South, where she had grown up, collecting folklore as both subject and object, insider and outsider (Hemenway 21-22, 62). McElroy, whose PhD was in ethnolinguistics and the oral tradition, has acknowledged Hurston's work as a definite influence on her approach to her research (E-mail 28 Jan. 2005). In an important respect little seems to have changed since Hurston's time:

it's [*Over the Lip of the World*] a book about another culture, a culture that is Malayo-Polynesian, as well as African in origin. But I'm a black American writing about it, where traditionally ethnographers and anthropologists and archaeologists have been white males. ... [T]here aren't that many books written by black women exploring other cultures ... (qtd. in Pliego 3)

But just as, for Hurston, McElroy, and Morrison, writing can be moulded to accommodate the oral tradition, perhaps there is not such a contradiction in McElroy's statements on attitudes to death in the US, for the point is that like other African-American writers she recovers her ancestors in her texts:

Only as an adult had I brought my grandfather back into the realm of the living through my writing. And only when I began to write about him did I realize how much I'd felt his absence during my childhood. (*Over* 165-66)

The resolution, then, is in the writing. Morrison and McElroy write their ancestors back into being. McElroy uses her travels to try to connect with other black people elsewhere, thereby tracking back into the past as she investigates possible affinities that might have survived the forced removal of her ancestors to the US. Travel is complicated for McElroy. It is not simply a return: cultural differences will not allow for that; but nor is it an escape, for she is everywhere reminded of herself and of her family, friends, and acquaintances. She can neither reconnect nor stay still. And so she is no sooner home than "the sound of jets streaking overhead fills me with longing" and she wants to find whatever it is that is calling her, wherever it is (*Long Way* 241). Away from the US, she is the exotic stranger attracting curious stares; in the US she is trapped by the prison of colour (9). It may seem that she is propelled by the wanderlust of a Bruce Chatwin (Youngs, "Punctuating" 82), but her desire for movement has quite different historical

and cultural roots and results in a quite different vision. It is true that like other travel writers she needs other people with and against whom she can identify herself. In that sense she shares the predicament of “[p]ostcolonial travel writers [who] ... must struggle to match their political views with a genre that is in many ways antithetical to them—a genre that manufactures ‘otherness’ even as it claims to demystify it” (Holland and Huggan 65). Yet Holland and Huggan’s postcolonial travel writers are Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Pico Iyer; not African-Americans. That omission means that we miss what McElroy does with travel writing. Critics’ near-neglect of McElroy’s work testifies both to postcolonialism’s ambivalence about African-Americans and to the difficulties in accepting into the African-American literary canon a form of writing whose central questions are generated by a history of oppression but that is made possible by the possession of higher education, leisure time, and wealth. It does not seem to belong.

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