



PROJECT MUSE®

An American Daughter in Africa: Land of My Fathers : Era
Bell Thompson's Midwestern Vision of the African Diaspora

Michael J. Lansing

Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 1-28 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578227>

MICHAEL J. LANSING

An American Daughter in Africa: Land of My Fathers

Era Bell Thompson's Midwestern
Vision of the African Diaspora

For weeks, as she traveled through Liberia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Belgian Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo), and Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe), *Ebony* reporter Era Bell Thompson heard stories about apartheid in South Africa. When her plane finally landed in Johannesburg in May 1953, she encountered it firsthand. Dumbstruck that an African American woman had received an official visa from a government committed to racial segregation, the South African immigration officers stared at her with “wonderment.” Insisting on holding her U.S. passport, they commanded her to leave South Africa immediately. The North Dakotan ended up taking her passport back—after procuring a train ticket to Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique)—and spent hours waiting at Johannesburg’s segregated depot before finally leaving the country. Thompson noted that she awoke “the next morning to bright sunshine and a tremendous sense of relief. . . . I felt like Eliza crossing the ice, like Harriet Tubman on the underground railroad, for the train I was riding was taking me out of the land of *apartheid* to the free soil of Portugal.” Allusions to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as a real life black heroine no doubt signified much about life for blacks in South Africa to Thompson’s many readers. Yet upon her arrival in Portuguese East Africa, three hotels turned her away because of her race. “The Promised Land indeed!” Thompson later wrote. “I could have done no worse in South Africa.”¹

Already well known for *American Daughter* (1946), her memoir of grow-

ing up as a black woman in North Dakota, Thompson spent three months in 1953 visiting eighteen different countries and colonies in Africa. Besides reporting on what she saw and experienced as a lone African American woman traveling the continent for the readers of *Ebony*, black America's most prominent magazine, she also wrote a book length account of her travels titled *Africa: Land of My Fathers* (1954). In the memoir, Thompson used her own experience to assess the African diaspora as well as entrenched racial discrimination in the United States.² But her particular take on these issues—profoundly different from other African American travelers to Africa at midcentury—grew from her identification with the prairie Midwest. As a consistently self described midwesterner, Thompson insisted throughout her life that her personal experience and outlook was shaped as much by regional origin as by race and nationality. This meant that she understood her Cold War era navigation of a decolonizing continent via her own midwestern identity.

Only recently have historians begun to examine Thompson's contributions to understanding the African diaspora.³ That she self identified as a rural midwesterner, called herself an *American Daughter*, and often referred to her North Dakota girlhood proved especially important in her writings on Africa. Exploring Thompson's unique perspective on Africa in the early 1950s responds directly to historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's call to examine "real differences of . . . regional culture" in African American women's experiences.⁴ It also points to a wide diversity of African American understandings of Africa as well as African American identities in the moment just before burgeoning freedom movements moved racial questions to the center of the nation's discourse. Equally important, Thompson's memoir illustrates the global relationships embedded in midwestern experiences and identities.⁵ Her insistence on claiming a midwestern identity in the midst of a simultaneous reflection on being African American in Africa and being black in the United States avails more complicated understandings of the Midwest itself.

Born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1905, Thompson is best known for her memoir, *American Daughter*. When she was nine, her family moved to a farm outside Driscoll, North Dakota. After her mother's untimely death and the departure of her older brothers, Thompson and her father relocated to Bismarck, where she graduated from high school in 1924. Following an unhappy stint at the University of North Dakota, Thompson graduated in 1933 from Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. Soon after, she moved



Fig. 1. This undated photograph shows Era Bell Thompson with Stanley Pargellis, the fifth Newberry librarian, reading Thompson's *American Daughter*. Photograph from the Newberry Library Archives 15-01-01, box 2. Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

to Chicago. Like many migrants during the Depression, she struggled to find steady work. After working as a domestic, a waitress, and as a clerk for both the Works Progress Administration and the Illinois State Employment services office, she applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship in Midwestern Studies from the Newberry Library to write a book about North Dakota. When the administrators discovered that Thompson was black, they asked her to write an autobiography, which the University of Chicago Press published in 1946.

American Daughter—which is still in print—met with generally positive reviews. Many lauded its storytelling and compelling prose. This literary attention catapulted Thompson to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 1949, connected her with leading figure of the Chicago Renaissance, and secured her a position with Johnson Publishing, the black owned company behind *Ebony* magazine. She spent her career at *Ebony*. In her later years, Thompson received the State of North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt Roughrider Award for her many achievements and became one of fifty black women interviewed for the Radcliffe College Black Women Oral History Project in 1978.⁶

American Daughter tells the story of an African American family that moves from urban Iowa to rural North Dakota to find prosperity on a farm. Instead, they find struggle. Surrounded by her older brothers, who leave North Dakota as quickly as possible, a young Thompson contributes to the family farm economy but loses her mother at age twelve. The young woman finds solace in the plains landscape, her friends, and in her relationship with her father. Thompson's ethnically diverse neighbors sometimes seem able to look past her race and admire the family for their willingness to work hard. When she enters high school, Thompson's father relocates them to Bismarck. There he works for Lynn Frazier, governor of North Dakota during the Nonpartisan League's brief tenure in power. Even though Thompson encounters increased racial trouble as the lone black teen in town, the father and daughter settle into Bismarck and then move across the Missouri River to Mandan, where they run a furniture store. After a short and unhappy summer stint in the African American community in St. Paul, Thompson heads off for a year of college in Grand Forks. At the University of North Dakota, she tries to transcend racism and ignorance from faculty and other students. She also competes as a sprinter, breaking state records. Finally, she refines her writing by serving on the editorial staff of the student newspaper. A bout of pleurisy ends her time at the University of North Dakota, and her father's death soon follows. After closing down the furniture store in Mandan, Thompson returns to Grand Forks, where she encounters a Methodist pastor named Dr. Riley. Riley brings Thompson into his family, and when he becomes president of Dawn College in Sioux City, Thompson accompanies him and his family and matriculates there. After graduation, Thompson leaves for Chicago, where she tries to make headway as a writer and learn the ropes of big city life among other African Americans.

Era Bell Thompson's distinctive voice proved a powerful addition to Chicago's African American literary scene, because it offered not only a woman's perspective, but also one from the prairie Midwest in a black community with deep southern influences. Throughout her life, Thompson reveled in her North Dakota girlhood. This regional identification emerged early. For instance, as a teen she penned an occasional column for the *Chicago Defender*, writing under the byline "Dakota Dick."⁷ Despite the racial prejudice she encountered as a child, Thompson insisted that "thanks to my North Dakota childhood dreams, I have been where I wanted to go and have done what I wanted to do."⁸ Indeed, by the early 1940s

she hoped to describe and explain North Dakota—which historian David Danbom has called the most midwestern state—to what she saw as an ignorant America.⁹ Soon after Thompson settled permanently in Chicago, she “saw an article in the paper about Rockefeller Fellowships for regional writing, and there was a parade downtown and the North Dakota American Legion came through, with the band . . . and people were saying the same thing that I’d been hearing ever since I’d come to Chicago: ‘what is North Dakota?’ and they were laughing and they were so stupid so I decided to write about North Dakota.”¹⁰ This project metamorphosed into *American Daughter*.

It is easy to envision *American Daughter* as a story of triumph over adversity. A critical review of the book by the then-little known Ralph Ellison noted that Thompson’s childhood “was free of the repressing effects of segregation; she knew whites intimately, both at home and at school, and she was able to see them in a more human perspective than is possible for the majority of Negroes.”¹¹ But the narrative embodies hardship even as it projects hope for racial rapprochement. As literary scholar Ayesha K. Hardison observes, Thompson pushed her way into the publishing world by conforming to editors’ expectations and emphasizing the idyllic as well as the troubling.¹² For example, Thompson’s successful application to the Newberry Library’s fellowship program highlighted her difficulties adjusting to life in black Chicago. It also noted her distinctive take on the many “humorous incidents of ours or any other Negro family that finds its way to remote and isolated sections of the Midwest.” Thompson went so far as to claim that “it has been a lot of fun, this business of being colored.” Obscuring her much more complicated subjectivity in order to ingratiate herself with an otherwise disinterested staff of white librarians and scholars, Thompson did what it took to carve out a space for herself as an African American woman writer.¹³

Needless to say, *American Daughter* offered as many thoughtful and understated meditations on race relations as it did amusing stories. Yet near the end of her career, despite almost fifty years in Chicago, Thompson still called North Dakota her true home and claimed that what she liked best about being a midwesterner was that “to Midwestern people . . . it’s what you do and what you are that counts.”¹⁴ Despite the racism she encountered in North Dakota, Thompson carried what she imagined to be regional values—equity, fairness, and hard work—derived from her childhood experiences and associations wherever she lived or traveled. Those values,

ascendant in midwestern prairie communities during the first third of the twentieth century, influenced her deeply.¹⁵ As late as the 1970s, Thompson, though a Chicago resident since 1933, recalled her own personal struggle to fit into the largely southern black community there. At first, she felt “more accepted among whites” back in North Dakota “than I was here with black people.”¹⁶ “When I got to Chicago I was as much of an oddity among black people” as she had been an oddity for being black in North Dakota.¹⁷ Isolated from the main currents of African American life, Thompson “in many more ways . . . was more comfortable with whites”—so much so that working for *Ebony* made her “think black for the first time.”¹⁸

That Thompson self consciously claimed the prairie Midwest in response to her exposure to black southern culture in Chicago proved more than coincidental. Geographer James Shortridge and historian James Madison argue that the moniker Midwest (or more specifically, Middle West) emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century, as a regional trans-Missouri West emerged in American public discourse.¹⁹ Ultimately, the creation of a shared past bound people together and fostered a place-based identity. This imagined past featured prosperous rural economies based on small scale, family based agriculture, created by hardworking white male pioneers through great struggles with both Indigenous peoples and the landscape itself.²⁰ Centered on agrarianism, the frontier, community, and economic success, this invented heritage “so thoroughly embodied the fictions of the *national* discourse that there was no sense of regional isolation.”²¹ Thus, for most Americans, the Midwest became the most American of the nation’s regions: the heartland.²²

Furthermore, the regional story told by boosters, historians, politicians—and ironically, late nineteenth and early twentieth century leaders of urbanized industry in cities such as Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago—“sublimate[d] real issues of class and race” in the Midwest. Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray contest that the “strong sense of equality” in the Midwest actually “rested on the foundation of racial (and gendered) exclusion” there dating from the early nineteenth century.²³ Etcheson goes so far as to argue that the resulting “history of class and race in the Midwest has been unique” and that this focus on white male pioneer farmers constituted a denial of racial and class diversity, a denial that “makes the region the Midwest.”²⁴ Era Bell Thompson’s claim to be an *American Daughter* challenged that denial even as it reinforced the central themes that underwrote midwestern regional identity.

Even though Thompson used *American Daughter* to both celebrate and critique the imagined history at the heart of the Midwest, the book's regional association has occasionally been misunderstood as western. To be sure, the northern plains hold a liminal place in the ever-shifting and especially complicated designation of American regions. Temporal and geographic considerations muddy any strict boundary drawn between Midwest and West. Stories of Euro American pioneers loom large in both regional imaginations. But throughout her life, Thompson herself consistently described her story and her own identity as midwestern, not western.²⁵

This regional specificity mattered because of the particular experiences of rural midwestern women. Often cited as an important countercurrent by scholars examining the region, Thompson's African American story from a predominantly white place defied not only the racial assumptions bound up in midwesternness, but also the gendered assumptions. Historians of midwestern women delineate the ways in which women came together to create community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both on the farm and in the city. In nearly every way, these scholars point to the basic fallacy of the story that lay at the heart of midwestern regional identification in the years before World War II. Women, not men, most often forged the community bonds that others identify as peculiarly midwestern during the decades in which Thompson grew up. Through their home production, their social connections in local neighborhoods, and the mitigating effect their relationships had on intensifying capitalist sensibilities, women made rural communities work. Though Thompson grew to adulthood without her mother and idolized her struggling father, her own attempts at relationship building in a gendered context marked her as a product of the prairie Midwest.²⁶

Historian Molly Rozum, studying women such as Thompson who left memoirs of their girlhoods on the northern plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, suggests that these memoirs offer up "micro-environments of intense personal experience impressed in childhood and remembered, formed, and reformed over a lifetime," which also are "an act of the creation of place" made manifest through "geographic sensual experience."²⁷ Through such processes, Thompson did not just claim the prairie as her own. She also created a region in which African Americans and women were central to that place, defying the expectations of most in her reading audience. In fact, according to scholar Michael Johnson, *American Daughter* reveals how "through female friendships, Thompson

create[d] a multiethnic social community.”²⁸ Without her mother or other black women to turn to, Thompson drew strength from this self-created network of immigrant and Indigenous friends. In turn, the tension between an imagined space that lionized white men and the lived experience of a black woman led to a life in which Thompson celebrated “survival” above all else.²⁹ Finally, survival in a difficult place reinforced the pioneer metaphor so crucial to the midwestern identity upon which Thompson relied throughout her life.

If anything, Thompson claimed the prairie Midwest because her rural background and racial struggles made her an African American pioneer—the metaphor is deliberate—in racial as well as rural and geographic venues.³⁰ Imagining *American Daughter* in this way, however, means most readers miss the ways in which Thompson works to claim the Americanness at the root of midwestern identity in order to advocate for citizenship and human rights for African Americans across the nation. She uses the discourse that assumes the Midwest to be the heart of Americanness and turns it on apartheid and sexism by casting that most American of regions as an especially multicultural one. For this reason, literary scholar Joanne Braxton squarely places Thompson’s memoir in the long history of African American women’s autobiography—even as it broke with previous manifestations of that genre. Rejecting “an expression of rage against racial oppression” for a focus on “resilient and self-sufficient individuals” who searched “for personal fulfillment,” in *American Daughter* Thompson attempts to stake out a place for African American women in a racist and sexist country. To that end she suggested that there was potential for a “united America,” one that her North Dakota friendships with Jewish, Indigenous, and Russian-German girls represents.³¹ Her memoir rendered the prairie Midwest of the early twentieth century as culturally diverse—despite its reputation to the contrary—to reckon with the nation’s deep divides.³²

Thompson claimed a central position in African American discourse as a midwestern woman, and correspondingly, as an *American Daughter*, even as she challenged the accepted civic imaginary of the prairie Midwest and America merely by being a black woman. This meant that Thompson’s own presence and perceptions challenged other people of every sort. Asked by an interviewer toward the end of her life whether or not she had a “sense of being apart, of being in, but not of” both mostly white North Dakota and black Chicago, Thompson responded: “not quite in.” Positioned as what African American feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls

an outsider-within—not just as a black woman, but also in relation to the midwestern regional story, the African American community, and American citizenship—Thompson drew on that ambiguity to interpret her experiences in Africa.³³

In the early 1950s, Thompson became one among many African Americans to travel to Africa. Decades of anticolonial struggles, coupled with economic dislocations caused by World War II, weakened Europe's grip on its African colonies. By 1960, richly diverse Africans had created sixteen independent nations. The tumultuous changes attracted attention around the world. African Americans, immersed in their own freedom struggles, paid special attention to Africa's decolonization.³⁴

Many years of work on the African diaspora have illuminated the complex nature of African American experiences in Africa in the 1950s.³⁵ Modernity, decolonization, Africanness, and Jim Crow swirled together in most African American accounts of Africa in the 1950s. The same year that Thompson toured the continent, Richard Wright—the renowned author of the novel *Native Son* (1940) and the memoir *Black Boy* (1945)—stepped off a ship in Takoradi, the lone deepwater port in the British controlled, but soon to be independent, Gold Coast (Ghana). As the most famous black writer in the world, the African American living in Paris proved eager to explore anticolonial movements and to discover diasporic connections between black Africans and African Americans.³⁶ In fact, he planned to “write the only book about Africa that will be written in my time.”³⁷ Yet what Wright discovered during his sojourn troubled him so much that he cut his trip short, returning to Paris in two and a half months rather than six.

In his narrative of the experience, published in 1954 as *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, Wright imagined himself as a citizen of the modern, Westernized, “Enlightened” world. In turn, he portrayed most black Africans he met—even those educated intellectuals leading the anticolonial movement—as stuck in an psychologically hindering primitive culture fostered by colonialism, one that Wright found abhorrent.³⁸ The book's muddled replication of the colonial gaze, awkwardly fused with a desire to give voice and value to indigenous anticolonialism and its potentially liberating result for black Africans, met with mixed reviews. What began as an exercise in travel and politics became an articulation of painful self identity for the black intellectual. He had not found the modernity he hoped to see in the African anticolonial movements that would soon blossom across the entire continent.³⁹

Even today, Wright's observations of politics and life in what would become Ghana trouble readers. Critics startled by Wright's Western assumptions claim that the book represents the author's racial self hatred, homophobia, and even his lack of support for black African political movements. Yet in recent years, Wright's trip to the Gold Coast in 1953 has been reclaimed by prominent black scholars of African America and the African Diaspora. Paul Gilroy argued that Wright's "work articulates simultaneously an affirmation and a negation of the western civilization that formed him," an evocation of a broader, transoceanic double consciousness that affected all those descended from black Africa.⁴⁰

Wright's more famous experiences in Africa in the early 1950s illuminate both a deep seated African American fascination with Africa and the ways in which African American identities were at stake in those encounters. These concerns also swept up Thompson, despite her best efforts. She admitted to her literary agent that she was "fed up with causes and propaganda" and wondered "just what the reception and response of an ordinary American Negro with the usual text book conception of the 'Dark Continent' would be if suddenly set down in the land of her forefathers."⁴¹ But what literary scholar Eileen DeFreece-Wilson calls Thompson's "eye-opening, fearful and sobering ordeal" deeply challenged her initial intentions.⁴²

Nor was Thompson alone among African American women. Many traveled to Africa at midcentury—including anthropologist Eslanda Goode Robeson (1936), dancer Pearl Primus (1948), and church musician Rosa Page Welch (1952).⁴³ Their travels built on attempts by a previous generation of black women to think and work globally around shared racial and gender experiences.⁴⁴ In contrast, Thompson declared that she was "neither a missionary nor an anthropologist turned dancer but a magazine editor and author."⁴⁵ Furthermore, she displayed a unique appreciation for ambiguity—derived from her own complicated self identification as a black woman from the prairie Midwest. Her travel writings for a popular African American audience enable us to see a wider variety of African American identities in a moment when African politics became more crucial to African American freedom movements.

That audience of largely working and middle class black Americans connected to Thompson over more than just race. As one of the first permanent writers at *Ebony*, a magazine modeled after *Look* and *Life*, Thompson helped to create an entirely new form of black produced media. Unlike

most journalistic enterprises in the African American community, *Ebony* spent less time articulating a politics of protest and more time examining black culture, celebrity, and consumption. The message resonated. Thousands of subscribers made *Ebony*, by the mid-1950s, the most popular black print media in the United States.

Ebony's popularity fostered a bad reputation among some African American intellectuals and activists. They saw the magazine as too bland, too careful, and too committed to racial accommodation. Describing African American journalists' visions of Africa in the 1950s, for instance, historian Penny Von Eschen argues, "by 1950 there was a fundamental transformation of anti-colonial discourse and a dramatic narrowing of coverage of Africa and the Caribbean in the black American press. . . . At its worst, the new journalism trivialized and exoticized a homogenized and remapped Africa." Brenda Gaye Plummer suggests that in the 1950s, *Ebony*'s editorial stance uncritically embraced Cold War anticommunism. Supposedly, this made it part of a broader effort to discredit as communist civil rights work in the United States, black internationalism, and anticolonial movements in Africa.⁴⁶

But *Ebony*'s stance on these issues, fashioned by Thompson and others, proved more complicated than critics suggested. Historian Adam Green argues that the magazine "sold the race new identities, a process that encouraged imagination of a black national community, and made new notions of collective interest—and politics—plausible."⁴⁷ While *Ebony* was not a typical outlet for black radicals, historian Kevin Gaines points out that the famous black sociologist St. Clair Drake contributed thoughtful pieces on African independence movements to the magazine in the early 1950s. Literary scholar Marsha Bryant observes the close relationship between black poet Gwendolyn Brooks, known for her stinging criticisms of white mainstream culture, and *Ebony*. In fact, Thompson and Brooks were close friends. Likewise, *Ebony*'s sponsorship of Thompson's 1953 journey suggests an effort by the editors to challenge the status quo in the black press.⁴⁸

Ebony and Doubleday sent Thompson to Africa with both articles for the magazine and a book for the press in mind. She set out on her journey in April 1953 with little knowledge of Africa or Africans. 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." Thompson also wished to know "what my own reactions would be to my African ancestors." Literary scholar Ayesha Hardison posits that Thompson was further driven by a

desire to develop “a global perspective and to find acceptance for her multicultural identity through her travel writing.” Her identification with the ethnically complex prairie Midwest of her youth kept her searching for a more complete understanding of the diversity of human experience.⁴⁹

While other African Americans who traveled to Africa during the period tended to extrapolate from a few experiences in one nation, Thompson traveled the length and breadth of the continent. Arriving first in Liberia, Thompson moved on to the Gold Coast and Nigeria, both British colonies. She then flew to the Belgian Congo, taking the train south into Rhodesia and the independent apartheid state of South Africa. Ejected from Johannesburg, she traveled east to Portuguese East Africa. Proceeding north to Tanganyika (Tanzania), Thompson stopped in Kenya briefly before heading on to Uganda. She then returned to Kenya, moved north through Ethiopia and Eritrea, and ended her African travels in Egypt. In many instances, she found herself dogged by visa rejections, formal segregation, and general mistreatment. “Even in partially self-governing colonies” that boasted of racial equality, Thompson experienced segregation. Africa was in the midst of massive transformations, but much had not yet been transformed.⁵⁰

That Thompson imagined herself as “coming ‘home’ to Africa . . . coming back to re-establish ties of kinship, not to sever them,” proved especially important.⁵¹ Her conscious exploration of shared experiences between black Africans frustrated by racism and colonialism and black Americans frustrated by racism and segregation signified an important theme in the book. She also hoped to transcend her own ignorance of Africa. Her rural midwestern background gave her few opportunities to learn anything substantive about the continent and its many cultures. The middlebrow readers of *Ebony* shared much of Thompson’s interest as well as her ignorance. While data gathered as late as 1957 suggested that seventy percent of African Americans polled could “name no countries or territories” in Africa, at least one out of every five regularly read a “columnist on national or international affairs” as early as 1953.⁵² Furthermore, the push among African American intellectuals and freedom movement organizations to envision a broader politics for the black Atlantic—squashed by Cold War anticommunism in the late 1940s—nevertheless left lasting imprints on both editors and readers.

The second red scare made Thompson’s efforts to see the continent, let alone describe her travels, especially perilous. In the midst of the Cold War, colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Portugal often

envisioned African liberation movements and ideas as communist. Nor could the U.S. government afford to have its claims of freedom and democracy undercut by stories in foreign nations about racial segregation at home. Scholar Mary Dudziak rightly maintains that “when critics of U.S. race discrimination traveled overseas, they posed a powerful challenge to the government’s narrative of race in America.” With anticommunism in mind, the U.S. Department of State “took a keen interest in the international travels of African Americans.” Those who explicitly denounced racial segregation or who explored international options to fight oppression, such as communism, faced travel restrictions. Most famously, Paul Robeson and W. E. B. DuBois dealt with State Department harassment and passport revocations in the early 1950s. Their formal affiliation with communist organizations rendered them exceptional. But the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) kept careful track of other black intellectuals and writers as well, equating the proliferation of racial critiques with anti-American activity.⁵³

African American women were not excluded from surveillance and interrogation. The anticolonial criticism levied in *African Journey* (1945), as well as her ongoing political work, landed Eslanda Goode Robeson in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R-Wisc.) investigative committee in 1953, just weeks after Era Bell Thompson returned from her African travels.⁵⁴ That same year, the singer Josephine Baker encountered trouble when raising questions abroad about racial justice in the United States. While performing in Havana, Cuba, Baker was arrested for statements made earlier during her Latin American tour concerning racism in the United States.⁵⁵

With all this in mind, Era Bell Thompson tread carefully. For instance, after being designated a “prohibited immigrant” upon her arrival in Zanzibar, she wondered if the term meant “something very loathsome, like a criminal or a communist.” She was right to worry. Her very presence—as an African American woman reporting on Africa for the leading black magazine in the United States—generated suspicion in many quarters. A week after her visit, one of Thompson’s friends in Uganda was questioned about whether or not Thompson was a communist.⁵⁶

To be sure, it helped to be a self-declared *American Daughter*. She used her identity as a midwesterner—hailing from the most American and supposedly most democratic of all regions—to emphasize her adherence to the American nation state. Regional identification intensified the authenticity of her claims to national loyalty. In fact, Thompson depended on her American citizenship to get her out of one precarious situation after another.

er. Queried about her politics in the Gold Coast, she pointed out that her “only crime had been three violations of Chicago’s parking laws” and that “the fact that I possessed a U.S. passport was proof positive that I was not a Communist.” Because race and gender created barriers, time and time again she counted on the power of her U.S. passport and leaned “heavily on my nationality, lightly upon my race.”⁵⁷ She knew the dangers of investigating black anticolonial movements and the assumptions many would make about her travels and reporting. Her many problems crossing national and colonial borders stemmed as much from the complicated politics a black American in Africa embodied as from her failure to secure all the necessary visas before heading abroad.

Given the stakes, Thompson struggled with how to connect the black African experience to the African American experience without raising red flags. She settled on narrating her direct, subjective experience. The relation between the two communities would be construed by her treatment in Africa, constantly compared to her treatment at home. When white men sharing a train car with Thompson through the Rhodesias worried that she would “write a book criticizing them,” she explained that she “had neither the intention nor the desire to do a book on Africa,” that I was writing only what I saw and what happened to me . . . What I would write was in their hands.”⁵⁸ To do so, she turned to memoir—the same approach she had used in *American Daughter* to highlight complex ethnic and racial relations in the prairie Midwest.

This forwarding of the subjective experience—an “appearance of openness” typical of African American women—set Thompson’s perspective apart from those of other black American travelers to Africa during the same period.⁵⁹ It also revealed the care she took to craft a journalistic voice that might allow her to articulate a more complicated vision of race and colonialism in Africa than the U.S. State Department’s simple communist or anticommunist divide. Thus Thompson’s readers garnered crucial insights that transcended simple definitions for freedom movements proffered by the U.S. or colonial governments in Africa. When questioned by a white American man on a plane from Cairo to Beirut as to whether or not African “unrest and . . . violence” was “Communist inspired,” Thompson responded by pointing out “subject peoples have always sought freedom from oppression. America was founded on that principal [sic] . . . It is only natural that Africa, [the] last stronghold of colonialism, should also want to be free.”⁶⁰

Ideology was only one issue that Thompson needed to navigate. As a solitary black woman and as an American citizen, she defied expectations wherever she went and faced numerous physical and emotional trials. Thompson's coping skills stemmed from her earlier experiences with rural and racial isolation in the Midwest. Heartily welcomed to Liberia, which she believed "was home if I wanted to make it that," the journalist also enjoyed the treasures of the ancient African city of Ife in Nigeria. Though she had been approached months earlier to ghostwrite the autobiography of the Gold Coast's prominent anticolonial prime minister Kwame Nkrumah, she was initially refused entry there. Thompson noted that she expected such treatment "in South Africa or maybe Kenya, but not the Gold Coast . . . here, where the great experiment of African freedom and independence was on trial, I was not welcome."⁶¹ After a few hours of confusion, she was allowed to enter. Nonetheless, she felt alienated by the experience.

Besides the indignities Thompson endured in South Africa (where *Ebony* had been banned) and Portuguese East Africa described above, she confronted racism at every turn. In the supposedly desegregated Belgian Congo, she entered a "whites only" grocery store where patrons "looked at me in silence." In the Rhodesias, Thompson saw little—she was unable to visit Victoria Falls or even leave the train on account of her race. By the time Thompson got to Kenya, where more legal confusion about the length of her stay dogged her, she finally proclaimed that she "was sick—sick of being harassed, of being black and unwanted!" Ending her travels in Egypt, she decided that for "these last three days on the continent I was going to be myself, an American—an American tourist, no less."⁶²

Threats to her womanhood did little to comfort her. On a train through the Rhodesias, Thompson overheard four white male passengers in deep conversation about interracial sex and interracial sexual violence. Belgian, British, and South African alike, they agreed that black men who raped white women deserved death, but white men who raped women were not in the wrong. With a chill, the African American woman "eased my door shut and bolted it. . . . I was alone with four white men who had no regard for black womanhood, riding a slow train through the heart of Africa, a million miles from nowhere." Entering Portuguese East Africa later that week, an immigration officer made sexual advances under the pretense of teaching Thompson the colony's official language. The journalist wryly noted that "if this was Mozambique's answer to apartheid, I should practice up on screaming." In Dar es Salaam, a white Canadian man who flew

there with Thompson called up to her hotel room hoping for company and a drink. Thompson worried that “all I needed was to be caught in my room with a man, drinking! Out I would go.”⁶³

Some of the white Africans Thompson encountered openly worried that she would have these sorts of experiences—experiences that would produce bad press for European colonialism. At a hotel dinner with British born Nigerian university faculty, Thompson learned that “Europeans in Africa are very sensitive to American journalists, especially those who linger lightly and form opinions not always flattering to colonialism.” Other Europeans, such as Carl Rupelt, a young Belgian the reporter hired as her guide to visit the Watutsis in the Belgian Congo, proved less guarded about their colonial attitudes. While driving into the bush, he suggested to Thompson that black Americans were “hundreds of years ahead of our Africans . . . look at the next African you see and notice his stupid expression!” She included this racist colonial viewpoint in her memoir, noting only that she laughed in response.⁶⁴

Grappling with foreignness, danger, and uncertainty at every turn, Thompson turned inward to her own self consciously midwestern past. While driving across southwestern Nigeria, the green shrubbery on both sides of the road “. . . reminded me of Iowa or Wisconsin.” In the Ashanti market city Kumasi, in the Gold Coast, Thompson observed that “traffic in the vicinity of the marketplace was reminiscent of a midwestern American town.” During her brief stay in the French Congo (Republic of the Congo, Gabon, and the Central African Republic) she even used Norwegian learned as a girl in rural North Dakota to placate a Scandinavian family wondering why she was not staying in the colony longer. When she got to South Africa, the geographic analogies shifted. There was no pretense of midwestern equity premised on hard work there. Waiting in the customs line to enter the country, Thompson reminded herself, “as I had done on my first journey to the Deep South at home: be careful, be polite, and for heaven’s sakes, *read the signs!*”⁶⁵

This story, and many others, illustrated the continuities in the African and African American experiences during the mid-twentieth century. In coming to Africa, Thompson clearly held some vague, if ill defined, sense of racial kinship with black Africans. This represented a major transformation in her racial awareness. As a recent high school graduate living in North Dakota in the mid-1920s, Thompson’s first contribution to the *Chicago Defender* was “an attack upon Marcus Garvey’s ‘Back to Africa’ move-

ment.”⁶⁶ Indeed, in the 1970s Thompson admitted to an interviewer that she “was actually ashamed of being black in the earlier years, because everybody else” in school and daily life “was white.”⁶⁷ Her father, a widower, had passed on to Thompson whatever African American culture he could. But only after developing a black cultural consciousness during two decades in Chicago and many years of reporting for *Ebony* could this self-styled *American Daughter* imagine Africa as the land of her fathers.

The mature journalist clearly saw the potential stakes in the diasporic relationship between African America and black Africans, but skepticism remained. While in Liberia, she went so far as to visit James Stewart, leader of what was by then the mostly defunct and fractured Garveyite movement. Noting that “every so often . . . there is a revival of the going-home urge,” but that “when the boat comes, few of God’s children are there to get on board,” Thompson seemed unimpressed. Apparently, they spoke little of politics. Instead Stewart shared stories of big game hunting, which prompted the writer to suggest she join him on a hunt. The Garveyite did not go out of his way to invite her to join him, and so Thompson departed.⁶⁸

Like so many African Americans who traveled to Africa at midcentury, Thompson encountered the question of black African social and political progress in relation to the West. A cacophony of opinions on the matter confronted her at every turn. While a Watutsi leader in the Belgian Congo informed the *Ebony* reporter that members of his community were superior to black Americans, one British visitor to the Gold Coast mocked Thompson for suggesting that “the new electric building, the community center, and their tremendous bid for self-government” constituted progress for black Africa. Still in the Gold Coast, another black companion argued that all small African villages “of sad little mud hovels” were the same. Thompson, for her part, watched black African men in the neighboring fields rhythmically cutting grass with scythes “to the rhythm of a crude instrument” playing “the music of a half-forgotten century.” Where the black African she traveled with saw nothing but backwardness, Thompson proclaimed: “it was beautiful.”⁶⁹

Clearly tempted at early moments in her journey to fall into a simplified vision of racial kinship despite these divergent views of black African progress, Thompson closely listened to one Nigerian tell her that she was “American by birth, but racially, we are brothers.” But again, her vision became muddled. Soon after, in the Belgian Congo, ten black men asked the reporter why African Americans had not “come to teach us the things they

have learned in America, how to operate our business or to farm our land.” Not wanting to suggest that “most American Negroes were too absorbed in fighting their own freedom wars to be concerned about ancestors thousands of miles and hundreds of years removed,” she went on and on about the difficulties of moving one’s family to a new nation. After more discussion, one man finally asked, “have our brothers in America forgotten us too?” Thompson replied: “we cannot forget those we do not know.” Then she assured those gathered that she “would tell America what they said.”⁷⁰

As she continued on her travels, Thompson remained skeptical, feeling a relationship between black America and black Africa built on racial kinship was problematic, at best. In fact, across the continent, she found that “the Africans’ knowledge of us is pathetically fragmentary and grossly exaggerated . . . to some Africans, weak are the ties that bind us to them. Our enslavement by and co-mingling with the white man has made us their inferiors.”⁷¹ Early in her trip, Thompson visited a slave castle in the Gold Coast, and her skepticism of easy conclusions about the diasporic relationship hardened. Peering out the window of a slaveholding cell, she turned and looked at her black African guide:

For an instant our eyes held, and in that infinitesimal moment, we heard the chains, smelled the stench of my forefathers. He had remained. I had slipped through the window. Three hundred years had passed. We weighed each other, the African and I, but by different standards, on different scales.

In that moment, enslavement and forced removal, as well as the passage of time, underscored the difference between Thompson and the black Africans she encountered on her trip. Yet even as she recognized the separate experiences, there remained an implied connection.⁷²

Over the next two months, a sense of a mutual relationship between black Africans and black Americans did emerge from Thompson’s travels. Vague visions of racial kinship paled in comparison to the shared colonial experience of informal, formal, and legal racism that both black Africans and black Americans confronted everyday. Warned about the trials of being black and visiting South Africa, one English woman in the Gold Coast suggested Thompson would not be “allowed to ride on buses or streetcars with Europeans . . . or in white taxis.” The reporter responded that she was “prepared for that . . . and segregation was not entirely new to me . . . there were restaurants in my own Chicago that would not serve me, and hotels

where I would not be welcome.” Similar forms of segregation—and the social, political, and economic structures segregation empowered—left a powerful impression on Thompson. On the train through the Rhodesias, queried on how she felt about black Africans by a group of whites, Thompson suggested she felt “no different than I felt about any other Negro.” Asked the same question by a white woman in Kenya, she again noted “little difference, relatively speaking.” The next morning, Thompson used the bathroom at the Nairobi airport, went inside “the door marked Ladies” and found “two more doors. One said, ‘Goan,’ the other ‘European and Asian.’” Faced with a racially segregated bathroom not unlike those found in the southern United States, Thompson told her readers: “it was a moment of great decision.” Significantly, she did not tell readers which one she chose. Simply highlighting that the choice confronted her was what mattered. This dramatic punctuation to the end of her chapter on Kenya suggested that, at least when it came to their relationship with many whites and some legal systems, African Americans and nonwhite Africans had much in common.⁷³

Imagining racial unity between black Americans and black Africans—or, alternatively, a common colonial oppression—became more complicated whenever Thompson’s own racial or gender identity confused her hosts. Thompson wrote home, telling friends that whites often classified her “as a ‘European,’” though they just as often “don’t know what to do with me.” Black Africans were “just as puzzled. Many of them never heard of America, let alone American Negroes—or Ebony.” In Kenya, Thompson realized that “both the whites and the Mau Mau”—an anticolonial revolutionary group—distrusted her. Visiting a class of university women in Uganda, she “could not understand why these intelligent young people” saw her as “such a novelty.” One young woman responded by suggesting that “the African woman . . . gets little attention. She does not travel around the world alone as you do. She is not treated with such deference by white men.” Later that week, a black African man on the street asked Thompson if she was South Asian. The North Dakotan said no, and complained: “all I had gone through to ‘come home’ to visit ‘my people,’ and this one takes me for an Indian.” Finally, in Ethiopia, her government escort thought Thompson had to be “a white man,” since she worked for an American magazine and had come from both South Africa and Kenya.⁷⁴

These mistaken or confused identities proved crucial because Thompson busily put forward her personal experience to examine the potential

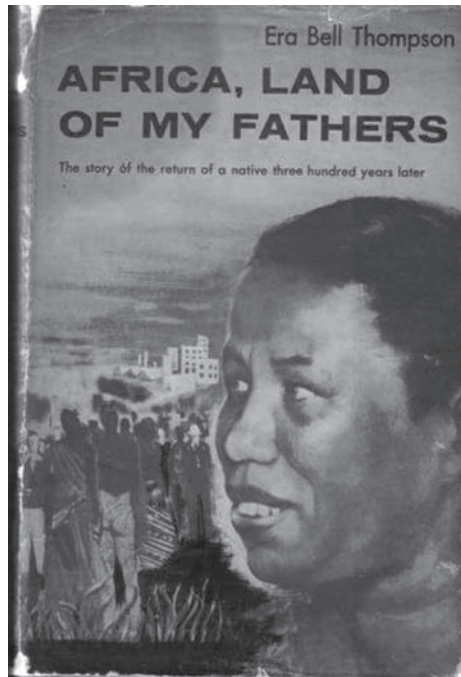


Fig. 2. A copy of Era Bell Thompson's 1954 book, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*.

bond between black Africans and black Americans. Though a reporter, she claimed no objectivity, and proposed to relate what she saw, tasted, heard, and felt in a given context in an autobiographical fashion. Consistently situating her viewpoint in this manner mirrored her approach in *American Daughter*, where she simultaneously related and created a midwestern story and a critique of the midwestern story. Furthermore, feminist Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis argues that such subjectivity in black women's autobiographies served to veil or protect the author. Indeed, Thompson could critique American race relations as well as colonial African race relations in her *Ebony* travel essays or in *Africa: Land of My Fathers* without fear of political reprisal at home only because she so firmly insisted on relating her personal experiences. Indeed, dissemblance proved to be a brilliant and effective strategy for offering a frank political assessment (in the guise of a firsthand account) without endangering herself.⁷⁵

As the title of her memoir implies, this black woman from the prairie

Midwest pictured herself returning to Africa, the land of her ancestors. Yet she complicated this vision by forwarding her subjectivity in her travel narrative as the measure of how the African diaspora brought people together across the oceans, or failed to do so, in an age of freedom movements. It led her to reject what historian Kevin Gaines has identified among some African Americans traveling to Africa in the 1950s as the “therapeutic return” of heritage seekers.⁷⁶ Instead, Thompson established a position that was of Africa but not from Africa—an ambiguity she knew all too well as a black woman, as an African American from the prairie Midwest, as an African American with midwestern sensibilities living in a southern black community in Chicago—and as a black person in America. For instance, while in Nigeria, Thompson noted that “all through childhood” she had “lived in towns where a dark face was a novelty and because of it I was a marked person.” As she walked down the streets of Lagos, local blacks “paid no attention to Europeans but stared at me.” Thompson found herself “in the same category” of being a “marked person” in a black majority African nation as she had in white majority North Dakota.⁷⁷

This vantage made Thompson’s contribution to understandings of black internationalism in the 1950s unique. Her work captured the contradictions of diaspora more thoroughly than other African American travelers of the period because of her careful consideration and articulation of her midwestern background and the outsider-within status that she derived from her fierce attachment to it. At the end of *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, she pithily claimed that “Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race.” By this she meant that racism worked to exploit and deny people with black skin on both sides of the Atlantic. She even noted her pride in “the African blood in my veins.” Carefully, however, she told the reader: “But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home.” In her mind she was ultimately “an American by nationality, a citizen of the United States by birth.” The status that she had found in her midwesternness, the ability to be an *American Daughter*, led her to weigh nation more significantly than race in the diasporic relationship. Even so, given the twinned freedom struggles undertaken by black Africans and African Americans, relying on nation rather than race did not sever Thompson’s connection to black Africans. Ultimately, Thompson’s writings reflect how multifaceted the seemingly simple act of “coming home” to Africa could be for black Americans of the period.⁷⁸

Equally significant, Thompson’s travels across Africa in 1953 catapulted

her into covering the continent—and the rest of the world—for *Ebony* for the next twenty-five years. Indeed, she became the most prominent African American journalist on the world beat.⁷⁹ After trips to Asia, Europe, and the South Pacific, Thompson returned to Africa in 1957, where she spent a night in jail in South Africa after again being told there were no hotels where she could stay. She next visited Africa in 1960, to tell what she called “the greatest liberation story in the history of the modern world.” Finally, in 1968, she traveled through sub-Saharan Africa with the explicit goal of measuring and evaluating the changes self government had wrought.⁸⁰ Again, she drew on her complicated sensibilities, writing one article in *Ebony* in 1969 that challenged the common assumption in the white press that decolonization in Africa had been a total disaster. In the next issue, she penned a piece on the problems black African governments still faced.⁸¹ Her witness at the birth of some of those governments put her in an especially informed position when it came to assessing anticolonial movements and even their relation with black America freedom movements, one that few other Americans could match. And again, she disseminated her subjective experience to *Ebony*’s broad audience.

All told, Era Bell Thompson’s crucial role in sharing Africa with African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s—too often overlooked—proved exceptional. Her perspective on the African diaspora, rooted in the regional and national dynamics that made her an outsider-within on multiple levels, suggest that African American visions of Africa in the middle of the twentieth century greatly depended on one’s position within the rich diversity of experiences in black America. She remained fiercely attached to a sensibility, perspective, and identity shaped by her girlhood in the early twentieth-century prairie Midwest. Thompson’s story shows us we should not forget the significance of regional identity in global interactions during the American century.

.....
Michael J. Lansing is an associate professor and chair of the department of history at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. He is the author of *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Susan Cahn, Jeffrey Kolnick, Mark Soderstrom, Dick Brown, and the referees and editors for the *Middle West Review*.

NOTES

1. Era Bell Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1954), 171–78, 182. Throughout this essay, the contemporary name of each country will be put in parentheses after the first mention of the colonial name Thompson uses in *Africa: Land of My Fathers*.
2. For recent scholarship on Thompson, see Ayesha K. Hardison, *Writing through Jane Crow: Race and Gender Politics in African American Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Karenbeth G. Zacharias, “Era Bell Thompson: Reflections in the Mirror—Observations of an American Daughter on the American South and the African Congo” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2012); Eileen DeFreece-Wilson, “Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2010). See also Kevin L. Cole and Leah Weins, “Religion, Idealism, and the African American Autobiography in the Northern Plains: Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 219–30; Michael K. Johnson, “‘This Strange White World’: Race and Place in Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 101–12.
3. James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 268–314; Jinx Coleman Broussard and Skye Chance Cool-ey, “Ebony’s Era Bell Thompson Travels the World to Tell the Story,” *American Journalism* 26 (Winter 2009): 7–30; DeFreece-Wilson, “Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer,” 111–53; Zacharias, “Era Bell Thompson: Observations of An American Daughter.”
4. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Meta-language of Race,” *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 256.
5. See especially Kristin Hoganson, “Transnationalizing the Heartland Myth” in *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien, 2012), 123–44; “Meat in the Middle: Converging Borderlands in the U.S. Midwest, 1865–1900,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (March 2012): 1025–51.
6. See Kathie Ryckman Anderson, “Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter,” *North Dakota History* 49 (Fall 1982): 11–18; Kathleen Thompson, “Era Bell Thompson (1906–1986),” in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. II, M–Z, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Carlson, 1993), 1169–70.
7. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, reprint ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 152.
8. For the intensification of Jim Crow in North Dakota during this period, see William C. Sherman, et al., eds., *Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988), 387. Quote in Anderson, “Era Bell Thompson,” 17.
9. David B. Danbom, “North Dakota: The Most Midwestern State,” in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 107–26.
10. Era Bell Thompson and Helen J. Dowling, interview by Larry Sprunk, Sept. 16, 1975, North Dakota Oral History Project, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.
11. Quoted in Anderson, “Era Bell Thompson,” 15–16.
12. Hardison, *Writing through Jane Crow*, 181–83. Hardison also suggests that the white

editors encouraged her meditations on race relations. In fact, she argues that the University of Chicago Press likely solicited *American Daughter* in order to publish a black retort to Richard Wright's widely reviewed *Native Son* (1940), which excoriated white society.

13. Era Bell Thompson to Stanley Pargellis, May 24, 1944, Newberry Library, Chicago, publications.newberry.org/digitalexhibitions/exhibits/show/realizingthenewberryidea/researchteachingpublishing/item/916.

14. Era Bell Thompson, interview by Marcia M. Greenlee, Mar. 6 and 10, 1978, Black Women Oral History Project, Radcliffe College, Chicago, in *The Black Women Oral History Project*, vol. 9, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 443.

15. Catherine McNichol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

16. Thompson, interview by Greenlee, 453.

17. Thompson and Dowling, interview by Sprunk.

18. Thompson, interview by Greenlee, 456.

19. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 13–26; James H. Madison, “Diverging Trails: Why the Midwest is Not the West,” in *Frontier and Region: Essays in Honor of Martin Ridge*, ed. Robert C. Ritchie and Paul Andrew Hutton (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 43–53.

20. Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 27; Madison, “Diverging Trails,” 47; Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, “The Story of the Midwest: An Introduction,” in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Cayton and Gray (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1–26. See also Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

21. Andrew R. L. Cayton, “The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest,” in *The American Midwest*, ed. Cayton and Gray, 157.

22. Frank Tobias Higbie, “Heartland: The Politics of a Regional Signifier,” *Middle West Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 81–90.

23. Cayton and Gray, “The Story of the Midwest: An Introduction,” 12.

24. Nicole Etcheson, “Barbecued Kentuckians and Six-Foot Texas Rangers: The Construction of Midwestern Identity,” in *The American Midwest*, ed. Cayton and Gray, 79; Doug Kiel, “Untaming the Mild Frontier: In Search of New Midwestern Histories,” *Middle West Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 9–38.

25. See, for instance, Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the West,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 14. Hardison describes the cover of *American Daughter* as a “western” scene, but goes on to note the memoir's many connections to “classic midwestern prairie fiction.” Hardison, *Writing through Jane Crow*, 184, 189; Madison, “Diverging Trails.”

26. Eileen DeFreece-Wilson sees the absence of black female role models as more significant than the gendered nature of her relations with others in North Dakota. In contrast, Michael Johnson notes the significance of Thompson's female friendships in this context. See DeFreece-Wilson, “Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer”; Johnson, “This Strange White World,” 108–9.

For rural midwestern women, see Joan M. Jensen, *Calling this Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850–1925* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006); Bar-

bara Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870–1930* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005); Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet, eds., *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Modern Agribusiness, 1900–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

27. Molly P. Rozum, “Indelible Grasslands: Place, Memory, and the ‘Life Review,’” in *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History*, ed. Robert Wardhaugh (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001), 120, 130. This turn to the pastoral in midwestern writing is analyzed most thoughtfully in William Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape Literature of the American Heartland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 11–54.

28. Johnson, “‘This Strange White World,’” 109.

29. Era Bell Thompson, interview by Marcia M. Greenlee, 455. For parallels among women memoirists in the racially charged American South, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘You Must Remember This’: Autobiography as Social Critique,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (Sept. 1998): 439–65.

30. For more on “black pioneering,” see Will Cooley, “Moving On Out: Black Pioneering in Chicago, 1915–1950,” *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 4 (July 2010): 485–506.

31. Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 140, 144, 180; Thompson, *American Daughter*, 296.

Johnnie M. Stover argues that African American women created a new form of autobiography, “not so much subgenre as a countergenre” in which the forms and limitation of more typical autobiographies were challenged. By this measure, Era Bell Thompson’s memoir would seem to be more countergenre than most other black women’s autobiographies. See Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women’s Autobiography* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 15.

32. More recently, historians have agreed with Thompson’s characterization. Eric Foner claims that “although ethnic diversity is generally associated with eastern cities, in the late nineteenth century the most multicultural state in the Union was North Dakota.” See Foner, *Give Me Liberty: An American History*, vol. II (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012), 598.

33. Hall, “‘You Must Remember This,’” 453; Thompson, interview by Greenlee, 453; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–38. Collins argues that black women producing knowledge are outsiders within both womanhood and blackness. Here I expand on her concept and note that Thompson was not only an outsider-within as an African American woman, but also as a black person in the rural Midwest, as a midwesterner in black Chicago, and as an African American in the United States.

34. James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

35. For broad treatments of the black diaspora, see Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History through Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

36. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 146.

37. Quoted in Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 417.

38. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper, 1954).

39. S. Shankar, "Richard Wright's Black Power: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative," in *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 3–19. For an analysis of Richard Wright's experiences in Ghana, just weeks after Thompson's visit, see Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). For a discussion of Wright's relationship to modernity and decolonization in Africa, see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 174–76.

40. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 186.

41. Thompson quoted in DeFreece-Wilson, "Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer," 117.

42. *Ibid.*, 139.

43. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 113–14; Maureen Mahon, "Eslanda Goode Robeson's Africa Journey: The Politics of Identification and Representation in the African Diaspora," in *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line*, ed. Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 115–33; Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013). Robeson, trained as an anthropologist in the United Kingdom, wrote her own memoir titled *African Journey* (New York: John Day, 1945). An ongoing stream of African American women visited Africa in the wake of independence movements in the 1960s. See Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, 110–35.

44. Colleen C. O'Brien, "'Blacks in all Quarters of the Globe': Anti-Imperialism, Insurgent Cosmopolitanism, and International Labor in Pauline Hopkins's Literary Journalism," *American Quarterly* 61 (June 2009): 245–70; Lisa G. Materson, "African American Women's Global Journeys and the Construction of Cross-Ethnic Racial Identity," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009): 35–42; Jacqueline Castledine, "'In a Solid Bond of Unity': Anticolonial Feminism in the Cold War Era," *Journal of Women's History* 20 (Winter 2008): 57–81; Mary L. Dudziak, "Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War," *Journal of American History* 81 (Sept. 1994): 543–70; Pamela E. Brooks, *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes: Black Women's Resistance in the U.S. South and South Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

45. Thompson quoted in DeFreece-Wilson, "Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer," 117.

46. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 146; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 206.

47. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier made this critique as early as 1957. See Frazier,

Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of s New Middle Class (New York: Free Press, 1957). See also Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. 129–77, quoted on 132. At least one historian argues that Johnson Publishing's ethos of black entrepreneurship that flowered in the postwar years grew out of Popular Front work in the 1930s. For an analysis of Thompson's role in this transition, see Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 198–201.

48. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, 47; Marsha Bryant, "Gwendolyn Brooks, *Ebony*, and Postwar Race Relations," *American Literature* 79 (March 2007): 113–41; Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), 251–52.

49. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 10; Hardison, *Writing through Jane Crow*, 199.

50. *Ibid.*, 279. The noted African historian Frederick Cooper argues that the transition from colonies to self government in sub-Saharan Africa encompassed more continuity than change. See Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

51. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 64.

52. Alfred O. Hero, Jr., "American Negroes and U.S. Foreign Policy: 1937–1967," reprinted in *The African American Voice in U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II*, ed. Michael L. Krenn (New York: Garland, 1998), 2–34.

53. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 61.

54. Robert Shaffer, "Out of the Shadows: The Political Writings of Eslanda Goode Robeson," in *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, ed. Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002): 98–112.

55. Dudziak, "Josephine Baker and the Cold War." For the broader challenge Baker presented to the nation-state, see Matthew Pratt Guterl, "Josephine Baker's 'Rainbow Tribe': Radical Motherhood in the South of France," *Journal of Women's History* 21 (Winter 2009): 38–58.

56. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 202, 234.

57. *Ibid.*, 68, 64.

58. *Ibid.*, 160.

59. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 915.

James Campbell explicitly compares Thompson's memoir of Africa to Richard Wright's. (Both were published in 1954.) Campbell finds in both an initial optimism eventually overwhelmed by more problematic experiences. This emphasis on declension overlooks the power of regional background and gender to shape Thompson's perspective. See Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 268–314.

60. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 278–79.

61. *Ibid.*, 67.

62. *Ibid.*, 107, 168, 172, 185, 229, 271.

63. *Ibid.*, 153, 181, 219.

64. *Ibid.*, 50–51, 136.

65. Ibid., 49, 83, 118, 172.
66. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 152.
67. Thompson, interview by Greenlee, 450.
68. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 31–32.
69. Ibid., 71, 139, 80.
70. Ibid., 116.
71. Era Bell Thompson, “What Africans Think About Us,” *Ebony* 9, no. 4 (Feb. 1954): 37.
72. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 62, 98.
73. Ibid., 101, 162, 249.
74. Era Bell Thompson to Stanley Pargellis, June 24, 1953, Newberry Library, Chicago, publications.newberry.org/makingmodernism/files/original/cb35f2684a1c7ab5a38b2539ff3c2815.jpg; Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 214, 227, 239, 255.
75. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Spellbound: Audience, Identity and Self in Black Women’s Narrative Discourse,” in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (New York: Routledge, 2000), 108–9.
76. See the extended discussion of “return” in Gaines, *African Americans in Ghana*, 52–76.
77. Thompson, *Africa: Land of My Fathers*, 58.
78. Ibid., 280–81.
79. Broussard and Cooley, “Ebony’s Era Bell Thompson Travels the World to Tell The Story.”
80. Era Bell Thompson, interview by Marcia M. Greenlee, 461 and Era Bell Thompson, “Freedom Comes to 83 Million as African Rule Passes from Whites to Blacks,” *Ebony* 16, no. 2 (Dec. 1960): 144–53.
81. Era Bell Thompson, “Progress: Africa’s Untold Story,” *Ebony* 24, no. 8 (June 1969): 74–82, 84–85; “Africa’s Problems: The Other Side of the Story,” *Ebony* 24, no. 9 (July 1969): 116–21, 124–27.