



# “GAYL JONES AND TRAVEL NO-WHERE”

## INTRODUCTION

In her historical novel *Palmares* (2021), Gayl Jones, contemporary US author, explores legends of a seventeenth-century Afro-Brazilian *quilombo*, or autonomous fortified city battling Portuguese colonial power in South America.<sup>1</sup> Writing from a feminist and ecocritical perspective, Jones speaks within a Black intellectual tradition that radically questions the assumptions of Euro-American literature. But she also rewrites that already subversive tradition. Thus, while drawing on a US Black narrative of escape and fugitivity, the so-called slave narrative or neo-slave narrative, she moves that narrative from North to South America, creating often disturbing alternatives to US fictions of travel or escape. In laying out this argument, I invoke Saidiya Hartman’s theory of “critical fabulation” (“Venus”) as it investigates what Hartman calls “violent fictions of the archive” (“Freedom and Fugitivity”) and the ways they have silenced Black history, making its stories of heroic resistance and escape invisible. This violent suppression of Black fugitivity has made it what I call “travel nowhere,” not travel at all, at least within Euro-American conventions. I see Gayl Jones

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1 I am deeply grateful to Paweł Jędrzejko for inviting this paper and to Joaquin Terrones for introducing me to Gayl Jones and Brazil, and for support in writing this essay. “*Quilombo*” is the Portuguese version of the Angolan (Kimbundu) “*ki-lombo*,” meaning military training camp. Although it came to signify “maroon community,” it is not a Portuguese translation of “maroon,” derived from the Spanish “*cimarron*” (having to do with feral livestock), and the French “*maron*” or “feral.” Instead *quilombo* maintained its root meaning as a community of people united by a common purpose, usually defense. Its use as a term for Palmares arose after the community was destroyed (Schwarz and Starling 94).

as resisting the “where” or desired destinations of colonialist travel but those also of the slave or neo-slave narrative; and I will suggest that Jones’s fugitive narratives and what they say about Black communities of caring and resistance are necessary more than ever for global survival in a time of planetary crisis.

*Palmares* tells the story of what happened after the *quilombo* fell to Portuguese militias in 1694; then, departing from a historical narrative that focuses on Zumbi, Palmares’ Afro-Brazilian leader (see Anderson, Kent, Reis and Santos Gomes, Schwarcz and Starling), Jones’s protagonist, Almeyda, then travels to what she hopes will be a New Palmares. Her journey, however, paradoxically seems to get her nowhere. But, as Jones shows, this nowhere reveals the No-Where of Palmarians’ lives, a placelessness that may seem unsettling but that imagines radical freedom. Like legendary “flying Africans” (see McDaniel), people who escaped enslavement by leaping into the air, Jones’s characters appear to launch themselves into an unknown, a Not-Know-Where that may take them to Africa or somewhere utterly unimagined. Other versions of this ambiguous travel appear in Gayl Jones’s drama, *The Ancestor: A Street Play* (1975; 2020), and her novel, *The Birdcatcher* (1986; 2022)—and incidentally in the works of Toni Morrison, whose novels likewise show concern with “critical fabulation,” or attempts to rethink history outside archives, travel beyond maps.

Saidiya Hartman’s work illuminates Gayl Jones’s characters and themes in remarkably precise ways. Her 2008 essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” reflects on Black women as targets of racial and sexual violence, particularly within European historical archives that have deliberately silenced their voices. Hartman thus asks questions that Gayl Jones’s work seems intentionally to address: “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?” (3). Hartman proposes a narrative practice that respects both the silence and what lies behind it: “The intent of this practice [critical fabulation] is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified. . . . It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive” (12).

In writing historical fiction in *Palmares*, Gayl Jones offers just this kind of radical speculation. Merging critical fabulation with travel narrative, she emphasizes the fluidity and agency of Black lives in history. The result is a model for engagement with an unspeakable past: that is the imaginary part, the fabulation. But the critical piece is just as important. This is fiction that rethinks travel in a world that lacks a destination. In Jones’s speculative fiction, there is no Underground

Railroad, no Great Migration leading characters to freedom. Instead, the “furtive communication” (10) that Hartman speaks of, the whispers and secret touches, songs and stories exchanged among fugitives, guide travelers to places where they may survive catastrophe—in a *quilombo*, a *terreiro* (place of worship), or the New Palmares that is, ultimately, planet Earth.

### WHO IS GAYL JONES?

Granting few interviews, Gayl Jones has in a sense kept herself out of the archive or even the canon, although she has inhabited its elite spaces. We know that she was born in 1949 in Lexington, Kentucky, where she now resides. A brilliant student and early writer, she attracted considerable notice: author Elizabeth Hardwick steered her to Connecticut College, where she worked with Robert Hayden; Michael S. Harper, with whom she studied at Brown University, introduced her to Toni Morrison; Toni Morrison edited Jones’s first two novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva’s Man* (1976); and more recently Helene Atwan at Beacon Press urged Jones to keep publishing after periods of silence in her career. In 1976 Jones began teaching at the University of Michigan, where she met and married Robert Higgins. Jones and Higgins moved to Europe in 1983, where she continued to publish poetry, essays, and a novel, *The Birdcatcher* (in German), in 1986. In 1988 her mother’s illness brought them to Kentucky, where her mother died in 1997 and then Higgins in 1998. After the appearance of two major works—*The Healing* (1998—shortlisted for the National Book Award) and *Mosquito* (1999)—Jones stopped publishing for over twenty years. But she maintained contact with Helene Atwan, who eventually invited Jones to release a stream of work: *Palmares* (2021), *Song for Almeyda and Anninho* (2022), *The Birdcatcher* (2022, now in English), *Butter: Novellas, Stories, and Fragments* (2023), and *The Unicorn Woman* (2024). According to Atwan, Jones had held some of these back for many years (“My Decades”). When *Palmares* came out, reviewers noted that Jones had possibly been thinking about Brazil and Palmares from her earliest work. Jones’s interviews from the 1970s and 80s confirm this perception (Jones and Harper, Rowell, Tate).

Although critics and reviewers of Gayl Jones’s books tend to agree that Toni Morrison encouraged and influenced her, the reverse may also be true, given that Jones was writing about South American enslavement of Africans before Morrison began to include Brazil in her work and to travel there herself (Coser). This counter-influence, in other words, may have led both authors to journey the Americas,

imaginatively at first, from early in their careers. Toni Morrison acknowledged their connection, famously saying of *Corregidora* that “no novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this” (Ghanash)—including her own? Although *Corregidora* takes place in the US, Jones’s title refers to the narrator’s great-grandfather, Simon Corregidora, a Brazilian planter who rapes enslaved women and their children—his own children. Jones’s Brazil, distant in time and place, nevertheless knits the book together thematically as a reminder of generations of violence against enslaved Africans, especially women.

Through her references to this history, Jones evokes a world of Afro-Brazilian communities in Brazil’s northern provinces and in *terreiros*, or sanctuaries, where spiritual practices deriving from African devotion to ancestors and nature deities emerged in a distinctive religious form called Candomblé. Morrison’s 1997 novel, *Paradise*, includes a Brazilian woman, Consolata or Connie, who gathers fugitive women in a small community housed in a building called the Convent. In this tiny *quilombo*, Connie draws on Candomblé to heal women who have suffered abuse (Myers). Morrison’s 2008 novel *A Mercy*, taking place in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, begins on a North American estate run by a Portuguese planter who, like Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, rapes enslaved African women; that fact generates the act of mercy that releases Morrison’s protagonist, Florens, in ambiguous flight toward ambiguous freedom. Florens finds a home of sorts among Morrison’s collection of women without men—another kind of *quilombo*. Such communities and their healing powers prove central in both Jones’s and Morrison’s books.

Just as remarkably Morrison and Jones may also have discussed the theme of “flying Africans” as it plays out across the Americas. Morrison’s first novel after *Corregidora*, *Song of Solomon* (1977), presents one of her strongest female characters, Pilate Dead, as a flying African—a trope Jones had taken up herself in *The Ancestor: A Street Play*, published in 2020 but begun much earlier, when she was a graduate student at Brown University—well before *Song of Solomon* (“Gayl Jones”). Were Jones and Morrison talking in the 1970s about freedom as flight? A flight from the Americas to Africa? A flight made by women as well as men?

But, as we review the relationship between Jones and Morrison, the US and South America, we are deep in Jones’s story without knowing where her interest in Brazil came from. In her 1982 interview with Charles H. Rowell, Jones says that “going to the Brazilian history and landscape helped my imagination and writing” (40). But she adds that “the Brazilian experience [was] (purely literary and imaginative

since I've never been there) [and it simply] helped to give a perspective on the American one" (41). Nevertheless, regardless of Gayl Jones's own physical location, in novels after *Eva's Man* her characters travel widely. And if they do not always go physically to South America, she refers to transhemispheric travels, histories, and geographies in most of her work. Even more tellingly, her long poem, *Song for Anninho*, written in the voice of Almeyda, protagonist of *Palmares*, first came out in 1981. She later wrote a companion piece, *Song for Almeyda*, recently publishing both in one volume; but clearly she had sowed the seeds earlier.

Likewise Jones's *The Ancestor: A Street Play*, independently published in 2020, was started much earlier. It tells the story of Zumbi and his dramatic death when Palmares fell. We can observe, then, that Jones's writings share certain themes and structures; they travel across the Americas and the globe; and *Palmares* is a travel book in more ways than one—traveling, as it does, in and out of Gayl Jones's other books as they travel in and out of *Palmares*.

#### PALMARES AND TRAVEL NO-WHERE

In the story told by European historians, Zumbi was born in northern Brazil in 1655 during a time when that part of Brazil, seized by Portuguese invaders from Dutch settlers but mostly ignored because of its inhospitable landscape, offered opportunity for *quilombos* to thrive; these were diverse communities of Black, Indigenous, white, and other groups resisting colonial rule. Palmares was founded around 1605 and led at first by Ganga Zumba, who created a powerful Afro-Brazilian city, capital of a confederation of smaller towns. In Portuguese-based accounts (see Southey, as well as Anderson, Kent, Reis and Santos Gomes, Schwarcz and Starling), Zumbi was born in Palmares but captured as a child in one of the colonialists' periodic raids and raised in Porto Calvo by a Catholic priest, Father António Melo, who taught him Portuguese and Latin and gave him a European education. In 1670, at fifteen, Zumbi returned to Palmares, not, apparently, cutting his ties with Father Melo and continuing to travel back and forth. Because of Ganga Zumba's concessions to local Portuguese officials, which many of his followers saw as betrayals, Zumbi killed Ganga Zumba and assumed leadership of Palmares. From 1678 until 1694, he successfully fought off Portuguese incursions, traded with or raided local towns for goods and recruits, and expanded the size, wealth, military preparedness, and fearsome reputation of Palmares.

Gayl Jones's novel does what no other Anglo-American retelling of Zumbi's story has done (see Southey, Kidder and Fletcher, Harper): it puts the leader and defender of Palmares in the background and focuses on survivors of the *quilombo's* fall, mostly women. Jones's singular innovation is to suggest that the women of Zumbi's time had complicated lives, traveled in and out of enslavement and emancipation, and formed their own versions of *quilombos*. Their life stories, mostly unimagined until now (except for that of a legendary warrior queen named Dandara; see D'Saete), are rich in the ways Saidiya Hartman claims for Black women's unacknowledged histories. Thus, Jones's narrator, Almeyda, begins her story when she is seven years old, the daughter of an enslaved woman on a sugar plantation. They live with Almeyda's African-born grandmother, a medicine woman whom the Portuguese enslaver regards with lust and fear. Almeyda grows up in this family of women, educated (as Zumbi was) by a Catholic priest, Father Tollinare. When she enters her teens, the enslaver involves Almeyda in a scheme to cure a white man's venereal disease by pairing him with a virgin. The plan fails when Almeyda's mother applies protective herbs that baffle the rapist. In retaliation, Almeyda's enslaver sells her to a shoemaker.

During this period of her life, Almeyda learns about Palmares, a place where Black people may apparently live freely. Almeyda awaits her opportunity, and when men from Palmares raid her new home, Almeyda goes with them willingly. When she arrives in Palmares, a Muslim man named Anninho, one of Zumbi's trusted advisors, chooses her as his wife. Although Almeyda falls in love with Anninho, she quickly observes inequities in the *quilombo's* power structure that, for example, separate men from women and wives from enslaved women; she has not left patriarchy or the slave system behind, even in an Afro-Brazilian city.

Unexpectedly, for admirers of Zumbi as an early Afro-Brazilian hero, Jones buries the culminating events in Zumbi's life—the fall of Palmares and his subsequent execution— in the center of the novel, where they take second place to Almeyda's story. If the first half of Almeyda's narrative concerns her growth from childhood innocence and enslavement to knowledge, love, and glimpses of freedom, the second half takes up her extensive travels after she leaves Palmares—a much less certain narrative. During the fall of Palmares, Almeyda learns that her husband Anninho had some premonition of the Portuguese attack and has prepared them a hideout. But soon they are ambushed, and Almeyda brutally maimed by Portuguese mercenaries—her breasts cut off with a machete—while Anninho disappears. From that point until

the end, Almeyda wanders—in search of Anninho but also of a New Palmares, a *quilombo* where all can be free, not just Zumbi's favorites. Against that background she recovers from her wounds and seeks shelter with a healer, Luiza Cosme, in Bahia. Here she learns the science of plants that, as with her grandmother's and mother's knowledge of herbs, gives the book's women a seemingly mystical power.

After many episodes, some humorous, others horrifying, Almeyda eventually finds Anninho, who has been a traveler himself. The novel ends with their reunion: one that is happy but inconclusive. They are in love but have experienced so much trauma that they will need to find their way back to one another over time. The novel ends before full return and reconciliation.

It should be clear by now that Gayl Jones has written no conventional Zumbi narrative. Just as strikingly, she has written no conventional travel narrative either. Her exercise in critical fabulation or speculative fiction suggests that Almeyda and Anninho have tested and found wanting any number of classic travel-narrative forms: the quest narrative, pilgrimage, flight to freedom, or Homeric epic ending in a return home. Instead, Almeyda and Anninho seem to have arrived nowhere, to have gotten nowhere. It is not certain that a New Palmares exists. It is not clear that they have arrived there. Indeed, so much of Almeyda's experience seems to have taken place in a dream state or fictional world, that the outcome may be nothing more than a fantasy.

In that sense, one might say that Almeyda and Anninho have arrived at a paradoxical no-where. They have traveled but come to a standstill. They have been motivated by love and longing for each other but may have lost that motivation along the way. Their travel has signified freedom from enslavement, but from their new vantage point, it may seem that they never left enslavement at all—the lesson that Toni Morrison's Sethe contemplates in *Beloved*, when she finds that escaping her enslaver leads to new bondage to her memories, as embodied in her ghost-daughter, Beloved.

The paradox of travel no-where thus has its roots in the paradoxes of enslavement itself. In *Palmares* the enslaved people are its freest characters. They travel beyond the boundaries of family and community, beyond expectation. But, again paradoxically, they have not arrived and are not free. At the moment of their reunion, Almeyda and Anninho seem to experience freedom; but the book ends before they can live it. The second to last chapter is called "The New Palmares," where Almeyda and Anninho meet and share their stories, as Sethe and Paul D do in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Much goes unsaid, however, and Anninho acknowledges that not even his love for Almeyda has

brought him to the New Palmares: “Perhaps you were the reason I came back at first but there were things I learned on the raids that would be useful here when we prepare to fight the Portuguese again” (492). He ends the book by saying: “there will be other days to tell you the details of that story, and to fill in the gaps in the other one” (492). The novel appears to ask, not, what happens to these lovers, but rather, what lies ahead in the world after Zumbi’s death, in the world after Palmares itself?

### CAUGHT IN PARADOX

In her little-known work, *The Ancestor: A Street Play*, Jones offers a different reading of Zumbi’s story, one that may illuminate the travels of her Afro-Brazilian characters in *Palmares* and her North American ones in *The Birdcatcher*—offering as well a deeper sense of what *Palmares* might mean for contemporary readers.

*The Ancestor: A Street Play*, as I have indicated for *Palmares*, showcases how far Gayl Jones departs from Zumbi’s story. This brief play begins with an unnamed woman’s account of the fall of Palmares. Whereas Jones’s novel *Palmares* presents the narrative generally accepted by historians, in which the Portuguese kill Zumbi and exhibit his head in the plaza in Porto Calvo, in *The Ancestor* the women of Palmares save Zumbi as he leaps from a cliff: “Rather than surrender, our men jumped. (Pause) I began singing. The other women began singing. The men grew wings. They sprouted wings. It was like the old place, you know, the country, Palmares. The palm forest. In the new world, Brazil, but it was like the old country. It was like Africa” (np). On the breath of their songs the women carry the men out of Brazil, presumably to Africa—an interpretation of Zumbi’s leap very different from those in traditional US or European accounts (cf. Southey, Kidder and Fletcher, Harper). At the heart of that remarkable transformation lies a paradox: Jones’s *Palmares is Africa*; one does not have to travel to get there. Jones’s narrator explains that the men fly to an “old country” that resembles the new city they built in Brazil in a palm forest.

Brazil, then, is a geographical palimpsest, through which one sees Africa. Jones also imagines a temporal palimpsest, as characters peer through the present into the past: the woman speaking may be Zumbi’s lover, and the old man with whom she speaks may well be Zumbi himself. Now, in the present, they are presumably free, and the play celebrates that freedom, the “soul” of their people, as a note explains: “The metaphor here, however, is that rather than jumping to their



deaths they sprouted wings, became birds, and flew away. And in this act of jumping they retain their manhood, their ‘soul’” (np). As birds, the ancestors are forever free.

But if in *The Ancestor* flight is freedom, in *Palmares* flight leads the characters to the paradoxical and uncertain freedom of no-where. Against this background it is disconcerting to turn to Jones’s *The Birdcatcher*, first published in German in 1986 and translated into English and reissued in 2022. In this book, three late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Black US expatriates, an artist and two writers, seem to be forever traveling, always in flight, but not necessarily free, and certainly not reaching a particular destination. This book seems a satiric travel narrative, far removed from the epic sweep of *Palmares* or *The Ancestor*. But it opens up Jones’s themes of travel, flight, and community in unexpected, even unsettling ways.

The book’s central metaphor is a sculpture called “The Birdcatcher.” The sculptor is Catherine Shuger, married to a writer of science journalism, Ernest Shuger. The narrator, Amanda Wordlaw, is a travel writer and their devoted friend. Catherine, a brilliant artist and charismatic woman, periodically and paradoxically tries to kill her husband, whom she adores. Each time, Ernest takes her to a mental hospital, retrieves her when the episode passes, and tries to keep potential weapons out of her way until the cycle begins again. Each time the attacks recur, Catherine and Ernest summon Amanda to whatever location they have chosen for Catherine’s recovery—in this case Ibiza, off the coast of Spain. Catherine and Ernest *seem* to travel the world with complete freedom. They seem the very picture of glamorous tourists or peripatetic artists. But the specter of Catherine’s outbreaks hangs over them, and both turn to Amanda for support. For her part, more and more Amanda seems to turn to her own travels—the places she discovers as a travel writer (including Brazil but also Madagascar, Mexico, and France), the lovers she meets, the books and magazine articles her journeys produce—turning to them for relief from these exhausting friends, whom she also loves more than anyone.

Catherine’s glamor suggests the freedom of art, and her sculpture, a lifelong project that involves collecting ephemera to add to this ever-growing assemblage, suggests the freedom of abstract art. But the bird held captive in this bird-catcher of a sculpture is herself. Unlike the bird-people in *The Ancestor*, she cannot fly away from a work of art that seems to represent her fractured, frustrated life. Her husband Ernest tells her it is not finished, not ready for exhibition: her work is “not good enough yet” (179). Yet she cannot have the materials she would like, since they might be used for attacks on Ernest. She falls back on ephemera,

fugitive materials, because “Glass, stone, nails, wrenches, drills: [are] things I cannot use” (186). When Ernest reminds her she cannot have dangerous objects nearby, she asks: “How do you expect me to work if you keep limiting my materials?” (20). Catherine abides in paradox, neither bound nor free.

Travel in *The Birdcatcher* thus becomes a series of frustrated flights—temporary escapes from a world in which the artist or writer cannot do her work. Amanda too hops from one place to another as she seeks fulfillment in travel writing. She has left a husband and daughter. Her life as a travel writer has kept her from writing fiction as she once did. Travel has brought intriguing men into her life, the most striking, perhaps, an Afro-Brazilian healer with a remarkable skin disease that has made him white from the waist down. Along with Catherine’s sculptures and Amanda’s books, his multi-colored body seems to represent a culture where Black people cannot be wholly themselves. Amanda’s travels and those of Catherine and Ernest thus seem doomed to go nowhere, even as these privileged people appear to enjoy the enviable freedom of artists. In *The Birdcatcher*, as in *Palmares*, characters seem trapped in the paradoxes of travel—always in flight but never free.

### ESCAPING PARADOX

Paradoxes like these, in Jones’s work, call for radical responses. In traveling with her characters, Jones brings them nowhere, to inescapable paradox. But just as often she frees them, lets them fly—not by arriving at a destination but by finding healing in a New Palmares, a new *quilombo*. In the knowledge of plant medicines passed from one woman to another, her characters find solace and recovery. And in sharing this knowledge they take up their travels again, becoming, like Saidiya Hartman’s women in her 2019 book, “wayward lives” and “beautiful experiments.”

*The Birdcatcher* contains a number of significant healers. Amanda Wordlaw reveals that she has written a book called *The Healers of Bahia*. Her research for that book takes her to Brazil, where she meets an herbalist named Encobierta. This medicine woman has an herbal remedy that can cure Amanda’s skin problems. But Encobierta does not consider herself an especially gifted healer. Her son Ensinanco, the man who is Black above the waist and white below and who becomes Amanda’s lover for a time, can heal with touch. But, his mother says, Ensinanco has turned his back on what he calls “ignorant country folks’ superstitions” to live in the “modern world,” to be

an engineer (95). Eventually Amanda leaves him, perhaps because he has undervalued his mother's gift.

Or perhaps Ensinanco is another of Jones's wry figures of paradox, like Catherine Shuger, someone living in absurdity. Black above though white below, Ensinanco seems a figure of resistance to European colonialism and its policies of white supremacy. But choosing engineering rather than botanical medicine seems to exemplify the success of European efforts to exploit and capitalize Brazil's natural resources. Ensinanco, a skilled healer, is thus fundamentally conflicted. He remains attached to African and Indigenous medicine; but at the same time, seeing his "disease" through European eyes, he is shamed and embarrassed. Amanda encourages him to go to the beach and show his whole body—and he does, but not happily. This vignette is one of many in the novel that capture paradox as a fundamental condition. Ensinanco simply cannot escape himself, his existential contradictions, and Amanda's invitation to embrace his absurd existence proves too overwhelming a challenge to his own healing powers.

For another of Amanda's writing assignments connected with healing, this one about "the flora of Malagasy for [a] gardening magazine" (134), Amanda visits Madagascar and meets a man, Vinandratsy, who seems to hold the knowledge of healing plants she seeks. It turns out, however, that his sister Miandra knows how to *apply* such knowledge, making a special botanical compound that repels mosquitos and a rice tea that cools the spirit. Vinandratsy, like Ensinanco, becomes Amanda's lover. But Miandra is the one who appears to know more about the powers of plants. In neither Brazil nor Madagascar does Amanda find the deep knowledge she is looking for. But women in both places share their special affinities with the plant world and how it might provide the physical and spiritual healing she cannot otherwise attain.

*Palmares* contains Jones's fullest rendering of female medicine workers and the healing potential of women's communities. Almeyda experiences some of this knowledge in the first half of the book when she learns from her mother, grandmother, and another elder, Old Vera, how to gain protective and curative powers from plants. In the second half of the novel, after Almeyda escapes Palmares, she apprentices herself to the healer Luiza Cosme to learn what she knows about plants. Unlike Amanda Wordlaw, whose contact with medicine women does not go far, Almeyda gains knowledge that eventually allows her to work as a healer herself. It turns out she has inherited healing gifts that her grandmother brought from Africa, including divination and prophecy. With her knowledge of plants, she enters

a realm inhabited mostly by women (the one male healer turns out to be a quack), where she finds the freedom she lacked in Palmares.

If Gayl Jones's characters, then, seem to get nowhere in their paradoxical travels, they also gain knowledge of healing arts that may create nurturing communities and relieve pain. Such an outcome may seem on some level romantic, but Jones's travel narratives do not produce happy endings. Rather, Jones's use of travel-narrative tropes and structures projects forward provocatively into our current moment.

## TRAVEL (AND) NARRATIVE

Gayl Jones would probably not call her work travel narrative, or expect to be grouped with authors called travel writers. But her books do challenge conventions of classic travel narrative. In making Amanda Wordlaw of *The Birdcatcher* a contemporary travel writer, Jones invites speculation on what it means to write about travel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a meta-literary question suggests how many authors in the classic European tradition implicitly write travel narrative, even if they are not recognized as doing so: stories in which characters leave home, move through dangerous and terrifying worlds, and return laden with riches, new experiences, and the promise of love and happiness. One does not find such outcomes in Gayl Jones's novels, in which, as we have seen, characters travel but do not typically return home or find new homes.

Gayl Jones's critical resistance to the archive of European travel narratives appears a chief contribution to thinking about this literary genre and intellectual tradition. But what seems distinctive about Jones's work is its *commitment* to getting nowhere—or at least to a “where” defined as a single place or existential condition. Many of Toni Morrison's characters wander: Sula Peace, Macon Dead, Sethe and Paul D, Joe and Violet in *Jazz*, the women of *Paradise*, Florens in *A Mercy*. But in Morrison's novels, characters seem to long for homes—places where women gather in kitchens, as Hannah Peace or Sethe do to make food or conversation or Violet to wash hair on the sink. Wandering tends to end when characters find homes somewhere—not always, but often.

Gayl Jones's characters seem radically homeless, in ways that Rodrigo Lazo addresses in thinking about characters' wanderings in what he calls “migrant fiction” (149): fiction in which characters are always moving but never complete their journeys. Lazo thus draws attention to migrancy as a perpetual, deeply human experience. He also considers the formal and generic implications of migrant literature:

“I refer not only to a narrative that recounts a story of and engages with the experience of migration but first and foremost a narrative that gets away from itself, escapes its own terms and moves in unexpected directions” (151). He distinguishes migrant fiction—“the movement of characters across national borders, the movement of books and print culture across borders, and the movement of imagination across various conceptual limitations” (152)—from “immigrant fiction” where characters arrive at and begin assimilating into a new culture. Migrant fiction, in contrast, is “wandering” fiction (163), in which “national belonging can be undone” (163), and literary structures, therefore, can take on new forms.

Jones’s vision, for which I borrow Saidiya Hartman’s term “waywardness,” likewise challenges the premises and meanings of wandering away from one’s starting point. To what we have seen in Morrison’s and Lazo’s accounts, Jones adds the notion of a new *quilombo* as what she calls in *The Ancestor* a place or condition where one finds the “soul” of a people. Maintaining that *quilombo* depends on Hartman’s illuminating concept of “furtive communication,” endless storytelling and song that keep communities of healing alive. But the wandering, the waywardness never ends, and the *quilombo* may not be in one place.

Where does that leave 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers? Surely contemplating endless wandering and travel no-where underscores a depressing truth about humans as traveling forever toward uncertain futures. The World Migration Report for 2020, produced by the International Organization for Migration, states that: “The total estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020 was 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970.” World migration is massive and growing, decimating planetary resources and exhausting human ingenuity. Moreover, the history of human migration shows this massive growth in scale as a relatively recent phenomenon, as humans scramble to make sense of cataclysmic change happening more rapidly than understanding can absorb.

It is not surprising, then, that it takes time for culture to catch up—to find ways of grappling with traumatic truths and accelerating conditions. But Gayl Jones’s work suggests that perhaps humans have been looking for refuge in the wrong places. The uncertainty about what might be considered a “right” place opens up a space of freedom—of imagination or possibility—that requires living with, and surviving paradox. Gayl Jones’s characters may join the millions of migrants “living in a country other than their countries of birth”—but if so, they

are prepared, as Anninho says in the last line of *Palmares*, to move on, to “fill in the gaps” in “that [other] story.”

Gayl Jones’s recent burst of new publications exhibits the energy of a writer who willingly embraces absurdity—and moves on. The “Epilogue” to *The Birdcatcher* ends with these words, all in capitals: “SCRAP THIS AND START OVER.” How many times in the half-century of her writing life did Gayl Jones think or write those words? How many journeys begin with them? In Gayl Jones’s work the wandering never stops. Nor does her wayward story.

*Abstract:* Gayl Jones (USA, b. 1949) writes of journeys throughout the Americas, while also, if implicitly, exploring a global African diaspora. Her epic historical novel *Palmares* (2021) focuses on Brazil, retelling the story of Zumbi, 17<sup>th</sup>-century Afro-Brazilian leader of a *quilombo*, or fortified rebel city. *Palmares* did finally fall to Portuguese colonial militias in 1694-5, and in her book Gayl Jones’s protagonist, Almeйда, then travels to what she hopes will be a new or second *Palmares*. Her journey, however, frustratingly and paradoxically seems to get her nowhere. But, as we will see, this nowhere reveals the No-Where of *Palmarians*’ lives, a placelessness that seems uncertain, but at the same time offers freedom, or at least imaginative space. Like legendary “flying Africans,” people who escaped enslavement by leaping into the air, Jones’s characters appear to launch themselves into an unknown, a Not-Know-Where that may take them to Africa or somewhere utterly unanticipated. We can find other versions of this ambiguous travel in Gayl Jones’s drama, *The Ancestor: A Street Play* (1975; 2020), and her novel, *The Birdcatcher* (1986; 2022)—and even in the works of Toni Morrison, whose novels show similar concern with what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation”: attempts to rethink history outside archives and beyond maps.

*Keywords:* Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, *Palmares*, *Palmares*, Zumbi, *The Ancestor: A Street Play*, *The Birdcatcher*, Saidiya Hartman, critical fabulation, African diaspora, Portuguese colonialism, *quilombo*, *Candomblé*, travel

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