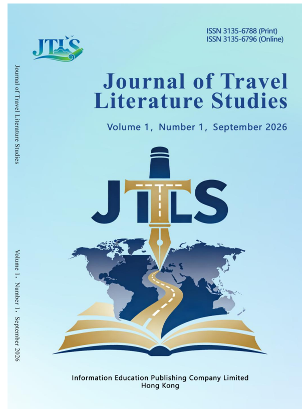

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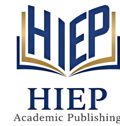

From Movement to Metaphor: A Review of Junwu Tian's *American Travel Narratives and Cultural Metaphors in Twentieth-Century Fiction*[1]

Jinxiang Huang

Abstract: Junwu Tian's *American Travel Narratives and Cultural Metaphors in Twentieth-Century Fiction* examines how travel in twentieth-century American fiction becomes both a narrative structure and a cultural metaphor. This review approaches the book by grouping the forms of travel discussed by Tian into two major categories: vehicle-based travel and quest-like travel. The first category shows how movement by car, train, or carriage can signify postwar restlessness, social aspiration, economic survival, historical loss, or modern violence in different texts. The second category examines how modern American fiction revises the classical quest structure through heroic journeys, wandering, drifting, time-space travel, and spiritual search. Particular attention is given to Tian's use of biographical and genetic criticism, since the book repeatedly links writers' travel experiences to the genesis of their literary works. By connecting authors, individual works, modes of mobility, and cultural meanings with the experiential, historical, and creative origins from which they emerge, the book

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offers a systematic account of how twentieth-century American travel narratives take shape.

Keywords: travel literature; cultural metaphor; twentieth-century American fiction; mobility; genetic criticism

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"I moved to be moving, for the pleasures of merely circulating" (Mewshaw, p. xvi). This sentence, taken from Michael Mewshaw's *Between Terror and Tourism*, captures something essential about the human impulse to travel: movement, in this formulation, is not undertaken for any external purpose—neither as a means of reaching a destination nor as a strategy for securing material gain, but instead becomes its own reward, a pleasure inseparable from the act of circulating through space. Travel is one of the oldest practices in human society, and since journeys invite record and narration, travel literature grows out of the practice of travel itself and therefore also boasts a long history. As early as the Twelfth Dynasty of Egypt, more than a thousand years before Homer's *Odyssey*, travel narratives had already emerged, including a tale of a shipwrecked sailor on an isolated island.

Junwu Tian, Professor of English and American Literature at the School of Foreign Languages, Beihang University, China, has long focused his research on travel writing and the intricate relationship between literature and cultural history. Having published extensively on major American literary movements such as the Lost Generation, the Beat Generation, and Southern fiction, Tian is particularly interested in how physical mobility shapes narrative form and cultural meaning. His monograph, *American Travel Narratives and Cultural Metaphors in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2021, hereafter referred to as *American Travel Narratives*), represents the culmination of more than a decade of research into the intersection of movement, literary expression, and American cultural mythology. The book deals with one of the oldest and most enduring literary genres—travel literature, yet instead of recounting its long history across time and space, it concentrates on twentieth-century American

travel writing. This focus is especially appropriate, for twentieth-century America provided particularly fertile ground for travel writing due to the rise of the automobile, the expansion of mobility, and the deep cultural association between movement and freedom; against this historical and cultural background, twentieth-century American fiction becomes a revealing site for examining travel narratives and their cultural metaphors.

Before turning to analysis, Tian first defines what "travel literature" is, since there is still no consensus in academia on what exactly constitutes the term. He argues that its definition depends both on form and on whether the text is fictional: nonfictional and non-belles-lettres writing belongs to travel literature in the strict sense, whereas fictional writing in a purely literary form belongs more properly to literature in the conventional sense. Although classical literature with travel features has long been a major concern of literary criticism, travel literature as a distinct field did not receive sustained scholarly attention until the 1970s. Existing studies have tended either to impose a single paradigm on works from a given period, to concentrate on individual authors, or to foreground thematic meanings without asking how those narrative patterns are formed. Moreover, there has been no monograph devoted specifically to travel narratives in twentieth-century American fiction that combines both macroscopic and microscopic analysis. Therefore, *American Travel Narratives* aims to reveal the narrative features and cultural metaphors of travel in twentieth-century American fiction through the lens of genetic criticism, with attention to writers' personal travel experiences.

In terms of methodology, the book begins with the rise of the automobile and the social phenomenon of automobile travel in the United States, highlighting the central place of the car in twentieth-century American life and imagination. It then groups twentieth-century American writers into categories, including the Lost Generation, the Leftist, Southern writers, the Beat Generation, Jewish writers as well as Black writers, and analyzes their travel experiences before moving to close readings of their major works. By drawing on biographical criticism, the book traces the genesis of literary creation, showing how writers' personal travel experiences shaped their creative practice within specific historical contexts, rather than moving directly to broad thematic or cultural abstraction. By bringing literary analysis into dialogue with philosophy and political thought, the book uses travel literature to illuminate broader

transformations in political structures and intellectual history. More importantly, the book moves beyond isolated paradigms by offering a clustered study of the diverse themes represented in twentieth-century American fiction, clarifying both their common patterns and their differences.

The book proceeds through an author-centered, chapter-by-chapter structure, but this review adopts a different organizing logic by focusing on the two key concepts highlighted in the title, travel narrative and cultural metaphor, in order to foreground more clearly the book's central concerns and critical contribution. Rather than treating these two dimensions as separate, the following discussion will emphasize their close interrelation. In the book, travel is never presented as a mere change of place. Different modes of movement also carry distinct symbolic meanings within specific historical and cultural contexts. The travel narratives examined in *American Travel Narratives* can be grouped into two interrelated categories: vehicle-based travel, such as journeys by car, train, or carriage; and quest-like travel, including wandering, escape, pilgrimage, and spiritual search.

The first category is vehicle-based travel. The same kind of travel narrative does not produce a single fixed symbolism. As the book shows, vehicle-based movement can signify postwar restlessness, sexual desire, social aspiration, economic survival, historical loss, or even modern violence, depending on the literary and cultural context in which it appears. For the Lost Generation and the Leftist, the car serves as a narrative vehicle for postwar restlessness, unfulfilled desire, and the illusion of the American dream. In Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Barnes keeps moving through urban space by car, as if mobility could temporarily compensate for his postwar trauma, both physically and psychologically. In Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (1934), automobile travel is closely tied to wealth and class aspiration, so that movement comes to signify not just physical mobility but the lure of upward social mobility associated with the American Dream. In Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the automobile is the material condition of migration and survival. The Joad family's movement toward California depends on the vehicle so completely that the car becomes almost a family member in its own right. It carries not only bodies, but also the fragile possibility of a future. The Southern writers complicate this pattern by diversifying the forms of vehicle-based travel. In Faulkner, carriage travel often carries a strong sense of historical residue, becoming a moving reminder of a

declining social order. In Thomas Wolfe, by contrast, train travel reflects the arrival of modern speed and the disruption of older regional consciousness. Faulkner's carriage looks backward toward a lost past, whereas Wolfe's train points toward the intrusive force of modernity. O'Connor offers an even darker variation. Her use of the automobile frequently links movement to violence, exposing the car as an instrument through which mechanized modern life enters and disturbs Southern society.

Beyond vehicle-based movement, the book identifies travel as a quest structure. In its classical form, the quest narrative usually centers on a single traveler who leaves home, undergoes trials, gains some form of knowledge, and finally reaches a destination or returns in a transformed state. However, twentieth-century American fiction often revises this heroic pattern. Travel is no longer a stable route toward fulfillment, departure does not necessarily lead to arrival, and return often brings no true restoration. Broadly speaking, this quest-like dimension of travel can be grouped into five main forms: heroic journey, wandering travel, drifting travel, time travel, and inner or spiritual travel. In addition, Tian treats Jewish fiction and Black fiction as two distinct traditions whose travel narratives are significantly shaped by their own historical pressures rather than by the generalized model of romantic adventure.

The book repeatedly identifies a heroic pattern of travel, though this pattern is often modernized, ironized, or transformed. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is read through the figure of the modern Fisher King. Characters move through European spaces, but travel does not truly heal the wounds of the postwar generation. *Main Street* (1920) is linked to a Don Quixote-like journey, suggesting that heroic aspiration has already become entangled with irony and misalignment between ideal and reality. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the heroic pattern is reworked through the biblical structure of Exodus, so that westward movement becomes both collective migration and a morally charged search for survival. Likewise, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is associated with biblical resonance and Noah's Ark imagery, which again shows that modern American fiction does not abandon heroic travel altogether, but reuses sacred and epic models in fractured, earthly, and often ironic forms. Even O'Connor's fiction participates in this pattern through contrast: the intrusive traveler in "The Artificial Nigger" (1955) bears the name "pioneer," while the outward-moving family trip in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953) turns travel into exposure, violence, and moral unsettlement rather than heroic expansion. Burroughs radicalizes this further by

transforming travel into a descent through the underworld of the lower strata of society, a kind of infernal travel book that empties heroic movement of any uplifting meaning.

The book distinguishes wandering travel as a separate mode. Here the journey is no longer oriented toward a stable destination, nor does it promise heroic completion. Instead, wandering emphasizes movement itself, uncertainty, and the inability to settle. This mode becomes especially prominent in Beat writing. In *The Dharma Bums* (1958), Ray Smith follows Japhy Ryder into the mountains, climbs Matterhorn Peak with him, camps outdoors, chants, meditates, and later withdraws into solitary fire-watch duty on Desolation Peak. Travel here is not a means of reaching a worldly goal. Instead, it becomes a way of suspending ordinary social life and seeking spiritual release through motion itself. Wandering travel also overlaps with what may be called drifting travel, a mode especially visible in the Beat Generation. Unlike the heroic journey, drifting has no stable object. Unlike pilgrimage, it has no secure spiritual destination. It is driven instead by dissatisfaction, rebellion, marginality, and the desire to escape ordinary social structures. In *On the Road* (1957), Dean Moriarty abandons wives and children, changes plans abruptly, and drives compulsively from one city to another, while Sal Paradise is repeatedly drawn back onto the road, following Dean across the country through temporary rides, improvised stops, fleeting encounters, and renewed departures. The road becomes a space of perpetual redirection, social looseness, and incompletion. Wandering and drifting therefore represent one of the clearest ways in which modern travel narrative becomes anti-heroic: it rejects closure, distrusts arrival, and remains bound to incompletion. The Beat Generation also develops a more radical form of travel in Burroughs. As the book suggests, this form begins with literal escape but soon exceeds ordinary spatial movement. In *Naked Lunch* (1959), William Lee first flees narcotics agents in New York, but this escape quickly opens onto a hallucinatory itinerary that moves through Mexico and then into the imaginary Interzone. Travel thus passes beyond physical displacement into the crossing of unstable boundaries between reality and hallucination, actual geography and invented zones. Burroughs transforms Beat mobility into a form of time-space travel: the journey no longer unfolds within a continuous world, and the traveler no longer moves through a stable sequence of experience. Formally, the novel’s fractured routines and disjunctive arrangement

already anticipate the cut-up aesthetics that Burroughs would later develop more explicitly. Besides, the book identifies what may be called inner or spiritual travel. This is particularly important because it shifts the meaning of travel away from geography alone and toward psychological or existential exploration. Thomas Wolfe is a key figure here, since his fiction often turns travel into a mental and emotional process rather than a merely external route. Journey becomes a search for values, self-understanding, or spiritual orientation. Even when the body moves through space, the deeper issue is how the self confronts memory, desire, and inner lack.

Jewish fiction and Black fiction are discussed separately in *American Travel Narratives*, because in the book they do not simply repeat the general modern pattern of quest and wandering. Their travel narratives are shaped by more specific historical experiences of displacement, identity, memory, and exclusion. In Jewish fiction, wandering is not merely a modern lifestyle or a romantic sign of freedom. It is deeply tied to historical causes. The journey often begins in rupture rather than choice. Works related to J.D. Salinger are linked both to father-son conflict and to quest, showing that travel in Jewish fiction may take the form of a search for meaning under the pressure of fractured inheritance. At the same time, the book also points toward a spiritual exploration of Jewish values, especially in narratives that return to an origin only to discover that the meaning of "home" has expanded beyond any single fixed place. Return does occur, but not as simple restoration. It transforms travelers' understanding of belonging. Black fiction is treated in an equally distinctive way. Here travel is closely connected to racial history and to the problem of movement through space. It reworks quest, exile, and return through the long pressure of racial displacement and the difficult labor of self-definition.

Having examined the book's main arguments in detail, it is worth turning to its contributions as a work of literary scholarship. One of its most valuable features is that it does not plunge directly into twentieth-century American fiction as if these narratives had emerged in isolation. Instead, it patiently reconstructs the larger background from which they arose. The book explains why travel occupies such an important place in the American imagination, linking it to earlier national myths and historical experiences such as ancestral migration, westward expansion, the Mayflower legacy, and the dream of self-making. It also clarifies why the automobile became so central to American travel culture by considering concrete social

conditions, including the replacement of rail travel, the affordability and variety of cars, suburban community patterns, and the expansion of highways. In this respect, the book is highly accessible even to beginners and general readers, because it does not present travel narrative as a purely abstract concept, but as something rooted in recognizable historical experience. At the same time, *American Travel Narratives* offers substantial value for literary researchers. Although its main focus is on the twentieth century, it still traces a much longer genealogy of travel narrative, reaching back to Greek and Roman myth and then moving through nineteenth-century American writing before arriving at modern fiction. This broader historical frame enables Tian to show more precisely what changes in the twentieth century: heroic travel persists, but is redirected toward the search for American identity and the American Dream; automobiles and other forms of transport become far more prominent; and modernist non-linearity begins to coexist with realist narrative logic. Equally important is the book's emphasis on literary genesis. Rather than treating texts as self-contained symbolic structures, it repeatedly relates them to the lived experiences of their authors. The discussion of Jack London is especially illustrative here: his experience as a hobo, his life as a sailor, and the masculine ethos associated with the Gold Rush are all used to illuminate the formation of his travel writing. Similar attention is given to the multiple relocations in the childhoods of writers such as Dos Passos, Lewis, Wolfe, and Bellow, as well as to the extensive travels of Lewis, Strindberg, Faulkner, Wolfe, and O'Connor. The book thus productively revives a biographical and genetic approach to literature. As René Wellek and Austin Warren famously observe in *Theory of Literature* (1949), "the most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, and explanation through the writer's life and personality has been one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study" (p. 75).

Another merit of the book lies in its ability to combine horizontal and vertical modes of analysis. Horizontally, it moves beyond isolated author studies by establishing connections among writers and literary groupings. Vertically, it places literary analysis in dialogue with broader intellectual and social frameworks. The chapter on *The Grapes of Wrath* does not remain at the level of narrative or imagery, but brings the novel into relation with sociological reflections on the tension between the group and the individual, Emerson's notion of the Over-Soul, and an almost religious ideal of universal love. The discussions of the Beat Generation and Bellow

are similarly layered. In the case of Kerouac, the book connects Beat mobility with Buddhist thought and a search for spiritual release. In the case of Bellow, it links travel writing to Trotskyism, exile politics, and the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century. In this way, the book not only maps relations across authors and literary formations, but also deepens literary analysis by embedding it in larger structures of thought, history, and culture.

Most importantly, *American Travel Narratives* does more than summarize existing knowledge. It corrects a number of received assumptions and offers fresh judgments of its own, including debates over the "father" of the Beat Generation, the relation between *On the Road* and *Walking* (1862), Salinger's supposed seclusion, and certain interpretations of *Native Son* (1940). The book concludes with a discussion of postmodernist writings, Black women's writing, and Chinese American literature, which opens the field outward rather than closing it down. For that reason, the significance of this book lies not simply in its breadth of coverage, but in its ability to generate new critical insights and to suggest further directions for the study of twenty-first-century travel writing. At the same time, a few minor limitations may also be noted. Because the book covers a remarkably wide range of writers, periods, and modes of travel, some individual texts cannot always be discussed at equal depth. In addition, certain categories of travel occasionally overlap with one another, so that the boundaries between wandering, drifting, and spiritual travel are not always sharply defined. However, these minor reservations do not diminish the overall value of the study.

In sum, *American Travel Narratives and Cultural Metaphors in Twentieth-Century Fiction* is a wide-ranging and illuminating study that successfully brings together literary history, textual analysis, and cultural interpretation. Its chief contribution lies not simply in surveying a broad body of twentieth-century American writing, but in showing how concrete forms of movement are transformed into narrative patterns and cultural metaphors under specific historical and ideological conditions. By tracing the interplay between mobility, literary form, and cultural meaning, the book demonstrates that travel in twentieth-century American fiction is never merely a matter of physical displacement, but a complex mode through which questions of history, identity, desire, belief, and social change are negotiated. For general readers, it offers an accessible and well-structured introduction to the field.

For researchers, it provides a productive framework for further inquiry into travel writing and modern American literature. It therefore deserves the attention of anyone interested in American fiction, travel writing, or the cultural imagination of mobility.

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