

# The Slave Narrative Tradition in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*

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LAWRENCE HILL'S THIRD NOVEL, *The Book of Negroes*, is a work of historical fiction that assumes an outdated but useful generic framework. Hill writes from the standpoint of a pre-Abolition slave narrator but subverts many features of the traditional slave narrative, as his first-person narrator, Aminata Diallo, challenges racial mythologies that have been created through the mediated manufacture of the genre. Aminata tells the story of her capture at age eleven, and narrates her experience of migration and hardship in the United States, Canada, Sierra Leone, and finally Great Britain. Like other slave narrators, such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, she tells a coming-of-age story that is also the story of the perpetration of racism against the body and the infringement of slavery upon the worthy intellect. Critics have appreciated Hill's use of the ever-popular slave narrative form, and this novel has garnered numerous awards, including a Commonwealth Writers' Prize and a CBC Radio Canada Reads win, since its publication in 2007. However, critics have been slower to acknowledge *The Book of Negroes* as an important revisionist work that simultaneously adheres to and undermines a genre.

The slave narrative has outlived its apparent political function: the form evolved to harness public reaction against slavery, but its further reaching by-product was a textual tradition that continues to inflect popular constructions of race. The abolitionist movement, though apparently "for" enslaved blacks, was a white Christian cultural phenomenon, and slave narratives were geared toward a white Christian audience. In a gesture of correction, Hill has infused *The Book of Negroes* with an historical and generic intelligence that allows him to generally adhere to the slave narrative story-form, while undercutting those thematic features that have created racial mythologies. Hill writes both within and against the abolitionist tradition, and presents a genuine fiction rather than a politically expedient one. He simultaneously works within and against the slave narrative genre, which evolved during the

Enlightenment, and became increasingly popular and genre-determined in America, Britain, and British Canada during the antebellum period. This essay will consider the ways in which Hill fixes his narrative within the textual history of the slave narrative, and the rhetorical and plot devices that he uses to “write back” to that history.

Black-authored, white-mediated antebellum slave narratives adhere to a set of market-tested tropes which both enchanted the contemporary white Christian audience and promoted the Abolition project: the slave narrator “proves” his or her humanity and deservingness of freedom by meeting a set of standardized Eurocentric criteria. Slave narrators assert their intellectual worth through the quality of their English prose, and validate their spiritual competence through their narrativized acceptance and experience of Christianity. The validity of black civilization is depicted in organized, culturally developed communities either in Africa or on the plantation, though these communities are often adorned with “savage” features for the sake of intrigue. The inhumanity of slavery is demonstrated through detailed descriptions of the brutal middle passage from Africa to the slave colony and the repeated severance of friendships and family ties through the slave trade. Gratuitous descriptions of violence, often coupled with Christian symbolism, further demonstrate the internal corruption of the slave economy and the morally deleterious effects of slave ownership upon white Christians. The slave narrative often ends with the narrator’s escape into a “Promised Land” in Canada or England, where he or she authors the narrative and attains a happy ending in the form of a modest middle-class social rank.

Besides (the somewhat obscure) Lucy Terry Prince, the earliest anglophone black writer who contributes to Abolition writing is Phillis Wheatley, a domestic slave who learned to write under the tutelage of her white mistress, and who could, by the age of thirteen, compose poetry in the style of Alexander Pope. Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, was the first black person to write a sustained prose autobiography in English, and he thereby created the basic narrative form that would be modified and mimicked throughout the antebellum period and after the American Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the ultimate example of this popular form, and certainly one of its best sellers, is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* of 1845. Also, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1862), although not a slave narrative, certainly owes much of its imagery and popularity to the genre. After 1900, and

especially toward the 1920s, as post-emancipation abolitionist sentiment turned to nostalgia for the Old South, literary slave narrative was partially usurped by oral interviews and other media that celebrated, and often fetishized, the speech patterns of rural blacks. The rhetoric of black simplicity, which had co-existed with the rhetoric of intellectual potentiality, temporarily overshadowed it, despite the public profile of scholars like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Slave narrative is less genre-inflected in early examples, such as Equiano's, and increasingly formulaic in the later antebellum period. As abolitionist campaigners realized the saleability and corresponding political usefulness of slave narratives, they became more active intermediaries in their production, and were often vested in the fictionalization of real life histories (Spaulding 5). Hill's narrator, Aminata Diallo, writes in the company of campaigning abolitionists who pressure her to make her story conform to both the pre-existing model and their manumission campaign. She (and perhaps a spectral Hill) complains of their interference and chooses to set down her narrative independent of their leadership. Though Aminata is without the means of publication and circulation, Hill circumvents the abolitionists' partial censorship and simultaneously draws critical attention to it.

The generic requirements pushed upon the fictional Aminata are not as great as those faced by later non-fiction slave narrators because, though racial essentialism was merely a competing theory during the Enlightenment, it was an accepted "fact" by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The abolition discussion was less polarized during the Enlightenment, as there were a greater variety of possible political and ideological stances surrounding the slave debate: some abolitionists thought that black people were inherently inferior but that the institution of slavery was itself corrupting; and there were also slave owners, like *The Book of Negroes*' Solomon Lindo, who knew that blacks were intelligent but were unwilling to forfeit their economic advantage. Alternatively, some slave owners considered blacks equal persons, but also believed that slave importation was an evangelical tool, and ought to be preserved as such. There were many possible rationales behind both pro- and anti-slave sentiments.

After the popular acceptance of racial essentialism, however, the debate became straightforward: blacks were emotive, brutish, and irrational, and needed to be absorbed into either western culture or

western industry to be adequately guided. Abolitionists and anti-abolitionists decided their political aims through their racist beliefs, and generated racist depictions to validate their political aims. Fortunately, Hill chooses to enter the slave debate during an era of greater intellectual fluidity and thereby frees Aminata from overtly responding to racial-essentialist rhetoric. While she must rebel against her immediate white benefactors, she does not have to answer the hugely circumscribed antebellum textual legacy, and can therefore be a generic pioneer rather than a conformist or rebel. She, like her contemporary Equiano, is in a position to define genre, rather than be defined or circumscribed by it.

Aminata is permitted to tell a compelling story, rather than merely present a narrative as a piece of evidence for use in a white-authored philosophical discussion. Phillis Wheatley's poetry, by contrast, was popular primarily because of its evidence-value within the racial-essentialism debates of the Enlightenment. She wrote before the advent of the cotton gin, when slaves were most often domestic labourers, and slavery was a minority practice rather than an economic base for society; hence, she was regarded as a curiosity piece rather than a serious systemic rebel. In her poetry, Wheatley foregrounds classical and Christian features, as in her best-known work, "To Maecenas," or in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," fully included here:

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
 That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
 "Their color is a diabolic die."  
 Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
 May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.

This poem is self-consciously derivative. The vocabulary is Christian, and the symbols are dictated by popular contemporary debate, with "diabolic die" serving as a double entendre to reference both the author's pigmentation and the indigo trade, allowing Wheatley to gesture toward, without actually commenting upon, this facet of the slave economy. The couplet rhyme scheme is typical of the era, and the metre is refined; Wheatley is not *saying* in this poem, so much as she is *showing* that she can write as well a white English poet. She is, in Aminata's words, "brought out" or given celebrity "to adorn the abolitionist move-

ment" (5). In a contrary display, an early twentieth-century scholar has recorded the oral testimony of Virginia Bell, an eighty-eight-year-old former slave: "I don't know 'zactly how old I is. You see it ain't like things is today. The young folks can tell you their 'zact age and every-thing, but in those days we didn't pay much 'tention to such things" (Yetman 25). This — or any — "empirical" presentation of voice is never far from the transcriber's influence. Features of Bell's vocabulary, such as "'zactly" and "ain't," might be absorbed and ignored by the ear, but are conspicuous on paper. The editor has chosen to leave out several commas that would make the oral text read more naturally; as there is no absolute way to measure an oral pause, punctuation choices are made largely at the transcriber's discretion. The omission of punctuation is an easy way to colloquialize Bell's speech, and to make her sound "more different" from a hegemonic orator. Hence, like Wheatley's poems, this account exchanges narrative aims for anthropological ones, as the mode of speaking and its cultural significance take on greater importance than what is said. At these extremes of defining "the black voice" against an imagined static white norm, diction supersedes story rather than infusing it, and text becomes an exhibit rather than a communicative tool.

Both the real-life Equiano and the fictional Aminata resist performative extremes; both combine ornate and functional language to tell their story while simultaneously, but secondarily, proving their intelligence. For instance, Equiano uses abolitionist rhetoric when he asks, "does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire and every noble sentiment?"; here he presents an awareness of, and a stance within, Enlightenment debates around the institution of slavery (Equiano 18). He also proves facility with the European trope of fire and light as signifiers of morality and intelligence. Later, he is rhetorically sarcastic, using parallel structure as he writes, "Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty" (33). Equiano even includes a poetic quotation that begins "Wing'd with lightening and impetuous rage" (59). These lines, like Wheatley's, are of hegemonic derivation, but Equiano is not consistently derivative. He later quotes the poem "The Dying Negro," which is topically distant from "To Macenas."

Also, unlike either Wheatley or Bell, Equiano can speak denotatively with clarity and ease: "Several of the strangers also shook hands with us black people, and made motions with their hands, signifying, I suppose,

we were to go to their country, but we did not understand them” (29). Equiano’s narrative has a style of its own, one which often abandons high rhetoric to fuse the literate with the oral, the writer’s perception with the speaker’s ease. His work is a “narrative”; while an “account” might come from a markedly unskilled or uninteresting writer or orator, narrative assumes both the ability and the intentionality of the storyteller. Hence, Equiano, as well as Aminata, chooses a mode of literate orality.

Aminata identifies her own narrative power when she describes herself as a *djeli*, a professional storyteller. However, though she has taken this term from her birth country, she does not seal out European accretions from her narrative style. For instance, she is in a nonliterary mode when she describes her birth as “sliding from my mother like an otter from a riverbank,” but uses a formal, abstract structure when she says “the misfortune of those women was my good luck, their misery my escape” (238). When she employs paratactic patterns, as in “I was no longer with the medicine man, no longer a six-foot-toss from the coldest grave on earth” (238), she is working within the oral tradition, but it is written literature that has named the sea “the coldest grave on earth.”

Were she to refer to the ocean as “the col’est grave on earth,” however, Aminata’s skilled narrative would become a display of quaintness, like that of Virginia Bell. She herself is aware of the disarming power of colloquial slave phrasing: as a young woman, she self-consciously uses “Dunno, Master” when she speaks to Mr. Appleby, her suspicious owner. She tells him that she is able to “make soap and slop hogs,” but certainly not that she is a literate midwife (149). Unlike Wheatley, the narrator Aminata is able to intervene on behalf of her younger self, to transform apparent dumbness into subversion, explaining that the soap-and-hogs response is a prepared answer for an anticipated question. Also, Aminata repeatedly chooses to record the word “Master” over the ubiquitous “Massa,” and thereby draws attention to the real nature of this verbal exchange, allowing no paternalistic misinterpretation of the relationship between master and slave.

Aminata often couples simple descriptions with a subtle organizational awareness. For instance, while young Aminata hears Georgia urinate outside their hut, she is anxious for the elder to return because her mind is “spilling over with questions.” After Georgia lies down, “her warmth swam across our bed” (135). This scene, while lucidly

straightforward, is also formally organized by the motif of water. Also, when Aminata uses vernacular expressions and sentence fragments, it is in a dramatic rather than unlettered manner. In one instance, she focalizes through Cummings Shackspear, saying that his liquor enterprise “raked in money,” and thereby indicates both his success and his character through word choice (392). She catalogues the items that the Sierra Leone company has a monopoly on, saying, “A bit of canvas for sail cloth? Salt pork? Molasses? Bread? Everything came from the company” (383). These abrupt shopping-list fragments force emphasis upon each item, and the correspondent dependence of the new colony on the company. When Aminata is ungrammatical on paper, it is only because she is employing ear-grammar instead.

Aminata celebrates her new opportunity to use text for telling her story, as she has spent her writing life using an impersonal and anti-oral style. When Jason asks her about the Book of Negroes, she asks the inward-looking question, “What did I write?” (344). She wrote what the overseers had her write, with clipped descriptions such as “Sarah Johnson, 22, squat wench, quadroon. Ind. To Donald Ross. Formerly slave to Burgess Smith, Lancaster County, left him with the above Thomas Johnson, her husband” (295). Hill is ironic in naming the text *The Book of Negroes*, given that that historical artefact typifies an opposite textual posture. While the clerical mode of writing annals story, the djelic mode fulfills it.

Aminata crosses a two-tiered intellectual boundary by becoming a skilled storyteller. Appleby represents the first tier, in that he requires his slaves to speak poorly and read nothing. Lindo, while more liberal than Appleby, sets up a second intellectual limitation, which Aminata herself identifies in unassuming Ebonics. He asks, “you sensible nigger?” and she responds that she is; but when he pushes the question further, commenting, “you learn fast,” she assures him that she is “just sensible,” knowing that he expects her to demur the charge of intellect (149). Likewise, Equiano is identified as a “sensible fellow” by a white auditor (Equiano 93). “Sensible” implies an intelligence that is useful, but not threatening: an intelligence that balances accounts but has no claim on sonnets, escape routes, or any imaginative product.

Slave narrative worked against a very active pro-slavery intellectual campaign, which provided many arguments and stereotypes to justify slavery. Both before and during the antebellum period, pro-slavery

pamphlets assume the limited teachability of Africans as they assert the necessity of the slave trade to black enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, described slaves being “rescued” from a land “without manufactures, without navigation,” and “without industry” (Boulokos 242). He proposed that blacks’ merit should be judged based on their performance “on the same stage with the whites . . . where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgement is to be formed” (242). Jefferson’s logic is almost farcically circular, as he suggests that the achievements of blacks within slave-holding America are reflective of the potentialities of the race, and that slavery therefore cannot be a limiting institution. Slave narrators refuted this proof-in-the-pudding argument by testifying to the obstacles that make the stage of judgement a stage of racist thwarting, and by describing African civilizations that are civilized and not cultureless free-for-all.

Aminata says that concern for her safety has “intruded” on her intellectual development in America, but suggests that the intellectual foundation provided her in Africa helped her learn under duress (Hill 2). Her father was literate and taught her to honour the printed word in the form of the Koran; her mother taught her a trade and how to participate in an inter-communal economy. Bayo society is complex enough to foster corruption, which is personified in Fanta, the anathema to noble savage stereotypes. While Equiano idealizes the Igbo more than Aminata does the Fulbe, both present a realistic description of their social organization to dispel Jeffersonian ideas of Africa. Slave writers who were born into slavery, such as Frederick Douglass, describe the family organization and black community on the plantation in order to suggest that the social organizational impulse is not just a white attribute (Douglass 1844). Aminata includes details of her apprenticeships under Mamed and Georgia to prove that, although slaves’ social organization is less comprehensive than that in Africa, blacks retain the impulse to design community.

There are a number of requisite plot elements within the slave narrative that are more constricting than the general communicative and political features. Slave narrators almost always include a traumatic separation from family — Equiano loses a sister, Aminata both parents — that makes immediate the trauma of cultural severance. This trauma usually appears in conjunction with a miserable middle passage, which is a nonvoluntary descent into the unknown that erases the social context



of childhood, replacing it with slave-adulthood. Aminata spends most of book 1 describing this transition, during which she, very tellingly, has her first menstrual period. Slave-born writers replace the middle passage with their first memory of being sold to a new plantation, away from their foster or biological family. Aminata also experiences this trauma, though as the mother rather than the child.

Most slave narratives include one, if not two or more, incidents of renaming. Equiano, after choosing the Christian title “Jacob” for himself, is re-named “Gustavus Vassa” by a white man. Equiano resists the name, but submits after “many a cuff” from the renamer (36). Aminata notably uses the name Equiano rather than Gustavus Vassa, though the latter name may have been more recognizable at the time. Indeed, Aminata seems to protect names more fervently than Equiano, accepting Georgia’s suggested “Meena Dee” as an abridgement of “Aminata Diallo” so that she can avoid the humiliation of being stuck with a western label (127). She explicitly enforces the value of her name at the outset of the narrative, when she explains how “Aminata” (3) is pronounced. Also, while Equiano often identifies blacks as a statistical mass of sufferers (76), Aminata speaks in terms of individuals and uses those individuals’ names. She is like Douglass in this regard, as he also individuated even minor characters in the narrative, calling black men “Henry” and “John” when unable to use their real names, but distancing most white men with the mister-prefix (Douglass 1863). While Equiano favours brevity and the authority of statistics, Aminata and Douglass exult the individual.

Renaming is symptomatic of the lingual-cultural transition. Slave narratives that begin in Africa portray the overcoming of one, if not several, language barriers; Aminata quickly learns the Ebonic language of the African “homelanders” and white American English. She is bilingual to begin with, having spoken both Bamanakan and Fulfulde in Africa, and has an innate verbal intelligence, which Georgia recognizes, saying, “she done learn so fast . . . zing zing zing. Words fly out her mouth like eagles” (129). Mamed also perceives her intellect and chooses to teach her how to write, thereby allowing Aminata to fulfill the second language prerequisite of slave narrators: literacy. The slave narrator will emphasize his or her love of reading and writing, as does Aminata when she declares, “I was instantly full of desire to read the book” (204). These descriptions contradict the eighteenth-century stereotype of the

mentally lazy African by validating Aminata's intelligence within the context of an interested and perceiving black community, rather than attributing her intelligence to the generosity of white benefactors.

In further contradiction to the lazy African stereotype, Aminata demonstrates a strong work ethic, yet consistently undercuts the Protestant work ethic. Slave narrators who wrote during the antebellum almost universally embody the "hard work, clean living" and "education" that will purportedly "bring a man, even if black — and unless flawed by character or caught by bad luck — to the top" (Bontemps vii). The two qualifiers Arna Bontemps injects into this promise point to the integral problems with the work ethic. Rum drinking aside, Aminata lives a chaste, moderate life and embraces learning, but she is "caught by bad luck" in the form of systemic discrimination against slaves, escaped slaves, British blacks, and "Toubab" Africans in Sierra Leone. Her character flaw is, perhaps, being female. These two combined factors nullify the work ethic's contractual guarantees, and lead to Aminata's conspicuous setbacks and her recurrent poverty. What emerges out of her personal disasters is a survival ethos rather than an ethos of success, and Aminata finally comes to the "middle" — that is, a supply of "food, and quills and ink and paper" and a skeleton of family — rather than the inaccessible "top" (457). Though *The Book of Negroes* has the texture of a happy ending, all Aminata's hard work really secures is a quiet deathbed.

Aminata's personal economic victory is limited, but her testimonial victory on behalf of the black community is substantial. She says, "there must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all these water crossings" (1), but is also sarcastic about the abolitionists' suggestion that she is to "change the course of history" (3) by writing, and she acknowledges her own life as "a ghost story" rather than a moral fable or tale of hope (4). She both affirms and denies her authorial destiny, and laces her narrative with red-herring humility. For instance, while the self-described "broken-down old black woman" (3) might not be such a formidable character, the Aminata who digs her fingers into a society lady's ribs certainly is. Aminata also adorns the opening pages of her narrative with subtle intellectual criticisms of her white contemporaries, much as she does at the London school, when she provides the children with her grocery list of "sausages, eggs, mutton stew, crocodiles, all those regular things" (4). She is aware of her interlocutors' stereotypes, and uses them to gesture toward the silliness of the white construc-

tion of blackness rather than conforming her self-presentation to that construction.

Pioneer slave narrators had a delicate project in framing their fantastic stories so that they would be palatable to an audience that demanded humility of black men and women. Equiano explains the problem:

I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity: we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence. Did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great. . . . Let it therefore be remembered, that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise. (4)

Equiano explicitly names the concerns that Aminata deftly copes with at the outset of her narrative. She avoids the charge of vanity by drawing attention to her life tragedy rather than her numerous successes. In particular, her descriptions of her elderly body, which is balding, stooped, and thick-toenailed, make her frequent remarks about her youthful beauty more palatable — nostalgic rather than boastful. Though she suggests her great sufferings in the form of her brand mark and her many journeys, she does not bemoan them at length; the only sorrow she focuses on is the loss of her family. She uses brief allusions to suffering as bait for interest rather than sympathy, and even discredits her ingenious survival, announcing, “I seem to have trouble dying” (1). Aminata keeps her pride partly in reserve until she has won her audience.

Slave narrators often recount one or more instances of complete isolation, usually after the loss of their childhood community context, which may occur through the middle passage or the first plantation sale, when the narrator loses the epistemological security of known soil. However, Hill takes a different tack, providing Aminata with a coherent and continuous community. She is captured along with Fomba and Fanta, and meets Chekura on the coffle trail. All three peers survive the passage to America, and though she is promptly separated from Fomba and Fanta, she marries Chekura and maintains intermittent contact with him until mid-life. He functions as a one-man social network and is co-witness to her story, reappearing every time she moves from one community to another. After he dies, John Clarkson is introduced and is with Aminata in Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, and London. While

the traditional slave narrator is the sole authority in his or her story, Aminata has “a social network that authorizes and organizes individual acts of remembrance” and “the social cohesion necessary for framing and maintaining memory within a collective context” (Shlensky 141). While coherence of place is “radically absent” for Aminata, she has a human community to authorize her voice (Shlensky 141).

Aminata is interested in both physical and interpersonal place, as is evident in her fervent desire to see maps and her declared intention to “go back home” (207). However, she gives interpersonal place priority; it is only when Aminata finds that Chekura has drowned, for instance, that she is psychologically prepared to leave for Sierra Leone, as there is “nothing left” for her “in Nova Scotia” (370). Just before learning that Chekura is dead, she sees Clarkson’s map of Africa, replete with pictures of jungle animals and “half-dressed” (367) natives, and remembers Jonathan Swift’s verse:

*So geographers, in Afric-maps,  
With savage-pictures fill their gaps;  
And o’er uninhabitable downs  
Place elephants for want of towns.* (368)

Her fascination with cartography becomes a disillusionment, and the place she pursues is not a place of landscape, or even a place of culture; she is following her human community to Sierra Leone. She undertakes her journey to the village of Bayo on the hope of finding her “people,” and not to simply to rejoin the Fulbe culture, or a culture “like” the Fulbe (431). When the African Youssouf offers to marry her and make her a permanent citizen, she refuses, and returns to Clarkson and the other Nova Scotians. Her diasporic identity is constituted by interpersonal relations, and not by physical or ethnic place. While Equiano vacillates between “the two worlds to which he belongs,” Aminata refutes the possibility of a static geocultural divide, and instead pursues fluid, mutable human community (Equiano 2). The most human location is the family, so Aminata is not “done,” or truly placed, until she has rediscovered her daughter, who is pregnant (Hill 469).

Slave narrators often use the Christian conversion experience to relocate themselves in terms of culture and human community. The former African develops a home away from home when he or she accepts Christ, and the slave-born narrator stakes a claim in Christian freedom.

While Aminata partakes of the church's human community, watching "Daddy Moses' services" and listening to him speak "until his voice is hoarse," she is never "born again like that" (326). When she first arrives in America, she attempts to maintain her Islamic faith and her parents' legacy, but by mid-life she is an atheist, consuming alcohol and pork, though she still fervently honours the memory of her parents. The erosion of her religion began upon her capture, when one of the slavers stops her from turning toward Mecca to pray (33).

Hill has chosen a neither-nor religious identity for his protagonist. Rather than synthesizing Christian and Muslim faiths, or exchanging one for the other, Aminata simply loses belief, revealing slave acculturation as a subtractive rather than an additive process. Other slave narrators have recorded the greedy absorption of Christian belief and code, and have rested their western moral authority upon spiritual allegiance. Douglass, however, also rejects this device, using his atheist spiritual polemic to rebut "Christian" society (Douglass 1845). Aminata, like Douglass, treats her atheism as a scar, an irreversible mark like the brand over her right breast.

It is noteworthy that Aminata's atheism becomes most pronounced after she has moved to Canada, which in slave narratives is so often presented as a *Canaan*. Canada often functions as a safe space in slave narratives because it was politically expedient for slave narrators to present the British territory in this way, as they thereby further "proved" the potential success of Blacks who lived in a free state. As George Elliott Clarke notes both in his *Odysseys Home* and in the introduction to *Eyeing the North Star*, the American understanding of the black experience has often been exported north, and accepted by blacks and especially whites, to the point that Canadians have themselves imported and accepted the Abolition-era Canaan-myth. Although there are numerous Canadian black-authored texts that attest to a much starker Canada, these texts are largely in the historical archives rather than in the white Canadian public consciousness, which has been offered instead the abolitionist fantasy of itself as a peaceable kingdom. In a dose of corrective, Hill has expanded the story of black America to include a larger arena of "the black Atlantic," revealing Aminata's struggle both under official slavery and unofficial conscription to dehumanizing poverty and racism (*Odysseys* 81). While she enjoys the rich cultural solidarity of the Nova Scotian black community, the continual assaults and economic pres-

asures inflicted by white Canadians in the region make it an inhospitable promised land. She ultimately joins most of her community in migration to Sierra Leone, leaving a lesser remnant in Nova Scotia.

Hill's text serves a special corrective function as a Canadian historical novel, as it offers what Herb Wyile has called (in relation to other contemporary Canadian historical novels) a "truer" version of history: a replacement for the hegemonic, monopolizing story (Wyile 8). In this case, the dominant history has been established by an external authority rather than an internal one: it is not even Canadian hegemony, but American politics, that have created the *Canada/Canaan* myth. So, while most post-1970s Canadian historical fictions have filibustered dominant historical narratives with a plenitude of subjective voices, and have thereby challenged narratives that mute historical fact, Hill undertakes the double task of both presenting a nonhegemonic subjectivity and correcting the widely circulated, and wildly inaccurate, historical "fact" that has construed Canada as a protective homeland for escaped slaves.

Slave narrators' search for a promised land is largely figured as a flight from perpetual physical strife, and Aminata does not attain safety until she is provided haven in England as an old woman. Aminata's slave experience, and in particular the first few years, is a series of tortures: she is marched in a coffle, starved, forced to stand in "soil that stank of urine and feces," and sexually tormented on the boat before reaching St. Helena, where she is raped by Appleby, stripped and shaved, and robbed of a child. In New England and Nova Scotia, she is under constant threat. Aminata lives the impossible life of a *homo sacer*, the person who is "stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him [sic] without committing homicide" (Salih 65). The "unconditional threat of death" necessitates "perpetual flight"; Aminata is a refugee without a potential refuge, migrating away from, and toward, suffering.

However, while eliciting sympathy, Hill is careful to avoid the sensational, often homoerotic, violence depicted in many slave narratives. Douglass and others often fetishize the black body, depicting cruelty in such luscious detail that the sufferer becomes object as well as subject. Aminata's sufferings, and those of her friends, are judged rather than merely depicted; for instance, she refers to Chekura's half-finger as "his punishment," forcing emphasis upon moral rather than physical brutality (Hill 221). During her time in Sierra Leone, she sees a group

of slaves, and says that she hates “herself for doing nothing to help the captives,” describing her emotional reaction and de-emphasizing the detail of what she sees (417). The voyeuristic eye is replaced by an ethical self-consciousness, and violence becomes a humanizing, rather than a dehumanizing, feature of the presentation of the black community (Spaulding 2).

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also attempts to use violence to teach mercy. By and large, however, it is a wellspring of ethnic stereotypes that have infected the slave narrative legacy. Stowe portrays blacks as “inherently religious” with qualities of “warmth, kindness, attachment, patience, meekness,” and “richly emotional natures that make them susceptible to music and art” (Gosset 66). Stowe’s blacks are also “unintelligent, unenterprising, and unattractive” (66). Hill creates an antitype in Aminata, a beautiful, ingenious, headstrong atheist who would rather read than sing.

Furthermore, Hill refuses both the pro-slave and the Stoweian stereotypes of the black male. The archetypal black male rapist is defeated in Hill’s depiction of Chekura, a romancer who “doesn’t press the matter” of sex with Aminata (159). His foil is, perhaps, the white patriarch Appleby, who takes Aminata’s virginity by raping her. While Chekura is not sexually aggressive, he is also not eunuch-like or maternal, as Stowe’s Uncle Tom-type is; he enjoys passionate, consensual sex with his wife. Hill farcically presents the Tom-type in Fomba, the “stupid woloso” (second-generation slave) who accompanies Aminata to America (Hill 17). Fomba is mentally handicapped, and therefore endures the ridicule of the Bayo children without complaint. In America, he becomes a useful slave: strong, silent, and compliant.

Hill parodies the essentialism propagated by abolitionists, and combats it directly through Aminata’s character. While her narrative project is to tell a good story, his is to tell a corrective story that redirects the existing slave narrative tradition. Rather than consolidating cultural, racial, and religious stereotypes into one figure, Hill is avowedly subjective, a “seriously introspective post-colonial biographer” with a will to retrieve one self, Aminata’s self, “from post-colonial hangovers” and “memories” that deny “free-ranging memoir, nostalgia, reminiscence, recall” (Matthews 854). Aminata is a self, not a political parcel; she is a self “recalled, explored and asserted as part and reflection of a larger complexity of national, religious and other issues[.] . . . a blow delivered

in the cause of one species of freedom or another without losing its quality of personal introspection and self-consciousness” (Matthews 855).

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Notably, however, Equiano does not adhere to all of what would become the typifying features of a slave narrative: for instance, he refuses to identify himself as a European, although he does accept the Christian faith. The parallels between his autobiography and Aminata’s fictionally contemporaneous one are numerous, as he was also purportedly enslaved at the age of eleven, resisted forced renaming upon arrival in America, and eventually found his way to London to speak in public and work toward the abolitionist cause. Like Aminata, Equiano’s historical positioning allows him greater control over his own writing than would be enjoyed by later slave narrativists.

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