

# Currency and Cultural Consumption: Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*

ANDREA MEDOVARSKI

**I**N A TRENCHANT SCENE in Lawrence Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata's slave-master, Lindo, gives her an economics lesson, explaining the double coincidence of wants necessary for barter to occur, the superiority of money over barter, and the particular value of the gold guinea coin. Aminata's realization that the coin is named after Africa and that "from my homeland the buckra were taking both gold and people, and using one to buy and sell the other," is a sophisticated and powerful indictment of the economics of slavery (203). This scene also offers a moment through which we can historicize, and examine critically, how a legacy of slavery continues to resonate in a contemporary context, both in literary and economic ways. This essay offers both a textual and paratextual exploration of currency — in its various meanings — and the practices of cultural consumption of *The Book of Negroes*. First published in 2007, *The Book of Negroes* has achieved near unprecedented success for a Canadian novel. In a nation where sales figures of 5,000 constitute a "bestseller," Hill's novel has sold over 600,000 copies domestically and over one million copies globally. A TV miniseries by filmmaker Clement Virgo is also currently in production. These are notable, and perhaps surprising, accomplishments given the novel's subject matter: its explorations of slavery in the Americas, and its narration of the middle passage — perhaps the only Canadian novel to examine these issues so fully. In light of such tremendous sales, I want to explore the material and cultural capital generated by the novel's popularity. What does it mean in the current global capitalist conjuncture that a novel about the slave trade has generated so much money? In the Canadian context, what might the popularity of the novel, and its narration of pedagogical moments such as the one related above, say about the nation's collective need to speak, and learn, about its history of slavery, a history that largely goes unacknowledged in dominant national narratives? More broadly, this essay also examines

the cultural and economic currencies of narrating black diasporic and black Canadian histories through popular literature.

The current need to intertwine literary and economic analyses is significant given that critics have not always attended to the material production and circulation of texts and their significance. As Frederic Jameson noted over three decades ago, “No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive being of Capital,” despite this distance having been “abolished in the new space of post-modernism” (87). The similar oppositions that Pierre Bourdieu offers between “heteronomy,” or the rules of the marketplace, and “autonomy,” or the ideology of artistic disregard for the marketplace (58), are “clearly no longer adequate. This neat conceptual separation . . . has rightly been questioned for some time now” (Gurr 6). More recent examinations of the cultural logics of late capitalism in the context of literary production have begun to explore the material production and consumption of books, and the ways they are circulated to readers who are largely interpellated as consumers. Analyses of the literary marketplace by post-colonial critics such as Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette have examined “the global commodification of cultural difference,” focusing on the ways so-called third-world writers are signalled through the trope of the exotic, “made available, but also palatable” to an English-speaking consumer readership in the global north (Huggan vii-viii). Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo’s extensive study *Reading Beyond the Book* (2013) explores reading practices in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., focusing on what they call “mass reading” or “shared reading events” (3). Julie Rak has examined the prolific rise of memoirs since the 1990s and the ways they are marketed to the American reading public. In the Canadian context, Lorraine York has explored the culture of literary celebrity in Canada, and Gillian Roberts has examined the growing economic and cultural importance of literary prizes, while Kit Dobson and Smaro Kamboureli have interviewed several Canadian authors about their relationship to the literary marketplace. Dobson and Kamboureli have observed that the reader, the marketplace, and the author exist “in a web of entangled networks” (3) and — alarmingly for those of us who engage in literary criticism — that the market “often changes the very substance of the [literary] works themselves” (2).

While examining the broader ways in which the literary text is shaped by market forces is important, we need also to attend to the specific racialized contexts in which Hill's novel circulates. Paul Gilroy, in *Darker than Blue* (2010), considers both "the political and commercial value of blackness" in North America and the ways they have been altered by "an unsustainable consumer culture," arguing that insufficient attention has been paid to the interrelated workings of slavery, racism, and capitalism in either historical contexts or the current geopolitical order (2). He claims that postbellum African-American and African diaspora thought consistently oversimplified the relationship between race and capitalism. Lines of inquiry either "pursu[ed] the expansion of African-American access to capitalism's bounty or . . . dream[ed] of the system's overthrow. In both cases, the interpretive significance of slaves having themselves once been commodities was set quietly aside" (5). In the emerging twentieth-century consumer culture, where race became attached to brands, styles, and objects of consumption, "blackness, which for so long had been entirely worthless, could be recognized as becoming endowed with symbolic value that nobody appears to have anticipated" (9). While the representational significance of these forms of commodification has been explored, the material and monetary implications have, according to Gilroy, gone unexamined. Even "the increasingly global character of the political economy of new world black cultures evident during recent years did not foster interest in the operations of the capitalist system" (6). By taking up *The Book of Negroes*, I aim to illustrate a complicated, and often antagonistic, relationship. On the one hand, we have the novel's subject matter: its critical representations of slavery and the emergence of finance capitalism in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, there is the novel's current circulation within a global capitalist market that continues to commodify blackness, both materially and symbolically, in various and sometimes troubling ways.

The novel's eighteenth-century setting is significant for understanding its textual and paratextual contexts, and for historicizing the current global capitalist conjuncture. Hill's novel is set during a century in which the intensification of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade were coterminous with the shift from commodity capitalism to finance capitalism; this period also witnessed the emergence of the modern nation as a political formation and the emergence of the novel

as a literary genre. These confluences of modernity overlap and inform each other in complex ways, while also informing the political, social, economic, and literary dimensions of our contemporary moment. Ian Watt, in his classic study, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), cites the development of publishers' relationships with authors and the shifting economic transactions through which booksellers played a role in "removing literature from the control of patronage and bringing it under the control of the laws of the market-place," illustrating that the notion of a literary marketplace has informed the production and consumption of novels since their inception (58). "By virtue of their multifarious contacts with printing, bookselling, and journalism," eighteenth-century authors "were in very direct contact with the new interests and capacities of the reading public" (61). However, unlike Hill's novel, which examines critically the emergence of finance capitalism, eighteenth-century novels often portrayed the world of trade, commerce, and industry favourably, suggesting that novels were "setting the seal of literary approval on the heroes of economic individualism" (64). Watt observes, for example, that Daniel Defoe's heroes (unlike Hill's protagonist) have no need to learn the techniques of profit-and-loss bookkeeping: "whatever the circumstances of their birth and education, they have it in their blood, and keep us more fully informed of their present stocks of money and commodities than any other characters in fiction" (65).

The obvious differences between Aminata's status as property and the property ownership of Defoe's protagonists notwithstanding, the significance of this divergence, between eighteenth-century authors' complicity with the capitalist system and Hill's critiques of it, reveals a great deal about the historical relationships between capitalism, the novel, and the nation, and the ways racialized authors such as Hill have been positioned within — or outside — of this nexus. Benedict Anderson, in his now famous examination of the nation as an imagined political community, argues that, in the eighteenth century, "a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to 'think' the nation" (22). He links these epistemological shifts to the development of the newspaper and the novel, claiming that these forms of print-capitalism "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36). These correlations between the economic, the literary, and the

national are particularly problematic for racialized subjects, both free and enslaved. Historically, citizenship has been closely correlated with property ownership; to restate the obvious, not only were slaves excluded from owning property, but they were also seen as property themselves. However, many slaves' exclusion from literacy also excluded them from the dominant forms of imagining Anderson cites; for the most part, they had little or no access to either print or capitalism. Foregrounding this issue, thus, necessitates not only that we think about the different types of diasporic, outer-national imagined communities that emerge among black peoples but also that we think more critically about the historical interrelationship between finance capitalism, slavery, the novel, and the nation.

Few scholars have explored these connections as rigorously as Ian Baucom. In *Spectres of the Atlantic* (2005), he offers a detailed examination of the correlation between the emergence of the novel and the economic shift from commodity capitalism to finance capitalism in the eighteenth century. He argues that "as mobile property displaced 'real' property, and the imagined value of stocks, bonds, bills of exchange, and insured property of all kinds increasingly trumped the 'real' value of land, bullion, and other tangibles, the concepts of what was knowable, credible, valuable, and real were themselves transformed" (16). Elaborating upon Watt and others, he observes that such epistemological shifts profoundly affected the development of capitalism *and* the novel, both of which necessitated an unprecedented ability to imagine things beyond materiality. In other words, at the moment that capital shifted from "real" to "imagined," so, too, did the novel emerge as an imaginative form.

Baucom further argues that these shifts continue to resonate in our contemporary understandings of literary and economic discourse. He builds his argument upon the 1781 massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong*, an atrocity in which 142 living slaves were jettisoned from the ship in the interest of claiming insurance for the loss of cargo. He claims that it is the imagining of speculative finance that shifts these human beings not just into tangible cargo but also into intangible profit, and eventual profit, that must be insured. This moment, according to Baucom, haunts the entire development of finance capitalism. It is not simply an example, however poignant, of an eighteenth-century atrocity. Rather, it is *the* cultural logic on which the eighteenth century's economic trans-

formations are based: “[the *Zong* episode] and its representations are central not only to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the political and cultural archives of the black Atlantic, but to the history of modern capital” (31). Moreover, these correlations, between different forms of “speculative discourse” that emerge in the “long eighteenth century,” inform our current moment, or what Baucom correspondingly calls “the long twentieth century” (22). Regarding the *Zong*, he goes on to argue “that atrocity’s conditions of possibility have not waned but intensified,” saying “[We live in] a present in which that ‘past’ survives not as sedimented or attenuated residue but in which the emergent logics of this past find themselves enthroned as the dominant protocols of our ‘nonsynchronous’ contemporaneity” (24). Describing the eighteenth century as a “hypermonetarized, hyperspeculative moment,” he observes that there has been an “intensified repetition of that moment within our own exorbitantly financialized present” (26).

All of this brings much to bear on the ways we might understand the novel and its circulation today. Borrowing and extending Jameson’s notion of formal sedimentation, Baucom points out that “as genres survive the moment of their fashioning, they survive by carrying within themselves a kind of ghostly aftereffect, the signature ideologies of their formative moments, which they then rewrite onto the subsequent historical moments in which they are deployed” (19). Thus, if we are to follow Baucom’s argument that the novel as a genre is so closely linked to finance capitalism, and that it emerges at a moment in which transatlantic slavery has intensified globally, then a significant corollary is that the economics of slavery also haunt the very form of the novel itself. This is perhaps not what Mikhail Bakhtin means when he suggests that the novel is “the only genre that was born and nourished in a new era of world history and, therefore, it is deeply akin to that era” (4). Nonetheless, making such a connection has profound implications for the ways in which we might understand the circulation of a novel such as *The Book of Negroes*. Hill’s novel might, thus, be understood as a kind of literary pathway, marking a provocative correlation between a historical moment in which the practice of slavery generated a great deal of capital and a moment in which a novel about slavery generates a great deal of capital as well. If we are to follow Baucom’s argument that “generic repetition signals the potential restaging of some earlier ideological contest” (20), then Hill’s critique of the monetary logic of slavery, and

of the eighteenth century more broadly, might also be understood as a powerful commentary on our contemporary hypermonetarized moment.

In interesting metadiscursive moments, the circulation of books and authors, and their monetary and cultural value, are topics explored critically within the pages of Hill's novel as well. Books, literacy, and the acquisition of knowledge play a significant role in Aminata's life, and — in obvious reference to eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives such as those by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Mary Prince — these discoveries are a significant aspect of her journey from enslavement to freedom. In other contexts, and for other characters, however, books are more directly related to the workings of capitalism. Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), argues that as Britain was “accumulating great wealth from the triangular trade,” the eighteenth century also witnessed the dawning of consumer culture with “the increase of consumption goods called forth by that trade” (98). What kinds of correlations can be drawn between this increase in consumer goods and the increased circulation of books, particularly novels, as commodities in the eighteenth century? Hill's novel seems to be pondering these connections. Solomon Lindo, Aminata's second owner, emphasizes the novel's status as a material commodity when he offers one as a tangible reward for Aminata's ability to learn about finance capitalism: “he promised me a book of my own if I could learn all about money in South Carolina” (200). Once he deems her knowledgeable enough to do his accounting, he gives her a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. Similarly, upon Aminata's request to see a map of the world, a trip to the Charles Town library is offered as a reward for her successful delivery of the Lindos' first child. At her first sight of the books, Aminata ponders their cultural value in educating the marginalized people of society: “I have never seen so many books,’ I said, looking around and wishing that women and Negroes were allowed in the library” (211). By contrast, Lindo, embittered by his own marginalization as a Jew in the predominantly Anglican Library Society, only emphasizes their monetary value, replying, “They have a thousand books . . . and I paid for half of them” (211).

Aminata's troubling relationship with finance capitalism begins long before this, however, when she is inserted into the capitalist economy as a commodity herself upon her capture and sale in Bayo. The novel's first mention of currency occurs when Aminata sucks on a cowrie shell as she

walks in the slave coffle and wonders how many cowrie shells she was worth (31). This moment demonstrates in the most visceral, corporeal way the exchange value of the cowrie shell in the context of slavery — she has literally consumed it, just as a Euro-American economy will soon consume her. Although Aminata understands the exchange value of currency, she is repeatedly puzzled by the unfamiliarity of European money. Her first encounter with coins comes aboard the slave ship when the medicine man offers her “mysterious metal discs” (76) after she shames him by rebuffing his sexual advances. At her first slave auction, she watches in puzzlement as “men passed rounded pieces of metal back and forth. Some were shiny, others dull. They didn’t look as attractive as cowrie shells or copper manilas” (113). Finding a coin in the dirt, she wonders, not for the first time, what it is used for: “Perhaps it could be pierced. If a hole could be made, through it, perhaps a tightly woven thread of grasses could be slipped through so that the thing could hang off a wrist or neck. Still, it would be ugly. I could not imagine what gave this thing its value” (113). This observation, which defamiliarizes money for a twenty-first century audience, also provokes a multifaceted examination of how “value” is determined in various cultural, economic, and social contexts, particularly in instances, such as this, where epistemological and economic frameworks are shown to be profoundly divergent.

The value of coins and other currency is what Lindo endeavours to teach Aminata in their economics lessons, though merely in the interest of increasing *her* value as his slave by using her to do his bookkeeping and secretarial work:

Lindo explained that I could either barter for an object, or pay with copper, silver, or gold coins. This confused me. It made no sense to me that someone would prefer to be paid with a useless metal coin than with five chickens or a tierce of corn. Lindo put some coins in my left hand and told me to imagine that I had a live chicken in my right. I was to imagine myself going to market with only these two possessions, he said. A person selling oranges would gladly take my coins, but only a person who needed the chicken would accept it as payment.

“But what if the coins become useless?” I said. “People will always want a chicken, but will they always want an ugly metal disc? It has no beauty and it can’t be eaten. If *I* were selling oranges, I would take the chicken.”



Lindo tapped the table. "This is not a debate. It is a lesson. . . ." (202)

Lindo's words are notable, for they echo, in condensed form, Adam Smith's arguments regarding the origin and use of money, which comprise chapter 4, part 1, of *The Wealth of Nations*. First published in 1776, this work consolidated Smith's status as the father of modern economics and quickly became a significant text in articulating the global shifts from mercantilism to finance capitalism. Nonetheless, while he promotes the use of money, Lindo does not espouse Smith's skepticism about slave labour, which Smith argues is the least profitable fashion for extracting value from a worker: "It appears . . . from the experience of all ages and nations . . . that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves" (81). Although Lindo refuses to consider them, Aminata's questions and continued doubt about the coins become prophetic given the subsequent events of the novel, and her wisdom is ultimately shown to be more valuable than Lindo's teaching. In subsequent years, as the American Revolutionary War looms and the Charles Town economy falls apart, monetary circulation tightens so that "coins were almost impossible to come by, and in the markets even small goods were exchanged by means of trade" (218). Thus, Aminata muses, "I thought ruefully of the lessons about money that Lindo had taught me years earlier. As it turned out I had been right. Chickens were more reliable than silver" (218).

Despite her initial reluctance, Aminata is drawn into the Charles Town economy in ever more complex ways when Lindo sends her to work as a midwife on the self-hire system, stating, "You will make me good money," as he garnishes ten shillings per week of her earnings (203). Despite her argument for chickens over silver, Aminata now prefers to accept money as payment, charging twelve shillings for every baby she catches. She states that "masters sometimes refused to pay me in coins but the only other payments I would accept were Madeira rum, tobacco, and high-quality cotton fabric" (206); these she uses to trade for goods she needs. By privileging the consumer goods that emerge from the slave trade, Aminata is forced to become complicit in the very economic system that dehumanizes her. Later, in New York, she refuses any payment but silver, becoming known among the British officers as "one pound Meena" for delivering, and sometimes aborting, the babies that result from their liaisons with black women (277). These

monetary exchanges for her midwifery services reveal the complexity of her position as an enslaved person in the eighteenth-century American economy. They also reveal another significant departure from Adam Smith's ideas.

In the opening chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith argues that "the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour" (11). Offering his famous example of manufacturing pins, Smith claims that a single workman "could scarce, perhaps with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty" (12). However, with specialized labour, he has witnessed factories in which ten workers with specific tasks "could make among them upwards of forty-eight thousand pins in one day," concluding that "the division of labour . . . , so far as it can be introduced, occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour" (12-13). Smith's foundational argument provokes the question of how to understand arts in which the division of labour cannot be introduced — such as midwifery. This other, literal, form of labour cannot be expedited by specializing; even if Aminata and other midwives were to divide their tasks, the babies would not come any sooner. Aminata's work as a midwife, which sometimes earns her considerable amounts of money, is a gendered economic activity, which necessitates that we think differently about the economic models Smith proposes. In this regard, Hill's novel offers a feminist revisioning of classical eighteenth-century economics. As Kathryn Sutherland argues, various forms of women's economic activity have been excluded from *The Wealth of Nations* and, as a result, Smith's writings "served to suppress the female contribution and to categorize work as a male preserve" (97). Women's labour, both in working and in reproducing new labourers through childbirth, "is placed decisively outside the economic order" (99). Yet, "the humble pin, on which Smith's sophisticated economic model turns, is in its bold triviality a feminized example: pins being commonly manufactured at this time with as well as for female labour" (101). Despite her dehumanized position as a slave and a commodity, Aminata's role as a wage-earning midwife also places her squarely within the economic order of her society, in a manner that challenges the assumed masculinism of labour. Her direct engagement, in multiple ways, with very literal forms of

female labour is perhaps an even more trenchantly feminized example that encourages us to think about labour in all its forms, both within the context of slavery and beyond.

Although Hill's novel is based rigorously in the historical facts of eighteenth-century slavery and capitalism, one of the valuable things about it is that, as a creative work, it provides a space for imagining alternate economies and different means through which currency can be conceptualized and circulated. Aminata engages in such imaginings when, while still enslaved, she must negotiate the marketplace on her own terms. Facing his own economic challenges due to a disappearing indigo market, Lindo casts Aminata out; because no coins circulate, he no longer garnishes her wages, but nor does he provide food or material sustenance toward her upkeep. Aminata is able to sustain herself only by continuing to offer her midwifery services:

Some of the new mothers gave me small quantities of rum, but one rich woman gave me a box filled with fifty glass bottles. At first, I felt cheated. What good was a box of empty bottles? But when I reopened the box at home, I found the glass to be of extraordinary beauty, coloured with swirling lines of blue. The tiny bottles had room for two or so ounces of liquid, but each was shaped differently, some cylindrical, others bulbous, some cube-like, and others faintly spherical. I filled each with two ounces of rum and stopped it with a cork.

For months, I used the smooth, slender bottles with swirling blue lines to make purchases in the market. The Negro hucksters loved the rum and kept the bottles because they considered it good luck to blow into blue glass. They called me Blue Glass Gal when they saw me coming, and the bottles that I traded changed hands among other buyers and sellers. (218)

This exchange of blue glass bottles is more than simply a validation of barter, which Aminata herself comes to question once she realizes, upon her return to Sierra Leone, the extent to which commodity exchange for human lives has pervaded her homeland and reflects critically on how many barrels of rum, guns, and bolts of cloth would have been paid for her. Rather, it can be understood as a symbolic imagining of an alternate form of currency, which has roles and purposes beyond simple exchange value. Aminata fills the blue glasses with rum, a significant aspect of the slave-trading economy from which she cannot entirely

remove herself. Nonetheless, she proposes a different kind of currency here, based on the beauty she has been longing for but missing in the coins and also based on the pragmatic value of the rum as a commodity. This is, moreover, a form of currency in which American economic practices and African diasporic economic, spiritual, and cultural practices collide. Blue glass beads were particularly popular among slaves in the American south, and “the colour blue, a recurrent and abundantly documented motif in African-American folklore among the sea islands, is considered a potent form of spiritual protection” (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 49). This is perhaps why a string of blue, green, and white glass beads is tied around the waist of the infant being buried in Holy Ground. Such practices originate from West Africa, where glass beads were widely used from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries for adornment, protection, and as “important trade items often used as currency” (53). This helps explain why Aminata initially ponders wearing the European coins as jewelry. In this instance, however, Aminata’s rum-filled blue glass bottles are a creolized, diasporic revisioning in microcosm of all of these practices. Deriving from multiple cultural contexts, they also foreground both a history of diasporic scattering and a cultural connection to a homeland that is profoundly valuable to an enslaved, or formerly enslaved, population.

Hill’s novel also offers idealized glimpses of what alternate economies that sit almost entirely outside of the workings of finance capitalism might look like. Birchtown, Nova Scotia, the black community populated largely by those who, like Aminata, migrate north from New York in the late 1780s, is a significant example. One of the communities to which free blacks have been relegated, it is situated three miles outside the coastal town of Shelburne, where few blacks can gain employment due to white citizens’ fear that they will take away their jobs. Marginalized from the dominant economy, the people of Birchtown function through largely money-free exchanges. Aminata relates, “Nobody had a thing in Birchtown, in our first months. Never a coin was passed among us” (323). Aminata writes letters for those who are not literate and catches babies in the community. Others offer her materials or assistance building her home or give her food and advice on how to stretch her supplies. Most often, however, these are not direct exchanges; rather than barter, Birchtown presents an idealized socialist vision, wherein each member of the community contributes according

to his or her ability and receives according to his or her need. Aminata is one of the few to secure occasional work in Shelburne, getting paid for her labour as a typesetter, housekeeper, and midwife. When she earns money, she uses it for the good of everyone in the community, not just for her personal gain: “salaries paid by McArde and the Witherspoons helped keep my daughter and me alive and often went to support others, such as Daddy Moses” (334). The collective socialism in the largely informal economy of Birchtown arises by necessity, given the active exclusion of blacks from the mainstream society and economy in Nova Scotia, a marginalization that becomes violent when the few black labourers in Shelburne are lynched during a riot. While the capitalist economy of Nova Scotia, based in fear and white supremacy, makes no room for free black labour, the community of Birchtown provides an imagined alternate vision of what an economic model might look like beyond, or outside of, finance capitalism.

The most resonant metadiscursive moment in the novel occurs years later in Sierra Leone when Aminata talks to Mrs. Falconbridge, who encourages her to document her own story in the form of a slave narrative. Mrs. Falconbridge says, “With your obvious literacy and experiences, you should write about your life,” noting that “others have turned out such accounts to great personal advantage” (409). She mentions, in particular, Olaudah Equiano:

Have you heard of Olaudah Equiano? He is an African, and formerly a slave, just like you. He wrote a book about his life, and became famous. I have no idea if his account is entirely true. But no matter. His book has sold everywhere in England. There is many a white Englishmen poorer than he. (409)

Within the context of the novel, these comments shed light on Aminata’s eventual involvement with the Abolitionist movement in England and her unpleasant exchanges with the white abolitionists who attempt to control, and mediate, the ways she will tell her story.<sup>1</sup> They also raise questions about what it means to write for material gain in the context of abolitionism. That Equiano makes money appears more important to Mrs. Falconbridge than the truth of his narrative, which is of “no matter.” While this comment gestures to the hotly contested debates among contemporary historians about whether or not Equiano was actually born in West Africa (as he suggests in his opening chapter),

Mrs. Falconbridge's immediate interest is in the profitability of his narrative and the extent of its circulation in England. Her remarks are also an interesting metacommentary on money and books as commodities, as well as how both of these circulated within slavery and continue to do so within contemporary global capitalism.

Like Equiano, as well as the authors of subsequent famous slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass, Lawrence Hill has written a book that has "sold everywhere" and circulates widely within popular culture. This historical continuity might then help us think further about the dissonances between the content of Hill's novel and its success as a commodity in Canadian and globalized contexts. Just as slave narratives were mediated by the ways white abolitionist discourse attempted to control the circulation of their messages and representations, so, too, Hill's novel is mediated by those who exert control over its paratext. Too often, the force of Hill's sophisticated economic critiques, and his imagining of alternate economic practices and spaces, has been attenuated by the ways the novel is circulated as a material commodity, its marketing working against the powerful political and social commentaries Hill offers. While the novel is a broad critique of global capitalism and the eighteenth-century slave trade, Hill has also mentioned in numerous interviews that one of his aims was to speak back to and revise dominant national narratives which articulate slavery as "a denied and deniable Canadian institution" (McKittrick 91), pointing out that many people in Canada do not know about the eighteenth-century migration of Black Loyalists from New York to the Maritimes, or about the historical ledger documenting this migration from which *The Book of Negroes* derives its title. However, the ways the novel is circulated and promoted by its publisher, HarperCollins, often run counter to these aims, so that the novel's text and paratext are sometimes troublingly contradictory.

Gerard Genette reminds us that the paratext is "a zone not only of transition but also of transaction" (2). This space of pragmatics, partially within and partially beyond the author's control, is supposed to be "at the service of a better reception for the text" (2). But one question we must ask is better for whom? In the case of Hill's novel, does the paratext best serve the author or his publishers and their aim of profit? Given the manipulative ways paratext can often operate, such power dynamics must be considered. As Genette ultimately concedes, "From the fact that the paratext always fulfills its function, it does not neces-

sarily follow that the paratext fulfills its function well” (409). Economic factors, largely absent from Genette’s structuralist analyses, provide an obvious answer to why this might be so, revealing the ways the novel’s paratext dictates its sometimes problematic circulation within the literary marketplace. In this regard, it might be useful to think about the circulation of *The Book of Negroes* in the same way that Gilroy thinks about the circulation of black Atlantic music, such as soul and reggae, in the mid-twentieth century. He argues that these dissenting cultural forms worked to “affirm a different axiology — an alternative system of judgment and value — that was not only incompatible with the indices of the capitalist market but also deeply opposed to them. Though the aspiration toward authentic freedom did coexist with market relations, the stresses involved in their coming together were always apparent” (126). While “music did become property under particular economic and cultural traditions . . . that outcome always followed a struggle over the moral economy in which these cultural economies circulated only ambivalently and reluctantly” (150). There are similar struggles between the moral and material economies of Hill’s novel, and these tensions are most clearly revealed in the ways the novel has been marketed to readers/consumers.

One of the most notable controversies surrounding the novel involves its title changes. In the U.S. and Australia/New Zealand markets, the novel is sold as *Someone Knows My Name*, while a French translation released in 2011 is called *Aminata*. These were publishing decisions in which Hill had little say. In “Why I’m not allowed my Book Title,” his first published statement regarding the matter, which appeared in *The Guardian* in 2008, he mentions receiving a “nervous email” from his editor in New York who was concerned that the word “‘Negroes’ would not fly, or be allowed to fly, in American bookstores.” The article offers a meditation on the historical resonances of the word in Canada and the U.S. and on the importance of the historical document from which it originates. Only recently has Hill revealed that the decision to change the title to *Someone Knows My Name* was motivated by financial concerns. The U.S. title change happened “because U.S. bookstores were refusing to place advance orders for my novel because the word ‘negroes’ was in the title” (*Dear Sir* 6). Hill says that he was not asked about the matter but was told the change would happen: “the most I could negotiate was that I would be the one to come up with a new title for the

American edition” (6). Because the book was already at press, he was given less than seventy-two hours to do so. A profound act of erasure concealing the historical significance of the title in both Canadian and American contexts, the title change for the U.S. market illustrates the power dynamics at work in the literary marketplace and the marginal position in which authors sometimes find themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In English-speaking markets *The Book of Negroes* currently circulates in several different formats. In addition to a Kindle e-book, there is a paperback version modelled on the original hardcover edition (22.6 x 15.2 cm), and a smaller, considerably cheaper mass-market paperback version (16.8 x 10.7 cm). In 2009, HarperCollins also released a hardcover, illustrated edition, a substantial book that adds nearly 150 pages and measures a hefty 22.6 x 20.1 cm. The illustrated edition includes the unaltered original text of the novel, as well as a wide range of period maps; paintings and sketches; photographs of chains and other instruments of violence used during slavery; and important archival documents, such as parts of the actual ledger kept by the British navy, bills of sale for purchased slaves, and newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves or masters looking to purchase slaves with specific skill sets. These illustrations reveal the depth of Hill’s archival research and contribute a great deal to a reader’s understanding of the novel and the history of slavery in Canada and the Americas. Nonetheless, the illustrated edition is marketed as a coffee-table book, a type of book that is often seen pejoratively as a light read, that offers a cursory approach to its subject matter, or that is primarily used for decoration and display rather than for information.

The book description on the HarperCollins website, which is also used on Amazon.ca, interpellates readers as consumers in a number of ways:

This beautiful full-colour gift edition of the new Canadian classic, *The Book of Negroes*, shares with readers the many photos, works of art, and documents that inspired Lawrence Hill to create his award-winning work. It adds to the novel more than 150 images: early maps and documents, archival photos, period paintings and never-before-published pages from the original handwritten ledger called the Book of Negroes. Readers will travel the world with Aminata Diallo, from a West African village to an indigo plantation in South Carolina, through the tough streets of New York City and the harsh



climate of Nova Scotia to the coast of Sierra Leone, and finally to an abolitionist's home in London.

A holiday gift to treasure, this keepsake edition is essential for any booklover's collection.

This troubling description of Hill's novel illustrates the many ways that the predominantly white publishing industry edits, produces, and advertises one-dimensional images of blackness "to a 'universal,' implicitly white (although itself ethnically constructed) audience" (Young 4). Labelling the book a "keepsake edition" clearly privileges it as a material object of consumer culture rather than as a literary text or a source of knowledge, while the blurb's reference to book collecting evokes a colonialist discourse of anthropological gathering and fetishization. The invitation to accompany Aminata on her "travels" gestures to the nineteenth-century travel narratives that emerged out of colonial encounters, completely erasing the violent and involuntary movements of African peoples as a result of the slave trade. Such a description conceals how the novel functions as a neo-slave narrative documenting the brutal conditions of the middle passage. Similarly, the reference to the "harsh climate of Nova Scotia" not only plays into dominant Canadian discourses of "survival" and "roughing it in the bush," but it also erases the racism the Black Loyalists experienced upon arrival; in Hill's novel, which narrates Canada's first race riots and lynchings in Shelburne, the people are clearly far more threatening than the elements. HarperCollins positions Hill's book as a "new Canadian classic," but I am left to wonder if this reproduction of colonial rhetoric, historical erasure, and commodity fetishization is what is necessary to bring the novel into the canon of Canadian literature. If we are to follow Paul Gilroy's assessment that we live in a postmodern society "in which consumerism has largely superseded the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (8), then this advertising copy becomes a powerful example of consumer capitalism's "power to depoliticize, disorient, and mystify" (23).

Hill's novel also circulates widely within Canadian cultural institutions in a manner that nonetheless benefits HarperCollins, since "the publisher pays for marketing, whereas publicity, if you can get it, is free" (Thompson 21). While the novel's widespread exposure is shaped by market forces, its circulation sometimes defies both economic hegemonies and the cultural logics that support them. Championed by documentary filmmaker Avi Lewis, *The Book of Negroes* won the Canadian

Broadcasting Corporation's 2009 *Canada Reads* contest, and in March 2013, *Aminata* won Quebec's version of the competition, *Le Combat des livres*. The English-Canadian version was also originally called *Battle of the Books*, a name that evokes capitalism's naturalized ethos of unfettered competition. As this earlier title implies, the contest is a kind of literary *Survivor*, in which five Canadian celebrities select and endorse a Canadian book and then debate its merits in weekly radio discussions. Novels are voted off the bookshelf until a winner remains, and the chosen book is then endorsed as the one the entire country should read. The contest has historically contributed a great deal to the sales of the winning book, and because there are no restrictions regarding a selection's publication date, it has boosted sales of many a backlist title.

In her analysis of the first *Battle of the Books* in 2002, Smaro Kamboureli explores the intertwined nationalist and pedagogical impulses that surround the culture of celebrity in Canada, claiming that "the culture of celebrity is the avatar of national pedagogy. It is what translates the panopticism of national pedagogy into public spectacle" (46). This type of pedagogy is not one "that liberates the citizen; rather, its aim is to fashion the political unconscious of people in terms that serve the *raison d'être* of the state" (42); moreover, as it projects itself onto the culture of celebrity, "its hegemony, like most hegemonies, it at once disciplinary and laudatory" (46). While her argument is convincing, and certainly holds true for Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, the 2002 *Battle of the Books* winner, as well as for many of the subsequent *Canada Reads* winners, the manner in which *The Book of Negroes* circulates within the Canadian culture of literary celebrity is perhaps more complex, for the book works both within and also against some of the hegemonic forces she identifies. There are certainly pedagogical elements to Hill's novel, which is written in an accessible, realist, linear fashion. It has been adopted as mandatory reading on some high school syllabi in Canada, and teaching guides from HarperCollins are widely available. But, in other ways, the novel runs counter to the pedagogical discourses that inform the culture of celebrity.

Kamboureli further argues that the culture of literary celebrity in Canada engineers a kind of public memory that "reconstructs the nation in the political unconscious of the citizens by eliding certain parts of its history while foregrounding others" (47). As the culture of literary celebrity offers "an amnesiac representation of history" (51), so, too, does

it “promot[e] formative narratives that hijack dissentions and appropriate differences” (46). Given these factors, the *Canada Reads* victory of *The Book of Negroes* is all the more surprising. But, as Gillian Roberts points out, “moments when texts resist or complicate recuperation into national discourses offer fruitful points for exploring the relationship between text and celebratory context” (6). Rather than concealing or dissembling, Hill’s novel reveals some of the erasures of Canadian history, clearly and deliberately. Hill has also spoken repeatedly, publicly, and powerfully about why this is so important, as well as about the ways his book and others can, and should, intervene in dominant national narratives. In a 2006 review of Afua Cooper’s *The Hanging of Angelique*, he emphasizes the need “to incinerate any trace of Canadian smugness about our treatment of black people over the past 400 years.” About his own book, he says that it is “convenient” for Canada to propagate “a triumphant, back-patting narrative [of] how gloriously welcoming we were to those who came into our country through the underground railroad, and how we ushered them into freedom and welcomed them here. It’s a very self-aggrandizing historical awareness, if we have any at all” (“Untold Story”). He hopes that his novel is “changing that” by revealing the many hostilities faced by the Black Loyalists, both free and enslaved, upon their arrival. While “prize-winning writers may both contest the nation-state and be celebrated for doing so” (Roberts 6), the force and bluntness of Hill’s arguments are noteworthy. In these and other similar public statements, he uses the culture of celebrity and his own prominent status in a counter-hegemonic way, by asking the nation to be held accountable for its acts of historical amnesia. Such statements might be read discursively as a response to *Canada Reads* and its tendency to “depoliticiz[e] the literary work” (Moss 8). As Laura Moss points out, the radio debates largely focus on plot, character development, and the on-air celebrities’ emotional responses to the texts, so that “most often it has been the politics of the novels that is lost in the commentary on the texts” (9). Hill’s insistence on situating his novel within the broader political context of historical erasure suggests a very different understanding of where the value of his book lies for a Canadian readership.

Both because of such widespread publicity and extensive marketing efforts and in spite of them, *The Book of Negroes* has quickly become one of the most widely circulated books in Canadian history and, argu-

ably, *the* most widely circulated novel by a black Canadian author. How, then, are we to determine the value of *The Book of Negroes*, which asks so many important questions about value: monetary, economic, historical, literary, aesthetic, social, and human? I do not believe the question is as simple as Pierre Bourdieu suggests when he claims that different types of capital and the powers that accompany them “amount to the same thing” (“Forms”), since his discussions of capital seem to be premised on hegemonic notions of what is considered valuable. Rather, to borrow from David Harvey, “What is really at stake here . . . is an analysis of cultural production and the formation of aesthetic judgments through an organized system of production and consumption mediated by sophisticated divisions of labour, promotional exercises, and marketing arrangements” (346). In my exploration of *The Book of Negroes*, I have endeavoured to illustrate and historicize the complex workings of globalized power relations in the current capitalist conjuncture and the ways they have shaped this novel’s circulation and capital accumulation. What is also at stake here is that, despite its sophisticated textual and metatextual interventions into multiple monetary moments, Hill’s novel reveals that erasures and commodifications of blackness persist, even in texts that are so visible, and so widely circulated, but that concealment happens in different ways. By examining the monetary, cultural, and political implications of these concealments, and the ways in which Hill has attempted to resist them, I have aimed to demonstrate that there is value in thinking about the intersections between the economics of slavery and the cultural and literary economies of twenty-first century global capitalism.

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am grateful to the numerous colleagues who have offered feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, including my anonymous reviewers for their focused commentary and valuable suggestions. I offer a special thank you to Leslie Sanders for always insightful questions and to Brenda Spotton Visano for being the kind of economist who cares about literature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed examination of this issue, see Yorke.

<sup>2</sup> As Hill relates in *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book*, the novel's title was, in fact, cause for contention among some members of the Afro-Surinamese community in Amsterdam, who burned copies of the cover of *The Book of Negroes* in 2011. This act provoked Hill to write his treatise against censorship, in which he reflects on the differing power dynamics behind his publishers' opposition to the title and that of a slave-descended community not unlike the ones he represents in the novel.

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