5 Transnational Diasporic Journeys in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007)

Introduction

Born in Newmarket/Ontario in 1957 as the son of civil rights activists, Lawrence Hill is an African Canadian novelist, essayist, non-fiction writer and former journalist. With *The Book of Negroes* (2007), a novel about a free-born West African woman captured by slave raiders in 1756, shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and forced to work as a slave in South Carolina, Hill has written an extremely popular and commercially successful neo-slave narrative: As of February 2013, his novel has "sold more than 600,000 copies—over half a million—in Canada alone, where sales of 5,000 constitute a bestseller."[1] Moreover, it has been translated into several languages, including French, Dutch and German, and continues to attract the attention of readers from around the world.

Since the publication of *The Book of Negroes*, Hill has become one of Canada's most acclaimed and internationally recognized writers. Over the last years, he has received numerous prestigious awards, such as the "Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book" in 2008 and the "Freedom to Read Award" by the Writers' Union of Canada in 2012.[2] Recently, Hill's best-selling neo-slave narrative was adapted into a six-part television miniseries that aired on CBC Television in Canada and BET (Black Entertainment Television) in the United States in January and February 2015. Directed by Clement Virgo and co-written by Lawrence Hill, the series was filmed in South Africa and Nova Scotia/Cana-

1 | Bishop, "Introduction" xiv.

2 | See ibid. xiv-xv; see also Katherine Ashenburg, "Seeing Black," *Toronto Life* Dec. 2009, 21. Jan 2015 http://lawrencehill.com/LawrenceHill.pdf 62-70.

da and features prominent actors and actresses, such as Aunjanue Ellis, Louis Gossett, Jr. and Cuba Gooding, Jr.[3]

Like Morrison, Hartman, Christiansë and other contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives, Hill seeks to explore aspects of black diasporic history that have been systematically ignored, suppressed or forgotten in both popular and academic discourses. In *The Book of Negroes*, his particular focus is on the complex experiences of African Americans during and after the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783): Adopting a black woman's perspective, the novel unfolds the story of those fugitive slaves who joined the British after Dunmore's proclamation of 1775, received their freedom for their faithful service and were relocated to Nova Scotia in 1783. Contrary to their hopes and expectations, in Canada, they were not treated as equal citizens but confronted with anti-black violence. In 1792, less than a decade after their arrival in Nova Scotia, more than one thousand black women and men left the British colony to move to West Africa, determined to create a new colony in Sierra Leone.[4]

Tracing the history of black refugees and self-liberators in late eighteenth-century North America, Hill contributes to a rewriting of the American Revolutionary War from a black perspective and powerfully deconstructs mythical conceptions of Canada as a "paradise" for blacks during the time of slavery: Today, within white (Canadian) mainstream discourses, there is a strong tendency to suppress the nation's history of slavery and racial segregation and to present an idealized view of Canada as a safe haven for American runaway slaves.[5] In fact, most discussions and debates about Canada's role in and relationship with slavery exclusively focus on the "Underground Railroad."[6] This term, Larry Gara explains, "refers to the assistance abolitionists provided fu-

3 | See, for instance, Taber, "How *The Book of Negroes*, a Profound Yet Unknown Canadian Story, Became a Miniseries;" Hill, "Adaptation: Rewriting *The Book of Negroes* For the Small Screen." See also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*.

4 | See also Lawrence Hill, "Freedom Bound," *The Beaver* Feb./Mar. 2007, 21 Jan. 2015 http://www.lawrencehill.com/freedom_bound.pdf 16-23; see also my following sub-chapter.

5 | See, for instance, Christian J. Krampe, "Inserting Trauma into the Canadian Collective Memory: Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and Selected African-Canadian Poetry," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 29.1 (2009): 62-83; George Elliott Clarke, "White Like Canada," *Transition* 73 (1997): 103; Siemerling 4-8, 182-85.

6 | See, for instance, Judith Misrahi-Barak, "Post-*Beloved* Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate," *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014): 44; Jutta Zimmermann, "From Roots to Routes: The Dialogic Relation between Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007)," *Cultural Circulation: Dialogues between Canada and the American South*, eds. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Christoph Irmscher (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013) 119-20.

gitive slaves going through the northern states, usually on their way to Canada."[7] Since the nineteenth century, many scholars, intellectuals and politicians "have used the fact that a portion of Canada's black population had reached the country via the Underground Railroad to create the image of Canada as the 'better America,'"[8] as a place of refuge for black runaways and freedom seekers. In *The Book of Negroes*, Hill strongly challenges this self-legitimizing discourse and sanitized interpretation of Canada's past, directing the reader to the black protagonist's experiences of racial discrimination, violence and disillusionment in Nova Scotia.

As I will outline in the following sub-chapter, the novel's (Canadian) title refers to a 1783 British military ledger that, despite its historical significance, has received little scholarly or popular attention in Canada and elsewhere: Documenting the migration of black refugees to Nova Scotia, Great Britain and Germany in the late eighteenth century, it gives precise information "about the names, ages, places of origin, and personal situations of thousands of blacks who fled American slavery."[9] Significantly, shortly before the publication of the U.S.-American edition of *The Book of Negroes* in 2007, Hill was urged by his editor in New York City to change the novel's title. As he explains in a 2008 interview with Jessie Sagawa:

> There were two reasons. The first is that the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, felt that *The Book of Negroes* sounded to their ears like a work of non-fiction and felt they would have trouble selling it as a work of fiction. The second reason was that they thought the word "Negroes" would be so inflammatory to American readers that they wouldn't give the book a chance, even to discover that the title had a historical resonance and authenticity stemming from a British military ledger kept during the American Revolutionary War.[10]

Initially, the African Canadian author was infuriated by his editor's decision: "It was a frustrating exercise. I didn't like having the title changed on me," Hill explains, "but as time went on I came to appreciate that the word 'Negroes' has

7 | Larry Gara, "Underground Railroad," *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007) 487. Crucially, most enslaved women and men who tried to escape from their masters and hoped to find freedom in the North traveled without the help of abolitionists. See Gara 489.

8 | Zimmermann 120-21.

9 | Hill, "Freedom Bound" 17.

10 | Jessie Sagawa, "Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.1 (2008): 319.

become offensive in American culture—particularly in Black urban culture, where its meaning has evolved over time."[11]

In the U.S., Hill's novel is called *Someone Knows My Name*, an intertextual reference to James Baldwin's "Nobody Knows My Name," published in his collection of essays of the same title (1961). In this text, Baldwin reflects on one of his first visits to the American South in the 1950s, in particular on his trips to Atlanta, Georgia, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Focusing on feelings of helplessness and bitterness caused by white racism, Baldwin highlights the devastating (psychological) effects of racial segregation on African American women and men in the first half of the twentieth century. Directing our attention to the hopelessness of the black struggle for recognition and equality in a white-controlled society, the essay's title captures Baldwin's emphasis on deprivation as a defining characteristic of black life.[12]

In striking contrast, by choosing *Someone Knows My Name* for the U.S.-American edition of his novel, Hill offers an empowering and consoling view of the past of slavery. The title is a quotation taken from "We Glide over the Unburied," a central chapter in Hill's neo-slave narrative about the trauma of the Middle Passage. Transforming a scene of oppression and utter humiliation into a narrative of affirmation, Hill particularly highlights the slave characters' attempts to resist the white power structure and to form relationships with other African captives: Reduced to objects, they call out each other's names, struggling to be recognized as human beings. On a meta-level, moving from victimization to empowerment, Hill's rewriting of Baldwin's title refers to a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of African American history and culture.

Like other neo-slave narratives discussed in this study, *The Book of Negroes* thus actively participates in contemporary discourses on the nature and history of the African diaspora. At the heart of Hill's novel is an exploration of the meaning of home for those black women and men who were violently kidnapped from their native villages in West Africa, exposed to the brutality of the Middle Passage, sold into American slavery and reduced to objects. Focusing on various forms of black agency and resistance and dynamic processes of diasporic self-invention, "the entire point of the novel," Hill contends, "was to offer dignity, depth and dimensionality to a person whose very humanity would have been assaulted as a slave."[13] In fact, Aminata Diallo, the novel's protagonist, is depicted as an extremely resilient female character driven by the overwhelming desire to escape from slavery and return to her place of birth.

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11 | Lawrence Hill, *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2013) 7.

12 | See James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961; New York: Vintage International, 1993).

13 | Hill, *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book* 6.

In exploring the past from the perspective of a female character, Hill, I argue, seeks to enter into the best-selling tradition of female-authored neo-slave narratives that unfold the stories of enslaved women. Moreover, in a self-legitimizing move, he intends to justify his decision to depict violence against female slaves. Employing a first-person narrator who gives an eyewitness account of her struggle for freedom and explicitly refers to her act of writing about slavery, Hill not only claims to create "authenticity" but also tries to encourage the reader's identification with his protagonist.[14] Without doubt, much of the novel's enormous popularity is due to this strategy of identification and its narrative of overcoming, healing and reconciliation.

Written in an easily accessible way, *The Book of Negroes*, unlike *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed*, never reflects on the risks of writing slavery and the ethical implications of appropriating a female slave's voice. Rather, it directs the reader's attention to the transformative power of literature as a tool in the fight against racial oppression. What makes the novel extremely problematic from a black feminist or Afro-pessimistic perspective is its melodramatic narrative structure and strong emphasis on the possibility of consolation: By incorporating "fairy-tale" elements into his narrative, Hill trivializes the horrors of the slave trade and slavery. Furthermore, he fails to explore the true implications of being a slave woman and to articulate the full meaning of chattel slavery as an utterly dehumanizing experience of "thingification." Thus, I argue, *The Book of Negroes* exposes the captives to what Hartman would call a second act of victimization.[15]

Focusing on specific historical developments and events on which Hill's novel is based, this chapter begins with a brief overview of the experiences of black Americans during and after the American Revolutionary War. In a next step, I will demonstrate that Hill's novel offers a dynamic perspective on the meaning of home for African diasporic subjects: While *The Book of Negroes* sheds light on Aminata's strong emotional attachment to her ancestral village, it also directs our attention to complex processes of black self-invention, dwelling and "*diasporic home-making*,"[16] to use Tina M. Campt's words, in late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century North America, West Africa and England. In a way similar to Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, it emphasizes the impossibility to restore the past and to reconnect with an African origin. Paying particular attention to the novel's triumphant ending as well as to the representation of the Middle Passage, the chapter's last part critically examines Hill's narrative and aesthetic strategies as well as his ethical self-positioning and theoretical conception of slavery.

14 | See also Siemerling 25.

15 | See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 5.

16 | Campt, *Image Matters* 52; italics in the original.

Struggling for Freedom: African Americans and the Revolutionary War

When the African American historian Benjamin Quarles published his groundbreaking study *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961),[17] he presented what Gary B. Nash describes as "the first full-scale, document-based history of the black revolutionary experience."[18] Over the last decades, Quarles's work has inspired several historians, such as Graham Russell Hodges, Leslie M. Harris, Ira Berlin, Simon Schama and Douglas R. Egerton, to examine the history of African Americans during and after the Revolutionary War.[19] Drawing on this scholarship, the following part gives an overview of specific historical developments in North America in the second half of the eighteenth century relevant for Hill's *The Book of Negroes*.

In early November 1775, a proclamation by Virginia's last royal governor John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore, marked a significant moment in the history of the American Revolutionary War. Suffering from a shortage of soldiers, Dunmore promised freedom to enslaved black men and white indentured servants who managed to run away from Patriot farms and plantations and were willing to fight for the British Crown.[20] As Schama and Egerton have shown, this offer of freedom was neither motivated by humanitarian considerations nor based on abolitionist principles; it was solely a military decision. Seeking to destabilize the enemy and put an end to the American rebellion, the British governor intended to increase the number of Loyalist soldiers, to damage the economy of the southern colonies and to encourage slave resistance. His goal was not, however, to abolish the institution of slavery.[21]

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17 | Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961; Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996).

18 | Gary Nash, "Introduction," *The Negro in the American Revolution*, by Benjamin Quarles (1961; Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996) xx.

19 | Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1996); Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, The Slaves and the American Revolution* (London: BBC Books, 2005); Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

20 | Hodges, *The Black Loyalist Directory* xii; Harris 54; Schama 15, 80, 108; Egerton 66, 70; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 112; Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 99.

21 | Egerton 195; Schama 15. See also Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997) 29; Diedrich "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 99; Christopher L. Brown, "John Murray, Fourth

Nevertheless, for many blacks in places like Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, Rhode Island and New York, Dunmore's promise was a source of great hope. In fact, not long after the British proclamation, hundreds of slaves answered the governor's call and decided to flee from their masters. Although they knew that re-captured slaves faced serious punishments, they risked their lives to join the royal forces or, later, also the Hessian troops under British command, hoping to gain freedom and protection. Infuriated by the British efforts to recruit slaves, masters and planters desperately tried to stop this black exodus, sending out patrols to track down runaways.[22] Moreover, as Schama explains, articles "appeared in the press (to be read to servants) that Dunmore's offer of freedom was a ruse to entrap slaves who would then be sold in the West Indies for his personal benefit."[23]

In 1779, four years after Dunmore's announcement, Sir Henry Clinton, then British commander-in-chief in North America, repeated the British promise, broadening "the definition of those entitled to liberty to black women and children."[24] As a result, until the war's end in 1783, tens of thousands of black refugees made their way to the British lines, where they were employed as soldiers, foragers, guides, guerrilla raiders, cooks, washerwomen and nurses. After arriving in British-controlled regions, many of them suffered from a shortage of food, unhygienic conditions and racial discrimination but most continued to support the British/Hessian troops because there were few alternatives. At the same time, a large number of slaves, especially in New England, chose to join the Patriots. Countless others used the chaos caused by the Revolutionary War and escaped from plantations without the intention of fighting for King George III or the American cause.[25] In fact, Egerton contends, "the majority of Africans and black Americans regarded themselves as neither Patriot nor Loyalist, but as independent actors in a drama that was largely written by white men of power on either side of the Atlantic."[26]

In 1782, British and American representatives began to conduct peace negotiations in Paris, discussing the withdrawal of British troops and debating the

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Earl of Dunmore (1730-1809)," *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007) 269. This is also a central argument of Benjamin Quarles's 1961 *The Negro in the American Revolution*. For a critical discussion of Quarles's work, see Nash xiii-xxvi.

22 | Schama 80-82; Diedrich "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 100.

23 | Schama 81.

24 | Ibid. 16.

25 | Harris 55; Egerton 6, 84-89; Schama 107-11; Diedrich "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 100; Hill "Freedom Bound" 18.

26 | Egerton 88.

fate of American fugitive slaves. In cities like Charleston, Savannah and New York City, thousands of black runaways hoped to obtain the freedom promised by Dunmore and Clinton. In several cases, they were bitterly betrayed by the British and other individual profiteers, who sold them into Caribbean slavery. Most American farmers and plantation owners demanded that their former slaves be returned to them. However, the British commander-in-chief, Sir Guy Carleton, was determined to protect any black refugee who had served the British Crown for a year or more during the American Revolutionary War.[27] In 1783, "Carleton ordered his officers to inspect all blacks who wished to leave New York and, most importantly, to register those who could prove their service to the British in the *Book of Negroes*."[28] This handwritten military document, Hill contends, "was the first massive public record of blacks in North America."[29]

For many fugitives faced with the threat of re-enslavement, Carleton's decision to keep the British promise of liberty marked a significant moment in their lives: Between April and late November 1873, approximately 3,000 black freedom seekers (whose names had been recorded in the *Book of Negroes*) embarked on British ships in New York Harbor. While most travelled to Nova Scotia/Canada or other British colonies, some went with the British troops to England or with the Hessian forces to Germany. However, several other blacks, especially younger refugees and single women, did not receive certificates of freedom and were left behind.[30]

Today, (excerpts from/transcriptions of) the *Book of Negroes* can be found, for instance, "in the Nova Scotia Public Archives, the National Archives of the United States and in the National Archives (Public Records Office) in Kew, England"[31] as well as in Graham R. Hodges's *The Black Loyalist Directory* (1996).[32] Like other white-authored documents in the archive of slavery (such as court and plantation records, bills or captains' diaries) that reduce enslaved women and men to silent objects, the *Book of Negroes* does not include black voic-

27 | Berlin, *The Making of African America* 94; Schama 134-40; Hill "Freedom Bound" 22; Hodges xvi.

28 | Hill, "Freedom Bound" 22; italics in the original.

29 | Ibid. 18.

30 | Berlin, *The Making of African America* 94-95; Hill, "Freedom Bound" 22; Maria I. Diedrich, "From American Slaves to Hessian Subjects: Silenced Black Narratives of the American Revolution," *Germany and the Black Diaspora: Points of Contact, 1250-1914*, eds. Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke and Anne Kuhlmann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013) 102; Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 107-110; Egerton 205-06.

31 | Lawrence Hill, "A Word about History," *Someone Knows My Name* (New York: Norton, 2007) 472.

32 | Hodges 1-214.

es. However, as a research resource, Hill argues, it provides us with valuable insights into the complex but largely forgotten history of black refugees and self-liberators in late eighteenth-century North America: In addition to listing the names of those black individuals who departed from New York in 1783, "it gives a description of each person, information about how he or she escaped, his or her military record, names of former slave masters, and the names of white masters in cases where the blacks remained enslaved or indentured."[33]

Those black refugees who migrated to Nova Scotia, hoping to start a new life as free women and men, soon became bitterly disillusioned: Upon arriving in Canada, they were forced to realize that only a few of them "received the promised land grants, and the plots turned out to be substantially smaller than the parcels awarded to white Loyalists."[34] Moreover, in the British colony, they were not allowed to vote, faced racial segregation and were exposed to anti-black violence. For instance, in July 1784, a mob of white disbanded soldiers attacked the black community of Birchtown, destroying several houses. In other words, for black women and men who had escaped American slavery, Nova Scotia was anything but a promised land.[35] The fact that there was "a small number of slaves in the province served as yet one more painful reminder that for His Majesty's government, their liberation had been but a means to a military end, not a moral goal in itself,"[36] as Egerton puts it.

Treated as second-class citizens in a racist society, almost 1,200 blacks decided to leave Nova Scotia in January 1792: Struggling for political autonomy and racial justice, they accepted the offer by the newly formed Sierra Leone Company to cross the Atlantic Ocean, aiming to establish a new colony in West Africa. Some of them had been kidnapped from Africa and sold into American slavery decades earlier; in 1792, they returned to their ancestral homeland as free women and men. Contrary to their expectations, however, in Sierra Leone, they were again subjected to racial discrimination, oppression and humiliation.[37] Although they had been granted free land by Lieutenant John Clarkson, the company's authorities in London "demanded a quitrent—a payment from landholders in lieu of services—of two shillings per acre from each settler."[38] This political decision caused enormous anger and frustration among the former American slaves; some of them rose in rebellion in 1800:[39] "Denied the

33 | Hill, "Freedom Bound" 22.

34 | Egerton 207.

35 | Hill, "Freedom Bound" 23; Egerton 206-09; Winks 35-9; Hodges xxi-xxviii.

36 | Egerton 207.

37 | Winks 61-78; Egerton 214-21.

38 | Egerton 218.

39 | Winks 68.

right to govern themselves, the freedmen regarded land ownership as the antithesis of their former condition,"[40] Egerton explains.

The Loss of Home and the Hope of Return

Like Hartman's genre-defying *Lose Your Mother*, Hill's novel enters into a fruitful dialogue with contemporary discourses on the African diaspora revolving around issues of home, forced displacement, return, loss and resistance.[41] Focusing on a slave woman's experiences of capture, enslavement, self-liberation and migration in the eighteenth-century transatlantic world, *The Book of Negroes*, Hill contends, particularly explores the following questions: "What is home? Does it exist once you have left it? Can you ever go back once you have been taken away?"[42]

Examining the intricate relationship between "roots" and "routes,"[43] *The Book of Negroes* not only directs our attention to the black protagonist's strong determination, overwhelming desire and constant attempts to escape from her captors and masters and to return to her ancestral village. Deconstructing static and essentialist concepts of black diasporic identity based on the idea of continuity, Hill's text also highlights the impossibility of going back to any "authentic" place of origin in West Africa. Moreover, and crucially, it addresses Aminata's attempts to create a new sense of belonging and feeling of home in the diaspora, emphasizing the possibility of black self-invention and solidarity in the "New World."

What emerges from Aminata's first-person account is a highly ambivalent depiction of Bayo, the place of her birth and childhood in West Africa. Raised by loving parents in Bayo, Aminata learns to develop such values as respect, responsibility and tolerance and is trained early on to assist her mother as a midwife. In London in 1802, decades after the violent separation from her parents and her deportation from Africa, she looks back nostalgically on this childhood and life before enslavement, constructing her native village as a place of stability and comfort: "In those days, I felt free and happy, and the very idea of safety never intruded on my thoughts."[44]

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40 | Egerton 218.

41 | See also Zimmermann 119-33.

42 | Sagawa, "Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill" 311.

43 | See chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study. See also Zimmermann 119-33.

44 | Lawrence Hill, *Someone Knows My Name* (New York: Norton, 2007) 2. All further references to Hill's novel *Someone Knows My Name/The Book of Negroes* (BoN) will be cited in the text and will refer to the 2007 U.S.-American edition.

At the same time, and this is a significant point, *The Book of Negroes* deconstructs this idealized view of Bayo and eighteenth-century life in West Africa. Throughout the novel, Hill strategically incorporates a number of elements into his text that challenge Aminata's nostalgic reminiscences of her childhood and highlight the ugly reality of Bayo. In a chapter called "Small Hands Were Good," which is set in Aminata's village between 1745 and 1756, Hill emphasizes the cruelty and inhumanity of domestic African slavery, directing our attention to forms of violence and abuse suffered by Fomba, the village chief's slave. Exploring Aminata's experiences as a child, *The Book of Negroes* also sheds light on acts of gender discrimination: In Bayo, young women are exposed to the harmful practice of female circumcision[45] and denied access to education. Breaking the village's rules, Aminata's father secretly teaches his daughter to read and write Arabic:[46] "So, in the privacy of our home, with nobody but my mother as a witness," Aminata recalls, "I was shown how to use a reed, dyed water and parchment" (BoN 11). Hill shows that Aminata suffers from the oppressive nature of a patriarchal and sexist society, having no chance to lead a self-determined and independent life in Bayo: On board the slave ship bound for America, she is shocked to hear that her mother and father have sold her to the village chief to become his next wife, without informing her about it. Via these plot elements, Hill deconstructs his protagonist's nostalgic memories of Bayo as her childhood paradise, while at the same time legitimizing and qualifying them as elements vital for Aminata's survival under slavery and anti-black racism.

In addition to directing the reader's attention to forms of gender-related oppression, Hill's novel depicts the devastating effects of the transatlantic slave trade and the practice of slave raiding on African communities like Bayo. In a way similar to *Lose Your Mother*, it not only highlights the complicity of Africans in the slave trade but also refers to a variety of strategies employed by African women and men to defend themselves against predatory troops and hostile groups, to protect their families and villages and to resist enslavement: "People were disappearing, and villagers were so concerned about falling into the hands of kidnappers that new alliances were forming among neighbouring villages. Hunters and fishermen travelled in groups. Men spent days at a time building walls around towns and villages" (BoN 11). Thus, like Hartman in "Fugitive Dreams," Hill challenges the myth of black passivity during the period of the slave trade: Focusing on forms of solidarity and cooperation between Afri-

45 | See also Zimmermann 129-30.

46 | See also Siemerling 172.

can groups with different ethnic backgrounds, *The Book of Negroes* represents blacks as active agents in the struggle against enslavement and deportation.[47]

Although Hill constructs Bayo as a place of patriarchal domination, *The Book of Negroes* emphasizes Aminata's strong attachment to her home and her family. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the violent capture by African slave raiders is depicted as a traumatic turning point in Aminata's life. Crucially, Hill has his protagonist suffer from extreme humiliation and violence on the forced march to the Atlantic coast: "We had no head scarves or wraps for our body, or anything to cover our private parts. We had not even sandals for our feet. We had no more clothing than goats, and nakedness marked us as captives wherever we went" (BoN 29). Soon after their capture and separation from their ancestral land, *The Book of Negroes* insists, African women and men are exposed to the process of "thingification" while still on the African continent. Having lost their freedom, they are denied the status of human beings and reduced to mere objects.

This passage provides invaluable insight into Hill's approach to writing and theorizing slavery: While *The Book of Negroes* repeatedly illustrates the disturbing effects of processes of "thingification" on the enslaved, unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, Hill does not engage in a radical rewriting of the past from an Afro-pessimistic and/or black feminist perspective. Creating an affirmative and empowering narrative of a slave woman's life, his primary goal is to depict and celebrate forms of black agency, cooperation, solidarity and cultural innovation, highlighting the slaves' efforts to resist the dehumanizing nature of the slave trade and slavery. Texts like *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* put a strong emphasis on loss and dispossession as constitutive elements of black life in order to reflect on the devastating logic of anti-blackness, to explore the misery of slave women and to emphasize the impossibility of working through and overcoming the traumatic past. In stark contrast, *The Book of Negroes* focuses on survival and the triumph over slavery, suggesting that it is possible to heal the wounds caused by "the transatlantic system of *thingification*,"[48] to use Sabine Broeck's phrase. Thus, in his chapter on Aminata's terrible march to the coast, Hill not only gives voice to Aminata's experiences of oppression, loss and pain but also calls attention to her longing and strong determination to run away from her captors and, most importantly, to go back to her place of birth—although she knows that her native village has been destroyed and her parents have been killed by slave raiders: "Surely I would get free. Surely this would end. Surely I would find a way to flee into the woods and

47 | For a critical discussion of strategies used by African women and men in the fight against enslavement in Africa, see also Diouf ix-xxvii.

48 | Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37; italics in the original.

to make my way home" (BoN 31). At this point of her life, Aminata clings to an idealized vision of Bayo, wishing to restore the past.

In these passages, *The Book of Negroes* engages in an intertextual dialogue with contemporary theories of diaspora. As shown in chapter 1 of this study, in recent scholarship, there are divergent conceptualizations of (the African) diaspora based on different understandings and constructions of home.[49] As the political scientist Safran contends, members of a diaspora community are not only united by traumatic experiences/collective memories of displacement from their homeland and feelings of loss and uprootedness but also, and essentially, by the desire to go back to their ancestral country.[50] In other words, this view of diaspora, which is closely associated with rootedness, continuity, tradition and authenticity and the metaphor of roots, "depends on attachments to a former home, and typically, on a fantasy of return,"[51] as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller put it. Scholars like Campt and Edwards, on the other hand, argue for a vibrant understanding of the African diaspora: Exploring the complex interplay between "roots" and "routes," their works focus on transnational exchanges and relations between black diasporic communities, hierarchical power structures and processes of arrival and home-making in specific local environments outside the original homeland.[52]

In his neo-slave narrative, Hill explores the meaning of the "fantasy of return" for African women and men abducted from villages and treated as objects: Given the brutality of the slave trade and forced migration to the coast, Aminata's yearning to find her way back to her roots in Bayo is presented as a powerful survival strategy, helping the young African woman to cope with loss, oppression and utter humiliation. In fact, in the course of the novel, in situations of hopelessness, despair and suffering, Aminata begins to engage in imaginary dialogues with her dead parents[53] and repeatedly indulges in nostalgic memories of her childhood in Bayo. *The Book of* Negroes presents the dream to go back to a native African village as a source of hope and consolation in the face of violence and death for enslaved Africans like Aminata, while at the same time highlighting the impossibility of return.

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49 | See chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study. See also footnote 21 in chapter 1.

50 | See Safran 83-99.

51 | Hirsch and Miller, "Introduction" 3.

52 | See chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study.

53 | See Krampe, "Inserting Trauma" 68.

Processes of Movement, Arrival and Home-Making in the African Diaspora

Hill's text elaborates on the loss of home and family in Africa; even more vital to the novel's agenda is the way it directs our attention to complex processes of black self-invention, dwelling and *"diasporic home-making"*[54] in North America and elsewhere: In 1757, after having survived the horrors of the Middle Passage, Aminata is bought by Robinson Appleby, a plantation owner on St. Helena Island in South Carolina. Separated from family members and friends, Appleby's slaves take every opportunity to exchange messages with black women and men from other farms and plantations, hoping to find or get information about their lost loved ones. This secret network of communication is called "the fishnet" (BoN 121). As Georgia, one of the female slaves on Appleby's plantation, explains in a conversation with her adopted daughter Aminata: "Our words swim the rivers, all the way from Savannah to St. Helena to Charles Town and farther up. I done hear of our words swimming all the way to Virginia and back. Our words swim farther than a man can walk" (BoN 141). Although they live in different places, Georgia and her fellow slaves manage to create a strong sense of community that transcends borders. For them, home is not a specific geographical location (in West Africa or elsewhere) but "a fluid, vibrant and frequently changing set of cultural interactions."[55] In other words, Hill represents black diasporic formations in eighteenth-century North America as dynamic groups that are not "spatially bounded,"[56] to use an expression taken from Arjun Appadurai's work on deterritorialization and diaspora.

Although, in North America, Aminata never abandons her dream of returning to Bayo, she participates in dynamic processes of home-making in the diaspora. The following scene—which is set in April 1775, shortly after the outbreak of the American War of Independence and a few months before Dunmore's proclamation—illustrates this point: Hill shows how Aminata takes advantage of the revolution's chaos in New York City and manages to run away from her owner, the indigo inspector Solomon Lindo. On the next morning, she encounters a heterogeneous group of black women and men who are about to bury a child. Some of these blacks are enslaved; others are free. Although they do not share the same language, cultural background and ethnic identity, they welcome Aminata as a community member: "They took me into their dancing, and did not ask where I came from, for all they had to do was look at me and hear my own sobs in my maternal tongue and they knew that I was one

54 | Campt, *Image Matters* 52; italics in the original.

55 | Cohen 123.

56 | Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*: *Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) 48.

of them" (BoN 256). In other words, what unites these black women and men is not a common African origin but a common history of anti-black violence, oppression, exploitation and resistance. Like the refugees and freedom seekers in the Ghanaian village of Gwolu, whose story Hartman tells in "Fugitive Dreams," they create a powerful sense of home not based on ethnic affiliations but on black solidarity and cooperation.[57] By focusing on the fusion of different (African) cultures and the complex relationship between tradition and innovation, Hill offers a dynamic and anti-essentialist view of black diasporic identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,'"[58] to use Stuart Hall's words.[59]

The Book of Negroes presents dwelling and movement as key features of Aminata's diasporic experience: During the American Revolutionary War, after escaping from her master, Aminata joins the British forces and works as a midwife and nurse in New York City. Like many other black fugitives serving the British Crown as soldiers, cooks or washerwomen, she hopes to be officially freed at the end of the war, as promised by Dunmore in 1775 and Clinton in 1779. Since she is literate and knows English and several African languages, Aminata is employed as a scribe in 1783. Her task is to register in the *Book of Negroes* all blacks who have worked for the British Army and are allowed to leave for Europe, Canada and other British colonies. Threatened with re-enslavement, Aminata accepts the British offer to relocate to Nova Scotia, hoping to escape anti-black racism and violence and to start a new life in Canada.

Challenging myths of Canada as a "paradise" for black women and men during the period of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, Hill constructs Aminata's time in Nova Scotia (from 1783 to 1792) as an experience of utter disillusionment.[60] Highlighting the precariousness of black life, the novel calls attention to the existence of slaves in the British colony and to the hardships of

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57 | See chapter 3, "Rethinking the African Diaspora: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007)," in this study.

58 | Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225.

59 | See also Zimmermann 119-34.

60 | For similar interpretations of Hill's representation of Aminata's experience in Nova Scotia, see also, Christian J. Krampe, *The Past is Present: The African-Canadian Experience in Lawrence Hill's Fiction* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2012) 170-78; Krampe, "Visualizing Invisibility, Reversing Anonymity: A Case Study in African-Canadian Literature," *Slavery in Art and Literature: Approaches to Trauma, Memory and Visuality,* eds. Birgit Haehnel and Melanie Ulz (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2010) 301-40; Krampe, "Inserting Trauma" 62-83; Zimmermann 119-34; Hans Bak, "Flights to Canada: Jacob Lawrence, Ishmael Reed, and Lawrence Hill," *Cultural Circulation: Dialogues between Canada and the American South*, eds. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Christoph Irmscher (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013) 135-53; Siemerling 182-85.

the black community of Birchtown: Reduced to the status of second-class citizens, Aminata and the other black local residents are confronted with the ugly reality of segregation, poverty and white supremacy. Not long after her arrival in Canada, Aminata is exposed to the horrors of a race riot, witnessing the killing of two black men and the destruction of several black homes by a white mob.[61] Consequently, what emerges from Hill's construction of Aminata's experience in eighteenth-century Nova Scotia is the insight that enslaved and free black women and men are faced with the ever-present threat of death and racial violence in both the United States and Canada. Drawing on the biblical story of the Egyptian captivity, in his reading of *The Book of Negroes*, Hans Bak argues that, for Hill's black protagonist, "Canada has turned from a promised land into another land of bondage, from a New Jerusalem into another Egypt."[62]

For Aminata, the most traumatic event in Nova Scotia is the kidnapping of her daughter May by a white Loyalist family, the Witherspoons. Although she is no longer enslaved, Aminata is deprived of the right to live with and to care for her children. "Conditions of life in Canada under British rule turn out to be uncannily similar to (if not worse than) those in America,"[63] to quote Bak once more. Again, however, Hill not only refers to Aminata's painful experience of loss and despair but also foregrounds her ability to find a way to deal with her extremely difficult situation: "But I kept going," Aminata recalls, "Somehow, I just kept going" (BoN 351). This passage is another revealing example of Hill's strategic goal to highlight the slave woman's resilience in the face of enormous adversity. His affirmative approach to writing and theorizing slavery differs intrinsically from Morrison's project in *A Mercy*: Employing a radical black feminist perspective, Morrison illuminates the complexity of black motherhood under slavery and the impossibility of overcoming the pain caused by the separation of slave families. In *A Mercy*, in sharp contrast to *The Book of Negroes*, the main focus is on deprivation and destruction rather than on black self-invention and renewal. While writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë explore the full meaning of slavery as an utterly dehumanizing system based on "thingification,"[64] Hill offers a triumphant and, ultimately, "kitsch" narrative about a black woman's heroic fight against slavery, failing to show the true implications of being a black female captive.

Driven by the overwhelming desire to return to the place of her childhood, Aminata decides to board the Sierra Leone Company's vessels and to emigrate

61 | See also Siemerling 182-85.

62 | Bak 148.

63 | Ibid.

64 | For a similar interpretation of Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, see Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 98; Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 34-51.

from Canada to Freetown in 1792, taking part in "the first 'back to Africa' exodus in the history of the Americas."[65] Tracing Aminata's journeys from Bayo to South Carolina, New York City, Nova Scotia and then Sierra Leone, Hill presents a distinct transnational story of black life in the eighteenth-century transatlantic world, while at the same time paying attention to the specificity of local histories and contexts: By focusing on Aminata's experiences of disenchantment, segregation and anti-black violence in Nova Scotia, Hill writes against a sanitized vision of Canada's past that ignores the country's role in the history of slavery and racism.[66]

A Stranger at Home: Aminata's African Experience

Throughout her life, in South Carolina, New York City and Nova Scotia, Aminata clings to an idealized notion of home in Africa, struggling to cope with her feelings of grief and pain caused by the slave trade and slavery. Emphasizing the impossibility to restore the past, to go back to an ancestral village and to reclaim an "authentic" African identity, Hill depicts Aminata's return to West Africa as another experience of disillusionment. Thus, in a way similar to Hartman, he challenges interpretations of the African diaspora that focus exclusively on cultural continuity, a diasporic attachment to ethnic roots and authenticity.[67]

In Sierra Leone, Aminata is forced to experience that the black Nova Scotians are betrayed by the British, who refuse to give them free land and political autonomy; moreover, it is a shock to discover that they are faced with the constant threat of re-enslavement by African slave traders: "Personally," Aminata writes, "I concluded that no place in the world was entirely safe for an African, and that for many of us, survival depended on perpetual migration" (BoN 385). In his chapters on Aminata's experience in Sierra Leone, Hill particularly sheds light on power negotiations and tensions between different African ethnic groups, deconstructing the notion of a single African identity or culture: What really troubles Aminata is the fact that she is treated as a stranger rather than as a beloved family member by the Temne people; they do not believe her story of forced migration to America and return to Africa. Like Hartman in *Lose Your Mother,* Hill draws the reader's attention to difference as a defining characteristic of the black world: Aminata and the local Temne people she encounters not only have different languages and cultural traditions; they are also not linked by a common history of transatlantic migration and enslavement.

65 | Hill, "Freedom Bound" 23.

66 | See also Bak 150-51; Siemerling 182-85.

67 | For a similar interpretation, see also Zimmermann 119-34.

Given her experiences of exclusion, betrayal and violence, for Aminata, Freetown is "nothing more than a stepping stone" (BoN 387). Searching for a true home, in 1800, she decides to accompany the local Fula slave trader Alassane on a journey inland, hoping to find her way back to Bayo. Focusing, once again, on the precariousness of black life during the period of the slave trade and the oppressiveness and cruelty of a patriarchal society, Hill challenges the idea of a static identification with an ancestral territory. Exposed to Alassane's cruelty, Aminata critically reflects on the treatment of women in her homeland, giving up her idealized picture of Bayo: "I didn't like the way Alassane issued orders. It made me wonder if men would try to speak to me like that when I got home, and if all my time of living independently had made me unfit for village life in Bayo" (BoN 434). To put it differently, Hill shows how Aminata's experiences of migration have transformed her into a self-confident woman who is not willing to submit to a white or black man's tyranny and domination—neither in Freetown nor in Bayo.[68]

Discovering Alassane's plans to sell her, Aminata is forced to abandon her idea of return to her native village, emphasizing that freedom is the most essential value: "Bayo, I could live without. But for freedom, I would die" (BoN 443). Therefore, what results from Aminata's reflection on the impossibility to restore the past and the necessity for an African woman to fight for self-determination and freedom is a dynamic understanding of home based on discontinuity and change. "Whatever 'home' she may find," Bak argues, "is no longer to be recuperated in a geographical or national space or territory, but in a de-territorialized, hybridized sense of self in a perpetual process of migration."[69] Also, and even more importantly: Home as a definer of her life is replaced by (the struggle for) freedom. Like the fugitives in Gwolu in *Lose Your Mother,* Aminata comes to realize that "home is where freedom is."[70]

Re-Imagining the Horrors of Slavery: Hill's Aesthetic Strategies

Over the last decades, there have been fierce debates among writers and scholars (in fields such as African American, feminist, ethnic and postcolonial studies) about the ethical challenges, implications and dangers of speaking and theorizing for—and about—the racial, sexual, gendered and/or cultural "other." These discussions center on various (interrelated) issues, such as the silencing and appropriation of women's voices by men; the misrepresentation of African

68 | See also Bak 150.

69 | Ibid.

70 | Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 98.

American culture and history by white authors like William Styron; "the problem of the muted subject of the subaltern woman" (Gayatri C. Spivak); and the phenomenon of "ethnic ventriloquism" (Mita Banerjee).[71]

In a 1991 essay, the feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff contends that "there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location."[72] According to Alcoff, "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for."[73] Following Spivak, she argues for a "'speaking to,' in which the intellectual neither abnegates his or her discursive role nor presumes an authenticity of the oppressed but still allows for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a 'countersentence' that can then suggest a new historical narrative."[74]

In *The Book of Negroes*, Hill, I argue, strategically adopts a black woman's perspective, trying to cash in on the commercial success of female-authored neo-slave narratives that feature a female protagonist. However, he fails to critically elaborate on what Alcoff calls "the problem of speaking for others,"[75] i.e., the intricacies and challenges involved in appropriating a black woman's voice as a black male writer. Seeking to create "authenticity," Hill employs a first-person narrator who offers an eyewitness account of the past and reflects on her task and identity as a writer. What characterizes the novel's metafictional parts, which are mainly set in London at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is a strong emphasis on the transformative power and political potential of literature.[76] For Aminata, writing is her way to address the horrors she has experienced and witnessed as a slave, to support the abolitionist campaign and to give a voice to all those black women and men whose stories are not heard; most importantly, it gives meaning to her life: "I have my life to tell, my own private

71 | See, for instance, María C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand For 'The Woman's Voice,'" *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 6.6 (1983): 573-81; Alcoff 5-32; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction," *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1990) 1-17; Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 54-95; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 295; Mita Banerjee, *Ethnic Ventriloquism: Literary Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008). As Banerjee puts it, "[e]thnic ventriloquilism represents the strategy of a white subject looking at itself through—presumably—ethnic eyes." Banerjee 16.

72 | Alcoff 6.

73 | Ibid. 7.

74 | Ibid. 23.

75 | Ibid. 8.

76 | See also Siemerling 175.

ghost story, and what purpose would there be to this life I have lived, if I could not take this opportunity to relate it?" (BoN 7).

Aminata's story in *The Book of Negroes* is told in a linear fashion and from one single perspective. Written in a vivid and clear style, the message that the text conveys is that it is legitimate and possible to offer a coherent account of the slave's life. Whereas, in *A Mercy*, Florens reflects on the painfulness of writing about her traumatic experiences in the Puritan village and the Blacksmith's cabin, for Aminata, it is not a challenging, or even impossible, task to reconstruct her life and write about the slave trade and slavery: "My hand cramps after a while, and sometimes my back or neck aches when I have sat for too long at the table, but this writing business demands little. After the life I have lived, it goes down as easy as sausages and gravy" (BoN 7). In other words, in Aminata's account, there is no critical exploration of the limits and risks of rendering anti-black violence but, rather, a strong focus on the liberating effects of the act of testifying and writing.

The Book of Negroes represents Aminata as an incredibly resilient and strong-minded woman who uses every opportunity to resist slavery's dehumanizing effects. By giving deep insight into her inner emotional state and tracing her life from early childhood in West Africa through slavery and self-liberation to her final years in London, Hill tries to foster the reader's identification with Aminata.[77] What is extremely disturbing is the novel's highly melodramatic plot structure and, in particular, its "happy ending." While Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë vehemently refuse to present a narrative of liberation to foreground the impossibility of healing the trauma of slavery, Hill deliberately incorporates a number of sentimental, "fairy-tale" elements into his text to celebrate forms of black agency and to highlight the possibility of overcoming the past.

This is most apparent in the novel's last chapter, in which Hill gives voice to Aminata's experiences of estrangement and despair in London, depicting her struggle with British abolitionists and members of the parliamentary committee. "Despite my life of losses," Aminata writes, "the loneliness I felt in London rivalled anything I had felt before" (BoN 452). Although she knows that she cannot restore the past and that the vision of her native village is idealized, she continues to dream of her childhood in West Africa. Like in a fairy-tale or a sentimental novel, however, the novel's deserving protagonist is somehow "rewarded" for her suffering: Shortly after Aminata's audience with King George III and Queen Charlotte, her lost daughter May enters her room: "She stepped forward and threw herself into me with such vigour that she nearly knocked me over. It was the embrace for which I had been praying for fifteen years" (BoN 465). On the plot level, this reunion is presented as a truly triumphant moment: Near the end of her life, after many Atlantic crossings, Aminata finally finds

77 | See also ibid. 25.

a new sense of belonging, wholeness and fulfillment, re-inventing herself as a storyteller in a school in London. Moreover, to her great delight, her daughter tells her that she will become a grandmother. In other words, unlike *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed*, *The Book of Negroes* is a narrative with a "happy ending," emphasizing the possibility to forget and overcome the traumatic past, to leave behind what Hartman describes as "the ghost of slavery."[78]

Arguably, a large part of the novel's popularity lies precisely in this evocation of "slavery as a closed chapter in American history:"[79] Like Haley's international best-seller *Roots*, *The Book of Negroes* tells a teleological story of redemption, reconciliation, rebirth and healing, without encouraging its readers to critically reflect on slavery's persistent legacies,[80] i.e., the systemic oppression and devaluation of blacks in our contemporary societies. To put it differently, both *Roots* and *The Book of Negroes* have found such a large readership because they offer an "empowering yet nonthreatening view of slavery"[81] as a phenomenon firmly situated in the past.

Hill's representation of Aminata's reunion with May not only "stretches the bounds of the probable,"[82] as Sarah Churchwell puts it in her 2009 book review for *The Guardian*, but also trivializes the complexity and painful reality of the black diasporic female experience in the eighteenth century: Focusing on May's successful escape from the Witherspoons and happy reunion with her mother, *The Book of Negroes* naively celebrates the possibility to challenge the existing white power structure and to sustain or restore familial bonds. In the last chapter, Hill's novel turns the reader's attention away from the black woman's plight in a white male-controlled society to Aminata's triumph over slavery and white supremacy. Thus, by drawing on what Hartman would call "the language of romance,"[83] Hill runs the risk of playing down and relativizing the core meaning of American chattel slavery as "thingification."

In stark contrast, in *A Mercy*, taking into account the complex (epistemological) insights of black feminist theory, Morrison offers a thorough, and excruciatingly painful, reflection on a slave mother's moral dilemma in the early colonial period:[84] Desperately wishing to protect her beloved daughter from rape on D'Ortega's plantation, Florens's mother is forced to give away

78 | Hartman, "The Time of Slavery" 763.

79 | Holsey 167-68.

80 | See also ibid. 155-56.

81 | Ibid. 156.

82 | Sarah Churchwell, "Bought and Sold," *Guardian* 24 Jan. 2009, 21 Jan. 2015 http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jan/24/lawrence-hill-book-ofnegroes.

83 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 6.

84 | See chapter 2, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," in this study.

her daughter, without getting a chance to explain her behavior; at the same time, she knows that it is impossible to save her child from slavery. Throughout the novel, Florens is deeply traumatized by this abandonment because she is not familiar with her mother's story and cannot understand her motives. For Florens, the pain and suffering caused by the separation from her mother will never go away; even her writing thus cannot be an act of liberation, only a desperate attempt to articulate the horrors of her life. Written from a black feminist standpoint, *A Mercy* engages in a dialogue with theoretical debates about the meaning of black motherhood under slavery as she challenges the "kitsch" vision of redemption that is at the heart of texts like *The Book of Negroes*: Unlike Aminata, Florens's mother will never see her daughter again; what remains is a deep sense of loss and a last glimmer of hope that her child will find a way to live without her. Unlike *The Book of Negroes*, *A Mercy* radically counters the notion that it is possible to overcome the trauma of slavery.

Like other writers of neo-slave narratives, Hill is faced with the challenge of representing a female slave's experience on board a slave vessel on its way from West Africa to North America. Whereas texts like *Beloved* and *Lose Your Mother* offer incredibly complex, self-reflexive, highly fragmented and multi-perspective reflections on the terrible journey to highlight the painful limits of their attempt to revisit the past, Hill's "We Glide over the Unburied" is written in the extremely accessible, first-person narrative style characteristic of the whole novel. Unlike in Morrison's key chapters in *Beloved* and in Hartman's "The Dead Book," there are no silences, textual blanks or narrative ambiguities that would require an active reader willing to reflect on the ethical implications of writing and reading the Middle Passage.

In her first-person account of her journey across the Atlantic, Aminata sheds light on a wide variety of experiences and incidents: On the slave ship's deck, the African captives engage in dynamic cultural activities, singing African songs and calling out each other's names. Determined to resist their subjugation, some of them start a slave uprising but are overpowered by the ship's crew. *The Book of Negroes* centralizes such acts of black agency and resistance, while also illustrating the incredible brutality and inhumanity of the Middle Passage. Aminata is forced to witness how her fellow slaves are whipped by their white oppressors and subjected to utterly dehumanizing treatment in the ship's hold. Deeply traumatized by her experience of deportation, one of the female captives kills her own baby and another woman's child; black women and men who are wounded or weakened by the journey are thrown overboard.

Significantly, Hill has made sure that his protagonist is in an exceptional position on board the slave ship: "A series of coincidences saved my life during the ocean crossing," Aminata recalls. "It helped to be among the last persons from my homeland to be loaded onto that vessel. It also helped to be a child. A child had certain advantages on a slave vessel. Nobody rushed to kill a child"

(BoN 56). Problematically, by giving in to the temptation to create a consoling account of Aminata's experience of the Middle Passage, Hill domesticates the traumatic effects of this event: His chapter evokes the possibility of benevolence and kindness on the part of the white captors; in stark contrast to *A Mercy*, it suggests that female slaves might find a way to escape (sexual) violence. This reconciliatory depiction is, to draw on Hartman's insightful 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," utterly "at odds with the annihilating violence of the slave ship."[85]

In an interview, Hill gives the following explanation for his strategic decision to focus not only on the brutality of the slave trade but also on what Hartman would describe as "the instant of possibility:"[86]

> One of the most difficult parts was writing the scenes in which Aminata is abducted and sent across the ocean in a slave vessel. How do you represent such human atrocity and not turn off the reader? If you depicted it in its full horror, who would want to keep reading? So somehow you have to shine enough of a light on the story that a reader has a reason, emotionally, to keep going, has to believe that his character Aminata will somehow survive, will carry on.[87]

Obviously, Hill's main concern is to create a story that captures the cruelty of the slave trade and slavery but that is, nevertheless and paradoxically, easy to digest; his primary goal is not to lose the reader's attention, even in those passages that deal with one of the darkest chapters of modern Western history, i.e. the Middle Passage. Of course, this narrative strategy is highly questionable: By putting Aminata in an exceptional position on board the slave ship, Hill trivializes the black female experience in the period of the slave trade and slavery, exposing the African captive to a second act of victimization.[88] Even more problematic, especially from an Afro-pessimistic and black feminist perspective: Hill refuses to acknowledge the full meaning of racial slavery as a dehumanizing institution of "thingification," to articulate the true implications of what it means to be a slave woman.

85 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 8-9.

86 | Ibid. 8.

87 | Sagawa, "Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill" 318.

88 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 5.

Conclusion

The Book of Negroes offers a transnational perspective on racial slavery and black life in the eighteenth century, challenging essentialist views of black culture and identity and static constructions of home as a geographically fixed place.[89] In Aminata, Hill invents a protagonist for whom the diaspora experience is not only about memories of the past, forms of migration and dreams of return but also about acts of home-making and struggles for freedom and equality in places outside the original homeland. Moving beyond what Brent Hayes Edwards would call "an obsession with origins"[90] and roots, Hill's novel presents a vibrant interpretation of the concept of the African diaspora; in this regard, there are significant similarities between Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and *The Book of Negroes*.

Hill's novel makes a crucial contribution to the genre of neo-slave narratives: Set on three different continents (i.e., Africa, North America and Europe), it explores the interplay between local and global structures of enslavement and anti-blackness; moreover, it reconstructs important historical events, processes and developments that have been largely ignored or silenced in (twentieth-century) academic and popular discussions about the African diaspora and the transatlantic world: the complicity of Africans in the slave trade; the role of African Americans in the American Revolutionary War; the history of slavery and segregation in Canada and the black Nova Scotians' experiences of estrangement and disillusionment in Sierra Leone. Written in a vivid and accessible style, Hill's novel has reached a wide international audience; as a result, the history of American fugitive slaves in the time of the American Revolution is not only known to a handful of scholars but to a large number of readers in Canada as well as in other parts of the world.

Unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, Hill constructs an empowering and, ultimately, triumphant story of a slave woman's life. Having lost her home, Aminata eventually regains her freedom, re-invents herself as a writer, and, most importantly, is reunited with her kidnapped daughter. This teleological conception of history is not convincing: By offering narrative closure, using melodramatic devices and putting Aminata in an exceptional position on board the slave ship, Hill runs the risk of playing down the horrors of slavery and the hardships of black womanhood and motherhood.

While Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë engage in an Afro-pessimistic and black feminist rewriting of history and the archive of slavery in order to illustrate the impossibility of narration and/as healing, Hill's novel conveys the

89 | See also Krampe, "Visualizing Invisibility, Reversing Anonymity" 302; Bak 150-51; Zimmermann 119-34.

90 | Edwards 63.

message that it is possible to transform the history of slavery into a reconciliatory narrative of overcoming. "I am not wallowing in slavery, and this novel isn't really just about slavery," Hill contends in an interview. "It's a novel about liberation; it's a novel about human courage; and it's a novel about the triumph of the human spirit in conditions of adversity."[91]

Strikingly, Hill's use of narrative form and style reflects his decision to offer a triumphant reconstruction of the past: Unlike *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed*, *The Book of Negroes* celebrates the healing power of literature, giving a first-person account of the slave's life without reflecting on the limits and risks of the attempt to re-imagine slavery from a twenty-first-century perspective.

91 | Sagawa, "Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill" 317.