

## Where Literature Fills the Gaps: *The Book of Negroes* as a Canadian Work of Rememory

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Volume 36, numéro 2, 2011

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl36\\_2art12](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl36_2art12)

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Duff, C. (2011). Where Literature Fills the Gaps: *The Book of Negroes* as a Canadian Work of Rememory. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 36(2), 237-254.

# Where Literature Fills the Gaps: *The Book of Negroes* as a Canadian Work of Rememory

CHRISTINE DUFF

LAWRENCE HILL'S *THE BOOK OF NEGROES*<sup>1</sup> takes its title from a late eighteenth-century document listing some 3,000 Black Loyalists given passage to Nova Scotia following the American War of Independence. Prior to Hill's widely read novel, few Canadians were aware of the document's existence, much less the reasons for this displacement of people and their treatment following their arrival. Through the voice of Hill's protagonist, Aminata Diallo, the fictional scribe who creates the register "The Book of Negroes," these historical facts are rememored<sup>2</sup> and rewoven into the fabric of the Canadian historical record. George Elliott Clarke explains the importance of these exercises of remembering and rememorying in his introduction to the anthology *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature*: "Because African-Canadian history is ignored in Canada, African-Canadian writers are forced to act as historians" (xx).<sup>3</sup> The need for this work of recollection and rememory in the Canadian context is an urgent one, as Canada is too often absent from discussions of post-slavery New World societies. Slavery fiction in the United States, for example, has been an object of study since its beginnings in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> In evoking the Black Loyalist experience in Nova Scotia, Hill brings parts of Canada's past out of the shadows, filling the gaps in the history books alluded to by Clarke. In this sense, the novel is part of a wider movement in contemporary Canadian historical fiction, as described by Herb Wyile in *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novels and the Writing of History*, in that it draws our attention to a historically marginalized population and is marked by a clear preoccupation with the historiography itself. This is also true of post-slavery writing. Since *The Book of Negroes* explicitly calls on a little-known extant document, the novel is engaging with the historical record<sup>5</sup> and raising questions such as: Who was this anonymous scribe? What was his or her story?

How did this individual regard the work he or she was performing? Answers to these questions are not, of course, to be found among the written traces of Canadian or American history, but in bringing them to the fore, Hill's novel, like many other Canadian novels since the 1960s, is "as much about the writing of history as [it is] about the past" (Wyile xii).

The task of this article, then, is to examine the various strategies the novel adopts in order to discover what they reveal about historiographical discourse in general and that of Canada's past and its experience of slavery in particular. *The Book of Negroes* addresses the interstices of Canadian memory as viewed through the lens of the accepted story of the country's past. When examined together with other aspects of the novel, we can see how Hill creates a multilayered response to a number of historical gaps: the Canadian experience (history), the slave experience, and the *female* slave experience. It is the presence of these multiple levels of re-inscription, and their interplay, that make the protagonist, Aminata Diallo, a multifaceted response to lacunae not only in Canadian history but also in the history of the Americas. While giving focus to questions of authorship, this article will address two main issues: first, how can fiction be a source of truth, helping to fill the gaps in popularly held perceptions of Canadian history? Second, how do Aminata's narration and the very act of writing constitute a powerful counter-discourse to the dehumanization of slavery, reaching far beyond the Canadian context?

### **Fiction as a Source of Truth: Where Fiction and History Meet**

Through the fictional life of Aminata Diallo, Hill has invested historical fact with a human dimension, writing the unwritten, as it were. American novelist Toni Morrison addresses this role of the writer in her essay entitled "The Site of Memory." Morrison argues that far from being anathema to memory, fiction (and other creative writing) can actually be a form of memory: not necessarily a lived memory, but one that draws on the powers of human imagination to discover a truth. In this regard, Morrison maintains that "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (113). Truth in this sense can be seen as the human dimension that lies beyond a historical fact, positing a notion of authenticity. Identification of historical fact — the dates, the

names — is, for Morrison, but the first layer in the work of uncovering a truth.

At almost the same time as Morrison articulated these reflections, three French Caribbean thinkers (two novelists, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, and one linguist, Jean Bernabé) published the manifesto *Éloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*. In this work, the authors assert that their histories cannot be found in the colonial historical records:

Notre Chronique est dessous les dates, dessous les faits répertoriés: nous sommes *Paroles sous l'écriture*. Seule la connaissance poétique, la connaissance romanesque, la connaissance littéraire, bref, la connaissance artistique, pourra nous déceler, nous percevoir, nous ramener évanescents aux réanimations de la conscience. (37-38)

(Our chronicle is behind the dates, behind the known facts: *we are Words behind writing*. Only poetic knowledge, fictional knowledge, literary knowledge, in short, artistic knowledge can discover us, understand us and bring us, evanescent, back to the resuscitation of consciousness.) (99)

With *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill firmly takes his place among American and Caribbean writers seeking out and expressing the realities (the “Words”) to be found “behind writing” or, to call upon Toni Morrison’s formulation, the truth that exists behind facts. In his construction of a strong female figure who resists the dehumanization of slavery, Hill makes an important contribution to the representation of an interior life that was deemed to be non-existent in the context of enslavement. The French *Code noir* of 1685 puts it in the most brutal of terms: “Déclarons les esclaves être meubles” (literally translated, “We declare slaves to be movable property”).<sup>6</sup> The slave was thus reduced to the legal status of object, stripped of all humanity. Historian Afua Cooper has spoken of the fundamental need to see slaves as human beings.<sup>7</sup> Literature plays a vital role in this work. In answer to the “soul murder”<sup>8</sup> and objectification suffered by enslaved peoples, Hill gives us the portrait of a strong and very human soul in Aminata, drawing on historical traces and the richness of imagination. As Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant maintain, the writer

est un renifleur d’existence. Plus que tout autre, il a pour vocation d’identifier ce qui, dans notre quotidien, détermine les comporte-

ments et structure l'imaginaire. Voir notre existence c'est nous voir en situation dans notre histoire, dans notre quotidien, dans notre réel. (38)

(More than anyone else, the writer's vocation is to identify what, in our daily lives, determines the patterns and structure of the imaginary. To perceive our existence is to perceive us in the context of our history, of our daily lives, of our reality). (99-100)

Historical events that receive the briefest mention in the traditionally accepted narrative of Canadian history occupy centre stage in *The Book of Negroes*. Just as Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* shifts the focus of historical record to Angélique, a slave in eighteenth-century Montreal, Hill has created a fictional character who, through her life story, threads together pieces of Canadian history and makes them part of the fabric of the history of the Americas and of the slave trade. Cooper dedicates a chapter in *The Hanging of Angélique* to "The Secret of Slavery in Canada," in which she asserts, "Canada may not have been a slave society — that is, a society whose economy was based on slavery — but it was a society with slaves" (68). The accepted Canadian historical narrative has preferred to focus on this country as safe haven on the Underground Railroad during the Fugitive Slave Law era south of the border. As Cooper affirms, "Scholars have painted a pristine picture of Canada's past. It is difficult to find a scholarly or popular publication on the country's past in which images, stories, and analyses of slave life are depicted. . . . People of African descent, free and enslaved, have vanished from national narratives" (69). George Elliott Clarke, citing the *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, points out that slaves arrived at Louisbourg on Île Royale (Cape Breton) "from St. Domingue (Haiti), New England, Canada (Quebec), Martinique, Guadeloupe, Senegal and France" (xiii). Furthermore, he affirms that Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Lower Canada (Quebec), and Upper Canada (Ontario) were all slave colonies (xx). He offers the following analysis of Canadian reticence in acknowledging its slave past:

English Canada's desire to assert its moral superiority *vis-à-vis* the United States muffles discussions of racism, which is cast as an *American* problem. African-Canadian history and literature,

feared as potential spoilers of white Canadian “innocence,” are, then, necessarily repressed. (xvii)

In *The Book of Negroes*, Hill carefully peels back the layers of the popularly accepted Canadian historical record to expose not only the very existence of the Black Loyalists, but also their mistreatment at the hands of the British. In return for supporting England in the American War of Independence, the Loyalists were promised safe passage to Nova Scotia as well as a parcel of land to cultivate. While passage to Nova Scotia was provided, the commitment of land was not honoured, consigning the Black Loyalists to an extremely tenuous existence. In foregrounding this group’s bitter experience, Hill deals a significant blow to any celebratory image of Canadian nationhood and can be counted among those contemporary Canadian novelists who “are much less inclined to construct patriotic narratives of the building of a nation and of a unitary Canadian character than to dramatize the exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion that such narratives of nation have often served to efface” (Wyile 7). The novel also calls attention to the fact that not all Blacks who came to Canada during this period made the voyage as free persons: many White Loyalists brought their slaves with them to Canada. Aminata says of those who made this journey as the slaves of White Loyalists, “if you came to Nova Scotia as a slave, you were bound just as fast as our brothers and sisters in the United States” (321). This observation emphasizes that the reality of bondage was not very different from one side of the border to the other, undermining the discourse of Canadian exceptionalism where slavery is concerned.

### **Aminata’s Narrative: A Counter-Discourse to Slavery**

As an elderly woman working with the abolitionists in early nineteenth-century London, Aminata writes her life story, and it is this writing that frames the novel. We follow Aminata from her African home to the Americas aboard a slave ship, then from the indigo plantations of South Carolina to New York, to Nova Scotia, to Sierra Leone, and finally to London. The novel is composed of four “books,” each beginning with a chapter that brings us back to the narrative present, reminding the reader of Aminata’s position of narrative authority. The exception is book four, which has the heading “Freetown, 1792.” The very last chapter of the book, “Grand *djeli* of the academy {London, 1802},” brings the

narrative full circle by returning to the same geographical and temporal spaces as the first chapter (“And now I am old”).

At the beginning of the novel, Aminata affirms her identity, her genealogy, and her power over the words she writes: “I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali. . . . I am writing this account. All of it” (4). She will reject the name Mary, imposed on her by a slave merchant, refusing to abandon her true name and relinquish her identity. In giving the names of her parents, she also claims a personal history and membership in a genealogical line, something denied so many by a system that sought to obliterate African identities. Aminata goes squarely against these efforts. In writing in the first person, Aminata situates herself as subject *and* as active agent. We have only to call on the *Code noir* to appreciate the significance of this gesture. In law, slaves were not agents, but were denied one of the most basic forms of agency: self-determination.

As a fictional slave narrative or, to use Ashraf Rushdy’s term, neo-slave narrative,<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Negroes* defies a significant constraint of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American slave narrative genre as described by Toni Morrison: that is, its distinctly political function as a tool in the movement for abolition. This ultimate purpose shaped the construction of the narrative in terms of both content and form. In the traditional slave narrative, certain unpleasant realities were omitted in order to avoid offending the sensibilities of the whites that held the political power necessary to put an end to the slave trade. Being “too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names,” explains Morrison, would jeopardize the political role of the slave narratives (106). This stands in stark contrast to *The Book of Negroes*, in which Aminata does not seek to shelter her reader from the reality of bondage. We are confronted with detailed scenes of the horrors of capture, the middle passage, and routine abuse at the hands of slaveholders and overseers.

Aminata’s story destabilizes the slave narrative genre by refusing to adhere to its conventions and by exposing the political machinations that dictated both its form and content.<sup>10</sup> The pressures exerted by the abolitionists on Aminata to tell her story in a certain way are explicitly addressed and her narration calls into question the discourse of the abolitionist movement. Aminata recounts, for instance, a meeting with a prominent abolitionist:

A tall man pumped my hand, introduced himself as Stanley Hastings and began to tell me all the great plans they had in store for me. "With delicacy and all meticulous care," he said, "we will interview you and write a short account of your life, including the abuses you suffered in the slave trade."

I cleared my throat. "You will write an account of my life?"

"It's so important that I may take on this task myself," said Hastings. . . . "We need to arrange the account just so. The slightest inaccuracy or inattention to detail could be fatal to our cause."

I listened warily to Hastings' plans to write about my life. (451)

Aminata concludes that Hastings "had no business breaking the soil of [her] own private garden" (451). She will not bow to the will of others when it comes to telling her story: "The abolitionists may well call me their equal," she observes, "but their lips do not yet say my name and their ears do not yet hear my story. Not the way I want to tell it" (101). The novel can thus be read as a critique of the abolitionist movement in early nineteenth-century London with the abolitionists attempting to shape Aminata's story, while it at the same time raises the larger question of who "tells" history and to what ends. The political strategy necessary to the abolitionist movement threatens to undermine Aminata's account of her life, and she will have none of it: "my story is my story and it will be published by the one who lets my words stand," she asserts (469). Aminata makes it clear that she alone will have control of her words, what is said and how it is said, and that the abolitionists with whom she is working in London will *not* have the final word over the story of her life. Hill allows her this dignity of self-expression and rememory, while illustrating how representation is subject to constant negotiation between competing points of view and differing objectives.

Not only does Aminata firmly resist the pressures exerted by the abolitionists, but her narration also exposes the fault lines in their tactics through the language she employs. To cite just one example, she writes of wearing a silk scarf on her aged and nearly bald head when she is "brought out to adorn the abolitionist movement" (5). There are unsettling echoes of objectification in the abolitionists' use of Aminata as an object to be "brought out" and presented at the opportune moment to serve their political goal. Furthermore, use of the term "adorn" implies she is simply a prop or an accessory for the abolitionist agenda. The well-intentioned crusaders for an end to the slave trade perpetrate a form of dehumanization not unlike that of the very system they seek to abolish.



The slave narratives, explains Morrison, had to appear as “objective” as possible in order to fulfill their political purpose of bringing an end to slavery, so their authors refrained from describing the horrors they experienced in too much detail. In this quest for “objectivity,” much of the interior life of the authors was left unwritten. As a creator of fiction, Morrison explains that her work consists of filling in these blanks left by the slave narratives, namely the representation of interior life, and casting an unflinching gaze upon the cruel realities of slave existence. To do the important work of humanizing the slave, Morrison says “only the act of the imagination” can help her gain access to the unwritten interior life of the subjects of the slave narratives (111).

Witnessing a slave auction in Charles Town, Aminata sums up the slave’s existence:

That, I decided, was what it meant to be a slave: your past didn’t matter; in the present you were invisible and you had no claim on the future. . . . I looked up from the street and again at the wretched captives. I vowed not to let the noises of the city drown out their voices or rob me of my past. It was less painful to forget, but *I would look and I would remember*. (189-90; emphasis added)

Similarly, upon her arrival at the indigo plantation on St. Helena Island in South Carolina, Aminata questions the very foundation of chattel slavery, wondering of her owner, “How did it come to be that he owned me, and all the others? I wondered if he owned me at all times, or only when I was working for him. Did he own me when I slept? When I dreamed?” (134). In questioning the notion of one human being’s ownership of another, she identifies what cannot be owned: her mind and spirit, her inner self. In this way, Aminata as a literary construction is an unequivocal response to the historical erasure of humanity epitomized by the *Code noir* and other documents of slavery.

### **Aminata’s Narrative: A Female Protagonist**

Women’s experiences of slavery have remained in the shadows, only becoming a focus of study in the last three decades or so. The work of Barbara Bush on the British Caribbean,<sup>11</sup> bell hooks in the American context,<sup>12</sup> and Arlette Gauthier,<sup>13</sup> Gisèle Pineau, and Marie Abraham in the French Caribbean,<sup>14</sup> to name only a few, has brought attention to the specificity of female bondage. With this in mind, we see that the

representation of a gendered subjectivity in Aminata is heavy with implications. Enslaved women experienced their condition differently from their male counterparts, facing the constant threat of sexual and reproductive exploitation. The particularities of female experience are given prominence in Hill's narrative: before her abduction, Aminata and her mother talk of becoming a woman, and allusions are made to rituals of initiation that would have been carried out if not for Aminata's abduction. Instead of undergoing these traditional rites of passage, Aminata begins menstruating on the long walk to the African coast in the slave coffle. She is raped by her owner in South Carolina. Her children are stolen and sold away. And yet, before her capture, she learns the art of catching babies from her mother. This woman-centred knowledge passed from mother to daughter is what often saves her, making her useful to her various owners and allowing her to support herself once she has escaped enslavement. The situation of the female slave receives further comment in one of the subtle intertexts of the novel, to which we will return below: nineteenth-century former slave and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth.

### Aminata's Narrative: Discursive Agency

The work of critic Barbara Havercroft on the question of agency in women's writing is useful here to show the ways in which *The Book of Negroes* is indeed a declaration of female agency, both thematically and through its narrative structure. Havercroft examines the question of female agency (which she translates as *agentivité*) with regard to women's autobiographical writing in Quebec. However, we can expand the reach of her work in using it as a tool to uncover some of the finer points of Hill's novel. A writing subject can exercise what Havercroft calls "discursive agency" ("*agentivité discursive*" 102). The three discursive strategies that can be employed to create agency, as identified by Havercroft, are "critical repetition" ("*réénonciation critique*" 102), intertextual references that construct a paradigm of agency, and metatextual discourses that highlight the relationship between agency and writing. Havercroft asserts that "*parler ou écrire, c'est déjà agir*" ("to speak or to write is already to act") (100).<sup>15</sup> She points out, though, that subjecthood does not necessarily mean agency: one can be the subject of enunciation without being an active agent effecting change. An enunciating subject, although in the position of performing the action, can, of course, still

perpetuate negative and harmful discourses. Havercroft defines agency as the way in which the subject acts on the world: “agir sur et dans sa vie” (“to act on and in one’s life”) (94). Subjecthood and agency are therefore intimately linked: declaring oneself subject represents the first step in a process of self-affirmation whereby one gains agency: that is, where one produces change in one’s surroundings (defying social constraints, for example). Aminata is an agent for change in the literal sense as she is working with the abolitionists shortly before the slave trade was officially outlawed in Britain and its colonies. Through her resistance to abolitionist pressures and strategies, Aminata’s narration is framed as the articulation of a political subjectivity that is distinct from, and at times squarely opposed to, that of the abolitionists.

We cannot neglect the apparently simple fact that Aminata is telling her own story. In view of the objectification of the slave and the denial of self-determination, the fact that Aminata should employ the first person, saying “I,” is significant. Within the context of the slave narrative genre, this is, of course, not unusual, but Aminata goes a step further, placing her subjectivity in a position of active opposition to the desires of the abolitionists.

### **Aminata’s Narrative: Reversing the Negative Through Critical Repetition**

The first discursive strategy identified by Havercroft, critical repetition, allows for the denunciation of social myths or offensive ideas by assigning them new meaning. The stereotype or negative discourse must be represented in order to be addressed, contested, and dismantled, but as Havercroft maintains, “l’itérabilité du signe, resitué à l’intérieur d’un nouveau contexte narratif, se révèle indispensable à la création d’un contre-discours” (“the iterative nature of the sign, resituated within a new narrative context, is indispensable in the creation of a counter-discourse”) (99). In rewriting and recontextualizing an offensive concept or discourse imposed by social norms, the writer exposes the underlying falseness of the discourse and allows it to be viewed critically. Agency resides in the re-citing of a concept in a way that goes against its original objective, thereby reversing its negative effect. For example, Aminata constantly confronts the degrading stereotypes that were used to justify the slavery of Africans. To give only one example, Aminata’s owner in South Carolina, Robinson Appleby, rapes her and then calls her “African whore” (161). Through the act of writing, Aminata places her subject-

tivity in opposition to the prevailing attitudes about slaves, and female slaves in particular, as illustrated by the violence she suffers at Appleby's hands. This episode also highlights the fundamental cruelty of a rapist calling his victim "whore." Just as she holds her head high after Appleby publicly shaves her bald to humiliate her and reassert his authority, Aminata uses her writing to respond to the dehumanizing and racist views she encounters.

In learning to read and write, Aminata opposes the stereotype that "Blacks were incapable of intelligence" (Morrison 108). In *The Book of Negroes*, myriad references are made to Aminata's capabilities. She is described as "the most literate Negro he has ever met" (364), "the African who knows more books than the Englishman" (381), "Worldly. Intelligent. Literate" (409), and "better read than nine out of ten Englishmen" (413). These comparisons to white men are significant, especially since, as Morrison points out, the assertion that Blacks did not possess the intellectual capacity to read and write was made by such male thinkers as Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson.

### Aminata's Narrative: Metatexts and Intertexts

The metatextual discourse — that is, the commentary the novel makes on the act of writing itself — is also a type of discursive agency. This metatextual dimension is pronounced in *The Book of Negroes* and is an important site for Aminata's assertion of self-determination. The power of words, the very material out of which narrative is crafted, and the power of narrative itself, is central to the novel. As she makes the horrendous journey of the middle passage with her fellow captives, Aminata copes by envisioning herself as a *djeli*, or storyteller. The *djeli* is a figure of great importance in her community, the guardian of collective memory and wisdom: "It was said that when a *djeli* passed away, the knowledge of one hundred men died with him" (55). In placing herself in the respected position of *djeli*,<sup>16</sup> Aminata asserts both the value of her story and her position as the source and bearer of this story: "I sought comfort by imagining that I had been made a *djeli*, and was required to see and remember everything. My purpose would be to witness, and to prepare to testify" (55-56). Toward the end of the novel, Aminata does in fact become a *djeli* three times over. On her trek from Sierra Leone to find her village of Bayo, villagers take her in. In return for refuge and food, Aminata shares her stories with her hosts: "For one month in a

tiny village of strangers, I became the storyteller — the *djeli* — that I had always hoped to be” (447). The final chapter of the novel, entitled “Grand *djeli* of the academy {London, 1802},” shows Aminata telling her story, in her own words, to Parliament in London. Finally, she becomes the *djeli* of a school in London (469). She thus refutes all denials of self-determination imposed by the slave system and takes her place as guardian of history and memory of a people. She bears witness as *djeli* and as scribe, through oral *and* written histories.

Aminata is an agent of change on a political level in that she is working with the abolitionists in nineteenth-century England, but the act of writing itself is heavy with implications for change. It was forbidden for slaves to learn to read and write, as these skills represented a powerful threat to the slaveholder’s authority. Narrative, in its form and in its execution, is present from the very first pages of the novel, as Aminata recounts her fascination with reading and writing as a child in Bayo. Before even revealing her name, the narrator evokes her wish as a child to “unlock all the mysteries” (2) contained in the only book in the village, her father’s Qur’an. One of the first images of Aminata’s father is as one who writes: “I can still picture my father with a sharp stick over hard earth, scratching out Arabic in flowing lines” (3).

In the first pages of the novel, Aminata provides a detailed description of her physical being, down to her toenails and the fact that she still has all but one of her own teeth. These details create an embodied narrator, with a physical as well as a mental existence. In this very human portrait, her body itself becomes a text of sorts, and we “read” her life and decipher the marks left by slavery. The narrative underscores two opposing physical marks: the “lovely crescent moons” carved into her cheeks and the brand burned into her skin above her right breast. The moons are marks of beauty for Aminata, whereas the brand is the mark of ownership burned into her skin by the slavers. This “body as text” notion is reinforced by Aminata choosing to expose her brand in order to counter a slave merchant’s assertion that rumours of branding are “nothing more than propaganda” to advance the abolitionist cause (421-22). As in her writing, she “exposes” the evidence that runs counter to pro-slavery narratives. The emphasis on Aminata’s physical being and the connection between the body and writing constitute an important element in the novel’s metatextual discourse. Before elaborating on this point, we must note that metatextual discourse is but one of a con-

stellation of discursive strategies Hill exploits to invest his protagonist with agency: that is, with the power to effect change. Aminata revels in the stories of each and every person whose name figures on the list, giving each one an existence beyond the sign on the page: "I liked . . . recording how people had obtained their freedom, how old they were and where they had been born. . . . I loved the way people followed the movement of my hand as I wrote down their names and the way they made me read them aloud once I was done" (294-95). As this example clearly shows, the most basic physical aspect of writing is highlighted, thus emphasizing what Havercroft calls the performative nature of writing (106). On writing her name in a hotel registration book in New York, Aminata declares, "The mere act of writing it, moving smoothly, unerringly with the quill . . . sealed a private contract that I had made with myself. I had now written my name on a public document, and I was a person" (244). Very early in the novel, the reader's attention is drawn to the physical act of writing: "My hand cramps after a while, and sometimes my back or neck aches when I have sat for too long at the table" (7), Aminata observes. The narrative is punctuated with such references, reminding the reader of the limitations of the narrator's elderly body and thus the human being performing the actions of telling and writing.

Not only does Aminata write but she also exercises some control over the creation of the historical document "The Book of Negroes." Her British military employers grow impatient as Aminata carefully records the name and description of each Black Loyalist. She does not approve of the expression "stout wench" and finds other ways of describing the female passengers: "The colonel was wearying of the details and the American inspectors were growing bored, so I dashed out the entry *as I saw fit*" (294; emphasis added). She remarks,

I have long loved the written word, and come to see in it the power of the sleeping lion. *This is my name. This is who I am. This is how I got here.* In the absence of an audience, I will write down my story so that it waits like a restful beast with lungs breathing and heart beating. (101)

The power of her narrative, and of narrative and language in general, is underscored by the image of the sleeping lion, the "restful beast." As such, the story becomes a living, breathing entity. It should be noted

that Aminata does not characterize *herself* as the restful beast: the potential for change resides in the force of the narrative itself. But the restful beast is of Aminata's creation and she thus becomes an agent for change, creativity and agency being closely connected. The story is hers, but its value is greater still:

If I live long enough to finish this story, it will outlive me. Long after I have returned to the spirits of my ancestors, perhaps it will wait in the London Library. Sometimes I imagine the first reader to come upon my story. Could it be a girl? Perhaps a woman. A man. An Englishman. An African. One of these people will find my story and pass it along. And then, I believe, I will have lived for a reason. (103)

In another metatextual play of mirrors, the reader of the novel *The Book of Negroes* becomes "one of these people" the narrator imagines, thereby vindicating Aminata in her scriptural mission. The *raison d'être* of her narrative is realized. The reader is reminded of his or her role as "receiver" of the text, and the novel's construction confers a vital role upon this actor. Not only has Aminata asserted and exercised her agency in writing her story, but her story has also been "heard."

Through its intertextual references, *The Book of Negroes* constructs a framework of meaning that points to various aspects of Aminata's struggle to assert her human dignity and agency, or what Havercroft calls a "paradigm of agency." Here, I will address two of the novel's many intertexts, namely Olaudah Equiano's 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a woman?" speech. Equiano's story is the only slave narrative explicitly named in Hill's novel, but as we have seen, Aminata's story shares some characteristics typical of the slave narrative genre, while challenging or even subverting others. The numerous explicit references to Equiano's account establish the link between the "traditional" slave narrative (Equiano) and the neo-slave narrative (*The Book of Negroes*). It is no accident that Equiano's account is the book that accompanies Aminata on her quest to return to her native village of Bayo. The book even helps to save her upon her arrival in the small village that shelters her, following her escape from the trader who was purportedly showing her the way back to Bayo. Aminata overhears his plans to betray her and sell her back into slavery, so she steals away in the night and seeks protection in a

small village. The villagers, however, are skeptical of her story. To prove she can speak “the language of the toubabu,” she pulls out Equiano’s chronicle, reads from its pages, and then explains what it means to the villagers (443). Equiano’s book legitimizes Aminata in the eyes of the villagers, and she is given shelter and food.

A more subtle yet even more striking intertext to be found in *The Book of Negroes* illustrates how the novel builds the “paradigm of agency” referred to by Havercroft. In a moment of self-assertion, Aminata says to her new owner, Solomon Lindo, after his use of the term “wench” to refer to her while reserving the term “lady” for his wife: “I’m not a wench. I had a baby and I would have it now but Master Appleby stole him away. I am no wench. I am a wife. I am a mother. Aren’t I a woman?” (200). This question that follows Aminata’s declaration of identity and her objection to Lindo’s use of the term “wench” is an unmistakable reference to the American abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth, a powerful figure of Black female agency. Truth delivered her celebrated “Ain’t I a woman?” speech at a women’s rights convention in Ohio in 1851. This pivotal moment in the movement for Black women’s rights and assertion of Black femaleness is in no way out of place in *The Book of Negroes*. Through this brief yet defining intertextual reference, Hill has his protagonist anticipate the words used by Sojourner Truth. The anachronistic nature of the reference<sup>17</sup> thus makes Aminata a fictional foremother to the famed abolitionist and women’s rights activist, suggesting Truth was not the first Black woman to assert her female humanity. The resistance to objectification articulated by Sojourner Truth in 1851 was present from the beginning of the slave trade; it simply was not part of the written historical record. Just as Truth asserts her right to human dignity and self-determination in the demand for the vote for Black women in mid-nineteenth-century America, Aminata challenges the authority of Solomon Lindo, who symbolizes white male power in a slave society.

## Conclusion

With *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill obliges Canadians to remember — and in many cases discover — that slavery is part of the collective Canadian past. Yet the novel’s reach extends beyond any simple transmission of historical fact: by engaging with the material history and the slave narrative genre (and contesting certain of its conventions),



*The Book of Negroes* participates in a wider conversation about the historiography of the Americas. Through metafictional strategies that assert Aminata's *agentivité* (as defined by Barbara Havercroft), the novel constructs a unified, multifaceted, and gendered fictional subjectivity, introducing us to an agent who tells her own story, the story "behind the Words," to borrow the phrase of Chamoiseau et al. in *Éloge de la Créolité*. Aminata's narrative is a declaration of humanity, subjecthood, and agency; she takes her place among the female characters resisting objectification that populate works by writers of the Americas. The role of Canada in Aminata's journey can also be seen as a reworking of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, which rests on the three traditional points of the triangular trade. Not only is Aminata's trajectory more complex, but it also poses a challenge to the idea of "America" and the elision of Canada in Gilroy's model. Through Aminata's story, the singular entity "America" is reconceptualized to include territory north of the 49th parallel. "America" becomes "Americas" and Canada's position in the historical and cultural space of the Black Atlantic is asserted. With *The Book of Negroes*, the neo-slave narrative is no longer a uniquely American literary phenomenon, and Aminata's story contributes to the important work of humanizing the enslaved, creating a narrative of presence where absence predominated.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

An earlier version of this essay was presented, under the same title, at the international conference Routes to Freedom: Reflections on the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, held at the University of Ottawa Faculty of Law, 14-17 March 2008. I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Sarah Casteel of the English Department at Carleton University, for her helpful comments and keen eye.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The American edition of the novel carries the title *Someone Knows My Name*, in homage to James Baldwin's story "Nobody Knows My Name," published in 1961. In a 2008 interview, Hill explains that the US publisher, W.W. Norton, felt that the title *The Book of Negroes* would be seen as inflammatory in the American context due to the word *negroes*. The phrase "someone knows my name" is actually spoken by Chekura, Aminata's future husband, aboard the slave ship (66). It is telling that his assertion is followed by the declaration "seeing you makes me want to live." Having his name known gives Chekura a sense of humanity and a reason to go on living. In another poignant scene, Aminata learns and calls out her fellow slaves' African names on the slave ship: "In the darkness, men repeated my name and called out their own as I passed. They wanted me to know them. Who they were. Their names. That they were alive, and would go on living" (66).

<sup>2</sup> I am borrowing Toni Morrison's neologism of rememory, nicely defined by Rushdy (1990) as "anamnesis available to one not involved in the originary act" (304). Rememory,

Rushdy emphasizes, “is never only personal but always interpersonal” (304), thus denoting recollection that extends beyond an individual subject’s memory while not entirely inhabiting collective memory. Rememory is at once the noun designating the space between individual and collective memories and the verb that signifies its negotiation. By employing Morrison’s term in relation to a Canadian novel, I seek to extend its use beyond the American frame of reference.

<sup>3</sup> It is revealing to note that, in addition to his works of fiction dealing with the experience of black Canadians, Hill has also penned a children’s history text, *Trial and Triumphs: The Story of African Canadians*.

<sup>4</sup> See Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*.

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on historical documents (or fragments thereof) is a technique common to much slavery fiction such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Maryse Condé’s *Moi, Tituba sorcière . . . noire de Salem*.

<sup>6</sup> The *Code noir* was, of course, French law, while Aminata was a slave under British and American law. The Barbados Slave Code of 1661 served as the basis for slave codes adopted in other British colonies, such as Jamaica (1664) and South Carolina (1696). Both the Barbados Slave Code and the *Code noir*, however, established the status of slaves as chattel property. This quote from the *Code noir* serves as a stark and brutal illustration of the underlying discourse of objectification to which the slave was subject.

<sup>7</sup> *Routes to Freedom* conference.

<sup>8</sup> See Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery.”

<sup>9</sup> For Rushdy, the neo-slave narrative is any contemporary novel that assumes the form, adopts the conventions, and takes on the first person voice of the American antebellum slave narrative (3). Paul E. Lovejoy makes a distinction between slave narratives and what he calls “freedom narratives,” the latter being penned by individuals who experienced the middle passage and had personal memories of Africa and of time before enslavement. In this sense, Aminata’s story is, in fact, a fictional freedom narrative. However, for the purposes of this paper, I retain the term neo-slave narrative as defined by Rushdy.

<sup>10</sup> For another perspective on this aspect of Hill’s novel, see Yorke.

<sup>11</sup> *Women and Slavery in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (1990).

<sup>12</sup> *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981). See also David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (1996); Patricia Morton, ed., *Discovering the Women: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (1996); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004).

<sup>13</sup> *Les Soeurs de Solitude: La condition féminine dans l’esclavage aux Antilles françaises du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (1985).

<sup>14</sup> *Femmes des Antilles: traces et voix* (1998). See also Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles 1635-1848* (2001).

<sup>15</sup> Translations of Havercroft’s work are mine.

<sup>16</sup> There is a strikingly similar trope in a Guadeloupean novel in French by André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967), the implications of which I examine in *Univers intimes: pour une poétique de l’intériorité au féminin dans la littérature caribéenne* (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Aminata’s narrative spans the years 1745 to 1805, thus predating Truth by at least fifty years.

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