To Dream of Return: The Rewriting of Memory, Black History, and Slave Narratives in Lawrence Hill’s
Someone Knows My Name

By

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Class of 2016

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in the African American Studies Program

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2016
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** .................................................................................................................. 2  
**Introduction:** Blurring Genre in Lawrence Hill’s *Someone Knows My Name* ........ 5  
  i. Chapter Outlines ......................................................................................................................... 9  

**Chapter One:** *A Subversion of the Slave Narrative Tradition in Lawrence Hill’s ‘Someone Knows My Name’* .................................................................................................................. 13  
  i. Credibility of Slave Narratives as Historical Documents ............................... 15  
  ii. The Danger of a Singular Cover; *Someone Knows My Name* vs. *The Book of Negroes* ............................................................................................. 16  
  iii. Discursive strategies ............................................................................................................. 22  
  iv. All Fiction Is Not Random ...................................................................................................... 25  

**Chapter Two:** *Where Fiction and History Intersect; Mappings, Movements, and Memory* .................................................................................................................. 28  
  i. Beyond America; Into the Black Atlantic ......................................................................... 33  
    a. On Trauma ............................................................................................................................. 38  
    b. Kinship: Blood and Belonging ........................................................................................... 40  
  ii. Rewriting Bayo ..................................................................................................................... 42  
    a. Trouble with European Cartography .................................................................................. 44  
    b. Empire and Linguistic Chaos .............................................................................................. 49  

**Chapter Three:** *Rewriting Wrongs; Canada & Freetown As Sites of Dwelling* ........ 54  
  i. Rewriting Canada ..................................................................................................................... 55  
    a. Transnational Constructions of Uplift and Community ................................................. 59  
    b. Land and Labor in Nova Scarcity ......................................................................................... 65  
  ii. Rewriting Freetown ................................................................................................................ 68  
    a. Slavery By Another Name ..................................................................................................... 69  
    b. Diasporic Black vs. Continental African ............................................................................... 73  
  iii. Questions of Return ................................................................................................................ 77  

**Chapter Four:** *Revisionary Black Women Slave Narratives & Conclusion* .......... 79  
  i. Rereading Gendered Agency ................................................................................................. 80  
  ii. Sexual Vulnerability ................................................................................................................ 83  
  Iv. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 86  

**Works Cited** .................................................................................................................................. 88
Acknowledgements

Born out of the collective efforts of my peers, professors, faculty, friends and family, this project is truly the product of persistent love, labor and honesty. Coming to Wesleyan has challenged me to learn in ways that I have never learned before. I have been left in awe by many amazing courses, but ultimately, I am most grateful for all the lessons I have learned from the amazing people that continue to make this place a home.

I am thankful to Lois Brown, for without you this “baby” would not even have been imagined, let alone conceived. You have taught me the importance of articulating the unspeakable. Your warm spirit, luminous words, and unending enthusiasm have continuously pushed me to complete this project. Above all, thank you for being an incredibly loving and calming counselor. I am in awe of all that you do. Special thanks to your “Slavery and The Literary Imagination” course, without which I would not have discovered Lawrence Hill’s stunning piece.

To Dreisen Heath and Christian Hosam. Thank you for continuing to mentor, care for, and advise me. This project would not have grown if not for our Skype sessions, late night calls, and (my) frantic texts. I regret not being able to shower you both with immense love during your last semester and thesis trials but I am incredibly grateful for the time that we shared and I’m looking forward to celebrating your continued triumphs.

To my Thesis Baes, Camila Recalde, Val Demuynck, and Chando Mapoma: Thank you for keeping me at peace in this process. Late 3-5am nights and spring break would have been miserable if I did not have the chance to be by your brilliant sides.

Core4!!! I have had the unique opportunity to be a part of such an amazing team of thoughtful, kind, and energetic souls. Thank you for the lovely late night powwows in the Bennet office. Thanks for bearing with my persisting answer to my “spice.” I am so lucky to get to spend time with a team of hilarious and motivating individuals. You all have kept me going.

Emily Pagano, you have been such an incredible force for me and for our team. Thank you for constantly checking in with me during this process and going above and beyond to make sure that I was taking care of myself. Working with you has made me a better leader, counselor, student, and friend.
To Gina Ulysse, Clemmie Harris, Elizabeth Mcalister, and Kehaulani Kauanui. You have taught me that there is an inextricable connection between words and actions and have encouraged me to act on my thoughts. I am so happy to have met and been inspired by all of you.

I have an amazing group of friends, each of whom has made me the person I am today: Tenzin Tsering, Jayleecia Smith, Tiffany Gordon, Nia Collins, Matthew Padilla, Jesalyn Ortiz, Meg de Recat and Emma Hagemann. I am excited to continue to learn from and grow with you all.

To my Love for Life, Tenzin Khyisarh: I get so happy when I reflect on the nearly 8-year journey we have taken together and that we will continue to take together (foreva). I am seriously so honored to have shared so many important moments of my life with you. You have been one of my biggest supporters and I will always cherish you for that. Thank you for constantly reminding me to stay true to myself and to my beliefs.

Rajaa Elidrissi, you inspire me. You are such a brilliant individual, and being around you, first off, keeps me in tears, and second, keeps me motivated. No matter what you have going on, you always hold me down. Thank you for keeping me engaged and informed about issues inside and outside of my world and for constantly challenging my faulty memory.

Though we have recently entered each other’s lives, I am so thankful for you Wayne Ng. Being around your cheerful and comforting energy this year has nurtured my motivation in and outside of this project. Forever fam!

To my lovelyBBs, Kafilah, Cat, and Sallie. Thank you for all of the late-night drives, phone conversations, and diner sessions. You all definitely keep things exciting. Thanks for reminding me to let loose, have fun, and feel every single moment. I am so lucky to have each of you in my life and to be a part of such an amazing and beautiful support system.

To Evelysse. You have held me together. Your encouragement and support has been endless and I am forever grateful. You have quickly learned how to keep me calm and to pull me out of my own head when things go awry. Although you are physically away, your warmth and loving presence has carried me through this whole project. Thank you for holding it down through this roller coaster of feels. #Blessed to have such a kind, caring, and loving soul by my side.
Dedication

In order to establish and recall a self-actualized memory, it is important to understand the individual yet alchemic layers of my mixed identity. I dedicate my thesis to my layers: Ali, Samba, Tety, Poochy, Papou, Lassine, Mom and Dad. This project is a manifestation of your stories. Mom and Dad, I am perpetually indebted to you for partaking in the strenuous process that is migration. Your courage and resilience has brought me here today. I am so lucky to get to call this uncontrollable love, laughter, and flat out ridiculousness my family.
Introduction:

Blurring Genre in Lawrence Hill’s ‘Someone Knows My Name’

There is immeasurable power in oral, written, and nonverbal memory. These resilient and authentic types of memory enable communities of disempowered people to transcend societal limitations and to combat the systemic silencing of forced African migrants and their contributions to the world. Throughout history, subordinated peoples have re-inserted themselves, their power, and their humanity by eliminating silence and partaking in dominant institutional methods of inscribing memory. The voice inscribed becomes a constitutive force, working to create a particular view of reality and of the self. If we as readers, scholars, historians, reflect on orality and other traditions of disseminating and transmitting voice we can begin to visualize oral tradition as “those, which the people formulate, pick up, and carry along as part of their cultural freight”(Carthy). This pervasive practice of orality or the carrying of voices, I argue, is at the foundation of the slave narrative genre. Enslaved individuals have spread written testimony about their life experiences with race on their paths from bondage to freedom. These narratives have been used as cultural freight carried to construct identity, trace origin, and relate a people across racial inequalities.

Lawrence Hill and his enslaved female protagonist provide insight into the lives of enslaved people, forced migrants, and the complexities of the numerous slave societies they inhabited. They achieve this while averting the dehumanization that is
commonly found in the archival traces that historians have created and readers have accessed in the past. The process of doing so requires emphasizing the humanity of enslaved people, naming them, giving them voices with which to tell their own stories, and examining their complexities and their creativity. Hill’s contemporary and subversive fictional slave narrative is well grounded in the truth-claims of historical research. Accordingly, while the voice of his enslaved protagonist is imagined, it is framed as if it was discovered in an archive. While there is an important distinction between a real voice and an imagined voice it is undeniable that both voices share a common power and common limitations.

The sweeping shift from orality to literacy as a medium for the preservation of community memory has allowed for the development of a plethora of different writing styles and objectives. Regarded as a form of technology, literacy and its symbolic power have served as an important outlet in the formulation of culture and the shifting of racial identities. It is therefore necessary to investigate how older forms of slave narratives have at times worked to perpetuate old ideologies by way of using new forms of disseminating ideas. While writing can be considered an artificial form of communication, it encompasses all of the positive qualities of its non-naturality. It develops another space for language to flourish and become etched into the material, the physical, while simultaneously and energetically refusing to lay flat, growing and soaring off of the page stimulating all human senses.

Close examinations of the formulaic model of traditional slave narratives are profoundly useful when analyzing contemporary and nuanced narratives. These new
forms work to alter bodies of evidence and deconstruct older forms of writing that have worked to perpetuate older belief systems. These advanced forms, as scholars note, have helped to “remix” social representations. According to Janelle Hobson, this remixing sensibility reminds us that various mediated narratives are not simple stories of oppression and resistance, of victims and perpetrators. The very act of the remix preserves complex dialogue between the powerful and the powerless. Furthermore, the fluid and hybrid identities [...] have enabled us to disrupt such dichotomous constructions while complicating texts and contexts. (Hobson 10)

Hobson refuses to simply engage with a top-down dichotomous view of power and control over narratives. Instead, she chooses to acknowledge that while the powerful can exert control from the top, those deemed to be powerless can still resist from the bottom. Thus when contemporary writers analyze, fill in, and create narratives using the voice of the powerless, fictional stories and historical accounts they begin to participate in a more complex discourse about power from the purview of resistance.

Tackling the intersectionality between social scientific writing and literary writing enables us as scholars to narrow in our focus when dealing with the widespread realm of literature that encapsulates slave narratives. It is at this interstice of genre where we recognize a rewriting of historical truths and political theories cloaked in creative freedom. These two methods of expressive writing take on qualitative forms when they work to reflect socio-historical change and engage with real life in ways that amend perception and spark social movement. For instance,
prominent author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is believed to have laid the groundwork for the Civil War. While the novel is justly critiqued for its failed caricatures of its black enslaved subjects, it still garnered a great deal of attention and is believed to have helped fuel the abolitionist cause in the 1850’s. The impact attributed to the book is reinforced by a story that when President Abraham Lincoln met Stowe he declared, “So this is the little lady who started this great war?” (Stowe 203)

There is a growing relationship between “social scientific writing and literary writing [...] [in which] presumed solid demarcations between “fact” and “fiction” and between “true” and “imagined” [are] blurred. ‘New journalism,’ a term created by Thomas Wolfe, describes an occurrence in the 1970’s when “writers consciously blurred the lined boundaries between fact and fiction and consciously made themselves the centers of their stories” (Richardson & St. Pierre). As writing forms began to crossover so did genre, spawning “the naming of oxymoronic genres -- ‘Creative nonfiction’, ‘fiction’, ‘ethnographic fiction’, the ‘nonfiction novel’, and ‘true fiction’. By 1980 the internationally renowned American novelist E.L Doctorow asserted “there is no longer any such things as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative” (7). The constant shifting, melding, and renaming of genre demonstrates how impressionable and how impacted we are in the face of a story. Contemporary texts like *Someone Knows My Name* take a blurred genre approach and demand innovative methods of questioning because they do not comfortably fit into the conventions of any single genre. By refusing to fit into any one genre, and yet by
blurring several different genres together at once, Lawrence Hill’s approach is inherently disruptive and offers the most promising method for understanding and revising traditional slave narratives.

Chapter Outlines:

Chapter One

In this chapter, I begin by arguing that Hill ingeniously uses a fictional framework to subvert the traditional slave narrative while, harshly critiquing the historically pervasive racial mythologizing that is furthered by white abolitionist intermediaries. I also address the contemporary authorial constraints placed on Hill’s novel and on other books pertaining to Africa. Specifically, I survey the visual oversimplification of Africa and its narratives on book covers. Using Hill’s blurred genre approach in revising the traditional slave narrative, I analyze and recognize the value of Hill’s disruption in working towards a greater understanding of forced migrants. Hill writes the story of a female protagonist, Aminata Diallo, who is kidnapped and transported from Bayo, located in Western Africa, enslaved and then freed in America, employed yet impoverished in Canada, returns to settler-colony Freetown in Sierra Leone, and works with abolitionists in England. Hill’s West-African born character is stolen and implanted into a horrific journey to the Americas, making her determined to find her way back to her homeland. Through the
voice and prideful storytelling prowess of the novel’s self-proclaimed narrator and djeli-to-be, Aminata, records the names of blacks who in serving the British Crown in the American Revolutionary War earned their freedom. Hill uses his protagonist to remember, retell, and revise history.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, I analyze Hill’s scrutiny of the methodology behind traditional slave narratives that are written to trigger the interests of white abolitionists. Exposing the lived realities of black captives during the slave trade, Hill re-examines the traditional 18th- and 19th-century slave narrative itself in an attempt to build nuanced truths of African slavery and culture outside of the dominant cultural narrative. In his subversive and well-imagined narrative, Hill addresses some of the European cartographic strategies used to silence forced migrant’s voices. This chapter will analyze the distortion of the importance of place, space, and language in the formulaic nature of traditional slave narratives. Scholars have noted that there is a pattern in a majority of slave narratives, “the validity of black civilization is depicted in organized culturally developed communities either in Africa or on the plantation” (Stephanie Yorke 140). By delving into a deeper geo-cultural reading of place and space, Hill disrupts racial mythologies supported by vague and shallow readings of black civilization and its formations. I use this chapter to explore Hill’s close attention to different sites along the transatlantic slave trade. With intentions of widening the colonial parenthesis of slavery, I focus in on Hill’s insistence on
including Africa and its complexities in conversation with other sites. I will also delve into Hill’s integral re-examination of West Africa at the beginning of forced migrant’s journey as an attempt to draw attention to the impacts of the African Empire on both sides of the Atlantic.

**Chapter Three**

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Hill uses his protagonist’s experience in Nova Scotia to rewrite history and to expose the untouched and unscathed versions of Canadian slave history that still exist and thrive today. Later in this chapter, I provide an overview of the ways in which race and faith took shape in black communities by focusing in on the history of the largest black settlement in Nova Scotia. Surveyed are the communal gathering space of the church and the mobilizing spirit of black faith that emulates an anachronistic black nationalism. Next I consider Hill’s revision of the first “back to Africa” movement from the Nova Scotia settlement to Freetown, Sierra Leone. Once again, Hill goes against the grain in his revision of the traditional slave narrative by including Africans as oppressors. He uses the pervasive demand for labor to point out the dangerous utilization of slavery instituted by empires on both sides of the Atlantic. I also analyze Hill’s commentary on the essentialization of African blacks and Diasporic blacks in the works of black authors. When Hill brings this often unspoken tension to the forefront of his protagonist’s and the reader's mind, he presents the elusivity of home when forced migrants dream of return. This chapter ends with Hill’s essential question of
whether a people ripped from their homelands can ever truly return to their rooted homes.

Chapter Four

This chapter analyzes how Hill centers the significantly different experience of women into the context of North American slavery. Traditionally, scholars have primarily articulated the impact of slavery on the black male, arguing that men, more so than black women, were the actual victims of slavery. However, as feminist, scholar, and social activist bell hooks contends in her book *Ain’t I a Woman*, while enslaved black males were stripped of their patriarchal status “they were not stripped of their masculinity” (hooks 21). In fact, it was this masculinity that slave owners sought to exploit. Prominent male authored narratives of enslavement document brutal physical abuse on plantations, escapes to the north, and heroic acts of individualism. Such events, though, fail to capture the specifics of the female’s experience. In this chapter I discuss Hill’s recentering of the black enslaved women and his construction of a counter-image of black womanhood, that actively works against popular images of black female debility, sexuality, and vulnerability. Hill creates a subversive and disruptive narrative of a heroic black female. A protagonist that uses her voice and writing to actively speak against systems designed to not only silence her humanity but also her womanhood. Hill does not evade gender and instead draws from it, using the particular hardships of black womanhood as potent elements that takes sweeping control over the narrative.
Chapter One:

A Subversion of the Slave Narrative Tradition

Lawrence Hill’s powerful novel Someone Knows My Name, is a work of vivid historical fiction. The fluid ways in which Hill writes this fictional autobiography compels me to analyze its metanarrative nature in terms of, Aminata, the fictional scribe, who self identifies as both storyteller and narrator. Hill does an expert job of dissecting the framework of the traditional slave narrative, sharing the story of forced migrants and in one fell swoop bringing to light issues with the publishing methods used by white abolitionists. Not only do the resurgent voices of forced migrants in Hill’s novel destabilize the genre of fiction, but they further the deliberate practice of storytelling. In a proto-narrative fashion, Hill’s displaced African griot rises above her own situation and advocates for the importance of self-authorship and a more accurate portrayal of the captured lives in slave narratives. Hill successfully contests what is generally accepted as American, Canadian, and African history by using forgotten historical facts to fill in gaps. He uncovers the widely neglected stories and strategies of resistance deployed by black diasporic individuals and by enslaved females.

What happens if we imagine that texts do social work? If etched words of slave narratives destabilize reality and weave new accounts and perspective into the stolen and manipulated fabric we call history. According to Stephanie Yorke, the slave narrative “evolved to harness public reaction against slavery, but its further
reaching by-product was a textual tradition that continues to inflect popular constructions of race” (Yorke 129). The slave narrative, having particular stake in the reconstruction of a humanity denied, works to dispel myth and assert truth. In doing so it lends itself to a revisional blurred genre approach, taking on the forms of history, autobiography, fiction, and plain old truth. The slave narrative is generally characterized by scholars as “the strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage” (Stepto 3). Using their own experiences to expose the horrible truths of slavery, authors transcend expectations as a result of their highly detailed, descriptive, and elaborative prose. From familiar and widely celebrated works like the action packed adventures of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, to the politically infused and transformative voice of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, these authors aimed to change things and expedite an era of extensive freedom. These clear and reflective pieces were necessarily published with documents written by abolitionists attesting to their authenticity and thereby manipulating the sympathies of a white Christian audience. This manipulation is apparent across several popular slave narratives as at their foundation they all seem to highlight similar thematic features. As a result, slave narratives were surrounded by questions of authenticity and mythology.

Hill’s writing featuring his female protagonist’s persistent refusal to let any abolitionist modify her story compels me to argue that her story is truly a
metanarrative transmission of Hill’s commentary on the overbearing influence of white abolitionists. My conclusion emerges from the fact that any presentation of a character’s voice is never too far from the transcriber’s influence.

Credibility of Slave Narratives as Historical Documents

The primary function of the slave narrative also is to authenticate the former slave account so that it carries both literary and historical significance. Hill’s use of fictional writing advocates for the inclusive telling of history. It was in 1972 that historian John Blassingame authored ‘The Slave Community,’ the first historical study of slavery in the United States to be presented from the perspective of those enslaved (Blassingame). Blassingame analyzes fugitive slave narratives to contradict the historically prevalent belief that African-American’s were docile, lazy, and submissive. While his work was recognized as an important piece of American Slavery, Blassingame was heavily critiqued by historians arguing that slave narratives were unreliable and biased. Arguing against this claim, scholar and Professor Ronald Judy asserts two crucial historiographical and literary features that serve to authenticate the slave narrative genre. He posits, “in their reliability and representation slave narratives are the documentary history of the collective African American experience in slavery” (Judy 34). In discussion of its first feature, representation, he asserts that slave narratives,

are just as representative as other kinds of literary material.... Like most personal documents, the autobiography provides a window to the larger
world.... When autobiographies are accepted both as records of the unique experiences of each individual author and as eyewitness accounts of several slave communities they are clearly representative. (Judy 34)

Judy’s assertion here -- against Historians critiquing Blassingame on the basis of fraudulent and manipulative slave narratives-- suggests that the representative nature of slave narratives is at least partially responsible for the narrative’s acceptance as historical and autobiographical evidence. He calls attention to the literary function of narratives as they create something close to a dialogue in which the benefit of reading “is that they shed some more light on what happened in slavery”(35). Moreover, he stresses that the purpose of such reading, is not to discover the history of events but rather “to trace the historical transcription of African American experience in literature” (35). These components, Judy contends, are what make the slave narrative a literary document of personal expression, a representative autobiographical account, and a reliable historical document.

The Danger of a Singular Cover; Someone Knows My Name vs. The Book of Negroes

It is extremely important to examine the authorship and publication of Lawrence Hill’s novel in close comparison to strategies of traditional slave narrative publication in the 18th and 19th centuries. While, in present-day, Hill is privy to living in a society that has begun to acknowledge the appalling truths of slavery and appreciate his brilliant piece, it would be wildly inaccurate to believe that his contemporary slave narrative did not endure its own culture-induced authorial
constraints. Originally published in 2007 as *The Book of Negroes* in Canada, Hill’s novel’s title was forced to change to *Someone Knows My Name* for American publications. The title change was an unanticipated request from Hill’s American publisher, warning him that the term “‘Negroes’ would not fly, or be allowed to fly, in American bookstore” (Hill “Why I’m Not..”). Irritated at first, Hill eventually changed

![Figure 1. Snapshot of a register of Negroes who were eligible for evacuation from New York by the British Crown.](image)

the title of his novel and found peace with what we know now as *Someone Knows My Name*. The Canadian title actually derives from a historical document of the same name that served to document the names of 3,000 blacks who gained “freedom” by serving the British crown in the American Revolutionary War and fleeing for Canada (e.g. see fig. 1).

In an article featured in *The Guardian*, Hill examines the evolution of the term “Negro” in America and explains that it resonates differently in Canada. He reflects,
“In urban America, to call someone a Negro is to ask for trouble. It suggests that the designated person has no authenticity, no backbone, no individuality, and is nothing more than an Uncle Tom to the white man” (Hill “Why I’m Not…”). While Hill eventually realizes that the title change was effective and sparked more American interest in his novel, it remains important to analyze the politics behind covers of books pertaining to African, American, and Canadian slavery.

Book covers, used to market and sell a story, tend to showcase ideas that are largely agreeable or provocative to its audience. For instance, books that are set in Africa tend to have similar covers. It is often a bright yellow and orangish sunset with an acacia tree¹ and a barren landscape in the foreground. Hill’s American cover falls prey to this commonality, as while the ubiquitous acacia tree is not featured on its cover, instead appearing in the first chapter of the book, it dons a singular woman, perhaps Hill’s protagonist Aminata, surrounded by a barren landscape. This visual oversimplification of Africa is symptomatic and reflective of a myth, “that supported colonialism--empty landscapes available for western consumption” (“Oversimplifying Africa”). This myth evidently is one that is still prevalent in America today. In designing identical book

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¹ Acacia trees are not even native to all parts of Africa. Acacias are especially numerous on the plains of southern and eastern Africa, where they are well-known landmarks on the veld and savanna. (Britannica- http://www.britannica.com/plant/acacia)
covers, American publishers expose the fact that perceptions of continental Africa are hardly removed from what they used to be. Book covers, similar to the literary frontispieces used by slave narrators addressed later in this chapter, are typically crafted by publishers. The choice to reflect a similar image echoes a pervasive othering and simplification that makes Africa and its people easier to understand.

The cover of Hill’s Canadian novel *The Book of Negroes*, works as a more representative and authentic counter image to his American one. Hill’s strategic choice in title mirrors his mission to draw Canada’s history out of the shadows. While the book delves into a myriad of sites and their histories, Hill’s nostalgic and specific reference to a Canadian historical document does more to actively gauge his targeted Canadian readership. On the cover is a black woman who stares, unapologetically, into the lens of the camera and also into the eyes of the readers. Her facial expression appears both to beckon and challenge readers to open the novel and read what will be an enlightening story.

While the Canadian title, *The Book of Negroes*, is accurate and the cover is much less cliched, Hill’s American title is still extremely relevant and fitting. The title *Someone Knows My Name* works to subvert authorship and coupled with the first chapter asserts the protagonist’s agency and power at the inception of the narrative. The auto-biographical objective of the title and cover page are integral elements that
should not be overlooked as they serve a strategic and political function. Along with a political title, traditional slave narrative tend to use frontispieces, an illustration facing the title page of a book, in a similarly potent way. Lynn A. Casmier-Paz completes a full analysis of slave narrative frontispieces and acknowledges the power that a frontispiece can have in guiding the reader’s understanding of a text. Casmier-Paz argues that within the frontispiece the,

author portraits become, in some cases, persuasive tools for abolitionist arguments. ¹ In this way the portraits are a guide for understanding the contradiction between slave status and the formality of author portraiture. And since the portraits appear before, or outside, the texts, as such they are "paratextual" elements, whose “threshold, or zone of transaction” functions to persuade the reader regarding the (auto)biographical objectives of slave narratives as life writings. (Casmier-Paz)

Utilizing Casmier-Paz’s semiotic engagement with the frontispiece included in some traditional slave narratives, we observe that Hill mirrors the effects of the traditional frontispiece in his reclamatory title and the powerful use of imagery in his first chapter. Imagery that invokes the senses of the reader and inverts prose to craft a vivid portrait of Aminata, Hill employs creative and realistic descriptions of a character corporealized as both marked and branded. The title and the first chapter of the novel disseminates a complex illustration of an African woman that is all together argumentative, persuasive, and manipulative.
The American title of Hill’s work is a reclamation of power as it emerges from the voice of an enslaved character that refuses to relinquish her name and uses her potent literacy to stake claims to authorship. Inherently possessive, the phrase “my name” in the title attacks the common practice of renaming slaves, validating Aminata’s humanity within the context of an interested readership. Other expressive titles of traditional slave narratives often follow a form similar to this title, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave” and in the space allotted for the author's name “written by himself” is inscribed. This method of asserting the self in titles also appears across other well known narratives, a few examples include: ‘The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself,’ ‘The Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave, written by himself, and the ‘Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself. Slave narrators used their titles as a political space to assert their own authorship and in doing so they, “contradict the eighteenth-century stereotype of the mentally lazy African”(Casmir-Paz) and instead validate their own intelligence. The title Someone Knows My Name is a preliminary testimony in its own merits, proving the protagonist’s humanity and ability to accomplish the rather impressive feat of being able to read and to write.

Just as the self-asserting titles of slave narratives worked to astonish and draw white readers in, the “frontispiece portraits present the initial ‘threshold’ through which the overarching irony of the writing slave is readable”(Casmir-Paz). Using the first chapter titled And Now I Am Old, Hill illustrates for readers the first body of
evidence, the protagonist’s corporeal humanity. Aminata asserts and addresses her mortality by saying, “I seem to have trouble dying” (Hill 1). Commenting on the shocking nature of her own vitality, the reader is drawn in by the immediate presence of a narrator describing her current countenance and disposition. Like a frontispiece, a snapshot of the subject is taken and drawn into the novel. Aminata tackles the issue of permanence and hints at an encroaching attempt to immortalize one’s life and thereby one’s story. Illustrating her own features, she captures her physical build, telling us she stands at an “unremarkable height of five feet, two inches,” her “rich dark skin”, her hair which has mostly fallen out now, and her hands. Hands, she recounts “are the only part of me that still do me proud and that hint at my former beauty. The hands are long and dark and smooth, despite everything, and the nails are nicely embedded, still round, still pink. I have wondrously beautiful hands” (6). The reader gazes at this African subject and is obliged to read her detailed description of her body, beauty, humanity, and its remarkable persistence.

**Discursive strategies**

Hill’s protagonist immediately asserts ownership of her name and of her resilient humanity. His talented storyteller is rendered omnipotent in this literary setting as she essentially has the power to define her own genre and to not be confined by one. She is so closely stitched to the literature that what she speaks about takes on greater significance than the fact that she can speak or write. She is the master narrator and revises the slave narratives hybrid form, one that has a “clear and
directed discursive strategy—one designed to affect a specific political situation and historical condition” (Spaulding 12). Instead she writes using her own structure and follows her own timeline, which led to her success in retaining agency and resistance in the power of a single voice that works to speak to and for so many. To accomplish a range of authentic representations, Hill uses the generic framework of slave narratives, supplements history, and transforms features that are characteristic of the slave narrative structure. He admits, “my responsibility to history is to project it honestly, meaning to project it in a way that’s faithful to my intellectual understanding of the time, places and conditions in which African people were living”(Sagawa 316). Hill outlines his mission to consciously reshape history by using fiction out of a desire to portray as many experiences of forced migrants as honestly as possible.

A plot element that Hill consciously subverts is the use of detailed violence. Authors of slave narratives and their abolitionist co-editors were concerned with triggering the moral sympathies of Christian audiences, and to do so they demonstrated the morally harmful effects of slave ownership by presenting the cruel violence inflicted against black bodies. While crucial to exposing slave owners and the inhumane institution of slavery, descriptions of violence in slave narratives were often depicted but not judged. Slaves who suffered brutal punishments were delineated as objects as opposed to subjects. Hill avoids desensitizing readers to Aminata’s scars and the scars of others by humanizing the events through which they occurred. For instance, Aminata’s head is publically shaven and her clothes ripped off
by Master Appleby because of his insane jealousy. After he finds out that Aminata has a child growing inside her he states, “I make the decisions around here about breeding” (Hill 176). Aminata screams when she is forced to look at herself, stating, “I didn’t recognize myself. I had no clothes, no hair, no beauty, no womanhood” (178). His punishment forces emphasis on her humanity and a stripping of her womanhood rather than simply physical brutality. Instead of constantly jumping in and out of gory descriptions of horrific events filled with violence, Hill replaces the voyeuristic eye with an ethical self-consciousness and “violence becomes a humanizing, rather than a dehumanizing, feature of the presentation of the black community” (Spaulding 2).

Hill’s integration of Western African cultural tradition is another humanizing presentation of black community and develops a necessary rootedness and authenticity in the novel. Hill’s protagonist is skilled at many things but her most exceptional talent is storytelling. Her distinct style of narration develops from cultural practices she has learned while growing up in Bayo and finds its origin in the practices of oral tradition in West Africa. West African historians, storytellers, and/or praise singer are referred to as griots or djelis. Djelis are generally viewed as reliable sources who “through recitation and singing, tells the story of a person, family, tribe, or people, to preserve knowledge and transmit it from generation to generation” (Ogunleye 4). Aminata acknowledges her own narrative power when she identifies herself as a djeli muso, a professional storyteller. This cultural background works to further establish Aminata as a narrator determined to share stories and adds to her creative individuality. While Hill’s protagonist certainly has to rely on her
white British counterparts to gain mobility and to spread her voice, the ultimate power lies in her skilled storytelling and impressive memory.

All Fiction Is Not Random

The act of writing fiction often is inspired by real life events. Though Lawrence Hill creates Aminata’s character, her story seems autobiographical as it is informed by lived experiences and lived connections. The very character’s name was originally entered into and taken from the official Book of Negroes document. Hill’s protagonist is intended to be fictional but her vitality jumps from the text and forces readers to reconcile with the fact that her imagined life reflects the lived experiences of other forced migrant taken in that historical setting. Hill’s story is supplemented with historical facts but also contextualized with things observed during his own travel to Western Africa, where he conducts research and learns about different African cultures, traditional practices, and prominent oral stories. Hill effortlessly establishes a place where fiction and the historical slave narrative engage in a symbiotic dance. The protagonist herself suspects that she was born around the year of 1785. Malian history in 1785, in fact, reveals the emergence of the Segou Kingdom. Biton Coulibaly, considered the founder of the kingdom, formed the ton djon, “a special standing army that started as a royal guard composed of captured enemy soldiers and slaves.” (Imperato 199) The ton djon became a powerful force in the life of the kingdom. The economy of the Segou Kingdom was based on slave trading and the ton djon “raided for slaves, which were sold into the Atlantic slave
trade and which provided the kingdom with much of its wealth”(199). This fact makes it clear that Hill’s aim is not only to tell the story of a fictional character but to affirm his character’s identity, genealogy, and her power over the words she writes.

Another way in which Hill injects truth into the novel is by finding inspiration in his own life. In an interview, Lawrence Hill mentions that his inspiration for Aminata came from his very own flesh and blood, his daughter. Hill admits,

‘I named Aminata after Geneviève’ he confesses, before noting that he ‘tried to love my protagonist the way I love my daughter.’ What if this had happened to my own child? he asks before mulling even more poignantly, ‘how would she have carried on, after losing her parents, her religion and her language, and after being cast into an alien world that saw her as little more than a work animal? So Aminata, the character, grew up under my tutelage.’

(Siemerling)

Using his daughter as a muse is a strategy Hill uses to infuse emotion into his reading of history. Hill uses this vulnerability and anxiety surrounding childbirth to jump into the powerlessness that is procreation during slavery. He crafts a strong empathy towards his fictive character.

Lawrence Hill combats the essentialism created by white abolitionists in traditional slave narratives. His project is to reveal the manipulative nature of abolitionist influence and to correct it by telling a more truthful story. Hill’s protagonist is able to tell an amazing story as she operates as a skilled *djeli* interested in exploring her own identities and capturing the stories of so many others because of
it. While intended to be a fictional character, her character does work that blur
divisions of genre and geography. Aminata constantly moves back and forth across
borders and throughout refuses to let pre-designated order regulate her narrative or
her movement. Rather than relying solely on his imagination, Hill uses truth and
reality as a narrative tool, allowing him to engage with history and participate in a
wider conversation about historiography of the Americas. Timothy Spaulding pens
the book, *Re-forming the Narrative*, asserting that the silver lining behind most
contemporary slave narratives is that “the contemporary black writers treatment of
slavery reveals a tense relationship between the anti-foundationalism of
postmodernism’s stance on history and the black nationalist goal of reclaiming that
past” (Spaulding 3). Hill creates the story of a forced migrant to revise the traditional
slave narrative, reframe slavery and its impact on today, and highlight the voices and
individuality of forced migrants who have been systematically silenced. Hill uses
fiction as a tool in crafting a subversive narrative and simultaneously examines the
inaccuracies of our narrative representation of the past.
Chapter Two:

Where Fiction and History Intersect; Mappings, Movements, and Memory

Lawrence Hill occupies a disposition different than those writing their own stories, those enslaved sharing their brutal experiences of slavery, of eventually finding freedom. Traditional slave narratives produced in the 18th- and 19th-centuries share the experience of authors who have been seized, confined, and their texts manipulated by white abolitionists. These narratives continue to be undeniably powerful testimonies, but it is sobering to realize that they often were rarely believed or disseminated, if not co-opted, skewed and tainted by white abolitionists. In contrast, Hill a 21st-century writer works against the essentialized and objective discourse created by 18th- and 19th-century abolitionists by re-writing history and challenging normative narratives of black voices across the diaspora. He is able to produce a more truthful and nuanced rewriting of history through the extensive amount of research he conducted into the works of memoir writers, diarists, historians, journals written by slave traders and native Africans. and others who wrote accounts of the slave trade on the coast of Africa. He also uses his own experience and research of Sierra Leone and Mali to learn more about specific places and people of West Africa. I argue that this arduous process of rewriting requires Hill to use trauma, kinship, and language as connectors and fundamental sites of resistance for forced migrants. These transatlantic sites and combative strategies allow him to
distinguish embodiment from disembodiment in making sense of the histories of the world around us.

His constant emphasis and descriptive illuminations of place, regarding Bayo, South Carolina, Manhattan, Nova Scotia, Freetown, and London, demonstrates his attempt to combat tools of political suppression by telling a more vivid and less idealized history of gained freedom and anti-slavery work. In addition to reworking and identifying narratives infiltrated and manipulated by the white abolitionist gaze, Hill compels readers to pay closer attention to the intricate connections that are formed within the journey of displaced Africans. The dizzying nature of Hill’s chapters is not meant to lend the reader a helping hand in deciphering the forced migrant’s physical disposition, but to mirror the haphazard experience of diaspora.

Hill reproduces historical geography through the collective cultural memory of individuals with shared histories of subjugation, of enslaved people and newly emancipated blacks in different parts of a massive journey. He creates in his protagonist Aminata, “a public self that engages societal expectations of propriety and behavior, confronts distortions of the narrative produced by the editing of abolitionists, and honors obligations to the masses”(Gaspar & Hine 197) of captured Africans, enslaved African-Americans, and self-emancipated black people. It is through the humanizing voice of Hill’s character that African, African-American, and African-Canadian history gets re-membered and re-inserted.

The stories of forced migrants are not meant to be palatable, binded tightly, and placed on an archival shelf next to four hundred plus years of other cruel
spectacles. These spectacles were often supported by manipulated historical precedence, altered by abolitionists, and showcased warped and tainted ideologies of an “earned” freedom. Aminata’s story, complete with extensive details on culture and place, is one of embodiment and meant to invoke and inspire empathy.

A Truthful Disruption of Fiction

_Someone Knows My Name_ is as much a recollection of an enslaved African’s personal memories as it is a historical recollection of the diasporic traveler’s sites of memory. Aminata is the embodiment of the forced migrant. Having lived most of their lives in bondage, slaves had minds that were etched with lasting memories of suffering and abuse. It is this collective consciousness born of brutal events that shape their memory and, at times, reject manipulative proposals of freedom as an immediate response to suffering. The various environments they inhabit are thus sites of diasporic memory in Hill’s novel. Hill retraces the grand transatlantic journey and recollects the scattered parts and memories of forced migrants. It is therefore important to question what is unique about each and every one of these places that forced migrants visit, and what kinds of shifts and changes take place within the individuals that travel through them. The depth of historical research completed by Lawrence Hill provides us with a rich history that is all too true to simply regard as fictional. He remaps the transatlantic migration using Aminata’s fictional sites of memory to truthfully confront the historically broader questions of “What really happened?” and “Where did it really happen?” In his remapping, Hill counters
notions of the monolithic black identity, and re-conceptualizes what freedom and home means for those who have been perpetually displaced.

The distinction between fact and fiction is both pervasive and cyclical in the genre of traditional slave narrative. As scholars, particularly Toni Morrison, have theorized, the stories and circumstances recounted in these narratives attempt to say two things, the first: “This is my historical life, it’s personal, but also represents race, and place” (Morrison 86). Thus as Morrison argues, slave narratives were clearly pointed and their authors were highly aware that they were not simply writing their own stories, but also sharing the stories of other enslaved blacks and their horrific experiences in particular sites. The second thing slave narrators aimed to express was, “I write this text to persuade other people... that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery ”(86) Hill writes his novel to say both and in doing so his fictional details become all the more real. As his imagined story is persuasive and representative of different identities and places, Hill’s work includes strong parallels with actual slave narratives such as the narrative of Olaudah Equiano titled, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Equiano’s prominent narrative--long believed to be factual--has come under scrutiny of late and there is the suggestion by some that it is a fabricated text, a “travel narrative.” The possibility of Equiano’s highly referenced narrative being false, mirrors the tension that manifests when one writes a narrative, factual or fictional, with the intent of advancing grand transformation. Both Equiano and Aminata are abruptly taken from their homelands and delivered to slave plantations in the
Americas. Ultimately, both also set out to change the horrible circumstances of captured black bodies. As they were written at different points in time, if the change that Equiano desired was the abolition of slavery, then what does Hill’s contemporary neo-slave narrative aim to change? Further, what does Hill aim to change by creating a protagonist that is exposed to each of these dense sites of collective memory? How does her story differ from one like Equiano, a man who is stolen by the Niger river in 1745, journeys across the Atlantic, survives brutal slavery in America, wars in Canada, and buys his own freedom?

Hill’s bold gesture of revision aims to extend, fill in, and complicate slave narratives. In detailing Aminata’s experience in each place she travels, Hill’s first correction is of the widely held perception amongst white abolitionists that slave narratives needed to be written objectively. Readers praised the narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass because they managed to remain “non-inflamatory” and avoided delving into gruesome details in order to avert “bias”. They gave abolitionists and readers the ability to engage with the material while “summon[ing] up [the abolitionists] finer nature in order to encourage him to employ it”(88). Hill deliberately exposes a more forthright history of each site to reject objectivity and to reject an apathetic recollection of events. He asserts instead that the most honest form of narrative and history are collections of vivid memories and voices. Hill uses the voice of Aminata, the skilled djeli, to reveal the truth behind each of these sites.
As readers follow Aminata as a forced migrant it becomes increasingly hard to distinguish between reality and fiction. Hill discusses his intentions in an interview titled “Projecting History Honestly” sharing that his responsibility to history “is to project it honestly, meaning to project it in a way that’s faithful to [his] intellectual understanding of the time, places and conditions in which African people were living” (Sagawa 316). Hill stresses here that existing narratives have not accurately reflected a comprehensive account of the different places and conditions of captured people. His approach, however, is investigative and he aims to remain truthful and candid. Truth “may be excessive, it may be more interesting, but the important thing is that it’s random--and fiction is not random”(Morrison 93). Hill’s fiction is not random and is written with a clear motive, it is a collection of truths held together and adorned by his whimsical and transportive writing.

**Beyond America; Into the Black Atlantic**

“There must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all those water crossings, while others fell from bullets or shut their eyes and simply willed their lives to end” (Lawrence Hill, Someone Knows My Name)

Forced migrants are literal denunciations of the artificiality of borders. Among the many strategies of physical torture and violent dehumanization the transatlantic slave trade utilized, the most effective tool in debasing migrants was community dissolution. To achieve this, plantation slavery, in particular, relied on force.
Descriptions of plantations in the Southern United States demonstrated an active
desocialization, depersonalization, and desexualization of slaves in order to achieve
an exploitation untempered by concerns for preserving the slave's physical humanity
and social capacities. In other words, in order to perform the intense labor required on
plantations, slaves were forced to disassociate themselves with their own humanity.
Additionally, they were expected to forget their naturally inherited norms, ideologies,
customs, and values. Diminished and considered to be chattel, African captives were
treated as an indistinct group of movable possessions.

When scholars examine the relation between slave migration and land, they
often focus primarily on the outcome as measured by the physical or ethnic place and
not on specific interpersonal connections themselves, which played an important role
in the lives of forced migrants. The outcome approach, to a large degree, mirrors the
slave owner's motive to use an expansive lens to further the artificial divisions of
space as opposed to realizing the more narrowed lens required to analyze
interpersonal connections provoked by migration. Hill’s aim is to emphasize a more
accurate understanding of migration and to delve into the ways in which slaves
throughout history have developed concrete methods to stay connected to one another
across socialized difference. Chained, packaged, and shipped to a multitude of lands,
forced captives continued to find ways to create their own interpersonal spaces and to
connect apart from the watchful eye of slave owners.

So how do people emerging from different lands foster connections? How are
those bonds strengthened through the transatlantic migratory experiences? How does
Hill give us a more full understanding of forced migrants by journeying beyond and through the plantation? Hill extends the constraints of place in traditional slave narratives by using a diasporic lens, a lens that looks beyond black America and into a more inclusive black Atlantic. His desire to delve deeper and analyze the ways in which stories are told, disrupts the methods scholars have used to study and analyze the slave trade. He underscores the importance of reading enslaved individuals as cultured humans first, and then examines the different ways in which they interact with their surroundings. He uses Aminata’s character to explore the experience of forced captives and deepens existing discourse about their relationships with travel and space.

Hill builds a character who is as invested in exploring, learning, and understanding the physical space surrounding her as she is in exploring, learning, and understanding the connections she makes with the many people she encounters along her journey. The key to the forced migrant’s survival and mobility here does not emerge from the physical spaces they navigate; instead, survival resides in the interpersonal spaces they develop and learn from. In creating such an expansive relationship to space, Hill argues that while slavery is commonly recognized as an American story, it is necessary to widen the emblematic scope of space, place, and national identity. As Aminata journeys from site to site and quite literally refuses to be mapped, she also negates the possibility of a static geographical and cultural divide and instead advocates for a “fluid, mutable human community” (Yorke 140). In other words, Hill creates a diasporic agent when he grounds his protagonist’s journey in her
interpersonal connections and knowledge sharing. Hill personalizes her diasporic agency with her command of learning from unfamiliar lands.

The traditional slave narrative, especially in its co-production with white abolitionists, adheres to a set of thematic standards. It typically begins with the capture, continues through the Middle Passage and the diabolic inhumanity of slave ships, and delves into detail about the corrupt and nefarious enterprise in slave colonies seeking to disconnect the enslaved from friends and family and thus their linkage to the motherland. Lastly and under scrutiny in the next chapter, these narratives typically end in Canada or England, the place where the narrator is finally free and has reached some sort of independence. Hill’s novel begins in the mid-eighteenth century at the slave trade’s peak and ends in the nineteenth century when British abolitionists began to make serious grounds in the abolition of the trade. It is noteworthy that in 1807, the British Empire passed legislation to abolish the slave trade in the following year. However, historians concede, “it was not until August 1, 1834, that slavery itself was finally abolished in Canada and in the rest of the British Empire” (Hill 472). It would take another thirty-one years for “the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution [to] officially abolish slavery in the USA in 1865” (473). Though Hill’s work is built on the foundation of history; in a few instances he bends fact to suit the purpose of Aminata’s story.

Aminata becomes a life force that represents the enslaved African, giving readers an inside account of the transatlantic journey back and forth and back again. Someone Knows My Name is organized into four sections, each section marked by
Aminata’s experiences in different locations. Book One begins with Aminata’s childhood in Bayo and continues through her parent’s brutal murder and her kidnapping, and subsequent journey to the Atlantic coast. Book Two opens in the Middle Passage as Aminata details her journey within the ship and describes her life under first Robinson Appleby and then Solomon Lindo, her slave masters in the Americas. Book Three starts in Manhattan after Aminata runs away from Lindo and eventually starts working as a transcriber for the British Army and ends when she is transported to Nova Scotia with other Black Loyalists. In Book Four, after a failed attempt at a new life in Nova Scotia, Aminata travels back to Africa, to Freetown in Sierra Leone. The book is narrated and framed by an elderly Aminata in London as she works with abolitionists and writes down her life story. In all of these places, Aminata jogs her pristine memory to recall where she was, the waters she ran through, what the lands felt like, and the potential route back to her original home. Just as travel is amorphous, Hill uses the perpetual migrant to argue that while physical place might be static, it plays a considerable role in altering the identities of traveling people.

Widening the colonial parentheses of slavery, Hill is able to tell the story of a forced migrant who survives the currents of the transatlantic crossing while inhabiting several lands and cultures. While these lands are physically separate and distinct, Aminata survives because she can visualize and take advantage of their similarities. These similarities, I contend, function as a system of linkages that have three connectors: trauma, kinship, and language. These three components work to
simultaneously bridge the mapped divisions and to maintain Aminata’s individual experience and unique voice while still speaking to the broader experience of enslaved and displaced captives.

On Trauma

Transatlantic slavery historian Vincent Brown asserts that “nested within debates about theories of slavery as social death or the absences of the archive is the deeper question of how we theorize resistance and agency and indeed our very definition of politics itself”(Goyal 51). To understand re-written agency by contemporary authors in slave narratives it is important to note that the idea of trauma, as an event, is manufactured in the present. “Trauma” is a Greek word that means “wound” or “physical injury”. What we learn from examining the etymological root of the term “trauma” is that, “it is not necessarily a mark of pathology; it is a neutral word that suggests that a strong emotional experience has taken place and has left some mark”(Campbell, David, and Mason 172). The word “trauma” can also be used as an adjective to describe a terrible event, traumatic. As the emblem of an experience, trauma does not always have negative connotations. More positive connotations of trauma would suggest that positive outcomes are indeed possible. In fact, this powerful experience can either injure or rejuvenate a person.

As slavery “became consumed by shame, and then denial and amnesia to the point that history became sublimated”(Murphy), recollections of the forced migrant’s
experience was characterized through an interlacing of place and trauma. Hill astutely recognizes that historians, scholars, and readers have all been cut off from knowledge of the past and that it is essential for him to tell the story of a character who remembers and recollects her trauma in order to reclaim the present and the future.

Hill uses trauma as a connector that transcends the socialized differences of the enslaved. Trauma exists and manifests in a myriad of ways throughout Aminata’s Middle Passage, it manifests from her experience as a slave on Robinson Appleby’s indigo plantation, her escape from master Solomon Lindo in Manhattan, her travel to Nova Scotia as a Black Loyalists, and so on and so forth. Thus in an attempt to parse out Hill’s tumultuous recreation of diaspora, and to defog the embedded division of place, it is essential and ultimately illuminating to examine the trauma exhibited in between these places. In examining the interpersonal connections created between trauma and place readers are able to delve into how collective trauma manifests and shapes diasporic journey, helping to complete Hill’s mission of projecting history honestly.

It is essential to use both noun and adjective versions of the term “trauma” to explore the agency Hill’s protagonist develops through the affliction of physical wounds and through the traumatic incidents that mark her. The very first chapter shows Aminata remembering negative and positive traumas in tandem as she describes physical marks on her body. The first, right above her right breast, “the initials GO run together, in a tight, inch-wide circle. Alas I am branded, and can do nothing to cleanse myself of the scar”(Hill 5). The second, she is much happier about,
“the lovely crescent moons sculpted into my cheeks. I have one fine, thin moon curving down each of my cheekbones, and have always loved the beauty marks, although the people of London do tend to stare” (5). In distinguishing these two physical markers, Aminata showcases her ability to survive despite slavery’s visible attempt to mark her as chattel. Instead, she persists, pridefully giving more power to the cultural mark of beauty and its significance over a branding that admittedly is hidden from public view. The psychological trauma of a body violated and branded as chattel, then, is but an asterisk in the grander scheme of her narrative. Rather, Aminata and even spectators in London are transfixed by the sightly humanity embedded in her beauty mark. Aminata dares to remember her trauma and it is this trauma that enables her character and, more importantly, other forced migrants to survive.

Kinship: Blood and Belonging

How then do communities of trauma emerging from different cultural and geographic spaces establish and maintain these links? How are these links formed by powerful internal and external social, political, material, and natural forces? Hill uses kinship to draw close attention to an intrinsic part of Aminata’s story that is often made out to seem historically distinct. He notes, “this is not Canada-only or just the U.S. or the Caribbean, it’s not just black or only white—because all our histories, like that of my own family, are joined by the movement of peoples” (Hill). African diaspora studies have always grounded the study of the spreading of people and their
connections in discussions of the power of kinship. In a microcosm, Aminata and the other forced migrants she encounters all showcase the invisible structure built when love, labor, and honesty are necessarily committed to each other. Scholars have studied kinship as the product of several components stemming from cultural, spiritual, political, and intellectual frameworks.

The elusive desire to return home is pervasive across traditional slave narratives. Aminata constantly expresses her determination to return home to Bayo. Despite the colonizer’s attempt to sever her familial ties, Aminata constructs her agency in the rebuilding of new kinship networks. It is this ability to forge across difference and to create new bonds with the people around her that enables her to build new shelters and spaces of belonging. In this space of abiding trust there is also a powerful sense of identification and belonging. What is central here is that family is linked through kinship and belonging, “neither of which rely on place for meaning” (Chamberlain).

One of the most substantial outcomes of slavery and forced migration was the active severing of familial ties. Thus along the journey it became increasingly imperative to establish new connections despite cultural differences. Aminata starts the work of bridging divides between individuals in a jarring moment in the undercarriage of the slave ship she was put on when she was forced from Bayo. Amidst the screaming of captives in different tongues, “shouting for the same things, water, food, air, light,”(Hill 64) Aminata reminds herself to “Be a djeli. See, and remember”(64). Enslaved people built new communities when their old ones were
forcibly dismembered. They did so by employing many of the essential materials of everyday life: from the ties and obligations of kinship, to the shared struggle of labor, and the spiritual energies and resources of religion. By delving into each location forced migrants travel, Hill highlights the qualitative significance of the migration experience and illustrates how the characterization of postmemory of place or trauma transcends location. This leads to the creation of Hill’s formation of diaspora, a spatial and temporal construction symbolizing themes of escape, suffering, tradition, ancestry, and the social organization of memory.

**Re-writing Bayo**

“I would like to draw a map of the places I have lived. I would put Bayo on the map, and trace in red my long path to the sea. Blue lines would show the ocean voyages.

Cartouches would decorate the margins. There would be no elephants for want of town, but rather paintings of guineas made from the gold mines of Africa, a woman balancing fruit on her head, another with blue poaches of medicine, a child reading, and the green hills of Sierra Leone, land of my arrivals and embarkations.”

(Lawrence Hill, Someone Knows My Name)

African narratives, governed as narratives of loss, mark “place [as] a space of shame and forgetting” (Chamberlain 172). This matter becomes more and more evident in the difficulty of locating the history or stories that accurately depict African life pre-slavery. It seems as though there is no African memory of slavery.

Siby 42
Laura Murphy, surveys African modes of self-writing and contends that, “Africans have neglected to respond to the slave trade and its effects on contemporary African life because of a variety of political and cultural barriers to open discourse regarding African participation in the slave trade” (Murphy). While stories of capture and uprooted travel to the Americas have been made abundantly accessible, stories that discuss the history of West Africans pre-capture are almost nonexistent.

There has been little done to relate ideas between Africa and the New World. Hill believes it is time to remedy this situation. He insists on taking a closer look at African heritage and the various sorts of issues and complexities that mire the waters of West African society before engaging with the British Empire. Hill restores African history and culture as it relates to forced migrants back into the context of a fictional slave narrative and in doing so he illuminates both. As Saidiya Hartman discusses in her novel *Lose Your Mother*, Africa has been considered by black diasporic agents as an ‘origin site’, a site where colorful people and authentic cultures add up to a finite enigma fit for dreams of returns. (Hartman) In her original story she retraces the Atlantic slave trade in Ghana, reckons with the tabula rasa of her own genealogy, and discusses the effects of slavery on three centuries of African and African American history. Her story is one of few that tackle the mystical spell of Africa and African American’s forced outside view. Hill creates Aminata, a character who is deeply socialized by African culture before her capture, to tackle the personal connection between black displaced migrants and Africa, “a connection now so theoretical and tenuous that it has become almost mythical for most blacks” (Hill,
“Why I’m not..”). I will identify some of the crucial issues Hill takes on, while acknowledging that there is a pressing need for more research. These issues include trouble with European cartography, creolized memories of Africa, African complicity in the slave trade, and the multiple languages of empire. Hill reveals to us that there are multiple layers of silence. In his novel he argues that no one is exempt from this history. This inclusion assumes not only “that humans are entitled to equality of rights but also that they have equality in human potential -- that men, women, children, Africans, Europeans, African-Americans…alike share the complexity that makes human nature so endlessly fascinating” (Gaspar & Hine 4). This means, however, that if positive qualities can be found universally, so can qualities of greed and violence. Hill delves into African cultures and ecosystems and discusses the nature of oppression as something not essential to humanity but to hierarchical economic systems.

Hill’s presentation of a character born in Western Africa widens the colonial parentheses and starts his novel off in a time and setting where mass European slavery had yet to truly manifest. If the forgetting of collective memory of experiences pre-slavery is a direct result of trauma, then Hill uses trauma subversively by recollecting an individual narrative to create a flourishing memory as opposed to a voided memory. Aminata is the embodiment of a memory that dares to say its name. She begins her search for self by reaching deeply into her past. Book One of the narrative places heavy significance on what she believes to be central aspects of her personhood. She introduces herself, “I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of
Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulabali, born in the village of Bayo, three moons by foot from the Grain Coast in West Africa. I am Bamana. And a Fula. I am both, and will explain that later” (Hill 4). Revealing the blood and ancestors that surge through her, she grounds readers, abolitionists, and other spectators into the stories of her parents, their ancestors, and their complex cultures. Aminata’s West-African identity, history, and culture materializes in Bayo and reappears in sites throughout the novel.

Trouble with European Cartography

Figure 2. Map of West Africa, ca. 1736, explaining what belongs to England, Holland, Denmark etc. (Moll)

Western maps of Africa purported to represent in a scientific manner what European explorers had “discovered” (e.g. see fig.2). Though Europeans crafted their own mapping of Africa and its spatial interior, in reality they remained on the coast and relied on the African slave traders they encountered for spatial knowledge of
surrounding land. It is this African knowledge combined with limited European exploration of Africa, that may have been filtered in the process of cartographic production. In lieu of penning the actualities and details of places and people, they sketched “some squiggles in the form of baseless triangles… a lion and an elephant sketched in the middle of the land called Africa”(211). These tokens of exoticsm damaged an accurate sense of place and identity for captives looking to find their way back to their homelands.

Accurately, Hill points to the difficulty of returning to places that have been stripped cartographically of their humanity and actualities. Hill challenges colonial discourse by writing a detailed narrative of a West African village. Doing so, Hill initiates discussion about the difficulty in using the term *diaspora* when encountering cultural difference brought on by one’s origin and particular socialization. Arguing, “we cannot speak of black identity and community formation without recognizing and interrogating the mutually constitutive positions of continental African and African diasporic populations” (Campt). Hill advocates for a repositioning of Africa that places the continent within broader global discourses of racialization and identity formation. Moreover, Hill urges diasporic theorists to confront their own analysis’ of Africa as a timeless cultural and politically cursory space and reformulate continental Africa as a valuable, active, and modern space.

Hill’s character, despite her own resistance, occupies spaces as both a continental African and as an African diasporic. Forced to become a traveling person, Aminata’s memories of Bayo remain triggered by “the pungent, liberating smell of
mint tea” (Hill 8). Bayo is not only filled with what European cartographers illustrate as sand dunes, tigers, and elephants but is also a site full of villages and towns with its own rules, hierarchies, and structure of civilization. Aminata’s detailed memories of her homeland and her inherited socialization account for the several situations in which she finds herself unable to communicate or understand other individuals with black skin. As the novel continues, Aminata’s strength emerges from her desire to engage with different cultural templates and her ability to see similarities and difference between them.

Aminata experiences a profound dilemma when she is prompted to reflect on her African identity after years of sea travel. After enduring the Middle Passage and on the verge of reaching dry land, Aminata has a rattling conversation with an oarsman. He informs her that she now belongs to the Toubab people and that they will call her African. She responds, “I belong to nobody, and I am not an African. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am from Bayo near Segu” (Hill 122). Hill points out that Aminata is not saying she is not African because she is ashamed, she is not African simply because “she is not walking around with Africa in her self concept” (Sagawa 311). She does not know what Africa is, but what she does know is that she identifies with Bayo, her various ethnic origins, her parents, and the people around her. Africa, for Aminata, exists as a word that belongs to the white man. What does it mean for a white man to say you are from this big continent with all these people? It means erasure. It means a kind of “dislocation” too, the scars and slashed divisions carved

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2 Toubab/Toubabu: A white person
into places by white European men. These divisions work to scatter, disconnect, and separate perpetual migrants of that time and continue disjuncture in present-day. Hill brings Aminata’s self-concept to light to delve into a deeper conversation about identification and belonging. In the text, Aminata defiantly denies her Africanness but what she is truly denying is being lumped together by white men. Instead, Aminata finds agency in explaining her own connections to Bayo.

Depictions of Africa catalogued by white Europeans reflected their depthless interactions with the land and its people. Aminata finds reassurance in Jonathan Swift’s powerful poem “On Rhapsody,” finding it comforting to know that “already sixty years earlier, before I was even born, Swift had expressed the very thing I was feeling now. These were not maps of Africa. In the ornate cartouches of elephants and women with huge breasts that rose in unlikely salute, every stroke of paint told me that the map-makers had little to say about my land” (Hill 368). It slowly dawns on Aminata that broad strokes and black skin did not make anyone kin. In this realization Aminata becomes determined to draw her own map of the world and to foster the connections necessary for her survival, connections that complicate the pervasive colonial gaze. Building a cultural template that includes place, religion, language, and tradition, Aminata recalls the trees into which she would climb to read her father’s Quran. The Quran was the only book she had ever seen in Bayo. In fact, “about half of the people of Bayo were Muslims”(9) Subtly, Hill underlines another important social value in Aminata’s western African setting, a clear influence by Islamic religion and culture. Before memories of Africa become creolized, Hill makes sure to
paint a very accurate and specific picture of the cultures and traditions of Bayo.

Returning to spaces of origin, spaces of shame and forgetting, become less perplexing as Hill grounds memories of Bayo in Aminata, a convincing and truthful griot.

Empire and Linguistic Chaos

The exploration of different spaces along the transatlantic journey and their overlapping characteristic reveals that each location is truly in conversation with one another. That within these sites, individuals are either partaking in the similar kinds of work to undo power structures or, more shockingly, are indicating that oppressive social structures exist across the world. Hill not only uses the power of language, words, and orality as a way to speak oneself into existence, but also as a way to build noticeable relationships between the European and the African Empires.

Hill uses language to discuss slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. In the middle of the 1700’s, “Europeans were not traveling deep into the interior of West Africa [...] so captives were brought from the interior of Africa to the coast by African intermediaries who were paid and bribed” (Sagawa 314). These African intermediaries partook in what was the expansion of the African Empire. Therefore, coming to the West might not have been captured Africans first encounter with a powerful empire. Thus, to expand on his own and others’ African research, Hill as critic, as novelist, as social theorist, reveals to readers that there are multiple languages of empire and consequently there are pre-ordained silences provoked first
on African soil. Hill sets about his agenda by using language as a method to discuss African complicity.

The slave trade was like a lateral version of the Book of Negroes project; part of the lexicon of slavery is that it is one language. Europeans used monolingualism as a tool and relied heavily on the English language to exchange information. Akin to the official document preserved as the Book of Negroes, there is one language and four common words: stout, wench, man, and child. These words showcase the European attempt to crunch down and condense individuals with black skin into one term, ‘African’. The strength of Hill’s observant protagonist, though, is that she works to put multiple languages in conversation with each other. Aminata is a challenge to the European oppressors that operate using one language because she carries multiplicity. Hill’s most influential character, then, is branded as chaos and disorder, in ways that recall the story of the Tower of Babel, an etiological myth in the book of Genesis of the Tanakh, that explains the origin of different languages (New International Version, Genesis 11:1-9). This biblical story is particularly useful for assessing narratives of language and enslavement. According to the Genesis story, everyone on earth speaks the same language and all have settled in a land called Shinar where they began to erect a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens. When the tower is almost complete God angrily intervenes, creates multiple languages, and disperses the people. In light of the story of Babel, Aminata is holding, preserving, and protecting not the Babylonian moment but her own self-recognized power to preserve many languages in order to enable global survival.
She finds freedom from the European attempt to utilize one language in the building of a slave trade empire. In a metatextual manner Aminata avoids creating a hegemonic narrative by finding ways to carry language and not just synthesize stories. Again using her culturally developed power as *djeli*, Aminata captures difference across language and stores it in her memory. Her journey and conversations across these sites exhibit her acknowledgement of the plethora of individuals that black skin encapsulates and responds that we are not one but many languages.

Aminata, in this moment of linguistic chaos and dysfunction, highlights her experience with different languages on Appleby’s plantation. Georgia, serving as a plantation mother and a guide for Aminata, slowly begins to teach Aminata different languages. Georgia explains that there are two languages. There is the language she “spoke when alone with the negroes on the plantation and she called that Gullah. And there was the way she spoke to Robinson Appleby or to other white people and she called that English” (Hill 128). Georgia, poignantly, instructs Aminata never to teach the Gullah language to the “buckra”, a word for white people, because they only understand their own way of speaking. Aminata is drawn to the redemptive qualities of language and in admiration of Georgia’s voice, she says “I did love to hear that woman talk. Every time she opened her mouth, she said something astounding. Something in her way of speaking made life tolerable” (129).

Aminata as an African subject in the western world is beginning to speak additional languages of empire. Hill unearths African history and complicity by
subtly inserting details about the African Empire throughout the novel. In his chapter titled, ‘Words Can Swim Farther Than A Man Can Walk’ Fomba experiences difficulty communicating with other slaves and slave masters on the southern plantations. When Georgia asks Aminata why Fomba did not speak Aminata responds that Fomba “had lost his words on the big ship” (130). Georgia, still perplexed, makes sense of what Aminata shares by saying “You all done cross one nasty shut-mouth river” (130). What Aminata did not delve into, however, was the complete truth about Fomba’s perceived wordlessness. She tells readers that “Fomba had been the village woloso” (130). The term woloso refers to the structure of Mande empire.

Traditionally, three main groups existed: the freeborn, which included nobles and commoners; the artisans who worked with leather, iron and words and the slaves called jon or woloso. The jon were people who were enslaved, either because they were captives of war, or sold into slavery for some infraction such as a crime, while the woloso were domestic slaves who worked in the household or in the field. (AccessGambia)

Hill uses the Bamanankan word woloso to insert commentary on African life pre-capture and the truths that became lost in translation from West African soil to American plantations. Fomba is silent and there are so many times in which he bears punishment and is crippled by his circumstance as a woloso or slave in Bayo. He does not fit the plantation image of the self made man because it is harder for him to manipulate his already subjugated African identity in this new space. The social rules,
hierarchies, and requirements of the southern plantation prove not enough to change or undo the impact made by his subordination under his previous empire.

Aminata’s reluctance to talk about Fomba’s caste and societal position as slave speaks to a greater historical reluctance to talk about the debilitating social organization that structured some West-African countries. More importantly, what this fact brings to light is the complex system and structuring of the early Mande Empire. The word *woloso* highlights the complicated nature of socialization that occurs prior to the transatlantic slave trade. Her reluctance to share is the true reason why Fomba’s inability to speak places him into the category of ‘insensible negro’, “one who couldn’t speak at all to the white man and who would never be given an easier job, or taught and interesting skill, or be given extra food or privileges” (Hill 130).

Hill disrupts the notion of an inherent understanding amongst black people in the United States and in Africa. He expands on several complexities that exist between forced migrants and delves into pre-ordained silences that were destined to exist due to European clustering of separate and distinct African identities. Deploying the language differences amongst diasporic actors, Hill is able to showcase audible difference and subvert cursory perceptions of skin color and origin. He creates a space in his novel for forced migrants to communicate through their differences and share pieces of their own stories.
Chapter Three:

Rewriting Wrongs; Canada & Freetown As Sites of Dwelling

To represent place at a particular time is difficult. To represent a place and its time in the written word is even more challenging. The difficulty of representing place poses itself most acutely when dealing with historically challenging perspectives. As the product of immigrant parents, Lawrence Hill is familiar with many hidden and ignored perspectives and he takes on the immense task of capturing them and rewriting them back into historical literature. Addressed later in this chapter is Hill’s challenging of the history behind his own national identity. Hill successfully reflects who he is and his own contentious relationship with Canada through his brilliant and observant mouthpiece, Aminata.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term “dwell” as, “delay, stay, stoppage” (OED). While the term “dwell” typically conjures up ideas of places where humans can sustain themselves, it truly signifies a site that is not intended to become a home. A temporary refuge where the person travelling stays for a short period of time. The term works well in reference to the Black Loyalist, for whom Nova Scotia has always been a site of dwelling as opposed to living. Hill highlights within Books Three and Four the many covert and widespread obstacles to establishing safe homes and free existence for Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and in Freetown. He reveals
 obstacles confronted in both places, most notably delayed freedom, broken promises of land, and the inescapable force of the British crown. Hill’s novel does not center on but introduces and lays the framework for the commonly unrecognized fact, that no matter the guise, blatant slavery, missionaries, or labor, the slave trade continued to serve Britain’s imperial interests even after the supposed abolition in 1807. Hill uncovers the type of “freedom” granted Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, a “freedom” in which they were made to be simultaneously neglected and perpetually reliant on the British Crown.

**Rewriting Canada**

Hill embarks upon a grand project of rewriting the slave history of Canada. Commonly concealed by uncomfortable deceptions of freedom and opportunity, Canada’s surreptitious relationship to its slave past is one that provokes Hill and many other Black Canadian scholars, researchers, and historians to examine Canada, often presented as *Canaan*, as the home of its own system of slavery. There are several remarkable studies of the lives of the enslaved in Canada and the history of Black Loyalists, such as the work of Afua Cooper, Eugene Genovese, David Bell, Barry Cahill, Simon Schama, Ellen Wilson, Robin Winks, James Walker and Ken Donovan. However despite their efforts, the texts of slavery remain hidden in historical archives and are often absent from white Canadian public consciousness. A persisting difficulty in documenting the fundamental profile of the institution leaves several aspects of Canadian regional slavery unknown. This dearth “can be explained
partially by the fact that historians do not have the type of rich documentation that can be found in parts of the American South and British Caribbean, such as ledger books, plantation documents, diaries, journals, or newspaper and magazines dedicated to slavery issues” (Whitfield 19). So instead information must be collected and pieced together from “slave advertisements, bills of sale, colonial musters, court records, and oral traditions” (19).

Despite the significant lapse in Canadian historical memory, Hill’s project of rewriting and analysis emphasizes a different story; a story about the true challenges that Black Loyalists faced as they freed themselves from bondage. Hill elucidates two major points about the Black Loyalists’ harsh trial in arriving to and dwelling in the free colonies they occupied. First, Black Loyalists had a large amount of agency in freeing themselves. The British Empire may have shuttled newly freed individuals to Nova Scotia, but it was people of African descent that initiated the process of attaining freedom by running away from their owners and joining the British in the American Revolutionary War. Second, Black Loyalists in Canada were not exempt from racist retaliations and governance; in fact, they were solely responsible for supporting themselves against an informal conscription, dehumanizing poverty, and racism. They did so by establishing self-reliant and independent communities maintained by developed family and kinship networks, churches, and other community organizations.

This project of exposing gaps in Canadian history hits close to home for Hill, the son of a white mother and a black father who immigrated to Canada from the
United States to get married. As a man trying to unravel the mysteries of his mixed ancestry, Hill notes in an interview that his childhood often centered around his own questioning of identity, belonging, and migration. As a diasporic figure himself, what does it mean for Hill to rewrite the story of a place he inhabits? What are the implications of rewriting a national history? Who gets to tell the stories of certain places? Is there a difference between a native and foreign person reworking the history? A common end for most scholars in the bold process of revising history is gaining insight into the lives of enslaved people and into complex slave societies without “reproducing the dehumanization that adheres to the archival traces through which we have access to the past” (Paton). Hill’s project is determined to take the dominant Canadian history fabricated by external authorities and revise it with the voice of a more forthright and internal subject. As mirrored in Hill’s novel, those who seek to rewrite and represent a nation’s history, whether in historical writing or in more imaginative forms and genres, share more than is sometimes recognized with the process of overcoming dehumanizing racist discourse.

Hill continues his mission to fill in the gaps of black transatlantic history after first discussing the journey from Africa to America by focusing in on Canada. In a memorable interview, Hill discusses the fact that most modern Canadians know nothing of Canadian slave history throughout the 18th and into the 19th-century. (Sagawa 308) They tend to believe that its institution only transpired in the grim lands of America. However, it is important to dispel this myth not only to expose the callous truths and histories behind slavery in Canada, but also to tell a greater story of
the liberation and survival of forced migrants in the 18th century. Canadian historian and novelist Afua Cooper (2006) in her novel, *The Hanging of Angelique; The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal*, tells us, “Canada may not have been a slave society - [it was not] a society whose economy was based on slavery-- but it was a society with slaves” (Cooper 68). She writes this in a chapter where she discusses the accepted narrative of Canadian history and its focus on the country as a safe haven where progressive acts such as the Underground Railroad transpired. Cooper affirms that, “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” (Cooper 69).

The official document of the Book of Negroes confirms that Black Loyalists were promised safe passage to Nova Scotia and free land upon their arrival. An estimated 3,000 Black Loyalists boarded freedom ships and made it to Nova Scotia safely in 1783 but the promise of free land was not kept. Black Loyalists in particular were left in severely precarious positions. It is important to note that these “freedom” ships that carried Black and White Loyalists to a so-called promise land also carried a great deal of the White Loyalists’ black slaves.

Hill compares the constraints that Black Loyalists endured in Nova Scotia to those experienced by the enslaved on America’s southern plantations. He asserts that most of Aminata’s life in Canada was not much different from what it was in America. Hill’s perspective on Nova Scotia counters popular discourse and grounds
Aminata and other Black Loyalists experience as literal evidence rejecting Canadian exceptionalism. The moment that she arrives in Nova Scotia, Aminata is abruptly confronted with the reality that the place is one of lack and had nothing to offer black settlers, in fact, she was told it was better known as ‘Nova Scarcity’ (Hill 316). The newly built port on the coast of Nova Scotia was deemed to be the pathway to well deserved land and opportunity, however while “Nova Scotia had more land than God could sneeze at…hardly any of it was being parcelled out to black folks” (316). Daddy Moses, a preacher that Aminata meets at the Loyalist office, warned Aminata that, “there are a thousand coloured folks waiting before you. And, ahead of them a few thousand white people” (317). Aminata would come to realize that here in Nova Scotia, where she was supposedly “free”, she would have “ less food and fewer comforts than at any other time in [her] life” (321). Through the voice of Hill’s protagonist these historical facts are brought out of the shadows.

**Transnational Construction of Uplift & Community**

Hill asserts that slavery is an important part of the Canadian collective past and as such he engages in discourse examining Canada as a problematic site for the formation of identity and community. Investigations of populations of African descent and their communities have focused on questions concerning “the ways in which ethnic group identities and social networks among African diaspora populations form, evolve, and dissipate over time and in particular spatial domains” (Fennell 3). Principal investigations of Black Loyalists in Canada focus in on the
settlement of Birchtown and question the social and economic dynamics impacting such communities.

The one social dynamic that black communities in Nova Scotia had in abundance, and that allowed them to persist despite ceaseless hardship, was a vibrant religious life. However this religious life is not the one “European American authors imagined as a pristine Adam” (Brooks 132), instead Hill’s novel and other “black authors adopt the persona of Lazarus--writing, singing, and preaching survival over and resistance to slavery and racism through a sense of community”(145). Hill connects black Canadians to the larger black diasporic network in acknowledging and alluding to what occurs when mainstream institutions fail to provide previously pledged safety, shelter, opportunity, or religion; black people consistently turn back to their own culture and spiritualities to refuel, reevaluate, and redirect their engagements. These spiritual and communal engagements in Black Loyalist history coupled with the momentous travel to Sierra Leone in Hill’s book are emblematic of black nationalist ideas.

Black communities of Nova Scotia grew strong with cultural solidarity and as they did, they faced continual assaults and economic pressure inflicted by white Canadians. The promise of freedom did not mean “equal or even better treatment for people of African descent. Black people’s labour could still be exploited through a system of gross inequities and racial discrimination without the stain of slavery on the region” (Whitfield 43). Living in a truly inhospitable promised land forced Black Loyalists to find other methods of survival.
Faith was not divisive in the black communities of Birchtown and in fact, dominant religious movements during the Great Awakening’s revivalism led to black formations that threatened not only white evangelists established churches, but also the entire social order. As “white evangelists failed to utilize the potentially progressive social aspects of revivalism, it was therefore left to African and Native American evangelists to use religion against the degradations to racist politics and science” (Brooks 362). These motifs of metaphysical collectivity or the concept of rootedness are integral to black diasporic study and provide an excellent lens for Hill’s characterization of, Birchtown, Nova Scotia, North America’s largest all black settlement and the largest community of free Africans outside of Africa (e.g. see fig.3). The idea of being in touch with, uplifted by, or “saved” by religion becomes another means to “disfigure cartography of dispersal and exile” (Gilroy 4). This space of interpersonal connection transcends modern Canadian’s moral superiority that aims to muffle discussion of racism as simply being an American problem. Hill’s
portrayal of a more honest Black Loyalist experience in Nova Scotia is a simple and direct response to the racist denial of the historical spirit of the black experience. In opposition, Hill uses the church and spaces of religion as sites that confirms and strengthens the collectivity and rootedness of a people.

It is in Nova Scotia where we see formerly enslaved people and even White Loyalists at their lowest points economically. Aminata tells readers, “Nobody had a thing in Birchtown… never a coin was passed among us” (Hill 323), and with no source of capital, the residents of Birchtown, “had so little that some of them traded their own clothes for food” (323). Just as black residents could barely find food, white businesses in Shelburne were also steadily on an economic decline. In this moment of decline, Hill employs language of uplift ideology. It is this ‘uplift’ that black residents of Birchtown cling to in order to survive.

The chapter titled ‘Gone Missing With My Most Recent Exhalation’ adopts a compelling take on kinship. Daddy Moses introduces Aminata to an integral form of kinship building in Birchtown, religion. Daddy Moses is a blind and crippled old man and the only way for him to get around is to be pulled by a young resident of Birchtown named Jason. When Aminata asks who Jason is Daddy Moses answers, “that boy right there? The one who is pulling me? I tend to his soul, and he and the others get me from here to there. Jesus tells us to take care of each other” (317). Daddy Moses goes on to ask Aminata if she had been saved and it is at this crossroad that Aminata gently informs Daddy Moses that she was not raised Christian, her family is of Muslim origins. Daddy Moses responds to this declaration by stating, “It
doesn’t matter what we call your soul… what matters it where it travels and who it uplifts” (319). What Daddy Moses concludes should come out of this mobility is the desire to help uplift others. Faith is not disruptive for Daddy Moses and the other members of the Birchtown community; instead it provides a basis for collective dependence, it is a matter of life and death. The church is also a central gathering space for politics, news, and uplift. It is the church structure and its followers that enable newly freed individuals to build their homes from the ground up and also to find work. Aminata uses the church as a place of education, not as a preacher like Daddy Moses urges, but instead as a teacher of word and script. As forced migrants have no choice but to rely on each other, the church and religion become collective spaces of healing and survival for all in both Manhattan and Nova Scotia.

At variance with black slave religiosity, Hill uses forced migrants that have lost their faith in religion or spirituality along their horrific journeys to reveal neither-nor religious identities and counter the dominant narrative of slave populations’ Christian absorption. Hill’s Atheist protagonist is at direct opposition with white Christian audiences that hope to promote the faith-based abolitionist cause. Traditional slave narrators and their abolitionist co-editors lay emphasis on spiritual competency and acceptance of Christian faith to garner intellectual respect. Hill counters by showcasing a character who destabilizes the formulaic nature of slave narratives and neglects the obligation to prove her humanity through religious affiliation. In her first interaction with Daddy Moses, Aminata makes it clear that she no longer identifies as Muslim and rejects his proposal of a christening. Refusing to
synthesize the two religions, Aminata speaks to another side of slave acculturation, one that reflects slavery as an injurious process that takes away parts of an identity as opposed to adding. Aminata’s developed Atheism is marked as a product of the harsh labor she endured in slavery and is ultimately irreversible. When Daddy Moses asks her if she has taken Jesus into her arms, she responds, “My arms have been busy, and Jesus hasn’t come looking” (317). Hill calls attention to the moralizing power of religion in traditional 18th and 19th century slave narratives and works against it by presenting a forced migrant whose moral authority is not steeped in any religion. Proving that while forced migrants survival is commonly steeped in the church as a space of community building and uplift, their survival did not always necessitate a Christian allegiance.

The attempt to locate overlapping cultural practices in Nova Scotia and Manhattan in order to connect the dislocated and divided blacks with each other and even with Africans is typically dismissed as essentialism. Paul Gilroy, author of the influential *The Black Atlantic*, points out that the difference is that it is the circulation and mutation of different types of connection across the Atlantic that “explodes the dualistic structure which puts Africa, authenticity, purity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation and rootlessness” (Gilroy 199). Rather than dislocating blacks or essentializing black individuals, Hill threads together pieces of Canadian history with pieces of American history and in doing so makes them both part of the fabric of the slave trade.
Land and Labor in Nova Scarcity

There is something ghostly and unnatural about the settlements given to free black migrants in Nova Scotia. Placed on the worst land and isolated on the margins of society, Black Loyalists were forced to endure a freedom delineated by a paucity of resources. Hill challenges history and the sheer impossibility of creating entirely separate communities for the free in Nova Scotia, as Black Loyalists, purportedly free, lacked control over their environments and moreover their own bodies. Ultimately, Hill illustrates the larger reality that black forced migrants survival is made extremely difficult due to betrayal by the colonial government who provided neither promised land nor political respects.

The more prosperous white Anglo-Saxon Nova Scotian community proceeded to exploit Black Loyalists, at the peak of their vulnerability, for menial labor. Without outside aid or charity, Black Loyalists became increasingly reliant on their communities and the natural environments around them. Taking to their cold and rocky surroundings, they spent the winters in tents and makeshift huts in the thick of the woods (e.g. see fig. 4).
Hill uses forced migrants’ reliance on their surrounding to speak to greater issues of place, migration, and powerlessness. His depiction of the Black Loyalists experience in Birchtown reflects a more expansive and contemporary issue; that of the remarkably high amount of black communities that have come together due to forced geographic isolation and neglected promises of citizenship and economic opportunity. Hill underlines the lasting effects of unmet obligations on black diasporic groups and stresses that as long as forced migrants live under Colonial rule they will remain politically disadvantaged and economically famined. The experience of Black Loyalists in Birchtown truly is a microcosm of place, black forced migration, and powerlessness. Hill uses this continual trial faced by forced migrants across several sites to expose the stifling force of Colonial rule.

Aminata confronts this uncontrollable force most apparently in Nova Scotia. While she has developed a great ability to rely on and thrive in new environments, she is unable to excel to the same degree that she had in Canvas Town. When Aminata first arrived in Birchtown she was told that some residents built shacks while others “dug deep pits into the ground, covered them with logs and evergreen boughs, and huddled together to stay alive through the winter”(Hill 320). When building her own shack, Aminata “stuffed moss in the spaces between logs to protect [her] cabin from the wind, and hauled wood from the forests to keep [her] stove burning through
the night”(354). The difference Hill showcases here is one of labor. While in Canvas Town, the residents used their surroundings to build their homes and to survive, they were also working and bringing resources into their communities. Birchtown residents were barred from working in neighboring Shelburne and without earnings from their labor there was a lack of consumable resources. This economic conflict makes Birchtown one of several geographical spaces of prescribed isolation, where residents were unable to sustain themselves due to their intended separation from all other necessary resources.

Hill’s protagonist asserts herself in a conversation about negated promises of land and the disposition of black residents in Nova Scotia. The Governess sharply replies, “every Nova Scotian can tell stories of delays in getting their land… it’s not just blacks who are clamouring for acreage”(366). Aminata responds to this statement, “It’s about more than land… it’s about freedom. Negroes want to make our own lives. But we are wilting here” (366). Aminata insists that what distinguished the struggle of Black Loyalists from that of White Loyalists existed beyond the realm of land ownership, and was first about reclaimed ownership of the self. Hill asserts that until the British crown reckons with its compounding moral debt, black forced migrants remain enslaved. Without promised compensation and with debts unfulfilled by the British crown, Hill contests the possibility of freedom before restitution.

Nova Scotia was a corrupt site for nation building and community formation. The concepts of uplift and self-determination lay at the heart of 19th century black abolitionism and nationalism. Nova Scotia eventually fails as a safe haven for Black
Loyalists because the land itself was not enough for residents to reach a desired freedom. As discussed earlier, residents of strategically isolated communities are barely able to survive without receiving external aid, this fact coupled with persisting violence against blacks quickly resulted in the realization of the impossibility of a separate and complete black nation in a land ruled by whites.

**Rewriting Freetown**

Black Loyalists formed the first major “back to Africa” exodus in the history of the Americas and did so from the shores of Halifax. Their return in 1792 occurred decades before former American slaves went back to Liberia and more than a century before Marcus Garvey became famous for urging African Americans to move “back” to Africa (472). Many people know extraordinarily little about the first colony of Black Loyalists in Canada, but even fewer are aware of the colony Black Loyalists helped found in Sierra Leone named Freetown. Representatives of the Sierra Leone Company, brothers John Clarkson and Thomas Clarkson traveled to Nova Scotia in November 1791 to recruit voluntary emigrants to live in a mass of land on the coast of Sierra Leone. (Brogan) As central figures in the abolitionist movement, the Clarksons convinced an estimated two thousand black Nova Scotians, including prominent church leaders John Marrant, David George and Moses Wilkinson, to embark the company's ships to Sierra Leone (Brooks 113). However, upon landing in Freetown, Sierra Leone, Black Loyalists realized that once again they were duped. The promise of land, freedom, and a safe Zion for blacks was yet again not upheld.
The first journey of forced migrants traveling back to Africa conjures up the kind of discourse provoked during the Civil Rights era. Debates among the black community at the time centered around whether it was more beneficial to try to integrate into North American politics and agendas or to realize a black nationalist dream of emigrating back to Africa. In returning to Africa, African Americans believed they would find a place where black skin color was paraded proudly, heralded and celebrated. While the time and setting of Hill’s novel is a far cry from the more contemporary debate of integrationism and nationalism, it is still valuable to explore the ways in which a contemporary author reinserts contemporary debates into the life of his 18th century protagonist. Starting with the first historically known emigration from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, we can re-examine forced migrant experiences in Freetown. Can forced migrants complete the mission of going back “home” and truly living freely or is Freetown merely another site where they will again be forced to dwell?

**Slavery By Another Name**

Hill uses the politics of black diasporics return to Africa to expose a corrupt colonial system in Book Four. His writing sheds light on what occurs when a severely undermined community engages in a contract with an Empire. Readers are prompted to reflect upon other historically prominent instances of contracts negotiated with blacks promising freedom and economic autonomy. Hill’s rememory of the contracted work completed by Black Loyalists in Freetown, reveals, once again, a
false freedom. In fact, his writing draws a connection between the labor required of
forced migrants in Freetown and the more contemporary institutions of peonage, debt
slavery, and later forms of share-cropping. Hill conveys this radical idea by detailing
the elusive contract of freedom British abolitionists proposed and revealing the severe
abuse of labor inflicted upon Black Loyalists while they occupy “free” African land.

John and Thomas Clarkson, central figures in the abolition of slavery, traveled
to Halifax in 1791 and were charged with the task of recruiting Black Loyalists for
Sierra Leone. Hill animates the bizarre predicament Black Loyalists are faced with
when they are offered the opportunity to inhabit “free” land but with a severe clause.
In Hill’s novel a fictional John Clarkson informs Black Loyalists that upon landing in
Sierra Leone they are to, “give to the best of their labour,” and warns them, “that
shirkers will not receive food, water, building supplies or anything else from the
Company” (Hill 383). The rhetoric Clarkson uses essentially forces Black Loyalists to
perform involuntary labor and reveals that they will have no choice over their
working conditions. Although Thomas and John Clarkson are popular abolitionist
figures heavily influenced by their Christianity, the language they use to describe the
type of work to be done by Black Loyalists in Freetown implies a hegemonic use of
faith and labor. Clarkson explains the duty of black people to Aminata,

Because black people had a right to live free of slavery and oppression, and
what better way to set them on the right footing than to send them back to
Africa, where they could civilize the natives with literacy and Christianity.
Patriotism, because we, the black colonists of Sierra Leone, would help Great
Britain establish trading interests on the coast of Africa … the land was so fertile, Clarkson said, that figs, oranges, coffee, and cane would lead from our farmlands. We would meet our own needs easily and help the British Empire bring to market all the rich resources of Africa. (Hill 359)

All of these artful arrangements are versions of peonage and later of sharecropping. The mention of continued service to Great Britain is extremely unsettling for Thomas Peters, a Black Loyalist whose travel and petition in London initiated the trip for Black Loyalists back to Africa. What freedom meant for Peters was complete autonomy from the British crown. Upon arriving in Freetown, Peters and other Black loyalists learn that they are still under British rule and completely dependant on the British for work, sustenance, and even the materials and tools to build their homes. Soon if they wanted food they would have to get it from the company in exchange for labor. Hill rewrites into history what is essentially an earlier form of sharecropping, in which European used the land they stole and the black bodies they stole as tenants to till the land in exchange for food and barren land. There was no way to survive in Freetown without providing labor and remaining indebted to the crown. Continued servitude and labor to the crown meant keeping the fate of black migrants in the calculating hands of subjugating institutions.

While slavery in Africa was not as auspicious an institution as it was in the Americas, it also was concerned with the extraction of slave labor to create maximum profit. Even so most African slavery was not chattel slavery. Scholars have found that “more common was that has variously been termed lineage, kin-based, or
absorptionist slavery, which was used primarily to increase labor but has as an essential feature the eventual assimilation of the slave into society” (Gaspar & Hine 6). Hill uses Fomba’s character to show that African slavery existed in multiple modes. In Bayo Fomba, considered a *woloso*, would have the right to keep any monetary earnings and eventually purchase his own emancipation more easily than in the Americas. Another huge distinction of slavery in Africa was the ability to hide one’s slave status. Such suppression was possible because slave ancestry was not associated with a caste bearing visible markers. Outside of Africa, the pervasive visible marker was black skin color. While slavery was universal and varied across different societies in the ancient world, it was the worldwide expansion of the European economy that created a demand for Africans in large proportions. Africans, in particular, made desirable slaves because, “they were accustomed to agricultural labor… and they were able to endure harsh labor in the tropical West Indies” (4).

Accordingly, the African ruling class, who enabled, helped, and profited from the slave trade, remains inextricably linked to a trade that exploited more Africans than it benefited.

As historians and sociologists note, “the determinants of the nature of oppression are not to be found in any essential human nature but in economic systems. If there is a universal human need, it is to maximize survival by maximizing gain,” and most civilizations have employed exploitation of another group at one time or another to do so (4). Thus in an scholarly analysis, it becomes possible for African slave traders to be both victims and oppressors. Aminata’s personal ordeal with
African slave traders who attempt to sell her back into slavery after she entrusts them with helping her return to Bayo capitulates Hill’s resolution to portray history honestly. Aminata has survived for so long due to her ability and desire to communicate and learn across different languages, and here she is forced to negotiate with a more dubious Africa than she has idealized throughout all her years of capture. In Book Four Hill brings up a plethora of questions surrounding false promises and manipulative contracts made by large institutions aiming to continually imprison blacks. It also highlights African slave traders and their active complicity in the slave trade. Aminata, as soon as she returns to Freetown, is shocked to discover that Africans too, “men who shared the religion of [her] father made their fortunes from trading in slaves” (Hill 434). These men, no matter their faith, were highly involved in the demand for slaves and developed Africa as an internal and export slave trade. Aminata slowly realizes that no matter the color of the people she was dealing with, the language they spoke, or the religion they followed, it was practically impossible to separate the impacts of the slave trade from her experience in Africa.

**Diasporic Black vs. Continental African**

“*Old and new worlds stamped my face, a blend of peoples and nations and masters and slaves long forgotten... [but] a black face didn’t make me kin.*”

(Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother)
Lawrence Hill takes aim at reductive racialized thinking perpetuated by both white Americans and black diasporics alike, “which failed to recognize the cultural and linguistic divides between Africa and African Americans” (Brooks 120). The potential effect of this aim being to include continental Africa in contemporary discussions of black diasporic identity politics and to recognize Africa as a large entity whose cultures and politics continue to evolve on its own merits. Scholar Joanna Brooks in her novel *American Lazarus* points to several other popular American and British black novelist who perpetuate the same disregard:

Some like James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Olaudah Equiano presented themselves as African princes, remembering their early years in Africa as fantastic or Edenic. Wheatley assumed an iconic “Ethiopian” persona, and her writings rehearse the passage “from Africa to America” more frequently than they recall Africa itself. Finally, American-born black authors like John Marrant articulated little or no native connection to Africa, instead characterizing themselves as types of the transformative biblical character Lazarus. (Brooks 129)

Hill undertakes the dual task of arguing that while both forced migrants and black literary contemporaries attempt to adopt personas and autobiographical strategies to position themselves in relation to Africa. Often the more pertinent question and fear is the neglect of continental Africa as an ever evolving space deserving acknowledgment of its natives and their choice in deciding whether to accept those who try to foster an authentic return. Language as a lens to observe difference is once
again deployed in Aminata’s experience of trying to engage with the local Temne
people neighboring Freetown.

Black individuals condemned to a forced migration exist in limbo between a
place they can no longer recognize as home and a place that refuses to acknowledge
their humanity. Readers, then, are able to reflect upon the lasting effects of
displacement for black diasporics. Aminata functions as a peculiar example because,
while she has forcibly migrated from what black diasporics refer to as a broader
African homeland, she can trace her origins to her birthplace of Bayo, West Africa.
Her return takes place almost 40 years after her departure and interaction with her
West African community. The difficulty Hill addresses in Freetown is whether forced
migrants are ever able to completely return and reacclimate into their original African
homes. Hill points out that the process of readjustment can take much more than
simple spiritual connections or an imagined solidarity. He uses Aminata as
intermediary and argues that a safe return takes the sharing of pronounced and
palpable facets such as language, appearance, and a deep understanding of native
tradition and even so, the next question becomes whether natives have to accept those
who return?

While Aminata’s use of language typically operates as a connector and a
bridge across difference, her ability to speak multiple language is met with opposition
in Freetown. Hill foreshadows the unanticipated tension when Aminata encounters
King Jimmy, the Temne village chief, on the company’s ship before the Black
Loyalists even reach the shores of Sierra Leone. After rejecting King Jimmy’s

Siby 75
advance and suggestion of a future marriage, Aminata reflects, “it seemed absurd that my first conversation as an adult with an African in my own homeland should take place in English” (Hill 383). After almost 40 years of being away, this is not the Africa Aminata is expecting to find. When she arrives in Freetown she fulfills her promised duty to the British crown but has greater interests in getting to know and understand the native Temne people. She admits that all of the building and work that the Black Loyalists were doing upon disembarking, “seemed designed to create barriers between Nova Scotians and the Temne people inhabiting the coastal region of Sierra Leone” (383). Even so, Aminata seeks acceptance from them and hopes that they will eventually recognize her too as African. Knowing that the Temne did not see her as one of their own and that they never would she still, “felt a certain connection to them, and the easiest and most natural way to feed that sense of kinship was to learn their language” (386).

Slowly but surely Aminata goes about learning new words and phrases every day. However, her typical skills of bridging division fail in an interaction with a young Temne woman named Fatima. After Aminata tells Fatima the story of her capture, enslavement, migration, and return, she inquires about how she could find her way home to Bayo. Fatima abruptly responds, “that is a story, and a very good one. And I will tell you a story too, if you want one. But you are not asking for a story now. You are asking about my land” (394). When Aminata replies that she is only asking about the land in which she was born Fatima counters by declaring, “you have the face of someone born in this land, but you come with the toubabu. You are a
toubab with a black face”(394). Fatima brings to the forefront an issue that thrives in the present day within black communities; a question of whether black diasporic individuals can go back to Africa and feel a sense of belonging. As belonging is a two way interaction, Hill points out that while Aminata might be adept at building connections, her positionality as a black forced migrant in Freetown will not give her the tools necessary to bridge a gap destroyed by several years of British infiltration and African collaboration.

**Questions of Return**

The perpetual migrant moves in ways that are akin to the movement of water. Constantly flowing, flooding, and remembering where they used to be, “all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was”(Morrison 99). Thus, Hill emphasizes that for forced migrants home can never be the same because they are not the same. Marked, molded, and altered, traveling people carry within them so many other places. Hill argues that a non-static perception of home and community is necessary and useful for diasporic blacks. Throughout the novel Aminata’s heart is constantly nourished by her great desire to return home to Bayo, where concepts and connections of culture, family, and belonging began to flourish. As a forced migrant she journeys through a myriad of places, actively remembering the sites she occupied before, harnessing different tools of survival and undergoing dramatic shifts in her identity. After escaping from African slave trade who attempted to sell her back into slavery, however, she realizes, “I would sooner swallow poison
than live twenty more years as the property of another man—African or toubab. Bayo, I could live without. But for freedom, I would die” (Hill 443). To the question, can forced migrants still be African if they can never go home again? Hill’s novel answers with a defiant yes, they return as African and so many more things.
Chapter Four:
Revisionary Black Enslaved Women Narratives & Conclusion

Hill’s novel is truly a declaration of female agency. He specifically exhibits black women’s female-centered knowledge and in doing so draws out the tools that black enslaved females utilized to combat a dual subordination of both race and gender. Hill invests female agency in his protagonist and uses intertextuality as a tool to reach back in time and discusses strategies of resistance implemented by other black enslaved female narrators that both work against and support his text. Hill uses fiction to juxtapose texts pertaining to the black enslaved women’s gendered agency, vulnerability, and sexuality in ways that challenge the legitimacy of dominant “truths.”

Lawrence Hill identifies as a male and it is important to think critically about what black male authors might or might not do with the black female body. While it matters greatly whether the voice of an enslaved women is taken from an archive or imagined by an author, both share a compelling power and influence. Hill’s novel is truly a nuanced and progressive piece, as while he presents scenarios that are tragic and recurrent in black enslaved women’s narratives, he also presents moments where the black female resists and does not always exist in despair. His power lies in his ability to respect, advance, call up and call on his protagonist’s feminine power. Just by virtue of writing this figure and going through her whole life course, Lawrence
Hill partakes in a process of disrupting gender-vague traditional slave narratives so that differences can be identified, contended with, and perhaps understood.

**Rereading gendered agency**

As black enslaved women, the act of writing accords one the ability to write one's own humanity but also to remember and reimagine one’s stolen history. Giving voice to that stolen history increases power and extends the breadth of lineages embedded in frameworks of family memory. Most narrators who have documented their experiences as black women, both slave and free, have offered one dimensional views that tend to limit their portrayal to ones of repression and deprivation that will ultimately be resolved through prevailing Christian moralities. While it cannot be denied that slave women bore the brunt of relentless repression and that slave masters sought to strip them of their essential identities both as women and as humans, enslaved women narrators fought back by aiming to reshape their own worlds and their identities through written narratives. Popular black female and neo-slave narratives include Harriet Jacob’s, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Francis Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. All of these novels aim to revise the traditional slave narrative, add gendered lenses, and tackle gendered subjectivity from different points of departure.

A point of departure commonly discussed in traditional slave narratives is the black female slave’s plight in relation to sexuality, rape, and other forms of sexual
assault. These slave narratives also reveal that there is little guidance and warning given to young enslaved females that might teach them about their bodies and/or prepare them for the possibilities of rape. Scholar, feminist, and social activist bell hooks took to her novel *Ain’t I A Woman*, to reveal that “Black female slave narratives that provide information concerning the sexual education of girls suggest that they know little about their bodies, where babies come from, or about sexual intercourse” (hooks 13).

Thus, in his characterization of his female protagonist, Hill constructs a black female identity that is born and raised to be complex and oppositional. His protagonist is shown the ins and outs of a woman's body and learns how to catch babies from the tender age of eleven. As Aminata grows older her ability to catch babies becomes a way for her to assist other women giving birth and allows her to earn money along her journey. Hill thus carves out a specific sense of womanhood that allows for the exploration of creative gender-specific responses to oppressive dynamics of power.

Slavery systematically influenced both the production and reproduction of gendered identities. Hill’s novel, however, is distinct in that his female protagonist is born and raised on African soil, and therefore privy to a gendered education that was not ensconced in North American slavery. At the start of the novel, Aminata’s mother teaches her daughter what it means to be a woman in Bayo. As the village baby-catcher, she first teaches Aminata how to read another woman's body in labor and then she begins to teach her about her own body and her oncoming menstrual
cycle. Aminata’s prospective induction into Bayo womanhood begins when her mother alludes to a specific initiation, insisting that soon “part of [her] womanhood was to be cut off so that [she] would be considered clean and pure and ready for marriage” (Hill 15). Although this proposed process of “correction” is a matter of contention for Aminata, she remains fully engaged in the educational process of womanhood and its traditional meanings in Bayo. Eventually, Aminata is unable to complete her traditional rites of passage when her parents are killed and she is forced to discover and learn more about her womanhood on her own.

Hill’s narrative does not evade gender but instead presents richer depictions of what it means to be black and a woman in the diaspora. In Charlestown, Aminata grows up to be the embodiment of slave women’s ability to give and nurture life. Depicting a self-reliant and self determined survivalist, Aminata maintains her most fundamental claims to womanhood, her roles as mother, nurturer, and wife. She proclaims these positions in an inspiring scene in which she challenges Solomon Lindo about his characterization of her in a notice he placed in the South Carolina Gazette. He writes that she is an “obedient, sensible Guinea wench” to which Aminata takes issue,

“And what is a ‘wench’?”

“Woman,” he said

“Is Mrs. Linda a wench?”

He sat up straight. He rubbed his hands, then looked at me directly. “She is a lady.”
“I am not from Guinea,” I said suddenly. The anger in my own voice 
surprised me. I jumped up from the table, knocking over an ink pot. ‘And 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?’”(Hill 200)

Her last line, “Aren’t I a woman?” is directly inspired by what Sojourner Truth said in 
her transformative “Ain’t I a woman?” speech. Hill uses a powerful intertextual 
reference to a speech given at a women’s rights convention in Ohio in 1851 by 
Sojourner Truth, a prominent figure of black female agency, to transplant a similarly 
potent power into Aminata’s character. Her courageous act of defiance is aimed at 
changing perceptions of her womanhood. Aminata challenges white male power 
when she demands respect for her humanity and acknowledgement for every one of 
the roles she occupies as a woman.

Sexual Vulnerability

Black women’s reproductive roles were an integral part of building a robust 
slave economy, accordingly rape and concubinage became common occurrences: 
matters of business as well as of pleasure. Scholars have recognized that for black 
women, “institutionalized rape not only strips them of dignity and self-respect, it 
threatens the retelling of their common stories. It nearly jeopardizes the act of 
autobiography itself and of any articulation of black women's common cultural 
memories” (Rascher 25). Thus the task of rewriting and remembering painful yet
common experiences amongst enslaved black women is one that is full of purpose and defiance while remaining at high risk of distortion. Hill represents black women’s sexual vulnerability and acknowledges this susceptibility as a common occurrence across black women slave narratives. He engages with the historical and written prevalence of sexual abuse of black women slaves, instead of looking away, erasing its pervasive occurrence, and masking its significance. Hill’s protagonist does not escape a horrific rape by Robinson Appleby. Nevertheless, as skilled storyteller and narrator she refuses to forget or look away from this disheartening event, reminding herself and readers to keep looking and, in effect, to keep remembering. Hill calls up the strength of black enslaved female narrators who remember the past and extend to their most painful of memories.

While Aminata’s story shares some characteristics typical of the slave narrative genre, Hill still manages to challenge the abolitionist’s use of the pervasive occurrence of sexual exploitation to portray black enslaved women as helpless subjects completely stripped of agency. Revising the rhetoric around the enslaved women’s sexuality, Hill inserts alternative aspects of sexual agency. He extends discourse surrounding black female sexuality by highlighting Aminata’s romantic relationship with Chekura. Most slave women found no way to fight back and refuse their slave masters and this ultimately led to the belief, commonly held by whites, that black woman were naturally promiscuous. Hill in his subversions of the traditional black women slave narrative reverts the trope of “the white cultural stereotype of rape—a hot black Sapphire who lures white men into sexual encounters—makes a
distinct departure from black male narratives, and chronicles a history of exploitation that rescues black women from the stereotype of illicit sexuality” (hooks 21). He retaliates by resisting an image of an enslaved women that fits within the condemning ideals of Victorian womanhood, instead he writes that his protagonist continues to indulge in her sexuality even after her rape.

Black females often have been socialized to think of their sexuality as inherently flawed and something of which to be ashamed. As a result, many girls grow up to become women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. Hill rewrites sexual agency into his protagonist, subverting traditional narratives and furthering the belief that black women, enslaved or free, need not silence their own needs and desires in order to be seen as respectable sexual beings. Aminata’s desire to be held, touched, and pleasured by Chekura are reflected when she divulges, “My young body was perfect back then, smooth and strong and curved and full. My skin was screaming out to be kissed and caressed. My hands and body were ready to stroke and hold and straddle a man. I woke up at night wert between the legs, aching for Chekura’s touch”(186). Hill liberates his protagonist from the constraints of sexual morality in a direct manner by refusing to emerge, “in the lore and mythology of slave women both as models for black female conduct and symbols of resistance that were unique to the black female experience”(Gaspar & Hine 171). Hill’s protagonist’s rape does not render her completely sex-less or powerless, instead, his female subject remains in touch with her body and her womanhood.
Conclusion

The first time I read Lawrence Hill’s *Someone Knows My Name*, I felt like a private detective. Bent over the novel, I viciously highlighted, circled, and underlined words that I recognized and that felt all too familiar. Hill’s protagonist Aminata Diallo carries my mother’s last name, has an identity that features ethnic divides that are identical to my own, and speaks *Bamanankan*, the language of my family. I was surprised to read a contemporary slave narrative and to see that people like me could exist in literature. I was surprised even more, though, to learn that Hill’s work was a complete fiction.

The discovery of *Someone Knows My Name* saved me from having a single perception of what a slave narrative looks like. The novel showcases a protagonist who uses her voice to communicate rather than to exhibit. Hill’s protagonist’s story is not entangled in shaping stories that conform to abolitionist views. She instead reveals that there never is a single story about any place or any people. Lawrence Hill writes fiction but he still manages to tell a true story about power and dispossession. His novel reclaims storytelling powers and disrupts Western traditions of false depictions and exploited voices. Hill does not subscribe to any one approach or genre in order to tell this story of forced migrants and enslaved peoples. Instead, Hill embraces disorder and fuses his imagination with history in the form of fictional storytelling, giving him several structural templates to play with and then to break.

I have analyzed Lawrence Hill’s expansive revision of traditional slave narratives and his ambitious attempts to combat their hyper-invisibility by
highlighting the stories of forced migrants. Hill addresses national memory and historiography by focusing on several sites along the transatlantic journey, by filling in the historical gaps of African, American, Canadian histories, and by illuminating the enslaved female experience. The resilience and metatextuality of his observant protagonist allows Hill to reflect on larger issues of nation, religion, and gender. Rather than presenting a conventional slave narrative with stereotypes of race, culture, and religion, Hill uses his subjective protagonist’s *djeli*-like power to argue that black skin encapsulates a multitude of memories. His innovative uses of fiction as a source of truth enable him to address national memory and historiography along the transatlantic journey. Hill models for other aspiring authors of traditional and contemporary neo-slave narratives the ways in which the slave experience is not a uniquely patriarchal and American story and proves that this compelling and sobering story belongs, equally, to Africans, Canadians, and enslaved females.


*Genesis 11 Tower of Babel*


