CANADIANA
Literaturen/Kulturen – Literatures/Cultures – Littératures/Cultures
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The Past is Present

The African-Canadian Experience in Lawrence Hill's Fiction

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PETER LANG
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

1. Introduction

> *It is difficult enough to figure out what it means to be Canadian, let alone African Canadian. (Clarke 1998, 98)*

In his article on Lawrence Hill's second novel, *Any Known Blood* (1997), Winfried Siemerling asserts: "Our most post-identitarian moments and movements notwithstanding, identities are hardly a matter of the past." (2004, 30) As I shall argue in this study, issues of identity might well be a matter of the past – yet this past is still vividly present. In exploring the constructions of collective memory in Lawrence Hill's historical fiction, issues of identity are conceptualized as a selection and representation of memories from a contemporary perspective to create what Lois Zamora (1997) has termed a 'usable past'. More precisely, the constructions of collective memory in Hill's writing represent a counter-hegemonic version of a usable past which amends mainstream Canadian constructions. In this endeavor, Hill is in fact emblematic of the vast majority of African-Canadian literature. As the epigraph above suggests, the proverbial preoccupation of Canadian literature with questions of identity – whether they are framed in terms of who/where, here/there, national/regional, or colonial/postcolonial[1] – is mirrored, in fact even intensified, in Black Canadian literature. Evidently,

1 Cf. for instance Frye 1965 and 1976 (here: 2003a and 2003b); Atwood 1972; Robertson 1973; Metcalf 1988; Klooß 1992 and 1994; Davey 1993; Gross 1994 and 1995; Staines 1998; Godard 2000; Moss 2003b; Morris 2004; Brydon 2002 and 2007 (incorporating an explicit African-Canadian perspective); Kuester 2008. With the exception of Atwood 1972, Metcalf 1988 and Davey 1993, all of the studies mentioned here are essay-length papers and may thus serve as points of departure. Unsurprisingly, most scholars suggest that the most fruitful approach to identity can (best/only) be found through *their* lens, be that postcolonialism, gender or ethnic studies, a thematic approach or indeed any given conceptual framework; cf. for instance Robertson 1973, 81 (emphasis added): "The discussion of identity is not dead nor will it die until identity can be defined within its *true* context, that of commonwealth literature." In recent scholarship, one of the prevailing views holds that identity has indeed remained one of Canadian literature's key topics and one of literary criticism's favorite subjects, yet both are embedded in more diverse contexts: "By a curious logic of history the Canadian identity question so dear to the cultural nationalists is

definitions of identity do not take place on a *tabula rasa* but are revisions of existing notions. For Black Canadians, the revisionist moment is augmented by the fact that for centuries, African-Canadians have largely *been* defined. On his urge to reclaim the power over identifications, Hill states:

> Identity is fluid and is evidently evolving. Initially other people tried to tell us [Blacks] who we were and tried to brand us with their own views of who we were. We have spent a few centuries trying to climb out from under that and to assert how we see ourselves. […] Part of it is reclaiming one's identity and rejecting imposed definitions. (Hill 2006, 145)

In this thesis, I set out to provide an analysis of the reasons, the modes and the ways in which Hill is "reclaiming one's identity and rejecting imposed definitions" in his fictions. Hegemonic definitions largely rest, as many Black Canadian writers have consistently claimed,[2] on three faulty assumptions, or rather lopsided perceptions. The first notion is the false supposition that, in contrast to the United States, African slavery never existed in Canada. In a 1995 poll, 83% of Canadians did not know that slavery indeed existed in what was to become their nation (cf. Clarke 1998, 103). On the contrary, it is maintained, Canada has proven to be a safe haven for American slaves, the north star promising freedom under British protection. The second assumption is that those Blacks coming to the True North found there racial equality and socioeconomic prospects. Black Loyalists, for instance, who sided with the British Empire in the American Revolutionary War, were granted not only freedom, but equality and economic opportunity fostered by land grants – at least this is what British officials promised. This allegedly benevolent nature is then extended into the present and underlies the third belief: Canada is, by virtue as much as by proof of its multicultural make-up and policy, a nation virtually free from the malignant racism purportedly dominating race relations south of the border. "In Canada, the party line goes, there are no racists save those who watch too much American television." (Clarke 1998, 101)

Based on historical misperceptions and misrepresentations, a view of Canadian race matters thus prevails which underplays the hardships faced by Black Canadians both past and present, while simultaneously promoting the notion of a Canaanesque nation north of the 49th parallel.

> In Canada, the prevailing view suggests, nobody has doors slammed in their faces because of the colour of their skin, for Canada has the potential to be one big, comfortable home for all people fortunate to live within its boundaries. […] No, the prevailing view argues, minority groups have no reason to whine or complain. Not in Canada, not in the place that had been

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still the central question in the new wave of multicultural novels, though questions of identity have become more complicated." (Kröller 2004, 209) Martin Kuester agrees, arguing that even though there has been a widening of foci to include more diverse centers of attention, the "question of Canadian identity and its survival certainly remains one of the central themes of English-Canadian literature until the present." (2008, 311)

2 Cf. for instance Clarke 1998, 101 and 103; 1999, 7; 2006a, 5f.; Compton 2001, 27; Cooper 2004, ii; Foster 1996, 31f.; Hill 2006, 143; Moynagh 2005b, 17; Walker 1982, 6 and 19.

> the terminus of the Underground Railroad for American Blacks fleeing slavery. (Foster 1996, 31f.)

In his historical fictions, Lawrence Hill sets out to correct the flawed constructions professed by, as Foster phrases it, the "prevailing view". Fiction, in Hill's estimation, has a "major social function" (2006, 132) in this regard. It may serve as a repository of memories repressed in hegemonic discourse and hence contribute to the ways in which groups define themselves and/or are defined by others:

> I am interested among other things in exploring fascinating and important elements of the Black Canadian experience and exploring them dramatically. […] I feel that revealing dramatic moments in our lives is one way of showing people who we are. (Hill 2006, 135)

Questions of the veracity of widely held assumptions and the (self-) definitions based on these assumptions have long dominated Black Canadian literature. As such, Hill's fiction can be considered representative of a vast majority of works. African-Canadian authors have regularly pitted their version of the Black experience in Canada against mainstream constructions (which are, as a matter of fact, often based in part on the writings of Black North Americans themselves, such as the slave narrative, whose influence will be discussed *in extenso* in the course of this study). Consider, for instance, Priscilla Stewart's poem "A Voice From the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity" (1858) which Wayde Compton reprints in *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (2001):

> […]
> God bless the Queen's majesty,
> Her scepter and her throne,
> she looked on us with sympathy,
> And offered us a home
>
> Far better breathe Canadian air,
> Where all are free and well,
> Than live in slavery's atmosphere
> And wear the chains of hell.

The contrast between Canada and the US established here in terms of heaven vs. hell has fed the Canadian imagination. Likewise, the slave narratives corroborate the dichotomy found in Stewart's poem by structuring the African slaves' escape to (what would later on become) Canada in terms of one of their key leitmotifs, the biblical Exodus. In Lawrence Hill's fiction as much as in African-Canadian literature in general, this dichotomy is questioned. In fact, there is frequently an outright reversal of the common notion that Blacks found – and continue to find – their 'Promised Land' in Canada. Commenting on the 'Exodus' of refugees and fugitive slaves to Canada, Walter Borden (1992) for instance counters the view held in Stewart's poem:

The Hebrew Children

[…]
Ham's descendants
shouted HALLELUYAH,
Caught a train
And travelled
To the Warden of the North
Who counted heads,
Heaved a sigh,
And told them:
Go, and make potatoes
Out of rocks!

Then God stopped
Gabbing
With the Angels
Long enough to promise
Deep investigation into
Segregated schools,
And land titles,
And housing,
And equal opportunity
In general;
And threatened
Every kind of social action.

Last I heard, God was at
The Lieutenant Governor's
Garden Party
Telling people
It was nice
To see the coloured population
Represented,
And yes, He was preparing
A paper on
Discrimination!

Can I hear an AMEN?

In a plain and highly accessible way, Borden summarizes the African-Canadian experience while focusing on its disillusioning quality. When African slaves ("Ham's descendants") left the slave-ridden United States via the Underground Railroad ("caught a train") or as Black Loyalists ("the Warden of the North" indicates Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia, where most of the Black Loyalists were headed), they expected a Promised Land. What they found instead was disenchanting, to say the least ("Go, and make potatoes / Out of rocks!"). Going through a chronological list of segregation, racial inequality, inadequate living conditions and the like, Borden delineates Black Canadian history, culminating in the complacent, bureaucratic responses of today's multicultural Canada.

Evidently, Hill's approach to African-Canadian history is rather more complex than the rendition offered by Borden in a single poem. Hill does, however, likewise deal with the issues mentioned above: in his three novels published to date, Hill touches on most major aspects of African-Canadian history – from the late 18th to the late 20th century. It is a history which seems to have been largely neglected by mainstream Canadian discourse, a void many African-Canadian writers set out to fill. Hill himself is very explicit about the goal of saving, through fiction, parts of the Canadian history which are on the verge of being forgotten or have already been removed from view:

> We still have probably twenty-five million Canadians who know extraordinarily little about the Black experience in the world and the Black experience here in Canada. The fact of the matter is that it is a fascinating history and I don't care to have it forgotten. The novel is one way to accomplish that." (Hill 2006, 143)

The aim of mending what is perceived as a pitted and unbalanced mainstream understanding of course is didactic in purpose as much as it is sociopolitical in effect. Issues of agenda setting and discourse formation are part of his writing's larger contexts. A theoretical framework to fruitfully approach these contexts can be found in conceptions of collective memory. Originally devised by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, collective memory theory has been modified and tailored to serve as a powerful tool in the analysis of the nexus between literature, memory, identity and sociopolitical practice.[3] Taking advantage of the refined corpus of studies and models available by now, I will make use of a slightly adapted version to supplement and guide the following analyses, thus replacing the more pragmatic terminology ('history', 'forgetting', etc.) employed so far.

Obviously, the following chapters will hence provide a significantly more nuanced picture than the one offered by contrasting Stewart's "A Voice from the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity" with Borden's "The Hebrew Children" – just as Hill himself of course proceeds in considerably more complex ways, yet without losing track of the general argument also illustrated by Borden. Amending what is taken to be an absence due to involuntary ignorance and/or willful neglect, an important part of Canadian constructions of identity, viz. the "Black Tile in the Mosaic" (Winks 1997, 470), has to be (re-) inserted. In order to do so, Hill reveals the supposed misconceptions *and*, importantly, provides an alternative conception. It will be a major concern of this study to delineate the ways in which Hill both reveals/refutes the lopsided model and offers/implements a counter-model.[4]

3 As Birgit Neumann rightly observes, Canadian literature has extensively dealt with the connection of memory and identity: "Dass zahlreiche dieser Werke [referring to a list of six novels] mit dem General Governor's Award [sic], Kanadas wichtigstem Literaturpreis, ausgezeichnet worden sind, zeigt, dass die Themen Erinnerung und Identität in Kanada zu einem Kulturthema ersten Ranges avanciert sind: [...]" (Neumann 2005, 10) Incidentally, however, only one (instead of the 'numerous' suggested) out of the six novels she lists has indeed received the Governor General's Award. Yet, in regard to African-Canadian literature, there has in fact been a significant increase in critical acclaim; accordingly, Hill remarks that "it's wonderful to see how African Canadian literature has exploded in recent years. Just look at the awards!" (Hill 2006, 133) In fact, Black Canadian involvement in the Governor General's Award (jury members and/or finalists) has risen from zero before 1990 to 34 until 2007 alone. See the appendix for a diagram of African-Canadian jury members, finalists and winners of the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize and CBC's Canada Reads between 1990 and 2007. Revealingly, Black Canadian poetry has largely dominated critical reception here as well.

4 It should have become obvious by now that, strictly speaking, qualifiers like "supposed", "alleged" or "perceived" ought to be added to most remarks pertaining to the "perceived" lopsided constructions of identity. This is not only impractical but superfluous. Though I often tend to agree with Hill's assessments as well as with points made by other African-Canadian authors (such as cited above), I strive to *describe* a stance while not necessarily *taking* one. While there is no such thing as a disinterested theory or fully objective scholarship, I am not pursuing a political or even ideological agenda here.

(Con-) Texts

Two out of the three novels Lawrence Hill has published to date will be at the center of interest in the literary analyses provided in chapters four, five and six of this thesis. Hill's first novel, *Some Great Thing* (1992) will be used comparatively (for instance in section 6.2.1., "Authorship"), yet there will be no separate chapter dedicated to Hill's debut as it is largely concerned with contemporary matters, such as Francophone minority rights in Manitoba, whereas the two works dealt with in depth here can unanimously be classified as historical writing – the main interest here. Comments on other fictional works by African-Canadian authors, e.g. George Elliott Clarke's libretto *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), his novel *George and Rue* (2005), or Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2002)[5] will be interspersed throughout this study. Moreover, (references to) poems will be used to illustrate certain points on occasion, thus underlining the pervasiveness of certain issues in African-Canadian literature irrespective of its concrete genre.[6]

In terms of secondary literature, there is a significant chasm between studies focusing on social or cultural aspects in general and literature in particular. As for the first category, a substantial number of works exist.[7] These surveys usually take the form of collections, often including one or two essays on literature as well, but largely concentrating on other issues. In terms of studies dedicated to African-Canadian literature specifically, their number is far more limited (back in 1997, Peter Hudson for instance went so far as proclaiming a "critical wasteland for African Canadian literature"; 5). The situation has improved, partly by sidestepping

5 For some authors and scholars, first names will be used in addition to last names in order to avoid confusion (e.g. Austin / George Elliott Clarke, Aleida / Jan Assmann).

6 The research interest leading to the present thesis in fact originated in African-Canadian poetry. Based on an annotated bibliography of more than seventy-five poems concerned with the collective memory of slavery and/or genealogy, many of the working hypotheses informing this study have actually been derived from an exploration of Black Canadian poetry. It should be noted that the present study is limited to an Anglophone African-Canadian context alone; the claims made here thus apply to Black Canadian literature *in English* exclusively.

7 A provisional and partial (pun intended) list includes early collections such as Dionne Brand's *Rivers Have Sources* (1986; some titles in this list are abbreviated) or *Bread out of Stone* (1994; her latest non-fiction collection *A Map to the Door of no Return,* 2002), *We're Rooted Here* by Peggy Bristow et al. (1994), Marlene NourbeSe Philip's influential *Frontiers* (1992) as well as her (lesser known) *Showing Grit* (1993). Also by Philip: *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (1997). Cecil Foster's *A Place Called Heaven* (1996) is among the first key collections *not* to be authored/edited by African-Canadian *women* writers. Foster, who is also a novelist, followed his 1996 essays with *Where Race Doesn't Matter* (2005) and *Blackness and Modernity* (2007). Althea Prince's *Being Black* (2001) combines minor elaborations on the literary scene with essays of a more general nature. *Talking about Identity* (2001), though not being limited to Black Canada, offers some useful articles, including "Zebra", by Lawrence Hill. Rinaldo Walcott's *Rude* (2000) and *Black Like Who?* (2nd ed., 2003) comprise thoughts on literature to a certain extent, but not primarily; the same applies to collections by Charmaine and Camille Nelson (*Racism, Eh?*, 2004) or David Divine (*Multiple Lenses*, 2007).

established venues such as mainstream literary magazines, essay collections and monographs (of which there exist next to none).[8] Instead, introductions to several anthologies provide a good source of information, e.g. George Elliott Clarke's various collections (1991, 1992a, 1997, 2008a), Janet Sears's anthology of African-Canadian drama (2000/2003), Donna Bailey Nurse's collection *Revival* (2006b), or Wayde Compton's *Bluesprint* (2001).

While individual papers on Black Canadian literature have slowly begun to make their way into literary magazines as well, special editions still offer the greatest wealth of useful articles (e.g. *Westcoast* 22, 1997 or *Canadian Literature* 182, 2004). H. Nigel Thomas's valuable *Why We Write* (2006) assembles interviews with fifteen African-Canadian writers. Likewise, Donna Bailey Nurse's *What's a Black Critic to do?* (2003) not only offers almost two dozen very brief profiles of African-Canadian writers and an equal number of short reviews but half a dozen interviews with Black Canadian Writers as well. By now, African-Canadian literature has also secured a spot in most literary histories (cf. for a German context e.g. Lutz 2005 or the brief comments in Banita 2008). The one volume still dominating the literary scene, however, is George Elliott Clarke's 2002 *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* [2002a]. By reversing the ratio of cultural/social and literary studies found in other collections, Clarke's assemblage of essays published between 1991 and 2001 provides the most comprehensive view on African-Canadian literature to date. Moreover, the "Africana Canadiana" bibliography annexed to Clarke's own extensive writings offers an encompassing list of Black Canadian publications from 1785 onwards; Clarke has thus created an indispensable means for any scholarly research in the field.

Structure

The present study is structured into four main parts: after an introduction to the theoretical framework and a short survey of African-Canadian history, a chapter on the theoretical underpinnings of Lawrence Hill's fiction is provided before the in-depth literary analyses, which constitute the bulk of this thesis, are presented.

In chapter two, "Theoretical Framework", a brief examination of the developments in the field of theorizing collective memory (going from the 1920s models by Maurice Halbwachs through contemporary theories by Aleida and Jan Assmann) is followed by a description of the working model employed in this study. This chapter is largely of a synoptic nature; I will not be concerned with developing new theoretical concepts but with adapting

8 One of the reasons for engaging in this study is the existing lack of scholarship in the field. *African-Canadian Theatre*, edited by Maureen Moynagh (2005a), provides a useful, though short, introduction to the genre of drama; G. E. Clarke's writings are wide in scope and substantially cover Africadian literature (poetry in particular). In a majority of further studies, female African-Canadian poets figure most prominently, e.g. Dionne Brand, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, and Claire Harris. As for Hill's *Any Known Blood*, only some short pieces have been published (cf. the respective chapter of this thesis as well as Harris 2004), while for the hugely successful *The Book of Negroes*, no detailed studies are available to date.

existing ones to the given literary field. Consequently, the working model used here comprises modifications and alterations, but no novel conceptions *per se.*

Chapter three, "The Black Presence in Canada", consists of an outline of the history of Blacks in Canada, focusing on two aspects particularly salient for the discussion of Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and *Any Known Blood*: the history of slavery in Canada as well as refugee and fugitive slaves arriving from the US either on the Underground Railroad to Ontario or as Black Loyalists sailing to Nova Scotia. As the primary interest lies in the historical dimension itself, there will be no extensive discussion of the contemporary Black presence in Canada (see on this aspect e.g. the collections listed in footnote 7). A bare minimum of historical background is necessary, however, to assess the historical veracity of the two novels discussed in depth in chapters five and six.

A general introduction to Lawrence Hill's oeuvre is provided in chapter four, supplemented by some very brief remarks on his biography. Since Hill has included extensive autobiographical details in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice,* it is superfluous to comment at length on his life here. Interdependencies between his biography and his fictional writing will be pointed out, however, in the respective analyses. As Hill uses the term 'faction' to describe his own writing, a brief survey of this term in literary criticism is given, followed by an examination of the ways in which Hill conceives of this notion. Hill's writing (in fact, there is a slight focus on *The Book of Negroes* in this section, while both *Any Known Blood* and fictions by other authors are included as well) is subsequently compared to the criteria identifying historiographic metafiction as conceptualized by Linda Hutcheon. The aim of this comparison is to clarify the mode/s in which Hill writes; in how far, for instance, do Hill and other African-Canadian writers share historiographic metafiction's questioning stance regarding the possibility of a 'truthful' rendition of history? The criteria of a further generic category, Barbara Foley's documentary novel, are then applied to Hill's fictions in order to find out whether Foley's model might possibly offer a more fruitful explanation of Hill's mode of writing. In the course of the generic analysis, it will become clear *how* and *why* Hill writes in the mode he calls faction.

The *what*, i.e. the actual content of Hill's fictions, will be examined more closely in chapters five and six. In fact, both chapters are structured in a parallel way, both offering a deductive approach to *The Book of Negroes* and *Any Known Blood,* respectively. After commenting on the (narrative) structure of the novels and briefly summarizing their plots ("Preliminaries"), chapters five and six both proceed with a section on "Narrative, Memory, Authenticity". In these sections, I will look at the way memories are, narratively, presented in the two novels.

For *The Book of Negroes*, the decisive structuring device will be a comparison with the (Neo-) slave narrative. By defining three basic aspects (composition, content, goals), I will examine in how far Hill complies to the mold of the classic fugitive slave narrative, where he diverges and why he does so. For *Any Known Blood*, the section "Narrative, Memory, Authenticity" is mainly concerned with the ways in which Hill provides 'fictional authenticity' for his narrative; questions of the archive, of fictionality, written and (or *versus*?) oral history,

reliability and the passing on of memories (over generations as well as in fiction) are addressed here.

The third main section in both chapters deals with "Movements", indicating not only the actual movements of the respective novels' protagonists but the changes in memory constructions Hill's novels promote. In line with the deductive approach of chapters five and six, these sections concretize what has been examined in the preceding chapters: having established the *why* and the *how*, these discussions provide the *what*, i.e. they focus on the concrete (memory) constructions provided by Hill. Close readings of key aspects of both novels reveal the alternative collective memory suggested to amend the perceived misrepresentations. In regard to *The Book of Negroes*, such issues as the (forgotten) history of Canadian slavery and indenture are dealt with; the traumatic Middle Passage is considered, and, serving as a conclusion of sorts, the Canadian perspective is examined: has Canada indeed been the Canaan for 'freed' slaves it is so consistently taken for? For *Any Known Blood,* in turn, the major issues arise out of its dual structure as a Canadian/US-American intergenerational tale. First dealing with its embedded slave narrative, the novel's take on the Cane family's migrations back and forth across the 49th parallel is considered as a construction offering new perspectives on the porous nature of this boundary. Importantly, however, these movements are also read as a stringent and forceful comment on the differences in terms of the two North American nations' approaches towards race both past and present. What emerges from the discussions provided in chapters five and six is thus an account and an explanation of the collective memory construction offered by Hill's novels; a construction, I claim, which may serve as a corrective for lopsided hegemonic memory constructions and as such is representative of a forceful general trend in African-Canadian literature as a whole.

Following a general conclusion (chapter seven) and the list of works cited (chapter eight), the last chapter consists of an appendix comprising two interviews: the first one with Lawrence Hill, conducted shortly after the publication of *The Book of Negroes* in 2007, the second one with George Elliott Clarke, conducted in 2004.[9]

9 While the latter conversation indeed took place quite a while ago (seven years prior to the writing of this study) and was in fact conducted while I was pursuing a different trajectory of this project, I believe Clarke's comments are both as topical and as noteworthy today as they were in 2004.