

TRANSMIGRATIONS

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Audubon Goes North

In the early summer of 1833, John James Audubon went north, leaving the United States for what was then literally uncharted land, the easternmost section of the Canadian Shield, also known as Labrador. Accompanied by his son, John Woodhouse, and four assistants (two medical students from Boston, George Shattuck and William Ingalls; the son of an old friend, Tom Lincoln; and Joseph Coolidge, an acquaintance of the captain of the ship Audubon had chartered), he left Eastport, Maine, on the *Ripley* on June 6. They rounded Nova Scotia, passed by Cape Breton Island and then entered the Gulf of Lawrence, headed first to the Magdalen Islands and finally the coast of Labrador. On August 13, they were back in Newfoundland again. Audubon was no longer young. At age 48, his teeth were falling out; his body ached; and fatigue threatened to cut short his typically long drawing sessions.

Due to bad weather, Audubon's party was laid low in Maine for three weeks prior to their departure. Snow covered the ground in Eastport, and Audubon was surprised how "shockingly cold" he was (Hart-Davis 199). He had equivocated throughout his life about where he was born (one of the many lies he told about his origin had him born in Louisiana, "my favourite portion of the Union"; *Writings* 384), but he had every right to consider himself a child of the South. Little Jean Rabin, as he was then known, had lived his early years in the sweltering and humid climate of Haiti, until the expanding slave rebellion forced his father to have him and his sister Rose whisked away to France. Some biographers think Audubon was three when he left; others believe he was six (the latter scenario seems more amply documented). The tropics remained forever in his blood, as did the racial complexities of that island. No wonder that he remained able to stalk his birds even on the hottest of days, weighed down by his rifle, knife, journal, and paint box. Where others would have fainted, Audubon strode on. Why did he suddenly decide to travel north, to expose himself, in advanced middle age, to the rigors of Labrador?

He had wanted to go to the "granitic rocks" of Labrador, Audubon said jokingly, because he wanted to be where the loon went for the summer (7: 299). But he also wanted to see the great auk, the gannets, the puffins, birds that had, he knew, colonized entire islands up there. Almost certainly, Labrador was some kind of athletic experience for him, at the other end of the

spectrum of extreme experiences to which he would subject himself. He was, he wrote in his journal, “farther north” than he had ever been before (*Journals* 364). Gales were so strong here that they rocked the *Ripley* even when she was firmly at anchor. On land, his men would sink a few inches deep in soft moss. There was little vegetation here, except low-growing plants “of the pygmy order” (*Journals* 374), plants so inconspicuous that they seemed like weeds, an impression not dispelled by their names. There was the chokeberry, for example, which Audubon had found in the coastal marches of Labrador and which he included in plate 194 of *Birds of America*¹ as the background for a group of boreal chickadees, or the dwarf cornel, the cloudberry, and dog laurel, all of which appear in the plate showing two Lincoln’s Finches, a new species they named after Tom Lincoln, the young man who happened to shoot the bird (Havell 193).

If the land wasn’t welcoming, the few birds that lived there weren’t eager to please either: the Lincoln’s Finches – the full absurdity of the fantasy of human ownership as expressed in scientific name-giving suddenly dawns on the reader – were “petulant and pugnacious,” as Audubon unhappily remembered later (2: 117). A fox-colored sparrow outwitted Audubon’s captain, not wise to the ways of birds, by rising with drooping wings and leading him away from her nest (*Journals* 403). Mosquitoes were as troublesome as they had been in Florida, attacking him “by the thousands” and costing him hours of precious sleep and leading him to spill ink on the pages of his diary (*Journals* 397, 412). They saw few other animals – some snakes and frogs on the Magdalen Islands and dogs as large as wolves. One night they indeed heard a wolf howl, and for three dollars Audubon bought the skin of a fox from a Scottish trader (*Journals* 392, 411). Of water birds, however, there were so many that the men’s minds went dizzy. As his journal and the corresponding essays from Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography* reveal, Audubon was little prepared for the multitude of birds he encountered in Labrador: they darkened the sky, crowded the rocks, and covered the sea around his boat, “playing in the very spray of the bow of our vessel, plunging under it as if in fun, and rising like spirits close under our rudder” (*Journals* 363-64).

¹ Plates from *Birds of America* will henceforth be referenced by the name of Audubon’s engraver, Robert Havell, Jr., followed by the number of the plate (converted to Arabic numerals). I will cite Audubon’s bird essays from the Royal Octavo edition, with parenthetical references listing first the volume number, followed by a colon and then the page number.

They had entered a world in which the distance between humans and other creatures was, in the absence of other markers, measured by whether they could be reached by gunshot or not. In this bird-filled landscape, Audubon and his men moved awkwardly. In his journal, Audubon returns time and again to the contrast between the barren land and the unimaginable numbers of birds swarming over it or nesting on the ground. Birds have no problem living here; humans do. In fact, the more birds he saw, the stranger Audubon felt. At night, John Woodhouse would play his violin, carrying his father's thoughts "far from Labrador, I assure thee" (*Journals* 495). Labrador chilled the heart, Audubon said (*Journal* 403). Apparently, it also chilled his art.

Audubon's journal from those six weeks has survived the editorial fury of his granddaughter – though not quite. Some of Audubon's manuscripts still exist, and if the slashing and rewriting Maria Audubon performed on those texts that have survived is any indication, we may assume that not much of the flavor of the original Labrador journal was left after she was done. That said, the journal remains a striking text even in its impaired form, and one particular passage from it has been quoted many a time as proof of Audubon's conversion, late in his career, from slayer to protector of birds as well as of an environment that he finally realized had become extremely fragile: "Nature herself seems perishing. Labrador must shortly be depeopled, not only of aboriginal man, but of all else having life, owing to man's cupidity" (*Journals* 407). But is it really true that Audubon saw the light here – that Labrador helped him realize his "past excesses," i.e. the nefariousness of his industrial-style killing of birds?²

I'm not sure I can answer this question definitively. I doubt that Audubon's life followed the neat trajectory that popular biographers have invented for him. He was an artist, after all – nothing else really mattered to him, and he would change his opinions the way he alternated between lies about where he came from. And while some of what he saw in Labrador appalled him, he certainly did not go on and become an ecologist *avant la lettre*. In fact, he himself did a number of appalling things during his Labrador sojourn, and he didn't hesitate to tell us about them. What I do know for sure, however, is

² See Ford 308. This alleged "environmental turn" in Audubon's life has become fairly commonplace in recent discussions of Audubon. See, for example, Branch, who recognizes Audubon as an "essential precursor to the ethics of modern environmental concern" (296). For a critique of such readings of Audubon, see Braddock and Irmscher, "Introduction."

that his art and his writing were greatly affected as he followed the loon up north.

Audubon is known for his dramatic compositions, uncanny stories of violence that mocked previous representations of birds that were largely static. Take his well-known representation of two red-tailed hawks ascending, apparently fighting over an American hare. Their unfortunate prey, though airborne, is still alive, oozing blood and excrement (Havell 51). But the Labrador images are different. Take a look at his pair of common murre – Audubon knew them as the Foolish Guillemots – keeping watch on a rocky shore in Labrador in ill. 1. The somewhat comical effect of the line behind the eye of the male in the foreground is offset by the dramatically opened beak of the second bird, a female. The ocean in the background is remarkable, the waves sculpted into mountainlike, unrealistic formations – perhaps an unintended reminder that, throughout his life, the painter of this scene suffered grievously from mal de mer, sea-sickness. In the absence of any vegetation, these birds are, indeed, the only things that live here. And yet they seem static, works of art, actors on a rocky stage, their faces like masks, frozen into immobility.

To some extent, Audubon seems to have returned to earlier conventions of bird illustration: showing his birds in profile views, against backgrounds that are more delineated than realistically depicted. And yet, the resplendently colored plumage of the birds, an effect of Havell's aquatinting that makes every feather transparent, as well as the deliberate contrast Audubon has created between rock and water (the two chief habitats of the murre's life) distinguish Audubon's and Havell's expertise from that of a Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), who had also represented a guillemot posed – though rather stiffly – against some rock formations in the background.³ Audubon's birds look as if they knew they were being "illustrated." Compared with such earlier representations, Audubon's images seem like conscious quotations, a riff on what others had already done with northern seabirds, with just enough detail inserted to make the quotation troublesome. The murre's delicately shaded wings show that, for an artist like Audubon, black is never just black.

³ See Bewick's "Lesser Guillemot" (an immature murre in winter plumage) in Bewick, *History of British Birds* 2: 164.

And if the tongue lolling inside the beak of the bird on the right makes us imagine sound, this only draws attention to what a silent, still image this is.⁴

Audubon's murre plate derives some of its effectiveness precisely from the fact that these birds are so obviously not human. And yet the question of what it means to be human is never far from Audubon's mind, and he never asks it more poignantly than in the plates that resulted from his stay in Labrador. Viewing an Audubon plate is always a lonely affair – at least this is how Audubon intended it. His essays are full of appeals to “the reader” whom Audubon invites along to see what, really, only he, the discerning observer and hardened naturalist, has in fact seen. These appeals are cast as a conversation between two, not as a collective enterprise. While the reader or viewer as well as the naturalist guiding him or her are always imagined as single, the birds in Audubon's plates and essays usually appear in pairs or groups (a vast difference from the lonely specimen preferred by earlier bird artists such as Bewick). The simple fact that there are two or more representatives of one species in most of Audubon's Labrador plates makes their world seem even more hermetically sealed – especially if we imagine the viewer facing the plate essentially alone (which is how I am currently viewing them, too, a facsimile of the seventh volume of the octavo edition of *Birds of America* propped up next to my writing pad). Even if they appear rigidly posed, they are together; we are not.

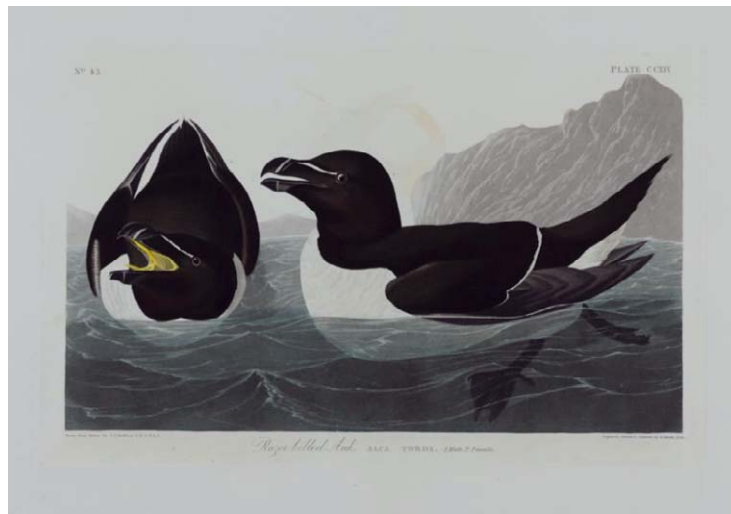
⁴ My assessment of the Labrador plates, then, differs crucially from the reading offered by Theodore Stebbins, who extols the “comfortable,” placid domesticity exuded by the birds Audubon drew in Labrador (20).



Ill. 1: Robert Havell Jr. after John James Audubon, Foolish Guillemot. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 218 (Courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington)

Seabirds live and move comfortably where we can't. Consider the pair of razorbills Audubon drew on June 18, 1835 (ill. 2). Note especially the feet of the male on the right, treading the unrealistically transparent water. Unlike humans, these birds are comfortable both on the surface of the water and under it. It's scientifically useful to give viewers such a glimpse, but I cannot shake a suspicion that Audubon liked the staged quality of this arrangement, too. The female's body on the left, tail pointed upwards at the sky, corresponds in outline to the massive rock in the background on the right. These birds are both part of and apart from a landscape. The only speck of strong color in this plate is the inside view of the female's bill that we get, which is Audubon's way of highlighting this extraordinary appendage (whose formation he describes in great detail in the corresponding essay, from the white lines across the mandible to the "decurved" tip). Audubon describes the inside of the mouth as "gamboge-yellow," a word rare enough to attract the same kind of attention that the coloring of the inside of the bird's mouth does in the plate. "Gamboge," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the

gum-resin obtained from the Garcinia or “monkey-fruit,” an exotic tree native to countries like Siam. Painters know the pigment derived from this tree, a bright yellow. In Audubon’s plate, the “gamboge-yellow” of the bird’s mouth attracts sufficient attention to invite us to try to re-animate the plate, to imagine sound where in reality silence reigns or, conversely, to realize the full extent to which Audubon, in painting these two birds, has also silenced them, stifled their cries.



Ill. 2: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, Razor billed Auk. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 214 (The Lilly Library)

Audubon’s murre and razorbill are very stylized images, icy in their precision. They say nothing directly of the massacres that preceded their making, the bloody collecting trips that yielded their bodies to the aging Audubon, who would then sit up all night, rainwater dripping on his sheet, sketching them. They tell us little, too, about the teeming bird life Audubon witnessed, the rocky shores and ledges where every inch seemed covered with birds. But even if these plates, by their very strangeness, do preserve some of the alienating effect that this “poor, miserable, rugged country” (*Journals* 365) had on Audubon, the viewer will inevitably turn to Audubon’s essays about the Labrador birds to supplement what the plates refuse to share.

And the sharing Audubon does in these texts is extraordinary indeed. Appalled by the destructiveness of the poachers they encountered in Labrador – rough, unwashed men who entered the breeding grounds of birds with clubs, oars, and guns, killing the parents for bait or stealing their eggs – Audubon’s men contributed their own share to the rampage. In earlier essays, like the one about the “Ruby-throated Hummingbird,” contained in the first volume of *Ornithological Biography* (published in 1831), Audubon often justifies his intrusion into the private lives of birds by the benefits they yield for science and the reader’s enlightenment.⁵ Now, however, such justifications no longer come easily to the narrator. Repeatedly, we find him floundering through a bloody landscape strewn with bird carcasses, many of which he has helped put there himself. There is nothing accidental about these descriptions. Often they come at the end of a careful build-up, in which anticipation leads to desire and then death.

In his essay on the razorbill in *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon describes what he found when they were entering the harbor of the island of Ouapitagone accompanied by the terrified screams of cormorants, guillemots, and razorbills. Audubon deemed the environment, by Labrador standards, “delightful.” Waxing lyrical, he remembers: “The mossy beds around us shone with a brilliant verdure, the Lark piped its sweet notes on high, and thousands of young codfish leaped along the surface of the deep cove as if with joy. Such a harbour I had never seen before” (7: 247).

The aesthetic pleasure that he felt does not, however, prevent Audubon and his men from doing what they do next. Leaving the Ripley at anchor, they proceed to a small island further up the coast, where they insert their long hooked sticks into the cracks and fissures of the rocks to pull out terrified razorbills. Sometimes they lower themselves into these holes, smashing multiple eggs in the process. As they escape, the razorbills fly directly towards the muzzles of the guns of the rest of the party. “Rare fun” this was for his sailors, observes Audubon. Soon they had piles of razorbills lying next to them (7: 248). Audubon marvels at the apparent stupidity of the birds, which would fly into the gunfire as readily as “in any other course” (7: 249). Their meat was “tolerable” – it seems Audubon made himself some razorbill

⁵ For a detailed reading of the hummingbird essay as representative of Audubon’s pre-Labrador phase, see my *Poetics* 199-200 as well as my “Audubon the Writer.”

stew – but what he, like the poachers of Labrador, really liked were their eggs, the yolk a delicate pale orange, the white a pale blue. They afforded, he told the reader, “excellent eating” (7: 250).

Audubon’s party is responsible for a similar destruction on the Murre Rocks, near Great Mecatina Harbor. Again, the sheer number of birds nesting there overwhelms him, while it also provides a convenient excuse for the slaughter in which he actively participates. “Every square foot of the ground seems to be occupied by a guillemot planted erect as it were on the granite rock, but carefully warming its cherished egg” (7: 268). Audubon deliberately plays with the ways in which the guillemots, depending on one’s vantage point, look like they are or aren’t part of the rocks on which they nest: since their heads are as dark as the rocks on which they stand, they seem headless when you approach them from the front. If you approach them from the back, they don’t seem to exist at all, except as another weird layer on the ground: “the isle appears as if covered with a black pall” (7: 269). Even before a single bird has been caught and killed, then, these guillemots appear to you already diminished – decapitated or merged with the ground.

I am using the second person singular on purpose, since this is what Audubon does, too, implicating the reader in the story of invasion and murder that he is about to tell. “Now land,” he tells the reader as if he or she were on his boat, too, “and witness the consternation of the settlers.” Note his choice of noun, which serves to represent this undertaking as an act of conquest, a hostile takeover of a peaceful settlement. The passage is so effective because Audubon doesn’t remind the reader that it is guillemots he is talking about until he is about half-way through. “Each affrighted leaves its egg,” Audubon continues, and then they hastily take a few steps and take off silently. “Thrice around you they rapidly pass,” he says, in lines that sound like a weird incantation. For the birds want to

discover the object of your unwelcome visit. If you begin to gather their eggs or, still worse, to break them, in order that they may lay others which you can pick up fresh, the Guillemots all alight at some distance, on the bosom of the deep to anxiously await your departure. Eggs, green and white, and almost of every colour, are lying thick over the whole rock; the ordure of the birds mingled with feathers, and with the refuse of half-hatched eggs partially sucked by rapacious Gulls, and with putrid or dried carcasses of Guillemots, produces an intolerable stench; and no sooner are all your baskets filled with eggs, than you are glad to abandon the isle to its proper owners. (7: 269)

This passage describes an uncomfortable experience, which is made doubly uncomfortable in that the reader is directly involved. Humans, wherever they are, cannot just be observers in Audubon’s Labrador; they are the agents of

destruction. Everyone is complicit. And so Audubon and the reader march through the empty Labrador landscape, pulling birds out of rocks, crushing eggs under their feet, inhaling the rank, rough smell of decomposition. In a particularly egregious instance of interference, Audubon, invoking the spirit of scientific inquiry as a justification, describes his attempt (“a severe experiment,” he calls it) to find out how long some black guillemots would be able to survive without food. He seals the entry to the fissure in which they live “for many days in succession.” Audubon says “many days,” as if to emphasize the starkness of this act, though he then goes on to explain that, kept away by bad weather, he had left the birds in that state for “only” eight days. Long, but not long enough for the birds to die: “The entrance of the fissure was opened, and a stick was pushed into the hole, when I had the pleasure of seeing both in a state of distress, run out by me, and at once fly to the water” (7: 275-76).



Ill. 3: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Great Northern Diver or Loon*. Aquatint engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 306 (The Lilly Library)

Lamenting the distress of the Labrador birds while freely admitting that he has also caused it, Audubon again and again stages such scenes of human guilt, with an insistence his biographers have overlooked. The violence that takes place here is different from the violence depicted in earlier compositions. Indeed, the icy plates and the bloody texts work together in interesting ways. While Audubon's Labrador birds do little else but sit and stare (as opposed to pursuing or devouring their prey), the humans who pursue them seem almost frantically busy. The violence they inflict on the birds seems gratuitous, quite unlike that of the farmer who shoots the red-tailed hawk that has taken his poultry, or of the reluctant artist who, in a story that could have been written by Edgar Allan Poe, runs a metal rod through a golden eagle's heart so that he can paint it any way he wants.⁶

Labrador brings home something Audubon had always known: birds are a provocation. They bring out the best and the worst in us. They are so close to us, and then again so far removed. Take the loon, the bird he claimed had brought him up north in the first place. Was he any closer to it now that he was up here? Audubon once playfully said that one of his fears as a naturalist was the prospect of being "outdone by a loon" (7: 287), and this seemed to happen here more than anywhere. John Woodhouse, for one, was almost upstaged by a Labrador loon when he shot the bird with his "enormous double-barrelled gun" (Audubon takes care to mention the size of the weapon), and yet failed to take it out. The loon ran on, stumbled, rallied again, and reached the water before John Woodhouse could get to him. Indeed, the bird would have escaped had it not died of his wounds first (7: 287). Then there is the story of that other loon who played possum, as it were, drifting on the water pretending to be dead, until Audubon's men had almost gotten to him, when it suddenly rose and dived again: "we stood amazed, watching its appearance, we saw it come up at the distance about a hundred yards, shake its head, and disgorge a quantity of fish mixed with blood, on which it dived again, and seemed lost to us" (7: 288). This one they eventually got, too, but all too often Audubon found that he couldn't shoot them, though he could "clearly perceive the colour of their eyes" (7: 289). His own eyes grew weary searching for them (7: 287). It is perhaps no coincidence that what stands out about the pair of loons Audubon paints in Labrador is the eyes of the male, deep red, almost bloodshot with the intensity of looking. Audubon had found them so difficult to draw (ill. 3)! As he was sketching the pair he had caught, water

⁶ "The Red-tailed Hawk" (*Writings* 254-60); "The Golden Eagle" (*Writings* 354-58).

kept dripping from the rigging of the Ripley through the open hatches right onto his sheet, smudging the colors. The loon's element had invaded his picture too. "Man against loon," as Thoreau would describe a similar experience with a loon in Walden two decades later, recalling how on a fall day at Walden Pond one of these demoniacal birds kept eluding him, showing up where he least expected it, mocking him with his "demoniac laughter" (Thoreau 160).

It isn't that Audubon doesn't understand these birds. He knows what is going on inside the murrelets as they are watching humans unfeelingly trample their nesting grounds into an unrecognizable pulp. In the fabulous plate of two Northern gannets, for example, he is able to project himself easily into the plate. The composition features an immature bird in front, with an adult visible behind, a kind of ornithological "before" and "after" image (ill. 4). Audubon painted the birds on June 22 and June 23, 1833, off Gannet Rock in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The adult bird's orange-buff neck and head, a loud, unrestrained color, adds luminousness, "conspicuous exuberance," in Alexander Theroux's words, to a composition otherwise done in muted colors. If the adult allows Havell to show off the possibilities of aquatint engraving, the young bird, in the foreground, with its intricately patterned, speckled plumage, gives Audubon the opportunity to demonstrate his marvelous eye for detail. "Each feather," he notes in his journal, "is divided in its contour from the next" (*Journals* 363), and this is precisely what he shows in his lovingly detailed depiction of the young adult's plumage. The viewer wonders why nature would spend so much effort on something that will only be superseded later. The adult bird's greenish, almost gaudy-seeming feet echo the color of the rock, reminding us of the absence of any other vegetation (moss, lichen, grass) in the image. If the feet seem to ground the bird in material reality, the resplendent head, pointed diagonally towards the sky, lifts it up. Orange is, wrote Theroux, also the color of high aspiration (108).



Ill. 4: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Gannet*.
Aquatint Engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 326 (The Lilly Library)

But as our eye wanders to the rock in the distance, swarming with birds about to land or about to depart from it, another narrative emerges, not one about youth and maturity, but about the difference between the one (or, rather, the two) and the many, between unique individuals and the indistinguishable mass of birds that nest on the Bird Rocks. Here, finally, is Audubon's attempt to let the teeming bird life of Labrador into his composition.

But the birds provide the background, nothing more. It is clear where Audubon's preferences lie. The combination of the old and the young bird in the foreground takes on a more than accidental dimension when we remember whom Audubon took along on his voyage, his 20-year-old son John Woodhouse (Victor stayed home, continuing to supervise the progress on *Birds of America*).⁷ A similar juxtaposition of young and old has shaped

⁷ According to Rhodes, John Woodhouse Audubon was a "vigorous, outgoing twenty-one-year-old" at the time of the Labrador voyage (380). However, John Woodhouse was born 30 November 1820, which means that he was still twenty. He also describes George C. Shattuck, Jr. as a "young physician" (380), though Shattuck, later to be Dean of Harvard Medical

other Audubon plates, too,⁸ but it appears nowhere as autobiographically charged as it is here. Linda Partridge claims that Audubon had gotten the idea of bird posed against bird rock from an earlier woodcut by Thomas Bewick, where a puffin appears in the foreground and a rock swarming with birds in the distance behind it (Partridge 294-95).⁹ However, a comparison of the two plates is mainly interesting for the differences it highlights: in Bewick's woodcut, the "bird rock" appears centrally behind the bird, not pushed against the left margin as in Audubon's, and the swarming birds seem to envelope, indeed frame, the puffin, so that it becomes as representative type specimen more so than an individual or, as in Audubon's plate, two individuals. Audubon was interested in anthropomorphism only as a tool, not because he really believed that birds were like humans. He'd seen too much on his travels all over the continent to know that they were entirely different, that their needs, desires, and joys were not like his, even when they seemed oh so close. They were not inferior, just different. In this plate at least, Audubon is firmly on the side of the birds. Here the affecting family scene – the young bird preening itself while the older one looks skeptically at the darkening sky above – is directed against the eggers of Labrador he had seen land on the bird rocks too, beating the gannets' brains out with their oars, wreaking havoc right and left until hundreds, no, thousands of gannets were dead and heaps of bird cadavers, fit for cod bait, had found their way into the men's ramshackle boats. The adult bird in Audubon's composition elevates its proud, orange head in defiance against such callous obliteration, interposing its body between its offspring and the site of potential destruction in the background.

School, would not graduate before 1835. Any of the current Audubon biographies need to be used with caution. Herrick's old biography remains the most accurate source on the details of Audubon's life as they were known in 1938.

⁸ Interestingly, a bird that is generally assumed to have been drawn by the young John Woodhouse during the Labrador trip is the fluffy, bright-eyed black chick in the left foreground of a plate showing Black Guillemots in different states of plumage (Havell 219).

⁹ For the image cited by Partridge, see Bewick, *History of British Birds* 2: 156.

But this is a wishful, wistful fantasy at best, one that negates Audubon's own complicity in the slaughter. From the time in Labrador comes also the only image in the Audubon canon that actually shows a dead bird, not a dead bird as another bird's meal, but a bird that's simply dead (ill. 5).



Ill. 5: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Esquimaux Curlew*. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 208 (The Lilly Library)

Audubon had long hoped to draw the Esquimaux Curlew, an abundant species then, which he thought previous naturalists had badly rendered (Esquimaux Curlews are critically endangered today, if not already extinct). He saw hundreds of them at “Port Eau,”¹⁰ where the birds briefly landed to feast on berries, and shot seven of them, according to his journal. But he found these birds surprisingly hard to represent. His men brought him four more, to no avail. When Audubon was finished, his watercolor showed a male looking at his dead female mate, stretched out on the ground. The colors of her plumage are beginning to fade – a process Audubon, who drew from freshly killed specimens only, dreaded. Was it a coincidence that at about the same

¹⁰ Forteau, a few miles northeast of the Québec/Labrador border.

time Audubon himself became acutely aware of the fading of his own powers? “The weariness of my body has been unprecedented,” he wrote a few days later. “My neck, my shoulders, and, more than all, my fingers were almost useless through actual fatigue at drawing. Who would believe this?” (*Journals* 425-26).

Labrador, for Audubon, meant a crisis of representation. Whether he became an ecologist here, or whether he was despondent about his own decline, I can’t say. But it seems pretty clear that, faced with a landscape that yielded nothing to him, his compositions freeze or crash, sometimes literally. For example, there is the dark cloud looming behind the Arctic Tern, painted on June 25: the bird shoots from the sky like an inverted bullet, a fall dramatically staged as if to mock our expectation that birds are supposed to go up (Havell 250).



Ill. 6: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Black-backed Gull*. Aquatint Engraving, 1835. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 241 (The Lilly Library)

In another drawing made in Labrador (ill. 6), he pictures a full-fledged crash, the malevolent Icarus felled not by hubris but by a shotgun. Richard

Rhodes claims that Audubon disliked the rapacious Black-backed gull (Rhodes 378), but this is not what I have found. Instead, he discovered in this bloodthirsty bird, who made, as he put it, the “winged multitude” tremble, a kindred spirit equipped with an amazing capacity for flight but also with an insatiable appetite for more and yet more. Remember the gulls that swept in on Murre Rock, finishing off what humans had left behind? But Audubon’s plate of the Black-backed gull gives us the destroyer destroyed. The bird appears in agony, collapsed, with shattered wing, onto a nest made of its own blood, the beak open to emit a silent scream of pain. One wing still reaches up, vertically, back into the element from where the bird came before it crashed, while the anatomical detail in the upper right hand corner anticipates the “after,” i.e. the bird’s imminent dis-mem-berment. Here, for once in Audubon’s Labrador works, stylized art and messy text meet. This is the aging Audubon’s grimmest self-portrait.

Audubon left Labrador in a hurry and with little regret. Like the reader eager to rush off Murre Rocks, Audubon couldn’t wait to get back to where he had come from. When he was back in Newfoundland on August 13, he was delighted to hear the crickets again. He came as a hunter and singer of birds, says Canadian writer Katherine Govier in her wonderful novel about Audubon’s experiences in Labrador, *Creation*, published in 2002. “He will leave here a mourner of birds” (Govier 125). Throughout her novel, Audubon argues with Captain Henry Bayfield, the British admiralty surveyor for North America and an excellent cartographer, whose ship, the *Gulnare*, they indeed encountered. Bayfield aims to make Labrador more accessible by surveying its coastline; Audubon fears for the birds, even as he is shooting them. Govier’s narrator, too, realizes how empty Audubon’s compositions have become: “The birds have presence without depth,” her narrator observes. “Their animation [is] temporary and without meaning” (Govier 75).

To lend heft to the story, Govier invents a conversation in which Audubon takes on Henry Bayfield’s theologically orthodox position that the earth is meant for the humans to exploit. “The Bible was not written by a bird or a fish” (Govier 86). Govier’s Audubon constantly dreams of the island of his birth; experiencing the degree zero of nature – this is what Labrador stands for – the lush tropics of his infancy arise in his dreams, as do the landscapes of South Carolina, the home of Audubon’s would-be lover Maria Bachman, his collaborator’s second wife. Govier has invented that love story, but it

helps her make a larger point, one that has inspired this essay, too: “North is the negative of South,” her narrator says. “North is the nesting ground, the first feathers; south is full plumage” (Govier 266). For me, though, Audubon’s “negative” North is also, in some way, a positive. As distant as they seemed, the injured or rigidly posed birds he paints are the fragments of an imagined, composite self-portrait, if an increasingly unflattering one.

Ursula Heise has written about how narratives of extinction seem to follow the models of tragedy or elegy, “in which the loss of a particular species stands in both for a broader sense of the vanishing of nature and the weakening of human bonds to the natural world” (68). Leaving aside for now that elegy and tragedy are two different things, I want to emphasize that, like the rest of his work, Audubon’s Labrador plates and texts do not follow a predetermined script. Audubon responded to the crisis into which Labrador had hurled him in two superficially different ways, as I have tried to show: by freezing his images and by bloodying his texts. In effect, though, the violence highlighted in his essays is only the obverse of the icy precision that rules in the plates. Both evoke a world where life is out of whack. But it’s *Audubon’s* life that is out of joint, and that is an important modification of the traditional environmental declension narrative. Seeing the specter of his own death in the deaths he caused and lamented, Audubon wrote his own, and not nature’s, elegy in Labrador. While he might have become a mourner of birds in Labrador, as Govier says, I think he was really mourning what had happened to himself, mourning the naturalist he once was. Previously, he could always tell himself that, whatever he did to his birds, he was their savior, too: when he killed them, it was so that he could make them come alive again in his art. Now they were just dead, or almost dead. And so was he, almost.

Rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, Audubon did not personally kill the last great auk. He never even saw one. He drew a pair of them later, after his return from Labrador, sometime between 1834 and 1836, presumably from skins someone had provided him with. The only one he knew who had ever seen this bird was his engraver’s brother, Henry Havell, who had “hooked” one on his passage from New York back to England and kept it on board for a while, for his amusement. “It walked very awkwardly, often tumbling over, bit every one within reach of its powerful bill, and refused food of all kinds” (7: 245). After several days, Henry decided to let it go. Unlike the murrets or razorbills or loons, this one really got away. And here there is no bloody

story to tell – for all practical purposes, the great auk is gone, “refusing” indeed to allow the naturalist to inject himself into its life, as Audubon had done with such desperate brutality in the case of the murre and razorbills, and with such affecting empathy in the case of the gannets.



Ill. 7: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Great Auk*.
Aquatint Engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 341 (The Lilly Library)

All that remains is the image, and an image that emphasizes precisely its imaginary nature. It could have been drawn by any of the closet naturalists Audubon had attacked so vigorously earlier in his career, except for the sheer brilliance, the luminousness of Audubon’s colors, the crystalline sharpness of his lines. Audubon’s art here appears detached from all contact with messy, bloody reality. Was that why he left the drawing unfinished?¹¹ Havell had to complete the leg of the bird on the left, which Audubon had drawn only in outline. In fact, the landscape was entirely Robert Havell’s creation; if Audubon hadn’t seen the great auk, Havell had seen neither Labrador nor the auk. Note the slab of land on which the bird on the right squats, the wave lapping up the stylishly rugged sides. The scene as a whole has a fantastical quality, removed from any reality we might want to associate with it: the waves arrested in timelessness as in Japanese prints, the rocks bathed in a

¹¹ See pl. 169 in Audubon, *The Original Water-Color Paintings*.

light that seems to come from nowhere in particular, a perfect stage for birds that exist no longer in nature, but only in the naturalist's mind and on the pages of his big book.

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R. J. ELLIS

Stowe, the South, Canada, and Sadism

This essay will consider the way in which the spatial geographies mapped out in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are less material than symbolic, and fundamentally compromised by the text's psycho-sexual mapping of slavery and its perverse sado-masochistic attractions, alluring not only to slaveholders, but also to the readers of slave narratives.

Two central features of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are going to provide my departure point. One of these is the frequent use of the word "Canada" (it occurs twenty-two times in the novel), the apparent clarity about what this proper noun stands for (symbolizes), and the way this clarity is compromised: Canada becomes, as it were, a fetishistic locus. The other is the way the text bifurcates into two narrative strands moving in opposite directions – one moving down on a Southward vector bearing Uncle Tom ever deeper into the slave-holding South, towards Louisiana; and one upward on a North-bound vector tracing the escape of the two runaways, George and Eliza towards Canada. Again, my argument will be that this apparently clear geographic polarization becomes compromised in the novel. Escape from the ramifications of slavery, particularly its racist underpinnings and its psycho-sexual dimensions is not and cannot be kept clear cut as flight to Canada implies, and any attempt to establish such a symbolic geography is unsustainable.

I want to focus first upon this latter feature of Stowe's novel and try to depart from the usual modes of analysis that this narrative bifurcation invites. Of course the two stories trace in rather different ways and with different emphases the interactions and tensions between a moral suasionist and a political position over slavery.¹ That is to say, the book's anti-slavery line explores the issue of slavery's existence in the United States on the one hand, by advancing a moral and ethical case against slavery showing how it trespasses against God's law and specifically Christ's teaching; and, on the other hand, by a political argument, which seeks to effect the abolition of slavery

¹ See, for example, my entry on "Harriet Beecher Stowe" in the *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition* (662-63).

by way of action within the political and secular sphere, involving negotiating changes to the laws of the land, so that slavery becomes a trespass against United State statutes.

The first, moral suasionist line is absolutist in its approach, and by implication moves towards an immediatist solution – seeking immediate abolition through conversions to the God-given cause (and the book consistently advocates this approach); the second, political, course is more relative and contingent, allowing for a more gradualist and accretive process, though more immediate solutions are not precluded (Pease and Pease, 1972). The former admits almost no compromise; the second can readily negotiate compromise. Stowe herself, within a few months of seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* completed, was to experience the force of this distinction. Her husband's open advocacy, in speeches made to outline their shared position (Stowe herself declined to speak in public, seeing an impropriety in this)² in favor of a boycott on the purchase of goods produced by slave labor, was to lead to accusations that the Stowes were proslavery, because any such boycott would necessarily be gradual (cumulative) in its effectiveness, and because success could not be guaranteed.³

Analyses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that emphasize its division along these two socio-geographical narrative axes can and perhaps should tend to identify the northwards advance of George and Eliza as more political in its orientations, with its accent on issues like those compromises surrounding the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave Stowe, as she explains in her final chapter, one main impetus for writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (II: 314).⁴ The long scene between Senator and Mrs. Bird is, for example, a plain discussion of how moral suasionists are reluctant to have any truck with such political compromise, though in this case, gradualism's progress towards abolition is so rarefied as to be effectively non-existent: there is little sign of hope in any of the antebellum compromises between South and North, and least of all in the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act, that slavery will be abolished (except insofar as the law's unsatisfactoriness guaranteed future conflict). Mrs. Bird's attack on the Senator for voting to pass the 1850 Act is therefore in many ways indicative of the rising tensions both the North-South

² See Hedrick (238).

³ See Calvin Stowe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (lvii).

⁴ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will from hereon be referred to as *UTC* in parenthetical documentation.

compromises and the Fugitive Slave Act generated. By contrast, the southward progress of Tom tends to center itself more around the immorality of slavery, by providing a catalogue of examples of its mendacious consequences, focusing upon the break-up of families, the abuse of slaves, and heavy intimations of sexual coercion; the accent here falls not on debate but on generating moral outrage and Pauline conversions.

Yet, having said this, one has to note that the North-South separation is far from complete: both the northwards progress of George and Eliza and the southwards progress of Tom invoke moral suasionist as well as political arguments. In this respect, the discussions about, or, rather, arguments over Liberian colonization considered by Tom's master, St. Clare, and his skepticism about this solution, are symptomatic. I label them "debates" because, importantly, though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at one point, near its end does seem to endorse such white-organized colonization (300, XLIII), as advocated by the American Colonization Society, during the course of the novel this political solution is quite skeptically presented, as it is, indeed, at the very end (318). Possibly, over the course of writing the novel, Stowe's position kept shifting – as part of a more general hesitation over this issue.⁵ The records of an 1853 convention of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been published) illustrate her uncertainty: according to the Convention report Stowe had argued that the existence of Liberia lent "dignity" to Africans everywhere, but a delegate who claimed to speak for her contradictorily argued that, if she were to rewrite *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she would not end her novel by sending off most of her freed men and women to Africa. In other words, by 1853 Stowe might or might not have changed her mind from what it seems to be represented as in the closing pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet even in her novel's closing pages, though Liberia is praised, it is also observed that it "may have subserved all sorts of purposes, by being played off, in the hands of our oppressors, against us. Doubtless the scheme may have been used, in unjustifiable ways, as a means of retarding our emancipation" (II: 301). Interestingly, George, when he leaves, "with his wife, children, sister and mother," embarks "for *Africa*" and not specifically

⁵ Take, for example, Douglass's opposition to colonization. Think also of the change of position of one of the two editors of first African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal*, John Russwurm, who initially supported the African Colonization Society, but changed his mind. The consequent falling out with Samuel Cornish, who had been his co-editor, led to the journal's collapse. See, for example, Hinks (101-03).

Liberia, which may suggest a measure of unease with the American Colonization Society and more enthusiasm for an unambiguously African-American-led colonization. As George says, “the whole splendid continent of Africa opens before us and our children” (II: 301-03; my emphasis). George’s rhetoric, as Susan M. Ryan points out, is consistently black nationalist and black emigrationist, rather than ACS colonizationist (Ryan 761). As such, George takes up a position which, at the time, was very popular amongst African Americans, as Howard H. Bell has noted (100). More surely, Stowe’s reluctance to endorse colonization in 1853 represents a return to a position voiced by St. Clare at an earlier point in the composition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. If one accepts that Stowe adjusted her position during the process of composing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and viewed Liberian colonization at least somewhat skeptically for much of the time she was writing the novel – which, it is worth recalling, appeared in installments – then the book’s focus upon Canada becomes all the more explicable, as it offers one solution to the issue of where escaped slaves should go, given that it would have become increasingly apparent how unsafe the Fugitive Slave Act had rendered the Northern States as a place of residence. Canada was the one acceptable (relatively uncontroversial) place where they could secure freedom.

Thinking in this way about the complexities of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shows us why suggesting that the northward vector is more political and the southward vector more moral suasionist is only broadly accurate. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tends not to sustain clear-cut separations in this sort of way. This breakdown is important, since it merges, even muddles together, perhaps realistically enough, politics and ethics, and this muddling helps me explore what I now want to focus upon in Stowe’s novel: why it had such an extraordinary power to affect its (mostly white) readers, thus generating quite enormous sales.⁶

This power can, of course, be simply attributed to the combined force of the moral arguments advanced and the political case made against slavery and, more specifically, to the novel’s deployment of well-established sentimental tropes with the power to move: one might call these (in line with Raymond Williams) the text’s connection to contemporary aesthetic and cultural “structures of [abolitionist] feeling” (Williams 53-63). I am not seeking

⁶ I need to say that this essay takes as its focus white debates over abolition and white responses to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and consequently tends not to foreground debates concerning how racist the novel might be held to be.

in any way to gainsay this line of argument. The novel's sentimental power does of course possess great cultural potency (see, for example, Tompkins). Though it can be argued that many other texts mobilized the same array of sentimental power quotients, if perhaps not in identical conjunctions, such works did not have anything like the affective force of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and had nothing like its enormous success.

This difference of scale when weighing the novel's success is fully signaled by the novel's phenomenal sales. Of course, these sales can be accounted for in large part by the way in which Stowe brought sentimentalism to bear upon the issue of slavery in fiction in a sustained and focused manner for almost the first time (albeit following in the footsteps of the slave narratives and antislavery lecture circuit). The main exception is, of course, Richard Hildreth's problematic text, *The Slave*, published first in 1836 but going through many editions before Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Famously, this novel passed as an authentic slave narrative at first, though Hildreth was a northern white. He later, dubiously, claimed this passing was merely part of a strategic desire to maximize his book's impact, but the controversy probably helped impede the book's success and constrain its sales.⁷ Sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by contrast, were so huge that something else beyond the novel's powerful conjunction of sentimentalism with the gothic and abolitionist elements seemed to be at work: almost two million had sold worldwide within a year of publication.⁸

Recalling how the focus of the trope of freedom in the text comes to fall upon Canada can perhaps begin to provide us with a clue to understanding its phenomenal success. I think this goes beyond the obviously symbolic function of Canada, which is always kept quite apparent. Plainly, Stowe is concerned to set up an ironic reflection upon how the institution of slavery generates a situation where the United States, that self-proclaimed bastion of universal freedom, in fact harbored in its very constitution the systematic oppression of a small but highly significant proportion of its population. Yet the reader can only be aware of the way in which Canada, as a locus, is in fact operating ironically: its shores, for example are called "blessed English"

⁷ When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out, Hildreth coolly republished his book, entitling it *The White Slave: Another Picture of Slave Life* (1852). The novel went through many different titles. See Bentley, Brandstadter, Emerson.

⁸ For one account of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* sales, see Fisch (96).

ones (*UTC* II: 238), which, to a U.S. American, can only invoke the way in which neither England nor one of its colonies can reliably represent a free haven. Even as it presses “Canada” forward as the locus of freedom, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* undercuts this via the clear note of irony deliberately invoked in the book by its many allusions to the Declaration of Independence.⁹ Beyond this central and overt symbolic irony, however, I believe that Stowe establishes Canada as what might fairly be described as a fetishistic locus – a release of tension – and I mean this in a double sense. Firstly, there is what I might call an analogy at work: there is something quite perverse about representing Canada as the perfect epitome of freedom. It certainly helped Stowe create a powerful, indeed moving sense of irony, since, plainly, Canada did not offer fugitives clear-cut political equality.¹⁰ It was a British colony, and Britain had only recently been fighting imperialist wars against its former colony, America (even if, of course, these wars also bore within them traces of the United States’ emerging imperialistic ambitions). In this sense, Canada stands, as it were, in terms of how it is established in the narrative, as a fetishistic totem for freedom, perversely represented as such (which is why Stowe ironically uses the phrase “English shores” and Canadian ones). But to note this does not, I want to maintain, go far enough, for the institution of slavery also obviously bore within it, quite centrally, as Stowe herself constantly reminds the reader, the opportunity for sexual oppression, exploitation and violation. If Canada functions as a kind of fetishistic symbol of freedom, it carries across in this symbolic process, inevitably, psycho-sexual traces that cannot be erased and that are vented by racial tensions. The intended allegorical perfect integrity of Canada as the locus of freedom bears within it the fetishistic understanding of (Canadian) freedom as orgasmic release (Freud speaks of “exclusiveness and fixation”; *Three Essays* 161), which is of almost explosive power for the escaping slaves:

She dreamed of a beautiful country, - a land, it seemed to her, of rest, - green shores, pleasant islands, and beautifully glittering water; and there, in a house which kind voices told her was a home, she saw her boy playing, free and happy child. She heard her husband’s footsteps; she felt him coming nearer; his arms were around her, his tears falling on her face, and she awoke! It was no dream. (*UTC* I: 203-04)

⁹ For an account of Stowe’s use of irony, especially in *Dred*, see Otter (2004).

¹⁰ For a full account of the travails of escaped slaves and free blacks in Canada, see Winks.

As Eliza dreams of an idyllic Canada, her husband comes to her. One might fairly describe this as the climax of such fetishization, in André Lussier's formulation: an intense erotic sensation arises from the attainment of fusion with the fetish object in sexual excitement (Lussier).

Therefore, I want to consider the operations of one other, less overtly foregrounded but, I wish to argue, just as important source of affective power in the text, to do with the distribution of tropes of sadism and masochism. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself makes it quite clear that it is only on the verge of reaching Canada as fetishistic perfect, fused release that the book's sexuality can become as purely ecstatic as that experienced by George and Eliza. The mulattoes and mulattas, who reappear constantly in the novel, remind the reader of how violation, rape, and coercive sex are recurrent in white/black relations within slavery. Relatedly, for Southern plantation slave owners, since slavery illusorily represents a symbolically fetishistic totem for release – in their case a release into economic freedom and a release from any need to labor – the South also carries across with it strands of leisurely sadistic sexual exploitation. A key part of this illusory release – illusory, because the southern slaveholder has to work hard to hold his slaves – is the real access to sexual dominance that it offers; love's labors are, coercively, lost. In other words, in so far as fetishistic perversion should be understood to apply in Stowe's case and (to paraphrase and adapt Phyllis Greenacre; 89), since the seeking of illusory comforts of union with the mother (country) is simultaneously a disengagement, detachment and disidentification from her (seeking utopian freedom in slave-“free” Canada or labor-“free” Southern leisure), then *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes an exploration of how the psychosocial dynamics of this atrocious institution always possesses a perverse sexual undercurrent:¹¹

[H]e thought he felt *that hair* twining round his fingers; and then, that it slid smoothly round his neck, and tightened and tightened, and he could not draw his breath; and then he thought voices *whispered* to him, – whispers that chilled him with horror. Then it seemed to him he was on the edge of a frightful abyss, holding on and struggling in mortal fear, while dark hands stretched up, and were pulling him over; and Cassy came behind him laughing, and pushed him. And then rose up that solemn veiled figure, and drew aside the veil. It was his mother; and she turned away from him, and he fell down, down, down,

¹¹ I perhaps need to confess that, following in the footsteps of Laura Mulvey (177), I persistently use a fair bit of “poetic license” in drawing my analogies.

amid a confused noise of shrieks, and groans, and shouts of demon laughter, – and Legree awoke. . . . (UTC II: 225)

So, though turning to sadism and masochism may sound like a large leap for this essay to take, it is less so than it first seems, not least because, as Georges Bataille points out, there is a connection between religious ecstasy (which is so very prominent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and sexual ecstasy. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the two become ever more subjacent, as both species of ecstasy's counterbalances to quotidian existence include masochistic and relatedly, sadistic acts:

“ . . . instead of getting cut up and thrashed, every day or two, ye might have had liberty. . . . You see the Lord an't going to help you. . . . Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, and can do something!”

“No, Mas'r,” said Tom; “I'll hold on. The Lord may help me, or not help; but I'll hold to him, and believe him to the last!”

“The more fool you!” said Legree, spitting scornfully at him, and spurning him with his foot . . . and Legree turned away.

When a heavy weight presses the soul to the lowest level at which endurance is possible, there is an instant and desperate effort of every physical and moral nerve to throw off the weight; and hence the heaviest anguish often precedes a return tide of joy and courage. So was it now with Tom . . . though the hand of faith still held to the eternal rock, it was a numb, despairing grasp. Tom sat, like one stunned, at the fire. Suddenly everything around him seemed to fade, and a vision rose before him of one crowned with thorns, buffeted and bleeding. Tom gazed, in awe and wonder, at the majestic patience of the face; *the deep, pathetic eyes thrilled him to his inmost heart*; his soul woke, as, with *floods of emotion*, he stretched out his hands and fell upon his knees, – when, gradually, the vision changed: the sharp thorns became rays of glory; and, in *splendor inconceivable*, he saw that same face bending compassionately towards him. . . .

How long Tom lay there, he knew not. When he came to himself, the fire was gone out, his clothes were wet with the chill and drenching dews; but the dread soul-crisis was past, and, in *the joy that filled him*, he no longer felt hunger, cold, degradation, disappointment, wretchedness. From his deepest soul, he that hour loosed and parted from every hope in life that now is, and offered his own will *an unquestioning sacrifice to the Infinite*. . . . (UTC II: 242-44; my emphases)

As Reich observes, “the masochistic character . . . seeks to bind the inner tension . . . through provocation and defiance” (*The Function* 246), so that s/he is not responsible for the forbidden climax: “Beat me so that, without making myself guilty, I can release myself!” (*Character Analysis* 265). Here

the ambiguous vocabulary, which seems to come hot from romantic sensation literature even as it describes religious fulfillment, generates the climax, which soon follows:

Tom was silent.

“Speak!” thundered Legree, striking him furiously. “Do you know anything?”

“I know, Mas’r; but I can’t tell anything. *I can die!*”

Legree drew in a long breath; and, suppressing his rage, took Tom by the arm, and, approaching his face almost to his, said, in a terrible voice, “Hark ‘e, Tom! . . . You’ve always stood it out again’ me: now, *I’ll conquer ye, or kill ye!* – one or t’ other. I’ll count every drop of blood there is in you, and take ‘em, one by one, till ye give up!”

Tom looked up to his master, and answered, “. . . Do the worst you can, my troubles’ll be over soon; but, if ye don’t repent, yours won’t *never* end!”

Like a strange snatch of heavenly music, hard in the lull of a tempest, this burst of feeling made a moment’s blank pause. Legree stood aghast, and looked at Tom; and there was such a silence, that the tick of the old clock could be heard. . . .

It was but a moment. There was one hesitating pause, – one irresolute, relenting thrill, – and the spirit of evil came back, with seven-fold vehemence; and Legree . . . smote his victim to the ground. (*UTC II: 272-73*)

Here, defiance leads directly to the moment of sadistic “thrill.” Launching out on this line of analysis can gain support from the way that a key part of my argument is anticipated by Marianne Noble. Noble subtly argues that at the center of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* lies the deployment of masochism, with which women can identify in a disempowering way – as a negative stereotype providing a model of passive and pain-bearing surrender – and/or in an empowering way – in that it provides women with a means of identifying with the pain-filled experiences of the slave that provides a basis for their finding a voice of resistance whilst also, more controversially, empowering them through a discovery of possible sexual fulfillment, which it shows as available to them in masochism. That is to say that masochism brings with it a species of liberatory power – transcendence – and here the focus again falls on Tom at the end of the novel transcending his pain in an ecstatic union.

Yet Noble’s argument, I believe, needs to be pushed further: there is a strand of sadistic perversity alongside the tropes of masochism in the infliction of pain in Louisiana, to which the fetishistic representation of Canada as release into freedom acts, specifically, as totemic relief from pain and perversity. I want to press beyond Noble’s focus on sexual masochism, by noting how it (openly) falls in line with the argument advanced in Krafft-Ebing’s

Psychopathia Sexualis, which formulated the category of paraesthesia (where the sexual instinct does not seek satisfaction in a sexual act; see 52) and in Freud's substantial refinements of this argument (*Three Essays; A Child*). Noble gains considerable traction for arguing this way by pointing out how, when discussing the role of pain in sexuality, both Freud and Krafft-Ebing mention examples of their patients' sexual arousal whilst reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Noble 296):

[I]n my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating-phantasies: those accessible to young people, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . (Freud, *A Child* 175)

Case 57: . . . in my early childhood I loved to revel in ideas about the absolute mastery of one man over others. The thought of slavery had something exciting in it for me . . . That one man could possess, sell, or whip another, caused me intense excitement, and in reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (which I read at about the beginning of puberty) I had erections. Particularly exciting for me was the thought of a man being hitched to a wagon in which another man sat with a whip, driving and whipping him. (Krafft-Ebing 144-45)

Despite the compelling power of her argument, Noble's invocation of Krafft-Ebing and Freud cannot but call up the intimate contingency between masochism and sadism in their writings. Accordingly, I want to focus more on the infliction of pain in the two vectors (North to Canada and South to Louisiana), in the sense of considering who inflicts it and who receives it, in a way less tied to considerations of sexual arousal or sexual gratification than readers of Krafft-Ebing and Freud might legitimately expect, whilst not denying their intimate linkage: I think it is worth recalling here that Freud and Krafft-Ebing both link sadism and masochism to anxieties over genital sexuality (Freud, *Fetishism* 155; Krafft-Ebing). I do want to acknowledge that there is anxiety in the terrain of sexuality, but also stress that both do involve pain and its infliction.

Plainly, in Tom's southbound story, pain is borne by blacks, and there is a constant flood of pain running through this vector of the narrative. And plainly there is a sadistic streak running through the administration of pain, upon white authority if not always actually by whites – by Simon Legree; by Haley the slave driver; by the Kentucky "mas'r" who had Prue whipped and left in a cellar until the "*flies had got to her*" (*UTC* II: 6; my emphasis); by Marie St. Clare; by Henrique, when beating Dodo; by the white master of Harry's sister. Each, quite apparently, in unleashing wanton acts of violence, enjoys inflicting pain upon a humiliated subject, and so, in the words of Sergio Benvenuto, puts into material effect sadistic perversion on a political scale (74). Along the other, Canada-bound northward vector, the occurrence

of pain is less pronounced, and is far less clearly sadistic or masochistic, not least because Canada becomes the totemic point of release from pain. Thus, when George Harris and Phineas mete out their violence in New England, inflicting pain upon the attacking slave hunters, with one pursuer shot and pushed off the precipice upon which the fugitives are assembled to make their “stand,” their party are heading towards nearby Canada (*UTC* I: 283). While it might be argued that sadism is not involved in this confrontation (even as the blood “oozes” out of Loker [*UTC* I: 289]), nor masochism either, overall in the novel the sadistic and masochistic strands that reside in the text are pronounced, and indeed were picked up on in contemporary visual depictions. With regularity, early illustrators of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* focus upon a minor, passing anecdotal mention of the whipping of George Harris’s sister, and carefully depict the way the female is bound and stripped bare to the waist so that the whipping can be better laid on. Indeed, browsing through any 1852 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reveals how central the infliction of pain and its experience is.

I want to suggest that the potency of the novel is enhanced by these disturbingly-inflected distributions of channels of pain and its carefully-weighted infliction, drawing, as they do, upon contemporary fascination with the instruments of slaves’ painful bondage (whips, manacles, ropes). The reader is invited to confront the possibility of sadistically inflicting pain (via identifying with the slaveholder or the resisting slave) or masochistically receiving it (via identifying with the abused slave or [even] the injured bounty hunter), and compelled thereby to confront a textual unconscious which both disturbingly and anxiously arouses the balance of subconscious sado-masochistic impulses within the reader, stirring up deeply-conflicted psychodramas (how much pain do you wish to inflict; how much pain do you wish to experience). Emotions are unleashed with unpredictable consequences, from which the reader cannot remain insulated – and here, I have in mind, in particular, the contemporary, mid 19th-century reader, far less accustomed to such sustained probings than is the case in the 21st century. Perhaps this lies behind the response of one 19th-century reader explaining how he was “sleeping one night in a strange house [and] annoyed by hearing somebody in the adjoining chamber alternately groaning and laughing” and decided he would knock upon the wall and enquire, ““What’s the matter! Are you sick or are you reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*?”” only to be answered, less serendipitously than we might think, by the words, “Reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (qtd. in Noble 312).

The text constantly deviates from maintaining the South-North polarities it initially establishes (with Canada and Louisiana offered as the points of totemic release) into a more ambiguously-conflicted terrain. This is, in my analysis, not so very surprising: because in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one is confronted not by clear geographical distributions and assignments, but shifting and ambiguous penumbras and what might be loosely called diasporas. In the South, for example, one encounters from the start and again and again northerners moved South, and I am not speaking here of Miss Ophelia alone, for, the St. Clare family originates from Canada, St. Clare was raised in Vermont, and even Legree originates from the North – Vermont, New England, enabling George Frederick Holmes in 1852 to speak of “the atrocious heart of that fiendish Yankee, Simon Legree” – entirely missing the point of Stowe’s rhetorically ironic arrangement of constant, deliberate sectional crossings (Holmes 728). Thus, though Legree’s Southern plantation seems to be the prime locus for sadistic pleasure, his northern roots/routes destabilize this apparent spatial clarity, and intimate that sadism knows no such sectional limits. When Mary Boykin Chesnut pointed out that “Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot” since “Legree [is] a bachelor” (114) she initiates a tradition of passing over how the lace of sadism and masochism infusing Stowe’s text is far more disturbing than mere adultery.

The main southern representative in the text is apparently Marie St. Clare, but it is established she is French American, and by no means WASP. Similarly Madame de Thoux, the mulatta, was taken by her husband to the “West Indies,” while, originally, Eliza Harris was purchased in New Orleans. Southern WASPs figure only thinly in this ethically hybrid, diasporic text. The characters in the northward vector are similarly located at the outer edges of the WASP mainstream. A Quaker family, a Senator and his wife, an anti-slavery refugee from Kentucky, and white southern bounty hunters constitute the cast-list for the majority of this narrative vector, and when, in the book’s closing chapters, escaped slaves and others flood northwards, New Orleans figures largest as their place of origin. In this, the text negotiates with the requirements of its pedagogic purpose, of breaking down sectional divides, as framed by Stowe, who is choosing her characters with this in mind. Thus, Ophelia is the more-or-less stock, initially naïve northerner encountering in the South the shocking characteristics of slavery in a classic narrative strategy; similarly, Quakers played a prominent role in abolitionist circles, and their non-violent, pacifist resistance dramatizes the problematic separation between political and moral suasionist antislavery positions, encapsulated in the violent shove given to Tom Loker by the pacifist Quaker, Phineas, at the

precipice when the fugitives make their stand. Nevertheless, the Sheldons in this process emerge as the main representatives of WASP America in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and their story of human frailty, centered upon the lapses of the patriarch, the ineffectuality of the mother, and the lack of good timing by the son, leaves the reader short of foundational role-models, and instead set adrift in a sadistic world of suffering, pain and perversity that, I want to maintain, does not provide safe or stable anchorages. The book is, in a sense, at sea, in a middle passage between South and North, where no port-of-call offers safety: the space where the Ohio River runs and the Middle Ground of Kentucky lies, which, Stowe claimed, harbored the "mildest" slavery (*UTC* I: 51), while, on the other, also harboring the horrifically sadistic circumstances of Prue's death at the behest of her Kentucky owners; the place from where slaves can be sold "down South"; and where Cincinnati lies, where Stowe resided for several years, and which can fairly be described as a "border" town between South and North, in which Ohio abolitionists campaigned alongside other Ohioans employing slaves hired out across the river. In these muddled grounds lies the institution of slavery's archetypal ideological roots. One is perhaps well reminded of the dry remark attributed to Malcolm X that the American South is "that area South of Canada" (qtd. in Crawford 40). Indeed, Miss Ophelia and St. Clare agree that the South "is the most obvious oppressor of the Negro, but the unchristian prejudice of the north is an oppressor almost equally severe" (*UTC* II: 139).

This of course leads me back to the role of Canada. Canadian soil is indeed offered as a place of safety, but for the 21st-century reader this is long established as a myth; indeed, Canadians are, in Norman Lederer's words, captives of their own myths if they believe Canada functioned as such a safe haven (Lederer 185). The black communities in Canada encountered substantial racism and intolerance, and "the blessed shores" described by Stowe's narrator as, in Eliza's dream, "a beautiful country – a land, it seemed to her, of rest" (*UTC* I: 203) offer no reprieve, precisely in the way that fetishistic totems cannot. All clear regional distinctions are, even as they are advanced, undercut by the lurking menace of the interdependent dark sadisms of racism and slavery. I argue that it is here that the power of the text resides. Take the passage where Cassy invites Emmeline to imagine the ash-black ground and blackened tree trunk where, we are led to believe, Legree burns his victims alive. As Cassy is preparing Emmeline for this revelation, the latter regards her in a way that can only be described as disconcerting, especially when the reader recalls how Cassy has just threatened Emmeline with a "glittering stiletto" (*UTC* II: 263):

“. . . you'd be tracked by dogs, and brought back, and then – and then –” [said Cassy].

“What would he do?” said the girl, looking with breathless interest into her face.

“What wouldn't he do, you'd better ask,” said Cassy, . . . You wouldn't sleep much if I should tell you things I've seen – things that he tells of, sometimes. . . . I've heard screams here that I haven't been able to get out of my head for weeks There's a place way down by the quarters, where you can see a black, blasted tree, and the ground all covered with black ashes.” (*UTC* II: 223)

Cassy's initial, theatrically hesitant, reluctance almost sadistically lures Emmeline into an unspecified imagining that is not exactly depicted in terms of fear. Emmeline's “breathless interest” is rather a type of perverse fascination, as, I would argue, her subconscious makes a break from its repressed cover. It is even unclear what end of the sado-masochistic spectrum is being patrolled by Emmeline's imagination at this point, though the masochistic might be held to predominate, and indeed this has been foreshadowed fully enough:

“Well, my little dear,” said [Legree], turning to Emmeline, and laying his hand on her shoulder, “we're almost home!”

When Legree scolded and stormed, Emmeline was terrified; but when he laid his hand on her, and spoke as he now did, *she felt as if she had rather he would strike her*. The expression of his eyes made her soul sick, and her flesh creep. Involuntarily she clung closer to the mulatto woman by her side, as if she were her mother. (*UTC* II: 178; my emphasis)

Plainly, Legree nauseates Emmeline in this gestural expression of sexual intent, yet the preference for the infliction of pain remains disconcerting: she is under the rod either way. Following Noble, one might argue that the sexual politics of the book compel the reader to regard Emmeline's later “breathless” fascination with Cassy's story as resulting from a masochistic anticipation of some intensity, but her fascination may in part stem from her imaginings of the tortured pain of Legree's burnt victims. Relatedly, the obvious pleasure with which Cassy narrates her anecdote and the hesitation she introduces into her narration, which perhaps enhance her dramatic performance, do not come across at all conventionally:

“. . . O, Cassy, do tell me what I shall do!”

“What I've done. Do the best you can, – do what you must – make it up in hating and cursing.”

“And I hate it so –”

“You'd better drink,” said Cassy. “I hated it, too; and now I can't live without it. One must have something; – things don't look so dreadful, when you take that.”

“Mother used to tell me never to touch any such thing,” said Emmeline.

“*Mother* told you!” said Cassy, with a thrilling and bitter emphasis on the word mother. “What use is it for mothers to say anything? You are all to be bought and paid for, and your souls belong to whoever gets you. That’s the way it goes. I say, *drink* brandy; drink all you can, and it’ll make things come easier.” (*UTC* II: 223-24)

As Cassy crushes Emmeline’s attempt to once more seek the “illusory comforts of union with the mother” (Greenacre 89), all this prepares us for the zest Cassy brings to the psychic torturing of Legree when he is down, and cumulatively disturbs any simple psycho-sexual distribution along familiar, “natural” gender lines. The sadistic inflictor of pain, Legree, suffers painful psychological torture from Cassy; apparently, his hidden God-given conscience has not been wholly extinguished. But it can well be argued that the Southerner, Cassy, toys with the Northern Legree with relish. Stowe’s intimation, I argue, through such complex, powerful characterizations, is that sado-masochistic distributions must be understood to proceed not simply by way of identifying male as sadist, female as masochist, and southern white as the sole reservoir of sadism, but must in fact be regarded far more anxiously. Things are not simple, as the frequent emphasis in anti-slavery literature on white female cruelty in the treatment of slaves intimates (see, for example, Douglass 36-40). What I am saying is that the text’s themes are rendered much more unstable when its subconscious complications are explored – though how subconscious they are for Stowe is open to debate, since at one point she suggests an awareness of suppression and its psychological consequences: “The psychologist tells us of a state, in which the affections and images of the mind become so dominant and overpowering, that they press into their service the outward imagining” (*UTC* II: 244-45).

Jim O’Loughlin suggests that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* works as “a way of structuring *experience*” (573), but perhaps it rather works as a way of recording the lack of structural fixity to experience, moving beneath any apparently clear structure, which in turn reminds us how power and its operations are not controllable in any safe way, but rather that the power plays of slavery are in fact infected by sado-masochistic dynamics that also complicate other power relations. This is surely what underlies Stowe’s fascination with the adage, “THE POWER OF THE MASTER MUST BE ABSOLUTE, TO

RENDER THE SUBMISSION OF THE SLAVE PERFECT.”¹² The apparently stable dyad, “Free Canada <> Slave South” is not as simple or as stable as it seems in this psycho-sexual underlay, in which seeking power is, in Fink’s formulation, a means to achieve an objective, but also, always power for power’s sake (29).¹³ Racial domination and the fulfillment of sadistic and masochistic impulses become fused.

I have thus argued in this essay that beneath the surface themes which have been frequently, if also expertly, explored by many critics, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be seen to be more contingent and provisional than its reputation suggests, as the anxiety-inducing implications of its sado-masochistic regimes are fully contemplated and confronted. I would argue that Stowe’s text unconsciously adopts its insistence on perverse fetishism because, in the words of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, perversion “is one of the essential ways . . . to push forward the frontiers of what is possible and to unsettle reality” (61). Surely *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s huge sales and enormous impact indicate that it did indeed unsettle reality and push back the frontiers of the possible, *desirably*, as people recalibrated their association with slavery and revisited their own perverse fascinations.¹⁴ Or, in the possibly apocryphal quip of

¹² The adage was formulated by Judge Ruffin in *State v. Mann* (North Carolina, 1829) and quoted by Stowe in both *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (71) and *Dred* (II: 103).

¹³ Ironically, exploring the text’s sado-masochistic underlay brings it thematically closer to Ishmael Reed’s *Flight To Canada* than might seem probable. See the article in this volume on Ishmael Reed.

¹⁴ To some extent, Hildreth was able to produce similar effects:

[Colonel Moore] repeated his commands, with a tone and a look that were frightful. “If you wish to save your own carcass, see that you bring blood at every blow. I’ll teach you—both of you—to trifle with me.”

She now comprehended his brutal purpose;—and giving one look of mingled horror and despair, sunk senseless to the ground. Peter was sent for water. He dashed it in her face, and she soon revived. They placed her on her feet, and colonel Moore again put the whip into her hand and repeated his orders.

She threw it down, as if the touch had stung her; and looking him full in the face, the tears, all the while, streaming from her eyes, she said in a tone firm, but full of entreaty, “Master, he is my husband!”

That word *husband*, seemed to kindle colonel Moore into a new fury, which totally destroyed his self-command. He struck Cassy to the ground with his fists, trampled on her with his feet, and snatching up the whip which she had thrown down, he laid it upon me with such violence, that the lash penetrated my flesh at every blow, and the blood ran trickling down my legs and stood in little puddles at my feet. The torture was too great for human

Abraham Lincoln, on meeting the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "So this is the little lady who made this big war" (qtd. in Gilmore 58). His words, I believe, make far more sense and reveal couched, violent meanings in Stowe's novel if understood within the perverse parameters that I have outlined here.

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endurance; I screamed with agony. "Pshaw," said my executioner, "his noise will disturb the House;"—and drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he thrust it into my mouth, and rammed it down my throat with the butt-end of his whip-handle. Having thus effectually gagged me, he renewed his lashes (Hildreth, *The White Slave; or Memoires of a Fugitive* [65-66]).

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JUTTA ZIMMERMANN

From Roots to Routes

The Dialogic Relation between Alex Haley's Roots (1976) and Lawrence Hill's The Book of Negroes (2007)

I. FROM SLAVERY TO DIASPORA

Although geographically the American South and Canada are at opposite ends of the continent, they are linked in the North American collective memory by the "Underground Railroad," the route and informal network of abolitionists that led fugitive slaves from Southern plantations to settlements in Canada, at the time still a British colony. Non-fictional and fictional accounts of flights from Southern plantations to Canada abound in North American literature, ranging from 19th-century slave narratives and the most popular abolitionist novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to contemporary texts such as Ishmael Reed's piece of postmodern historiographic metafiction, *Flight to Canada*, and Robert Hayden's poem "Runagate Runagate." Even more recently, in *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore alludes to the Underground Railroad when he crosses the U.S.-Canadian border at Windsor, Ontario to find that African Americans perceive race relations in Canada as less strained than in the U.S.

As will be shown in this essay, the historical experience of the Underground Railroad has led to a distinct image of the U.S. as falling short of its democratic ideals and of Canada as the "better America." Starting with novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Alex Haley's *Roots*, the focus of literary representations of slavery by black authors has shifted from claiming participation in the national collective to claiming recognition of cultural difference. The shift has occurred gradually, shaped first by the black nationalism of the 1960s and 70s, and then by the emergence of a black diaspora in the 80s. The concept of a diasporic black consciousness can best be illustrated by a highlighting of the dialogic relation between Alex Haley's foundational novel *Roots* and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, the latter a rewriting, over thirty years after the publication of *Roots*, which gives expression to a diasporic understanding of identity as hybrid and processual rather than homogeneous and stable.

As a Canadian author, Lawrence Hill critically engages with the positive image of Canada as “safe haven” or “paradise” that is present in much of 19th-century abolitionist literature. A good example of this strategic, stereotypical use of Canada as a counter-image to the U.S. is a popular ballad that was sung to the tune of Stephen Foster’s “Oh, Susannah”:

I’m on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The dire effects of slavery,
I can no longer stand.
My soul is vexed within me so,
To think that I’m a slave;
I’ve now resolved to strike the blow
For freedom or the grave.

O righteous Father,
Wilt thou not pity me?
And aid me on to Canada,
Where colored men are free.

I heard Victoria plainly say,
If we would all forsake
Our native land of slavery,
And come across the Lake[,]
That she was standing on the shore,
With arms extended wide,
To give us all a peaceful home,
Beyond the rolling tide.
Farewell, old master!
That’s enough for me –
I’m going straight to Canada
Where colored men are free. . . . (Simpson 6-8)

In granting slaves the freedom that Americans had fought for a few decades earlier, the British colony to the North made use of a powerful political instrument. To radical abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, slavery discredited the nation’s founding document, the Declaration of Independence. For the country to be able to live up to its ideals, slavery would have to be abolished. Since Britain had set the standard with the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and with the refusal to return fugitive slaves to their owners across the border, Sir John Colborne, the Governor of Upper Canada, in 1829, and Canadian politicians, publicists, and academics ever since have used the fact that a portion of Canada’s black population had reached the country via the Underground Railroad to create the image of Canada as the

“better America.” As has been pointed out, among others by African Canadian author and critic George Elliott Clarke, Canadians’ favorable perception of themselves is founded on an all too “cheerful reading of Canadian history”:

Canadians take pride in the fact that their country was the last “stop” on the Underground Railroad. One standard history of the country noted that Canadians can “claim the proud distinction for their flag . . . that it has never floated over legalized slavery.” The claim is literally true, but only because Canada did not yet exist when the enslavement of Native and Africans flourished on what is now Canadian soil. A 1995 poll conducted by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association found that 83 percent of Canadian adults did not know that slavery was practiced in pre-Confederation Canada until 1834. (103)

Over the last five decades, black writers in both the U.S. and Canada have turned to slavery as a literary topic (in contrast to the first half of the 20th century when black authors mostly focused on racial discrimination and segregation in the present). The contexts for the literary exploration of this topic, however, differ in the two countries. In the U.S., black writers turned to slavery in the 1970s, a time when race – like gender – was exposed as socially constructed rather than biologically given. Their premise was that a collective black identity could only be founded on historical experience and on the ways in which this experience had shaped black culture. “Ethnicity” replaces “race” in order to foreground the historical formation of culture and collective identity. Not coincidentally, the term African American emerges at this time, indicating the shift from race to ethnicity. Ron Eyerman points out the central role that slavery plays in this context:

It is important to keep in mind that the notion “African American” is not itself a natural category, but an historically formed collective identity which first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate. It was here, in this identity-formation, that the memory of slavery would be central, not so much as individual experience, but as collective memory. It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one’s identity as an African American, it was why you, an African, were here, in America. It was within this identity that . . . the identification “former slave” or “daughter of slaves” became functionalized and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States. (16-17)

When Barack Obama delivered his famous speech on race during the presidential campaign in 2008, his reference to the slave ancestry of his wife and daughters was an indicator of the role slavery has played in recent decades in constructing a collective African American identity. Whereas 19th-century black authors were motivated by the desire to challenge stereotypical representations of African Americans by the white mainstream and to

demonstrate their equality in relation to their intellectual potential, artistic creativity, or emotional and moral sensitivity, contemporary authors now foreground the cultural difference between African Americans and the white mainstream. Alex Haley's *Roots*, the 1976 best-selling novel that was turned into the most successful TV series ever broadcast in the United States, can justifiably be called the single most influential work in popularizing the idea that African American distinctiveness can be traced back to Africa and to the cultural traditions which the slaves had brought with them to the "New World." While slavery remains crucial, it is no longer perceived as the complete disruption with the African past.

The argument for cultural continuity between Africa and the New World had first been presented by Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past* in 1941. Ever since the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, black authors have made conscious efforts to highlight the continuities between the various African cultures from which slaves were taken and the traditions and practices that have been established by the slaves and their descendants in America.

Paradoxically, when *Roots* first came out, the novel's focus on the African side of African Americans' composite identity led to it being perceived as typically American. In his 1976 review for the *New York Times* entitled "How One Black Man Came to Be an American," James Baldwin reads *Roots* as a symptom of "the beginning of the end of the black diaspora" (1976). Not only have blacks, in Baldwin's opinion, become an integral part of America and the West, since the Civil Rights Movement they also speak with heightened moral authority. The subtitle of Haley's novel, *The Saga of an American Family*, indicates the novel's claim to be representative of the American nation. In this context, it is significant that *Roots* – in spite of the fact that the author explicitly thematizes his upbringing in Kentucky and the novel, for the most part, is a portrayal of the Southern plantation system – is hardly ever discussed in the context of Southern literature. Baldwin's comment accounts for this fact. The Civil Rights Movement and the black nationalism of the 1960s, which aimed at decolonizing the United States, had put an end to the practice of delegating responsibility for slavery and racial conflicts to the American South. In this respect, *Roots* has performed important cultural work: "Haley's monumental achievement helped convince the nation that the black story is the American story," states Michael Eric Dyson in his introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition. The "nationalization" of the slavery experience, however, led to severe criticism and, according to David Chioni Moore, to the novel's "critical non-existence":

[M]any on the Left . . . have been uncomfortable with the unchallenging character of the book's politics: for though *Roots's* white characters are almost without exception villainous, they are all also, without *any* exception dead. *Roots* situates American crimes of race all comfortably in the past, and when the family's narrative stops in about 1921, one is left with an American success story in the classic mold. (8)

While the 30th anniversary of *Roots* in 2006 gave critics an occasion to assess the novel's impact on American culture, Canadian author Lawrence Hill set out to write a novel that is clearly modelled on *Roots*, yet diverts from it in crucial points. *The Book of Negroes*, published in 2007, presents a female protagonist who is irrevocably changed by the Middle Passage and slavery yet who creatively translates her African heritage to her New World environment and who realizes that her experience sets her apart from both mainstream North American culture – in both the U.S. and Canada – and from the homeland in Africa. Hill's critical rewriting of *Roots* is inspired by recent theoretical works on the black diaspora. The two novels represent distinct stages in the history of the African diaspora in the New World. Alex Haley's *Roots* marks both the culmination and the demise of black cultural nationalism. While the "roots" metaphor firmly grounds the novel in the tradition of African American nationalism and Pan-Africanism, its focus on the cultural continuity between African and African American cultures points towards a new understanding of the African diaspora that emerged in the 1980s. David Moore captures the emergent discourse in *Roots*: "Alex Haley's *Roots* profoundly argues, in some sense against itself, that we need to talk not about *roots* but about *routes*: trajectories, paths, interactions, links" (21). Thirty-one years after *Roots*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* illustrates this new discourse which substitutes for a negative image of the diaspora (as a community that suffers from the consequences of its dispersal) one that celebrates the effects of dispersal. Stuart Hall defines the new understanding of "diaspora identities" thus:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (401-02)

The intertextual relationship between the two novels can be captured by taking recourse to Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism," as Tzvetan Todorov has described it:

After Adam, there are no nameless objects nor any unused words. Intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place. This is true not only of literature but of all discourse, and Bakhtin finds himself forced to sketch out a new interpretation of culture: culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory (the commonplaces and stereotypes just as much as the exceptional words), discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself. (x)

The dialogue which the two novels engage in is more than just an isolated event or a relation between two individual texts. Both novels take part in the larger project of inventing and reinventing a collective black identity under the conditions of what cultural critics refer to as “transnationalism.” Both novels, however, in spite of their involvement in the diaspora discourse, are also part of their respective national discourses on collective memory and diversity management.

In rewriting *Roots*, Hill not only tries to overcome essentialist notions of race and nation that are at work in Haley’s novel but also challenges the Canadian national discourse which “projects [blackness] . . . onto that country conveniently located just south” [the geographical direction is significant here, as a similar phenomenon can be observed in the United States where the South has also served as a foil onto which to project blackness] (Harris 367). Moreover, *The Book of Negroes* positions itself in relation to the diaspora discourse that has emerged since the 1970s. As I will show, the novel illustrates the theoretical concept of the African diaspora that was introduced in the 1980s. The title for this essay, “From Roots to Routes,” is taken from Paul Gilroy’s seminal study in the field, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy uses the two terms as shorthand for the constructivist turn of the 1970s and 80s:

Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes. (19)

Gilroy chooses the spatial metaphor of the black Atlantic to draw attention to the movements and the cultural contacts that led to the emergence of hybrid identities and hybrid cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. The main target of Gilroy’s critique is the “reductive, essentialist understanding of ethnic and national difference which operates through an absolute sense of culture so powerful that it is capable of separating people off from each other and diverting them into social and historical locations that are understood to be mutually impermeable and incommensurable” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 65).

Organicist images such as the tree with its roots, stem, and branches or its appeals to kinship or family give expression of *Roots*' essentialist view of culture. In contrast, the metaphor of the Black Atlantic conveys the idea of the fluidity of cultures. The term 'diaspora' is used in opposition to 'ethnicity' or 'nation,' concepts that are usually correlated with a specific territory. In his essay collection *Routes*, James Clifford defines "diasporic cultural forms" by taking recourse to both roots and routes:

They are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms. Diaspora is different from travel . . . in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home. . . . Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (251)

[T]he term 'diaspora' is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement. (252)

The constitutive features of diasporic formations are what Clifford calls "travel" and "translation": movement and contact lead to continuous acts of translating concepts from one culture to another. Even the transatlantic slave trade, the most violent displacement of people, did not lead to the eradication of African cultures, a position that, for example, African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had taken in the 1930s. Rather, it "has resulted," as Clifford suggests, "in a range of interconnected black cultures: African American, Afro-Caribbean, British, and South American" (36).

When Clifford reintroduces the root metaphor, he foregrounds the processes by which collective identities are constructed and, more importantly, points to the ambivalence that marks the position of difference that diasporic people occupy: deficits in the present are often projected onto a past and an imaginary homeland. As James T. Campbell concludes in his study on *Middle Passages*: "Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society" (xxiv). Against the backdrop of these theoretical assumptions about the African diaspora, *Roots*' intertextual relationship with *The Book of Negroes* can be characterized along the lines of Todorov's remarks on Bakhtin – as a discourse in dialogue "with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates". *Roots* has triggered a new diasporic thinking that

challenges the essentialist and nationalist identity conception on which Haley's novel is based.

II. *ROOTS* AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Alex Haley's *Roots* marks a turning-point in the collective identity of African Americans. It is the culmination of black cultural nationalism which emerged in the 1960s and was inspired by struggles for independence and decolonization in former African colonies. It was in this context that the diaspora concept first gained currency. German ethnographer Hauke Dorsch defines the rationale of those who introduced the term as follows:

Africans should no longer be represented as passive victims of proselytising, slavery, and colonialism but rather as agents who actively shape their world through resistance, escape, opposition but also cooperation and the reinvention of African cultures in the diaspora. (33; my own translation)

No other statement could serve better to characterize *Roots*. Haley's project, however, is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, the roots metaphor, a set piece of nationalist discourse like the family or the tree, suggests that cultural identity is biologically inherited. The novel's plot structure, which presents the history of several generations starting with the African Kunta Kinte and ending with Alex Haley in the present, foregrounds the biological continuity between the African ancestor and his American descendants. On the other hand, the novel's authorial narrator takes on the role of ethnographer, putting the focus on the cultural practices – in particular storytelling – by which the African tradition is kept alive.

When representing the early life of Kunta Kinte in his native village Juffure in Gambia, Haley takes great efforts to get across the cultural otherness of the Africans. The use of a great number of African words, among them "toubab" for "white person," and metaphorical expressions that refer to all those objects with which a member of the Mandinka tribe would not be familiar at the time, among them "a heavy metal stick with a whole in the end" for a gun or "big canoe" for sailing ship, indicate an African perspective. The prologue of the popular TV series (1977) refers to Kunta Kinte's removal as a journey that takes him from "primitive Africa" to the Old South. Critics have accused Haley of having misrepresented the conditions in Africa at the time. The most obvious distortion is, of course, that Haley does not mention the degree to which Africans were involved in the slave trade. Yet, while

Kunta Kinte is portrayed as naïve and innocent, a noble savage, Haley endows this character with an awareness not only of a tribal but also of a national affiliation. At one point, Young Kunta Kinte reflects on the widening circles he is part of, “his mates, his village, his tribe, his Africa” (120). The notion of Africa as an imagined community, however, elides the diversity of African peoples and is, as James T. Campbell argues, “itself an outgrowth of the slave trade, an artifact of the centuries-long encounter between Africa and the West. Such a conception would have made little sense to [18th-century Africans who were taken captive and shipped to the New World]” (10). But Haley’s novel does in fact construct such a collective African identity, and its representation of the Middle Passage illustrates this very process:

Then, after a while, a clear voice called out in Mandinka, “Share his pain! We must be in this place as one village!

. . . for the first time since they had been captured and thrown in chains, it was as if there was among the men a sense of being together. (Haley 183)

From this moment on, a collective African identity is constituted by “othering,” i.e., by opposing African cultural practices to American ones. Kunta Kinte is equipped with the ethnographic insights gained by anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits. His reflections provide instances of African cultural survival similar to the ones that Herskovits provided in his study *The Myth of Africa*:

Ignorant as they were, some of the things they did were purely African, and he could tell that they were totally unaware of it themselves. For one thing, he had heard all his life the very same sounds of exclamation, accompanied by the very same hand gestures and facial expressions. And the way these blacks moved their bodies was also identical. No less so was the way these blacks laughed when they were among themselves – with their whole bodies, just like the people of Juffure. (Haley 243)

Even at moments of intense crisis – for example, when Kunta Kinte is separated from his daughter, who is sold to another plantation – Kunta Kinte is presented as consciously reflecting his cultural otherness: “As if Kunta were sleepwalking, he came crippling slowly back up the driveway – when an African remembrance flashed into his mind. . . .” (Haley 453). Arguably, the detailed ethnographic description of cultural practices is an expression of what Gilroy criticizes as an “absolute sense of culture so powerful that it is capable of separating people off from each other and diverting them into social and historical locations that are understood to be mutually impermeable and incommensurable” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 65).

Kunta Kinte's resistance to acculturation highlights the strict boundaries between cultures and people. Throughout his time in the American South, the protagonist alternates between his determination to retain his pure African identity while keeping himself apart from the American-born slaves and his fear of acculturation against his will: "Indeed, by now – Kunta grimly faced it – he even *thought* in the toubab tongue. In countless things he did as well as said and thought, his Mandinka ways had slowly been replaced by those of the blacks he had been among" (Haley 328). And yet, his conflict is ultimately resolved when he comes to know some of the slaves more intimately and realizes that he had misjudged their feelings towards slavery: "it pained him to think how grievously he had underestimated . . . the other blacks. Though they never showed it except to those they loved, . . . he realized at last that they felt – and hated – no less than he the oppressiveness under which they all lived" (Haley 359). Cultural essentialism – evident in phrases such as "Kunta felt African pumping in his veins – and from him flowing into the child, the flesh of him and Bell" (Haley 368) – is functionalized by Haley in order to counter white representations of passive and docile slaves.

However, there are also forces that work against the predominant essentialist ideology. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson draws attention to the way in which both individuals and nations construct their identity through narrative. In contrast to individual biographies that have a beginning and end, a nation's biography, according to Anderson, needs to be written "up time," that is starting "from an originary present" moving backwards in time (305). *Roots* illustrates how the process of invention is naturalized by eliding the status of the narrator's speech as discourse. Yet, at least on the plot level, the invented character of the collective African identity is explicitly thematized, in particular once Kunta Kinte is removed from the plot after the separation from his daughter Kizzy. When Kizzy gives birth to a son, Chicken George, after she was raped by her white master, she consciously constructs the genealogy of her child: "Kizzy decided that however base her baby's origins, however light his color, whatever the name the massa forced upon him, she would never regard him as other than the grandson of an African" (Haley 465). Haley's choice to trace Kizzy's son's ancestry to one individual, Kunta Kinte, and to neglect Chicken George's 255 other ancestors, who are equally related to him, serves the same purpose, namely to create a homogeneous cultural tradition. In choosing Kunta Kinte as the one

ancestor Haley remains caught in the racist ideology manifested, for example, in the one-drop rule that identified as black anyone with African ancestry.

However, the contradictory forces also at work in the novel indicate that racial essentialism is no longer tenable. David Chioni Moore argues convincingly that *Roots* points towards a future in which the idea of a bounded, homogeneous collective identity needs to be given up:

The recovery of a root – as in Haley’s *Roots* – serves an especially important function when a major chunk of the tangle of one’s identity has been either erased or systematically denigrated, or, in the case of Haley and his primary readers, both. Yet, once that origin is recovered, that nobility restored, the next important, and I would argue, moral task is to recognize that purities can only ever be tentative – that all languages are Creole, . . . that human evolution is . . . interlinking. (21)

III. *THE BOOK OF NEGROES*: A DOCUMENT OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* realizes the shift from roots to routes that is only emergent in *Roots*. “We are travelling peoples” (301, 404) is a statement that the protagonist Aminata Diallo makes twice in the novel, thereby putting Gilroy’s and Clifford’s argument for the centrality of movement in the form of a memorable catch-phrase. Hill’s novel displays enough similarities with *Roots* to throw the contrasts into sharp relief. Like *Roots*, *The Book of Negroes* presents the narrative of a young African who is snatched by slave-traders and displaced to the American South. That Lawrence Hill chooses a female protagonist illustrates the heterogeneity of the diaspora: there are fault lines besides race or ethnicity – one of them is gender. This specific focus allows the author, for example, to represent a critical view of the female initiation rites such as circumcision, thereby avoiding the homogenization of African tribal communities. By using the young Aminata Diallo as focalizer, the novel can present the practice from two points of view, the first one embodying the dominant, the second one expressing the dissenting view:

Mama began to speak to me about how my body would change. I would soon start bleeding, she said, and around that time some women would work with her to perform a little ritual on me. I wanted to know more about that ritual. All girls have it done when they are ready to become women, she said. When I pressed for details, Mama said part of my womanhood was to be cut off so that I would be considered clean and pure and ready for marriage. I was none too impressed by this, and informed her that I was in no hurry to marry and would be declining the treatment. . . . (Hill 15)

In the following, the representation of this discussion shifts from indirect speech to direct speech, thereby foregrounding the clash of the opinions, that of Aminata, which is identical with the Western human rights discourse, in particular the right to physical integrity, and, conversely, that of her mother, which implies a competing right to cultural integrity:

“Did they do this to you?” I asked her.

“Of course,” she said, “or your father would never have married me.”

“Did it hurt?”

“More than childbirth, but it didn’t last long. It is just a little correction.”

“But I have done nothing wrong, so I am in no need of correction,” I said. Mama simply laughed, so I tried another approach. “Some of the girls told me that Salima in the next village died last year, when they were doing that thing to her.”

“Who told you that?”

“Never mind,” I said, employing one of her expressions. “But is it true?”

“The woman who worked on Salima was a fool. She was untrained, and she tried too much. I’ll take care of you when the time comes.”

We let the matter drop, and never had the chance to discuss it again. (Hill 15-16)

As is the case with Haley’s construction of a collective African identity in *Roots*, this conversation between mother and daughter is clearly an anachronism that reflects on today’s debates about female circumcision rather than on 18th-century reality. The main function of this anachronism is to represent African cultures as internally heterogeneous and diverse rather than as fixed and stable entities.

The diversification of black experience also governs the parts set in America. In contrast to *Roots*, Aminata Diallo’s journey in *The Book of Negroes* does not end in the American South. During the Revolutionary War the protagonist accompanies her master, a Jewish merchant, to New York where she escapes and starts working for the British Army. After the British defeat she is among the black loyalists who are taken to Nova Scotia. The title, *The Book of Negroes*, refers to the historical ledger in which the names of the black loyalists were listed. In Birchtown, Nova Scotia, however, none of the promises made by the British are kept. The black community is segregated from the white settlement, the blacks are resented because they compete for the little work there is. Aminata witnesses a race riot and is separated from a child of hers for the second time. Disillusioned, she joins a group of colonists who, under the leadership of British abolitionist John Clarkson, are

taken to Sierra Leone, a British colony, designed to relieve Britain of the blacks who had been taken from the American colonies. In Africa, however, her dream of going home is shattered. The homeland, which had been omnipresent in Aminata's thoughts, has become an imaginary one, incompatible with reality. Threatened to be re-enslaved by African traders, Aminata Diallo accepts Clarkson's invitation to accompany him to London and to become active in the Abolitionist Movement.

Compared with *Roots*, a number of significant changes suggest Hill's familiarity with the recent theoretical works on the diaspora. In *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata Diallo's journeys exemplify the criss-crossing of the Atlantic, which Gilroy uses as metaphor for the cultural hybridization that the slave trade effected. Her return to Africa and the disillusionment that follows illustrate Gilroy's most crucial point about the African diaspora: that in the New World Africans are subjected to and participate in modernity. When Alex Haley chooses for Kunta Kinte to be a Muslim, this choice reflects the militant attitude of black nationalism in the 1960s that looked upon Christianity as an instrument of oppression. In Hill's case, the same choice seems to be motivated by a desire to deconstruct the dichotomy of primitive and civilized, one which is so pervasive in that Western discourse about Africa that represents Africans as modernity's other. The deconstruction of these binaries is most obvious in the climactic scene of the novel after Aminata realizes that the man who is supposed to take her to her native village will sell her back into slavery.

[A]fter I heard Allesane's words, I felt no more longing for Bayo – only a determination to stay free. . . . Bayo I could live without. But for freedom, I would die. (Hill 442)

Freedom, the political ideal of the European Enlightenment that inspired the American Revolution, is here invoked by a slave for whom the word has a meaning quite different from the one white Americans attribute to it. At the outbreak of the Revolution, Aminata – then still in Charleston – had reflected on different meanings attached to the terms slavery and liberty:

White people in the markets mumbled to each other about being enslaved by the King of England, but I had stopped listening to their complaints. *Liberty to the Americans. Down with slavery.* They weren't talking about the slavery I knew or the liberty I wanted, and it all seemed ludicrous to me. (Hill 228)

Significantly, Aminata makes a distinction between "freedom," a term that seems to have an existential meaning, and "liberty," a term that is bound to a specific historical context, the American Revolution.

While Lawrence Hill uses a richly metaphorical style in order to express the particularity of Aminata's African world view, he simultaneously foregrounds the acts of translation that are constantly performed in cultural contact zones. This focus on cultural change through contact distinguishes *The Book of Negroes* from *Roots*. Aminata tells her own story in retrospect. The novel proceeds on two levels that alternate with each other. In the present, Aminata Diallo writes her life story in order to support the British abolitionists' initiative to put an end to the slave trade. The life story itself is presented in chronological order so as to foreground the fact that it is the result of Aminata's retrospective view. The use of the English language in this context is performative; it constitutes an act of translation, a fusion of perspectives. While Hill's representation of the Middle Passage echoes *Roots* in its use of figurative language to represent objects that are unknown to Aminata, it significantly differs from *Roots* in that the use of concrete and sensual images still characterizes the language of the narrating I when she composes her life story. The opening passage illustrates the particularity of Aminata's style, which is both metaphorical and colloquial. Some of the statements sound familiar enough to qualify as proverbs, though they are not:

I seem to have trouble dying. By all rights, I should not have lived this long. But I still smell trouble riding on any wind, just as surely as I could tell you whether it is a stew of chicken necks or pigs' feet bubbling in the iron pot on the fire. And my ears still work just as good as a hound dog's. People assume that just because you don't stand as straight as a sapling, you're deaf. Or that your mind is like pumpkin mush. (Hill 1)

Whereas in *Roots* the authorial narrator's use of English contradicts the novel's overt attempt at establishing and policing the boundaries between cultures, the narrator's discourse in *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds what Todorov metaphorically refers to "as a single voice . . . blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place" (x). What takes place in Aminata Diallo's discourse is an act of translation.

Due to the striking parallels between Haley's *Roots* and Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, the differences are thrown into stark relief. Haley's novel *Roots* has a nationalist agenda; it tries to define an African identity by taking recourse to biological inheritance. At the same time, however, the novel foregrounds the cultural practices that slaves held on to in the "New World" and thus points towards the concept of the black diaspora that emerged in the 1980s and 90s. Moreover, the novel has performed important cultural work within the U.S. in that it has represented slavery as a national issue, or as Gilroy has shown, as an integral part of modernity. Slavery can no longer be projected onto the South as the remnant of European feudalism in the "New

World.” Lawrence Hill accomplishes a similar task for Canada: Canadians can no longer hold on to the myth that, in contrast to the U.S., they never had a race problem. The part of the novel set in Nova Scotia does away with the image of Canada that was predominant in 19th-century abolitionist fiction. At the same time that Hill embraces the concept of the diaspora as sketched out by Gilroy, Clifford, and others, he also points at the blind spot in the Black Atlantic, as Canada is hardly ever mentioned in this context. The transnational and transcultural perspective implied by the concept of the Black Atlantic reveals that close attention needs to be paid to the very specific cultural and historical location in which a voice is raised to make itself heard in a choir of voices. And in this context, national discourse still plays a prominent role, as both *Roots* and *The Book of Negroes* indicate (see Mayer 14).

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HANS BAK

Flights to Canada

Jacob Lawrence, Ishmael Reed, and Lawrence Hill

Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind. (Ishmael Reed)

We are traveling peoples . . . all of us. (Lawrence Hill)

In this essay I compare and contrast the visual and literary representations of Canada as the imagined utopia at the end of the exilic, diasporic experience of the flight from slavery in the works of three contemporary North-American artists: (a) *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1967), a narrative series of paintings by African American artist Jacob Lawrence, intended as a tribute, conceived in the spirit of the Civil Rights movement, to the life and work of Harriet Tubman and her efforts to help runaway slaves escape to “the promised land” of Canada; (b) *Flight to Canada* (1976), a quirky and ironic post-modern exploration of Canada as a space of otherness (heterotopia) through a revisiting of the historical genre of the slave narrative, by African American novelist Ishmael Reed; and (c) *The Book of Negroes* (2007) by Canadian author Lawrence Hill, the widely praised account of the exilic passage from Africa to South Carolina to Nova Scotia (and back to Africa) of the female slave Aminata Diallo. Focusing on the shifting representations of the “flight to Canada” motif I will explore the tensions between (nostalgia for) an original homeland (Africa, the American South) and an “imagined community” in exile (Canada). In what follows I propose to read the three texts – one visual, two literary; two American, one Canadian – as an intertextual triptych of different but interrelated modes of “cultural circulation,” of revisiting the history of slavery and revising the motifs of exile and return, diaspora and homecoming.

I. JACOB LAWRENCE, *HARRIET AND THE PROMISED LAND* (1967; 1993)

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was one of the earliest African American artists to gain support from mainstream art museums and patronage outside of the black community during an era of “legalized and institutionalized segregation” – as early as 1941 he exhibited side by side with established modernists such as Stuart Davis, John Marin, Charles Sheeler and Ben Shahn

(Nesbett & DuBois 11). It signaled the first time an African American artist was able to bridge the hitherto separate art worlds of Uptown Harlem and the established white avant-garde modernist galleries Downtown (Nesbett & DuBois 11; King-Hammond). Committed to a modernist aesthetics, Lawrence nevertheless developed a mode of painting that spoke to social and political issues concerning race. He maintained his belief in art as a communicative medium that could/should speak to as wide an audience as possible and that could have an educational function in giving shape to and helping to preserve collective African American (and ultimately American) cultural memory. It yielded a combination of – or perhaps, a cultural compromise between – modernism and humanism that earned Lawrence the dubious honor (mostly by white art critics) of being dubbed a “modern primitive” (LeFalle-Collins 121). Overtly or covertly, an element of social protest against a culture riveted with racism and prejudice is always palpable on, or closely under, the surface of his work. The effect has been to subvert the stereotypical images and representations of African American experience and to give eloquent and poignant expression, as if in visual counterpoint to the blues, to the pain and grief resonating through the black experience in the US.

Lawrence’s was above all a democratic and accessible art, in its use of simple materials, but also in its style and technique. Seeking to mediate high-modernist elements with a broad mass-appeal, he walked a careful line between abstract and figurative art. As he himself observed in 1945: “My work is abstract in the sense of having been designed and composed but it is not abstract in the sense of having no human content” (qtd. in LeFalle-Collins 123). His art always contains a recognizable representation of moments from the black experience that permitted easy identification on the part of black spectators. To this purpose, using seemingly limited means (mostly water-based paints on hardboard or paper), Lawrence painted numerous scenes from African American daily life that illustrated the effects of racism and bigotry on the black community, in Harlem and beyond – from street scenes to game playing in the black urban ghettos, from women’s domestic labor to factory life, education, and political revolt. Collectively, such images amount to a pictorial “imagined community,” a recuperated homeland-in-art.

Lawrence’s imaginative vision was unmistakably shaped by the social consciousness of the Great Depression years. Like many others he participated in FDR’s New Deal Federal art projects and, like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, he was courted by (but never joined) the Communist Party. He early absorbed the dominant ethos and aesthetics of social realism, as

evidenced by the many WPA murals, documentary photography, and the work of Mexican painters like Diego Rivera, whom he singled out as an early influence (King-Hammond 67-96). But Lawrence's work fused the social awareness of 1930s America with the ebullient and emancipated spirit of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, an eruption of black pride and racial self-awareness, which, in literature, art and music, led to the celebration of the essential contribution made by blacks to American culture through the centuries. Its spirit is perhaps best captured by a famous quote from Langston Hughes:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 1926)

Recent revisionist scholars have shown that American modernism in art and literature needs to be rethought as in essence a phenomenon in black-and-white (Hutchinson; Sanders) and that the "Jazz Age," even though the label originated with – and was embodied by – a white modernist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, would have been unthinkable without the input of African American art and music. It is this cultural mood and moment (of regained and rediscovered racial pride), carried over into the 1930s, which formed the launching pad for Lawrence's artistic career. Many of the themes of his work had been part of Harlem Renaissance literature in the 1920s (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay); through Lawrence they now (belatedly) entered the world of African American art.

Lawrence, whose parents had separated when he was about seven, moved to Harlem with his mother in 1930. He dropped out of high school in 1934, and received no formal training in art, beyond what he learned at the Utopia Children's Settlement House and the WPA Harlem Art Workshop, at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. In Harlem he listened to oral stories about the African American past and to lectures on African American history and culture at the 135th Street Library. As he later recalled, he was eager to fill in the gaps in his historical knowledge of his own people:

I've always been interested in history, but they never taught Negro history in the public schools. . . . I don't see how a history of the United States can be written honestly without including the Negro. I didn't do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe [the

stories of black people under slavery] tie up with the Negro today. We don't have a physical slavery, but an economic slavery. If these people, who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer their slavery, we certainly can do the same thing. (qtd. in LeFalle-Collins 123)

He was inspired by some of these lectures to do his own research into history, among others through voracious reading at the Schomburg Library. His explorations set off an astounding outburst of productivity: in a mere five years (1936-1941), between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four, he painted over 170 panels and paintings on interrelated themes spanning nearly two hundred years of African American history, grouped in five large-scale narrative sequences: *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (42 paintings, 1936-1938), which celebrates L'Ouverture's role in establishing the first black republic in Haiti; *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (32 panels, 1938-1939); *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (31 panels, 1939-1940); *The Life of John Brown* (22 paintings, 1941); and the series that brought him mainstream recognition, *The Migration of the Negro* (60 panels, 1940-1941), on the grand exodus of African Americans from the diaspora of the impoverished rural and prejudice-ridden American South to the imagined community of the congested ghetto-like neighborhoods of the big industrial cities in the North.

Lawrence's narrative sequences offered representations of iconic figures and crucial episodes from African American history which had been neglected or suppressed in official cultural historiography, yet which had been formative in shaping and performing the cultural memory of the collective African American experience in the US (and by extension of Americans at large). As *Art Digest* put it in 1974: Lawrence "has put back into painting everything that recent history has concentrated on removing" (Nesbett & DuBois 53). If some of these black cultural heroes had been lionized in poems and essays of the Harlem Renaissance, mostly these stories had been kept out of the reach of the masses of black people (as Lawrence recalled, they were not taught in public schools), and many of them were not well known (if they were known at all) outside of African American communities. Lawrence's narrative paintings thus worked as an antidote to cultural amnesia and became an important educational resource for teaching black (and white) children about their own cultural history.

Especially in his narrative sequences, the element of story (rooted in an African American tradition of oral storytelling) ensures both communication and identification: the captions are elaborate, factual, descriptive, narrative, but also sober, plain, restrained. Even as they relate to instances of rabid in-

justice and racial violence and oppression, they are rarely charged with outrage or anger. The effect is that the images serve as illustrations to a story (rather than vice versa), as in comic strips or, more poignantly, medieval frescoes on saints' lives, or stations of the cross depicting, in narrative form, the stages of Christ's progression to crucifixion. As Patricia Hills has convincingly demonstrated, Lawrence in the late 1930s was casting himself in the role of the "pictorial griot" of the polyphonic Harlem community in which he was growing to personal and artistic maturity. In his narrative series of paintings he had made it his mission to translate the life stories of African American culture heroes (Toussaint L'Ouverture, Douglass, Tubman) as he had absorbed them in the stories of the Harlem community into a series of images (Hills 42), hoping to "bring them into the present to give courage and inspiration to his community" (Hills 43). Thus, by forging and articulating a collective cultural memory Lawrence was helping to create a sense of home and belonging that could function as a redemptive counterpoint to a historical experience of exile and diaspora.

In *The Life of Harriet Tubman* Lawrence celebrated Tubman as an American heroine of epic proportions. In this he was following the example of Aaron Douglas, whose Harriet Tubman mural had been reproduced in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* in January 1932: "I used Harriet Tubman [wrote Douglas] to idealize a superior type of Negro womanhood. . . . I depict her as a heroic leader breaking the shackles of bondage and pressing on toward a new day" (qtd. in Hills 44). Such religious rhetoric fitted Tubman's story – she presumably had visions and long communications with God – and is also echoed in several panels: in panel 2 a black man, scarred by whip lashes, hangs like a crucified Christ; the North Star figures as a "guiding" light in several of Lawrence's panels (10, 11, 12, 15, 18 and possibly 31); at least two panels (28, 29) "feature Tubman in tableaux suggestive of Christian iconography" (Hills 57); and the final panel features a river evocative of the biblical River Jordan that was crossed by the Jews on their way to the Promised Land, an image echoed in many slave songs and spirituals. Though *Life* evokes the Christian inspiration of Tubman's efforts to liberate her people, nonetheless the focus of the series is on the searing pain and suffering of slavery as the principal impetus to Tubman's subsequent heroism. The "realism" of Tubman's slavery experience is underlined by quotations from public figures (Henry Ward Beecher, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln) and elaborately descriptive captions adapted from authentic historical sources which Lawrence had consulted in the Schomburg Library (see Hills 45, passim). Both types of captions serve to underline the historical and

larger-than-personal significance of Tubman's efforts. Canada is explicitly mentioned (and snowily depicted) as the ultimate destination of the flight into freedom, in particular after the passing of the Fugitive Slave law of 1850 (panel 20). And the caption of panel 23, taken from a song called "I'm on the Way to Canada" (Hills 57), explicitly represents the border with Canada as "the line" to be crossed into freedom: "The hounds are baying on my track,/ Old master comes behind,/ Resolved that he will bring me back,/ Before I cross the line." Yet in the entire series Canada is not given much symbolic or mythologized weight as a place of redemption or "promised land" – the final panel of *Life* evokes Tubman's death in Auburn, in upper New York State, and ends with a Calvary-like commemoration of her death in the form of a "memorial tablet of bronze."

In 1967, Lawrence revisited the life story of Harriet Tubman in a series of seventeen paintings entitled *Harriet and the Promised Land*. Here we encounter not only a shift in technique – from the synthesis of an angular realism with cubist abstraction which made the *Life* series so forcefully expressive, to a softer mode of patchwork-color realism befitting a more consoling vision – we also meet with a different Harriet Tubman and a different representation of Canada. Thus, in *Life*, we are presented with a Harriet Tubman who may carry the biblical nickname "Moses," but who is realistically described as "huge, deepest ebony, muscled as a giant, with a small close-curved head and anguished eyes" (panel 25). Her figure haunts slave masters "Like a half-crazed sibylline creature . . . stealing down in the night to lead a stricken people to freedom" (panel 17). Also, her service in the cause of the Union – during the Civil War she acts as a hospital nurse curing soldiers of "some malignant disease" (panel 29) – is highlighted (in *Harriet and the Promised Land*, by contrast, the Civil War is conspicuously absent). Whereas the captions in *Life* do not in any way downplay the searing pain, cruelty, and humiliation of the slavery experience which motivated Tubman (panels 5, 6, 8, 9), in *Harriet and the Promised Land* the captions are softened, and the emphasis is unmistakably on the redemptive vision of hope and "promise" embodied by Canada.

Harriet and the Promised Land was first published in 1968, the year following its production, on the upswing of the Civil Rights Movement, and was reissued in 1993 to become a much-used educational tool in elementary schools. It was first of all intended as a tribute – emphatically pitched to an audience of children – to one of America's great women, a throwback to the many stories Lawrence had heard growing up as a young boy in Harlem,

from his mother and his teachers, about “the drama and the exploits” of Harriet Tubman, who risked life and livelihood by making nineteen trips from South to North, leading over three hundred blacks to “the promised land” of Canada, “always following the North Star until she and the other runaway slaves reached the vast snowy fields of Canada.” In paying tribute to Tubman, Lawrence wrote in a 1992 foreword, he wanted to implicitly honor the women in his life to whom he owed most – his late mother and his wife – and who enabled him “to express through the elements of color, line, texture, shape and value the wisdom of an almighty God” (Lawrence 1997, n. p.).

In both word and image the biblical overtones are likewise dominant in the 1967 narrative series: as befits a Christian icon, Tubman becomes a Moses-like leader of her people’s exodus from bondage to freedom. Her birth is imagined as a nativity scene, with a black female Jesus being born in slavery in a manger-shaped crib, watched over by an admiring and happy Mary and Joseph, and the North Star (a near-synonym of the Star of David) already presiding (panel 1). Harriet (dressed in impeccable, redemptive white) grows up amidst the harsh realities of a life in bondage: “Work for your master/ From your cradle/ to your grave” (panel 2). As a young girl she takes care of white children against the background of a tree whose leaves bear an uncanny resemblance to cotton blossoms (panel 3). In panel 4 the North Star is visible as young Harriet listens to her mother tell the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. As Harriet grows into adulthood, her prayerful life is marked by the ruthless exploitation of slave labor (panels 6, 7). But from the moment she is given the “sign” (panel 8), the North Star will beckon her on as a guide to salvation and redemption, the symbol of the promise of freedom in Canada – enabling the runaway slaves who follow Harriet to survive the dangers of the wilderness (snake, owl) and the brutal pursuit of slave catchers and bloodhounds, as Harriet urges them to persist through the sheer force of her belief in Christ (panels 9, 10, 11). As they hide in stations on the Underground Railroad, Harriet’s companions-in-flight are fed by white abolitionists and Harriet’s feet are washed by a white man, much like Mary washed Jesus’ feet when he and his disciples ate at the Pharisee’s house (panel 13). Whites, also, give Harriet protection and coverage so she can travel in safety by day (panel 14), and lead her people across wind-swept stretches of snow and ice toward Canada, with always and infallibly the North Star pointing the way (panel 15). At moments of doubt and despondency Harriet’s faith is rewarded: in an image that suggests Elisha riding the chariot of fire into heaven, the Lord sends a chariot – pulled by a white horse (panel 16) – to

finally bring Harriet and her runaway slaves to “The Promised Land” of freedom in Canada, where children come running with flowers to welcome them home (panel 17).

Lawrence’s vision in *Harriet and the Promised Land* is one of unblemished and unshaded heroism. By presenting Harriet Tubman through analogies to Elisha, Moses, and Christ, Lawrence makes her into a prophet and messiah, an icon of suffering, endurance, courage, sacrifice and faith. Canada is represented less as a real place than as symbolic wish-fulfillment, the biblical promise of freedom redeemed, the paradise-like destiny of an imagined home – a dream that it is possible to find release from exile and diaspora, to find a site of home and belonging, to cross not just the geographical line into freedom, but perhaps also the color line. The latter is suggested by a painting Lawrence produced in 1967, just before but not formally a part of the Harriet series, entitled “Over the Line.”

Lawrence’s 1967 representation of Canada stays uncannily close in spirit to the way Canada was represented in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). As David Staines has observed in his illuminating *Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century’s End* (1995), “For Stowe, Canada is the alternative to the United States, a better land where freedom and prosperity are available to all races. More mythic than real, it functions as an ideal which underlines the social injustices of its southern neighbour” (45). For African Americans in Stowe’s novel Canada is “the New Jerusalem, the land of Canaan . . . the earthly embodiment of the freedom promised in the Bible” (45). Similarly drenched in biblical allusion, Lawrence’s visual representation of Canada thus echoes Stowe’s understanding of Canada as a mythic place, a recouped imagined homeland, an “Elysium of romance” intended as “a forceful repudiation of her own country” (46). Yet it gains enhanced poignancy from being read in the social and political context of its time: first published in 1968, Lawrence’s panels articulate *both* a tribute to a heroic anti-slavery champion *and* a searing reminder of the historical analogies between Tubman’s endeavors and the Civil Rights movement, between the campaign against slavery and the battle for equal rights.

Seen thus, Lawrence’s implied meanings may be understood in the light of Ishmael Reed’s self-professed interest in “slavery as a metaphor for how blacks are treated in this civilization” (Bruce & Singh 20). Implying an analogy between Eliza’s famous flight pursued by bloodhounds and the dogs let loose on African Americans seeking liberty in the American South at the time of the Civil Rights movement, Reed continues in a 1971 interview: “So

I say to myself and the rest of us that we are going to get to our aesthetic Canada, no matter how many dogs they send after us" (Bruce & Singh 21).

II. ISHMAEL REED, *FLIGHT TO CANADA* (1976)

Flight to Canada (published in 1976, the year of the bicentennial) is Ishmael Reed's parodic-postmodernist revisiting of Stowe's and Tubman's mythic exodus to the promised land of Canada, anachronistically transplanted from the pre-Civil War South to contemporary times (the early 1970s when Canada served as promised land of freedom for draft-dodging fugitives). Pre-civil war runaway slaves merge with 1970s political fugitives. Reed's protagonist, Raven Quickskill, seeks to escape slavery by making his way from Emancipation City to Canada by airplane. In the poem "Flight to Canada," which opens the novel, the author Raven Quickskill announces to his former slave master that he finds himself "safe in the arms of Canada":

I flew in non-stop
 Jumbo jet this A.M. Had
 Champagne
 Compliments of the Cap'n
 Who announced that a
 Runaway Negro was on the
 Plane. Passengers came up
 And shook my hand
 & within 10 min. I had
 Signed up for 3 anti-slavery
 Lectures. Remind me to get an
 Agent

Traveling in style
 Beats craning your neck after
 The North Star and hiding in
 Bushes anytime, Massa ...

I borrowed your cotton money
 To pay for my ticket & to get
 Me started in this place called
 Saskatchewan Brrrrrrr!
 It's cold up here but least
 Nobody is collaring hobbling gagging
 Handcuffing yoking chaining & thumbscrewing
 You like you is they hobby horse ...

I must close now
 Massa, by the time you gets
 This letter old Sam will have
 Probably took you to the
 Deep Six

That was rat poison I left
 In your Old Crow

Your boy
 Quickskill
 (Reed 3-5)

Reed mocks the myth of Canada as imagined utopia at the end of the exilic, diasporic experience of the flight from slavery, the land of rebirth and redemption, and the miraculous Pentecostal transformation of the escaped slave merely by setting foot on Canadian soil. A boatsman, who sets a group of runaway slaves ashore in Canada, relates:

They said, "Is this Canada?" I said, "Yes, there are no slaves in this country"; then I witnessed a scene I shall never forget. They seemed to be transformed; a new light shone in their eyes, their tongues were loosed, they laughed and cried, prayed and sang praises, fell upon the ground and kissed it, hugged and kissed each other, crying, "Bless the Lord! Oh! I 'se free before I die!" (155)

Reed's "real" Canada no longer works as an imagined ideal. As one character will have it, it has come close to being a Nazi nightmare one could only pray to be delivered from: "As for Canada, she said they skin niggers up there and makes lampshades and soap dishes out of them, and it's more barbarous in Toronto than in darkest Africa. . . ." (57).

In Ishmael Reed's ironic postmodernist revision, Canada has forfeited its function as the idealized "other," a Foucault-like heterotopia; instead, it has become an uncannily exact mirror image of its Southern neighbor, a promise unredeemed, betrayed. Thus, Quickskill has barely made it to his dreamland Canada, when he runs into an old friend, Carpenter, who tells him he has just been beaten up in the streets and been denied a room at a hotel. Quickskill's image of Canada as a paradise of freedom is brutally subverted:

"I don't understand, Carpenter. Why, outside it looks like the Peaceable Kingdom."

"Maybe here but not elsewhere. Man, as soon as you reach the metropolitan areas you run into Ford, Sears, Holiday Inn, and all the rest."

"You're kiddin'," Quickskill said. "You have to be kiddin'."

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“But what about St. Catherine’s? William Wells Brown told me that he’d gotten a number of slaves across to St. Catherine’s, where they’d found rewarding careers.”

“Let me show you downtown St. Catherine’s,” Carpenter said, removing a photo from his wallet. It looked like any American strip near any American airport; it could have been downtown San Mateo. Neon signs with clashing letters advertising hamburgers, used-car lots with the customary banners, coffee joints where you had to stand up and take your java from wax cups.

“It looks so aesthetically unsatisfying.”

...

“Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look like statesmen. Vigilantes harass fugitive slaves, and the slaves have to send their children to schools where their presence is subject to catcalls and harassment. . . . They beat up Chinamen and Pakastani [sic] in the streets. West Indians they shoot.” (160)

Not only does Canada look like America, Americans have literally taken possession of it. As Carpenter will have it: “Man, Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them.” (161) Quickskill is devastated, deprived forever of a cherished illusion: “All my life I had hopes about it, that whatever went wrong I would always have Canada to go to” (161).

Reed projects the nightmare of a thoroughly Americanized Canada as the postmodern counter-image of a historical myth. Such a Canada can no longer function as what David Staines calls “the dispassionate witness,” an alternative to, and an inspiring source of critical commentary on, the U.S. But if, instead of the U.S., it is the real Canada that is to be repudiated, then all that remains is “the promised land . . . in [our] heads” (177), an “aesthetic” Canada as the only possible imagined homeland. Reed’s “aesthetic” Canada, then, is to be understood as a symbolic one, an artistic construction of the mind, a “Canada” that is a projection screen at best for imaginary hopes and desires, an internalized idealization which may serve as a source of personal consolation and dream, but which has little or no relation or resemblance to the actual political and geographical reality of present-day Canada. Understood thus, this new “Canada” may be tapped into wherever one is, a portable inspiration kit available according to the needs of the moment, in any place, at any time. As if in confirmation of this new understanding of “Canada,” the novel gives its last word to Uncle Robin (not Uncle Tom) – an old former slave who did not set out on a flight to Canada, but stuck it out in the American South: there, by slyly altering his master’s will so that the plantation is

left to him, he is now established in his former master's luxurious fifty-room Southern plantation mansion, done with the illusion of a promised land, but at home and at peace in his "Canada" of the mind:

That was a strange letter from Raven this morning. . . . I wonder did he find what he was looking for in Canada? [...] Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind. (178)

III. LAWRENCE HILL, *THE BOOK OF NEGROES* (2007)

Unlike Reed's irreverent postmodern revisionism, Lawrence Hill revisits the genre of the slave narrative – as well as the brutal realities of 18th-century slavery and the slave trade – with unsparing realism and from a *transnational* perspective. *The Book of Negroes* revises history less through postmodernist subversion than by recasting the narrative of enslavement, middle passage, and escape to freedom in an epic-realistic picaresque mode that uncovers neglected dimensions of Canadian slavery and highlights the repatriation of slaves to their recuperated African homeland, thereby challenging accepted readings of the history of slavery and Canada's role in it. The novel thus effectively re-imagines the diasporic slave experience as a process of multi-directional flow and hybridization across national boundaries, a mode of both transatlantic and intra-continental "cultural circulation" as it was analyzed in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

This is not the place to recapitulate the story of witty, intelligent and somewhat iconicized Aminata Diallo – how she dreams of becoming a griot for her African community, but is abducted as a child and branded by African slavers; how she undergoes a harrowing middle passage aboard a slave ship to America; how she is sold to an indigo plantation on Sullivan's island, off the coast of South Carolina. Where forced to eke out a new home and refashion a sense of belonging in diasporic exile, she undergoes the brutalities of rape, exploitation, and child theft. Her experiences in the American South are a humiliating nightmare, to be sure, but my focus here will be on the way *The Book of Negroes* represents Aminata's flight to, existence in, and departure from Canada, hoping to find a new "promised land" – and reconstitute a new sense of self – in her originary homeland of Africa.

For Aminata Diallo the idea of resorting to Canada first comes toward the end of the American Revolution, as she learns about the British plans to "remove" Loyalist blacks who had served the British for a minimum of a year (and hence were nominally "free") to a place called Nova Scotia. Her first response is a cynical but realistic one: "I hoped it wasn't a penal colony"

(285). A British officer, Colonel Baker, explains and offers a familiarly idyllic image of Canada:

“Nova Scotia is a British colony, untouched and unsullied by the Americans, at a distance of two weeks by ship from the New York harbour. It is a fine colony indeed, on the Atlantic Ocean but north of here, with woods, fresh water, abundant animals and rich forest just begging to be converted to farmland. Nova Scotia, Miss Diallo, will be your promised land.” (285-86)

Aminata agrees to support the venture by registering all blacks entitled to leave for Nova Scotia in a ledger called “The Book of Negroes” – though a more cynical title is suggested by Captain Waters: “Exodus from Holy Ground” (the area where British soldiers met and maintained their black prostitutes; 287).

Taking down the names of fellow blacks, Aminata feels a surcease of loneliness, a sense of solidarity and imagined community in the knowledge that her personal history of “unexpected migrations” is shared by countless others. As she puts it, “We are traveling peoples . . . all of us” (301), a recurrent theme-song in Aminata’s life and story. But she also feels that in recording the names of prospective migrants she is giving them voice and visibility, a scripted identity that can serve as an antidote to historical silencing and erasure.

. . . I loved the way people followed the movement of my hand as I wrote down their names and the way they made me read them aloud once I was done. It excited me to imagine that fifty years later, someone might find an ancestor in the Book of Negroes and say, “That was my grandmother.” (295)

From the first, however, we receive hints that the promised freedom in Canada is not going to be pure and unsullied: in registering names, Aminata must give priority to the slaves and indentured servants of white Loyalists – only after these, can the free refugees be listed. As her husband Chekura scathingly observes: “Slaves and free Negroes together in Nova Scotia? . . . Some promised land” (294).

On the threshold of departure, on August 15, 1783 (she just knows), Aminata conceives her second child. Shortly after, she and her husband are handed their tickets for departure to Annapolis Royal on November 7, 1783. Their dreams of a joint marital life in the new, recuperated homeland of Nova Scotia, however, are cruelly disrupted when, on the brink of sailing, Aminata’s former owner from South Carolina, Robinson Appleby, re-appears to lay a patently false claim upon her, and husband and wife are once more separated by force – not until much later in the novel do we learn that on his

way to Canada, Chekura's ship has gone down, taking all its passengers with it.

Aminata spends over eight years in Canada, from November 1783 to January 1792. From the moment she arrives in Port Roseway (now Shelburne) the reality of Canada clashes with the "promised land" of freedom. Most of the people in the streets are white, "and they walked past as if I didn't exist" (313). Whites shoot peanuts and spit at her. The realities of segregation and discrimination ("we don't serve niggers"; "Birchtown is the place for your kind" [313]) are at least as bitter in Canada as they had been in America. The "free" blacks of Shelburne are effectively ostracized and ghettoized in a separate community called Birchtown, at a two and a half hour walk outside of town. Ironically, her guide to this new "promised land" is a lame and blind preacher called Daddy Moses, who informs her that though "Nova Scotia had more land than God could sneeze at," "hardly any of it was being parceled out to black folks," British promises notwithstanding. Nova Scotia turns out to be "Nova Scarcity" (317).

An experienced midwife as well as a highly skilled reader, writer and teacher, Aminata manages to make herself indispensable to the self-fashioned community of about a thousand free blacks who are vainly waiting to receive their own share of the promised tracts of land. In Canada she gives birth to her daughter, May, on whom she bestows an Anglo name, whereas her first child had been called, in African, Mamadu. Conditions of life in Canada under British rule turn out to be uncannily similar to (if not worse than) those in America: freedom and security are no more assured, and even the Canadian mosquitoes are "meaner than any I had met in South Carolina" (337). Poverty and hardship, violence and immorality, promiscuity, corruption, oppression, racism and discrimination are the order of the day – miseries only aggravated by the harshness of Canadian winters and the searing memories of her lost father, mother, husband and son. The sermons preached in church by blind Daddy Moses (he wears steel-rimmed spectacles with no glasses in them) about "Moses taking the Hebrews to freedom" – "*we too are the chosen people. We too, brothers and sisters, are chosen for freedom. Right here in Birchtown*" (327) – sound hollow and ironic to her Muslim ears.

After three years, the colony is beginning to suffer from economic adversity – and blacks suffer first and most. With businesses closing down and jobs becoming scarce, blacks are hired at lower wages than whites, thereby fostering racist resentment among white laborers – a carpenter is thrown into the harbor, the biggest black man in town is gang-beaten and his throat slit.

Rape and racist violence are rampant, blacks are lynched, and white gangs with torches descend on Birchtown, reducing Daddy Moses' church to a charred ruin and leaving Aminata's home torn apart. The promised land of Canada is a wasteland of destructive racism and oppression. But the worst is still to come. Eager to return to Birchtown to offer help, Aminata leaves her daughter in the care of a childless white Loyalist family, only to find that they have departed Canada for Boston by ship, taking her daughter May with them, leaving Aminata amputated once again: "My children were like phantom limbs, lost but still attached to me, gone but still painful" (350).

Over the next four years Aminata (meanwhile forty-five, graying and bespectacled) stays in Birchtown with the other free but still landless Black Loyalists, to face a seemingly endless perpetuation of British promises betrayed and conditions of slavery and intolerance persisting. A crucial turning-point comes when news reaches Birchtown that a Sierra Leone Company is setting up a "free settlement" (no slavery allowed) on the coast of Africa. A young British abolitionist, John Clarkson, manages to fire up the blacks of Birchtown with enthusiasm for "passage to a new life" in Sierra Leone, promising land, "freedom to govern their own affairs," as well as "political and racial equality" (356), provided they live in an atmosphere of Christian morality and purity: no dancing, no drinking, no licentiousness, no "displays of uninhibited emotion." As one black from Birchtown observes: "Hell, man, we go all the way back home and can't dance about it?" (357)

Despite initial reservations, Aminata falls for Clarkson's depiction of a new promised land, as her persistent dream of a return from exile to a recuperated homeland momentarily crowds out the searing reality of her pain and abandonment. Had she listened closely, she might have heard the echoes of a different fate in store: what Clarkson is really promising is a cleverly self-serving British plan, in which the Birchtown blacks will be made to serve British imperialist economic interests slyly disguised under the banner of human rights and abolitionist ideals.

The Sierra Leone Company, he continued, would spare no expense in removing us from Nova Scotia, out of the twin sentiments of duty and patriotism. Duty, 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. No longer would the empire have to depend on slavery for enrichment. The land was so fertile, Clarkson said, that figs, oranges, coffee and cane would leap from our farmlands. We would meet our own needs easily and help the British Empire bring to market all the rich resources of Africa. . . . [The abolitionists in London] wanted to create a profitable colony

in Africa, where liberated blacks could live productively and in dignity, and from where Great Britain could build a profitable trade with the rest of the world – trade, he said, that did not rely on the evils of slavery. (359-61)

Aminata consents to work as Clarkson's assistant, once again registering the names of blacks eager to ship out to Africa, and upon learning of her husband's death by shipwreck, decides to "join the exodus to Africa. There was nothing left for me in Nova Scotia" (370). On January 15, 1792, together with 1200 free Nova Scotia blacks, one third of whom had been born in Africa, she leaves Halifax for Africa.

Even for Muslim-raised Aminata, then, Canada has turned from a promised land into another land of bondage, from a New Jerusalem into another Egypt – and Aminata (who has fully internalized the Christian rhetoric and symbolism) re-enacts another exodus, another journey to another promised land, her imagined homeland of Africa. Imagined, because the new colony in Africa turns out to be another deception and betrayal of the promise of freedom, as abolitionist idealism is inextricably entangled with imperialism and the slave trade that has taken deep roots on African soil and among African tribes. Once in Africa, Aminata not only finds herself in shocking proximity to the very island of Bance on which she had been branded as a slave and from which she had been exiled to South Carolina, she must now also face up to the fact that in the three decades since leaving Africa, her multiple migrations have effected a change of identity in which African, American and Canadian elements interact and intermingle:

In South Carolina, I had been an African. In Nova Scotia, I had become known as a Loyalist, or a Negro, or both. And now, finally back in Africa, I was seen as a Nova Scotian, and in some respects thought of myself that way too. . . . I wondered just who exactly I was and what I had become, after more than thirty years in the Colonies. . . . what part of me was still Africa? (385-86)

The real and most searing exodus has been an existential one, as in seeking to recover her homeland, Aminata must acknowledge that, where "survival depended on perpetual migration" (385), her African identity has become intermixed with an American and Canadian one. Whatever "home" she may find is no longer to be recuperated in a geographical or national space or territory, but in a de-territorialized, hybridized sense of self in a perpetual process of migration. Canada may have been left behind, but will remain an inextricable part of her portable migratory transnational identity.

In *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill has thus offered us a searingly realistic historical representation of Canada as a land of promise and betrayal, of exile and belonging, but embedded in a revisionist historical understanding of slavery as a transnational experience of “perpetual migration,” making Canada a full-fledged and deeply implicated player in the transatlantic slave-trade, a presence no longer erasable from the Black Atlantic, nor from Canadian cultural memory.

IV. CONCLUSION: A TRIPTYCH OF REPRESENTATION

If we read the three texts discussed above in dialogue with each other, as a triptych of representations of “flights to Canada,” we see an interesting shift in the nature and purpose of representational dynamics. Rooted in a modernist aesthetics, yet acknowledging a communicative and educational function for art as an instrument of cultural memory, Jacob Lawrence’s pictorial depiction of Harriet Tubman’s flight to Canada in *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1967) is foremost a tribute to an African-American culture heroine of epic proportions, whose life story of sacrifice and endurance (especially when read in the light of the Civil Rights movement) held out a consoling vision of redemption, the utopian promise of an end to a historical experience of racial oppression and enslavement. But as he moved from the forcefully expressive synthesis of angular realism and modernist abstraction that marked his narrative paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s to a softer mode of patchwork-color realism that more easily fit his educational intent, Lawrence in the late 1960s shifted to a religious iconicization of Tubman through a plethora of biblical allusions which brought him uncannily in line with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s vision of Christian heroism. In *Harriet and the Promised Land* Canada is first of all a utopian projection of an imagined possibility, an ideal of freedom that flickers beyond the horizon, but that remains untested in a practical encounter with concrete and lived reality. Never a real place, it remains a symbolic wish-fulfillment, a biblical promise of an imagined home, an end to exile and diaspora, the illusion that it may be possible to cross not just the geographical line into freedom, but perhaps also the color line. The reality beyond that borderline remains unseen, at best fleetingly imagined.

In Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) Canada is no longer mythic but disturbingly real: here, the utopian ideal *is* tested but found wanting. Reed’s trenchant examination of a false ideal, the exposure of the brutal reality behind the illusory promise, is drenched in postmodernist irony and

subversive mockery. In Reed's imaginative re-vision, Canada has become a promise unredeemed and betrayed, "aesthetically unsatisfying," an Americanized Canada that is closer to a nazi-nightmare than a vision of the "peaceable kingdom," a dystopia to be rejected and repudiated. In Reed's darkly-comic, ironic-parodic and postmodernist vision, the only Canada that remains is an "aesthetic" one, a symbolic or artistic construction in the mind – the possibility of freedom internalized, not bound by geographical or political borders, lifted out of time and space, but existing as "a state of mind," as compelling for a 1970s draft dodging refugee into Canada as for a post-Emancipation black man living in his former master's Southern mansion.

Whereas Reed represents the "real" Canada through a lens of post-modernist irony which precludes full narrative identification on the part of the reader, Lawrence Hill in *The Book of Negroes* (2007) draws upon the full register of narrative delights and identificatory pleasures that come with a (post-postmodern) return to the genre of epic, episodic realism – notwithstanding the harrowing and horrifying brutalities of slavery and the slave trade experienced and narrated by its protagonist. Unlike Lawrence and Reed, Hill vividly and concretely brings to life the searing realities of Aminata's actual life in Canada, begun in pursuit of a mythical promised land of freedom, but concluded in a somber realization that for her as for all blacks in Nova Scotia, Canada is little more than a wasteland of destructive racism and oppression. The myth of Canada – tested and found wanting – is here not so much repudiated as moved beyond: subverting any notion of Canadian exceptionalism, Hill's novel envisions Canada as merely one in a string of mythical places of promise and redemption, as Aminata shifts her dream projection of a life of freedom, home and belonging from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, only to be similarly disillusioned. If the nation state still functioned as an unarticulated spatial and political touchstone in both Lawrence's and Reed's representations of the "flight to Canada," *The Book of Negroes* places slavery and the slave trade at the center of a transnational network of economic and political interests, as it shows us how even the "promised land" of abolitionism is subsumed in the service of a transnational imperialist economy slyly disguised under the rhetorical banner of human rights and ideals of emancipation. Hill's revisionist historical understanding of (Canada's role in) slavery as a transnational experience of "perpetual migration" and "cultural circulation" is fittingly reflected in Aminata's new awareness of home and identity as by necessity transnational, de-territorialized, hybridized, and

perpetually in process of change and (re)composition – a multi-faceted kaleidoscope in motion, in which “Canada” is but one among many constituent elements interacting and intermingling.

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SHARON MONTEITH

The Bridge from Mississippi's Freedom Summer to Canada

Pearl Cleage's *Bourbon at the Border*

African American playwright Pearl Cleage describes herself as a transplanted northerner who grew up in Detroit but for whom Atlanta is home and has been since 1969 (Paige 239). *Bourbon at the Border* premiered in Atlanta in 1997 and is set in Detroit in an apartment that looks out to the Ambassador Bridge connecting the US to Windsor, Ontario, the southernmost city in Canada and formerly an entry point for escaping slaves via the Underground Railroad. The play is set in September 1995 but revolves around events that occur in 1964 during Mississippi's Freedom Summer when African Americans May and Charlie Thompson are volunteer civil rights workers in Sunflower County in the Delta. Cleage has them suffer the same racial terrorism that broke the will of some organizers, damaged more and left other volunteers dead.

Bourbon at the Border is a story told against the grain; it belongs to a sub-genre of civil rights fictions that unsettles the dominant ways in which, in recent decades, American literature about the Civil Rights Movement has privileged stories of racial reconciliation. It unsettles the complacency that such stories risk fostering because it is finally a play about African American suffering and anger. Cleage has described herself as "a true child of the sixties" and "a third-generation black nationalist"; she sees herself as a political writer describing her cultural heritage as "a rich legacy of protest and resistance" ("Fighting Monsters" 104; "Artistic Statement"). Therefore, this essay explores the ways in which Cleage draws on black nationalist tenets and texts, notably LeRoi Jones controversial play *Dutchman* (1964) and examples of African American revenge narratives, to depict "the insanity of American racism" (Cleage, "Exceptional" 62). It also examines how she textures her play with political nuances that, in my reading, are most closely attuned to the ideas of French writer and philosopher Albert Camus, a touchstone for civil rights activists who were debating the efficacy of violent versus non-violent resistance in the 1960s.

Georgia-born May first sees Charlie Thompson campaigning on the steps of Douglass Hall at Howard University, drumming up support for the voter registration drive in Mississippi. Cleage studied at Howard from 1966-69 before going to Spelman. Her two-act play "Duet for Three Voices" debuted there in 1969 (Coe E8) and she remembers student protesters taking over Howard's Administration Building to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam (Cleage, "Believe" 124). In the play she imagines May and Charlie as a little older and implies that Charlie is a member of Howard's Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), the affiliate of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that drove the Mississippi voter registration project and campaigned on campus for volunteers. Some of the most well-known civil rights organizers first became politicized in NAG: Charles Cobb, Stokely Carmichael, William Mahoney, Michael Thelwell, Muriel Tillinghast, to name but a few. They joined SNCC and a number of these Howard students remained in Mississippi after the summer project ended. Cleage's characters Charlie and May fall in love at Howard and go to Mississippi together in 1964 to work for voter registration.

The play's central traumatic event occurs when Charlie and May are out canvassing; they stop to exchange an affectionate kiss and are arrested for their supposedly lewd conduct by a sheriff and his deputies. The three white men find a twisted and novel way to punish Charlie and May for invading their county as "outside agitators." In the basement of the jail, they force Charlie to beat May mercilessly; if he refuses she will be raped. As May admits when thirty years later she finally tells her friend Rose what happened, "they made him beat me half to death and . . . pulled my dress over my face and did it anyway. They all did it anyway in front of my Charlie" (Cleage, *Bourbon* 57). Charlie is forced to watch while the girl he loves is gang-raped. This event is the nucleus of the play. May leaves Mississippi to recover from her injuries at home but she is no longer capable of having children. Charlie stays to continue their civil rights work, calling her on the phone whenever he can until he is arrested a second time. In Parchman Prison he is tortured, his leg is broken in three places and he is left to rot in isolation until a doctor is finally called to set the leg. Left with a limp, Charlie is a dramatization of what Stokely Carmichael called "the walking wounded" of the Civil Rights Movement (284); it is an idea that Cleage explores in complex ways in *Bourbon at the Border*.

Thirty years on when the play opens, the Thompsons are married and settled in Detroit. Since Mississippi Charlie has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals and each time both he and May hope that he may be healed of the

residual trauma that has precipitated multiple suicide attempts. She maintains that Charlie has not changed from the idealistic Howard student she fell in love with: “He’s not dangerous,” she tells her best friend Rose, “the only person he ever tries to hurt is himself” (*Bourbon* 10). Spoken within the first few minutes of the play, this pronouncement guides the audience to sympathize with Charlie when he appears on stage. On his return from a psychiatric hospital in Scene 1, he tells May that he has “figured it out: The only way they win is if they make me too crazy to be with you” (19). It is only with hindsight that the audience identifies “they” as the three Mississippi lawmen that broke Charlie’s mind and spirit in 1964. Cleage augments audience sympathy at the end of Scene 3 when Rose’s boyfriend Tyrone offers Charlie a job but wants to know: “What kind of crazy are you?” and Charlie answers without a beat, “the nonviolent kind” (36-37). It is, the audience will realize later, a profound lie from a man who has killed another on his first evening back in Detroit.

Rose and her new boyfriend Tyrone, a Vietnam veteran, are foils for Charlie and May; against their reactions the events of the play may be weighed. Tyrone, for example, finds it difficult to conceptualize the role of strategic non-violence in the civil rights movement when remembering his own experience as a soldier in Vietnam, leading Charlie to muse that “sometimes it seems like it was all one big war, some over here and some over there, but one thing guaranteed – you weren’t coming out the way you went in” (33). It is a cliché but also a clue for the audience to the identity of the serial killer who is cutting the throats of white men. The play foregrounds the deep love between the Thompsons, something that both Tyrone and Rose openly admire, and while this does not change, its dramatization in the early scenes serves to mitigate against the audience even considering the possibility that the murder of an “old white man” on the night of Charlie’s homecoming could have anything to do with him or the two murders that follow in quick succession and racially polarize Detroit. For example, he tells May that “[i]f I ever do another thing that makes me have to leave your side for longer than eight hours at a time, I want you to do me a favor.” “Anything,” she replies. “Shoot me,” he states (31). The murders Charlie commits come to be understood as another desperate suicidal gesture that will ensure that he will be removed from society and sent back to prison, the institution in which the defining moments of his life took place. Consciously or subconsciously he plants a clue for the police to ensure that this will be the case, dropping a piece of paper by the third body that is traced back to him.

Mississippi's Freedom Summer is the catalyst and context for this two-act drama. Cleage's dramatic vision also coheres around a series of tropes that interlock with the U.S. South of 1964: the bridge, the U.S.-Canadian border, and the Canadian wilderness. The South has long been understood as a symbolic signifier of resistance to racial change. For Malcolm X in the 1960s, the "South" was "anywhere south of the Canadian border" because he conflated the racist landscape of the region with the rest of America. The 49th parallel has been described as being "of enormous importance in the imaginative life of any Canadian" (Mandel 105) but the US-Canadian border is strangely absent from US literature and cultural productions, with the exceptions of 19th-century slave narratives whose protagonists escape over the border and fictions written since the 1970s about young Americans escaping being drafted to fight in Vietnam. The relative neglect of the Canadian border in American literature may well be the result of the historical power imbalance between the two countries; it only began to change when the events of September 11, 2001 ensured that the northern border became a focus of U.S. security measures. In the 1990s, though, Cleage created a border-text that goes some way towards drawing the U.S. and Canada into an imaginative configuration. On his first morning back at home, Charlie suggests that he and May head over the bridge to Canada the following weekend because in the peace and quiet of a Canadian cabin, May will be able to see more clearly that he has recovered. That she responds so quickly with "Let's do it today" is a clue that she is not convinced; that Charlie projects the visit into the future makes it equally evident that he is really avoiding her close "inspection" and "examination" (*Bourbon* 20). That trip is continually deferred. The border is, as one literary critic has mused, "forever on the periphery of the possible" (Henderson 1) and in cultural criticism this interstitial space has traditionally been marked as liminal. The border may be used to distinguish a place of danger from one of safety; to communicate this idea, Cleage uses the metaphor of the bridge as a possible escape for her protagonists from their American past into a Canadian future.

The Ambassador Bridge is the central visual motif of the play and its emotional hinge. The stage directions indicate how it should be conceived in the drama and by the audience: "On clear days and at night, when it is lit, the bridge is almost a presence in the apartment" (5). The apartment is suspended like the bridge. Perched between two worlds, their home is as precarious as the Thompsons' life together. In a review of the original production of *Bourbon at the Border* in Atlanta, Freda Scott Giles noted that its staging emphasized the isolation of Thompsons' home. The rooms have no ceilings and the

doors are permanently open “into the blue cyclorama, indicating that, outside of a limited area of their space, there is much about their lives that exists in a netherworld, perhaps the border between sanity and madness” (Giles, “Theater Review” 725).¹ In the play, when May is trying to convince herself that Charlie’s shuttling back and forth from psychiatric hospitals will cease, she speaks to him “without taking her eyes off the bridge”:

When we first moved in the thing I really liked about this place was that I could wake up every day and be someplace that wasn’t here. I could just walk across the bridge and everything would be different. The money, the street names, the politics. Everything. There was a whole country where not a living soul knew my name. (*Bourbon* 51)

Gradually, the bridge seems even more precarious and May’s repeated use of the modal verb “could” emphasizes that hope in the future has not been realized by commitment to action.

In African American cultural history, “the bridge” is a landmark of the civil rights movement, as epitomized by Selma, Alabama’s Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* Selma is the “Bridge of Freedom,” on which demonstrators were beaten and bloodied in March 1965. The bridge is also a metaphor for the arc of racial change, as in the title of David Remnick’s 2010 study of the rise of Barack Obama to the US Presidency: *The Bridge*. In President Clinton’s second inaugural speech just three months before *Bourbon at the Border* premiered in the U.S. South, he recalled Martin Luther King, Jr., and promised that America would build a bridge towards the 21st century. Early in the new century, Rev. James Webb, who had been a local leader in Selma in 1965, stated his belief that the Edmund Pettus Bridge continued to “remind us never to slip into complacency.”² *Bourbon at the Border* – like Remnick’s biography of Obama – is about just that: the risk of nostalgic complacency that celebrates the successes of the civil rights movement but elides the suffering of those who fought its battles. James Baldwin warned that, “[t]o overhaul a history or to attempt to redeem it . . . is not at all the same thing as the descent one must make in order to excavate a history” (Baldwin 478). Cleage’s play is an excavation of this type and a chilling reminder that the pain and rage that May

¹ This is a review of the April 30, 1997 performance at the Alliance Theater, Atlanta.

² Rev. James Webb, qtd. in Anita Weier, “A Bridge to Remember,” *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), June 8, 2001.

and Charlie experience during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s can persist for thirty years before exploding in vengeful and self-destructive violence.

Her play is at its most convincing when Cleage draws on an enduring image of the South in the mid-1960s, a period during which Mississippi was variously described as the South exaggerated, a police state, and an Orwellian nightmare. She returns to the lawless segregationist violence and vengeance underlining the region's massive resistance against social change. May recounts a horrific experience of abuse that she and Charlie suffered at the hands of a sheriff and his deputies. Her description recalls exploitation movies with psychotic sheriffs, corrupt judges, rabble rousers, and racist peckerwoods proliferating. The atrocities the movies depicted, however, were all too often prosaic realities for black southerners and civil rights workers who lived in fear for their lives, struggling not to be intimidated by beatings, bombings, or shootings.³ Cleage has Charlie incarcerated in Parchman, the prison farm where Freedom Riders and civil rights workers suffered the brutality of prison guards and where in 1965 a fourteen-year old boy shot by a trusty was left blinded and brain-damaged.⁴ Parchman was also where SNCC's Bob Moses re-read Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), having first read *The Rebel* (1951) while incarcerated in Pike County jail in 1961. Moses was most struck by Camus's thesis because it could inform his philosophy of non-violent resistance, most specifically Camus's warning in his essays as spelled out in "Neither Victims Nor Executioners" (1946) that if you cease to see yourself as a victim of violence, you should also work to avoid becoming an executioner of violence against others.

Moses has been represented as a philosopher of the movement and as something of a mystic or saint. But in fact he was also the archetypal civil rights organizer who promoted the idea of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project to the rest of the SNCC staff. He was very aware of the reaction that seeing black and white young people together campaigning would provoke among segregationists who sought to act out their fear of racial change in the

³ See Monteith, "Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s."

⁴ See "Roberts vs. Williams" (1971) and David M. Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice (1996).

form of violent reprisals. Having pursued a Master's degree in Philosophy at Harvard, Moses read Camus throughout his time in Mississippi, and both Jane Stembridge and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC recalled later that on first meeting Moses they ended up talking about Camus (Sellers 41; Carmichael 310). In my reading of her play, Cleage's depiction of Charlie and May's experience during Freedom Summer alludes indirectly to Bob Moses and to the impact that reading Camus had on him and on other activists.

Moses was admired as the member of SNCC who would raise ethical questions and he reminded volunteers that during the Freedom Summer project they would be defined by their acts. A volunteer's description of Moses is typical: "[He is] like someone you only read about in novels. He has great currents of moral perplexity running through him."⁵ SNCC's Mary King reported that locals sometimes called him "Moses in the Bible" (144-46) and stories even circulated that when suffering a beating, Moses would look heavenward and ask God's forgiveness for his assailants. Carmichael often laughed about "the fortuitous accident of Bob's last name," and Moses indeed renounced it in 1965, taking his mother's name Parris when he feared stories of saintliness placed him too centrally within what he saw as a movement towards participatory democracy. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, had changed the words of the spiritual to "Who's that yonder dressed in red? Must be the children Bob Moses led" (Carmichael 286-87). Like red rags to bulls, the summer volunteers soon discovered that their presence in the rural South was sufficient to provoke violent retaliation. Howard Zinn, historian and friend of SNCC, acknowledged that white supremacist ideology hit volunteer civil rights workers full force as "that terrible and special anguish with which youth discovers evil in the world" (216). During the orientation of Freedom Summer volunteers, Moses reached for existential analogies, like Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to communicate what they should expect of "the struggle of good against evil." And he alluded specifically to Camus's *The Plague* when he told them, "The country isn't willing yet to admit it has the plague, but it pervades the whole society. We must discuss it openly and honestly, even with the danger that we get too analytical and tangled up. If we ignore it, it's going to blow up in our faces" (qtd. in Sellers 83-84). Camus's allegory of a small town locked down by plague was for Moses similar to the epidemic of white supremacy in Mississippi with

⁵ Belfrage quotes the student volunteer in *Freedom Summer* (25).

segregationists embodying the plague by acting as “a shrewd, unflagging adversary” (148) wearing down volunteers and undermining their studiously learned non-violence. In *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (1964), psychiatrist Robert Coles, treating civil rights activists suffering battle fatigue, cited one organizer who allowed that, “We get angry and scared, usually both . . . when all that happens, day after day, year after year, there is an effect on us, and part of that effect is that we become like our enemies . . . you develop his tactics and learn from him in order to beat him. What else can you do?” (Coles 236). Cleage’s Charlie is a fictional extrapolation of such fears and the story she tells seems to be informed not only by her knowledge of the history of Freedom Summer but also by Bob Moses and the writings of Albert Camus.

Moses found in Camus a way of articulating his fears about the long term effects of the black freedom struggle for civil rights and the long-term damage that he knew some civil rights workers would inevitably suffer: “For when people rise up and change their status,” Moses allowed, “usually somewhere along the line they become executioners and they get involved in subjugating . . . other people.” In 1965 he explained to Robert Penn Warren that the black individual’s reaction to being a victim of race hatred involved a larger concern as to whether an individual could cleanse themselves of that feeling or would seek to perpetuate it (Warren 95-96). Moses’ abhorrence of killing and the moral code by which he tried to live in Mississippi suffuses this play even though he is never mentioned. It underpins any understanding of Charlie who “somewhere down the line,” decades on and far from Mississippi, literally turns himself into an executioner. Such ideas are not confined to Camus, of course. Charlie may also be read as suffering from the long-term effects of what Cleage describes as “the insanity of American racism” (“Exceptional” 62) insofar as he entangles himself in the classic Nietzschean knot alluded to in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into the abyss the abyss also looks into you” (98). When Bob Moses looked into the abyss, he found Camus, as did so many young people in the 1960s. Camus’s existential dilemma texts were among the “scriptures of the generation”; he was one of the writers on a countercultural reading list providing cultural critique and performance models.

Like Camus’s Meursault who appears to be a “stranger” to his murderous act in *L’Étranger* (1942), Charlie is oblivious to his criminality. They each commit murder by proxy and both kill anonymous men. But where Meursault’s inability to mourn his mother’s death provokes another death

that will ensure his own, Charlie at first seems to crave that the murder he commits be understood, or at least discussed; without giving himself away, he sustains a conversation during which he steps outside of himself to consider the crime. When Tyrone wonders about the killer's motive, Charlie offers that "It could be something political," but also throws out false leads, like the idea of the killer being female, before agreeing that the mode of attack is intensely personal: "Slitting somebody's throat is always real personal" (41-2). Charlie's guerrilla-style retribution is a personalized act of anger and revenge, the antithesis of Moses' philosophy. It also contrasts with Cleage's primary political-philosophical lens, which emphasizes Black Nationalist self-defense and may be best understood via her allusions to W.E.B. Du Bois and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka).

In the final line of her "Author's Note," in an extended reference to the work of LeRoi Jones in the 1960s, Cleage posits that "somewhere in the space between the nonviolent warriors and the powerless rage of the would-be poet" is W.E.B. Du Bois's "color line," a ubiquitous trope for the history of US race relations when Cleage was writing. In my reading, Du Bois's more acute relevance to the play lies in his response to the "Red Summer" of 1919 when in "Let Us Reason Together" he advocated using "the terrible weapon of Self Defense" but advised caution, warning that it should never become vengeance in the form of "blind and lawless offense against all white folk . . . we must carefully and scrupulously avoid on our own part bitter and unjustifiable aggression against anybody" (231). Du Bois drew the line between defense and retaliation carefully; Bob Moses tried to instill a similar attention to caution. The dilemma over whether non-violence as a strategy should give way to armed defense was a debate whose ideological heart could also be found in Detroit by the late 1960s. Cleage grew up in Detroit, the daughter of Rev. Albert Cleage, the civil rights leader who launched the Black Christian Nationalist Movement in 1967 and whose outspoken turn to Black Nationalism was epitomized by the huge black Madonna he had put up in his church. Detroit was a center of African American political activity with the city's Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a fusion of SNCC and the Nation of Islam agitating for self-defence by 1968.

Detroit in 1995 seethes with racial tension again when Charlie kills three white men. Their only possible or imagined relation to the racist violence he and May suffered in 1964 is their whiteness. Charlie confesses: "I picked out

three, just like those three in Mississippi picked us out, and I did what a man is supposed to do" (61). Twisted by the idea that the murder may restore a moral equilibrium, Charlie only regrets that he did not act on his anger earlier. This is Cleage's nod to the genre that informs her plot – the African American revenge narrative that since the 1960s may be traced through John O. Killens's *Sippi* (1967), in which the Elders react with vengeful violence against the white community when a civil rights activist is murdered. Revenge textures Gwendolyn Brooks' *In the Mecca* (1969), in which Way-out Morgan collects guns and his mantra "Death-to-the-Hordes-of-the-whitemen!" is a vengeful response to his sister's gang rape in Mississippi. It also propels the group that calls itself The Seven Days in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), willing to take revenge every time a black person is killed by a white.

The hypothesis on which the play is founded is implied in the Author's Note which specifies the "racial warfare" that threatened the Mississippi Project and that escalated through racist violence to murder. Nevertheless, so far Cleage's critics have yet to explore the fact that Cleage sets up a link to another play first performed in 1964: LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*. Cleage worries that "[t]he anguished assertion of Clay, the twenty-year-old Negro protagonist, that murder is the only solution to African-American madness is as real and as frightening now as it was then" (3). That this analogy has not been pursued by critics is surprising because in the 1999 publication *Flyin' West and Other Plays*, which includes *Bourbon at the Border*, Cleage adds an epigraph which was not present in the 1997 script and which makes the link explicit. In the original script, she implied that *Bourbon at the Border* pivots on yet another border too, "somewhere in the space between the nonviolent warriors and the powerless rage of the would-be poet" (3), and in 1999 she makes it apparent that she is alluding to Jones's play. *Dutchman* is a disturbing parable of 1960s race relations in which a white woman predator on a New York subway train taunts a black man until he slaps her across the face and rants against her, shouting "If I murdered you, then all the white people would begin to understand me" (35). The warning he issues prefigures Cleage's Charlie: "They'll murder you and have very rationale explanations. . . .They'll cut your throats and drag you out to the edge of your cities" (36). Clay may be read as a frightened and frightening precursor to Charlie, but he mistakes Lula's attentions from the outset when he takes her conversation as "pure sex talk" and is amused (8). She sees him as "a well-known type," a taunt that speaks to her assault on his black manhood and youthful idealism.

Lula's murderous rage is further ignited by Clay's sense of himself as a college student – as were so many of the volunteers for Mississippi Summer – and the discourse changes: "I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger . . . [Lula almost shrieks] A black Baudelaire" (12, 19). But just when Clay thinks Lula's racial psychosis has run down, she stabs him to death. Where serial killer Lula is left stalking her next black male victim at the end of Jones's play, Cleage shows herself more interested in Clay than in Lula and she turns her audience's attention to Clay's warning of murder and revenge.

In *Bourbon at the Border* revenge is deferred and it is random. Rather than avenge himself on the three Mississippi lawmen who came across Charlie and May sharing a kiss, or the prison officers who tortured Charlie and broke his spirit in Parchman, Charlie remains powerless against them and directs his anger away towards three anonymous white American men thirty years later. Cleage may be commenting on the futility of revenge for this tortured character. His psychic paralysis is intensified in the final moments of the play by which time the audience is secure in the knowledge that he is indeed a murderer and a criminal. Charlie has turned the men he killed into an abstraction; just as his assailants saw him solely as black and an "outside agitator," and Lula saw Clay as an object of hate, so Charlie sees only the white maleness of those he kills and murders what is human in himself, thereby turning himself into an abstraction. The closest he comes to acknowledging this is when he confesses that the white men in Mississippi "took the part [of me] that can feel something beside anger all the time" (61). In this sense *Bourbon at the Border* is a declensionist drama and Cleage adds a tragic cast to the play's close. Charlie suffers an existential despair that is finally expressed in the quiet, fatalistic way in which he speaks to his wife in the play's final moments – about Canada. "Just tell me about the garden" he says quietly, "Is there enough sun?" (62).

Charlie's racial paranoia is no longer an inevitable or practical response to the murderous oppression he discovered in Mississippi, or defensive rhetoric like Clay's; it is pathological. The brutality of racial terrorism has ruled his life and made of Charlie an executioner in the way Bob Moses feared – but rather than subjugating others he has become a serial killer. The murders are both a release and his twisted idea of a moral equilibrium being somehow restored. His victims are not tyrants or despots, as Camus discussed, they are not even known segregationists fronting the anti-movement in the South; nor are they corrupt and violent sheriffs or sadistic prison guards. They are simply men who are visibly white and they constitute the lowest rung, if you

like, on the ladder of psychiatry that Charlie has been attempting to climb since 1964. Charlie is the idealist turned nihilist in existentialist philosopher Albert Camus's sense whereby the nihilist justifies suicide but advances as easily through a compulsive logic to seemingly logical murder.

Pearl Cleage's drama has not yet been the subject of much sustained literary criticism. When critics read her work, they tend to focus on her cycle of "history plays." While *Flyin' West* (1996), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1997), and *Bourbon at the Border* were all commissioned by Atlanta's Alliance Theater, to only read them together is to risk diluting the particular power of *Bourbon at the Border* to de-romanticize aspects of the African American freedom struggle of the 1960s. Thus, for example, Freda Scott Giles can end her essay on all three plays by concluding that, "Cleage demands that we air the festering wounds of our history, as black and white Americans and as men and women, so that we can begin to clean and heal them" ("Herstory" 711). However, healing is precisely what is withheld from Charlie and May. Charlie is too paralysed to move on. The impossibility of Charlie reconciling what happened to them strikes the play's final chord when May persists with her impossible dream, even more urgently as the police close in to arrest her husband: "We'll go to Canada. Tonight. You and me. We'll go so deep in the woods they'll never find us and we'll figure it out, Charlie. We'll figure it all out" (62). The violent act of 1964 has neither been contained nor survived; it has seeped into their present. They are trapped now not only by what happened to them in 1964 but also by his crime in 1995. They cannot cross the bridge to their imagined place of refuge. Even if in Canada they might escape their identity as Americans, forged in the crucible of Freedom Summer, they are left in Detroit at the play's end, trapped in the stark racial dichotomy that the racist murders have unleashed and that the idea of Canada cannot overcome.

Cleage's powerful play is perhaps least successful in imagining Canada, although the fact that it does imagine it at all is interesting enough. While Canada in the play functions as a dream-symbol, it also rests on a time-worn image of the Canadian wilderness as the "bush garden," as in Northrop Frye's metaphor. *Bourbon at the Border* conjoins the political metaphor of the bridge associated with the civil rights South with a Canadian trope: the myth of the Garden of Eden as a quest for self, identified as key in Canadian

literary criticism.⁶ Through this conjunction Cleage explores the possibility of healing, thwarting that option for her character Charlie Thompson and leaving “Canada” as a metaphor, and little else. May’s dream of finding peace in the Canadian wilderness is personal and local insofar as she and Charlie once enjoyed a few days there in a cabin in the woods that she has since mythologized as the place where Charlie is “different” (24), as if the Canadian sun and snow were able to cleanse him of the trauma he carries. The Ambassador Bridge is the passage to the only haven that she dreams could save and restore them. The bridge is symbolic of that long arc of racial change in that it recalls the dreams of runaway slaves heading for the border to begin new lives in another country. But for Charlie and May even to escape north is to “return” south and to be swallowed up by the past; to cross the Ambassador Bridge into Canada is, in fact, to turn south again insofar as driving to Canada involves turning south to cross the bridge to the north.⁷ The circuitous route that the Thompsons would have to take is therefore an ironic addendum to their plight, underlining, yet again, their inability to escape what happened to them in the American South in the 1960s.

While the plot faces south and looks back to the civil rights movement, “Canada” acts as an objective correlative in a play driven by grief and dejection. Cleage closes *Bourbon at the Border* with the impossible hope of a racial haven that Canada lends the protagonists, “so deep in the woods they’ll never find us” (62). While Canada was a place of safety for slaves in the 19th century, its meaning here is textured with little more than the Thompsons’ fantasies: they are indeed like desperados drinking bourbon at the border planning a hopeless getaway that will leave them “safe in the arms of Canada.” “Is there enough sun?” asks Charlie. “There’s good sun all over,” May tells him. “And in the wintertime, we’ll have a sleigh and we’ll go for rides in the snow and put bells on the horses and chestnuts on the fire like in that song you like” (62). Nat King Cole’s rendition of “The Christmas Song” is finally as relevant to their romantic ideal as any bolthole they might have found over the Ambassador Bridge. All that remains is for May to soothe Charlie as the police knock insistently at the door by describing for him the

⁶ Northrop Frye, in his Preface to *The Bush Garden*, allows that, “If the Canadian faces south, he becomes either hypnotized or repelled by the United States: either he tries to think up unconvincing reasons for being different and somehow superior to Americans, or he accepts being ‘swallowed up by’ the United States as inevitable” (1).

⁷ Thanks to Aritha Van Herk for pointing out how this fact supports my reading of the play. See also Mason, *The Ambassador Bridge*.

imaginary garden they would have planted in Canada to grow flowers and vegetables. She is reciting the names of tomato plants as the lights fade to black.

Charlie's experience of racial terrorism in the South of the 1960s is inassimilable. May lives beyond it, can share her pain with Rose, and has something of an historical understanding of the event that sets them apart from others: "People like to say how brave you are, but they don't want to hear how scared you were" (59). Charlie's nihilistic act finally signals his retreat from that world in anger; utopian ideas of the safety of Canada, and even of a happy marriage with May, are finally superseded by his need for the closed world of a prison psychiatric hospital, the only space now open to him in which to wait for his own death. The idea of escaping to Canada is a romantic plot that confirms Charlie's inability to endure the past and May's enforced acknowledgment that escape from the trauma that defines their lives together is an impossible dream.

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DAVID WILLIAMS

Metropolis and Hinterland

*Faulkner and MacLeod*¹

At the provocatively titled “One West, Two Myths” conference held in 2002 in Cody, Wyoming, participants by and large validated the claim that two distinct national historiographies, if not myths, had produced two differing Wests with disparate patterns of cultural development. Turner’s ‘Frontier myth’ of “perennial rebirth” on the American frontier, “at the hither edge of free land” (Turner 12-13), describes, with some justice, a body of thought running from Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau to Steinbeck, Stegner, and Kesey, while the “myth” of metropolis and hinterland, associated with the Canadian economic historian Harold Innis, tends to underwrite a plot that turns back from the wild interior to a “maritime frontier” and formative contact with the culture and institutions of Europe.²

But what we all chose to ignore at Cody was a “sectional image” of the South that, as C. Vann Woodward once remarked, controverts the myth of “perennial rebirth” by its story of poverty in a land of plenty, by its history of defeat in a land of success, by its experience of evil in a land of innocence, and by its sense of rootedness in a land of mobility (181-85). The very premise of the “Frontier myth” – the rebirth of innocence on the margins of savagery – was evidently belied by southern history in general, and by Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*³ in particular, with its wilderness adaptation of the biblical story of the Fall. If it remains an outlier in terms of Turner’s concept of the American West, a “sectional image” of the American South does fit

¹ I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a grant in aid of travel to the “Cultural Circulation” conference held at the University of Vienna from September 24-26, 2010.

² See *One Myth, Two Wests: Special Issue on the West(s)*, *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (2003), particularly L. Clark Mitchell’s essay (497-508) on the continuing influence of Turner, and R. Douglas Francis’s essay (473-85) on the many differences between Turner and Innis.

³ John Crowe Ransom explicitly rejects the Frontier thesis in “Reconstructed But Unregenerate”: “Europe is founded on a principle of conservatism, and is deeply scornful of the American and pioneer doctrine of the strenuous life” (4).

surprisingly well with Innis's myth of metropolis and hinterland, hinting at likely similarities between these geographically separate cultures of the southern Confederacy and the northern Confederation.

In the "Conclusion" to his classic *History of the Fur Trade in Canada*, published in the same year as *I'll Take My Stand*, Innis had noted that a staple economy of southern cotton, like that of the fur-producing northern half of the continent, managed to keep both regions "closely dependent on industrial Europe, especially Great Britain." Separating these two hinterlands of fur and cotton was "the widely diversified economic territory including the New England states and the coal and iron areas of the Middle West demanding raw materials and a market" (392).⁴ While the southern hinterland would be "forced after the Civil War to become subordinate to the central territory," the British-colonized northern hinterland would continue to be organized by London, before various successors in Montreal, New York, and Chicago gained economic control in the early 20th century.

After the Civil War, subordination in the South "to the central territory" likewise meant subordination to "centralizing" capital, to what Marxist geographer Neil Smith has described as "the drive toward universality in capitalism" that "brings only a limited equalization of levels and conditions of development," given the need of capital to resist falling profit rates by "an acute differentiation and continued redifferentiation of relative space" (121-24, 139, 147). And yet this familiar model of centre and periphery must also be inflected by capital's tendency toward "the equalization of geographical differences" (117), resulting in what "Smith calls the subtle 'urbanisation' of the countryside itself" (Willmott 152). While "the modern city produces the country as a differential and underdeveloped space, at the same time the city produces the country as a potential double of itself." In this context, modern, electronic media can only work to accelerate an "urbanization of consciousness" (151) in the hinterlands.

If the periphery has not yet collapsed into the center, it might be because it will not easily forget its colonization by the metropolis. In fact, the cultural geography of both the South and the various regions of Canada may be likened to the situation "in modern colonial Ireland," in the apt paraphrase of Fredric Jameson by his Canadian student Glenn Willmott. In *Ulysses*, for

⁴ Innis verges on economic determinism in his view that "The Northwest Company was the forerunner of the present confederation," since transport and communication, rather than political will, appear to determine the space of community.

example, the experiences “of the colonizer and the colonized, the metropolis and the periphery” are indissolubly linked, given that Joyce’s “dear, dirty Dublin” is “surrounded by and still rooted in a rather intimate, local, and rural society, even while subjected to and permeated by a metropolitan empire” (Willmott 45, 47). If such co-dependency appears exceptional to Jameson, it is much less so to Willmott, who has adopted Smith’s idea of the “invisible city, with its modern modes of production and class-social structure” as a basis for exploring in Canadian writing of the same period an “alternative regional modernity that is both metropolitan and colonial” (152, 45).

In this light, the fidelity of the Southern Agrarians to the metropolis is not surprising: “I have in mind here the core of unadulterated Europeanism,” John Crowe Ransom opined, “with its self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely provincial communities” (3). What is surprising is his more shuttered view that “[t]he South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture” (5). But, insofar as his real *bête noir* was the defection of urban Southerners “to the industrial gospel” (x) of the northern states, Ransom could only look to “the village South and the rural South [to] supply the resistance” (20). In larger terms, this situation is close to that of “dear, dirty Dublin,” with its interdependence of colonizer and colonized, of urban and rural, in the same space. It is virtually the same space that Willmott locates in a modernizing Canada where “[t]he modern countryside is simultaneously both fixed and fragmented, underdeveloped and urbanized” (152). So how is one to locate the “invisible city” in literary works of either “hinterland”? It is the pull of a “globalized modernity” that massively disfigures, for Willmott, “every aspect of form – of narrative space, narrative perspective, plot structure, characterization, and genre” (60).

Form in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is obviously disfigured in massive ways, as undergraduates regularly attest, but it hardly seems deformed by an “invisible city.” At first, it appears to be disfigured by a *primitive* mind, not a modern one, a mind fundamentally unable to structure time sequentially or even to infer causation. In Benjy’s section, each instant has the sensory immediacy of a cinematic image, linked by time-shifts that merge in a prose equivalent of cinematic montage. Take a moment in 1908, when Benjy is thirteen, that abruptly merges into the narrative present: “He stayed in the moonlight. Then I could see the swing and I began to cry.” A cinematic straight-cut returns us to the present of 1928: “*Come away from there, Benjy, Luster said. You know Miss Quentin going to get mad*” (56). Longing to recover his childhood with his lost sister Caddy, Benjy appears

to inhabit a verbal form of cinema⁵ where all time is one, in a sort of ever-present non-presence, rather like a film-loop without progression. And yet the ever-present pull of global modernity is subtly registered in his cinematic epistemology, even if it seems to be left on the margins after Caddy is married in 1920 “to a minor movingpicture [sic] magnate, Hollywood California” (“Appendix” 413).⁶

The sale of Benjy’s pasture to a golf club also evokes the wider *production* of nature by an urbanizing modernity when what Benjy had regarded as an absolute space of innocence, presided over by his beloved Caddy, turns into a relative space, where every golfer calling for his caddie recalls, to him, his intolerable loss. Finally, this artificial space of nature is transformed back into an ironic, relativized space as the “old Compson Mile” is made “intact again in row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individuallyowned [sic] bungalows” (411), in what amounts to a bitterly ironic production of urban space.

In Jason’s section, the “invisible city” is linked to the hinterland by the telegraph office that connects him to his New York broker. A site of his red-neck animus against “a bunch of damn eastern jews,” the telegraph office is also associated with his “bitch” of a niece who costs him stock profits, “all because she had to come helling in there at twelve, worrying me about that letter” (237, 281).⁷ While Jason’s boastful claim “to be associated with some . . . of the biggest manipulators in New York” (238) evidently links him to modern, predatory capital, it is his deeply anti-modern animus that drives him to be revenged on his sister Caddy and her daughter Quentin, since their

⁵ See my *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (2009), particularly chapters 5 and 6, for parallel examples of verbal cinema in three anti-war novels published at exactly the same time. It is this “cinematic epistemology,” which I regard as a true marker of “modern memory” in the Great War and its literary products, and of a globalizing modernity in novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*.

⁶ After her divorce “by mutual agreement, Mexico 1925,” Caddy vanishes from sight “in Paris with the German occupation, 1940,” where she will only re-surface on the arm of a “staffgeneral” in “a picture, a photograph in color clipped obviously from a slick magazine” (415). The trajectory of Caddy’s “globalizing” career in the novel thus marks her very literally as the tragic victim of this Southern version of “global modernity.”

⁷ That Jason finally succeeds in becoming a dealer in cotton (“Appendix” 421) marks him as an ironic avatar of global modernity, boasting how “Abe Lincoln freed the niggers from the Compsons. In 1933, Jason Compson freed the Compsons from the niggers” (422).

menacing sexual freedom likely represents to him “the feminization of culture” under the sign of a globalized modernity.⁸

By contrast, his brother Quentin appears as Leopold Bloom in reverse, strolling through foreign territory that turns into an uncanny double of his own predicament. In the suburbs of a northern city, the southern boy seeks to recuperate his lost tradition – to salvage the honour of his “Little Sister Death” (94) – by joining her in an imagined hell of incest, thus stopping time and transforming *now* into an unchanging eternity of *was*. Even the style of his grammar – marked by sentence fragments resistant to completion – is a sign of his resistance to development, to any further engagement with history. In the largest sense, Quentin’s suicide hints at the farthest extreme of retreat of the post-bellum South into social and personal withdrawal from the urgent pressures of modernity, and from the co-dependency of the metropolis and the hinterland.

Finally, the Dilsey section unites the fragmented tales of the brothers, each “disfigured by an elsewhere” (Willmott 63), into a coherent framework of third-person, omniscient narration, a framework explaining the family’s decadence through the timeless vision of the old black servant, who, speaking historically as much as theologically, says “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (371). It is Dilsey who gives Ben the narcissus flower to hold in the closing scene, while Jason whips Luster’s horse-drawn trap in a counter-clockwise direction around the monument, as if to turn back the clock in an anti-modern pretense of continuity with tradition, or rural self-sufficiency. But it is mere temporizing, a Pyrrhic victory that turns into an emblem of its own defeat in the image of a broken narcissus.

What plays out as tragedy in *The Sound and the Fury* turns to elegy in Alistair MacLeod’s Dublin Literary Prize-winning novel, *No Great Mischief*, where a similar tension between metropolis and hinterland reaches back to the Highland clearances and the increasing power of London. Set in Cape Breton in 1968, a pivotal epoch in modernizing Canada, the apparent subject of the novel is the survival of a local, Gaelic-speaking culture into modern times, in a family saga that takes the narrator’s sister back to Moidart to revisit their origins in the western Scottish highlands of the 1770s. The first third of the story comprises an oral history of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, with tales passed on through the generations in successive chapters: the first recalling the arrival of the ancestor, Red Calum, in Nova Scotia in 1779; then

⁸ See Willmott’s “The Feminization of History” in *Unreal Country* (102-43).

a tale of the clan and its shibboleths likely familiar to Southerners – “*What’s your name?*” “*What’s your father’s name?*” “*What’s your mother’s father’s name?*” (28) – before recounting the life of the maternal grandfather; followed by that of the paternal grandparents, then the parents (who disappear crossing the ice to their island lighthouse), then the elder brothers, and finally, that of the narrator Alexander and his twin sister Catherine (both of whom have been raised by their grandparents after the death of their parents). More like dramatized genealogy than conventional bildungsroman, the opening chapters of MacLeod’s novel recall the “Appendix” to *The Portable Faulkner*, in its turn reaching back to Culloden.⁹

MacLeod even includes a Faulknerian scene of soldiers from the clan fighting in the Revolutionary War against “friends and relatives” from “the Cape Fear River area of North Carolina,” singing “Gaelic songs to one another across the mountain meadows where they would fight on the following day” (20). But the MacDonalds had fought for the British before that, at Québec, where they served under the command of the same James Wolfe who, at Culloden 14 years earlier, had crushed their feudal society. Writing to a friend in the title words of the novel, General Wolfe “made the cynical comment [about the Highlanders] ‘No great mischief if they fall’” (109). As the narrator’s sister quietly remarks: “It sort of changes the conventional picture of Wolfe with his ‘brave Highlanders’” (235). But the conventional picture of the Conquest will also be transfigured by a battle in 1968 between the MacDonald clan and hard-rock miners from Québec, resulting in the death of Fern Picard, the French leader (a modern Montcalm), and in the imprisonment of the narrator’s eldest brother, Calum (a modern stand-in for Wolfe). Only in the continuing friendship of the narrator and one of the Québécois is there a possible rapprochement that turns the Conquest into a civil war between brothers struggling to speak each other’s language, “as if Marcel Gingras and I had been inhabitants of different rooms in the same large house for a long, long time” (199). What Benedict Anderson has characterized in French history “as reassuringly fratricidal wars between – who else?

⁹ One need look no further than the patronymic ancestor of Faulkner’s “Appendix” to *The Sound and the Fury*: “These were Compsons: QUENTIN MACLACHAN. Son of a Glasgow printer, orphaned and raised by his mother’s people in the Perth highlands. Fled to Carolina from Culloden Moor with a claymore and the tartan he wore by day and slept under by night” (404).

– *fellow Frenchmen*” (200)¹⁰ here becomes a similar trope of fellow citizens who have to learn to “remember to forget” (*Imagined Nations* 91).¹¹

At the same time, the music of Marcel Gingras recalls a different longing for a homeland that is neither Canada nor Québec, rather “*au pays des Laurentides*,” a local borderland where “the people of that region had more in common with one another than they had with those whom they felt controlled their destinies from the distant cities of Toronto and Quebec City” (247). By contrast with Marcel, the narrator appears as an agent of modernity, commuting between his luxurious home in Windsor and the flophouse of his alcoholic brother Calum in Toronto – that sinister metropolis of “canyons” – and in memory between the Atlantic, the Precambrian Shield, and the Prairies, until the entire nation is contained in his mental map of “the Trans-Canada Highway,” just visible from his sister’s palatial home “located high upon one of the more prestigious ridges of the new and hopeful Calgary” (167, 93).

The vehicle in which Alexander travels from beginning to end finally comes to figure as the vehicle of elegy, transporting him with his dying brother over dangerous winter roads from Toronto, crossing the Canso Causeway to Cape Breton, only to feel Calum’s hand on the seat beside him growing cold. “Ferry the dead,” the narrator thinks. “*Fois do t’anam*. Peace to his soul” (283). Just as his transistor radio had once brought news of world-altering events to the mine on the Canadian Shield (244-47), so his car now ferries him between the hinterland and the invisible city. Always on the road, sketching every region into his mental map of the nation, Alexander appears to accept the co-dependency of the metropolis and the hinterland, in the process becoming an antithesis of Faulkner’s Jason Compson who, in preventing his niece’s flight to the city, is left choking on gas fumes and hiring a black man to chauffeur him and his pounding head back home (Faulkner 390-92).

In the end, of course, the plot and the narrative perspective of *No Great Mischief* are both “disfigured by an elsewhere” that differs from that of *The*

¹⁰ Beyond French history, Anderson notes how “[a] vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers’ rather than between – as they briefly were – two sovereign nation-states” (201).

¹¹ In what follows, I draw from my previous discussion in *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction* (2003) concerning the reprise of the Conquest in MacLeod’s handling of this scene.

Sound and the Fury. Appearing seventy years after Faulkner's novel, MacLeod's work stands at the end of many decades of technological, economic, and social change. While the reaction of the Southern Agrarians to the challenge of "industrialism" is surely writ large in the maladaptive behavior of the brothers Compson, the die was already cast in MacLeod's novel: economic necessity has long ago driven the clan MacDonald into the mining industry. In the narrative foreground of the 1990s, the information revolution and its assumptions are also at work to disfigure the plot of *No Great Mischief*. For that reason, the Mountie who stops the car on its return to Cape Breton may be less ironic than the narrator assumes: "'MacDonalds?'" he says. 'Are you the guys who make the hamburgers?' 'No,' says Calum, 'we're not the guys who make the hamburgers'" (280). Yet, more than he realizes, Alexander is effectively linked to this agent of globalizing modernity, since he has managed, by knitting center and periphery together, to reveal the co-dependency and reversibility of metropolis and hinterland, in a brave new world where centers are everywhere.

As for the disfiguring of perspective in *No Great Mischief*, there can be no doubt "that an oral narrative strains at the seams of the printed book."¹² From his opening sentence, the narrator is caught in an unacknowledged contradiction: "As I begin to tell this," he says, "it is the golden month of September in southwestern Ontario" (1). Such specificities of time and locale are quickly undone by his pretense that "[t]he 401, as most people hearing this will know, is Ontario's major highway" (3). No one is really "hearing this" except in the context of a conference presentation; the narrator is thus open to the charge that he tries to conceal the agency of the book as an emissary of the invisible city. Ought we then to conflate the hypocrisy of General Wolfe, the agent of the metropole, with the hypocrisy of MacLeod's narrator as an agent of modernity? Likely not, since the automobile, like the radio, or the industrial mining equipment used by the men has long ago foreclosed on the question of resisting a globalized and globalizing modernity. For it is not the narrator, but economic and social forces that have brought his fellow, foreign miners from "Portugal as well as Southern Italy" to the Canadian Shield, these lonely, dreaming men who circle a date on their calendars "with a word or phrase beneath: 'Freedom' or 'Gone' or 'Last Day'

¹² For a discussion of the tensions between an oral narrative and the print-politics of this novel's narrator, and thus of a plot massively "disfigured by an elsewhere" (Willmott 63), see my *Imagined Nations* (98-102).

written in English; or words of equivalent meaning in the various languages of Europe” (145). It is ultimately to MacLeod’s credit that the vehicle of urbanization becomes a vehicle for eulogizing what is lost in the collapse of margin and centre, for what Faulkner had so movingly anticipated as the tragic fate of the Old South.

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