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Changing 'society-made' language: reenacting and rewriting history, past and memory in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*

George Orwell claimed in *Politics and the English language* that "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought", suggesting that our use of language influences our thinking; as language deteriorates, so do our thoughts.

I'm hoping to draw a parallel between the negative portrayal of people of the African diaspora in Canadian literary works and its ongoing effect on society's perception of these individuals today. Language is pivotal in all aspects of life, from facilitating communication and understanding to enabling manipulation through linguistic tactics. It also acts as a social marker, influencing how society labels individuals based on their speech. In literature, language is essential in establishing conventions, forms and genres of texts. Ultimately, it shapes self-perception, worldview, and historical interpretation.

This essay explores Laurence Hill's 2007 novel, *The Book of Negroes*, focusing on language's use to fight greater causes. The novel follows Aminata Diallo's journey from her abduction in Africa, enslavement in South Carolina, her escape to Halifax, return to Africa, and her travel to London where she writes her story. The novel's title, referencing a historical document, contains a word now considered offensive in English. This highlights the profound impact that language choices can have on people and narratives, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and community. This essay questions how Hill's use of language is a tool to transform history, shape perceptions, and reflect broader societal views.

The Book of Negroes, a neo-slave narrative and fictional autobiography, uses language powerfully to challenge traditional storytelling.

This blending of history with fiction creates a humanistic story from the imagined life of Aminata Diallo. As scholar Gregor Benedikt Pudzich argues in *Rewriting the Past, Pluralizing the Present: Renegotiating Canadianness in the*

Works of Dionne Brand, George Elliott Clarke, and Lawrence Hill, combining historical facts and changing perspectives underscore the intertwined nature of national and transnational histories in the black diaspora. In fact, by mixing genres, Hill innovatively disrupts narrative conventions: he re-educates readers on slavery's history, reshapes modern racial perceptions, and reclaims his people's history and glory.

Moreover, Aminata's recollection also challenges language conventions. Aiming to dismantle the oppressive postcolonial system that shapes slave narratives, her intention to write her life account herself reflects the historical reality of white abolitionists controlling Black writing ("a black message in a white envelope"). Daria Tunca , member of the Center for Teaching and Research in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Liege, writes that, stories have an incredible power "not only in the decolonizing process, but also [...] because [...] there is no better way of controlling people than providing them your own version of who they are", a saying which echoes with white abolitionists' wish to pen slave narratives (*The Power of a Singular Story: Narrating Africa and Its Diasporas* 8). Aminata's encounter with Dante, a black butler in London, further illustrates this, as he cannot speak with her to avoid "influencing" her thoughts: "They want your story to be pure. Straight from Africa" (454). Rather than homogenizing African diasporic experiences in an abolitionist discourse, Tunca emphasizes the importance of preserving their diversity: "Africa is by definition a fluctuating entity, which under the pen [...] of its diasporic writers refuses to be generalized, an amalgamation that would only lead to a "single story" of Africa (7). Aminata's refusal to let others write a stereotypical "African" book demonstrates her use of language as a weapon to untie herself of white people's preconceptions, while underscoring that each member of the diaspora, from Sanu to Chekura, had their own experience. Furthermore, Aminata advocating to end slavery highlights language's role as a political instrument to do what war should or might do.

Moreover, Aminata's linguistic skills and knowledge make her a powerful character who "redefines a stereotypical colonial stock character: the witch". As Pudzich argues, she transcends usual boundaries, "counteracts and deconstructs existing literary stereotypes" (108). In fact, she subverts the norms of white dominance but also confronts traditional gender roles being a female slave. In reality, as a woman slave, her survival wouldn't have been possible and since many well-known black leaders are men, she wouldn't necessarily be recognized at the end.

Additionally, *The Book of Negroes* underscores the power dynamics of language, where English, spoken by white people, is predominant, sidelining the black slaves who must adopt it or be marginalized. Aminata's ability to read

gives her a significant advantage over her illiterate peers, exemplified when many of them couldn't read the placards that offered freedom in Canada to slaves who joined the British cause.

Moreover, the novel is also a metafictional historical novel (storytelling about storytelling). Numerous are the scenes which focus on the act of writing: Aminata learns to read and write Arabic from her father, keeps records for her master Lindo, teaches others to read, scribes in the Book of Negroes and writes her own story. This focus on being able to use language shows how much her community values literacy, as it allows people to tell their own stories.

The black population in Canada has often been marginalized and their stories "silenced," so much so that many people don't know about Canada's slaveholding past. Hill's novel, notably centered on memories and the African diaspora provides millions of people — silenced and forgotten throughout centuries, narratives and societies — with a platform for recognition and an opportunity to explore their "roots and routes."

A character like Aminata, linking various locations and historical events, mirrors the journey of many slaves who returned to Sierra Leone. Given the challenges of integrating into a place's history when not originally from it, the exclusion of black individuals from historical narratives becomes evident: their forced diaspora, highlighted by the novel's structural shifts between past and present, complicated their inclusion in historical narratives. This exclusion reflects the continuous struggle against racism and discrimination in Canadian society.

Language is a tool of power: for colonizers, silencing slaves by gagging or language barriers keeps them in a dependent state, excluded from public life; for the slaves it is a way to secretly communicate via a coded language, the Gullah, without encouraging the risk of being whipped: "*Buckra* was the Negroes' word for white people [...] You call a white man white, he beats you black and blue" (Aminata 129). In fact, the colonizers' dismissive language aims to silence and dehumanize black people. For instance, Salomon Lindo's notice in the South Carolina Gazette objectifies Aminata as an "Obedient, sensible Guinea wench." She is a wench, while Ms. Lindo is "a lady" (200). This worldly discrimination is also found in the brief and pejorative descriptions British soldiers make of black loyalists' in the Book of Negroes, silencing their individuality. In summary, black people's exclusion from Canadian narratives showcases language's problematic nature, ideologically reflecting their non-belonging.

Muteness also demonstrates humiliation, like when Aminata stays silent during her rape and her visits to the medicine man's bed. Her capture and marches through African villages demonstrate the power of silent witnessing, as villagers watch without intervening or condemning enslavement. Later, when Aminata witnesses slaves being taken and remains silent out of fear, silence is a defense mechanism for not becoming the next victim herself. Through these silences, Hill conveys the unspoken atrocities of slavery and the inner turmoil of those who endured it.

Much like Hill's own novel seeks to uncover a neglected part of history, Aminata's novel aims to document the overlooked stories and identities of black individuals.

On the ships, slaves lost their distinctiveness: their origins and names were forgotten, they were collectively labeled as "Africans" or "slaves" while Aminata herself is renamed "Meena". Indeed, she shows how names matter for identity when at the end, she asks schoolchildren in England to call her Aminata, not "Meena" (3).

Moreover, Aminata attempts many times to reclaim her identity by saying she's from Bayo, but faces punishment and disregard for it. Once, she asks what "Africa" and "Guinea" are, saying "Guinea means nothing to me, so how can I be from it? I am from Bayo. [...] Have you heard of that?" (Aminata, 201). She's unaware of her "country" as the concept of nations in Africa was defined by white European colonizers, who divided the land based on treaties and resources without considering native communities: "It's a big dark continent. I don't know it at all. Nobody does." (Lindo 201). Consequently, language can sometimes fail to convey accurate realities, as seen in the differing perceptions of Africa between Aminata and Lindo. Pudzich notes this in his analysis of Africa's depiction on colonial maps, where stereotypical animal images suggest an untamed land ripe for colonization. Aminata, with parents from different African tribes, symbolizes this diversity, in contrast to colonizers' homogenized view of Africa.

Moreover, Aminata measures age in "rains" and time by lunar cycles, which contrasts with English concepts of years and months. This linguistic discrepancy, aligning with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis[1], reflects how each language shapes each person's perception, immersing the reader in Aminata's world, where nature is integral to daily life and understanding.

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[1] Linguistic Relativity proposes that a specific language an individual speaks influences their perception of reality. It is also referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, quoted in the early 20th century by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.

Aminata's role as a djeli, an oral storyteller, highlights language as a tool for memory, independent of written conventions.

Throughout her journey, Aminata shares her story globally, ensuring the experiences of the black diaspora are remembered and the voiceless heard. She challenges the Roman saying that "spoken words fly away, written words remain" by also being a writer, preserving the diaspora's memories on paper. Her multilingualism (African languages, English, and Gullah), central to her identity, unites diverse African diasporic communities and serves as a bridge between whites and blacks.

According to Pudzich, Hill's use of "historical characters, setting and atmosphere [act] as a foil to re-enact the past" (102). As we've previously asserted, the novel's title is drawn from a historical document, which is itself a testimony of the past. Consequently, by providing blacks with historical materials, Hill's voicing of the past is a form of catharsis, "a redemptive act, liberating his characters from the uncertainty of origins" (Pudzich 245). In fact, as Pudzich later explains, novelists make the past tangible for their contemporaries (102). Understanding and remembering the past are crucial for shaping the present and guiding black culture forward, as emphasized by the importance of the next generation in the novel, seen in Aminata's role as a midwife. There is still hope for the future. In fact, Sanu's choice of naming her baby "Aminata" is a departure from Shakespeare's "What's in a name" idea, showing that names are relevant. Similarly, the urgency of Biton's men on the slave ship to have Aminata remember and repeat their names emphasizes the crucial need to be remembered.

In summary, Hill's novel underscores language's dual role in defining identity but also wielding influence and authority.

Aminata's journey has been made possible because of the abilities her parents taught her (writing, praying, catching babies) and the linguistic skills she developed. Throughout the story, she kept on saying "I am Aminata from Bayo", "I am a free born Muslim", which is a way for her to keep on hoping that her world still exists, even if it's in her thoughts. But at the end, when Aminata returns to Africa, her language and past make her an "outsider". People debate her identity: is she African, American, Canadian, or a "toubab with a black face?" (394).

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Participation

B

I was not the most active student of the class but I nonetheless expressed the ideas and reflections I had.