Considering the Use of “The Book of Negroes” by Lawrence Hill:

A Classroom Experiment

by Nicki Parker – V00722105

The University of Victoria

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**Themes in the Novel**

One of the major draws to “The Book of Negroes” is the presence of what a review in Macleans magazine says is, “one of the strongest female characters in recent literary history, a woman who cuts a swath through a world hostile to her race and her gender. Aminata Diallo is a character who, despite an onslaught of travesties, maintains courage, faith and acuity—rising above her adversaries and achieving what she truly desires most: to return to her homeland in West Africa” (Virgo, 2011). Through this heroic young lady, readers are introduced to an array of pungent and moving themes such as family division, the quest for home, injustice in gender and race, identity, survival, and the use of story telling as a form of hope and freedom. The use of story telling is one of the main themes in Hill’s book as it is the hopeful avenue that Aminata takes to express her pains and to teach others about the power that people are capable of. Hill describes this important aspect of advocacy in the book by writing, “we need your story, we need your voice… your voice could move thousands of people” (Hill, 2000, p. 425, 26).

The framing story in the book if broken up into four parts, introducing Aminata as the reflective storyteller. This use of breaking the book into four separate ‘books’ is similar to what Eden Robinson does in her book “Monkey Beach” (Robinson, 2000). This literary technique does two important things: it creates curiosity and suspense, and it gives the reader some security that the main narrative voice, in this case Aminata, makes it through her trauma.

**About the Author**

Hill was born in 1957 and is the son of a “Black father and a white mother: American immigrants who married and moved to Canada in 1953” (Sagawa, 2008). Subsequently his upbringing and evident roots encouraged curiosity of his history. This curiosity was the grass roots of his journey into writing historical fiction about the abolition of slavery.

In an interview, Hill says that The Book of Negroes is “not a novel of slavery, but a novel of liberation” (Sagawa, 2008). He has received a fair bit of criticism on the novel for digging up the subject of slavery and for his unsympathetic and stereotypical portrayals of some characters of African descent. For example, his “portrayal of the slave trade of Africans by Africans, and the encouragement of civil war within African communities as an avenue to sell off captured enemies. Hill’s response was that he had a debt to the truth and to history, but he also noted the places where he veered from history in order to tell the story he wanted to within the novel” (2008).

An interesting question was brought up to Hill about his muse as a writer. His response was, “I have a private little — completely unscientific — theory that the writers who influence you the most are the ones that you ingest as a teenager because you are still forming your character. I was so struck by the people I was reading as a teenager that I think they are the writers that I carry with me most profoundly. I am not saying that I imitate them or strive to imitate them, but I carry them with me somewhere in my soul. When I was fourteen or fifteen I turned to adult literature with a passion, and my parents, being educated people, had hundreds of books, and I ate up every book in the household. Most of the books were African American literature: Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, etc. I read — inhaled — books: initially the Black American male writers who were so dominant in the 50s and 60s, as they were on my parents’ shelves in the 1960s. Later, I turned to African-American women as they became more prominent” (Sagawa, 2008). Considering Hill’s muse of historical literature and the credit he gives to the influence of literature at a young age, one can assume that Hill’s writing was written to offer the same opportunity for adolescent readers. The book is most definitely, as Hill might say, an ‘edible’ book for readers, and it certainly offers adolescents an opportunity to learn about history in creative-narrative form. A fantastic resource for teachers to deepen students understanding of the book is “The Book of Negroes Teachers Guide” by Lawrence Hill. In it teachers are given pre-reading activity ideas, and other historical, and biographical teaching ideas to help students experience the book, to help them “inhale” it (Hill, 2011).

Hill is a former speechwriter, journalist, director of a documentary, and has now published three novels (Sagawa, 2008). Of his novels, all of them have received outstanding reviews, and Hill has “won a National Magazine Award, as well as an American Wilbur Award for his film documentary, *Seeking Salvation: A History of the Black Church in Canada”* (Book Zomie, 2009).

**Connections with the Novel**

A helpful resource for students and teachers as they approach this emotional venture into history, is the chapter on *Managing Emotions*, from authors Bokett and Percival’s “Coaching Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom” textbook (2011, p. 83). In the chapter they discuss Jewish psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl and his Choice Theory, which he discovered while in the Nazi camps. This resource is very helpful for me and could be helpful for students as they consider Aminata’s practice of Frankl’s theory by choosing to seek freedom, despite her entrapping environment. Understanding this Frankl’s Choice theory was a helpful connection for me as I saw that, though Hill’s book was about slavery at its surface, it pointed to the shameless audacity of the gate of freedom that lies within every person, chains or not, in their “choice on how to respond to what [they] are subjected to” (2011, p. 83). I can directly take this thought and apply it to my life by intentionally *choosing* to take on the stance of freedom instead of being bogged down, for example, by numerous assignments.

One of the ways that this book connected with me and, I believe would reach secondary students as well, is through looking at the real, hand printed names of the slaves who were made to board the ships. I found a copy of one of the printed lists while searching on the University of Victoria library database. The document titled, “Inside the Book of Negroes” is published by Laurence Hill, which aids in making connections to the book (Hill, 2007). The connection to the real found in historical fiction brings a sense of meaning and purpose to the book that is easier to find here then basic fictional novels.

**Fan Fiction / Song Response to the Novel**

Literary analysis of Aminata’s song – the Lyrics of Call and Response

***What will you?***

**I will remember**

***What will you do?***

**I will remember**

The opening of Aminata’s Song establishes a decision. Just like the book, Aminata is jarred with the invitation to surrender, to submit to the desires of those pushing her. It is her consistent sturdiness in looking forward to her goal of sharing her life story that enables her to make the decision to persevere. The hope of sharing her story to liberate the captives of slavery, to share the inhumane dealings imparted by the Toubabu, is what keeps Aminata level headed and what holds her rhythm as she walks from home to home and ship to ship (Hill, Pg. 103).

***What is your name?***

**My name be Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**djeli Aminata**

The questions, “What is your name?” and “What’s in a name?” are questions that plow deep into the foundation of who Aminata is. Throughout the book, Hill uses Aminata’s name and title in society to introduce his readers to the branding that slavery has on its victims. Aminata responds to this branding, both literally and figuratively (Pg. 422), not in anger but with courage as she constantly tells people that she, “belong[s] to nobody” and is Bayo Born Aminata Diallo (Pg. 122).

**Brought up in a town tight circle in form**

**where my momma caught babies and my daddy read book**

**Great teachers I was given (2x)**

***What is your name?***

**My name be Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**the child Aminata**

**The child turned woman when the men fast killed**

**both my momma and papa brought to the ground**

**To the sea I am forced (2x)**

***What is your name?***

**My name be Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Baby catcher Aminata**

**I don't hate you for bringing me to**

**this ship Chekura I will trust in you**

***What’s in a name?***

**Great worth in a name**

***What’s in a name?***

**There is life in a name**

***What is your name?***

**My name is Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Conquered river Aminata**

**White men blind about beast and man**

**Why they put me in these little small pens?**

**Always lookin’ for a lil’ home**

**A familiar face, a nod, a tone**

***What is your name?***

**Yet my name is Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Bayo born Aminata**

**Whipped and raped, bruised and scraped**

**Yet my daddy’s words pushed me to keep on**

**Is this what it means**

**to be a slave**

**Am I really alone**

**I must learn their ways**

***What is your name?***

**Still my name be Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Baby catcher Aminata**

**When hope came it felt like a dream**

**Is Chekura really standing before me**

**Now a baby lives in me**

**Brought up with a daddy**

**Now we are family**

***But the dream went sour***

**Go to sleep little baby**

**Daddy gone little baby**

**It’s you and me baby**

**They take my baby and manipulate me**

**They call me servant to justify deeds**

**I have lost more then have gained**

***What’s in a name?***

**I am masked Aminata (189)**

***What’s in a name?***

**Am I mommy Aminata?**

***What’s in a name?***

**The reader Aminata**

**It was my Masters who taught me**

**To keep enemies away from safety (241)**

**Control, attack, pin**

**Were the examples for me**

**It was an ugly game**

**Submission was defeat**

***What is your name?***

**And I am Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Fighter Aminata**

**Ship to ship, house to house**

**Will I ever make it into my own house**

**Away to Africa**

**You will be free**

**Was the treaty**

**My feet sunk deep into the soil of (382)**

**My home Africa, it has been far too long**

**Yet I am home with no family**

**Slavery still awaits me**

**“Don’t give up little baby”**

**“Write on little baby”**

**Now you have heard my story and see our pain**

**We will only live free**

***What’s in a name?***

**I have lived for a reason (103)**

***What is your name?***

**My name is Aminata**

***What’s in a name?***

**Djeli Aminata**

***What is your name?***

Music creates a historical existence. By sharing her story, Aminata Diallo created a historical existence, strongly linked to her African heritage. “I became the storyteller – the djeli – that I had always hoped to be” (Pg. 447). My exploration of *The Book of Negroes* through the songwriting exercise took the power that the words held on me and synthesized them into the song’s lyrics. My hope is that the lyrics, as a poetic device, touch other depths of meaning to those who hear the song, and could possible even inspire secondary students to express their response to the book in a similar fashion.

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