

## From Historical Fiction to Historiographic Metafiction: Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* as Deviant Literature

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### Abstract

Scholars have debated the classification of the African American literature as a plain historic text, which further stimulates the controversy between history and literature. It is on this presumption that this paper critically explored Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, more as a subversive text, which is constructively predisposed to certain postmodern stylistic techniques. While amplifying obtrusive matters that still affect the black race in contemporary American society, it is observed that Hill employs Historiographic Metafiction to creatively reconceptualise the narrative of African American slave history. By implication, the fictional mode in *The Book of Negroes* deconstructs a fixed categorisation of historical hermeneutics of African American slave narratives, as limited to the issues of slavery, captivity, racism, oppression, and so on. While using qualitative approach as methodology, Jacques Derrida's *Deconstruction* served as theoretical framework, complemented by Linda Hutcheon's conception of historiographic metafiction. As a stylistic import, this paper submits that historiographic metafiction is substantiated as a counter-discourse against the lopsided criticism that deprecates black history and literary artistry as immaterial. With reference to its literary originality, *The Book of Negroes* is therefore categorised as a deviant form of black writing in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** *Historiographic metafiction, African American literature, Book of Negroes, Strategic motifs, Night work*

### **Introduction**

That the first piece of writing by an African American is historical should not be simply admitted as a coincidence, given that history mostly has a role to play in the invention of major literary traditions of the world. It was in fact the historic account of a Massachusetts Indian raid written by a slave girl, Lucy Terry, in 1746, entitled “Bars Fight” that became the first known piece of writing by a black American slave. Invariably, history becomes the bedrock on which African American literature is built, an exclusive account characterised by arduous struggle and phenomenal survival. The renowned African American essayist, W.E.B. DuBois, asserts that “the history of the American Negro is the history of strife...” (DuBois, 8). And in the last couple of centuries, many African American literary writers have ingeniously, as distinctive genres would tolerate, ‘narrated’, ‘performed’, ‘sung’ or ‘voiced’ out their personal and/or collective experiences of slavery and its aftermaths, in relation to the extremely hostile environment they were forced to subsist.

The late eighteenth century, which was dominated by pioneer African American writers, has been characterised by diverse controversies in black American writing. Decades after Terry’s short stint, Phyllis Wheatley, the first black American woman to publish a collection of poetry, became known for her audacious voice. She was heavily criticised for her justification of slavery in her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America”. In a similar vein, Jupiter Hammon, the first black American male to publish a literary work, became a victim of his own expressions. One of his famous poems “An address to Miss Phyllis Wheatley (sic), Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, who came from Africa at eight years of age and soon became acquainted with the gospel of Christ” was published in 1778. For these two pioneer writers, their brazen solecism mainly lies in the absolute internalisation of Christianity, which was expressed as unfaltering justification for slavery, its advancement and perhaps total submission to this course by incoming slaves, who were still then victims of the dastardly experience of the Middle Passage.

All these criticisms are however irrelevant due to the fact that literary hegemony at that period was one of the fervent tools of oppression. Attention appears centred on the artistic weaknesses of the pioneers, and deviated from the fact that it is on this premise that the whites assumed racial superiority over black Americans. Regardless

of their questionable style and unimpressive themes, the literary frontier for the black American was permanently broken. Since writing was adjudged to determine black intelligence, the status of African American literature remains heavily dependent on the efforts of the trio, controversies nonetheless. It is therefore inferred that African American is rooted in black history and it is on the shoulders of these pioneers that the early nineteenth century black writers rode into literary achievements, beginning with the compelling slave narratives of the like of Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Gustavus Vassa, Sojourner Truth and Briton Hammon. Other latter writers include William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Frances E. W. Harper in particular, who is particularly known for her poetic thrust on black oppression. One poem worth mentioning is "The Slave Mother", which is part of her published work, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854). The arrival of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois set the pace for an explosive black literary era in America which later characterised the twentieth century. Both authors generated robust debates in their works, *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) respectively, on which direction African American race should go.

After the Harlem Renaissance tradition, the mid-twentieth century witnessed an outstanding level of artistic creativity that practically responds to the severity of American civil rights movement. Just like their African counterparts, the African American writer during this period portrayed literature as a tool for reformation. Two prominent literary writers of this period are Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, whose works *Native Son* (1940) and *Invisible Man* (1952) respectively foreground the status quo of the American society as retrogressive to the advancement of Black Americans. Other American writers of this volatile period include James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry, Chester Himes, Lorraine Hansberry and so on. The black arts movement, which is the cultural arm of the black power movements, gave birth to more vociferous voices in the likes of Malcolm X, also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, Martin Luther King (Jr), Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, among others.

The late twentieth century, starting from the 70s, witnessed African American writers who are contemporary voices that, through their unique literatures, attempted to define and redefine the collective

existence of the black nation in the New World. These writers responded to issues of racial discrimination, identity crisis and other postcolonial derivations, which are still major socio-political realities of the American society. Furthermore, this was also a period where African American women foregrounded their artistic creativity by finally taking their place in the history of African American literature. Among these popular literary giants include Toni Morrison, whose works *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) revoke slavery and unjust servitude, the very foundation of African American race. Another prominent feminist writer, Maya Angelou, would be remembered for her popular poem "Still I Rise", which reiterates the vicious struggle of black Americans in contemporary times and, at the same time, foregrounds the tenacious will of the black Americans towards survival. Others who are unrelenting, vibrant voices of the twentieth century in African American literary history include Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Jamaica Kincaid, Ntozake Shange, Rita Dove, and so on. In sum, the African American literature in the twentieth century and beyond appositely responds to the socio-political and national dictates of the modern era, one which audaciously and ultimately converses with the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

#### **A Brief Overview of Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes***

Hill's *The Book of Negroes* is one of the contemporary enigmatic slave narratives of the twenty-first century. Published in the United States of America as *Someone Knows My Name*, this book details the stories of African Americans who were resettled in Nova Scotia, a Canadian province after the American Revolution. It is however a story of a female character, Aminata Diallo, who takes us back to the beginning of black migration from Africa to the United States under the repressive yoke of slavery. After her wild capture, blustery march away from her African home and her unpalatable experience across the Middle Passage, Aminata finds herself on the strange land, having been bought by a *toubob* (a white slave master). She turns towards a servant of the slave master, simply known as a homelander and asks a question that defies time and space. "Where are they taking us? I whispered to him. He looked at me without expression on his face, and said a few incomprehensible words" (Hill, 135).

The significance of this question instigates an inquiry towards the direction of African American race vis-à-vis its literature; or perhaps the lack of it, as metaphorically foregrounded in the inexplicable words of the doleful homelander. The seeming deficiency is propelled by inflammatory presence of a prejudicial hegemony that still categorises African American literary revelations as peripheral, especially due to its affinity to its history. *The Book of Negroes* presents itself as a deviant literature and aggressively challenges this predisposition. For instance, in an interview in 2008, the author confesses as to why the original title, *The Book of Negroes* would not be accepted in the United States. He affirms the disconcerting sensitivity that the word “Negro” still resonates a negative connotation in contemporary times. However, the novel is in fact a symbolic representation of “the actual Book of Negroes (which) is the largest single document about black people in North America up until the end of the eighteenth century” (Hill 489). These people are referred to as the Black Loyalists because of their untold bravery and contributions in the American Revolutionary War. There is a unique history which necessitated the reflections of their names and details in the actual Book of Negroes. Hill’s title choice parodies the disdain that the word “Negro” represents, while making reference to the real life historical document which ironically is still used today to racially categorize these valiant blacks. History becomes Hill’s tool of narration in his projective criticism of this systematic repressive ideology. In one of the preludes of the novel, entitled “A word about history”, the Canadian writer affirms the necessity of synchronising history and creativity in the literary reproduction of African American experience. The author notes that the novel is,

a work of ... imagination, but it does reflect (the) understanding of the Black Loyalists and their history. In this novel, some of the excerpts from the book of Negroes are real, and others have been (creatively) invented or altered. Readers who wish to see the Book of Negroes can find it, or parts of it, in the Nova Scotia Public Archives, the National Archives of the United States and in the National Archives (Public Records Office) in Kew, England... (The Book of Negroes, 489/90)

Therefore, Hill's *The Book of Negroes* deconstructs Kenneth Warren's denunciation of history as a catalyst of redundancy in African American literature. The novel is an exemplification of contemporary African American literature with a peculiar literary approach in which black American history becomes a crucial part of its contemporary experience. It is this discourse that *The Book of Negroes* allegorically brings to limelight. The novel has won several literary prizes including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book, Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and CBC Radio's Canada Reads. And so, there is no denying its contemporary relevance. One of such is the necessity of retelling the African American experience, while using a *new* unprecedented approach. Hill's narrative predominantly hinges on black history in America, figuratively dwelling on the abolition age which marks the pioneering period of black resistance. However, he doesn't simply retell this unique history; he challenges its claim of reality as well as attempts to subvert certain restrictive hegemonic impulses, while using the pluralistic choices that postmodernism offers.

#### **Theoretical Framework: A Brief Study of Deconstruction and Historiographic Metafiction**

This study adopts Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction as theoretical approach in this study, complemented by Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction. Derrida's ideas on deconstruction stem from his inquisition of Heidegger and Nietzsche's assumptions way back before the twentieth century. However, his famous text, *Of Grammatology* (1967) which extends from Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, sets the pace for the far-reaching perception of literary criticism in the twentieth century. Surging on conceptual radicalisation of the interpretation of language, deconstruction as a theoretical approach began as rapid reaction to Western hierarchical impulses embedded in the basic principles of structuralism and formalism. The structuralists claim that the fundamentals of human ideology, literature in particular, is conceived as parts of a system of signs, particularly in terms of binary opposition. On his angle of thought on deconstruction, which is also commonly referred to as poststructuralism, Derrida speaks on hierarchies in which Western culture is considered as superior to others. While using deconstruction, the scholar purposes to eradicate the border between binary

oppositions such that this implicit hierarchy by oppositions is constantly interrogated. It is on this common philosophy that deconstruction feeds postmodernism as a radical reaction to Western hegemonies.

In literature, deconstruction interrogates the close reading of texts in order to foreground the notion that “any given text has contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole”. J. Hillis Miller, one of its principal proponents, expounded in his essay entitled “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure”, that “deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air” (Miller 273). Therefore, deconstruction argues that the very linguistic structures which formalists and structuralists foreground as universal basis of meaning, according to Derrida, are probably not universal, and therefore instability in meaning is established. Christopher Norris further describes this line of thought.

Deconstruction can be seen in part as a vigilant reaction against this tendency in structuralist thought to tame and domesticate its own best insights. Some of Jacques Derrida’s most powerful essays are devoted to the task of dismantling a concept of ‘structure’ that serves to immobilize the play of meaning in a text and reduce it to a manageable compass (Norris, 2)

In view of this, the deferment of meaning(s) in the cosmos of deconstruction is unpopular among certain philosophers. Therefore, several criticisms have been generated which categorised Derrida’s work as chaotic and conflicting and that deconstruction simply undermines already established universal interpretations. A prominent American critic of deconstruction, and by extension, postmodernism, Hicks, offers a polemic argument on the notion of deconstruction as a mere political retort to the technological advancement of the Western society. He concludes that postmodern thinkers, while quoting deconstruction, are simply orchestrating a blind standpoint against the progressive mechanism of science and technology, of reality, of reason and of the “greatness of human potential” (Hicks 199). He concludes that in tandem with anger and depression, postmodern thinkers apply

“resentment strategies” by a way of showcasing and celebrating the metaphysical and epistemological imbalance of the modern era. He however attacks the very foundation of deconstruction, conclusively averring that,

Deconstruction theory says that no work has meaning. Any apparent meaning can be transformed into its opposite, into nothing, or revealed to be a mask for something distasteful. The postmodern movement contains many people who like the idea of deconstructing other people’s creative work. Deconstruction has the effect of leveling all meaning and value. If a text can mean anything, then it means nothing more than anything else – no texts are then great. (Hicks 199)

Terry Eagleton further states that deconstruction is a “critical operation by which such oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning” (Eagleton, 115). Therefore, deconstruction does not show that all texts are pointless, but rather that they are brimming with multiple, and most times, contradictory meanings.

The term ‘historiographic metafiction’ was coined by the Canadian literary scholar, Linda Hutcheon, who in her book, entitled *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, references literary works of historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, 5). This concept, through this description, can further be explained as a combination of historical fiction and the literary tenets of metafiction, which include the use of allusion, intertextuality and so on. Hutcheon cited examples of novels that employ the use of historiographic metafiction, such as García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980). The use of historiographic metafiction relates to literary works that are self-conscious in relation to the pervasive nature of history. As a literary concept, it allows the possibility of questioning the past in a pluralistic



way that deconstructs metanarratives, hence a viable tool in relation to postmodernist literature.

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Hill's *The Book of Negroes* therefore can be categorised into the class of historic fiction, a genre which thrives on the reflections of historical realities. Although this assertion is quite obvious, this specific delineation limits the postmodern stylistic import that novel intrinsically represents, which will be explored at a later stage in this analysis. However, the convolution of this genre (historic fiction) lies in its inexorable conflict between historical verisimilitude and literary artistry. While Shaw attests to the problematic nature of historical fiction, given its never ending narrative, Ridney asserts an alternative, which is focusing on the significant role historic narrative plays in the formation of cultural past. Hill's novel principally objectifies the African American past, one which Warren impulsively dismisses, while recognising the gaping void in his argument: "admittedly, my insistence on this rather constricted historical frame for something called African American literature may seem at the very least, counterintuitive..." (Warren 1). Hill deconstructs and subverts this notion, with the declaration that the novel is inventively "built on the foundation of history" (*The Book of Negroes* 491).

Therefore, the suppressive instinct of interrogating the African American past is in fact rather of repellant vintage particularly in the twenty-first century. Attention is now shifted towards catechising the prejudicial literary standards which have continually repressed African American literature at every stage of its renaissance. Of course, the Harlem Renaissance signifies the peak of black artistry, but definitely was not the beginning of black literary creativity. If the word renaissance simply interprets as a "re-birth", then there must be birth(s); therefore, in the case of black literary history in American, these literary antecedents have continually suffered incisive criticisms. Terry's exploit, if objectively contextualized, is the first black literary effort in dire circumstances irrespective of its flaws and literary weaknesses. From Terry through Wheatley, Hammon and finally the abolitionists, there has been spiral subversion of the lack of intellect ascribed to black slaves, right from the eighteenth century to contemporary times. Hill's novel, *The Book of Negroes*, is a counter-

discourse against the lopsided criticism that denounces history as preponderant element of literary artistry, especially within the context of African American experience.

From its contents and artistry, *The Book of Negroes* is a deviant form of black writing in contemporary times. More importantly, the novel challenges certain transcendental truth: the continuous distortion of slave history as non-idyllic in terms of representing African American experience, particularly in present times. The protagonist, Aminata Diallo, asserts this in her determined will to survive against the odds of brutality, slavery and intense racial discrimination. The novel opens up with a deviant but categorical statement from old Diallo, a female abolitionist popularly known as Meena Dee:

I seem to have trouble dying. By all rights, I should not have lived this long. But I still can 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.... There must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all those water crossings, while other fell from bullets or shut their eyes and simply willed their lives to end. (*The Book of Negroes* 13)

Having lived for so long, Diallo prides herself on this very basis of her survival. Her reflections about her present state underscore a cynical modesty. But her conclusion about her future, from the above excerpt, is never devoid of challenges. Diallo figuratively typifies the African American race in its esteemed resilience in the ultimate subversion of a tyrannical history. However, its future is laced with racial and ideological gap that may only be filled with consistent introspection into the past. Diallo strongly and consistently confirms this future throughout the course of this novel. During an abolitionist meeting for instance, she was teased to be nearing her grave by another influential woman, saying "We must get this woman into Parliament soon. Who knows how much longer she'll be with us?" (*The Book of Negroes* 13) Diallo, despite her old age, fought back: "Half bent though I was, I dug my fingers into her ribs. She let out a shriek and spun around to face me. "Careful, I told her, "I may outlast you!" (*The Book of Negroes*

13). Old Diallo's expression deconstructs any signification to an end and confirms the tenacity of African American literature in its continuous re-representation of its unique historical past that instructs its presence and still defines its future.

Therefore, *The Book of Negroes* proves a significant role in the formation of contemporary African American literature in the twenty-first century. More pertinent is the writer's deviant choice of recalling the past, a notion that modern critics such as Warren defines as retrogressive. "As for the status of the fiction, poetry, and letters written before the Jim Crow era, my claim is that the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature (Warren 5)". The question therefore is, what does? With references to other literatures of the world namely English, African, Australian, Chinese, history plays the formative role. Why advocate a non-existent variance when it comes to early stages of black American literature or the past it represents? Our argument is that the literatures of Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs have contextual similitude with Hill's *The Book of Negroes*. In narrating her past, Old Diallo never gets tired.

My life is a ghost story... I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, born in the village of Bayo, three moons by foot from the Grain Coast in West Africa. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am both, and will explain that later. I suspect that I was born in 1745, or close to it. And I am writing this account. All of it.

*(The Book of Negroes 16)*

Therefore, the outright dismissal of these writers irrespective of their flaws (which ought to be objectively contextualised) registers the same fate for Hill. On what exact premise does Warren dismisses the founding patriarchs and matriarchs of slave narratives, if not, in his words, "to do so nostalgically, reproachfully, or perhaps in a manner combining both moods?" (3). As far as African American literature is concerned, dismissing the past immediately severs the umbilical cord that connects to prospective future. Consolidating on the past however provides the qualitative roadmap that leads into dynamic futuristic prospects. For the African American race, the past is woven into the

future: this is the distinct nature of African American literature. And this is precisely what *The Book of Negroes*, amidst other contemporary works in the twenty-first century, epitomizes.

But Hill is not merely recycling the history of slavery. On the contrary, his novel redefines and ultimately preserves one of the unique genres of black literature, slave narratives in the most compelling fashion. *The Book of Negroes* is a contemporary cast of slave narrative, of a young girl's experience and her ultimate triumph as an influential abolitionist. The setting begins in the early eighteenth century England but the rapid use of flashback brings back vivid experiences of pre-colonial African society from whence the protagonist, Aminata, took her first breathe of freedom. The stylistic choice of this narrative interjects with varied theoretic layers, one which is the feminist postmodernism, which is a departure from the traditional feminism. This can be seen in Aminata's interaction with a young white girl in a school in London, on one of her speech delivery visits.

One girl asked if it was true that I was the famous Meena Dee, the one mentioned in all the newspapers. Her parents, she said, did not believe that I could have lived in so many places. I acknowledged that I was Meena Dee, but she could call me Aminata Diallo if she wanted, which was my childhood name... She asked why I was so black. I asked why she was so white...

(*The Book of Negroes* 15-16)

Aminata playfully but cautiously asserts the consciousness of her identity on the girl. Although the last two antithetical statements have serious racial implication, Aminata's composed response downplays the hegemony of colour as a weapon of racial subjugation, but subtle asserts her individuality. Decades before, she could have been serving the little girl as a slave. Aminata through her modest responses brings to consciousness that feminine equality that had been lost due to racism, that equality she had experience in the mid-wife partnership she shared with her mother even as a child. Also, when compared with Alex Haley's *Roots*, there is a narrative subversion of the narrative voice of Kunta Kinte. His personality has gained a somewhat

monarchical representation of African American experience in terms of recounting the complete journey of slavery from African world to the New World. In *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata simply shifts the black feminine voice from its restrictive periphery to the centre of discourse. She nevertheless still reminds the reader of Kinte's historic narration, on which Alex Haley's *Roots* (1978) is also premised.

*The Book of Negroes* sets the pluralistic tune which provides reasonable anchorage on postmodernism. Shaila Mehra, in her work titled "Recasting the past: history and the African American postmodern" also admits that "postmodern African American literature about history does not seek to recuperate the past or treat it nostalgically as a way of locating and freezing that which seemingly cannot be accessed in the present" (Mehra 1) On the contrary, history within the ambience of contemporary African American literature is a viable viewpoint of interrogating the present with introspection into the past, and clearly not the other way round. Mehra believes that contemporary African American writers... "use literature to formulate and test theories about how to produce historical knowledge, and what, if anything, to do with that knowledge in the present" (Mehra 1), adding that these writers "model a specifically African American postmodern critical practice that is tasked with addressing both the modes of literary and racial representation available to African American writers in this moment" (Mehra, 1).

Hill belongs to that category of writers. This is why *The Book of Negroes* is explored as a subversive text, one which is constructively predisposed to postmodern practices. Regardless, it amplifies, expending on its postmodern method, seemingly unobtrusive matters that still affect the black race in contemporary American society. In *The Book of Negroes*, Hill employs postmodern techniques utilised as fictional representation to creatively reproduce the African American slave history. Therefore, conclusive classification of the novel as just a historic text further stimulates the controversy between history and literature. Hill joins the fray of postmodern writers by his reconstructing and re-writing the African American historical experience. By implication, the fictional mode in *The Book of Negroes* deconstructs a fixed categorisation of historical hermeneutics of African American slave narratives, as limited to the themes of slavery, captivity, racism, oppression, and so on. The stylistic choice of *The Book of Negroes* is accentuated by Linda Hutcheon's notion of

historiographic metafiction, which naturally attracts other postmodern techniques such as reader participation, pastiche, and so on.

The postmodern trope of historiographic metafiction is extensively defined by the narrative style of Hill, as recounted in *The Book of Negroes*. The novel is indeed self-reflexive in the sense that it continuously interrogates the relationship between fiction and reality, within the context of history. In the course of the narration, there is a disruption of the reality that routinely comes with the genre of slave narratives through a deliberate incursion of fiction, and vice versa. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to characters who are significantly representational to the discourse of abolitionism. Aminata, in her attempt to justify the reality about her narrative, introduces John Clarkson to the reader. She describes the character as responsible to judiciously preserve her story, in case of her unexpected demise.

I have instructed John Clarkson – one of the quieter abolitionists, but the only one I trust – to change nothing. The abolitionists here in London have already arranged for me to write a short paper, about ten pages, of why the trade in human beings is an abomination and must be stopped. I have done so, and the paper is available in the society offices.

(*The Book of Negroes* 16)

Aminata's story receives a boost of reality and truth due to her reference to Clarkson, who is one of the central figures during the abolition of slavery in England during the eighteenth century. A naval lieutenant officer, Clarkson, was responsible for the repatriation of formerly enslaved African American to Freetown, Sierra Leone. He is regarded as the first governor of Freetown and one of the founding fathers of Sierra Leone. Aminata's affiliation with Clarkson not only justifies her story, but also justifies her message of freedom and her presence as a free black woman. Not only that, there is a role subversion later on in the novel as Aminata portrays Clarkson as her doleful assistance, who gets her mails and ensures that she gets her newspapers such as "*The Times, The Morning Chronicle, The Gazette, The Morning Post and Lloyd's List* (and) every single newspaper (that) carried the story of (Aminata's) presentation" at the Parliament

committee (*The Book of Negroes* 478). Apart from Clarkson, Aminata's prestige did not escape the notice of another real-life characters such as William Armstrong, a highly respected and inventive engineer; William Wilberforce, a renowned politician and so on, who all played fundamental roles against slavery during the abolitionist period.

The temporal setting of the novel begins in 1802 and this becomes significantly referential to the antebellum period which epitomises the creation of anti-slavery campaigns in England, and by extension, the United States of America. References to Africa, England, Canada and the New world as spatial settings in the novel concretize the historical realities of the novel and, at the same time, demystifies the fictional thrusts projects. Also, the reality of history is also uncertain through the introduction of fictional characters and events. Hill lays claim to such imaginative scenarios in the novel, stating that "I have taken complete liberties, creating imaginary dialogue, actions, events and circumstances" (*The Book of Negroes* 494). The combination of the Aminata, the fictional character and Hill, the author cum historian, as the narrative voices of the historic story circumvents conventional narrative technique. This literary style is aberrant, and consolidates on varied perspectives to a single story. While relating to characters, setting and narrative technique, historiographic metafiction sets an ambiguous trajectory in reconciling history and fiction. This story, as narrated by Diallo, constitutes a factual version of reality that is dependent on history.

Another stylistic technique employed in the novel, *The Book of Negroes*, is participation, which deconstructs the usual narrative styles. As an attempt to subvert conventional writings, there is a sudden involvement of the reader within the framework of the story. Here, the narrator often directly speaks to the reader or sometimes could apply the use of rhetorical questions, all in the bid to get the reader directly involved in the story. This technique is seen when Old Diallo suddenly breaks off from narrating her present state as an abolitionist. She deviates toward advising the reader(s) on being careful of signs that could lead to enslavement. Here, it is as if the reader is a participant, an invisible audience lurking around somewhere within the story.

Let me begin with a caveat to any and all who find these pages. Do not trust large bodies of water, and do not cross them. If you, dear reader, have an African hue and find yourself led toward water with vanishing shores, seize your freedom by any means necessary. *(The Book of Negroes 19)*

Through this technique, Old Diallo draws on the imaginative prowess of the reader on the severity of slave trade, chronicling its beginning with a personal experience which captures the travails of the Middle Passage. By this inclusion technique, the reader is automatically positioned as a conceivable victim, who constantly needs to be on guard, even though the reality of contemporary times dictates that a re-enactment of such horrid experience is almost impossible. Acting as a concerned individual, Old Diallo is relentless:

And cultivate distrust of the colour pink. Pink is taken as the colour of innocence, the colour of childhood, but as its spills across the water in the light of the dying sun, do not fall into its pretty path. There, right underneath, lies a bottomless graveyard of children, mothers and men... Every time I have sailed the seas, I have had the sense of gliding over the unburied. *(The Book of Negroes 19)*

Paranoia is another literary technique employed in this novel. Defined as an obsessive state of trepidation, Diallo, through her imagistic narrative, re-lives the atrocious state of the victims of the Middle Passage. In the chapter entitled, "we glide over the unburied", the protagonist, using a poetic description, brings the past to the present. Through her narration, history metamorphoses into expressive poetry: "The ship was an animal in the water. It rocked from side to side like a donkey trying to shake off a bundle, climbing on the waves like a monkey gone mad. The animal had an endless appetite and consumed us all: men, women and babies" *(The Book of Negroes 72)*. At this stage, the spread of paranoia becomes diachronic. However, Diallo does not present herself as a victim of paranoia, perhaps for the purpose of objectivity. Hill, through young Aminata, takes advantage of a child's innocent state of mind in narrating the ordeal, claiming that



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“a child’s mind is elastic. Adults are different – push them too far and they snap” (*The Book of Negroes* 71). Although young Aminata “was terrified, yet (her) mind remained intact” (*The Book of Negroes* 71) in her recount of the horrors of the Middle Passage.

On that slave vessel, I saw things that the people of London would never believe. But I think of the people who crossed the sea with me. The ones who survived. We saw the same things. Some of us still scream out in the middle of the night. But there are men, women and children walking about the streets without the faintest idea of our nightmares. They cannot know what we endured if we never find anyone to listen. (*The Book of Negroes* 71)

The heartbeat of this excerpt is that African American literature must continually find its own voice in the multitude of other voices trying to suppress it. Also, the continuous interrogation of the past not only validates a historic identity that cannot be ignored, it serves as a means of enlightening misconstrued sentiments about the African American history. In summary, *The Book of Negroes* represents that deviant voice, which radically challenges the hegemonic denunciation of African American history which continues to define its future.

### **Conclusion**

*The Book of Negroes*, the literary concept of historiographic metafiction, is illustrated as a counter-discourse against the lopsided criticism that denounces black history and black literary artistry as irrelevant. Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* deconstructs Warren’s denunciation of history as a catalyst of redundancy in African American literature. The novel is an exemplification of contemporary African American literature with a peculiar literary approach in which black American history becomes a crucial part of its contemporary experience. From its contents and artistry, *The Book of Negroes* is a deviant form of black writing in contemporary times. More importantly, the novel further challenges the continuous distortion of slave history as non-idyllic in terms of representing African American experience, particularly in present times.

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