Infinite Worlds:
Eighteenth-Century London, the Atlantic Ocean, and Post-Slavery in
S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, David
Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*, and Thomas Wharton's *Salamander*
John Clement Ball

In *Black London: Life before Emancipation,* Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina writes of how, on discovering that 15,000 people of African descent were living in London in 1768, she was struck by a vision of her present-day London as 'suddenly occupied by two simultaneous centuries'[1] – an eighteenth-century city of black pageboys and entertainers, of black beggars and prostitutes and autobiographers, overlaying the late twentieth-century one like a ghostly palimpsest. In the same decade as Gerzina was articulating these spectral imaginings, four prominent black British novelists were similarly looking back to the eighteenth century – to the final decades of the British slave trade, to the Atlantic Ocean across and around which it took place, and to London, where the abolitionist cause was advanced. Caryl Phillips, S.I. Martin, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar all published novels in the 1990s that have black protagonists and are set entirely or partly in the eighteenth-century metropolis. In the subsequent decade, two Canadian novelists did likewise: Thomas Wharton and Lawrence Hill both published historical novels featuring female ex-slaves that end up in London after long and circuitous ocean journeys.[2] Since historical novels are always prompted by present-tense obsessions and therefore frequently gaze at two centuries simultaneously, how does this outpouring of eighteenth-century-oriented narrative reflect and enhance our contemporary understanding of slavery, the Atlantic world, and London? What geographies and identities, what forms of mobility and dwelling, what personal quests and local or global communities do these novels imagine for the imperial capital's black inhabitants at a time when the prevailing winds were blowing abolition and revolutionary political change across the Atlantic world? And how do these texts' transhistorical, transnational, circum-Atlantic visions of London echo – or anticipate – other postcolonial writings about the world city of our time and the black person's place in it?

　　The four novels examined in this essay – Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996), Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), and Wharton's *Salamander* (2001) – collectively offer a rich set of correspondences and contrasts in their portrayals of the black urban subject.[3] Two of these texts are by black British authors (Martin and Dabydeen), and two are by Canadians (Hill and Wharton); two are written in a traditional realist mode (Martin and Hill), and two are postmodern metafictions that generate dizzyingly speculative ontologies (Dabydeen and Wharton); two are individual life stories modelled after the slave narrative genre (Hill and

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[1] Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995) 2.

[2] Phillips published *Cambridge* in 1991 and D'Aguiar published *Feeding the Ghosts* in 1997. The novels by Martin (1996) and Dabydeen (1999) are discussed at length in this essay, as are those of Wharton (2001) and Hill (2007).

[3] Page references to these novels in the text are: IW, BN, HP, S respectively.

Dabydeen), and two are adventure novels about small groups of people, with no single protagonist or focalizing consciousness (Martin and Wharton). However, none of those six pairings matches any of the others: a foursquare arrangement of the texts reveals multiple and complex similarities and contrasts between every possible pair. What does unite them all is that to varying degrees in all four books travel is constant: dislocation prevails over settlement (or unbelonging over belonging) and characters' affiliations are intercontinental and transoceanic rather than local or national – though slavery being what it was, their internationalism is not by choice.

These relational aspects of narrative and identity are reinforced by three central elements common across the novels that become identified in them with such interrelated concepts as the boundless, the endless, the inclusive, and the infinite. First of these common elements is London itself; the port city and international gathering-point not only presided over a global empire on which the sun shone *ad infinitum*, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries London was seen to contain, in Peter Ackroyd's words, 'the great world itself':[4] the city Addison called 'an aggregate of various nations' included, it was imagined, 'no less than everything.'[5] London's perceived infinitude was a function not just of its physical size and the variety of peoples it contained but of the economic and political power that the empire's intricate web of international affiliations brought to it; London was as global a city as the eighteenth century had to offer, and this idea of the metropolis as infinitely expansive, inclusive, and diverse has been a persistent trope ever since. For many ex-slaves going to London in the eighteenth century, as for their twentieth-century postcolonial counterparts, it seemed to offer the infinite hope and possibilities associated with freedom, opportunity, and access, even if the reality when they arrived was a far cry from any utopian imaginings.

The second image of the infinite central to the four novels is the sea on which their itinerant characters journey – the endless, boundary-defying oceans that separate but also connect their continental 'worlds,' which variously include Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America, and Asia. If London is a key site and symbol of imperial power, the ocean is another: the waves Britannia ruled, the literal 'space-of-flows' that enabled London to become a metaphorical 'space-of-flows.'[6] Laura Brown, in an elegant survey of oceanic imagery in seventeenth – and eighteenth-century poetry, shows how the ocean was often employed, along with the River Thames that flows into it, as a figure for Britain's expansionist destiny and benevolent global power, rhetorically figured as power over the unpopulated salt water rather than over inhabited lands. The popular image of 'the empire of the sea,' Brown argues, denoted

> a providential system of distribution and a proxy for British global power. Indeed, … the claims for the benevolence of that system depend on that movement of superimposition of sea and land that generates the displacement of power from the

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[4] Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto, 2000) 544.

[5] Ackroyd 701, 3.

[6] A fuller contextualizing of this term, as used by Ian Baucom, is found in the discussion of his book *Specters of the Atlantic*. The term 'space of flows' originates with Manuel Castells. See Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 169.

'solid space' of the globe to the nonspace of the flowing, gliding, foaming ocean. The representation of the solid *imperium* cannot be so pacific. By displacing imperial violence in this way, the fable of torrents and seas performs an essential service to the ideology of the Pax Britannica, sanctioning its assertion of the peaceful imposition of empire on the world.[7]

The ocean was, of course, the space across which were borne many of the actors in the imperial drama, the goods that generated imperial wealth, and the ideas, images, and knowledges the imperial encounter produced. And as Derek Walcott's poetry (e.g., 'The Sea is History') and D'Agiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (whose first sentence is 'The sea is slavery') [8] among other texts, remind us, the sea has a particular resonance for those who have experienced slavery. Indeed, the sea's infinitude is symbolic for slaves and former slaves of the boundless, disorienting infinity into which slavery plunges them, unmooring and uprooting their identity and often prompting them, on acquiring literacy, to look to narrative as a way to ground their identity – to make it finite and defined – once again.

It is paradoxical, therefore, that the third image of infinity, present in different forms in three of the four novels examined here, is a valorised book, a textual object of desire that promises to represent the seemingly unrepresentable or access the previously inaccessible, and that is either produced in London or leads to its supposedly endless possibilities. The infinite book that Wharton's protagonist is challenged to create is the most obvious of these, but Hill's historical *Book of Negroes* and Dabydeen's multiplicitous postmodern text point to their own apparent infinities. Popular science writer John D. Barrow begins *The Infinite Book*, his fascinating account of humanity's efforts to conceptualize infinity, with the following observation:

> There is something about infinity and books. Never-ending stories, libraries that contain all possible books, books that contain everything that has ever happened, and everything that hasn't; books that write themselves, books about themselves, books about there being no books and books that end before they've begun'.[9]

And while he goes on to examine the mathematical, philosophical, and religious implications of unbounded or never-ending numbers, temporalities, spatialities, lives, and more, he acknowledges that 'infinity' is also used as 'a shorthand for "finite, but awfully big"'.[10] The latter, looser, everyday meaning is at least as relevant to the books discussed here as the more elusive literal one.

The three spaces and objects that, I argue, are associated in these novels with infinity, unboundedness, a kind of hyper-inclusive transnational worldliness – London, the sea, and the book – are important keys to their visions of eighteenth-century black

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[7] Laura Brown, 'Oceans and Floods: Fables of Global Perspective,' *The Global Eighteenth Century* ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003) 116.

[8] Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1997) 3.

[9] John Barrow, *The Infinite Book: A Short Guide to the Boundless, Timeless and Endless* (London: Vintage, 2005) 1.

[10] Barrow 2-3.

identity. All four authors render London, and the inhabitation of the city by their black characters, in relation to an interconnected eighteenth-century Atlantic world, a world that historians and cultural theorists have advanced as an alternative to nation-based framings of history and identity. Most well known of these is Paul Gilroy, whose influential (if controversial) *Black Atlantic* articulates a transnational, intercultural, triangulated black cultural history for which the ocean is a conjoining centre, a defining space, rather than a yawning emptiness between the more consequential continents. Gilroy's organizing image of ships crossing the Atlantic stands for a mobile, mutable, hybrid, fluid black identity characterized by its infinitely variable 'double consciousness,' a concept he adapts from W.E.B. Du Bois as a legacy of 'the intimate association between modernity and slavery'.[11] Also relevant is the work of Atlantic historians such as Bernard Bailyn, Thomas Benjamin, and many others who gather the Americas, Europe, and Africa into an integrated and mutually constitutive (if Europe-dominated) Atlantic World that began with Columbus, ended when slavery ended, and reached its peak of interconnection and cross-pollination in the eighteenth century.[12] In the words of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, a 'many-headed hydra' of separate but intimately linked peoples emerged as a result of 'the circular transmission of human experience from Europe to Africa to the Americas and back again'; all this movement created, 'in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, … a new transatlantic economy'.[13] In the same spirit, Felicity Nussbaum's *The Global Eighteenth Century* suggests adding to the established concept of 'a *long* eighteenth century' that of a geographically '*widened* eighteenth century' in which the origins of contemporary globalization can be traced.[14] In making her case for a global and less Eurocentric view of the century, Nussbaum lists 'the increased mobility of commodities and ideas, the unprecedented expansion of global trade, improved navigational techniques, and cultural and racial mixture' that included 'the period's well-known diasporas of the black Atlantic'.[15] For Bailyn, such historic interactions are best understood within an 'inter-hemispheric, transnational perspective'.[16]

These scholars all articulate relational models of the Atlantic and the lands, peoples, activities, and ideas located around its rim, including, of course, in London;

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[11] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 53.

[12] See, for instance, Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Contexts and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005) and Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and their Shared History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), among other notable works by these historians. Elizabeth Mancke, another leading Atlantic historian, notes that the Seven Years' War (1756-63) and the territorial acquisitions it brought about, 'forced Britain to reassess the kind of empire it governed. For a century and a half, the government had pursued a policy of oceanic empire, emphasizing commercial regulation and the growth of a navy to defend shipping,' but it now had to 'shift from a blue-water empire to a territorial empire'. See Elizabeth Mancke, 'Negotiating an Empire: Britain and Its Overseas Peripheries, c. 1550-1780,' *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500-1820* ed. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

[13] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000) 2.

[14] Felicity Nussbaum, 'Introduction', *The Global Eighteenth Century* ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003) 1.

[15] Nussbaum 8.

[16] Bernard Bailyn,'The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800' ed. David Armitage and Michaek J. Braddick (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan,2002) xvii.

sometimes their purview extends beyond the Atlantic to incorporate Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, or Pacific worlds as well. The final scholarly text that frames this essay's readings is Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Meticulously teasing out the implications of the notorious British slave ship *Zong* and its captain's deliberate drowning of slaves for insurance purposes in 1781, Baucom places London and Liverpool at the heart of what he calls 'the oceanic trade that had become fundamental to Britain's prosperity even as it linked the nation's capital culture to an extranational, circum-Atlantic geography of exchange'.[17] London's role as a dominant 'space-of-flows' – where ships, capital, commodities, and people continuously came and went – became, over the eighteenth century, diluted and multiplied; it was superseded by a decentralized 'archipelago of flows' scattered around the ocean, Baucom shows. His complex theory of finance capital underpins his concept of a long twentieth century that repeats and subsumes key elements of the long eighteenth century. Indeed, when Baucom talks about 'a late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century "now" that houses within itself an eighteenth-century "what-has-been"',[18] and when he argues that our current era 'inherits, repeats, and intensifies the late eighteenth century'[19] he articulates something like the correspondences established by these recent fictions about slavery, the Black Atlantic, and eighteenth-century London.

S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World*, set in 1786 among black loyalists promised freedom for fighting in the American Revolutionary war, focuses on a small community of male immigrants living hardscrabble London lives of poverty, danger, and grand schemes, criminal and benign.[20] The novel, lauded by Sukhdev Sandhu as 'probably the best evocation of historic black London to date',[21] uses detailed realism to evoke a neighbourhood (St Giles and Seven Dials) where 'dark skin drew no second glances',[22] but whose many African inhabitants risked re-enslavement or coerced resettlement in Sierra Leone as a result of growing ill-feeling toward the burgeoning black population. A kind of eighteenth-century counterpart to Sam Selvon's classic novel about post-World War Two black immigrants, *The Lonely Londoners*,[23] Martin's novel looks explicitly forward in time in passages that question whether black people would ever make London their own or instead remain, even two hundred years hence, 'hovering by closed doors, waiting for scraps from the master's table?'.[24] Together with passages referring *back* two hundred years to Queen Elizabeth I's proclamation against blacks,[25] Leila Kamali reads such speculative, forward-looking visions as evoking a 'cyclical' history of 'hostility

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[17] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 52.

[18] Baucom 32.

[19] Baucom 41.

[20] S.I. Martin, *Incomparable World* (London: Quartet, 1997).

[21] Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) 302.

[22] Martin 4.

[23] Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1956)

[24] Martin 40.

[25] In 1596 Elizabeth complained in a letter to civic authorities that 'there are of late divers blackamoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are already here to manie' quoted in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984)10.

towards black people'.[26] In Martin's version of historical simultaneity and double-consciousness, then, 1596 echoes through 1786, which, in turn, echoes through a variety of late twentieth-century moments, from the Notting Hill riots of 1958 to Margaret Thatcher's Nationality Act of 1981.

Complementing this cyclical history is a circular geography; although *Incomparable World* is set almost entirely in London and, unlike the other novels discussed here, does not describe its characters' sea-voyages, its black Londoners have been formed as much by the ocean as the city; they are denizens (if not exactly citizens) of the Black Atlantic as much as of Britain, and the indeterminate, unsettled nature of their identities is figured spatially in both urban and oceanic settings. Georgie George, King of Beggars, says he lives 'Nowhere. And everywhere' in London' (IW 109); William is described as feeling, in London, 'as cold and grey, as vague and as restless as the ocean that separated him from his kin'(IW 59). The adjectives *cold*, *grey*, and *restless* could serve readily as descriptions of the metropolis, and indeed often do, but 'an even colder, whiter country than this' (IW 60), William notes, is the Nova Scotia colony to which he will eventually commit himself in preference to London or the perpetual in-betweenness of a transatlantic identity. Indeed, a defining moment for William finds him relaxing in that ocean after he has escaped London for coastal Brazil; floating in the South Atlantic, he imagines himself dying there, his body 'drifting away … at the mercy of the tides, floating forever between the Old World and the New, never sinking, never rising, and never touching either shore' (IW 159). He sees himself suspended infinitely in between, belonging nowhere and everywhere, dead to the terrestrial world until he finally opts for family and agrarian stability in Canada. The man who has been singing 'London Bridge is falling down' throughout the novel decides that 'London Bridge could fall down without him' (IW 170). Buckram, the other main character, also ends the narrative with hopes of leaving London for a reunion with family – in his case in Staffordshire, to which this 'black man on a black horse' rides 'through the white of winter' across Hampstead Heath (IW 178). But his racial identity is hidden beneath his winter clothing, suggesting infinite possibilities for reinvention: 'With just his eyes visible,' the narrator says, 'he could have been anyone or nobody at all' (IW 177).

Early in the novel, Buckram tells himself 'sadly, slowly, *This is home: London*' (IW 42); by the end, he and William are seeking new rural homes and newly domestic family lives as an escape from indeterminacy, although the novel concludes without revealing whether these hoped-for futures will work out. It is significant, however, that their decisions and desired futures project William and Buckram into non-metropolitan space: in the overseas colony or the overland British countryside that, as Raymond Williams has shown, had comparable structural relationships to London (as peripheries to its centre) during the age of empire.[27] Kamali's reading of Martin's novel suggests that both William and Buckram ultimately turn their backs on the Black Atlantic cycle, seeking new positions outside 'the centre-stage occupied by the drama of slavery and racism'[28]; but it is important to note as well that the infinite possibilities the men imagine

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[26] Leila Kamali, '"Circular Talk": The Social City and the Atlantic Slave Routes in S.I Martin's *Incomparable World*,' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 55 (2005) 144.
[27] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth, 1993) 279-288.
[28] Kamali 158.

for themselves as settled terrestrial subjects are located outside the spaces they have known that are most associated with infinity: the metropolitan city and the Atlantic Ocean. The infinitude of those two spaces – whether perceived or actual – is too tainted by, on the one hand, the alienation and drift of the unanchored, uprooted self, and by, on the other hand, images and realities of confinement. London is, for Georgie, a 'prison' (IW 6), and the novel's earliest images of London architecture, the tenements of St Giles – with their 'numberless small chambers,' 'tidal waves of shrieks and coarse chatter,' and odour of 'human gong' (IW 3) – look, sound, and smell remarkably like a slave ship, as if standing in for this otherwise unrepresented space.[29] The London of *Incomparable World* can bring like-minded blacks together and provide a social and economic springboard to better worlds, but those worlds will not be found in the city itself. Through his detailed depiction of this previously little-known London history, Martin may hope to make the metropolis more habitable for blacks in his own time – our time. But two hundred years earlier, the metropolitan possibilities for his characters are finite.

Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* begins and ends in London – its narrative frame has the ex-slave Aminata Diallo writing her memoirs for abolitionists in 1802 – but from the outset, her first-person narrative frames her life as much through the sea as the city.[30] She introduces herself as 'a broken-down old black woman who has crossed more water than I care to remember' (BN 3), then warns readers: 'Do not trust large bodies of water, and do not cross them' (BN 7). The ocean, which she calls 'a bottomless graveyard' (BN 7), generates consistently negative associations throughout her narrative; captured as a girl in her inland West African village of Bayo, she knows only rivers, and when she first sees 'the big water' (BN 44), it therefore looks frighteningly as if a river has 'expanded into eternity'; and 'water had taken over the world' (BN 49). The slave ship is 'an animal in the water' with 'an endless appetite' (BN 57), and as it sails she feels 'lost in a world of water' that resembles an 'endless desert' (BN 68).[31] These images of infinity convey the disorientation of a locally rooted village life and identity violently displaced and, ultimately, unmoored into the vagaries of what the global meant to any eighteenth-century African unlucky enough to have it mean anything: a lottery of death or survival into enslavement, enforced mobility, and an unasked-for double consciousness. 'The ones who survive the great river crossing are destined to live two lives,' says the first African American that Aminata meets, echoing (or anticipating) Du Bois and Gilroy; but Aminata steadfastly maintains that she does not want two lives, just 'my real life back' (BN 121). Hers is a tale of stubborn non-belonging, of disaffiliation, and although

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[29] Stephanie Smallwood in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2007) writes that, 'in the early modern world any sailing vessel was an enclosed space, where it was impossible to create physical distance ... But the crowded conditions on slaving vessels made for a level of human density unmatched on other types of oceangoing vessels.' (135-136).

[30] Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007).

[31] 'As African captives confronted the problem of the European merchant ship, it presented them with challenges both physical and metaphysical. With regard to physical challenges, its cavernous form signaled an eerie emptiness demanding to be filled, a powerful and dangerous capacity to consume. As for the metaphysical aspect, the very habitat of the ship – the open sea – challenged African cosmographies, for the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in precolonial West African societies as a domain of human (as opposed to divine) activity…. In its guiding principle – the proposition that life can be lived at sea – the ship presented an oxymoron' (Smallwood 124).

she becomes a shrewd and adaptive survivor, when she tallies up her successive identities, the list suggests not relational, hybrid accumulation of multiple selves so much as misidentification and out-of-placeness. She says, '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' (BN 385). Even there, in Freetown, she feels 'as lost as I had been across the ocean' (BN 395); 'I felt that the colony we were establishing was neither one thing nor the other' (BN 384).

In such passages, Aminata's narrative reminds us that what the Atlantic historian or theorist may see as additive relational interconnection the slave, that most reluctant of participants in circum-Atlantic modernity, feels as subtractive loss. The British may have optimistically identified the global oceans with Britannia's expansionist destiny to 'rule the waves,' but Aminata sees the ocean, London, and the lyrics to *Rule Britannia* (which she roundly critiques) rather differently. London, where she resigns herself to being buried to avoid further ocean crossings, she experiences as 'an assault on my senses' (BN 450): a damp place of suffering and indignity to many, of tasteless food, acrid air, and a colour palate limited to grey, where her solicitous but self-serving abolitionist hosts initially keep her away from other black people. (She does meet the King and Queen, but little comes of it.) However infinite and inclusive London may have seemed to many then and now, the city is limited and finite in its associations to the drained and disappointed Aminata. Reuniting with her stolen daughter, and writing her story to assist an abolitionist cause on the verge of success, are the most enabling things Aminata does in London, but even such positive developments bring less hope and possibility to this dying woman than reminders of the irrecoverable losses they both signify. It is no surprise, then, that the Book of Negroes she earlier helps write up in New York proves to be another tainted image of infinity and possibility. By presiding over this book of names and stories of those petitioning to emigrate, Aminata does feel newly connected to a community of black people with pasts like hers, and doing so makes her feel less isolated. But the hope that the Book of Negroes is supposed to represent for its transnational black Atlantic survivors proves severely compromised. The provision of liberty in return for loyalty that it represents is a will-o'-the-wisp: many listed in its pages are barred from leaving New York by prior claims of owners, including Aminata herself for a time; others will remain slaves in Nova Scotia or, if free, will struggle with racism, poverty, and betrayal on reaching the supposed promised land. Indeed, in a bitter irony, the parcels of land the freed slaves *are* promised by the British are never given, their delivery infinitely deferred.

Not surprisingly given its subject and narrator, then, Hill's novel affirms a local, rooted identity – one left behind in Bayo and endlessly longed for thereafter – over the violent exigencies of circum-Atlantic travelling routes and the transnational, relational identities they generate. It posits Aminata as a type, even an archetype, of the enslaved casualties of the eighteenth century's emergent Atlantic World, and her story as an antidote to any celebratory or complacently Eurocentric views of that newly globalizing world. Baucom suggests that there is a 'violence' in being seen as a 'type' – of person or nonperson, of commodity or property [32] – that the slave trade exemplifies and that the realist novel, whose stock-in-trade is character types, manifests in a figurative way. *The*

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[32] Baucom 11.

Book of Negroes incorporates various kinds of violence – to the body, the psyche, the family, and the at-homeness of a rooted identity. In this realist novel, with its linear autobiographical narrative and debt to the slave narrative[33] (a genre that originated in the eighteenth century), the breaking of that wholeness is an ushering of the black subject into the infinitely unsettled black Atlantic life – here lived by a character conceived of as the epitome or aggregate of the beleaguered slave. London provides a satisfactory end-point for Aminata in a way it does not for Martin's characters, but only as a kind of last resort when other places and people have failed her – and particularly after she has aborted her journey from Freetown to Bayo upon realizing that her guide plans to betray her into slavery again. In contrast to Buckram and William's experience in *Incomparable World*, then, for Aminata London *is* the best place – the only place – to escape the perils and disappointments of the Atlantic world.

Aminata insists on writing her own narrative rather than telling it to an abolitionist scribe; having had little control over her life, she will control its public representation. Another way of putting this is to say that, like many slaves or ex-slaves who wrote their life stories, she is drawn to narrative as a way to make finite and defined what has hitherto been damagingly infinite. Mungo, the generically named protagonist of David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*, is also an elderly former slave living in London after a peripatetic life, and the abolitionists are attracted to his story too. But unlike Hill's heroine (as far as the reader can tell), Mungo asserts control over his narrative through highly selective editing and reimagining of his life experience. As he coyly says at the outset, 'I can change memory, like I can change my posture' (HP 2), and it becomes clear that the polyphonic mix of first-person and third-person narrative that he shares with the reader exceeds and complicates what this 'oldest African inhabitant of London' tells the abolitionist committee's secretary, Mr Pringle (HP 3). A confusing mélange of the told and the untold, the spoken and the silently thought, his narrative is full of irresolvable contradictions; it captures what Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace calls 'the chaos of Mungo's consciousness,' which 'defies logic, linearity, and reason' as it freely blends 'past and present, here and there, living and dead, truth and lies'.[34] Wallace's and Pamela Albert's detailed readings unpack these labyrinthine indeterminacies to support their similar conclusions that the novel 'implicates everyone equally in the brutality and exploitation that comprised the slave trade'.[35] Indeed, the novel's speculative, unstable narrative so radically multiplies what happened or could have happened to Mungo that it becomes its own kind of infinite text. It seems that anything he or his abolitionist interlocutors or the reader can imagine is fair game for inclusion – a possible truth. Like the embedded narratives explaining the meaning behind the infinite number *Pi* branded into Mungo's forehead – relayed in multiple versions that suggest, in Wallace's words, that 'he is simultaneously the product of the Greek marauders, his African forebears, and white

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[33] See Stephanie Yorke, 'The Slave Narrative Tradition in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*,' *Studies in Canadian Literature* 35.2 (2010) 129-144 for a discussion of Hill's use and subversion of features associated with the slave narrative genre.

[34] Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, 'Telling Untold Stories: Philippa Gregory's *A Respectable Trade* and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*,' *Novel* 33.2 (2000) 235-252.

[35] Pamela Albert, *Transatlantic Engagements with the British Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) 134. Compare Wallace 250.

civilization'[36] – this parodic subversion of the slave narrative formula is a radically unstable, epistemologically flexible, oceanically fluid signifier.

As such, its relevance for the argument here is less in how it represents the eighteenth-century metropolitan scene – a conventional catalogue of smelly, noisy, visually overwhelming, and disorderly streets[37] – than its use of London, as in *The Book of Negroes*, as a final destination for its protagonist and framing location for narrative. The centre of empire, of the abolitionist movement, and of Britain's eighteenth-century black community is also, as both novels are clearly aware, the centre of English-language textuality: of publishing and disseminating ideas. Mungo does not believe (as Mr Pringle does) 'that a single book will alter the course of history' (HP 256), but his is not a single, unified book conveying a coherent truth any more than London is a single, unified city. A single text (a newspaper ad for a slave auction) may have prompted Mungo's purchase as a boy by Lord Montague, but as strong a factor in the aristocrat's impulsive decision to buy him is the completely contradictory accounts of the Thistlewood slave-drowning case (modelled after the *Zong* case) published in a dozen London newspapers. Concluding from those journalistic texts that 'truth itself was … another commodity changing hands at a price' (HP199), Montague decides to rescue the advertised boy, Mungo, from his own commodification. It is one of the novel's cheeky ironies that Mungo's own text is as epistemologically slippery as the newspaper accounts, which purport to get at the truth of an oceanic event for a metropolitan readership coming to terms with the slave trade just as his own narrative will purport to do. The London coffee house where Mungo is sold he recalls as being 'as infernal as the slaveship's hold' (HP 163), and when he meets Lady Montague, to whom he is a gift, this 'most esteemed hostess in London' is wearing 'blue clothes, ruffled like waves of the sea, little nips here and there like the beaks of fish' (HP 186, 184).[38] Not only is the ocean embedded in Dabydeen's London imagery, but Mungo describes the city as a 'cannibal region' (HP 266); 'What I know of London,' he says, 'is a jungle of poor white beasts with savage looks who will eat me' (HP 239) – playfully reversing a common colonialist trope.

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[36] Wallace 249.

[37] Mungo's first impressions of London are described on pages 159-160, and include hints of the city's seemingly infinite space in a passage such as the following: 'But they continue to walk all morning, going down endless lanes and crossing countless squares, as if Betty [his minder] has no intention of arriving' (160).

[38] Lady Montague is intriguingly reminiscent of Lady Caroline in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Possession* (London: Putnam, 1963), set in 1950s London. Both ladies acquire dark-skinned tropical boys as human pets, and both Mungo and Markandaya's Valmiki are exotically but inauthentically dressed up in turbans for metropolitan display. Both are associated directly with pet monkeys. Dabydeen's Lady Montague also may be modelled after Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the eighteenth-century writer who, in a famous portrait that appears on the cover of a 1997 Penguin Classics edition of her *Selected Letters*, appears with a black boy servant in the background. Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999) a biography of Montagu, summarizes several theories as to why this writer, known mostly for her depictions of Turkish life and not elsewhere represented as having black servants, would be so portrayed (301-303); in her notes, Grundy references David Dabydeen , *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo,1985), and specifically a section in which Dabydeen examines the eighteenth-century fashion for paintings of aristocratic white ladies posing with small black boys who look admiringly up at them (*Hogarth's* 30-32), as in the portrait of Montagu. Thanks to one of *Transnational Literature*'s anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to explore this possible connection between the fictional Lady Montague and the historical Lady Montague.

Conflating the places and spaces of the Atlantic world and the slave trade as freely as he does times, stories, and contradictory 'truths,' Mungo unites his worlds and their peoples in a shared complicity with slavery's violence. That multiply located violence includes sexual violence; a shared implication in enslavement and abuse marks the otherwise separate locations of the African village (where Rima is a domestic slave in Mungo's house by day and 'giv[es] pleasure' to his father by night [HP 35]), the slave ship (where the pederast Thistlewood frees Mungo from the infernal hold to facilitate his own pleasure), and Lady Montague's house near London (where the servants Lizzie and Jane chain Mungo down and have sex with him nightly). He escapes this final situation and his identity as a slave by fleeing the Montague estate for urban London, where he works with dying prostitutes and later tells his story (or rather, stories) to Mr Pringle. London thus provides for Mungo what it did for Aminata but not for Martin's characters: a place to escape from the oceanic indeterminacy and exploitive violence of Black Atlantic slavery, and to participate in a movement that will free future generations – potentially infinite numbers of fellow Africans – that would otherwise have faced similar fates.

Herb Wyile calls contemporary historical novels 'speculative fictions' because they so often foreground our partial and compromised knowledge of the past.[39] *A Harlot's Progress* does this to the nth degree: determining the veracity of Mungo's contradictory and unstable text is a project of infinite and unverifiable speculation. Of course, 'speculative fiction' is more often used as a generic label for those close cousins of science fiction and fantasy novels that imagine alternative worlds in the past or present. Thomas Wharton's *Salamander*, the fourth and final novel to be examined here, is a speculative fiction in that sense, as well as an historical one. More magic than realist, *Salamander* inhabits an eighteenth century overlaid not just by ours but by an alternative, parallel version of its own era filled with impossible objects and experiences that imaginatively extend that century's technologies and curiosities. With its mechanical people, its castle with endlessly moving walls, its optically illusive ship, and the time-warping printing press with which its protagonist seeks to print 'an infinite book',[40] *Salamander*'s differences from the previously discussed books are as notable as its similarities. It differs from them further in being written by a white author and in being the only one in which the slave or ex-slave character is not the protagonist. While the experiences of Buckram and William, Aminata, and Mungo were variously positioned as typical or representative of eighteenth-century black lives, their counterpart in *Salamander*, Amphitrite Snow, is as atypical and unlikely as most of what happens in Wharton's fantastic, layered tale. This female ex-slave's seafaring, swashbuckling ways may affiliate her more with Olaudah Equiano than Aminata Diallo, but she shares the latter's intelligence, cunning, and determination, and she too ends up living and apparently dying in London. And while both Canadian novels discussed here include a major event in Canada's eighteenth-century history – the 1759 Plains of Abraham battle in *Salamander*, the Black Loyalists' arrival in Nova Scotia in 1783 in The Book of Negroes – they subordinate Canadian settings and themes to what Baucom calls 'the

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[39] Herb Wyile, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's UP, 2002) xii.
[40] Thomas Wharton, *Salamander* (Toronto: McClelland, 2002) 40.

geographies of circulation' of an increasingly global and relational modernity ushered in by the slave trade.[41]

Purchased by a British navy admiral and renamed after a Greek sea goddess, *Salamander*'s Amphitrite Snow is shipped as cargo to the Bahamas but leads an all-female rebellion en route, taking over the ship and casting the crew adrift; introduced as a 'NOTORIOUS FEMALE BUCCANEER' (S 205), this unrooted black woman is as global in her orientation, and as seemingly accepting of her enforced mobility, as Aminata is not. Although she appears over halfway through and in a supporting role, Amphitrite exemplifies the spirit of perpetual motion, transformation, and reinvention that infuses Wharton's novel, with its constantly moving bookshelves in the castle library and its magic printing press whose rippling 'gooseflesh type' generates new forms automatically and endlessly in pursuit of the infinite book (S 186). Set in Quebec, Slovakia, Venice, Alexandria, Macau, China, Ceylon, Cape Town, London, and the seas and oceans between, the novel abounds with images of the infinite and inclusive accessed through the solid and contained: 'the spiral of a seashell, for instance, which is itself only a fragment of a greater spiral of increase' (S 94); the tiny ship named the *Bee* that, like the castle, contains a vast and shifting labyrinth;[42] the cosmic 'web of connectedness' that allows the 'tiniest pebble' to reflect 'the entire Creation' (S 107); the description of books as 'fragile vessel[s] of cloth and paper' that take readers 'everywhere and nowhere' (S 221), 'wondrous box[es] of paper that could contain anything' (S 309); and the novel's final sentence describing the character Pica's last piece of blank metal type as 'infinity in her pocket, … the beginning of a new collection' (S 368).

This idiosyncratic novel – which merges reality with fantasy, endings with beginnings, and eighteenth-century-novel conventions into a postmodern speculative fiction – also, like Dabydeen's, posits similarities between city and ocean. London, where most of its characters end their globe-spanning quests, has 'swampy heat' that is 'as suffocating as anything they had endured on their ocean crossing' (S 304). Full of marvels, 'London was every place they had been: the crowds and the murkiness of Venice. The heat of Alexandria. The many-tongued babble of Canton' (S 292). It is a smoky, spectral place that has been transformed over time into something almost unrecognizable to the Londoner Nicholas Flood, its few familiar landmarks 'like beckoning islands in an unfamiliar sea' (S 291); 'This was a city extending not so much in the familiar directions of the compass as in sundered zones of fortune and desolation, with hidden passageways that could transport you from one to the other in an eyeblink' (S 287).

These various passages convey something of *Salamander*'s ontological fluidity, its obsession with infinity and with correspondences between the tangible and intangible, the materially contained and the expansively all-embracing. As a speculative metafiction, its genre facilitates such dizzying linkages and shifts between the minute and material local and the infinite, cosmic global in a way the other novels cannot. As it imagines an alternative, parallel, possible/impossible eighteenth century, Wharton's novel generates

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[41] Baucom 36.

[42] The castle's own labyrinth is one whose inhabitants often appeared as if from nowhere and then 'vanished with a ripple as concealed doors silently opened and closed like the valves of some giant undersea creature' (S 31).

characters and incidents, philosophies and technologies that cumulatively reinforce its vision of a relational, global world – a 'limitless world' (S 131) in which the ocean is as much a centre as London, a book is as viable a route to the infinite as a global journey, and a black female slave is as capable of commandeering a ship as a white slave-master. Its sense of infinite transformative possibility is one element that makes Wharton's novel seem to reflect a sensibility more of our age than the other three, as does its sense of a disorienting world that seems simultaneously (and paradoxically) both larger and smaller, more known and more unknown, than ever.

At one point, Amphitrite tells the others sailing on the *Bee* that 'the one great law of the ocean' is '*Sooner or later you're going to run into someone you know*' (S 230). As she takes a familiar idea from urban life and transplants it to an environment where such inevitability seems much less obvious, she establishes herself as a new kind of citizen for a new kind of eighteenth century. However sad at times her story and unfulfilled her quest, however dangerous and disorienting the 'limitless world' she is plunged into often proves to be, it is a world whose newness Amphitrite, like the Europeans on the *Bee*, accepts and functions in comfortably. These Europeans' quests, unlike Aminata's, are not for home, a notion in which none of them is terribly invested. As free-floating citizens of a globe whose strange and disorienting temporalities, geographies, and spatialities they are learning to navigate, these characters seem at home everywhere and nowhere. The oceanic modernity into which Aminata is dragged kicking and screaming is one to which they, however eccentrically, seem to belong.

One could see Wharton's choice here as deracinating Amphitrite and affiliating her with the 'cartography of celebratory journeys' that Joan Dayan critiques Gilroy's Black Atlantic for perpetrating.[43] As she almost effortlessly trades a typically black seafaring identity (as slave) for a normally white one (as ship captain), Amphitrite joins the *Bee* as a kind of honorary European, with reminders of her blackness coming only occasionally – as when in London she disguises herself as a servant to avoid standing out. But as Katherine McKittrick writes in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, it is important to see the ship as more than a space of confinement and disempowerment for blacks. She writes:

> Technologies of transportation [such as] the ship, while materially and ideologically enclosing black subjects, … also contribute to the formation of an oppositional geography: the ship as a location of black subjectivity and human terror, black resistance, and in some cases, black possession.[44]

And Amphitrite has to keep struggling; the captain she usurped chases her tirelessly round the globe in another ship and finally zeroes in on her and apparently kills her, at the end of the novel, on the Thames. But she goes down fighting, defending her ship in swashbuckling fashion because, she rhetorically asks, 'Don't you know how stories like mine have to end?' (S 362). That she does this in London at the beginning of another

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[43] Joan Dayan, 'Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor,' *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996) 7.

[44] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006) x-xi.

ocean voyage, just as her shipmate Nicholas Flood has finally printed the infinite book he has been struggling to make, is a measure of the complex ways in which Wharton's speculative text positions the capital.

London, like the ship, is also the site of what McKittrick calls 'an oppositional geography' – a space of struggle, resistance, and incipient, tentative, insecure possession. As such, the eighteenth-century London of these four novels resembles that of the many dozens of postcolonial fictions of contemporary London, to which we might see the eighteenth-century ones, loosely speaking, as prequels.[45] In the variety of experiences, of subject positions, and of reasons for the precarious purchase – the tentative traction – of their ex-slave characters, these novels both echo and anticipate the oceanic London still haunted by the legacy of slavery and racism that subsequent generations of black Londoners – from George Lamming and Sam Selvon to Buchi Emecheta and Joan Riley – have documented in fictions of the twentieth-century metropolis. As they speculatively and variously deploy images of the infinite city, the infinite ocean, and the infinite text, these novels, like palimpsests, add foundational, supplementary layers that overlay (or underlie) the uses of those images in dozens of other London novels written before them but set later.[46]

The four contemporary novels of eighteenth-century post-slavery examined in this essay experiment with varied fictional forms but with the shared effect, among others, of teasing out the multiple infinities implied by black subject's move from slavery to freedom, and from sea to city. As a group, moreover, these fictions respond to the paradox at the heart of the concept of infinity, the number that cannot be quantified, by showing how readily and paradoxically slaves and ex-slaves – and the maritime, urban, and textual worlds in which they find themselves – can oscillate between the infinite and the finite. Collectively, they suggest that the binary itself needs unshackling, because if the infinite can represent the hope of possibility to the ex-slave, to the newly enslaved it can prompt the dissolution of the self; and if the finite signifies on the one hand the shackled, immobilized self of slavery's commodification and 'social death' (Smallwood 59), it also, on the other, points to the rooted, grounded self first lost to slavery, whose recovery is sought thereafter over the sea, in the city, through the book that tells one's story.

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[45] For comprehensive examinations of representations of post-war London in postcolonial fiction, see John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004) and John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

[46] Albert argues that contemporary writers' 'transatlantic retrospections [back to the eighteenth century] can be understood on one level as trans-historical, cross-cultural dialogues enabling the authors to better understand and represent their distinct colonial histories and current encounters with neocolonialism and racism. At the same time they reflect the fact that, like those who produced the works they confront, contemporary writers are experimenting with different modes of representation to articulate and portray their experiences in a world that continues to be traumatized by political conflict and violence' 5.

Author's Note
This essay's first incarnation took the form of a keynote address presented at Paris and London in Postcolonial Imagery, a conference held at London's Insitut Français in June, 2009. My sincere thanks to Christina Horvath and her fellow organisers for inviting me, and to the other participants with whom I had stimulating exchanges there. This much-revised version has benefited in the meantime from conversations with my colleague Elizabeth Mancke and with my students in graduate seminars; I am also grateful for the helpful suggestions of *Transnational Literature*'s two readers.