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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Signifying the In-Between

Race and Identity in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*
and *Black Berry Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White*
in Canada

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ABSTRACT

In his novel *Any Known Blood* and his non-fiction book *Black Berry Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* Lawrence Hill presents the ambivalence of being neither white nor Black in Canada. This in-between space which characterises the mixed-race subject allows Hill to propose a notion of nationhood and culture which contests fixed, idealized preconceptions around the sense of identity, particularly that of Black people. By exposing the historical links between Blacks in Canada and the United States as well as Canadian on-going racism in spite of multicultural policies, the author challenges the Canadian metanarrative which constructs Canada as a place where race does not matter, in contrast with its Southern neighbour.

Key words: multiculturalism, identity, borders, Canada, hybridity, Lawrence Hill

RESUMEN

En su novela *Any Known Blood* y su libro de no ficción *Black Berry Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* Lawrence Hill presenta la ambivalencia de ser mestizo en Canadá. Este espacio liminal que caracteriza al sujeto biracial permite a Hill defender nociones de nacionalidad y cultura que refutan ideas preconcebidas e idealizadas sobre el sentido de identidad, especialmente la de los sujetos negros. Al exponer los vínculos históricos entre los negros de Canadá y Estados Unidos, el autor expone las grietas de la política del multiculturalismo y desafía la metanarrativa canadiense que establece Canadá como un lugar libre de racismo, en contraposición con los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: multiculturalismo, identidad, fronteras, Canadá, hibridez, Lawrence Hill

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INTRODUCTION

Canada has historically built a sense of national identity as a peaceful, hospitable nation of freedom, law and order, in contraposition to its neighbour to the south, the United States of America. The African American myth of Canada as the land of freedom contributed greatly to this Canadian imaginary, as the Blacks fleeing the plantations in the Southern American states via the network routes known as the “Underground Railway” used the tropes of the North Star and the New Canaan to metonymically refer to Canada, the land of freedom for runaway slaves. Attempting to define what it means to be Black in Canada is an ongoing challenge. In spite of the significant role that the 1988 Multiculturalism Act also underlined Canada’s character and identity as a benevolent, welcoming country where diverse constituencies can live together peacefully. However, Canada’s multicultural policy has been criticized for its ineffectiveness in achieving a truly egalitarian polity (Mergeai 84). As Mergeai argues, by its promise to overcome racism in the nation, the Multicultural Act creates “to a similar extent as the Underground Railroad, an ‘embellishment’ of national history by presenting a romanticized picture of Canada as ‘the North Star’” (Mergeai 83).

This mismatch between reality and the national discourse is related to the fact that “the nation has historically attempted to erase or contain Black presences” (Harris 369), thus leading to the subsequent necessity for some writers to render the national history and identity more accurately. Lawrence Hill successfully achieves so in his second novel *Any Known Blood* (1997) and his non-fiction book *Black Berry Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001). Both works draw particular attention to the position of the mixed-race subject in Canada as an interpreter and mediator of the Canadian approach to multiculturalism, race and its role in national identity building. In the novel, the plot is structured along a genealogical line in which the mixed-race protagonist

Langston Cane V initiates a journey in pursuit of his cultural identity. In this quest, he unveils the stories of five generations of Canes which implicitly condensate the history of Black America. In the latter non-fictional work, Hill combines memoir with interviews of thirty-four biracial Canadians to reflect on different attitudes around the concept of race, exploring the divergences between the United States and Canada regarding the repercussions of mixed-racedness. Focusing on the construction of hybrid identities, this essay attempts to explore the strategies employed by Hill in order to reconsider the mixed-race subject as a cultural mediator in favour of social justice, which entails rescuing historical memory, revisioning historiography, and the subsequent adjustment in the national metanarrative. Through an exercise in border crossings, the author contributes to the construction of a new Canadianness which contests idealized notions of Canada and reaffirms a Black Canadian identity with strong connections with African American history. Moreover, the author's depiction of the hyphenated identity transcends fixed racial polarities.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE CANADIAN METANARRATIVE

The belief that Black Canadians are not an integral part of the national fabric remains as “a myth perpetuated by national rhetorics that prefers to frame Canada as a refuge from, rather than a participant in, the African slave trade” (Harris 368). Hill structures the plot of *Any Known Blood* around two interwoven temporal lines, which connects the realities of Black peoples over generations. On the one hand, Hill articulates a chronological series of events which address Langston's journey to discover his roots, as he alleges: “My life can't go on until I know these things” (Hill, *Any Known* 360). On the other hand, during this investigation, the reader is revealed the secrets and stories of a family that has “been moving back and forth across the [Canadian-U.S.] border for five generations” (Hill, *Any Known* 504.) from more recent to more remote generations. So, contrary to the traditional

representation of Canada as “a destination to which one *only* escapes” (Harris 368), in *Any known Blood* Canada is the overwhelming starting point of arrivals and departures which requires disambiguation through transgressing national boundaries.

These crossings of the U.S.-Canadian border over generations suggest that the experiences and history of Blacks in the U.S. and Canada are interrelated, which is underscored through Hill’s emphasis on Canada’s covert historical anti-Black racism. Aberdeen Williams and Evelyn Morris’ love story condensates the repercussion of miscegenation, as this biracial couple is assaulted by the American Ku Klux Klan in Oakville, Ontario. Luckily, Langston Cane III, together with a police officer and some people from the neighbourhood managed to pacify the hooded men, who eventually left the house where the couple was sheltered. The incident contrasts with the harsher racial situation in the US: “In the States they’d swing you from a branch and there’d be no talking before or after.” (Hill, *Any Known* 326). Nonetheless, it does lay bare the prevalence of racism in Canada over time. Hill’s engagement in underscoring the impact of racial discrimination in Canada, however, is not inferred through isolated, anecdotal examples, but permeates the entire novel. It is noteworthy to mention the effects of the country’s history of racial segregation based on the One-Drop Rule, according to which any individual with a single drop of black blood was classified as black. This principle, which inspires the title of the novel, is implicitly satirised throughout the story: “I won’t have any man driving me if he’s got a drop of alcohol in his blood” (Hill, *Any Known* 31). However, the extremely significant repercussion of this rule in undervaluing the lives of Blacks in North America is suggested by alluding to it in the epigraph, thus making it a crucial aspect of the novel’s overall message: “no amount of white ancestry, except one hundred per cent, will permit entrance to the white race” (Myrdal qtd. in Hill, *Any Known* epigraph). This is especially stressed in the experiences of Langston Cane IV, who is

denied service in a white-owned restaurant because they “don’t serve colored” (Hill, *Any Known*, 84). Likewise, in a manifestation of blatant racism, he and his girlfriend Dorothy were rejected by a potential white landlord when he knew that Langston was black, arguing that he had already rented the apartment to another couple (36). In writing that “Langston waited for the refusal, Canadian-style” (35), Hill exposes that the long-established view of Canada as a hospitable nation which embraces heterogeneous identities (Harris 370) is nothing but a myth. The idea that while championing diversity and turning blackness into a token, Canada continues to discriminate minorities is also epitomised in the saying “The blacker the berry/ The sweeter the juice/But if you get too black/ It ain’t no use” (Hill, *Black Berry* 23) that serves as inspiration for the title of Hill’s non-fiction book. As Hill puts it, the expression constitutes “a bittersweet reminder of the hopelessness of being Black in a society that doesn’t love—or even like—black people” (*Black Berry* 23). These examples emphasise that Canada, like the U.S., is a country which has been and still is far from being a place of equity and justice for Black people. While racism is still in place, Canada cannot be conceived of as post-racial.

In his attempt to expose the ways in which blackness has been traditionally thought in Canada, Hill not only unsettles fixed views of Canada as a land free from intolerance, but also demystifies the idea that Black Canada is inauthentic (Harris 372). The author seems to be determined to question the U.S. uncritical Afrocentrism, which often reveals ignorance of all concerning Africa (Cuder 98): “ ‘If you are African,’ Yoyo said, ‘tell me the capital city of Burkina Faso’ ” (Hill, *Any Known* 248). That “blackness is not merely a product of the United States, but also part of the Canadian family tree” (Harris 373) is also implied through certain observations on the multiple Black people that Langston encounters in the States: “these women have never been to Africa. They just got in them [African robes] to look African” (Hill, *Any Known* 125). These disruptive

comments allow Hill to confront the idea of unique ways to experience blackness, thus raising questions about an American tendency to perpetuate illogical binary oppositions not only between black and white — “interesting is a white word, man. Interesting isn’t a word for people of color” (Hill, *Any Known* 234) — but also between Blacks in the U.S. and Canada: “that must be something of a shock for whites in Canada – to see such and educated African man in their midst” (Hill, *Any Known* 248). In doing this, Hill revises and expands the parameters that have historically shaped the identities of Black Americans and Black Canadians, thus urging to reconsider the national history. In this sense, the protagonist’s discovery of Langston Cane I’s adultery or Mill’s prostitution also implies uncovering glossed-over realities. Hence, if the story of the Canes represents African American history (Siemerling 6), then to demystify the family lore also signifies to deconstruct national myths. Therefore, transgressing firmly established convictions at various levels, Hill brings to the fore “the ways in which African American history and myth-making are productions” (Harris 371).

By discrediting preconceptions related to the ways in which Blackness is constructed in North America, Hill contributes to blur the separation between Black Canadians and Black Americans and proposes “fluidity instead of the stability of national markers” (Carmona 67). This is underscored by the reverse chronological order of the embedded stories. The last story is the story of Cane I, a fugitive slave to whom Langston V feels connected because, like him, “he didn’t fit in. I love him for his mixture of weakness and dignity” (Hill, *Any Known* 497). His escape to freedom is paralleled by Cane V’s “safe journey home” (Hill, *Any Known* 505), thus replicating a process of liberation through transgressing boundaries which connects the lives of Blacks in the Americas. This seems to be suggested in “There was Yoyo, who was as dark as dark got, and a good deal darker than Mill. There was Annette, who was of a medium complexion,

and then there was me-Zebra Incorporated" (Hill, *Any Known* 400). This confirms Mary Louis Pratt's suggestion that the liminal space or the 'contact zone' "where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination" (34) contributes to problematise —and subsequently dismantle— the binary system that perpetuates it. In this regard, Hill conveys that the 'contact zone' is as a place of unity rather than separation through implicitly suggesting that "The border, after all, is not just geographical, but ideological" (Harris 373).

THE HYPHENATED IDENTITY AND THE DESIRE TO BELONG: HILL'S ZEBRA POETICS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The mixed-race protagonist of *Any Known Blood* is not only astride the Canada-U.S. border, but also astride the black and white identities. As such, he faces a constant struggle to identify himself as Canadian due to the ambivalent readings and interpretations of his body, which underscores that "It's a difficult space to occupy, being of mixed race" (Hill, *Black Berry* 34). W.E.B. Du Bois encapsulates this in the concept of "double consciousness" to refer to "a peculiar sensation, . . . this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (8), which Hill rephrases as "the endless dance of adjusting how we see others, how we want to be seen, and how we see ourselves" (Hill, *Black Berry* 10). Such anxiety resulting from the social construction of race is portrayed from the very beginning by referring to the possibility of being categorised differently depending on the gaze of the observer, as the protagonist has "the rare distinction... of not appearing to belong to any particular race, but seeming like a contender for many" (Hill, *Any Known* 1). Similarly, the epigraph foreshadows this notion of rootlessness of those whose identity places them as "neither white not black" (Hughes qtd. in Hill, *Any Known* epigraph) through an allusion to the Harlem Renaissance which both gives name

to the hyphenated main character of the novel and creates an “intertextual dialogue between contemporary black Canadian literature and history and African-American literature and history” (Walcott 67). The pervasiveness of racial classification in spite of differing times and spaces is also reflected in the novel through repeated comments about Langston’s skin tone based on unfounded readings of his racial identification: “I thought you had colored blood in you. But if you don’t mind me saying so, you’ve just about passed over the edge” (Hill, *Any Known* 104). Such arbitrary definitions of the racialised bodies is also questioned in *Black Berry Sweet Juice* when Hill refers to the repeated question that “Canadians . . . like to ask –they absolutely have to ask– where you are from if you don’t look convincingly white” (159), a question which the author denounces because it implicitly labels the mixed-race subject as an outsider.

This sense of unbelonging characterises Langston Cane V at the beginning of the journey of disambiguation that he transits with regards to his family history across the U.S.-Canadian border, which is paralleled by a process of disambiguation concerning his own identity. In the opening chapter, his ambivalent identification is both established by others and self-promoted. In this way, Langston explains that “In Spain, people have wondered if I was French. In France, hotel managers asked if I was Moroccan. In Canada, I’ve been asked -always tentatively- if I was perhaps Peruvian, American, o Jamaican” (Hill, *Any Known* 1). To counteract these prejudices, Langston decides to play the "game of multiple racial identities" (Hill, *Any Known* 2) and claim to be a Sikh, Jewish, Cree or Zulu. This reflects that hybridity is not a fundamental parameter in the representation of Canadian identity, which leads the mixed-race subject to be identified through disidentification: “For the longest time I didn't learn what I was— only what I wasn't . . . I was allowed to grow up in a sort of racial limbo. People knew what I wasn't-white or black-but they sure couldn't say what I was.” (Hill, *Black Berry* 11). In this sense,

Langston's deliberate passing entails a form of subversiveness against an imposed sense of identity and a way of expanding constrictions about his racial identification, especially on the part of his father, as Siemerling (4) notes. Whilst Langston delves into his family history, these conflicting possibilities for identification seem to untangle until he self-identifies as a "zebra incorporated" (Hill, *Any Known* 400). This suggests his "role as mediator integrating both black and white strands in the family" (Fraile 98) and overturns the initial ambiguity of finding himself 'neither black not white'.

Hill's reflections in *Black Berry Sweet Juice* show parallels to some extent between his personal experiences and those of the protagonist of *Any Known Blood*. The author's first trip to Africa underscores a change of heart regarding his perception of racial identity after a serious illness. He initially asserted that he desired "to be known and treated and welcomed as a prodigal son" (Hill, *Black Berry* 66). Similarly, Langston asserts: "I didn't want to be seen as a white visitor. I wanted my race clearly marked" (Hill, *Any Known* 119). However, after Hill is tended by his white Quebecois friends, he acknowledges that he "had more in common with Line, Daniel, and Marie-Paule than [he] would ever have with the people of Niger. And yet [he] had a family heritage and a sense of self-identity that was in part connected with the people of Africa" (Hill, *Black Berry* 69). He thus identified himself as a 'man of two races'. Notwithstanding this, Hill concludes *Black Berry Sweet Juice* reaffirming his black self-identification (219) because "Attempts at pleasant symmetry, as in "half white, half black," trivialize to my eye the meaning of being black". (Hill, *Black Berry* 42). As Carmona points out, this suggests a blurring of definite boundaries "in favour of hybrid experiences and multiple identities." (58). Such rebelliousness implicit in transgressing lines of identification is related to Bhabha's notion of 'the third space' or "the in-between space-that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" and "by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of

polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (39). Certainly, in stressing that self-definition as “a key way to define one’s identity” (Hill, *Black Berry* 193), Hill demonstrates the arbitrariness of race and claims that racial borders of identification, like nation-state political borders, are to be deconstructed and reconsidered as fluid and malleable aspects of one’s identity.

CONCLUSION

The sense of self that Langston V desires to find through investigating his ancestors’ lives arguably reflects Hill’s desire to provide Canada with a more encompassing and inclusive sense of identity which, like Langston’s, can be discovered by bridging information gaps through history revisioning. In this process, Langston crosses multiple borders geographically in his journey in search of his origins and abstractly in the disambiguation of his racial self (Flagel 17). The stories he finds uncover forgotten or ignored history and challenge the myth of an absent Black presence in Canada while dismantling the widespread idea that the nation has historically remained a benign place towards racialised bodies, and Blacks in particular. By connecting the Black experiences in Canada and the U.S., Hill highlights that “the foundation of Canadian identity—which is defined in opposition to the United States—is mostly based on illusions” (Mergeai 88). This indicates that the author defends a real transculturalism which allows not only the contact but also the interaction among the diverse peoples who occupy the nation. While dissolving national borders, the author also dismantles identity boundaries. Hill is concerned to problematise fixed conceptions about Canadian identity by presenting the ambiguity that characterises the liminal position in which mixed-race subjects find themselves. The author underlines that self-identification plays a pivotal role as it envisages the oscillations that racial identity entails and it works against binary categories of identification, thus allowing the mixed-race subject to be deemed as an integral part of

the national fabric. In doing this, as Walcott notes, Hill consistently unsettles “the ground of any too-easy claims concerning nation, race, ethnicity and belonging” (67). Therefore, by proposing a rearticulation of the myths underlying the construction of Canadian identity from the position of mixed race subjectivity, Hill contests homogeneous definitions of what it means to be Black and white in Canada.

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