

Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill

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Projecting History Honestly: An Interview with Lawrence Hill

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY JESSIE SAGAWA

BORN IN 1957, LAWRENCE HILL is the son of a Black father and a white mother: American immigrants who married and moved to Canada in 1953. A former speech writer and journalist, he is the author of three novels: *Some Great Thing* (1992), *Any Known Blood* (1997), and *The Book of Negroes* (2007), published as *Someone Knows My Name* in the United States. His non-fiction works include the memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), and *The Deserter's Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier Who Walked Away from the War in Iraq* (2007), a collaboration with Joshua Key. He has also written a major essay that asks "Is Africa's Pain Black America's Burden?" and a documentary film, *Seeking Salvation: A History of the Black Church in Canada* (2004).

Identity, belonging, and the quest for home are central themes of Hill's fiction, and he has spoken of the need to project history as honestly as he can. His work has been critically acclaimed and he is the recipient of several awards. *The Book of Negroes* won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book and the 2007 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. It was also nominated for the 2007 Giller Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. For the essay on Africa, Hill received the 2006 National Magazine Award for best essay published in Canada in 2005; for the documentary, he was awarded the American Wilbur award for best national television documentary.

This interview was recorded on the afternoon of 23 October, 2007, in Fredericton, before Hill read from *The Book of Negroes* at the University of New Brunswick.

JS Would you tell me something about your roots: your family background in Canada and elsewhere?

LH Well, I am the product of American immigrants who married and came to Canada in 1953. My father had been at the University of

Toronto for a few years before that doing his MA at the University of Toronto. He went back to teach for a year in the Washington, D.C. area and met my mother. They married and hightailed it back to Canada where they started a family.

JS In your childhood, what was your perception of Africa?

LH There wasn't a great deal of talk about Africa when I was a child. Sometimes my father might have mentioned an African leader here or there, but for the most part, as in so many North American families, the conversations were focused primarily on the United States and Canada. And, as my father and mother had never travelled to Africa, there wasn't a great deal of talk about the continent when I was a child. I think some of my uncles and great uncles had travelled in Africa, and I believe my grandfather had too, but my father hadn't, and so it wasn't central to our family discussions when I was a boy.

My first immediate connection with Africa came in 1978 when I started studying at Laval University in Quebec City and there were a number of African students from French-speaking West African countries studying with me in Economics. And the next year, 1979, I went to Africa. I went to Niger on an exchange program with Canadian Crossroads International as a volunteer. And so that was the first time that I had gone to West Africa; otherwise, I had been to Morocco previously.

JS Have you been to other parts of Africa?

LH Yes, I have been to Niger, Cameroon and Mali. I have worked in each of those three countries as a volunteer with Canadian Crossroads International. I have been to Morocco and I have been to South Africa. But that's the extent of my travels. There's much that I have yet to see.

JS I read an article that you wrote titled "Is Africa's Pain Black America's Burden?", in which you mentioned that you have ancestors who were enslaved.

LH Firstly, my father was a Black American, so necessarily I have ancestors who were enslaved, as his ancestors went back many generations in the United States.

JS Were you exposed to Black folklore as you were growing up?

LH Well, I was exposed to a lot of conversation and exchange with my Black American family: aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. You know, I wouldn't have termed it folklore when I was a boy, but I suppose you might term it folklore if you are looking at it from an academic perspective. Folklore wasn't really a word that entered into my vocabulary; usually when you are living it you don't think about it as folklore; it's just what your grandmother says. Sure, there are all sorts of sayings that I was exposed to and biases and thoughts and experiences, and I guess many of them would amount to folklore. But really, what is folklore but the manifestation of cultural habits in any specific ethno-cultural group? So we all have our own folklore I guess, whether it's the way we talk about ourselves and the things we do, or the practices we have at home or out in the world.

JS I have always thought of folklore as the basis of any written culture, so it fascinates me. And, I found *The Book of Negroes* especially rich in terms of African folklore.

LH I think it is. But my own "family folklore" came down to a great amount of storytelling, most of which was invented. There wasn't so much telling of the stories of family members, although there was some of that in the sense of a *griot* passing on information about family culture. Mostly it was just wild unadulterated imaginings, in which my father or grandfather would tell stories about the man and the elements, nature and so on. So there were definitely some discussions about family members, about the liberation of the family from slavery in the United States. There was also the retelling of family stories, but much of my family tradition came down to pure storytelling, and that is what really interested me in the act of fiction writing.

JS How about deciding to become a writer? When and how did this develop?

LH Well, like so many immigrants to Canada, my father was obsessed, and I use the word advisedly, with the notion that his children should all become hyper-educated and hyper-professional. He wanted above all else that we should strive for the highest achievements scholastically, have PhDs and be doctors, lawyers and engineers and the like. This is because he wanted us to transcend any racism that we would encounter, and he felt that a good education, along with professional success, would be the best tool with which to combat racism. And he

descended from a long line of highly educated African Americans who had doctorates going back to the late 1800s from various Black universities in the United States.

I remember an episode when I was the age of six in which my father asked me to write a letter explaining why I deserved to have a kitten. He said, “If you can write me a well-worded letter with no spelling mistakes I will give your request due consideration.” And I marched into my bedroom full of purpose and I knew that I’d get that kitten if I wrote a good letter, but if I wrote as he termed it a “slap-dash letter” — a lazy, sloppy letter with no revisions or thought — that I’d never get what I wanted. I believed that the outcome of my desires rested on my ability to render a convincing argument on paper. I got that kitten, and from that point on any time I ever wanted anything I had to write another letter. So my father, although he hoped to make me a professional, actually drove me to the profession of writing by requiring all those letters of me when I was a boy. He made me a very passionate writer at a very young age, and I didn’t stop.

JS Now, in the same line, did you have some writers whom you identified as your forebears?

LH Yes. I have a private little — completely unscientific — theory that the writers who influence you the most are the ones that you ingest as a teenager because you are still forming your character. I was so struck by the people I was reading as a teenager that I think they are the writers that I carry with me most profoundly. I am not saying that I imitate them or strive to imitate them, but I carry them with me somewhere in my soul. When I was fourteen or fifteen I turned to adult literature with a passion, and my parents, being educated people, had hundreds of books, and I ate up every book in the household. Most of the books were African American literature: Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, etc. I read — inhaled — books: initially the Black American male writers who were so dominant in the 50s and 60s, as they were on my parents’ shelves in the 1960s. Later, I turned to African-American women as they became more prominent.

JS One of the issues that I found runs through your writing, be it *Black Berry Sweet Juice*, *Any Known Blood* or *The Book of Negroes*, is identity. Would you like to say something about that?

LH I think that who we are and how we relate to the world is a fascinating issue, and I think that people of all backgrounds can identify with these matters. I don't think that Aminata in *The Book of Negroes* is too terribly troubled about her identity. The desire to find home is something that haunts her throughout, but sometimes other people around her challenge her identity. Whether it's African people in Sierra Leone when she returns there near the end of her life, or whether it's people in the Americas who don't fully acknowledge her humanity, she is fairly conscious of and confident in who she is. She has another quest in mind: to get back home, as elusive as home is when you have been ripped from it and you can't return for decades.

What is home? Does it exist once you have left it? Can you ever go back once you have been taken away? I don't know. These are the sorts of issues that are worked out under the surface in the book. So I don't know that *The Book of Negroes* is primarily a quest for identity definition; it's more a quest for home, but certainly in *Black Berry Sweet Juice*, *Any Known Blood* and in my first novel *Some Great Thing*, identity looms very large. I find the issue fascinating, clearly. I don't know that I will always be focused on it. The novel on which I am currently at work isn't centrally focused on identity, although I am sure in one way or another we will come back to the issue.

JS So, in other words, identity is really a fluid rather than fixed construct?

LH Absolutely! Partly it's a function of age. I think geography has a lot to do with it as well. Where you live, who is around you, how people perceive you, how they treat you, how they define you whether you like it or not: these things are absolutely fluid, and so they should be.

JS It's a sad moment but also one of the most striking for me when someone tells Aminata, "You belong to this white man," and she says "I am not an African, I belong to nobody, I am from Bayo."

LH Well, she is initially insulted when someone says, "You are an African, you are from Africa." But she is not insulted because she has any shame with regard to Africa. She is insulted because she has never heard the word before. She is from Bayo, born in 1745; she is not walking around there with Africa in her self-concept. She is from Bayo, she is of various ethnic origins, she knows who her parents are and who the people around her are, but "African" is a foreign concept. It's a white

man's word, really, and it's a word that other people use to define the people of Africa. And what does it mean to say you are from this big continent with all these people? I find that fascinating.

JS Now, turning to the character Langston Cane the Fifth: I know that he is a fictional construct, but there are many parallels between his family story and your own in *Any Known Blood*.

LH Well, there are many parallels and they are quite transparent. For instance, I worked briefly as a speechwriter and so does Langston Cane the Fifth. Also, I had a great-grandfather who was born just a step outside of slavery in the United States and whose mother died when he was a very young boy. His father with ten or so children had no means to raise them, so he farmed out his kids here, there and everywhere. And so my great-grandfather, Daniel Hill the First, was raised by white Quakers who sent him back into the Black community into higher education once he had grown up. And so this happens vaguely to one of the characters in *Any Known Blood*. There are a few more similarities: my grandfather and my great-grandfather were both ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In this novel, *Any Known Blood*, there is a minister as well in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. So there are many parallels, but I have to emphasize that these are jumping-off points. They are really emotional grist for the mill of writing a novel.

I think the novel is deeply autobiographical on a more important plane: in how it reveals, as does *The Book of Negroes*, my soul and my heart, the way that it beats and the values that I have. So if you read *Any Known Blood* or *The Book of Negroes* carefully, you will have a pretty good idea about the sort of person I am. I think that is a far more profound sense of autobiography than any coincidence in the book. So yes, there are a number of coincidences between some of the characters in *Any Known Blood* and some people in my family, but again they are very short, transparent moments of parallel that end almost as quickly as they begin, and so it would be a mistake to think that it wasn't a work of invention or that the characters weren't entirely fictional; they are. As a novelist, of course, I am sensitive to that. And naturally, my father particularly would be turning over in his grave if he thought that I was representing any of our family members in that book, which I haven't. In fact when he read it — and he was a sociologist who also knew and

loved fiction — but he said, “Fine Larry, just fine but did you have to make my sister a prostitute? And I said, “Well, as a matter of fact I did.” First of all it wasn’t his sister. He didn’t have any sister remotely like Mill in the novel. He had sisters but they don’t in any way resemble Mill, who had to be, briefly during the Second World War, a prostitute. He was a little unhappy about that, but he understood that it was a work of fiction.

JS What intrigues me about Mill is her strength.

LH Yes. She has a heart of gold in spite of her gruff exterior, and the first time that Langston comes to see her — by the way she kicks him out and won’t have anything to do with him — he just can’t keep away, and he knows it. She can kick him out of her home, but she can’t kick him out of her church, and that’s the way he eventually seeks her out successfully. Clearly, I am attracted to the strength of African American women. And so Mill’s strength was important to me.

And here we are again in *The Book of Negroes* with a terrifically strong character. She doesn’t really behave like Mill, but Aminata also has a phenomenal reservoir of strength, which carries her through the most unspeakably difficult moments. I can’t help but tip my hat to the people who have gone before me who have had the strength to keep going amid conditions of adversity and who have not become hateful or murderous. I guess I am trying to salute those qualities in both *Any Known Blood* and *The Book of Negroes*.

JS I was struck by Aminata’s characterization but also by the characterization of Fanta, who starts off as a really hateful character, but as time goes you begin to see that there is also an element of nurturing in her. There are those moments when she becomes the mother to Aminata and really helps nurture her. There is a core of resistance to Aminata that I think helps her to survive, as well.

LH Yes, and of course we all react differently to extreme circumstances, and one character loses the capacity of speech when he is exposed to the coffle, the long walk to the sea, the ship and the slavers from Sierra Leone to South Carolina. He is no longer able to speak. He is so shocked and traumatized by this upheaval in his life, and Fanta understandably becomes murderous for at least a brief spell, and why not? Her reaction is fully understandable. Some people chose to end

their lives by throwing themselves overboard; on the other hand, some people resisted on board slavers, knowing full well they were likely to die and hoping to take some people down with them. Some people fought to the last drop of blood, but Aminata doesn't have a killer instinct, doesn't react with a vengeance or with violence. She reaches for something else, and she wants to be sustained by the love of family, by the memory of the strength of her parents, by the desire to tell her story and share it, to have made her whole life worthwhile. She hopes to become a *djeli* or *griot* and thereby to valorize herself by passing along her story.

JS It's interesting that you should mention the coffle and Fomba because one of the issues in *The Book of Negroes* is that Aminata cannot understand that she's been betrayed by her own people. And for me it was a fascinating topic because we rarely discuss the issue of African complicity in the slave trade.

LH Well it's an explosive subject, and some people are just infuriated to have the matter raised. I am not raising it as a polemicist, but it does nobody any good to deny fact. I am not finger-wagging in the book, nor am I attributing blame. The fact is that Europeans were not travelling deep into the interior of West Africa in the middle of the 1700s. They were not yet deep into the continent; that's why their maps are so incredibly inaccurate and uninformed. They hadn't been inside the continent to the sort of places where Aminata lives. And so captives were brought from the interior of Africa to the coast by African intermediaries who were paid and bribed to supply those on the coast with slaves who were captured in any number of ways. I wanted to shock and disturb the North American reader who has no concept of the complexity of this trafficking of human beings and how far some people had to walk to be taken as captives overseas. And so, necessarily, Africans were drawn into the trans-Atlantic slave trade as intermediaries and as people who supplied the Europeans on the coast with the product, the chattel, the human chattel that was used to enrich the European empires.

Aminata is eleven when she is abducted. She's just begun her womanly cycles and this boy who is overseeing the movement of captives from the interior to the coast is just a few years older than she is. He is barely out of boyhood himself. He is still a teenager and I guess he is, in contemporary parlance, a young man by African standards. And yes, he is participating in the slave trade, but why? Because his uncle has sold

him and he is required to participate in the slave trade or be enslaved himself. So in a way he is already a slave himself, a captive as he moves other captives to the sea, and eventually he is captured and sold off in the very same way that Aminata is.

JS Is Bayo a historical or just a fictional place?

LH Apparently there is a village in Mali somewhere called Bayo, but I learned this after finishing several drafts. The Bayo in the novel is fictional.

JS At the back of *The Book of Negroes* you list a very wide range of references. Which part of researching this book was the most fascinating?

LH The memoirs written by Africans and Europeans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were by far the richest and most fascinating. Some of them I'd already looked at and read. I looked at the memoir *The Autobiography of Olaudah Equiano* much earlier in life, but I came back to it and read it carefully as I was preparing to write the novel. I read memoirs by formerly enslaved people who survived and went on to write their own stories, and I also read accounts by Europeans who were travelling in Africa in the area of Sierra Leone in the eighteenth century. I also read the diaries and letters of some of the European men who'd been caught up in the slave trade at the time and who later renounced it. I also read the diary of the young British naval lieutenant John Clarkson, who organized the exodus from Halifax to Sierra Leone; he kept a detailed diary that spread out over about a hundred pages. And of course looking at "The Book of Negroes," the document, was also a very rich experience.

JS Were there any surprises along the way?

LH Well, a lot of things I just couldn't visualize until I really turned my mind to it. I wanted to know how people were moved from, say, the interior of Africa to the coast. How were they taken? And so I just dug around and found some first-person accounts of the time. Another fascinating point of meditation for me was to contemplate the massive linguistic challenges faced by African people as they arrived in, say, South Carolina. What are you to do when you are twelve years old and you don't understand a word that people around you are saying? You

see people around you who look African, but none of them speak your language.

JS Again returning to *The Book of Negroes*, since it's based on historical reality, what do you feel is the fiction writer's responsibility to the past?

LH What are my responsibilities as a writer when I am writing historically? Well, I guess I have to answer that book by book because I am not sure that each one will be the same. Each book has its own dictates, but this is a novel that purports to represent history faithfully. I have taken several liberties with dates and places and so forth, but I wanted the novel to be realistic. I wanted to realistically reflect my understanding of the movements of African peoples around the world at this time, whether it's from the interior of Africa to the coast to the shipping across the ocean in the Middle Passage, or the movement of Blacks from South Carolina up into places like Manhattan during the American Revolutionary War, or the movement of African Americans from Manhattan into Nova Scotia as Black Loyalists, or the exodus from Halifax to Sierra Leone. I wanted these things to be quite accurate in the overall depiction of events. And I wouldn't like it if a historian came behind me and said, "This is preposterous. The things that Hill is having take place in this novel are utterly impossible, never happened and never could have happened." It doesn't so much matter if they never happened, but I would like them to be plausible and to make sense. And so my responsibility to history is to project it honestly, meaning to project it in a way that's faithful to my intellectual understanding of the time, places and conditions in which African people were living. So for example, I happen to know that slavery was thriving in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia when the Loyalists arrived in large numbers in 1783, so if I had a novel set there with no people enslaved, then that would be a little ridiculous. I have tried to be faithful to my understanding of history; I guess that was my primary responsibility. On a deeper level my responsibility is to write as honestly as I can and be faithful to my own heart and to my perception of the world and to write with integrity, meaning to believe what I write.

JS *The Book of Negroes* has a very timely release date. This is the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in British colonies, and I am curious as to whether anyone has questioned why you want to talk about slavery now.

LH Yes. Many people are quite upset to hear you talk about slavery. Many young people in high school and university, and even some educators that I have met in Africa, the US and Canada are highly opposed to emphasizing the history of slavery. This is because they feel it is demeaning and that instead we should be talking about successes in contemporary Black Canada or something like that. I don't think it serves any point to ignore history. I think too few of us know our history in the first place. I am not wallowing in slavery, and this novel isn't really just a novel about slavery. It's a novel about liberation; it's a novel about human courage; and it's a novel about the triumph of the human spirit in conditions of adversity. It's a novel about a woman's journey through life in the eighteenth century.

I think that every generation strives to come to terms with the grand lines of its history. Why are we talking about the decline of the Roman Empire in the year 2007? Because some of us think it is significant. Why should our grandchildren be talking about the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews in the Second World War? Because it is significant. Our own grandchildren should strive in their own ways to come to terms with these great huge lumps in our history, and so we all try to make sense of the past in our own ways. So hiding my head in the sand and pretending it didn't happen doesn't serve my objective, which is to illuminate and to dramatize the human condition.

Most Canadians know extraordinarily little or nothing about Black history in Canada. They know more about Black American history than they do about Black Canadian History. They can tell you about slavery in plantations in the US. Some of them do not even know that slavery existed here in Canada. So there are tremendous gaps in our self-awareness. A lot of it stems from a sense of moral superiority. We think we are better than those nasty Americans who have done all those dastardly things south of the border. I think that's a dangerous position because ignorance is no way to learn from one's history and to move forward in a humane way.

JS We talked about the parts that were the most fun to handle during the research. What was the most difficult part for you when it came to writing *The Book of Negroes*?

LH One of the most difficult parts was writing the scenes in which Aminata is abducted and sent across the ocean in a slave vessel. How do you represent such human atrocity and not turn off the reader? If you depicted it in its full horror, who would want to keep reading? So somehow you have to shine enough of a light on the story that a reader has a reason, emotionally, to keep going, has to believe that this character Aminata will somehow survive, will carry on. There were a lot of extraordinarily painful moments, and the Middle Passage was just one of them. When Aminata loses her children, it's hard to write about these things as well. So much of the novel was hard to write.

JS And still she turns out to be a very interesting character in her own right in that she is precocious, assertive, dignified, perceptive, courageous, mature beyond her years, yet very innocent and vulnerable at times. Who was the inspiration when you were writing?

LH I can't say that I had one person in mind. Aminata is every woman I have met and come to admire in Africa, and in my own family. And she is my daughter; I gave her my daughter's middle name. And my daughter was eleven when I started working on this book and Aminata is eleven when she is kidnapped and taken away to slavery. And so the question was, "What if she was my daughter? How would she have survived? What if this had been my own child? How would she have made do and persevered? And so she is not my daughter the real person, but she is fashioned out of the real love I feel for my oldest daughter.

JS How difficult for you was it to tell the story from Aminata's perspective, especially to carry her from childhood to womanhood?

LH It was both difficult and liberating. I've always had the sense that the characters most unlike me are my most vivid literary creations. Mill, for example, in *Any Known Blood*: I couldn't possibly be Mill, but she really jumps off the page.

JS The idea of resistance to being labelled takes us again to Aminata. Initially she resists any labels, but by the time she goes to England she is accepting a change in her name to Meena Dee.

LH Well, everybody calls her Meena. She prefers to be called Aminata, and that's why she talks to the schoolgirl in London in the beginning of the novel and tells her, "Sure my name is Meena, but if you really want to know my name it's Aminata. Try to say it, try to say it. It's just four syllables. It's not hard try to say it. Say my name." She wants her name to be heard, and indeed the American title for the novel is *Someone Knows My Name*. That title suggests how she wants her name to be recognized, and so I think she is very proud of her name. She can't control, however, the natural impulse of people in the New World to shorten it or to Americanize it as a common name, but she can affirm her own name when she is able to.

JS Was there a reason for the change in name for the American edition?

LH Yes. There were two reasons. The first is that the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, felt that *The Book of Negroes* sounded to their ears like a work of non-fiction and felt they would have trouble selling it as a work of fiction. The second reason was that they thought the word "Negroes" would be so inflammatory to American readers that they wouldn't give the book a chance, even to discover that the title had a historical resonance and authenticity stemming from a British military ledger kept during the American Revolutionary War. So that was the reason, and given that reality I was faced with the obligation to come up with a new title and so I did: *Someone Knows My Name*.

JS How are we to interpret Aminata's decision to spend her last days in London, the centre of Empire?

LH I've been waiting for someone to ask me that question. A scholar or a critic will have his or her own interpretation, I suppose, and might call this a rejection of Africa and an adoption of European values. You could push it and make that argument. I wouldn't make it, and I wouldn't buy it. I think she has every reason to move to London when she does. I don't know how much I can say about the last bit of the novel right now without giving away the entire story in the interview, so suffice it to say that she encounters sufficient trauma when she returns to Sierra Leone. Close to the end of her life she is given an opportunity to be valuable and to contribute in a way that she doesn't feel she can do in Sierra Leone. She is not home; she's not been able to get home. She is in Sierra Leone; that's not her home. At the end of her life she wants

to contribute to the abolition of slavery in a way that she couldn't in Freetown but she can in London, which is a hotbed of Abolitionist activity. One could look at that as a repudiation of Africa. One can also look at it as an embracing of the needs and utmost desires of her brothers and sisters around the world.

JS Do you have other projects in the pipeline?

LH I do. I have started working on another novel, but it's in its embryonic stages, so I can't really speak about it yet because it's just too new.

JS In the memoir you mention that for most of his life your father had to deal with the issue of race. How do you see the issue of race now?

LH I think that depends on whom you are talking to. Who is it we are discussing? What do they look like? How are they educated? What is their socio-economic class? Where are they living? To state the obvious, race is nothing but a sociological construct. Race is nothing but a social hierarchy imposed by and among human beings, and as long as people are anxious to maintain the profits from certain social hierarchies, race will be a concept that we can't get away from. We can talk about it academically until we are blue in the face and agree that it has absolutely no biological meaning, but sociologically it has a very profound meaning. And so I am not optimistic that the social hierarchies that have led to racial categorizations and to racism will cease and fade in my lifetime. I am not optimistic that my own children won't be grappling with some aspect of these issues years after I have gone. So I think that it's an ongoing concern, and we will continue to face the challenges of making a better world and creating equity for all people.

JS I know that you were nominated for the Giller Prize. How would you characterize the reception of your works to date?

LH Well, I've been very fortunate. I am able to live as a writer and to support my family as a writer. There are some good years and some bad ones, but I am able to work full-time as a writer. On the whole, critics have responded very favourably to my works, certainly very favourably to *The Book of Negroes*, which has been celebrated in

reviews around the country. I have been warmly welcomed in communities of all backgrounds where I have spoken about *The Book of Negroes* and others of my books.

JS In *The Book of Negroes* you recommend some further reading. What books would you recommend for a syllabus on African Canadian literature?

LH Well, how interesting. I guess it depends on what age we are talking about. But let's assume we are talking about senior high school students.

JS Or university.

LH Or university. One body of work that I would suggest, which is largely ignored, are the memoirs written by Blacks in Canada who may have been at one point enslaved but who liberated themselves and went on to write their life stories. George Elliot Clarke has collected some of these memoirs, and one of his anthologies is about early Nova Scotian writing. I mentioned it at the back of *The Book of Negroes*. So it's not that hard to find in anthologized format memoirs by some people who were former slaves in Canada. I read these first-person accounts as a way to get away from a purely academic interpretation at the secondary level and to listen to the voices of the people. A memoir is the first form of artistic literary expression among African Canadian people and African Americans. Memoir is the first way that we have asserted ourselves in North America on paper. It says, "This is who I am. This is my name. This is who I was. This is what I have done. Now I am going to prove my humanity to you by writing my story down."

The next is to look at the historical "Book of Negroes," which few ordinary Canadians have heard about or seen. The document is available in archives and libraries in various forms, and you can even see parts of it electronically. It touches Black history in Canada as well as Black American history, as it charts the movement of thousands of people from New York City into Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Looking at "The Book of Negroes" and learning to decipher it and take meaning from it, I think, could be a rich exercise for any enterprising university or senior high school student. Those are a couple of things that could be very valuable. There is also a tremendous amount of literature written

by contemporary African Canadian writers that is virtually unknown in the schools and universities across this country and a tremendous amount of history that's been written as well that is virtually unknown. And so, the task is to bring this material into the sphere of awareness of educators so that they know it's there to be drawn on. We are in a renaissance of writing right now. There is a terrific explosion, a happy explosion of African Canadian writing, certainly over the last couple of decades, and there is a lot to be admired.