

INTERVIEW

“THE CHALLENGE OF HEART AND IMAGINATION”: IN CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE HILL

«EL DESAFÍO DEL CORAZÓN Y LA IMAGINACIÓN»:
EN CONVERSACIÓN CON LAWRENCE HILL

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Lawrence Hill was born in 1957 in Newmarket, Ontario. He is the son of a black father and a white mother from the U.S. who moved from Washington, D.C. to Canada in 1953, where they became influential Civil Rights activists. His mixed-blood heritage plays a relevant role in his approach to race, ethnicity, identity and belonging. Hill is the celebrated author of ten books, including the non-fiction works *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of African-Canadians* (1993), *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women's Association* (1996), the memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), *The Deserter's Tale: The Story of An Ordinary Soldier Who Walked Away from the War in Iraq* (2007) –in collaboration with Joshua Key–, *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning* (2013) and his 2013 Massey Lectures published as *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (2013). Hill's novels include *Some Great Thing* (1992), *Any Known Blood* (1997), and the much-acclaimed novels *The Book of Negroes* (2007) and *The Illegal* (2015). *The Book of Negroes* –also released in the U.S. in 2007 by W.W. Norton & Company under the title *Someone Knows My Name*– won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' prize for best book, as well as both CBC Radio's *Canada Reads* competition and Radio-Canada's *Le combat des livres*. The book was also turned into a six-part television miniseries. *The Illegal* won the 2016 edition of *Canada Reads*, making Hill the first writer ever to win the competition twice.

The following interview took place in my office in a mild, sunny afternoon on February 28, 2017, as an audience of about two hundred students and Faculty

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gathered at the theatre *Juan del Enzina*, eager to listen to and engage in conversation with the award-winning author for the second time in two consecutive days.¹

Ana María Fraile-Marcos: First of all, Larry, I'd like to thank you for accepting to inaugurate our 2017 Guest Speaker Series. We're truly honoured. This is a momentous year for us, as we set out to celebrate the pioneer role of our University in establishing English in Spain as a Higher Education discipline sixty-five years ago. You have particular links to Salamanca, and I'd like to count you among the plethora of writers –from Fernando de Rojas, Cervantes, Fray Luis de León, Beatriz Galindo, Teresa de Jesús, Nebrija, Lucía de Medrano, and Góngora, to Unamuno, Carmen Martín Gaité, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Jorge Luis Volpi, Antonio Colinas, among many others—who have found inspiration here. Incidentally, Salamanca is also the birthplace of Canadian author Yann Martel. Could you, perhaps, start this conversation on a personal note by talking about the part that Salamanca has played in your vocation to become a writer?

Lawrence Hill: Sure, and thank you for inviting me to Salamanca and to the interview. It's wonderful for us in Canada that you have this Department of English Studies. It gives Canadian writers the opportunity to be read, understood and appreciated in Spain. As for Salamanca and my experiences here in 1985, when I was 27 years old, I worried that I was getting old and that I should do something about it before I got too old, and so I quit my job. I was a newspaper reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. I was a parliamentary correspondent covering the Supreme Court in Canada and Canadian Parliament for a newspaper in Ottawa, and I left my job –I quit my job– and I moved to Spain with my wife –my first wife– and we came to Salamanca after a week or so of travel, and I rented an apartment in Paseo Canalejas, and stayed for a few months until it got too cold and then I moved further south into Andalusia. But I stayed here for three months, and it was a time to write. I wrote all day, I wrote every day. I knew that I wasn't ready to publish yet, but I told myself that I would spend one entire year writing all day, every day, and see if after one year I still felt that I could make this my life. So it was a year of experiment, it was to discover –not so much to discover my talent, but to discover whether I felt that I could truly live this way for a whole life and if I had it in my heart and in my brain to live as a writer and to *work* as writer. So it was a year of discovery for me: a disco-

¹ Lawrence Hill's lectures "Faction: The Merging of Fiction and History in *The Book of Negroes*" (Feb. 27, 2017), and "*The Illegal*: Creating imaginary nations to engage fictionally with international refugee issues" (Feb. 28, 2017) can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xAqj9TCaPk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RssEF483lKw>, respectively. This interview would not have been possible without the support of the research project "Narratives of Resilience" (MINECO/FECYT, FFI2015-63895-C2-2-R) and of the English Department at USAL. I am also grateful to Lidia Cuadrado-Payeras for her help with the transcription of this interview.



very of Spain and of the Spanish language, but also a discovery of my own creative heart. And so, for me Salamanca and Spain represent not just a wonderful city and country but also the beginning of the movement into a writing life that I began formally at the age of 27. It was a big risk to quit my job and to just move to Spain with no guarantees of anything. It's very hard to make a life as a writer, and so it was a risk to quit a good job and to come here but it was worth doing, and I was very happy here.

AF: Welcome back!

LH: Thank you!

AF: [laughs] Now, in the book that resulted from your CBC Massey Lectures, *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, there are frequent references to historical events such as the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish Civil War, all of them contributing to the Spanish "black legend". Would you say that your travels in Spain at different periods have inflected your views about race, for example?

LH: Yes!

AF: –which is a central concern of yours?

LH: Yes, they have affected and influenced my views of race and how I understand race to be perceived. I should begin by saying that I am a novelist, so I'm not a sociologist or an expert in matters of race but it's something that I've been reading about and writing about for decades as an artist. As far as I'm concerned, race is an artificial construction, it's a way of imposing a social hierarchy on people and it's completely unrelated to science. It's only constructed in order to create hierarchies between people. One of the things that interested me in writing about race, as a novelist and as an essayist is in what ways do we falsely, fictitiously, equate race and blood. And in our language, in our social policies—even in our policies with regard to blood donation—in various formal government rules, we have incorporated notions of blood and race. So I tried to investigate the origins of how we think about race, and how we think about race as being part of the blood, which is ridiculous: my blood is no different than yours, except for our blood types. I'm very interested in the origin of this. Although I'm not sure, I've never found any instance earlier than the Spanish Inquisition in which we first start reading about the equation of blood and race. In reading about the rules of *la limpieza de sangre*—cleanliness of blood—I discovered that during the Spanish Inquisition *los Reyes Católicos* [the Catholic Monarchs of Spain, Isabella I of Castille and Ferdinand II of Aragon] even created this way of finding whether you could be a Spaniard or whether truly you were Arabic or Jewish and would have to be burnt at the stake or deported or tortured or killed, have your property stolen from you, and even if you tried to pass, if you were tempted to become a Catholic and hid your origins for generations, still these rules of *la limpieza de sangre* were meant to determine who truly had Spanish blood and who did not. And it's a ridiculous and utterly frightful way of thinking about human beings, but it's the first time in my understanding of history that human beings are equating blood and race,



and saying your race is lodged in, or is housed in, your blood. That just so happened to be in Medieval Spain because that's the first instance I found of it, so that's very interesting to me.

And of course, issues of race and identity continue to pervade in Spain today just as they do in Canada and in every other country, and whether that has to do with the Roma people or whether it has to do with North-African refugees or other African or Middle-Eastern refugees –issues that we're facing too– issues of racial identity continue to be present in both of our countries. Just yesterday in Salamanca I saw people demonstrating in the streets here in favour of letting more refugees in into the country and with lines such as “No person is illegal.” Basically, people being activists and trying to argue that Spain should be more generous with regards to receiving refugees. These issues continue to be important today.

AF: Certainly, they are, and we'll get to that in a minute when we discuss your latest novel, *The Illegal*. But before we do so, I'd like to dwell on your analyses of race and racial identity for a little bit longer. In your book *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* you explore from an autobiographical perspective the paradoxical denial of racial identity while growing up in Canada and the pervasiveness of the notion of race ingrained in all facets of society. If Daniel Coleman draws attention to the centrality of the notion of a culturally hegemonic *whiteness* in the emergence of a literary canon that would support a specific ideal Canadianness, your book situates the question of identity in the border zone of mixed-race subjectivity, destabilizing fixed notions of identity and proving how race is a social construct. Mixed-race subjectivity continues being an important site to think about Canada's collective ethos and identity, which become more complicated when mixed-race enters the equation, as George Elliott Clarke's recent claim of Indigenous ancestry illustrates. Are you aware that Clarke now uses his term “Africadian”² to denote “a Métis who identifies with African-American culture” (Clarke, “Indigenous Blacks” 402) and claim his own indigeneity?³ The embodied identity that Clarke claims as a mixed-race Aboriginal Black is politically charged and complicates the current debates in Canada over the need to de-colonize the culture.

LH: Sure. Well, I didn't know specifically that George Elliott Clarke had claimed Indigenous identity, I wasn't aware of that particular claim, so I can't talk about his specific case because I don't know much about that exactly.

² Clarke coined the term “Africadian” to denote the particular historical experience of colonization, discrimination, oppression, miscegenation, adaptation, and resilience of blacks in the Maritimes, arguing that “African-Canadian culture and literature have domesticated –nationalized– their influences enough to create an aboriginal *blackness*, even if this mode of being remains difficult to define or categorize” (Clarke, *Odysseys* 13).

³ In the ensuing controversy, Paula C. Madden contends that Clarke's espousal of African identity is “a statement of claim against the land and territory of Mi'kma'ki” (Madden 100).



AF: Well, it was just an example to illustrate how mixed-race subjectivity works as a productive contact zone for the cultural, political and social debates going on in Canada at present.

LH: It's well known that in the history of Canada and the United States there was a great amount of mixing between black and indigenous people. There was a great amount of mixing between white and indigenous peoples too, and of course between white and black, but specifically, something that most Canadians don't know, is that there was also a lot of mixing between indigenous and black people. So, it's hardly a surprise that George is making this statement. In my own family, I'm also told –I don't know this factually– but I'm also told by my father and my grandparents that there was also an indigenous person in my own family tree, on my grandparents' side, but I never have claimed... I think you're the first person I've ever said this to, in a public interview, that I have this indigenous ancestor, and I haven't said it because I don't make that claim. It would be preposterous for me to say that I have an Indigenous identity: I do not, and I would never claim it. Did I have an indigenous ancestor who married a black ancestor? Apparently yes, but do I claim that identity? No, I do not. I mean, Indigenous and Black identities are constructed in very different ways, and one has to establish them in very different ways, so I would never claim such a thing. One of the things I've thought about often while watching the Joseph Boyden controversy unfold is how differently Black and Indigenous identities are constructed.⁴ You know, identity is an active performance, and it's an active establishing something that's considered to be valid, and the way to establish that clearly is different in Indigenous culture than it is in black culture.

One of the most painful things is, when a person who's attempting to identify with a specific culture, whether it's Indigenous or Black, is being told within that cultural group that they do not belong. That is extraordinarily painful for people and I think, in a way, that's more painful emotionally that encountering unexpected moments of racism from time to time. It's more damaging emotionally, and one of my preoccupations as an essayist and novelist is the pain that that person might feel in being told, "no, you don't belong." So that's very interesting, and so there are collective identities and individual identities and identity is a performance in a certain way. Sometimes you can fake it and change your identity: sometimes people believe it, sometimes they don't, sometimes you're exposed...

There was a woman who was the head of the Washington chapter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peo-

⁴ Joseph Boyden became arguably the most celebrated Indigenous author in Canadian history after the publication of his debut novel *Three Day Road* in 2005. However, in 2016 doubts were raised about the nature of his Indigenous identity. For more on this, see Eric Andrew-Gee.





ple in Washington and a few years ago –her name was Rachel Dolezal– it came up that she was not black, that she was white. There’s no reason why a white person can’t be the head of a local chapter of this activist organization, many white people are involved with the NAACP, but she said that she was black. Her parents outed her, her parents said, “we’re both white, she’s lying,” her parents brought her to public attention and unveiled her, in a way, and exposed her, and she was met with an incredible amount of ridicule and derision. And it seemed to me that the ridicule and the derision was excessive, that the bad that she did seemed to be exaggerated in relation to the good that she did as an activist in this organization, and I was very interested in why the response was so negative, so hostile. Partly, I think it’s because she was a woman.

Some men have done this and have not been criticized nearly as firmly as she was. If you think about *Black Like Me* (1961), which was a non-fiction book written by a Texas journalist by the name of Howard Griffin who underwent a series of medical treatments to change his skin color so he could pretend to be a black person in trouble in the States to explain to America what it meant to be black. He’s a white man, explaining to America what it means to be black, because he’s changed his skin color artificially for a short period of time. Well, did anybody challenge his ability to do this? The book was a massive best-seller, one of the most monumental publishing sensations of the 1960’s in the United States, and nobody expressed the vitriol that Rachel Dolezal faced in her situation, and so I think the gender has something to do with this. Of course, it’s a different time too, this was 1961 and Rachel Dolezal was sometime around 2014 or 2015. It’s a very complicated issue, but people respond in very different ways, sometimes very emotional ways, to the way other people define their race.

I’ll end that little meditation if I can by saying that my stepdaughter, who is seventeen, came into my life when she was three, and she’s white and has Jewish ancestry, and for a while, when she was about four or five she’d say to my wife, her mother, who is also white, “I’m a little bit black, right, because Larry is black,” and her mother had to tell her “No, you can’t go around telling people you’re black because your stepfather is black,” but I found it very interesting that the child wanted to do this, and the child wanted to do this out of love for her stepfather, and so who are we to say that she couldn’t be or couldn’t become black? People often create, let’s call them “false identities,” and move into altered identities, and sometimes they’re very successful. Sometimes they do it to save their lives, during the Holocaust, in slavery, other times they do it for economic advancement... “passing” is a very interesting thing and a very fraught thing. So it’s a big question you’ve asked.

AF: Yes, your train of thought reminds me of the dichotomy between the homonyms descent/dissent, right? Or consenting to the essentializing and fixed identities conveyed by biologically descending from or belonging to a race vs. freely adopting and performing a given identity that may differ from

the one one is born into. Playing with the phonetics of the words “descent” and “dissent” is also a way of disturbing fixed notions about race.

You’ve been recently appointed Professor of Creative Writing at Guelph University. Creative Writing courses are common in North-American universities but it’s only now that Spanish universities are beginning to offer Master degrees in Creative Writing –the University of Salamanca among them. In your view, what makes a writer? Can writing be taught? It may become a profession, but what are your thoughts about teaching creative writing?

LH: Well, it’s a complicated question. If we think about a painter, a seventeen-year-old, a twenty-two-year-old, young woman who wants to become a professional painter, is she going to develop her skills as a painter in a vacuum, in complete isolation to other painters? Probably, if she’s going to be very good, and if she’s going to truly be a highly accomplished professional painter, she’s probably going to be studying painting. She may not study it formally, in a university environment –perhaps she will, perhaps she won’t– but she will most certainly be spending time with other artists, spending time in their studios... I don’t think any rational person would dispute that a painter who wants to become great is going to learn from their masters, is going to learn certain techniques from their masters, and somehow, although we accept that a painter will learn from their masters, we are resistant to the idea that writers can also learn from other more experienced writers. Somehow we ask ourselves questions like “well, can this be taught?” Of course it can be taught. I’m not saying that creative genius can be taught, but technique –there’s so much to do with technique– and contacts and business, and social contacts... And unfortunately, the reality of publishing in North America today is that if you don’t know anybody, if you don’t have any contacts, it will be harder for you to enter the publishing market, so there are business concerns as well as artistic concerns that lead many young people, or not so young, to decide to do, say, a Master’s degree in Creative Writing. So yes, I think a great deal can be taught. Things as elementary as manipulating point of view... Often a young writer, or a writer any age who is starting to write for the first time whether they’re fifty or fifteen, they will not understand a very elementary notion: that every story has to have a point of view, or several points of view, and they’ll slip accidentally, unintentionally, between points of view without being conscious of what they’re doing, so it’s revolutionary and it’s sort of life-altering for a young writer to be told, “By the way, who’s telling your story? Make a decision and stick with it,” or, “Whether it’s one person or five, understand who’s telling your story, and if somebody is going to take over and supplant the first narrator, well, what will be the reason and why?” So things like that are very significant, but many young writers don’t understand that until they start to write, so yes, I think there’s much that can be taught. Is it necessary to study Creative Writing? Absolutely not. Does it help? Sometimes. Sometimes it doesn’t –sometimes a creative writer is emotionally damaged in the course of doing an MFA programme and it does not help their creative process. It takes a



certain kind of confidence to be assessed, to be criticised... Maybe there's a sense of competition among students. Not everybody is going to thrive in a Creative Writing programme and I have developed a sense of the type of person who is likely to thrive versus the type of person who's not, but it can be very helpful, not just in developing your artistic abilities but also in developing a professional network that you can use to launch your career.

AF: Right. So, what about your own beginnings as a writer? What were the main obstacles or difficulties that you faced?

LH: Well, I guess that the base obstacle was one of finding time, and committing to the time that it takes to develop the writing skills and that's a difficult thing if you're a university student –I was studying Economics–, or if you're busy working, trying to make a living, or if you have children, if you're a young mother with three children and have a job too, when do you find the time? These are all issues that writers have to deal with and I think one of the most significant ones is clearing your schedule and taking the time to write. I was very lucky to come over twice to Spain for two years each time to write and also to take time to write in Canada. So one of the biggest obstacles was committing to taking the time with all the economic risks that are associated –quit my job, live on my savings with no guarantee that it would be a financial success and also, you know, if you're a writer you don't earn a living usually, or certainly not for the first many years. If you're a doctor or a bus driver you'll earn a living while you're doing your work, but if you're a writer you may earn nothing or almost nothing, or you might spend five years on a book and earn a tiny amount for it. And so, writers have to think about how to live while they're writing, so I do believe that one of the greatest obstacles, perhaps even more for women than for men, is to find time to say “no” to their families, and find other ways to take care of their families, if they have families, and to say “no” to economic commitments in the work front and to take the time to write.

As for the skill of developing the art form, I started quite early by writing letters to my parents: I had to write letters for the things I wanted. My father was an immigrant, and immigrants are worried that their children may not succeed and they want their children in Canada to be professionals, they want their children to be doctors and lawyers and engineers so they won't face any of the economic insecurities –or racial– that their parents faced in the countries that they fled. Writing letters to my father made me very passionate about writing because I got to have the things I wanted if I wrote good letters, so it made me very excited about writing. It wasn't a sterile classroom activity, it was to get things I wanted, like a pet cat or a pair of running shoes or permission to stay out later at night. I had to write letters, so the writing was an act of passion, persuading this man that I deserved to have things, so I became passionate about writing as an instrument of self-improvement [laughs], to get the material things I wanted as a boy. It seems a bit funny, but it was a great way to write because I was writing with passion and gusto, to convince somebody who was hard to convince. It was



a good technique. And also, I wrote a lot of letters to friends when I was travelling –there was no Internet, I’m very lucky– so I used to write letters when I travelled and the letters were very lively and funny and they helped me become a more relaxed writer, to write with speed, it helps you relax.

AF: Yes, humour is also interspersed in your novels and essays, even when you’re portraying dire situations...

LH: Yes, and you can’t get that humour if you’re trying to be very careful and perfect in every sentence, you have to learn to let it go, and to, as I say, “let it rip,” and take a few chances and relax. You have to relax to write well, and then later, to come back and do all the hard work of rewriting but you have to relax, and so just spending the time learning to relax and be comfortable –comfortable in your own heart, and be free of self-criticism, that’s a hard thing to learn.

AF: Talking about hardships, you’ve mentioned in several occasions that writing involves lots of work, that it’s kind of painful because it doesn’t come naturally, it means writing and rewriting and revising and a lot of time put into it. How do you approach your writing, what are the elements of your writing that make more trouble for you? Is it character construction, or is it finding the right tone for the character; or is it the structure, or the research that involves recreating a historical setting?

LH: Well, you know, even though writing is hard, I take great pleasure in it, it’s what I’ve chosen to do and nobody is making me write, it’s my choice to write and it’s my love and I feel lucky to have such a love. Many people do things that they don’t love at all and they have no choice in the matter, or little choice, so I do like to remind myself that I’m very fortunate to do something that I love to do even when it’s difficult. I guess, well, research is not really very hard. I mean, any person who has a basic education can learn how to research. Nor is writing a clean sentence. I mean, if you’ve been practising writing, surely you can learn how to write a clean sentence or an efficient paragraph. I think by far the greatest challenge for the novelist is the challenge of heart and imagination. The challenge, I guess, is to be personal, and to have colour, and to have idiosyncrasies seeping into your work, and to be creative, playful and draw on the heart and the imagination. Again, it’s kind of like a painter: if you have great skills with your paintbrush but you have nothing to show, what value will the painting have? I think the same can be true of writing. Often I read novels and they’re splendidly written in terms of sentence structure, but they don’t move me, or engage me, or move my heart because they fail to capture my imagination. So I would say that by far the biggest challenge for me... I mean: there are tools, and there’s heart. The two have to be developed, and it’s difficult, but the heart is a challenge, and the job of novelists is to emphasise the people. Even people you don’t like, even characters who do despicable things: you have somehow to find a trace of humanity and not ridicule your characters but bring them to life and show them some dimensionality. You know, there’s a character that I wrote who was pretty two-dimensional in *The Book of Negroes*,



his name was Robinson Appleby, and he was the first slave owner of Aminata, the protagonist, and when it came time to film the book in South Africa, the actor who was playing Robinson Appleby, this fairly two-dimensional character in the novel, looked at me and said: “Come on, Larry, give me something to work with here!” And I thought it was a brilliant thing to say, “give me something to work with,” like “I’m playing this character, give me something so I can bring some humanity into my role as a monster slave owner.” So I had to give him something more in the script so that he felt he had something to work with as an actor. And that’s a very good lesson for a novelist: you have to give something to your characters, even the ones you detest, even the ones who are doing terrible things, and that takes a lot of heart, so I would say that the biggest challenge is that of the heart.

AF: Among the various developments that have taken place in Canadian literature since the 1970s is the shift from the focus on nationalism and local matters and settings, to a concern with the global or with the intertwining of both the local and the global –although I tend to think that, as a colonial nation, Canadian writers of all times have been aware of this. Would you say that a chronological analysis of your novels corroborates such a perception? For example, from *Some Great Thing* which is mostly based in Winnipeg in the early 1970’s, to *Any Known Blood*, with its trans-Canadian focus back and forth in history and mostly across the US-Canadian border and then to *The Book of Negroes* with its drawing of the Black Atlantic slave trade triangle, and more recently *The Illegal*, which chooses to leave aside the Canadian soil altogether and focus on the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers, a topic of huge global urgency.

LH: That’s a very interesting question. In my own case, yes, what you’re saying is very true, that there’s been a gradual movement more and more out into the world in my works. I don’t disagree with your observation about the evolution in those four novels towards a more and more global perspective, but I should add that, even in *Some Great Thing*, all the main characters in the novel, they go to Cameroon and so although the rest of the novel is set in Winnipeg, Canada, they go to Cameroon. And in *Any Known Blood*, the main character goes to Africa –he goes to Mali– and so he moves across the seas for an important but relatively short scene in the novel. So even in the earlier novels you have these characters who are leaving the Americas and are going to Africa for short periods of time, for a momentous event in their lives, and then finally further out into the world with *The Book of Negroes* and *The Illegal*. But I would say that some of the most successful and respected Canadian writers examine places and peoples who are outside Canada. Esi Edugyan’s novel, which won the Giller prize, *Half-Blood Blues*, is set in Germany and France before, during and after the II World War. One of our most respected writers is a fellow named Rohinton Mistry and his novels are set in India. He’s an Indian immigrant in Canada, his novels don’t take place in Canada at all, they’re set, as far as I recall, entirely in India, and he’s been hugely successful in Canada. Austin Clarke



and Dionne Brand, you know, have also often ventured away from Canada to situate their works, and so it's really very common for at least some successful Canadian writers, especially in the last 20 or 30 years, to reach further and further abroad and to write outside of the traditional canon of Canadian literature. It's true Alice Munro, whose work I very much enjoy, is set in Huron, Ontario, and she's probably our most respected writer internationally, having won the Nobel Prize, and she's an astoundingly capable writer and her stories are set in Huron, Ontario, but very many writers today, including young writers who are getting a lot of attention, are setting their novels outside Canada, so that's, I think, something interesting to Canadians, and Canadians are finding something rich and special and satisfying in encountering themselves more universally, with stories set in other countries.

AF: Would you say that Canada's self-conscious multiculturalism has increased Canadians' interest in the world outside its borders?

LH: Absolutely, it does and for us that's one of the reasons why Canadian writing is so interested in events and peoples around the world. I should say that the last winner of the Giller Prize, which is the most prestigious prize for fiction in Canada, was won by Madeleine Thien. Her novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is set during the Cultural Revolution in China, during the Tiananmen Square Massacre in China, and a little bit to the national side in Vancouver too, so it's a novel that examines connections between Canada and China, but mostly set in China. And there again we have a contemporary novel, very successful, which is concerned mostly with things happening in other places. So yes, I think the interests of novelists and poets and creative non-fiction writers reflect the make-up of the country.

AF: Going back to your work and its national and international reception, *The Book of Negroes* has just been translated into Spanish as *El libro mayor de los negros* by the renowned Mexican poet Pura López Colomé. It was also adapted into a TV series, as I think *The Illegal* will be, too? I'd like to know your views about the work of translation and adaptation. As your novels are being translated into several different languages, or adapted to the screen, what are the main challenges you envision during these processes of genre mutation and, perhaps, transculturation? do you feel that you're somehow losing control of your work?

LH: First of all, I want to be a sentimentally positive person. Sure, I could say I'm losing control but I prefer to think that I'm gaining wonderful opportunities to reach readers or television viewers in other countries or other media, and I'm thrilled by the idea of being approached by other artist, be it a translator or a filmmaker who loves –hopefully– what I've done and wants to translate it or to adapt it to film. For me it's a great honour. There's no greater honour than to be recognised by other artists who wish to work with your work in their own way, and yes, of course there's a loss of control but I don't think that's something to worry about. If you want control, just stay home and write your own novels, which is what I do, but when your



work enters the world, there's lots of ways to lose control. I mean, when my book enters your hands, you're the reader. In a way, it's as much your book as mine, your experience in reading the book is as fully valid as mine is in thinking about the book, and so it belongs in a certain way to you, especially if you care about it and it enters your heart, in your own way. And so, my general attitude about translation and the film adaptations is entirely positive. Maybe that's because I've had good experiences, and perhaps I might complain more had something terrible happen, but I've been very fortunate and I feel that it's a real honour to be engaged with by other artists, but also to reach people in other formats. Sometimes, somebody will see a film and then go read the book, and I can reach people that way too –the book will always be there, and so the film doesn't take anything away from the book, it just offers a new interpretation of the book in another medium. So, no, I don't think about issues such as loss of control because it'd just take me to a negative place. I'd rather think about it as a great compliment and as an honour, and often I've felt that I've learnt a lot from translators, too. Translators, they show you your own mistakes, even more than editors. Your book may have been edited five times and you might have rewritten it ten times, and then it's published in your own maternal language, and then a translator will come along and say, "By the way, you made a mistake on page 61," which nobody saw! But the translator will see. So it's a bit humbling too, it's great. So the translator can correct mistakes that you make that you didn't catch. It always happens. There's always five or ten things that the translator will find that nobody else saw.

AF: Although the figures of the refugee and the migrant are central to your previous novels, in *The Illegal* you leave aside the historical perspective to project our economically and politically polarized current global reality on the imaginary countries of Zantoroland and Freedom State. Could you talk about the challenges of writing a novel that functions as a parable about the risks and consequences of historical imbalances and present neoliberal *liquid modernity*?

LH: Well, I can speak of the emotional approach, and I can also speak of the technical approach. Emotionally, there was a similar desire [to that in my previous novels]. And the desire was to give a face to people who are generally faceless, to give a voice to people whose voices are not often heard, and unfortunately, in the 21st century, say –I won't speak for Spaniards, but I'll speak for Canadians– when we collectively in Canada think about slaves and slavery, we generally think of a slave as a person who has no face, no hands, no lovers, no particular skill... They're just a faceless person in chains. You think of shackles around the wrist, you think of a person bound, but you don't see a face, you don't see eyes, you don't hear a voice. And I was looking to shatter this mask that sort of covers the slave, and allow a person to see a possible human being. Aminata wasn't a slave in her primary identity, she was a woman who happened to be enslaved from a short period of time in her life, maybe for about one fifth of her life she's enslaved, but she's a girl



and a woman and a mother and a midwife and a lover and a person who learns many languages, a person who becomes highly literate and so forth, a grand traveler of the world; she's many things, she's not just a slave, and I wanted to give her a personality and a voice, especially since that's something that most slaves don't get. And I wanted, in *The Illegal*, the same emotional register. I wanted to give a sense of humanity to not just a refugee but to an undocumented refugee, one without papers who would often be vilified or hated or imprisoned, incarcerated if caught, even in a country such as Canada, which prides itself on its human rights record, but which denies in many respects its own difficult historical record and difficult contemporary situation too; and so, the emotional need was to show a person moving, either voluntarily or involuntarily—not that different in some respect—from one country to another, to show a sense of adaptation, to show a sense of loss of home, a sense of dislocation, but always to try to show a person and to give a humanity to a person whose humanity might be ignored. And today, when we think of millions of refugees living in Turkey or Lebanon or crossing the Mediterranean Sea and some of them, thousands of them, drowning in the sea, taking their lives in their own hands, it's hard to recognize that humanity. It's frightening. And so the easiest thing is just to shut these people out of our hearts and not think about them as possibly our own mothers or daughters. Not to imagine their humanity makes it easier to shut them out of our hearts and of our countries, and so the emotional desire was similar in both books: to give humanity to someone whose humanity has been ignored and denied.

But the writing techniques were completely different. First of all, *The Book of Negroes* is narrated in one person's point of view. I was looking for a quiet, sedate, almost biblical tone, I was looking for a tone of language that would not interfere with the reading, that would fall into the background, that would be deeply personal and a little bit biblical in the sound. *The Book of Negroes*, the Book of Exodus... I really was thinking about a quiet, meditative, narrative voice. Whereas with *The Illegal* I had multiple points of view. It's a very rockish, rambunctious, loud, confident narrative that erupts, and it's very playful and deliberately a bit hysterical, sometimes a bit over-the-top, a bit outrageous. I wanted to be playful and funny and irreverent and satirical in moments. I wanted to kind of bust out of the obligations and the austere historical fiction writing tone. I thought I needed to be more playful. I'd had enough of the austerity in the voice of *The Book of Negroes* and I needed, emotionally, myself, as person, to write in a different way. I thought, "now I want to do something else," so part of it just responded to my own needs as a person, to be more playful, and so I set the novel in fictional places to rid myself of any obligation to write "specifically" and "authentically." I use those words between quotes because I have a quarrel with the need to be authentic. I think sometimes it can interfere with the creative process. But anyway, I satisfied the need to be starkly authentic or accurate in *The Book of Negroes*, and in *The Illegal*



I just wanted to invent a world and not to be limited by specific socio-political realities, let's say Canada's or the United States', and so I felt the best way to be playful and to create an allegory, in a way, was to just invent a country –two countries.

AF: Which are nevertheless kind of recognizable...

LH: Oh, yeah –I mean, they're real, but I thought for me to borrow from some of the things actually going on around the world, there's a little bit of Australia, a little bit of France, a little bit of South Africa, certainly a little bit of Canada and the United States in that novel, and of various African countries, too. So, I was just sort of borrowing from things that I've come to know and understand to create two competent countries that would reflect my preoccupations and also, I was writing about a dystopia. I was imagining a world amok with xenophobic hatred, and we weren't particularly at that moment yet in the United States –unfortunately we seem to be there now– or Canada, but I wanted to imagine countries, say, that had elected the equivalent of the Front Nationale, or now, of course, Donald Trump, and I wanted a country that had a campaign whose government had been elected promising to catch and deport refugees and destroy their communities. I wanted to write a novel that had a government, a major parliamentary democracy, predicated on notions of hate and xenophobia, and at the time, the best way to do that seemed to be to invent countries.

AF: You're talking about capturing the contemporary context and concerns in fiction, but you also write essays and non-fiction. What is it that you need to express through the non-fiction writing that you cannot in fiction and vice-versa?

LH: Well, I mean, the books, in several ways, they all examine the same sorts of things, whether it's non-fiction or fiction, I seem to keep coming back to issues of identity, belonging, migration, individual and collective identity... So sometimes I feel I can get at that best by writing fiction, which is what's closest to my heart, it's what –I'm not saying it's more important than non-fiction: it isn't, it is not more important, it's just I seem to do it better than write non-fiction and I spend more time in it; but sometimes an essay is better for me; and sometimes I will write something in a novel and then I'll come back and examine it in an essay. I've done that many times, for example, in my novel *Any Known Blood* there was a scene in which the Ku Klux Klan comes to burn a cross and they threaten the life of a black man who's promising to marry –who's planning, I should say– to marry a white woman. And that scene actually reflected a real moment in history in Ontario when this very thing actually happened, and after I wrote the novel I wasn't terribly satisfied with how I'd depicted that scene, and I felt I'd like to come back to it and really examine it for thirty or forty pages in a long essay, about what actually happened when the Ku Klux Klan came to this city called Oakville, Ontario, in the early 1930's, or around 1930, and threatened the life of this black man, what happened; to examine the court records, to examine the newspapers, to really talk about it in more



depth, which you can't do in the novel. And so sometimes I want to come back to something and really dig into it and peel it back. In the novel, you have to move more quickly, but sometimes I have returned to the same subjects in my essays, and just examined them in a more intellectual way.

AF: Maybe one last question, ... and that's about your future writing projects. Would you like to talk a little bit about that?

LH: Well, I'll just mention quickly two creative writing projects. I'm writing for the first time in my life a children's novel, and I'm quite enjoying that. So I've been working on that here in Spain. It's an allegorical children's novel which I'm having fun writing, and I hope to finish that in the next few months. It's such a pleasure to move in different ways and try different forms of writing and take roads and feel challenged, and try new things. So, I had this children's story that I'd been thinking about for years, and I'm finally writing that, now that *The Illegal* is finished. But the more major, long-term, multi-year project is to write a new novel about the building of the Alaska highway in Northern Canada during World War II. It was a highway that was over two-thousand kilometers long, built in very difficult conditions –minus 50 degrees Celsius in the winter, burning heat and mosquitoes in the summer– and many thousands of African American soldiers built this highway during the war in Northern Canada, so it sort of fits into my interest, which is the movement of African peoples across the border between Canada and the United States. It's about an aspect of Black Canadian history that's fairly unknown, maybe almost no Canadians know the story that thousands of black people were building this highway in Canada in the II World War, racially segregated as they were. It's a very interesting story that enriches the breadth of how we can understand Black history in North America. So that's the big project, to write about the African Americans from the Deep South who were building the highway in Northern Canada for about a year, in 1942-1943.

AF: So, you're still bringing to our attention events that have been obscured by history.

LH: Yes, I like to do that. I like to go to a place that we don't know about –most of us do not know about– I didn't know about until the last five of ten years, and to dramatize these sort of forgotten elements of Black history.

AF: It's such a pleasure talking to you. Now, we need to move on, as it's time for your lecture. Hopefully, we'll continue this conversation with the audience after it. Thank you very much, Larry.

LH: Thank you.

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