

Possibilities of “Peace”: Lévinas’s Ethics, Memory, and Black History in Lawrence
Hill’s *The Book of Negroes*

by

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B.A., Queen’s University, 2009

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis interrogates how Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* represents histories of violence ethically by utilizing Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy of ethics as a methodology for interpretation. Traditional slave narratives like Olaudah Equiano's autobiography and postmodern neo-slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* animate the violence endemic to slavery and colonialism in an effort to emphasize struggles in conscience, the incomprehensible atrocities, and strategies of rebellion. However, this project illustrates how *The Book of Negroes* supplements these literary goals with Hill's own imagination of how slaves contested the inhumanities thrust upon them. Through his aesthetic choices as a realist, Hill foregrounds the possibilities of pacifism, singular identities, and altruistic agency through his protagonist Aminata Diallo. These three narrative elements constitute Lévinas's ethical peace, which means displaying a profound sensitivity towards the historical Other whom imperial discourses and traditional representations of catastrophes in Black history might obscure.

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Dedication

To my youngest brother and sister, Mark and Esther, whose curiosity about Black history is yet unsatisfied.

Introduction: Literary Ethics

A novel internationally acclaimed for its detailed rendition of the past, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007) familiarizes its readers with the less explored facts, sites, and identities of the past as the novelist introduces his distinct concept of memory which he uses to interpret Black history.¹ The narrative takes the form of a fictional autobiography that reconstructs eighteenth-century history through the memories of a fictional former slave named Aminata Diallo. She recounts her childhood in Africa; enslavement and later freedom in America; impoverishment in Eastern Canada; residency in the settler-colony Freetown in Sierra Leone; and participation with the abolitionists in London, England. The author researched extensively to write his nuanced work of fiction, declaring that "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" ("Projecting History Honestly" 316). Hill reshapes history into fiction through a personal standard of responsibility to depict his subjects honestly. The notion of responsibility to others evokes the question of ethics that writers recapitulating violent histories encounter.

Certainly, there are numerous strands of ethics, particularly normative ones about determining proper conduct in pragmatic situations (Perpich 4-5). While virtuous actions are relevant, they are the outcome of an individual's ethical engagement. Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy deliberates on the elusive origins or foundation of ethics that

¹ *The Book of Negroes* is also known as *Someone Knows My Name* in the United States because the publishers were concerned the term Negro, with its historically negative connotations, would be offensive to the American public (Hill, "Projecting History Honestly" 319). Also, I employ the term Black history to refer to the collective histories of slavery, colonialism in Africa, and other coexisting forms of racist exploitation (I allude to shared struggles rather than a fixed idea of black identity).

culminates in a profound responsibility to other human beings. Responsibility, according to Lévinas, is imposed on one before the self can even make a conscious decision about it, preceding any reflection on existence (that is, ontology) (“Diachrony and Representation” 111). Since one is always and already implicated in the world with other human beings, responsibility extends infinitely into the past towards the victim or, in a word, the Other. Though Lévinas is mainly concerned with responding to those living in the present, his ethics also gestures to historical casualties. Certainly, bygone tragedies cannot be undone or the dead revived, but responsibility enters into the challenge of preserving the complexities of the historical Other in representations upon which contemporary understandings are based. Furthermore, I contend that learning about the intricate mechanisms of political systems culpable in the long victimization of the underprivileged can reveal the aspects of these structures in need of reform. Lévinas’s philosophy contains both a macrocosmic and microcosmic scale of ethics because the face-to-face relationship with the Other bears universal implications, and this dual perspective is germane for delving into the individuality of historical figures while still critically evaluating the enterprise of the slave trade and the tradition of interpreting Black history itself. The irresolvable tensions and the instability inherent in Lévinas’s ethics that does not prescribe specific actions correspond to the unsettled issues and shifting views among historians, critics, and novelists about the representation of Black history.

My master’s thesis proposes a theory of literature’s ethical potential through the example of *The Book of Negroes*. Hill’s fictional remembrance is unique because he does not primarily focus on the atrocities that Aminata survives or witnesses. I do not wish to

suggest that her story lacks scenes of slaves' resistance or that the various descriptions of brutality in Hill's novel do not jar the reader, but I argue that Hill rewrites the chaotic past "peacefully," a term which I draw from Lévinas's essay "Peace and Proximity" (1984). Lévinas's idiosyncratic concept of peace does not mean an absence of conflict; rather, an ethical peace signifies the profound sensitivity to the victims whose humanity or complex identities might be obscured by the violence of historical disasters. To contextualize the essay historically, it was published near the end of the Cold War, which had the effect of propagating new states based on the oppressive politics of nationalism and socialism in Europe. Lévinas extends his critique of the late-twentieth century to a repudiation of the centuries-long system of European domination that the novel also illustrates in its depiction of slavery and exploitation governed by the British Empire. While other European empires certainly existed as well as the Arab slave trade, I specifically critique Britain's presence overseas because of its principal role in the novel. Lévinas claims the Western imperial order relies on a traditional notion of peace as the unstated ascendancy of one culture and its accompanying discourse over other cultures, regions, or philosophies. This supremacy of the West actually results, as many European cultural critics of the twentieth-century concur, in the violent events related to the eras of nationalism and imperialism ("Peace and Proximity" 163). Lévinas claims that the victims of this political order disturb the conscience of the Western subject, who feels an inescapable sense of guilt about his or her accomplished position of freedom and power because, as the philosopher and social critic Walter Benjamin affirms, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). As an antidote to the catastrophic corollaries of supposed Western progress, Lévinas

envisions an alternative politics, which contests the deployment of force that furthers the spread of European influence as he redefines peace ethically to prioritize the Other. *The Book of Negroes* embodies this reflective view as its backward gaze illuminates the figures of the past as Lévinas wishes. I utilize Lévinas's revised concept of peace to argue that *The Book of Negroes* enriches the neo-slave narrative genre by offering more than the conventional tropes and theoretical approaches to slavery, and it therefore constructs an ethical memory of the historical Other aside from the portrayal of catastrophes and violence that are prominent in the texts on Black history and beyond violently negating Western discourses that Lévinas deplors.

In my reading of the novel, Hill responds ethically to the task of rewriting slavery by re-imagining those figures who do not enter the history books and whose names and memories are most often lost. In particular, the novel expands on three areas of Black history that receive less attention in other literary texts and academic discussions. First, Hill challenges the common opinion that slavery and brutal forms of racism did not happen in Canada since most Canadians, he claims, know very little about their own Black history ("Projecting History Honestly" 317). Hill undermines the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism that emerged in the sixties and that retrospectively suggests the nation was historically accepting of diversity (Johnson iii). In addition, the author fictionalizes the Black Loyalists whose names survive in the historical document *The Book of Negroes*, a passenger list of those blacks loyal to the British crown sailing from New York to the region now named Nova Scotia. Second, Hill portrays numerous African figures who participate in the slave trade by leading the abductees to the coast, confessing that "I wanted to shock and disturb the North American reader who has no

concept of the complexity of this trafficking of human beings” (“Projecting History Honestly” 314). Hill creates memorable African characters that rival the European traders in their greed and ambition, but he offers a complicated portrayal of these slave-nappers by refusing to vilify them (or the white slave traders). Third, Hill brings to life the journey of former slaves back to Africa and life in the Freetown colony on the coast of Sierra Leone run by a British colonial company at the end of the eighteenth-century. Hill’s portrayal of these organized freed slaves, which testifies to an early form of settler-colonialism in Africa, animates the dilemma of the free residents who witness the ongoing enslavement of Africans on the western coast. *The Book of Negroes* thus foregrounds some of the lesser known figures of Black history, such as the Black Loyalist, the early African-Canadians, the African enslavers, and residents of the Freetown colony. All these individuals coalesce in the experiences of Aminata, whose subjectivity gestures to facets of other black identities. My master’s thesis concentrates on what Hill’s literary representation of Black history chooses to foreground, stemming from the author’s sense of obligation to create an alternative portrayal of eighteenth-century figures and events.

Though an individual living in the present does not have any personal memories of the distant past, writers of Black history attempt to subjectively recount what they did not actually experience. The literary and cultural critic Walter Benn Michaels, who also discusses the ethics of representation with regards to histories of violence, claims that, for anti-essentialists, memory is the personalization of historical events and figures through aesthetic experiences that engage the individuals of present generations affectively (137). In Benn Michael’s interpretation of historicists, many modern and postmodern novelists

earlier than Hill's novel re-imagine the slave experience or life after emancipation. These works of historical fiction, Nadine Fligel states, count as neo-slave narratives, which have been written since the late 1960s and are largely American (vi). Fligel argues that the genre reveals the constructedness of actual slave narratives while advancing new understandings through the mixing of multiple genres and discourses, such as the Gothic style, speculative fiction, and family memoirs (10-11). Like other neo-slave narratives, *The Book of Negroes* diverges from some of the genres and rhetorical devices in the traditional slave narrative, such as the spiritual autobiography, ethnography of the travelogue, and persuasive emotionality of the sentimental novel (Allison 29-30).

These revised narratives mostly concentrate on the horrors of slavery and its equally horrific consequences: slave uprisings, hauntings, revenge plots against white masters, suicides, and the brutality of slave whippings or sexual assaults like in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.² The recreation of such atrocities risks portraying the black figures as inseparable from the violence of slavery. However, as Walter Benn Michaels expresses about literature on slavery and the Holocaust, these texts are premised on ethical claims because they transmit the horror and trauma rather than attempting to objectively elucidate the events (145). Certainly, various models of ethical literature are essential, especially if one gives credit to Lévinas's philosophy that claims that ethics is not a fixed rule. Yet Hill's novel appears largely distinct from the list of similar neo-slave narratives that Fligel references. Stylistically speaking, *The Book of*

² Fligel names the Canadian author George Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*, a female slave's story about rape, murder, and revenge; Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* about a modern black woman who experiences the wounds of a slave; William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which concerns a famous slave revolt; Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* whose major theme is the vengeful fight against oppression; and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, which focuses on the actual group suicide of fugitive slaves who would rather die than be captured (1).

Negroes does not exhibit any significant aesthetic innovations despite its possible allusion to *Beloved*. Whereas Morrison's novel arguably assumes the postmodern guise in its overt mixture of genres and fragmentary voices that challenge interpretation, Hill's fiction seems to ground itself in historical facts, chronology, and its purportedly reliable first-person narrator through whom all events are filtered. Throughout my analysis, I will note the potential advantages and shortcomings of Hill's text, which does not include intricate psychological characterization or an elaborate form because the content of his novel is easily accessible to the reader.

To note the contributions of Hill's fiction, *The Book of Negroes* fulfills a need for an alternative ethical hermeneutics for histories of violence that foregrounds dimensions of subjective experience unconsumed by the torments of slavery and exceeds the exclusive concern with victimization by catastrophes. Hill's method in this sense remains a vital yet marginal literary practice. By not placing the brutalities as the focal point of its narrative, *The Book of Negroes* brings forth a humanizing and complicating perspective that resists the reductive typologies and discourses connected to the singular historical figures who demonstrate a refusal to capitulate to the slave masters' inflicted or the slaves' reactionary violence and cruelties during the era of slavery and colonialism. Clearly, a primarily postcolonial or diasporic analysis of *The Book of Negroes* is viable as a means of analyzing the structural components of power and victimization. However, these interpretive lenses, though they might espouse their own brand of ethics, tend to privilege the tensions between race, culture, authenticity, aesthetics, and political aims. I do incorporate the theories of critical thinkers from these fields, such as Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and bell hooks, but Lévinas's ethics provides a language for

discussing alternative concerns. I primarily engage in an ethical framework for reading Hill's historical fiction to respond to the lacunae in representations of slavery and exploitation that emerge when the literature in question concentrates extensively on the violence and calamities of history rather than the many different modes of prosaic agency. Fiction can ethically foreground the possibilities of "peace" in the Lévinasian sense, meaning the actual and literary displays of profound sensitivity towards the Other that exist amidst histories of violence, and Hill's novel is an addition to the literary discussion that supplements the style of the typically graphically violent postmodern neo-slave narratives.

The little scholarship currently available on *The Book of Negroes*, belying the text's significance, compares Hill's novel with actual slave narratives and other neo-slave narratives, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While I also engage in such juxtapositions, my research project extends this discussion of genre and stature among other works of literature by emphasizing Hill's unique ethical remembrance of Black history. In each of my three chapters, I first contextualize aspects from Lévinas's argument about the ethics, focusing on what I name as the three elements that constitute ethical peace. I then proceed to demonstrate their utility for understanding the novel while also interpreting *The Book of Negroes* in an ethical light. The first chapter of my thesis, "The Memory of a Pacifist," highlights the authorial choices that Hill makes to celebrate realistic moments of pacifism in the character Aminata's disengagement from defensive or reactionary violence, the vilification of slave traders, and the centrality of the horrors in her fictional autobiography. Pacifism, which I view as the first component of Lévinas's peace, does not guarantee a resolution to ethical difficulties; it is, rather, an ideal by which to guide

the individual's fulfilment of his or her responsibility because complete avoidance of violence in actuality or representation is impossible.

In the second chapter "The Paradox of Identity," I emphasize how Aminata's cosmopolitan identity, though it signifies a universal openness to other cultures, gestures to the absolute alterity or singularity of the historical black figure. This paradox, another element of ethical peace because it ensures an open-ended appreciation of the Other, shows how Hill creates a sympathetic relation to the historical figure that does not assume complete knowledge about her unlike the violently reductive imperial or colonial discourses. Borrowing from Eduard Jordaan's reading of Lévinas's philosophy, I invoke the scholar's conceptualization of cosmopolitanism to illustrate how the characterization of Aminata embraces a fluid identity without fixing it to one type or idea of language, religion, and gender in contrast to Olaudah Equiano—a traditional slave narrative that Hill alludes to—grappling with his single chosen identity as a black British Christian.

The notion of altruism is the third element of Lévinas's peace that I introduce in the final chapter called "The Aesthetics of Altruism." I explore Aminata's position as an individual with freedom and privilege like the Western subject in Lévinas's essay due to her valuable skills and later escape. She acts on the responsibility she feels towards more disadvantaged black Others in her roles as a midwife, teacher, writer, and small acts of heroism that operate as small social justice projects. I further underline her ethical agency by contrasting her deeds to the free acts of other characters in *The Book of Negroes* and in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel about a fugitive slave who kills her baby daughter that Hill implicitly references. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these two novels invites a discussion of Hill's aesthetics as a realist that I evaluate the advantages and

disadvantages of. Many neo-slave narratives creatively envision the historical black slave's reaction to the horrors of slavery. Yet framing *The Book of Negroes* through Lévinas's notion of ethical peace elucidates how the author proposes an alternative discourse of memory for contemporary works in the neo-slave narrative genre that sustains the complexity of the historical Other in Black history, which some postmodern interpretations and discourses undergirding slavery and imperialism risk reducing.

Chapter One: The Memory of a Pacifist

This chapter examines pacifism, a term I introduce to describe an element of Lévinas's ethical peace and I further define below. Pacifism is especially evident in how Hill characterizes the protagonist of his novel. I highlight how Aminata resists resorting to reactionary or defensive violence as the novelist does not place brutalities at the forefront of her invented autobiography. Her pacifism is essential to Hill's literary practice of ethics because *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds the possible dimensions of historical figures and events, which existed despite the atrocities and torments and are not typically addressed by traditional historical accounts and discourses on slavery. Scholarly articles on *The Book of Negroes* juxtapose the novel with actual and fictionalized slave narratives to examine Aminata's black slave identity, such as Stephanie Yorke's "The Slave Narrative Tradition in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*" (2010) and Christine Duff's "Where Literature Fills the Gaps: *The Book of Negroes* as a Canadian Work of Rememory" (2011). However, employing an alternative ethical lens of the Lévinasian variety demonstrates the complexity of Hill's protagonist that is not sufficiently explicable by discourses on race and culture.

I begin by contextualizing Lévinas's "Peace and Proximity" in his oeuvre and differentiating an "ethical peace" from the Greek-based politics that he identifies and critiques as the classical basis of Western regimes. Subsequently, I demonstrate how Lévinas's repudiation of the imperial politics of assimilation and racialized discourses can be applied in a re-reading of Hill's novel. To do this, I point out the idiosyncratic characteristics of the figure of the slave and slavery itself that Aminata's pacifistic stance

implies. Her refusal to seek vengeance; the instances of so-called luck and destiny in her understanding of events that contribute to the slave's survival rather than any violent recourse; scenes that indicate growth and healing, not only a capitulation to the horrors of slavery; a remembrance of lives lost that resists the brute finality of death; and choosing not to vilify the agents of the slave trade are all themes in the novel that illustrate Hill's uniquely Lévinasian ethics of representation.

“Peace and Proximity” comes from the late period of Lévinas's thought, but this essay is less abstract than some of his earlier texts because it imparts his contemporary view of political events in the twentieth-century. In the secondary criticism of Lévinas's oeuvre, the two treatises, *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), and the progression from the former to the latter receives the most attention. “Peace and Proximity,” which takes an adamant stance against what Lévinas identifies as the dominant modes of European thought and their historical ramifications, carries over elements of both. Fundamental themes, such as peace, responsibility, and freedom from *Totality and Infinity*, a theoretical endeavour to overcome what he viewed as the totalizing force of Western philosophies that do not sufficiently recognize the Other, persist in Lévinas's essay (Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 43). Lévinas's later exposition, *Otherwise Than Being*, is an attempt to further escape ontological language (Peperzak 451). The notion of proximity that emerges in *Otherwise Than Being* indicates the connection to “Peace and Proximity.” Lévinas defines proximity as “contact with the other. To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other” (*Otherwise Than Being* 86). This concept of safeguarding the other human being from egoistic and thereby reductive thought or demeaning actions upholds

an ethical peace, which he describes in a more explicitly political agenda in “Peace and Proximity” (160). Furthermore, he invites the application of his longstanding concepts to fiction when he interprets the face of the Other through a character in Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* (1959), a novel that critiques Stalinist Russia (167). For the purposes of my thesis, the underestimated essay “Peace and Proximity” serves as an exemplary text of Lévinas’s philosophical oeuvre because it encompasses major concepts from his philosophy and models their application to political realities and historical fiction, much as my analysis of *The Book of Negroes* does.

Lévinas’s essay begins by tracing the Western political order based on a reading of Greek wisdom that imagines “peace on the basis of the Truth—on the basis of a truth of a knowledge where, instead of opposing itself, the diverse agrees with itself and unites; where the stranger is assimilated” (162). This ancient philosophical discourse champions the assimilation of different peoples and beliefs into one unified order of knowledge, which claims the status of a singular truth in order, Lévinas asserts, to support the supremacy of the ruling culture. Lévinas uses the terms “agreement” and “unity” to express how the imperial European power likewise pursues sameness or uniformity in hopes of harmony. This traditional discourse of peace actually supports a project of domination because, Lévinas asserts, imposing order results in the suppression of difference; since the resulting contradictions cannot be reconciled, conflict arises.³

³Lévinas writes that “this rational peace, a patience and length of time, is calculation, mediation, and politics. The struggle of each against all becomes commerce and exchange” (“Essence and Disinterestedness” 111). Even if a break in the war between parties materializes, the antagonism does not dissipate and a profoundly respectful relationship does not emerge; the aggression simply gets sublimated into matters of the market. Immanuel Kant also discredits this peace resulting from treaties as insufficient with his essay “Perpetual Peace” in which he proclaims that reason can lead to a long-lasting peace between states. However, complete avoidance of conflict is impossible, reason can be utilized in the logic of domination, and intergovernmental diplomacy cannot guarantee an ethical peace rooted in genuine sensitivity towards the other individual.

Lévinas argues that this “Greek” conception of peace, in which rational discourse ironically propels the erasure of other modes of thought, has long influenced the configurations of European power. Lévinas is not wholly antagonistic against any form of rationality in politics because, in the latter part of the ethical transformation of the individual and the collective, the philosopher posits that reason is a necessary tool to better the sociopolitical institutions designed to respond to the underprivileged (I discuss this premise further in my third chapter). Yet Lévinas’s pejorative view of rationality in the early stages of his ethics comes close to a generalization because the universal capacity for reason is neither inherently positive nor negative. Thus, I endeavour to frame his concept of political rationality rather as a hegemonic or totalizing discourse that impels the systems which govern through force. The consequences of this authoritative vision are the catastrophes and casualties of the twentieth-century, such as the world wars, genocides, impoverishment of the Third World, fascism, and the Cold War during which the author wrote this essay (163). Lévinas proffers an alternative vision of peace that does not impose a single kind of order upon alternative cultures and beliefs and takes into account the vulnerability of each of the oppressed.

Another philosopher of history that rallies against any objectivist accounts of the past, Walter Benjamin, also suggests a subjective methodology in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that echoes Lévinas’s ethical peace. Benjamin writes of “a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (263). As Harro Müller’s incisive analysis of Benjamin’s concepts emphasizes, Benjamin rejects a particular strand of historicism that he claims empathizes with the conquerors; accumulates data as opposed to constructing a narrative;

focuses on causality; and conceives of history as constantly unfolding progress (244-5). His idiosyncratic denunciation of this specified historicism is somewhat flawed because, arguably, any telling of the past is a narrative based upon a subjective framework (the triumph of the victors being one example) (Müller 247). Nevertheless, Benjamin's historical materialism suggests a profound break in the ongoing narratives of history in order to decelerate and foreground the liberating moments overlooked in the past. Similarly, Lévinas's ethical peace evolves in reaction to the reigning hegemonic discourses characterized by Greek thought. Both theorists repudiate any analytical perspective that neglects particular details like minor struggles or significant consequences like major casualties.

Lévinas, though, also advocates for a reformation of European politics that necessitates pacifism in the idiosyncratic sense that he suggests it, and thus, he redefines peace by explaining that:

Behind the danger that everyone runs for themselves in an insecure world, there dawns the consciousness of the immediate immorality of a culture and a history. Will we not have heard, then, in the vocation of Europe—prior to the message of truth it bears—the “You shall not kill” of the Ten Commandments and the Bible? (“Peace and Proximity” 164)

Lévinas's “peace” begins with the philosophy of pacifism, a concept I employ (somewhat idiosyncratically) to signify the opposition to the violence that the global dispersion of European power—and its teleological discourse that presumes the subjection of other cultures or classes—perpetuates. I do not mean to suggest by the term pacifism that Lévinas's ethics is the final word against aggression, because the stance of a pacifist does

not ensure an end to conflict; pacifism in this distinct sense is the constant questioning of violence as an instrument or solution. Though the philosopher invokes the sixth Commandment, he does not intend for his ethics to be dogmatic or prescriptive, like some religious values, because then it would be fruitless to debate Lévinas's philosophy (Perpich 53). The capacity to be ethical does not derive from formulating decisions or rationalizations, which are essential to politics. Through the image of the divine injunction against murder echoing in the individual's conscience, Lévinas wishes to illustrate that the possibility of ethical responsibility has been embedded in the individual before one is capable of conscious thought. Peace comes from an acknowledgement of the violent consequences of the structure and thought underlying European supremacy, as Lévinas experienced it in the aftermath of WWII, rejecting these political foundations in a pacifistic stance in order to remember—that is, to include in rational discourse—the historical Other who so often is the objectified victim rather than the agent of history. In the context of Hill's literary practice, I suggest that remembering means to subjectively restage experiences of the past through the viewpoints and concerns of the present.

The setting of *The Book of Negroes* occurs during the tragic millennia of European dominance that Lévinas describes in his essay, but Hill reaches back to the eighteenth-century in particular to critique an earlier period in British imperialism. Moreover, *The Book of Negroes* breaches European borders by concentrating on catastrophes transpiring on other continents. The novel overcomes Lévinas's Eurocentrism because Hill imagines an ethical assessment of Europe originating from an outsider perspective that is also diasporic; he acknowledges victims everywhere, not only those lost in Europe. Hill constructs his examination of the politics of slavery and

colonialism through the gaze of the travelling Aminata. She personifies pacifism because she does not entirely submit or retaliate, despite the brutalities that she experiences and rebellions that transpire in her presence. Aminata repudiates the British culture that advocates slavery in its imperialistic attempt to absorb others into the order of the Empire: “Englishmen do love to bury one thing so completely in another that the two can only be separated by force: peanuts in candy, indigo in glass, Africans in irons” (103). The British Empire exemplifies the Greek order of peace as the deliberate integration of different items acquired overseas contributes to Britain’s economic wealth and its culture of privilege. However, the narrator’s ironic sequence of items shows how the British objectify human beings to justify their enslavement through their discourse of naturalized order; violent subjugation underlies the semblance of a harmonious union. Looking at *The Book of Negroes* as a critique of slavery and its discursive justifications, the novel reflects Lévinas’s philosophical ruminations by considering the human lives entangled within the mechanisms of Europe’s extensive political grasp.

The abolitionist characters question the commodification of Africans alongside Aminata, but some also partially represent the imperial British culture and discourses despite their opposition to slavery. The narrator observes their hypocrisy when she hears English abolitionists singing a national song in the Anglican Church she visits. She first hears the lyrics from the medicine man on the slave ship: “Sir Stanley Hastings was singing passionately...*Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves Britons never never shall be slaves*” (237). Aminata remarks on the myopia of the leading abolitionist Stanley Hastings, a real historical figure, and others who do not see that their fervent patriotism feeds the imperialism that supports the slave trade. These white activists

continue to acquiesce to the dominant interests of British society by attempting to influence Aminata's imagined life story: "The abolitionists may well call me their equal, but their lips do not yet say my name and their ears do not yet hear my story. Not the way I want to tell it" (101). The abolitionists hold a different view of Aminata's experiences and perhaps aim to publish an alternative version. However, Aminata resists the control that they wish to exercise over her narrative as she preserves her memories for her own purposes:

If I live long enough to finish this story, it will outlive me. Long after I have returned to the spirits of my ancestors, perhaps it will wait in the London Library. Sometimes I imagine the first reader to come upon my story. Could it be a girl? Perhaps a woman. A man. An Englishman. An African. One of these people will find my story and pass it along. And then, I believe, I will have lived for a reason. (103)

The autobiographer hopes that her book will receive a wide-ranging audience. As Stephanie Yorke states, Hill "writes both within and against the abolitionist tradition, and presents a genuine fiction rather than a politically expedient one," meaning for direct use in the campaign of abolitionism (129). Dwight McBride, who provides a detailed exposition on abolitionist discourse, dissects the rhetorical strategies at play, such as the notion that only those who suffered slavery firsthand have "access to the real" (90). Additionally, only "drastic measures and graphic descriptions of the horrors" will suffice to convince English society "to act against practices they did not [personally] know" (McBride 89). Certainly, the abolitionist movement was a genuinely remarkable human rights and social justice movement. Yet the slave narrators who wrote autobiographies on

behalf of the cause had to negotiate what they wanted to communicate with the trends in public opinion. For instance, actual slave narratives incorporated genres popular in eighteenth-century Europe to render the autobiographies more appealing and persuasive to white audiences through their cultural traditions (Allison 28-31). Aminata is less concerned with compelling her readers towards the abolitionist goals of the genre's original conception. She hopes to establish readership beyond the largely white multitude to which abolitionism was directed in England to include black readers as well as both genders. Her book disrupts the dominant cultural discourses that the British texts in the London Library represent, just as the presence of an African woman in the national library in the eighteenth-century upsets the convention of only privileged whites in the exclusive space.

Aminata does in fact enter a library in London: "One persistent chatterer pleads with me to say how I spend my time. I volunteer that I have someone who takes me to the library...I can imagine heads turning, he says. Don't laugh, John Clarkson says a little too sharply. I bet she has read more books than you" (102). The nameless commentator insinuates that Aminata lacks intelligence, but Aminata's literacy and Clarkson's defence both invalidate the discursive racism that characterizes Africans as ignorant. To better tie in Lévinas's ethical critique with studies on Black history, I link Lévinas's essay with another theorist who scrutinizes the principles motivating the violence of the European empires: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). This pivotal text on diaspora proffers an intellectual model that departs from racial essentialisms and cultural nationalism to embrace the plurality of influences from diverse origins that the transplantation of Africans brought about. Similar to Lévinas's disavowal of European discourses of

domination, Gilroy interrogates the intellectual movements that supported slavery when he considers “the way that modernity operates, about the scope and status of rational human conduct, about the claims of science, and perhaps most importantly about the ideologies of humanism with which these brutal histories can be shown to have been complicit” (217). Gilroy highlights the limited idealism of humanism that withheld basic human rights and freedoms from Africans because of their supposed animality and irrationality and the scientific racism that reduced black bodies to objects of study. In an effort to rethink the epistemological terrain that grounded histories of violence, *The Black Atlantic* proposes the diasporic condition, which humanizes the historical Other as an individual always in the process of becoming: “If [diasporic multiplicity] can be called a tradition at all, it is a tradition in ceaseless motion—a changing same that strives continually towards a state of self-realisation that continually retreats beyond its grasp” (122). The diasporic subjectivity can never be solidified, and consequently any attempt to apprehend the multifaceted individual through racialized thinking or binary oppositions denies the fluidity of identity. Revealing the author’s own anti-imperialist politics, *The Book of Negroes* dismantles the discursive stereotypes informed by some philosophies of modernity and the Enlightenment while challenging the limited scope of abolitionist slave narratives.

Displaying Aminata’s non-antagonistic character, the narrator implies that Clarkson reacts with hostility to the commentator because Aminata describes his tone as “too sharp.” She suggests that Clarkson should learn to keep his temper in the face of such prejudice because she does not react strongly to the discrimination herself and surrender to hate despite these types of confrontations in London. Hill constructs his

heroine as a pacifist who actively refrains from both violence and disputes as the author himself declares that “this novel isn’t really just a novel about slavery...[but] the triumph of the human spirit in conditions of adversity” (“Projecting History Honestly” 317).

Certainly, Aminata’s experiences are not necessarily universal since not all slaves were emancipated. However, I suggest that Hill wishes to spotlight those historical figures whose spirits mostly survived despite the climate of atrocities. Other writers on histories of violence also contemplate what such literature should focus on or what underlying principle should be fundamental in representing scenes of slavery or the Holocaust.

Articulating a different perspective on literary ethics than Hill, Walter Benn Michaels discusses another style of remembrance that privileges an experiential understanding of the past over factual knowledge that particular strands of traditional historiography concentrate on: “the representations and explanations of [some conventional] historians...are ‘a way of escaping,’ ‘a way not to face the horror’: what the Holocaust requires is a way of transmitting not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (141). Benn Michaels theorizes about a graphic account of history that reanimates the inhumanities of the past for the reader, and I will return to this critic’s position again. However, a kind of Lévinasian ethics proposes another mode of representation that narrows in on the characteristics and capacities of the black slave more than the horrors of slavery.

In Hill’s portrayal, Aminata eventually becomes emancipated, but liberation also resides in her refusal to capitulate to the dehumanizing acts or vengeful desires around her. Initially, as an impulsive young child, Aminata contemplates violence as a legitimate option. After arriving in America, she sees a black barber shaving another with a knife,

and “I remember thinking, *That man has a knife and he’s not even using it. If he’s got a knife and still can’t run, what will become of me?*” (124). At first, Aminata thinks that she must fight for liberty, but she quickly realizes that gaining one’s freedom is not as simple as acquiring a weapon. As she grows, Aminata demonstrates a pacifistic attitude akin to Lévinas’s philosophy. Chekura, her husband who was enslaved along with her, voices his desire to kill Aminata’s owner, Appleby, who sold their son, but she replies: “‘I want you to stay alive, and I want you to stay good.’ ‘You want me to stay good?’ ‘There’s been enough killing in our lives. And you’re no killer anyway’” (225). Aminata wants to establish an oasis in the times of slavery in which to sustain their love and later a family. Though her plans do not entirely come to fruition as her husband dies and both her children are taken, she does maintain this conviction by never seeking vengeance for herself. In contrast, Paul Gilroy discusses the lack of pacifism in Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative. Gilroy states that Douglass “underscored the complicity of civilisation and brutality while emphasising that the order of authority on which the slave plantation relied cannot be undone without recourse to the counter-violence of the oppressed” (63). Claiming that Douglass turns from the principle of non-violence found in the ex-slave’s earlier writings, Gilroy writes about Douglass’s belief that slaves could only liberate themselves through violence. One cannot recapitulate Black history without violence of any kind, and I do not discount the argument for reactionary violence as invalid. However, Aminata, who is at the forefront of the novel, does not engage in such defiance, and her reaction to experienced and witnessed brutality is not retaliatory or defensive in a physical manner. Imagining a slave opposed to any kind of conflict, Hill enriches the discourse on Black history by foregrounding those historical black figures who resisted

the very violence that the imperial discourses and culture thrived on.

Aminata's avoidance of conflicts is certainly part of the reason that she survives, but her physical and mental well-being are also thanks to luck and her personal claim to destiny. Hill's inclusion of these two factors perhaps displaces a linear comprehension of causality because the links between reasons and consequences are not entirely transparent in historiographical, albeit fictional, writing. Aminata contemplates her long life on the first page of her fictional memoirs, wondering at the "reason why I have lived in all these lands [and] survived all those water crossings" (1). She insists on a definitive explanation for her survival by which to make sense of her life. However, there can be no single answer to Aminata's query. One reason Aminata prevails lies in fortune. Recalling her time on the appalling slave ships, Aminata admits that "[a] series of coincidences saved my life during the ocean crossing. It helped to be among the last persons from my homeland to be loaded onto that vessel. It also helped to be a child...Men and women the age of my parents lost their minds on that journey" (56). The health of those Africans who arrived earlier on the ship deteriorated as they waited for the enslavers to fill the cargo hold. Additionally, being a child with a growing mind, Aminata was more easily able to accept the magnitude of the horrors about her as opposed to the adults, who were accustomed to normality of quotidian affairs. Aminata recognizes her advantages in the factors that she could not control, acknowledging that others endured the worst of fates instead of her. She is also lucky to meet the maternal Georgia on the plantation (in the state of Georgia) because the older woman's medicinal knowledge of herbs and organic ingredients saves Aminata from smallpox (145-147). In fact, Aminata's life is perhaps too serendipitous. In his authorial comments, Hill insists that he created "plausible" events

that were likely to have happened during the novel's setting ("Projecting History Honestly" 316). However, the fact that Aminata is the sole bearer of much fortune and present during many of the major events in the eighteenth-century intimates that the lead character is at times more of a convenient historical lens to educate Hill's audience than a believable historical slave (which I discuss further in my third chapter). Yet my reading submits that the overly dramatized life of the protagonist illuminates the realistic or probable reasons that a number of black slaves survived. As a pacifist, Aminata commemorates those few advantageous circumstances that rescued some from agonies during the times of slavery.

The Book of Negroes also suggests that retaining strong personal beliefs contributed to the mental fortitude that helped some black slaves survive, like Aminata's claim to destiny. In an instance of metafiction, the narrator contends that she is destined to fulfil her childhood dream of becoming a *djeli*, a villager storyteller whose tales promote growth and healing:

Early in life, a child born into the *djeli* family would be taught the story of the crocodile who carried off five children...I sought comfort by imagining that I had been made a *djeli*, and was required to see and remember everything...Papa was not supposed to show his daughter how to read and write a few lines in Arabic. Why did he break the rules? Perhaps he knew that something was coming, and wanted me to be ready. (55-6)

To support her vision of destiny, Aminata suggests that her father is prophetic because he imparts the gift of literacy for her future use as the "guardian of history and memory of a people" (Duff 248). Aminata describes a society based on collective memory that

sustains the cohesion of a village by constantly revitalizing the past. She proves that knowledge of her African culture did not diminish despite the trauma of the Middle Passage and the dominating Western influences she lives under in the Americas.⁴

Considered from a different perspective, however, the author may be said to construct what one may call, after Hill, a “djelic” mode of memory that incorporates orality into literature. Applying a postcolonial lens to Hill’s novel, I gesture to Homi Bhabha’s “Signs Taken for Wonders” in *The Location of Culture*, a seminal work in which Bhabha upholds hybridity as a model of postcolonial identity and necessary for comprehending historical and contemporary intercultural relations. This colonial mimicry (the parodying of the colonizer by the colonized) results in hybridity, and this mimicry is “at once a mode of appropriation and resistance...the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery” (Bhabha 120). Bhabha articulates how the products of Europe enforce the colonizer’s dominant position. The colonized may wish to gain privilege by gaining possession of Western objects, but he or she simultaneously undermines them through the questions that the colonizer’s presence and its symbols, such as English texts, provoke from the subjugated.⁵ Exemplifying hybridity in his fiction, Hill both adheres to and distorts the original slave narratives already stamped with European authority because his narrative partly challenges the Western genres that the traditional autobiographies were based on by fictionalizing the slave’s account. For instance, the genre of the travel narrative consists of decorative descriptions of foreign races in digressions from the plot

⁴ “Earlier scholars of the slave trade argued that the Middle Passage itself was so brutal, and life in slavery so demeaning, that the African people abandoned their traditions when they arrived in the New World. But recent studies suggest that many African traditions survived in African-American society” (Allison 20).

⁵ I do not intend to suggest that the product of written literature, as opposed to oral storytelling, is inherently colonial because the printed text may be appropriated for alternative ends and hybrid combinations of both narrative forms can be found prior to and outside the era of colonialism notwithstanding Bhabha’s contextual usage of the term.

development. However, Aminata's fictional autobiography does not depart from the unfolding story to spend pages exclusively on extended ethnographic passages that objectify its target (unlike Olaudah Equiano's long illustrations of Igbo peoples and Mosquito Indians in chapters one and eleven respectively of his narrative). Instead, *The Book of Negroes* partly integrates the explanations of traditional African hierarchical structures and cultural customs into Aminata's journey. The novel thereby refutes the discursive violence of colonial discourses that assert essentialisms about other races and beliefs, which Lévinas also discounts as I discuss below ("Peace and Proximity" 163).

In "Peace and Proximity," Lévinas references European colonialism overseas in the twentieth-century as an example of Western thought and supremacy. The Greek order of peace exalts the false dichotomy between civilization and barbarity that justifies the degradation of the colonized. Yet Lévinas wishes to elevate the principle of responsibility to the Other as first philosophy: this ethical "exaltation...is perhaps explained by a remorse nourished by the memory of colonial wars and of a long oppression of those who were once called savages, of a long indifference to the sorrows of an entire world" (163). Lévinas's use of the terms "sorrow" and "remorse" suggests regret and mourning for the long subjugation of the colonized overseas; his writing promotes a pacifism that seeks to end the violence of both the colonizer and his discourse. Walter Benjamin also bemoans the onslaught of progress in the borrowed image of an angel of history, whose "face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage...The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (257). The disastrous events of the past collide together and the objectivist branch of historicism that Benjamin impugns is insufficient to

discriminate between them or determine the extent of their ramifications. Benjamin advocates historical materialism as an alternative. Yet, since Benjamin does not individualize all those whom he refers to as the “oppressed,” his methodology, at least in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” does not seem to include a microcosmic view of the victim.

Lévinas’s analysis, though, recognizes each vulnerable life as utterly unique, and thus his ethics breaks down the indifference towards others that fosters brutality. He suggests emotional memory as an antidote, meaning the casualties of history should not be neglected by scrutinizing them with insensitivity to the particularities of their plight. By casting off the objectifying—and consequently reductive—gaze of the Western colonizer, Lévinas’s subjective remembrance sees the Face of the Other, who is both a vulnerable human being and transcendent (not in an otherworldly sense) in the Other’s ability to command the self to infinite responsibility (Perpich 68). To reiterate differently, the disadvantage of the Other compels a generous response from the one in a favourable position. Lévinas models the transition to an ethical peace by illustrating a growth in conscience that advocates pacifism.

Through the project of the djeli, Hill embodies the retrospection that infuses history with emotionality in order to humanize the figures of Aminata’s past. In the aforementioned passage from “Peace and Proximity,” history and memory operate together or, more specifically, memory is the means through which to animate history in all its nuances and subjectivity. In training her mind in the art of remembrance, Aminata becomes what Pierre Nora calls a “memory-individual,” who lives in the modern era when fewer cultures of collective memory persist and forgetting ensues: “[W]hen

memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals” (16). A memory-individual is any member of society, not necessarily a historian, who wishes to preserve the legacies of a group. Aminata sees it as her duty to remember all the lives and trials of Africans to ensure they are not forgotten. The narrator attempts to repair the gaps that the disintegration of collective cultures leaves by continuing the djeli tradition to pass on stories about her childhood village of Bayo and the diasporic community of slaves. The djeli mourns the lives lost through tales like the one of children eaten by the crocodile responsible for the families’ sorrows, but the story also promotes a growth in consciousness because it serves as a warning about dangers in the world. Lastly, the repetition of the incident suggests that storytelling is a form of healing because Aminata’s recall of the violent crocodile does not involve a graphic retelling of the violence (if the phrase “the crocodile carried off” can be seen as a euphemism for a gruesome description of the killings). The notions of growth and healing, in addition to the miseries of the historical victims that Lévinas acknowledges, allow for a constructive goal in remembrance that does not solely concentrate on mourning and remorse over the calamities.

Aminata proves herself to be a memory-individual when she returns to Africa because she appoints herself to the duty of recollecting the names of other black slaves. She shares stories of her journeys, proudly giving the names of those she encountered (446-7). *The Book of Negroes* succeeds here as a work of fiction in its capacity to maintain a simultaneous universal and particular view of the historical Other. Traditional

slave narratives, as Stephanie Yorke reminds us, largely concern themselves with the progress of the title figure: “Equiano often identifies blacks as a statistical mass of sufferers... Aminata speaks in terms of individuals and uses those individuals’ names. She is like [Frederick] Douglass in this regard...calling black men ‘Henry’ and ‘John’ when unable to use their real names” (137). Equiano tends to generalize about the other individuals mentioned in his autobiography or not offer background details about them as Yorke states. However, *The Book of Negroes* does not concern itself with the fate of one individual alone, enriching its portrayal of Black history by including many subplots of secondary characters (and more than just generic names like Douglass). These other individuals also act as witnesses to Aminata’s life as she does for theirs, and therefore the social networks in which she functions legitimize the djeli’s memory (Yorke 140).

Secondary characters even insist on the inclusion of their names and biographical facts in her collective remembrance. Aminata recalls the period of physical exercise on the slave ship when the slaves sang and danced: “When I sang out a name, a man or woman would clap if I got it right, and the others would call it out, once. When I got a name wrong or didn’t know it, the person would clap twice and dance a little with me and sing out his or her name and village. Everyone took to this activity” (80). Aminata and the slaves use the regulated period of physical activity to carry out an exercise in memory. In this neo-slave narrative, names do not simply identify one’s cultural origins but seem to signify the very fact of one’s existence. Diane Perpich explains that proper names can only capture a particular person in a given context and not the uniqueness of the human Other (47). However, since the reader or historian might never know more than these little biographical details about those enslaved, these particulars become hints

about the singularity of these individuals. The characters in *The Book of Negroes* actively resist the erasure of their presence and subjectivity in history by pushing Aminata as a djeli to remember their names and thereby their lives past death. Although other slaves who lead the singing insert lyrics of resistance, such as Biton who organizes the rebellion on board, Aminata sings the song to develop personalized images of the individual Africans and thus creates a moment of respite from the cruelties on the journey overseas.

As Aminata's life unfolds in numerous locations and events, her djelic memory becomes prey to forgetfulness. After recording the names of many in the historical ledger *The Book of Negroes*, which lists the Black Loyalists en route to what is now known as Nova Scotia from New York, the names and faces of the passengers begin to fade from her mind. In Canada, she meets a young man named Jason: "'Heavens,' I said. 'Did I write you up too? I'm sorry, Jason—I worked on so many ships and wrote down so many names that I've just forgotten some of them'" (344). The fallibility of human memory becomes apparent, but her fictional autobiography, which I suggested earlier is a hybrid, survives as the written embodiment of her collective memory as the book preserves what her mind cannot. In regards to the novelist's agenda, the theme of forgetting actually reinforces the concept of memory because Hill's text looks back upon history to remember what time has neglected, what one has repressed, or what one has never personally experienced (like Lévinas's portrayal of the colonized). Walter Benn Michaels explicates the third type of forgetting when he speaks about *Beloved*, claiming "it redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience" (137). In agreement with Benn Michaels, I contend that Aminata further enacts this redefinition of forgetting when she

retells episodes from Chekura's separate life as though they were her own (142). Though he later dies on a different ship sailing to present-day Nova Scotia, the narrator continues to mention Chekura's name after learning of his demise. The remembrance of names assists in the act of mourning or expressing remorse about the loss of a singular individual. Recalling names also promotes growth and healing in the retrospective act of writing that aids in recapturing what one should not forget.

When Aminata revisits her memories of death, she continues to refrain from violence by not creating graphic depictions of fatalities in *The Book of Negroes*. Aminata thinks back upon the murder of her father by the slave-nappers who seized her: "Fire exploded from the stick and blew Papa onto his back. He turned up his head to look for me, but then his eyes went blank. The life gushed up out of Papa's chest, flooded his ribs and ran into the waiting earth, which soaked up everything that came out of him" (27). Of course Aminata reels from the shock of witnessing her father die, but she does not rehash the incident in alarming detail. Instead, she personifies the earth as waiting, implying the inevitability of death as though devising a topographical memorial of the many lives lost during this era of history. Though she does not meditate on her grief at length in her narrative, both her parents continue on as characters in novel. Aminata comes to believe that their spirits nourish her with wisdom and encouragement: "*Take the food. This I heard my mother saying to me, from the spirit lands. Take the food, child. These women won't hurt you*" (40). Aminata's sense of obligation to heed this imagined piece of parental advice partly explains her relatively calm reactions to the surrounding chaos as she strives simply to survive.

By including phantom voices, Hill is possibly subscribing to the common trope of

haunting that appears in much of African-American literature to gesture to the spectre of slavery still looming in the contemporary consciousness. One iconic example is the ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that causes grief for the other characters, but the spirits surrounding Aminata alleviate her suffering by prolonging the intimacy of her relationship with her parents. The mention of spirit worlds also implies a conception of the past and its figures as ever present, as though Hill might be alluding to a West African spiritualism or cosmology that envisions the realm of the ancestors coexisting with the domain of the living. Whatever his motivations, Hill awakens the reader to the historical Other by enlivening the dead through the literary vehicle of spirits, using imaginary voices to counter the brute finality of her parents' death.

In accordance with the lack of vengeful feelings and violence, the narrator also does not actively vilify the white characters, and Aminata even displays sympathy towards the British and American men in their deaths. Certainly, *The Book of Negroes* lays some blame on the Europeans and Africans complicit in the slave trade, but Hill does not offer a one-dimensional image of them as inhumane villains. In fact, Aminata's invented memoirs include personalized and even sympathetic portrayals of the British sailors manning the slave ship. Aminata remembers that "we were too weak. Our ribs were showing, our anuses draining. The toubabu sailors looked just as ill. I saw many dead seamen thrown overboard without ceremony" (93). Though the toubabu—meaning white men—obviously hold a position of greater freedom and privilege than the black slaves, the fact that the British sailors were conscripted into service and were just as susceptible to death as the black prisoners on the slave ships means their lives were vulnerable as well. The narrator remarks that the bodies drown without ceremony, and

this lack of burial suggests that these unnamed lives have become spirits too that deserve the dignity of remembrance. On the slave ship, Aminata has sustained encounters with one British man aboard: the medicine man responsible for the health of the slaves. Aminata is forced to share the same bed with him while he sexually exploits older female slaves. A woman from Aminata's village, Fanta, asks: "The medicine man. Do you call him by a name?" "He has a name. Sounds like "Tom." "Do you call him that?" "No. I never call him anything. I just speak to him. No name." "Good" (84). Aminata, though, chooses to include the name in her fictional autobiography; she separates him from the generalized mass of the white population on board to address his singular individuality, preserving the very fact of Tom's existence.

She effectively humanizes the sailor by evoking sympathy in her genuine portrait of his loneliness and aversion to the horrors, which are so complete that he resorts to speaking and singing to a pet parrot whose life he obsessively cares for (72-3). The medicine man later dies in the rebellion on board, perhaps a sentence of poetic justice for his crimes (92). Although Hill may pass a final judgement on this character, *The Book of Negroes* extends the signifier of the Other to the guilty yet suffering subject, a direction towards which Lévinas only vaguely gestures: "In an interview where he is asked whether an SS officer has a Face [of the Other], Lévinas replied, 'a very troubling question that calls, to my mind, for an affirmative answer. An affirmative answer that is painful every time!'" (Altez 56). Lévinas reluctantly admits that a Nazi officer embodies a potential Other because even the life of a horribly culpable individual is vulnerable to misfortune. To reiterate in the context of "Peace and Proximity," the privileged European subject can count as an historical victim alongside the tormented slave.

For instance, in New York, Aminata bears witness to the battles and casualties of the American Revolutionary War. She comments on how “The cries of white men dying sounded so much like those of captives on the slave ship that I avoided walking anywhere near the chapel” (279). Aminata’s sympathy might strike readers as overly gracious, but I do not intend to suggest that she forgives the guilty parties involved in the slave trade (especially because Lévinas’s ethics is not a prescriptive doctrine that dictates such moral behaviour). Aminata is simply able to recognize that culpability does not solely define the agents and beneficiaries of slavery because there exist multiple dimensions to each subject. In constructing his protagonist Aminata in this way, Hill presents *The Book of Negroes* as a pacifistic narrative in the Lévinasian sense insofar as Hill does not demonize the authorities complicit in the dehumanizing enterprise. Hill’s narrative reaches beyond the violent politics of imperialism to establish a profoundly sensitive relation to all the historical Others, including white victims, who suffered during the catastrophes of the eighteenth-century.

In one of her restless sleeps on the journey from her village, Aminata dreams that she leaves behind the territory of the white slave traders and returns to Bayo, following a magical rabbit that leads her home. The white Europeans or toubabu morph into the African men of her homeland:

the toubabu transformed into hunters from my village. We heard drumbeats from the forest, shouts from the village women washing clothes by a stream. The rabbit turned into my mother, balancing a slain rabbit on a platter on her head. We had just caught a baby and we were returning home. (117)

This dream encapsulates many of the themes in the novel. Primarily, it represents Aminata's wish to return to safe and secure times, but it also reveals her desire to escape what we may call, after Lévinas, the imperial order that violently assimilates the lives of subjected peoples into the fold of the British Empire. Aminata's writing resists the abolitionists' attempts to revise her invented autobiography according to their political objectives and rejects the dominant Western discourse that popularizes the racist stereotypes that "Peace and Proximity" indicts.

She interrupts the negating force of European thought by offering a humanizing view of the cultural habits and roles that constitute the village of Bayo. The magical rabbit who leads her back home potentially symbolizes the inexplicable combination of coincidence, luck, and sense of destiny that assists her physical and mental survival. In addition, her dream is also a remembrance of those villagers now gone, suggesting that this imagined retrospective view is one of mourning, evoking Lévinas's remorseful acknowledgement of the colonized's sorrow. Aminata's fictional autobiography, though, does not only express grief for the lives lost. Expanding on the discussion of Aminata's authorship in the analyses of Christine Duff and Stephanie Yorke, I indicate how the narrative depicts growth and healing through the collective memory of the djeli or village storyteller. The djeli's oral and written remembrance approaches the very existence of these individuals by recalling the names of the suffering black victims, differentiating each singular Other. Aminata commemorates the deaths of her loved ones by reanimating qualities of her parents and others, in contrast to Walter Benn Michaels's ethics of representation that attempts to recapture the horrific violence of the varied atrocities and the consequent fatalities.

Returning to the dream, the toubabu's transformation into the village hunters, who were possibly slave-nappers as well, suggests a growing acceptance of the reality of the inhumanities and deaths all about her. However, Aminata's narrative, though, does not perpetuate this violence by placing it at the forefront and, as a pacifist, she does not wish vengeance upon nor vilify the British sailors and the American soldiers involved in slavery. In this respect, *The Book of Negroes* expands on Lévinas's suggestion that a guilty subject can also figure as an Other, one to whom Hill's novel fulfills an ethical responsibility by sympathetically remembering such characters. Expanding on the interpretation of the narrating protagonist in secondary criticism on Hill's novel, I illustrate how Aminata acts as a pacifist in the Lévinasian sense, especially in her moments of reflection and metafiction. This chapter demonstrates that the violence of slavery and the reductive discourses of imperialism that reinforce the exploitative system do not overwhelm Hill's nuanced portrayal of the historical Other in relationship to his or her communities and the numerous scenarios possible within the context of slavery in *The Book of Negroes*.

Chapter Two: The Paradox of Identity

In the first chapter, I examined Aminata as an autobiographer because her self-representation as a pacifist provides fruitful insight into the ethics of Hill's neo-slave narrative. However, understanding Aminata as an historical Other illuminates another way in which *The Book of Negroes* accords with Lévinas's image of peace. This chapter will utilize the paradox of the Other that is integral to Lévinas's ethics to explore how Hill's characterization endeavours to distance the historical Other from any totalizing definitions of identity. The novelist resists the violence particular to the racialized discourses of imperialism and similarly reductive interpretations of slavery. After articulating Lévinas's view of the suffering human being, I emphasize how Aminata's criticisms destabilize such discursive stereotypes about the Other. Then, while engaging in a comparison of Olaudah Equiano's narrative and *The Book of Negroes* in the context of identity, I demonstrate how Hill represents Aminata as cosmopolitan, meaning universal yet unique—in terms of language, religion, and gender—as she eludes any strict categorization of identity.

Lévinas's philosophy asserts that the Other is absolutely different from the self or altogether singular (this is the meaning of Lévinas's term absolute alterity). This is not to claim that alterity exists absolutely of its own accord; the Face of the Other only appears in the face-to-face encounter with the self because it is the social relation that produces ethics (Perpich 76). Lévinas writes about how the Western subject, who is awakening to the Other, is:

troubled at the prospect of committing violence—albeit necessary for the logical unfolding of history...[and] advancing in absolute thought and promising at the end of the journey the peace of the ‘identity of the identical and the non-identical’...one can ask oneself if peace has not to respond to a call more urgent than that of truth.

(“Peace and Proximity” 164-5)

Again the philosopher rejects the Greek order of peace, which inspires the European discourses of domination that claim to be true and absolute. In order to maintain political supremacy, Lévinas argues, Europe must perpetuate violence to assimilate and subdue other peoples and their beliefs in the name of historical progress. However, the philosopher suggests that the individual who becomes attuned to the Other feels an anxiety about murder. Looking back upon historic catastrophes, the Western subject laments the domination of the disenfranchised, as this concern for past victims is more imperative than any rational justifications of imperial power. Discourses of Western domination perceive all human beings as belonging to a single category or a set of categories by differentiating persons according to their bodies, race, ethnicity, and so on.

Yet each individual is not simply equivalent to any other member of the human species, which Lévinas further affirms: “Men [by which Lévinas refers to all of humankind] are absolutely different from one another; the concept of man is the only one that cannot be comprehended, since each man is absolutely different from the other” (“Transcendence and Height” 27). An ethical remembrance of past victims must recognize that each Other is special in his or her own right (though the figure in question might share some characteristics with a larger cultural group). The Other is always a

priority over oneself because “the epiphany of the Absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution. He challenges me from his humility and from his height” (“Transcendence and Height” 17). The Other, whose metonymic face stands for both privation and the prohibition against killing, doubly petitions the individual’s responsibility, but one cannot completely comprehend the Other (Cohen 149). Human adversity is ubiquitous, but at the same time each vulnerable individual is unique and unlike any other, partly because his or her set of experiences is distinct. The act of representation always risks capturing its target in a static light, diminishing the figure of absolute singularity. Nonetheless, the individual must try to sensitively portray others in their vulnerability because the widespread miseries of fellow human beings deserve attention. The negotiation of this paradox between singularity and universalism, which ethical peace demands, is essential in Lévinas’s illustrations of the Other in a number of his philosophical texts.

The protagonist of *The Book of Negroes* explicitly rejects manifestations of eighteenth-century imperial discourse that calls for the subjugation and assimilation of different peoples and their cultures. Stemming from her desire to return home, Aminata asks her second owner Solomon Lindo to show her a map of Africa: “I saw a lion and an elephant sketched in the middle...Now that I could read so well, I had been excited by the prospect of finding my own village on a map. But there were no villages—not mine or anyone else’s...This ‘Mapp of Africa’ was not my homeland. It was a white man’s fantasy” (211-2). The contemporary cartography testifies to the limited knowledge that Europeans possessed about Africa. Yet this deficiency of facts becomes the basis of discursive claims about the continent and its inhabitants that then supports the superiority

of the British Empire. The drawings of wild animals on the map instead of structured villages reinforce the fallacy of Africa as a savage place, evoking its binary opposite of the civilized white man. Most importantly, the representation does not even include humans, not even attempting to acknowledge the singularity of Aminata and her village. However, returning to Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity evinces how Aminata's opinion undermines the supposed authority of the map: "If the appearance of the English book is read as a production of colonial hybridity, then it no longer commands authority. It gives rise to a series of questions of authority" (113). Colonial dominance emerges after interaction with the colonized, but the natives' questioning of the colonizer's products means this authority is ever unstable.

Aminata also interrogates the command of William King, a wealthy slave trader in Georgia, who encapsulates the demeaning capacity of the Western imperial gaze. Dispensing advice to Appleby on how to manage a plantation, King says "get to know your people. Slaves from the Gold Coast or Gambia are best...your girl here might be a Mandingo-[they] are gentle but useless when tired. And they tire too damn fast'... If he knew so much, how could he say Mandingos tired fast, when I had seen them working all day" (171-2). William King prides himself on differentiating between individual slaves on the basis of nationalities and ethnicities. Lévinas, in describing reductive Western discourses, utilizes the term "genus" that implies a biological categorization of species similar to King's classification of various Africans. Though King might be somewhat cognisant of the numerous cultural groups in Africa, his pejorative descriptions reveal the operation of racialization that continuously subjugates the slave; his assertive language presumes an understanding that loses sight of the individual black men and women.

Antithetical to the pervasive racism of certain characters, *The Book of Negroes* presents the protagonist without attempting to wholly characterize the historical black slave that she symbolizes. After arriving on a Georgian plantation, Aminata resists discursive racial generalizations when she learns the white man's name for the continent. An unnamed male Negro explains in response to Aminata's question: "'They call it Africa?' 'Yes. If you were born there, they call you an African. But here they call all of us the same things: niggers, Negroes. They especially call us slaves.' 'Slaves?'" I said... 'I belong to nobody, and I am not an African. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am from Bayo near Segu'" (121-2). Aminata counteracts the subsumption of her ethnicities into the sweeping signifier of the term Africa and suggests that her individuality lies in her birthplace. However, classifying the singular Other entirely by one category of identity is not possible. Applying Lévinas's paradox of universalism and singularity to the study of culture in the novel, I indicate how Hill demonstrates Aminata's uniqueness because she is not simply interchangeable with any other human being including those from her cultures of origin. This radical individuality transcends bodily or outward characteristics because, as Diane Perpich elucidates in the Lévinasian mode, "No social identity exhausts the whole of who one is, nor is who I am a matter of adding up or combining a set of overlapping and interwoven identities... 'I am this,' the face [of the Other] says, 'but not only this'" (193-4). Even though minorities share commonalities, identities that society attributes to an individual cannot speak to all the possibilities of that one person, and thus racial, gender, and linguistic markers do not totally delineate the Other. Hill accentuates Aminata's uniqueness by adorning her with a cosmopolitan subjectivity. Due to living under a variety of influences, Aminata becomes both every man and every

woman while simultaneously not entirely inhabiting a single identity category as she belongs nowhere. Her cultural identity embodies the universal yet elusively singular nature of otherness.

Consequently, in my interpretation of *The Book of Negroes*, I suggest that Lévinas's paradox of the Other becomes the paradox of cosmopolitanism because the latter embraces the concept of a fluid identity. To specify my use of the concept cosmopolitanism, I refer to Eduard Jordaan's Lévinasian critique of particular theories of cosmopolitanism that risk limiting the subject's responsibility to the Other. Jordaan states that "[C]osmopolitanism's global-level ambitions—global distributive justice [apportionment of wealth and resources], the democratization of international institutions, etc.—are worthy of support," including the mandate of a shared humanity (85). However, these goals might prioritize the desires, freedom, and individualism of global citizens and privileged nations, permitting ethnocentrism and neo-colonialism to arise. Jordaan aspires towards a cosmopolitanism that originates from an "open-ended responsibility for the [O]ther" that acknowledges radical difference or singularity without constricting it (ibid). Hill's view of the black figure as cosmopolitan in the Jordaanian sense establishes a remembrance of the multifaceted identity shared by many slaves as well as the distinct individuality of each character. I therefore position *The Book of Negroes* as a challenge to the violence of discursive stereotypes, assimilationist rhetoric, and reductive interpretations.

To clarify what I see as Hill's anti-reductionist project, it is worth juxtaposing *The Book of Negroes* and Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative. Though the former text is fictional and the latter autobiographical, both reinvent historical reality, particularly since

Equiano's narrative is not definitively true (as I will soon discuss). Hill suggests that Equiano's autobiography is the literary template that *The Book of Negroes* simultaneously borrows and deviates from when he deliberately alludes to this intertext. Aminata learns of Equiano's death in London: "Equiano was one man I would have liked to meet. I felt I already knew him after reading his story, and had hoped to ask how he had gone about writing the account of his life" (454). Seeking Equiano's counsel on writing her memoirs hints at the fact that their lives follow a similar trajectory because both are kidnapped at a young age and mature during their enslavement. Equiano too participates in the abolitionist movement, battling against the cruelties that he experienced (though he did not suffer slavery on a plantation). I discussed in the first chapter how Aminata tests the bounds of plausibility because of her fortuitous adventures, but her diverse travels are very reminiscent of Equiano's incredible voyages at sea. Thus, assuming that his autobiography is largely authentic, his text lends further credibility to Hill's depiction of an eighteenth-century slave. Another commonality dwells in the fact that Equiano's slave narrative was one of the first, and Yorke's comparative analysis points out that Aminata, like Equiano, also "does not have to answer the hugely circumscribed antebellum textual legacy, and can therefore be a generic pioneer rather than a conformist or a rebel. She, like her contemporary Equiano, is in a position to define genre, rather than be defined or circumscribed by it" (132). Equiano's autobiography is largely responsible for forming the slave narrative genre, and Aminata likewise generates a distinct piece of writing because she does not allow the abolitionists' expectations to determine the content and style of her life story (as discussed in the first chapter).

However, Hill's novel diverges from Equiano's text in the absence of a spiritual

autobiography genre that largely determines the development of some traditional slave narratives. Adam Potkay describes Equiano's employment of the spiritual autobiography or conversion narrative: "Equiano literally reenacts the basic narrative pattern of the books of Genesis and Exodus, as well as learning, by his conversion or Christian rebirth, to read Israelite history along with his own experience as an allegory of spiritual deliverance" (681). Through his mounting faith, Equiano perceives his life as fulfilling the events in the holy book. However, commenting on the scholarly attention that Equiano's memoirs have received, Lincoln Shlensky writes that "the conversion scene...[is] liable to be dismissed by an audience for whom the concern with literal authenticity forecloses allegorical readings and other nonliteral forms of symbolization" (127). Many academics study the historical facts available in Equiano's text, the intersections between West African and British cultures, or Equiano's assimilation into white society rather than examining the spiritual elements of the text that do not signify an immediate reality. In particular, historian Vincent Carretta has emphasized the fact that unanswered questions remain about Equiano's origins, suggesting that the slave narrator may not have been born in West Africa (Allison 24-5).

The question of authenticity seems rather pressing to those contemporary critics who search for conclusive evidence about Equiano's identity in an effort to identify the slave narrator. However, looking at the embedded religious allegory that Equiano incorporates permits one to appreciate the multi-layered storytelling and his negotiation of the relationship between Christianity and slavery. For instance, Equiano undergoes a moral dilemma about whether to forgive or wish vengeance upon the brutal white slave masters (Potkay 681). Rather than imitate the spiritual autobiography, *The Book of*

Negroes relegates religion to the background and does not provide an in-depth view of the struggles within Aminata's consciousness. I suggest that Aminata's fictionalized character serves the function of dissuading the reader from debates about the authenticity of representation. *The Book of Negroes* encourages the audience to acknowledge that the singular identity of the historical individual is ever elusive, culminating in a literary exercise of Lévinasian ethics. Whereas Equiano's slave narrative situates matters of morality in the internal monologue of the narrator, Hill's text shifts the task of ethics more so onto the reader by facilitating a sensitive interpretation of his novel that does not replicate any violently foreclosing discourses.

Commencing with the first theme of language, Aminata learns many tongues, though she slips in and out of the cultures that the languages belong to. Aminata is bilingual from childhood, speaking both Bamanankan and Fulfulde because she inherits the liminal position of her mother as a Fula outsider (11); from the beginning, Aminata demonstrates a hybridity that does not conform to a single culture. Her two languages allow her to communicate and help other captives on the march to the West African coast and aboard the slave ship. On the plantation in Georgia, Aminata acquires spoken English by imitating the speech of the American-born slave named Georgia: "I came to see that she was teaching me two languages...There was the language that Georgia spoke when alone with the Negroes on the plantation, and she called that Gullah. And there was the way she spoke to Robinson Appleby or to other white people, and she called that English" (128). Speedily picking up both official and unofficial Englishes, Aminata demonstrates her linguistic talent, which partly depends on a capacity for mimicry. The white masters impose total assimilation into the culture of plantation slavery under threat

of violence. Georgia, though, subtly teaches Aminata the subversive tongue of the southern slaves, Gullah, and this vernacular threatens the customary discourse of the Anglo-Americans. In contrast, Equiano does not retain any African languages and only converses in standard English, but his unilingualism does not indicate a lack of complexity within his cultural identity. As Eileen Elrod elaborates, Equiano's indoctrination into a British Christianity involves restless debate with himself because he both rejects and embraces Christianity due to its endorsement of the slave trade (410).

Aminata does not undergo ethical crises when she confronts new cultures. She records few conflicts about whether her principles are compatible with whatever local beliefs she encounters; Aminata simply proceeds on her journey. Mamed, a mixed-race overseer on the Georgian plantation, teaches Aminata how to read after a glimpse of her intelligence, and his harsh attitude towards her abates. Aminata expresses her passion to learn: "So much had been taken from me that was mine by rights—my mother, my father, my land, my freedom. And now I was being offered something I might never have received... 'I have wanted to read forever,' I said" (154-5). Aminata measures her losses and values the gift of literacy as a means to detract from her misery about her deprivation. She confesses a lifelong desire to read and write to which her father had acquiesced in their private lessons, implying that Bayo culture prohibits females from learning just as the Anglo-Americans culture bans slaves from reading. Thus, Aminata's desires and capacities surpass gender and racial roles of both Western and African societies. She learns to write from Solomon Lindo, her second owner, and puts this skill to use in constructing her invented autobiography (199). However, unlike other actual slave narrators like Phyllis Wheatley, Hill does not have Aminata employ a European

poetical style to prove the character's (or author's) sophisticated command of the English language. Neither Equiano nor Aminata try to convince the white audience of the black writer's civilized nature because, as Stephanie Yorke concludes, they both "choose a mode of literate orality" (133-4). However, in an effort to display his piety, Equiano does turn his narrative into a testament of his faith through constant biblical references, but his text is not without complexity in terms of spiritual identity. Aminata, though, does not adhere to one form of religious or cultural rhetoric and its accompanying set of beliefs.

Becoming a cosmopolitan situated within and beyond the African-American diaspora, Aminata continues to prove her knack for languages during her residency in the Sierra Leone colony, Freetown. In order to travel inland, she decides to learn Temne, the language of the indigenous Africans (386). She communicates with the locals amicably and thus indicates her partial inclusion into Temne society while evading the violence of assimilation. King Jimmy, the Temne King and slave trader, tries to re-enslave Aminata but does not succeed because she overhears their conspiracy due to her knowledge of the Fulfulde and Temne tongues (439). Her propensity for languages, which renders foreign worlds accessible to Aminata, also helps her survive. However, as a result of her many travels, Aminata comes to believe that she loses her cultural heritage. Living in England while writing her fictional autobiography, she asks herself: "Without my parents, my husband, my children or any people with whom I could speak the languages of my childhood, what part of me was still African?" (386). This inner thought encapsulates a moment when Aminata displays a narrow or naive perspective of her own identity because she believes that the remnants of her African heritage might dissolve from disuse. She regrets the loss of her birthplace identity, but a reading that perceives the

illusion of a fixed subjectivity acknowledges that Aminata could not classify herself through the use of one cultural signifier even if her family had remained with her on her migrations.

The notion of diaspora that characterizes Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* additionally dispels any claims to an immutable identity. Clashing with the philosophies of essentialism, the paradigm of "the black Atlantic explodes the dualistic structure which puts Africa, authenticity, purity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation, and rootlessness. There has been...a two-way traffic between African cultural forms and the political cultures of diaspora" (Gilroy 199). Gilroy wishes to discourage the theoretical approaches of white and black academics that do not acknowledge the distinct identities that emerge from contact with various diasporic locations. I incorporate Lévinas's philosophy to propel this anti-essentialism further by insisting that the individual see others as unique regardless of their race and transplantation into other cultures. Moreover, the paradox of cosmopolitanism, the tension between shared cultural differences and the unbounded identity of each individual, moves beyond place, whereas the concept of diaspora is closely associated with locations—the origin and terminus of the cultural group—and thereby potentially effaces historical figures outside the major paths of dispersion. Christine Duff remarks on such a blind spot in Gilroy's theory: "Aminata's journey can also be seen as a reworking of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, which rests on the three traditional points of the triangular trade. Not only is Aminata's trajectory more complex, but it also poses a challenge to the idea of 'America' and the elision of Canada in Gilroy's model" (Duff 252). Reaching beyond Gilroy's model of diaspora, Duff emphasizes how Hill

foregrounds liminal figures like the early African-Canadians who reside on the periphery of the global narrative of Black history. Remembering the slave as cosmopolitan saves her from reductive cultural or geographic classifications and preserves the irreducible singularity of Aminata who exists outside all the locales she temporarily lives in.

The second cultural theme, religion, not only reveals Aminata's denunciation of pious slave traders but her own ambiguous position on faith. *The Book of Negroes* creatively includes the three Abrahamic religions, and Aminata has or gains affiliations with all. With regards to the basis of Lévinas's ethics, it is relevant to note that Judeo-Christian conceptions do figure in his philosophy. However, in Lévinas's thought, God is not the most supreme Being or the First cause of everything because these views are thinkable in the human mind and thereby still ontological (Peperzak 454). Lévinas's God is truly transcendent, only leaving an inexplicable trace which is "the idea of God [that] is God in me" that possibly inspires one to responsibility ("God and Philosophy" 136). Once the self acknowledges and responds to the call of the Other, the ethical relationship or "this tie to the other...we call *religion*" (Lévinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" 7). Therefore, Lévinas does not present organized religion or theology as a necessity for cultivating sensitivity towards the Other. *The Book of Negroes* is not an ethical narrative because of its portrayal of faith but because the retrospective viewpoint of the novel encourages an indirect and thereby deeply sympathetic relation to the historical Other, whom the protagonist represents. Aminata begins as a Muslim, and she even insists to the slave-nappers that "I'm a freeborn Muslim" (25). She retains a few tenets of Islam through the Middle Passage, so when she sees men smoking on the plantation in Georgia, Aminata comments: "God say no tobacco,' I said. 'Huh!' Georgia slapped her thighs.

‘Master Appleby got God, he smoke...Some of us got God and some of us don’t, but ain’t a nigger in Carolina don’t love tobacco’” (142). Aminata cannot adequately defend the religious laws or customs of Islam (and Christianity) that she observes being transgressed and unenforced. She too loses her conviction regarding sacred rules partly because others warn her not openly to identify as Muslim. The slaveholders believe that Christianity is the only legitimate faith and an avowal of Islam is erroneous and punishable (122).

Consequently, Aminata no longer announces her Islamic belief in freedom or prays aloud for fear of violence. She never acquires a greater familiarity with Islam other than the prayers and rules she has memorized. It seems then that Aminata assimilates to the brand of Christianity practiced on the plantation, but the aforementioned scene about smoking hints at the greater hypocrisy of Christian slavery. This implied criticism does not constitute a major premise in her fictional autobiography like it does in Frederick Douglass’s narrative or Olaudah Equiano’s (Yorke 141). Eileen Elrod addresses the fact that while Equiano condemns the brutal slave drivers and believes that Christianity is ultimately irreconcilable with the European slave trade, he does not absolutely renounce all forms of slavery (410; 423). He does not disapprove of slavery in Africa and actually becomes a humane overseer in Jamaica (Equiano Chapter XI). Equiano’s spiritual state is in turmoil over the issue of slavery, just as the reader cannot resolve Equiano’s ambiguous choices. Yet *The Book of Negroes* does not engage in extensive or complicated arguments against Christian slavery. Hill’s evaluation of the slave trade emerges in minor and infrequent judgments rather than a continuous assessment of the entire enterprise. Instead, the novel counters slavery’s literal and conceptual violence by

creating a character who does not permit the catastrophes of history to overly determine her identity in the representation of her memories.

Solomon Lindo, the Jewish trader, best embodies the hypocrisy of a religious slave owner in *The Book of Negroes* and rouses Aminata's scepticism. Lindo of course does not suffer under the violence of the slave trade nor is he prohibited from practising his faith, but Jewish people are nevertheless outsiders in the gentile Anglo-American societies of the eighteenth-century. Lindo tries to establish a bond out of Aminata's and his common status as minorities (188-9), and he also tries to assert that his enslavement of Aminata is beneficial to her: "In my faith,' he said, 'it is considered a very good thing to give another person what they need to become independent, and to take care of themselves in the world.' Then why, I wondered, didn't he set me free?" (202). Lindo initiates Aminata into the local self-hire system in which slaves, given room and board, work unsupervised about town and surrender a significant portion of their earnings to their owners. Lindo sees his sponsorship of Aminata as a measure of his wealth, advantage, and purported goodwill. While Aminata does profit from this economic arrangement, Lindo's justification falls short of persuasion because the logic of needing to be dependent on Lindo for her independence is unsound. Nonetheless, this Jewish slave owner proves himself to be more altruistic than the Christian master, Appleby. Lindo, along with teaching Aminata writing, math, and a little economics, is the one who frees her when Appleby tries to re-enslave her in New York. Lindo explains his good-natured act: "It is a matter of making peace with my past.'...I could see that Solomon Lindo was a better class of man than Robinson Appleby. But he was tainted by the very world in which he lived" (310-1). Lindo comes to believe in the urgency of one's

relationship to those underprivileged as, to borrow Lévinas's terms, his guilty conscience calls for an ethical response towards others.

Lindo's self-hire system, though, might greatly appeal to Equiano because, as Ross Pudaloff's commentary about the ex-slave autobiographer's participation in commerce suggests, "Equiano does...condemn chattel slavery but...he finds in the relationships of exchange, which permits commodification, the means of creating freedom" (508). Equiano works as a slave aboard British ships and willingly returns to the naval life after his manumission. He eagerly participates in the marketplace not only to buy his freedom but as a means to enacting his independence afterwards. Adam Potkay explains that Equiano casts the event of escaping his subjugation through economic savvy as his spiritual deliverance in his overall Christian narrative (687). In contrast, after her trials and liberation, Aminata does not see her later life as a satisfying conclusion in the context of faith. Indeed, after meeting Muslim African slave traders in the latter part of the novel, Aminata judges all Abrahamic religions: "I wondered for a time how a person who considered himself a good Muslim could treat other humans in such a way, but it occurred to me that the same question could be asked of Christians and Jews" (434). Religion, which the traders use to legitimize slavery and their own authority, operates as another mechanism to establish the peace of imperial dominance that Lévinas repudiates. Aminata's reflective statement condemns all the hypocritical individuals who profess to hold righteous ideals yet perpetuate the slave trade. Although Aminata's spiritual views contain some principles from or share similarities with Islam and Judaism (she believes in chastity which the Koran preaches), her singular character engages with and withdraws from the different categories of religion. *The Book of Negroes* offers a paradoxical

representation of Aminata, discouraging any diminishing interpretations of the protagonist as simply upholding one faith or another.

By the end of the narrative, Aminata does not necessarily prefer any of the Abrahamic religions. In fact, Aminata seems to become agnostic as she is dubious about religion. Additionally, she does not associate racial identity with faith despite her acquaintance with black Christians. Conversely, Equiano, deliberately linking religion with race, cements his Christian faith by the end of his narrative, following the teleological trajectory of the spiritual autobiography to describe the hardships that lead to his liberation. Potkay argues that Equiano's Christian narrative is tropological, meaning Equiano "relates the [Biblical] historical event to an occurrence in [his] own spiritual [life]" (681). Equiano believes that the triumph of salvation is possible for the black individual in the times of slavery, and his outlook is more optimistic than Aminata's resigned perspective at the end of her fictional autobiography as she embraces death. Hill does not represent Aminata as achieving salvation, and furthermore he deliberately dismantles the salvation myth that celebrates Canada as a promised land for slaves escaping America.

Stephanie Yorke proclaims that Aminata's atheism serves a corrective function: "It is noteworthy that Aminata's atheism becomes most pronounced after she has moved to Canada, which in slave narratives is so often presented as a *Canaan*," the promised land for the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible (141). For Aminata and other blacks, Canada is not a safe haven during the era of slavery due to vehement racism and deliberate impoverishment facing blacks; they do not find any alleviation from their suffering up north. *The Book of Negroes* includes characters who arrive from New York

as slaves (Hill, "Projecting History Honestly" 316). Despite Aminata's disbelief in the God of organized religions, she gathers with black Christians in the Birchtown community after she meets Daddy Moses who leads the Methodist church. Aminata's acquaintance with the various holy books suggests that she has cultivated a capacity for openness that perhaps explains her willingness to join the community of Daddy Moses's congregation, echoing Lévinas's perception of religion as residing in the social bond. Aminata clarifies that "I never found myself born again like that, but...[m]any times that winter, I slid onto my knees and called out the names of my parents, my son and my husband, crying for them as if they had just gone missing with my most recent exhalation...I prayed for the gift of a healthy child" (326). She never converts, but Aminata uses the affective atmosphere of worship to grieve for her lost loved ones and hope for a future family. Finding some solace in the rituals of religion, Aminata partly integrates into but remains outside the Christian tradition, complicating Yorke's supposition of a simple progression from piety to atheism in the novel.

Though she demonstrates sympathies for Daddy Moses, Jason, and other members of the community, Aminata does not wholly relate to either black or white Christians. In fact, Aminata barely poses questions about racial identity as Hill draws the attention away from this topic. I turn to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to evince how racial identity does not overtake my study of an historical black slave. This prominent text on race studies how black consciousness is affected by living in white society and the legacies of colonialism. Fanon is concerned about how to bear the psychological effects of being torn between African and European identities: "The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites"

(*Black Skin, White Masks* 1). Since I examine Aminata through an ethical image of the Other rather than the paradigm of double-consciousness popular in postcolonial or African-American literature, my research project does not foreground issues of blackness and whiteness because Aminata embodies more than just a racialized Other. Not that this theoretical model cannot supply insights about the protagonist, but I wish to illuminate the careful construction of Aminata's singularity that paradoxically dwells within and beyond race, religion, and culture to sensitively remember the historical Other as Lévinas proposes.

To reveal Hill's ethical construction of identity in the context of Black history, this thesis appropriates Lévinas's philosophy. However, Lévinas believes ethics is absent in any form of artistic creation, suggesting that fiction cannot exhibit sensitivity towards the Other. He asserts in *Totality and Infinity* that "he finds no ethical 'meaning' in art works, only a dangerous and wicked distraction or swindle" (Eaglestone 124). Lévinas believes that art is a superficial product that does not contain any transcendent qualities. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Lévinas writes that, in art, "the said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology" because beautiful works do not transcend their material essences or existing components (40). In his wholesale objection to artistic productions, Lévinas reveals a narrow-minded view that counts as a limitation in his philosophy. I acknowledge Lévinas's oversight, but I contend that other principles of his philosophy are still fruitful for interpretation as this flaw is not sufficient to disregard his other illuminating concepts. Moreover, Lévinas's philosophy actually contradicts his personal bias against art, and Robert Eaglestone lists "three factors [that] suggest this: first, Lévinas's understanding of language in general; second, the use of, and appeal to,

literature in *Otherwise Than Being*; third, the text's own potential 'literary' status" (157). Lévinas's conception of language suggests that it contains both the Said (meaning Western ontological discourse) and the Saying (the realm of the Other). Since literature is fundamentally language, aesthetic writing therefore possesses an ethical dimension. Indeed, *Otherwise Than Being* relies on figures of speech to explain the otherness that transcends discourse, and Lévinas utilizes literature in his analyses in *Otherwise Than Being* as well as "Peace and Proximity."

In the essay, he refers to a novel that critiques Stalinist Russia to advance his explication of the Face of the Other: "The face is thus not exclusively a human face. In Vassili Grossman's *Life and Fate* the story is of families, wives, and parents of political detainees traveling to the Lubyanka in Moscow for the latest news. A line is formed at the counter, a line where one can see only the backs of others" ("Peace and Proximity" 167). The Russian novel corresponds with Lévinas's philosophy because it offers multiple corporeal metaphors for and explanations of the Face of the Other while applying ethics to fictional yet historical realities that are far from superficial. My integration of historical fiction and ethics models the utility of Lévinas's philosophy by showing the significance of a wider range of his concepts in the criticism of literature. For instance, Lévinas's notion of proximity from his historical essay is relevant in the pursuit of ethical peace. Proximity does not refer to actual distance; it means maintaining a conceptual distance from the Other that does not presume total knowledge of the singular figure and thereby absorb the vulnerable party into the ego of the individual (Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 96-7). In seeking to evade the risk of totalizing the Other,

proximity is an ethical concept because it signals a paradoxical tension between remaining at a respectful distance while also approaching the Other sensitively.

I borrow this notion of proximity to illuminate how Hill represents Aminata's femininity, the third theme in this chapter, because the author portrays her as closely paralleling and simultaneously diverging from both Western and African gender roles. I do not mean to automatically judge Muslim cultures as oppressive, but beginning from her childhood, Aminata does not wish to conform to the traditional mold of a Bayo woman because she wants to "travel, and cultivate my mind" (20). Ironically, the unfortunate fact of her enslavement allows her to transcend the domesticating brand of femininity because becoming a slave does provide Aminata with opportunities to migrate and learn. Rejecting another aspect of West African Islamic womanhood, Aminata refuses to succumb to female circumcision. Her mother explains the ritual: "I was in no hurry to marry and would be declining the treatment... 'It is just a little correction.' 'But I have done nothing wrong, so I am in no need of correction'" (15-6). Aminata counters her mother's insistence with quick rejoinders that the autobiographer perhaps embellishes. She denies circumcision on the grounds that nothing is incorrect or inferior about the female body as she is unconvinced by her mother's justifications for the procedure. It is unlikely that Aminata would articulate her antipathy towards circumcision through such individualistic language that one might attribute to Western liberal feminism. Her adult responses in this debate hint that the retrospective Aminata, after having travelled to America and settled in England, rewrote the scene to recast her childhood sentiments in mature rhetoric. Yet Hill demonstrates that even before Aminata

lives in the Western world, she possesses an alternative vision of femininity that cannot be traced to the culture of the Bayo village or Islam.

The origins of her gender identity remain ever unclear because it is impossible to fully determine how Aminata develops her position and, in a broader sense, satisfyingly understand her. Aminata escapes another non-consensual requirement of a Muslim girl, becoming a child bride of a polygamist, due to slavery. On the slave ship, a fellow woman from Aminata's village, Fanta, explains that "In just a rainy season or two, you were about to become my husband's next wife" (85). Aminata refuses to believe so, but Fanta's recollection again shows that Aminata's childhood is not so idyllic as a consequence of her parents' conservatism, but "Equiano idealizes the Igbo [his people] more than Aminata does the Fulbe" (Yorke 136). To continue this comparison between the traditional and neo-slave narrative, Aminata and Equiano both evince the same attitude towards African slavery, but they somewhat differ on the topic of gender. Equiano paints a nostalgic portrait of his childhood among the Igbo people (in present day Nigeria) and insists that his enslavement in Africa is benign compared to the malicious exploitation of blacks by the Europeans and Anglo-Americans. Louise Rolinger remarks on the lack of differentiation between the slaves and masters in Africa especially because Equiano was invited to dine at his owner's table (110). Furthermore, Equiano likens the customs of his African country to the Jewish laws written in the Pentateuch, and these commonalities serve as the basis for his conversion (Potkay 682). However, Aminata does not find similar comfort in the rules of her childhood village. The prospect of Aminata (not older than eleven) undergoing circumcision and being married off to an older man against her will insinuates a kind of cultural enslavement

crueler than any subjugation a young male slave in Africa might endure. The female obligations in Africa are not entirely dissimilar from the abuses that black female slaves are forced to submit to in the Americas.

Probing more deeply into the burdens of the historical black female slave, I refer to bell hooks's *Ain't I A Woman* (1981), which supplies an analysis of the intersections between racism and sexism in the scholarly studies of Black history and culture. As a black feminist, hooks criticizes the racism underlying Western feminism that neglects the distinct circumstances of the black female. Modeling the intersectionality that she calls for, hooks points out that sexism against black women was endemic to both African and Anglo-American societies: "[Western] observers of African culture...were not accustomed to a patriarchal order that demanded not only that women accept an inferior status, but that they participate actively in the community labour force...African women were sold into slavery as punishment for breaking tribal laws" like adultery (16-7). Aminata reluctantly learns about the lack of autonomy for women in her society, and her denunciation of the prohibition against education, child brides, and circumcision that the African gender role entails for women insinuates that she is a non-conformist. However, Hill does not allow for such a simplistic definition of Aminata as rebellious because she does not completely disavow prescriptions for Islamic femininity. Aminata remembers the Islamic teachings about female and male chastity, which she continues to heed when Aminata recounts how she resists the advances of both white and black men in Charlestown (199). A reading that acknowledges the paradoxical tension in Aminata's identity as a female does not simplistically categorize the novel as a celebration of Western femininity over African womanhood or vice versa.

Aminata's femininity becomes increasingly cosmopolitan, meaning varied in qualities yet still irreducible to one gender identity, when she sees that basic freedoms are accessible to white females in the Western world. This sight perhaps partly inspires Aminata to vindicate her dignity in the eyes of her slave masters. After arriving in America off the slave ship, she spies an independent white woman walking and wearing gloves (110). Aminata's gaze does not signify materialistic desire but a yearning for physical comfort and the freedom to own her body in order for her womanhood to flourish with pride. However, Aminata must endure sexist violence before she becomes a liberated woman, and bell hooks graphically revives the torments particular to the black female slave. While "the black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields[,] the black female slave was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault" (hooks 22). On the plantation in Georgia, Appleby rapes Aminata (161), and the details in this scene contrast with Equiano's brief remarks about nameless black women agonizing under the abuses of white men: "the offensive sight of the violated chastity of the sable females, which has too often accosted my eyes" (155). However, a neo-slave narrative like *The Book of Negroes* challenges Equiano's self-centered observation by foregrounding such suffering through a woman's eyes. Perhaps more so than Hill's novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* lingers on the horrors and traumas that black female slaves contended with, especially in the manifold miseries and injustices they faced as mothers. *The Book of Negroes*, though, discredits the stereotypes of the hypersexualized black man or woman—which the slave masters propagated to justify their abusive control—with scenes illustrating consensual sex between Aminata and Chekura: "The archetypal black male

rapist is defeated in Hill's depiction of Chekura, a romancer who 'doesn't press the matter of sex with Aminata' (Hill 159)" (Yorke 143).

Alongside her love affair, Aminata endeavours to achieve a dignified femininity by dressing more effeminately and stylishly than before, but Appleby further degrades Aminata when he notices her improved appearance. He impetuously cuts all the hair off her head in a public display of enforcing a Southern convention: "'We have a law in the Province of South Carolina,' he said. 'Niggers don't dress grand'" (176). Aminata is not permitted to imitate the stature of the white woman, but she persistently fights to maintain her integrity as a black female and ultimately as a human being. She stands up to Lindo when he calls her a wench: "'I'm not a wench. I had a baby and I would have it now but Master Appleby stole him away. I am no wench. I am a wife. I am a mother. Aren't I a woman?'" (200). Here, Aminata asserts her multiple roles as a female that accord her respect which the pejorative term wench does not because such language tries to assimilate Aminata into a generalized conception of undervalued females. Equiano's only battle is for his freedom, but Aminata also defends her womanhood and her children. Her rhetorical question (similar to the title of hooks's monograph) alludes to the famous 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth, an early black feminist in seventeenth-century America: "The anachronistic nature of the reference [to Sojourner Truth's words] thus makes Aminata a fictional foremother to the famed abolitionist and women's rights activist, suggesting Truth was not the first Black woman to assert her female humanity" (Duff 251). Hill imaginatively gestures to the other black women who surely fought for their rights even if lacking a political platform. Though Hill gives a voice to Aminata, this does not make her less of an irreducible Other as the author aims to ensure the

impossibility of defining Aminata by keeping the reader in a Lévinasian proximity to her. The paradox here consists in the fact that her liberatory speech universalizes the multiple roles that every historical female slave bore, but Aminata still exceeds the category of a female because she is a unique human being, as the grammatically contextual and asserted subjectivity in the repeated pronoun “I” emphasizes. It is this singularity that Aminata demands Lindo and the other slave traders recognize along with Hill’s audience.

Stephanie Yorke proclaims that “Hill creates an antitype in Aminata, a beautiful, ingenious, headstrong atheist who would rather read than sing,” an antithetical figure to proslavery discourse as well as the limiting stereotypes that some traditional slave narratives contain (143). Yorke’s reading is progressive because it celebrates the novel as performing an ethics of difference, meaning a recognition of the marginalized subject. Rather than seeing the text as unambiguously ethical, I argue that the novel encourages what Yung-Hsing Wu calls “readerly ethics,” which forefronts the audience’s role in refraining from a definitive judgement of the characters and their circumstances (782). However, Aminata paradoxically both inhabits and supersedes all these descriptors. Unlike Equiano’s narrative that emphasizes the struggles of his conscience, ethics in *The Book of Negroes* depends more so on the reader’s interpretation of the protagonist’s multifaceted yet elusive identity. Her talent for languages introduces her to many cultures, yet the cosmopolitan Aminata never wholly assimilates into any of them. She perhaps becomes agnostic, but she holds onto a few tenets of religion, and her experiences show that the social bond, tantamount to religion in Lévinas’s eyes, is ethical. Her repudiation of the stereotypical African and Western gender roles for women

is balanced by her partial acceptance of the ideals of female chastity and dignity, and this tension models a proximity that cannot fully identify Aminata's brand of femininity.

In the context of languages, religion, and gender roles, *The Book of Negroes* represents Aminata through a multiplicity of themes as the character herself is in part the approximate summation of many historical black figures. Whereas Equiano portrays himself as conflicted about the one culture that he gravitates towards, Hill's survey of cultures through the lens of Aminata's character allows the reader to more easily recognize that the black slave is beyond categorization and resist the urge to define or authenticate her. Thus, the Other can materialize in literature not only through abstractions or generalized images of the human body but through specificity of facts and dialogue whose meanings never settle. Though *The Book of Negroes* may not offer a probing portrait of the slave narrator's spiritual conflicts and crises of identity, this neo-slave narrative does consider the contrapuntal implications that gender has on many of the same themes contained in Equiano's text. Hill's fictional work engages the reader in the practice of ethics by encouraging a paradoxical and ambiguous view of historical figures. In contrast to the long tradition of violently negating discourses and interpretations, the novel persuades its audience to view the identity of the (former) black slave as elusive, exemplifying a peaceful relation to the singular Other evocative of Lévinas's philosophy.

Chapter Three: The Aesthetics of Altruism

In Chapter Two, I examined how Hill creates a paradoxical image of the historical Other in order to distance the figure of the black slave from any reductive definitions. Yet Aminata's altruistic character (altruism being a term I introduce to describe acting on ethical responsibility) allows one to simultaneously look at the protagonist as a conscientious individual similar to the Lévinasian self or privileged subject in "Peace and Proximity." Pinpointing Aminata's deeds that serve as alternatives to the violent agency of white authorities and slaves themselves, this chapter considers altruism as a form of resistance to the exploitative enterprise that thrives on sadism. Whereas Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel about the unthinkable act of infanticide committed by one female slave, illustrates how inhumanities of slavery affect the characters and their capacity for interpersonal relations, *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds the mutual sensitivity that black subjects possibly displayed towards one another. Furthermore, I contend that Hill's pointedly realistic illustration of altruism is indicative of the accessibility of the novel's aesthetic form in contradistinction to other neo-slave narratives that accomplish their nuanced remembrance of Black history through an anti-realist style that eludes linear comprehension.

Following an explication of the individual's relationship with multiple Others in Lévinas's philosophy, this chapter examines Aminata's maturation into one who cares for the Other by applying his ethical concepts to the novel. Aminata does not merely concern herself with the pursuit of her own freedom because she acts as a translator, teacher, midwife, and even a modest heroine for others. I utilize my discussion of these ethical

roles to launch an evaluation of Hill's aesthetics as his style renders the content of his novel easily intelligible to his audience.

Lévinas's philosophy details the individual's eschewal of egoism after the realization of his or her responsibility to the Other and other Others in society. To usher in an ethical peace, the individual must first realize that a tranquil, solitary freedom is inadequate: "peace would no longer amount to a simple confirmation of human identity in its substantiality, to its freedom made up of tranquillity, to the repose of a being found founded in itself, in its identity as an ego" ("Peace and Proximity" 165). Again Lévinas breaks with the Greek wisdom of peace upon which European politics and discourses of domination are historically based. He wishes to reform the reigning system and its imperialistic discourses by prioritizing the Other in order to unsettle the subject's sense of freedom and security: "it would no longer be a matter of the bourgeois peace of the man who is at home with himself behind closed doors, rejecting the outside that negates him" (ibid). The subject with material and social advantages should not isolate himself or herself from the world because such a detached state continues the pattern of egoism that reinforces hegemonic power.

An ethical peace relies on the belief that "sociality will be a way of escaping egoistic being otherwise than through knowledge" (*Ethics and Infinity* 61). Being social is fundamental to the fact of one's existence, more so than the egocentric quests for power and knowledge, because the individual is always already implicated in the sociality of the world. Once the privileged subject heeds the call of the Other, the individual becomes open to the Face of another Other or another vulnerable human being, whom Lévinas calls the third party: "how does responsibility obligate if a third party

troubles this exteriority of two...? The third party [another victimized or injured party] is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow. What am I to do?" ("Peace and Proximity" 168). The individual feels an obligation to many Others unique in their own right because responsibility is not a calculable quantity, as Diane Perpich elaborates on Lévinas's key concept: "It is not a matter of the actual number of demands increasing, but a matter of my sensitivity increasing so that demands and injustices of which I was formerly unaware now come to press on my attention and weigh on my conscience" (89). Ethical responsibility is a constantly growing consciousness of all those vulnerable in the world because ethics never permits the individual to claim that he or she is finished helping others. Lévinas's dilemma is twofold: which Other should one respond to first and how can a person even respond to all those suffering? Lévinas answers these difficult questions about the extent of altruism by advocating the utility of sociopolitical structures, such as health care systems and social welfare agencies, to answer to many Others at once (Burggraeve 643). Thus, the philosopher repudiates the European regimes only because he wants to reorient them from their project of domination to preserve vulnerable human lives.

In "Peace and Proximity," Lévinas further explains that "it is the ethical order of human proximity that gives rise to or calls for the objectivity, truth, and knowledge... Biblical heritage implies the necessity of the Greek heritage...[because t]he relation with the other and the unique that is peace [meaning ethical peace is atypical rather than the norm] comes to demand a reason...that thinks a world and reflects on being" (168). Though Lévinas privileges an ethical peace over the Greek-based one, he recognizes that ethics partly inspired by the moral teachings of the Hebrew Bible is not sufficient in itself

to create an ethical politics; the Greek wisdom that upholds rationality as a primary tool is indispensable in order to assess and modify the flawed sociopolitical institutions. Governmental organizations concerned about the legal, economic, societal concerns of the populace can actually embody the notion of proximity because these institutions can maintain a conceptual distance from Others that does not deny or efface their subjectivity. Earlier in the essay "Peace and Proximity," Lévinas disclaims the mechanisms of European states for their indirect facilitation of conflicts and neglect of their casualties, which proximity also potentially allows. The philosopher perhaps shifts his opinion on the capacity of the government too easily, especially because he does not discuss the need for administrative bodies to adhere to rules of accountability. Nevertheless, an ethical transformation of the state is necessary to respond to many Others at once. Reason and the continuous search for knowledge, which are integral to the idea of the Greek-inspired peace, can be positive pursuits because they allow the Western subject to critically reflect on the governing sociopolitical structures and help to ceaselessly improve them to better aid Others.

The transformation of the individual from a self-centred mode of existence to one of tireless altruism is dramatized in the progression of Aminata's character. Though one cannot pinpoint an exact moment of transition for the protagonist, Hill's portrayal of her compassion enriches the remembrance of slavery. Certainly Aminata is not a member of the bourgeois class like Lévinas's European subject, but she gains her relative stature and privilege by initially cooperating with the institution of slavery (though at times facetiously). Aminata deliberately obeys agents of the British Empire, such as the European traders, sailors, and the Anglo-American slave owners, in order to survive.

Appleby, the owner of the Georgian plantation, boasts about Aminata's subservience:

“‘My prize Coromantee,’ Appleby said to the others. ‘Just three years here, and perfectly sensible. She helps the others cook. Makes soap. You’ve seen her handle indigo. And the most amazing thing is that she doctors pregnant slave woman...Could sell her for twenty times what I paid’” (168-9). Displaying a compliant attitude outwardly and placing her special abilities in the service of her master, Aminata performs the role of the slave well. Stephanie Yorke explains that “‘sensible’ implies an intelligence that is useful, but not threatening: an intelligence that balances accounts but has no claim on sonnets, escape routes, or any imaginative product” (135). Aminata proves herself very useful and thereby valuable to white authorities, and she endures her enslavement and witnesses atrocities without reacting vehemently.

Aminata does later escape from slavery as she sneaks away on a boat to New York from her second owner Lindo in Charlestown, Virginia, but she does not isolate herself in her newfound liberty. Upon arriving in New York, Aminata meets the kind black owner of a tavern, Sam Fraunces, who welcomes her with accommodations and a meal: “I had never before had the experience of watching a tall black man open my door, slip in with a tray of steaming food and set it down on a table near my bed... ‘Would you prefer to eat in solitude?’ he asked. ‘If you have the time, you may sit with me, for I have never cared to eat alone’” (245). While her position as a free slave is precarious because slave owners often come to the city to capture their fugitives, possibilities for an improved socioeconomic status emerge. However, Aminata does not seek release from the realities of ongoing slavery through solitude; instead, she sees sociality as necessary for her personal fulfilment. She returns Sam's hospitality in recognition of their

interdependent needs for sustenance and human comfort. Perhaps this modest interaction seems trivial, but the inclusion of easily overlooked scenes from the past accomplishes the aims of historical materialism that Walter Benjamin formulates: “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (254). Benjamin likely refers to moments of revolutionary clashes, declaring that humankind can only redeem itself by acknowledging even the most insignificant of class struggles and their ramifications in history. The liberation of the lower classes from a long tradition of oppression through a singular moment that configures the past with the present to guarantee the future may be overly idealized by Benjamin’s Messianism (Müller 249-50). Yet instances of hospitality and sympathy during historical conflicts can expand, if not quite redeem, one’s view of humanity in the past.

Aminata also befriends a white man by the name of John Clarkson, the organizer of the trip to the Sierra Leone colony and a prominent abolitionist. She agrees to volunteer her efforts: “‘My name is Meena, for short,’ I said. ‘You wanted a note taker, and I can help.’ ‘You can?’ John Clarkson lowered his hand. His face lifted into a smile the likes of which I hadn’t seen in years...To my great surprise, I felt the same way. I liked the man from the instant I met him” (358). She uses the anglicized version of her name to perhaps facilitate a casual mode of communication with John, and the instant affinity that they both feel towards the other implies mutual respect. Clarkson’s guidance leads Aminata to join the abolitionist movement in London as Clarkson himself exemplifies the relinquishment of bourgeois comfort: “Any white man who wanted to

help Negroes ‘raise themselves up,’ as Clarkson liked to say, would be an unpopular man indeed among his peers” (363). John’s energies fuel his relentless battle against the rigid status quo that does not accommodate African lives. As a non-conformist, he questions the British commodity market and culture of privilege that both hinge on slavery.⁶ John is not content to simply isolate himself from the world; he seeks change by unsettling the mindsets of the free subjects constituting British society. Abolitionism endeavours to reform the contemporary political order by challenging the slave trade (though not necessarily disqualifying the supremacy of the British Empire or its racism). Aminata joins John Clarkson in this eighteenth-century social justice movement, trying to help the underprivileged Africans and American-born slaves en masse. Even prior to her involvement in London, though, Aminata manifests an ethical individuality in her multiple social roles that I have outlined in this chapter. She acquires a position of agency through her recognizable intelligence and numerous skills, and she uses her relative privilege and later freedom to respond to many disadvantaged others.

Since *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds Aminata’s altruistic agency, it does not primarily concentrate on the possible brutalities, the reactionary hate, or cruelty of black figures in contrast to other neo-slave narratives. Speaking about Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Nadine Fligel writes that fictionalized slave narratives such as this “run through a variety of responses from horror and fear to complicity to violent resistance...[making] all of the available responses to slavery more comprehensible” (214). Fligel claims that these novels illustrate all the possible reactions to slavery, but in fact she mainly accounts for the negative responses and not the constructive ones. In particular, I refer to the neo-

⁶ The actual John Clarkson worked for the colonial Sierra Leone Company and was against the settlers’ claim to self-rule, benefiting from the mercantile interests of settler-colonialism (Hochschild 203-5).

slave narrative of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which Hill potentially alludes to through the character of Fanta in his novel. Fanta gives birth to a baby boy with Aminata's guidance, but the slaves stage an uprising afterwards. She seizes the riot as an opportunity for a premeditated act: "Fanta brought out the knife from the medicine man's room, placed a hand over the baby's face and jerked up his chin. She dug the tip of the knife into the baby's neck and ripped his throat open" (90). Fanta chooses to kill her baby boy along with Sanu's child out of her hatred for the white enslavers; consequently, Sanu follows her baby overboard (91). Fanta believes that her child would suffer if he lived when she states: "No toubab will do to this baby what they have done to us" (83). In an alternative sense of responsibility to another, Fanta thinks that ridding Sanu of her child is her duty. Sanu believes that her baby's existence constitutes a reason for living or dying, whereas Fanta supposes that the death of those most vulnerable and guarding one's solitude are the means to survival and even freedom. More importantly, Fanta insinuates that the existence of child slaves is a tortuous one as boys and girls are born into horrors from which they cannot find any reprieve. Thus her actions are meant to rescue them.

The description of Fanta cutting her baby's throat echoes Morrison's portrayal of Sethe killing her own baby girl: "what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on...the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life" (251). The baby girl returns initially as a ghost and then as an actual girl named *Beloved*, and both forms haunt the house in the style of Gothic fiction. Sethe justifies the murder with reasoning equivalent to Fanta's: "I stopped him...I took and put my babies

where they'd be safe'" (Morrison 164). However, Morrison's visceral description of infanticide is more graphic than Hill's scene with Fanta, and this event becomes the epicenter of *Beloved*. The novel's lack of closure on the issue does not treat Sethe's act as an illegitimate response to the brutality she lives within. Morrison's meditation on Sethe's decision from the varied viewpoints of the characters accomplishes this ethical writing because *Beloved* is not interested in definitively judging Sethe's violence (this stance is similar to Hill's paradoxical representation of Aminata that leaves her uncategorized). As Yung-Hsing Wu insists after assessing the wide-ranging scholarly criticism about *Beloved*, the novel discourages an unproblematic interpretation of the murder (like Homi Bhabha's reading of Sethe's choice as triumphant) because it does not condemn or celebrate Sethe (792-3).

Though Hill implies that he is not condemning Fanta's actions when he claims that "her reaction is fully understandable," the author suggests that Fanta becomes less "hateful" because "there is also an element of nurturing in her" revealed when she later shows tenderness towards Aminata ("Projecting History Honestly" 313). Hill's disparagement of Fanta likely extends to her homicidal behaviour. The author transforms her into a more humane figure, perhaps aiming to render her capacity for murder less appalling as though Hill wants to spare the reader the discomfort of leaving the issue of infanticide unresolved. Yet *Beloved* suggests that total comprehension of infanticide is impossible. The novelist perhaps invents Fanta to act as a foil to Aminata, helping to emphasize the admirable qualities of the protagonist through contrast. His authorial choices are thus the inverse of Morrison's because Hill foregrounds Aminata and de-emphasizes Fanta's presence, whereas *Beloved* centers on Sethe and relegates its figure

of altruism, Baby Suggs, to the background. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, establishes an unofficial ministry of sorts after "[deciding] that, because slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once" (Morrison 87). Baby Suggs upholds community as the path to vitality and healing, counselling Sethe to lay down "her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt" (Morrison 86). Sethe should surrender her reactionary and at times violent ploys against white oppressors along with her inner shield against the pain. Baby Suggs's therapeutic endeavours are akin to Aminata's methods of consolation, but Baby Suggs, already having passed away before the time of the present in the novel, persists only in the other characters' memories.

Though I cannot ascertain if Hill read and purposely evokes Morrison's text, this similarity and reversal of types in *The Book of Negroes* illustrate how Hill prioritizes the gracious impulses of slaves rather than the divisive ones. To elaborate on the term "type," Hill's construction of Aminata borders on fixing her as a model rather than a psychologically fleshed-out character. Yet, as I explore below, the principle of altruism is not without its conundrums that complicate Aminata's position. Nonetheless, I suggest that the protagonist is representative of all those black subjects who performed any kindnesses that are perhaps less spectacular than, say, the empathy of the underground railway conductors. *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds the small occasions of benevolence that transpired amidst the catastrophes as profoundly significant. Considering Lévinas's philosophy in the context of morality, Richard Cohen writes "[t]hink of opening a door for someone...The world's greatest events have always taken place in the proximity of a

face-to-face seen by no one else. No one else need know, ever. Lévinas will call it ‘sacred history,’ deeper than the history of kings and armies” (14). In keeping with the view of the intimate precincts of history, Hill’s novel intertextually dialogues with *Beloved*, dwelling less on violent agency and more on the forgotten or unknown “sacred” events of the past that also constitute resistance to the surrounding oppression.

Though the thematic violence risks overwhelming her narrative by her incorporation of the conventional tropes of slavery, Morrison’s contrary style contributes to the innovation of the neo-slave narrative genre in her departure from realism because “claims of authenticity, realism, and objectivity result...in a potentially oppressive obfuscation of the past” (Spaulding 5). Instead of potentially obscuring elements of the past through a strictly mimetic representation, *Beloved* reorients and politicizes the Gothic aesthetic in order to highlight the real horror, which is the “very human aspects of slavery,” and create a “balance between the psychological and the historical” to imagine the perturbed consciousnesses of historical figures (Spaulding 64; 72). Morrison’s novel seeks to reanimate and ruminate on the countless horrors and traumas that unfolded during slavery. Walter Benn Michaels explains the effect of such literature on “the reader...[who] will be in the position not of someone who reads about the ‘horror’ and understands it; he or she will be in the position of ‘facing horror’” when the author conveys past catastrophes in all their lack of intelligibility (142).

Curiously, *The Book of Negroes* mostly adheres to the style of realism, not incorporating diverse and fragmentary viewpoints or introspective monologues to intensify his profile of Aminata’s psyche.⁷ One might argue that Hill wishes to render the

⁷ *The Book of Negroes* is also a “ghost story” like *Beloved* as Aminata declares (4). After losing both of her children, one sold and the other abducted, Aminata mourns their absence: “The pain of my losses never

brutalities more palatable than the visceral scenes in *Beloved*. He poses these rhetorical questions in his interview about his novel: “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?” (“Projecting History Honestly” 318). Though the descriptions of slavery in his novel might be plenty horrific to mainstream consumers who have never encountered slave narratives of any variety, Hill insinuates that he deliberately withheld from depicting shockingly gruesome scenes in order to ensure his reader’s relative comfort and thereby enjoyment. The author himself seems to mistrust that graphic literature can compel an audience’s attention as though readers are primarily affectively engaged, not intellectually or ethically. Writing about one of the currently unresolved issues that the field of postcolonial literature is facing, Chris Bongie discusses the “middlebrow” novel in *Friends and Enemies* (2008) that shares commonalities with Hill’s implied intentions. In a borrowed phrase, Bongie defines the middlebrow as a “second form of the popular, which occupies ‘the vast middle where high values are folded into the commodity form of quality entertainment or discerning lifestyle choice’” (282). Despite the “anti-hierarchical ethos” of the postcolonial studies that claims to be inclusive, its literary canon tended to by academics does not credit novels that lack of innovative literary style and deliberately cater to consumers (Bongie 312). I continue to investigate the motivations and outcomes of Hill’s aesthetic choices that the theme of altruism alludes to by juxtaposing both neo-slave narratives throughout the chapter.

Since *The Book of Negroes* is not a tale of underground revolution or dramatic escape, Aminata’s position of agency resides within systems of exploitation and

really went away. The limbs had been severed, and they would forever after be missing. But I kept going” (351). Aminata symbolizes the tragedy of losing her two children as phantom limbs, a psychological wound that never heals.

prejudice, not on the margins of the white authorities' jurisdiction. Aminata begins with her work as a translator due to her bilingualism in African languages and increasing proficiency in English that she learns on the journey to the coast and the slave ship. She becomes a sympathetic intermediary for her fellow compatriots like Fomba. Fomba is a *woloso*, "a second-generation captive," which means his father was also a slave in the Bayo village (16). Aminata confesses that the children had teased Fomba, "[b]ut we had never hurt him. We had never yoked him by the neck, or deprived him of food. I had never seen captives passing outside our walled village. But if we had seen men, women and children yoked and forced to march like *woloso*...I hoped that we would have fought for them and freed them" (38). Aminata hopes that the moral conscience of the Africans in her village would never allow such brutality at home. She admits to an existing social hierarchy in Africa that permits slavery, but she claims that this African system is not excessively cruel like the European slave trade, taking a stance similar to Equiano. After their enslavement, Aminata becomes a concerned representative of the village *woloso*. On the slave ship, the inspector uses Aminata to communicate instructions to Fomba (59). Aminata's presence and translation calms her fellow slaves, who might otherwise react violently to the intimate probing of the inspector establishing the health of the human cargo. Fomba admits that his ribs are injured, but Aminata tells the inspector that Fomba is fine (59). Aminata's quick lie likely saves badly injured slaves from mistreatment or being thrown overboard after being deemed useless.

Though her altruistic efforts are not always successful, Aminata continues to heed a feeling of responsibility for Fomba. Aminata looks after him on the Georgian plantation when the ordeal of the Middle Passage robs Fomba of the ability to speak. Morrison

imagines worse traumas for the nameless Negroes in *Beloved*: “Once [Paul D] met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn’t remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies [sic]” (66). Morrison depicts utter mental disintegration, acknowledging the black slaves who could not even recall a time before the damage of slavery. Fomba’s mutism, though, seems to work in favour of the slave owners because his talent for hard and heavy work and inability to speak back mean he virtually embodies the ideal labourer. However, Aminata arranges an almost reciprocal relationship between Fomba and the plantation’s overseer, Mamed, who at first has difficulty managing Fomba. Mamed asks Aminata about Fomba’s hunting abilities: “‘Good hunter? ‘The best,’ I said...Mamed released Fomba from all indigo jobs on the understanding that he would return every afternoon with whatever fish he had netted...Fomba would make himself useful if he was left to work alone” (157). Fomba’s mutism makes him unresponsive to authorities, but the fact that Aminata informs Mamed of Fomba’s unique abilities allows Mamed to take into account Fomba’s subjectivity for the benefit of both overseer and slave. Aminata’s praise elevates Fomba from a position of mere servitude to enjoyable indulgence in his solitary work, preventing Fomba, as a vulnerable Other, from being forcefully assimilated into the plantation hierarchy.

However, once Fomba strays too far from the community of Appleby’s Georgian plantation without Aminata to intervene, his loss of speech becomes a handicap again: “Fomba had been fishing in his skiff at night when the buckra called out for him to identify himself. Fomba had never recovered the ability to speak, and the patroller shot him in the head” (214). Aminata cannot save Fomba from the rash decision of the white

guard who kills Fomba without provocation. One might deduce that Aminata's intervention on Fomba's behalf to provide him with solitary work results in his exposure to fatal harm. This arrangement and its consequences are similar to the unconventional treatment of slaves on the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*. The master, Mr. Garner treated his black labourers rather humanely, and this laxity only made them incompetent slaves in the eyes of their succeeding slave owner, the cruel schoolteacher (Morrison 125-6).

Though the sympathetic efforts of Aminata (and perhaps Mr. Garner) aim to ease suffering, altruistic deeds do not preclude devastating consequences. Here, I situate Hill (and Morrison by extension) to highlight the ambiguity in Lévinas's ethics because, in "Peace and Proximity" and his other writings, Lévinas does not delve into hypothetical scenarios to clarify the premises of his philosophy. One cannot entirely predetermine if an action or lack thereof will be a sufficient response to the Other. Adhering to the principles of pacifism or altruism does not necessarily guarantee resolutions to ethical quandaries. Although she strives incessantly from her position of agency within the existing political order to attend to others, Aminata's charitable intentions may inadvertently lead to further conflict. In the attempt to project an honest representation of the past, the author also hazards ethical risks. Hill is careful to create miniature biographies for secondary characters, which I suggest addresses Lévinas's insistence on individualizing the historical Other by singling him or her out from the anonymous mass of casualties. Yet a more personalized profile of Fomba could be accomplished by providing Fomba textual space for his own voice, which would imaginatively circumvent his mutism that potentially diminishes him to an image of black corporeality. As the

novel stands, the audience can only discern finer details about the other characters through the insights of the protagonist.

Aminata's skills as a translator continue to aid her work as a midwife, and this realistic role demonstrates the complexities of altruism and the resistance it signifies. She learns midwifery as a child apprentice alongside her mother at the young age of eleven. Aminata also helps a woman in labour on the Georgian plantation: "'What your name?' I asked again. No response...When I tried Fulfulde, words rushed out of her. Georgia nudged me with her elbow. 'Good thing you're here, chile.' The woman's name was Falisha" (139). Though Aminata assists many women in labour, she does not consider her patients to be interchangeable nor does she treat them with detachment; she learns Falisha's name. In *Beloved*, while Sethe is pregnant with Denver, she escapes from enslavement, and a young white girl named Amy Denver helps Sethe give birth to Denver, her second daughter. Denver imagines her mother's impromptu midwife saying "'You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?...You better tell her. You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston" (Morrison 85). Though Amy has no experience with midwifery and the imagined dialogue between the two conveys Amy as prejudiced, the black characters look upon the rare concern of this white person with surprise. In addition, Morrison does not portray Sethe's birth of Denver in a realistic manner, as the layered narration makes it impossible for the reader to glean the exact details surrounding Sethe's agonizing labour.

Paul Gilroy explicates the novelist's refusal to convey the past straightforwardly: "Morrison's emphasis on the imaginative appropriation of history...make her harsh on those who believe that being a black writer requires dogged adherence to orthodox

narrative structures and realist codes of writing,” especially since the genre of the novel is associated with modernity and the Enlightenment (222; 218). However, Morrison’s style agitates her reader, serving to emphasize the unsettling nature of graphic violence. Her innovative form is experimental as the novelist intertwines episodes of analepsis and snippets of consciousness within the colloquial, fragmented third-person narration. For the most part, Hill does not interrogate the aesthetic conventionalities of the modern, realist novel partly because he wants the reader to be able to establish facts. A number of the chapter titles are dated as though to suggest that one can simply trace every fictionalized figure and event back to its documented source. Indeed, reading Adam Hochschild’s non-fictional narrative about British abolitionism, *Bury the Chains*, reveals a multitude of the actual persons and historical milestones that Hill weaves together. *The Book of Negroes* seems to subscribe to the idealized notion that one has relatively easy access to the past through the plethora of documents left behind. It appears that Aminata has not incurred any major losses in memory because Hill unifies the findings of his research in a continuous narrative without any substantial gaps, implying that his telling of history is nearly consummate.⁸ Thus, the novelist relies on a chronological framework that garners its authority from indisputable proof like The Book of Negroes passenger list itself. Though Hill succeeds in investing his themes with nuances and his characters with agency like other writers of neo-slave narratives, his writing actually seems to reinscribe the objectivist historiography that Walter Benjamin discounts. Similar to the particular

⁸In contradistinction to Hill’s portrayal of the past as accessible, the celebrated writer Dionne Brand’s *The Map to the Door of No Return*, a quasi-autobiographical fiction that meditates on the struggle of a Trinidadian-Canadian to learn of her cultural heritage before the era of slavery. Her textual collage exemplifies the notion that the transplantation of slaves and immigration of Caribbeans afterwards has resulted in a disjunction in knowledge between the past and present that cannot be overcome as the door to early history remains closed.

historicists that Benjamin objects to, Hill is concerned with verisimilitude and sequential time. From this perspective, *The Book of Negroes* is not enriching in its aesthetic form despite its unique contributions in content.

Unlike a majority of the white characters, Aminata is sympathetic beyond racial boundaries and the prevailing tropes in other neo-slave narratives. She continues to be a midwife in New York, mostly for the black prostitutes of British officers and sailors who work in an area ironically named Holy Ground: “I despised the British officers, but knew that their women would suffer without my help. Among the officers in the British barracks at Broadway and Chambers, I became known as ‘One-pound Meena.’ With the money, I bought food, clothing and scraps of lumber to make it through a long, cold winter” (277). Midwifery becomes a reliable job for Aminata, and it provides her with income to purchase provisions and improve her makeshift dwelling in Shantytown. Yet clearly the welfare of these women, for whom care and help will not come from anyone else, is a priority to Aminata. She chooses to involve herself in the scene of sexual exploitation in obedience to her moral conscience that wishes to respond to these other women. The British officers’ nickname One-Pound Meena negatively insinuates that Aminata’s midwifery is merely a commodity, but the establishment of her skills also suggests that she becomes a one-person branch of social justice that works alongside the British military in an endeavour to provide relief to those who suffer under white authority.

Describing the dire circumstances of pregnant women before and during the Middle Passage, bell hooks writes that: “the barbaric nature of childbearing on the slave ship was both physically harmful and psychologically demoralizing...The numbers of

black women who died during childbirth or the number of stillborn children will never be known” (18-9). hooks recaptures the sorrows particular to female slaves, and in light of the callous injustices they faced, Aminata’s traditional female role as a caregiver for women in labour embodies resistance against such horrendous fates. Aminata also induces abortions with the organic concoctions she likely learned from the maternal figure Georgia (280). This procedure perhaps raises moralistic concerns about Aminata’s actions because she could simply be preparing the women’s bodies for further sexual exploitation. In the context of Lévinas’s philosophy, altruism does not mean an end to ethical debates; the perpetual questioning of the value of an individual’s constructive or destructive actions sustains ethics. Despite the potential issues involved in Aminata’s treatments, the scenes of female doctoring in *The Book of Negroes* revives the possible compassion and sisterly support that women offered one another during this era of bodily exploitation. Aminata apparently inhabits the limiting gender roles traditionally assigned to eighteenth-century women, but her subservience extends beyond the domestic sphere into exceptional circumstances when nurturing and generosity are not commonplace. In fact, it is the humility of Aminata’s actions that makes her non-threatening to slave masters and sailors, therefore allowing her to perform her deeds subversively within the domains of patriarchal power.

Hill imaginatively envisions how slaves educated each other as well. Aminata’s literacy contributes to her position of agency because she comes to teach other Negroes how to read and write, showing how literacy can lead to liberation. In Charlestown, she teaches Samuel, the son of Dolly, the woman with whom she shares a room on Lindo’s property in Virginia (215). *The Book of Negroes* does not mention Samuel again after this

scene, but one may imagine that Aminata's gift of literacy potentially elevates his stature in the eyes of his overseers or masters, making his enslavement less brutal, as reading and writing save Aminata from dire circumstances. Literacy may not appear to be a necessity to slaves distracted by their miseries, but exposure to the news or political texts can also foster political consciousness. Aminata reads her students the Virginia governor's proclamation, which promises blacks freedom if they fight for the British against the Yankees in the American Revolutionary War (268). While a political education may lead to blacks uprising against the British or Americans, Aminata educates her black students about current events, informing them of their options. Reading then becomes the means by which to acquire a measure of control over one's future. After responding to an advertisement calling for volunteer teachers at the Trinity Church, Aminata works with a white authority figure, a minister, to establish a social organization in the service of disadvantaged blacks in Shantytown (258). Rather than tending to her own concerns, she challenges the systemic rule of keeping blacks uneducated by operating a makeshift place of instruction.

Slave narratives often include a white figure who teaches the title slave how to read and write just as Solomon Lindo teaches Aminata, but Hill adds a twist to this convention by making his black protagonist the teacher of other slaves, tracing a legacy of literate blacks. *The Book of Negroes* encourages its audience to contemplate the countless ways that (former) slaves united to lighten each other's hardships including through the restorative ideal of education. In *Beloved*, Denver feels alienated from other students at school when one boy, Nelson Lord, expresses his curiosity about her mother's notorious deed, but, prior to his question, Denver escapes the isolating and suffocating

environment at home through the pride and pleasure she gains from writing (Morrison 102-3). Learning facilitates emancipation from the repressed traumas, and Frantz Fanon's work offers a suitable example because decolonization and rebellion against European empires did not transpire only through violence. The colonized also strengthen their front through writing and reading political works during their subjugation in hope for the future (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 167). Hill's depiction of literacy pays homage to the redemptive power of such edifying literature that liberates the mind from fallacious myths the oppressors propagandize about the colonized.

The Book of Negroes clearly contains themes relevant to the field of postcolonial literature, but it has not earned significant critical responses from academics perhaps because it qualifies as a middlebrow novel. However, I propose that the author is not necessarily seeking scholarly recognition. His target audience possibly subsists of the mainstream demographics that purchase the book and likely find inspiration reading about Aminata's feats while learning about hitherto unknown facts about Black history. In addition, the teacher's guide of *The Book of Negroes*, which is intended for secondary school educators, emphasizes the didactic aims of the novelist. There also exists an illustrated edition that compiles images of the archived documents, recovered testimonies, and drawings that Hill found in his research. The author's pedagogical text does not involve the aesthetic complexity that scholarly critics typically gravitate towards. However, Chris Bongie considers studying these marginalized works popular in the mainstream to redirect postcolonial studies to the materiality of literature, such as how commodification, consumerism, and diverse readerships function in cultural production (312). These empirical concerns might render the study of literature more

relevant to contemporary issues of social injustices and thereby potentially “repoliticize” the field as increasingly oppositional to the hegemonic forces of global capitalism (Bongie 21-3). Lévinas sees art as frozen and disengaged with politics and society as though the subject matter in representation can have no referent in contemporary reality or lasting impact on the audience intellectually and affectively (Eaglestone 108-9). Yet I suggest that while the desire to fill in the lacunae in common knowledge circulating about slavery and colonialism holds less appeal in its aesthetic simplicity, Hill’s ethical goal is political in its potential to inform the younger and older generations with a nuanced portrayal of the past and hopefully transform the ignorance or insensitivity of the reading public into a profound appreciation of the historical Other.

My analysis continues to demonstrate these nuances in the potential growth in knowledge, consciousness, and thereby agency of the black slave, which in addition illustrate the overlapping positions of the vulnerable Other and the relatively free and privileged subject. I draw out an unspoken implication in “Peace and Proximity” wherein Lévinas speaks of the European subject as the self when he writes that “the conscience of the European is henceforth guilty” (163). Since a number of the catastrophes that Lévinas names occur on the European continent, Europeans are both perpetrators and victims. Therefore, through *The Book of Negroes*, I indicate that the binary opposition between the Lévinasian positions of self and other offers a limited understanding because, depending on the historical context, one can be both a privileged subject and injured party simultaneously. Sethe in *Beloved* proves so when she becomes the victim of the torture that the resurrected Beloved visits upon her as a consequence for the violent assumption of agency that allows the mother to murder her own child. Writing on

postmodern slave narratives, Timothy Spaulding asserts that “Beloved as a ghost represents open-ended and highly ambiguous dimensions of the past...She stands as a sliding and almost incoherent signifier of slavery—one that resists narrative stability” (66). The ethics of Morrison’s novel partly lies in the indefinable Beloved who symbolizes other helpless souls like the “girl locked up in the house with a whiteman” that Stamp Paid reports finally escaped, making it difficult for the reader to pin Beloved down as any one victim or agent (235).

However, Aminata as a capable individual enacts ethics in another way. Aminata continues to endure suffering and impoverishment like the image of Lévinas’s Other, yet she heeds the call to responsibility during spontaneous events by acting as a modest heroine. A riot leads to crowds of white men lynching and killing blacks in Birchtown, but she saves Jason from being hung in a tree as “I waited a few minutes to see if anybody else was coming...[and then I] ran to him and hurried to loosen the knots binding his wrists to the tree” (343). Unlike Ben Henson, who bravely stands up to the white mob and dies as a result (339), Aminata does not try to confront and dissuade the belligerent white men from their murderous racism. She does not try to correct all; she works for the safety of one whom she can effectively do something for. In Sierra Leone, Aminata comes face-to-face with the newly enslaved Africans whom the residents of the colony watch board the slave ships in coffles. Thomas Peters, a fellow resident cannot bear the sight.⁹ Peters accuses John Clarkson of “sanctioning the trade of men.’...‘Everything

⁹ The historical Thomas Peters was instrumental in petitioning for the journey to Sierra Leone with British abolitionists, and he wanted the settlers to govern themselves rather than rely on the Sierra Leone Company (Hochschild 200-1). Peters was concerned with seeking reparations in the aftermath of slavery by facilitating the way to a refuge of sorts. However, Hill curiously diminishes Thomas Peters’s role, portraying his personality as short-tempered and aggressive. Though his novel might accurately recapture the salient points of the eighteenth-century, the author does distort facts in his revisionism, which hinders the reader’s access to the finer details.

about me opposes the trade in slaves, but we have to pick our battles' ...I admired Peters for objecting to the slave trade. But for the time being, I felt that Clarkson was right" (379). Aminata concurs with John that one should not engage in futile battles with the slave traders. The two future abolitionists suggest that refraining from action does not necessarily mean that one is complicit or apathetic.

This dilemma that the residents of Freetown feel, whether to act or not, embodies the complex position of one relatively free and privileged in the times of slavery. Peters eventually tries to stop the slave traders, but he is shot and dies (399). In direct opposition to Peters's choice of spontaneous revolt, Olaudah Equiano actually works as an overseer on a plantation in Jamaica: "All my poor countrymen, the slaves, when they heard of my leaving them, were very sorry, as I had always treated them with care and affection, and did everything I could to comfort the poor creatures, and render their condition easy" (194). Though it might be easy to condemn his participation, Equiano treats his fellow blacks humanely (at least according to his own report), making their enslavement more bearable albeit temporarily. Aminata seems to inhabit the middle ground, neither rebelling nor partaking but performing small acts of charity:

A girl in the coffle looked at me pleadingly...Looking at me directly, she called out a few words...although I did not know her language, I knew what she wanted: water, food, and most of all, help getting back to her family...I longed to give her water but had nothing with me but the clothes on my body...I slipped the red scarf off my head and tied it quickly around the girl's wrist. (396-7)

This scene epitomizes the face-to-face encounter that rests at the heart of Lévinas's philosophy of ethics. Though the girl cannot actually communicate with Aminata, understanding is perhaps not necessary because Aminata can guess at the girl's pleas. Lévinas explicates that "the face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse" (*Totality and Infinity* 66). The presence of the Other is already an address to the individual as the vulnerable human being does not need to utter actual words to invoke responsibility. The Face of the Other is not in essence the girl's literal face but whatever calls Aminata to acknowledge the destitution of this fellow human being and demands a response of goodness.

Again, there is uncertainty with altruism. Though Aminata may have deduced the slave's needs, one cannot necessarily fully understand the extent of one's responsibility or entirely know the desires of the Other. In addition, the individual can always refuse; Lévinas's ethics is not prescriptive. As Diane Perpich clarifies, one "may turn away...but not in complete indifference or with the certainty that it is none of my affair or, more exactly, without it having even crossed my mind that I should do something to help" (90). The individual can misconstrue or disregard the pleas of the Other, but the question of responsibility nonetheless remains. Aminata responds by giving the girl a piece of cloth for comfort and to protect her female modesty. In accordance with Lévinas's description of the self, Aminata is willing to help to the point of a small sacrifice of her own belongings. A scholarly critic on Lévinas, Roger Burggraeve draws attention to a lesser known concept of Lévinas's that befits Aminata's generosity of spirit: "Lévinas speaks about the ethical necessity of 'the small goodness'...This goodness is small also because it is anything but spectacular. It wants to be anything but total. It is about a modest,

partial goodness, with no pretensions to solve everything once and for all” (644).

Aminata does not claim to be a heroine herself; she does not hope for a groundbreaking reform in the British Empire’s role overseas through these small actions. Though she cannot save or even substantially help all the newly enslaved, her kindness challenges the oppressive system that disdains the humanization of its captives.

Aminata initially returns to Africa out of a desire to rediscover her childhood village Bayo. Her desire to return home is a somewhat self-absorbed fantasy in search of a freedom isolated from the brutal realities of the eighteenth-century world. Aminata, though, never returns home, but *Beloved* suggests that even if a former black slave manages to return to the origins of his or her family (house 124 for Sethe), the history of violence inescapably haunts one as the Gothic element in the novel emphasizes. It seems unrealistic that one black subject could accomplish so many acts of goodwill, but Aminata is in part a symbolical figure for those individuals who sought freedom in a social mode of being as translators mitigating the suffering of fellow Africans; midwives acknowledging women neglected in their pregnancies; teachers improving the mental and thereby physical welfare of (former) slaves; and modest heroes or heroines performing small acts of goodness to undermine the system of slavery. Aminata’s character proves that the positions of the self and Other overlap as she is both a suffering and able individual. Though altruism is not without its own ramifications and does not wholly resolve all ethical complexities, Hill’s novel imaginatively remembers the possible benevolent actions within histories of violence that also count as moments of liberation.

Beloved does contain a number of scenes celebrating sociality such as Paul D discovering large black families living together: “Once, in Maryland, he met four families

of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years...He watched them with awe and envy” (Morrison 219). Encountering those more fortunate than him, Paul D learns of familial relationships and havens that have weathered the calamities. However, Morrison places atrocities at the forefront of her novel rather than the empowering capacity of communal bonds. Conversely, Hill perhaps renders the historical brutalities more tolerable for the reader by relegating the catastrophes to the background of Aminata’s story. Yet his literary practice of ethics foregrounds the altruistic events that signify as resistance against the inhumanities of slavery and imperialism. Paul D recalls all his nearly indescribable hardships and then asks Stamp Paid, another ex-slave: ““How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?” ‘All he can,’ said Stamp Paid. ‘All he can’” (Morrison 235). Whereas Morrison’s novel asks how much horror can a black slave bear, the question that *The Book of Negroes* poses is how much good can a black subject do and offers the same answer as Stamp Paid—all Aminata can.

Despite the philosophical questions raised about the ethics of altruism and the thematic concerns introduced through the harrowing adventures of the protagonist, Hill’s novel does not lure academics as Morrison’s text does through its artistic complexity. *Beloved* has generated innumerable analyses in scholarly articles, just as its ghost conveys endless meanings about slavery whereas Baby Suggs, Aminata’s possible equivalent, does not. Hill’s aesthetics may be found wanting as he chooses to adopt the structure of realism that grounds itself in factuality, the idealized notion of an accessible past, and supposed objectivity of first-person narration, potentially overlooking the value of penetrating psychological sketches and experimental form. Yet the Lévinasian project of peace that I argue *The Book of Negroes* fulfills suggests that potential benefits lie in

placing the ethical efficacy of fiction as the foremost criteria for valuable literature, more so than aesthetics, in order cultivate a sensitivity to the historical Other through what may be called a middlebrow novel.

Conclusion: Further Possibilities

As I have illustrated through my reading of *The Book of Negroes* from a Lévinasian perspective, British imperialism justifies the dehumanizing exploitation of bodies and minds through the formulation of peace as dominance over others that perpetrates itself through devastating violence. I contend that Hill's text repudiates this discourse. Although his protagonist is unable to extricate herself from all dire circumstances, Aminata embodies pacifism in her decision to refrain from vengeance, defensive aggression, or the vilification of the agents of the slave trade, demonstrating an alternative response to the surrounding cruelties. Through Aminata's instances of luck and personal claim to destiny, the novel also acknowledges the fortunes and mental fortitude that likely aided slaves in escaping or at least enduring the tragic fates. Furthermore, a kind of Lévinasian retrospection that infuses history with the subjectivity of memory, which manifests itself as a "djelic" mode of remembrance in the fictional autobiography, commemorates other aspects of the slaves apart from their reactions to the catastrophes and brutalities.

For instance, Aminata inhabits different categories of identity in a universal guise, but paradoxically she does not entirely conform to Western and African traditional gender roles, any of the Abrahamic religious faiths, or the linguistic and ethnic identities described in the novel. This multifaceted representation of her elusive identity, which I suggest Hill accomplishes through a brand of cosmopolitanism, serves to protect her singular otherness against the conceptual violence of reductive discourses or interpretations. Hill's literary practice of ethics is further evident in Aminata's altruism as

the lead character reifies Lévinas's concept of small goodness by improving the welfare of the many others whom she responds to. Her altruistic deeds illustrate Hill's endeavour to highlight the possible modes of resistance as a translator, teacher, midwife, and modest heroine, which all function within the bounds of the system to enact the justice that ethical peace entails. The author's interpretation of Black history, I argue, puts forth ethics as a means to avoid reinscribing the violence of slavery through the tropes commonplace in other slave narratives, which often highlight the destructive agency of slaves alongside the brutalizing mechanisms of imperial structures. Rather than primarily aiming to transmit the horrors and traumas of the slave trade to later generations fictionalized in the novel or contemporary audiences, the novelist's approach suggests that the spectres of the atrocities are not the only significant legacies. *The Book of Negroes* retreats from the centrality of catastrophes that potentially overshadows the diverse characteristics and circumstances of the innumerable slaves.

Lévinas's ethics serves as a fruitful lens with which to evaluate the fictionalization of Black history, in contrast to a largely postcolonial or diasporic analysis. I do not conclude that Lévinas's philosophy is easily transformed into a fixed methodology because his ethics is not prescriptive or unambiguous; the guiding principles of pacifism and altruism do not guarantee ethical peace as Aminata's demonstrations of agency prove. Moreover, the application of his philosophy requires a renegotiation of the boundaries between the positions of the self and other that are overlapping or interchangeable depending on the historical context or vantage point. Yet despite Lévinas's own disavowal of artistic representation as lacking in ethical value, his elaborate concepts prove illuminating. They lead to a discovery of the possibilities of

“peace,” which the themes that *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds to profoundly appreciate the complexities of the historical Other exemplify.

Arguably, Hill’s novel has its own limitations because it does not offer a glimpse of crises in conscience like Olaudah Equiano’s narrative or possess imaginative psychological profiles of its characters and an experimental style like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Traditional and neo-slave narratives such as these tend to exhibit an ethical dimension by placing the horrors of slavery, rebellious capacities of the slaves, religious dilemmas, and aesthetics at the forefront. Although its potential standing as accessible middlebrow fiction exposes what the novel lacks, Hill’s work enriches his audience’s understanding about Black history by focusing on a globalized, community-oriented narrative that depicts constructive female agency along with a broad range of scenarios that slaves realistically faced. My study of *The Book of Negroes* contemplates how writers might draw nearer to these strangers long gone and pauses to consider the qualities of an historical black identity not entirely defined by the epic conflicts of slavery and colonialism. This examination of the novel calls attention to how slaves possibly resisted dehumanization without completely capitulating to the violence. Being unconventional, my analysis prompts the question of which other interpretive lenses can be utilized in reading Black literature to reveal further nuances of the historical Other and which aesthetic frameworks can lead to writers representing histories of violence ethically.

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