

# Talking Translation

## An Interview with Lawrence Hill

Lawrence Hill, “a compulsive storyteller in the oral, African-American tradition”<sup>1</sup> is celebrated for both his works of fiction and non-fiction, which include *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), his novel *Any Known Blood* (1997), and *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (2013), in the Massey Lecture series. His best-selling novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007) garnered the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize; its American edition, *Someone Knows My Name*, was a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. This epic story has moved readers around the world—in six different languages—and recently reached television audiences as well.<sup>2</sup> Torn from her West African village as a young girl and sold into slavery on a plantation in South Carolina, Aminata Diallo escapes the cruelty of Master Appleby, leaving the nurturing arms of his slave Georgia, and becomes the “servant” of Solomon Lindo in Charleston. Her remarkable journey continues north to Manhattan, on to Nova Scotia, back to the shores of Africa, and finally to London, where she addresses a group of British abolitionists, and meets the King and Queen of England.

When I sat down with Lawrence Hill, I sought his insight on questions I had raised with my students in the context of an undergraduate course in English-French translation. For example, what challenges does the translator face when working with historical fiction, with passages in dialect, or when deliberating over important lexical choices and searching for *le mot juste*? Much of what follows focuses on Carole Noël’s French translation of *The Book of Negroes, Aminata* (2011). Winner of the 1986 John Glassco

Translation Prize for *On n'en meurt pas* by Russian author Olga Boutenko and short-listed for the Governor General's Award for *Ce qu'il nous reste* (2003), her translation of Aislinn Hunter's novel *What's Left Us* (2001), Noël recently translated Hill's 2013 Massey Lecture *Blood: The Stuff of Life* as *Le Sang, essence de la vie* (2014). She has said her greatest challenge in *Aminata* was preserving the *musicalité* of the slaves' dialogue; she wanted these passages to ring true (*sonnent vrai*)—but admits she was not wholly satisfied with the results (Noël, "Traduire" 1).

Hill and I also briefly discussed his first novel, *Some Great Thing* (1992, 2009), translated by Robert Paquin as *De grandes choses* (1995) and recently republished as *Un grand destin* (2012). This lighthearted, yet insightful story of a young journalist working for the *Winnipeg Free Press* at the height of French-English linguistic tensions features a cast of colourful characters, including one endearing reporter from West Africa named Yoyo. A translator of novels, advertising, poetry, television and film, Paquin was able to preserve much of the humour and the authenticity of Hill's dialogue.

This is not an interview in the traditional sense; this is an informal yet earnest exchange between a writer and a professor about what can be lost and gained in translation. It sheds some light on the nature of the writer–translator relationship, the creativity demanded of them both, and the knowledge they share: that their work can never be perfect.

Kerry Lappin-Fortin (KLF): *Aminata*, the French translation of your award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes*, won Radio-Canada's *Combat des livres* in 2013 and was short-listed for the Prix Fetkann in France that same year. This is testament to the importance of your book and to your tremendous talent as a storyteller. To what degree do you feel this success reflects the quality of Carole Noël's translation? Has your book been equally well received in other languages?

Lawrence Hill (LH): There are only a few countries where the translation has done well: Norway, the Netherlands, it did well in Quebec, but not so much in France—that's a hard market to crack. There's a perception [in France] that literature coming from Quebec will somehow be less well written. But *Présence africaine éditions* in Paris made very few changes to Carole Noël's translation, so this is testament to the quality of Carole's work.

KLF: You have told me you enjoy a good relationship with your French and Spanish translators and can actively participate in the translation process because you are fluent in these languages.

LH: I do read the drafts and try to answer the translator's questions. In fact, Carole Noël is just finishing up the translation of *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, and she occasionally had comments or questions for me, sometimes on something quite idiomatic. For instance, in *Blood* I used one of my grandfather's expressions: "Prop me up on every leaning side" (354) [he smiles] and I had to explain to Carole what this meant: "I'm not doing too well here and could use all the help you can give me." When she was translating *The Book of Negroes*, I think I was helpful with the dialogue. That is what we spent most of the time talking about. For example, it's important to see Aminata's progress in English over the course of the novel.

KLF: Language does play an important role, particularly when Aminata first arrives in South Carolina. Georgia teaches her how to speak with the *buckra* [the white man], using a non-standard variety of American English—and warns her never to speak too correctly. She also teaches her to use the Gullah dialect as a secret code among slaves. The treatment of the period dialogue and these various codes of communication was no doubt the most challenging aspect of the translator's work. Did you expect something necessarily would be "lost in translation"?

LH: We [Carole Noël and I] were invited to participate in a translators' conference in Banff [in June 2010] where we discussed the problem of translating the dialogue. Carole felt what is called "le petit-nègre" wouldn't be a good solution because it's too simplistic, a caricature—and I agreed with her.<sup>3</sup>

KLF: Yes. Let's look first at the language lesson Georgia gives Aminata (Hill, *Book of Negroes* 128-29), using three phrases in Gullah: *Bruddah tief de hog, De hebby dry drought 'most racttify de cawn* and *De buckgra gib we de gam; demse'f nyam de hin'quawtuh*. Georgia explains this means: "Brother done steal the hog," "The long drought done spoil the corn," and "The white people give us the front quarter, they done eat the hindquarter themselves." Then, from that point on, *you* become the translator, and the reader is to understand their private conversations continue in Gullah.

LH: Yes, that's right, because I didn't want to write in idiom.

KLF: Of course. But these three phrases were quite a problem. Noël rendered them in a form of non-standard French: *Frè' voler cochon, Gross' chalèr gaspié maï, Boukras donner nous devant; gâder derrière*, then she had Georgia explain in quite standard language that they meant: "frère a volé le cochon," "La longue chaleur a gaspillé le maïs," "Les Blancs nous ont donné le quartier de devant et ont gardé pour eux le quartier arrière" (*Aminata* 161). And then the novel goes on, and Noël had the task of attempting to translate

countless passages of non-standard dialogue into some kind of non-standard French. And somehow her translation of Gullah and her translation of the second code of non-standard language had to appear markedly different in the French. I wonder, since so few examples of Gullah appear in the novel, could the translator not simply leave them as is? And in doing so, preserve some of the authenticity of the original text?

LH: You mean leave them in Gullah in translation?

KLF: Yes, much like Richard Philcox did when translating some of Maryse Condé's novels. He left passages in Guadeloupean Creole *en créole* in the English (see for example Condé, *Victoire*). Their meaning was always clear from the context (Lappin-Fortin 541). And the meaning of your Gullah passages would have been clear also; Georgia provided the translation of these phrases to both Aminata and the reader. Do you know if any of your other translators took this approach?

LH: I don't think so. I suppose what you describe would be an option, but remember that an attentive English reader is going to be able to understand a good part of those few words of Gullah—I mean *tief-thief-steal-thieve*, it's pretty easy—but certainly a Francophone wouldn't understand, unless they spoke English too. It's certainly a possibility. I've never really considered that before—it wasn't proposed to me—but instinctively, I'd rather see it translated.

KLF: It's astonishing to think about this young girl leaving her village, speaking both Bamanankan and Fulfulde, her parents' languages, and then learning both Gullah and English in such short time.

LH: Yes, that whole issue of language acquisition fascinates me. . . . I've seen few novels about the slave experience pay attention to the skills slaves had to display and exercise and really, you're talking about some pretty severe intellectual gymnastics. And we rarely imagine or stop to admire the challenges that slaves must have faced. Just think of it, you're stepping off a slave ship, half dead, and suddenly you're on an alien planet and you have to learn one or two new languages and even the people who look like you who've also been stolen from your homeland can't communicate with you because they come from another part of Africa. And so the challenges must have been elevated and the *prouesse intellectuelle* required to make that transition is something we rarely ponder. So I kept it in mind while writing the novel.

KLF: Well, certainly it's admirable to see Aminata, already speaking two African languages, go from a lesson in Gullah to saying to Georgia (*Book of Negroes* 140): "I done tell you before. My mama done teach me to catch babies," and

to Dolly (*Book of Negroes* 197): “You get big wit’ chile, yo feets swole up.” Then not long after, she produces perfectly grammatical, formal English when speaking to Lindo: “I do not know from where I come . . . I do not understand where South Carolina is in relation to my homeland” (*Book of Negroes* 209). The linguistic skills she displays are truly remarkable, and certainly the English reader appreciates how complex her world is, because we too are asked to follow and understand these different varieties of language. Perhaps keeping a few phrases in Gullah in the translation would help *that* readership feel some disorientation, a greater sense of linguistic discomfort. It’s something I’ve discussed with my students. What are the options translators have and what are the consequences? And what is the author’s intent? You were trying to make a point, weren’t you?

LH: Yes, I’m trying to show the astounding mental gymnastics of these slaves, and I’m trying to tip my hat in respect to the work they had to undergo to survive. Also, most people of African heritage, including in Canada, will have had some experience watching their elders slip in and out of different registers in English. My father had a doctorate in sociology from U of T, so he could speak in academic jargon like any other scholar, but at family functions in the South, he slipped into Black idiom. He was no longer speaking as he would in public as Chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Verbally, he became a different person. . . . And that’s not an uncommon thing to see people slipping from one register of language to another. It’s not limited to Black folks; I mean when I lived in Quebec, on one hand, I could hear a university prof speaking with grammatical French in the classroom, and then I could hear him joking around later with friends in the hallway in *joual*—and why not? People commonly slip and slide among various registers of speech, so it’s normal that Aminata should speak in one way with a fellow slave at the back of the house and then another way with Lindo—especially since Lindo has given her permission; he and his wife have let her know that she’s safe in terms of how she speaks and shouldn’t have to pretend to be illiterate, or pretend she only speaks in a Black idiom. And so they open up the vista of language that she can use in the household without being punished for it. And so, to me it’s normal that she would slide around like that.

KLF: This was very well done in the novel, and the characters—Dolly, Georgia, Claybourne—sound pitch-perfect to me. The dialogue brings them to life. But I find, with no disrespect to the translator, that it doesn’t come off nearly as well in the French. Of course, Noël drops the *ne* in negations: *Sais pas*. . . “Si tu travailles pas, tu meurs, si tu fais pas le travail . . . tu meurs . . .”

(*Aminata* 168). Or she elides the pronouns: *Y, t'es, t'as, j'suis*. . . . Georgia says: "Qu'est-ce que t'as à me casser les oreilles . . . Fille, j'suis morte de fatigue. . . . Dans ton pays, les Africains y jacassent tout le temps?" (*Aminata* 168), but this is all just familiar French. It's a good start, and certainly these are strategies other translators have used, for example Maud Sissung in her translation of Alex Haley's *Roots* (Noël "Présentation" 2). However my students and I have wondered what else could have been done, if anything, to render the Black idiom more authentically in French.

LH: Yes, it doesn't have the same colour, for sure. And so that comes back to the second half of the question you asked a few minutes ago, that is: "What is lost?" We could talk 'til the cows come home about what's lost in translation, but I always think about what's gained. What's gained are the readers, new markets, people who come to your work who would never have discovered it because it wasn't published in French, because Carole didn't translate it. So what's gained is at least a possibility to engage with other readers in other languages. For sure, you can't deliver the original in a translation; you're delivering an interpretation of it. I've read books in their original French or Spanish versions, and then their translations in English. I know that some things may be lost. . . . I always prefer to read them in the original. Sometimes I'll compare translations because I'm interested in how it all works out. So, for sure, you lose the original voice and you lose some idiom, and it's hard to match that, especially if you're talking about Black idiom. Carole negotiated the difficult parts of the translation as best she could. I think she opted for a fairly conservative, unambitious translation in those parts rather than overreaching. Once I was taking a course in translation at UBC where I studied—it was a third year undergraduate French course—and I remember the French prof, in asking us to try and translate something, told us to keep this in mind: "Plutôt un chien vivant qu'un dinosaure mort." . . . So better to not be too ambitious and to try to deliver something simple and at least have it be understood, rather than overreach and come crashing down and have a disastrous translation because you're trying too hard. Carole followed that dictum to not try too hard, to not be too fancy or too literary in her translation. So they're not ambitious translations, they're fairly faithful, and they're fairly cautious. Especially when we're dealing with idiom and dialogue. But I understand that. That was her way of respecting the original. I mean, Carole is a translator. She's a translator *pure et parfaite*. She's not a poet or a novelist, she's a *translator*. So, she's not going to overreach, or try to be more literary, or as literary as the original, when it's not required.

She's just trying to get the job done, I think, in the most straightforward way possible. Those are the tools that she works with. Pura López Colomé, who's now translating the book into Spanish, is a well-known Mexican poet. She can bring a certain literary playfulness to her translation because she can draw on her background as a poet. Every translator brings to the table a different set of inclinations and aptitudes.

KLF: That was actually one of the questions I had for you. In your interview with [University of Waterloo professor] Winfried Siemerling, when asked what you see for the future, you said someday you would like to translate a Québécois writer ("Conversation" 26). I thought, well, you have a BA in Economics from Laval, an MA in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins, you're fluent in French, and you're a great writer. So the tools you would be bringing to the translation process would be your writing skills and your knowledge of the languages. On the other hand, a translator could possess formal training in translation, and understand all the techniques and theoretical aspects, but not do creative writing. So, how do you see that *métier du traducteur*? What would be the ideal mix, in your view—for literary translation in particular?

LH: I would love to translate a work by a Québécois as I mentioned to Winfried, especially someone who is not known in English Canada, someone I could do double-duty for: translate and also introduce to English-speaking Canadians. But I have my own limited baggage. I would bring my *élan* as a novelist, but I don't have any formal translation training. I believe I could do a good job, an adequate job, my own job, especially with a backup of informal advisors telling me where I goofed up. I'm a consultative sort of writer. . . . I'm also a journalist in my background, so if the writer's alive, I'd engage with him or her and ask a bunch of questions to make sure I wasn't making mistakes.

KLF: Yes, knowing the author's intent is key, isn't it?

LH: If you can. I mean often you're translating dead writers! But if I could ask someone something, I'd like to. . . . There's a Canadian writer named Wayne Grady. He's written many books in English, he's a novelist, and he's often translated French writers into English. When he was longlisted for the Giller Prize last year, one of his translations into English was also nominated for the Giller Prize in translation, so he had two books up for the Giller. Wayne's not a formal translator, but he's done a lot of translation. And so he brings his work as a non-fiction writer and a novelist to the fore.

KLF: I had a question along that line. Baudelaire adopted an instinctive approach when he translated Poe *à la Baudelaire*, whereas Marguerite Yourcenar went

about her translation of *The Waves* in a very systematic way, attempting to recreate Virginia Woolf's style by looking at how she had played with language to evoke the sounds of the sea and the wind (Gauvin 185-86). So, literary translation can be approached in different ways and is a great challenge, isn't it?

LH: It is a great challenge and it's a work of great intellect as well as artistry. We've often talked about how you can get a different sense of a work depending on who has translated it. So to a certain degree, every translation will vary even if you're talking about formally trained translators. A person's inclinations, biases, strengths, and weaknesses will affect the tenor of the translation. So, I think that just as you have to look at a novel as a work that's going to have its imperfections and idiosyncrasies, a translation will have its imperfections and idiosyncrasies too. A translation is a work of art too. So, a novelist would probably bring something different to the table than a classically trained translator. On the other hand, if you're a thoughtful, artistically mature person, then I would hope that you're working as closely as possible with the text and you're not creating any more than what the translation requires you to create. You *are* creating, of course, you're creating a way to say something in another language, but hopefully you're being as respectful as possible, not overreaching, and not inventing, unless you're pitching it as something other than a translation. If you're calling it something else, well, that's another matter. Ah, the Calgary writer who lives in Paris. . . Nancy Huston, she doesn't even use the typical word "translation" when she describes what she does with her works.

KLF: Perhaps we could discuss, hypothetically, how one could go about translating your colourful character Yoyo, the reporter, in *Some Great Thing*. Part of his considerable charm comes from the formality of his West African speech patterns, and there are frequent allusions to his accent, even if you don't try to suggest this in any concrete way in his English. Now Robert Paquin preserved that formality well in his translation. But what if the translator were familiar with West African idiom, and attempted to evoke Yoyo's accent in some way. Would you consider this a liberty the translator should *not* take? Or could this potentially enhance the translated text?

LH: As they say with regard to fiction: "When it works, it works." It's hard to comment in the abstract what-if. I suppose it could be done beautifully, or it could be too much. But if Robert Paquin had been a West African writer with a whole access to West African idiom, he might have brought that in the way he translated some of the idiomatic bits into French. We have to



remember, we want the book to be read, understood, and appreciated in a primarily Western context. It's hard to answer that question theoretically. I'd have to see it. But again, we come back to the issue: "Can different translators with different backgrounds and cultures bring different things to the page and offer different possibilities to the reader?" For sure! I guess that's, again, why it's an art as opposed to a science.

KLF: I read *Some Great Thing* a few years ago, but just recently read the French translation, *Un grand destin*, and I was delighted to hear the Québécois voice, for example: "ce gars-là . . . s'en vient" (11), "Mange de la marde" . . . "tes rien qu'un ostie de nègre pareil" (58-59). To me, this is essential to keeping the novel authentic, given that it takes place in Winnipeg, in the context of Franco-Anglo linguistic tensions, and that some of the characters are *Franco-Manitobains*. Anything other than a Canadian variety of French would have been out of place. . . . Would you agree?

LH: Oh yes! It was important to me, and I did notice it, and I was very happy about it. That was the first time I had something translated formally, for major publication. Robert came to my home in Oakville and stayed with me for a few days, and he said: "I'd like to hang out with you and get to know you a little bit . . . see how you speak and just understand your voice a little more since I'm translating *Some Great Thing*." So, here's a man that I'd never met arriving at my door as I did at yours today, and we welcomed him; he was a wonderful guy and he wanted to make that personal connection because he felt it would help him in his work as a translator. And I believe it did. I was happy with the way he played with the language and happy with the Québécois idiom. It's a very Canadian book, a very political book about language politics in Canada, so why not have it translated in a colourful, bold way by a Québécois translator? Robert and Carole are very different people and brought their very different aptitudes to the page. I think Carole is more professorial and Robert is probably a little more *flyé*, as you'd say in Quebec, he's a little more playful and he brought that playfulness to the page.

KLF: And there was a comic undercurrent, a *ton ludique* in that novel.

LH: There was, and humour is tricky to translate. That was a rollicking novel and Robert had a good time translating it. He remains a friend. He was involved with touching up the translation when it was republished a year or two ago by *les Éditions de la Pleine Lune*.

KLF: Do you know what types of corrections were made?

LH: I think they were fairly modest. I was told by the publisher they were minor as opposed to major revisions. She was the one steering that process; she

felt some passages needed to be strengthened, and she had the title changed [from *De grandes choses*] to *Un grand destin*.

KLF: That's interesting. I often remind my students that there's no such thing as a perfect translation. But at some point you have to hand it in and walk away. I found it quite moving when Carole Noël quoted the French poet Paul Valéry in her address at University of Ottawa ("Traduire" 4): "On n'achève pas un poème, on l'abandonne."

LH: [laughs] That's beautiful!

KLF: It's really the translator's fate, and perhaps the writer's fate . . .

LH: Yes.

KLF: I've heard authors say that if they were to sit down and read one of their books, they'd immediately want to rewrite it.

LH: Every time I go to speak somewhere, if I'm reading aloud from a published novel, I always adapt it when I read it because I feel it doesn't work to read it aloud the way it appears on the page. There're some lines in it that are funky or redundant or impede the narrative drive and should be taken out for the reading. And so, I do adapt the page, modestly, when I'm reading from it. So, we all kind of play with our work, even post-publication. . . . "It's never finished, it's abandoned." That's beautiful!

KLF: It is, and as a translator or as a writer, you have to accept that, don't you?

LH: Kind of like a child. Is a child ever perfect? No child that I've brought into the world . . . [laughs]. But hopefully they're not abandoned either! But we bring them to a point and then we send them out into the world, although in their imperfections, and hopefully their imperfections will be part of what makes them beautiful and unique.

KLF: Well, Maryse Condé has been quoted as saying that when she finishes a work, that's it. She lets go. Apparently it's sometimes hard for her translator-husband to get her to answer questions, because she doesn't see the translated work as being hers anymore (qtd. in Kadish and Massardier-Kenney 755; see also Lappin-Fortin 536).

LH: I've always been so touched that someone would bring my work out in another language that I've never refused a request to answer some question from a translator just because I like to cooperate, and translators are very discreet people. They're generally people not used to being in the limelight. They're respectful and focused on the work, and so, I've enjoyed the process.

KLF: Were there any specific lexical items in the *Book of Negroes* that the translator had trouble with? I'm thinking of *wench*, for example, or *catching babies*. There were terms that I found very well chosen, for either historical or

stylistic reasons, but some of their colour is lost in translation: the *medicine man* Aminata describes on the slave ship becomes a banal “doctor” (*médecin*) and she helps “deliver babies” (*elle aide les femmes à accoucher*). I wonder, during your travels in West Africa, did you ever hear another term in French that could capture some of the charm of *I catch babies* . . . or perhaps an African term that could be borrowed in the translation, much as you have used *djeli* (the traditional storyteller) in the novel?

LH: Carole did discuss many terms with me. . . . That’s a challenge. How would you translate *medicine man*? It suggests the introduction of folk medicine into medical interventions and not just a straight doctor . . . it’s a doctor steeped in folklore and folkloric culture. In the case of *baby catcher*, I believe I put Carole in touch with a midwife I knew of in Quebec to see if she could find a French term, kind of an old-fashioned term that might work, but I don’t think she found one. So I think that this is one of those instances where she played it pretty straight. I myself didn’t know of anything to recommend to her. I was happy with coming up with it in English!

KLF: *Wench* is another word which frequently appears in the novel, and it’s always derogatory, isn’t it?

LH: Yes. And it also appears in the *Book of Negroes* itself; as women were registered, the term would be used again and again. Now, I don’t think—I’m not about to excuse the British naval officers for what they did—but I don’t think being derogatory was the guiding influence when they were writing it down, I just think this was a mode of unexamined speech. . . . It’s horrific, and it’s insulting, it’s especially insulting historically, so I’m not trying to let them off the hook, but I don’t believe when a British officer was writing *wench* into the *Book of Negroes* that he was personally trying to be insulting. I think he was just using the regular offensive language that he would use on a daily basis for women, especially Black women. We find it offensive, but I think it was just used in the way so much sexist language is used, without purpose.

KLF: When Lindo wrote his ad, he chose—you chose—to use the word *wench* to describe Aminata. This is an important scene. She reacts, she asks: “What is a wench?” and he says “a woman,” and she says “Oh, so Mrs. Lindo’s also a wench?” and he insists, “No, she’s a *lady*.”

LH: Exactly, because she brings it to his attention; she challenges him. I think what we’re talking about is intent.

KLF: I ask my students to see how *wench* is translated, to track its occurrences in the novel . . .

LH: What *did* Carole use? I don't remember.

KLF: Well, when Appleby calls Aminata a "stupid no-good Guinea wench" (*Book of Negroes* 185), in the French, the derogatory tone is also clear: "toi, espèce de stupide bonne à rien de Guinée" (*Aminata* 225), and when an African wench is being sold off in the streets, the word *négresse* accomplishes the same effect. But the translation for Lindo's ad: "Obedient, sensible Guinea wench" (*Book of Negroes* 200) is translated by: "Démouille de Guinée obéissante et sensible" (*Aminata* 242).

LH: That's much more polite.

KLF: Yes! It didn't resonate well with me, and I wondered, "How did the translator arrive at that? Did she see Lindo's intent?" Also, what's interesting in that scene, in translation, is that the indignation Aminata expressed comes from the realization that *démouille* means she wasn't married, and Mrs. Lindo was. And of course she protests: "But I *am* married and I have a child! I'm not different from her!" So, it kind of works.<sup>4</sup>

LH: That's a good point. I hadn't thought about that. I wonder if Carole was thinking of the different ways that Appleby and Lindo relate to Aminata. Appleby is a straight ahead two-dimensional rapist, he doesn't bring much humanity to the story and he's not treated in a three-dimensional way. He's just straight up evil, whereas Lindo is a more complex character. On one hand, he does some atrocious things—he participates in the sale of Aminata's baby—on the other hand, he doesn't oppress her in the same way Appleby does. He continues to own her as a slave but he facilitates her learning . . . he treats her better. And so maybe Carole was trying to come up with two different words to depict this woman that would represent the two different mindsets of these slave owners: *bonne à rien* versus *démouille*. I'm not sure . . . that might have been something she was trying to get at. I don't remember having that conversation with her, but it's a very interesting point. Is *démouille* really the best way to translate it? It sounds like it was striking to you and that you thought there may have been a more appropriate word, and there may well have been. I'm sure that if you were to show Carole her translation, she might rethink a few words here and there. And why not? This happens to novelists all the time. I have seen bits of my published novels that I could fix up in retrospect. But I don't. I just move on.

KLF: Absolutely! But again: What are the translator's choices? How does she go about determining how such an important word should be translated? And . . . *sensible* . . .

LH: How did she translate *sensible*?

KLF: She translated it by *sensible*, which in French means “sensitive” rather than “possessing reason.” As I tell my students, it’s a *faux ami* (a false cognate), unless there’s something the translator knows about that period that I don’t.

LH: No, I think it’s a mistake. *Sensible* (Fr.) is different [pause]. But also, most Anglophones wouldn’t know that the word *sensible*, in English, meant something different in the context of African American slaves. *Sensible*, in twenty-first century English means your mind is ordered properly and you respond appropriately to the world around you. You’re *sensible* as opposed to *illogical*. But back then, when a slave was described as “sensible” it meant that particular slave understands English, so it’s a value, it’s a proof of that slave’s higher worth because at least they’ll understand instruction and cooperate. So *sensible* is an economic asset. I’m not saying that the word meant that with regard to other people, but it meant that with regard to African American slaves. And survival was often determined by whether or not you were deemed to be “a sensible Negro.”<sup>5</sup>

KLF: So it could have been translated: *Parle anglais?*

LH: *Comprend anglais?*

KLF: And when Appleby asks Aminata (*Book of Negroes* 149): “You sensible nigger? [. . .] You learn fast?” she answers “Yessir,” but adds: “Just sensible, Master Apbee.” She was being cautious.

LH: She doesn’t want to oversell her assets.

KLF: However, Noël’s use of the French cognate *sensible* (“Demoiselle de Guinée obéissante et sensible” (*Aminata* 242) and “Toi, négresse sensible? . . . Tu apprends vite?” (*Aminata* 184) appears problematic to me.

LH: Yes, that’s a slip up.<sup>6</sup>

KLF: Here’s another term: *homeland*. There’s so much emotional connection implied in that word, and the derivative *homelanders*. It’s hard to translate. Obviously one dictionary definition is *patrie*, but that doesn’t work, because of the political connotation.

LH: Right. What did Carole use? I don’t remember . . .

KLF: Sometimes she would paraphrase. For example, when Aminata met Georgia for the first time, she recognized she was not African-born. She was not a *homelander*; in French: “elle ne venait pas de mon pays” (*Aminata* 158).

LH: But *homeland* and *pays*, they’re not quite the same, are they? *Pays* seems more specific.

KLF: For Aminata, weren’t the *homelanders* all of these people marched halfway across Africa with her to be forced onto a slave ship? They weren’t just from her village. There’s a connection to something greater . . .

LH: Yes, it's a question of the land they come from. My *home*, as opposed to a political and geographical definition. In the English, there's a major distinction between *homeland* and *Africa*. Until Aminata arrives in America, the word *Africa*, or *Africans* has no meaning for her. She has to have a word that represents her notion of where she's from that precedes the concept of Africa in her own intellectual framework. It's got to be a word that suggests something more fundamental, something less political. So I chose *homeland* to get at that pre-political sense of where she comes from. When I say political, I mean the fact that she has been brought to this new world as a slave gives birth to her sense of political geography. It's got to be a term she's employing before she learns that other people are calling this place she comes from Africa. She's indignant the first time she hears the word *Africa*. Africa? What's that? *Africa* has no meaning for her. So *homeland* gets at it for her more richly, it's the land that she comes from and that she feels her people have come from too. . . *pays* is a more politicized, concrete notion of geographical borders.

KLF: Yes. What is also interesting to me is that throughout the crossing on the slave ship, Aminata's *homelanders* become, in French, *les prisonniers*—this is what they are in their captors' eyes, this is what they've become; all they are in the white man's, the slave trader's view. That's quite a shift in meaning, in perspective, don't you think?

LH: Yes, that's very interesting. That's a radically different way of imagining these people. . . in *prisonniers* there's suppressed liberty, but *homelanders* share . . . that's a very interesting issue. It must have been very challenging to figure out how to manage that.

KLF: There is a technique in translation which allows for reversing a perspective [modulation]—but that would work best if the narrator on the slave ship were not Aminata, that is, someone else describing objectively, coldly, in French: "The prisoners did this, the prisoners did that, the prisoners got tossed overboard." But this is Aminata speaking of her own people. . . *prisonniers* sounds detached.

LH: Yes, that's an interesting point. . . . That's a tricky one!

KLF: So those are just some of the lexical items I talk about with my students.

LH: It gives you lots to work with and allows for lots of discussion in the classroom, and lots to write about: the choices that translators make and don't make. And you talked earlier of what you lose and what you gain, and here you're losing a word that evokes a certain sense of cultural and land based belonging as opposed to a neat concise word to describe one's state of liberty or lack thereof. So it's different . . .

KLF: What about the title? You have spoken a great deal in previous interviews about the controversy surrounding the title of your novel *The Book of Negroes*, but I am curious to know how easily the French title was chosen, and if other options were discussed.

LH: It was difficult. I was the one who proposed the title, *Aminata*. I felt there was no valid, effective way to translate [the title] *The Book of Negroes* into French in a relatively literal way. Certainly I didn't hear and couldn't imagine any literal translation that worked for my ears and my sensibility. That option seemed completely unacceptable to me. There're so many reasons for that. There's the word *book* which has religious connotations—the book of Exodus, for example—and that isn't as strong with *livre*. *Registre* is far too dry, kind of bureaucratic; it's not nearly as poetic as *book*. *Negroes* is a tricky word to translate into French and to get just right. *Noir, nègre*. . . it's very hard to find a word that gets at *negro*, which was meant to be relatively polite by those who were using it at that time, even if it's not seen that way now, and so, it's tricky to translate that word convincingly. Also, the *Book of Negroes* is the name of a specific historical ledger, so that's going to be lost in translation, so there are all sorts of things that just wouldn't work if the title were translated literally. I felt it was better to go with a long-established French tradition of using a person's name as a title. So I proposed *Aminata*, and I had to argue a fair bit to get the publisher to accept it. It was the only part of the translation process where I really weighed in heavily.

KLF: Did the publishers want the French title to be as close as possible to your original title so readers would recognize it, and the book would sell better?

LH: That was part of it [pause] but that wasn't my concern.

KLF: I actually quite liked the solution: *Aminata*. I was curious as to how it came about. The *Book of Negroes* is translated by *le Registre des Noirs*—but I wondered at what point the name of that British ledger existed officially in French, as that was long before official bilingualism in Canada.

LH: It could have been that there was indeed a formal translation of the document, years later, and that's why Carole used it in the novel to refer to the ledger: *le Registre des Noirs*. It would have been a killer of a title for a book! It sounds so boring!

KLF: [laughs] And you're absolutely right about the problem of translating the word *negro* itself. In English, there's a whole range of nuances expressed with the terms *African American*, *Black*, *Negro*, *coloured*, and *nigger*. . . which must somehow be translated by two terms in French: *Noir* and . . .

LH: . . . *nègre*, yes, and *Negro* was considered polite. So there are complicated

racial politics around that word and it would have been hard to translate satisfactorily, and that is why I thought it would be a losing cause to go down that road.

KLF: In Spanish, is the title also *Aminata*?

LH: No, no, it's very interesting in Spanish. First of all, Spanish has a more nuanced approach in this case. The title will be *El Libro mayor de los Negros*—do you speak Spanish?

KLF: Well, *negro* is of course the Spanish word for *black*, *libro* is *book*, *mayor*. . .

LH: In this context it introduces the notion of formality as in a register, an official document. But first of all, *libro mayor* is much more interesting than *livre*, and *negro* more interesting than *noir*. Also, Pura was able to convince me that it would really be understood by a Mexican readership.

KLF: I have one last question: I imagine there is some level of discomfort when a writer hands over his or her creation so that it can be transformed, either as a translated work, or a film adaptation. . . . Do you feel this?

LH: No, Kerry, I don't feel any discomfort whatsoever at the prospect of being translated. If I were told that a work of mine had been badly translated, I would be unhappy to think that it was circulating. But, apart from that, no, there's no discomfort. On the contrary, it's an honour. It's a sign that the world is taking the work seriously, and it's an opportunity to engage with readers in other countries—I've heard from readers I would never ever have reached had the book not been translated and so it expands the reach of my work. It expands it imperfectly, but everything's imperfect. The novel itself is imperfect. So, necessarily every translation will be too. But as long as the imperfections are within an acceptable range, and as long as the work, meaning the translation, is serious and solid and basically good, no, I don't feel any discomfort. Why would I? What I feel is delight and honour that the work is entering other people's hands, and also profoundly entering the mind and hands of another artist who is the translator. So, no discomfort. . . . I wouldn't put a translation and a television adaptation in the same category, except that they are both interpretations. But, my opinion is that a translation, if it's serious and appropriately conservative, is a far less bold, adventurous, and manipulative way to work with the original as is, say, a television miniseries, which has to really project a story in an entirely different way upon an audience. It's a totally different art form, so I feel there's really no comparison in terms of the magnitude of the departure from the original. I didn't feel uncomfortable with the creation of the television miniseries based on *The Book of Negroes*, partly because I had confidence in



the director and producer, partly because I co-wrote it, and partly because the book has been out long enough that I don't feel so wedded to it. I don't worry: "Will this or that be respected?" If the adaptation to the screen were offensive or disrespectful to the original, then I would be troubled. But as long as the adaptation honours the original work, there's no point being anxious about it. It's mostly out of my control anyway and the book is always there! So, I don't tend to worry. I worry about lots of things. I'm not trying to portray myself as being some Zen master who's calm about everything related to my work. . . . For one thing, it's almost entirely out of my control, so why fuss about it? For another thing, nobody forced me to do it. I chose to accept, to engage contractually. And third, look at the worst possible scenario: it's a bad miniseries. But even if people generally disliked the miniseries, the book is still there. And so, there's no reason to be anxious about it. . . . I was a journalist before I became a novelist. Every day my stuff was ripped apart and then reconstituted. Sometimes in the most flagrant and disrespectful way. That's the process of being a reporter and having your stuff yanked around at two in the morning by an editor—especially in your early years on the job. You have to drop the notion that your words are sacrosanct and that nobody must touch them. If you go into a newsroom with that mindset, you'll go crazy. So, newspaper work taught me to be calm in the face of adaptations and translations. So there's lots that I worry about, but I don't worry about things like that.

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Text of Carole Noël's address at Banff and at the University of Ottawa, cited below, graciously provided by Marie-Madeleine Raoult, Editor, les Éditions de la Pleine Lune, Montreal, Quebec.

## NOTES

- 1 This anonymous quotation appears as a heading on Hill's website: <http://lawrencehill.com>.
- 2 The novel has been translated into Dutch, French, German, Hebrew and Norwegian, and is soon to be published in Spanish. A six-part television series entitled *The Book of Negroes*, which Hill co-wrote with director Clement Virgo, aired on CBC in January 2015 and on BET (Black Entertainment Television) in February 2015.
- 3 Carole Noël defines *petit-nègre* as the simplified French spoken by African slaves in the French colonies. She found it too condescending, and chose instead to use the technique of *compensation* to translate the passages of dialogue into non-standard French ("Traduire" 2-3).
- 4 For that reason, I prefer this solution to, for example, *négresse*, which wouldn't have worked at all here. However it's clear to me something was lost in using *demoiselle*.

Indeed, in email correspondance, Carole Noël indicated the translation of *wench* in this passage gave her considerable trouble and ultimately she had to accept what she too considers to be “une perte.”

- 5 In the novel, Hill (through Aminata) explains this distinction to readers in the following passage (*Book of Negroes* 130): “On this plantation, I learned that there were two classes of captives. There were “sensible Negroes,” like me, who could speak the toubabu’s language and understand orders. And there were the other ones. The insensible ones. The ones who couldn’t speak at all to the white man, and who would never be given an easier job, or taught an interesting skill, or be given extra food or privileges.”
- 6 Through email correspondence with Carole Noël, I learned that she had chosen to resort to a literal translation here—in spite of *sensible* being a false cognate—rather than using, for example, the word *sensé* (which translates as “possessing common sense”). When first used, it appears in quotations (*Aminata* 162-63). Thereafter, the reader is to understand that the word does not have the modern meaning of the (French) word *sensible*. Nevertheless, I still question whether this was indeed the best option.

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