

On Refugees, Running, and the Politics of Writing

An Interview with Lawrence Hill

Lawrence Hill writes in the spaces where the personal and political intersect. A former journalist and political speechwriter, Hill has published ten books of fiction and non-fiction. The impact of his work as a novelist, essayist, memoirist, activist, and educator speaks to the power of writing to effect social change. “Artists have voices,” he affirms in the interview below, “and their voices can help influence—profoundly, sometimes—the way we see ourselves, and the way we see our country and the world and our roles in them.” Hill’s voice has contributed widely to pressing conversations about race, Black history, and social justice in North America for over two decades, most famously through his narrative of Canada’s Black Loyalist history and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in *The Book of Negroes* (2007). Yet Hill’s multi-genre oeuvre is linked not only by its sustained meditations on belonging, identity, race, and history, but also by storytelling as an art where private life and public history merge. From the autobiographical elements in his early novels *Some Great Thing* (1992) and *Any Known Blood* (1997), to the intimacy of social critique in his memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001) and Massey Lectures *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (2013), to the archival negotiations with history in *The Book of Negroes*, the borders separating fact from fiction, story from history, text from context, and body from body politic are crossed and so become permeable.

Hill’s most recent novel, *The Illegal* (2015), questions borders literally, exploring the contemporary refugee crisis in a global context. Set in a near-future fictional dystopia that presciently foretells the dangerous resurgence of far-right politics and immigration policy now unfolding in the West,

The Illegal has won numerous awards, including CBC Radio's Canada Reads, which Hill previously won for *The Book of Negroes*. Following the success of the six-part TV adaptation of *The Book of Negroes* (2015; CBC and BET), *The Illegal* has been optioned for a television miniseries development by Conquering Lion Pictures. In 2015, he won the Governor General's History Award, and in 2016, he became a Member of the Order of Canada, not only for his contributions as a writer to Canada and its literary institutions, but also for his social activist work with such organizations as Crossroads International, the Black Loyalist Heritage Society, and the Book Club for Inmates.

During his stay as the 2017 Cecil H. and Ida Green Visiting Professor at UBC, Hill sat down with Laura Moss, Brendan McCormack, and Lucia Lorenzi at UBC's Green College for an interview. Meeting on April 3, 2017, coincidentally the day before Canada's Refugee Rights Day, questions prompted by *The Illegal* opened to a broader discussion about the conjunction of art and politics in Hill's work as an author, public intellectual, and prominent voice within the Canadian literary community, broaching topics such as Canada Reads and UBC Accountable.¹

Laura Moss: Your recent lecture at the Vancouver Institute was called "Crossing Seas: Refugees in the World and in the Imagination." At the lunchtime discussion in the UBC English Department today, you're going to be asking us to consider "What business has fiction in politics?" So I want to begin by asking two questions: how *do* you bring the imagination and refugees together, and what business *does* fiction have in politics?

Lawrence Hill: Well, it's funny, because in some parts of the world—let's say, in the various West African countries where I've worked as a volunteer—it would be almost absurd to suggest that the creation of literature should be divorced from politics. But in North America, and certainly in Canada, you might get, "Oh, you're a political writer, why would you do that?" It's almost as if that's a strange incursion in a territory you don't belong in. I don't consider myself to be a highly political writer, but *The Illegal* is my most political book. When it comes to social issues including policies relating to refugees, there are a thousand ways to contribute to public debate. My role is no more important than that of a historian, or an English professor, or an advocate who works for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, or anybody else. But artists have voices and their voices can help influence—profoundly, sometimes—the way we see ourselves, and the way we see our country and the world and our roles in them.

LM: I teach African and Canadian literatures and I would say that in both there's a conjunction of art and politics that's inextricable in many ways. I think that so many important African writers have been concerned with how to make creative and imaginary writing engage a problem and then show possibilities of different ways forward. You also do this in *The Illegal* so well. It's amazing how prescient this novel is—

LH: —unfortunately—

LM: —the Family Party, it's unbelievable, really.

Brendan McCormack: You said that *The Illegal* is maybe your most political book, and I wanted to ask about its form, or the way that you engage with the novel as a genre. Coming after *The Book of Negroes*, I'm struck by how different these two novels are formally, even though they're both interrogating a fundamentally similar interest in giving a voice, or a story, to people whose stories or voices are often forgotten. *The Book of Negroes* was very historical and contextual, archival in many ways, whereas *The Illegal* is a much faster-paced novel. It has some of the conventions of a political thriller—

LH: Yes, it does.

BM: —and satire. You've said that you weren't really interested in writing another *Book of Negroes*. I'm wondering how form and content were working together in your writing process, how the different way you engaged the novel as a genre relates to the different kind of story you wanted to tell.

LH: *The Illegal* is closest in my body of work to my first novel, *Some Great Thing*, which is set in Winnipeg. It's quite a political novel too, in many respects; it's kind of mouthy, and the narrator's voice is very prominent, and there are as many people taking turns telling the story in *Some Great Thing* as there are in *The Illegal*. I guess you step into a book the same way you step into a relationship. You follow your needs, and I needed to break free of any obligation to write a novel that offered an authentic replication of history or current socio-political issues in specific countries. My publisher suggested that I write another historical novel and I declined, because I didn't have it in me and I wasn't interested. I needed to sort of break out and do something else.

I experienced a personal tragedy, which was the accidental death of my sister, and I wanted to cope with and explore that loss, but to do so in an outrageous, funny, playful way. And I also felt the need to invent places, and go into a kind of creative mode that was more irreverent and saucy than the tone of *The Book of Negroes*.

I didn't want to have a really colourful survivor of genocide and have him cross the seas, and be all lively like most protagonists have to be. How would I create a readable character who wasn't spilling over with life, who was a sedate character? I chose to invent some vibrant secondary characters to lift my protagonist off the page. It helped to create a different time, with made-up countries, and not to feel the obligation to write about Canada. I didn't want a reader coming behind me and saying, "It's not like that in Canada, so how can you write that?"

BM: Right. Had you ever considered setting this book in Canada, or in any real place?

LH: No, I just wanted to break free and borrow from some of the worst anti-refugee policies I've seen in the world, and then imagine things, which, unfortunately, are happening now. And some things I discovered afterwards which I wish I'd known when I was writing. Did you know that in Switzerland, and I think in Denmark—countries who wouldn't usually have done such a thing—if you arrive now as a refugee they strip you of your possessions, and they say: "Well, fine, but we're taking everything you own—that watch, hand it over—you have to enter and be stripped of most of your belongings." I can't think of a more effective way to criminalize a person arriving as a refugee. I wish I'd known that while writing the novel, because it seemed like a great device to accentuate the hideousness of some anti-refugee thinking.

LM: I first read *The Illegal* last summer, right before I went to South Africa. I went to Cape Town—

LH: —Did you go to some of the townships?

LM: Yes, I went to Khayelitsha and it seemed so much like I had imagined the Africtown community you created. It felt like I recognized part of where I was from your descriptions. The expansiveness of that township was striking to me. I wondered if you were drawing on a place like that.

LH: I was channeling Khayelitsha . . . for sure, but I was also thinking (but not so literally) about Africville in Halifax.

LM: Because of the displacement of that Black community?

LH: Because of a Black community that's basically an underclass living where they're not supposed to be: a disregarded, underserved community with no municipal services, but still, people are there, carrying on. There are certain similarities, but not too many. So I was thinking a bit about Africville—it was bulldozed, of course, and people want to bulldoze Africtown. There were also Black people living here [in Vancouver], in an area called Hogan's

Alley, which was also bulldozed around the same time as Africville. In Cape Town, there was a formerly-defined-as “coloured” community, District 6, that was also bulldozed. So we have these three partly or entirely Black or “coloured” communities that are being bulldozed in the late 1960s: Vancouver, Halifax, and Cape Town. So I was thinking about communities at risk of being flattened. I was thinking about people living—in the case of, say, Khayelitsha, or other townships—in large numbers together, sometimes hundreds of thousands, some of them with legal status and some of them without. People living without legal status, even in South Africa, is a huge issue. And there’s a certain amount of xenophobia against foreigners—say, people from Zimbabwe who take people’s jobs. That’s the perception. There’s some antagonism about that, even among the most disenfranchised South Africans. So yes, I was very much thinking about the townships, which I visited a few times. My last visit to a township was during the filming of *The Book of Negroes* miniseries, which was shot near Cape Town.

BM: You recently wrote in *The Globe and Mail* about Harper Lee and the legacy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the Canadian classroom and the Canadian psyche. You discuss a type of comfortable “Canadian-ness,” I think you call it, of studying histories of racism—particularly Black history—as American, which allows us to examine “evil in another era and another country” (“How Harper” n. pag.). For readers, one of the really important things creating a fictional world for this novel does is that it draws on a lot of political conditions that are, if not universal, at least prevalent—particularly in the West, with respect to Freedom State—in attitudes towards refugees. But I wonder if you had also thought of that idea of obsession over evil in another era and another place with *The Illegal* because it *is* in a created universe, and whether there’s a chance for that same kind of convenient reading of “this is not here, it’s somewhere in this made-up world.”

LH: Do you mean is it easier to read because it’s not where we are?

BM: Yes, in terms of not having it located in a particular place, because this novel clearly could be set in so many places.

LH: It’s true that when you set a story in an imaginary place it’s easier for the reader to step into it without feeling personally challenged. Consider the typical thirteen-year-old reading *Harry Potter*. It’s a meditation on the Holocaust: the whole story is about the extermination of mixed-race wizards. You can enter the story without feeling personally challenged. It is one thing to read a fantasy or a book set in an imaginary time and place, or to read, say, a historical novel like *The Book of Negroes*. Most readers of that

novel, even people who are quite conservative politically, would probably be able to agree that the transatlantic slave trade was an abomination. However, you won't win such an easy moral when offering the reader a twenty-first-century novel about refugees. In terms of reactions to *The Illegal*, the responses I get are far more across the political spectrum, and the way people engage with the book seems to reflect their politics. It's easier to engage with an issue that's over than to enjoy a contemporary novel that goes against your political grain. Look at the response in the world to refugees today: you're either for reaching out to them, or you are hoping to shut down your borders. It's rare to be in the middle and to not have an opinion.

LM: You just mentioned that you started to think about this novel at the time of the accidental death of your sister. I'm sorry to hear about her passing. One of the things I see in the novel is an incredible love between the siblings, between Keita and Charity, and also the love of the father and mother. There's a lot of love in this book, which is very powerful, and it ends in this interesting way with things working out. That sense of love is there even in the middle of the intense politics and the political engagement with refugees.

LH: Well, there's some horrible stuff that happens in this book, even though it's told with a lighter touch than *The Book of Negroes*—playful, sometimes satirical, sometimes downright goofy. The goofiness and touches of lightness help get the reader through what would otherwise be a painful story. Keita Ali endures losses which are as hideous as the losses that Aminata suffers in *The Book of Negroes*. So in writing *The Illegal*, the question for me was how to meditate indirectly on the loss of my own sister, and to meditate on loss that others experience too. I needed to guide that meditation along a boisterous path.

In Canada, we tend to disrespect a novel that has a comedic thrust. We think it's not serious, or that it lacks gravitas. I think that's reflected in so many ways in the establishment of Canadian literature: what's taught, but also what wins prizes, what gets reviewed and how, what gets talked about. Books that are funny generally don't get the same respect, and I think that's unfortunate. Our lives contain elements of humour and love and comedy, and often those are saving graces for people who have survived something awful. Humour is part of the human experience, so why not integrate it into fiction?

Lucia Lorenzi: You spoke about the kinds of books that might win awards, and also about the social value of literature and the role that authors play. I'm thinking about the Canada Reads competition in particular, and how it very explicitly situates literature not just as something that we should do because the arts are great, but also because art and literature are social

goods. Around the Canada Reads table each year, the social function of literature is what a lot of the conversations centre around. So I'm curious, with two of your novels having won Canada Reads, what do you think these competitions do for the role of the author, both within the nation as well as within the social fabric?

LH: What do they do for the role of the author as opposed to the reader, or for Canadians generally?

LL: Does it put pressure on authors to write about certain topics, or to pursue it for political purposes rather than maybe for purely aesthetic purposes?

LH: That's an interesting question. I've often been asked, "What's the value of something like this for Canada, or for Canadian readers?" But what does it do for the author? I don't think many writers in Canada would say, "I'm going to write this book because it's likely to win a prize." Most of us don't operate that way. Most of us write the book—whether it's a thriller, an openly commercial book, or a literary, poetic novel—we need to write. It has to speak to us, and excite us. Do we, as Canadian writers, hope to win a prize? Of course we do. But do we say, "I'm going to write this kind of book because it's more likely to win a prize"? We're probably not going to succeed that way. If you're not writing the story that speaks to you, you're likely to write a lesser product, because it doesn't really come from a place of engagement and passion.

LM: There's a question too, though, of responsibility. Since *The Book of Negroes* did so well, and has reached such a large audience, do you feel a sense of responsibility while you're writing? I mean certainly to the subject matter, but also to a range of readers? That's also a "what does it do for the author" kind of question.

LH: Responsibility can be paralyzing. I don't want to feel any responsibility on the first draft. I would rather be responsible to myself, and try to do the best work I can without worrying about whether I'll excite or displease Reader X. For example, my work is situated mostly inside different aspects of the Black diaspora. Well, there's a certain pressure in Black Canada to write characters who act as role models. That's hardly a formula for authentic fiction. My grandmother, an African American woman born in 1896—May Edwards Hill—she hated *Porgy and Bess*. Hated it! She didn't like a musical that showed Black people cavorting around, being sexually free, doing things that they shouldn't have been doing when they were married. She didn't like the way that musical reflected on Black culture. So she was just incensed by *Porgy and Bess*. In a way, May wanted her art to contain good people

who would reflect well on the Black middle class. Well, it's understandable why she'd feel that way, being born in 1896 and living in America as a Black woman, and I get that. But that doesn't work for me as an artist, to feel that I must create a story that a grade nine teacher might be happy to teach because the protagonist is behaving well on the page. But it swings both ways. I *do* want to be responsible. I don't want to write something that's going to insult or mistreat or demean the dignity of a group of people or their experience, or even an individual. So I feel a responsibility to write as authentically as I can about the human experience, but that doesn't mean that I must not write a character who does bad things, or that I have to uplift a segment of the population with my book, which is a heavy thing to put on an artist's shoulders. I think the responsibility is to be honest to your understanding of the world, and to your understanding of people, and to your own literary intentions, and to be transparent, to allow the reader to see and understand what you're trying to do. But I don't feel that it's necessary to have a responsibility towards, say, historical accuracy. What if you're writing a book that deviates from history intentionally or playfully, like [Michael Chabon's] *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which sets Alaska as a place where Jewish people go after the Holocaust instead of Israel? That's a deviation from history, but that doesn't make it a lesser novel. It's playing with history. So I don't think that a historical novel is less valid because it's inaccurate. Maybe the inaccuracies are necessary to drive home a point.

LM: That's what Salman Rushdie says in his essay "Imaginary Homelands." He talks about how, after he published *Midnight's Children*, people got in touch with him to correct him about Bombay, and he argues that he needed the imagined spaces to deviate precisely so his story could go the way it had to go.

LH: Oh, I'd like to read that. Do I feel responsibilities as a novelist or essayist? Well, they are different, too, because being an essayist I feel the responsibility to be literally, specifically accurate in the traditional sense of the word, whereas of course I don't feel that in the case of writing as a novelist. Yes, I feel a great deal of responsibility, but it's to be honest to my own values, and to respect my characters, and to respect people, even when they're doing disrespectful things on the page.

LL: You mentioned your grandmother's opinions of how Black people are portrayed. A couple of years ago, bell hooks said that she would be happy if she never saw another slave story being portrayed onscreen, and I'm curious about that tension in creating narratives around Black people. There are a lot of historical narratives about people who might be slaves or maids,

and while those are certainly real Black experiences, they risk becoming stereotypical and sombre portrayals of Blackness—but then also, there’s the other spectrum of Black exceptionalism or Black resilience. I’m curious, then, given the current political climate around Blackness, both in the States and in Canada, what your thoughts are about both the historical portrayal of the Black experience and the contemporary Black experience?

LH: Sometimes, within the Black community, I’ll encounter opposition to writing about slavery. A grade nine teacher at a school with a lot of Black kids in Scarborough, Ontario, may well come to me and say: “We don’t need another story about slavery, that hurts my students’ feelings. I’d rather have an uplifting story about an astronaut or somebody who succeeds in the Black community. Why can’t you give us something uplifting? Why do we have to rub our children’s noses in this awful past?” So sometimes, from within the community, you receive vociferous opposition. I guess my response has to be—well, first of all, not *everyone* is writing about slavery, and *The Book of Negroes* is not in my opinion a novel about slavery. It’s a novel about the strength and resilience of a woman who spends some years enslaved, but who also lives free for many years. It’s not fundamentally a novel *about slavery*. But even if it were, I still think that’s fine. Do we ask people not to write about love, or war? People write what they need to write. In every generation, somebody—or many—will want to explore the decline of the Roman Empire, or the Holocaust, or the transatlantic slave trade, or residential schools. And why shouldn’t they? Why should we bar people from exploring what they need to explore in their own time and in their own generations? We have to talk. We have to express ourselves. And if some people are made uncomfortable by the subject of a book, well, books aren’t supposed to be about comfort anyway. I’m sorry for people who are pained by the experience of reading, but I can’t worry about a person being uncomfortable because a subject doesn’t make them happy. That’s not my preoccupation. I have to write honestly and if I need to write about slavery, I will. And anyway, we *still* don’t know about it in Canada: most Canadians don’t know about slavery here. They can happily tell you about Abe Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation and the slow process of desegregation in the United States, but they couldn’t tell you a damn thing about slavery in Canada.

LM: That’s why *The Book of Negroes* was so important, I think, and so well received. It was eye-opening to many people. Picking up on what Lucia was asking regarding exceptionalism, it’s interesting in this novel that the characters are exceptional—

LH: —yes—

LM: —they're not necessarily exceptionalist representations, racial representatives who are representative of any one thing. But they *are* exceptional. Keita is an exceptional runner—

BM: —“elite” is the word that's used—

LM: —elite, yeah. Viola is exceptional. Candace is exceptional. Yoyo is exceptional. Each of them excels at his or her position. They need to be tested to their extremes to get through to the end and to come together communally. But it's interesting, because you're not shying away from the exceptional in here, right: the story relies on it.

LH: So, exceptional in that case as opposed to, say, an Alice Munro character who's an ordinary person struggling in ordinary ways. Or a John Cheever character, somebody who really does look ordinary, and we derive our pleasure as readers from watching them struggle as ordinary people, as opposed to people with stellar accomplishments or exceptional abilities.

LM: Right, but they work for it; it's not predetermined. You see how hard Keita trains to run, you see what Viola has to go through to get her stories, you see how hard Candace has to push as a police officer. However, they *do* excel, and that's really interesting.

LH: Is the question really whether exceptionalism in this respect is the way to go, is that the best way to deliver a story? Would you consider expressing a narrative in another way that doesn't derive from the notion of exceptional behaviour or skills—is that the heart of your question?

LL: I'm thinking about the conundrum that refugees face, insofar as exceptionalism can become a way in which some people justify allowing certain people into the country: if we don't let this person into the country, they may not become the next famous scientist, and so on. It seems that this is a challenge that refugees have to deal with: what value we assign to them based on what they might accomplish.

LH: Leaving aside literature for a minute and talking specifically about refugee politics, yes, there are altruistic principles that should drive us, because it's the right thing to do to open up Canada to more refugees and to accelerate their possibilities to engage in Canadian life, whether it's through ESL classes or medical attention. Some refugees to Canada need to see a dentist or doctor quite urgently. There's so much to do just to get people stabilized in a basic medical way. But in addition to the altruistic motivation—we should do the right thing because we're human beings—I think that it's important to be a bit humble about this and admit that we're acting in our own interests,

too, and that today's refugee will be tomorrow's mathematics professor or Giller Prize-winning novelist or street cleaner or cardiac surgeon. Today's refugee will be carrying our country forward tomorrow. I think our cabinet minister now representing refugee-related issues is a refugee himself, if I'm not mistaken.² I think it's important to remember this exceptionalism. People have phenomenal skills and abilities and if we just set them free and let them live, they'll be helping in whatever way they choose to build our country tomorrow. So it's in our best interests to do this: it's not just a nice thing to do because we're good Canadians.

LM: Tracey Lindberg, who wrote *Birdie*, and the Amnesty International Book Club have promoted your book for tomorrow, April 4th, which is Refugee Rights Day. Have you seen their response to the novel? They lay out a set of guided reading questions on the AI website.

LH: Tracey did something with *The Illegal* and me about a year ago, in which we connected. I quite like Tracey and her writing, but I didn't know they were doing something right now.

LM: Yes, right now . . . it's lovely. It's interesting, though, because it's set up as a brief description of your book, and then a set of questions from Tracey Lindberg and some questions from Amnesty International, and then several screens on Canada's changing positions on refugees, and the myth of Canada's role on refugees, and the reality of the Canadian government's actions. And so there's an *absolutely* explicit link between what you do in your novel—and they're very careful to depict it as a creative work—and debunking the history, myth, and realities of refugees and Canada.

LH: Oh? Is it on the Amnesty website?

LM: Yes, it is—

LH: Okay, thanks, I'll check it out.

LM: My question was really, what do you think of this? What do you think of the link between an organization like Amnesty International doing this and your work?

LH: It feels fantastic. It's great that a novel—any novel—would drive a set of readers to communicate actively about a vital issue. I think a UN Under-Secretary-General is talking about the current famine in East Africa as being probably the greatest humanitarian crisis we will have seen since the Holocaust. He made this comment just last month in a report. The plight and the needs and the absolute desperation of millions of people are going to continue. It's probably going to be one of the most pressing issues the world faces over, I'm sure, a good chunk of time, and so how do we respond to this,

how do we situate ourselves as Canadians? Do we embrace the xenophobia that we've seen in Marine Le Pen and le Front National in France, or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, or Donald Trump and his people? Just remember, many are to the right of Donald Trump; he lost the Obamacare repeal because of Republicans to the *right* of him, which is scary. So are we going to embrace hatred? And often, the more desperate people are, the more a certain segment of us wants to hate them. It seems like desperation and hatred rise hand in hand, and that terrifies me. So I feel satisfied if any work of art incites deeper conversation about how we want to live, and feel, and see this issue.

LM: I just read *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book*, and you take up the intersection of art and politics right there. You write about censorship, and you argue in a nuanced way around why people would censor a book. One of the things you do with *The Illegal* is address censorship and storytelling through journalism. You have three journalists who each tell stories differently. I am thinking here of Yoyo, Viola, and John. You don't just have one journalist, you have three: one who is killed for writing about the coup in Zantoroland and two in Freedom State who save the day because of their reporting and videography. It's fascinating to think of the role of journalism in the book, but also in the world.

LH: I'm influenced by my own personal background. My working life after university began as a journalist. I was with *The Globe and Mail* for a little bit, and then with the *Winnipeg Free Press* for three years in Winnipeg and Ottawa. So my background was as a newspaper reporter. I can draw on that knowledge to create an interesting character. But also, journalists are great characters in fiction because they have to interact with many characters, and can help to hold a story together. As is a marathon runner, because everybody interacts with him, whether it's a spectator, or the coach, or the event organizer, or a corrupt agent trading in athletes, or another runner.

BM: You still publish in newspapers quite often—maybe not journalism, but non-fiction about things you feel the need to respond to. I'm wondering how you see the relationship between writing fiction and writing journalism, and the types of different political work these modes of writing do. How do you negotiate those two media and writing genres, not just as an author but as a public intellectual?

LH: Sometimes I explore the same issue in fiction and non-fiction. Maybe I haven't satisfied myself with the way I represented it in fiction, so I return to it later in non-fiction. You bring out different tools to explore the same

subject in different ways. I like to try to exercise my intellect in an essay. I've written about the Ku Klux Klan coming to Oakfield to oppose a marriage between a Black man and a white woman. I wrote about it fictionally in a novel called *Any Known Blood* and I didn't feel that I'd gone as far as I could, and then I wrote about it in an essay in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*.

BM: With respect to the Canadian literary community more specifically, one of the moments where you exercised your public voice as an author—as a prominent author—in non-fiction was to speak about the UBC Accountable case here at UBC surrounding Steven Galloway.³ Why did you feel it was a particular moment where you needed to speak, as an author whose voice would be heard?

LH: I wasn't going to say anything publicly until that letter came out. I was so offended by that letter—the UBC Accountable letter—signed by so many powerful, notable Canadian writers, that I felt that I couldn't let that moment go unchallenged. I have nothing against Steven Galloway, and I don't pretend to know the precise details of the case. But I think that the result, the effect, of that letter—intentional or unintentional—was to disrespect the women who had brought forward concerns about their own safety, and to disrespect the process of being able to lodge an anonymous complaint in an administrative context and to see the investigation carried through to completion.

LM: The public could only hear very partial stories reported by the media.

LH: The administrative process is supposed to offer anonymity to the complainants, or at least privacy. Anyway, I spoke up because I was ashamed to see a huge body of Canadian writers—perhaps unintentionally, in many cases—contributing to the vilification of women who are complaining about mistreatment. I'll use the word “mistreatment” because I don't know exactly what happened, so I'll use the word as a placeholder for some kind of wrong that they had experienced. I don't think that we should be vilifying those people, and I think that was the result of this letter. That's why I spoke.

LL: Simon Lewsen published a piece in *The Walrus* about how the UBC Accountable incident was the moment of the “great rift” in Canadian literature,⁴ and that previous to that, CanLit enjoyed a sort of “happy consensus.” I believe that is how he worded it. I wonder what you think about the way that CanLit as a community and as an institution has been portrayed to the public in the past few months, and what happens to how the community is perceived when something like this occurs.

LH: There have been other rifts. [Everyone laughs.] Writing *Thru Race* was something that drove writers into camps, and I followed that controversy. This isn't the first time that we've been split at the seams, and I don't think it's actually unhealthy that writers should disagree vehemently with each other. It's uncomfortable, especially if some of your closest friends have taken opposing positions, but it's inevitable from time to time.

LM: I think in a way it was interesting because it made public the fact that there is not *a* Canadian literary community. There are many communities that oscillate, that sit side by side, and that's very important. There are voices—not just *a* voice, many voices—many voices who disagreed with each other, and said so strongly. It's challenging to talk about the case here at UBC because I know some of the faculty and some of the students involved, and it's a very complex situation, the whole thing. But I really valued when you said that it was important for the women to be heard, and that the UBC Accountable site was an act of silencing, and an act of people in power who didn't seem to know they were in power. Many of the people who signed that letter have at other times been cultural dissidents in some ways. So they didn't see themselves as disempowering the students, and when that was pointed out, some of them stepped back, and some of them stepped forward.

LH: That is what makes the whole thing so painful in the writing community. You know, if you're a reader, and your favourite writer signs that letter, it could be even more shocking to you, if you're concerned about respecting the women who came forward with complaints.

LM: Okay, to change gears a little bit. I wanted to bring you back to *The Illegal*, and to talk about running. I see this book, in a way, as a love story to running. I'm a former long-distance runner, and I recognize so much of it. You capture the pain and the strange mental games you play with yourself so beautifully. As an English professor, of course, I have to see it as a metaphor as well! [Everyone laughs.] You balance the literal act of running with the important metaphor of [Keita Ali] running a race for his life.

LH: I can't run anymore, by the way. My knees are shot, which I regret. I did run hard for forty-two years, and ran marathons and half-marathons, 10Ks, and shorter races. I wasn't very good at them but I certainly know what it feels like. By the way, I raced for the UBC cross-country and track teams while I was here—

BM: Oh!

LM: Really! Well that's cool!

LH: I wasn't very good—

BM: We should look you up in the history books.

LH: Well, you'll see that I was not very good—I can guarantee you'll find me in no history books. I was not a successful or elite athlete. I was merely fit, but I wasn't ever able to win any important race.

LM: That's not what it's about, generally, for most people.

LH: I'd figured out before coming to UBC that I was never going to be an elite athlete, but I still ran my legs off because I just loved to do it and it felt wonderful in a thousand ways. One of the things you notice, if you go to lots of races, is that sometimes African runners come to run in the North American races for the prize money. I started thinking about the refugee in this novel and how he's going to make money living illegally in a country from which he'll be deported, if he's caught. What better way to move him through his paces of survival than to have him running for cash, hoping to scoop up the prizes for winning local road races in Freedom State? His legs carried him toward the possibility of Olympic stardom when he was in his home country, but when genocide and war force him out, he runs to stay alive as a refugee and to help his sister stay alive. I like that transition, in the purpose of his legs, and that he's using his body to stay alive. Also, I think running is a beautiful thing. To watch a pack of runners fly by, at the 21K point of a marathon, there's such beauty and fluidity and poetry in the movement, it's really something. So I've always loved to watch runners fly along, much faster than I could ever go, and more smoothly. So there's a poetry in that movement—

LM: I've written down here that you write with the poetics of running, so there you go!

LH: To me, it's interesting to watch how Keita survives in this land. Running becomes his survival tool. And it does reflect, in a lovely, metaphorical way, on his Black body and how he's using it to stay alive in this place where he doesn't belong. It brings him to all these places and moves him through all these spaces, and so it seemed perfect for Keita's situation and character that he be a runner.

BM: It is interesting how as a refugee running for his life—which you see in all the publicity for this book, Keita is “running for his life”—he's also running into a certain kind of security.

LH: He's in trouble. He's not a person who's going to vanquish every challenge, and he has problems, even physical problems; these accentuate his humanity. He's going to suffer, and he's going to fail sometimes. Refugees have problems. You think about all those thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean or

walking across Europe: some of them will be pregnant, some of them will have bleeding sores on their feet, some of them will have broken bones or serious medical conditions, unattended, and they're on the move. So why shouldn't my character also have problems that would complicate his desires?

BM: And in the end, second place is good enough.

LH: I had somebody complain to me, "Why couldn't he win the race?" And I said, "Well, he kind of *does* win. He wins what he needs to win." It doesn't really matter in his life if he places first or second. It matters that he can accomplish something that is accomplished by placing second. That makes him a little more human, anyway. I tried to write the book in a way that the reader would feel that they were stepping into a marathon on page 1, and running—or at least following the race—all the way to the last page. Naturally, there had to be a sprint toward the finish line near the end of the book.

LM: We should probably wrap up here, since we have to get up to the English Department in twenty-five minutes, so thank you so much.

LH: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

NOTES

- 1 This interview is a transcription of that conversation, edited for clarity and slightly condensed. The interviewers thank Mark Vessey, Principal of Green College, for facilitating our conversation with Lawrence Hill and providing the Principal's office as a lovely place to hold our conversation.
- 2 Ahmed Hussein, a former Somali refugee, became Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship on January 10, 2017.
- 3 In November 2016, eighty-eight writers and other members of the Canadian literary community signed a letter posted to the UBC Accountable website in support of increased transparency over the controversial dismissal of Steven Galloway, former Chair of the UBC Creative Writing Program. A Counter-Letter petition signed by 552 cultural workers voiced solidarity with the complainants in Galloway's case and critiqued the UBC Accountable signatories for having "chos[en] to close ranks around one of their own and to say nothing about what the women who came forward actually want and need" (Rak n. pag.). Separately, Hill published an opinion piece in *The Globe and Mail* titled "Women have a right to be heard and respected," in which he situated UBC Accountable's defense of Galloway within wider contexts of sexual violence and hostility toward the rights of complainants, writing that he "refuse[d] to join any social movement that silences and hurts women who have brought forward complaints related to harassment or assault" (n. pag.).
- 4 In "The CanLit Firestorm," Lewsen argued that the UBC Accountable letter was "turning peers against one another and cementing what feels like an irreparable generational rift" in the CanLit community, which he describes as having previously "operate[d] under a broadly progressive consensus" (n. pag.).

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