

# “May I See Some Identification?”

## Race, Borders, and Identities in *Any Known Blood*

Race isn't about skin colour. It's about social categorization.

—LAWRENCE HILL

. . . every identity is actually an identification come to light.

—DIANA FUSS

### 1

Our most post-identitarian moments and movements notwithstanding, identities are hardly a matter of the past. New constructions of identities and post-identities are continually wrought by historical subjects, the agents who invent or choose them, and who modify, resist, or discard them. “Unused” identities continue to exist as possible scripts, as virtual and often virulent realities until human actors put them into play, and through identification use them in practice and performance. One of the important ways of crossing borders of identity is travel, a movement I explore here with respect to “Crossing Cultures,” “Frontiers of North American Identity,”<sup>1</sup> and identities ascribed or self-ascribed through “race.” Identification, a transformative displacement or transposition and a form of cognitive travel, signals the crossing of borders of who we think we are, or who others think or say we are. Under the sign of “race,” however, identity, identification, and travel have worked in particularly “arresting” constellations. Through race, identity and identification were tied to pseudo-scientific laws of biology, abetting the enforced displacements and the end of free personal movement in the middle passage and in slavery, and the impeded mobility across social and economic lines ever after.

Lawrence Hill continues to devise, from a Canadian vantage point, intriguing laboratories for the study of the intricate relations between identification, identity, and race. Hill is an expert on the crossings of (borders of) identities and cultures with respect to race and language, and on the

changing processes of ascription and self-ascription that he calls “the endless dance of adjusting how we see others, how we want to be seen, and how we see ourselves” (*Black Berry* 5). In his first novel, *Some Great Thing* (1992), a black reporter with an interestingly allusive first name, Mahatma Grafton,<sup>2</sup> explores the borders of race together with divisions of language and the state of French in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Hill’s second novel, *Any Known Blood* (1997), crosses borders of racial identity and identification by travelling in time and geography across generations and the Canada-United States border. I will concentrate here on this text, together with his *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), which is partly “memoir, an examination of my own life through the prism of mixed race,” but also “includes comments and observations from the many people I interviewed of black and white ancestry” (*Black Berry* 13). Not surprisingly, one of its sections is entitled “Crossing Borders.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2

Identification is an act of recognition with both positive and insidious possibilities, ranging from acceptance and fame to stereotypes and defamation. Identification works from the inside as reflexive self-relation. In Diana Fuss’s words, “Identification is the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition. . . . It operates as a mark of self-difference, opening up a space for the self to relate to itself as a self, a self that is perpetually other” (Fuss 2). Yet this phenomenological and psychological algorithm of cathexis describes but the formal side of variable binding. If “identification is the detour through the other that defines a self,” it does not “travel outside history and culture. Identification names the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world” (Fuss 2–3).

Literary texts have time and again thematized one such “entry of history and culture into the subject,” the moment of racial identification. The entry into race has often been rendered, for instance, from the perspective of a child in biographical or seemingly biographical texts. It appears thus at the beginning of Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, in the shock of recognition experienced by James Weldon Johnson’s young protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, or when Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie as a child does not recognize her photographic likeness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Another limit of racial identification and recognition is thematized through racial passing, as, for example, again in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored*

*Man*, in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Faulkner's *Light in August*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, or Henry Louis Gates's portrayal of a longtime *New York Times* literary critic, "The Passing of Anatole Broyard."<sup>4</sup> Passing highlights "race" as social convention—epitomized in the arbitrariness of the one-drop rule—which here leads to disidentification from unwanted ascriptions. In Anthony Appiah's words: "It is because ascription of racial identities—the process of applying the label to people, including ourselves—is based on more than intentional identification that there can be a gap between what a person ascriptively is and the racial identity he performs: it is this gap that makes passing possible" (*Color Conscious* 79).

Appiah reviews extensive evidence against the existence of factual "race" in the first part of his long essay "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," entitled "Analysis: Against Races." In the second part of the essay, however, entitled "Synthesis: For Racial Identities," he observes that "the label works despite the absence of an essence. . . . In fact, we might argue that racial identities could persist even if nobody believed in racial essences, provided both ascription and identification continue" (*Color Conscious* 81–82). He quotes in this context W.E.B. Du Bois' reflection in his 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*:

But the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa. (qtd. Appiah 75)

Racial labels for Appiah are socially constructed signifiers that lack an essence yet possess reality in that they have social and psychological effects. With Ian Hacking, Appiah refers to this reality as "dynamic nominalism": "numerous kinds of human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labelling them" (Hacking, "Making Up People," qtd. in Appiah 78). As Appiah suggests, such labels can be ascribed from the outside, but also motivate psychological self-identification.

[They] shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. In particular, the labels can operate to shape . . . "identification": the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects—including her plans for her own life and her conception of the good—by reference to available labels, available identities. (78)

Lawrence Hill lays out a similar position in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, where he refers, like Appiah, to scientific accounts of genetic variation to conclude that there "is no biological difference between black people and white people. One cannot use genetics to explain race" (201).<sup>5</sup> Despite this affirma-

tion, however, again like Appiah, he does not negate racial self-identification in response to socially constructed racial realities:

You can have a white parent and still be considered black, but you can never have a black parent and be considered white. Unless you are so light-skinned and devoid of black facial features that you can pass for white, you don't get to be white in this society if you have black parents. It ain't allowed. You'll be reminded of your "otherness" more times than you can shake a stick at. This is one of the reasons why I self-identify as black. Attempts at pleasant symmetry, as in "half white, half black," trivialize to my eye the meaning of being black. (41–42)

Yet in addition, Hill, who is born in Canada but whose parents immigrated from the United States in the 1950s, also notes in particular certain differences in this respect between Canada and the United States:

Canadians are quick to point out what we of mixed race are not—we are not White, and we are not Black—but they don't tell us what we are. This is the quintessential Canada: the True North, Proud, and Vague. What interests me is that, in recent years, it has become possible to define oneself in one's own terms. . . . Growing up, I was aware that Canada provided me with a little maneuvering space that my American cousins did not have. For example, I didn't have the weight of a legally sanctioned United States school system telling me that I had to attend this particular school because I was black. Unlike my cousins, I had at least some room to concoct my own identity, declare it, test it out, see how it flew out there in my world. This, I think, is what still defines Canada today for a mixed-race person. There is some wiggle room. (228–29)

Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997) unfolds identification, in Appiah's sense, in considerable complexity, using and transforming to some extent materials and incidents from his own family history. Hill's protagonist, Langston Cane V, tries to work out how to conceive of himself, his projects, and indeed his conception of the good, in relation to available labels of race and identity. His identifications at first travel and pass across lines of racial identity; since "passing over" his identity delivers only the ambivalent downside of double consciousness without its potential multiple affirmation, he travels across geographical borders that separate different mappings of available identities, partially in order to disambiguate his identifications. In addition, *Any Known Blood* also explores how identification crosses lines of identity both as ascription of identity by others and as self-identification (or disidentification) from the inside.

### 3

*Any Known Blood* engages issues of racial identification and "mixed race"<sup>6</sup> from the title and the epigraphs on. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* provides the first epigraph: "Everybody having a known trace of

Negro blood in his veins—no matter how far back it was acquired—is classified as a Negro. No amount of white ancestry, except one hundred percent, will permit entrance to the white race.” The second epigraph sounds Langston’s name and filiation by citing Langston Hughes’s poem, “Cross”:

My old man died in a fine big house  
My ma died in a shack  
I wonder where I’m gonna die,  
Being neither white nor black?

Whether the cross of *Being Neither Black nor White yet Both* (as Werner Sollors’s title puts it by reversing Hughes’s sequence) means crucifixion or distinction remains a complex question in Hill’s novel. Langston’s surname evokes Jean Toomer’s *Cane*—co-opted against Toomer’s race-ambivalent will by Alain Locke for the signature Harlem Renaissance anthology *The New Negro* (see Lindberg), and calls up Toomer’s own pun or misspelling *Cane / Cain* (Toomer 145). Hill decides to have none other than Frederick Douglass employ this pun when he meets the protagonist’s forebear, Langston Cane I (475). Yet the novel’s first chapter, which opens with the theme of passing and various conflicted or ambivalent identifications from within and without, also sounds a different note: “I have the rare distinction—a distinction that weighs like a wet life jacket, but that I sometimes float to great advantage—of not appearing to belong to any race, but of seeming like a contender for many” (1). A spirit rebellious both against his black father and against prejudice, Langston Cane V has been playing a “game of multiple racial identities” by identifying himself to others as “part anything people were running down” (2), be it Jewish, Cree, or Zulu. When he does settle on one identity in his application for a Government speech-writer position for which “Only racial minorities need apply,” he successfully claims the position as Algerian.

Among his motivations seem to be certain joys of passing (that can exist despite the anxieties of discovery),<sup>7</sup> his interest in Canadian officialdom’s increasing reliance on racial self-identification, and finally a severe dose of disidentification. Hill’s protagonist begins his narrative by relating with a certain relish several episodes in which he passes by self-identifying as member of another minority, including the already mentioned job application in which he wants “to test my theory that nobody would challenge my claim to racial identity” (2).<sup>8</sup> His interest in expanding his freedom of self-definition and self-identification seems particularly motivated, however, by the constraining expectations of his domineering father. He has thus

relegated to some psychic limbo a black identity that Langston Cane IV has repeatedly impressed upon him with a long list of family achievements. The pressure is clearly registered: “It has been said that I have come down in the world. Down from an unbroken quartet of forebears, all, like me, named Langston Cane. A most precipitous descent, my father mumbled, when he heard about my latest job” (3). In contrast to his unprincipled speech-writing for a politician whom he despises, “Conviction ruled the lives of my ancestors. They all became doctors, or church ministers. By my age—thirty-eight—they already had their accomplishments noted in the *Afro-American*, the *Oakville Standard*, the *Toronto Times*, or the *Baltimore Sun*” (3).

Passing is for Langston V also a form of resistance to this kind of internalized threat of other-determined identification, a threat that would seem to preclude his own freedom of assent. His reasons for testing this freedom in crossing lines of identification, and his pursuit of the potentials for creative subversion implicit in these crossings, exceed classical motivations. Instead of seeking avoidance of racial oppression outside the family, *misidentification* is driven here by *disidentification*<sup>9</sup> in response to family dynamics: an aversion, in this case, not to racial identity, but to his father’s control over his identity through the insistence on racial identity.<sup>10</sup>

This disidentification reveals itself as such at a critical limit that will precipitate its demise. After a particularly painful reminder of the disappointments his strategies cause an old friend, Langston finds himself almost “unintentionally” leaking a government proposal to abolish human rights legislation in Ontario. While he swears upon the memory of the first Langston Cane (14) that his sudden action was neither planned nor the “courageous blow” (15) reported in the papers, he gets both himself and his minister fired with a doctored speech. Despite the fact that he seeks to downplay the importance of his deed and does not seem interested in taking any credit for an act that, for once, would garner the approval of his father, he certainly *has* written the speech. The moment reveals a decisive identification from within that suddenly destabilizes and then derails his habitual disidentification and previous playful passing. Indeed, in the logic of identification we have seen Appiah explore with respect to racial labels, the moment changes all shapes and shapings of his future projects.

In response to his conflicted (dis)identifications, similarly conflicted “recognitions” mark his last day at the office. A surprise visit by his father creates a double outing: the father learns of his passing, and his boss of his dissimulated race. At the same time, the puzzled minister receives a standing

ovation from the Canadian Association of Black Journalists, for a passage in the doctored speech he delivers but fails to understand (17). Langston Cane V thus receives, incognito, recognition for “his” speech and the identification it reveals. At such borders of identity, he decides to travel.

#### 4

Langston Cane V understands his sacking as chance and challenge. Involuntarily freed from writing speeches for others, he now becomes a writer in search of his own identity and family history. In the process, like all other Langston Canes before him, he crosses the boundary between Canada and the United States.<sup>11</sup> His geographical and generational boundary crossing into the “four family legends” (4) of his namesake ancestors also takes him across different mappings of “mixed race” in Canada and the United States. In this respect, Langston Cane V’s experiences resemble very much those in Hill’s self-portraiture in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*:<sup>12</sup>

my own experience of race, including my concept of my own racial identity, is shaded quite differently from that of my parents. They were both born and raised in the United States, and their racial identities were clearly delineated all their lives. The America of their youth and early adulthood was replete with laws that banned interracial marriages and upheld segregation in every domain of public life. . . . In the United States, there was never any doubt that my father was first and foremost a black man. Or that my mother was a white woman. And there is no question that, had my siblings and I been raised in the United States, we would have been identified—in school, on the street, in community centers, among friends—as black.

But my parents threw their unborn children a curve ball. They came to Toronto right after they married. . . .

Learning that I wasn’t white, however, wasn’t the same as learning that I was black. Indeed, for the longest time I didn’t learn what I was—only what I wasn’t. In this strange and unique society that was Canada, I was allowed to grow up in a sort of racial limbo. People knew what I wasn’t—white or black—but they sure couldn’t say what I was. (*Black Berry* 4–5)

This borderland of possible identifications is what Langston Cane V also sets out to explore, heading south in search of family roots in Baltimore, where his aunt lives and two previous Langston Canes were ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Juxtaposed with his trip south are flashbacks of his father’s crossing north after being an American soldier in World War II, which “he later said was enough to make any black soldier hate America” (*Any Known Blood* 62). Canada-United States difference with respect to racial difference features

prominently in these opposite trajectories of father and son. One of the father's often-told stories concerns a rent refusal that launched his civil rights career in Canada. From a landlord's reaction to the mixed race couple at the door, "Langston instantly knew that they would not get the flat . . . but Langston sensed that it would come in a distinct way. This wasn't the United States. Nobody would swear at him, or wave a gun. Langston waited for the refusal, Canadian-style" (35). Indeed, racism here comes packaged in (initially) polite formality.

By contrast, while his father had travelled north into politeness and ambiguity, his son's trip south moves into disambiguation. Describing his first experiences in Baltimore, several episodes at the beginning of Chapter 7 mirror in reverse some of his father's experiences upon arrival in Toronto. Whereas his father failed to find a black neighbourhood in Toronto, Langston Cane V's perception registers immediately segregated geography in Baltimore: "The street switched as quickly as a TV channel" (93). In his apartment search, racism is as prominent as in his father's story, but here it is open (94); and while his father confidently discounts the probability of a threatening gun in Toronto, his son expects one from the first squeegee-at-red-traffic-light-moment in Baltimore; he promptly does walk into a drive-by shooting, and is mugged to boot. While the shooting is not aimed at Langston Cane V or directly caused by his race, Hill here clearly marks a different scene.

In his orchestration of these cross-border stories, Hill comments in interesting ways on a pervasive African Canadian theme, the importance of African American culture north of the border. In his essay "Borrowed Blackness," André Alexis discusses the presumption of an archetypality of African American experience, evinced in an interlocutor's opinion that "no experience I might have in Canada could bring me closer to an understanding of real Black experience, that black Canadians were not Black enough" (17). George Elliott Clarke, in his by now canonical essay "Contesting a Model Blackness," is as critical of any notion of a "model blackness" as Alexis, although the impact of African American culture on African Canadian realities seems as ubiquitous as that of the United States in general on Canada. Clarke quotes Diane Jacobs's "On Becoming Black Canadian," a poem that both contests the ideology of an insignificant African Canadian experience and confirms some of the catalytic potential of border crossing: "Strangely it was in the U.S.A./ that I truly became a black Canadian./ In an attempt to rebut American Blacks' assumption/ that being Canadian was an aberration./That Canadian Blacks had no history" (71-72,



qtd. in Clarke 41). In Hill's novel, Langston Cane V's disidentified self at first seems to have taken the advice given to Alexis, "that in order to discover my 'Black self' I should move to the United States" (Alexis).<sup>13</sup> Yet Hill's novel as a whole turns in quite different directions. Hill's text, an example of historiographic metafiction that delivers cross-cultural experiences through the writer Langston Cane V (who works on the novel we read) and uses or mentions writings by Langston Canes I–IV, is packed with both actual and imagined aspects of Black Canadian history. Searching for his cross-border family roots, Hill's protagonist certainly also presents African American history, and encounters those positive qualities of African American culture that Clarke describes as prominent in African Canadian perceptions: "For African Canadians, *African America* signifies resistance, vitality, joy, 'nation,' community, grace, art, pride, clout, spirituality, and *soul*" (Clarke, "Contesting" 39). Yet Hill does not romanticize any such thing as *African America*; his engagement with aspects of African American culture is creative rather than imitative, and includes, as we will see, some playful Canadian re-appropriation of history as well as negative aspects of *African America*. Significantly, in one incident he has his Canadian border-crossing protagonist, in search of family history and perhaps of a model blackness, become a model himself. Because of his behaviour in the shooting incident, the congregation of the Baltimore African Methodist Episcopal Church perceives him as exemplary, model community member—an identification so desired by his father, and worthy perhaps of his ancestor Baltimore church ministers, Langston Cane II and III. Yet the narrator finds not only documents about their achievements, but also a manuscript by the first Langston Cane, a much more ambiguous figure and questionable candidate for identification than the subsequent three Langston Canes, as Langston V has already learned from documents. This multiple border-crosser is surrounded by family history rumours: "The link between my ancestor and John Brown" says the narrator, "seemed farfetched, but it had always fascinated me" (11).

## 5

With the fictive manuscript of Langston Cane I (429–94), Hill invents a fugitive slave narrative that is reminiscent in some episodes of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). Like Douglass, for instance, Langston Cane I thanks his owner for instructing him by interdiction about the forbidden pleasures and activities he will now make sure and seek out (435–36); more importantly, as we will see,

Hill also incorporates some lines from *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882) in which Douglass recounts his meeting with Brown shortly before Harpers Ferry. Yet as border-crossing account, the narrative of the first Langston Cane echoes in particular some of those in Benjamin Drew's *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*.

Travelling the Underground Railroad in 1850, Langston Cane I crosses boundaries of legalized racial ascription, first between the Southern United States and the North; here, however, he remains under the threat of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act (443). His further journey takes him across Lake Ontario and into the freedom of "Canaan" (436)/ Canada West, hidden in the boat of Oakville Captain Robert Wilson, an actual Underground Railroad conductor re-envisioned by Hill. Yet in a move that perplexes his descendant Langston Cane V, he then doubles back to turn south again: "To escape as he did . . . getting into Canada only to turn around nine years later and go back. Why? Could he possibly have joined John Brown's Raid? It was hard to imagine a fugitive slave settling comfortably in Oakville and then turning around and heading right back south into slave territory" (62). One of the reasons for his leaving Oakville, it turns out, is an accusation of bigamy against him. Yet his crossing back into Southern slave territory also finds an explanation as a raid on "race." In this border-crossing, he travels across boundaries of geographical and legal difference to change the meaning of race not only in his own life, but once and for all in North America: he is seen last on a wagon with John Brown, shortly before the raid on Harpers Ferry.

Without diminishing the historical importance of Brown's actions, Hill's fictive portrayal also echoes less positive contemporary accounts of Brown. When he appears on a fictive recruitment trip in Oakville,<sup>14</sup> Captain Robert Wilson throws him out of his house: "Spittle flew from Brown's lips. . . . He scared the wits out of my friend, Paul. . . . Captain Wilson spoke first. . . . You're living in a fantasy, and you don't even know it. I believe you are mad" (472). The John Brown portrayed by Hill proves also particularly insensitive to important United States-Canada differences<sup>15</sup> (Hill thus seems to extend the critique of a model blackness to a critique of a white model resistance to slavery and racism): "'The bondage of men. It is a blight upon our great nation.' 'Your great nation,' Captain Wilson said." Reminded by Brown of past slavery in Canada,<sup>16</sup> Wilson asks him "not to patronize me in my own country and in my own house" (471). Langston Cane I initially follows Brown nonetheless. He remains even undeterred when Frederick Douglass shows himself as skeptical as the Canadian Captain about the outcome of

Brown's plans, and denials—like the historical Douglass—Brown's famous request (which Hill takes from Douglass's *Life and Times* [Part 2, Ch. X]): "When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them" (*Any Known Blood* 476). And while Langston Cane I joins John Brown during the preparations at the Kennedy Farm and then in the raid on Harpers Ferry, he will, at the last possible moment, decide like Douglass. He escapes before it is too late what Douglass once called the "perfect steel-trap" of Harpers Ferry.<sup>17</sup>

Hill's plot decision is hardly motivated by the need to have the founder of his family saga survive for it to continue: the founder has fathered, at this point in the novel, not one but three Langston Canes II (465). Yet his survival and escape allow for his tale to be told with the effect of heightened authenticity that comes with a first person point of view. Such authenticity was one of the most sought-after qualities in the slave narratives that attested, for predominantly white, northern abolitionist audiences, to the horrors of slavery and, in their written form, to the former slaves' capacity of authorship and literacy that in many arguments about slavery stood as the litmus test even of humanity (Gates, *Figures* 21, *Signifying* 129–30). In addition, Hill's decision was also suggested by available sources. Fittingly, he draws for the details of the raid on the manuscript of the Pennsylvania-born black Canadian Osborne Perry Anderson, who survived, like Langston Cane I, the "trap" of Harpers Ferry.<sup>18</sup> With the entire "masterful" (Clarke, *Odysseys* 312) journal and slave narrative of Langston Cane I, Hill thus adds a particularly significant genre to this also genre-wise border crossing, historiographic novel (that includes long epistolary passages and newspaper accounts), which links it intertextually to the primordial black tradition I have already referenced.<sup>19</sup>

Another significant reason for Hill's choices at this point of the novel, however, surfaces in his review of a work that appears one year after *Any Known Blood*, Russell Banks' *Cloudsplitter* (1998). Banks' novel is a portrayal of John Brown written from the point of view of Brown's son, Owen, who also escaped Harpers Ferry. Both narrators initially follow Brown, yet leave the scene at crucial moments (*Cloudsplitter* 744–46, *Any Known Blood* 491) and live to tell the tale. While Hill's narrator, like the historical Osborne Anderson, comes to his own conclusions and makes his own decision (Du Bois 200; in the case of Langston Cane I it comes earlier than in Anderson's case, and as a consequence of a clear rejection of one of Brown's decisions [*Any Known Blood* 489]); the Owen Brown conceived by Russell Banks remains caught to the end in the trap, not of Harpers Ferry, but of his

father's will. Ordered to guard an abandoned school house outside Harpers Ferry to arm insurgent slaves that he knows won't come, he finally acts against one of his father's instructions: to keep silent about Douglass's refusal to mobilize support for the raid (741–42). When his companions decide to disclose this information to the other raiders, Owen neither stops nor joins them. He obeys what he is convinced is his father's will, who "does not want me to save him" (744). Where Hill's *Langston Cane* moves quickly across boundaries of definition and decision, Banks's Owen Brown remains locked: "For a long while, as if I could not, I did not move" (745). Although he feels for a moment "unexpectedly—free" after having cast aside "the heavy steel manacles and chains" of his father's will, he ponders the freedom of his will and subsequent actions with abiding ambivalence: "But were my actions from then on those of a free man? I cannot say" (746).

Hill's review of *Cloudsplitter* focuses from the beginning on the question of point of view. Comparing Banks's choice to that of Faulkner in "Barn Burning," Hill observes that Banks has "chosen to tell the story from the vantage point of the main character's son, Owen," which "brings the reader within intimate reach of . . . the gap between a man's public victories and private failures" ("Gory"). And within this question of literary technique emerges for Hill the issue that we have seen to loom large in *Langston Cane* V's predicaments of identity: the issue of generational position and identification. "What emerges from Owen's first-person account," Hill asserts, "is a sad memoir of how he was unable to create a life for himself under the shadow of a domineering, charismatic father." While Owen Brown has escaped Harpers Ferry, his identity remains strangely shackled to the internalized will and law of the father. "And what a will John Brown had," Hill writes. He concludes his review: "*Cloudsplitter* . . . illustrates that people of great accomplishments are not necessarily great people. Banks deftly dramatizes John Brown's commitment to unshackling African-Americans, and at the same time laments that, in the process, he destroyed the lives of those around him."

The consequences of "race" and slavery control the life of Owen Brown as they have controlled that of his father (and of an entire nation headed for civil war). Yet Hill's *Langston Cane* I, although his identity and freedom would seem to be circumscribed even tighter because he is black, negotiates a certain freedom nonetheless, despite the realities of racial ascription that dictate many aspects of his life. He not only succeeds in crossing boundaries drawn by North American political and racial geography, but also defies the

“paternal” authority of John Brown, and an identification that would ascribe him the role of victim in the very process of resistance to victimization and American slavery.

## 6

Langston Cane V, reading the manuscript while in search of his own identity, ponders his affinity with this crosser of multiple borders. He notes a certain identification, motivated by what seems to be the indeterminate status of his ancestor with respect to identities and boundaries. If he feels “strangely connected to Langston I,” it is because he loves “the fact that he didn’t fit in. I love him for his mixture of weakness and dignity” (497). His aunt Millicent (Mill) Cane, however, seems conversant with the pitfalls of romanticizing models: “Don’t make a hero out of him” (497). Yet she agrees with Langston Cane V’s self-identification: “you are right about him not fitting in. If you ask me, the man had a loose chromosome that skipped a few generations and turned up in you.’ She had a point” (497).

Langston Cane V’s “not fitting in”—his relationship to boundaries of identity—is intimately connected with the strange “bondage and freedom” of his disidentification. He lives with both a certain freedom and a paternal trap. “My father,” he says “has placed so many demands on me—get a doctorate, get a job, hold on to your wife, have children—that I have subconsciously arranged to fail at every one of them” (331). One more of these demands concerns racial identification, which he sabotages by passing, a choice made possible by his being “neither white nor black,” to quote Langston Hughes’ words again from Hill’s epigraph. With his protagonist’s later self-identification as “zebra incorporated” (400), however, Hill reverses the double negative of this phrase.

In his 1994 essay “Zebra: Growing up Black and White in Canada,” Hill reveals that his own father used to call him “zebra” (44). While “Zebra sounds faintly ridiculous,” says Hill, he prefers it by far to a term like mulatto, which “reduces me to half-status—neither Black nor White” (47).<sup>20</sup> Instead of this double negative, Hill arrives at a double affirmation in this essay, after an itinerary across different cultures and with several twists and turns of identification. In a passage later transformed into an episode in his first novel, *Some Great Thing*, he relates his desire during a visit in Niger to distance himself from his white Québécois friends: “Their presence made me feel White. And that summer, with an intensity that I had never anticipated, I wanted to be Black. Welcomed and loved as a brother” (“Zebra”

46). People in Niger, however, “appeared to see me as White”; and his Québécois friends remain by his side when he is ill. He leaves the hospital, as he says, “a changed man”: “I discovered that bringing my White friends into conversation with Africans was more rewarding than hoarding new friendships to the exclusion of the Quebecers. I knew what I was, and I felt it frankly. I was both Black and White, and this was irrevocable, whether other people noticed my colours or not. Years have since passed, but I still feel that way. I’m a man of two races” (47).

Hill relates the possibility of this identification here to his Canadian upbringing: “I didn’t grow up under apartheid, or slavery, or racial segregation. I grew up in a country in which I had a say in what I would be. That meant periods of ambiguity. It meant confusion. It meant anxiety. But it also meant the opportunity to come full circle and to decide, years after my father first poked me in the ribs and teasingly called me a zebra, that I truly was both Black and White” (“Zebra” 47). We have also seen, however, that Hill self-identifies as black in his later *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (41–2). “When you are black and white, negotiating racial identity is like going through a revolving door” (41), he writes, and concludes the book with an emphatic re-affirmation of his black self-identification: “I am black because I say so, because I feel it, and own it. It is not the only thing I am. . . . But having seen issues of race and identity raise their heads in North America, I know that when the census form comes around, I’ll mark myself down as black” (239).<sup>21</sup> That identification, however, will not limit his explorations. These last words of the conclusion come after an “Introduction” in which Hill summarizes the project in *Black Berry* and suggests that his narratives will continue to travel across boundaries and contexts of identity: “Nevertheless, I think the sands of identity are shifting once again in my own heart” (12). Motivated by his mother’s family pictures, he announces another “journey,” this time to the white side of his family, which would again take him south into the United States. If Hill explores a number of boundaries of identity in *Black Berry*, clearly there are more to come.

*Any Known Blood* also ends with another crossing of the border. Langston Cane V’s return trip home to Canada, his car full of people of different complexion, provokes the “customary” question: “May I see some identification?” (504). The Canadian guard, requesting and receiving border declarations of identity, eventually waves them through with the last words of the novel: “Have a safe trip home, folks” (505). The identifications and voyages

of this *nostos*, however, are all complex border crossings. For Langston's American lover Annette, who passes the border without having to show identification, this "would be a trial visit" (504). For Yoyo, the black refugee reporter from Cameroon who had satirized Canadian mores in *Some Great Thing*, and in this novel goes to work on the United States, it is also an undocumented trip. He crosses the border to reconnect with his love interest introduced also in the previous novel, H el ene Savoie.<sup>22</sup> Langston's aunt Millicent (Mill) Cane returns to Canada to rejoin her childhood friend Aberdeen and her own brother, re-crossing a line she had drawn with respect to Langston Cane IV's mixed race marriage.<sup>23</sup> At the border, she (re)claims not only her actual Canadian citizenship, but also all other travellers in the car as her family.<sup>24</sup> Her act—in which necessity proves yet again the mother of invention—symbolically and practically has more integrative power than the laws of a country whose official she thus deceives at the border. Her "conducting" on this (rail)road trip permits Annette and Yoyo to cross into Canada, and is achieved by her identification of, and with, a "family" that appears of many stripes and colours in Hill's description of Mill's earlier, first "adoption" of this family: "There was Yoyo, who was as dark as dark got, and a good deal darker than Mill. There was Annette, who was of a medium complexion, and then there was me—Zebra Incorporated" (400).

Yet while Hill ends this novel with a border official wishing this group "a safe trip home," he makes it also clear that there is no unproblematic Canadian "national" family (or model) available for homecoming. In an article entitled "Black Like Us," he writes: "Canada is not nearly as integrated as we like to think." Instead, as he demonstrates in virtually all of his writings, there are stories about black Canadian history and lives to tell. The summary of "Black Like Us" states emphatically: "Let's celebrate our own stories during Black History Month, says Canadian novelist Lawrence Hill, not those from south of the border."<sup>25</sup> Hill himself hardly objects to "American content" *per se* in the films he discusses here, but among other things to the way they are received by Canadian audiences; reiterating a familiar problematic, Hill worries "that Canadians often develop a second-hand, borrowed impression about what it means to be black in Canada from the American experience."

In Hill's own stories, as we have seen, identity and identification certainly involve "crossing cultures, travel, and the frontiers of North American identity." Partially because he draws on his own experience and family history, these stories also speak about the United States. This does not

mean, however, that they are not Canadian stories, or imitate a “model blackness.” They are centrally concerned with important versions of African Canadian experience, whether they deal with Canadian-born characters like Langston Cane V or immigrant experiences like those of previous generations.<sup>26</sup> The story of Harpers Ferry revisited is a prime example. It shows Langston Cane V in the process of searching and writing part of a family history—certainly an integral part of one’s identity—that has much in common with that of Lawrence Hill. In the process, Hill uses a perspective on Harpers Ferry that owes much to the account of the Canadian Osborne Perry Anderson, which has otherwise been routinely relied upon to tell the story as American only, with often nary a note for Canada. Hill reappropriates it as an African Canadian narrative in his multi-storied imagining of one major strand of Black Canadian history. If Harpers Ferry affords Hill a crossing, he has return fare in his pocket.

#### NOTES

- 1 This article developed from a paper presented at the conference “Crossing Cultures: Travel and the Frontiers of North American Identity” at the Institute for North American Studies, University of Gröningen, Netherlands, May 19–21, 2003.
- 2 Mahatma barely avoids “Euripides Homer,” proposed by his father, who sees him obviously destined for “some great thing,” yet objected to by his mother, whose veto extends to both Greek and “Negro pride names” but fails to include other great race leaders (*Some Great Thing* 49–50).
- 3 Hill’s other books to date are *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of African Canadians* (1993) and *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Women’s Association, 1951–76* (1996).
- 4 For a wide-ranging discussion see Sollors, and in particular the chapter “Passing; or, Sacrificing a *Parvenu*” (246–84).
- 5 See Appiah, “Uncompleted Argument,” and *Color Conscious* 69; Hill quotes comments by the French geneticist Albert Jacquard about the concept of race: “The reason why the concept is not valid is well known. If a genetic inheritance is to acquire a certain originality, if it is to distinguish itself significantly from that of neighbouring groups, it has to remain in complete isolation for a very long period . . . . That kind of isolation can exist in the case of animals, but is barely conceivable for a species as nomadic and as keenly curious as ours . . . . The proportion of the total genetic diversity of the human species that can be put down to differences between the four traditional ‘races’ is only 7–8 per cent. In the case of differences between nations within these races, it is also only 7–8 per cent, while the remaining 85 per cent is due to differences between groups belonging to the same nation. In other words, the essential differences are not between groups, but contained within them. The concept of race consequently has so little content that the word becomes meaningless and should be eradicated from our vocabulary” (qtd. in Hill, *Black Berry* 202). See also Rotman or Cooper et al. for scientific discussions that take the recent mapping of the human genome into account.



- 6 Subsequent to his discussion of “race” in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, Hill extends his comments there also to “mixed race,” which thus is also under erasure: “If ‘race’ is in itself a meaningless term, then so is ‘mixed race.’ I have used the term ‘mixed race’ all my life, but now see it as an utter absurdity, even as I use it in this book” (202).
- 7 Passing may evoke that “feeling of elation and exultation” Sollors ascribes to “an experience of living as a spy who crosses a significant boundary and sees the world anew from a changed vantage point, heightened by the double consciousness of his subterfuge. Thus persons who pass may enjoy their roles as tricksters who play, as does [James Weldon Johnson’s] ‘ex-colored man,’ a ‘capital joke’ on society” (253; cf. 268).
- 8 Langston’s job, advertised by a fictional “Ontario Ministry of Wellness” to “promote employment equity in the public service” (*Any Known Blood* 2), seems modelled on the actual Ontario *Employment Equity Act*, introduced in the early 1990s under Premier Bob Rae. Hill asks in *Black Berry*: “And just how would a person qualify to be considered, say, black? Self-definition” (209). Hill also observes about the definition of an “African Nova Scotian elector,” introduced in 2000 under the amended *Nova Scotia Education Act*: “Self-definition is emerging as a key way to define one’s identity. . . . In speaking with . . . a senior official with the Nova Scotia Department of Education, I noted that the government had basically concluded a black person was any person who calls himself or herself a black person, and I asked whether anyone had considered advancing a more specific definition of blackness. ‘We weren’t going to go down that road,’ he said wryly” (*Black Berry* 210). Hill cites a 2001 court decision to similar effect with respect to Métis self-identification, and comments on the “absurdity of rigid racial categorization” that defined the legal Indian status of women by that of their husband under the federal Indian Act until 1985. Native women thus lost their legal status when marrying a non-Indian; and since status Indians could not vote in federal elections until 1960, “any non-Indian woman who married an Indian lost the right to vote” (*Black Berry* 204–5).
- 9 Fuss speaks of disidentification with reference to what Judith Butler calls disavowed identities: “What at first may appear to be refused identification, Butler proposes, might in some cases more accurately be termed a disavowed one—an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious. A disidentification, in other words, may actually represent ‘an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it’” (Fuss 7, quoting Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 112). Butler also refers to such disavowed identities as abject, although I find Julia Kristeva’s different understanding of the abject particularly useful. In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva discusses the abject as something that cannot be permitted to be constituted as object, which then could be negated and pushed into the unconscious; rather, the abject is physically refused by the body before it crosses the threshold of thetic constitution (1–7). In this sense, Langston’s disidentification is a disavowed identity floating between consciousness and the unconscious, but not abjection.
- 10 Relations between father and son suffer from similar pressures in Hill’s *Some Great Thing*: “By the time he is a teenager, Mahatma tunes Ben out. Despite the lectures about discrimination on the railway, the struggle to unionize porters, black pride, Martin Luther King and Mohandas K. Gandhi, Mahatma learns little more of these things than how to shut them out” (*Some Great Thing* 46).
- 11 Hill’s decision to write a multigenerational novel in search of identity or, perhaps better, the possibilities of identification, ranges his work alongside other recent Canadian novels that chronicle diasporic displacements over several generations and conceive of the unwritten stories of lives lived “elsewhere.” One might think for instance of Dionne Brand’s stunning *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), or Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischiefs* (1999).

- 12 There are many similarities but also significant differences between the Lawrence Hill of *Black Berry* and Langston Cane V. Hill's father, "Daniel Grafton Hill III . . . son of a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, American soldier during the Second World War, sociologist . . . human rights pioneer . . ." (*Black Berry* 37–38) shares, apart from the profession, all of these qualities with Langston Cane IV. The differing generational numbering may be the result of Hill's decision to invent the additional—and as we will see, crucial—Langston Cane I. Yet it also points to a different generational situation that Hill explores in his novel with respect to passing. Langston Cane V's options and predicaments vis-à-vis passing would be closer to those of Hill's children than to his own; in *Black Berry*, he writes: "Passing for white would never have tempted my father, even if his skin had been light enough for him to try. I might have been able to get away with it here and there, but I could never have pulled it off completely. And like my dad [but unlike Langston Cane V], I've never been tempted, either. My children, however, won't have to be tempted. They're going to have a hard enough time asserting their blackness and getting people to believe it" (*Black Berry* 39). In the novel, it is indeed not generation IV, but Langston Cane of generation V who wants his "race clearly marked" on his trip in the United States, and who has to contend with comments like "You're pushing white, son. Pushing awful hard (*Any Known Blood* 123)" and "Ain't there enough white churches where you all come from?" (125).
- 13 Alexis also refers to one of the most cited exchanges on the question of race and nation when he remarks parenthetically: "Of course, the question whether 'black experience tout court' exists at all is the question. The disagreements between Leopold Senghor and Richard Wright at the first conference on Negritude are a challenge to the idea that a shared race is enough to overcome differences of language, culture and history." See for example Fanon's "On National Culture" (*Wretched*, especially 215–16).
- 14 In 1858, Brown went to stay with Harriet Tubman at St. Catherines, and then to Ingersoll, Hamilton, Chatham, and Toronto (Du Bois 148–49), and returned briefly in 1859. At the 1858 Chatham meeting, a constitution was read and adopted (Du Bois 154); the *Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States* was printed later that year in Hamilton (Winks 268n77).
- 15 There are factual antecedents for this portrayal. Du Bois quotes (via Martin R. Delany) a member of the 1858 Chatham convention: "One Evening the question came up as to what flag should be used; our English subjects, who had been naturalized, said they would never think of fighting under the hated 'Stars and Stripes.' . . . But Brown said the old flag was good enough for him. . . . He declared emphatically that he would not give up the Stars and Stripes" (Du Bois 152; see also 154).
- 16 Under John Graves Simcoe, Upper Canada adopted legislation to abolish slavery gradually, although it did not free any slaves. Slavery remained legal in British North America until the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire, legislated in 1833 and effective August 1, 1834 (See Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* 96–113).
- 17 Douglass writes in *Life and Times*: "I told him [Brown], and these were my words, that all his arguments, and all his descriptions of the place, convinced me that he was going into a perfect steel-trap, and that once in he would never get out alive; that he would be surrounded at once and escape would be impossible" (Part 2, Ch. VIII).
- 18 Du Bois calls Anderson's *A Voice from Harpers Ferry* "The best account of the raid by a participant" (239); for Hill it is "most important of all" the books he relied upon for Harpers Ferry ("A Word About History," *Any Known Blood* 508).
- 19 See also Cuder-Domínguez for a discussion of other recent African Canadian writing in this context; the article focuses on Hill, George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*, and

Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Austin Clarke's Giller Prize-winning *The Polished Hoe* was published in 2002.

- 20 For discussions of the figure and implications of the “mulatta/o,” see for instance Clarke’s “Canadian Biraciality and Its ‘Zebra’ Poetics” (*Odysseys Home* 211–37), Sollors’ “Excursus on the ‘Tragic Mulatto’; or, the Fate of a Stereotype” (*Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* 220–45 and passim), Spillers’ “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor” (*Black, White, and in Color* 301–18).
- 21 Excerpts of his book appeared in *Maclean’s* under the title: “Black + White . . . Equals Black” (Hill, “Black + White”). Decisions about identification influence census results crucially. Clarke reports that “43 per cent of African Canadians did not identify themselves as ‘Black’ in the 1991 Canadian census.” According to one source he cites, some Haitians for instance identified themselves as French and some Jamaicans as British (*Odysseys* 41).
- 22 Yoyo passes under assumed identities since leaving his home country, while Hélène initially changes her name to Helen to conceal her French Canadian identity in Winnipeg, which she reveals to Yoyo in a code-switching passage (*Some Great Thing* 67–68).
- 23 One of the main reasons is a Ku Klux Klan incident (based on an actual event in Oakville in 1930 [512]) in which Aberdeen is attacked because he wishes to marry a white woman; after this incident, he leaves Oakville. Mill is left heartbroken and “convinced that she had lost her best friend because he had been seeing a white woman, and nobody could change her mind” (326). Her nephew’s presence and project in Baltimore thus meets an initially cold reception on her part. In *Black Berry*, Hill has devoted a chapter to the “emotionally charged issue of black men loving white women” (115–49).
- 24 Walcott points out that Mill’s role is central because from a certain point on she provides her support and much of the family documentation; it is thus “through her that Cane V is able to complete his investigation.” Walcott sees her decision as the result of having worked through the traumatic experience of the Ku Klux Klan incident and the loss of Aberdeen (69–70).
- 25 Hill’s title is part of an intertextual web that also includes John Howard’s *Black Like Me* (1961), Rinaldo Walcott’s *Black Like Who?* (1997/2003), and Hill’s review of it, “Black Like Us, Eh?” Hill addresses here again the relationship between African Canadian and African American experience and identifies as one of Walcott’s main arguments that “part of what makes African-Canadian society unique is the way it plays off black cultures in other countries.” Hill comments on the title: “It seems ironic but fitting that Rinaldo Walcott’s collection of essays about black culture in Canada features cover art and a title taken from the American experience. *Black Like Who?*, which emphasizes the distinctiveness of the black Canadian experience and urges black artists in this country to celebrate their identities more profoundly, draws its title from the American classic *Black Like Me*. Written by the late John Howard Griffin and published in 1961, *Black Like Me* was a best-selling autobiographical account of a white American who underwent a series of medical treatments to change his skin colour temporarily in order to write a first-person account about American racism. Borrowing from Griffin’s book to create the title *Black Like Who?* seems to be Walcott’s playful way of saying that room remains for new definitions of the black experience in Canada.” Walcott discusses other responses to his book, in particular that of George Elliott Clarke, in his “Introduction to the Second Edition” (*Black Like Who?* 11–23).
- 26 The author identification at the end of “Black Like Us” thus describes *Any Known Blood* as “a historical novel about five generations of a black family in Canada.”

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