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THE PROTAGONIST'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY
IN LAWRENCE HILL'S *ANY KNOWN BLOOD*

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how Langston Cane V, the protagonist of Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*, finds out who he is, how he belongs not to the United States but to Canada and what the role of his American roots is in defining his identity. The methods of character and thematic analysis are used to understand and analyse the protagonist's quest for an identity. The introduction gives a brief overview of the cultural and literary background of the novel. The first chapter focuses on previous studies written about the protagonist's search for identity. The second chapter analyses the protagonist's quest to understand who he is, his discovery of his ancestors and how he finally still belongs to Canada, even if his roots are linked to the United States.

Keywords: Lawrence Hill, transnationalism, identity, passing, re-membering

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th and early 21st century Canadian societal landscape, the questions of identity can be considered to have changed. The perceived Canadian identity can be seen to have shifted from an English and French bi-cultural society, predominating from the founding of Canada in 1867, to a more multicultural one, since the adoption of the policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Moreover, multiculturalism can be seen to have challenged the understanding of Canadian identity as it has been acknowledged before. The implications of these changes are explored in Lawrence Hill's novel *Any Known Blood* (1997). This is done through the character Langston Cane V, whose father is Black and mother is White, which in turn, creates a new, bi-racial identity. As the mixed identity of Langston V is the result of European and African cultural and racial mingling, it goes against the historically perceived Canadian identity.

Lawrence Hill as a writer explores race through the lenses of history and fiction in both his creative and nonfictional writings (Carrière et al 2016: 95). As a mixed-race writer himself, issues of mixed race are central in his works. His literary focus on race is also matched to his contributions to documentary and historical work, especially concerning the Black Canadian experiences. Hill has also written educational works on Black Canadian history for younger audiences, written about the history of the Canadian Negro Women's Association, and created a script for a documentary about the Black church in Canada. In addition to his work as a novelist, he worked as a journalist for the *Globe and Mail* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and he continues to contribute to newspapers and magazines. (Carrière et al 2016: 95)

When exploring Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*, one needs to understand the cultural and literary background of Black Canadians. The title itself is already a statement: "*Any Known Blood* announces its concern with mixed race in the title" (Carrière et al 2016: 96), furthermore, the name "Langston Cane" emphasises on mixed race and Harlem

Renaissance: “Langston Cane V, further signals Harlem Renaissance comment on mixed race by Langston Hughes and the author of *Cane*, Jean Toomer” (Carrière et al 2016: 96). In his discussion of Black Canadian identity, Harris (2004: 371) explores the topic of “one-drop rule” that can show racial categorisation and how Blackness itself might have been historically constructed as something that is absolute and biologically fixed. Additionally, Harris (2004: 371) shows how Black Canadians might lack the African American tradition of transforming exceptional or influential community members, or both, that become “supersignifiers” of a given time or movement. She challenges the idea that Black history can only be natural or unified. (Harris 2004: 371) Harris’ (2004: 372) analysis lays the groundwork for understanding why Black Canada, which lacks a widely recognised set of figures, is often dismissed as historically thin or culturally inauthentic compared to the United States. This is reinforced by Siemerling (2004: 37), who identifies this as the presumption of African American archetypality. He uses André Alexis’s quote in his discussion which demonstrates how Black Canadian experiences can be devalued by the belief that “real” Blackness can only be experienced in the United States, rendering Black Canadians “not Black enough” (Siemerling 2004: 37). Siemerling compares it with Diane Jacobs’ quote: “Strangely it was in the U.S.A. /.../ that I truly became a black Canadian /.../” With this, Siemerling shows that “border crossing” could also contribute to Black Canadian identity, as it is through confrontation with American assumptions that Black Canadian history can achieve its own identity and visibility. (Siemerling 2004: 37).

Mergeai (2011: 92) extends this to Canada's symbolic use of Lake Ontario which can be central to white Canadian narratives as well as Black escape narratives which demonstrates that Black history might not be external to the Canadian nation, but could also be considered to be embedded within it. This shared symbolism has the potential to undermine the overall opinion that Black culture arrives only from “elsewhere” and supports the idea that Canadian

identity could have always been plural. Both Wall (2011) and Nurse (2006) debate these issues within the context of Black Canadian literature. They present it as a literature that has come of age through the discussions of migration, racial exclusion, and belonging. Nurse (2006: 15) emphasises that Black Canadian writing remains “quintessentially Canadian” because it deals with immigration, lack of welcome, and limited opportunity. Wall (2011: 10) further explores the issue of identity by rejecting the opinion that Black Canadians could only exist in an “in-between” space; instead, they could be both African and European, at the same time, negotiating multiple cultural inheritances simultaneously. According to Nurse (2006: 17-18), mixed-race identity and interracial relationships could then function as metaphors for the broader Black Canadian identity.

Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood* is a novel about one man’s quest of finding out and trying to understand his identity, race and family history going through five generations of a Black Canadian-American family. The novel is centered around Langston Cane V, a 38-year-old mixed race Canadian man. He is the son of a White mother and a prominent Black father. He feels disconnected from both sides of his familial identity. As a recent divorcee, childless, and now fired from his government speechwriting job after sabotaging a politician’s speech, Langston reaches a crisis. Looking for meaning, he begins researching his family’s past. Langston’s search takes him from Canada to the United States, specifically Baltimore, where he reconnects with estranged relatives, especially his paternal aunt Millicent who will turn out to be the key to writing Langston back into his own family’s history. In Baltimore he will uncover letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, and oral histories to piece himself back into the family narrative.

This thesis will argue that Langston Cane V, the protagonist, belongs not to the United States but to Canada, and that the role of Langston’s American roots in defining his identity is crucial in his quest to re-insert himself into his family’s legacy. This will be achieved by

analysing the protagonist's journey through its key stages and events, and his relationships with people surrounding him. The first chapter focuses on previous studies written about the protagonist's search for identity. The second chapter is a study of his journey, which is based on the themes of "passing," "re-membering" and "transnationalism" discussed in the literature review.

1. PREVIOUS RECEPTION AND KEY THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This literature review aims to give an overview of the existing academic work on the topic of identity and the protagonist in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*. This overview focuses on three key themes: passing, re-membering and transnationalism that will be applied in the empirical part. The purpose is also to show how race, identity, and belonging in relation to the novel have been discussed, and to highlight the main ideas that are relevant to the thesis. In addition, this literature review provides a background for the analysis that follows. This will help place this study within earlier research and show how the thesis is connected to and informed by earlier discussions of Hill's novel. At the same time, it points out aspects that may not have been fully explored, such as Langston V's quest to find his identity, where Langston finds out who he is, that he belongs not to the United States but to Canada and what the role of Langston's American roots is in defining his identity. In this way, the literature review supports the main argument of the thesis and explains how the present study, to an extent, may contribute to a better understanding of identity in Canadian literature and in *Any Known Blood*.

1.1. Passing

As *Any Known Blood* explores the question of belonging, one of the themes that is involved with it is “passing.” As Harris (2004: 370), notes: “passing in *Any Known Blood* signals all of the usual issues common in African American passing narratives historically” yet Lawrence Hill at the same time destabilises this through what Harris terms “playful passing.” Traditional passing narratives, which can typically involve movement from Black to White, that might be rooted in racial fear and the desire to escape oppression, can rely on a biologically fixed notion of race even as they reveal race to be visually unstable and socially constructed (Wall 2011: 8). Hill draws on this paradox in order to critique it. Siemerling (2004: 32) argues that Langston Cane V’s racial ambiguity can allow him to pass with relative ease, exposing “race” as a social convention rather than a biological truth. Langston’s passing is not an attempt to become white; he consistently refuses whiteness as an end destination. Instead, he passes as various other marginalised identities, for example, an Algerian. Siemerling (2004: 34) quotes Lawrence Hill: “nobody would challenge [his] claim to racial identity.” Both Moynagh (2005) and Fraile (2012) too highlight the theme of racial ambiguity and passing. Langston Cane V initially rejects his father’s prescriptive model of Blackness, passing as various nationalities and having an identity like a chameleon: “/.../ the allusion to race is implicit in the novel’s title, which underlines the social construction of race by referring to the possibility of willingly changing or choosing one’s race, the same as chameleons change colours to blend with their environment” (Fraile 2012: 81). Fraile also points out Siemerling’s suggestion that this is not a simple rejection but is rather a “disidentification.” It is a borrowing of Judith Butler’s term for: “an identification one fears to make because it is already internalized” (Fraile 2012: 83). Langston simultaneously sticks with and resists his family’s legacy, leaving him suspended between an insider and outsider. His “camouflage” being mistaken for French in Spain or Moroccan in France shows exclusion rather than integration (Fraile 2012: 90). He never fully

belongs to the group he for a moment chooses to resemble. This experimentation can highlight the performative nature of race and can undermine the belief in an “authentic racialized self, based on history, culture, community, and experience” (Harris 2004: 370). It is emphasised that Langston’s motivation for passing differs significantly from other passing narratives. Siemerling (2004: 34-35) argues that Langston’s passing is mainly driven by disidentification rather than denial. Passing becomes a strategy through which Langston seeks control over his own identity, testing the limits of self-definition in a multicultural society that is increasingly reliant on racial self-identification (Siemerling 2004: 34). However, Lawrence Hill also reveals the limitations of playful passing. While Langston believes his performances expose race as a fiction, his actions ultimately fail to disrupt racial hierarchies or institutional power. As Harris observes: “Langston’s initial deliberate passing inadvertently supports the national injunction to contain the spill of memory” (Harris 2004: 370), avoiding deeper engagement with racial history and responsibility. Playful passing runs at the level of an individual’s own performance and remains ineffective; it “disturbs no one except Langston’s father” (Wall 2011: 9). Rather than liberating him, passing distances Langston from his family, his racial community, and himself, making it out to be a broader crisis of racial misidentification (Wall 2011: 8-9). This kind of fragmentation reaches a breaking point in his professional crisis. By inserting an incendiary speech into the Ontario Minister of Wellness’s address, Langston exposes the government’s plan to dismantle anti-discrimination legislation (Fraile 2012: 89). This act marks a break from “playful passing.” In Fraile’s words: “Through this subversive act, Langston proves to be “a revolutionary under that placid exterior” and a worthy descendant of all the Langston Canes that preceded him.” She also brings out Siemerling’s observation: “the moment reveals a decisive identification from within that suddenly destabilizes and then derails his habitual disidentification and previous playful passing” (Fraile 2012: 89). Losing his job becomes the starting point for a deeper interest and research into his family history. His journey

to Baltimore reverses his father's migration to Canada and shifts him from "politeness and ambiguity" toward disambiguation (Fraile 2012: 89). Through archival research and storytelling, Langston transforms from a fragmented subject into an artist. Fraile suggests that "Hill's novel also becomes a *Künstlerroman* with the potential of effectively changing the world. It is through taking up a role as artist/writer that Langston rejects contemporary multiracialism /.../" (Fraile 2012: 89). Fraile further states that Langston's later embrace of his mixed heritage resists the colour-blindness that is often associated with multiraciality. By the novel's end, he defines himself as: "zebra incorporated, integrating both black and white strands in the family, a phenomenon, the novel implies, which can be extended to the Canadian nation at large." (Fraile 2012: 98) She expands upon it by suggesting that: "The border official's acceptance of Mill's mixed-race 'children' and wish for a 'safe trip home' symbolically reinstates faith in a plural society while acknowledging diasporic connections."

1.2. Re-Membering

Mergeai, however, links the problem of racial identity to the work of memory. To explain this phenomenon, Mergeai (2011: 90) explains this with the words of Helen Lock: "to 're-member' something is to perform the act of reassembling its members, thus stressing the importance to the memory process of creative reconstruction." Rather than treating memory as a simple recovery of the past, Lawrence Hill presents it as a process of reconstruction, a response to what can be described as "fragmented memory" (Mergeai 2011: 90-91). Langston Cane V's search for identity is inseparable from his effort to gather the pieces of his family history, suggesting that personal identity emerges not from racial certainty, but from narrative continuity. Rinaldo Walcott brings the idea of re-membering into the context of the novel. He explains that in *Any Known Blood* re-membering is not a nostalgic narrative that the official

idea of multiculturalism would like it to be. Walcott explains that remembering is an active process of clarifying the “gaps and silences” in official histories of a nation. In his words:

Most importantly, remembering forces a series of ethical questions about how the national narrative is imagined, conceived and deployed; who belongs to it, who does not and why; and what the implications of this might be. *Any Known Blood* is a serious recounting of black Canadian history that has been largely absent from imaginative writing by black Canadians. (Walcott 2003: 68)

The quest to find oneself could include the rediscovery of one’s ancestors and their achievements, and one’s sense of place as Harris sees it. She states: “Langston Cane looks for an understanding of both. What he initially sets out to find on his journey are family stories, which provide an anchor for him on which to hang his own family history and concomitant sense of self.” (Harris 2004: 371) This process of “re-membering” is shown in Langston’s relationship to his ancestor Langston Cane I. As Siemerling (2004: 42) notes: “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.” Langston V recognises in him a model for living with ambiguity rather than resolving it. The manuscript Langston V reads, becomes a way through which identity is transmitted not biologically or racially, but narratively, supporting the idea that belonging is constructed through acts of remembrance rather than inheritance. Lawrence Hill situates this inexactness within a specifically Canadian context. Unlike societies shaped by apartheid, slavery, or segregation, Lawrence Hill argues that growing up in Canada allowed for “periods of ambiguity,” confusion, and anxiety, but also for choice (Siemerling 2004: 43). This environment makes it possible for an open negotiation of identity, even as it can in turn complicate it. Lawrence Hill compares mixed-race identity to “going through a revolving door,” capturing the constant motion between identification and disidentification that shapes Langston’s experience. Yet this motion does not end in relativism. By the novel’s conclusion, Langston affirms his Black identity as an act of self-definition rather than biological destiny: “I am black because I say so, because I feel it, and own it. It is not the only thing I am” (Siemerling 2004: 43). The novel reframes the hierarchy of identification. As Wall

observes, choosing family ultimately becomes more significant than choosing race; Langston learns to identify himself first through familial connection and only secondarily through racial categorisation (Wall 2011: 10). This shift signals a movement away from passing and racial performance toward relational identity. Through re-membering his family history, Langston is able to reconcile racial ambiguity with belonging, demonstrating that identity is not found in certainty, but in memory, family, and chosen affiliation.

1.3. Transnationalism

The third overarching theme that influences Langston's quest for identity is that of transnationalism. Nadine Flagel argues that Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* goes against the traditional slave narrative by putting it within a multigenerational family saga and with it challenging the origin of Black history and representations of race and nation. As she states, “/.../ the Cane family is not exclusively genetically defined, not exclusively black, not exclusively bound to one nation, not exclusively bound to a single myth of origins” (Flagel 2011: 20). Rather than simply presenting slavery as a one singular point of origin, Hill situates it within a broader genealogical context in which family memoir, historical reconstruction, and fiction come together. As Flagel (2011: 8) explains, “the slave narrative is thus no single origin; the family novel it nests in supplies plurality. Hence, *Any Known Blood* can most accurately be thought of as ‘a family novel or family saga,’ which is how Hill conceives of the ‘big, sprawling, touching, loving family story.’” Within this structure, the slave narrative, family memoir, and family saga interact with each other, which in turn produce a layered narrative that fights fixed conceptions of identity. Rinaldo Walcott adds to the genealogical idea. Aside from the slave narrative, he explains that Langston Cane V's quest to Baltimore and his remembrance of ancestral history is a template for the ways to make sense of Black people's historical relations to the two nations and the border crossings between them. In his opinion,

the Cane family genealogy symbolises Black North American border crossings in terms of “inter-raciality”: “This symbolizing practice forces the reader to attend intricately to the ways in which metaphors of race and nation work and are unmade in the text” (Walcott 2003: 68).

In her work, Flagel focuses on Chapter 22 of the novel, which contains a fictional slave narrative written by the character Langston Cane I. She explains that this narrative functions, in Gérard Genette’s terms, as an “autographic ad hoc hypotext” that retroactively defines the novel’s genealogical quest. While Cane I’s narrative adopts some conventions of nineteenth-century slave narratives, particularly the images of escape and family separation, it departs from the genre’s usual abolitionist moralism and heroic archetypes. Instead, the narrative takes on psychological fracture, moral ambiguity, and personal shame. In doing so, Hill revises the slave narrative into something that is more private and family centric, rather than a public political performance. Flagel therefore claims that Hill’s novel produces a critical rethinking of slavery, genealogy, and Black Canadian identity by placing a revised slave narrative within a broader narrative of family memoirs. In this way, Hill creates a unique African-Canadian identity within the family in the novel.

This genealogical framework also shapes the novel’s transnational and Black Canadian image. Moynagh (2005: 20) emphasises that the novel keeps the border between the United States and Canada symbolically open by tracing the multigenerational crossings of the Cane family. Rather than presenting Canada as the final destination for freedom, Hill revisits the “/.../ flight to Canada trope again and again /.../” (Moynagh 2005: 20) showing that each generation’s movement north is followed by disappointment. The quest for the “Canaan” (Canaan – the land of promise, promised land) continues, suggesting that it has never been fully achieved (Moynagh 2005: 20). This culminates in the memoir of Langston Cane I, a fugitive slave, in the novel, whose narrative departs from the utopian meaning of many slave narratives. It is far from celebrating homesteading and morality in Ontario, Cane critiques the racialised

economy and respectability politics that are imposed on Black settlers: “Cane refuses the Loyalist work ethic directed at black settlers which emphasized homesteading, sobriety and churchgoing as a means to self-reliance and independence” (Moynagh 2005: 21). His refusal of farming, churchgoing, and “unwavering employment” destabilises the usual Loyalist work ethic that is directed at Black communities. Even his return southward, accompanying John Brown before abandoning the insurrection, shows a refusal to be contained within national narratives (Moynagh 2005: 21). By situating his narrative at Harpers Ferry, which is described as: “/.../ a kind of nodal point in the struggle against slavery waged on both sides of the border and indeed across it,” Hill underscores the permanent nature of borders and the shared but differentiated histories of Black narrative.

Transnationalism in Hill’s novel is not only geographical but also genealogical. Fraile brings out that miscegenation structures the Cane family history:

/.../ the history of miscegenation is embedded in the Canes’ genealogy: from Langston Cane the First and his second white wife, who caused his escape from Canada after being accused of bigamy, to Langston Cane the Fourth, who married a white Canadian, and Langston Cane the Fifth who also married and later divorced another white Canadian woman. Successive generations marry across racial lines, producing both intimacy and rupture /.../. (Fraile 2012: 93)

The relationship between Aberdeen Williams and Evelyn Morris further illustrates the racialised double standards that govern interracial sexuality (Fraile 2012: 93). Aberdeen’s complaint that a white mayor’s affair with a Black woman provoked no outrage, while his own intention to marry a white woman caused scandal, exposes the gendered hierarchy embedded in Canadian society (Fraile 2012: 94). As Fraile observes, this dynamic shows the sexual exploitation of Black women under slavery while in turn showing Black male desire for white women as a threat to white social order. Even within the Black community, interracial marriage generates tension, as Millicent severs ties with her brother for “marrying white” (Fraile 2012: 94). Through this, Hill integrates the history of miscegenation within both private and national narratives, shining light on how race and gender together influence belonging.

Fraile, Harris and Moynagh emphasise that Hill's transnationalism challenges the usual image of multiculturalism. Moynagh argues that African Canadian writers "worry the nation" by insisting on histories that exceed geopolitical boundaries (Moynagh 2005:17). She goes on to argue: "To compare transnationally within the Americas is nonetheless to work against the dominant Canada-Europe axis that, until relatively recently, has informed the nation's sense of self and, in large part, its main paradigm of literary analysis" (Moynagh 2005:17). By bringing forward cross-border migrations and racial struggle, Hill contests claims to Canadian exceptionalism (Moynagh 2005:19). Fraile (2012:100) similarly contends that *Any Known Blood* widens Canadian identity by including African Canadian experience with the roots of it in the United States. This is supported by Harris' view of transnationalism in Hills' novel. She explains that: "Hill is certainly playful. Langston Cane the fifth has roots on both sides of the border. He slides back and forth, both imaginatively in the writing of his family history, and by ground and air in his pursuing of family history" (Harris 2004: 369-370). At the same time, Harris (2004: 370) emphasises how Hill draws attention to the "permeability" of the border between Canada and the United States in addition to the transnational experiences and allegiances of both the black Canadians and African Americans. It could then mean that Hill's *Any Known Blood* does not abandon the Canadian nation, instead it revises it from within through diasporic roots.

When tackling specifically the topic of Langston Cane V's quest, three major themes emerge, which are: passing, re-membering and transnationalism. The three key ideas are intertwined in defining Langston's story in *Any Known Blood*. In the novel, they reveal how identity is actively shaped through movement, memory, and perception. Passing demonstrates the pressure to fit into a dominant cultural, racial, or national frame. In the case of *Any Known Blood*, as a means of acceptance. Re-membering challenges these identities by reconnecting

fragmented histories, cultures, and experiences, which allows Langston to reconnect himself with his ancestral history to again belong. At the same time, transnationalism shows how identities can extend beyond national borders which are shaped by migration and diaspora. Together, these three key ideas show that identity is neither fixed and not a singular idea. It is open, negotiated, and deeply influenced by historical, cultural and personal experiences.

2. LANGSTON'S JOURNEY

The empirical part of this thesis examines how Langston Cane V finds out who he is, how he belongs not to the United States but to Canada and what the role of Langston's American roots is in defining his identity. To analyse Langston quest, the most important events of Langston's search for identity have been chosen from the novel. The study of his journey is based on the previously discussed three themes of "passing," "re-membering" and "transnationalism," as these are a key to help define his identity.

Structurally, Langston's quest can be divided into three parts, each marking a shift in the protagonist's journey of finding his identity. First of all, the starting and ending points of the journey need to be defined. Langston's journey to find his identity is a "transnational" quest. It begins with him being fired from his job in Canada. This shatters the comfortable illusion of passing that he has been engaging with to avoid facing the problems in his everyday life and the quest really starts with him heading to the United States. His adventure then finds a conclusion with Langston returning home, back to Canada. Between the start and end points, there are multiple events that help Langston "re-member" his roots and find himself.

2.1. Identity Crisis

As Langston's quest is defined by the three main ideas: passing, re-membling and transnationalism, the first of these ideas to appear is passing. Before his decision to go on a quest to find himself, Langston mingled with passing. With this, he is a unique case, as he does not want to pass as white or any other **one** particular race and nationality, but instead, he enjoys “dressing up” different races and nationalities he thinks fit for the moment. He lacks a clear identity that he wants to define himself as. He has nothing to latch onto because one could argue that someone trying to pass as a one chosen identity, has an understanding of who they are or who they want to be. In Langston's case this is missing. One day he is an Algerian, the other day he could instead be a Moroccan.

What additionally contributes to Langston's disassociation is his lack of understanding of the name “Langston.” As his father is a well-respected man who also bears the name Langston Cane (the Fourth), he feels the pressure to fill these expectations. He then chooses to disassociate from his roots due to his failures in life and the expectations his father has put on him. His situation is not helped by him being in the dark about his roots. Langston's father has told him grand stories about his forefathers bearing the same name, but has always refused to further elaborate on them. He is completely oblivious about what it actually means to be Langston Cane V. What complicates matters even more for Langston is that his family is from two different nations. The past generations of his forebears originate from the United States with the more influential side in forming his identity, his father's side of the family, living mostly in the Unites States.

Now Langston's quest for his identity begins with his life crumbling down in Canada. He is recently divorced, loses his job due to self-sabotage while trying to fight for justice and decides to leave his old life behind. This forces him to completely abandon the idea of playing a chameleon and passing as anyone he so chooses. The first step he takes is to go back to the

beginning of his own roots. He returns to his parents' Oakville home. Langston hopes to find some answers from his parents, but his strained relationship with his father hinders this. This is where Langston makes the decision to head from the leaves down south to the roots of the family tree in Baltimore.

2.2. Culture Shock

Like other Langston Canes before him, Langston Cane the Fifth crosses the border between Canada and the United States and with this his quest becomes transnational. The first major point of differentiation in the cultural landscape for him appears in Chapter 7. With his arrival at Baltimore, from the very first moment on he sees the many differences to Canada. The streets in Baltimore are full of potholes, there is a lack of vegetation, and no one walks on the streets. In addition, sketchy activities can be spotted. Events like the exchanges of unknown bags or thievery seem commonplace at first glance. Langston's first encounter when arriving in Baltimore is behind a red light. As he stops, he immediately falls foul to a pair of fifteen-year-old boys who have caught on that he is an outsider. They wash his windshield to grift themselves a dollar. As he moves on, he describes the drastic change in scenery of the town as: "The street switched as quickly as a TV channel" (Hill 1997: 93). Langston starts to see more greenery and parks. He states the fact that he sees some White people for the first time in Baltimore which in turn refers to a prominence of segregated structure in the city. When looking for an apartment, Langston encounters more prominent and open forms of racism than in Canada. In Toronto, racism has appeared in more subtle forms, however, in Baltimore he encounters the first example of open racism. A landlord he meets when searching for an apartment calls him an "octoroon" which confirms to Langston that he is not in Oakville, Canada, anymore: "Where I came from, not very many people knew the word meant someone who was one-eighth black. But Baltimore was obviously not Oakville" (Hill 1997: 94).

Langston's first impressions of Baltimore conclude with a puzzling interaction between a Cameroonian street vendor Yoyo and a white police officer. Yoyo is selling kebabs without a vendor's permit and a meat inspection department's license. What Langston cannot believe is that: "/.../ a six-four white cop with a night stick in his right hand was grinning in the presence of a law-breaking African street vendor and a Canadian recently mistaken for an octoroon" (Hill 1997: 98).

His first impressions in Baltimore are almost the opposites to his father's experiences in Canada. The only positive interaction Langston has made with anyone in the first days of arriving in Baltimore is the kebab street vendor Yoyo. Why this even happens or comes easy for Langston, is due to the fact that Yoyo himself is an outsider to Baltimore and has lived in Canada before Baltimore. The part that seals the deal of a room to stay is the fact that Yoyo is really fond of Winnipeg from which Langston's mother was from. When Langston asks him for a place to rent, Yoyo responds: "I have just the thing for you. I will be pleased to assist a man whose mother comes from Winnipeg" (Hill 1997: 99). From these encounters, one can conclude that Langston appears and feels "alien" to the environment in Baltimore. These first impressions for Langston away from home show the end of passing for him. In Canada, Langston knew how people behaved, what they knew, thought and expected. This enabled him to fit in as anyone he found to be convenient at the time. The illusion shatters as the environment and society in Baltimore at the very least are more upfront than in Canada.

Another shock in differences of the way of life in Baltimore strikes Langston in a drive-by shooting and mugging. In Chapter 14 Langston survives a drive-by shooting where a little boy gets caught in the cross-fire. When helping the boy, people around him do nothing. They stand around and no one thinks about calling the ambulance, even when Langston asks. After calling them himself, the people around are concerned about him being a white man coming to watch them die: "/.../ woman said, You a doctor? No, I said, but she's upsetting this boy and

he's in shock. No matter, Mr. White man, he's gonna die, we all die around here, what you doin' here watchin' us all die?" (Hill 1997: 217). As soon as the sirens are heard, the crowd dissolves quickly. After being questioned by the police and left alone for a moment, Langston is mugged in an instant. He wants to make a report about the mugging, but for the police one hundred dollars is too little to make a report about: "We don't do reports if that's all it was. You'll manage" (Hill 1997: 219). This episode further instils that Langston is an outsider in Baltimore and has no idea of the life and its dangers in Baltimore.

The quest continues in Chapter 10, when in Baltimore, Langston meets his estranged aunt Millicent who will be the key figure to unlock and re-member his roots in his journey to find himself. At first, Millicent repels Langston's attempt to reconcile with her, because she assumes that Langston is just after her money. His aunt is a Black religious person. Compared to Langston, who is an atheist, she attends church on Sundays and so Langston decides to attend as well. When going to the church, Langston again remarks on the state of the streets in Baltimore: "Half the stores had boards nailed across the windows. The other half had iron gates guarding every possible point of entry" (Hill 1997: 119). This further points to his uncomfortableness to the way of life in Baltimore compared to Canada. When going to attend the church service, in an all-Black church, Langston is for the first time concerned with passing and fitting in as himself. As Langston is half-Black and half-White, he has a fairer complexion than others at the church: "I /.../ wondered if there would be anybody – one solitary soul – in the African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation that morning with a complexion as light as mine" (Hill 1997: 117). When he arrives, the first steps toward an awareness of his self-identity can be seen as he wants to fit in as a part of himself: "I was glad that my hair was longer than usual, and combed out into an afro, because I didn't want to be seen as a white visitor," and the most important statement of them all: "I wanted my race clearly marked" (Hill 1997: 119). Still, fitting in would not be an easy task for him and the reception would be mixed.

His insecurity, though, at first, is not enforced. When talking with a street usher in front of the church, Langston claims himself to be a “half-brother,” but the usher implies that they are all Africans and that: “Nobody’s counting halves and quarters. If you are one of us, it’s that simple. End of conversation” (Hill 1997: 121). Nevertheless, when looking for his aunt Millicent, some church goers cannot believe him to be related to her as to them he looks to be “pushing white,” but they welcome him due to him choosing to attend the church and identify as a black person, even though he could pass as a white person. When moving on into the church, a newspaper vendor considers him to be White: “Ain’t there enough white churches where you-all come from?” (Hill 1997: 125).

Attending the church makes Langston think about who he is. He is for the first time concerned about passing as someone he actually is and it is not easy for him. Langston has to face his insecurities to fit in, as he is not able to hide behind a facade anymore. Even though Langston does not look the part, he is still accepted, because it is he who wants to fit in as someone he is, even though he may not look completely like the others. This idea is enforced by one of his aunt’s friends: “Most folks that light would just go ahead and pass. They wouldn’t come back to the A.M.E. church” (Hill 1997: 123). Even though visiting the church is intended for meeting aunt Millicent, the experience there has a larger impact that was expected at first. Passing for Langston takes a different meaning to the one he has mingled with before. Instead of it being about appearance or race to pass as someone, familial and cultural ties take importance over race and appearance. Experiencing Baltimore, Langston makes the first important steps in developing his identity. He sees how he does not fit in as a Canadian into an American society, but at the same, he time learns to fit in racially as someone with a mixed racial background.

2.3. Exploring Roots

Exploring his roots in Baltimore is the key for Langston to complete his quest for an identity. In addition to feeling at home, more importantly, Langston needs to find closure on the name he has and the past of the ancestors whose stories have remained incomplete. He describes this to his father: “/.../ It’s to know my past. I have to know. My life can’t go on until I know these things” (Hill 1997: 360)

With Langston being able to reconcile with aunt Millicent and explain to her his intention of learning about the history of his roots, he starts the next part of his quest. This is the process of re-membering. Luckily for Langston, aunt Millicent has a problem with hoarding and she has kept a large number of letters, diaries, newspaper clipping and other documents of his relatives, including his forefathers. These documents are a key for Langston to anchor himself back into the family narrative through the idea of re-membrance. This is crucial for developing his identity, as he has previously withdrawn and alienated from the family.

When exploring the documents at his aunt’s house, the first instance of re-membrance happens with him reading about his grandfather Langston Cane the Third. What Langston V instantly notices is his grandfather’s relationship with his grandmother Rose. At first, he believes their relationship to have been a perfect one and he even makes a remark about it to Millicent when asked, why he is so interested in learning about him: “He and Rose seemed to have an incredible relationship,” (Hill 1997: 179) but aunt Millicent tells him to delve more into it: “I don’t think *she* thought it was incredible. Him, neither” (Hill 1997: 180). Doing so Langston finds out that it truly is not as simple. The long relationship between Langston III and Rose is full of challenges, with Langston III finding it difficult to reintegrate into society after returning home from overseas, as he is self-absorbed and his life stagnates which leads to them growing apart. This revelation has some parallels that can be drawn between his own relationship between Langston V and his ex-wife Ellen. A similarity between these

relationships is how both Canes left for a foreign country and returned to grow apart with their significant others. Later on, Langston V also had a fallout and had separated from Ellen, like Rose and Langston III. Even though Rose and Langston III got back together later on, it showed to Langston V, whose divorce was frowned upon by his father, which destroyed the perfect picture that Langston's father had imagined for him, that his forebears were also imperfect and had misfortunes happen to them too, like him. This helps Langston rethink and find closure about his own past relationship with his now ex-wife Ellen.

Langston takes the most interest in his great-great-grandfather, Langston Cane I. He feels the closest to him and even sees him as a hero. The main point of importance concerning Langston Cane I is that he is a fugitive slave. Due to his past, he differs the most from other Canes. He does not fit in like others after him. That is why Langston V identifies with him the most: “/.../ I felt strangely connected to Langston the First. ‘I love the fact that he didn’t fit in. I love him for his mixture of weakness and dignity’” (Hill 1997: 497). Langston's envy of him seems to be associated with his opportunity to be free and not to be connected to anyone or anything. Langston I is able to be whoever he wants to be or become, something that Langston V is unable to do with his name weighing on him.

Langston V's father has put numerous expectations and demands on him, as he describes: “My father has placed so many demands on me – get a doctorate, get a job, hold on to your wife, have children /.../” (Hill 1997: 331), or how by his age, his ancestors had become notable Black men: “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*” (Hill 1997: 3). Langston feels trapped due to his father who has had a great influence on his life for years, and he yearns for freedom to be who he himself wants to be. In addition to the demands Langston describes, it can be guessed that additionally, there is the pressure of having a Black identity. With the name “Langston,” he has

been put under the pressure by his father to identify as a Black man and to carry the legacy of those bearing the name before him. In the first chapters, Langston describes himself feeling to be the wrong one to carry the name and that it should have been his brother instead: “/.../ Sean, my younger brother. They should have named him Langston” (Hill 1997: 7). Delving into the histories and stories of his ancestors, Langston feels that his father is at fault for not letting him fully into the history of his family. When his father confronts him about Langston digging up painful things about the past, he responds with the claim: “You planted all those stories in me. I have to get to the end of them” (Hill 1997: 360). What Langston finds out with this, is that his father has turned his back on the past and tries to bury it, as his father feels guilty about his sister Millicent having been a prostitute. This sheds light on why Langston’s father and Millicent have not communicated anymore and why aunt Millicent thought his father to have betrayed Black women by marrying a White woman. Langston’s quest to find himself makes these suppressed memories resurface in the process of re-membrance. This brings closure to old wounds left between Langston’s father and his aunt Millicent. At first, this might not seem important in Langston’s quest, but in a way, Millicent is the forgotten chapter in the family’s history that Langston’s father has left without a closure, which has indirectly hindered Langston’s identity development. By having his family reconcile, finding out the information about his ancestors that Langston has been after in Baltimore, he has paved a way for a return to Canada.

2.4. Homecoming

As Langston’s quest in Baltimore ends, he is ready to return to Oakville, Canada. The quest’s end is one of closure and the end of a cycle. Until now, he has repeated a similar pattern like the other Langstons before him. This cycle has been the movement between the United States and Canada to end up in Oakville. What Langston I started with his escape north, ends

with Langston V returning there with aunt Millicent, which at the same time brings closure to his father's chapter and, additionally, brings closure to Langston I's chapter. By helping Yoyo publicise information about John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Langston connects it to his own family history. Langston's quest is not only about him learning about his ancestor's history, it is for him to write about them and capture their legacy. This contribution, in turn, will allow him to write himself into the legacy of his forebears.

When Langston V returns to Canada, he goes there with his aunt Millicent and two new acquaintances that he had made in Baltimore. These are the kebab vendor Yoyo and his new love interest Annette. Before crossing the border, aunt Millicent takes over the wheel and states that: ".../ our family had been moving back and forth across the border for five generations and that she would know how to handle this crossing" (Hill 1997: 504). When crossing, aunt Millicent claims at the border that they had spent a week in Baltimore and that all the four of them are related, Yoyo and Annette being his children with Langston being his nephew. The officer checking only aunt Millicent's and Langston's IDs wishes them: "Have a safe trip home, folks" (Hill 1997: 505), which marks them returning home where they had lived and their forebears had lived. After leaving Canada and being in Baltimore, this is the first time that Langston has been welcomed home. This return mimics the transnational circle of life and movement that had occurred in the five generations of the Cane family. With the return to Canada, both aunt Millicent and Langston himself reclaim their identities as Canadians. With aunt Millicent showing her old: ".../ seventy-year-old certificate of Canadian citizenship" (Hill 1997: 505), she returns to her identity as a Canadian just like Langston.

With his quest to Baltimore, Langston finds out what he has been looking for. He understands that he is Langston Cane V. He can piece together what it means to be a Langston Cane through the stories of his ancestors. By this, he is able to place himself into the line of

distinguished figures of the family and he will do it as a writer, capturing the history of his family. Langston is able to make out the difference between his home in Canada and the United States, which confirms to him that his roots might be from the United States, but he is still a Canadian. He does not belong to the United States, rather, he is accepted into the community which resides there.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse the protagonist, Langston Cane V's quest for identity in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*, how he finds out who he is, how he belongs not to the United States but to Canada and what the role of his American roots is in defining his identity. These three major events were analysed with the help of three ideas: passing, re-membering and transnationalism. These ideas were chosen due to them describing Langston's situation the best. Langston's initial story in Canada revolves around passing as he tries to portray other races and nationalities like Algerian and Moroccan. Passing also influences his quest for an identity in Baltimore as he wants to fit in as someone he really is, an African-American. Re-membrance is the key for his journey to the United States. As he delves into the history of his forefathers by piecing together their stories and by bringing closure to his aunt Millicent's chapter in Canada, he is able to understand his place in the familial narrative and piece himself back into it. As for transnationalism, the Cane family's roots are intertwined between the United States and Canada, so both Langston's journey and stories of his ancestors take place there.

The first event to be analysed was Langston's initial reception and observations of Baltimore. His reception and observations show that Langston did not fit into the cultural and racial circles of Baltimore. From Langston's own comparisons to the opinions of the locals, he

stood out as an outsider. He initially fits in with only other outsiders like the street vendor Yoyo, who had also previously lived in Canada or through his connection to his aunt Millicent. Langston sees and feels the difference of the city and the attitudes of its inhabitants. This could be seen when he was attending the A.M.E. Church where he was seen as an outsider, a White man, by both the regular attendees and a newspaper vendor. Still, he was accepted when his roots and motivations were known to the people. In addition, when helping a young child who was caught in a drive-by shooting, the people there acted not to Langston's expectations and saw him again as an outsider and called him White. He did not fit in as he did in Canada.

The second event is him studying his family history. In this part, the key to unlock his identity is his own aunt Millicent, who hands him all the documents, notes and mail of his ancestors and additionally tells him about her own history with his father that later helps Langston bring a closure to their chapter. When studying his familial history, Langston finds out that his forefathers did not have the perfect lives he had assumed. Firstly, he learns about his grandfather Langston Cane III, whose relationship with his grandmother Rose, helps him have closure on his divorce with his ex-wife Ellen. He finds comfort in Langston Cane I who as a fugitive slave did not fit in like him and he admired his freedom to choose to be whoever he wants to be. This is linked to his relationship with his father Langston Cane IV. His father has put many expectations on him. He feels trapped and wants to escape from what the name Langston carries with it. With Langston's father trying to forget the uglier parts of the family's history, he has indirectly influenced Langston's inability to fit in as a Langston Cane, which is finally mended by him studying his ancestors and finding closure to Aunt Millicent's chapter in the United States.

The third event is Langston's and his Aunt Millicent's return to Canada, which concludes their arcs in the United States and cements their place in Canada. With his aunt returning to Canada, she reclaims her Canadian citizenship, and Langston is finally welcomed

back home by the border guard. It is the first time Langston is welcomed and fits in. The border officer is assumed to believe them to be Canadian, even if he must check their ID's by procedure, because he allows both Yoyo and Annette, who are not Canadian citizens, into the country without checking them. This return to Canada is similar to the transnational story of the generations of the Cane family, who due to one reason or another, crossed the border of between Canada and the United States.

During his quest in Baltimore, Langston finds out that he is Langston Cane V. He understands what it means to be a Langston Cane through the experiences of his ancestors and pieces himself into the respected figures of the family as a writer. Langston sees the difference between his home in Canada and the United States, which tells him that even if his roots are from the States, he is still a Canadian and does not belong to the community which resides there. He is accepted but does not belong. Langston's journey reveals that his American roots have an important part in defining him, that without them he would not be a Langston Cane. More in-depth research could be done on Langston's quest in the future, as it is an important and interesting angle, and because the scope of this thesis did not allow to discuss all the nuances that contributed to his formation of identity.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Marten Paabo

The protagonist's quest for identity in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*

Peategelase identiteediotsingud Lawrence Hilli romaanis "Any Known Blood"

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 31

Annotatsioon:

Lawrence Hilli romaani "Any Known Blood" keskpunktis on tegelane Langston Cane V, kes on 38-aastane mees, kelle isa on mustanahaline ning ema valge. Ta tunneb ennast eraldatuna mõlemast suguvõsa poolest ning talle isa poolt seatud ootustest, mis tulenevad sellest, et ta on viies Langston Cane pealtnäha edukas suguvõsas. Ta on hiljuti lahutatud, lasteta ja nüüd ka vallandatud, mis viib Langstoni kriisiolukorda. Selline asjade kulg paneb teda uurima oma perekonna minevikku. Tema otsingud viivad ta Kanadast Ameerika Ühendriikidesse, täpsemalt Baltimore'i, kus ta taastab suhted võõrandunud sugulastega, eriti oma tädi Millicentiga, kes osutub võtmeisikuks, kelle abil Langston, taasavastades oma perekonna ajalugu, leiab ennast uuesti Langston Cane'ina.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest milles antakse ülevaade Lawrence Hilli romaanist „Any Known Blood“ ja selle ilmumise taustast Kanada ja Kanada mustanahaliste kirjanduses. Esimesest peatükist milles keskendutakse varasemale kirjandusele, mis käsitleb peategelase identiteedi otsingutega, et tuua välja, mida on selle teema kohta varem leitud ja arutatud. Teises peatükis analüüsitakse peategelase identiteediotsinguid, et mõista tema arengut, tema Ameerika juurte olulisust ning seda, kuidas ta ikkagi kuulub pigem Kanadasse, isegi kui tema juured on suuresti seotud Ameerika Ühendriikidega.

Tegelase ja temaatilise analüüsi meetodeid kasutades tuleb välja, et Langston avastab esivanemate kogemuste kaudu, mida tähendab olla Langston Cane ning leiab endale kirjanikuna koha perekonna tunnustatud liikmete seas. Langston näeb erinevust Kanada ja Ameerika Ühendriikide vahel, mis annab talle mõista, et isegi kui tema juured on Ameerikas, ei kuulu ta sealsesse kogukonda, vaid ta on ikkagi kanadalane. Langstoni otsingud näitavad, et tema Ameerika juured mängivad tema isiksuse kujunemisel olulist rolli ning et ilma nendeta ei oleks ta Langston Cane.

Märksõnad: Lawrence Hill, transnatsionalism, identiteet, teesklemine, mälestuste taaselustamine

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