

MIKE'S LITTLE SECRET: How Hard Lemonade Funds Fine Wine

Maclean's

Canada's Weekly Newsmagazine

August 27, 2001 www.macleans.ca \$4.50

CENTRAL AMERICA
Much Ado About a
Canadian Dam

STEM CELLS
Promise in a
Moral Minefield

Black + White

...equals black,

says author
Lawrence Hill in
an excerpt from
his provocative
new book

Mixed-race
Canadians
chronicle their
search for
identity



\$4.50

35



0 5511370001 9

Black + W

...equals black,

says Oakville, Ont., author Lawrence Hill in an excerpt from his provocative new book

When writer Lawrence Hill (Any Known Blood) was growing up in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills in the 1960s, he rarely saw any other children of colour apart from his brother and sister. Their father, Daniel Hill, the first director and chairman of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and, later, the province's ombudsman, was a black man; their mother, Donna, was white. Civil-rights activists in the U.S., they had been attracted by Canada's more tolerant racial environment. For Lawrence Hill, now 44, being mixed-race in a white-bread Canadian suburb led him to reflect on his identity. His new book, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (HarperFlamingo, \$32) combines memoir with an examination of national attitudes about race—and includes interviews with 34 people who have one black and one white parent. He also weaves in the voices of his parents (Donna is now 73 and Daniel, 77) and his siblings (Dan, 47, once in the limelight as a pop singer, now devotes his energy to songwriting, while Karen, 43, is an aspiring writer). An excerpt:

My childhood was punctuated with sayings about black people. My father's relatives sometimes said, "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." On one level, the meaning is obvious: a raspberry or strawberry that is full and dark and pregnant with its own ripeness is sweeter than

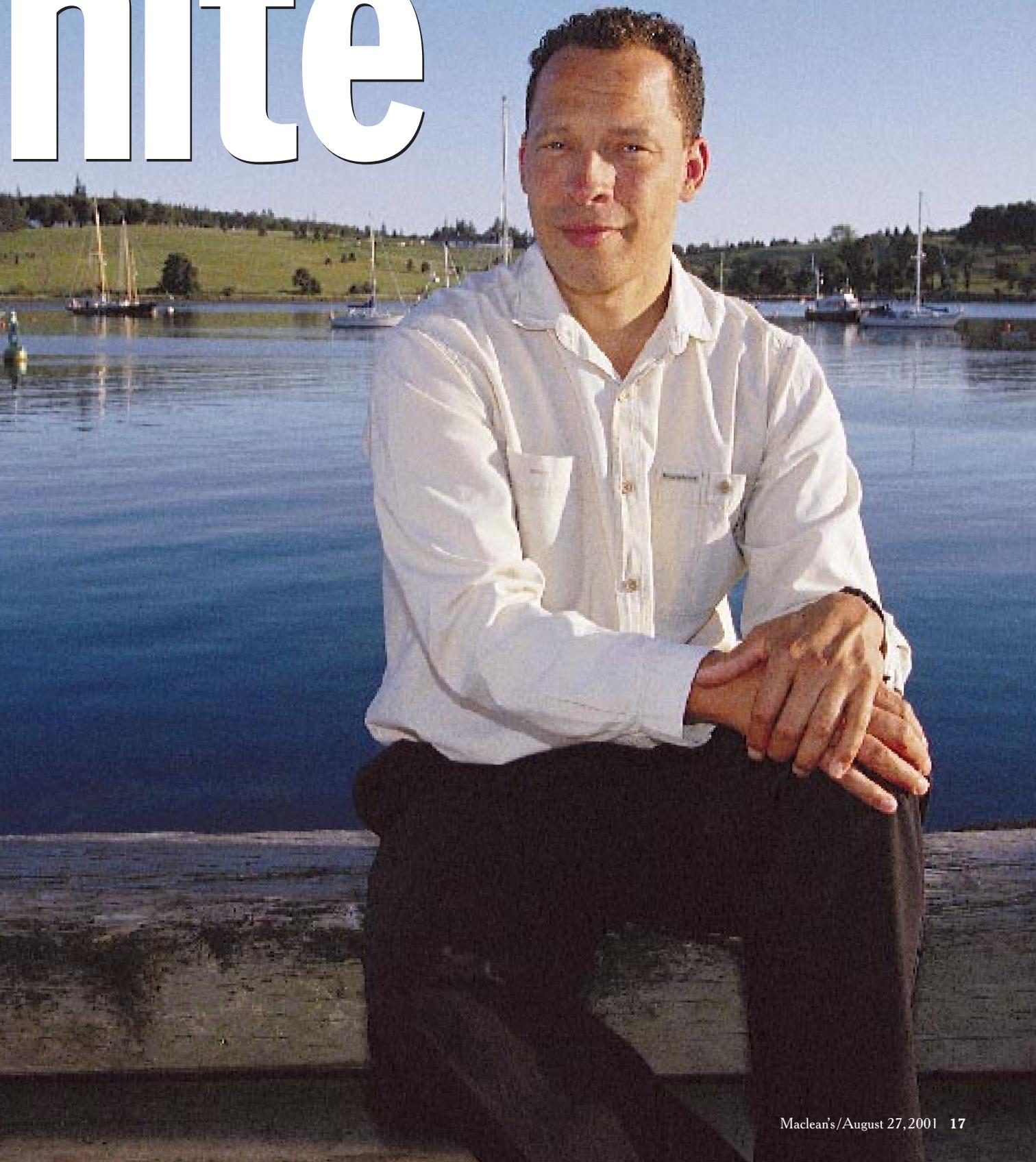
its pink, prematurely plucked counterpart. But there is also a sexual undertone to the saying, a suggestion of the myth of the overcharged, overheated, high-performing black body. Presumably, the blacker berry tastes richer, more full and is juicier. The trouble with this expression is that it has always struck me as a limp-wristed effort to help black people believe that it was OK to be black. It seemed to me sad and pathetic that we even felt a need to pass around a saying like that.

But I wasn't the only one who found that the words itched more than they tickled. My father bombed the pious saying to smithereens with his own sarcastic version: "The blacker the berry/The sweeter the juice/But if you get too black/It ain't no use." I absolutely loved that variation. Why? Because it turned self-affirmation on its head with a mere 10 additional words, offering a bitter-sweet reminder of the hopelessness of being black in a society that doesn't love—or even like—black people. There were many other sayings, such as "If you're white/You're all right/If you're brown/Stick around/If you're black/Stay back." Black people said these words and laughed. All the sayings underscored the utter futility of being black.

I discovered, very early, that some people had strange ideas about the children of interracial unions, and seemed inclined to

The writer, shot in Lunenburg, N.S., says it took a long time for him to assert his blackness

hite



'I discovered, very early, that some people had strange ideas about the children of interracial unions, and seemed inclined to believe life for us would be miserable'

believe that life for us would be miserable. When I was 12, my best friend was a white girl, Marilyn (as I shall name her), whose mother would embarrass the dickens out of me by singing my praises to her own children. "Look how well Larry does in school. Why can't you be like that, Marilyn?" Astoundingly, this same mother who thought I was doing so well once took me aside and said, "Frankly, Larry, don't you think it is terrible, mixing races like that? It ruins the children! How are they to make their way in life?"

As a child, my own experience of race, including my concept of my own racial identity, was 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. One of the most telling details came to me from my mother, who was working as a secretary for a Democratic senator when she met my father in Washington in 1953: "When I started dating your father, even the federal government cafeterias were segregated." 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 centres, among friends—as black.

But my parents threw their unborn children a curveball. They came to Toronto right after they married, had us and we all stayed here. They had had enough of racial divisions in their country of birth. And although they spent their lives at the forefront of the Canadian human-rights movement, they were also happy and relieved to set up in suburban, white, middle-class Toronto, where race faded (most of the time) into the background.

When I was growing up, I didn't spend much time thinking about who I was or where I fit in. I was too busy tying my shoelaces, brushing my teeth, learning to spell, swinging baseball bats and shooting



The author (centre), with his family in 1958, grew up in 'a sort of racial limbo'

hockey pucks. But once in a while, just as my guard was down, questions of my own identity would leap like a cougar from the woods and take a bite out of my backside.

I found that race became an issue as a result of environmental factors. The average white kid growing up in a white suburb didn't have to think of himself as white. Gradually, my environment started talking to me and making me aware that I could never truly be white. There's nothing like being called "nigger" to let you know that you're not white.

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 the 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. I have black American cousins, of both lighter and darker complexions, who attended segregated schools and grew up in entirely black communities. They had no reason to doubt their racial identity. That identity was wrapped around them, like a snug towel, at the moment of birth.

In 1977, when I decided to take a year off university, I went to visit my cousins

in Brooklyn before flying to Europe, which must have appeared to them a quintessentially white thing to do. My cousin Richard Flateau took me under his wing, and was patient until I asked if he liked to play squash. An indignant retort exploded from his lips: "Larry! That's a white folks' game!" Today, looking back, I find irony in that memory. There I was, son of a black American Second World War veteran and a white American civil-rights activist, playing squash, a sport virtually unknown to inner-city blacks in the United States.

These days, I think of the factors that contributed to my sense of identity, and of how malleable that sense of identity was and still is. There were days when I went straight from my exclusive, private boys' high school to family events populated by black relatives or friends who idolized the icons and heroes of my childhood—Angela Davis, with her intelligence and her kick-ass Afro; sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, with their black-gloved fists raised on the Olympic podium in Mexico City; Muhammad Ali, who stood up to the white man and spoke the words that moved the world: "I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong." I bounced back and forth between studying Latin, playing

‘Gradually, my environment started making me aware that I could never truly be white—there’s nothing like being called “nigger” to let you know you’re not white’

squash and revering black American cultural icons, but who exactly was I?

Lately, I have been looking at some family photos and mulling over what they mean to me. In my home office, I have some 30 framed shots of relatives. There are my three children, running, cavorting, picking apples. The eldest, Geneviève, is 11, and I wonder how she will come to see herself, racially, as she moves into adolescence. She has been a ballerina for six years, and you don’t find a world much whiter than that, not even in Oakville, where we live. She knows who she is, and has had much contact with the black side of her family—but the girl has blue eyes and skin even lighter than mine, and I can see that if she is going to assert her own blackness one day, she may have to work hard at it. Nine-year-old Caroline, the middle child, is the darkest of my three, and has that uncanny middle-child ability to relate to anybody of any age. I have noticed that she already bonds vigorously with black women. Andrew, who is 7, is about as interested in race as he would be in nuclear physics. Interestingly, though, he has already called out a few times, “I’m not black, I’m white,” and shot a look my way to test for a reaction. He looks white, too.

Would you like to know how my children would once have been categorized, racially? Quadroons. They have a father who is supposedly half-black and a mother who is white, and that parentage, according to the traditional racial definition blender, would have made them quadroons. Quadroons, of course, were most definitely black, and enslaved like the rest of us in Canada and the United States. Quadroon women were favoured by slave owners for features deemed exotic and sexy but not too black, thank you very much. I shudder to imagine children who looked just like mine dancing in the infamous Quadroon Balls in New Orleans, where hot-looking young women were bought and consumed until they were no longer young or beautiful.

Today in Canada, black people still contend with racism at every level of society. And yet, the way my children will define themselves, and be defined by others, re-



Karen, Dan and Lawrence, shown in 1978, saw few brown faces in their suburb

mains up for grabs. Racial identity is about how you see yourself, about how you construct a sense of belonging, community, awareness and allegiance.

To this date, I have mostly seen myself as black. My black American relatives, who lived in Brooklyn, Washington, Baltimore and North Carolina, were much closer to us and much easier to visit than my mother’s family. Apart from her twin, Dottie, whom we all adore, we never really got to know my mother’s relatives. My mother spoke negatively of her brothers when we were young, describing how they gave her a hard time—one even questioned her sanity—when she announced that she would be marrying a black man. As a result, as a child I came to nourish a minor grudge against some of these relatives. On my father’s side, however, family was like an extension of my own body and psyche.

My first sense of blackness, sprang from warm places. Our house boomed with jazz and blues on weekends. Dan, Karen and I watched—entranced, intrigued—as our parents danced in the living room to Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington. Dad has an amazing voice. When he sang, he waltzed up and down the tunes with a playfulness and irreverence that we found absolutely infectious.

I remember being laid up with the flu when I was 5. My father asked: “Any musical requests, sir?” And I said, “Put on Joe Williams.” *Every Day I Have the Blues* began to jump off the record player. I listened to my dad and Williams nailing the notes as Basie hammered the piano, and trumpets, trombones and saxophones erupted with glee. It’s one of the happiest songs I’ve heard—even if it is about the blues. *Nobody loves me/nobody seems to care/between bad luck and trouble/well you know I’ve had my share.* Just about any words could have flown from Joe Williams’s lips and soared, ecstatically, as if to prove that nothing could keep this man from living and loving. Jazz and blues were already showing me the sweet alchemy of trouble and joy that defined black musical expression, and black people themselves.

I don’t recall early moments with family members that gave me a negative sense of race, but my siblings do. Perhaps because he was the firstborn, Dan had a rockier time with our father. Dan has no doubt that our father gave us mixed racial messages. When my brother was 11 or so, Dad gave him a stocking to wear on his head at night. The idea was to straighten out Dan’s hair while he slept, or at the very least to keep it from getting too curly on

Cover

'I have black American cousins who attended segregated schools and grew up in entirely black communities—they had no reason to doubt their racial identity'



When Donna Bender (above centre, and right) married into the Hill clan (shown at a 1967 gathering), her mother was aghast

the pillow. I asked Dan if Dad had told him why he had to wear it.

"It wasn't good to have curly hair. He'd pull a hair out of my head and put it on the table and say, 'See? This is curly. It's not good to have curly hair.' And I remember feeling extremely hurt and ashamed, and I started wearing the stocking cap. I remember feeling very concerned that my hair was curly, and I remember being frantic about straightening it."

Dan now attributes the incident to the strange paradoxes of human nature. "I think that kind of behaviour is common among people like our father, who have worked in the field of human rights. Very often, people go into these fields as compensation for their own feelings of inadequacy. That way, they can still bring those feelings of inadequacy and self-hatred—self-racial-hatred—into the house."

Dan, Karen and I learned early that you can have a white parent and still be considered black, but you can never have a black parent and be considered white. It ain't allowed. You'll be reminded of your "otherness" more times than you can shake a stick at it. 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. This doesn't mean I don't love my mother. I love her as profoundly as I love any person on earth. But I just don't see myself as

being the same race as she is. I raised this issue with my mother recently. "Listen," she told me, "when I married your father, I knew that our children would be black. I would have been an idiot to fail to see that. Look where we came from."

However, the suburb of Don Mills in which they eventually settled became as suffocating for their children as D.C. had been for them. There were no blacks in my school, on my street. Because I looked so different from everyone else, I feared that I was ugly. I worried about having frizzy hair, big ears, a big nose and plump lips. When I looked in the mirror, I felt disgust. None of the people I admired looked the least bit like me. Listening to stories of my father's working world instilled in us a measure of black pride. We also derived a sense of connection from family moments around the television, which is odd because we weren't that interested in TV. But the late 1960s and the early 1970s featured big stand-up comedy numbers by Bill Cosby and Flip Wilson. When I watched these shows, I felt alive. I felt that there were people in the world who were speaking to me.

I had to find other ways to connect with them. So I ate up every bit of black writing that I could find. Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright—whom I approached gingerly because my mother confessed that *Native Son* had upset her so much, it had made her vomit. James Bald-

win. Eldridge Cleaver—now that cat fascinated me, especially when, in *Soul on Ice*, he speculated as to why black men and white women end up together. I read Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and had to struggle through the section of Malcolm X's life when he ardently believed that white people were the devil incarnate. I knew this to be false. My mother was white, and she was no devil.

Without knowing exactly what I was doing, I was forming my own sense of blackness and my own connection to the black diaspora. Soon, this exploration blossomed into creative writing. Every time I wrote, my mind wandered into the lives of black characters. Slowly, I was developing a sense of myself. These days, when I'm invited into schools with black students, I feel a tinge of nostalgia for a past not lived. I can't help wondering what it would have been like to have black people around me when I was young. I can't help wondering what it would have been like to go out with black girls, or to drift into a friend's home and find myself surrounded by black people. What a different life that would have been.



Adapted from Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada by Lawrence Hill. Published by Harper-Flamingo. Copyright 2001 Lawrence Hill. All rights reserved.