

**Black Atlantic Reconfirmed**

Siemerling, Winfried. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. xiv + 546 pp.

The title of Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (2015), indicates the dual-focus of the work. In one thread of his argument, Siemerling wants to "reconsider" Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and its legacy as perhaps the ur-text of black diasporic writing and cultural production. His other thread focuses on how contemporary black Canadian writing represents the historical past of slavery, racism, generational hauntings, and familial trauma. Certainly these are two parallel concerns: just as Gilroy's theory of black transnationalism reframes the historical past, a reappraisal of the historical record enables new perspectives on Gilroy's framework. Yet these two argumentative strands do not serve exactly the same purpose, and in this sense Siemerling's book contains two related threads that aren't always twined.

While the first part of the title, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, suggests a reappraisal of Gilroy's work, Siemerling's volume is more a Canadian supplement to *The Black Atlantic* than a sustained reconsideration. Siemerling certainly addresses George Elliott Clarke's concern that "Canada, as a subject space, is patently absent" from Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (*Odysseys* 9) and he proceeds to demonstrate the relevance of black Canadian writing and cultural production to Gilroy's formulation. He thus resituates Canada within the Black Atlantic through effective archival study, historical work, and analysis of historical and contemporary writing. In doing so he synthesizes and builds upon previous work such as Robert Winks's *The Blacks in Canada*, James Walker's *The Black Loyalists*, and Marcel Trudel's *L'esclavage au Canada français*. Alongside the recent work of Karina Vernon, Phanel Antwi, and others, this text marks an important step towards revising the early Canadian canon and further mapping the field of black Canadian writing.

*The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is divided into two sections. The first, "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century," surveys slave narratives, abolitionist writing, religious documents, and the historical presence of black people in Canada and New France. This supplements the extant literary-historical work of George Elliott Clarke and others by providing analyses of slave narratives in Lower Canada, New France, the

community of black intellectuals in Chatham, ON, as well as a sustained reading of *the Book of Negroes* (which he reads doubly as both a “record of Canadian slavery and indenture, but certainly also a record of Canadian freedom” (49)). The second half of Siemerling’s book, “The Presence of the Past,” considers how the past of the middle passage, slavery, and the experience of modernity from the perspective of its black subjects, serve as the imaginative material for contemporary black writers. Siemerling argues that Glissant’s notion of relation, wherein “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 11), “speaks to much contemporary black writing in Canada” (Siemerling 23). Each writer’s relation to the ghosts and traumas of the past, the politics of nationhood, creolized notions of citizenship and race all “concern our contemporary with the past, cultural memory, haunting, and transformation; more generally, they relate to the black Atlantic and the affirmation of a modernity that most decidedly was also black” (159).

Siemerling’s most compelling historical analysis is his discussion of the black literary and political community organized around Chatham, Ontario throughout the mid nineteenth century. He effectively maps out the community of letters that cut across American and Canadian borders and demonstrates how the debates among Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Mary Ann Shadd, and Martin Delany created a number of “contact zones” where ideas of blackness, nationalism, and citizenship were placed into productive conflict with one another. He convincingly shows that “These accounts help to document the lives and communities of one of the most substantial groups of immigrants in nineteenth-century Canada. They afford us insight into an aspect of Canada that is often marginalized but is crucial to any approach to the period” (128). This section is particularly important for Siemerling’s identification of the emergence of a Black Canadian Renaissance; he masterfully demonstrates how, “driven by a relentless desire for liberty...Collectively, the work of these writers, thinkers, and activists can rightly be called a Black Canadian Renaissance” (98). The identification of an early black Canadian black Renaissance is a daring claim that promises to reconfigure not just received ideas of the black Atlantic but pushes at the borders of Canadian writing itself.

The strength of this book is also one of its greatest weaknesses. Siemerling’s striving for completeness allows him to provide a clear, almost comprehensive, overview of the field of black Canadian literary production. His discussion of contemporary writing is so encyclopedic, however, that his impossible quest for completeness becomes something of a fetish that

overwhelms other important dimensions of the work (the Introduction is a microcosm of this, as it reads like a sampling of relevant frameworks rather than a purposeful structure). The impressive volume of texts that he discusses means that a great deal of the book is necessarily taken up with plot summary and positioning a given text within a writer's oeuvre; the reader is therefore occasionally left with the impression that an author's work has not received the sustained attention that it merits. For instance, Siemerling cites Émile Ollivier's statement that black writing in Montreal must "montrer comment notre presence bouscoule, bariole, tropicalise le lieu montrealias" (56). Yet Siemerling doesn't always tell us precisely *how* each writer transforms the Canadian spaces that they and their characters inhabit. This makes the book very useful for surveying the field of black Canadian writing but less so for identifying an incisive argument concerning the relation between the literary and historical representations of the Black Atlantic and Canada.

His reading of David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* is representative of his method: "*Soucouyant* shows a process of self-articulation that works as a relational mediation of the self through cultural and historical contexts, as well as through the presence and the perceived past of others" (275). This is a fine reading of the novel that is supported by his observations; however, it also demonstrates Siemerling's tendency to have literary works confirm, rather than complicate, his explicatory theoretical frameworks. Also one wonders whether there is anything particularly compelling about Black *Canadian* literature that we can draw from this survey? Is it yet another node in the transnational network of the Black Atlantic, as his reliance on Glissantian relation suggests, or has Canada's slow emergence from under the shadow of French and British colonialism led to a unique cultural and political milieu that enables a particular articulation of blackness *here*? Does Canada's policy of multiculturalism at once enable, and perhaps encourage, the very "relational mediation of the self" that Siemerling describes while, in its substitution of race for culture and ethnicity, disables an articulation of a kind of relational blackness in Canada? How does the legacy of the past that Siemerling discerns contour an expression of the way in which "multiculturalism is part of the consciousness of Blackness and...an exercise in Blackness" (Foster xv). How might Siemerling contend with McKittrick's insight that "While some critics reverse narratives of elsewhere and absence in order to 'find,' 'list,' or 'rediscover' black Canada, others analyze elsewhere and absence for their critical geographic possibilities, specifically how elsewhere and absence *are* in Canada, how black Canada is lived as unvisibility" (96)? While Siemerling

maps the territory quite effectively, his analysis misses opportunities to engage with these theoretical frameworks and thereby does not address what George Elliott Clarke sees as “a primary ontological conundrum to confront the analyst of African-Canadian literature...How Canadian is it” (*Odysseys* 71)? As a result of the broad strokes of Siemerling’s text there is less ‘reconsideration,’ as the title promises, of the established theories and too much ‘reaffirmation.’

One such missed opportunity for articulating the specificity of Canadian blackness, and what might be called the negative identification with the nation, comes in the disagreement between Mary Ann Shadd and Martin Delany. Shadd rebukes Martin “Delany’s call for a separate black nation in favour of integration in a Canada that she daringly recodes as a ‘Colored British nation’: ‘You *cannot* be a whole African Nation here brethren, but you can be *part* of the Colored British nation. This nation knows no one color above another, but being composed of all colors, it is evidently a *colored* nation” (Siemerling 112; italics in original). While motivated partially by propagandist and rhetorical ends, Shadd’s formulation of a Canadian-British “*colored* nation” is an intriguing reimagining of the nation. What is it about Canada and Shadd’s own conception of Britishness that enables such a blackening (to borrow Rinaldo Walcott’s phrase) of the nation? Shadd’s formulation demonstrates the partial flexibility of the *idea* of the nation while challenging Gilroy’s diasporic and transnational approach to reading black Atlantic cultures. Her words may also gesture towards a middle ground in the debates between Walcott and George Elliott Clarke that dominated black Canadian literary studies for a number of years. It is a shame that this rich passage receives little comment from Siemerling.

Siemerling’s attention to the historical record also somewhat impedes his literary criticism. In his reading of the figures of domestic workers, for instance, he writes that “The workers and domestics shown by Foster, Silvera, and Clarke seek alternatives in Canada” (220). He argues that Austin Clarke “portrays the lives of highly educated Bajans (like himself)” (220) and shows how “a worker in Clarke’s *The Survivors of the Crossing* comments on this continuity of oppression and exclusion that reaches from Bajan plantation realities both before and after emancipation to his Canadian Caribbean present” (220). The language of “show,” “observe,” and “comment” belies Siemerling’s realist perspective; this is partially a product of his effort to position literary representation as a response to historical contexts. This is not to deny Siemerling’s many valuable close readings, but at times he veers too closely to what George Elliott Clarke

calls the sociological criticism of black writers wherein the critic reduces “writers to the status of sociologists or they bleach their work of aesthetic value” (“Harris, Philip” 168). This criticism is particularly unfortunate for a writer like Austin Clarke whose work is either “characteristically neglected” (Keith 78) or typically “limited to readings addressing the authenticity of representation” (Bucknor 141).

The historiographic bent of Siemerling’s project leads him to these kinds of sociological readings while also influencing the kinds of texts he discusses. For instance, his most sustained reading of Austin Clarke’s work focuses on *The Polished Hoe*, a fine novel in need of the kind of careful treatment Siemerling offers, but by no means representative of Clarke’s oeuvre. Slavery and other traumas of the past are not the primary focus of Clarke’s work, and as a result a great number of his works receive only a passing consideration. Similarly his discussion of Wayde Compton’s turntable aesthetics is fascinating and compelling but Compton’s transformation of the past via remix technologies is by no means representative of hip-hop musical forms in Canada. A more sustained engagement with some of the numerous texts for which the representation of the past is not a primary concern might have offered a useful and complicating counterpoint to Siemerling’s thesis.

The central tension of Siemerling’s text is that he wants to at once disrupt Gilroy’s transnational framework by insisting on the importance of Canada as a site of black politics and cultural production while never fully interrogating the symbolic and material valences of the diasporic and the transnational. This is not paradoxical but in fact accords with Walcott’s observation that black writing in Canada practices a “deterritorialized strategy that is consciously aware of the ground of the nation from which it speaks” (15). However, a more incisive navigation through the interactions of deterritorialization, nation, multiculturalism, and diaspora, particularly as they are articulated in contemporary Canadian literary representation, would have enabled Siemerling to complicate Walcott’s formulation rather than affirming it. Indeed, given that *The Black Atlantic* is a product of an a decidedly post-national moment, Siemerling might have brought Canada’s own recurring anxieties about its own nationhood and national literature to bear on the post-national biases of Gilroy’s formulation.

Yet these criticisms are less the shortcomings of Siemerling’s text and more suggestions for how subsequent critics might continue his work. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is a well-argued and encyclopaedic analysis of the field that makes a strong case for the historical and contemporary

import of black representations of the past to Canadian literature. His work disputes the notion that black voices are new in Canada or that their work is marginal to Canadian Literature. Siemerling shows that black voices in Canada predate not merely Frye but also Moodie and the Confederation poets. His thesis rings true for the bulk of the texts that he considers, and he deftly shows the manner in which these writers contend with the past as ghost, trauma, object of loss, or object of melancholy. This text therefore does not merely insist on the presence of black people and their stories but calls to account a Canadian canon that has ignored those presences up to now.

## Works Cited

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