

REVIEW

REASSERTING THE CANON OF BLACK CANADIAN LITERATURE. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past*. By Winfried Siemerling. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015. 540pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-4507-6).

Winfried Siemerling's latest book, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past* (2015), offers a thorough re-examination of Black Canadian writing and cultural studies, relatively new fields of study if compared with the well-established traditions of the African American canon and postcolonial literatures from Africa and the Caribbean.¹ Siemerling's well researched and elegantly written book contributes to reverse the critical neglect of this body of literature both in diasporic studies—such as Paul Gilroy's influential *The Black Atlantic* (1993)—and in Canada, until the groundbreaking research of scholars such as George Elliott Clarke.² Engaging with the historical dimensions of Black Canada from its beginnings to the present, Siemerling's book thus follows previous endeavors to resituate the study of Black Canada, and presents a global (re)consideration of African Canadian polyphony. It focuses on the work of as diverse authors as Marie-Célie Agnant, André Alexis, Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Austin C. Clarke, George Elliott Clarke, Wayne Comp-

ton, Esi Edugyan, Lorris Elliott, Gérard Etienne, Lorena Gale, Claire Harris, Lawrence Hill, Dany Laferrière, Suzette Mayr, Emile Ollivier, M. NourbeSe Philip, Mairuth Sarsfield, and Frederick Ward, among many others, representing the variegated Black geographies in Canada and beyond, while underlining the relevant role of past historical events in the construction of Black identities.

Siemerling's volume is organized in two complementary parts: "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century" and "The Presence of the Past". This division seems appropriate as it follows the evolution of Black Canadian literature and history from the early slave documents and testimonies to the contemporary Black Canadian authors whose fictional accounts shed light on the past so as to come to terms with both the past and the present. Previous to these two sections, Siemerling includes a well-researched but concise introductory chapter intended to contextualize Black Canada, demonstrating its interconnection with many other times and spaces of the Black Atlantic. This initial chapter is the one that non-specialist readers who are unfamiliar with Black Canadian history may find particularly illuminating, since it is here that some of the most important theoretical and conceptual frameworks are explained. Siemerling persuasively explores the major milestones which heralded Black Canadian criticism as an emergent field of study.

Part I, "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century", includes two chapters framed around the retrieving of slave narratives in Canada. Siemerling mainly focuses on the eighteenth century Black works recording slavery in Nova Scotia and the substantial body of Black writing produced in Upper Canada/Canada West, which became the background of the nineteenth century Black writing as a

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² See, for instance, Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*.



result of the massive Black immigration to Upper Canada at that time. Despite the lack of narratives by former slaves evoking Canadian slavery in the eighteenth century, chapter two strives to show various documents recording early slave testimonies, particularly in Nova Scotia, so as to assert the continued practice of slavery in New France, where slavery began in what we know as Canada today. This chapter revolves around the historical “Book of Negroes”, deemed as an official document which offers the testimonies of Black slaves in Canada. In a similar vein, the works written by Black people who arrived in Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century are included in this chapter and therefore analyzed by Siemerling in an attempt to highlight the transnational nature of Canada. Thoroughly researched, the chapter considers other narratives such as John Marrant’s *The Journal* (1790), a travel narrative which offers useful insights into the life of Nova Scotians and highly contributes to the reconsideration of the Black Atlantic.

Moving into the nineteenth century, Chapter 3, “The Black Canadian Nineteenth Century”, Siemerling foregrounds the outpouring of an entire genre mainly written by border-crossers engaged with the abolition of slavery in the United States and the consequent emergence of Canada as the “land of liberty”. Drawing attention to the period before the abolition in 1834, Siemerling explores the figure of Susanna Moodie as a pivotal example of canonical settler writers whose works are highly influenced by the presence of Blackness in Canada. While Moodie’s duality leads her to criticize the country as though she were a stranger, other border-crossers such as Henry and Mary Bibb who wrote in the period between the abolition of slavery and the United States Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, hopefully represent Canada as the “sweet land of rest” (Siemerling 96). Consequently, the developments in the 1850s accelerated Black immigration to Canada, resulting in what Siemerling called “The Black Canadian Renaissance”. The anti-slavery activist Mary Ann Shadd was the most representative figure in this Black Canadian context. Shadd portrays Canada as a strategic site for emigration where Black people can fight for their rights.

Her literary response engaged in struggles for liberation and racial integration which resulted in an active Black self-transformation. However, Shadd’s portrayal of Canada as a perfect space for liberty and transformation was challenged by Martin Delany who understood Canada as a temporary solution to Black immigrants. Along with these groundbreaking authors, Siemerling analyzes other Black figures deemed as models of resistance against slavery and racism in Canada after the outpouring of the Civil War in 1861.

Part II, entitled “The Presence of the Past”, consists of three chapters which foreground the necessary juxtaposition and integration of earlier Black Canadian contexts, history, and literature with the contemporary Black Canadian cultural expressions. Accordingly, in Chapter 4, entitled “Slavery, the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century, and Caribbean Contexts in Contemporary Black Canadian Writing”, Siemerling offers a compelling examination of a corpus of significant works written by Black authors who contribute to the re-articulation and integration of Black diasporic communities in Canada. This is clearly visible in Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2007), a neo-slave narrative that inscribes through the voice of a Black woman the diasporic lives of slaves and ex-slaves in Nova Scotia in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War. Also dismantling the myth of a slavery-free Canada, George Elliott Clarke places slavery at the center of his outstanding play *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), in an attempt to engage the reader with the controversial and radical story of slave resistance in Canada. Furthermore, Siemerling explores the ways in which such an historical past is connected with the Caribbean context, as Caribbean Canadian authors redefine Caribbean Canadian spaces by evoking the legacies of slavery in their works. In particular, Makeda Silvera’s and Austin Clarke’s writings intertwine Caribbean Canadian time-spaces and show the continuities between slavery times and present-day domestic workers who immigrated to Canada.

Turning the gaze towards other Black geographies in Canada (Chapter 5), Siemerling explores Black musical traditions, institutions, and communities in the history of Black Anglo-



phone Montreal through Caribbean-descended Montreal musicians such as Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones. Jazz is an icon of Montreal Black history which, albeit elided in some literary expressions, is often placed at the center of historical novels such as Mairuth Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair* (1997). These developments become the hallmark of the Africadian Renaissance, a term coined by Clarke that highlights the significant role of Black experiences in Canada. Africadian Renaissance was highly propelled by the symbolic recuperation of Africville in Halifax, a place that intertwines the past and the present. Siemerling concludes this chapter by discussing texts from the Black Canadian prairies and closes with a (re)discovery and therefore (re)consideration of British Columbia as a Black space. Wayde Compton's writing, which often evokes the use of hip hop as a practice of Black British Columbians, contributes to the depiction of the history and culture of Blacks in this region. Finally, in the last chapter of the volume, Siemerling aptly reconsiders most of the works mentioned in previous chapters, summarizing his reconstitution of the Black Atlantic.

The Black Atlantic Reconsidered manages to explore and redefine Black Canadian writing in a language that appeals to both non-specialist and academic readers alike. In the Appendix, Siemerling provides a timeline gathering the titles and authors mentioned in his book, which provides a clear idea of the development of Black Canadian literary history. The timeline is divided into two parts, including the earlier works and documents in the first part and the most salient works published after 1960 in the second part. In

addition to Siemerling's valuable insights about Black Canadian diasporic writing, history and culture, the book provides a useful bibliography with notes and references to the most significant studies in the field. Besides challenging previous genealogies of the Black Atlantic, Siemerling's comprehensive volume is an indispensable tool for the study of Black Canadian literature and culture. As a complement, the website companion to *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* (<http://www.blackatlantic.ca>) presents a compilation of many of the primary and secondary texts, including historical documents, information about authors, scholarly and newspaper articles, and other relevant websites, constituting a useful tool for individual readers, researchers, teachers and students. All in all, Siemerling's historical survey of Black writing is an essential reference to understand not only this relevant body of cultural production, but also Canadian history, the transatlantic Black diaspora and Modernity at large.

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