
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 diverse authors as Marie-Célie Agnant, André Alexis, Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Austin C. Clarke, George Elliott Clarke, Wayde Comp-}

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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 narra-
tives 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 narra-
tives 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 out-
pouring of an entire genre mainly written by
border-crossers engaged with the abolition of
slavery in the United States and the consequent
ame 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 narra-
tive 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
georaphies 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](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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WORKS CITED
