

WINFRIED SIEMERLING, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015), 560 pp.

With his *Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, Winfried Siemerling has produced a necessary milestone for Black Canadian studies and, possibly, has written his *magnum opus*. The recipient of the 2015 Gabrielle Roy Prize, awarded by the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures (ACQL), it counts as a major intervention in the still burgeoning scholarly field of Black Canadian Studies. At the same time as it is geared towards students, teachers, and scholars, the study garners much of its appeal by its outspoken address, too, of "a much wider readership" (ix). In *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, Siemerling combines several "time-spaces" (3) to situate what we call "Black Canadian writing" today in "its diasporic black Atlantic and hemispheric contexts," which is one of his longstanding projects (ix).¹ In doing so, he follows other scholars like George Elliott Clarke who have criticized Paul Gilroy's lack of attention to Canada as part of transatlantic history. Siemerling's ambitious project features a vast amount of material from different temporal, spatial, and linguistic dimensions, stretching from the early eighteenth century to the immediate present, over various geographical locales, with a particular focus on the interplay between Canada and the Caribbean, and including the two major languages of English and French.

Following its didactic outreach, the study makes a deliberate attempt to incorporate digital enhancement and learning at home and in the classroom via its companion website *blackatlantic.ca*. This website offers, for example, links to author biographies as well as an ever-changing row of author portraits on the right-hand side of the page visualizing the Black Canadian diaspora. Most importantly, the website offers a plethora of documents and documentation following the chapter outline.

¹ For Siemerling's work in transnational and hemispheric studies, see *Canada and Its Americas: Transnational Navigations*. Ed. Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2010); *The New North American Studies: Culture, Writing, and the Politics of Re/Cognition*. (London: Routledge, 2005).

In this way, readers are able to access primary source material, articles, newspaper clips, videos, etc., for each (sub)chapter according to their personal interests in order to 'dig deeper' into the archive. Here, then, lies one of the important contributions of Siemerling's volume, i.e. continuing the work of scholars and artists like Lorris Elliott and Clarke in unearthing, presenting, and making accessible the Black Canadian archive, as well as reinforcing its undeniable presence and undisputable importance for Black Atlantic (literary) history and research.² The archive becomes ever more palpable in the appendix's timeline of works and authors (362-96), which lists close to 300 years of textual production. Overall, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* can be used in different ways and might cater to different needs: one can read it as one continuous narrative, as a scholarly investigation by using the extensive body of notes, or as a handbook offering ventures into specific works and authors.

Without a doubt, this extensive study makes several crucial contributions to Black Canadian literary and cultural studies. Aside from rendering the archive palpable as one browses through the pages, and even aside from pointing out the transatlantic, transnational reverberations in Black "Canadian" writing, Siemerling (re)appraises two important figures of the nineteenth century in important ways that shift their position overall in Canadian literature. For one, this concerns, quite surprisingly, the white canonical author Susanna Strickland Moodie (1803-1885). While she is best known for her writing as an English immigrant in the Canadian wild, as in *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), Siemerling focuses on her complex relationship to Black people and race. Moodie was of course active in England's Anti-Slavery Society and became the amanuensis of the two 1831 narratives of former slaves Mary Prince (from Bermuda) and Ashton Warner (from St Vincent). For Siemerling, this work is also an imperative, however, to consider Moodie in relation to the construction of Canadian whiteness (see 72). For instance, Siemerling does well in pointing out how Moodie treats the institu-

² See Lorris Elliott, most notably *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* (1985); and George Elliott Clarke, *Fire on the Water* (2 vols, Lawrencetown Beach (N.S.): Pottersfield Press, 1991-1992); *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002).

tion of slavery as pertaining to Britain's past rather than consider its immediate afterlife on both sides across the U.S.-Canada border, in order to focus on "British moral superiority" (82). Looking at the depiction of blackness in her own works, Siemerling detects "racial ambivalence" at best (85).

The second reevaluation focuses on Mary Ann Shadd Cary (1823-1893), one of the most prominent and important Black figures in Canada West at mid-nineteenth century. It is crucial that Siemerling calls her a "transformative figure" in North America at the time (99). Her work as a journalist and first Black woman newspaper editor, her activism and feminist stance, and no least her connections to the intellectual Black elite made her a "key figure" in her own right (100). Her work in a male-dominated intellectual sphere, actively intervening in emigration debates that moved the Black community at mid-century, most notably through her *Plea for Emigration* (1852), Siemerling sees her represent "values that are later emphasized by Marcus Garvey or Malcolm X" (101). In her criticism of the United States, he links her to the "repressed side of the American Renaissance" of the 1850s (107), and moreover, incorporates her into his own terminology of the "Black Canadian Renaissance" (97).

With this obvious play on F. O. Matthiessen's milestone intervention and limited application of the term to white, male writers, Siemerling is intent on stressing the plethora of writing by Black "freedom-seekers" (98) around the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which was, however, expressly "written and rooted in Canada" (98). While his assessment of the 1850s as a major period in Black Canadian writing is well taken (see 67), the terminology remains somewhat confusing. Although Siemerling explains the difference to Matthiessen's expression, it still suggests a break in the production of texts by Black people in what is Canada today, which, however, would contradict not only his own findings but also that of scholars like Clarke, who have repeatedly underlined the continuity of such writing (see, for example, his article "This is No Hearsay": Reading the Canadian Slave Narratives" from 2005).

Thus while *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* does offer multiple ways "for more exten-

sive contexts of discussion" (ix), its ambitious design overall also creates several problems on a structural and methodological level. The sheer mass of material seems overwhelming at times and selective at others. The chapter outlines, for example, are intricate to the point of becoming a maze for the reader who gets easily lost. The only detailed table of contents is available on the companion website. This can make navigation between the various layers of subchapters difficult. Also, the study represents a great way to familiarize oneself with the richness of Black Canadian writing and to find ever so many routes into the field. However, the introduction of so many authors and their representative works also translates into a fair amount of summary (of plot as well as secondary literature), which at times overshadows the original purpose of the book, which Siemerling describes as tracing the presence of the past and outlining the quest of a usable past for and in Black Canadian writing (see 11-27).

What is more, it is rather difficult to see where the line of selection was drawn: in the chapter on the nineteenth century, for example, Thomas Smallwood and his narrative receive no discussion at all, although Siemerling lists him explicitly as one of "the most important abolitionists of Canada West" (96). In the discussion of the twentieth century, though there was admittedly an acceleration of the literary production, it seems that in view of the wide variety of authors, languages, and topics, from the influences of Caribbean emigrés to Jazz music, from the Haitian Diaspora to the Black prairies, the book can no longer do justice to the complexities of each. However, it is certainly not the place here to debate the (dis)advantages of creating a multivolume work for the multifaceted literary history of transatlantic Black Canada. After all, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* does assemble "in one place" (ix) the current state of the art, based on an impressive amount of research and synthesis. It will therefore be an indispensable resource for students, teachers, and scholars alike as long as they bear in mind that there is room for many more explorations.

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