

Beyond National Time: Black Atlantic Temporalities and the Time-Space of Black Canadian Cultural Studies

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This paper works with methodologies offered by Winfried Siemerling's The Black Atlantic Reconsidered (2015) to elaborate the complexities involved in conversations between the fields of Canadian Literature and Black Canadian cultural studies. As Siemerling argues, Black Canadian literature is marked by the transversal time-spaces of the Black Atlantic which run counter to linear national time. What are the implications, then, of the Black Atlantic's incommensurable time-spaces in the ongoing project of institutionalizing Black Canadian literature?

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“We can't tell what the future holds, but it will surely include a protracted campaign of clashing imaginations.”¹

There is a scene in Black British Columbian writer Wayde Compton's *The Outer Harbour: Stories* (2014) that helps us think through some of the tensions involved in current conversations between the fields of Canadian literature and the field of Black Canadian cultural studies, tensions that emerged as an urgent problematic during the Mikinaakominis/TransCanadas conference at the University of Toronto in May 2017. At this conference, organized by scholars Smaro Kamboureli and Larissa Lai to think through issues of justice and relation in Canadian literature and on Turtle Island, Rinaldo Walcott, a senior scholar of Black Canadian cultural studies, strongly censured the Canadian literature (CanLit) community present, arguing that the field of CanLit, as he understands it, “fails to transform because it refuses to take seriously that Black

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1 Wayde Compton, *The Outer Harbour: Stories* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2014) 189.

literary expression and thus Black life is foundational to it. CanLit still appears surprised every single time by the appearance of Black literary expression and Black life. Because Black expression is reduced to surprise there has been no sustained and ongoing serious consideration of Black work in CanLit.”² Though Walcott’s assessment of Canadian literature’s engagements with Black writing demands to be nuanced—the publication of Winfried Siemerling’s magisterial work of scholarship *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*³ in 2015 already complicates Walcott’s assertion—Walcott rightly underscores that as a discipline, Canadian literature has been both slow and uneven in giving Black Canadian writing appropriate consideration. As Siemerling notes in his volume, “The study of Canadian literature intensified from the mid-1960s and 1970s but initially focused on claims for national recognition and other priorities. This internal dynamic failed to support an earlier scholarly attention to black Canadian writing,” which would have transformed the investments of CanLit as a discipline “in national, North American, transatlantic, and hemispheric terms” (4). In the current moment, as Siemerling notes, the critical potential of the Black archive “has yet to be made fully visible” (4).

But Compton’s short story collection, and especially Siemerling’s stunningly detailed and sustained engagement with a large corpus of Black Canadian writing, including work by Compton, suggests that the problematic may be more multifaceted, and hence, more challenging to address in institutional terms, than the public conversation around institutionalized anti-Black racism has so far suggested. Compton’s “retrospective” fiction collection, set in both a real and invented Vancouver between the years 2001 and 2025, explores the connections not only between racialized peoples and their geographies, as in his previous work, but also between raced peoples and their complex temporalities. As Siemerling highlights, via his engagement with the work of Stuart Hall, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we’re positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (13). *The Outer Harbour* explores the copresence of multiple historical realities simultaneously for its differently racialized characters. In the final story of the collection, for instance, a native insurgent who was killed by the state in an earlier story for claiming a newly created volcanic island in the Salish Sea as indigenous territory reappears on the imagined island in the speculative future. There are other similar echoes of the past in the fiction’s narrative present that point toward alternative future possibilities: a population of “illegal” migrants who transcend time and space by “blinking out” of the confines of the “Pauline Johnson Island Special Detention Facility” reappear in other locations on the island. “The composite,” a holographic entity created to act as a “Multiple Perception Immobilization Device” in order to police crowds, likewise breaks free of its structure and joins “the girl,” the ghost of a child who dies while in detention but who continues to dwell on the island. In his reading of the story, Siemerling notes that “the ontological realities of these figures are transversal to the spaces and temporalities ordained by dominant definitions of the real” (351). Quoting Compton’s story “Counter Clockwise” in the collection, Siemerling notes, “The future will surely include a protracted clashing of

2 Paul Barrett, Darcy Ballantyne, Camille Isaacs, and Kris Singh. “The Unbearable Whiteness of CanLit,” *The Walrus* (<https://thewalrus.ca/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-canlit/>).

3 Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).

imaginations” (351). The final story suggests that these clashes will also involve the differing temporalities of Black Atlantic and national time-spaces.

Although Siemerling’s *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* attends to the important geographic dimensions of a wide range of Black Canadian writing, from local and regional contexts including Black British Columbia and the prairies, Montreal and Africville, to their wider diasporic contexts, the monograph stands out for its special engagement with Black Canadian time-spaces and what Siemerling calls “the accumulated temporalities of the black Atlantic” (353). Rather than approaching time as an abstract, homogenous measure along a singular axis, Black writing in Canada, as Siemerling deftly elucidates through an engagement with a rich corpus of texts, is plural—less of a temporality than temporalities. As he indicates, “Most of these writings are anchored in what is now Canada but continually relay its times and places via other diasporic histories and routings.” By making “wide-ranging connections across time and space, and bringing these diasporic histories and geographies into the here and now, black Canadian writing significantly contributes to the rewriting of circum-Atlantic and hemispheric modernity, repositioning Canada and our present in this context” (354). The temporalities of the Black Atlantic, as Siemerling theorizes them, “span centuries” thus disturbing “the geographies and temporalities, the borders and sedimented histories, left behind by the hemispheric expansion of empires in the Americas” (28). Siemerling acknowledges some of the effects of apprehending Black Atlantic temporalities in such multivalent ways. “To be in the presence of these times and spaces,” he writes, “has multifaceted implications. What are some of the consequences that the presence of this work might have for readers, pedagogy, and scholarship? What does its presence mean in relation to other areas of writing, within and beyond Canada, and with respect to the nation itself? Such questions imply a range of critical problems that remain challenges in the future” (354). Indeed, how the temporalities of the Black Atlantic also disturb the sedimented temporalities of Canadian literature as a discipline, and what the implications may be for the ongoing work of engaging with and institutionalizing Black Canadian literatures also remains an open question.

We could ask as well how disciplinary-dominant ways of narrating national literary history might displace, efface, and foreclose engagements with Black literatures and their Black Atlantic temporalities? As Wayne Compton’s *The Outer Harbour* demonstrates, Black cultural production does not necessarily occupy the singular present within a unified “now” or a shared “then” of the past. How, then, does the project of “including” Black Canadian texts and their temporalities into national histories and literary canons involve the circumscription of their specific time-spaces? What are the alternatives? How might we need to revisit the ways in which Black Canadian writing has been sutured, insofar as it has been, into national narratives and chronologies that take, as their sign posts, for instance, periods marked out by confederation, modernism, the world wars, and so on? How can the presence of Black writing in Canada be written in such ways that are not necessarily synchronous with the time of the nation-state and its related cultural formations?

Striking about Siemerling’s engagement with Black writing is the range of texts and authors that his method makes visible—texts that slip out of collective literary-critical consciousness and are new even to specialists in the field. Siemerling’s thirty-four-page timeline of titles and authors mentioned in his study includes slave narratives and early

testimony such as Lewis Clarke's *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky* (1854) and Mahomma Gardo Baquaqua's *An Interesting Narrative* (1854), to more recent texts such as *That Lonesome Road: The Autobiography of Carrie M. Best* (1977), *A Black Man's Toronto 1914–1980: The Reminiscences of Harry Gairey* (1981), and especially works written in French by Gérard Étienne, Émile Ollivier, Robert Berrouët-Oriol, Paul Fehmiu Brown, and Anthony Phelps, among many others, that have not been widely read by scholars and students working in Anglophone Canada. Siemerling also points to other avenues of future engagement. The relation between Black diasporic writing and indigeneity is one Siemerling outlines as an important subject of consideration, one that I would suggest may be facilitated by the recent publication of Mark Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (2017). Siemerling also gestures to another possible line of inquiry: the use of Black Canadian literary antecedents in non-Black Canadian writing. It would be exciting to see more robust horizontal conversations between, for instance, Asian-Canadian and Black Canadian literary criticism and writing in this regard. In these ways, Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is a work of tremendous intellectual generosity: it offers scholars and students in Canadian literature, Black cultural studies, Black Atlantic, diasporic, and postcolonial studies a diverse range of materials as well as novel methods for attending to Black pasts, presents, and futures.

Siemerling's monograph, like Wayde Compton's *The Outer Harbour*, looks to the past in order to imagine future change. In Siemerling's case, this is a future in which "[m]arginalizing this rich and transformative corpus is not an option" (361). In Compton's title story, the composite—a holographic figure designed by a security company to subdue crowds—breaks away from its disciplinary apparatus. After rowing out on the Salish Sea past the range of the projectors, the composite becomes putatively free, but, as he finds on arrival, he still feels the roll and wave of his histories. Compton writes, "He has memories to sort through, brought up by the boat, the journey, and all its echoes. He looks out there feeling them." As we turn to the last page of the collection, the composite remains on the shore, awaiting new arrivals to the island with whom he will organize and "discuss what it means to regroup" (194). In light of this discussion, I wonder what it might mean for Canadian and Black Canadian cultural studies to regroup?