

Re/cognizing the Time-Spaces of the Black Atlantic: A Response

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In this response to the incisive and stimulating discussions by Karina Vernon, Robert S. Levine, Barrington Walker, and Katja Sarkowsky of The Black Atlantic Reconsidered, I focus on the dynamic dimensions of Black Canadian and Black Atlantic time-spaces and temporalities, as well as issues of public, institutional, and pedagogical inclusion, incorporation, recognition, and transformation. In addition, questions of history and its uses, social aesthetics, and contrapuntal national/transnational frameworks are brought to the fore, often with reference to specific texts, to reflect on Black Canadian cultural achievement and its transnational and diasporic contexts both past and present.

Keywords: Black Atlantic, diaspora, Black Canadian writing, inclusion, recognition, pedagogy, history, social aesthetics, transformation

Black Canadian times and spaces matter, within and beyond Canada. The writings and cultural achievements emanating from them remain understudied, however, both nationally and in discussions of modernity, diaspora, and the Black Atlantic. I am grateful to Robert Levine, Katja Sarkowsky, Karina Vernon, and Barrington Walker for their illuminating comments in this context on *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. Facilitated by Ato Quayson's editorial initiative, the interventions by these eminent scholars of literature and history from Canada, the United States, and Europe help to clarify the stakes of the critical and theoretical project my study seeks to amplify and to outline some of the tasks ahead.¹

As antiracist demonstrations spread across North America and Europe in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, statues of confederates and slaveholders have been toppled in the United States and England. While the current US commander in chief showed his true colors on July 4, 2020, by calling the monuments to traitor generals “our

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¹ For a detailed table of contents of the volume and related sources see the companion site: www.blackatlantic.ca. A timeline with the most important texts and authors is provided in pages 362–96 of the print edition.

statues,” and the words “Black Lives Matter” a “symbol of hate,”² the mayor of Bristol greeted the lowering of slave trader Edward Colston’s statue into the very harbor that launched his slave ships as a “piece of historical poetry.”³ In Toronto, the name of a busy street is up for debate in a reckoning with Henry Dundas’s active role in delaying the end of slavery in the British Empire.⁴ Embodiments of white imperial time in the public square, these statues and street names are now focal points of protest as they endlessly reiterate the winners’ past in present space, repeating their segmentation of time like broken records, ready for a remix.

The current developments witness the resurgence of the accumulated time-spaces of the Black Atlantic, encoded as they are in facts and stories but also in displacements, silences, and ways of keeping time that have piled up and coexisted—if marginalized and “forgotten” by some—alongside Western versions of modernity. Suddenly ubiquitous, they now forcefully reclaim the public sphere—Benjamin’s Angel of History slightly turning.

The Black Atlantic Reconsidered explores and celebrates the living chronotopes of the Black Atlantic as mediated by Canadian times and spaces. Spatially, the volume studies a corpus doubly defined by specific location *and* its diasporic lines of transnational connection; temporally, within these texts and in their relation to us, the book opens a wide spectrum that includes, for instance, Benjamin’s “Jetztzeit” as well as the many layers of time evoked by Dionne Brand in her magical and magisterial *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999): “There is time that is always happening. The time that is lost or forgotten or misplaced . . . and the time that is unresolved and therefore unmoving, held there by frail wills” (35–36).

Whether in Vernon’s discussion of disciplinary and pedagogical tensions around raced and compound temporalities or in Levine’s focus on the “recuperative past,” whether in Walker’s insistence on the history and space of the “racial state” or in Sarkowsky’s revisioning of the national/ transnational dichotomy through the lenses of “re/cognition,” the dynamic potentiality of these time-spaces of the Black Atlantic is productively explored in these thoughtful forum contributions.

Inclusion, Transformation, History

Karina Vernon cites British Columbian writer Wayne Compton’s radiantly imaginative *The Outer Harbour* (2014) to zero in on its staging (and my analysis) of a “co-presence of multiple historical realities.” Resisting state-ordered impositions, Compton’s text deploys indigenous and Black times and spaces across different ontological, temporal, and virtual registers into a speculative future. Like his use of track-defying, time-disturbing turntablism in his earlier *49th Parallel Psalm* (1999), Compton’s

2 Annie Karni and Maggie Haberman, “At Mt. Rushmore and the White House, Trump Updates ‘American Carnage’ Message for 2020,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/04/us/politics/trump-mt-rushmore.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>).

3 Steven Morris, “Bristol Mayor: Colston Statue Removal Was Act of ‘Historical Poetry,’” *The Guardian*, June 13, 2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/13/bristol-mayor-colston-statue-removal-was-act-of-historical-poetry>).

4 Oliver Moore, “Tory Open to Renaming Dundas Street over Concerns about Anti-Black Racism,” *Globe and Mail*, June 10, 2020 (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-tory-open-to-renaming- Dundas-street-over-concerns-about-anti-black/>).

combination here of speculative virtuality with local specificity refuses to be slotted or predetermined, or to take anything off the table with regard to imaginative and real possibility. Vernon's specific move is to connect such imaginative brilliance with its reception and potential cultural work beyond the page. Relating Compton's inspired articulation of alternative perspectives and coalitions to the issues of disciplinarity and inclusion, Vernon poses tough questions that come after recognition. Can an engagement with these texts redraw the map of literary history and pedagogical practice? Or is it possible, on the contrary, that "inclusion" might lead to "the circumscription of their specific time-spaces"? In other words, will this corpus withstand neutralizing incorporation? Prompted by recent events, Dionne Brand has voiced similar concerns: "This we fear—this we know—that all of our thoughts will be rushed into editorial pages, used up in committee meetings; all the rich imaginings of activists and thinkers who urge us to live otherwise may be disappeared, modified into reform and inclusion, equity, diversity and palliation."⁵ Brand's comments eye the public realm, but they may equally apply to academic practice.

Aspects of disciplinarity are present throughout *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, but Vernon effectively magnifies pedagogical and institutional challenges that I noted mainly toward the end of the volume. Historically, much Black struggle has aimed at recognition and inclusion (if often ambiguously so, as the great W. E. B. Du Bois himself showed); yet the question Vernon brings to the fore is whether these texts and achievements can lead to further paths forward and become *catalysts* of wider transformations. Beyond inclusion, then, can (work with) these texts help to rethink—and potentially change—our current situation in more trenchant and primordial ways? Visibility and *some form of inclusion* are obvious aims of *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, but the volume at the same time seeks to establish transformative connections and relations throughout. The outcomes of the challenges identified by Vernon are less than certain, and they depend on our own further inventiveness and many other actors' practices; yet I doubt I could have written *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* without at least some hope of providing resources that can facilitate change at several levels.

I will return to the question of "recognition" at the end, but let me first address hope. Like Vernon, Levine appreciates the openings created by *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, yet he also diagnoses some "utopianistic" aspects of this "very hopeful book." Levine—whose work especially on Douglass and Delany were prized resources for my research—initially emphasizes the importance of the book's subtitled "presence of the past," surmising that "the chapter on the Black Canadian nineteenth century would probably not even exist in its current form" without the conduit of the contemporary historiographic works by Black writers analyzed in part 2 of the volume. These texts are indeed powerful shapers of reader engagement with the past. Lorena Gale's play *Angélique* (premiered 1998) was thus my first guide to the eponymous enslaved woman who allegedly burned down Montreal in 1734. Osborne Anderson, the lone surviving participant to have written about Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry (a source also for Du Bois's book on John Brown), came to me via Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997).

5 Dionne Brand, "On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying," *Toronto Star*, July 4, 2020 (<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2020/07/04/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying.html>).

Mary Ann Shadd, by contrast, was a familiar figure when she resurfaced in a 1985 play fragment by Lorris Elliott: the flow of interest here worked inversely from the past to the present, part of a two-way hermeneutic central to *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*.

Yet Levine further finds a prominence of the “recuperative past” in the volume—the idea and hope that engagement with the past can facilitate individual and collective healing, a notion that is relevant far beyond the current context. Although one always hopes for healing, however, I would venture that the critical ethos of *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* moves along slightly different vectors. Levine’s discussion turns especially on the narrator of Hill’s *Any Known Blood* and his beneficial exploration of family history at a low point of his life. I think my reading of the novel, though, emphasizes less “healing” (at least if understood as a return to a previous state) than regaining the ability to act and an openness toward further transformation. As is even more evident in Hill’s subsequent *The Book of Negroes* (2007; issued as *Someone Knows My Name* in the United States), instead of healing, both works feature a turn toward *writing* and storytelling—in this case, forms of continued processing that are turning in on themselves but that also give up on a simple “return.” Both texts are metafictional and have elements of a *Bildungsroman*, in that they recount the story of their genesis and the acceptance of a loss. In the earlier novel, it is the admission that there is no perfect ancestor to save the narrator’s self-esteem and help him forget his many imperfections; in the latter novel, the enslaved Aminata at a crucial point renounces her goal of a “return” to her native village. Her erstwhile “home” is replaced by the multiple telling of her story and diasporic witnessing. This narrative performativity keeps the past alive in the present; although it is not a melancholic “plaint” (see the discussion of melancholia in my volume’s introduction) and although her role as witness is “part of her emotional salvation,”⁶ the result is not a healing (or Freudian mourning) without remainder. The integrative dimension of this retelling is shown to secure emotional survival in the novel, yet its aspect of witnessing instantiates a temporality that is directed to the future and radiates outward toward audiences and changes in other times and places.

But what might be the effects? What relation might returns to the past have with the potential of real-life transformations? Glissantian “detours” through the time-spaces of the Black Atlantic can certainly play a supportive role in the toppling of statues, toponymic revisions, and even in the call for reparations. I agree with Levine, however, that they will not by themselves do away with systemic racism⁷ or counter the threats of white nationalism (ridiculing knowledge and education is, after all, a key strategy of the populist right). Yet, with regard to such mediations of the past in literary texts, there is another important question: Should they?

Social Aesthetics and the “Racial State”

For Levine, it might be “putting too much pressure on history” to make the value of historical knowledge contingent on its “recuperative uses.” Henry Louis Gates Jr.

6 Lawrence Hill, “A Conversation with Lawrence Hill,” with Winfried Siemerling, *Callaloo* 36.1 (2013): 5–26, esp. 21.

7 See Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees’s comments on symbolic action (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-statues-and-symbols-are-just-the-start-of-brisbols-struggle-with/>).

once similarly argued against reducing Black art and testimony to the realm of the pragmatic—as routinely seen throughout abolitionism, in Du Bois’s notion of Black art as undergirding claims for national belonging or in the postulates of the Black aesthetic and beyond.⁸ Robert Stepto also warned against reducing Black literary texts to convenient entrance points for discussions of the “Big Questions.”⁹

Yet as Barrington Walker insists, attention to literary specificity does not preclude awareness of the political nature of aesthetic artifacts; he cites Richard Iton’s claim that “aesthetic judgments should not be confined to the political realm and cannot be detached from political considerations.”¹⁰ Walker notes the importance of Black Atlantic chronotopes in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* but also points to the presence of the “racial state” as a mediation of “the political” in which artistic practice operates and which circumscribes any social aesthetic. Gale’s *Angélique*, Compton’s *The Outer Harbour*, or Chariandy’s exceptional novel *Brother* (2017) would certainly be among the many examples that concretely help to validate such claims.

Socially grounded aesthetics has a long history and comes in many guises, yet routinely seems to neglect race as a constituent factor. Take social reception aesthetics, which for instance appears to have done little with Stepto’s idea of “the distrust of the American reader” in Black writing or film theorist Manthia Diawara’s charge that many approaches to spectatorship have “remained colorblind” (211).¹¹ Walker is correct in claiming that even now “artistic and vernacular responses” to the racial state remain a subject “ripe for further reflection and development.” Although most writers and artists would resist one-dimensional functionalization of their work, many Black Canadian texts *do* appeal to their readers’ sense of social and racial justice, even as they may luxuriate in nonrealist modes or, like Esi Edugyan’s *Washington Black* (2018), articulate the fantastic. Or take writer and critic George Elliott Clarke, who pointedly subtitled an article on Claire Harris, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, and Dionne Brand—three Trinidadian Canadian authors who have received sustained critical attention—“Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism.” For Clarke, many critics “reduce the writers to the status of sociologist or they empty their work of aesthetic pursuits.”¹² Yet though all of Clarke’s own work requires detailed attention to aesthetic form, it would be impossible to discuss many of his texts without simultaneous attention to the “racial state,” most explicitly so in the case of *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), about slavery in Nova Scotia, or with his *Execution Poems* (2001) and the novel *George and Rue* (2005), which thematize

8 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xxiii, 21.

9 Robert Stepto, “Teaching Afro-American Literature: Survey or Tradition,” in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, eds. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1979), 8–24, esp. 15.

10 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9, quoted by Walker.

11 Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1979, 198; Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 211; see also bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, 295.

12 George Elliott Clarke, “Harris, Philip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism,” *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 253–74, esp. 254.

the 1949 execution of his own remote relatives in Fredericton, New Brunswick. And though Walker points out that “narrative history bears many similarities to literature,” Vernon makes the inverse point that Black Canadian writers often do double duty as historians “so that black Canadian history wouldn’t get erased from the public imagination.”¹³ Any socially grounded aesthetic, then, cannot lose sight of how much Black Canadian writing—as Walker insists with regard to the racial state and as Levine says of the Black Canadian nineteenth century—indeed “is very much Canadian.”

The Risks of Re/Cognition

Such contextually determined specificity also marks the contrapuntal nature of writing about transnational literary contexts within a framework that at the same time pays close attention to national determinants. Sarkowsky points to this complexity in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* by framing it as a certain “incompleteness” of its theoretical project and the “inevitable consequence” of its multiperspectival intervention.

In the interest of honoring and sustaining multiple and contradictory relations, I confess that I am happily prepared to “own” this incompleteness. Discussing the cultural achievements of Black subjects in Canada through a national identifier, to begin with, is a strategic approximation. As the book makes abundantly clear in delineating multiple historical, geographical, transnational, linguistic, generational, and other circumstances, there is no such thing as a single “Black Canadian literature”—despite such potentially unifying factors as the “encounter with the racial state over space and time” (Walker), chains of intertextual repetition and revision, and marked differences with contexts south of the border. On the other hand, many channels of cultural conveyance (including literary awards and other institutionalized forms of recognition, such as curricula or media programs) work through nationally circumscribed parameters, and it would be perilous to cede a ground that can determine a writer’s reputation and success. Some Black writers in Canada have been remarkably successful in the last few years with regard to national awards. Why would one want to see their and others’ work elided in public and educational contexts when some readers, whether in Canada or elsewhere, still seem to wonder whether relevant and exciting Black writing in Canada matters or even exists? In addition, Levine’s warnings against abdicating national considerations in favor of typically US-dominated hemispheric studies are well founded, and such concerns could be extended to diaspora studies.¹⁴ National parameters, then, can be porous or constraining, but they are also useful and important.

The overall framing of the book’s subject matter thus intentionally evokes dimensions that are often difficult to reconcile. While the main title sounds a diasporic transnationality that troubles conceptually Canadian grounds, the subtitle worries blithely transnational concepts of the Black Atlantic that marginalize national levels of mediation. In the end,

13 Wayde Compton, Esi Edugyan, and Karina Vernon, “Black Writers in Search of a Place: A Three Way Conversation about History, Role Models, and Inventing ‘The Black Atlantic,’” *The Tyee*, 2005 (<http://www.thetyee.ca/Life/2005/02/28/BlackWriters>).

14 See also Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine, eds., *Hemispheric American Studies* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008); and Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel, eds., *Canada and Its Americas: Transnational Navigations* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

these levels always also affect scholarship and inevitably result in the locationally conditioned kinds of (de)emphases that *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* critiques in its illustrious titular inspiration by Paul Gilroy—an otherwise astounding work of scholarship to which it obviously also pays homage.

Whether on a national or transnational level, however, the dialectic of recognition—evoked by Vernon and implicit in Levine’s concerns about hemispheric studies—comes with the rewards but also risks of incorporation, in the various senses of that word: making part of, but also ingesting or devouring; the latter is especially concerning if there are only a few works “recognized” on the basis of conventionally compatible norms. I have tried elsewhere to designate this split and double-edged process as “re/cognition,” using a doubled sign that seeks to capture the contradictory duality by which transformative and cognitive change (re - cognition) necessarily has to draw on, and negotiate, the normativity of “recognition”—which is pattern matching that produces acceptance under dominant standards.¹⁵ In this view, recognition limits re - cognition, but the latter does not exist in pure and unentangled form.

This problematic pertains to the risks of “inclusion” addressed by Vernon (and Dionne Brand), while Sarkowsky proposes to use the concept of re/cognition also with respect to what she calls “the internally strained dual agenda” (national/transnational) of *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*. It is here that “incompletion” joins an avoidance of assimilative recognition that I have also called a strategic “evasion of equation.”¹⁶ The internal strain and doubled perspective emphasized by Sarkowsky indeed marks the book’s intervention but is intentionally open-ended. Both national and transnational recognition are at the same time necessary and risky; reducing one to a clear-cut alternative of the other would flatten their productive contradiction, and even modifying one through the other always seems to leave a remainder. Sarkowsky rightly puts her finger on this “incompletion”—which I think of as a necessarily continued, sustained, and productive challenge. As with the hope for historical change, of course, the idea of closure or completion would seem misplaced—even mystical—not only with regard to this aspect of the book’s critical enterprise; the sheer depth of both Black Canadian achievement and the concept of the Black Atlantic asks for more. I hope that the clear-eyed discussions offered here by Levine, Sarkowsky, Vernon, and Walker will reinforce the invitation extended to other scholars by *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, which is to reconsider the time-spaces of Canada as unthinkable without those of the Black Atlantic and, as Hortense Spillers puts it, to “come upon the black Atlantic once again as a reconfigured repertoire”¹⁷ that is also, most certainly, Canadian.

15 Winfried Siemerling, *The New North American Studies: Culture, Writing, and the Politics of Re/Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 140. The shorthand double sign of “re/cognition” thus signals the unoblitable *differential* between difference and assimilation, between the dialogic emergence of the new and the dialectic incorporation into the old.

16 Siemerling, *The New North American Studies*, 145; I use the phrase in a discussion of double consciousness in Du Bois’s first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*.

17 Hortense Spillers, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* companion website (<http://blackatlantic.ca/about-2/>).