

The National, the Transnational, and the Diasporic: Black Canadian Writing and the Logic of Literary History

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*This response takes as its starting point the twofold agenda Winfried Siemerling pursues in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*: his systematic outline of a history of Black writing in Canada from the eighteenth century to the present and his goal to fill a geographical gap in Paul Gilroy's influential concept of the Black Atlantic, thereby also offering a reconsideration of this concept. I suggest that, although Siemerling is clearly successful with regard to the first aspect, he is only partially so with regard to the second, with the logic of a nation-based literary history to some extent countering the agenda of the constitutive transnationality of the Black Atlantic. This tension between the two agendas, I suggest, results in crucial questions concerning the complex relationship among the national, the transnational, and the diasporic in the specific logic of literary histories.*

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In *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, Winfried Siemerling pursues a twofold agenda: on the one hand, he systematically outlines the history of Black writing in Canada from the eighteenth century to the present. On the other hand, he not only sets out to fill a geographical gap in Paul Gilroy's influential concept of the Black Atlantic, but by doing so he also offers a reconsideration of this concept. In this response, I want to suggest that although Siemerling is clearly successful with regard to the first aspect, he is only partially so with regard to the second; nevertheless, I want to argue in a second step that precisely because of the tension between the two different agendas, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* offers valuable starting points for a timely discussion about literary histories regarding the national, the transnational, and the diasporic.

In the first chapter of his groundbreaking study *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy engaged with the African American abolitionist and Black nationalist Martin Robison Delany and his three-year residence in Chatham, Ontario, as a key example to understanding the dynamics of the “rhizomorphic, fractural structure of the

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transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic.”¹ However, he paid little attention to Delany’s exile in Canada as a specific location that may contribute to the counter-modernity of the Black Atlantic as being more than the northern neighbor to the United States and destination of Black women and men seeking to escape slavery. Gilroy was more interested in the transnational mobility of his protagonists (persons and cultural products alike) than in the kind of contribution their specific national or local positionality may offer. It has been a frequent point of criticism that he in effect thereby focused almost exclusively on the interaction between the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain, leaving out other key geographies, Africa not least. In Canada, scholars such as George Elliott Clarke, Rinaldo Walcott, Leslie Sanders, Karina Vernon, Wayne Compton, or David Chariandy have explored the embeddedness of Black writing in Canada in local as well as in diasporic circuits—including that of the Black Atlantic. Building on these scholars’ and his own strongly comparative and hemispheric work in the past, Siemerling offers a comprehensive, book-length history of Anglophone and Francophone Black writing in Canada, which not only sets out to reconcile the “archival” and “national” focus on Black Canadian literature with a diasporic approach (a debate exemplified in the occasionally caustic exchange between Rinaldo Walcott and George Elliott Clarke), but that also offers a consistent reinterpretation of Black Canadian archives in light of transnational connections. Thus, the first objective of his twofold agenda is without doubt admirably successful.

As for the second objective, filling a geographical gap in Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic and thereby offering a reconsideration of the concept, the book clearly fills that geographical gap. Throughout his study, Siemerling is careful to show how Black literature since the 1960s has been implicated in and contributed to diasporic constellations across the Americas, with a particular emphasis on both Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean-Canadian connections. He illustrates how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources already attest to complex transnational networks of exchange and mobility, complementing the work that had been done for instance on the African American exiles in Chatham, Ontario, by reinterpreting their abolitionist activities as part of a transnational activism not only directed at the United States but also at the location of these activities. Siemerling’s analysis of the “Black Canadian Renaissance”² shows how these “only transient, tangential, and tacit ‘Canadians,’” as George Elliot Clarke has called them,³ can be regarded as important representatives of the Black Atlantic, precisely because of that transience.

The second objective of *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* remains incomplete, though, with regard to its exploration of the potential conceptual shift in understanding the Black Atlantic resulting from the focus on Black literature in Canada. Siemerling’s claim is clear. “The different time-spaces emerging from these contexts and their re/cognition in contemporary black writing,” he writes of early Black writing in

1 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

2 Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 2015), 98.

3 George Elliott Clarke, “The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Literature, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past by Winfried Siemerling (review),” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 86.3 (2017): 184–85, esp. 185.

Canada, “contribute to a counter-modernity that Gilroy has evoked in *The Black Atlantic*. But they also change the influential map he provided”.⁴ This is a crucial point; just *how* this “map” is changed, beyond the immediate geographic resonance of the metaphor, is implied, but addressed only cursorily at the end of the book. I suggest that this incompleteness (if that is what it is) is not Siemerling’s shortcoming but an almost inevitable consequence of the first and most successful agenda of this important study and that it results from the different logic that structures a nationally oriented literary history on the one hand and transnational literary structures on the other.

Concepts of transnationality and diaspora have always posed challenges to national literary histories and so do histories of minority literatures. E. D. Blodgett has highlighted the dilemmas of minority histories that “assume what official, national literary histories of Canada are incapable of doing: they assume that ‘Canada’ has no ontological function.”⁵ Nevertheless, histories of such literatures face similar challenges as national literary histories do if they focus exclusively on one national context. For not only do “transnationality” and “diaspora” call into question the taken-for-granted political and geographical focus on the nation; they also defy the kinds of emplotments (to borrow Hayden White’s term) and strategic homogenization of the subject matter as a basis for inclusion and exclusion so crucial for literary histories. Consequently, although *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is not a national literary history, the problems of emplotment and strategic homogenization, in order to adumbrate a relevant body of texts and experiences, remain. As George Elliott Clarke has argued in his review of the book, Siemerling like others before him “cannot resolve the ontological differences among African-Canadians: we are a multitude of cultures, languages, faiths, and sometimes only ghostly hints, of *négritude*, and do not compose, unlike Gilroy’s Black Britons and African Americans, a ‘bloc’ of shared experiences.”⁶

Siemerling does address the different “groups” that make up the Black population in Canada, however; his focus indicated in the subtitle, the “presence of the past,” is conceived as the presence of multiple pasts, complicating the very notion of diaspora. Nonetheless, Clarke’s criticism points to the question of how to narratively frame literatures that have emerged from very heterogeneous histories and manifestations of Black experiences in Canada—including the heterogeneity of diasporic experiences, a point regarding Gilroy’s concept, which Clarke has made in a different context.⁷ Siemerling presents a narrative of a cultural production that was transnationally embedded from the start and continues to further diversify, but he also follows the trajectory pursued by contemporary histories of Canadian literature by enlisting them as part of a Canadian national literary history. Although Siemerling’s terminological choice in the subtitle—“Black Canadian Writing”—resonates with Clarke’s own choices of subtitles (“African-Canadian literature”) in its focus on *Canadian* literature, both contrast markedly with Walcott’s decision to subtitle his own book “Writing Black

4 Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, 30.

5 E. D. Blodgett, *Five-Part Invention. A History of Literary History in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 210.

6 Clarke, “The Black Atlantic Reconsidered,” 185.

7 George Elliott Clarke, “Must All Blackness Be American? Locating Canada in Borden’s ‘Tightrope Time,’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s Black Atlantic,” *Odysseys Home. Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 71–85, esp. 71.

Canada” and its focus on constructing and transforming *location*, rather than on national identification and categorization. These examples do reflect affiliations either with national (Siemerling, Clarke) or transnational and diasporic frameworks (Walcott) when writing about Black Canadian literature (or Black literature in Canada). My point is not to criticize Siemerling for the choices he has made; the dilemmas facing the expansive kind of project pursued in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* are of a much broader scope and not his alone. Nonetheless, I do see that his first agenda—writing a history of Black literature in Canada—poses a conceptual problem for the second agenda, particularly for considering how the inclusion of this literature may change not only the geographical, but also the discursive “map” of the Black Atlantic.

I propose to frame the internally strained dual agenda of the book in terms of Siemerling’s own helpful concept of re/cognition, a concept that he frequently draws on in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* and that he developed in his 2005 volume *The New North American Studies*. Critically engaging with Charles Taylor’s notion of recognition, Siemerling argues that recognition in Taylor’s understanding defines “identity from the beginning as relational and a function of alterity. Identity is conceived *with reference to the instance from which recognition is sought, and which is perceived to be able to dispense such recognition.*”⁸ Particularly in its constitutive relation to multiculturalism, recognition has to be understood in a hierarchical structure of majority and minority relations, a criticism often directed at Taylor’s understanding of recognition. Siemerling, however, though sharing the view of recognition as necessarily bound to images of self and other, as mediated by available registers,⁹ highlights yet another facet of recognition, “re-cognition,” a dual move not unlike the one implied in DuBois’ double-consciousness: “In a first sense of recognition, by given standards, it is a normative, repeated cognition that is, a matching process and recognition of sameness attributed to the other. In another sense of re-cognition, it would be cognition of self and other in a different way that cannot retain the same ground of cognition.”¹⁰ In order to capture the complex and oftentimes contradictory interplay between these two forms of cognition, he suggests the term “re/cognition.”¹¹

Framing Siemerling’s dual agenda in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* in his own understanding of re/cognition allows one to see more clearly where Siemerling is successful and at which point it is faced with conceptual problems. It also draws out the set of productive questions for further inquiry that this study undoubtedly presents. The literary history he writes is very much about the recognition of Black literature in Canada, not so much as a mere addition to the canon but as a *constitutive* part of Canadian literature. It also concerns the recognition of Canadian culture in and through Black writing and thus the claim that these texts reinscribe the Canadian literary and cultural landscape. From Mary Ann Shadd’s 1852 *A Plea for Emigration* to contemporary novels, plays, and poems that rewrite and question hegemonic historical narratives, as for instance Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) or Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of*

8 Winfried Siemerling, *The New North American Studies: Culture, Writing, and the Politics of Re/Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 133; emphasis mine.

9 Siemerling, *The New North American Studies*, 136.

10 Siemerling, *The New North American Studies*, 140.

11 Siemerling, *The New North American Studies*, 2.

Negroes (2007), Black writing presents a powerful kind of re-cognition not only of Black history in Canada but also of Canadian history in both national and transnational contexts. Historical genres as well as texts that address the contemporary lives and experiences of Black people in Canada are crucial in debunking long-standing Canadian myths and self-images, from the notion that Canada's only connection to slavery was its being a destination for fugitives from bondage south of the US-Canadian border to the narratives of a supposedly color-blind multicultural openness.

As a literary history, then, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is in part a dynamic process of re/cognition both in its institutional dimension and with regard to the cultural work of texts that it highlights. Perhaps even more important than the challenge these texts pose to hegemonic narratives of Canada, however, is the way in which they potentially partake in calling into question the concept of and the focus on the nation, Gilroy's agenda in *The Black Atlantic*. Putting Black Canadian writing explicitly "on the map" of the Black Atlantic in a comprehensive literary history recognizes its being part of this larger transcultural and transnational framework; *re-cognition* thus is not the problem. It is the process of *re-cognition* of the Black Atlantic by way of a specifically Canadian positionality that remains to be more fully explored. Siemerling is of course aware that reconsideration of the Black Atlantic entails not only an addition of a previously neglected literature to the transnationally mobile literatures and cultures that make up the Black Atlantic. So it may be the specific heterogeneous composition of the Black experience in Canada and its multifarious literary manifestations, as Walcott has suggested, when he called Black Canada a "matrix for the contestations that are currently taking place in black diasporic studies,"¹² that present the potential for re-cognition and a change in Gilroy's "influential map."¹³ Along related lines, Siemerling proposes that Black literature in Canada—"a national designation that implies transnational routings"¹⁴—may function as a model for other transnational and comparative fields. This points to important questions concerning the complex relationship among the national, the transnational, and the diasporic in the specific logic of *literary histories*, and *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* provides an invaluable basis for further examining such questions. Although most literary histories in the North American context tend to be firmly grounded in national contexts (even if they cover regional or the literatures of specific groups or time periods), there may be other models to investigate; postcolonial and diasporic literatures clearly offer a challenge to such grounding, as Siemerling's book shows only too clearly. Literary histories provide narratives of "meaning making" within and beyond national frameworks, and *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* opens an important avenue for further exploration of such processes across national borders.

12 Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003). Kindle. Loc. 465.

13 Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, 30.

14 Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, 360–61.