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The Recuperative Past in Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*

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Central to Siemerling's impressive study of black Canadian writing is an optimism about the recuperative potential of historical knowledge. My contribution to the forum acknowledges that potential, while raising questions about the limits of such knowledge for addressing the persistence of racist ideologies and practices. My test case is Siemerling's fine reading of Lawrence Hill's novels.

Keywords: Black Atlantic, Winfried Siemerling, Black Canadian writing, Lawrence Hill, Mary Ann Shadd, Édouard Glissant

Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic* is an astonishing achievement, a wide-ranging account of Black Canadian writing from the eighteenth century to the present moment. There is no other book quite like it, which makes it an essential work for anyone interested in Canadian literary history, Black diasporic studies, and postcolonial studies. The book is driven by Siemerling's passionate conviction that Black Canadian writing, heretofore left out of most "diasporic critical conversations about the black Atlantic" (ix), needs to be fully factored into our understanding of the Black Atlantic. In this respect, Siemerling revises and enlarges the scope of Paul Gilroy's seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), which has virtually nothing to say about Canada (just a few quick references). As Siemerling elaborates in his comprehensive study, Canada was an important part of the so-called Triangle Trade, beginning with the introduction of slavery into New France and Nova Scotia during the eighteenth century. Canada was also an important site of Black resistance to colonial powers, for during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Upper and Lower Canada saw the development of Black communities that contested the French and British, and then the slave power at their immediate southern border. Working against stereotypes of Canada as an isolated backwater, Siemerling presents Black Canadian writers of the past and present as global citizens who are fully aware of, and regularly reckoning with, their complex relation to a diasporic history that includes Africa, Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean. Indeed, one of the most original contributions of *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is Siemerling's extensive consideration of the Caribbean contexts of Black

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Canadian writing. Not surprisingly, then, a guiding spirit of Siemerling's study is Édouard Glissant, whose notions of "errantry" and "relation," elaborated in his 1990 *Poétique de relation*, give Siemerling the critical tools to explore Black Canadian writers' efforts to develop "a relational practice of new beginnings and community" (27).

The idea of new beginnings and community is central to what can at times seem a utopianistic (even naive) aspect of Siemerling's book. That said, if Siemerling is naive, I wouldn't mind more such naiveté in current critical practice, for this is a very hopeful book.[1] Let me explain. Following Glissant and a number of historians, Siemerling regards Black Africans' encounters with European enslavers, and their subsequent experience of the Middle Passage, as "primordial events of modernity" (27), as well as the traumatic history that continues to haunt the Black diaspora. It is only by reckoning with the past, Siemerling argues, that Blacks can set in motion the practices that could lead to a regenerated community. In other words, reckoning with the past not only brings new knowledge but is recuperative, and in this respect Siemerling presents Black Canadian writing itself as having the potential to bring about political, social, and even psychological transformations at the present moment. When Siemerling describes Black Canadian writers' search for what he terms "a usable past" (12), he suggests that what makes the past "usable" for writers and readers alike is its potential for healing. I'll have more to say about Siemerling's emphasis on the recuperative past when I turn to his discussion of Lawrence Hill , but suffice it to say here that the concept of "the presence of the past," which is somewhat buried in the subtitle of Siemerling's book, is perhaps more important to the overall work than the foregrounded "Black Atlantic reconsidered." In the manner of a Gothic novelist, Siemerling is interested in exposing and coming to terms with the ghosts of the past.[2] And in the manner of a critical therapist, he sees possibilities for healing in such reckonings.

Before turning to recuperation in the present, a few words on Siemerling's exceptionally useful historical chapter on "The Black Canadian Nineteenth Century." In this compact and well-researched chapter, Siemerling provides perhaps the best account we have of the interconnections between nineteenth-century US and Canadian Black activists and writers. On the one hand, the chapter underscores the importance of attending to a Black Americas diaspora; on the other, Siemerling demonstrates that the Black Canadian nineteenth century is very much Canadian. After all, the particular conditions of mid-nineteenth-century Canada allowed for the development of a diasporic Black community in ways that the United States did not. As Siemerling shows through his impressive archival research, the interactions between US and Canadian Blacks led to the emergence of comparatively more diasporic newspapers and Black political groups than those in the United States. The many African Americans who managed to cross into Canada found supportive Black communities that they could become part of. In the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, in particular, border crossings became the order of the day, and US figures such as Mary Ann Shadd, Henry Bibb, and Martin Delany came to have a major impact on Black political and intellectual life in the Canadas.

1 Christopher Castiglia argues for the value of hope in critical writing in his splendid *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

2 On the importance of the Gothic to the study of slavery in nineteenth-century US literature, see Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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Shadd is an especially important figure in Siemerling's account, for after immigrating to Canada in 1851 she emerged as the leading advocate of Black emigration to Canada. Siemerling remarks that Shadd's emigrationism was "an explicit judgment on the United States that mapped out other Americas" (102), and certainly what we see in this chapter is another America, or at least not the US African America presented in the standard African American literature anthologies. Key figures here include not only Shadd, Bibb, and Delany, but also Moses Roper, Israel Lewis, Austin Steward, Lewis and Milton Clarke, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and Osborne Anderson. Siemerling is excellent as well on the importance of Black Canada to Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Brown. As Siemerling recounts, Brown recruited Blacks for his attack on Harpers Ferry during an 1858 visit to Chatham. Osborne Anderson, a free Black who had attended Ohio's Oberlin College, moved to Chatham in 1850 and participated in Brown's 1858 Chatham convention (which also drew Harriet Tubman and Martin Delany). Choosing to join with Brown's Harpers Ferry raiders in 1859, Anderson turned out to be one of the few survivors. He wrote about his involvement in his 1861 *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, published by Shadd, which remains a neglected text in African American studies. And yet it's as revealing as anything published during the 1850s and 1860s about how the practice of slavery in the United States worked to create Black resistance in the Americas.

The overall chapter on the Black Canadian nineteenth century speaks to the importance of developing transnational perspectives on Black writing and activism in the United States and Canada. But in the final section of his book, Siemerling cautions against an "exclusively transnational perspective" (360), arguing that such an approach risks eliding the localized contexts and achievements of Black Canadian writing, which is to say the very contexts and achievements that Siemerling so deftly attends to in this chapter. I would add that, as we have seen from recent work in "hemispheric studies," the risk of transnational studies is that all other countries and regions will eventually become subsumed by, or subordinated to, the United States.[3] Thus Siemerling rightly warns that "bypassing the nation" can lead to the "continued erasure" of Black Canadian writing "from national histories, and exclusion from state-sponsored channels of recognition and conveyance" (360). Siemerling's emphasis on Black Canadian institutions, resources, and perspectives in the nineteenth-century section helps us to better understand figures like Shadd, Bibb, Anderson, and to some extent Delany as Canadian. Siemerling's vision of a "Black Canadian Renaissance" (99) includes all of these figures, along with Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose 1856 novel *Dred* concludes with some of the novel's fugitive slaves and white abolitionists joining a Black settlement in Canada. There, they establish a Black Canadian, and not a US African American, community.

In his longest and most comprehensive chapter, "Slavery, the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century, and Caribbean Contexts in Contemporary Black Writing," Siemerling presents the contemporary moment as another Black Canadian renaissance, inspired and empowered, as the chapter title suggests, by the presence of the past. That past, to return to the large theme of my commentary, is a recuperative past when imaginatively deployed by the writers Siemerling discusses. Attending to the

3 See Paul Giles, "Hemispheric Partiality," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 648–55.

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relation between past and present in Glissantian fashion, this sprawling chapter (140 pages) might have worked even better as several chapters. But the critical energy informing the chapter is formidable, and what we quickly pick up from the writers Siemerling examines at length is that the past not only haunts the present (the numerous literary and even musical works he discusses), but that to some extent the present haunts, or inhabits, Siemerling's notion of the past. Clearly, a wide range of Black Canadian writers working in the contemporary period—writers such as Austin Clarke, Cecil Foster, Liz Cromwell, Marlene NorbeSe Phillip, and especially Lawrence Hill—have helped Siemerling to reimagine the past, to the point where we could speculate that the chapter on the Black Canadian nineteenth century would probably not even exist in its present form if it weren't for his engagement with those contemporary Black Canadian writers who themselves reimagined the past. My own work on contemporary representations of Frederick Douglass has taken me to Lawrence Hill's 1997 *Any Known Blood*, which I first learned about in Siemerling's book, and I'd like to focus on that novel as a way of pointing to the strengths and arguably a limitation of Siemerling's vision of "the presence of the past."[4]

Like most of the writers Siemerling discusses in the chapter on contemporary Black Canadian writing, Hill uses his fiction to engage the past. His prize-winning *The Book of Negroes* (2007) takes as its starting point an actual late-eighteenth-century record kept by British naval officers that noted those Blacks who fought on the British side of the Revolutionary War and who could therefore be granted the right to take up residence in Canada. The novel focuses on Aminata Diallo, whose name is inscribed in "The Book of Negroes" and who has a traumatic personal history going back to when she was kidnapped into slavery as a young girl in Bayo, Niger. Marked by that trauma, she travels from Africa to the Americas, and then to England and Africa, and then back again to England, where she becomes a powerful antislavery writer. The novel thus addresses the linked histories of Africa, Great Britain, the United States, the southern Americas, and Canada, building to a point where Aminata and her daughter appear to come to terms with their complicated diasporic histories. The presentation of Aminata's return to Africa, in particular, part of the novel's larger pattern of errantry, underscores the recuperative value of putting past and present into relation. Her return is thus imagined less in terms of a personal than a collective healing.

Hill's earlier *Any Known Blood* is similarly recuperative, at least on its surface, while remaining more geographically focused on the diasporic histories tied to the US/Canadian border (the very topic, of course, of Siemerling's chapter on the Black Canadian nineteenth century). Compared to *The Book of Negroes*, *Any Known Blood* chronicles a longer family history. At the risk of simplifying a complex plot, the novel focuses on the Black Canadian Langston Cane V, who is depressed and adrift at the waning of the twentieth century. He attempts to come to terms with his malaise by undertaking travels and research that will help him to better understand his family history and himself. As a historian and traveler, he journeys over the course of the novel to cities and towns in Maryland in an effort to learn more about the original Langston

4 On Douglass in the novels of Hill and other contemporary writers, see Robert S. Levine, *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 10.

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Cane, who was alive and well during the period that Siemerling focuses on—the 1850s—in his chapter on nineteenth-century Black Canadian writing. The first Langston Cane interacts with Frederick Douglass and a number of other mid-nineteenth-century Black leaders, and he eventually escapes to Canada where (like Osborne Anderson) he is seduced by John Brown's revolutionary talk at the 1858 Chatham convention, deciding to participate in the attack on Harpers Ferry. Like Anderson, the original Cane survives to tell his story. Years later, his son attends a lecture on Brown that the historical Douglass gives at Harpers Ferry's Storer College. Hill does wonderful things with Brown and Douglass, and his novel deserves to be read alongside Russell Banks's great novel about John Brown, *Cloudsplitter* (1998). Compared to Hill, Banks does very little with the Canadian context in his novel; for Hill, that context is crucial to his vision of both the porousness of the US/Canadian border at the mid-nineteenth century and the profound national differences between the United States and Canada. (As I say, Hill's vision of diasporic conversation and national difference clearly informs Siemerling's study.) And whereas *Cloudsplitter* ends on an indecisive note, with Brown's son Owen, also a survivor of the attack on Harpers Ferry, reflecting decades later on his father's history, Hill's *Any Known Blood* ends with possibilities of healing and recuperation. Or at least that's how Siemerling reads the novel.

In his overview of the novel, Siemerling writes that Hill "charts a path from indecision to a narrativized past, to community, and to an ability to act in the present. This journey allows the protagonist [Langston Cane V] to overcome his isolation and personal failures." I'm not completely convinced that Hill has such a positive, uplifting take on historical understanding, and I can say with great confidence that the historians I know who have an excellent grasp of the past seem to have the same personal problems or failures as the rest of us. Can a reckoning with the past in the present solve so many of our problems? Siemerling goes on to argue that Langston Cane V's "willingness to confront the contradictory complexity of history enables him to bring his family together" (169), and to some extent that is true in the novel. But the novel has a number of other emphases that might have further complicated Siemerling's analysis. For instance, Langston Cane I joins John Brown's warriors not out of some deep conviction about the righteousness of the cause, but because he has a messy personal life and needs to flee from Canada in order to escape accusations of bigamy. Langston Cane V has some of his ancestor's problems of being a bit on the macho and individualistic side. Cane V is a good historian, but I can't say I feel an overwhelming sense of resolution in the novel, even as Cane V gains some insights into his family history. The character is gritty and determined in his quest for knowledge, but he still seems something of a narcissistic prig. I suspect that a number of female readers would find his posturing as the "Great Man" in history rather annoying, and I suspect that Hill knows what he's doing with this characterization. This is a flawed hero who gains partial knowledge of the past. Hill is especially good at re-creating the mid-nineteenth-century scene in Black Canadian communities, and in that respect he brings to dramatic life what Siemerling terms "the importance of United States culture north of the border" (161). But when Siemerling talks about the "fictional recuperation of the past, which recasts black narratives from both sides of the border to allow for agency in the present" (161), I wonder if such a recuperation is really needed in order to act in the present. There are moments when it seems that Siemerling is suggesting that historical knowledge in and of itself lacks value

unless it can be put to recuperative uses. Perhaps that's putting too much pressure on history.

Like Siemerling at his most Glissantian, I'd like to believe that literature and historical understanding can have recuperative, reformist power and really could help to foster new beginnings and community. But I'm wary of any formulation that makes the challenge of bringing about social change sound easier than it actually is. What about the pervasiveness of white racism in the period that Siemerling studies, including our own historical moment? What about structural and institutional racism? And where does literature fit into all of this, especially right now, at a time of fake news and a revival of white nationalism? Reading Siemerling, and reading the writers that Siemerling studies, will certainly help us to have a better understanding of racial conflict and possibilities for antiracist resistance, and for this reason, among many others, we should be grateful for Siemerling's expansive new literary history. But as I say this, I can't help but think of the late writings of the antiracist and anti-imperialist Mark Twain, who again and again remarked on the irremediable mendacity, cruelty, and stupidity of humankind. (See, for example, his posthumously published "The Damned Human Race" [1909], a work that emphasizes humans' inability to learn from the past.) Not that Twain's late-career pessimism should guide our thinking or politics. But perhaps a humbler take on what Siemerling calls the "usable past" is in order. For starters, we need to engage the problematics of the term *usable* (usable in what ways? by whom? and how?) and to respect, as Siemerling clearly does, the otherness of the past. Siemerling's wonderful study opens up new ways of thinking about Black diasporic history, Canadian and US national histories, and Black Canadian writing in a global context. I can only hope that the fresh perspectives he develops on the past can help us to make a better world of our present.

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