

Where the Racial State Meets the Black Atlantic: Reflections on Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*

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Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Historical Past*, to put it mildly, is an impressive piece of scholarship that will stand as one of the definitive works on the histories of Black writing in Canada for the foreseeable future. In his preface, Siemerling states that he embarked upon this undertaking when he learned, to his surprise (one is reminded here, incidentally, of Katherine McKittrick's injunction that Black Canadian Studies is always constituted as a "surprise"),¹ that there had been little written about Black contemporary writing aside from a few of the comprehensive and encyclopedic works that George Elliot Clarke published in the early to mid-1990s. It is this pioneering work upon which Siemerling builds. He starts with a discussion of "Modernity and Canadian Time-Spaces of the Black Atlantic" in his first chapter and introduction, where he lays out the analytical and conceptual approach of the work. Part 1, "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century," includes chapters titled "Slavery and Early Black Canadian Writing" and "The Black Canadian Nineteenth Century." Part 2, "The Presence of the Past," highlights chapters that expand on the themes of "Slavery, the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century, and Caribbean Contexts in Contemporary Black Canadian Writing" and move into a discussion of what he calls "Other Black Canadas" and "Coda: Other Canadas, Other Americas, the Black Atlantic Reconsidered." As one would expect of a scholar of the range and stature of Siemerling, this "multi-dimensional study" rests upon an impressive bibliography, an archive of modern Black Canadian thought.

Siemerling's remapping and reorienting of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* in and through the parts of the world that would become Canada is a task that has been taken up by others before—the late David Sealy, Rinaldo Walcott, and George Elliot Clarke immediately come to mind. What distinguishes Siemerling's work—in addition, of

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1 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), chap. 4.

course, to the extensive research upon which *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* rests—is its extended meditation on time, space, relationality, and ultimately the conditions that mark Black modernity in Canada and elsewhere throughout the Black Atlantic. The “time spaces”—what Gilroy called the new chronotopes of the slaveship² that marked the condition of the Black modern—are the rich conceptual and analytical ground that is mined in this book—specifically its Canadian registers. Ruminating on the work of Edouard Glissant, Siemerling invites us to think about how “black Canadian writers . . . transform discursive scripts and identities and indeed the past and our possible futures” by engaging in many different ways what Glissant calls relation. Their work creates a *practice* of relation that connects times, spaces, and texts in a “shared knowledge,” extending, in Glissant’s words cited earlier, separate identities “through a relationship with the Other.”³

The remainder of my reflection turns to a critical engagement with Siemerling’s important work. Rather than offer up the typical staple of the formulaic book review—laundry list of alleged weakness and, perhaps most banal, of all *omissions*, this article now turns to some of the trajectories in Siemerling’s work that might be fruitful areas of further exploration, contemplation, and further scholarship. Siemerling’s rich monograph opens up many different trajectories for future research, but I am going to focus on three areas. The first is what I have called elsewhere—based on the work of David Theo Goldberg—the Canadian Racial State.⁴ Next I will extend this discussion to talk about the political a bit further, on the register of Black expressive and vernacular culture as detailed in the pioneering work of Richard Iton (albeit in the US context). Third, this review article will talk briefly about the Siemerling’s encounter with the historical, more specifically the historiographical and what his work about the time-spaces of modernity might have to offer the historical profession, and in turn what a more expansive reading of historiography might offer the study of Black literatures.

Siemerling’s work on Black literatures, Black writers, and Black writing is committed to rerouting the Black Atlantic in and through Canada. Blackness is moored in the Black Atlantic frame, where—according to Gilroy—it is neither a floating signifier nor rooted in biology, nature, or nation. The Black Atlantic then, following the historic routes and roots of the slave ship is for Gilroy, and by extension for Siemerling, one of the foundational expressions of the Black modern. With this frame of analysis I wholeheartedly concur, as I do with the imperative to include the Canadian nodes of the Black Atlantic, for here too was an important site where the Black modern was made and expressed. Nonetheless, there is another register of Black modernity that is opened up by an exploration of Black literatures and writings during and in the aftermath of slavery: the racial state. As David Theo Goldberg (and Michel Foucault for that matter) have ably

2 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (London: Verso, 1993), 4.

3 Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2015), 27.

4 Barrington Walker, *Colonizing Nation: A Potted History of Colonization, Settlement and Canada’s Racial State*, unpublished book manuscript.

shown in several works, the rise of the modern state was coterminous with the rise of the racial state and blackness, in turn, was tethered to that. Black modernity, birthed on the slave ship, was also the product of national racial formations, histories and techniques, and modes of (racial) governance. Siemerling's work is rooted in an Atlantic frame; nonetheless, one is struck by just how much of the historical intervention is grounded in what I would essentially call national histories. Siemerling shows us in his thoughtful discussion of the histories of Black peoples in Canada that the state—both juridically and extra-judicially—mattered in terms of defining and shaping the contours of blackness in geographical spaces that comprise (or would comprise) Canada. The state set the parameters of the legal freedom, for example, that Black people in Canada would begin to enjoy in the early nineteenth century and definitively by 1834. It also set the limits of their freedom as well. I won't belabor the point, but Canada's racial state with its particular articulation of legal freedom (which nonetheless allowed indenture, which is significant in the late-eighteenth-century Nova Scotian context, for example) and customary support for anti-Black racism meant that by necessity the Black modern was tethered to both national/local colonial and supranational racial and cultural formations.

Further to this point, another possible avenue for further exploration is the link between racial state formation and Black vernacular cultures. I am thinking here of the work of the late Richard Iton (and the work of the late David Sealy, who made similar arguments in his work).⁵ In his work *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Iton talks about the relationship between politics and popular culture—specifically the novel and the realm of politics—an association which, he argues, was made explicitly clear in the writing of artists such as Claude McKay during the Harlem Renaissance and perhaps most explicitly in the work of W. E. B., in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*. As Iton states:

There are grammars that determine the relative success of political interactions and the impact of political communication in the cultural realm: signs, styles and performance whose qualities transcend the political and artistic realms. In other words, the suggestion that aesthetics cannot be divorced from politics does not imply that we cannot make aesthetic judgments regarding creative and political work; the point is that aesthetic judgments should not be confined to the political realm and cannot be detached from political considerations. Accordingly we should not resist the erasure of the lines distinguishing the politics of poetry and the poetics of the political.⁶

The political in this instance for me encompasses, among other things, Black Canadians' encounter not only with history and histories of racial exclusion and their (always) contested citizenship status but their encounter with the racial state over space and time. The chronotopes that mark the Black modern—the multiple registers of time-space that mark Black modernity—are not only revealed in literature but in racial state formation. Surveillance, state violence, unfreedom (slavery, debt peonage, incarceration,

5 David Sealy, "Canadianizing Blackness: Resisting the Political," in *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism*, ed. Rinaldo Walcott (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), 87–108.

6 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.

surveillance) all operate on multiple registers of time and space. In his work, Siemerling gestures to the fact that these artistic works are both working within and through racial state formations, as well as artistic and vernacular responses to them that are as political as they are aesthetic. One finds here the beginnings of a discussion ripe for further reflection and development.

A third and final area that might well open up further avenues of thought and reflection in Siemerling's fine work is its encounter with history—more pointedly, historiography. As I have alluded to previously in my discussion about the racial state, one of the key themes throughout is the book's encounter with history. The writing of Black Canadian history and the imprint of historians of Black Canada feature prominently in this book. Siemerling makes a note of his indebtedness to several noted scholars of Black Canadian history in his work, citing the foundational work of James W. St. G. Walker, Robin Winks, and others. With regard to the relationship between Black writers (George Elliot Clarke and Wade Compton in this particular instance) and the historical, the “conversation” that these works have with bodies of historical writing, that which we historians refer to as historiography, Siemerling contends:

These works can be read with reference to a wider trend towards historical and historiographically conscious writing in Canada that has received substantial comment. Yet while these black Canadian texts can be usefully related to other historical and historiographic metafiction in Canada and beyond, they also follow specific—and often different—strategies that speak to black struggles and intertexts, both past and present. They regularly reveal counter-discursive engagements with the past that exceed purely deconstructive aims; their strategies are often marked by their exploration of diasporic routes and roots, and a search for a useable past. These texts are also distinguished by their attention to particular earlier texts and traditions, contexts, linguistic registers and hoped-for futures.⁷ (12)

One would be hard pressed to find a quarrel with the insights in this paragraph. I will not, but it can be troubled somewhat. The search for a useable past is, as Siemerling clearly shows throughout his work, a staple of Black Canadian writers as is the intertextual nature of their historical interventions. What one might also consider, however, is how here historical work and the work of historians is being juxtaposed to the intertextual nature of Black literatures. I would suggest that although the works of (methodologically) traditional historians do not deal explicitly with these sorts of concerns, all historians of Black Canada are confronted with intertextuality and concerns of time and space. True, these works did not overtly theorize or engage with theory. Nonetheless, it is also true that Robin Winks, with one eye on a Black Canadian history he found wanting for its lack of similarity (and successes) vis-à-vis its American counterpart, wrote *The Blacks in Canada* as white liberals (and liberal racists) like Winks were pushed aside amid the growing call of Black power. In the introduction to the second edition of his work, *The Black Loyalists*, James St. G. W. Walker explicitly informs the reader that the events of 1970s Nova Scotia and the province's failure to meet the demands of Black people who were making demands for equality and inclusion—including the

7 Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, 12.

representation of their history and their importance in Nova Scotian history—were among the impetuses for his research. In other words, both wrote in (at least) double time.⁸ Both works show that when you excavate blackness from the almost invariably officially raceless archive you by necessity are writing the past through the present, the historical present. And when one writes the histories of blackness in Canada, one is struck by what I have elsewhere citing the work of Black critical theorists called the “changing same.”⁹

And although only a handful of historians of Black Canada acknowledge this, all of us confront the collapse of time-space when writing Black history. The historian’s craft is never just about writing the past. These concerns are not the sole provenance of literature or writers of narrative fiction. Simply put, narrative history bears many similarities to literature. The fragmentary nature of the archive necessitates that the narrative historian often takes creative license within the strictures of disciplinary practice pushing the boundaries of documentary evidence. The challenge is redoubled when writing Black histories through archives that were never primarily tasked with representing the full humanity of Black people nor preserving the lives of the subaltern and nonelites more generally.

8 Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); James St. G. W. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992)

9 Barrington Walker, “Critical Histories of Blackness in Canada,” in *Unsettling the Great White North: African Canadian History*, eds. Michele Johnson and Funké Aledejebi (University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).