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Winfried Siemerling. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015. Pp. xiv, 545. \$34.95 CAD.

Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* offers an excellent critical account of more than two centuries of Black Canadian writing that ranges from eighteenth-century autobiographical narratives of Black Loyalist preachers to contemporary novels, poetry, plays, and non-fiction by Black anglophone and francophone writers. The book traces the diverse "trajectories of different groups of black slaves, early settlers, and later arrivals over time and across Canadian space" and maps how their literary outputs and cultural achievements "constitute an important and foundational aspect of Canadian history" and "implicate Canada in hemispheric and transatlantic stories of modernity" (Siemerling 8). Siemerling contests the routine elision of Black Canada from theories of the Black Atlantic and studies of hemi-

spheric America and elucidates how “black Canada—and hence also Canada in general—is closely interwoven with so many other times and spaces of the black Atlantic” (6). His compelling close readings of Black Canadian writing are attentive to both national specificity and transnational perspectives of slavery and its legacies.

The book is divided into two parts: Part One (chapters two and three) explores a wide range of Black writing produced in what is now Canada during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Part Two (chapters four to six) examines critical engagements with slavery in Canada and the Black Atlantic in contemporary Black Canadian writing. In Part One, Siemerling works with a rich and diverse archive of documents that directly and indirectly record the experiences and circumstances of Black life in early Canada. In chapter two, Siemerling argues that the transcribed Black narratives in the “Book of Negroes” (1783) and eighteenth-century memoirs authored by John Marrant, David George, and Boston King “show or imply successful statements of self-claimed freedom and offer examples of black agency and self-determination” (51). These texts, he suggests, figure early Canada “as a node in transnational webs of transatlantic and hemispheric connections premised on the contexts of slavery, race, and emancipation” (64).

In chapter three, Siemerling employs the phrase “Black Canadian Renaissance” to signal the large assortment of writings produced by a group of leading African American intellectuals, including but not limited to Josiah Henson, Henry and Mary Bibb, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Mary Ann Shadd, and Martin Delany, in Upper Canada/Canada West during the 1850s. Siemerling offers careful analysis of “the transnational but written and rooted in Canada” work of these nineteenth-century writers, thinkers, and activists (98), and he notes how they “record shifting circumstances and perspectives of the self that are afforded by the transition from one set of conditions to another” and speak to “black hope, self-transformation, and possibility in the face of oppression and brutality” (88). For Siemerling, black writing in early Canada addresses the imperial expansion and competition of transatlantic slave labour and participates in the hemispheric project of witnessing slavery in the New World.

In Part Two, Siemerling attends to how slavery as a central leitmotif in contemporary Black Canadian writing is a form of collective remembering that recognizes the past in the present. Early in the book, Siemerling theorizes contemporary representations of slavery in Black Canadian writing as acts of testimony and witnessing that move beyond “the registers of the melancholic” (23). He critiques the “deceiving slippage of melancholia from an incapacitating state to a transformative potential” evident in the works of

scholars like David Eng and Anne Anlin Cheng (17) and contends that the presence of the past in contemporary Black Canadian writing offers “an *anti-melancholic* politics of memory,” a notion that he borrows from Ian Baucom (23; emphasis in original). This concept suggests that “conscious awareness of relational connection undoes a basic condition of melancholia, the disavowal that masks the cause” (23). For Siemerling, Black Canadian writers’ representations of the past “expose, defamiliarize, and critique perspectives that facilitate obliviousness to the violence, dislocations, and exploitation of slavery and that forget the consequences as foundational realities of the Americas” (289).

In chapter four, Siemerling explicates his theoretical understanding of contemporary rearticulations of slavery as a Glissantian “*practice of relation*” that generates signs of community and commonality across the Black Atlantic and the Americas through a series of nuanced, sophisticated analyses of works by Black anglophone and francophone writers in Canada, including Lawrence Hill, George Elliott Clarke, Cecil Foster, Austin Clarke, M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Marie-Célie Agnant, and Dany Laferrière (27; emphasis in original). The penultimate chapter further demonstrates “how transnational networks have traversed locally situated black writing in Canada” (291) in literary case studies of Black anglophone Montreal (Mairuth Sarsfield), Africville and the Africadian Renaissance (Frederick Ward, George Elroy Boyd, Maxine Tynes, and others), Black prairie writing (Cheryl Foggo, Claire Harris, and Esi Edugyan), and Black British Columbia (Wayde Compton). Siemerling’s ambitious surveys of Black Canadian writing demonstrate that “Canada is an important site for a substantial exploration of slavery and the black Atlantic” (353).

In the process of paying close attention to Black Canadian writers’ creative appropriations and transformations of the past, however, Siemerling glosses over what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery” in the present that these works urgently address (6). While Siemerling connects the impetus of the “Black Canadian Renaissance” to the denial of citizenship to African Americans by slavery, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, he does not relate the more substantial literary outpourings of “the Second Black Canadian Renaissance” (6–11)—Black Canadian writing since the 1960s—to the “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” that have confronted and confront black life in Canada in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Hartman 6). That is, Siemerling misses the opportunity to engage in a robust discussion about the continued experiences and circumstances of Black legal alienation and civic estrangement in

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Canada. Toronto's Black Lives Matter movement against anti-Black racism, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence highlights the ways in which Black Canadian lives have been and continue to be "imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic . . . entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 6). This trans/national and transatlantic struggle for Black freedom and justice for all Black lives is one articulation of "the presence of the past" in Canada to which the book does not fully speak.

Despite this missed opportunity, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* is a significant contribution to the field of Black Canadian literary studies. Addressing the local and global networks and implications of Black Canadian writing, Siemerling broadens the critical contexts within which these writings can be appreciated and discussed. The book's broad cultural history of Black writing in Canada makes it a valuable resource for scholars and students seeking to situate Black Canadian writing within Canadian, hemispheric American, or Black Atlantic literary canons.

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### Works Cited

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, 2007. Print.