

Introduction

This book considers autobiographical writing by Black authors in Canada West (roughly, today's Ontario)¹ between 1850 and 1861 to explore Black autobiographies as acts of textual community building that contributes to the emergence of a Black North America across national borders.² In doing so, *Fugitive Borders* answers a long-standing call in disciplines such as literary history and historiography to view Black Canada and Black Canadian history in transnational terms. At the same time, the book builds on the resurgent interest in the slave narrative and autobiographies by Black authors, and turns its scope to the neglected literary history of Black people in nineteenth-century Canada and the “fluid frontier” of the North American borderland. *Fugitive Borders* focuses on an original archive of heretofore underinvestigated texts that demonstrate the importance of cross-border movements for community building in a formative socio-historical period for Black people in North America.

The autobiographical testimony by former slaves from the United States constitutes a form of life writing which cannot simply be subsumed under the prevalent terminological umbrella of the slave narrative. Instead, the four autobiographies considered here are an expression of the explorative creativity and originality of Black authors who use the slave narrative template to express complex, often ambivalent, attitudes towards their migratory and racial experiences. At the same time, their writing illustrates how authors wrote about

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- 1 Upper Canada and Lower Canada existed from 1791 until 1841, when the Act of Union created the Province of Canada, which was subsequently divided into Canada East (roughly today's southern Quebec) and Canada West (roughly today's Ontario). The Province of Canada ceased to exist upon Confederation in 1867.
 - 2 I am not the first to use this term. See, for example, Candy Gunther Brown and her analysis of religious periodicals in “Religious Periodicals and Their Textual Communities.”

their intricate lives in unique ways that transcended ready-made genre categories as insufficient matrices of expression. Since authors crossed the border between Canada West and the northern United States multiple times, *Fugitive Borders* shows how the autobiographies reflect their status as versatile abolitionists, activists, businesspersons and clergymen. The autobiographies under scrutiny here, i.e. *A Narrative of Thomas Smallwood, (Coloured Man)* from 1851; the *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* by Samuel Ringgold Ward (1855); the *Narrative of the Life and Sufferings of Rev. Richard Warren, (A Fugitive Slave)* (1856); and Austin Steward's *Twenty-Two Years A Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* (1857), must be readily inserted into what scholars have termed the "fluid frontier" (see ch. 1) between the two countries since they continuously negotiate forms of cross-border community belonging.

This book offers to view the concept of a Black community as a focal point for the idea of a Black North America. The authors appear to be invested in this idea and contribute to shaping this Black North America through their autobiographical writing. In this process, this book contends, the concept of "nation" plays only a subordinate role. Instead, the dominance of "community" finds expression in what is here labeled the shaping of "genealogies", to which each author recurs individually through his text and into which he inscribes himself. Seen as a whole, this results in a process of community building through narratives which, in the context of emerging national discourses before Canada's Confederation in 1867, offers alternatives to a hegemonic national narrative of the white settler nation.

In recent years, Black Canadian Studies has become institutionalized as an academic field after long being relegated to the margins within Canadian Studies. To this day, only very few chairs and programs in Black Canadian Studies exist. Results of this process are, for example, the formation of the Black Canadian Studies Association in 2009 and the recently established Black Studies minor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, one of the provinces with the longest-standing history of a Black community in the country. So far, however, works of history and historiography have shaped the development of the field, even as it has performed its own transnational turn.

Few if any cross-border literary studies exist on this seminal, culturally formative moment in Black North American culture. As one of the few exceptions, literary scholar and writer George Elliott Clarke established the notion of "Africadia" (for Black Atlantic Canada) in the early 2000s and has continuously drawn attention to the *literary* output by African Canadians since the eighteenth century. Yet, it was not until 2015 that Winfried Siemerling's seminal *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* attempted to offer a holistic view on Black literature in

Canada from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, including Anglophone and Francophone literatures, as well as the “time-spaces” of Canada and the Caribbean. Despite Siemerling’s long chapter on the nineteenth century, there are practically no (case) studies dedicated to Black Canadian literature of this time. The reasons for this oversight are manifold: the archive is still too often dismissed as “un-Canadian” or “American”, causing it to fall under CanLit’s academic radar. If such texts do appear, they are often treated as historical sources with which literary scholars have not concerned themselves. This has happened to nearly all four autobiographies that are presented here.

Fugitive Borders addresses this gap. It builds on the existing historical and historiographical studies to provide a literary analysis of this original corpus of Black writing. It contains pioneering work by focusing on four relatively unknown autobiographies, including Richard Warren’s overlooked narrative. An analysis of less publicized texts extends the Canadian literary canon and challenges the dominant paradigm of the North American slave narrative; moreover, it continues to problematize Canada’s self-image as the Promised Land for Black refugees. It is crucial that we consider literature shaped by the dynamics of the mid-nineteenth century, which affected Black people irrespective of national borders: the unrest, tension, and fear created by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the comings and goings across the border by fugitives, conductors, free Blacks, the debates on integration and separation, etc., all position Canada (West) not at the margin but at the heart of a transatlantic abolitionism and Black nationalist discourses. This project sets out from the assumption that the literary output, particularly life writing of the period, reveals this position. Finally, an analysis of these texts contributes to a differentiated understanding of the border zone between Canada West and the United States and how this “fugitive border” was marked by the category of race (see ch. 1).

Chapter 2 on Richard Warren’s brief autobiographical sketch from 1856 functions as an entryway into such an understanding. This unknown text, supposed to test the economical ground for a longer, more elaborate narrative, overtly picks up on the myth of the Canadian Promised Land. Warren incorporates it into a geography imbued with religious mysticism, but also leaves gaps that hide troubles in the Methodist Church that would cast a more differentiated light on the alleged Canaan. Nevertheless, Warren’s *Narrative* represents a bottom-up insight into black community work as a traveling preacher in Canada West, the organization of the Black Methodist church in the province, as well as its cross-border network. Therefore, it functions as a part of the genealogy that is made up of written (Methodist) church history.

Thomas Smallwood had his *Narrative* published in 1851. His groundbreaking text, explored in detail in chapter 3, addresses a number of topics that occupied the black community at the time. Hence, his manifesto is also a claim to leadership. Smallwood inserts himself into a radical political genealogy by basing his cross-border allegiance on African American leader David Walker. At the same time, his text is exemplary in foregrounding the consequences of the conflicted relationships between Smallwood and the black community, particularly in the United States, visible through his numerous border crossings.

Samuel Ringgold Ward's complex narrative reflects a multilayered identity as an international globetrotter, intellectual, journalist, and abolitionist (see ch. 4). Composed at the end of his tour through Great Britain in 1855, the so-called *Autobiography* highlights the complicated relations to Canada and Britain, which oscillate between realizations of Black British subjecthood and experiences of fierce racism. This truly border-crossing text demonstrates how Ward must balance wide-spread representations of slavery in the United States with his impressions of discrimination in Canada West and the British Isles, which he nevertheless sees as the flourishing ground for his genealogy of heroic fugitives and "the modern Negro" (214).

Finally, Austin Steward's *Twenty-Two Years* (1857), usually only valued for its description of the allegedly failed all-black Wilberforce settlement, actually presents one of the most elaborate texts of the period. Chapter 5 demonstrates how it offers a mosaic of black life in slavery and freedom in the United States and Canada West, and how this remarkable literary montage of slave narrative, novel, and travel account can hardly be pinned down to one genre. Steward's life is emblematic for so many individuals of the nineteenth century in that his experience in Canada West was temporary but significant. His narrative, among many other things, is a strong reminder that black autobiographical writing does not simply recount one individual's story. Steward highlights the importance of ordinary family and community members, and by including their stories within his own, creates a genealogy of meaningful individuals in order to make sense of Wilberforce.

A final reflection has the four narratives speak to each other more directly, tracing correspondences between the authors of one generation of black leaders who wrote different texts but shared similar concerns. Their textual community building in the nineteenth century underlines that it is as crucial as ever to acknowledge the important work of calling for a genealogy that still matters today.