

## Peter Susand, Lost Texts, and Black Canadian Literary Culture of the 1850s

In 1856 a Black resident of Berlin, Ontario—now Kitchener—published an eponymous work, *The Prose and Poetical Works of Peter Edward Susand*. The fact of a Black man publishing in Canada in the era is not highly unusual, given the prevalence of Black Canadian activist newspapers such as *The Voice of the Fugitive* (1851-1853) and *The Provincial Freeman* (1853-c. 1859). Publishing a volume of poetry or fiction, as Susand did, is less common. With the exception of Martin Delany's novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, partially composed in Canada between 1856 and 1859, nothing comparable has been uncovered in the period. Unfortunately, no copy of Susand's work appears to have survived, and for that reason Susand has been absent from discussions of nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature, despite extensive recuperation work undertaken by Linda Brown-Kubisch on Susand as a historical figure. In light of this situation—and to a certain degree because of it—Susand invites a series of questions crucial to the study of early-nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature: how do we write about authors whose work hasn't survived? Can we recuperate their literary practices in the absence of their writings? Is it possible to marshal other evidence to reconstruct their literary networks and affiliations? What might we gain by undertaking such scholarly excavations? And, as Lois Brown asks in a related context, “how do we grapple with the seeming silences—these rhetorical ruptures and biographical caesuras—that all too often define the early African American canon and history?” (131). Brown in particular identifies her struggle to locate what she names “death-defying testimony—evidence that defied the notion of social death advanced by historian Orlando Patterson” (132). What might such “death-defying

testimony” look like? Considering Susand and his career provides an opportunity to work through these problems in a Canadian context; drawing upon him as a case study, as I do in this paper, invites us to consider a broader Black literary culture operating in Canada in the 1850s, beyond the abolitionist texts which currently define the era. In the process, I attend to what Brown names “transformative reorientations” whereby “the devalued became cherished; the undone lives became reconstituted entities; physical work became a tool of, rather than replacement for, intellectual enterprise; and profound silences became unmistakable articulations” (132).

Given the ephemeral nature of print culture and the material conditions of early-nineteenth-century Black North American life, questions about how to approach the field are not insignificant. In the US context so much has been lost, from private letters to widely circulated newspapers, that it is estimated as little as ten per cent of nineteenth-century African American literary production has been located (Lockhard 417-18). Recent excavations by scholars such as Lois Brown, Hazel Carby, Frances Smith Foster, and others have increased the materials to which scholars have access.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the scholarly and bibliographic work of George Elliott Clarke has invited further explorations, and reprints of texts with Canadian affiliations have periodically emerged. A few literary scholars—notably David Chariandy, Jade Ferguson, and Karina Vernon—have proposed new orientations, archaeologies, and methods, though in relation to later materials. Yet this work is by no means complete, and Black Canadian literature of the early nineteenth century continues to be treated by many as a prelude to that of the twentieth, a way to assert national belongings, or a curiosity. Repeatedly, the same authors are cited, circulated, and reinscribed in a narrative that seems too comfortably fixed, a narrative that forwards Canada as a relatively safe space from which to mount a critique of slavery and the US.

While it may seem counterintuitive, I want to argue that scholars of early-nineteenth-century Canadian literature might productively attend to lost material such as Susand’s volume as a means of troubling that narrative. That this has not yet happened might be attributed in part to the way in which Black Canada—or really, Black Ontario—has come to function as an overdetermined space of early-nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature. Names like Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, Mary Ann Shadd, and others are recognized for their important contributions to nineteenth-century Black Canadian writing.<sup>2</sup> It is on the basis of their contributions that Winfried Siemerling has provocatively claimed the 1850s “can rightly be called a Black Canadian Renaissance,” a term he uses to signal “a nineteenth-century effervescence of

black writing and testimony that was transnational but written and rooted in Canada” (98). In addition to works by those cited above, Siemerling cites Martin Delany’s *Blake*, as well as “narratives by Thomas Smallwood, the ministers Samuel Ringgold Ward and Jermaine Wesley Logan, Austin Steward, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua . . . , and over one hundred former slaves whose testimony was transcribed [by] Benjamin Drew” (98). Many of these authors are familiar to us: so large do they loom in the mythos of Ontario that they overshadow the landscape in a way that has the potential to make us read over those with less-documented experiences, or imagine them beyond our reach. Siemerling does not ignore the existence of these lesser-known authors or other genres; in advancing his case for a Black Canadian Renaissance he also cites the production of “a large assortment of reports, pamphlets, letters, speeches, sermons, editorials, and other documents related to black experience and organization in Canada” (98). Yet, rather than forming the basis of new investigations, these materials are often treated as ancillary. Ultimately, the understanding of nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature has not kept pace with the study of Canadian literature more broadly.<sup>3</sup> A thorough investigation of the institutional and disciplinary reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, though still insistently circling and informing it. My desire here is to forward thinking about Black Canadian writing of the era by introducing previously unstudied individuals. There is no doubt Susand deserves to be recuperated for his own merit and literary ambitions, even in the absence of his volume. Assembling the materials associated with him provides the basis for considering other unknown literary production, for locating its traces and illuminating Black Ontario literary culture of the 1850s. While this culture is undoubtedly influenced by Bibb, Henson, and Shadd, highlighting Susand draws attention to the additional voices who may have been involved in abolition and community organization, but were not generally leaders or figureheads located within abolitionist or religious print networks, and whose relation to print culture was therefore inflected differently. Attending to such differences has the potential to deepen our appreciation of literary production by Black Canadians of the 1850s.

### **Who was Peter Edward Susand?**

Born in Louisiana *circa* 1804, enslaved in New Orleans, Peter Edward Susand first appears in the Canadian record in Cobourg, Northumberland, Ontario in the early 1830s.<sup>4</sup> Situated on Lake Ontario, Cobourg was a vibrant hub at the time, with a new harbour completed in 1832 that could accommodate

large steamships traversing the Great Lakes, some no doubt carrying freedom seekers like Susand. While Robin Winks cites Cobourg as a port of arrival following the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, it is obvious that some of Cobourg's thirteen hundred residents in the 1830s were Black men and women who had fled slavery (244-45).<sup>5</sup> These included Benjamin Harris, a Kentucky-born gunsmith who, in 1832, would witness Susand's marriage to the British-born Elizabeth Liddicoat.<sup>6</sup>

Black life in 1830s Northumberland, Ontario, has not been adequately researched, though it is worth noting that slavery was within living memory—the last known sale of an enslaved individual in Ontario occurred in Northumberland only six years before the Susands' marriage (Walker 94-96).<sup>7</sup> It should not be surprising then that, following general practices in Canada, Black residents of Northumberland were accorded less respect. For instance, while reports of house fires in the Cobourg press name white individuals who have been displaced, in 1837 it was reported that a fire has destroyed the house of “one or two coloured families,” naming only the building's owner (“Fire”). Anxiety about interracial marriages like the Susands' erupted in 1841, when the wedding night of Moses and Ellen Carter was disrupted by a charivari-turned-mob who gang-raped Ellen while her husband was restrained (Grazeley 241-44).<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, the Susands departed Cobourg before the assault on the Carters. While there is no evidence they faced similar violence, “the great offense” interracial marriage gave to the “prejudices and feelings of a portion of the community” must have been evident (Grazeley 242). With the arrival of son Nathaniel in 1833 and daughter Lavinia Daphney in 1836, the family became more vulnerable. In 1837 they departed Cobourg for Oakville, where they would welcome three more children, before relocating again *circa* 1843 to the Queen's Bush Settlement in Wellesley Township, where their final five children were born (Brown-Kubisch 226).<sup>9</sup> With approximately 1,500 Black settlers, the settlement provided a close-knit community for those willing to homestead on uncleared land without the security of deeds of ownership. But agriculture was not ideal, and by 1853 the family had settled in Berlin, where Susand returned to barbering. It was there Susand published his *Prose and Poetical Works*, of which we have only a single couplet, included in a later newspaper account: “Yo ho! Here comes a schooner! / Eh ho! I wish she'd come a little sooner!” (“A Bit of History”).<sup>10</sup> Some would no doubt be tempted to dismiss Susand as an author on the basis of these lines, which might initially read as doggerel. Yet, I argue that taken out of context

as this couplet is, Susand's merit as a writer is impossible to judge. That context is important, and includes a consideration of Susand's speeches, his involvement in local politics, and even his advertisements—what Brown calls the “purposeful reclamation of the ordinary” (132). Eric Gardner argues that “our near obsession with certain kinds of narratives has drawn sharp and narrow boundaries around ‘what counts’ as and in black literature” (9), often in a way that might foreclose conversations. In the absence of all but two lines, the need to cast our net more widely in order to recover not just Susand's oeuvre but its context becomes all the more crucial in our search for the death-defying testimony which will bring him back into view.

By his own admission, Susand attended school for only a week (“A Bit of History”). This lack of schooling did not translate into a lack of literary engagement, however. While it is possible his daughter Lavinia Daphney did not take her name from characters in Shakespeare, we cannot say the same about his son, Othello. Susand's love of words and wordplay is evident; in an advertisement for his barbershop, Susand claims “his lather is unrivalled and his razors (like true wit) cut deep both up and down, leave no wounds and shave clean” (Snyder 234). Despite—or perhaps because of—his lack of formal education, Susand advocated strongly for the necessity of educating the youth of his community. At an 1847 meeting he was named president of a committee dedicated to the welfare of the community and the education of Black children. In his speech, printed in *True Wesleyan*, Susand argued:

In the early part of our lives we have been oppressed and denied the rights common to man universally. A few years since when I was a slave in the city of N. Orleans, I had little hope of enjoying the freedom which I have this day, and those who are before me have feelings similar to mine. Joseph was sold by his brethren, but God was with him. We have been sold by our brethren, but God has watched over us. He sent Moses to deliver his people anciently, and he has also provided for our deliverance. And after we had reached the promised land, Moses is still with us in the form of teachers, who are instructing our children and preparing them for the duties of life. In former times, we had not these advantages, and to-day we have met to express our feelings in view of the happy position we occupy.—Let us cherish the means of education, and thus show our friends that we are not unthankful for the benefits received. There is no lion in our midst to claim his own rights and then usurp ours, but our rights are secured by law, and when we meet our fellows, we meet them as men. Again I say let us sustain the schools until we can build seminaries and establish schools of our own. If we were in the South we should not be permitted to meet as we do now. We could not even hold in our hands the papers now before me. We love our children. We love those who are striving to elevate them to the condition of sentient beings, and fit them for stations of usefulness. (Susann [sic] et al.)

Susand's speech exhibits a sophisticated use of language, introducing metaphors with personal and spiritual resonance, deploying parallelism and anaphora to strengthen his point, moving between the specific and the universal. Delivering his speech to a predominantly Black audience, he did not need to persuade them—but persuade them he did.

This verbal mastery continues in a second speech delivered almost a decade later, though in a different context: namely, in January 1856, when Susand was nominated for election to the Berlin Town Council. It was a long shot: Linda Brown-Kubisch suggests “there was little doubt that incumbent, Dr. James Scott, would be re-elected to office” (227). Still, Susand delivered a rousing speech, which acknowledged his commitment to the nation and his awareness of the realities of race, to what we can presume was a predominantly white audience. As the *Berlin News* reported:

He said the present occasion gave him much pleasure and delight and in rising to address such a large body of his honorable and well-disposed fellow citizens, he did not do so with any desire to exonerate himself, but in order to express the enthusiasm he felt toward the free, uncorrupted and glorious institutions of Great Britain—the land of the brave and the home of the free, upon whose territory the greater light in the firmament never went down, not in shining lit up with its effulgent radiance, the face of a solitary slave. He confessed there was one thing which worked against him in the present highly delightful contest, which scarcely required a name, as it stared them all in the face. He hoped, however, that as men living in an enlightened age, when the blessings of education and Civil and Religious Liberty were scattered broadcast over the land, as chaff is scattered by the winds of heaven, that all distinctions of country and color would be forgotten. And that the electors would rally under the banners which marshalled the forces of the good and true temporal warriors. There was a dark night, a black night, a tempestuous night of peril to British supremacy in this Province, when its most sanguine supporters trembled as they beheld the tide of war which set in, as the billows of the ocean tossed to and fro in the arms of Boreas, from the shores of that land the stripes on whose flag was emblematical of the cruelty of its people towards the down-trodden humanity of the South. Where, in this peril, was the black man! Where he was most wanted,—at his post—offering himself up as a willing sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. Yes! He was one of the glorious band who fought in defense of British connection and their own firesides—who hurled back the body and soul-murdering legion of the slaveholder, and cut off at the elbow the arm stretched out to grasp the heart-strings of this young land. If he then shared the dangers of the white man, he now claimed the privileges of the white man. Would they deny them to him? They might scorn to give the black man these privileges in the hour of national prosperity, but they would ask him at less fortunate times to take their balls. (“A Bit of History”)

With a rousing act of rhetorical prowess, Susand engaged his audience, incited their nationalism, invoked their fears, and appealed to their humour. The *Berlin News* indicates in parenthesis where cheers greeted his words.

As anticipated, Susand was not elected. A resident later claimed he was nominated “as a joke” (Stroh 195), though it is not evident Susand understood it as such. However, if this was the case—a burlesque at Susand’s expense—it would enrich our appreciation of Susand’s scathing letter to the editor, received by the *Berlin News* post-election. In it he adopts a minstrel dialect presumably to condemn the hypocrisy of white voters. Writes Susand:

My dear friend—Niggah is niggah in de eye of the world, but he may hab as white a soul as his white brudder. I thanks you much for de publication of Peter Edward Susand’s speech. He ain’t a great man for he ain’t a white man like the Doctor, but he ain’t perniciously envious, and he says to himself that a clar conscience is worth more than all the public offices in de Kintry. (“A Bit of History”)

Minstrel dialect would have been familiar to residents of nineteenth-century Ontario, as minstrel shows frequently toured through the province. Their deployment of the racial grotesque was an affront to many Black people of the era.<sup>11</sup> For Susand, proficient at producing rhetorically sophisticated speeches in Standard English, to adopt the language of minstrelsy is telling, serving as an acknowledgement of the entertainment he had unwittingly been forced to provide, and meeting it with his own linguistic violence. In his letter, Susand both reminds readers of his competency in citing his earlier speech and satirizes the inability of whites to read him as more than the colour of his skin by invoking broad stereotypes and demeaning language. His adoption of the minstrel dialect is ironic, clearly at odds with his own speech patterns as well as those of his children, some of whom spoke French and—as befitting citizens of Berlin, Ontario—German.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, this missive demonstrates his mastery of multiple registers, and his ability to deploy them when desired, even as others do not recognize this move. The tendency of white audiences to misread him is borne out in the assertion of a later author that this letter was a genuine expression of gratitude (“A Bit of History”). These two productions in relation to the election reveal Susand’s dilemma: while he uses his initial speech to offer a particular iteration of Black citizenship which repudiates limiting definitions of Blackness, the “joke” of his nomination suggests that at least some audiences were incapable of receiving anything he might say. Hence Susand’s caustic conclusion, “Niggah is niggah in de eye of the world,” condemning those who cannot read him as anything but a static trope.

Susand would not give up, however. Within a few months of this election, *The Prose and Poetical Works of Peter Edward Susand* appeared. It is likely that Susand self-published the work and distributed it through his multiple

businesses, including a barbershop, which was stocked with newspapers from multiple cities, as well as a reading room and coffee house.<sup>13</sup> Many of Berlin's male residents would have benefited from the reading materials Susand provided, whether waiting for a haircut or conducting business over a beverage.<sup>14</sup> Susand himself was known for providing "poetical entertainment" to his customers as he catered to their other needs ("A Bit of History"). Selling his own volume was characteristic of his entrepreneurial spirit.

The 108-word review of Susand's volume published in the *Berlin Chronicle* in April of 1856 was generally positive, claiming "Mr. Susand speaks eloquently of the sufferings of his people, and whatever he lacks in genius it is but fair to say he makes up in fire" (3). While Susand's poems are not quoted, the reviewer's choice of words—eloquence and fire—to characterize the collection suggests "Yo ho! Here comes a schooner!" is not entirely representative of Susand's poetry. Indeed, the language Susand deployed in his speeches, as well as his razor wit, would seem to promise a broader range than this couplet. This makes the presentation of "Yo ho!" curious and worthy of investigation.

Perhaps most telling is that the surviving couplet is recorded in a newspaper account recalling the election of 1856, which introduces Susand's nomination as the work of "insatiable jokers of the village," ridicules his skill as a barber, and presents his minstrel letter as an authentic expression of gratitude ("A Bit of History"). The commentary and episodes are clearly intended to diminish him. We thus must question why this couplet was chosen, if not to suggest his work was inferior and mock him for, once again, aspiring higher than he should. Thus Susand's ambitions and achievements are dismissed, and he is reduced to an example of local-colour humour from days of yore. But Susand, whose death appears to have occurred at some point in the 1870s, was still well within living memory.<sup>15</sup>

If the "Yo ho!" couplet was the only surviving writing by Susand, I might have presumed his work inferior, as the *Berlin Chronicle* writer appears to have intended. In this way, it would have been easy to collude with what, within a broader context, appears to be at best a belittling and at worst a wilful repression of Black voices and agency. Such historical practices, I would argue, invite a defiant scholarship, one that demands we persevere in the recuperation of those whose voices have been wilfully misread, downplayed, or refused circulation. In this I am informed by not only Brown's idea of "death-defying testimony," but also by the work of Elizabeth McHenry. Contemplating the pieces Mary Church Terrell penned but could



not find publishers for, McHenry argues this work “is important because it insists we move away from the most obvious forms and sites of literary accomplishment; it pushes us to think more carefully about literary acts—not only those that were successful in the conventional senses, but also those that failed or were only partially achieved” (382). Following McHenry’s lead, I began by searching for Susand’s partially achieved literary acts in the usual places: catalogues, newspapers, advertisements, and archives. He is notably absent from both *The Voice of the Fugitive* and *The Provincial Freeman*, suggesting he operated outside of the networks of print usually forwarded as the centre of Black Canadian literary production in the era. No additional writings have been located in regional newspapers or archives.

The search found me in an unlikely place—Kitchener’s Mount Hope Cemetery and the graves of Peter Susand’s children who predeceased him: Angeline, Lavinia, and Theodore. Broken, overgrown, and eroded, the tombstones required significant cleaning and greater scrutiny to make legible even a fraction of their text. However, there, on the tombstones, Peter Susand’s poetic sensibility is evident. Each of the tombstones bears an amended stanza from the hymn “Christian’s Rest,” penned by Comfort Lavius Fillmore, a member of a prominent Ohio musical family. It is impossible to know how or where Susand encountered the hymn, though at least one volume by Fillmore was endorsed by *The Herald of Freedom*, an abolitionist paper from Cincinnati, Ohio (“Literary Notes” 3).<sup>16</sup>

The stones themselves are small, reflecting both the era they were created (1854-1862) and the Susands’ limited resources, and therefore do not have space for multiple stanzas. As Lavinia Daphney’s reads:

There is a land of seraphs bright  
where pleasures unceasingly roll  
there Christ is the day and the light  
and God is the joy of the soul.

Angeline’s tombstone features the verse:

Arisen to the Christian land of  
heaven forever to reign  
holy and gloried spirits blest  
conquered through him that was slain.

At a time when makers of tombstones might charge by the letter, even short stanzas could be beyond the reach of some individuals. The Susands’ choice to include lengthy inscriptions speaks volumes about their faith in the power of words to convey meaning, to comfort, and to memorialize.

We can imagine them sharing the verses with friends and family before their inscription, discussing them, weeping over them. We can envision other Black residents reading them on the tombstones. The unusual choice to use a different excerpt from a single hymn on each child's tombstone is fascinating. The effect is to unite the family in death within a single poetic composition, further asserting their bond and interrelation beyond the commonality of patronyms or relations often preserved on tombstones. Even in a family where literacy and poetry were fundamental, the decision to deploy tombstones as intertextual artifacts is notable, and serves as a powerful demonstration of the family's belief in the power of words to convey meaning beyond the ordinary.

### **Beyond Biography**

It is undeniable that in the 1850s, specific conditions were present in Black Canadian communities that we might see as preconditions for an explosion of creative energy, including increased access to literacy, the freedom to write, and more control over one's time. However, other conditions that would facilitate a fully realized literary culture are crucially absent, including access to publishing, control of the means of circulation, a white public with an interest in Black writing and opinions, a Black readership with an income that would allow them to support Black creative productions, and a climate that would create opportunities for Black professional authors.<sup>17</sup> The former conditions made Susand's volume possible; the latter would seem to be responsible for its lack of preservation in private and public collections.

That *The Prose and Poetical Works of Peter Edward Susand* did not survive is not surprising. In considering early Black North American writing, Joanna Brooks has argued that the lifespan of Black books correlates with the race of the author. Citing the exacerbated disruption of Black lives and livelihoods, she notes that "existential conditions of chronic discontinuity and disruption endemic to communities of color by reason of political and economic exploitation affect books and book culture as well" (41). The instability of Black households had material consequences for the preservation of Black books. Brooks concludes that the books most likely to survive were those best adapted to mobility, including those closely aligned with social movements (51). Texts by Bibb, Shadd, Henson, and others profited by the authors' names and abolitionist associations, as well as their genres—anti-slavery, slave narrative, and guidebook—ensuring distribution. While Susand's text was informed by Black life, and no doubt participated in the

call for freedom, it does not appear to have been framed primarily as an abolitionist text and thus would have had less utility for white readers and activists, impeding its circulation. The perceived lesser utility would also translate to a diminished sense of its importance as a historical document, making it less likely to be preserved by historians, libraries, and archives.

The lack of cultural or historical value accorded a text, not surprisingly, can hinder its preservation. As Jacques Derrida opined, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (11). Much of the archive of Black Canadian literature of the 1850s exists because of the place of the materials in the abolitionist movement, not a desire to document and preserve the humanity and creative expression of Black individuals. Complicating this is the reality that the tendency to see blackness as not Canadian, and Black Ontario residents as American sojourners rather than Canadians, has meant that Canadian archives did not actively seek materials related to Black communities until recently.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the preservation of materials related to nineteenth-century Black writing in Canada has historically been undertaken by US institutions, which have their own agendas and flawed histories. In the end, as much as we may hope that there might be an overlooked copy of Susand’s book in an attic somewhere, the factors Brooks identifies, in combination with the reality of Canadian collecting, make it highly unlikely it will ever be located.

In the absence of his volume, it is still worth considering that Susand published a book at all. While entrepreneurial authorship such as Susand’s “rarely succeeded,” as Brooks tells us (51), that does not mean we should discount the desire to succeed, or the initiative taken. Susand’s belief that he could leverage personal and professional networks to distribute his volume, as opposed to literary and political ones, is not naive. Without knowing how many volumes he printed, we also have no idea how many volumes he sold—it is entirely possible he sold all of them. In this vein, returning to Brooks’ comment about success, it is worth considering what success might have looked like for Susand, who was arguably less concerned with the preservation of his volume 160 years after its publication, and more attentive to its immediate reception. Did success look like a material artifact he could hold in his hands? Did he measure success by the conversations about his poetry that might have resulted in his barbershop? Did his family read aloud the glowing review in the *Berlin Chronicle* and celebrate it as a success?

In thinking about these questions, I want to return to McHenry's comments about literary accomplishment and posit that what may look like "failed" or "only partially achieved" literary acts to us may in fact have looked or felt like fully achieved literary acts to the nineteenth-century Black Canadians engaging in them, particularly given that for many people, participating in literary culture at all was a success. In short, the answer to all of the questions above is yes. Importantly, where contemporary scholars might look and see an absence of surviving publications as an obstacle, I want to use Susand's example to argue for reading literary success through the *evidence* of literary activity we already have, rather than waiting—perhaps futilely—for the discovery of previously unidentified manuscripts. The very fact of evidence itself provides the death-defying testimony necessary to undertake such a project. In this way we can expand from Susand's example to look for other examples of literary activity that may not fit within our current understanding of what nineteenth-century Black Canadian writing is.

These examples would include those Black Canadians who participated in non-publishing literary production, engaging in other forms of circulation. That there were Black Canadians of the 1850s who desired a space for such activities is evident. Toronto's Provincial Union, founded in 1854, was ostensibly established to ensure civil rights for Black Canadians, and to raise funds for and provide services to refugees from slavery (Cary 4-7). Providing services might include instruction in reading and writing, but the Provincial Union did not limit itself to remedial offerings. Notably, when Mary Ann Shadd drafted the constitution of the Provincial Union, she explicitly accounted for Black Canadians interested and actively engaged in literary production.<sup>19</sup> As Article IX reads:

A monthly meeting of members, both male and female, shall be assembled for the purpose of promoting the literary objects specified by the recitation of original pieces, readings, debates, &c. Twice in the year at the semi-annual and annual meetings parties shall be solicited to address the society. (Cary 6)

It is not merely a matter of who read their original compositions at these meetings—whether that audience was limited to the executive, though that seems unlikely—but it is a matter of Black creative expression being actively fostered and encouraged among the masses. As Heather Murray has argued, "the 1850s represent a remarkable growth in the literary-society ideal throughout African-Canadian communities" (73). No doubt other Black societies founded to promote literacy in the 1850s—including the Windsor Ladies Club, the Ladies Literary Society of Chatham, the Dumas Society

(Chatham), the Young Men's Excelsior Association (Toronto), the Mental and Moral Improvement Society (Toronto), and more—also provided opportunities to circulate original compositions (72-73). In all likelihood, many more authors wrote without the support of an association, and sought literary communion when convenient. It is unknown how many engaged in these forms of circulation among family and friends. In sharing their work they were participating in a nineteenth-century culture of literacy where one wrote poems, signed autograph books with original stanzas, and composed original verses for friends, family, and occasions. Letters might be dashed off, but they might also be carefully plotted, informed by the reading of epistolary novels. At the same time, we can't forget that Black residents of Canada were engaging in a literary culture in the context of a wider society that may not have prohibited literacy, but did devalue their literary contributions.

What these compositions looked like is uncertain, but to not account for romantic verse, or humour, or domestic writing, is to underestimate the complexity and scope of Black lives.<sup>20</sup> As an example of such productions, I want to introduce Simcoe County resident Z. H. Martin. A representative of the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper from 1854-1855, Martin also contributed several letters about the region in which he resided. Ostensibly, Martin was expected to report on the suitability of settlement and community activities. It is clear, though, that for Martin such reports were business; the Romantic literary tradition was his passion. His account of Lefroy, Ontario, celebrates the “wild and luxuriant foliage, at this period of the year, which is the common resort of birds; these birds we find to be cheerful companions: if one awakens here at the breaking of day, his ear is caught by the unbroken chant of hundreds of these wild songsters, and held thus in sweet suspension until the sun arisen” (“For the” 2). Only after addressing the flora and fauna does he mention there is a schoolhouse. In a later letter, Martin recounts a ramble through nature, noting

the echoing forests and deep tangled thickets, on either side of my road, dripping with the pearly rain-drops of the past night, wore an aspect of brilliant green, the richness of which was truly a feast for the eye; and the morning air, which ever now and then bore along the delicious fragrance of the various gums, peculiar to the trees of which the wood consist, relieved me of my drowsiness, and restored me to the perception of the opening splendor of the morning. (“To the Editor” 2)

In demonstrating his ability to value the scene of nature in all of its richness, as well as his self-awareness of its beauty and restorative properties, Martin asserts that Black subjects are not incapable of appreciating the sublime, thus claiming a space within a Romantic discourse that more often represented

Black people as subjects within a landscape than as interpreters of it. Martin's writings on nature were not his only productions: as one individual recorded of him in 1854, he is "quite an enterprising gentleman, one in who poetry and business tact are combined—by-the-way, he is a poet, of that fact I have had an ocular demonstration."<sup>21</sup> Martin was obviously recording his compositions, and allowing other Black Canadians to read them, facilitating literary conversations.

This casual literary exchange between Martin and his acquaintance is of interest to me: Z. H. Martin has proven elusive; I can find no record of his involvement in any literary society, and the *Provincial Freeman* letters are the only publications I have uncovered to date. But he wrote carefully crafted and evocative descriptions of nature; he shared his poetry with other Black Canadians he encountered; and he took pleasure in composing outside of publication. To what degree is Martin representative of literate Black Canadians of the 1850s? How much of this writing did not survive because its topic was not valued as abolitionist writings were?

In introducing Susand, Martin, and the anonymous participants in Toronto and Chatham societies, I want to ponder: can we rethink nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature in a way that is not fundamentally defined by those already familiar names and the narratives into which they have been formed? Is it possible to expand our understanding of nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature beyond publishing, or—as in the case of Susand and others—even texts? To do as McHenry asks and "think more carefully about literary acts" such as Martin's sharing of poetry? To do so invites a consideration of the unpublished, the unrecorded, and the misrecorded; an engagement of exchanges absent the actual texts; and an investigation of materials dismissed, unconsidered, or unexcavated. Including Susand expands our understanding of the various ways Black people used literature in 1850s Canada beyond abolitionist enterprises, and is an invitation to consider different orientations and networks; it asks us to look in different places.

It is my belief in the necessity of this effort that decided my actions in regards to the Susand tombstones, lying flat and overgrown. Experts agree: removing the grass and cleaning tombstones can further damage them. The very act of exposure invites erosion from the elements. Almost any act which assists in deciphering degraded letters, words, and dates—from rubbing stones with tinfoil or paper to dusting them with substances which settle in the grooves—risks further damage. Already, Theodore Susand's tombstone is damaged beyond hope, with only some words still legible:

. . . above  
Join with the bright angelic bands  
and eternal love.

Yet allowing them to become overgrown also comes with consequences, and the stones may likewise be damaged by organic elements, or runoff from nearby roads. But to not clean and decipher the stones is to let that history—and the people it represents—erode just beneath the surface. In a nation which has both neglected and deliberately erased markers of Black history, not excavating is not all that dissimilar from erasure.<sup>22</sup> Thus there is an academic imperative to not be passive, to not wait for the materials to emerge from the archives in uncomplicated and familiar forms, or else we risk continuing to facilitate, and be complicit in, the same practices. A scholarly practice that insists upon transformative reorientations has the power to bring more of the nineteenth-century Black Canadian literary landscape into view. In this instance, I take hope from the tombstones of Peter Susand's children; the identification of a single hymn, "Christian's Rest," enables us to predict—if not exactly pinpoint—the illegible words memorializing Theodore, while giving new meaning to the stones themselves, and forwarding a greater understanding of how a single family interacted with literary culture. Similarly, inserting what we do know of Peter Susand's literary output into the discussion of nineteenth-century Black Canadian literature has the potential to perform a similar function—not necessarily revealing all, but nonetheless furthering our understanding in profoundly meaningful ways, while simultaneously inviting scholars to all reach for a trowel, and continue the necessary work before us.

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I am indebted to Brendan McCormack, editorial assistant at *Canadian Literature*, for locating this hymn.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Arno Press, the Schomburg Library, and the Regenerations series.
- 2 See Afua Cooper's arguments about how the Underground Railroad has come to stand for all nineteenth-century Black Canadian history (193).
- 3 Despite work by Vernon, Clarke, and others, the study of nineteenth-century Black Canadian writing has not kept pace with Black Canadian Studies. Essays which merge both include Rinaldo Walcott's "Who Is She and What Is She to You?" and Andrea Medovarski's "Roughing It in Bermuda."
- 4 *Township of Hamilton – Index of Census and Assessment Rolls 1830 – 1837*. My thanks to Beth Kolisnyk of the Cobourg Public Library for locating these references.

- 5 Population: [cobourghistory.ca/harbour/waterfront-history](http://cobourghistory.ca/harbour/waterfront-history).
- 6 Wilson, Bond 3751.
- 7 In March 1824, a fifteen-year-old named Tom was sold by Eli Keeler of Colborne to William Bell of Grafton, Northumberland, Ontario.
- 8 Moodie fictionalized this in *Roughing It in the Bush* (208-11). Jamaican-born barber Turner Boyd testified Ellen previously had a relationship with another Black man (Grazely 245). Susand would have been aware of the event, as it was covered in newspapers across Canada and into the US (see “Reward”; “Lynching in Canada”).
- 9 The timing suggests it may have been their home destroyed in the fire—the landlord, Thomas James, was also a hairdresser (“Fire”). Benjamin Harris left at the same time (Shadd 99-100, 131). Turner Boyd’s Cobourg home also burned down in 1847, shortly before he married a white woman. Annette Victoria Susand’s marriage certificate gives her birthplace as Oakville (*Ontario, Canada, County Marriage Registers, 1858-1869*). At the time of writing I have amassed over four hundred primary sources tracking the Susand family across borders and through several generations, from vital and census records to patent applications, city directories, and newspaper clippings. Reproducing that material here would be unwieldy.
- 10 “A Bit of History” is a section within an unpaginated local history volume that reproduces these newspaper clippings; the original issues have since been lost. I am indebted to Brown-Kubisch for her uncovering of this source.
- 11 Not all residents were unsympathetic. See W. V. Uttley’s account of local residents chasing a clown from a circus who taunted a Black audience member with “I smell a n—r!” (85).
- 12 Othello L. Susand was fluent in French and German (“Dictation”); Annette’s second marriage (perhaps not legally recognized) was to a very recent German immigrant.
- 13 It is likely the reading room also contained a variety of scientific publications, given the patents later filed by the Susand sons. The family also operated a clothes-cleaning business (Brown-Kubisch 121-22).
- 14 The coffee shop was near Heller’s Hotel; the barbershop was adjacent to the Red Lion Hotel. Susand’s career can be traced through various issues of *The Grand Trunk Railway Business Directory and Gazetteer*, *The Canada Directory*, and *The Great Western Railway Directory and Gazetteer*, as well as the 1851 and 1861 Census.
- 15 No record of Susand’s death has been located. He appears in an 1862 directory as a barber, and an 1863 city directory as proprietor of a confectionary shop (*Great Western Railway Directory and Gazetteer, 1861-1862 and 1862-1863*). In 1865 and 1881 Elizabeth is described as a widow; in the 1871 Census, she is recorded as married. A local historian claims Susand is in New York in the 1870s, but that is Peter E. Surand, a shoemaker (Rickert-Hall).
- 16 I am indebted to the editors for locating this hymn.
- 17 Conditions in Canada were not ideal for white writers, either.
- 18 The notable exception is the Alvin McCurdy Collection, at the Archives of Ontario.
- 19 For Cary’s authorship, see Rhodes (94).
- 20 It is obvious that Black readership was seen as varied: an 1855 *Provincial Freeman* advertisement of Mrs. Higgins promoted a lending library featuring “over 2000 volumes of Standard Works in History, Biography, Belle Lettres and Novels” (“The Toronto Circulating Library”).
- 21 He is a subscriber to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in 1855.
- 22 See Rinaldo Walcott’s argument about the renaming of Negro Creek Road, and the possibility that “many ‘negro creek roads’ exist; they are yet to be found and documented” (*Black* 44).



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