

Mis-mappings and Mis-duplications

Interdiscursivity and the Poetry of Wayde Compton

In her seminal work on historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon argues that the genre simultaneously enshrines and ironically undermines its intertexts of history, literature, and popular culture. In particular, she notes, “the ontological line between historical past and literature is not effaced, but underlined” (10) and “the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction’s challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts” (10). In effect, the use and “ironic *abuse*” (12) of the intertexts lead to a more profound engagement with history, literature, and popular culture by questioning these received discourses. Taking Hutcheon’s idea that intertexts can be used as ways to challenge existing discourses and realities, in this paper I posit that it is productive to place her analysis in dialogue with the poetry of African Canadian writer Wayde Compton. Compton attempts to rewrite official histories of identity creation through his work and undermines historical narratives and discourses through the ironic re-use of both poetic forms and cultural intertexts. In the context of the official histories of British Columbia, Compton’s work interrogates assumptions in order to remember what has been lost and excluded.

Hutcheon’s sense of the writer’s agency in destabilizing the ontological boundaries between history and fiction is particularly relevant when one considers how Compton’s poems bring diverse intertexts together, and poetic and cultural frameworks. With his “mis-duplications” of these sources (Compton, “Turntablism”), the conventions of official histories and literatures are, as Hutcheon puts it, “simultaneously used and abused,

installed and subverted, asserted and denied" (5). Compton shows us the fictiveness, hypocrisy, and limitations of official histories and attempts to create new and confabulated ways of approaching the complex, multicultural, and diasporic society that he lives in. It is also useful here to consider Michel de Certeau's idea of "tactics." For de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a tactic "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. . . . The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them" (xix). De Certeau emphasizes the possibility of acting within a system where a certain meaning or narrative has already been imposed, speaking very much to the situation that Compton's intertextuality, or rather "interdiscursivity" works within (Hutcheon 12). Winfried Siemerling makes a similar point about Compton's work in the context of "transcultural improvisation," hip hop, "lit hop," and turntablism, seeing his ability "to combine transcultural and migrant resources in a rooted, historical and social aesthetics that forces . . . a rethinking of narratives of Canadian culture" (31). While building on Siemerling's work, my own analysis will also look at how the particular cultural, theoretical, and geographical contexts of Compton's writing have played a seminal role in shaping his poetic oeuvre. Additionally, while Siemerling suggests the powerful improvisational quality of Compton's earlier work, I argue that Compton's more recent work presents a more carefully considered, constructed, and performed approach to black identity, history, and memory in Canada. This reflects an important influence of Compton's appropriation of hip hop poetics, something that Adam Bradley argues, "embodies a series of opposites: predictability and spontaneity, repetition and revision, order and chaos. These creative tensions help define the specific values and conventions that govern rap" (207). While Siemerling rightfully acknowledges the power of Compton's improvisational strategies, "predictability," "repetition," and "order" are a notable part of the dynamic tensions that contribute to Compton's poetics.¹

I propose that Compton is a tactician in de Certeau's sense, using the array of popular and critical sources and references available to him to create new approaches to remembering and defining community and place. This is particularly evident in his poems "Performance Bond," "The Reinventing Wheel,"² and "Rune." These works are taken from Compton's 2004 collection *Performance Bond*, a book that is engaged in a re-appropriation and recovery of history and memory through its ironic use and re-use of a rich array of intertexts, both of genre and of content. While Compton began similar work

in his 1999 *49th Parallel Psalm*, his poetic voice appears more assured and wide-ranging five years later in *Performance Bond*, moving beyond narratives of arrivals and cultural discoveries to longer, more complex mixings of history, historiography, street culture, voodoo, the Bible, intellectual theory, political slogans, and philosophy. Compton is concerned with recovering, remapping, and re-performing official histories in ways that question fixed ideas of nationhood, identity, and belonging. His semi-fictional accounts of Hogan's Alley in "Rune" highlight how texts like Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter's *Opening Door in Vancouver's East End: Strathcona* are bleeding together memory and history in their oral interviews, and the inherent instability of both categories. "Performance Bond" and "The Reinventing Wheel" challenge received ideas of multiculturalism, and explore the tensions and contradictions inherent in official discourses and in transnational Afro-diasporic influences. The works appropriate and interrogate multiple sources and references in order to come to a more profound understanding of identity and belonging.

In doing so, Compton contributes to a longstanding conversation among black Canadian critics such as André Alexis, Rinaldo Walcott, and George Elliott Clarke, who have combatively debated the nature, origins, and future of actually existing blackness in Canada. Compton does not align himself completely with any one particular school of thought—choosing neither Clarke's historical localism nor Walcott's own "diaspora sensibilities" (22). Instead, Compton is crucially rooted in the textured urban spaces of Vancouver, while simultaneously positioning himself on the West Coast of Canada with its expansive Pacific histories and ties. This geographical and historical positioning also comes with its ambivalent perspectives on both the physical proximity of the American border and the perceived gap between the "boondocks" and the apparent centres of black culture, like New York. The poet is conscious of Alexis' claim that Canadian blackness is, in many ways, "borrowed" from African American culture and must be considered with a certain scepticism. Perhaps his efforts are closer to the optimistic yet complex point David Chariandy makes in his work on second-generation black writing in Canada, "that we have moved into a moment in which belonging has been revealed as a fiction" (828). Chariandy acknowledges the "very real feelings of disaffection and unbelonging" (827) that Afro-diasporic subjects may harbour, but remains hopeful that second-generation black writers still "[approach] everyday life in inspiringly creative and sensitive ways" (827).

In Compton's case, this means the meaningful construction and confabulation of an identity and a belonging that is cognizant of its literariness and its interdiscursivity. With his work in *Performance Bond*, he is literally creating and enacting a "bond"—a word that has both affective and legal implications—in the performance of his craft. "[A]n assertive Afroperipheralism" permeates Compton's work, which counters "the redemptive drive of Afrocentrism, which iterates everything but a narrow set of perceived traditions as inauthentic and culturally ersatz" (*Canaan* 15). Peter Hudson argues that Compton's "Afroperipheralism" and his "sense of isolation and alienation" in British Columbia means that his work can fight "any sense of blackness as a known shape, an *a priori* entity, whose main goal is to police its own limits and the terms of its membership" (Hudson, "Lost Tribe" 156). Compton's efforts at collage and bricolage are techniques that he also sees in Barack Obama's memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995), of "growing up and piecing together . . . black identity from a mix of popular culture representations, books and fleeting encounters with other blacks" (*Canaan* 14). In the context of these multiple discourses, Compton also brings to bear a sense of geographic specificity of the "complicated terrain" (*Canaan* 17) of British Columbia, where he sees "being an afterthought minority has left open a modicum of space for self-definition—if, that is, one can take it as an exhilarating opportunity rather than a deficiency" (*Canaan* 17). Being "of colour" in British Columbia is to be simultaneously excluded from historical discourses within the province and to be left out of global discourses of black history and culture. Yet, the poem "Performance Bond," with its call-and-response format and its range of intertextual references to historical, popular, cultural, and theoretical intertexts, enables these exclusions to be interrogated and incorporated into a complex self-creation.

Besides these intertexts, "Performance Bond" and "The Reinventing Wheel" are also influenced in their tone and form by hip hop aesthetics. Adam Bradley's work on the poetics of rap is useful here with its careful consideration of the various literary and stylistic elements of the art form: rhythm, rhyme, wordplay, style, storytelling, and signifying. In particular, Bradley's "Prologue" to his *Book of Rhymes* intuits the visual power of rap lyrics when he relates a rap performance where lyrics were "*projected in bold print against the back of the stage*" and "*you notice new things in the familiar lyrics: wordplay, metaphors and similes, rhymes upon rhymes, even within the lines. You notice structures and forms, sound and silence*" (x). Compton's production of a CD recording of "The Reinventing Wheel" to accompany

Performance Bond makes it clear that he is aware of the aurality and orality of his hip hop influences. However, my analysis of Compton's poems shows that his words predominantly function as literature on the page, with its attendant attention to lineation, punctuation, orthography, and certain types of wordplay, such as homophones and visual puns. In "The Reinventing Wheel," for instance, he plays with puns that are only obvious in their written form: "Every ear shall here. Every eye shall sea" (106).

Of course, Compton's engagement with the intertext of hip hop aesthetics and black American culture is not one-dimensional. "[A]s a kind of first step," Compton has said in an interview,

hip hop is a really useful thing to grab on to, the most visible form of black culture. . . . But it's disturbing to me at the same time, because it's really foreign to me and my sensibilities; it's not about here. It's all created by conditions that are very different from the conditions of Western Canada. So I'm kind of ambivalent about it that way. Okay, you're going to seek out black culture if you're a black kid growing up in Vancouver, and if that's the first one you find, then that's cool, use it. But there has to be some intervention with your whole experience at some point. ("Epic Moment" 142-43)

Compton identifies the heart of the paradox inherent in his use of hip hop, that it is "really foreign," "not about here," and yet, it is "useful" as "the most visible form of black culture." Compton engages with an intertext that is transcultural and transnational, which also involves shared history, tradition, and ideological struggle (as seen in Compton's musings about Obama's memoir). Compton's work moves beyond conceptions of rap music and hip hop by American scholars like Tricia Rose, who see it as predominantly "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (2). Rose might see "Rap tales" as referencing "black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film, video and television characters, and little-known black heroes" (3)—Compton's work, on the other hand, broadens this scope considerably, while rooting it in the particularity of Black Vancouver, an urban space that perhaps speaks to Rose's conception of hip hop as "black urban renewal" (61). Compton's grappling with these issues shares greater commonalities with the sociologist and musician Sujatha Fernandes' definitions of a global hip hop culture. Fernandes traces the evolution of global hip hop through its nationalist, gangsta, and corporate strands before arguing for a "communitarian strand of hip hop culture" that "exists as a counterpoint to the grossly materialistic, individualist nature of corporate rap" (21). Fernandes also points out a tension that is a central theme in Compton's work and common to the global use of hip

hop culture—“the incongruity of the desire for unity and fellowship across borders and the need to be grounded in a specific place and experience” (21).

One other crucial intertext that Compton is heavily invested in is what he calls the “character/god/theory called Legba” (“Epic Moment” 138), which he sees as another “literary method, a heuristic process” (138) that privileges the tropes of “indeterminacy, . . . crossroads, and chance” (138).³ He sees this as “a sharp deviation from the hip hop aesthetic, which is marked by extreme confidence and firm constructions of identity” (138). In her 2009 book *Legba’s Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*, Heather Russell sees the tropes of African Atlantic modernity such as “gateway” or “crossing” as epistemologically and conceptually tied to Legba, “god of the crossroads—residing literally at the gateway, the interstices of truth, meaning, and interpretation” (9). She argues that Legba’s power “is derived from his strategic duality—his mastery of discourse and attendant recognition of its gross limitations” (9).⁴ Russell makes a case for a “*Legba Principle*” as a “metonym for African Atlantic narratives whose episteme is engaged in freeing praxis at both the level of form and of theme—in other words, texts whose narratologies interrupt, disrupt, erupt Euro-American literary convention for sociopolitical, ideological purposes” (12). Compton’s poetry is making the same theoretical moves by working with its diverse intertexts, its reappropriation of the Afro-diasporic genre of hip hop, and its focus on the indeterminacy of Legba’s crossroads. The sheer density of his *tactical* intertextuality and referentiality speaks to the multiple openings and pathways that his poetry provides the possibilities for, in the creation of the past and the present. And in works like “Rune,” Compton’s destabilization of historical truths is an example of how Compton sees his work as a celebration of

repetition, knowing that you will mis-duplicate—and that the mis-duplications are the closest achievable thing to an actual you. . . . The remix is a way of—in one moment and one performance—re-enacting the manipulation of history and source culture. (“Turntablism”)

What I am particularly interested in is how this precise combination of intertexts, rooted in Compton’s version of a black British Columbia, produces new ways of performing and remembering identity, culture, and place.

Performing Mis-duplications and Indeterminacy

The complexity of Compton’s poem “Performance Bond” means that any analysis that is not a critical edition cannot point out each and every reference in his lines. My close reading of the poem will draw on the ones

that I deem most relevant to how Compton embeds the “mis-duplication” of hip hop aesthetics and indeterminacy in the poem. Opening the poem with a reference to the song “As time goes by” from the movie *Casablanca*, Compton mis-duplicates the chorus of the song, substituting “multicultural” for “fundamental”:

The multicultural things apply
as time goes by
when the I itself
will not abide
eternal solipsism.

Everybody’s a migrant.
Every body gyrates
to the global bigbeat.
It’s sun
down in the Empire, and time has done
gone by,
and multiculturalism can’t arrive
by forgetting , but remembering
every hectare taken, every anti-Asian defamation,
because those who don’t remember
repeat. (42)

Compton’s language echoes the rhyme, rhythm, and repetition in hip-hop lyricism, and his opening lines further indicate the re-mixing and sampling that his poem will partake in. However, his use of enjambment and the visual placement of the text on the page complicate the orality and aurality of hip hop. For instance, Compton locates the pun in the word “everybody” by simply separating “every” and “body” in the following line, conflating ideas of identity and corporeality, and creating equivalences between the ideas of national origins and popular culture. Compton connects the ideas behind the terms “migrant” and “multiculturalism” to the physicality of “gyrat[ing] / to the global bigbeat.” Compton invokes Vancouver’s place on the “edge of empire” (Adele Perry) with the lines: “It’s sun / down in the Empire,” the presence of black vernacular English: “time has done / gone by,” and the historic slave trade: “The cracks are filled / with the bodies of those fallen through.” These vertiginous combinations reflect an overwhelmingly complex field that is located between the terms “multicultural” and “migrant.” “Performance Bond” does not shy away from its central premise that remembering, and especially remembering specificities of “every hectare taken, every anti-Asian defamation,” is most important of all. Issues of geography are implied here, whether these are hectares taken from First

Nations peoples or non-white communities in Vancouver who lost their neighbourhoods to urban redevelopment. Forgetting, on the other hand, is equated with erasure and elision, in order to create a seamless whole or an authorized history, and dooms one to “repeat.”

Ironically, Compton spends much of the poem repeating: literally, as he quotes other thinkers, activists, and cultural artefacts, and also formally, with his poetic constructions. These are tactical repetitions, as when Compton quotes the Canadian poet Jamie Reid, and proceeds to rewrite and appropriate his argument on the criminalization of poverty:

It's a crime
to be poor, to be broke, to float, to colour
outside
the lines, to cross, to coast, to confound
the order, the entrance, the ocean, the border, to be
unrestrained,
uncontained. (43)

Again here, Compton's poetic construction and language echo the rhythm and rhyming structures of hip hop and rap. His use of caesuras and assonance in “to be poor, to be broke, to float, to colour” drive the line forward in beats that end suddenly with an abrupt line break at “outside,” which demarcates “colour” from “the lines” and recalls W. E. B. DuBois' famous proclamation in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (n.p.). The rhythmic effects of each caesura also recall the rhythms of rap and the balance between flow and rupture that Rose points out. Further, this construction formally reflects what Compton is emphasizing about the transgressive nature of being “outside” the boundaries, “the lines,” and on the margins. He goes on to show, however, that these boundaries are merely constructs, since it is possible “to cross, to coast, to confound / the order, the entrance, the ocean, the border.” Again, with each caesura, Compton introduces ideas that progressively increase in size and scope. Here, the poem refers to the idea of being at a crossroads or in a landscape of indeterminacy, with the wordplay between the similar sounding “unrestrained / uncontained.” It is important to note that Compton began from Reid's quote on the criminalization of poverty and intervened with this intertext to improvise a grand gesture of exploding meaning, borders, and carefully demarcated hierarchies.

This movement from a singularity to a plurality is repeated throughout the poem, drawing ever larger circles in time and space, in history and

geography, bringing temporal and spatial intertexts into play. This is especially clear in Compton's explorations of "the history of BC," which he sees as a performative "history of whiteness" unable to affect "the watcher" (43). Compton is quick to point out the slippages in this closed definition of history, which features its share of erasures in the image of "whiteness." He utilizes the poetic stanza break to emphasize a history "of colour" and reverses the structure of the sentence construction, where now

. . . the history
of colour is the history of BC
as it's watched and created, assimilates
as it changes the watchers in the shadows,
the whiteness. The history

of whiteness is the history of colour
as it changes BC
which it watches
and estranges, as it changes
in stages,
history performing
as race
in BC
is created. (43-44)

Here, arguably, Compton references important discourses about the place of "whiteness" and "blackness" in North American history and literature that have been already put forward by thinkers like DuBois and Toni Morrison. Crucially though, Compton replaces the idea of "blackness," "darkness," and "Africanism," which Morrison sets up against "whiteness" in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, with "colour." This reflects the more complex demography in BC, where South Asian and East Asian populations have to be considered in conjunction with the African Canadian minority. Compton works in the spirit of Morrison's project,⁵ but complicates it by placing "the history of colour" at the heart of "the history of BC." This, he argues, is the true history that has the power to "estrangle" and "change." Later in the poem, Compton also enlarges the idea of "whiteness" beyond a literary context, seeing its "invisibility" (45) and non-existence, as part of its ability to be omnipresent: "it is universal because it is without perimeter; / its perimeters are that which is not (non-)" (45). Compton conflates ideas of a white gaze with those of surveillance technologies, where "whiteness is the camera; / whiteness is the eye that creates the panorama; / whiteness encompasses; / whiteness, if seen, implodes" (45).

This sinister combination of “whiteness” with its unnatural “epidermis” and “the perimeter” which has “[acquired] eyes” allows Compton to introduce additional historical intertexts regarding the arrival and assimilation or rejection of immigrants to BC. However, as critic Reg Johanson argues with great validity, Compton’s challenge to British Columbia’s “primacy of whiteness” with his “many different overlapping Columbias” is inadequate because it fails to take into account a proper consideration of First Nation claims. Compton performs a palimpsest-like territorialization of British Columbia, where “Chinese Columbia / Haida Columbia / Punjabi Columbia / Japanese Columbia / African Columbia / Vietnamese Columbia / Squamish Columbia / Jewish Columbia / Salish Columbia” (44) are superimposed onto each other, erasing chronological and geographical hierarchies. He points out that the motto of British Columbia, “*Splendor Sine Occasu*” (44)⁶ already has a “myriad” of translations intrinsic to it, emphasizing the plurality that has already been secretly entrenched. Arguably, even though the issue of First Nations is somewhat elided here, Compton is still doing important work in collapsing the constructs of official history and geography, allowing for new insights and ways of thinking about how history and territory can be reconciled. In some ways, he is attempting to move beyond what Hudson sees as an “overprivileging [of] the black experience at the expense, especially, of the racial conflicts over space fought by the Aboriginal and Asian communities of the province” (“Lost Tribe” 158). *Performance Bond* represents larger concerns than those of *Bluesprint* or *49th Parallel Psalm*. Indeed, with his use of the word “colour” as opposed to simply “black” and his attempts (albeit, as Johanson points out, incomplete) to encompass a multicultural British Columbia, he is perhaps taking a larger view of what Hudson sees as “the very meaning of black British Columbia” (158) and “blackness” “as always foreign to any place—as always remaining the lost tribe of a lost tribe” (172).

Part of this more expansive view of history is greatly influenced by Kamau Brathwaite’s “tidalectics,” which Compton sees as “a scrambled neologism for a dialectic that does not move forward, but rather transforms statically” (“Turntablism”), “a way of seeing history as a palimpsest, where generations overlap generations, and eras wash over eras like a tide on a stretch of beach . . . [where] we do not *improve upon* the past, but are ourselves *versions of the past*” (*Bluesprint* 17). Certainly, the repetition of the various Columbias echoes Brathwaite’s vision of a tide coming and leaving, as various groups repeatedly transform the territory of “Columbia.” History becomes “tracers,

flashbacks, and ripples in time,” which “ring the screen” (*Performance Bond* 45). Compton uses both “tidalectics” and the historical arrival of immigrants and explorations of First Nation peoples as intertexts that interact and evolve to complicate how history unfolds and the various claims that ethnic groups have made on British Columbia over time. This kinetic concentric imagery recalls Brathwaite’s own insights, where “in the culture of the circle ‘success’ moves outward from the centre to circumference and back again: a tidal dialectic” (qtd. in Torres-Saillant 704). In an interview with Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite further explains how tidalectics are “dialectics with my difference. In other words, instead of the notion of one-two-three Hegelian, I am now more interested in the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose, motion, rather than linear” (44).

Oceanic movements also pervade Compton’s focus on ships and vessels, which invoke Paul Gilroy’s ideas of the Black Atlantic, where “routes” are literally “roots” and culture is embedded in the image of a ship as “a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion” (*Modernity* 4). Compton uses Gilroy’s critical framework, but replaces the slave trading ships with “Haida⁷ vessels”, which sail into the death that is “museumization” (45); the Japanese steamliner *Komagatamaru*,⁸ with its would-be immigrants unable to reach a utopian “*terra sine occasu*” (45); and the “[e]picantial Japanese vessels” (45) that brought Japanese Canadians to the fishing port town of Steveston. These seafaring vessels represent major ethnic groups in British Columbia, from the First Nations to the South Asians and the East Asians. Each group, Compton points out, suffers from its interactions with “whiteness” and the enforced boundaries of British Columbia. Yet, as befitting a poem that has indeterminacy and tidalectics as intertexts, Compton shows how the tide can deliberately shift and turn. Here it is again useful to consider Gilroy’s ideas of “the sea’s liquid contamination,” which “involve[s] both mixture and movement” and stands in direct contrast to the land “where we find that special soil in which we are told national culture takes root” (“Black Atlantic” 2). By focusing on ships and vessels, Compton evokes Gilroy’s notions of the ocean “as an alternative form of power that confined, regulated, inhibited, and sometimes even defied, the exercise of territorial sovereignty,” where “the Black Atlantic opens out into theories of diaspora culture and dispersion, memory, identity, and difference” (“Black Atlantic” 2). Compton complicates the Black Atlantic, turning our gaze instead to the Pacific, where similarly significant movements and mixtures were occurring: ships arriving from Hong Kong with passengers from India; Japanese populations stepping

off boats to play a significant role in the fishing industry, and the First Nations themselves, setting out from the coast of British Columbia to launch their own explorations. This is a radical re-appropriation of the intertext of the Black Atlantic, which also situates the experience of British Columbia in a greater historical context of global mixtures and movements, and challenges the imagined isolation of the province.

Throughout “Performance Bond,” Compton remains aware of the difficulties and compromises that occur as he uses the intertexts of history, global black culture, and critical theory. He includes a quote by Tseshaht actor, activist, and writer George Clutesi⁹ in the poem: “*The old folks used to say that it’s not good, it’s not wise, to copy other people. You just gotta be yourself. Okay?*” (47); yet Clutesi’s position as a promoter of Tseshaht traditions, with his advice to “be yourself,” is not tenable for Compton, who is only able to see a reality that has been complicated beyond “self,” compromised by the “borrowed finery” of these critical and cultural frameworks, with “Africans from America, then Canada, wearing the Caribbean” (47). This is not to say that Compton is not hopeful, as his poem returns to the potentiality of the sea, where walking across the ocean seems to be walking to a kind of promised land. This movement is purposeful, as he enters as a “contraband” and remembers as an “anti-racist” (48).

Spinning Words on “The Reinventing Wheel”

Like “Performance Bond,” the poem “The Reinventing Wheel” explores questions of identity in the context of globalization, insisting that their complexity comes from the “wheel” itself and not from any master “inventor” or single official narrative. In effect, the multiplicity of influences, inflections, and histories inherent in the “wheel” of history and culture acts as a continual source of renewal and reinvention. This is immediately clear from the opening of the poem:

The reading of the Red Sea bleeds into me
as parable. The parabola
of the word crossing water,
Kamby Bolongo. The perambulation
of call and response,
the word made vinyl. The Nile,
like the culture,
overflows, the line secedes. Jordan,
like papyrus,
tears or folds. (100)

In these lines, Compton deftly weaves strands of biblical, literary, and popular culture references so that they become intertwined, each reference lending another greater import. The biblical tale of Moses parting the Red Sea is conflated with allusions to a Christ-like figure who “bleeds” and speaks in “parable[s].” Compton pushes the text itself to unexpected places, as the word “parable” morphs into “parabola”—a mathematical concept that speaks to multiple possibilities since a parabola can open up in any geometrical direction and which further recalls oceanic imagery as it is the shape of a wave. Indeed, Siemerling points out that these open possibilities speak to the “improvisation” that is at the core of Compton’s work as he constantly spins the “reinventing wheel,” moving effortlessly from intertext to intertext. Thus, from the Red Sea, we move to the river *Kamby Bolongo*, a reference to Alex Haley’s work in the novel *Roots*, where the words “Kamby Bolongo” literally function as a keepsake of diaspora that eventually leads Haley back to his origins in Gambia. Compton moves to “the word made vinyl,” a play on biblical language and a reference to hip hop culture and what he see as the instinctive development from the gospel genre of “call and response.” As in “Performance Bond,” Compton returns to the initial preoccupation with tides and water, recalling Brathwaite’s “tidalectics” while emphasizing its connections to waves of culture and history. Thus, both the rivers Nile and Jordan as profoundly allusive symbols continue to be sources of artistic inspiration.

However, Compton does not take these tides for granted, or the fact that there can be “safe passage” through them. The poem’s opening gambit also embeds a sense of the ephemerality that is associated with the ebb and flow of the water:

Snatch It Back and Hold
 It,” Junior Wells told us,
 And Arrested Development sampled
 it. The passage is collapsing
 and Moses’ magic for passing as African
 is the fashion
 among blacks.
 The lighter skinned, the damned-
 near-white among us blush
 with pride when called “nigga,” flushed
 out. Snatched back and held. Elemental.
 And all there is to say to that is

*It be’s like that sometimes
 cause I can’t control the rhyme.*
 (Keith Murray) (101)

Tracing a genealogy from blues to hip hop and rap and melding biblical stories with slave narratives, Compton attempts to encompass the stereophonic qualities of contemporary black culture as seen through the eyes of an African Canadian poet writing in Vancouver. Thus, while the influences of black American culture weigh heavy in his work, Compton also speaks to a more borderless idea of black culture and its complex *inclusivity*. Reversing racist binaries of skin colour, Compton describes a restorative inversion where “the lighter skinned, the damned- / near-white among us” are recuperated and reappropriated “with pride” with the loaded term “nigga.” The poet simultaneously acknowledges the complicated history of blacks “passing” as whites, while contemporizing the idea of “passing” with a racial reversal that seems to occur as a “rhyme” reaches out and “holds” people of mixed race. Indeed, a great deal of “The Reinventing Wheel” is about this re-appropriation and re-evaluation of the difficult and painful nature of black history and present. Compton continues later in the poem,

The rupture is the inscription, the brokenness the tradition,
the repetition the affliction, the body the preserved fiction.
The script the friction. (103)

With the repetition of the strong end rhymes, Compton achieves an incantatory mode that blends an oral tradition with “the script” of the poem. His confluences of traumatic images of “rupture” and “brokenness” with ones of continuity like “inscription” and “tradition” destabilize the binaries that have been associated with these terms. Compton recuperates “rupture” and “brokenness” while remaining ambivalent about their effects on black history. And while “repetition” with a critical difference may be a postmodern means of re-appropriating culture and master narratives, Compton also emphasizes that it is an “affliction,” indicating a certain inevitability in the matter.

Throughout “The Reinventing Wheel,” Compton’s confluences of various cultures and histories are not simply hybridities—his intertextuality and interdiscursivity function more as an expansion of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, where, as Compton puts it, “[t]he speakers are feeding back” (104) to his “hip hop / in the boondocks” (108). Compton’s vision is one of “a communion” that “is happening worldwide, a whirlwind / of performances, Black English, black expropriation / scattered to the four corners” (106). This vision of a “whirlwind” challenges the strict categorization of art, culture, race, and immigrant that Compton sees as detrimental to a real engagement with the complexity and richness of life in British Columbia. In a stanza that begins

with traditional categories paired into binaries, Compton plays with the reader's expectations before collapsing into the ambivalent word "split" (105):

Lyrical / prosaic,
settler / native,
American / North American,
nationalism / segregation,
gold / pyrite,
familiarity / contempt,
ocean / border,
sub / urban,
dispersal / determinacy,
mulatto,
mestizo,
metis,
cabra,
Eurasian,
creole,
coloured,
colored,
split. (105)

In these lines, Compton challenges not just traditional boundaries between concepts of "settler" and "native," but also draws our attention to the fact that some "split[s]" occur within words themselves, where for instance, "sub / urban" highlights both the fracture and ambivalence in the word "suburban." Compton also lists terms to describe a situation of mixity, showing a multilingual yet elusive struggle to pinpoint an exact way to describe mixed race people like Compton himself. Compton's subtle juxtaposition of "coloured, / colored," which changes only the spelling of the word from American to British, further emphasizes the nuances between being black in America and being black in Great Britain or its former colonies. With this play on words and understated mis-duplications, Compton remaps the spaces and words that form the borders between countries, cultures, and races.

With his insistence on interdiscursivity, Compton also rejects the idea of a singular historical narrative, even autobiographically, noting how,

My family history is fractured, impure,
history imported with deft warp and weft.
You don't know your past, you don't know your future. (106)

In this line, Compton quotes a vocal sample from the opening track of the Public Enemy album *Fear of Black Planet* (1990),¹⁰ recalling the hip hop group's sound collages of a diverse range of song samples and media recordings.

Familial knowledge is all that Compton aspires to here, but he grapples with his real lack of knowledge of either his “past” or “future.” What he does have in “The Reinventing Wheel” is “the global click track” (110) and “the lingua franca, the stutter” (110). Compton may be ambivalent about being “a cargo cult / of reception. A buffer / between selves” (110), but what he has achieved with this ambitious poem should not be discounted. Compton is aware of how black history can be commoditized and re-appropriated with

The packaging of our trauma, blood,
our bastardizing of the scripts from the metropole, the black ones:
these are the ready-made blues in the backwoods, backwards.
A spiral lineage. A root through. (110)

However, his attempts to move “backwards” in the “backwoods” to trace this “spiral lineage” have already created a rich, multifaceted, nuanced engagement with what it means to be black in British Columbia.

Rune: Confabulation and Black Vancouver

The dense layers of historical, literary, and theoretical intertexts that inform Compton’s work, both in form and content, allow him to have them interact and create new ways of understanding his contemporary contexts. In essence, the intricacy of his work reflects the complexities of a site such as British Columbia, where, as he notes, one is at “an integrated outpost, / a province of edges, / a contact zone” (*Performance Bond* 48). Most significantly, Compton is not content to simply document the multiple layers and ways of approaching British Columbia’s history; in writing about such a space of diversity, he is conscious of the fact that “the visuals / won’t stay still” (*Performance Bond* 48), and that the intertexts in his poetry estrange, change, and perform to constantly alter and challenge themselves and perceptions of fixed identities and heritages. In this instability, Compton’s work reflects on the tensions and contradictions in creating a context for a multicultural British Columbia in a space dominated by American popular culture, global black culture, and official Canadian histories.

In the last section of *Performance Bond*, Compton goes one step further in his active improvisation and mis-duplication of culture and history. Entitled “Rune,” Compton’s literary and visual memorial to the historic black Vancouver neighbourhood of Hogan’s Alley consists of both historical and “factitious elements” (10). While Compton makes the artificiality and fictionality of these elements (a newspaper article, four landmarks, and two transcribed interviews) clear in the introduction to the book, the way

they are presented without preamble or other mitigating factors in the text gives them an aura of authenticity. Compton's astute confabulation of various historical voices, visuals, and records of Black Vancouver fleshes out the gaps and silences in its history. His invention and re-interpretation of what these historical documents might look like continues in the mode of interdiscursivity that I outlined above, but also points to the complexities, slippages, and referentiality inherent in the process. Remixing and mis-duplicating the work of Daphne Martlett and Carole Itter's oral histories in *Opening Doors in Vancouver's East End: Strathcona*, citing Andrea Fatona and Cornelia Wyngaarden's moving documentary on Hogan's Alley, and taking up the challenge of Peter Hudson's whimsical essay "Natural Histories of Southwestern British Columbia"—Compton performs what he calls

a satire on Afrocentrism. (The title is an allusion to the "Lost-Found Nation of Islam," for example.) Afrocentrism is often fascistic, so maybe I'm attracted to satire as a method of de-railing those tendencies. You certainly can't assail Afrocentrism with rational argument, because it usually rejects rationalism, in an essentialist or religious way. ("Black Writers")

Yet, while Compton's quotation here suggests a certain cynicism and ironic playfulness, in an essay for *West Coast Line* also published in 2005, he reveals an emotional attachment to Hogan's Alley that proves that the crossroads that lead to various versions of this historic Afro-diasporic neighbourhood in Vancouver are also capable of more affective readings. In "Hogan's Alley and Retro-Speculative Verse," Compton reveals his anxiety about his "experiment" with "notions of historiography and cultural memorialization" (115). He is worried that readers might see it as a simple "hoax" (115), when what he intends for the work is an exploration of both "displacement" and "self-enculturation" (115).

In fact, particularly affecting are Compton's stagings of the "Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver"—a series of carefully composed tableaux of old shop and house-fronts in Vancouver disguised with fictitious signs, like "Strathcona Coloured People's Benevolent Society of Vancouver," "False Creek Moslem Temple," "The Far Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Northwest (Since 1957)," and "Pacific Negro Working Men's Association." Compton gives these imaginary communities a real physical address in Vancouver, firmly mapping their presence and absence in the urban landscape. His choice of names for these sites speaks to the lack of black voices and organizations, or at least a lack of a memory of them in the city. The poet creatively misduplicates history and memory in the absence of

any other official or available archive. Like the poems “Performance Bond” and “The Reinventing Wheel,” the histories and records that Compton invents in “Rune” have a performative element to them that is conscious of their improvisation and mis-duplication of historical records, cultural expectations, and intertexts. Taking things a step beyond the use and abuse of the intertext, Compton imaginatively creates in “Rune” something new from an unstable sense of the old. This seems fitting in the wake of Vancouver’s rich and complex contemporary setting, as the poet’s work seeks to open up radically different ways of approaching history and memory.

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NOTES

- 1 Another way of considering a hip hop aesthetic is put forward by Tricia Rose, who quotes Arthur Jafa pointing out that the “flow, layering, and ruptures in line” (39) that structure graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. Again, there is a balance here between the improvisational qualities of “layering” and “rupture” with the underlying sense of the “flow.”
- 2 Donna Bennett and Russell Brown have anthologized Compton’s poem “The Reinventing Wheel” in the third edition of *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2010). Their footnotes to the poem represent the most comprehensive annotated edition of Compton’s work, with sixty-four notes devoted to a single poem, mostly explaining Compton’s intertextual sources and reflecting the dense intertextuality of the piece.
- 3 See Siemerling for a more extensive reading of how Legba influences Compton’s earlier poems in *The 49th Parallel* and the section “Vévé.”
- 4 Art historian Robert Farris Thompson points out that to achieve “*àshe*” or a divine gift “to make all things happen and multiply,” (18) “one must cultivate the art of recognizing significant communications, knowing what is truth and what is falsehood, or else the lessons of the crossroads—the point where doors open or close, where persons have to make decisions that may forever after affect their lives—will be lost” (19). While acknowledging her debt to Thompson’s work, Russell extends Legba’s possible influence to narratology, seeing how concepts of indeterminacy and crossroads affect African Atlantic narratives.
- 5 Compton here seeks to rechart certain cultural, historical, and geographical boundaries. While Morrison’s text seeks to show how concepts of “blackness” were necessary for white American writing to create a discourse of white supremacy in the American context,

her use of cartographic and geographic metaphors in her study seem to speak to certain aspects of Compton's project:

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest. I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls. (3)

- 6 The British Columbia Province's website translates the motto as "splendour without diminishment" (See "B.C. Facts—Province of British Columbia." 9 Dec. 2010. Web), but Compton is referring to the plurality of meanings inherent in the original Latin.
- 7 An Aboriginal people indigenous to Alaska and the islands they call Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands). There is archaeological evidence that they have been there for up to 8,000 years. See *Haida Gwaii: Human History and Environment from the Time of Loon to the Time of the Iron People*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2005. Print.
- 8 For a detailed history of the incident involving the Komagata Maru and would-be Indian immigrants in 1914, see Hugh J. M. Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: the Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1979, and the more recent book by Ali Kazimi, *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru: An Illustrated History*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011. Print.
- 9 For more on Clutesi, see "Influential Figures." History and Culture. *TSESHAHT First Nation*. 9 Dec. 2010. Web.
- 10 *Fear of a Black Planet* is an album that expands on the sample-laden work of *It Takes Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), which Compton mentions in *After Canaan* as an album that "thoroughly rocked my sense of identity" (146) and led him to the library to track its references to Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.

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