SOUNDIN’ CANAAN:
Music, Resistance, and Citizenship in African Canadian Poetry

by

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ABSTRACT
SOUNDIN’ CANAAN:
MUSIC, RESISTANCE, AND CITIZENSHIP IN AFRICAN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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Professor Ajay Heble

Idealistically, citizenship—like music—is not confined to any single space. Soundin’ Canaan (Canaan, as Canada was often referred to in spirituals during the Black migration to Canada) draws from a cross-fertilization of communicative techniques to examine how citizenship is explored by African Canadian poets’ resistive soundings. The dissertation investigates how many African Canadian poets draw from African American and pan-African musical forms (including blues, jazz, hip-hop, reggae, dub, and other improvisatory practices) in order to remap the concept of identity and citizenship within intercultural (or multicultural) spaces. I ask: what does Canadian citizenship sound like, particularly as voiced by African Canadian poets interested in a fluid citizenship that moves, like music, between local and global spaces? By looking at Canadian literature in a more global cross-cultural and interdisciplinary context and focusing, as Ajay Heble does in his article “Sounds of Change: Dissonance, History, and Cultural Listening,” on the values of dissonant histories “not in harmony” as a meaningful disturbance to knowledge production in Canada, my dissertation investigates poetic fluidity between African Canadian multimodal practices (particularly orality and music) and those of African Americans and the larger African diaspora.

The Introduction outlines my methodologies, and sets the stage for the larger theoretical discussions pursued in Chapter One. Chapter Two establishes parameters for what defines a dub poem, converging around M. NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! Chapter Three focuses on George Elliott Clarke’s musical dedications in Blue, Black, and Red. In Chapter Four I examine Dionne Brand’s Ossuaries, particularly the deconstructive jazz approach that Brand takes to remapping a historically marginalized, yet fluid community of resistance. Chapter Five focuses on Wayde Compton’s Performance Bond into which he incorporates hip-hop and turntable poetics. Chapter Six looks at hip-hop artist K’naan, whose song of global fraternity, “Wavin’ Flag,” was chosen as an anthem for the FIFA 2010 World Cup. The Outro (conclusion) brings the primary themes back into the mix, examining how citizenship, the self, and nationality are articulated in African Canadian poetry and literature through what I am terming “listening communities.”
SHOUT OUTS

My name may appear on the cover of this dissertation, but the work itself is an intricate DJ mix comprised of many speaking voices. The ideas herein are the result of hundreds of conversations and self-reflections, thousands of pieces of spun vinyl, various and varied readings, and too many cups of oolong tea to possibly count. This thesis would not have reached the level of intellectual rigor it did without the encouragement, support, and nuanced critical feedback of my advisory committee: Ajay Heble, Cecil Foster, and Christine Bold. Cecil’s own writing about multiculturalism is in many ways the catalyst for my own conception about how we sound together to form meaningful (even if at times dissonant) communities comprised of citizens. Christine supported my DJ approach from the early stages and has provided me with confidence to trust my instincts, especially when they go against convention. And my supervisor, mentor, and dear friend Ajay Heble has done far more than guide my writing, but has shown me countless times that academic work is an opportunity to enact social change, particularly when rooted in the community. Truly, my entire committee remains an excellent dialogic model for my own academic hopes as I forge forward and make my own sounds.

Aside from my committee proper, this thesis is deeply enriched because of the various writers/poets who gave their time to participate in interviews with me, including M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke (What up, George!), Cecil Foster, d’bi.young, and Wayde Compton. Aside from interviews, the aforementioned writers also provided stimulating conversations in person or via email. An early conversation over tea with Dionne Brand in Kensington Market led me to write an additional chapter on dub poetry; further, Dionne’s early feedback was instrumental in the process. Thanks to Mark Kaethler for listening and providing feedback on an early draft. I am also grateful to my students from English 2130 (Fall 2013) who engaged with many of the texts and ideas I present in this thesis. Thanks to Katherine McLeod for her collaborative work on the Clarke interview and event. Further, during my time at UBC and Guelph I’ve had the good fortune to work with some remarkable teachers and people, and Kevin McNeilly (who served as a mentor for some of the early ideas in the thesis and whose graduate course on “The Poetics of Listening” at UBC led to an early draft on the Clarke chapter), Ric Knowles, Smaro Kamboureli, Daniel Fischlin, and Jade Ferguson have all enriched my critical thinking. I am thankful to the editors of Macomère for allowing me to revise my essay on Dionne Brand for this thesis. I also acknowledge this research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Further, both the community and people of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project taught me an immense amount in regards
to how improvisation provides a nexus to understand that there are alternative ways to being in the world and to form community.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my loving and enduring wife, Meg, who remains an invaluable eye and ear for everything I write and sound. And to my newly earthside son, Phoenix, whose due date challenged this new papa to finish a first draft faster than he thought was humanly possible. Both of your energies and love, like the music in the discussed poems, hold these words and myself together and sound beauty.
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to be here. sound
of the stones going, ‘Canaan Land’
fulla honey. going, ‘steal away.’ stage
whispering. breeze blowing. knowing only
one way, one direction. Flowing. crossing.
—Wayde Compton, 49th *Parallel Psalm*, “The Book” 108
INTRODUCTION

I. SING CANAAN LAND

“I learned that to the north, in a land called Canaan, all men were free.”
—Lawrence Hill, *Any Known Blood* 82.

Prelude: Soundin’ Canaan

I dreamed a dream…
a fitful dream.
The life I lived so long ago,
in ‘Canaan’ land.
False ‘Freedom’ land—
strained welcome—
subtle hatred—
covert discrimination—
Slavery … Canadian style.
—George A. Borden, “Fashions of slavery,” *Canaan Odyssey* 7

In Canada, slavery was not officially denounced until 1793, and was not formally abolished until 1834. Across the border in America, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, delegates decided that slavery should be allowed to continue on American soil, laying the foundation for the Slave Fugitive Acts of 1793 and 1850. The Underground Railroad, a surreptitious underground network of paths and safe houses that led to the slave-free Northern states and Canada, was a result of these Acts. According to a conservative estimate by historian Robin Winks, up to 30,000 fugitive slaves (between 1830-1860) survived the journey from the United States to Canada (235)—to Canaan land, that heaven coded in the African American spirituals. For myriads of escaped slaves, Canada represented reprieve from a life of dehumanized imprisonment experienced on the brutal plantations, offering freedom from what abolitionist Frederick Douglass described as the “the hell of slavery” (*Narrative* 51). Many slaves fled to Canada knowing that capture meant being placed back on a plantation, or worse, public humiliation and torture, or a gruesome public lynching. Despite the risks, these escaped slaves set out to follow the North Star, the drinking gourd, journeying along that physical and metaphysical Underground Railroad which started in the south and ended in Canada. At the helm of many of those murky trips into the unknown was Harriet “Moses” Tubman, safely providing passage across the crossing, bearing the cross of thousands of escaped slaves who travelled that literary and very real railroad towards freedom land. The gourd they followed was the big dipper, and the North Star was the celestial tracks the train ran along. They travelled (as if) across the Red Sea and the Sinai desert and through the rocky wilderness into Canada with nothing more than a
hope for a better life. This journey paralleled the biblical parable of the Israelites’ escape from Egyptian bondage to the promised land of milk and honey. Canada appeared a place where the escaped slave might be free and prosperous or at the very least free from racism, extreme poverty, and “the hell of slavery.”

Surprised, these rebel warriors, fugitives, and survivors of the crossing found that many of their ambitions were stymied, uprooted, and unable to grow into fecund realities. Instead of biblical vindication they found that a new group of oppressors—philistines—had replaced their old Egyptian slavers. And while Canada continued to congratulate itself as being other than the United States for providing a fugitive haven for slaves “under the lion’s paw,” the escaped slaves soon learnt otherwise. They encountered very direct racism (although often described as subtle), devastating poverty, segregation, and found the vestiges of a slavery system, what Saidiya Hartman refers to as “the afterlife of slavery” once practiced in Canada. “Negroes” to Canadians were presumed to be a monolith, comprised of visitors, others, and not a fit people for integration into Canadian society (Winks 24). Nevertheless, the escaped slaves founded their own Canaans—Dawn, Wilberforce, The Refugee Home Society, and Elgin—(a moniker that underlines their identification with the biblical promised land) and continued to plant their hopes and dreams into the soil and fabric of Canadian society. And so, while Canada was not quite the place that the astute Frederick Douglass envisioned, where “the wild goose and the swan repaired at the end of winter” and not “the home of man” (Life 110), it was nonetheless, for many, a chance for a new beginning. The survivors of the crossing not only survived in Canada, but many thrived, despite the hegemonic centre’s historical imperative to marginalize and whiteout the achievement of blacks in Canada. These achievements came, despite the fact slavery had existed in Canada, despite the exclusionary immigration laws parliament drafted to limit black integration into Canadian society, despite the leveling of Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver for a highway and Africville in Halifax, despite the arrest of Viola Desmond. But I am getting ahead of myself, and strategically reducing a large corpus of historical narratives to beleaguer the point that African Canadian histories are manifold and are part of where Canada has been and is going.

Regardless of the catalogue of many despites, African Canadians—and not just those “indigenous” survivors of the crossing, but immigrants and refugees as well—have left a considerable legacy ineluctably interwoven into the fabric of Canadian history and literary production. They survived, and so has Canada. But, like those first Europeans (oppressors), slaves, immigrants, and refugees, who took that leap into the unknown, we are still asking, where is here?2

*Soundin’ Canaan* is not so much interested in asking “where is here?” or “have we survived?” so much as it is in asking “where can here still be?” What will it take to out-survive the
prejudices of the past with the dreams of a more inclusive future for all people who share this massive bountiful land that could still be that promised land as envisioned as a just society by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and social rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. before him. This dissertation is predicated on the hopes of those escaped slaves, improvising songs along those wild tracks, with the belief that we have not yet reached that just society—but we might one day. The poets this project engages with provide textual spaces formed from the historical and lived experience of African Canadian and afrosporic people, allowing us to dream that we are more intent, more engaged, and more aware of the historical underpinnings that hinge upon us reaching that more just society than ever before. What we need, to borrow from Paulo Freire, is a pedagogy of hope, for as bell hooks affirms, “Whenever we love justice and stand on the side of justice we refuse simplistic binaries” (Community 10). Soundin’ Canaan: take it as a theoretical manifesto of hope.

**Living with Poetry and Music**

Music and poetry offer an opening. Music, poetry, and art contain ideas, and the ideas that this thesis is concerned with are largely democratic and revolutionary. As pianist Cecil Taylor notes, “It seems to me that in the long run your art becomes a reflection of a consciousness which, if it is powerful enough, may change the social consciousness of the people who listen to you. Great music implies a challenge to the existing order” (qtd. in Willener 255). Amiri Baraka contends that this liberatory potential in art can happen at a purely aesthetic level, since he points out, “Ideas do not require lyrics! Sound carries ideas, that’s why you get sad at one song, happy with another” (Digging 102). Music is about ritual, which allows participants, from the performers to the listeners, to explore and co-perform community. The idea that music and literature carry ideas that might be dangerous to those who hold power is hardly anything new. After all, in Plato’s Republic poets are barred from the Republic for their distortion of reality via their written words, which Plato argues gives a “distorted image” (377e) of reality, gods, and heroes. It is in the spirit of this distortion, and the various moments of dissonance in the explored poetic texts of this thesis, that I offer some cursory background samplings of sonic ideas that border my approaches to the discussed literature. The performance is my mixing of the ideas of the various poets through a wide range of scholarship that moves between thinkers that include W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Giorgio Agamben, and incorporates modernist, postmodernist, improvisational, and cultural studies approaches into the mix.

My approach is multi-sonic and models what scholarship might look like as a DJ mix. To state that my intent is informed in part by pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, and theoretical analysis is,
since “Pleasure falls outside the realm of knowledge,” as Terry Eagleton asserts, “dangerously anarchic” (*After Theory*) 5. At various points, the reader is challenged to listen to two different mixes being mashed, as I move between aesthetic and rhetorical registers (discussed in the Coda following the Introduction). The selected poets, and their own samplings and the black people they write about and represent, are full citizens of Canada deserving of a method that is emotionally resonant and critically astute. Hence, we can appreciate the poetry for both its aesthetic qualities and for the poet’s ability to resist oppression and reframe the notion of citizenship. Rather than judge the poetry as good or bad, although I certainly engage with the rhetorical implications present in the poems, I prefer to be compelled and enter into the sonic mix a given poem welcomes. Reading is an act of cultural improvisation, and music and poetry are ways of organizing sound and words, often across a multitude of borders. As an aesthetic experience, a jazz musician manipulates sound and rhythm to allow the listener to transcend everyday experiences.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* contains an experience of sonic transcendence when his protagonist listens to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” on his phonograph. The music speaks a whole historic sounding, including a chronicle of slaves praying for deliverance—“longing for [that] truer world” that Du Bois articulates in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (157). Ellison’s unnamed narrator, who desires to play multiple recordings of Armstrong’s song simultaneously so that he can become more fully lost in the mix, provides an articulation of the kind of sonic blending I am interested in, and recalls Baraka’s notion that “[s]ound carries ideas” that are both aesthetically pleasing and rhetorically dense. From Bartok, who incorporates Hungarian folk songs in a cosmopolitan mix, to Duke Ellington, who fuses classical and jazz traditions, the notion of sampling and the mix is hardly a postmodern concept, which is why my adherence to postmodern thinking, as I will discuss, is not chronologically bound. Du Bois, writing in 1903, understood this in his affinity with a range of thinkers when he wrote: “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color-line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas […] I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension” (*Souls* 67). Literature itself is a multicultural mix, and I think Ezra Pound’s straightforward definition of literature as “language charged with meaning” (*ABC* 28) suits this dissertation fine. I would also add that literature is language decontextualized, and that language, despite our best intentions, often resists the frames we impose on it. 3 We could spend countless dissertations asking what is poetry, or jazz, or literature? 4 But all those questions raise the *a priori* question of why do we want to define these terms in the first place?
In this thesis I negotiate a dual role as listener and performer. I spend the first few chapters laying groundwork (working definitions and skeletal literary reviews) to discuss the scope of African Canadian literature, while I also move away from precise nomenclature in order to examine how words and ideas are malleable. I am not interested in what jazz or poetry is—*per se*—but in what poetry and jazz can do, and how we can negotiate community through these doings. As Canadian poet Earl Birney wrote in regards to teaching poetry: “Persons employing this text for authoritarian purposes are the enemies of all genuine students” (2). I am a scholar of literature and music, but I am equally a student, and so rather than teach readers about African Canadian poetry, I hope I can help others enjoy the imaginative craft and pleasure these poets have provided me as a reader. Of course, this is still a thesis and so theoretical frameworks and substantive close readings are offered. Nevertheless, like the poets herein, I am not interested in only the truth of meaning (although there is a little of that going on), but in how, as Derrida writes, “the poet plays on the multiplicity of signifieds” (*Margins* 248). I insist, even while I emphasize the importance of play, that the words of these poets also offer profound readings of the conflicted nature of citizenship.

W. H. Auden wrote: “poetry makes nothing happen” (“In Memory of W.B. Yeats” 246). And yet, the various writers of this thesis are engaged with the communities from which they write and to which they respond, and they are largely concerned with the task of changing society. To be fair, I am taking Auden out of context to emphasize what some see as the hermetic inutility of poetry. Auden is, however, being ironic, since the statement appears in a poem that eulogizes W. B. Yeats who was a poet all about making things happen, finding little separation in his political activism and writing. What I think Auden means is that poetry might make little happen in private or public acts, but has greater powers to teach, liberate, build community, and heal wounds. The same stanza concludes by stating that poetry “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth.” Poetry cannot enforce meaning; poetry is an opening to other worlds, which is precisely what the poets of this thesis do: they open up pathways to what I refer to throughout—borrowing from Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Martin Luther King, Jr.—as the just society. This is a tall order for the poets of *Soundin’ Canaan*, and for it they deserve a spot next to Yeats or Auden. We can appreciate the poets for the aesthetic beauty in their poems, but also for the powerful meanings in the stories they tell.

Stories are a big part of this thesis: they underline my approach to history, and they signal that, as Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri writes, “if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (46). There is the story of crossing into Canada and being freed from the shackles of slavery, and there are competing stories for what signifies a citizen, meaningful performance, or black identity in Canada. As a literary sonic architect, I move between various and, at times,
competing stories while also honing in on specific moments. For me, this act of mixing is an improvisatory one taking place at the site of encounter where a word or idea, as Vološinov states, is “a bridge thrown between myself and another” (*Marxism* 86). Engaging and deeply listening with the poetry recalls postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard’s notion that “the capacity to speak to others is a human right” (“Other’s Rights” 184). Like the improvising act, the people/denizens/citizens/African Canadians can never be textually reduced, which is why I proceed in this dissertation by moving outward with the ideas I’ve extrapolated from my own readings and into the specifics of the text as I reencounter them. I apply a series of competing approaches—I discuss my methodology as largely postmodern—and find that even when I work on the borders of a text I am drawn back into the text: “There is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 158). For me, theory is functional when it is innately interdisciplinary (it engages with other discourses), and even though theory is systematic and more than hypothesis, it is of particular efficacy when it acknowledges the inherent value of improvisation by engaging, critiquing, or playing with received ideas.

One potential critique in the eclecticism of my approach, in fact it is the same critique that poets like M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, and Wayde Compton encounter, is that I run the risk of muddying any ethically grounded statements. I contend throughout that the approach is modeled after the very poets I write about, and that indeterminate meaning is an invitation to enter into a literary mix that lives with the music and poetry, rather than one that attempts to codify, colonize, or control either realm. Within the borders—there are always ideological borders—of this approach I focus, as much as possible, on the cultural specifics of each given work, for I do not proceed with the notion that anything goes, so much as I focus on listening to the texts for the antiphonic responses they might anticipate. I bring in the poet’s voices themselves (through personal interviews), I offer various sonic tangents that move outside the text to take us back in, and I provide detailed close readings throughout. There is surely much that I overlook and given the relative popularity of the writers I’ve chosen, I will have to answer for a number of exclusions. I selected the poets I did because they create the imagined community/just society I have in mind when sounded together. My privileging of text/sight, sound, and hearing will also raise questions about why I exclude readings that would include taste, smell, and touch, to which I respond that my area of focus is on sonic and textual confluences, but that my approach can be applied—and should be, by others more fitted to the task—to other physiological capacities of perception. The theme of a multicultural Canada as a site of social justice and full human actualization regardless of race, ethnicity, nationalism, ability, sexuality, language is one that engages with all of the senses. My own approach is multi-sonic rather than multi-sensory, but it is adamantly multi-spatial.
Citizenship—like music—is not confined to any single space. While in prison, Nelson Mandela listened to Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” an act Paul Gilroy describes as “The global dimension of diaspora dialogue [made] momentarily visible” (96). Through such sonic imagining, the value of a global (yet still often regional) citizenship is avowed: a diasporic citizenship that, as Alexander Weheliye argues, functions “beyond the borders of the nation-state” (148). Canadian borders become malleable through a cross-fertilization of communicative techniques—between orality and textuality, sound and sound reproduction, literary texts and musical performances, and across cultural lines. Unlike prior projects that have admirably mapped and explored African Canadian literature (Compton 2001, Clarke 2002, Richardson and Green 2004), this dissertation hopefully provides a unique take on how many African Canadian poets draw from African American and pan-African musical forms. It is in the music and poetry that life takes new shape. And it is at the sonorous crossroads that we discover the inexhaustible ways to sound ourselves as citizens within the larger sonic-multicultural mix that comprises Canadian literature, Canadian society, and diaspora.

**What’s In a Title?**

For me, the title of this dissertation, abbreviated throughout as *Soundin’ Canaan*, signifies the active nature of the vernacular adjective (*Soundin’*) upon the noun (*Canaan*) in order to emphasize the lively, noisy, cacophonous, and sound-filled nature of place, and the hopes we often attribute to heterotopic (Foucault)—that is, imagined—spaces. Canada signified as Canaan represents faith and contradiction for the poets explored in this thesis, embodying the hopes of thousands of slaves, African Americans, African Canadians, among many others who believe in the pursuit of justice, who envisioned Canada—amidst the hell of slavery—as heaven. Canaan (Hebrew, *k’na’an*), as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it, is “The ancient proper name of Western Palestine, promised to the Children of Israel; hence *fig.* (esp. in hymns and devotional use) land of promise, land of heavenly rest across the Jordan of death, heaven.” While Palestine was a border unattainable to the escaped slave, Canada was not.

And how appropriate that Canada is nearly a visual cognate to Canaan, holding homophonic echolocations with rapper/poet K’naan, who is the focus of Chapter Six. In addition, cannon sounds close to Canaan, which works well since the ideas of this dissertation are something to be fired forth, while forming (as the word canon means “to form,” or “flow in”) a literary canon from a group of contemporary African Canadian poets. I think there is value in forming “new” canons, but I am aware of the pitfalls of canon formation, heeding Cornel West’s admonishing of canon creation, since it “reveals the worst of academic pluralist ideology” (“Pitfalls” 197). I also take note from
feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak who argues that “canons are the condition of institutions” (Outside 304) and so we “must make room for the coordinated teaching of new entries into the canon” (305). While I agree with West and Spivak that canon formation is quite limiting and potentially destructive, specifically canons that ignore innovative writers who fall outside of popular literary lineages and genealogies, I also concur with African American feminist Deborah E. McDowell that canons in literary studies can function usefully as a “unit of disciplinary organization and understanding” (22). Therefore, canons are tools of socialization that are inherently exclusionary and essentialist, but by reworking old canons and introducing new ones, while acknowledging that canon formation is a discursive act, canons can be cacophonous units of understanding (and play) that disturb the idea that there is one theoretical approach applicable to all aspects of society. True, canon fits the literature norm, but it is a mistake, as Eagleton insists, “to believe that norms are always restrictive” (After Theory 15). There is no one canon: canons are invented units of understanding of a given body of literature. From the archive (in this case, African Canadian literature) we can form a separate African Canadian canon if we choose, although I would prefer to see more African Canadian texts enter the larger Canadian canon—an imaginative bonding of texts—since that very passage into mainstream education is an affirmation that acknowledges the multicultural nature of Canada’s own literary formation.

Lastly, canon means, although much more rare in usage, a piece of music in which an extended melody in one part is imitated successively in one or more other parts, such as the phrases of a bird singing being canoned in similar or new phrases, or like the Abdullah Ibrahim piece, “Moniebah,” which is gradually and ineluctably drawn into the pull of the previous melody from “The Pilgrim” (Good News). In Soundin’ Canaan I present a contemporary canon (one among many) of Canadian poets who explicitly make use of music in their poetry—canoning the performances of various musical styles—to tell us something about the ways in which African Canadian identities are formed in Canada, often in relation and resistance to Canada’s big brother (the USA) while also providing salient musico-poetic examples of how to approach modern citizenship, and theories around multiculturalism. Soundin’ Canaan is largely about the possibility of fashioning icons of opposition through the expressive possibilities of language, poetry, and music, underscoring the transmutability of raw materials into abstract or concrete soundings.
II. METHODOLOGIES, PEDAGOGIES, AND “NEW” EPistemologies

“The role of the critic is to become the poet. (S)he must find a plant and water it and care for it without crushing one blade of grass or one weed along the way.”
—William Parker, who owns music? 83

Writing B(l)ack to the Centre: Objectives and Overview

The United Nations continue to designate Toronto as “the world’s most ethnically diverse city,” surpassing even New York City. Such diversity, diasporic mélange, and interculturalism are at the crux of what it means to perform and sound one’s citizenship alongside others, which is especially relevant to the poetic contours of my dissertation given that four of my six core chapters focus on poets principally based in Toronto. Further, the reality of this diverse literary and cultural landscape helps to unwork the notion of Canada as a white man’s country, a prevalent attitude upheld well into the 1990s (and in many circles still today) as Bhausaheb Ubale, drawing on his experience as Human Rights Commissioner, as well as Ontario’s first Race Relations Commissioner, observed in 1992: “mainstream white English Canadians define themselves as Canadian and all others as immigrants or non-Canadians” (qtd. in Huggan 126). More than 20 years after Ubale’s observation, matters of community, nationality, belonging, and citizenship continue to converge and to be grappled with in how the self is defined within a multicultural era and culturally diverse metropolis like Toronto. It is no wonder Toronto generates and inspires poet/citizens who meaningfully negotiate citizenship, community, culture, and notions of the self within textually performed and multiplicitous spaces which congregate—spaces and poets—at the centre of the global (or glocal) world (with Dionne Brand having served as Toronto’s poet laureate from 2009-2012, and with George Elliott Clarke currently holding that honour). Toronto is scarcely the margin or periphery.

In fact, poetry—hardly a “dead” literary medium regulated to the past—articulates diverse textual soundings of engaged citizenship, poetizing a negotiation of the self in relation to others. An apt comparison of this cooperative sounding can be found in jazz groups; African American poet, novelist, and scholar Nathaniel Mackey describes how jazz groups, particularly in the 1960s, provided a view into the future of a “freedom within a collectively improvised context,” which “proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands” (34). Mackey describes the force of Black music, most focally in free jazz, as an artistic desire for both individual and collective freedom: it is a freedom not signified by homogeneity, but rather by disruption, disparate sounds, fragmentation, sonic adventurism, and ultimately an imperative sounding for freedom and equality, particularly as voiced from “minority” perspectives.
So while black writers, performers, and poets have often been read as marginalized, as operating on the peripheries of Canadian literature and history, or as a deplorable prefix in the genre of “victim literature,” a more useful approach would to be to read and sound the poets herein as writing back to the centre, and from the centre of cultural multiplicity and discrepantly engaged (the phrase is Mackey’s) citizenship. As Dionne Brand has argued, “I don’t consider myself on any ‘margin,’ on the margin of Canadian literature. I’m sitting right in the middle of Black literature, because that’s who I read, that’s who I respond to” (qtd. in Chancy 117). Of course, you can still be in the middle of Black literature and be marginalized by those who define the centre—e.g. the public or university—but Brand’s statement suggests multiple centres. Brand’s riffing upon the perceived margin as the centre testifies that literature as community is about textual engagement between writers and texts and the communities in which they are situated and performing. When the various poets and larger historical imperatives are read together, we can envision a diverse map that charts—even through select texts published in the last fifteen years—an ever-widening gyre of intellectual influence, conversation, exchange, riffing, debate, and reciprocity, bolstering Kenneth Burke’s useful declaration that a critic’s “methodology should be formed, at every turn, by reference to the ‘collective revelation’ of accumulated critical lore” (68). Drawing from the “collective revelation,” I enact a pedagogy that is formulated vis-à-vis a critical lore that is open to constant variation, paying homage to those texts and (mostly black) writers and critics who have come before me.

My dissertation is an exercise in Blackness, and engages with my own positioning in relation to Black culture, which is hardly closed. As a scholar who is somatically white, I examine how the modern subject and citizen, in a space like Toronto, can freely improvise the self through self-determination: an ethical disavowal of the notion that skin colour defines the person. In fact, this approach aligns closely with what writer and critic Nigel Thomas argues is the central ethos of Black Canadian writers: identity (xi). My working explicitly with Blackness as an academic praxis, literary framework, and identity model—defined extemporaneously, improvisationally, and within communal networks—has the intention to work against imperialist approaches to teaching and writing about Black literature. My self-identification with Blackness is hardly an attempt to sideswipe the lived realities of somatic experience for African Canadian people in Canada—racism and xenophobia are carefully examined in the thesis—but is instead an ethical imperative to show that Blackness as a modus operandi unworks many of the hegemonic forces of symbolic whiteness. Powerfully, the diversity of the poetic soundings I explore heralds the inevitable death of whiteness, displacing it as a misguided fantasy, as we now live in a multicultural reality—a specific form of creolization. In this way, my dissertation is as an exercise in Blackness; it views Blackness as an
ethical order, using “Diaspora sensibilities” (Rinaldo Walcott’s term) in an attempt to render static whiteness as unstable and ultimately untenable in the modern multicultural world. I am under the perception that we cannot truly exist as individuals unless we reconcile ourselves with others to create a “we” which enacts a multiculturalism formed cross-culturally and within a multiplicity of shared and intersecting cultural spaces.

As gender theorist Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you” (49). At its best, multiculturalism is this precarious act of yielding to others’ potentialities in order to allow for the maximum agency of every individual, improvising upon new amalgamated spaces—riffing on them, if you will—with our own unique jazz soloings. The visual epigraph which opens Michael Ondaatje’s jazz novel *Coming Through Slaughter* depicts three sonographs of sounds from dolphins: one image shows a dolphin making two kinds of signals simultaneously, and reminds us that there are no simple hermeneutic answers to polyphonic performance: “*No one knows how a dolphin makes both whistles and echolocation clicks simultaneously*” (6). A reminder that deep listening—for Ondaatje the dolphin’s performance symbolizes the performance of the jazz artist, specifically Buddy Bolden—is about responding to the multiplicity of echolocations (what dub poets might similarly refer to as “duppy”) we encounter daily in our lives: a paramount sounding for fraternity. Fraternity, collective understanding, and endeavor are tantamount in the construction of a shared society, but the literature of this project reminds us that the construction of a literary or cultural community is full of ruptures, and a cacophony of diverse opinions. We can and should differ with others in our field, for this is a sign that a community is healthy: the challenge is to stay discrepantly and respectfully engaged.

**Discrepant Engagements: Scholarly and Theoretical Contexts**

“We must be clear: trying to write total stories of any cultural group is an impossibility and in the case of black Canadian cultures this impossibility presents itself from the first instance.”

—Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?* 13

There are manifold tensions among writers in relation to Blackness in Canada, as well as numerous debates around language, gender, class, and race. Bordered realities of place and identification exist and become more malleable under an open approach. Even though American, Caribbean, and Canadian literatures have many distinctive differences, at least in how they are historicized, pedagogized, and often approached, the cross-culturality of a disruptive practice in writing (as explored by Nathaniel Mackey in his work *Discrepant Engagement*) is an attempt to
recognize how many writers across the African diaspora valorize dissonance, divergence, and formal
disruption, often through the lens of music. While hardly all African Canadian texts employ musical
techniques in direct praxis, a prevalent body of African Canadian literature concerns notions of
mobility and disruption in their resistance to various normative forces. Resistance—to aesthetic
forms as well as to hegemonic powers—fits within the model of multicultural praxis as a form of
liberal citizenship, as well as a form of democracy that values and acknowledges discordance. While
jazz, reggae, and hip-hop music, among many other forms, certainly employ discordant forms that
subvert older forms of reified practice, there is a very literal level of theoretical discordance among
the various writers with whom my dissertation engages, from semantics and politics around self-
identification, concepts of citizenship and multiculturalism, to notions of how to approach literary
and social history. Black writers and practitioners of African Canadian literature in Canada—like all
writers and scholars—hardly write or perform in a conclusive homogenous fashion, even though (as
most critical work must take some position of strategic essentialism) my thesis employs music (and
musico-poetics) as a unifying element.

Some of the tensions between the African Canadian writers I explore are put forth through
my own personal interviews with various writers who intersect directly with the project and concern
an ethos rooted in identity. For example, forms of naming based on ethnicity directly attest to the
complexity of constitutive Blackness, participating in age-old quarrels over labels, markedly complex
here because of the way “ethnic” literary products are commodified. Such dynamic debates around
labeling and identity are hardly new, as evidenced, for example, during the Harlem Renaissance
(often referred to as “The New Negro Movement”) with the castigation (some 90 years ago) that
Langston Hughes gave Countee Cullen for his rejection of the label, “Negro poet.” Similarly, many
“African Canadian” writers, for instance, such as Ayanna Black, Lawrence Hill, and Rinaldo
Walcott express discomfort with the label African Canadian. Afrosporic writers living in Canada, but
not born here, often disavow the “Canadian” label. Dionne Brand rejects both the Canadian and
Trinidadian poet labels, and embraces the role of the stateless, saying, “places and those who inhabit
them are […] fictions” (Listening for Something). In addition, when I was writing a biography of
NourbeSe Philip for an online interview, she told me “I am a Caribbean writer/poet or
AfroCaribbean, or Afrosporic Caribbean writer. Not ever Canadian!” (“Message to the Author”).
Perhaps, ironically, being Canadian, as I will argue, allows one to self-identify as they choose and to
change those identities as one sees fit. To illustrate the issue for those who still want Canadian as an
identifier, Walcott prefers to use the terms “blackness” and “black Canadian” over “African-
Canadian,” which he sees as a borrowing from the use of “African-American,” which has
connotations, he argues, “related to distancing oneself from the black urban poor and working class” (*Black* 27). By contrast, and in direct debate with Walcott, George Elliott Clarke prefers “African-Canadian” 14 (African-Canadianité), which for him constitutes an archipelago of Blackness based upon a Caribbean model of Antillanité: a model which unites the Caribbean islands through a shared history while recognizing their unique diversities, which is akin to a kind of multiculturalism.

The feverous literary rap-battle between George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott in the 2000s around classification, naming, identity, and history charts the many diverse approaches one can take when mining either the distant past or contemporary present of African Canadian literature. Clarke argues, in “Treason of the Black Intellectuals?,” that Black Canadian scholars are guilty of intellectual treason: Dionne Brand, for her exclusive “up-front nationalism” (*Odyssey* 196), where “‘we’ enacts a warm gesture of inclusion for immigrant blacks, but excludes simultaneously the history of indigenous African Canadians” (196); Cecil Foster, for his peddling upon “the hoary stereotype of emotional spontaneity to authenticate his interviewee as black” (197); with Rinaldo Walcott taking the principal brunt of Clarke’s charge of treason, who “by stooping to an unexamined, facile black nationalism and Pan-Africanism, to support his reading of certain African-Canadian writers into or out of an African (or black) aesthetic, which is, treacherously (perhaps just lazily), never defined, Walcott is a capital candidate for the charge of treason” (188). Clarke’s primary concern is that the aforementioned writers commit treason because of their lack of adherence to the history and the achievements of early African Canadian settlers of Canada (particularly the “Africadians” of Nova Scotia), as well as for their reliance on diasporic models that move too far beyond the nation, or for excessive sentimentality (as he charges Foster with). Clarke claims that the imperative allegiance is to the Canadian state, which many immigrants to Canada chose to ignore, while by contrast Walcott et al. contend that Canada is part of a larger nexus where statehood is secondary to diasporic identifications. While I don’t think Clarke goes so far as to claim that recent waves of immigrants have a purely spurious loyalty to Canadian citizenship, I think his point about the treasonous intentions of writers who ignore Canada’s African Canadian history draws out some of the central debates around the modernist and postmodernist approaches I myself negotiate in this thesis. Clarke’s treasonists, particularly Walcott, cut to the issue as a matter of historical construction and essentialism (Clarke) versus models that move outside the nation, and standard historicizing.

Walcott responds to Clarke in the revised edition of *Black Like Who?* with the accusation that Clarke’s *Odysseys Home*, while offering some “insight into aspects of black Canadian culture […] offers little by way of theoretical and conceptual frames for making sense of blackness in Canada” (13). Walcott calls Clarke a remarkably adept chronicler, but ultimately views him as belonging to
the nation: “Clarke’s mapping supposes an authentic older and rural black Canada set against an inauthentic newer and urban black Canada, as if the two have not always and cannot live side by side […] Clarke lacks a diasporic sensibility: his love is not so much for black people as it is for the nation” (22). Both Clarke and Walcott are intentionally rude in their castigation of Blackness as absolute or irresolute, but they also importantly bestow new tools for how to conceptualize African Canada. In his 2012 Directions Home, Clarke does (ironically?) “apologize for [his] inadvertent rudeness” while reaffirming his belief that “I do not grant that literary scholars can read African-Canadian (or Black Canadian) literature adequately unless they are also able to accept the historical (or ‘indigenous’) African-Canadian population and its cultural production as a constitutive element” (4). I largely agree with Clarke, and I’m sure that Clarke is also aware that much work needs to be done on writers whose work focuses on immigration, refugees, and writers deeply entwined in the present moment. The fact is that we can never fully escape the ripples of the past, as we continue to work through its various corporal manifestations in the present to conceive the future.

Clarke’s concerns for the importance of historical accuracy are compelling, but must every project be so rooted in a specific history? There are two stories at play vying for authenticity. Clarke’s approach is rooted in the historical specificity of early African Canadian people and a loyalty to the Black Canadian nation, while Walcott’s thinking is of the postmodern diasporic present. Both stories concern the past, since both really are stories about how they identify within or outside the confines of the Canadian state. As First Nations writer Thomas King explains: “Most of us think that history is the past. It’s not. It’s the stories we tell about the past. That’s all it is” (Inconvenient 2-3). King’s methodology echoes Ezra Pound, since what we know, as Pound writes, “we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time” (xi). I find myself theoretically in the middle, moving the crossfader back and forth, but I do agree with Clarke that some level of regionalism and history (and its discourses) needs to be taken into consideration. I actually find that the unity and disunity in Clarke and Walcott’s debate, and their reverberations with other critics/writers who were drawn into the circle, have fostered a productively unstable, discordant historical model that acknowledges that no history is ever complete. The Walcott and Clarke debate is only one strand of disputes around historical approaches towards defining many diverse populations of African Canadian people—from the recent urban poor to historical populations of African Canadians—who are often webbed together in the intersections of historical knowledge.

This relationship to place and home is especially varied since many of the writers I explore (Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Philip, K’naan) could be read as self-exiled poets. By way of disruptive poetics, and through musical undertones that move freely across borders, the politics of the
exiled individual directly rehearses utopian hopes for a “coming community” (Agamben, *Community*). The ambiguity of identity is the reality of the exiled, or globally-defined, jazz poet and citizen; further, and even more complex, is the refugee, who takes the issue of belonging—or not belonging, which can be positive at times—into complex boundaries that challenge any simple understanding of identity or community within a globalized framework. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues, refugees “[break] the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis” (*Homo Sacer* 131). It is precisely this crisis, amongst others, that this thesis will explore in its search for an understanding of what performed citizenship might sound like when thrown into “the mix” of the larger contours *Soundin’ Canaan* critically—and sonically—animates.

**Creating a “Mix”: Schizophonophilic Methodologies**

“I use the notion of the ‘indexical present’ to describe the way in which I attempt to draw the viewer into a direct relationship with the work, to draw the viewer into a kind of self critical standpoint which encourages reflection on one’s own responses to the work.”

—Adrian Piper qtd. in Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* 85

There is no simple way to divorce oneself from one’s choice of study. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall articulates, “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in ‘context,’ *positioned*” (“Cultural Identity" 222). I’ve believed for some time now that what we say as literary critics should contribute to an ongoing conversation that is part of the wide-spectrum of literary understanding or, at best, that it should take part in creating “new” conversations that help us understand the value that literature can play in changing the world. Hence, I concur with scholar Myriam Chancy who argues, as “a literary critic, I do not believe in divorcing literature from its wider social context: texts by minority writers in general must be explored within their own historical, cultural, social, and philosophical structures” (*Safe Spaces* xx). I consider myself a *cosmopolitan humanist* who is deeply interested in understanding how literature creates new epistemologies that change intellectual and public opinion, which through an often-discordant process can help to democratize society. My thesis for my Master of Arts degree, “Voice in Text”—which investigated the process of translation that occurs when transmitting oral stories into a written framework with the intention to bridge the gaps that exist between oral traditions and technological scholarship—was my first encounter with the process of reinscribing Indigenous narrative against the hegemony of traditional academic practice, a process many academics refer to as postcolonialism. I have remained interested in literatures that do just
that: literatures that deconstruct pervasive colonial narratives, enact resistance, challenge my own listening approaches, provide “new” epistemologies, and ultimately offer methodologies for retooling the academy, and potentially, society at large. The polyphony of epigraphs/quotations which introduce each section of this project provide voices from a variety of literary spheres and margins that, for me, engage with the works in dialogic ways, often illuminating the interconnectedness of diverse opinions, while highlighting their inherent ruptures. These quotations—out of context, as such is the definition of a quotation—are also reminders that certain voices stay with us, refusing to be silenced. This process also reflects my practice as a DJ, sound poet, and general music enthusiast, for music is the central metaphor of *Soundin’ Canaan*.

For me, sample-based DJ practices offer a malleable, and often improvisatory, pathway into blurring the lines between scholarly practice and everyday engaged citizenship. By looking at citizenship through the lens of music as an often dissonant site (or text) of struggle and identity formation, *Soundin’ Canaan* demonstrates how music in African Canadian poetry is not solely aesthetic, but a form of social, ethical, and political expression. My methodology itself is closest to the practice of DJing, which provides a malleable guide to my murky topology: DJs mix multiple records by using various constituent elements of rhythm, timbre, texture, and overall sonic experience. In essence, what happens when a mixer and cross-fader are placed between several diverse cultural realities? Music, DJ methodology, and the large repertoire it provides help to facilitate my theoretical linkage between diverse musical practices, oral poetics, and notions of global citizenship, all of which are incorporated, negotiated, and sonically mixed in the texts and recordings I explore. In several ways, my work operates under what poet Wayde Compton describes as “schizophonophilia,” which is, the “love of audio interplay, the pleasure of critical disruptions to natural audition, the counter-hegemonic affirmation that can be achieved through acoustic intervention” (*After Canaan* 199). I like the notion of acoustic intervention, of disrupting the pretense of naturalism, as a reminder that democracy (as embodied in sound) is itself most effective when it is its most discordantly free. Sampling becomes a new way of doing something that has been with us for a long time, creating meaning with found objects. As DJ Spooky describes, “The mix breaks free from the old associations. New contexts form from old. The script gets flipped. The languages evolve and learn to speak in new forms, new thoughts. The sound of thought becomes legible again at the edge of the new meanings” (25). Rather than an archive, the material I constantly draw from becomes a “living repertoire” (a concept I’ve adapted from theorist Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*), and a source of “embodied memory” where various multimodal texts are collaged together to create a sonic mix that draws the reader/listener and myself into direct relation with the
Music—whether in performance or in listening—is an activity about enjoyment as much as it is about making sense of the world. Music is not a “fixed” product. I agree with Christopher Small’s assertion that “[t]here is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (Musicking 2). By replacing the noun “music” with the verb “musicking,” Small highlights that each musical work is not an autonomous creation of one-way communication between creator and audience, but rather a social undertaking where musical works ultimately exist in order to give performers something to perform. Under this rubric, I prefer, like Paul D. Miller contends, to view DJ Culture as “actionary” rather than “re-actionary”—we end up with a more “indexical[ly] present” and healthy culture (Rythmn 13).

While I am liberally using labels like jazz, DJ culture, and multiculturalism as apt theoretical lenses for the dialogic nature of my project, I must also account for postmodernism(s), particularly “Afro-postmodernism,” which, as scholar and musician Jesse Stewart suggests, involves a “kind of fragmentation, plurality, and intertextuality normally associated with postmodernism, but locates these processes within the cultural matrix of the African diaspora wherein they often function in unique ways” (240). Afro-postmodern forms of pastiche, intertextuality, and irony function as strategies of identity formation, reconstructing the past while imagining a better future. I use these applications in my own musico-poetic performance and praxis and find meaning in using them in my theoretical writing as well, for they allow me to speak explicitly in performance with and about texts that also use such techniques. Notwithstanding the complicated debates around “race politics,” I believe, as Nathaniel Mackey argues in Discrepant Engagement, that the “assumption that black critics are to write only about black writers and that black writers are to be discussed only in relation to other black writers” is problematic, and agree that “creative kinship and the lines of affinity it effects are much more complex, jagged, and indissociable than the totalizing pretensions of canon formation” (3). African Canadian “literature is heteroglossic, a callaloo of languages” (Clarke, Eyeing xv), and rather than a methodology that reinscribes imperialist notions of canonicity and specific guidelines for literary merit, I opt for an applied praxis that simultaneously models a reading practice that fuses the literary (including aesthetic qualities) within the literature’s wider social context—a model where textual material does not exist to be discovered, so much as it does to be sensitively engaged with.

It is certainly tempting to read African Canadian poetry as a simulacrum/reflection of music or performance, for as Harold Head argues in the first Anthology of black writers in Canada, Canada in Us Now, “It is the rhythm of our music that is the formal basis of our poetry. Music, and especially rhythm, syncopates our entire existence in the here and now as it has throughout our history” (9). Of
course, one must be careful to avoid drab clichés of the black writer as solely musician, as it is more productive to examine how poets are able to turn phonemes into poetic phrases that sound music on the page, while also articulating diverse identities and polysemous notions of citizenship. For example, Mackey argues in *Discrepant Engagement* that “[t]he rush to canonize orality as a radical departure from the values of an ‘eye-oriented’ civilization runs the risk of obscuring the attention paid by recent poets to the way the poem appears on the page” (122). I agree, and would further argue that a poem can simultaneously be read in page-bound and sounded/performed format; in fact, many of the poets I explore intend for their work to operate in both media. Few Canadian critics—beyond the poets themselves—have written at length about how music functions in African Canadian literature. We find no shortage of this approach in African American literature, but in Canadian scholarship we encounter reluctance to such approaches, with novelist Austin Clarke (the first black Canadian novelist to have his work published by a mainstream publisher) stating, “I don’t know of a single reviewer who has seen the significance of music in my work […] if reviewers missed something as fundamental as the role of music in the structure of my work, how many other points did they miss?” (qtd. in Thomas 16). For writers like Austin Clarke, narrative—or poetic content—is often related directly to blues, jazz-variation, signification, call and response, etc., rather than straightforward notions of plot. This is not to say that all African Canadian writers in Canada want to be read this way, as such a generic approach would be myopic. Rather, I argue that the African American/Canadian/diasporic poetic traditions have deep roots in the Black musical tradition: historical roots that function as modes/models to sustain life and connect the individual to larger communities, often across geographical borders.

Recounting the emotive and philosophical power of slave songs, Frederick Douglass attests, “I have sometimes thought the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (57). Douglass declares that the slave song is the final province of resistance to slavery. Ralph Ellison provides a similar grain of understanding to the power of Black music in his description of the blues: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing it from a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 8), which is echoed by improvising artist and bassist, William Parker: “Black improvised music has had to fight for its life since the first slaves were brought here in 1619” (58). And, then again by M. NourbeSe Philip in her potent improvised dub text, *Zong!*: “*Zong! is Song!* And Song is what has kept the soul of the African intact when they ‘want(ed) water… sustenance
…preservation’” (207). Music functions within these “black-authored” texts as a reminder that song is often a plea to listen, if not merely on an intellectual level, at least on a human level. Music is a way for slaves, immigrants, refugees, settlers, and indigenous people alike to find the common humanity—and I risk essentialism here—that binds us together to identify with a community based on the intrinsic value of union with others. Music is both a making sense and an aesthetic device that takes us into the world together, or allows us to escape from the oppressiveness of a historical undercurrent that often tells a certain group of people they have less value, to which those people respond with the strategy of song. Although the history of Black music in North America is deeply embedded in a Black radical tradition which responds to the abject violence of slavery through unscripted performances, shouts, moans, and cries, the history also concerns traditions of celebration, unity, play, and constant revision—where riffing, signifyin(g), and revising function as respectful modes of response by critics and musicians alike. While these texts do have plenty to teach many Canadians about racism, among other social issues in Canada and the diaspora, I also find music provides a valuable aesthetic tool with which to observe the aesthetic qualities—not solely the social implications—of the texts. We are reminded that black dialect and writing is not perennially folksy—perhaps folk culture never was or is—but is always created, as the texts make use of many complex techniques found most commonly in African American and diasporic musics: signifyin(g), heterophony, bent notes, elisions, hums, moans, grunts, vocables, epistrophe, echo (duddy), oral declamations, melisma, among other techniques. Because the music itself might be unfamiliar to a number of CanLit scholars and readers, I dedicate a great deal of space to discussing Black musical traditions, making judicious links between certain genres/styles and a given poet’s work. I find great importance in this approach since all the writers I explore, at some point or another, talk very explicitly about how music is central to their poetic craft; further, many would welcome readings that move away from racial or gender codified analyses that view African Canadian writing solely as a kind of sociological service camp. That is, while I focus on both rhetorical and aesthetic analysis throughout this thesis, I do not find value in discussing African Canadian literature solely under its rhetorical functionality—how it teaches us to live—nor only under its aesthetic prowess. In fact, I hope I am able to do justice to how the literature sounds and creates meaning around what it means to negotiate identity in relation to larger Canadian and diasporic communities.

As listening critics (academics who translate stories into theory), we are challenged to be witnesses to any polyvocal poetic text, echoing Houston A. Baker’s assertion of hip-hop critics to “be at least as exacting of their knowledge of rap as the rappers they pretend to discuss, defend, categorize, or witness” (Rap 81). Essentially, under Baker’s assessment, and as this thesis claims, the
act of reading becomes the act of listening: good listening creates good critics. Baker’s analysis of the blues as a matrix is a good model for intersecting web-like theories, which he describes as a “point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit” (*Blues Ideology* 3). However, as a critic myself, I need to be careful to avoid privileging phonocentric approaches (developed and critiqued by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*) where phonocentrism becomes a transcendent and privileged signifier that produces unreadable abstractions. Because much of the work the project is doing involves embodied praxis with material consequences—mashing, mixing, sampling, spinning, signifying—the dissertation carefully considers the politicized and embodied reality of lived practice. I focus on praxis when possible, particularly the poet’s own practices, while providing a carefully nuanced theoretical language; once again, like a good DJ mix, there needs to be balance, transition, and occasionally disruption (I have an affinity for what I hope are productive tangents and juxtaspositions) to achieve a fruitful blending of constituent elements. Listening is performed just as is citizenship in the project. Citizenship is about performance: like listening, it is made in the alacrity of the moment.

While I spend a great deal of energy using music as both the aesthetic and rhetorical launch pad to discuss the larger themes of this thesis—primarily citizenship, race, belonging, identity, and resistance—it is worth pausing to ask why I provide so much textual space to discussing music, often before discussing the primary texts themselves? Strategically, mostly because I have always felt, like the West African griots and ancient Greek rhapsodizers before me, that music and poetry are often part and parcel. For Jamaican Canadian poet, feminist, and arts advocate Ayanna Black, there was a persistent desire to fuse poetry and music, which was reflected in her desire to write poems in an avant-garde jazz tradition, telling Thomas in an interview that there is, for her, a strong link “between poetry and avant-garde jazz—the composers such as John and Alice Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Sun Ra and John Cage. It’s the world presented in sound and images” (3). Further, the traditional connection between poetry and music finds solidarity in dub poet Afua Cooper who sees poetry as an aural-oral literary form that can include music, as she says in an interview: “I think of ancient poets like Celtic Bards who sang their poetry accompanied by musicians; or the West African poets: the griots, who are accompanied by musicians—ballaphon players, cora players, and sometimes drummers […] It’s poetry that relies on music, whose very soul is music” (qtd. in Thomas 76). I have also always understood that poetry is musical, and that music is poetical. The Greek root of poet, *poiein*, means “to make, create, produce” (OED), which is essentially what musicians do with the raw materials they have at hand. Musicians and poets create using what tools they have available to them. Although it might seem that interdisciplinary studies
are a current move away from the poetic (as many lament the demise of the poetic in literary studies), interdisciplinarity by its very definition requires an analysis or methodology that aligns it with poetic praxis. This is because the interdisciplinary requires an inherent understanding of the canonical as well as the modes of interrogating it. Interdisciplinary approaches require the double mastery that Stathis Gourgouris explicates as a gesturing towards poesies. He says that, “As transformation, [interdisciplinary] work is quintessentially poetic. It is a gesture of poiein, by which I mean not merely the art of making but the art of forming (thereby, in the domain of history, transforming)” (225). Poetry is an interdisciplinary practice in the pursuit of new forms that are often beautiful, as well as a searching for alternative possibilities.

Alternative possibilities are enacted through music, improvisation, and self-identification, enacting a tripartite methodology that infuses meaning into my earlier, and the subsequent, discussion of the open-ended nature of Blackness. As Rinaldo Walcott argues, Blackness, like improvisation, is an open-ended approach that exceeds somatic identification, biology, or ethnicity: “Blackness for me, like black Canadian, allows for a certain kind of malleability and open-endedness which means that questions of blackness far exceed the categories of the biological or ethnic” (22). Always in progress, Blackness, to restate a central approach to the thesis, is a way of becoming. Blackness as a non-axiomatic libratory process works against the dominating narratives of collective belonging, unworking the community of the pure nation as “Diaspora sensibilities” provide methods that disavow simply locating oneself within national boundaries (Walcott, Black 22). Not to belabour the point, but I believe intercultural and intermedial pedagogies, notably through my reference to and as a DJ/sound artist, help to shape how we can form new knowledges, as well as approaches to literature. The rupturing effect of using creative performance and music in settings that typically nullify such approaches to page-bound poetry compels us to think about how creative disruption can function as a model for critical practice. Definitions and ideas are to be worked, sounded, and reworked. More important than a single term are the musical intersections where ideas coalesce.

Post/modern Praxis

I am a postmodernist/poststructuralist who happens to be influenced by modernist and even classical thinking. Conceivably, I am what some theorists are now calling post-postmodernist or a metamodernist, referring to a movement that both departs from and is informed by modernism and postmodernism (Vermeulen, “Notes”). Even Canada’s preeminent postmodern critic, Linda Hutcheon, concludes the epilogue to the second edition of The Politics of
Postmodernism by announcing: ‘‘Let’s just say it: it’s over’’ (165-6), which is echoed by Robert David Stacey who gathers Canada’s postmodern critics together and concludes that “the majority opinion among this volume’s contributors is that the Canadian postmodern, whatever it was, may well be over” (xvi). Hutcheon goes on to say that while the postmodern moment has passed, “its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world” (181). I don’t think that postmodern, post-postmodern, or metamodernism quite hold my ideological positioning, but my own thinking has been informed by postmodern thinkers, ranging from Foucault, Umberto Eco, Lyotard, and Hutcheon, to writers such as Kamau Brathwaite and Wayde Compton who challenge a straightforward division between modernism and postmodernism. Entire theses and books have been written on postmodernism, and so my engagement here is exceedingly brief, and while I direct readers to texts for further potential reading, my intention is to outline a rough lineage informing my schizophrenia philic praxis.

It is a truism that postmodernism is indefinable; however, it does operates under a described set of rhetorical strategies that include concepts such as repetition, difference, and simulacrum to destabilize other concepts such as presence, historical progress, and epistemic certainty (Aylesworth). The term “postmodernism” entered the theoretical lexicon with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 publication The Postmodern Condition, a hybrid text of philosophy and historical research. Such mixing, between philosophy and other disciplines, defines postmodernism in the broad sense, and it is how I largely proceed in my sonic-cultural mix throughout this thesis. Much of my thinking is informed by postmodern literature—in many ways different from postmodernism as a movement—and its techniques of fragmentation, paradox, and questionable narrators. For me, such approaches make for challenging and pleasurable reads, but there are various writers in this thesis (such as George Elliott Clarke and Dionne Brand) whose formalism, as I will discuss, appears speciously modernist. Found in nearly all the poetic works of Soundin’ Canaan is what Lyotard describes as the postmodern “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (xxiv). Further, while many African Canadian writers are interested in the hybrid they still want to maintain a connection to old epistemic traditions. Under how I view postmodernism this is possible since postmodern thinking, as I understand it, leaves plenty of room for reader-response and deconstructionist approaches that allow us to repeat and rework tradition, which is why many poets in Soundin’ Canaan, particularly M. NourbeSe Philip and Wayde Compton, apply innovative postmodern techniques like pastiche while maintaining cultural epistemes. In fact, several epistemes may co-exist at once in the way that numerous keys can sound together in a free jazz performance.
Postmodernism has been critiqued by a number of critics, including Terry Eagleton who equates postmodern theory with “textualism” and Jürgen Habermas who argues that postmodernism contradicts itself through self-reference and narrows the division between philosophy and literature. In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* Eagleton does credit postmodernism for the movement’s scholarly work on racism and ethnicity, as well as for the danger of totality, but the bulk of his text is focused on what he sees as postmodernism’s failure to acknowledge (as he sees it) the reality of grand narratives. Eagleton states, “For socialist thought there has indeed been a grand narrative […] What strikes a socialist most forcibly about history to date is that it has displayed an almost remarkable consistency—namely, the stubbornly persisting realities of wretchedness and exploitation” (51). Eagleton’s position is that any cultural theory that dissolves historical reality into discourse, semiosis, or metaphor risks “suppressing the tragedy of the past and so striking itself impotent in the present” (275). Eagleton has a point, which is why, even though my methodology applies postmodern techniques like pastiche, repetition with difference, and remix, in some ways my approach to history is still largely un-postmodern (by strict standards) in that I resist the idea of a history that would displace the lived experience of actual people—in this case, African Canadians. Thus, for me, postmodernism remains a way of operating in this dissertation and not a movement within a defined historical period. As Eagleton writes, *postmodernism* refers to contemporary culture, and *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period (vii); for me, postmodern literature is most applicable to my thinking since it is largely concerns, like poetry, how we engage in the process of creating meaning—a mode of thinking rather than an absolute.

While the critiques by Eagleton, Habermas, and other critics of postmodernism is for the most part bereft of literary analysis—they focus largely on postmodern theory or the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson)—for me, and others, postmodernism (and postmodern literature) remains a way of thinking that differs from a modernism that is “elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial” (Davey, *There to Here* 20). Democratically, postmodern writing is about play, revision, and irony, and as Umberto Eco writes, “We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period has its own mannerism (and, in fact, I wonder if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as metahistorical category)” (66). For Eco, postmodernism does not abandon the past, but in fact revisits it, usually with irony, and not innocently (67). We see this when Wayde Compton, in “Performance Bond,” references the song “As Time Goes By” from *Casablanca*, but substitutes the word “fundamental” with “multicultural”: “The multicultural things apply / as time goes by” (42). It is this ironic self-reflexivity that interests me, and, I assume, the majority of the writers in *Soundin’ Canaan*, since it shows that history (a teleological affair) and
History (an entity always unfolding) are entwined processes open to “metalinguistic play” and that “the modern and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely” (Eco 68). Such postmodern praxis helps break down the border between art and enjoyability.

I very much like Umberto Eco’s definition of postmodernism for it removes it from the grip of chronologists; he says: “Postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category—or better still, a kunstwollen, a way of operating” (66). Eco’s fruitful definition of postmodernism fits well within the matrices of Black music, which connects with what Alexander Weheliye terms “sonic Afro-modernity,” which “envelops both temporally and conceptually any putative original” (6). Essentially, as Weheliye argues: “no Western modernity without (sonic) blackness and no blackness in the absence of modernity” (45). Weheliye’s contention is that modernity involves cultural and sonic confluences between sound, sight, and text, and he operates with the intention to “establish a dialogue between literary texts and current popular culture to conjecture how sonic technologies and black cultural production have fruitfully contaminated each other” (8). While such innovative confluences of sound, sight, and text are commonly explored in African American literature (see Jean Toomer’s Cane [1923] for an early example of a variety of creative forms exploding generic boundaries without offering an easy resolution), I argue that such confluences have also been happening in African Canadian literature for quite some time. As such my approach might be more postmodern—its focus on dissonance and discontinuity—than the literature itself, which is arguably modern at times. That is, until we get into closer analysis, particularly in works like Philip’s Zong! and Compton’s Performance Bond, which clearly and intentionally play with the modern and postmodern, sounding equal parts cultural unity and continuity, rupture and mixed assemblages that speak to the postmodern condition of being between things. The poets this dissertation explores use Blackness as an improvisational model to move freely across generic prefixes and to redefine the parameters of the Canadian literary experience.

To provide another resonance with my way of thinking, postmodern Canadian poet and critic Frank Davey, building on the work of another Canadian poet and critic, Robert Kroetsch, thinks of postmodernism (pomo) as a mode, and “not a period, not an aesthetic, but an understanding of how meaning is constructed. How meaning is constructed is an ethical matter and is connected directly to how texts are constructed” (“Canadian Postmodernisms” 10). This mode of operating also includes attending to the geographical, cultural, and historical situatedness present in a given text, and how the aforementioned constellations bind us together—poets, readers, and imagined communities—in acts of shared belonging. My main adherence to postmodern thinking is that it strives for the multiple, rather than the monolithic. Further, while I disagree with Eagleton’s debasement of postmodernism,
his lack of engagement with current postmodern writers,\(^25\) and his call for a return to the grand narratives (although narratives of love, morality, metaphysics, and revolution come up throughout this thesis), in what sounds very postmodern to me, Eagleton acutely describes my approach to theory: “To be inside and outside a position at the same time—to occupy a territory while loitering skeptically on the boundary—is often where the most intensely creative items stem from. It is a resourceful place to be, if not always a painless one” (After Theory 40). The in-between—like a crossfader on a DJ’s mixer—defines the drift (movement) of my post-theory approach, as I synthesize rhetoric, aesthetics, modernism, and postmodernism, under the auspices of schizophrenic poetics.\(^26\)

III. POLYPHONIC MAPPING: CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Chapter One, following this introduction, helps to lay the thematic and methodological concerns which are explicated throughout this thesis, providing brief literature reviews: an overview and history of Canada (Canaan land) as a promised land and its frequent failure to fulfill this role, with a specific focus on the literary history of African Canadian people; an exploration of Blackness, whiteness, and racism in Canada; a detailed breakdown of how musical genre functions in the dissertation as a central aesthetic and rhetorical trope for freedom; a detailed analysis of how improvisation functions in the project; an examination of resistance; a look at what defines creative and polyphonic citizenship; as well as an overall call for new listening communities. Citizenship is sounded: it is more than a passport, just as multiculturalism is more than an act. Further, the first chapter of this dissertation postulates a theory that navigates the intersectionality of sound (and sound technology) in relation to African Canadian subjectivity. On one level, this sounding appeals to our basic intrinsic need to be heard and sounded, as well as to the indeterminacy of sound, always going out of existence, which speaks to the malleable framework I have in mind for how we can citizen with one another. The other possibility, and greater leap, is that this sounding from the various black poets I write of and represent in my analysis, shows us, through diverse poetic soundings, that being a full citizen in Canada, especially multicultural Canada, happens at a sonic level—a frequency that defies total appropriation—that moves beyond ocular and xenophobic categories of race, ability, sexuality, language, and ethnicity, even as those markers remain critically visible. To avoid the pitfall of depicting ethnicity as a normative identity where marginalized writers are labeled as multicultural, I prefer to examine how African Canadian poets sound multiple diverse identities. The thesis ventures to argue that membership, inside and outside of spaces, and the philosophies of exclusion
and inclusion (Agamben), are distinctively challenged by African Canadian poets and hip-hop artists who sound an often globalized, nonhegemonic citizenship.

The dissertation is concerned with how the authors dialogically remap poetic traditions, interrogate sub-imperialist notions of canonicity, and create multiple planes of ambivalent listening that sound the self through musico-poetic praxis. I accept that as a critic I am also in many ways a “metaphoric” cartographer. I find the notion of mapping particularly useful in thinking about how we as scholars draw up borders and then deconstruct them for the purpose of making sense of our fields of analysis. As dub poet and scholar Kwame Dawes writes in his poem, “Map Maker,” “The cartographer, I know understands the fiction / of this telling, the lines are myths, dream stories / in the face of his crew” (Midland 33). Maps, while useful, are fictions. As satirist Jonathan Swift writes: “So geographers, in Afric-maps, / With savage pictures fill their gaps; / And o’er unhabitable downs / Place elephants for want of towns” (“On Poetry” 646). As Aminata Diallo of the village of Bayo—who is later ignominiously renamed Meena because it’s easier to pronounce—in Lawrence Hill’s The Book of Negroes observes: “This ‘Map of Africa’ was not my homeland. It was a white man’s fantasy” (216). Thus, any mapping must acknowledge that there is no single cohesive map, only a polyphony of place-markers. And yet, despite the fiction of maps, literary maps can be valuable; that is, we often need such maps desperately. As Margaret Atwood suggests: “we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive” (Survival 19); even if that place is In Another Place, Not Here—the title of one of Brand’s novels. The first chapter of the dissertation, through the application of its core themes (music, resistance, citizenship, community, multiculturalism), creates a tentative map to help guide the reader through the literature explored, and African Canadian literature more generally. I proceed with the knowledge that even though I focus especially on texts created during the twenty-first century, these texts mine a history extending back hundreds of years and borders.

The second chapter begins by focusing on dub poetry in Toronto. Reggae, of which dub is the closest ancestor, provides a poetic form (originating in Jamaica and the Caribbean region) with a distinctively postcolonial and postmodern aesthetic that is not afraid to borrow from other forms or change and be changed. Given that music plays such a vital role to my project, it is imperative to examine dub poetry in Toronto, since it has one of the world’s highest concentration of dub poets (see Cooper, Utterances 9), while also looking at some of the larger thematics of dub poetry in Toronto through a series of textual bricolaging and interviews. Chapter Two helps establish parameters for what defines a dub poem, focusing predominantly upon M. NourbeSe Philip’s most
recent poetic text, *Zong!*. *Zong!* is an incredibly demanding work of Afro-postmodern poetry which, given the typographic complexity of the work, appears page-bound. The chapter provides a complex reading of *Zong!* as an improvised dub poem that changes with every reading, much in the way critical nuanced improvised performances typically do. While Philip might be more apt to see her poem in the jazz aesthetic,28 the multiple echoes (the dubs of the drowned African voices) in *Zong!* allow it to fit within multiple contact zones of sonic, oral, textual, and multimodal traditions. An interview I did with Philip provides a valuable layer and affirmation to my approach of *Zong!* as an improvised dub chant. *Zong!* defies simple hermeneutic interpretation—the poem is cut up and recontextualized to the point of near unreadability—as it deals with an actual legal case (Gregson - vs- Gilbert) in Britain where slavers threw 150 Africans overboard in order to save as much of their “cargo” as possible since supplies were running low. *Zong!* along with the other, perhaps more explicitly defined dub poems, provides a nexus of musical/poetic material from which *Soundin’ Canaan* builds upon in its more singular approach to examining a few works by a single poet in each of the following chapters. Further, *Zong!* provides the invaluable concept that a dub poem changes, like our identities do, with each sounding. We are challenged to improvise the poem with a lyrical, and often sorrowful, chant every time we pick it up.

Chapter Three focuses on George Elliott Clarke’s musical and political dedications in his trilogy of poetic colouring books: *Blue* (much *à la manière* of Miles Davis), *Black* (much *à la manière* of Malcolm X), and *Red* (much *à la manière* of Charles Mingus). While Clarke’s poetry often reads as particularly structured vernacular (what theorist Kevin McNeilly has usefully called “vernacular formalism”),29 in many ways so too does improvisation, in that it demonstrates that you have mastered a technique so well that you can create new amalgamated spaces of play upon the old standard. In creating a bricolage of styles, often stealing or parodying musical and poetic traditions, Clarke creates an interpretive space for his poetry to function as improvisation. Clarke is both the linchpin and occasional straw man to my dissertation. It’s not that Clarke is a more proficient poet than Brand, Philip, or Compton, or any other writer discussed, but in many ways Clarke is one of the first to write critically and in a substantive way about African Canadian literature, particularly within a Canadian nationalist framework and with a concern—one that might irk some critics—to anthologize and meticulously historicize his material. In many ways, Clarke’s theoretically nationalistic approach is antithetical to my own transnational approach, yet I find his poetry often works against his nationalistic frameworks, given his cosmopolitan passion for fusing a callaloo of forms to create complex sounding texts. A public interview I did with Clarke and Katherine McLeod adds additional polyphony to the chapter, responding to the call of Clarke’s own poetics.
In Chapter Four, I examine *Ossuaries*, Dionne Brand’s latest book of poetry, which invokes Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker—jazz musicians who employ disruptive techniques as well as repetition, epistrophe, blue notes, contrafacts, and improvisation in their compositions, highlighting the formal and deconstructive lexical approach that Brand takes to remap a historically marginalized, yet fluid community of resistance. Like the jazz artists *Ossuaries* invokes (Charlie “Bird” Parker being at the epicentre of the work), the text can be read as an extended jazz solo that draws improvisations from the margins of history to assert a poetics of dissent, difference, and disruption, which empowers a shifting community (in many ways a diasporic jazz community) that has been othered.

Chapter Five focuses on Wayde Compton’s turntable poetics (primarily *Performance Bond*) into which he explicitly incorporates hip-hop, quite self-critically describing his use of it to me in a personal correspondence as being “largely about the anxiety of the globalization of hip-hop.” I examine what I adapt from his terminology as the schizophrenophilic poetics of his text—also drawing upon an interview I did with Compton to add his voice into the mix—envisioning how Compton’s notion of acoustic intervention imagines a democracy (as embodied in sound) that is most effective when most discordantly free. Further, Compton provides a unique perspective of Vancouver’s current and historical black community, far outside of Toronto, where he describes that currently “there is no centre for the Black Community” (qtd. in Thomas 64). Working with/against traditions perceived as inauthentic and culturally ersatz, Compton’s work reminds us—often through embodied practice, dialectical relation, and layering of sound and thematic—that one’s identity in relation to a larger community is a project always to be remixed.

Chapter Six focuses on Toronto-based (and Somalia-born) hip-hop artist and poet K’naan, whose song of global fraternity, “Wavin’ Flag,” was chosen as an anthem for the FIFA 2010 World Cup. Hip-hop represents an increasingly global phenomenon, not only with international audiences but also for a host of other cross-cultural identifications, providing a global forum though which displaced subjects can negotiate multiple concepts of identity/citizenship. I investigate the possibility of a global citizenship beyond the nation and in relation to multiculturalism and globalism, as emphasized in the Toronto hip-hop scene with a particular focus on K’naan’s first two albums, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (2006) and *Troubadour* (2009), using “Wavin’ Flag” as an anthemic case study for the aforementioned themes.

The outro (conclusion) brings the primary themes back into the mix, examining how citizenship, the self, and nationality are articulated in African Canadian poetry and literature through what I am terming “listening communities.” The outro articulates what a new transnational listening
community might sound like. The “transnational” cannot mean abstracting from national paradigms, but rather requires that we reconsider the national as a relational effect that needs perspectives beyond itself (Siemerling, “Bi-Culturalism” 150). The outro highlights how communities are often improvised and how community and social practices are tied directly into the concept of a dialogic “writerly” (Roland Barthes’s term) audience. As Leslie Marmon Silko argues in her essay, “The Border Patrol State”: “It is no use; borders haven’t worked, and they won’t work, not now, as the indigenous people of the Americas reassert their kinship and solidarity with one another. A mass migration is already under way” (115). While Silko’s focus is on indigenous transnationalism, I find her desire to form communities across borders a particularly apt way to read the cross-culturality of multiculturality, especially given the “politics of drifting” (Marlene Goldman) found in many of the poetic texts, offering alternatives to the boundaries of home and nation state. This is not to do away with national paradigms so much as it is to consider why and how they are constructed and for what purposes, and in which ways the poetic texts explored move with or against such paradigms in setting up their own. In many ways, Clarke’s notion of nationalism is an anathema to the current model of nationalism in place: “This nationalism enacts a counter-influence to the pervasive identification of Canada as a northern, white, wanna-be empire, a pseudo-imperial self-image which reduces blackness to the status of problematic and pitiable Other” (Odysseys Home 45).

These are some of the concerns regarding community and citizenship found throughout my readings, and they are challenges this thesis negotiates throughout while thinking through how community and citizenship are defined, particularly as they are articulated by African Canadian poets. Both Trudeau and Martin Luther King, Jr. are important figures in how Soundin’ Canaan is framed in relation to a “coming community” (read alongside poetry, politics, and music). Isolation can only create more of the same, and so multiculturalism, reimaginings of citizenship and Trudeau’s notions of the just society present an opportunity to moderate disorder and fragmentation by embracing difference through fraternity. Furthermore, as a reading audience, we can begin to broaden our understanding of the role that listening plays in shaping our approach to literatures as a lived embodied experience. At some point we need to take our readings out of academia and make “use” of them in the real world where our actions dictate the type of society in which we live. While this is only a dissertation—a set of words and thoughts on paper—I hope it is a valuable starting place to create new conversations, and hopefully some interventions, about how we conceive of identity and citizenship. Ultimately, and realistically, since poetry is the primary focus, I also hope this dissertation will provide beneficial readings of an influential group of African Canadian poets,
bestowing “new” tools for others in how we approach any multinational, multimodal, and multilingual Canadian text.

**Remix 0**

This introduction outlines my own methodological and pedagogical approaches to the literature discussed; it also provides a breakdown of how music functions in the dissertation as the central aesthetic, mapping the thematic content of the chapters to follow. The DJ as poet/scholar navigating an interconnected past to conceive of a contemporary present is the central metaphor for how we conceive of the future and form new epistemologies to literature. Everyone who merges, converses, counterpoints, and unites a variety of texts together is essentially creating a mix, just as the DJ often uses the recorded medium as archive (or repertoire). However, this archive is not stagnant; rather (in relation to “versioning”), anyone can remix, remake, reshape, and re-edit a piece of recorded history, creating his or her own mix. My readings are a series of many possible readings and resoundings. I believe there is a liberatory constituent to an open pedagogy that values dialogism and conversation over closed “authoritative” opinion. Early hip-hop DJs and oppressed youth did just that when they repurposed the turntable to create an art form to express the creative possibilities of liberation through art, becoming artist activists (“artivists”) in the process.\(^{30}\) We find resonance with the do-it-yourself dialogic mentality of urban youth in the work of Paulo Freire. Freire was a Brazilian philosopher, perpetual educator, and a significant theorist of critical pedagogy, most known for his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he argued “the oppressed unveil the world of oppression” and ultimately transform themselves and eventually “all people in the process of permanent liberation” (54). Perhaps these are lofty ideas for any thesis to trumpet—especially one focused on textuality—but Freire’s advocating for the dialogical process of pedagogy, believing that students should have an equal opportunity to express their opinions with their peers and instructors, is an opportunity to co-perform the process of knowledge formation. While this is a literary thesis focused on the reading of poetic texts through the musical contours inherent in the poetry, it is also a reminder that critical reading is an important step to liberating society.
CODA

DIALOGUE AND DISSONANCE: AESTHETIC AND RHETORIC

Coda, Italian for “tail,” is an extended cadence, the last part of a piece of melody, “the implication being of some addition being made to a standard form or design” (Grove). This coda tails the introduction to provide a brief clarification to my modus operandi in what follows, principally in relation to my aesthetic and rhetorical collisions. Art can affect us rhetorically or aesthetically, and it is my contention that the writers in this thesis do both. I argue that the music in the poetry affords greater aesthetic appreciation of the work, but that the music itself is also a resistance to standard poetic form, and more radically, sounds revolutionary ideas concerning social justice. This is similar to what Fred Moten maintains in In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, which examines both Black performance and Black radicalism, arguing that the two concepts are, if not one and the same, mutually constitutive to the point of proximate inseparability. In hearing the text—sometimes a sounding that goes as far back as the cries of slavery—we are aesthetically moved to consider the larger issues of a given poem, whether those are citizenship, displacement, belonging, or the meaning of being black in Canada. We can, of course, choose to be only affected aesthetically by a work and ignore its rhetorical connotations. On a purely aesthetic level, I can enjoy Handel’s Messiah without being moved to believe in God’s grandeur. We can enjoy African Canadian literature on the same terms. My application of both rhetoric and aesthetic throughout, often with quick cuts between the two, is a disjunctive praxis that attempts to sound both, often with little transition. My intention here, given that much has been written about beauty and aesthetics by capable art historians and philosophers, is to state my position in relation to how I work my way through the poetry on both aesthetic and rhetorical registers.

The aesthetic concerns beauty and is sensational and deeply personal. Rhetoric regards meanings and ethical relations and is external and social. Narrowly defined, aesthetics is the theory of beauty, from Plato’s notion that art is mimesis to Edmund Burke’s ideas about the sublime and beautiful. For Immanuel Kant, perhaps the primary theorist on Western aesthetics, aesthetic objects have a “purposiveness without purpose” (1.15): that is, we are not to take the work as destined to achieve some purpose, such as informing or persuading us, but that the aesthetics intrinsically contain some form of transcendental significance. This view of literature, where aesthetic objects “could make us ‘better people,’” is, as Jonathan Culler argues, linked to the notion of the liberal subject free of social determinants (37). Rhetoric, by contrast, concerns meaning and influence; rhetoric as persuasion in the Greek tradition is preeminent (Plato, Gor. 455, 457; Aristotle, Rh.
1355b). By contrast the Roman rhetorical tradition views eloquence as the principal factor in achieving persuasion, but as Plato alludes in *Phaedrus*, Cicero in *De Oratore*, and Quintilian in *Institutio*, eloquence must also indispensably include goodness (*Ph.* 261a; *Ins.* 1.4) and wisdom (*De Or.* 1.xii.50). However, the tradition of African American rhetoric—arguably linked to an African lineage older than the Greek tradition—presents an atypical concept of persuasion with a rhetoric constructed and based within a rhetorical community (Karenga 5). African American rhetoric is communally constructed within the context of historical oppression; it is a rhetoric of resistance; a rhetoric of possibility and additionally a rhetoric of reaffirmation (6-7). Literature contains aesthetic and rhetorical elements and uses pathos to invoke an emotional reader response to the malaises in a given society. Hence, the rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* drew American readers into the anti-slavery movement and helped fuel the American Civil War, and Amiri Baraka's poem “Somebody Blew Up America” drew so much public indignation that he was removed from his post as Poet Laureate of New Jersey.

Rhetoric and aesthetics are two distinct discourses, but I think when read together they produce fuller understandings in the quest for meaning. Such is my intention, which is why I’ve interviewed many of the poets in *Soundin’ Canaan* in acts of joint meaning-creation among me, the text, and the poet’s intended utility of the poem. In terms of poetry, rhetoric and aesthetics can also be examined through the old debate between poetics and hermeneutics. Poetics starts with attested meanings and asks how they are achieved (such as what makes a passage ironic) while hermeneutics starts with texts and asks what they mean (Culler 62). Poetics further complicates the division between beauty and meaning since poetics are about how meaning is possible in the first place through the combination of images and the manipulation of language. For Aristotle, rhetoric was persuasion and poetics was imitation; for me, poetry is neither rhetoric nor imitation alone, but is both and, most importantly, always a making (riffing on signifieds) that requires improvisatory engagement from the reader to sound its referential meaning. Poems resist: we have to labour to convince others that a work does something, and that something in *Soundin’ Canaan* is a poetics that aesthetically integrates music to move readers into the underlining social consciousness and communal engagement from which the poem materializes.

My blending of poetics, hermeneutics, rhetoric, and aesthetics is a condition of postmodern thinking, and it is for these reasons that my approach, like most writers engaging with contemporary Canadian poetry today, have moved far outside the school of Frye, Bloom, and other perennial figures of the twentieth century who applied a scientific approach to literature. Frye’s concern in *The Anatomy of Criticism* was that literary criticism was a jumbled, unscientific mess needing systems of
organization. The organization of this thesis into divided sections by ideas implies a kind of scientific approach, but I clearly differ from Frye in theoretical application, and I hardly share his assertion that value judgments (we are always positioned and influenced by the discourse of our time) have no place in criticism. Frye writes: “Rhetorical value-judgements are closely related to social values, and are usually cleared through a customs-house of moral metaphors: sincerity, economy, subtlety, simplicity, and the like. But because poetics is undeveloped, a fallacy arises from the illegitimate extension of rhetoric into the theory of literature” (21). Of course, Frye clearly made value judgments when he only decided to write on what he considered serious twentieth century authors, predominantly European (or Canadian) male authors (Joyce, Eliot, Yeats). Frye’s criterion for serious study excluded the Beats, Black Mountain Poets, Faulkner, black writers, and other more experimental writers in favour of the mythopoetic poets. This is not to downplay the influence and contributions of Frye to literature—they are immense—but it is to declare my allegiance as one of the new multiculturalists that Harold Bloom bemoans in his introduction to Anatomy (viii).  

For Frye, poetry was about form and did not reflect life but rather “a world of its own” (On Canada 288). I admit, too often the work on black writers focuses entirely on their radicalism, rather than on aesthetic beauty or an emotional response to a work, which is another reason I dedicate a great deal of textual space to musical form as one aesthetic pathway into the poetry of M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Wayde Compton, and K’naan. Musicalizing the literature is one technique to ensure we hear the sonic contours in the text as both aesthetically pleasing and as a rhetorical strategy that encapsulates diverse notions of citizenship and identity in Canada. To be fair to Frye, he was writing in the 1950s, as statements like “The forms of prose fiction are mixed, like racial strains in human beings, not separable like the sexes” (Anatomy 305) certainly date him, but his ideas continue to be grappled with, whether we try to claim him as Hutcheon does, as a postmodernist, or critique him, as Frank Davey does, for his thematic influence as a “testimony to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism” in general (“Surviving” 133). CanLit—and the continuing urbanization of Canada—has come a long way since Frye’s early writings, but it’s important to remember Frye championed CanLit at a time when few critics of his stature did. My criterion for value and multimodal theory set us apart, but his imperative desire to study Canadian literary productions in order to understand the Canadian imagination—for me an imagining of the just society—bring us a little closer in praxis (Conclusion 334).

I suggest that Canadian poetry—specifically Black Canadian and Black Art more generally—is most fully represented when we consider both the aesthetic and rhetorical applications of a given work, especially when we regard those aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities as never closed in the
same way that identity, citizenship, and community are always to come. As Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz suggest there is a certain value in resisting closure and embracing the improvisatory nature and didactic possibilities of art created by aggrieved communities: “the Western art tradition teaches us to expect and savor narrative and aesthetic closure. In contrast, the improvisatory art of aggrieved communities prepares us to resist closures, to enjoy interruption, syncopation, and indeterminacy” (233). The full appreciation of art—the beautiful and the non-literary values we attach to it—is an improvisatory leap of faith since we are dealing with the play of words (or sounds, or images, etc.) to envision a more inclusive society: truly, a work of meaning and beauty combined. Work in contemporary literary aesthetics acknowledges that it is faulty that “[t]eachers and critics assume that in order to discuss the aesthetic value of a literary text one must treat it as an autonomous object and isolate it from non-literary values and disciplines. The result is an ironically self-fulfilling judgment: literary aesthetics becomes identified with nineteenth-century notions of art for art’s sake and mired in fruitless arguments about the possibility of art’s autonomy” (Literary Aesthetics 3). The editors of Literary Aesthetics maintain that by “resisting this trend, this anthology asserts the continuing vitality and importance of literary aesthetics but insists that aesthetic value can be understood properly only in the context of a broader inquiry into human values and cultures. That is, we feel that literary aesthetics must be reintegrated into the widening repertoire of cultural practices” (3). I agree, and the same goes for cultural theory that is devoid of any notions of beauty.

I am reminded of a modernist debate between Harlem poet Claude McKay and W. E. B. Du Bois on the nature of art and propaganda, another reframing of the arguments in this coda. McKay felt that incorporating the New Negro propaganda of the time would hinder his art and stifle the development of what he viewed as a true Black literary tradition. By contrast, Du Bois argued that “whatever art I have for writing has always been for propaganda, for gaining the rights of Black folk to love and enjoy. I don’t give a damn for art that is not used for propaganda” (“Criteria” 295-96). Propaganda here essentially means rhetoric, influencing a society towards some cause or social action. Propaganda, for Du Bois, is the very soil that grows art. Similarly, in 2007, poet Amiri Baraka spoke in Guelph, Ontario and recalled that the entire Black Arts movement was a merging of aesthetic and rhetorical practice, describing, “that our art—if it were relevant—had to help our people gain food, clothing, or shelter. We saw it as absolutely functional in that sense. And the question is: Can you make a song about feeding people that’s beautiful? Can you make a song about building a house that’s striking and aesthetically powerful? Maybe you can’t do that, but that’s what we wanted to do. We didn’t want to separate social function from the aesthetic function. We wanted to unify those. And we still do. I still do anyway” (“The Future of Jazz”). Baraka’s and Du Bois’s
desire to merge rhetoric and aesthetic encapsulates my hope for how the theory in Soundin’ Canaan sounds in its mixing and merging of aesthetic and rhetoric, since theory should be about seeing how far an argument can go, providing prospect for future thought, and even social mobility. My notion of the self is thus primarily social—that is, that we have rights and are most free when we learn to sound together. This doesn’t mean separating rhetoric from aesthetic appreciation, but the exact opposite: we are multiform (polytropos) beings with the potential to enact real social change, and the poets of Soundin’ Canaan find eloquent, challenging, and beautiful ways to articulate this meaning. I now turn to brief soundings—perhaps, in the Frye School of themes—that contour the imagined communities that hold the poets I sound together.
CHAPTER ONE

RIFFING IN AN “OPEN FIELD”: FROM HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO MULTICULTURAL CITIZENSHIPS

“From the moment [a writer] ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go under no other track than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself.”
—Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”

I. HISTORY

“[T]here is a more serious task of determining not what history is—a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms—but how history works.”
—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past 25

A Brief Field Overview of African Canadian History and Historical Approaches

“We had to learn that the history is always there to be found/out-about, to learn, and to make.”

History, like poetry, is an open field, rife for the riffing. History is a story, a narrative of the past we tell ourselves, open to social construction, recovery, and remix. Just because historical interpretation is porous, it does not mean we can avoid specificity, nor can we avoid how historical discourses and events shape and inform the present. The epigraph from Charles Olson’s influential essay, “Projective Verse,” which opens this chapter, is—while focused on poetics—an apt reminder that attentive interpretations are akin to field compositions—open, rhythmically inclined, and woven together by the writer-poet-historian. Olson’s “Projective Verse,” first published in 1950 as a pamphlet, pioneers his notion of “composition by field” through projective or open verse, which builds on William Carlos Williams’s 1948 proposition that poems be approached via “fields of action” (“Field of Action”). Olson’s “Projective Verse” converges on “certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings,” calling for syntax shaped by sound and conveyed to the reader through typography. So what does a musico-poetics of listening have to do with history, or any of the other themes to be raised in this chapter? Well, for one, it allows us to work through a lot of history in a small typographically defined field through the soundings that I feel bring the most harmony and dissonance to the chapters and writers to follow. Secondly, it is a reminder that history is not static or written in stone: the field—as in poetics—is always to be reworked and made. History is, as Clifton Joseph argues, “to [be made]” (20). African
Canadian history is “to make,” because often such histories have been damagingly read as having no field or history whatsoever.

To not look into the history and legacy (over 350 years) of African Canadian people—including its various social and cultural vicissitudes—is in the words of George Elliott Clarke, to opt for a “veritable intellectual treason” (*Odyssey Home* 198). To an extent, I depart from Clarke’s notion that our approach to history needs to be in support of nationalist or regional histories or identities, concepts which will be dealt with in the chapter dedicated to Clarke’s poetry; nor must our approach to history and memory be read exclusively under certain postmodern lenses that often disavow the past in favour of the present moment. As scholars of African Canadian literature and history we cannot run from history. As poet Dionne Brand attests: “We do not wish to run from our history but to recover it; our history is to us redemptive and restorative; inasmuch as it binds us in a common pain it binds us in a common quest for a balm for that pain” (*Bread* 37). The history of African Canadians is a history that many Black Canadian writers must recover, respond to, rewrite, because in historiography, as in chess, “the white is always the first to move” (Winks 497).

Brand describes in her own experience (*No Burden to Carry*) how she was forced to read and learn about white writers in the academy, and hardly at all about African/American/Canadian writers (29), a sentiment which is echoed by social geographer Joseph Mensah (*Black Canadians* 45) and by James W. St.G. Walker, who attests that “[t]he student of Canadian history can go right through our school system, university courses, and even graduate school, without ever being exposed to the history of blacks in Canada” (3). But why is this? Surely Canadians, and particularly historians, must be interested in the rich, complex, and tumultuous history of black people in Canada. Leslie Sanders, a self-identified white scholar of Black Literature, convincingly argues, “White scholars of Black culture have often represented the academy at its most imperialist” (“White Teacher” 169). Sanders challenges the belief that the scholar is an absolute “authority” on a subject, labeling scholars who attempt to ascertain absolute truth as “extremely dangerous” (172): “What is at stake is power, who gets to decide what is true” (173). Sanders’s argument, deconstructive of her own positioning, challenges the claim that authority insinuates that the scholar has a privileged right to create and define—essentially cutting off the possibility of fruitful dialogue. Sanders provides a useful self-critical approach to African Canadian history and literature where knowledge is formed in dialogic counterpoint, and one in which scholars learn to take pleasure in difference. The DJ metaphor, for me, described in the introduction, is one way I negotiate difference while acknowledging multiple sonic and textual histories. Another complication to exploring African Canadian history is that few historians (at least in written traditions) have written detailed accounts of the history, although there
are some well documented accounts, such as Robin Winks’s *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (1974) and James W. St.G. Walker’s *A History of Blacks in Canada: A Study Guide for Teachers and Students* (1980). Both historians provide comprehensive historical studies of black immigration, mobility, and slavery in Canada. Given its depth of historical analysis and the time in which it was written, Winks’s *The Blacks in Canada: A History* is particularly seminal.

*The Blacks in Canada* is worth mentioning because it was the first text of its size to detail black presence in Canada as a substantive and valuable history, although it often does so with the couched notion that assimilation is a possible resolution to Canada’s “Negro Problem.” Through an extraordinary amount of primary and secondary materials, Winks details the diverse experiences of slavery and black immigration in Canada, focusing on both the French and English periods of slavery, the abolitionist movement in Canada, (including the cross-border continental antislavery crusade), the experiences of black slaves brought to Nova Scotia and throughout the rest of Canada by Loyalists at the terminus of the American Revolution, black refugees who fled to Nova Scotia following the War of 1812, the experiences of the Jamaican Maroons, (as well as the fugitive slaves who fled to various regions of British North America), and the formation of the Canadian Canaans. Also examined are the pre-confederation and post-confederation experiences of blacks in each province of Canada, Canadian responses to nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial mores, as well as the various efforts African Canadians made in attempts to make Canada a meaningful experience, even if many black people thought of their time in Canada as temporary until American slavery ended. Overall, there is much to be admired about Winks’s text, especially given the time period in which it was written, including Winks’s potent treatment of white racism in early Canadian history: “To Canadians, Negroes were a monolith” (240). And so while “Canadians came to increasingly congratulate themselves upon their lack of prejudice and contrast themselves favorably with the immoral and once slave-ridden United States” (193), Winks’s acute historical documentation tells us otherwise, but not always Winks himself.

As scholar David Austin describes, “Winks leaves little room for self-activity or self-organization of Blacks – that is, their own efforts to organize themselves in order to humanize their existence or confront Canadian racial oppression” (139). Despite numerous historical engagements in *The Blacks in Canada*, Winks’s text is not without its prejudices, as it often suffers from a myopic approach, particularly when Winks makes sweeping statements, such as “Negro’s churches often lacked intellectual conviction while possessing an abundance of emotion and faith” (337), or, for me, the most problematic sentence in the colossal work: “Negroes in Canada were often responsible for their own plight, since they by no means made use of all the channels of opportunity or all the roads
to progress and all the sources of strength open to them” (480). I disagree with Winks’s generalization here, as he becomes the culprit of the type of bigoted claims he spends most of the book disputing. His conclusion problematically reads the African Canadian experience under the liberal American experience that produced potent figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, el al. True, Canada does not have a Martin Luther King, Jr., but I argue with a “cosmopolitan passion” (to borrow from George Elliott Clarke) that the Canadian experience is more focused on community, movement, and malleable identification, than on concrete individualism wrought from violent historical struggle—not that the Canadian pages of history do not have a considerable share of struggles involving violent upheaval. Despite my critique, what I found most useful about Winks’s text, and why it is valuable to all historians of the African Canadian experience, was his detailed exploration—through historical documentation—of slavery in Canada which, before Winks, was not dealt with in great detail in Canada, except by Marcel Trudel in French Canada.\(^38\)

Afua Cooper asserts that slavery is “Canada’s best kept secret, locked within the National closet” (Untold Story 68). The unfortunate reality is that most Canadians, to borrow from Yvonne Brown, suffer from a “collective amnesia,” and fail to take into account that the Middle Passage—the capture of Africans and the brutal crossing of the sea into the New World—was a holocaust that ruptured, damaged, or destroyed the lives of over 20 million African people. Yvonne Brown describes the Middle Passage as a “collective amnesia” because “a history that involved those fourteen European nations could be omitted completely, an event that lasted 350 years—omitted completely” (qtd. in bluesprint 155).\(^39\) Slavery existed in New France (chapter one of The Blacks in Canada focuses on the period of 1628-1760) and was still practiced in English Canada (chapter two of The Blacks in Canada focuses on the period from 1760-1801); further back, many “Indians” were kept as slaves (\textit{panis}) with the Portuguese explorer, Gasper Corte-Real, first enslaving “fifty Indian men and women in 1501 when he put ashore from an inlet in Labrador or Newfoundland” (Winks 1).\(^40\) In 1759, according to Winks and Trudel before him, local records in New France highlight that there were some 3,604 separate slaves, and of these, 1,132 were “Negroes” while the others were “Indians,” all the more complex since many First Nations groups kept their own slaves.

The first person from Africa to set foot in Canada, according to historical documentation, was Mattieu da Costa, circa 1605, who was an African guide and translator. Olivier Le Jeune is the first slave in Canada for whom there is an adequate record. Olivier Le Jeune was taken from Madagascar and was sold into slavery at age eight in Quebec, New France, before it was Canada. Le Jeune, as David Austin suggests, is “perhaps the first instance of Black consciousness in Canada” (8). What little indirect quoting we have from Le Jeune works against the supposed inferiority of the African.
In “Of National Characteristics” philosopher David Hume describes with virulent quasi-pseudo-philosophy: “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to white” (qtd. in Popkin 213). More than a hundred years before Hume’s overtly racist comment, Olivier Le Jeune in philosophical adage speaks with a more rational understanding about the inherent constructedness of race by semiotically deconstructing it: “You say that by baptism I shall be like you: I am black and you are white, I must have my skin taken off then in order to be like you” (qtd. in Winks 1). Le Jeune is getting at what W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon would do in their deconstruction of race some three hundred years later. For example, Du Bois asks, “But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” (Darkwater 18), while Fanon begins his Black Skin, White Masks with the premise: “There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men” (10). Fanon then undermines this superiority complex by disturbing “white men” as the signifying category of Western society: the white man, in constructing himself as white—as differentiated from black—participates in the signifying time-lag of cultural difference that scripts the instability of racial constructions. There is no ontological whiteness; whiteness, like race, is a social construction. I am making these comparisons across wide historical chronotopes—in an open field—to highlight that Black literature, diasporic philosophical thought, and resistance have longer genealogical traditions than are typically acknowledged.

Those Canadians who are able to name a Canadian slave might possibly refer to Marie-Joseph Angélique who in 1734, after learning about her impending sale by her mistress, burned Montreal to the ground; she was subsequently tortured, burnt alive, and hanged in public. Thus, one of Canada’s early race rebels was a black woman and a slave. In my opinion and given the lack of focus to early Black history in the current education system in Canada, it is an ignominy that many Canadians, as well as some scholars, likely have no idea who Harriet “Moses” Tubman or Mary Ann Shadd are. Harriet “Moses” Tubman, dubbed “Black Moses,” led escaped slaves on the underground railroad to its terminus in Chatham, Ontario, and Mary Ann Shadd was the full time editor of the radical paper The Provincial Freeman and the first woman publisher of a newspaper in Canada. All the more remarkable is that these black women achieved the seemingly impossible at a time when white women were not even legally considered persons. The efforts of Mary Ann Shadd and Harriet Tubman are all the more commendable when we consider their ability to unite and forge new identities transnationally across borders with the hopes to resettle escaped slaves in Canada. They did all this while fighting the severe injustices of slavery back “home” as they came to a violent apex with the Civil War. Canada, while hardly a land of equal opportunity for blacks, became for many a
space of possibility to construct ideals along an axis of freedom. Exodus to Canada became a “business” of resistance to American policy, as one writer in *The Provincial Freeman* states:

> Well, notwithstanding these brutal arrests and the ever vigilance of the slaveholder and slave-hunter, the number of fugitives escaping, and of those who are ready and willing to aid them to Canada are daily increasing, and there is not the least room to doubt but that the underground Railroad will do this year, according to what has already been done since the year set in, just double the amount of business that was done last year.

As mentioned earlier, the legend of Canada akin to Canaan (heaven) continued to grow over the years. However, we must remember Canada has its own history—despite its significantly smaller population size than the US—of xenophobia, which includes the genocide of First Nations peoples, slavery, segregation, Chinese Exclusion Acts, racist immigration policies, Japanese internment camps, and still functioning pattern of systemic racism.

I don’t intend to downplay the role Canada played in shaping many important democratic principles in the West, particularly as “other” to the United States, but as Robin Winks suggests, while Canadians have often congratulated themselves for providing justice “under the lion’s paw,” it is insensitive—and false—to read Canada as a savior of Nations (193). For escaped slaves Canada was a far better option than living in an actual plantation and being treated with little more worth than cattle. No wonder that, even if it’s described as such for dramatic effect, the moment Josiah Henson (a founder of the Canadian Canaan Dawn settlement and an inspiration for Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) crosses into Canada he falls to the ground in an ecstatic fit and kisses the fecund earth of an earthly heaven. This belief is echoed throughout much of African Canadian and American literature, as Martin Luther King, Jr. (in his Massey Lectures) praises Canada as more than a neighbor to the Negro: “So standing today in Canada I am linked with the history of my people and its unity with your past” (*Trumpet* 3). However, for many of the escaped slaves, or for those who fought on the side of the Loyalists, it became apparent that Canada was something else, and not quite the heaven on earth many thought it to be. This disappointment is reflected in Austin Clarke’s 1964 novel, *The Survivors of the Crossing*, which begins in the Caribbean with a letter from a friend describing “Canada [as] a real first-class place!” (31), and later: “Life up here in Canada is the same thing as living in Goat-heaven and Kiddy-kingdom” (57). The letter provides the Barbadian protagonist (Rufus) with the strength to stage a protest in the cane fields in Barbados, which ultimately fails because it is predicated on what Clarke sets up as a fictitious Canadian heaven. Towards the end of the novel the friend sends a more honest letter that describes the racism and
unemployment the black man faces in Canada, calling it the very same type of racism he had hoped to escape: “I sorry to paint a technicolour picture o’ the place but, Jesus Christ, man! I couldn’t let you know that here in this country is the same slavery as what I run from back in the island” (104). This passage reminds us of Canada’s attempt to construct an empire predicated on the privilege of whiteness (reflected dramatically in the Immigration Policy that Mackenzie King supported). Like a boomerang, history is cyclical; we are always working through the past to make sense of the present. History is not determinism; we can, and do, create a history of possibility, one that recognizes, as Paulo Freire did, “that History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined—that the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically” (qtd. in Macedo, “Introduction” 13).

**Approaching the historical**

How does the student of African Canadian literature approach history? I am arguing for a two-pronged approach that is both specific and non-linear, like the allegorical image of a DJ reappropriating the past. Problematic and obfuscated at times, history is to be grappled with as “real” and made into fiction, or understood as fiction. History—as archive, lived reality, personal narrative, and fiction—is vital to this dissertation, and even though the texts I examine principally focus on contemporary moments (with most of the texts being written after the year 2000), they are all interested (in some way or another) in mining Black histories and History (that is the ripples of the past that affect us all) that dates back some 400 years with the arrival of the first slave ships in North America. However, *Soundin’ Canaan* is not so much about discovery as it is about fecund engagement, critical assemblage, and careful listening. As Miles Davis poignantly states in his *Autobiography*, “White people used to talk about how John Hammond discovered Bessie Smith. Shit, how did he discover her when she was there already? […] It’s like, how did Columbus discover America when the Indians were already here? What kind of shit is that, but white people’s shit?” (406). In order to avoid another self-effacing undertaking about “white people’s shit,” this thesis—an assemblage of ideas—offers contributions and polyphonic layerings to the burgeoning fields of African Canadian poetry and performance, as well as critical studies in improvisation. Through critical discussions and soundings—perhaps even interventions—we can further develop and help to (re)define interdisciplinary approaches among the bordering fields of literature, music, and theories of multiculturalism and citizenship. While *Soundin’ Canaan* works thoroughly through a vast amount of material—literary, musical, philosophical, and historical—it does so to provide a larger framework/sphere of influence (a “mix”) to aid in understanding the selected poets and their texts.
One of the hopes of Soundin’ Canaan is to provide polyphonic methodologies for how we approach literary criticism and interdisciplinary practice via cross-cultural approaches to literature.

History—which I view as very much of the present, and the future even—enters this dissertation and the works explored (used very consciously by the writers I engage in dialogue with), particularly in relation to citizenship and identity. Historical tensions range from the views expressed by George Elliott Clarke (drawing from the Grant school) for what he views as a betrayal by Canadian/black intellectuals who refuse to adequately “inquiry into the history of the formation of the African-Canadian people,” which leads to, in Clarke’s analysis, “bewilderment, confusion, [and] a veritable intellectual treason” (*Odyssey* 198), to the theorizing of Nation/Transnationalism in relation to Blackness without a centre or essential nation by writers such as Trudeau, Rinaldo Walcott, Brand, Foster, Agamben, Lingis, Nancy, among manifold others. NourbeSe Philip states that to “write’ about what happened in a logical, linear way is to do a second violence” (*Genealogy* 116). For the most part I agree with Philip, and even though I’ve clearly attempted to provide some timelines and frameworks of African Canadian literature and history, I accept that history as disunity tells us more than ordered histories that claim a singular truth, often on behalf of other peoples’ histories. There is value in a history of disunity, as Hayden White advocates: “we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot” (qtd. in *Odysseys Home* 19). Further, as Ajay Heble asks in “Sounds of Change: Dissonance, History, and Cultural Listening,” “whose histories count as knowledge and whose get disqualified as unpleasant and inharmonious noise?” Very true, since histories that are “out of tune”—ones that do not fit rigid and often biased versions of what is considered harmonious—occasion, as Heble puts it, “a purposeful disturbance to naturalized orders of knowledge production in Canada.” Perhaps we need to opt instead for less universal and more particular approaches. History is itself created via a series of perspectives, interventions, oral and written stories, speculations, and dialogues. There is no “one” history, just as there is no “one” story. There are either serious or non-serious engagements with historical material, as there are good tellings or bad tellings of a story. History is not a universal and this goes for African Canadian history too: as outlined earlier, George Elliott Clarke focuses on the autochthonous presence of black people (dating back to the Loyalists) in Canada and Rinaldo Walcott focuses on the diasporic nature and more recent presence of black people in Canada. My rejoinder to these versions is that they are different stories that compete for history, but that both are historical approaches to understanding a version of black identity and presence within Canada. To say that there is one story of Black History in Canada would be to reduce the presence of black people to a monolithic whole. As Nelson Mandela states in Clarke’s dramatic poem, *Trudeau,*
“History isn’t born, it’s made” (110), which echoes Joseph’s notion of a history “to make” (20) and resounds with African American theorist Hortense J. Spillers’s view that “Traditions are not born. They are made” (“Cross Currents” 250). History is never as simple as the Manichean terms of colonizer or colonized, written and oral.

History is full of resonances and, like the resonances found in jazz’s remarkably exciting history of improvisation, often upon a standard, we are part of a cyclical endeavor to riff upon the past. Evidently, there is no absolute meaning or essence, for history as narrative can be read through what Kamau Brathwaite terms *tidalectics*, a counter-European theory to Hegel’s dialectics, which provides an Africanist model for thinking about history. Discussing *tidalectics* in an interview with Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite describes how we can see history as cyclical: “In other words, instead of the notion of one-two-three Hegelian, I am now more interested in the movement of backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose, motion, rather than linear” (44).49 Hence, we are part of an ongoing continuum full of ruptures, repetitions, everyday vagaries, incommensurabilities, and (most productively) constant change that can potentially contribute to an increasingly freer society. Furthermore, we can read history as playwright Susan-Lori Parks beautifully articulates: “History is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It’s present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past. It’s mostly directional” (“Interview” 317). While I think Braithwaite’s metaphor of waves better encompasses the cyclical approach to history I am privileging than Parks’s use of “directional,” her point is that history is not something that happened only in the past, but that history is very much of the present—always in relation to the past and future. Even forgetting can be an act of the historical, or at least it is entwined within the ongoing relational power of history to affect those living in the present. Such memorative history is articulated by the son in David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* who returns home to care for his aging mother who suffers from dementia: “History is a rusted pile of blades and manacles. And forgetting can sometimes be the most creative and life-sustaining thing that we can ever hope to accomplish […] This is how we awaken to the stories buried deep within our sleeping selves” (32). On the other end of the spectrum, with virulent force, the young Haitian narrator of Danny Laferrière’s *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* answers back to a history “not interested in us” (30) through sexual intercourse with white women: “I’m here to fuck the daughter of these haughty diplomats who once whacked us with their sticks […] history hasn’t been good to us, but we can always use it as an aphrodisia” (95).50 With the mixer, I’ve moved between two records of history: one about linearity and the other about non-directional—wave-like, sonic even—approaches; I’ve also mixed in literary examples of memory and the value of non-memory. Both approaches, whether
about remembering or forgetting, concern the human agency behind deciding what version of history matters when defining one’s identity in the present. For me, the most complex versions of history—of any sonic mix—must be both: historical approaches that engage with the complex negotiation between past and present, fictional and “factual” material, and the need to approach history as an open field rather than a straightforward linear truth that speaks equally to (or for) all people.

African Canadian history (and its many versions) and the plurality of debates about how to approach the self and community in an official multicultural era (at the least at the level of policy)—and the literature and music which are often interwoven with those histories and memories—are valuable implements to retooling the academy. As George Elliott Clarke attests in *Odysseys Home*, “African Canada is a conglomeration of many cultures, a spectrum of ethnicities […] a fragmented collective, one fissured by religious, ethnic, class, and length-of-residency differences” (14-15), which is why we cannot subsume all African Canadian writers, literature, or history under a homogenous approach. The challenge we face as historians, poets, writers, and scholars of African Canadian literature and history is in trying to tell a story (and stories) whose memories can only ever be partially recovered, but which must be told in retellings, untellings, or at times, in listening to the text speak. Telling the total stories of any culture is an absolute impossibility. History can be a useful aid and reminder of why music and poetry—and the intersections between the two—are important counterhistories that work against canonicity and specific guidelines for literary merit. History has always mattered in Canadian literature, for as Linda Hutcheon has said: “History leaves its mark on our literature, it always has” (*Other Solitudes* 10). But certain stories of history can be oppressive; hear Wayde Compton riffing on Countee Cullen: “What is Britannia to me?” (*Performance, “Declaration of the Halfrican Nation”* 15).  

It is precisely this divergence between the inescapable mark of history coupled with the indifference towards a certain strand of enforced history that Compton disavows, and it is within (and between) these ruptures, fissures, and fragmentations that *Soundin’ Canaan* creates a sonic literary mix. History is the border in the way a book contains story, and in scholarship it is where African Canadian literature sits, a border of historical possibility that the writers examined in this thesis gracefully navigate.
A Brief Field Overview of African Canadian Literary History

“Early Canadian writers were certain of their moral values: right was white, wrong was black, and nothing else counted or existed.”
—Northrop Frye, Mythologizing Canada 74

While Canadian literature’s most dominantly recognized scholars have had to aggressively argue and debate that there is even literature in Canada, black writers have been historically excluded from such conversations. Clarke’s adept chronicling in Odysseys Home and Directions Home are two examples that highlight that there have been black writers in Canada nearly as long as there have been black people in Canada. In 1951 the Massey Report asked “IS THERE A NATIONAL LITERATURE?,” echoing the concern of many chroniclers of African Canadian literature some forty years later:

Is it true, then, that we are a people without a literature? To this question we have had similar replies from different sources. Defining the term “Canadian literature” as the reflection in works of imagination of the interests, the ideals and the character of our people, the author of one of our studies states that Canada cannot yet show an adequate number of works that correspond to this description. (3)

Even having to ask if there is a Canadian literature implies there is something there, but if the existence of Canadian literature—that’s literature written primarily by white Anglo Canadian writers—had to be proven, then African Canadian writers and literature were hardly considerations in the report. Yet, as Clarke argues in Odysseys Home there is not only a deep history of African Canadian literature, but there is also a sense of nationalism around Black Canadian literature, which I take up in my chapter on Clarke’s poetics. In fact, Black Canadian nationalism, as Clarke reads it, helps to announce that there is a large literary corpus with writers who feel a certain nationalistic affinity with one another. While my own arguments move towards soundings of citizenship that move beyond paradigms that are strictly national, a nationalist reading can, although not as an endpoint, work against white colonial narratives that depict Blackness as both a threat and a dilution to the white civilizing project of Canadian nationalism.

More than just satire: Whiteness in early Canadian Literature

Black bodies have long represented a threat to the neo-mythic purity of Canadian whiteness (an a priori whiteness that produces a closed Canadian identity). Conversely, white women’s bodies have represented a nationalism founded on the notion of a “pure, virtuous, and uncorrupted state” (Austin 176). Much of early Canadian literature written by white writers is paradoxically marked by
an amorphous whiteness that performs Blackness as a degenerative space of danger, threatening to
dilute, deform, deprave, and pervert the supposed purity of neo-mythic whiteness. My brief
investigation here of whiteness in early Canadian literature provides some of the grounds for which I
will set up my affirmative representation of Blackness later on as a driving impetus in Soundin’
Canaan. Simply deduced (or reduced), Blackness unifies, whiteness separates. I am interested in
the instabilities of whiteness as it is articulated through early Canadian literary perspectives because
these highly constructed capricious moments provide valuable locations to make visible larger
normalized systems of oppression. For if, as Richard Dyer attests, “race is a means of categorizing
different types of human bodies which reproduce themselves” (20), then white reproduction
(diegetically disseminated via heteronormative values) is a markedly unstable process.

Whiteness becomes dubious under the perpetual threat of racial degeneration; through
miscegenation’s counter-normative production of hybrid, “half-caste” (Black Candle 17; Roughing it
in the Bush 325), and other racial conflations, constructed linear whiteness becomes disordered.
Many early Canadian writers show concern to preserve whiteness by performing Blackness to
display, disrupt, and disavow it as degenerative to whiteness; yet, likely unintentionally, by doing so
they also displace whiteness as a colonial construct that is malleable under the imperative to maintain
white hegemony. By semiotically constructing Blackness as degenerative, as a threat to whiteness
and its heteronormative values, many early Canadian writers fabricate texts that exhibit racial-mixing
as the social and physical death of whiteness. Numerous early Canadian texts and writers are
didactically interested in examining the dangers of miscegenation within the colonial project of
constructing an idealized white Canadian Nation. Early Canadian texts (such as Emily Murphy’s The
Black Candle and Thomas Haliburton’s The Clockmaker, including the Canadian classic [although
written by English author Helen Campbell Bannerman] The Story of Little Black Sambo, which in the
1960s was still popular in its 16th edition) are paradoxically marked by an amorphous whiteness that
performs Blackness as a degenerative. These texts are engulfed in racial phobias, from afrophobia
(the self-parodying “niggers” of Haliburton’s text) to sinophobia (the “yellow peril” opium peddlers
of Murphy’s text), to a more generalized alterity and xenophobia of all racial Others. Often in these
texts the white body (typically the young, fertile, feminized white body) is directly under attack from
somatically black characters or permeations of Blackness.

Haliburton’s incredibly racist satire The Clockmaker provides one case study of how
Blackness was to be disavowed, for it was something whites could accede into if they were not
careful. For Haliburton the American South constitutes an imaginatively elsewhere, where “niggers”
provide Sam Slick (and Haliburton) with a space of disunity to comparatively criticize Nova Scotians
as figuratively black and therefore lazy: “‘Do you know the reason monkeys are no good? because they chatter all day long; so do the niggers, and so do the Bluenoses of Nova Scotia; it’s all talk and no work”’ (13). The dehumanizing language of Haliburton’s Sam Slick is hardly ontologically Canadian, but rather belongs to a long modernist tradition (oddly enough out of Enlightenment) that viewed white as pure and “right,” and Black as evil and degenerative.\textsuperscript{33} As Fanon states: “Sin is Negro as virtue is white” (139), which Frye—likely unbeknownst to him—echoes when he states: “right was white, wrong was black” (74). In this way, many early “white” authored texts create textual boundaries—in Haliburton’s text, it was as racist satire—to protect the interests of whiteness. Whiteness, in early Canada, is amorphous in that its ideals are transnational (Canada as being another site of the British Motherland), although its transnationality is imaginatively fixed by an edifice of whiteness that attempted to keep out internal enemies. “No surprise,” as Benedict Anderson in \textit{Imagined Communities} argues, “that on the whole, racism and anti-semitism manifest themselves, not across national boundaries, but within them. In other words, they justify not so much foreign wars as domestic repression and domination” (136). By keeping racial Others on the fringes of Canadian society, early Canadian writers attempted to keep Canada statically and idealistically white, whilst America and its growing Black population endangered whiteness.

For example, in Susanna Moodie’s \textit{Roughing in the Bush}, in the Charivari scene, Moodie recounts the lynching of a black man named Tom Smith, whose crime was marrying a white woman. Charivari is a word that means “rough music” and is described in the text as “a custom that the Canadians got from the French” (218) where the young fellows in town “disguise themselves, blackening their faces, putting their clothes on hind part before, and wearing horrible masks” (219). Equipped with pots and pans, they demand from the “bridegroom admittance to drink the bride’s health, or in lieu thereof to receive a certain sum of money to treat the band at the nearest tavern” (219). However, this French folk custom, and discordant carnivalesque wedding serenade takes on a darker performative malevolence as the blackening of the faces and performance of Blackness disavow the ambiguities of race by making race the specific motive behind the nature of Tom Smith’s death. Smith is killed partially because he does not allow the revelers admittance into his room, but his lynching serves as a direct correlation, like the American racism of Sam Slick, to the lynchings of blacks by white supremacists in the American South. Thus, like in Haliburton’s text, Canada in policy is free from slavery, but not from racism, as Tom Smith is described as a “poor nigger” who despite “his shrieks for mercy” is taken from his room, stark naked, and killed in the street in the cold winter air (222). Further, the chapter concludes with the narrator of the story, Miss. O—, espousing a diatribe predicated on a generalized afrophobia, describing the African race as “the
children of the devil [for] God never condescended to make a nigger” [and] as is “generally believed, [they] are the descendant of Ham” (226). The performance of race is clearly on display in this chapter and it is useful to take up the question critic Richard Almonte poses: “What is Moodie saying with her ironic pointing out of the fact that whiteness so easily becomes Blackness?” (21). While Moodie certainly displays the amorphous qualities of race-making in the Charivari scene—white revelers in blackface—she, like Murphy, highlights the degenerative nature of race conflation: miscegenation and racial hybridities disrupt heterotopias, causing white people to act black.

As the margins of Blackness infringed upon the centre of whiteness, it became more of a necessity for writers and politicians to defend static whiteness in the hopes of maintaining a colonial legacy that did not have room for other races, cultures, and competing histories. We see this fear articulated in Frye’s influential essay, his “Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada” (1965), where he posits his “garrison mentality” (342) theory, which sees early Canadian writers as unequivocally fixated by the recreation of community forged from a xenophobic panic of all threats from outside it: “a garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable” (342). Gloria E. Anzaldúa, in the Preface to Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, attests that “Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (v). It is from these bordered spaces that many early Canadian texts confront interracial conglomerations, often with repulsion and apprehension. Race, like gender, is socially assembled; W. E. B. Du Bois in The Philadelphia Negro—providing an early African American perspective—articulates the nature of race and race-relations in America by showing that race is really about how people are socially constructed within or outside the state, as the “social environment […] greatly influences [a group’s] social development” (5). Whiteness safeguards its power by surveilling its geographic zones and bodies, through differentiating itself from racial Others by casting them as stereotypically undesirable, as alien and degenerate, and it does so by speaking on behalf of black characters.

Toni Morrison notes “how the dialogue of black characters in [white authored texts] is constructed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize [sic] it” (Playing 52). While for the most part the black characters in The Clockmaker are effectively silenced, in the sketch “Slavery,” Slick’s slave Scip acquires a voice (albeit mediated) in a garbled dialect that renders him as subordinately Black: “Oh, Massa Sammy! Massa Sammy! Oh, my Gor!” (266). Scip provides an Africanist presence only, as Morrison argues, to “reinforce the slaveholder’s ideology” (28). By portraying Blackness along stereotypical significations, as primitive
and destructive to order, Haliburton reinforces his white desire to maintain racial hierarchy and neo-feudal order, and to quench Nova Scotians’ (that is the Bluenoses) ascension into Blackness.

Haliburton—who was an inflexible Tory—had, as George Elliott Clarke describes, an “eccentric devotion to neo-feudal, social ideals, [and an] advocacy of slavery” (“Must We Burn Haliburton?” 8); he appropriated the South’s prolonged struggle to maintain slavery, using, as Clarke argues, “these images not only to ‘sell’ slavery and a hierarchical social order, but also to lampoon threatening ideas” (“White Niggers” 28). Slavery, and the anachronistic appropriation of its Southern manifestations, resurges in a Canadian context to reaffirm Haliburton’s archaic devotion to white principles while attempting to transplant his Toryism upon a heterotopic Nova Scotia that mirrors the traditional politics and neo-feudalism of Britain he so admired. While *The Clockmaker* is certainly satire, its thematic machinations produce a much more sinister whiteness than a merely racist enunciation for the superiority of the white race; the text attempts to absorb all of its characters (including the white ones, especially the Bluenoses) into a homogenous symbolic narrative, ascribed to the law of the father—a masculinized and feudal social order—using blackened characters as examples of the perils of liberal reform. Blackness creates social dissonance and presents for Haliburton an inherent semiotic instability to his social order, which Clarke describes as the decisive threat to Haliburton’s Tory whiteness: “To conservatives, blacks were signs of liberal modernity: their struggle for emancipation jeopardized order, beauty, even whiteness itself” (“Burn” 24). Thereby, anyone who is of low-class standing, whether they are white or not, presents a threat to order and is represented in *The Clockmaker* as blackened, or, as a “white nigger” (130-34).

There is much more that could be said about early racist Canadian texts and by extension, modernist Canada, and certainly I could provide a wider range of examples, but there is neither the space nor need for such divergence here. Certainly, an entire thesis could be written on early representations of white blackfacing in early Canadian literature. Hopefully, this survey of early white-authored Canadian literature is a reminder of the painful reality behind the desire of many black writers to not only write themselves into a/the canon, but to participate in an archival process which chronicles the black experience in Canada via black voices.

*Some approaches towards a Black Canadian Canon*

There is a substantive body of early African Canadian literature. Much of this material was (and is) on the fringes of the mainstream publishing industry, and much of the style and format was in the form of pamphlets, leaflets, poems, religious tracts, public orations, and songs, rather than novels, but nevertheless, African Canadians have had literary audiences—albeit not usually white
ones—since they’ve been in Canada. One particularly early African Canadian text is Boston King’s “Memoirs” written in 1798 and published in *Methodist Magazine*. King’s “Memoirs” tell of his experience as a former American slave, and then Black Loyalist, who gained freedom and resettled in Nova Scotia following the American Revolutionary War. The narrative describes his emigration to Sierra Leone where he helped to found Freetown as the first Methodist missionary. Due to a lack of interest and marginalization by academia until recently, many African Canadian writers have had to dually play the role of writer and archivists of African Canadian material.

For example, George Elliott Clarke began mapping the wide breadth of African Canadian literature in his anthology *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing* (1991), followed by *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (1999), and then by *Odysseys Home* (2002), which Clarke describes as responses to the revelation of “the existence of a canon of texts dating back to 1785” (6). Clarke argues these early texts work against the perception “that ‘Black Canadian’ literature consists of two or maybe three writers, and, if pressed, [one] will struggle to name Austin Clarke and Dionne Brand” (7). In Clarke’s most recent critical work, *Directions Home*, he reiterates this point, arguing that “African-Canadian literature did not—and does not—begin with the publication of Austin Clarke’s first novel in 1964 […] I do not grant that literary scholars can read African-Canadian literature (or Black Canadian) literature adequately unless they are also able to accept the historical (or ‘indigenous’) African-Canadian population and its cultural production as a constitutive element” (4). While I moderately disagree with Clarke that certain African Canadians might have a greater claim to being Canadian than others, I take his point that there is an incredibly rich history to mine. Further, one strategy to work against the “collective amnesia” Yvonne Brown describes, is to research the vast archive of African Canadian material (Clarke’s *Odysseys Home* contains a large bibliography of African Canadian texts as a compendium): “for those who do not research history are condemned to falsify it” (7). Since *Odysseys Home*, a plethora of archived material that is often in the form of anthologies, has appeared, mostly by Black Canadian writers. Many of these writers have taken Clarke’s emblazoned approach into exciting and diverse and contemporary excavations. Some of these anthologies and historical readings of African Canadian history include, but are hardly limited to: Levero and Velma Carter’s *The Black Canadians: Their History and Contributions*, Vincent D’Oleye’s *Black Presence in a Multi-Ethnic Canada*, Lorris Elliott’s *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada*, Rosemary Sadlier’s *Leading the Way: Black Women in Canada*, Dionne Brand’s *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario*, Rinaldo Walcott’s *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism* and *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*, James W. St. G. Walker’s *A History of*
Blacks in Canada: A Study Guide for Teachers and Students (which predates Clarke’s explorations by some twenty years), and Ayanna Black’s Fiery Spirits: Canadian Writers of African Descent, as well as more recent regional and national readings such as Beckford, Richardson, and Green’s T-Dot Griots, which anthologizes slam poets, hip-hop artists, and storytellers in Toronto, and Wayde Compton’s Bluesprint which, like Clarke’s Odysseys Home, provides a substantive history of black presence in Canada, but in the specific context of Black British Columbian literature. This is but a small catalogue of some of the historicizing and archiving in which many Black Canadian writers participate—many who are creative writers in their own right. I draw attention to these texts to emphasize the expanding canon and massive literary output by African Canadian writers, particularly since the 1970s, and the desire of anthologists to record this material for future generations.

Such anthologizing dispels the thin racist belief that African Canadians have no history, or that, if so, the material need not be archived; further, while Foucault, Derrida, and other poststructuralists have done tremendous work deconstructing authorial voice and canons, we must remember that many African Canadians have had their voices silenced, and so a canon can serve as a useful unifying strategy to animate a shared past. Of course, traditionally canons—from biblical to literary—are intended to instruct and teach contemporary and future citizens standards of a given practice that have been established. Essentially, canons are acts of socialization, which is why counter canons can fruitfully, I think, disrupt the aged, often exclusionary ideologies of the past, by providing alternative models from which to rebuild and ensure the future health of the imagined nation—a repetition of the same with, and as, difference. In this sense, African Canadian canons—there is not an established single canon—are acts of damage (and healing) that make more room in the larger Canadian literary “canon,” which itself since the mid 1970s has become increasingly—and productively—more and more fractured and layered. This is not to downplay the value of oral and sonic histories, nor to disavow my own methodological preference for living repertoires; rather, it is an argument for the need to engage with multiple unifying strategies towards understanding African Canadian literature. As Clarke describes in an unpublished paper he delivered at an Editing Modernism in Canada (EMiC) event, “Theoretically, the establishment of an—or the—‘Archive’ of African-Canadian literature will make discussion of even current texts more coherent, if not ‘literate’” (“Archive” 20). Clarke’s belief in the value of canons is emphasized in an interview with Anne Compton, where he argues in Derek Walcottisan fashion (that is via a blackening of traditional models) that the English literary model has adaptable value for black writers:

Another point to make about the canon is that it is our canon too. Even though it was imposed on us, it still belongs to us. I am told that I have to accept these writers as
great writers, and that, in terms of English poetry, these are the models I have to use, but perhaps we can take these models and blacken them. We can make them speak Black English. We can adapt them. In everyday life, I see people adapting the English language all of the time to suit their own needs. We can adapt the forms.

Responding to the past is an act of recovery, as well as an amalgamation, absorption, and, in Clarke’s case, a reciprocal process of cultural exchange. The need to establish counter canons (informed by counter narratives) is a reminder, to appropriate from Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, that African Canadian literature exists and is distinct.\(^5^6\)

While all literatures produced by distinct cultures, or a group of distinct people writing in a historical time frame, are different, African Canadian literature tends to get lumped in with African American literature and culture, often as a subset. It is hardly inaccurate to say that there are many similarities between African Canadian and African American literatures; I am after all applying a transnational approach to African American and diasporic music/poetic models, but just because a model is borrowed or adapted, it hardly indicates the literature is a simulacrum of another. Take the sonnet form for instance, and think of how many diverse incarnations it has had over the years. For example, while Harlem Renaissance and Jamaican born poet Claude McKay often utilizes the sonnet form, he inflects and effectively blackens it via language, tone, meter, and subject matter.\(^5^7\) The point is that the form (a sonnet, or a jazz rhythm) might have universal appeal, but the subject matter, while also possibly universal in appeal, is often intensely regional. Read George Elliott Clarke’s *Odysseys Home* or Wayde Compton’s *Bluesprint* for two anthologies that provide a range of examples of how we have begun to map the unique African Canadian experience through literature, often regionally.

There seems to be persistent truth in Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (published initially in 1972), which states that literary maps help us learn about the shared history of Canada: “we need to know about here” (19). Yet, I wonder who this collective “we” speaks to and for, especially since black voices are particularly absent in Atwood’s manifesto, although she does include the work of Barbadian Canadian Austin Clarke in a section titled “Failed Sacrifices: The Reluctant Immigrant.” It would after all, be another four years until the first anthology of black writers in Canada, *Canada in Us Now*, edited by Harold Head, would appear in print. This is not to discredit much of the fine work done in *Survival*—it is certainly hard to deny that survival is a central symbol of Canada. Atwood is aware of the many nuances of survivors and victims, and does acknowledge the experience of First Nations survival in the face of unspeakable horrors by the European settlers (and invaders), challenging the pervasive Canadian-European narrative of hostile natives in uncharted territories. It was this concept of the unknown, once again
rather Eurocentric in origin, which would be adapted by Northrop Frye as he mused, in his “Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada,” that Canada “is less perplexed by the question ‘Who Am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is Here?’” (338). It was French and English communities which forced African Canadians, First Nations, and all other visible minorities out to the perceived margins in order to maintain a mere vestige of cultural survival. Yet the myth-making process of the Canadian nation-state as white is but one story among many, for I agree with Dionne Brand: “Canada is not (and cannot ever claim to be) a homogenous culture” (Bread 137).

So while I’m eager and apt to deal with the literature of the now, I realize that the five primary poets this thesis examines (M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Wayde Compton, and K’naan) are also rooted in what the past can tell us about the present and, in the hopeful construction of an unknown future. These writers, among many others, have helped put African Canadian literature, and Canadian literature more broadly, on the literary map, and not just in Canada. It is my hope that the renewed and continued interest in these poets will also expand our interest in earlier poetic texts by African Canadian writers, beginning with some of the diversely complex poetic texts I encountered in my own archeological digging through the archive for poetic texts written by or about African Canadians: such as Liz Cromwell’s Canadian Jungle Tea Poems, or Charles Roach’s Root for the Ravens from the 1970s; Clifton Joseph’s Metropolitan Blues, and George Borden’s Canaan Odyssey: A Poetic Account of the Black Experience in North America, and Danny Laferrière’s incredibly musical beat-like novel, How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired, from the 1980s—as well as the vast explosion of literary output since the 1990s. Perhaps, as African Canadian texts gain in popularity publishers will reissue them, although given the current state of the publishing industry it seems unlikely. Once again, such preservation has become the work of the archivist and/or remixers. Nevertheless, the accolades bestowed upon African Canadian writers are a promising indication that although the publishing industry might not have changed in leaps and bounds, the reading and critical public certainly has. One need only to do a quick search on any of the writers engaged with to realize this (Dionne Brand won the prestigious Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize in 2011, and in 2011 Esi Edugyan’s Half-Blood Blues won the Scotiabank Giller Prize). These honours are hardly indicative of a just society, nor a claim for an equal literary landscape where writers of colour are on equal footing with “white” authors, so much as they are testament that, despite the machinations of history, African Canadian writers continue to change, respond to, and form an integral part of the vast literary community of Canada.

The question remains whether or not there is an African Canadian canon, to which I respond that there is and there is not. Certainly, I am suggesting the writers this thesis explores constitute a
kind of canon—which is formulated on the basis that these texts herein share a similar concern for sounding dialogic notions of citizenship and present some of the best Canada has to offer by way of musically informed texts. There is no official African Canadian canon that I am aware of, sanctioned by any university or literary society (although George Elliott Clarke offers a canon of sorts in the appendix to *Odysseys Home*); rather, anyone working today with the Canadian literary archive must consider black authored texts if the examination is to be considered serious. To reiterate, I don’t find much value in the notion of canons as a “measuring stick” for great literature, and while I acknowledge that canon formation is always essentialist—they are acts of discourse—they serve to unify a body of ideas and can, at least for me, run congruently with or against other canons (discourses) in study. To return to the notion of texts as bodies of “living repertoire,” canonization can be a creative act of mixing. By finding texts that play with and against one another, we enter into the experience of literary thinking, even if much of that takes place off the page and into the social fabric that informs much of the discussed literature.

II. RACISM, RESISTANCE, BLACKNESS AND THE SPIRIT OF HOPE

“I don’t dig badges, skin colors, blood lines. I’m not using any of the rules.”
—Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* 131

(re)Approaching Racism

“[Y]ou have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.”
—Richard Nixon qtd. in *The Haldeman Diaries* 53

The epigraph from Nixon, attributed to him by his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, is indicative of a shift from overt Jim Crow policies to more subdued systematic racism. Nixon made this comment on April 28, 1969 after promising a quick end to the Vietnam War as well an easing of tension between blacks and whites. He achieved neither. Some attribute Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, a little more than a year before, on April 4, 1968, to King’s outspoken stance against the American government as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” (24), stating that the “war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit” (*Trumpet* 32). And while race might be a social construction, a product of slavery and colonialism among other things, racism is painfully experienced in real time. Racism not only harms the direct victims of racist actions and systems, but it undermines the fabric of any society claiming democratic principles. A racist consciousness is indicative of a symptomatic and axiomatic malaise contingent with white colonial power. Canada suffers from the same malady King describes although, as David Austin
states, “Canada’s master narrative of exclusion eclipses its many histories” (49) in order to conceal racist practices in favour of a grand narrative of justice.

Rather than apply racist practices through sedative politics as Nixon does, Canadian politicians, at times, deny the possibility that racism even exists in Canada, as if we have moved beyond race, or as if inequality were an American quality. (Un)surprisingly so, at the Toronto G20 summit in September 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper boldly declared that Canada has no history of colonialism, which Harsha Walia, in her response to Harper’s blatant falsity, declared “[u]nsurprisingly, no world leaders walked out as he said this, nor was he subsequently denounced, for Indigenous Holocaust denial” (“Really Harper”). To further underscore Canada’s racist colonial history she cites the racism of Duncan Campbell Scott, Head of the Department of Indian Affairs in the 1920s: “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question” (qtd. in “Really Harper”). Harper did issue an apology (delivered on June 11, 2008) to Aboriginal people acknowledging them as one of the founding peoples of Canada, but given the apology was made prior to his statement at the G20 it shows that while his apology was perhaps heartfelt and a very significant step towards reconciliation, his “We’re sorry,” was, as Native scholar and writer Thomas King expresses, an empty apology (Inconvenient Indian). To deny the existence of colonialism while claiming democracy is, as Martin Luther King, Jr. contends, a sickness. Further, if those in power cannot even recognize overt colonial and racist practices against First Nations people, how then might they recognize the colonization of all of Canada’s historically racial Others? To say there is no history of colonialism in Canada is akin to claiming Canada has no history of racism, or no history of sexism. Racism like colonialism is a matter of power: it is about who gets to decide what is more pure, more capable, more right—essentially, more white. In (re)approaching racism we must also (re)approach sexism and gender, and reflect upon how exclusion is a locus for maintaining power. The notion of the “whatever being” (Agamben, Community) free from ethnic or biological categorization is an idealization of the hope that Trudeau and Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned.

Post-racial authorship?

Earlier in this chapter I outlined instabilities of whiteness to highlight that the death of whiteness signals the birth of a multicultural era. The death of static neo-mythic whiteness gestures towards the death of the author and the disintegration of racial categories. As Roland Barthes articulates in “The Death of the Author” he would rather use script than author, acknowledging both the dialogic nature of authorship and the deconstructive desire to redefine a more democratic version
of how texts and criticisms are produced (*Image*). And while Mikhail Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault have done excellent theoretical work to deconstruct power and discourse, and to show how texts are produced in dialogue, they often fail to consider issues of race, gender, the desire of writers of colour to be identified, acknowledged, differentiated, or accepted via more traditional concepts of authorship. While I find the deconstructive approach has significance for my own DJ methodology, there is a concern in *Soundin' Canaan* with ensuring that marginal voices are heard. Further, this is hardly to say that a “black-authored” text cannot be deconstructive, nor work against the lyrical “I” of poetry—Philip’s *Zong!* and Brand’s *Ossuaries*, two principal texts in this thesis, do just that—but it is to insist that there is continued importance for many authors to be directly acknowledged, at times, by more traditional authorial strategies. Making it known to my readers that I am “white,” even if I do not identify with that category, although it marks me as visibly “white,” is, I hope—and believe—not to place myself outside my field in order absolve myself of scholarly mistakes, or even worse, some reappropriative act of white-guilt. Rather, this confessional unveiling is an authorial interest in full disclosure since we are constantly being read outside the texts we read, and while it may not matter to some, it will matter considerably to others. White is the identity I am outwardly ascribed, and while I acknowledge the privilege my somatic appearance affords, I also work to remove my own possessive investment in the socialization process that comes with whiteness.

As much as we argue for a post-racial consciousness, the effects of racism are long lasting. As George Lipsitz argues in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, “White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another” (3). Lipsitz goes on to argue that “those of us who are ‘white’ can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree to which we are already part of the problem—not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it” (22). Lipsitz is outing himself as “white,” while at the same time deconstructing the validity of such a category by announcing “white” academia’s possessive investment in it. By looking at how racist attitudes are dealt with in African Canadian literature, we can productively begin to deconstruct racism as a corporeal machination of hegemonic forces by larger institutions with an invested interest in holding onto such vestiges of whiteness and power.

*Another look at whiteness*

Ezra Pound, as Aldon Lynn Nielsen has critically remarked, was like all racists: a “complicated racist” (“Pound” 151); Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, translations of Chinese poetry (*Cathy*), and the use of African material in his texts therefore require a critical reading praxis that engages
with the racist elements that are not simple but are markedly complex in their textualization. Rather than label a text as racist, we can, as Canadian theorist Tracy Kulba suggests in her reading of Emily Murphy, examine how racism is fundamentally constructed on volatile ideas: “Instead of labeling Murphy a racist and disavowing her politics […] it matters to attend to the productive mechanisms of her text—mechanisms that attempt to produce and secure racial constructs that are fundamentally unstable” (“Citizens” 86). In fact, Murphy displays in her own text how her racist claims are a slippery slope, and might reflect a larger sociological problem about perception, privilege, and access, rather than one rooted in any validity: “Some of the Negroes coming into Canada […] have similar ideas […] ultimately they will control white men […] Many of these Negroes are law-abiding and altogether estimable” (189); or, “the white races lack both the physical and moral stamina to protect itself” (210). Such reverse victimization in Murphy’s elegiac tone are clear markers of rhetoric—as is her amendment that many “Negroes” are law-abiding—establishing that there are no clear boundaries regarding xenophobia, only invalid opinions, and given her popularity, her arguments were obviously persuasive to her white audience. It is Murphy’s access to white skin that allows her the ability to wield power, even as she fights for another share of that power as a woman, for as Brand correctly attests, “White skin is the signifier for socio-economic opportunity and privilege” (Bread 125). This access of whiteness is not to claim that Pound and Murphy are the same racists—not all racists are homogenous across gender and cultural lines—but rather, studying racism draws attention to the instabilities of racist thought. Instabilities which, for example in the case of Murphy, threaten to undermine the established order of Empire. Such readings of “complicated racism” help us to undercover how notions of whiteness are aligned with xenophobic principles (although quite complex and ambiguous), as well as to perceive how the construction of an apparently stable narrative of Nation-building is in fact opaque and polysemous, pliable, and invested in the white imperial project, and ultimately forged on the failures of Empire through the trepidation and social threat of hybridity (what would eventually become multiculturalism). While I speculate about the instabilities of the racist thoughts that materialized in much of early Canadian literature, the other reality is that many African Canadians have lived, and many still experience, racist attitudes that affect their daily lives as they struggle to “make their humanity every goddamned day, because every day we are faced with the unmaking of us” (Brand qtd. in Daurio 14).

*From race to ism*

James Clifford reminds us that “‘Cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits” (*Writing Culture* 10). Cultures are always changing, even when they appear static from the outside. Racism is
fundamentally principled on the notion that culture is the same as race and that culture and race are static entities when both culture and race are socially constructed. There are no distinct biological groups called races with some groups having more desirable qualities than others, in the same way that gender does not exist in the strict sense: such dogmas are at the core of racism, sexism, and the many other “isms.” What Du Bois was getting at when he was talking about the problem of the colour line was to show that race is ultimately about how racism and power are correlated and socially constructed. Despite this construction, Lipsitz argues, “Race is a cultural construct, but one with deadly social causes and consequences” (2). The marginalization of African Canadian people from mainstream operations in society, to the less-privileged in typically quasi-segregated communities, is an instance of othering, and is more often than not an example of systematic racism with “deadly social causes.” In “Institutionalized Racism and Canadian History,” Adrienne Shadd, reminds us that black “descendants, particularly in the Maritimes, have been living in quasi-segregated communities for over 200 years” (qtd. in Chancy 80). African Canadian literature constantly reflects the horrifying experience of being read somatically as Other. Dionne Brand and Lois De Shield’s No Burden to Carry provides polemical, personal accounts that examine the narratives of Black working women in Ontario from 1920-1950. We also get a detailed historical account of the story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada (BSCP) from Stanley Grizzle who speaks about his experience working as a Pullman porter, and later as Canada’s first Black citizen judge in My Name’s Not George. Cecil Foster’s evocative A Place Called Heaven compiles interviews with prominent black figures in Canada (including Grizzle) and details many aspects of Canadian racist policy, explicitly dealing with the lived reality of being black in Canada (as DWBB [Driving While Being Black] can lead to being pulled over). As Foster argues, “For specific groups of humans, however, the black colour of their skin is rationally and objectively associated almost exclusively with the undesirable and inferior, with what at best might be merely contingent” (Blackness 10). Such pervasive conditional and conditioned racism makes it hard for human beings to simply exist as they are, void of stereotypes and free of the “badges, skin colors, blood lines” that Mingus lives by in Beneath the Underdog (131).

More complex than racism as an entity of hate is how networks of power are concocted in the first place. And so while many black activists fought racism, Anne Cools, the first self-identified Black Canadian to be appointed to Canada’s senate, who still holds a seat, describes how black men fought for equality while oppressing their own women: “Black women, the slaves of the slaves, can have no peace, no rest until they have evolved new social structures within which men can be Men, women can be Women, and their children, free-thinking total creative human beings”
(8). Cools was speaking in 1971, and her sentiment echoes Fern Shadd Shreve, who in 1924 emphasizes a desire to simply be read as *whatever* and *however* we find her. Shreve says: “I look at myself as me, not as a woman, or as a Black, and I want people to take me as they find me, and not as a Black, or as a woman, or as a woman who is Black. It’s just that I hope that it’s just the me that shows through, and you like me for me, not because I’m Black or a woman” (qtd. in Brand, *No Burden* 279). One’s inclusion in or access to Canadian identity is concomitant along a contingent access of power and whiteness. Might one be simultaneously Canadian and Caribbean in the volatile nature of modern sovereignty? This thesis argues that certainly one can, but historically racist immigration policies and ignorant public opinion make such polyphonic iterations difficult to achieve. In her poem, “On Becoming a Black Canadian,” Diane Jacobs describes how subversive racist practices hinder her attainment towards a version of Blackness that includes Canadian:

> My little white friends made it clear
> I could not really be Canadian because I was Black
> ...
> Strangely it was in the U.S.A.
> that I truly became a Black Canadian.
> In an attempt to rebut American Blacks’ assumption
> that being Canadian was an aberration.
> That Canadian Blacks had no history. (156)

Just as the flattened fifth in jazz was considered deviant, and jazz often considered the devil’s music, Jacobs finds herself a deviation, a wobbled note, reworking the margin in order to form a standard she can play. Jacobs reworks her blackness to discover that her identity is multiple: aggregated by others’ subjective readings of her, as she ultimately finds her grounding in pluralist spaces that acknowledge the lived reality of diasporic difference and history, culminating in the poem with her pilgrimage to Barbados: “Where I did my own ‘roots’ search / and found long lost family. / And finally felt grounded” (156). She achieves this grounding through multiple flights, being read by both whites in Canada and blacks in America as aberrant, as not belonging, to finally finding her roots in an elsewhere. The notion that Canada has no history of colonialism is a malady in Canada that—like racism—is subtly practiced to fashion the guise that it does not exist.

Dorothy Nealy argues that “the racism in Canada is so subtle, and so elusive you can’t really pin it down” (qtd. in *Bluesprint* 119), which is amplified by Dorothy Sylvia, who argues that “The Negro is better off in the much-maligned Southern United States than in Canada” (qtd. in. *Mathieu* 209). Racism in Canada is, as Cecil Foster describes, not as open as in the United States, but
certainly as pervasive; it is “[r]acism with a smile on its face, as Canadian Blacks like to call the brand they live under. A racism that nonetheless still saps dreams and leads to despair about the future” (Heaven 320). And with the provocative title, Niggers... This is CANADA: C-old A-nti N-Iggers A-nD D-efinitely A-merican, Odimimba Kwamdela [J. Ashton Braithwaite] illustrates, from personal experience in the early 1970s, how Canada is polluted with the virus of racism, describing how “Nigger, we don’t need you” (5) is a notorious public saying in Canada. Racism continues to covertly operate in the present, being most felt by immigrants, migrants, and refugees. For the narrator of Claire Harris’s She, creative improvisation works against the subtle intricacies of racism:

She have going for She in this canada, is inventive She is, eh. Real creative. Besides we black. is a funny thing about racism here, lots of stuff you couldn’t get away with in trinidad, here they ignore because maybe they think you don’t know better. but is also they don’t know better. but is also they don’t want to look racist! (89)

She’s “Besides we black” is reminder that black skin is associated, in the minds of many Canadians, with inferiority, and at best, contingency; creativity, for the narrator of She, and for those who are perennially being read as inferior, is one way to undo or work against and resist such oppressive metaphors in order to build more inclusive and creative futures.

**Resistance**

“I imagine them hearing spoken English as the oppressor’s language, yet I imagine them realizing that this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance […] English was transformed, and became a different speech”

—bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress 168.

I contend that the resistive elements of African American music (often global in practice and dissemination) have been inscribed in Canadian literature to relate to a larger transnational system of oppression. Black English, like Black music, is—as James Baldwin has argued—a record of brutal necessity. Further, African Canadians’ musico-poetic practices find solidarity in global practices across borders while the music itself makes the poetry more radical. For poets such as Dionne Brand, the personal, the political, and the historical are not easily separated, and the same could be said for the other poets I examine. The long history of oppression of African Canadians includes an equally long history of resistance, for as George Lipsitz states in Footsteps in the Dark, “The history of resistance is as old and powerful as the history of oppression” (277). While Canada might not have produced a poet quite as militant as Amiri Baraka, who calls for “Black scream / and chant” (Dead, “Black Dada Nihilismus” 63), Canada continues to generate radical poets of all backgrounds who not
only resist the practices and racism of mainstream society, but who labor against the standardization of education and poetic form. One such collection of Canada’s radical poets—that is, poets who challenge dominant worldviews, values, and aesthetic practices—is Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy’s *Writing in Our Time: Canada’s Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*. This collection shows that Canada has its own tradition of radical poets with the main focus on writers such as Nicole Brossard, Daphne Martlatt, bpNichol, George Bowering, Roy Kiyooka, Fred Wah, and Frank Davey, with nods to Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and a few other black writers.

Of course, a single book cannot cover everything, but the lack of African Canadian writers in anthologies is the same argument that Aldon Lynn Nielsen makes in *Black Chant* in regards to critics of avant-garde poetry, whom he argues “seldom look at black writers while compiling their genealogies of aesthetic evolution” (13). I would argue that some of the most resistant writers—in lived praxis and poetic form—have been African Canadian writers and that any anthology of resistive poetics must include a substantive amount of them. African Canadians, particularly those writing today, have in most cases used poetry as a tool of resistance to challenge dominant modes, for as Steven Green contends in *T-Dot Griots*, we can think of the artist “as a mouthpiece of resistance with tongues as sharp as swords” (viii-ix). The radical poet is perpetually reshaping the past in order to resound in the present with new meaning, however provisional the form might be; after all, according to Pauline Butling, “[t]he cultural utility of the radical now lies in recuperating the *old* and reconstituting the *now* into rhizomatic formations that embrace difference” (26). Nonetheless, and repetition being a better word choice than Butling’s use of the rhizomatic, the difference that the writers examined evokes is a repetition of the same, yet with a difference that demarcates itself as such via the musical aesthetics in the fortification of a resistive subculture.

Resistance subcultures challenge the patriarchal conquest of language through grammatical reforms, recontextualizing standardized English into a variety of vernaculars, for language performs social identity, negotiating a sense of individuality by challenging standardized English. For example, hip-hop artist Mos Def (now known as Yasiin Bey) raps:

> Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips
> Used to speak the king’s **English**
> But caught a rash on my lips
> So now my chat just like dis *(Black, “Hip Hop,” emphasis added)*

The result of the above passage is the creation of a new stylized hybrid African American Language spawned from the speech fragments of the other—the *other* being the tongue that suppressed Black culture and black identity in the course of the brutal physical and psychological manifestations of
slavery and colonialism. As bell hooks’s epigraph illuminates, the appropriation of English by slaves was an act of resistance: as they transformed language, “English was transformed, and became a different speech” (168). Similarly, Nikki Giovanni describes how African Americans have turned survival into an improvisational art form: “Style has a profound meaning to Black Americans […] If we can’t have ham, we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches, we will make cobblers; if given scraps, we will make quilts; take away our drums, and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need” (Racism 101 154-55). It is through tactics, improvisation, and appropriation that Black culture is able to spatially re-impose upon the terrain that has been imposed on it. I argue that the various poets in this thesis—M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, Wayde Compton, Dionne Brand, and K’naan—are able to transform English into a new poetic language that resists a simple commoditization of how a text performs its meaning. Music and poetic form cannot only be radical when mixed together, but they can inform our approach to how we define politics in relation to literature.

Far from passive citizens, the various poets of this project use poetry as a *modus operandi* to affirm the self in relation to a larger community. Aminata Diallo [Meena] in *The Book of Negroes* feels powerless at times in facing oppression, vulnerably stating, “Fifty niggers piss out of mud for Master Apbee’s shirt. All this work, for what?” (154). Eventually Aminata becomes resistive to oppression of all forms, and at all costs for freedom: “I would soon swallow poison than live twenty more years as the property of another man—African or toubab. Bayo, I could live without. But for freedom, I would die” (457). Freedom can mean death, and in the case of Hill’s rewriting Aminata Diallo into history (although a character like her may have very well existed), freedom means a resistive voice to those who have often had their voices silenced, or written as being unresistive.

We are thus challenged, as Robin D. G. Kelley argues in *Race Rebels*, to “not only redefine what is ‘political’ but question a lot of common ideas about what are ‘authentic’ movements and strategies of resistance” (4). Politics, as a “history from below” (5), also functions by what Kelley defines as “infrapolitics” (8), a term he uses to describe the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups who function beyond the visible spectrum. Similarly, many of the poets in this thesis could be read as race rebels using infrapoetics at the level of how they sound language and create a discursive modernism that speaks via Black resistance in the face of a white hegemonic static finality. Perhaps the difference between a poet and a radical poet is that a radical poet uses his or her poetic prowess to enact change outside the poem or, at least, to change public perception through the poem. It is the difference between an artist and what Asante fruitfully christens the “artivist”: the artist who uses his or her “artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and
oppression—by any medium necessary” (203). The key word in Asante’s definition is medium—a riffing on Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary”—which indicates that the process towards justice is aligned with Black creativity and hope in the face of unspeakable horror and injustice.

**Blackness and the Spirit of Hope**

“Black was not solely the colour of skin—it was the reflection of a mind that had good and pure intentions to all humans.”

—Cecil Foster, *Where Race Does not Matter* 65

While, as Austin makes clear, “Blackness represents both ethos and pathos, ‘a problem’ or conundrum that is to be tempered and contained” (186), it has represented, for many creative black practitioners, as well as those who have drawn lines of affinity with black culture, the agency to be wholly creative in a world that often aggrandizes Eurocentric staticism over dynamic pluralism. Blackness is an agent for change and as a creative category belongs to more than just somatically black people, for even though history books discuss Africans becoming Americanized, or of whites stealing the blues, the ways that African Americans, Canadians, and Europeans have always dealt with one another is far more complex than reducible binaries. Blackness is a mix, and like any conglomeration, various elements are combined and mashed together to articulate complex realities. Of course, white people (and I am speaking in essentialisms because I am cognizant of the material conditions that whiteness as a signifier of power entails) have often borrowed (or stolen) from black culture to be more “hip,” or in order to animate their own struggles, as shown in Norman Mailer’s “White Negroes” or Pierre Vallières’s *White Niggers of America*. In *White Niggers*, Vallières compares the plight of French immigrant colonists in Quebec to those of African Americans in the South arguing that both groups were forcefully imported to the New World and exploited by capitalists. While Vallières’s text highlights how blackness—like Négritude, a philosophical and literary movement providing an alternative to the rationalism of modern Europe—is not an issue of skin colour, so much as it is a symbol of anti-oppression, in Vallières’s Montreal, as Austin points out, “Blacks, in essence, did not exist” (69). In response, blacks in Quebec rightly asked, “If you’re a nègre, then what am I?” (69). While Vallières overlooked African Canadians in his own province, at least in the first edition, he did flesh out a central theme of Blackness: its representational power against the supposed purity of whiteness. If whiteness epitomizes oppression, rather than virtue as it did during The Age of Enlightenment, then Blackness, by contrast, represents hope and freedom.

Cecil Foster cuts to the core of the issue when he states, “Idealistically, then, Whiteness is death: in the end, or transcendence, as Heidegger says, that towards which being exists” (*Blackness*
xxi), while Blackness can represent creative potential and goodness inherit in pure intentions. Such a view of Blackness works against the Eurocentric assumption in the Enlightenment that light/whiteness signifies beauty and virtue, while dark/blackness is evil. Rather, we come to an understanding of Blackness as unfixed, as “equivocal in form and meaning, indeterminate, changing, and unfixed” (Foster, *Heaven* 19). Blackness in Canada is a potpourri of diverse cultures always intersecting along a wide spectrum of colours, creeds, borders, allegiances, and nationalities. For Aminata of Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes*, a poly-identity is her reality—an offshoot of slavery, but also a composition of desired exodus—that defines the presence of many African people across the diaspora: “In South Carolina, I had been an African. In Nova Scotia, I had become known as a Loyalist, or a Negro, or both. And now, finally back in Africa, I was seen as a Nova Scotian, and in some respects thought of myself that way too” (297). Aminata gets at the root of how modern identity is formed for the exiled individual and why Blackness can represent positive perpetual change. Blackness is about movement, for as Foster argues, “Blackness was diasporic, the scattered seeds of humanity: international and local at the same time” (54). Blackness is also a testament to the powerful bonds of community that Africans across the diaspora were able to forge in “the hell of slavery.” Therefore, “Blackness emphasizes the continuous construction process that is part of cultures and nations that are always works-in-progress” (Foster, *Blackness* 285), while also deconstructing the supposed legitimacy of whiteness. Blackness calls the very notion of authenticity into question, a central concern of Charles Taylor in *The Malaise of Modernity*, where he asks, “Authenticity can develop in many branches, but are they all equally legitimate?” (66).

It is no wonder then that Taylor believes that postmodern writers—particularly Derrida, Foucault, and their followers—are proposing deviant forms that “delegitimize horizons of significance” (66). Taylor, at least in *The Malaise of Modernity*, while wanting to hold only some form of authenticity in relation to freedom, seems to misunderstand the potential and value in constructing societies that do away with “horizons of significance” and great chains of being in favour of more pluralistic, complex, and even deviant communities of possibility. Are not the blues, jazz, and hip-hop mercurial forms that welcome deviance by their very nature? Have African Canadians not always been regulated, until recently, as second-class citizens, and as inauthentic? By second class, I mean they have the legal and nominal status of the citizen, and yet they are systematically discriminated against within the country, or local vicinity, in which they reside. Such phantasmal borders between legitimate and illegitimate are the underpinnings of oppressive societies that enact stasis by assuming there can be ontological purity. Blackness, like the Black musical model borrowed here, is a reminder that fluidity is a more accepting and sustainable model because it
acknowledges the human experience as improvised. As Foster attests, “Perhaps such fluidity and lack of fixity is the future of a world that knows its Blackness—a place where boundaries are not fixed for humans or capital, where sovereignty and responsibilities are negotiable and transferable from one living space to another” (Race 179). Fragmentation is empowering: it was for many jazz musicians who reappropriated and refractured the materials they were bequeathed, not in the hopes of producing a unity of singular meaning, but rather in the hopes of fashioning icons of opposition that acknowledge the lived, and shared, experience of a group of people. Blackness is improvisation, and to borrow from Rinaldo Walcott’s description of Blackness, the texts this thesis examines function in the in-between space where politics and ethics refuse “the boundaries of national discourses. To be black and at home in Canada is to both belong and not belong” (50). Blackness tells us something about the human condition, its desire to belong as well as serving as a persistent reminder that as humans we are all fallible, changing, and no one can own a representation of us. Even as I attempt to make meaning with Blackness, I hope my definition falls into the fold of the backbeat.

To restate, Blackness helps me remain discrepantly engaged with the material because I identify with it, learn from it, and draw valuable inspiration from “Black” musics and the improvised musician’s ability to engage with musico-poetic modulation, highlighting the instability of both material and identity. Ergo, Blackness offers a malleable metaphor that, as Robin Kelley argues in Freedom Dreams, addresses “anyone bold enough to dream” (7), and challenges us to “visualize a more expansive, fluid, ‘cosmos-politan’ definition of blackness” (2). Blackness, as Cecil Foster argues, is a universal feature common to all humans who embrace their creativity, disruptiveness, and spontaneity, for “humanity is black when viewed from this perspective of full self-determination and a holistic humanity that is essentially equal” (Race 36). Blackness is not ethnicity anymore than whiteness is; rather, Blackness is resistance, freedom, creativity, hope, and fraternity. Black identity, or any identity formed within improvising principles, is alacritous in its continual formation. The challenge is to cultivate our own identities as improvised beings and to come together—without any essentialist pretensions—to work for the betterment of society. And how might that sound?
III. MUSIC AND IMPROVISATION

“I contend that the Negro is the creative voice of America, is creative America, and it was a happy day in America when the first unhappy slave was landed on its shores.”
—Duke Ellington, The Duke Ellington Reader, 147

The Backbeat of Soundin’ Canaan

Music and poetry are the unifying stylistic elements of this dissertation. Through blues, jazz, hip-hop, calypso, reggae, dub, and other improvisatory practices, various African Canadian poets effectively remap the concept of identity, creating a sonic mix of Blackness that affirms the value of difference, dissonance, and more malleable conceptions of citizenship. Accordingly, music becomes an open metaphor, just as poetry has always been a metaphor about how meaning is shaped, performed, and sounded. In the way that poets arrange words on the page in a certain order for effect, so too do musicians, particularly in musical mediums such as jazz, hip-hop, and other improvisatory styles that cannot be easily conscripted into orthodoxy. To borrow from free jazz bassist William Parker, we can think of music as “sound painting”: “A composer arranges sounds in a particular order, alternating between sound and silence. The result is a sound painting. Sound painting over a canvas of silence. The range, shape, and quality of the sounds used to make up a sound painting are limitless. Any sound that exists in the universe can be used in a sound painting” (26). Thinking of music as “sound painting” opens up music as a tool—even as its conscripted by major corporations—from the living organic world, for as Parker elaborates: “No one owns music, no one invented music, it existed before the human species was created and may have played a part in the creation of man and womankind. Music lives in a world separate from the musician, a world of which we have only touched the surface” (34). Parker’s autochthon approach to music—as of the earth—is similar to Christopher Small’s assertion that “No human being ever invents anything from nothing but is guided always in his invention by the assumptions, the practices and the customs of the society in which he or she lives—in other words, by its style” (203). I quote from Parker and Small here at some length—even though, in the examples, Parker privileges the form of music, and Small the social subjects of music—because I think their descriptions of music are useful in bestowing that no race invented or owns music, as no race invented or owns poetry, just as no race or culture owns a monopoly on the precise mechanisms that define citizenship. In order to really understand music, and the same goes for poetry, we first must let it go. Black authors writing about Shakespeare are not any more culturally ersatz than white musicians playing the blues. However, a poor black musician might be more sensitive to the subtleties of blues music, in the way that disenfranchised and urban youths
will likely have more to acquire and articulate through a mastery of the hip-hop medium than affluent middle-class youths would. And while no race invented music—there are no races after all, other than the human race—there is inherent value in understanding the beneficial role that African Americans—often at the helm, but always across cultures—played in creating and continue to play in shaping the blues, jazz, soul/funk, hip-hop, and countless other musical mediums.

The introduction of this thesis highlighted the connection between music and poetry alongside my methodological desire to reunite the two mediums in theory, as I believe the poets are already doing in practice. Each subsequent chapter in *Soundin Canaan* opens with a description of a musical genre and is intended to provide those readers who might not be particularly familiar with the music applied to the poetry discussed with a basic understanding of how the various musics are used by the poets to articulate citizenship. First, the music that opens each chapter is part of a pedagogical strategy, providing a brief historical narrative to CanLit scholars who might know plenty about Canadian poetry, but little regarding Black music. The music and poetry combine to provide a framework for how a certain poet uses a particular music genre (or multiple styles—usually the case) to sound their own, along with this thesis’s, primary themes. Second, the music is there to provide its own account—somewhat outside the scope of the thesis—of how history, resistance, and forms of citizenship are embodied within sound. It is hardly a comprehensive history on any of these “genres,” as each musical medium could easily fill an entire thesis or book, as they often do. Further, as opposed to intense musicological analysis, I provide sketches—many from literary sources, since this is a work of literary scholarship—to weave a tapestry that weds music and literature to the larger web of the diaspora. These sketches may help initiate readers who might not be acquainted with the larger contours of the music (or with some of the intersecting matrices between poetry and music) with the intention to guide the reader to an understanding of how citizenship is performed, just like a musical performance. The genres—or *styles*—are loosely defined here as blues and folk vernacular, jazz, reggae and dub poetics, DJ culture, Hip Hop, and musical improvisation broadly conceived. Often, I make a stylistic or essentialist choice to attribute a primary musical style to a poet—for example, opening the Clarke chapter with blues history rather than jazz—because it fits the musical narrative being told, as well as most clearly articulating a poet’s sonic counterpoint. We can call Louis Armstrong a jazz musician first and foremost, but he easily and often incorporated or played blues, swing, and traditional pop music. The same goes for every poet here. Further, I realize these are only brief sketches of some of the musical polyphonies in the texts, but they are the key lenses I use in the project. I would also argue that these concomitant musical *styles* dance together in a tradition of rupture and fluidity where past forms or styles inform our understanding and conceptualization of
present forms. Hip-hop music, for example, relies heavily on the innovations of earlier musical genres, even as it reinnovates those previous styles. Nas’s song “Bridging the Gap” is a great example of how hip-hop absorbs and is indebted to prior African American musical forms. The track samples Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy”, and Nas’s lyrics demonstrate an appreciation of the musical forms and artists that came before him: “Did it like Miles and Dizzy, now we getting’ busy / Bridging The Gap from the blues, to jazz, to rap / The history of music on this track.” Such is Guthrie P. Ramsey’s central argument in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, where he suggests that if we begin to see how bebop in the 1940s epitomized the quintessential Afro-modernist expression of Black urbanity, we can better understand how the musical styles most closely aligned with hip-hop represent “the urban contemporary” for the current generation (187). The present musical landscape is always engaged with the past in an ongoing and often improvised conversation.

So while I strategically rely on generic prefixes of music to categorize our basic understanding of how they are used by the poets, the reality is that even the poets themselves often, if not always, conflate these forms. For example, M. NourbeSe Philip describes how the poems in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* “can be seen to be working in the jazz aesthetic—word jazz, perhaps—where different themes are working with and against each other” (127). Small polemically phrases the imperative for more open pedagogical models, arguing that “The big challenge to music educators today seems to me to be not how to produce more skilled professional musicians but how to provide that kind of social context for informal as well as formal musical interaction that leads to real development and to the musicalizing of the society as a whole” (208). Musicalizing could easily be replaced with the poeticalizing of society, the point being that music and poetry will always have didactic value because they are always teaching us how to listen. If we are to understand anything about one another, we must begin with listening.

The poets of *Soundin’ Canaan* have certainly done some careful listening and work in multimodal musical stylings. As music journalist John Leland argues in *Hip: the history*, it was the recording industry of the twentieth century that created the arbitrary separation of music into genres in order to meet market demands. In the early twentieth century many itinerant African American as well as white performers played a mix of minstrel tunes, ballads, folk songs, blues, and rags. Leland contents that “Black performers became blues singers in the studio, dropping their other master at the door; whites became hillbilly singers. The blues singer, then, was an invention of the studio, and often white record executives” (36). While genres are constructed by particular interests and for material purposes, I prefer the concept of “sound painting” or Small and Amiri Baraka’s notion of music as a verb: they are useful as tools to examine how a poet employs a style to play within a given
format. Further, there is relevance in examining how African Canadian poets borrow largely from American and diasporic musics to create a unique sounding that speaks to the Canadian experience. In this chapter I begin by looking at improvisation; Chapter Two examines dub and reggae, even though dub poets often conflate poetry with jazz or other stylings; Chapter Three opens by looking at blues and folk vernacular before examining Clarke’s trilogy: *Blue, Black, and Red*; Chapter Four surveys jazz before moving on to examine its use in Brand’s *Ossuaries*; Chapter Five explores DJ culture and highlights how *Soundin’ Canaan’s* methodology is put into practice in Compton’s poetics; and Chapter Six looks at Hip Hop culture and music and its influence on the Toronto scene, exploring the medium as a multicultural pedagogy in rapper/poet K’naan’s work. Music is the bass notes, and the soundtrack that propels the ideas of this thesis forward; it is the poets who resound the music in acts of spontaneous creation who provide textual acoustic colour to the blank page.

**Improvisation in Music and Practice**

“Improvisation is a muddy ditch; it’s where things can grow.”
—Derek Bailey qtd. in Watson 208

In looking at the ever ubiquitous and elusive practice of improvisation— with an emphasis on improvised musical styling/genre—we can better understand much of what African Canadian poets are doing when they blend together diverse traditions and sound off against the past to make meaning in the present. Derek Bailey argues, “improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood” (ix). At its core, being human *is* improvisation: from the first steps we take as a developing child, to the first time we pick up a guitar and try to form a chord, to every single time we enter a new space. While my focus here is on musical and poetic improvisation, we find improvisation everywhere we look: in dancing, acting, talking, creating an artwork, solving a problem, or simply responding to immediate stimulus in one’s environment. Improvisation is not only about these “off the cuff” and spontaneous experiences, but it is about the experience itself: the process of undergoing change. It is better to think of improvisation under a constellation of possibilities, such as spontaneity and change upon a standard, rather than as any one single thing. Because improvisation is always changing, this enables us to think about what it means to negotiate differences within a community, and ultimately what it means to be living in a multicultural society that is itself frequently changing. It is hard to pinpoint improvisation as any single entity—in fact, improvisation resists any single all-encompassing label—yet, within the context of music, it can be reasoned as an act of remembrance and, most productively,
as hope and possibility. In *The Other Side of Nowhere*, editors Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin argue “that improvised music archives historical practices and speaks to a community about its past and present” (7), a process that opens up the possibility of “solidary relations”—the common interests of a group—held together by the unified desire of musicians.

These “solidary relations” make particular sense within the spirit of African American musicians who—dealing with a legacy of erasure produced by the inhumanities that arose out of American slavery—are able to find creative, yet often dissonant ways to articulate a horrific past to a common community. One of the challenges in writing succinctly and with a focus on improvisation is that it often cannot be contained in discourse, especially since discourse is often used—as Foucault and others have shown, albeit through discourse—to inflict harm upon people. Yet improvisation, given its universal quality, is a reminder of the greater spiritual or poetic need to sustain life in the moment, which is why we find so many invaluable expressions of the medium—often in music—by African Americans, even if these utterances were rendered mute by outside/mainstream listeners. As Frederick Douglass’s words suggest, improvisation for the slave is often an artistic act that sustains life in moments of desperation: “This they would sing, as a chorus to words [that] to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves” (*Narrative* 57). Thus, to understand how meaning or anti-meaning is made, we must reflect on how meaning is always open to being reworked in the alacrity of the moment. The Douglass example provides a poignant instance of how improvisation can be used to make sense of the world, especially when it is most fragmented. As Daniel Fischlin states, “Improv *ISIONING* [a neologism combining visioning with improvisation]—for want of a better word or, perhaps, as the best word to describe this practice beyond words—unifies notions of diverse improvisatory practices with what those practices express, the vision—esthetic, social, intimate, unspeakable—that only an embodied, live, improvised performance can bring into being” (“‘Wild’”). Improvisation helps us connect beauty and meaning and through a visioning process, is a way to make sense, when we lack the adequate words—in the moment and through creative practice—and envision a better world despite the fragmentation, disorder, or the violence of the present.

Pedagogically, improvisation is a valuable tool to understand how African Canadian poets use multiple styles to create a complex blending of ideas; in the classroom improvisation can also positively function as an anti-theory: it can challenge philosophies that, or people who claim absolute certainty. As Sander Gilman remarks in *Fortunes of the Humanities*, humanities research and teaching have for too long functioned on the faulty assumption that knowledge is a rigid, unchanging, and permanent commodity (36). Improvisation research is important not merely because it is
cutting edge work that few academic institutions are engaged in, but because it critically opens up new spaces of dialogue, social mobility, and opportunities for retooling how we learn. Improvisation teaches us to respect differences, whether those differences are cultural, gender-based, or differences in physical attributes. And while improvisation often moves beyond the grasp of language and into the arena of embodied experience, this does not mean that improvisation—especially in the realm of free jazz—is completely free. The common myth that improvised music, as critiqued in The Other Side of Nowhere, “involves adherence to neither convention nor protocol, that it tolerates no system of constraint” is itself simply not accurate (23). Such a line of thought devalues many of the complexities of improvised music and denies a long history of improvisers working across cultural lines while adhering to many carefully mapped protocols, just as any defined musical practice does. Thus, improvisation in music can simultaneously occupy the space of a learned skill, and it can function as a tool for expression outside hermeneutic vigor. As Derek Bailey states, “Free improvisation, in addition to being a highly skilled craft, is open to use by almost anyone—beginners, children, and non-musicians” (83). In this way, improvisation is community.

To improvise is to draw from the past while living in the moment, which for many global listeners involves engaging with the music as a social practice while forming dynamic interrelational communities. Improvisation is about listening (as well as performing, reading, and so on), but it is also about the risk involved in trying something new. These unexpected aspects of musical improvisation allow bridges to form between multiple creative and interdisciplinary practices, often within a single space, and with an unforeseen result. Improvised music invites exciting cross-disciplinary collaborations, such as Pierre Hébert’s (the visual) and Bob Ostertag’s (the digitally oral) project Between Science and Garbage, or Langston Hughes’s (the poetic) and Charles Mingus’s (the musical) joint album, Weary Blues. Improvisation defies simple categorization, and has ignited furious debates about whether the music belongs to the jazz tradition or not, particularly since Ornette Coleman dropped the album The Shape of Jazz to Come (1959), and then the even more harmonically free Free Jazz (1961). Improvisation, at its most provocative, is usually at its most free, innovative, and powerful. Improvisation provides not only a model of social organization, but also one of oppositional struggle reflected in the work of the best improvisers, which aside from a long list which includes free jazz luminaries John Zorn, Anthony Braxton, The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, William Parker, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and too many to possibly list, is used in some redacted form by each of the poets under discussion in this thesis.
Improvisation is vital in creating new thought patterns, symbols, or ways of being in the world. In many ways, improvisation is a larger thread that weaves throughout the dissertation to connect the various writers together in the vast tapestry of spontaneous poetic creation. While few scholars have written about the musical qualities in African Canadian poetry at length, even fewer have written about improvisation in poetry, and perhaps this is one of the first attempts to write about both in a Canadian context. There have been those who have previously written about improvisation in relation to poetry and I am grateful for the willingness of those writers to trudge through the unknown to make it a little easier for me to do so. Improvisation in African Canadian literature is a rhetorical tool to subvert standard Western notions of notation in music and poetry, as well as a way to reclaim voice and community. Because improvisation cannot be easily concocted into orthodoxy—although people try: think of how many of Charlie Parker’s improvised solos have been transcribed exactly for performance and popular consumption—it is also a reminder that improvisation is about possibility, especially where life seems impossible. Additionally, improvisation is about experimentation, something the poets of this thesis venture in their work in earnest. As Steven Green affirms in *T-Dot Griots*, an anthology of black communities in Toronto expressed in fiction, poetry, articles, plays, and songs, “We are improvisers, and spontaneous creators; off the cuff performers whose traditions are largely oral” (ix). Improvisation for African Canadian poets is about appropriation and subversion of western academic devices, as a means of alternation in the project of defining the self. Improvising the self in relation to a larger community is a venturing towards a redefinition of citizenship in the matrices of spontaneous performance.

**IV. Citizenship, Trans/Nationalisms, Community, and Multiculturalism**

“We have to start thinking about planetary citizenship. Not just national.”
—Angela Davis, “Black History”

Towards Multiple Citizenships

Defining citizenship via poetic praxis becomes clearer by thinking through some of the larger historical social constructs that have prompted poets to work through and with the concept of the citizen. As Richard Iton asks: “What happens when the shadows are foregrounded and those not normally seen as citizens with full rights—the disposable—are brought more into the picture?” (136). In principle, refugees, the disposed, the exiled, and historic racial Others, challenge the doctrines of the nation-state and pose the question: What exactly is a citizen? This thesis takes the stance that the
poetic is an act of citizenship, and that for citizenship to have real meaning it needs to be performed, although there are infinite representations of that performance. Likewise, identity, which novelist Lawrence Hill views as “fluid” and “evidently evolving” (qtd. in Thomas 145), is hardly a static entity. We must expand our definition and practice of citizenship rights, particularly for the underprivileged and underrepresented. Citizenship in this thesis is defined from below—those subsonic bass notes—for those people whose presence is often felt, but rarely heard.

The role of the citizen has been debated since the ancient days of the Greek polis. Aristotle, in *Politics*, defines the state in relation to citizens: “a compound made up of citizens; and this compels us to consider who should properly be called a citizen and what a citizen really is. The nature of citizenship, like that of the state, is a question that is often disputed: there is no general agreement on a single definition: the man who is a citizen in a democracy is often not one in an oligarchy” (qtd. in Brubaker ix). As Aristotle reinforces, citizenship is a question about definition, and the concept is hardly stable. Further, the passage from Aristotle prompts us to consider what it means to be a member of a larger political body. While full citizenship in the Athenian system was restricted (women, slaves, and others were excluded), what is key is that those who were citizens were deeply enfranchised and had the right to attend assembly, council, and other political bodies, creating a multi-performative city-state comprised of citizens who can sustain a self-sufficient life.

The modern usage of citizen (*citoyen, citoyenne*) was adopted by French and then Haitian revolutionaries to declare the symbolic reality of equality. As Derek Heater, at the forefront of citizenship studies, writes, “the French revolution first established the practice of citizenship as the central feature of the modern socio-political structure” (*What is Citizenship?* 4). I would also add the Haitian revolution to this modern “socio-political structure” because it contributed to our understanding of Blackness, freedom, and modernity in relation to being a citizen and was the only slave revolt which led to the founding of a state. Today, the concept of citizenship is virtually global in its reach and is largely synonymous with modernity; however, equality and citizenship, and the need to explore and challenge the border between being a citizen and being an alien are as imperative as ever. Idealistically, citizenship grants equality in a fraternal state, but often there is a disconnect between the promise of equality and the reality of exclusion under the auspices of citizenship for all.

In *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Rogers Brubaker examines the global perspective of citizenship as “a powerful instrument of social closure, shielding prosperous states from the migrant poor. Citizenship is also an instrument of closure within states. Every state established conceptual, legal, and ideological boundary between citizens and foreigners” (x). Essentially, Brubaker, while presenting citizenship as a universal feature of the modern socio-
political landscape, shows that citizenry is a public act that acknowledges a set of persons as members while it renders all others residually as non-citizens, or aliens. Because only citizens have a right to enter (and remain in) the territory of a state he concludes: “Citizenship is thus both an instrument and an object of closure” (23). Rather than looking at citizenship as a legal formula, Brubaker ventures towards a concept of the citizen as a prominent social and cultural verisimilitude where active engagement for the better of society should be the role of the citizen. Through Brubaker’s analysis, the validity of the nation-state—he is particularly critical of Nazi Germany—is put into question and makes room to consider how one can sound a poly-citizenship. For example, what does it mean for a Canadian citizen to think of himself or herself as predominantly Quebecois, yet still Canadian? Can one maintain “Indian” status and also be a Canadian citizen? What does it mean for a Canadian citizen to think of himself or herself as a Jamaican-Canadian? The question and definition of what citizenship encompasses must consider not just who can be a citizen, but how one can be a citizen with multiple allegiances and identities.

In the most literal and legal sense, one is usually a citizen by virtue of *jus sanguinis*, which is citizenship by inheritance, or by *jus soli*, citizenship by state territory. While citizenship accords rights, most notably the right to vote, historically citizenship has also been about exclusion. Until emancipation in 1863, millions of Americans were not only denied their citizenship status, but they were not even considered free. The right to vote for women in Canada was not granted until 1918, and did not apply to Quebec until women gained full suffrage there, in 1940. Further, Native Americans were not accorded citizenship until 1924. In some cases citizenship can be a rejection of special status, as shown in Canada in the late 1960s by “The White Paper,” an act created in 1969 under Trudeau’s liberal government with the intention of abolishing the “Indian Act.” By demolishing the “Indian Act” the government would essentially be abolishing land claims, status Indians, and making way for a gradual integration of Native people into Canadian society (arguably filling the initial secretive goals of the “Indian Act”). Thomas King argues the “White Paper” had a single goal: “To get the government out of the “Indian business” (137). Clearly, citizenship is a complex business, and not having the rights that are afforded from citizenship or special status is, as Sharon Morgan Beckford states, “like living in hell; as [Northrop] Frye argues, ‘it is like living outside the bush garden, with its culture, cultivation, and civilization’” (36). Many of the liberal proponents for minority citizenship rights have come from the liberal school that emphasizes rights. This liberal style is in contrast with what Heater defines as the “civic republican style,” which is largely based on the idea of a republic: a sharing of power where citizenry in public affairs is “to the mutual benefit of the individual and the community” (44).
The civic republican style builds on Aristotle’s view that citizens should share in the civic life of ruling and being ruled in turn. The problem with this model is that traditionally citizenry is the providence of the leisured propertied elite, precisely why Aristotle favoured landowners over traders. Civic republicanism also disavows those who are considered “free-riders” or lazy, which is how the modern American Republic party functions. While I certainly like the participatory nature of the civic republic system, as long as it doesn’t include forced military service, this thesis is closer in thought to the liberal tradition in its emphasis on inalienable rights for all people in a state—unless they want to harm others, of course. However, I also dispute the neoliberal view that freedom and autonomy are stripped away when we help others through welfare programs, while also acknowledging, as Heater attests, that the liberal tradition is a product facilitated by the emergence of capitalism, where private life—like free trade—is protected under the state. In this way, my notion of citizenship rejects both the civic republican style and the liberal tradition in favour of a hybrid system (perhaps similar to what Richard Dagger terms “republican liberalism”): where citizenship is freely sounded and performed, but where we are always actively working towards the concept of a global community. Few countries, and the residents and denizens of their major cities, can claim that their citizens share the same language, or belong to the same ethno-national group. I am in agreement with Will Kymlicka, a strong proponent of citizenship rights for minorities, who in *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, contends that a “liberal theory of minority rights, therefore, must explain how minority rights coexist with human rights, and how minority rights are limited by principles of individual liberty, democracy, and social justice” (6). It is through the acknowledgment of minority rights, and of those deemed as aliens, that we can arrive at freer and more just concepts of the citizen.

As Heater usefully questions, “Is it perhaps the very concept of a singular form of citizenship that should be questioned?” (114). I think that if we are to study citizenship meaningfully in today’s world, we need to understand the concept as a mosaic of identities, responsibilities, allegiances, nationalities, and rights, rather than as any single unitary concept. Rather than a *damnosa hereditas*—a ruinous inheritance—we should be striving to leave the world a better place, which includes taking care of the planet as well as the people and living creatures who inhabit it. And while citizenship is often conceived within national boundaries, even within provincial or state boundaries, as the Dred Scott Case of 1857 exemplifies, there is value in thinking in how the citizen can be conceived as multiple through a cosmopolitan citizenship. As Angela Davis said when she spoke in Guelph, Ontario in 2012, “We have to start thinking about planetary citizenship. Not just national,” which echoes Greek thinker Marcus Aurelius who stressed cosmopolitan citizenship, believing that
wherever a man lives he is a citizen of a world-city. As Heater states, “Cosmopolitanism stressed the importance of the individual in the universal order and therefore connected to the civil ideal of a citizen’s freedom and equality with his fellows” (96). The very notion of cosmopolitanism, deriving from the Greek *cosmos* (Κόσμος, the universe) and *polites* (Πολίτης, citizen) is an age-old concept where we are citizens of the cosmos or universe. Under this model the responsibility of being a citizen is applied on a planetary level, which insists that all people deserve the right of access to clean water. Further, it implies that animals and the environment have rights as well, and that citizenship is performed in the moment because we can no longer sit comfortably if another citizen across the globe is being poorly treated. It also means we must put pressure on multinational companies to change their policies if they adversely affect people or the environment.

While I’ve hardy done the concept of citizenship full justice in my exceedingly brief analysis, I hope I was able to emphasize the point that citizenship is textured. No longer for the elite alone, it is to be, as Heater attests, universally confirmed for all citizens are: “(a.) equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship; and (b.) equally subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship” (192). I’m not going to adumbrate what all those rights are, which is far outside the scope of this thesis, but will rather use the poetry in the subsequent chapters to outline how citizenship can function as both a right and a responsibility for change. Citizenship is more than a piece of paper. As the Gate Keeper tells Lacuna in Wayde Compton’s fable, “The Blue Road: A Fairy Tale,” “If you sign papers and become a citizen, you can come and go as you please […] Citizens like yourself are required to take possession of a special mirror, which they are to carry on their person at all times” (49th Parallel 92-93). The parable sounds familiar to citizen cards in Nazi Germany. Citizenship bounds a group of individuals together, typically to the state, or world (however defined), while ethnicity binds individuals to their cultural group. I, as do the poets of *Soundin’ Canaan*, fervently reject all incarnations of second-class citizenship. Rather, citizenship should come with the intended premise that citizens are to work together for the betterment of the society to which they belong—working most diligently for those who hold the least power in society—if the term is to be useful at all in this work. We are all connected, yet separate, and Canada might just become, as Heater believes, “the first post-modern democracy, that is, a cluster of groups with their own identities and participative roles replacing a holistic citizenship” (*A Brief History* 94). Citizenship as an active individual right provides a model of improvisatory citizenry where we take turns soloing within the larger group—a form of individuated transnational identity.
Nationalism, as a social movement and ideology, is a fairly new concept conferred as a doctrine at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Özkirimli 12; Smith 5; Kedourie 1). Nationalism is often discussed in reference to the belief, creed, or political ideology of a group of individuals who have a strong identification with a nation: a nation is often thought of as a group of people or a community who share a common tongue, culture, descent, or history. Yet, I agree with Anthony D. Smith and Ernest Gellner that nationalism is none of those ethno-symbolic registers in the singular sense, but rather an ideology defined by a belief in a nation. Nationalism is, as Gellner defines, “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (1)—in short, nationalism is an inescapable result of modernity. American jingoists or Quebec separatists, for example, subscribe to an ideology of a national dream that often excludes those who do not fit under the ethnic model they have in mind for the nation. As the St. Augustine epigraph states, “A nation is an association of reasonable beings united in a peaceful sharing of the things they cherish” (XIX—xxiv); figure out what those cherished things are and you might understand the nation. Yet, we must remember that Augustine’s vision for these cherished things was ethereal and patriarchal, reinforcing the notion that nationalism is an ideology, since it always involves competing notions vying for authenticity, whether they be primordialist, modernist, perennialist, or ethno-symbolic.

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, nationalism is an imaginative act that relates “to reproductive heteronormativity as a source of legitimacy” (Nationalism 13) and which “negotiates with the most private in the interest of controlling the public sphere” (57). For the theoretical framework of this thesis, I intend to move away from ethnic uniformity and into multiple soundings and imaginings of the nation that privileges the notion that human beings within the nation/state maintain equal human dignity. So, while I agree while Spivak that nationalism colludes with the private imagination to control the public sphere, whether those ideologies are heteronormative or ethnoracial, the nation—a people sharing a set of values—can also help create more just societies. I work against a singular definition of nationalism, as I find ethnic nationalism particularly limiting, and move to suggest, as Cecil Foster does, that genuine multiculturalism acknowledges that society is not structurally perfect and that all citizens—for me that includes the historical archetypal slave, outsider, immigrant—should claim an equal part on the fraternal membership of belonging to society.
In this thesis, I engage with how each poet thinks of himself or herself as performing their own brand of citizenship in relation to, or against, the various ideologies of national boundaries—even if they construct their own version of ethnic nationalism, as poet George Elliott Clarke does, in his intention to contest the current xenophobic models in place.

Like citizenship, it is often those in power who get to decide what the nation is, as a novel like Hugh MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes* (1945) reuses the romantic mytho-historical narrative of Canada with two founding nations of French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians. A nation (and its offshoot—nationalism), like citizenship, is an age-old concept that is more a fantasy than a reality. Of course, all ideas are representations of perceived realities, the nation being one we have often used to organize history. The nation, as Benedict Anderson argues in his *Imagined Communities*, is an imagined political community. This community is imagined because as Anderson puts it, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The imagined nation became particularly possible, as Anderson argues, when print capitalism did away with axiomatic privileged access to script-language such as Latin by printing media in the vernacular to maximize circulation. As a result, a reading public and a common discourse emerged.

What is appealing about the nation in Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is that he is not adverse to the idea of nationalism, as he finds utopian value in nationalism even in a globalizing world. Conversely, nationalism can be a dangerously pervasive force at the root of war between different nations. Hence, Bertrand Russell criticized nationalism for removing the individual’s ability to judge his or her country’s foreign policy (*Speaks*), and Albert Einstein defined nationalism as “the measles of mankind” (Viereck 117). Nationalism has often been conflated with patriotism to exploit citizens or members into engaging in the Nation’s conflicts, and nationalism often has trouble working along the bordering realities of other nations, or poly-citizen allegiances (see Anderson): such poly-citizen allegiances are at the heart of genuine multiculturalism (see Foster). I also acknowledge that at times nationalist movements, such as the Black Arts movement, or Clarke’s desire for national paradigms, are formed in response to other more oppressive nationalisms. The notion of a diasporic nationalism can be empowering as we consider the political possibilities of diaspora, or what Richard Iton, in his book *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, refers to as diaspora’s “geo-heterodoxy,” its “capacity to imagine and operate simultaneously within, against, and outside the nation-state” (202). As Winfried Siemerling maintains, the move “to ‘transnational’ cannot mean abstracting from national paradigms; it rather implies reconstructing the national as relational effect that need perspectives beyond itself to explicate its specifications” (“Bi-Culturalism” 150). Most of
the writers in this thesis—aside from Clarke—are more interested in transnational models, working against claims for singular nationalisms in favour of assemblages of ideas, and more malleable borders. Continents and borders, as well as cultures, continue to shift over time. Rachel Adams’s central claim in Continental Divides is that “many of the things we know about ‘American’ culture appear very different when examined through transnational frames that include portions of Canada, the United States, and Mexico” (7). Adams provides a more fluid model, akin to a model of indigenous transnationalism where Native writers have formed “coalitions across the boundaries of tribal nations and nation-states” (35). We also see transnationalism actively taking place in cities where large assemblages come together in a global city, where Canada itself functions as a transnational space. Such is the case in Dionne Brand’s novel What We All Long For, where lives “in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated” (5) and full of “polyphonic, murmuring” (149). Under the global-city model, transnational paradigms can be valuable because they acknowledge the inherent multiplicity of the postmodern human experience. Without ethnic nationalism as the base ideology, we are all equally citizens of the state (can we ever escape?) working towards what King, Jr., Trudeau, and others define as the just society.

However we conceive of nationalism or transnationalism, we should move away from an emphasis on uniformity, for it is uniformity (particularly ethnic uniformity) that often generates violence and hate. Isolation can only create more of the same; as Trudeau eloquently argued, societies must consider the interests of all people who inhabit them: “What I dare to believe is that men and women everywhere will come to understand that no individual, no government, no nation is capable of living in isolation, or of pursuing policies inconsistent with the interests—both present and future—of others” (qtd. in Axworthy 29). Trudeau argued that the modern state is pluralistic, and one in which citizens must come together as individuals with equal rights and mutual tolerance, irrespective of their ethnic background, class, or religion (Essential 100). Thus, in part because of Trudeau’s multicultural approach to nationalism, which fits with the decentralized and plural approaches of postmodernism (was Trudeau a postmodernist?) we enter into Canada as a space in process, always becoming. Such was Trudeau’s desire to “separate once and for all the concepts of state and nation, and make Canada a truly pluralistic and polyethnic society” (127). It was also the foundation for his lasting legacy, and Canada’s hope for a more inclusive future: multiculturalism.
Multiculturalism

Here I am, in my sixties,
But I announce the 1980s—
A new Canada, a new Canaan,
A gilt, sparkling Constitution,
Sunning a Just Society,
A rainbow of minorities—
Multicultural, bilingual, at peace.
—George Elliott Clarke, Trudeau 104

Much of this thesis is an idealization of what Canadian multiculturalism can aspire to be: a gesturing towards a more equal and free society for all its members. Despite the challenge that power is multiple, diffuse, and ubiquitous, I hope to show how an improvised multiculturalism provides a possible template of how we can begin to think about change, and the just society. Soundin’ Canaan attempts to demonstrate how improvised beings—that is, individuals allowed to exercise their identities as mutable constructs open to constant change—when theoretically read in relation to jazz innovation (and disruption) gesture towards what Cecil Foster describes as “genuine multiculturalism” (Blackness 503). However, it might appear anachronistic to assume that Pierre Elliott Trudeau (a white Canadian Prime Minister), whose robust liberalism (which emphasizes equality of individuals) took shape through multiculturalism, championed the ideals that jazz and the American Civil Rights movement heralded freedom for most African Americans; yet, upon a closer look, multiculturalism in its most idealized form provides a framework for radical social change in the spirit of Black creative praxis and freedom. In a public interview, when I asked Cecil Foster about the connection that Canadian multiculturalism shared with jazz, and more specifically with the Civil Rights movement in the United States, he polemically stated, “it is difficult to see a separation between multiculturalism and the Civil Rights Movement” (“Writing” 6):

But by the 1960s the [Canadian] system was bankrupt, ideologically the system was bankrupt. We see this for example in the Bi and Bi Commission, certainly not as a bicultural country, certainly not as a white man’s country. But this also coincides with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, where the pressure was on for a second reconstruction. And it is key to think of Trudeau and John F. Kennedy in terms of the parallels. Where both of them were personalists in terms of their ideologies: Roman Catholic, left-wing personalists. The same ideology that produced Martin Luther King, that produced many of the leading leftist leaders, people who
gave the world a universal declaration of human rights, people who fought against nationalism. (7)

For many the American dream had become a fragmentary nightmare, first with the death of John F. Kennedy, and then when James Earl Ray gunned down Martin Luther King, Jr. only one day before the Liberal leadership convention on Thursday, April 4th 1968. The upsurge of violence and chaos in America’s largest cities following King’s assassination shared front-page headlines in Canadian newspapers with the convention victory of Pierre Trudeau. Multiculturalism and Trudeau’s notions of the just society presented an opportunity to negotiate disorder and fragmentation by embracing difference and trying to come together as a holistic group.

Ideally, in their most organic forms, multiculturalism and improvisation—or a multiculturalism predicated on improvisation—provide frameworks in policy, and hopefully in praxis, to deconstruct some of the power formations that initially thought of Canada as the last (albeit amorphous) white man’s country. Multiculturalism is an opportunity to engage with the rights of all people in a society, and it is for this reason that I believe multiculturalism provides a valuable multi-locus for how we conceive of the citizen. As Will Kymlicka argues in Multicultural Citizenship, “A comprehensive theory of justice in a multicultural state will include both universal rights, assigned to individuals regardless of group membership, and certain group-differentiated rights or ‘special status’ for minority cultures” (6). Kymlicka argues that the multicultural policy promotes polyethnicity rather than an assimilation of immigrants, which is why some “French Canadians have opposed the ‘multiculturalism’ policy because they think it reduces their claims of nationhood to the level of immigrant ethnicity” (17). Multiculturalism, aside from a policy, has been used to unite Canada’s two official cultures—French and English—and promote cultural pluralism and diversity.

Therefore, rather than apply multiculturalism as a whitewashing blanket strategy that subsumes all others to solely highlight the ecumenicity and diversity of the term within the Toronto cultural milieu, I prefer to engage with multiculturalism at the level of policy, as well as by examining how various writers and theorists, myself included, approach the term. At best, as Foster attests, “Multiculturalism is the living out of faith, the belief that the good that humans choose will be a good not only for their time but for the future as well” (Race 154); in the middle, multiculturalism, as Smaro Kamboureli states, “recognizes the cultural diversity that constitutes Canada but it does so by practicing a sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them” (Scandalous 82); at worst, Neil Bissoondath argues that multiculturalism creates “idealized Blackness that is chaos and fragmentation with no clear sense of common unity, history, or culture” (qtd. in Foster, Blackness 373). Furthermore, many critics argue
that multicultural policies and practices concentrate on the preservation of the (static) heritage of the Other and on containment within a dominant society, which has given rise to discourses of recognition, which is often a kind of ‘tolerance,’ promoted by Charles Taylor in his “Politics of Recognition.” Rinaldo Walcott, throughout his text Black Like Who?, argues that multiculturalism produces a static heritage that “support[s] identity politics and limit[s] political imaginings and possibilities” (35), that “locates specific cultural practices in an elsewhere that appears to be static” (119), and that makes “Others adjacent to the Nation, not quite citizens” (139). Other African Canadian critiques of multiculturalism, such as M. NourbeSe Philip’s “Why Multiculturalism Can’t End Racism,” disparage multicultural policy because it does not address the problem of racism.

Further, many theorists take issue with multiculturalism on a semantic level, as Ric Knowles in Theatre and Interculturalism asserts: “I prefer intercultural to other terms available […] because it seems to me important to focus on the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces between cultures, spaces that can function in performance as sites of negotiation” (4). In various ways, Walcott, Philip, and Knowles (and others) are right in asserting that multiculturalism in Canada is flawed, and although the policy does include specific methodologies on how to deal with racism, in many of its earlier inceptions it could be read as a policy of attempted assimilation of certain groups, specifically First Nations people through documents such as the “White Paper,” and the later direct and seemingly inevitable exclusion of First Nations people as existing outside the 1988 Act itself (section 2 (d)). Yet, many of the critiques leveled against multiculturalism often perceive the Act itself as static when it is rather intentionally ambivalent as a policy that is intended to guide decisions, to create a space that allows for improvisation, future possibilities and inevitable change. It is intended to reflect the “racial diversity of Canadian society and [acknowledge] the freedom of all members” (3. (a)), which is hardly a static idealism so much as it is predicated on the hope of the people promoting the policy and moving within multicultural spaces. It is within these spaces where we can put democratic discordance into practice to negotiate difference in productive—albeit sometimes unstable—ways.

For fragmentation

Charles Taylor, in The Malaise of Modernity, argues that the real danger in society is not actual despotic control but fragmentation (112), going on to claim that the absence of effective common action throws people back on themselves (117). Taylor’s anxiety is founded on the modernist notion of authenticity and judicial civility, which is threatened under polarization by special interest campaigns, and by a lack of what he believes to be effective compromise. Taylor has
articulated one of the central concerns of multiculturalism, which is: how do we all come together, if all cultures, groups, individuals, and political factions have their equal say? Taylor’s rhetorical question is a concern and desire for a cohesive cultural narrative. One way Soundin’ Canaan works its way through questions and quarrels around multiculturalism, as well as gender, race, and identity, is through what I read (in the poets explored) as an impetus towards improvised practices, poetic echolocation, and musical/poetic mélange that acknowledges performances of identity and community as unfixed, and as in process. For example, a passport photo is often duller, poorer, and less lifelike than any other photo, which is why Jean-Luc Nancy argues that “A true identification photo would be an indeterminate mélée of photos and scribbles [graphies] that resemble nothing, under which one would inscribe a proper name” (Singular 157). Similarly, if we were to represent the people of Canada in a photograph it would appear as a tapestry of interwoven polylayered representations that are always changing. Even Trudeau’s tripartite Canada (French, English, Other) includes difference, although not as much as it could: “Linguistically our origins are one-third English, one-third French, and one-third neither. We have no alternative but to be tolerant of one another’s differences” (Essential 145).

Canada’s history and linguistic makeup are more complex than a division by thirds, and involve more than tolerance, but I think Trudeau was on the right track to claim that in Canada there is no absolute historical (or racial) meaning. Further, multiculturalism—other than at the level of official policy—is not all that different at the level of community outside of Canada. For, as Nancy argues in Being Singular Plural, multiculturalism exists wherever we find culture, which is essentially everywhere on this planet: “Every culture is in itself ‘multicultural,’ not only because there has always been a previous acculturation, and because there is no pure and simple origin [provenance], but at a deep level, because the gesture of culture is itself a mixed gesture: it is to affront, confront, transform, divert, develop, recompose, combine, rechannel” (152). I very much like Nancy’s conception of multiculturalism as an understanding of culture. Wherever there is culture, acculturation, and contact zones, there is multiculturalism. Or clearer still: there is community.

The Canadian Community to Come

While self-individuation is critical to the conception of Blackness and the modern self, as well as to individual poetic style, there cannot be a notion of the self without the impulse for others to come together and form a whole. As Kymlicka evocatively states, “The fact that community rights exist alongside individual rights goes to the very heart of what Canada is all about” (27). There is
No community without individuals, and there is no individual without community. The challenge is to decide what values unite individuals to a community, or to an imagined nation. While shared values often hold a community together, it is also a lack of a cohesive narrative that has the potential to make the Canadian community unique. More so than our neighbours to the south, Canada struggles with an identity crisis, exemplified in Atwood’s concept of failure in *Survival* and debated in the large manifesto-like Massey Report. A lack of a singular homogenous narrative is a reminder that Canada has always been a land of constant immigration, exodus, acculturation, and change. Further, community is hardly limited to the space in which one resides, evidenced in the split identities and communal affiliations of the various poets’ soundings. Rather, the poets of this thesis challenge the pervasive narratives of collective belonging via “Diaspora sensibilities” to overcome “the problem of locating oneself solely within national boundaries […] in the contradictory space of belonging and not” (Walcott, *Black* 22). It is around the “contradictory space of belonging and not” that the writers of *Soundin’ Canaan* create a common culture—syncretized from a plurality of communities—to form the basis of a community without community still to come. Community is not perennially static, but is always changing and coming as Nancy argues: “Community without community is to come, in the sense that it is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity” (*Inoperative* 71).

Individuals and, by relation, the societies that connect them together, have no single essence, and therefore, as Giorgio Agamben insists, “the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize” (*Community* 43). Rather, as humans discursively practicing the act of being human, we are always striving towards a “coming community,” where people do not belong to this or that universal, but to a whatever category: “the coming being is whatever being” (*Community* 1). As Agamben polemically attests in *The Coming Community*, the whatever simply belongs, since it is the condition of belonging itself (1-2). We exist as possibility, and it is the possibility of the whatever “itself being [taken] up without an identity [that] is a threat the State cannot come to terms with” (86). In the same way that the disruptive musical practice of Black creative musicians created an anti-assimilationist musical soundscape, so too does multiculturalism, at its core, enact anti-assimilative predispositions against the State, for the Nation-State can no longer represent any single unified ideology. Chapter One’s long exegesis into history, community, multiculturalism, and resistance is a protracted effort to show that the literature of this thesis belongs to a markedly complex history full of continuities and ruptures. Now in knowing some threads of the past, as well as the evocative provocations of “accumulated critical lore,” we can proceed to critical readings of the texts themselves.
REMIX 1

It is a tall order for any thesis to cover all histories and theories of music, citizenship, poetry, and so on. Certainly this chapter was unable to do so, but hopefully it also highlighted that the schism between the various theoretical underpinnings of Soundin’ Canaan is not necessarily so wide. The selected poets, as we shall see, are writing, sounding, perhaps even signing, about the very resistance and need for greater citizenship status I argue for, and with an ear towards history, resounding the upheavals of the past to build a better future. I began with a focus on a loosely constructed historical time-lag by outlying historical figures and several of the larger themes of the thesis before delving into sketching the literary output and concerns of African Canadians over the last 400 years, because the two are related. True, there are boundaries between much of the theory and history I’ve drawn together—often we construct them—but one of the interesting things about African Canadian literature is its ability to move across many of our self-imposed literary boundaries. George Elliott Clarke describes African Canadian literature as “one that is a branch of Canadian literature, but which also maintains definable, Africanist oral linguistic strategies, as well as a special relationship to song, rhythm, and a specific history” (Odysseys 203). All literatures have a specific history, but Clarke reminds us that we cannot look at African Canadian literature without also considering the dialogism from which it springs, mainly orality, song, as well as specific regional, national, and global histories.

My use of Blackness—as improvisation and hope—is an in-the-moment antiphon to the racism and the imperialism of whiteness, both within and outside the nation. Resistance in music and poetry, as a disruptive pedagogical mode, challenges the larger transnational systems of oppression. Citizenship as an improvised form of Blackness can work against the malaise of capitalist apathy through a reengaging of the poetic, which can respond to, or reengage, the political. Once again, I emphasize the value of such discursive methodologies through the significance that music and the larger DJ methodology of Soundin’ Canaan can play in reinvigorating the active nature of critically nuanced and engaged practices by treating history not as an artifact but as a living elastic fabric of social consciousness. Music as such runs the risk of de-politicizing or de-historicizing the material I engage with, but it does so with an eclectic hope to challenge fixity in all of its forms: there is no one citizen, no one community, no one concept of the nation, no one DJ mix. And so, I argue that DJ methodology is not ahistorical, but an understanding and dedication to the past with the need to effectively sound and blend such histories into the present. If anything, a cerebral DJ methodology is a multifarious engagement with the past in order to make the present more palpable and immediate.
There is no unitary approach to history and I’ve merely outlined some historical underpinnings and scholarly concerns of perceptively approaching African Canadian literature. Improvisation and Blackness are driving forces of African Canadian scholarship that disavow the narrow belief that we—that is, Canadians, and human beings—are fatally determined. We are not. Chapter Two on dub poetics sounds an improviso imperative—and within a Canadian and global Caribbean context—as dub is not afraid to borrow from other forms, change, and be changed, through perpetual self-examination and a stretching of the boundaries of the form’s aesthetic to reveal and revel in the poetic possibilities of improvisatory citizenship(s).
CHAPTER TWO

A DÜPPY STATE OF MIND: DÜB POETICS AND IMPROVISED CHANT IN M. NOURBÈSE PHILIP’S ZONG!

Dubin dubin
dubin dubin
de people dem a dub in de street
—Mutabaruka, “Dub Poem,” The Mystery Unfolds

I. REGGAE AND DÜB POETICS

Reggae

Play I some music: (dis a) reggae music!
Play I some music: (dis a) reggae music!
Roots, rock, reggae: dis a reggae music!
Roots, rock, reggae: dis a reggae music!
—Bob Marley & The Wailers, “Roots, Rock, Reggae”

Reggae, a precursor of dub poetics, is integral to the performative poetry scene in Toronto, particularly beginning in the 1970s until the present moment where reggae and dub continue to develop and thrive. My discussion of reggae is curtailed, because the primary focus in the first half of this chapter is on how dub poets, chiefly in Toronto—with a particular emphasis on the “mother” dub poets—create a complex understanding of global communities, sounding polyphonic citizenships, plural identities, and iterative resistances with an attuned diasporic consciousness. From there, I adapt the dub consciousness as a viable tool for historical revisionism and resistance in M. NourbeSe Philip’s long poem, Zong!

Reggae, as a musical genre, form, or style, first developed in Jamaica in the 1960s. While reggae is sometimes used most broadly to refer to all popular styles of Jamaican dance music, the term reggae refers to a particular and distinct aesthetic style of music that evolved out of ska and rocksteady, although the music was strongly influenced by African American jazz and rhythm and blues. As poet and reggae historian Kwame Dawes articulates in Natural Mysticism, reggae’s arrival signifies “a pivotal and defining historical moment in the evolution of a West Indian aesthetic” (14). Dawes offers that it was the emergence of reggae in the late 1960s “that provided Jamaica (and the Caribbean region) with an artistic form that has a distinctively postcolonial aesthetic” (17). Reggae is postcolonial for the political response contained within its subversive lyrics (and form), which contests the cultural legacies of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. Reggae absorbs other forms and it is not afraid, as Dawes informs us, to “change and be changed, it is not reluctant to examine
itself and try to stretch the limits of the aesthetic” (32). In addition, as Dick Hebdige illuminates, the Jamaican concept of “versioning”—a panache of democratic revisioning—is at the heart of most African American and Caribbean music: “They’re just different kinds of quotation. And that’s the beauty, too, of versioning. It’s a democratic principle because it implies that no one has the final say. Everybody has a chance to make a contribution” (Cut n’ Mix xv). The notion of “versioning” is particularly useful in thinking through how citizens adapt to a society that is itself always changing. Reggae’s adaptability and open aesthetic have made the music particularly popular amongst urban populations: you will find reggae and its diverse offshoots in nearly any metropolis on the planet.

The term reggae is described in the Dictionary of Jamaican English (first published in 1967) as a modified spelling of “rege,” as in “rege-rege,” which is a word that means rags, ragged, or a quarrel or row. As a musical term the word first appeared in the 1968 rocksteady song, “Do the Reggay” by The Maytals. There are, unsurprisingly, like the blues and jazz, numerous debates about the origination of the term. Reggae music is typically played in 4/4 time because the symmetrical rhythmic pattern of the music is most suited to that pattern. Perhaps the most distinguishable features of the music are the offbeat rhythms: staccato chords, typically on a piano or a guitar (or both) on the offbeat measures, frequently referred to as the skank. A standard drum kit with a highly tuned snare drum (to give a timbales-type of sound) often blasts out the riddim, a basic pattern that is used repeatedly for different artists to write and work with. Reggae was largely made popular to Western audiences through the music of The Wailers (a group started by Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer back in 1963), the 1972 film, The Harder They Come, starring and featuring the music of Jimmy Cliff, and Eric Clapton’s 1974 cover of Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff.” Reggae is a music that is always revisiting and dubbing over itself, being rooted in a central aesthetic of change and variation upon a repeated rhythmic pattern. We see the dub aesthetic in praxis in quintessential dub organizer Lee “Scratch” Perry’s consummate capacity for improvisation, never truly settling down as he articulates in his song, “African Hitchhiker”: “I am an alien from outer space / And I got no home and I’m living in my briefcase.” Despite Scratch’s scratching over the conception of home, reggae has found many homes in its continued evolution and influence of form, from styles and spinoffs in hip-hop and rap, dancehall, raggamuffin, reggaeton, and other fusions.

Although Reggae music is often intensely political—many songs and groups narrate the Middle Passage and slavery and contest the history of colonialism—it is also music with a strong message of love, unity, and community, which is spread through the embodied practice of dance. As Marley animates in “Roots, Rock, Reggae,” “Feel like dancing, dance cause we are free / Feel like dancing, come dance with me!,” reggae is a celebration of life’s potential realized and enacted in
loving practice. Dawes articulates, “dancing is not simply an act of recreation, but a statement, an articulation of reality” (110). I contend that reggae, like most musics, allows one to effectively bend time and cross national boundaries, to enter an ideal category where unity and allegiances can be formed across the fictitious borders of nation-states. Dub—as a palimpsestic aesthetic—is largely at the heart of the postmodern articulation of reggae music, and yet dub poetry stands apart as a unique articulation for African Canadian poets who sound a citizenship locally and globally engaged in the communal space where poetry and music can dance together.

**Dub Poetics**

Dub poetry is just another chapter in a long succession of dynamic innovative forms which includes the griots of Africa, slave narratives, the dialect poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the Baptist church preacher. There are the blues poets—Langston Hughes and others of the Harlem Renaissance— [...] black American jazz and blues with their poets of the sixties, Jamaican DJs and then dub poets and black American rap... bringing out the dynamism of the word has always been part of black culture and lifestyle.”

—Clifton Joseph qtd. in Lillian Allen, “De Dub” 18-19

As Clifton Joseph articulates, and as I have mentioned, the sequestering of musical styles is largely a fiction, as Black creative expression finds unity and cross-pollination in a vast “sound painting” of influences across the diaspora. For, as theorist Brenda Carr contends, “Dub should be understood in a continuum with diasporic oral, musical, and popular culture performance practices including (but not exhausting) gospel, jazz, blues, r&b, ska, calypso, rapso, megasound system DJs, reggae, and rap” (10). Essentially, dub can absorb any musical style if it fits its aesthetic purposes. More concisely, dub poetry is a form of performance poetry with a West Indian aesthetic and origin. It evolved out of dub music comprised of spoken word pieces over reggae rhythms and Nyabinghi traditions in Jamaica beginning in the 1970s. Rather than the Jamaican form of “toasting” (a significant stylistic influence on hip-hop), which also featured spoken word performances that were improvised, often in chant, to the music of the dancehall DJ, a dub poet’s performance is usually pre-written and prepared. Spoken or chanted with the background of reggae rhythms, or a capella or ital, and using Jamaican Creole/Patois, dub poetry effectively blends African and Caribbean, oral and griot traditions with more standard approaches to poetry and performance. Dub performances were created by removing vocals from side A of a record with a dub machine to create a B side containing a rhythm/instrumental track, often amplifying the bass and drums. Traditionally dub poets are closely aligned with DJs—DJing is indeed traditional—as they reanimate and sound the past in the present through a music-poetic performance atop a tentative original.
Jamaican-British dub poet and activist Linton Kwesi Johnson provides an early prefiguring of the dub-poet-DJ when in 1976 he wrote: “The ‘dub-lyricist’ is the dj turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub-lyricism is a new form of (oral) music-poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm background of a popular song” (“Jamaican” 398). For Johnson, the influence of reggae—both in style and as protest—are readily apparent in his poem “Reggae Sounds,” from the 1980 album Bass Culture:

Shock, black double down-beat bouncin’
Rock-wise tumble down sound music
Foot drop, find drum blood story
Bass history is a-movin’ is a-hurtin’ black story

While Johnson is certainly one of the earlier progenitors of dub poetry, Oku Onoura, inspired by “the ‘vibes’ of the deejays,” was the first to coin the term “dub poetry” (Cooper, Utterances 2). Living in Jamaica during the late 1960s, Onoura’s early stylistic influences were a mishmash of African American popular musics and trends, as he read/listened to The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as the poetry of Langston Hughes—similar models used in proto-rap and hip-hop in the late ’70s and early ’80s in the US. Christian Habekost in Verbal Riddim purports how Onoura “sees dub poetry as a form of poetry that can absorb and incorporate any kind of black musical rhythm” (4). In a 1986 public discussion Onoura defines dub poetry as “to take out and to put in […] It’s dubbing out the little penta-metre and the little highfalutin business and dubbing in the rootsical, yard, basic rhythm that I-an-I know.” As Pound resisted the tyranny of the “goddam iamb,” dub poetry often resists what Edward Kamau Brathwaite refers to as “[t]he tyranny of the pentameter” (Voice 32), although classical dub is often carefully structured around a chorus and metered rhymed verse.

Traditionally, “Jamaican Creole is the natural language of dub poetry” (Utterances 1) and as mentioned, while dub poets often privilege reggae music, nearly all forms of African American and Afro-diasporic musics are used in the performance of a dub poem as the mode continues to evade a single homogenizing definition or approach. For me, what binds dub most explicitly to reggae is not so much the metrical rhythm, but the fact that dub poetry, like much reggae, “began as, and remains, rebel poetry” (2). This is not to say that dub poetry eludes the possibility of definition.

d’bi.young.anitafrika—one of Canada’s most renowned dub poets and dub monodramatists—thinks through dub vis-à-vis her own mother’s manuscript on dub, which identifies the four major elements of the then emerging form: music, language, politics, and performance (“r/evolution” 27). Dub, as such, bridges the personal and the political, and as d’bi developed her own understanding of dub she added four more elements for a total of eight: “urgency, sacredness, integrity, and self-knowledge. I
then renamed the earlier elements of music, politics, and performance to rhythm, political content and context, and orality” (27). For d’bi.young, the principles of dub poetry—consisting of self-knowledge, orality, rhythm, political content and context, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity—combine to comprise “a comprehensive eco-system of accountability and responsibility between my audiences and me. Each principle in the methodology challenges me to not only be self-invested but to (re)position to the centre of my micro and macro communities, being both accountable and responsible (able to account for and respond to these communities)” (27). As d’bi.young told me in an onstage interview in Toronto, “the community is a big, big thing, because the community has raised me” (“‘we tellin’” 3). Similarly, Dawes writes in his poem, “Holy Dub”: “This poet is a griot in search of a village” (Midland 18). Dub poetry has the power to connect disparate communities together—like a grand multicultural dub mix—through lines of solidarity.

Numerous dub poets opt to leave dub elusive, with some of the biggest names in dub poetry referring to their work as poetry (full stop), rather than as a subset of music or poetry. For example, dub pioneer Mutabaruka contends, “My poetry is just: poetry” (qtd. in Habekost 3), which is echoed by Jean “Binta” Breeze who notes: “I’d rather say I am a poet and write some dub poems than say I am a dub poet” (qtd. in Habekost 47). Breeze and Mutabaruka’s defensive responses reflect their desire to be taken seriously, as dub poets—particularly in print—have often had to justify themselves against negative critiques of the form. Victor Chan, quite falsely, charges that dub poetry does not reflect any “subtlety of approach, anything that is inward looking, musing, quiet, reflective, tender, delicate, or registering a complexity of position or feeling” (50). Even those who write carefully about reggae, dub, and performance poetry have critiqued the form, as Gordon Rohlehr writes about both the potential and failure of dub poetics in his introduction to Voiceprint: “Dub poetry at its worst is a kind of tedious jabber to a monotonous rhythm. At its best it is the intelligent appropriation of the manipulatory techniques of the DJ for purposes of personal and communal signification” (18). Similarly, Kwame Dawes, a reggae/dub poet himself, acknowledges some of the limits of dub poetry, particularly how the “back-beat rhythm lends itself to anapaestic and iambic rhythms which have become too easily stereotyped meters for the ‘dub poem’” (83). Defying Chan and others’ recalcitrant claims about dub, the best dub poets, like top-tier performers/innovators/writers in any medium, are able to extend dub’s form to new soundings, which I will argue M. NourbeSe Philip does in Zong!. Further, all genres have those who master its aesthetic and those who mimic or appropriate the form—surely there is a palatable distinction between Charlie Parker and Kenny G despite them both falling under the fold of jazz? And despite however valid critiques of dub—or any
poetic form—may be, dub remains a powerful aesthetic challenge to Western paradigms of poetic validity, allowing for open diasporic identifications across nations.

Dub, as Carr succinctly articulates, “reframes the logic and assumptions of Western cultural gatekeepers who have asserted the incompatibility of political and aesthetic categories” (11), enacting “dub-aesthetics-in-the-diaspora” (12). Further, such dub aesthetics, as Habekost contends, are shaped by Jamaican Creole/Nation Language and a rhythm/riddim that allows poets to pick words over a distinctive musical beat. Zong!, as I will argue, is dub, at the level of language, just as at the core of Philip’s She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks is a dub chant: “and english is / my mother tongue / is a foreign lan lan lang / language/ l/anguish” (56). For “dread talk” and Creole—a mishmash of languages and vocal inflections—is, as Cooper asserts, “the language of the poor, the downtrodden, those who continue to resist and resist and resist” (Utterances 6). Thus, (particularly exiled or diasporic) women in dub, who have been working with and changing dub since its inception, are the doubly downtrodden (for gender is as Austin argues, “a double whammy,” and the “burden of black women” [126]) in search of a mother tongue. Women dub poets continue to expand dub’s repertoire to include not just familial concerns—which they do—but also a wide poetic spectrum which includes, but is hardly limited to love, sex, spirituality, and other diverse concerns that speak to the experience of being gendered in Canada, or the larger diaspora, dubbing down not only white supremacy, but also the sexist manifestations of societies that often place women, especially women of colour, at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As Cooper insists, “almost from its inception, women were bringing new agendas and new voices, different sounds and riddims into dub” (2). Cooper names Queen Nanny, an Akan Jamaican Maroon warrior princess leader, anti-slavery fighter, black liberation warrior and strategist, as an inspiration for women dub poets; she also cites dub poet Faybiene Miranda who co-published a book of poetry with Mutabaruka in 1976, and Louis Bennett, one of the first women to write down her dubs. Women dub poets are integral from the onset, and it’s not just that there are a significant number of women in dub, but there are at least as many women dub poets as men, especially in Canada: a stark verity that cannot be ignored.
Womb/an Dub Poets in Canada

I break from your sentence
write a paragraph of my own
create new forms
space
—Lillian Allen, “The Subversives,” Revolutionary Tea Party

Toronto, like Jamaica and England, has a high concentration of dub poets, many of who are founding mothers of the Canadian dub poetry scene and legacy, including Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, d’bi.young, Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, and I would add NourbeSe Philip (with an asterisk). The poetry of these dubbists articulates new forms of space on the page and in performance, enacting African Canadian individuation from the mother-poet perspective. Of the eleven poets anthologized in Cooper’s anthology of women dub poets, Utterances and Incantations, seven live in Canada and all are Afro-diasporic. This mother-poet perspective provides an idealized womb-metaphor for the birth cycle of growth, regeneration, and wisdom heard in the sounding of women dub poets’ chants, in their utterances and incantations, and in their “‘multiplying tongues’” (Utterances 10). While there are many virtuoso male dub poets in Canada (I often quote from Clifton Joseph in this thesis), the great number of women dub poets is particularly revealing, especially when we consider dub’s origins in the 1970s and the number of Caribbean immigrant women who have used the form to articulate their experience upon emigrating to Canada. Dub is an immigrant art form: it is an articulation and performance of citizenship rights, often across borders and through cross-cultural connections to diasporic communities. Just as dub borrows from recording technology, removing sounds from recordings, and then adding to them, a vast number of Caribbean-Canadian women were removed—whether by forced exodus, choice, or economic imperative—from one society into another, irrevocably changing themselves and Canada in the multi/cultural exchange.

Kristen Knopf contends that dub, using Lillian Allen—who met Oku Onuora in Cuba in 1978 and shortly after began working with dub in Canada—as her example enacts the possibilities of multicultural performance: “For the first two albums she received a Juno Award. Her dub poem ‘Colors’ is a piece that propels us directly into the way multiculturalism is reflected in most of Allen’s dub poetry […] expressed through the various colours in which the lyrical subject is dressed, on the other hand it poses the question of who subdues/marginalizes these colours/cultures” (85). It is this give-and-take and push-and-pull of multiple influences and cultures, as well as gendered experiences, which allows dub to function as a powerful articulation of female diasporic encounters. Since diaspora is an involuntary scattering or migration of people, dub is a direct manipulation of those experiences into “new forms” (Allen, Revolutionary Tea Party). Further, women dubbists
continue to evolve dub poetics within a Canadian context, most dramatically, perhaps, in dub theatre.

One of the earliest examples of dub theatre in Canada is Ahdri Zhina Mandiela’s chimerical *dark diaspora*... *in dub*: a theatre piece composed wholly from dub poems that integrates choral vocals, dub *riddims*, drums, choreographed dance, chant, elaborate costumes. *dark diaspora* announced a new era in dub, which was continued by other dub theatre practitioners such as d’bi.young. *dark diaspora* openly acknowledges its influence to Ntozake Shange’s experimental choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, yet, as George Elliott Clarke contends, rather than the universalist and feminist approach that Shange takes, Mandiela’s approach is marked “nationalist and Pan-Africanist” (*Odysseys* 54). Significant about the play is not that it incorporates American influences, but that diasporic experiences, as articulated through dub, are hardly exclusively Canadian; rather, such experiences are “African” as well as African-Canadian within the play: *dark diaspora* could have only ever been conceived in the malleable poly-consciousness of a diasporic-Canadian woman. *dark diaspora* charts the experience of black women from African through the Middle Passage and into the New World, exposing the dark irony of a country like Canada trying to turn brown or “raw” sugar into “refined” white sugar, since the raw element of the African or diasporic experience can never be erased. As the choreopoem “afrikan by instinct” in *dark diaspora* makes clear, “diasporic black canadians” are “afrikan/ by instinct/ afrikan” (465), as the speaker searches for “my own tongue” (466) and reminds the audience—parenthetically—that “(slaves do have beginnings)” (467). *dark diaspora* concludes with a dubbing of the pro-black James Brown chant: “say it/say it/ say it loud/ i m black / & I’m proud/ say it loud” (470). Is this a facsimile Blackness copied from America?—if so, only partially and with intent. We need to remember that dub is about drawing lines of affiliation: once we move out of the cultural, and into the cross-border (musical) associations we realize that dub, at its heart, is a way to write over the language of the colonizer. Such a writing-over allows women dubbists, as Cooper contends, to “not only [act] Kali- and Demeter-like, but [to] constantly [strive] to be like Maat, the Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) deity of order, harmony, balance, justice, compassion, and righteousness” (*Utterances* 9). These dubbists desire to tell stories that reshape and find meaning with the disharmony of the world, as Dawes writes, a “raven chattering over the cacophony of corn” (*Midland*, “Midland” 81), for “You’ve got to sing those songs just to keep on keeping on” (86), as difficult as it might be to sing, let alone to find an appropriate voice and language to speak in.
In an interview with Nigel Thomas, M. NourbeSe Philip describes, from a Caribbean perspective, how “language is central to the way we are, to the way we be, to use a Black expression, the way we interact with our environment and others” (Why We Write 198). Language can afford mobility, resistance, and self-awareness, and yet it can be used as a form of oppression, depending on how, by whom, and for what purposes it is used; for dub poets, it is unequivocally the former. As Yvonne Brown testifies, English is a language that has been bent in a multiplicity of ways by those who have had the King’s English forced upon them: “They bend it in all sorts of ways. Expressed in dub poetry, in reggae, in calypso, the whole thing. They make that language work and they bend it out of shape […] we have a good time making it deviant!” (Bluesprint 157). It is this notion of deviance, of troubling the line between standard language and coded speech that empowers many black poets and musicians across the diaspora as they find the write words to express their feelings of discord against a standard mode of operation. It is precisely this bending of language within a diasporic context that provides a conceptual framework to read the aesthetic qualities of Philip’s Zong!. I contend that the dub aesthetic is informed from the rhetorical implications of being outside what is considered standard. Dissonance is not simply something unmusical—there wouldn’t be jazz institutes or hip-hop festivals if it were—but rather articulates the reality of being raced in North America. Dissonance provides a valuable metaphor for Black creative expression and experience, and is a valuable mode to contest and reshape standard Western notions of proper language, harmony, and rhythm in music. As Ajay Heble notes in Landing on the Wrong Note, dissonance remains an important strategy for aggrieved populations to sound off against systems of oppression.

As I argue in “Disruptive Dialogics,” “[Thelonious] Monk’s style, or even his public persona, can be read as a negotiation of dissonance with the intention to disturb the naturalized order of knowledge production, thus creating a disruptive poetics that challenges hegemonic listening approaches to jazz and its dialogically intertwined manifestations.” While Monk has provided an endless fountain of poetic inspiration for poets in America (Amiri Baraka, Al Young, Charles Simic, Michael Harper, William Corbett, Yusef Komunyakaa, Dave Etter’s book Well you Needn’t, and Art Lange’s The Monk Poems, among others), he has equally been an inspiration to a variety of African Canadian poets. Everyone from Fred Booker, Frederick Ward, Clifton Joseph, Wayde Compton,
Dionne Brand, and Hope Anderson, as well as others has drawn inspiration from Monk, and often within a Canadian context. As Fred Booker, a singer-songwriter-poet born in Cleveland, Ohio who immigrated to Canada in 1966 writes in “Can You Dig That?”: “Thelonious Monk […] names rolling off my tongue / easier than / ‘William Lyon Mackenzie King’ / ever did” (Bluesprint 143). Clifton Joseph, one of Canada’s most revered dub poets, ends his first collection, Metropolitan Blues, with an elegiac poem that pays homage to Thelonious Monk who died one year before the work was published. The poem ends with an affirmative and iterative “MONK LIVES” (42-43) for two full pages, and was recorded as a jazzy-dub poem on Joseph’s record Oral/Trans/Missions (1990). It is Monk’s tipping meters and peculiar chords that attract poets who want to represent dissonance through a jazz orthography on the page; we can ask: What does Monk tell us about dub poetics?

Of course, Monk was not a dub poet, certainly not in the strict sense, but Monk’s negotiation of multiple forms in both the classical and jazz tradition and his stylization of those forms into new modes of playing and approaching rhythm—of making it new—is a reminder of how black artists have subverted, and continue to destabilize oppression while improvising upon a standard to make tradition meaningful in the present moment. Ajay Heble advises: “oppression, after all, is itself a space of dissonance, for it means being out of tune with naturalized assumptions about social structures and categories” (Landing 20). Through rhythmic alteration and angularity, poets working in the African tradition are able to use negation of form and language to challenge the Western epistemic order of knowledge production, not just at the level of music, but also at the level of language. Even Monk’s titles become verbal nouns, evidenced in Monk’s songs “Rhythm-a-ning” and “Jackie-ing,” for resistive identity formation is largely about using, or bending notes or words differently. To my ear and logic, this strategy makes perfect sense, since as Philip describes in Genealogy, “To speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own. […] The survival of African musical art forms probably owe their success and persistence to the fact that they were essentially non-verbal art forms” (46).105 These non-verbal art forms manifest in numerous ways, from coded speech, to the datum of drum playing, to the dubbing over of English through new modes of speaking, writing, and performing.

This desire to change language, to make it dance, is expressed in African Canadian poet Claire Harris’s long poem, Drawing Down a Daughter, which scatters “words sentences paragraphs drawing down a daughter/ / she scrambles after…” (14). The poem uses just about every device of verse poetry (poems, prose, narrative)—sans strict meter and line breaks—to create a literary collage of the narrator’s past (Trinidad) and present (Calgary) and her pre-birth experiences as she prepares a
birth gift for her daughter. The challenge of finding an appropriate gift is most explicitly confronted and emphasized in the narrator’s knowledge that the English language is oppressive; the best advice she can give her daughter is to shape this enforced language so that it may dance and sing:

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Daughter  there is no language
            i can offer you  no corner that is
            yours   unsullied
you inherit the intransitive
case   Anglo-Saxon noun (24)

[...]

Child       all i have to give
is English which hates/fears your
black skin
           make it
d   a    c
    n   e
        s
           i   g (25)
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Harris is letting her daughter know that she can find an identity even in a language that is not explicitly hers, particularly by making it dance/sing—by dubbing over it. The entwined orthographic representation of dance/sing through a glissando of fragmented words is a feat of finding the beat in dissonance, for as James Baldwin has said, “Negro speech is not a question of dropping s’s or n’s or g’s but a question of the beat” (Standley, *Conversations* 4). As Philip makes manifest, New World Africans, in their deforming and fusing of English and African dialects, were able to create a new language full of rhythm. Philip contends that “[t]he linguistic rape and subsequent forced marriage between African and English tongues has resulted in a language capable of great rhythms and musicality” (*Genealogy* 55). Philip terms this new speech, “kinopoeia,” which combines the African with the English to create a new speech that can reclaim “i-mages”—the loss of the ability to create an image of oneself: “the kinetic quality of language which I believe is best exhibited by those vernaculars that combine the African with (in this case) English” (51).106 This kinetic quality is essentially what dub exemplifies, an ample ability to duppy107 the past and manipulate a present to create more meaningful “i-mages” of the self and the African diasporic community.

In worrying the line—challenging normative ways of acting and speaking—through coded speech, resisting standard speak, classical music, enforced dress, etc., poets and musicians across the diaspora continue to transpose lines of power by disturbing the popular notion of what is right/white. James Scott has discussed how forms of resistance among subordinate groups are not always legible
by those in positions of power, and because of this they constitute “hidden transcripts” that intersect
with the sphere of formal politics only on occasion (qtd. in Dawson 18). Since dub’s choice of clear
narrative via Nation Language speaks most directly to the people who need the alternatives a dub
poem provides, which is why dub poems are frequently resistive in nature, yet hardly absent of love.
In “I Write About,” Oku Onuora probes: “You ask: Why do you write so much about blood, sweat &
tears? Don’t you write about trees, flowers, birds, love? Yes I write about trees - trees with withered
branches & severed roots I write about flowers - flowers on graves I write about birds - caged birds
struggling I write about love - love for destruction of oppression” (Echo 44). In the anger and
resistance of a revolutionary poetics is a love for a better future: a more just society.

In Canada, Mandiela uses dub, as in her choreopoem “a snow white morning” from dark
diaspora, I think to challenge the image of a multicultural Canada—as one in which whiteness often
represents purity, like snow covering Canada’s racial others—to dub over that whiteness from the
perspective of the non-white citizen:

got up this morning
saw a white man
in white shirt & tie
standing: off white walls
in his white/office
blowing his white nose
in some white/tissue
i
reached for some white/
paper to record the white/
words i knew could not describe
the colour of my disgust. (455)

The speaker struggles to find the words to colour the opaque residue of a system of oppression that
continues to ignore Blackness, as the preceding poem “blues bus” elucidates how “no one sees black
/in the rainbow” (455). Similarly, in Afua Cooper’s poem, “Oh Canada II,” Cooper provides, as
Knopf argues, “a postcolonial subversive revision of the Canadian national anthem” (96):

Canada
of genocide you are accused
why is it your jails are filled with Black men
why is it your prisons are filled with Native men
what are your intentions Canada
that you seek to bound us so (memories 85)

Women dubbists, such as cooper, mandiela, d’bi.young, lillian allen, et al., who challenge the whitewashing strategies of canadian imperialist history, appropriate their adopted tongues through acts of rhetorical alteration and linguistic combat in order to reclaim a silenced voice: to provide greater citizenship status for the disposessed. If the voice sounds militant, resistive, and confident—yet tinged with love—it is because these women dubbists have historically had agency stripped from them. Left “tongue / dumb” (she tries, “discourse” 54) they must find new ways to dance and sing.

**gender and mother tongue**

english
is my mother tongue.
a mother tongue is not
not a foreign lan lan lang
language.
languish
anguish
- a foreign anguish.
—m. nourbeSe philip, she tries her tongue, “discourse on the logic of language” 54

many female (a nebulous term, for many of these “female” authors challenge the concept of gender itself) african canadian poets work through the complexities and vagaries of language—often phallocentric and oppressively male in a colonial context—giving birth to poetry, the self, and ultimately to community. lillian allen’s psychic unrest and claire harris’s drawing down a daughter are two long poems that illustrate that poetry does in fact give birth to new revolutionary ideas. allen’s poem, “stereotype friggin’” (from psychic unrest), explores some of the contradictions of multicultural policy, particularly its inability to deal with racist or gendered violence. such resistance is affirmed by black canadian female poets who are interested in fashioning icons of opposition that resist the commoditization of form and voice, using the lacunae and the silences of the historically ancillary black female body and person as a way to reclaim the “gendered” poet, and ultimately, language itself. many african canadian female poets, including dionne brand, claire harris, and nourbeSe philip, among manifold others, set out to reclaim black female bodies and agency with the intention to revivify an afrocentric feminist epistemology that acknowledges the value of difference in the reclamation of community. as sharon morgan beckford avows in naturally woman, the demeter and persephone myth represents the black female’s quest for individuation (2). the need to reclaim myth is the same need to reclaim subject position and
ultimately language: the loss of mother tongue. This individuation and reclamation of gender and language is carefully nuanced and articulated in *Soundin’ Canaan* in the work of Philip (this chapter) and Brand (see Chapter Four), who use multimodal techniques (see Maria Caridad Casas)—orality, text, and particularly musical and poetic form—to un/tell historical silences.

Philip argues in *She Tries Her Tongue* that she “set out to destroy the lyric voice, the singularity of the lyric voice, and found that poetry had split. Metamorphosed. Into a multiplicity of voices—the polyvocula” (*Genealogy* 115). Similarly, Claire Harris, in “Why Do I Write?,” argues that the lyrical “I” is charted in African Canadian literature with a complex history of resolute politics, ethical implications, and within a variety of topologies:

The response embedded in my “I” is not the disembodied “I,” nor is it everyone’s “I,” both of which are rooted in the faulty and debilitating versions of history, in notions of power and control over both persons and nature central to modern European culture, to its cult of individualism, and to the Americas. Nor is it the naïve “I” of autobiography. Instead it is the “I” of a specific body, the African body, the female African body, as well as the “I” of the imagined, and selectively structured, narrative context. (31)

Thus, the “I” of the lyrical voice is subverted through the untelling of its various metaphorical and corporeal machinations and reclaimed for the gendered subject, even if that subject is a cacophonic choir of voices. Similarly, in *Ossuaries* (explored in Chapter Four), the lyrical “I” is a contested site, full of narrative multiplicities and contradictions, as the narrator in the second Ossuary exclaims: “I, the slippery pronoun, the ambivalent, glistening, / long sheath of the alphabet flares beyond her reach” (2.22). In describing the ambiguities of a solidified personality, of the failures of language to describe the multiplicities of identity, the unnamed narrator of *Ossuaries* reminds us that truth in the text is indiscernible from the falsities of language, demonstrating the unreadability of Yasmine (the central character of *Ossuaries*), gender, and ultimately, of a split language/consciousness. There can be lyric voice in African Canadian literature, there often is, but like most modern/postmodern poetry, there is usually no singular voice. As Canadian poet Robert Kroetsch explains in an interview with Robert Budde: “Each of us have many voices. That’s why I distrust the authority of that lyric ‘I.’ Sort of forgoes one’s own multiplicity” (124). In undermining the lyric form by markedly displaying a speaker who is made anew in each habitat *she* encounters, African Canadian texts navigate the tumultuous rift between father (English) and mother tongue (a lost language, culture, self, or past).

Through dub poetics many female African Canadian poets are able to challenge the symbolic, what Julia Kristeva terms the father (the social republic), using a resolute politics aligned with black
emancipatory principles to create a semiotic *chora* that unravels any punitive or final representation of the female experience. These poets create new spaces that not only threaten existing social orders, but also in turn make new spaces, and new communities, possible. Space is, as Jean-Luc Nancy philosophizes, “everywhere open, there is no place wherein to receive either the mystery or the splendor of a god” (*Inoperative* 148), which is why language and gender, like gods, are always modifiable—a terrain to be reworked through tactical maneuvering. Women dub poets continue to rework the spaces imposed upon what a poem or a woman should be, showing that poetry and feminism are hardly the sole domains of white people. Within the black sphere of poetics (aesthetics) and politics, black women also work against the misogyny of their male counterparts, for Austin rightly asserts, “Blacks will not be free until their women are free” (121). The linguistic rape (of enforced English) becomes all the more corporeally manifest when read along the designated space that black women historically occupy. As Philip tells Thomas in an interview, “one of the reasons that Black women were brought to the New World was to pacify men […] Black women’s bodies were reaped, very much the way that land is reaped” (202). Historically black women have had very little agency over their bodies, exemplified in the systemic raping of black women by their slave masters, to having their bodies displayed as sexually perverse (think Saartjie Baartman, aka, the “Hotentot” Venus), to pop markets where the black female body is often subsumed or appropriated in acts of minstrelsy by white pop stars. In recent Canadian history, black women’s bodies were reaped once again by affluent whites for material gain, such as in 1955 with the Domestic Worker Scheme, which was implemented to recruit approximately 300 women annually from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados to redress a perceived “‘shortage of labour’” (Carr 22). Hence, it should surprise few with even the slightest knowledge of Canada’s colonial history, that black women’s writing in Canada challenges gender conceptions through a feminism—in search of a mother tongue—that must be of necessity, as dub poet Lillian Allen contends, “anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-sexist” (“A Writing of Resistance” 67).

As Carr fittingly notes, “Canada, formed of many distinct cultural entities, has to negotiate its complexities and productive dissonances in ways that allow for the m/othering and be/longing of all its citizens with their diverse transnational allegiances” (29). And yet, if this m/othering is to work against the othering of black bodies, we must place value on the importance of stories (not just the ones that we tell, but the ones we contest) to create counter narratives from the black female perspective. M. NourbeSe Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue* is an exodus that riffs upon the wombs of language, racism, and exile, through the epic rebellion of the father figure—colonialism—in the search for a mother figure, a mother tongue, a reworking of the Demeter and Persephone myth. In
She-Tries-Her-Tongue the speaker acutely listens throughout history, “the listening / breadth of my walk” (“Adoption Bureau” 27), as the exiled Persephone searches for “She whom they call mother” (“Sightings” 33). For Philip, Canada functions as an adoptive mother country that she holds historically accountable for its injustices and re/birthing: “Canada needs to m/other us. Her very salvation depends on m/othering all her peoples—those who be/longed here when the first Europeans arrived — the Native peoples; as well as those, like the African, who unwittingly encountered History and became seminal in its development” (“Echoes” 23-24). Without a mother, or a tongue, the poet is left “tongue / dumb” (She Tries 54), a figurative representation of the violence enacted upon the slave who was torn from a real mother, a mother country, and a mother language, often with horrifying consequences for slaves caught speaking their native language as Edict II signifies in “Discourse on the Logic of Language”: “Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ, when removed, should be hung on high in a central place, so that all may see and tremble” (56). I suggest that to dub over language, not just for mother-dub poets but for many African diasporic poets, is to claim a space of resistance where maternity can be representationally, mythically, or communally possible again. Part of discordant and complex citizenship is the ability to maintain, recover, and engage with mother tongue, especially within a foster-mothered country. A dubbing that orally connects a disjointed and painful history to a fragmented, yet congruent tradition, maintained through the oral transmission of stories, language, and riddim, is both a choice to sustain language, as well as a necessity of survival.

Orality — vs- Written Language

“Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”
—Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 98

“the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.”
—Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” 56

While I find Walter Ong’s Orality and Literacy a compelling read, I’ve argued elsewhere that his “oversimplification of the division between the written and the oral as two modes of communication that are irresolute at their roots is both a reductive and prescriptive view of language that does not consider the possibility for interaction between the two” (Watkins, “Voice” 25). In praxis, First Nations literature and Black literature, among others, resist these reductive dichotomizations between oral and written mediums. Such sublimations of a cultural product (a story, book, or song) as unequivocally oral or written risk domesticating not only the literature, but
the larger tradition from which it springs. True to a degree, as Walter Ong argues, “Though words are
grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever” (12), but Ong’s
reading of written typography is too literal, as it repudiates the prosody of each living reenactment by
a reader, or teller. Here, I turn to orality as mode of speech, which like improvisation, remains
aporetic of a single approach to reading or listening. Such dialogism disrupts standard and non-
standard approaches to music and improvisation, as well as orality and text. Orality and text are not
as divergent as we often assume, and many poets (including the dub poets who are often only written
about and studied in performance-settings) desire to be both graphically and auditorily (just as they
want to be rhetorically and aesthetically) appreciated on the page.

The page provides another vantage point to understand how a poem functions, while it also
changes what we think about the written poetic tradition. I find a useful analogy in First Nations
writer Thomas King’s description of the interaction between the written and oral in his analysis of
oral storyteller Harry Robinson, which he dubs as “interfusional” writing, a style in which “the
patterns, metaphors, structures as well as the themes and characters come primarily from oral
literature” (“Godzilla” 13). The notion of dub poets writing “interfusional” poems helps to disrupt
hermeneutic approaches to texts, because the way the poems appear on the page challenges us as
readers to sound them out, blurring the lines of compartmentalization between orality and literacy.
The poems are recreated in the moment, words are left untranslated, and without the voice of a reader
enacting them, the words often fall flat. This is not exclusive to dub poetry, for as Head attests in
Canada in Us Now, “Black literature springs from a still vital oral culture. The close interaction
between creator and audience, artist and community, is perhaps the single most important element in
Black literature, especially poetry” (9). A text or a recording gains new meaning through its readers
or listeners who share in an oral tradition that Edward Kamau Brathwaite says, “makes demands not
only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the
poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him” (“English” 25). The strategies
of the dub poet reflect the desire to recreate the village, and by writing poems down, calling together
a larger reading public, the dub poet enacts a cross-cultural literary bridging between mediums.

As NourbeSe Philip remarks, dub poetry’s popular culture status with its long roots in
African oral practices invites its crossover appeal between black and white audiences (“Who’s
Listening?” 9), enacting what Maria Caridad Casas terms the playscript, which is written in medium,
but spoken in mode (xxv). Through multimodal techniques, African Canadian writers reach new
communities and engage in a larger tapestry of literary meaning, for as Casas argues, “although still
written, their poetry is also oral; if oral, then also embodied; if embodied, then also participating in
discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and a host of other systems of social organization and individual identity” (160). Another multimodal technique is abrogation, which postcolonial experts Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin define as “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and the assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in words” (Empire 37). Through abrogation, dub poets and other African Canadian writers challenge what is considered authentic writing or performance, straddling the cultural margins and rejecting “the process by which ‘authenticity’ is granted to the categories of experience authorized by the centre at the expense of those relegated to the margins of Empire” (Empire 90). A dub poet’s choice to write down poems, or tell stories in the language that subjugated their own, is a politicized act of resistance; by changing the intonations and meanings of the English language through grammatical reformation, among other linguistic techniques, all the poets in this thesis enact semiotic resistance. We see this in d’bi.young’s poem “foolishness” (rivers), which undulates between solecistic dialect (via various elisions) and standard English in order to find solidarity and poetic “revolushun”: “mi membah when mi did deh a jamaica / ghetto life nevah fun [...] I am di colour of her skin / when she look pon mi / she see herself within [...] unity mean finding solidarity / among our differences” (15).

As d’bi.young argues, there is importance to the stories we tell: “I believe that we are accountable and responsible for the stories we tell and the stories we believe” (“r/evolution” 26), which is why her art emerges “out of [her] lived experience, grounded in afrikan oral storytelling traditions, and bathed in the magical realm of myth and folklore. coupled with the sorplus methodology, I call the genre of storytelling that I am developing (influenced by many other genres and by my mentors) biomyth monodrama” (28-29). To speak and to write is to tell stories, which is why words can heal or be used as weapons. Indeed, words are weapons, as Richard Wright writes in Black Boy—in many ways his own version of a biomyth monodrama: “He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were” (272). A mastery of words and language, especially when it is in a language of colonization, or the very language that colonized you, can be, as it is with rapper/poet K’naan, a tool of upward mobility, and a testament to the will to overcome by the downtrodden: “Do you see why it’s amazing, / When someone comes out of such a dire situation / And learns the English language, / Just to share his observation / Probably get a Grammy without a gram of education. / So fuck you school and fuck you immigration!” (Troubadour, “Somalia”). K’naan’s mastery of English and rap verbiage, outside the school or immigration system, is a reminder of academia’s blindspots to the value of street education, to an orality that reshapes the very writing of my writing. More
dramatically, it is the representation of words which break at the edge of new meaning, evidenced in the chant of *Zong!*, or in the plural spaces of dub poetic soundings.

As Philip articulates in *Zong!*: “Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound—grunts, plosives, labials—is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?” (“Notanda” 205). And so, we move closer to black chant, a language in itself, and a force that exists on the edges of orality and literacy—perhaps in a space that punctuates silence. There are forces older than writing; as Zora Neale Hurston writes in *Mules and Men*, “Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started” (183), for magic is like improvised black chant: “the chant of strange syllables rose” (202). Black chant is diasporic postmodernism—once again, not to be chronologically defined—that reminds us, as Aldon Lynn Nielsen argues, how “traditions of graphic reproduction and improvisation are part of an iterative continuum with orality, not secondary or elitist or pale reflection of the spoken” (19). A dub chant refuses to conform to standard English, as we will soon see in *Zong!*, and by doing so, NourbeSe Philip and other dub poets cultivate what Kamau Brathwaite calls “Nation Language,” a positive expression he uses to disrupt the hierarchical “bad English” implications of “dialect” (“English” 21). This chant or dialect, as Brathwaite goes on to say, “may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues” (“English” 21). Further, there can be no chant without silence, since chant is often a response to historical silences, and a response to the failings of language—written or oral—to express the dramatization of a horrifying past. For how can the enslaved or exiled speak if they are left without a language to speak in? This lack of language is poetized in NourbeSe’s “Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-Bones” (*She Tries Her Tongue*), to which I’ll give the last words here:

If not in yours

In whose

In whose language

Am I

[...]

If not in yours

In whose

In whose language

Am I
In not in yours

Beautiful (50-51)

Silence?

“between notes / composes / the improvise in silence / —a symphony”
—M. NourbeSe Philip, Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence

Silence is an oft-articulated theme by the marginalized writer. It is the primary topic of Philip’s Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence, which presents a polemical challenge to Western assumptions about the silence of indigenous populations, as well as a postulation on the empowerment and story of silence. As Philip indicates, “When the missing text is silence, what is the language with which you read the silence? […] To deal in silence one must learn a new language” (Genealogy 83). Thus, Zong!, like Looking For Livingstone, is about finding new language and sound, even in silence, for “Everything has its own sound, speech, or language, even if it is only the language of silence” (Livingstone 35). In Zong! it is the un-telling of silence, represented in the various manifestations of chant, in which silence becomes audible, challenging us to listen, or un-listen: there is no music without silence. In Philip’s Zong! the reworking of the legal text (“Gregson v. Gilbert”), particularly in the opening section “Os,” exposes the many silences of the legal jargon.

Silence provides pause, allowing the mind of a reader/audience to enter into a work, as evidenced by John Cage’s experimental piece, “4:33.” Silence can be a symbol of victimization and repression, as it often is in Philip’s poetry, or in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan—a novel that chronicles Canada’s Japanese internment camps—or it can be the recognition of the lack of appropriate words between Japanese Canadian poet Roy K. Kiyooka and his father: “assuaged tongue/s of a father & son” (Wheels 138); “father our equal in either tongue / lets the silences hail ‘us’” (141). There are also moments is Kiyooka’s Wheels, Wheels, Wheels, where silence is expressed in relation to the atrocities of war—where only the “click” of a camera can animate the abject horror of genocide. It is at the museum in Hiroshima where Kiyooka’s father physically leaves the museum in disgust of the violent images: his silencing and disappearance is our silencing. Further, how can “we” respond to the question the poem poses: “which hand / pulled the trigger?” (168). We will have to answer a similar question in reading and listening to the Zong massacre. Whether it is the silences of war, our own silences, or the silences of those who have had their histories written for them, the explored literature of this thesis calls us in to listen.

The chant of dub—I’ve moved to using dub more figuratively here—is a direct response to a history of silence, and as Philip tells Thomas in an interview, “I don’t believe that we as a colonized people were ever silent or were ever silenced […] we have been written in as silences” (198). The
challenge is to learn to read the historical silences in order to learn “a new language.” Philip’s writing of poems that deal explicitly with historical silences reflects her desire to speak out, to reexamine and give a voice to the historically silenced, echoing James Baldwin’s call (in a 1970s letter to Angela Davis) to speak out, rather than continue the cycle of silence: “We live in an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal… for if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night” (qtd. in Asante, Jr. 146). For these reasons Zong! “can only be told by telling. In the many silences within the Silence of the text” (“Natanda” 191). Scholar Patricia Saunders, examining Zong!, makes the case that “[t]o work through language and silence, language must be destroyed, and ‘Ferrum’ allows her [Philip] to do this. She calls ‘Ferrum’ her ‘revenge’ on language and her ‘very own language’” (“Defending the Dead” 71). I emphasize silence here not so much as the antithesis to chant, as silence is the doubling/dubbing of chant—its phantom limb. No chant without silence, and no silence to be revealed without the healing power of chant. Silence, an articulation of historical evasions, can also be a moment of power, for silence, as we shall hear in Zong!, can reveal discovery, possibility, and even meditation. As dubbist d’bi.young unveils, “through meditative silence all is revealed. be sure to ground yourself firstly in an ongoing personal practice of silence and from that place, all your truth (questions and answers and practice) will emerge” (“r/evolution” 29). In addition, silence is about surrender—“I surrendered to the SILENCE within” (Livingstone 75)—in the hopes of recovering distant memories apropos a new diasporic consciousness.

III. DIASPORIC MEMORIES

Exile

“When transplanting, you may notice a gently ripping sound as the roots are torn from the soil. This is to be expected: for the plant, transplanting is always a painful process.”
—M. NourbeSe Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, “The Practical Guide to Gardening” 83

Exile uproots and transports a body from one space into an/other, between one bordered reality into an/other. As Chancy argues in Searching for Safe Spaces, “The condition of exile crosses the boundaries of self and other, of citizenship and nationality, of home and homeland; it is the condition of consistent, continual displacement; it is the radical uprooting of all that one is and stands for, in a communal context, without loss of the knowledge of those roots” (1). Whether one’s exodus/exile from one’s homeland is forced, whether facing civil war, lack of opportunity, or imprisonment, or even by choice (people leave home for all sorts of reasons), the uprooting is often a disruptive process, potentially leaving the exiled individual a ghost of a former self. Alternatively, of
course, exile is a necessity where exiled individuals can find hope, transforming hardship into a greater understanding of themselves, developing, as I will argue, a diasporic consciousness equally concerned with homeland, as with how the world operates. As Dante learns in his *Comedia*, once he abandons his earthly concerns—and the city he loves—he can reveal the painful truths of a sick world. Cacciaguida foretells Dante that he will “be forced to leave behind those things / [he] love[s] most dearly […] and [he] will know […] how hard the road that takes / [him] down and up the stairs of others’ homes” (*Par.* 17.55-60). Dante, at this imperative point in the diegesis of the *Comedia*, has been authorized to “reveal all that [he] has seen, and let those men who itch scratch where it hurts” (17. 128-9). Yet, Dante never forgets where he came from, which is why Beatrice, the love of his young Florentine self, is his spiritual guide, and which is why, even in exile, the African Canadian poet Lorena Gale remembers: “I am an expatriate Anglophone, Montrealise, Quebecoise, exiled in Canada. And I remember. Je me souviens” (from *Je me souviens* qtd. in *Bluesprint* 198). The exiled poet picks up material from the past, and the present, to create a poetry that dubs meaning in the possibilities of the future.

All the more reason why community and malleable conceptions of citizenship are vital to the health and well being of those who have left communities to live in new ones. As d’bi.young says, “I am a child of the village. I was raised by the village. half of my life was spent in jamaica and the other half in canada. I am the result of the community taking time over and over again to give loving attention to the growing black girl child” (“r/evolution” 26). For d’bi.young, community is defined diasporically, and her exile is not so much a painful one, as it is the reality of the diasporic citizen, of the postmodern individual making sense and performing multiple roles, “as a womban, as an afrikan, as a mother, as an artist, as a queer-identified person, as a working person, as an able-bodied person, as a not-so-new immigrant” (27) to form meaningful diasporic communities improvised with the self. Most of the poets I explore share this sense of mixed identity and inheritance, inhabiting compound identities in multiple cultural contact zones, particularly NourbeSe Philip, the central poet of this chapter. As Myriam Moïse announces, “Philip’s writing encourages the reader to share her African spiritual quest and her triangular journey from the Caribbean to Canada and back to West Africa. Philip’s poetry demonstrates how boundless diasporic spaces can be, as the diaspora displaces home and away, here and elsewhere, thus constantly redefining the limits of its own horizon.” Home, like citizenship is a process to be reworked, remade, akin to dub performance: a postmodern pastiche of past and present. I find Philip an ideal poet to examine the larger ideologies of dub, to test the limits and elasticity of the form, as a poet who often invokes black chant and creative black approaches to poetry, and yet, is often exiled, as she describes, from the Black tradition.
M. NourbeSe Philip is as a poet who is often difficult to label as to what tradition she explicitly belongs in, as she often finds herself exiled from the Black tradition, perhaps much more so than the academic tradition, or by those who write and discuss L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. “my work does not fit the traditions of Black poetry” (Genealogy 130-31). Yet, what are the traditions of black poetry and music? I resist calling NourbeSe a dub poet, or on the other end of the spectrum: a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet. What I want to emphasize is that in improvising at the margins of multiple traditions (dub, jazz, Euro and Afro avant-garde aesthetics, oral and written), NourbeSe is able to take the experience of exile—exemplified in form—and make it sound a complex citizenship routed/rooted in place and poetic language. Philip gives voice/chant to the act of uprooting. As a flexible dub chant, Zong! straddles and pushes the limits of representation and exile. The same poetics/politics can be found in Dionne Brand’s poetry, as George Elliott Clarke deems the central leitmotif in Brand’s politics and poetics to be exile, escape, and movement; “to stay, to not go, is to suffer; to endure any context of oppression is to know pain. One must leap—escape—if one can, or die trying” (Directions 159). It is through escape, through flight—physical or metaphorical—that exiled individuals develop duppy states of mind that aid in survival, resistance, re-routing and rooting, and even pleasure.

A Duppy State of Mind

“Without memory can there be history?”
—M. NourbeSe Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, “Klein’s Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language” 95

The concept of a duppy state of mind alludes to Richard Iton’s notion of “duppy states,” which is an illusion to ghosts (duppies) throughout the Caribbean who “haunt the living because their bodies were not properly disposed of,” as well as Iton’s conjoining of the prophylactic post-industrial state and its duppy equivalent in the global South (Austin 74). In Zong!, the past haunts the memories of the present, as the ghosts of the past are not done with us, which is essentially why Philip describes Zong! as hauntological, “a work of haunting” (“Notanda” 201), as the poem is haunted by the specters of the drowned Africans who were disposed of in the mass grave of the cold, dark sea. Diasporic memory is an act of survival, as diasporic memories recall a past that African people were systemically taught to forget. Scholar Mary Chamberlain maintains, “Diasporic memory is a necessarily layered one which links the black experience and provides a cultural continuity with those back home and overseas” (186). Chamberlain elaborates: “diasporic memories” are a “certain form of memory or post-memory of place or trauma” associated with the forced exodus of Africans
to the Americas (179). The echoes of this collective trauma persist vis-à-vis a collective remembering: through the weaving together of memories across time and the diaspora, the past is dubbed into a present where meaningful counter-memories can be formed. David Scott classifies “counter-memory” as “the moral idiom and semiotic registers of remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion” (vi). It is against the grain of history that we, as readers or audiences, along with the poet, are compelled to remember, or (un)remember, the past.

Much politically motivated dub is about remembering, recalling, and reworking a prolonged and arduous history of enslavement. Lillian Allen remembers the past of slavery in the present through a diasporic consciousness that finds a new brand of slavery in the modern discriminatory practices of Canada:

sey: no job
discrimination injustice
a feel the whip lick
an is the same boat
the same boat
the same boat
Oh Lawd Oh Lawd Oh Lawd eh ya (Women 83)

Remembering across the diaspora is hardly a static act, nor is it a complacent one. Allen’s remembering and parallelism between discrimination and slavery is a document of the ability of Africans across the diaspora to find identity and to form community despite the myriad obstacles. “Diasporic memories” challenge insular representations of national identity that often devalue difference. Not forgetting is about reliving the past, while simultaneously not letting those who enslaved Africans forget about their crimes. For many, a dub is about more than riddim and feeling good (although those are important parts), in the way that Carnival is about much more than the party. As Philip argues, “To African Caribbean people, Carnival is much more than a dance in the street; it represents our sense of collective freedom and right to be free” (Genealogy 229). “Diasporic memories” recall traditions, which despite the efforts of white colonialists, imperialists, and racists, remain powerfully intact in the consciousness of African people across the diaspora. Philip’s quoting of Ovid’s Metamorphosis in the title poem from She Tries Her Tongue, that “All Things are alter’d, nothing is destroyed” (82), is a remembrance of the altercation and alteration that Africans underwent from the Middle Passage into bondage and then freedom. In Zong!, Philip’s fictional remembering, and improvising (Philip co-writes the text with an African spirit: the cover says, “As
IV. VOICEING THE UNVOICABLE: THE IMPROVED DUB CHANT OF PHILIP’S ZONG!

The sea is slavery [...] Sea receives a body as if that body has come to rest on a cushion, one that gives way to the body’s weight and folds round it like an envelope. Over three days 131 such bodies, no, 132, are flung at this sea. Each lands with a sound that the sea absorbs and silences. Each opens a wound in this sea that heals over each body without the evidence of a scar [...] Those bodies have their lives written on salt water. The sea current turns pages of memory. One hundred and thirty one souls roam the Atlantic with countless others. When the wind is heard, it is their breath, their speech. The sea is therefore home.
—Fred D’Aguiar, Ghosts 3-4

Ebora: “Hauntological” Legalities

Zong! is hauntological:118 “it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the specters of the undead make themselves present. And only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it’s not told—literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning” (“Natanda” 201). There is a need to collect the bones of the dead, the drowned Africans who were thrown overboard the Zong by the crew to allegedly conserve water and make a legal claim for “goods” lost at sea. Zong! is haunted by the ebora of the text, the Yoruba word meaning underwater spirits. The text is also haunted by the legal jargon of the “Gregson v. Gilbert” case, the surviving document of the massacre, which is reworked by Philip—who shows her skills as both a poet and a lawyer119—into a language of dub, as Philip inserts collective agency into the remembering of one of the slave trade’s most brutal massacres. The Zong massacre is a story many people are familiar with, as the episode continues to inspire various works of literature which, aside from Philip’s Zong!, includes Fred D’Aguiar’s Feeding the Ghosts (1997), which focuses on the story of an enslaved African who survives being thrown overboard; a detailing of the bizarre legal case by James Walvin in Black Ivory; and Margaret Busby’s play An African Cargo, which was staged at Greenwich Theatre in 2007 and dealt specifically with the 1783 trial, among other works.

As the story goes, the Zong, a merchant ship, sailed from the West Coast of Africa with 470, 442, or 440 slaves, seventeen crewmembers, and was captained by Luke Collingwood. Due to poor navigation the six to nine week journey took some eighteen weeks. The navigational error led to a shortage of water and a sickness that ravaged crewmembers and Africans. Apparently, to conserve
what water remained, and to preserve remaining African cargo, the crew threw slaves into the sea to
drown, a tactic that allowed the owners of the Zong to make a legal claim to the insurers for the loss
of cargo/goods. At the grotesque sight of watching the “cargo” thrown into the sea, some other
Africans threw themselves into the sea, with a total number of the drowned ranging from 130 to
150,\(^\text{120}\) who were either thrown in, jumped in, or were ordered to jump into the Atlantic against their
will, with an additional thirty more dead upon arrival in Jamaica. Upon arrival the owners (Gregson)
made a claim to their insurers (Gilbert) for the loss of “cargo,” citing a lack of water to sustain the
slaves (the “cargo”). When the insurers refused to pay, the ensuing trials maintained that in certain
cases the deliberate killing of slaves was in fact legal, and that the insurers could be obliged to pay
the insurance money. While Collingwood’s orders were not uniformly popular with the crew, what is
particularly disturbing is that during the week of the massacre it rained for two full days, which
allowed the crew to replenish their water. Essentially, the massacre had no “logical” reason to
continue (Fehskens 407). Initially, on March 5, 1783, the court ruled in favour of the ship owners,
although Gilbert refused to pay, citing that one cannot bring about a loss intentionally, and an appeal
was heard at the Court of King’s Bench in Westminster Hall on May 21-22, 1783. At the hearing it
came out that heavy rain had fallen during the massacre and so the case was to be tried again,
although there is no evidence that another trial took place. Zong! riffs on the legal document from the
King’s Bench hearing. The legal account is one version of what happened, a happening couched in
lawful/official language that Philip gradually dislodges through the poetic excavation and untelling
of the legal text. Reworking the legal document (“Gregson v. Gilbert”) the story is untold through
fugal and counterpointed repetition to create a complex weaving of memories, polyphonies, and
cacophonies, which respond to and sound the Zong massacre.

The Zong massacre was a particular touchstone for the abolitionist movement of the time, as
one abolitionist, Granville Sharp, unsuccessfully attempted to have the crew prosecuted for murder.
The Zong massacre continues to remind us of the illogical brutality of the slave trade. In 2007 there
was a bicentenary commemoration of the end of the British slave trade, which featured a replica of
the Zong sailing down the Thames to the Tower of London (Rupprecht 266). British Romantic
landscape painter, J. M. W. Turner envisioned the Zong when he painted the “The Slave Ship,”
formally “Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on” in 1840.

Philip’s Zong! is (at the time of this writing) the latest in a long series of responses that
attempt to deal not so much, as Veronica J. Austen argues, with the transcending of the trauma of
history to overcome the silence of the Zong massacre, as it does with a complex questioning of
“whether or not silence can, or even should, be overcome” (64). This silence remains in the
intangibility of a historical document that in a mere two pages turns the murdering of 150 human beings into incomprehensible legal jargon. The seeming incommensurability of the brutality is represented in the poetic medium’s reappropriation of legal speak, even though Philip deeply “distrusts this tool [she] works with—language” (“Notanda” 197). In spite of this distrust, poetry is a possible site of intervention against the apparent logical order of the legal report, for poetry not only “push[es] against the boundaries of language,” but phrases the need “for each poet to speak in his or her own tongue” (197): to find a voice in the cacophonous babel of the Zong. Through “exaqua”—a neologism meaning to bring above the surface of water—Philip is able to rework the “Gregson v. Gilbert” document into a poetic sounding that echoes “those murdered Africans [who] continue to resound and echo underwater. In the bone beds of the sea” (203).

Want of water

The first part of Zong!, “Os,” a Latin word meaning bone, and poetically the most conventional section of the long poem, deals explicitly with the underwater bones through the skeleton of the legal case. For example, “The order in destroy” (“Zong! #2” 5) and “to the order in / destroyed” (“Zong! #9” 17) comes from “the slaves were destroyed in order to throw the loss on the underwriters” (“Gregson v. Gilbert” 211), as does “the loss in underwriter” and “the sustenance in want” (“Zong! #9” 17), which comes from the case: “the loss in underwriter” and “the negroes died for want of sustenance, &c.” (211). There are, however, prominent manipulations of the source text in the poem, but the riffing, the dubbing of the source text, is used and reworked to highlight the brutality behind the façade of the legal jargon. In particular, the phrase “want of water” appears throughout the text, copied verbatim from “Gregson v. Gilbert.” The text opens in water, as the word itself is interrogated with mantra like percussion, immediately challenging any simple ortho/typographic representation of the case:

```
  w  w  w     w  a  wa
       w  a  w  a  t
   er  wa  s
        our  wa
  te  r  gg  g  g  go
  o  oo  goo  d  (“Zong! #1” 3)
```
The words on the page undulate like waves crashing against the page, or bodies sinking to the bottom of the poem. The single syllable of “wa” becomes a melismatic chant, a heterophonic modulation that uses a few sounds—musical cries—to articulate the pain of loss. *Zong!* is an elegiac chant, but it is also a poetic manifesto for the possibilities of historical revisionism: a re-imagining of the events of the Zong through the poetic excavation of the bones of the drowned.

We are called to chant the poem, and quickly realize in *Zong!* that poetic voice is collective, a force of many voices working against the singularity of the legal case. Each phoneme, as Dowling argues, “roils and stutters so that the first line of the poem contains only the letters w and a, barely completing the first syllable of the first word.” The poetic text/speaker(s) are trying to get at that which is nearly impossible to speak. In 2012, in Toronto, I heard Philip read *Zong!* as part of an AvantGarden reading series. In her reading, the opening poem and phoneme “wa” was enunciated by Philip, slowly and elongated and in the order it was written while she had around 15 others read the poem in non-sequential order, echoing or dubbing her words, a reverberation that erased the origin of clear beginnings or endings. Philip’s desire to read this way dates back to her figuring out innovative modes to read *She Tries Her Tongue*, which she explains to Thomas was a “need for a choral collective voice. I ask the students to come and read with me” (199). The soundscape we entered at her reading was cacophonous, but also mantra- and chant-like—horrifically beautiful. The graphical possibilities of the written text, the various morphemes and phonemes, became realized in the performance of them, taking us into the unreality and corporeality of the haunting events that transpired when Collingwood ordered the throwing of Africans overboard. “Os” is concerned with water, the thirst for water, the repetition of being surrounded by water, and yet lacking water—of being engulfed by the legal language of murdered “goods.” Throughout the opening section of “Os” we are surrounded by a sea of words that cycle back over the legal case trying to find truth in the untruth of what transpired, squeezing out a blues lyricism that thirsts for some answer; “the truth is” of the legal case becomes “the truth was” (“Zong! #14” 24), and the opening poem’s asking of whether the water was good, challenges the essentializing of the assured “is.” We are in the past, reworked in the present, where the legal language is repeatedly used to highlight the thirst and drowning of the murdered Africans: “negroes of no belonging” (29); “came the insurance of water” (30); “negroes exist / for the throwing” (34); “a sea of negroes / drowned / live / in the thirst” (35).

The sonic repetition of the legal case provides a context where a singular phoneme from water, the “w,” or “wa,” proliferates significations beneath the surface to highlight the intangibility of interpreting the legal text, and history itself. As Fehskens suggests, “This is fresh and salt water, water as conduit, lack of drinking water, water as grave, and more metonymically, maritime trade as
the material foundation of the insurance industry and speculative finance. Water in the poem resists graphic and aural cohesion while demanding repetition” (408). The ebb and flow of water washes over the language of the poem, yet the sediments of the bones rise to the surface. Law and poetry share an inexorable concern with using the right words, and yet how can poetry or law possibly express Captain Collingwood’s deliberate drowning of 150 Africans, with another 60 dying “for want of water for sustenance” (“Gregson v. Gilbert” 210)? The only way, for Philip, to express the deliberate destroying of humans, considered mere property, is to destroy the very properties of language in the retelling, or untelling, which is why Philip “intentionally mutilates the text” (“Notanda” 193). Similar to how Philip moves beyond representations of what New World experiences were for Africans in She Tries Her Tongue, we are made visually aware in Zong! that Black creativity is never exhausted. The spectrum of Black creativity ranges from silence to shout, as Philip draws from Lindon Barrett’s argument in Blackness and Value that shout was the “principal context in which black creativity occurred” (qtd. in “Notanda” 196). Shout, and the cacophony of Zong!, is one strategy to make meaning of the deliberate massacre of 150 people to collect insurance money. In a recent interview with Myriam Moïse, NourbeSe asks, “How do we make meaning of 400 years of peoples being uprooted, kidnapped and taken half way around the world? To what end? I think we are hardwired as humans to try to make meaning. Zong! is an attempt to write, to come to terms with the meaninglessness of so much that passes for life.” At times the only way to make sense out of the unspeakable is to improvise a voice that unravels such human brutality.

**Zong!: An Improvised Dub Chant**

As James Baldwin writes in a 1962 letter to his nephew, “We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other, none of us would have survived, and now you must survive because we love you and for the sake of your children and your children’s children” (“Letter”). Baldwin’s emotive words emphasize the power of love to hold familial ties together despite the damaging effects of the legacy of slavery in the diaspora. As an improvised dub chant, Philip’s Zong! responds to that painful legacy through a doubling of voices, sound systems, lexical markers, and languages, in order to emphasize and echo the Middle Passage and transatlantic slave trade. By contorting historical trauma into the power and love of song, into Black creative survival, Zong!, as a dub, is a form of political engagement that chants the transatlantic slave trade to create diasporic voice and agency where history has inserted silence. I’ve taken dub here (with much liberty) as an extended metaphor for how bricolaging is an act that finds resonance in interwoven dialogues across time and space. Zong! is a noisy text—full of intersecting dialogues and voices; a riffing on the legal
text—which is actually an integral part of dub, as Kamau Brathwaite emphasizes the “noise” of dub as in the tradition of African oral performance heritage (“English” 24). The dub, like the bass line, the “dread beat,” washes through the text, and as a dub is challenging to represent on the page, it is even more exigent to represent a massacre in a literary form, especially using English.

The challenge in reading/sounding *Zong!*, what I am calling an improvised dub poem, is the need to improvise the meaning each time we pick it up, and pick it apart. I realized after writing a first draft of this chapter that Phil Hall had already referred to Philip’s work in a review as “dub chant,” not in *Zong!*, but in reference to *She Tries Her Tongue*, saying at “the book’s core is a chant” (1). I’ve settled on improvised dub chant because *Zong!* is not quite dub in the strict sense, and yet I’ve aligned Philip on the boundaries of the dub tradition because I think dub is a useful strategy to understand what’s happening or unhappening in *Zong!*. Even as Philip plays with the margins of dub, and ultimately does not belong to a single unitary tradition, dub provides a model that underscores the echoing of the past in the present through a subversive practice of call and response, shout and chant, and with a wholly new poetics. I hope this reading does the opposite of simplifying *Zong!*; rather, I expect it provides a context for how we get lost in the *riddim* of the poem and sink into its polyphonic folds. Philip reads her own text more in the classic fugal tradition where the theme is stated and then reiterated in second, third, and subsequent voices (“Notanda” 204), although her reference to African dance style “crumping” is elusive. Crumping, in which NourbeSe describes a dancing body being “contorted and twisted into intense positions and meanings that often appear beyond human comprehension” (205) is another instructive challenge to find meaning in the chaos—to read and hear differently. Ultimately, despite how the poem is read, words are mashed together, grunts, plosives, labials combine to form new meanings as words echo, antimetabole, and canon one another—new thoughts and patterns emerge in the multivoicedness of the text.

While my focus here is own my own interpretation of the written text, I asked Philip about her improvisatory live readings and about what she thought of my reading of *Zong!* as an improvised dub chant, and she positively responded that her work is both dub and chant:

Your question is an exciting one and very generative and addresses some of the questions I myself have—questions that come out of doing these “improvisatory” performances. I should explain that there are two kinds of performances I have been engaged in with *Zong!*. One is the type of collective reading you were a part of and which you mention in your question. In the other type of performance I work with musicians in an improvisatory context. We chose small sections of the text and improvise on those. The work lends itself beautifully to this process. However, while
I don’t think that there is necessarily an opposition between the jazz improv process and the multiple echoes of a “duppy performance,” or that you’re suggesting it, the “multiple contact zones” approach you speak of is what interests and haunts me. For instance, I am very keen to introduce the sounds of techno, scratching and turntablbing into the text. Yes, oh very, very yes, it is an improvised dub chant. As it must be, for improvisation is what you are left with once you enter the Zong. (“We Can Never”)

Like improvisation in musical practice, Zong! as text and performance embodies creative real-time poïesis, risk-taking, and collaboration: as readers we are called to sound the text, to meditate with and between the various languages (glossing with the aid of glossary). Edited in Zong! are improvised performances, incantatory phrases, chanting, stories, webs and threads, the echoes of the undead, languages and sounds, polyphonies, mutilations, *riddims*, silences, legal jargon, and listenings. Indeed, Zong! is a resonant reminder that poetic language and history are there to make.

As readers and listeners we are co-performers of Philip’s rehistoricizing of the Zong! massacre, for as Austen argues, “readers too must perform a balancing act, neither assuming that they can construct an authoritative reading of Zong!, nor surrendering themselves to accepting incomprehension” (66). Without our co-performance, our chanting of the text, the page and history remains inaudible. Philip’s desire to “introduce the sounds of techno, scratching and turntablbing into the text” is another way into understanding the construction and mutilation of history taking place, for Philip is creating a DJ mix, improvising an African multi-vocal language mix with English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Patois, Latin, and African languages (predominantly Yoruba and Shona). Philip’s choice to leave various words untranslated reflects her concern to preserve cultural context (and language). Ashcroft et al. contend that the “technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness” (62); furthermore, Ashcroft et al. argue that an understanding of the untranslated words “will require the reader’s own expansion of the cultural situation beyond the text” (64). Like a detective, we return to the glossary at the back to understand how meaning in Zong! is multiple. The various intermingling languages are a reflection of the transnational globality of the slave trade, as well as the Babel and Babylonian madness aboard a slave ship.

The poetics of the text emulate and are engulfed in this cacophony, with improvisation being both a necessity to survival, as well as a reflection of the unmediated and random brutality of the massacre. The circular nature of the appearance of many poems highlights how Philip works against linearity: as a general rule words do not tend to appear directly below other words. Further, Philip often picks random words like Collingwood’s own throwing of random slaves overboard (“Notanda”
119), exemplified in the section “Ferrum” (Latin for “iron”) where words become particularly fragmented, and yet another language begins to emerge from the submerged voices of the eborā. This randomness transforms mistake into a generative possibility, much like the fault of the very name of the Zong, which was actually supposed to be zorg, a Dutch word meaning care. A careless error was made when the name was reprinted, and this carelessness in writing the name on the ship is a reminder that song can manifest anywhere, for Zong is a close homophone to song. Philip describes in writing her compendium essay to Zong! that her “fingers would hit an S rather a Z in typing Zong. Song and Zong [...] if said quickly enough they sound the same” (“Natanda” 207). The improvised dub chant of Philip’s text riffs on this critical error and the many errors of human cruelty to find, to make, and to chant song where it seems impossible. Such dubbings appear throughout the text’s blood (sang) song: “& rum they sang & / sang [...] le sang” (68); the red / cove / le sang le / sing le song” (75); all sing / sing / they sang le / sang el / song le / song sing” (79); “sings a / tune a sad tune” (84); “we / they / drum / a / rude / sound how / they dance / always” (98).

The rudimentary sounds of the text are the natural rhythms of suffering and trauma experienced and resisted through the act of song. Words fall and echo other meanings (“pig” slides into “nig,” 69) as the text moves from the provisional “if / if / if/ if only Ifá” (70) into the whole, yet fragmented note of Ifá, the Yoruba Grand Priest divination who is silent, as an African King (the oba) “sobs again” (70). As readers we are implicated in this chanting, mixed in the italicized question, “did we decide?” (80). And while, as the epigraph to the section “Ratio” (Latin for reason) by Paul Célan advises, “No one bears witness for the witness” (100), we bear witness to our own listening of a text too unreal to be told. As Sina Queyras writes, “What right do I have to be witnessing this?” And so we listen to our own listening as Philip “spin[s] a tale / to be / told not / heard nor / read / a story that can / not be / un / told (107-8), canoned later in the text: “come the tale / that can / not be / told” (127). As Zong! repeats the abject horror over and over we find ourselves chanting, propelled into the grotesque mutilation of bodies at the edges of orality and literacy, in a space that punctuates the silence of history.

Philip breaks words down to emphasize how malleable language and identity are, such as the metathesis in Zong! between slave and salve, like a balmy chant healing the slave: “salve the slave / e salve to / sin salve / slave salve” (63). Homophonic and anagrammatic links between otherwise incommensurate terms—like “salve” and “slave,” “song” and “Zong,” or “if” and “Ifá”—show how easily meaning flows into new meaning, where a song “for us” enjambs into a song “for os” (68)—for the underwater bones. The text asks us to reflect upon our listening experience by linking the collective “us” to the living memory of the submerged dead with “os.” Philip represents chant by
showing how words are sounded even against the stagnant and inaudible pages of history and the book. Such breaking down of words into sound, into phonemes and morphemes, and half-utterances, is the only way, for Philip, to represent the destruction of African bodies and voice aboard the Zong!.

Philip’s linguistic strategy of graphic representation fits with Fred Moten’s line of reasoning that voice still remains in African American visual art forms, arguing that the cries of Emmet Till and his mother can be perceived in the photographs that were captured at his funeral (197-209). As Philip contends, her “crumpling” of words together breaks them down in order to “return [them] to their initial and originary phonic sound—grunts, plosives, labials—is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?” (“Notanda” 205).

Zong! takes us directly into the language of grunt and groan, moan and stutter, and multimodal chant, for it is only through such chanting that the text can improvise its meaning, challenging the printed logocentric understanding of language, while asking readers to concede that human experience is fragmented and “broken by history” (205).

Zong! enacts a poetics of fragmentation from a babelian chorus that challenges the reader to unpack its meanings. Thus, in writing this chapter I found that Zong! resists straightforward quotation, and that an abstracted quotation sounds silent compared to the cacophony of the reading/listening experience of the text proper. By defying hermeneutic interpretation—in the cacophony of the many-voiced—the underwriters are underwritten by the palimpsestic and experimental/experiential embodiment of the words crashing together like waves that bend and swell.

This dissonance is most apparent in the final section of Zong!, “Ebora,” where the voices of the underwater spirits mix and mash to form one of the most polyphonic and generatively unreadable poetic endeavors in all of Canadian literature. “Ebora” is an instance of improvised happenstance as Philip’s printer for no apparent reason printed the “first two or three pages superimposed on each other—crumped, so to speak—so that the page becomes a dense landscape of text” (206):
I don’t think we can adequately interpret the above landscape of text using traditional scholarly tools. The palimpsestic layering of the light grey text is Philip’s careful consideration and struggle to avoid imposing absolute meaning. We are welcome to see and hear the faded and multiplicitous voices of history’s undead, but not unsounded. We are presented with a bombardment of voices that had earlier been silent in the text. While Zong! opens with “Os,” reworking the bones of the source legal case, it dramatically departs from “Gregson v. Gilbert” in the remaining movements: “Sal,” “Ventus,” “Ratio,” “Ferrum,” and “Ebora.”

Such dramatic transportation through the myriad voices chanting with and against one another represents Philip’s choice to ground the poem in the ungrounded space of pure poetic sound: the black ink speaking back to the blank inaudible page of history. Experimental poetry is the choice medium—although, Philip does perform Zong! live with improvising musicians—because as Matthew Jenkins argues, an experimental poetics of indeterminate meaning “can be more ethical […] because it speaks with a language that does not try to control, judge, know, or totalize the Other” (xiii). Philip describes her desire “to avoid imposing meaning” and does so through a poetry that can
“disassemble the ordered [the legal text], to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself” (“Notanda” 199). For Philip, poetry, like improvisation, is “[r]isk taking of the highest order; otherwise known as working on the edge” (Genealogy 113). Philip’s poetics combines various mythologies, as well as poetic traditions, to create an intermediate mix where meaning is negotiated at the crossroads: a crossroads that re-images the past so we can envision the future. The experimental poetics of Zong! animates the many-voicedness of the massacre, but the lyrical is also an important signifier in Zong!, as lyric voice and apostrophe sound authorial voices within the waves, even if they are often blended with a white male voice: “the lute sound / to raise / the dead / the died / i hear” (64); “i pen this / to you / when i am / her / able” (65). The anti-narrative or anti-lyric at work is indicative of the glossolalic scatting required to make history sound, as Philip views the Caribbean “and the entire New World as a site of massive interruptions” (“Interview with an Empire” 200). The drowned Africans are non-citizens (legally speaking) and it is by giving them a voice that Philip provides them with historical personhood. Zong! is a text of improvisatory interruptions and dubbings; how else is Philip, or anyone, supposed to voice the unvoiceable?

**Audi: Voicing the Unvoiceable**

Philip manipulates epic and lyric traditions to provide a voice to those whose voices have been taken away from them. In her poetic archeology she digs up the bones of the past saying, “I, too, want the bones” (“Notanda” 201). The story that cannot be told, but must, is “a metaphor for slavery” (206), because it is the institution of slavery, perhaps more than any mechanism of modernism, which ignominiously denied people their identities and transformed them into products of capitalist logic. Philip’s apostrophic naming, her choice to include and create names for the drowned, which appear at the bottom of each page in “Os,” is an attempt to claim that which is irrecoverably lost in the sea of history, a symbolic act of resistance on behalf of the bodies that in legal terms to do not matter:
As Dowling asserts, naming is not an address exactly, but it undoes the slaves’ anonymity, calling them into some form of lyric personhood. The Africans aboard the Zong become dicta, footnotes (“Notanda”199), as Philip explains her need to name the slaves: “The Africans on board the Zong must be named. They will be ghostly footprints floating below the text [...] the footnotes in general is acknowledgment—someone else was here before—in Zong! footnote equals footprint” (200).

The 150 slaves that Philip gives names to reads like an epic-catalogue roll-call, and poetically accounts for the lost ledger that should contain the names of the slaves. Rather, what was archived was a list of each slave’s value, placed alongside a list with foul and other “goods” to be sold. Thus, Zong! destroys narrative and epic form, yet it does so by creating counter narratives that provide polyvocality and epic voice to the unmitigated loss of an entire group of people’s histories, which includes their African name. The new ledger, placed as a glossing at the bottom of the page in “Os,” untells the legal case, reworked above the names, while also providing an elegiac song that moves through the text like an undercurrent. Akin to the epic cataloging of names, the glossary at the back of the text provides, as Fehskens observes, a connective tissue between the various sections, where the reader deciphers repeated words, toggling between glossary and poetry, “infusing the purposefully disordered poetic space with the apprehending, cataloguing powers of definitions. The Manifest provides a fascinating collection of lists, fascinating because of their explicit imbalance with one another” (422). It is this balancing act within the cacophonous poetic form and historical glossing, between ordered and destroyed, that Philip bestrides in order to bestow voice to the historically silenced, and destroyed, in the Zong massacre. Agency is achieved through the polyvocality of song.

Through what Philip calls the “cacophonous representation of the babel that was the Zong” (“Notanda” 207), the sections of the poem following “Os” chant a series of stories that repeat themselves, and yet do not want to echo, canon, or retell the details as they unfold. As a crewmember tells Ruth—a woman who waits on the ship—after reading the Captain’s orders, “do not / read this ruth / it will destroy you” (Zong! 160), which is followed by his intimately declarative statement that, “this is me / ant for y / our eyes” (160). The play on words through the clever use of enjambment emphasizes the implications of the order to murder the Africans, directing the text not only to the crew, but (by the “me / ant” and y / our eyes”) implicates also “our eyes” as we listen to the horror unfold. Like the elliptical relation between “order” and “destroy”— “the order in / destroyed” (“Zong! 5” 17)—Zong! alters meaning in order to allow readers to arrive at their own conclusions, once again recalling the Ovid quotation: “All Things are alter’d, nothing is destroyed” (82). Through the cacophony of babel, Philip alters the Zong massacre and does so by including voices, particularly
white male European ones who are responsible for destroying bodies (and therefore histories). In “Sal,” Philip clarifies the primary voice belongs to “a white, male, European voice” (“Notanda” 204) who addresses his dialogue chiefly to “dear ruth” (64), a character in the Manifest listed under the category “Women Who / Wait” (186). The epistolary form of this correspondence, as well as the Captain’s auspicious order to throw the Africans overboard, provides contrast with the more plural voices of the Africans in the text, while also working to undo “‘authorial intention’ [that] would have impelled [Philip] toward other voices” (“Notanda” 205).

By embedding, jamming, and crumpling the language of the colonizer within the text, Philip compels us as readers to listen even more closely to decipher exactly who is speaking. As Dowling usefully contends, “Philip creates a contrast between different types of vocal utterance in order to break the association of voice with personhood.” These multi-voiced utterances recall Philip’s use of the Caribbean demotic,126 a dub grammar, which is not used often, but when it is it is highly localized. As Dowling suggests, the Caribbean demotic invokes a moment of capture: “de men / dem cam fo mi / for me for / yo for je / pour moi & para / mi flee / the fields / gun bam / bam” (Zong! 66), which extends the narrative into the larger history of the slave trade—of which the slave ship is the metaphor and moving extension.127 As readers, we acknowledge the massacre as a moment of unknowability, and yet we must read with the hope that some truth is to be revealed in our ethical improvisation upon a history of silence. Philip’s sounding of “impossible bodies, slaves whose material traces have been fully lost” (Dowling), is an act of recovery, repatriation, and a moment where mourning itself is purgative and essential to not only the poetic form of the text, but in forging a historical community that cuts across time and space in order to remember what was lost. It is a letter that chants the past to the future.

As Judith Butler opines in Precarious Life, we can “reimagin[e] the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (20). She says, “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xviii–xix). Mourning, for the insurmountable and incommensurable loss of people killed in the Zong massacre, and by extension the larger transnational slave trade, is a moment of close reflection that reminds us of our humanity, and the degradation and countless crimes against humanity during the slave trade. To be a slave was to be ignominiously deprived of one’s name, identity, and personhood; essentially, it was phenomenologically to not exist. As Moïse puts forth in her reading of Zong!:

Identity and being are two important concerns in Zong!. In the section entitled “Os,” and especially in poem # 21, Philip plays on notions of being and not being, thereby questioning definitions of humanity, which leads to the implicit indictment of slavery as a crime against
humanity. Absence of being is linked to the oppressive presence of the blank on the page, a visual effect which arguably represents the historical voicelessness of African Caribbean women.

Moïse’s salient reading of *Zong!* summarizes the absence of being for victims of the slave trade and qualifies the poetic form Philip uses in the text as a *modus operandi* that reinscribes being back into the bones of the dead. The dead, the duppies of the text, haunt the present as the bones are retransformed back into sounding beings. This is no simple transmutation, and as transformative as this process is in the text, the bodies are still lost to the sea, a metonymic marker for the image of Empire. By looking at the sea of history, and its *tidalectical* sediment in the present, we can engage in the anti-narrative potential of Philip’s improvised dub chant. As Marina Warner contends, we must: “for no story, for no past, for the blank [s]pace, for the emptiness of the sea against this terrible charge, this terrible burden, of needing to look at the past and its cost” (“Indigo” 12). The duppies of the past will continue to haunt us, until their bones are appropriately laid to rest.

*Àse: A Genealogy of Possibility*

The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about what happened then, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present. If slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times. If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 133

As the Hartman epigraph suggests, the past is hardly static: the specter of slavery still haunts the present. Therefore, the stories we tell are crucial to engaging with the palimpsestic past to build a more ethical future. The sea in *Zong!* represents the cyclical nature of history, swallowing up the past while washing the sediments upon the shores of the present. *Zong!* speaks of the wretched sea like Mutabaruka’s “Dub Poem”: “Dis poem shall speak of the wretched sea that washed ships to these shores / Of mothers cryin’ for their young swallowed up by the sea.” Dub is effective in framing *Zong!* as the text grooves with the notion of echoing the past, like the ghosts (duppies, or zombies) in Jamaica who haunt the living because their bodies were not properly interred. At times I felt horrified (haunted) reading/listening to the Zong massacre unfold, and couldn’t help but feel there was a pedagogical intent in Philip’s untelling, and so I asked her about it, and she evocatively responded as follows:

I would say that modernity itself is haunted, isn’t it, by the ferocious history or histories of murder, genocide, war and death that brought it into being, no small part
of which is the slave trade, and in particular the transatlantic trade. Take, for instance, the speculative financing we live with today, which brought the world financial system to the brink of collapse. The roots of that system lie in the financing practices developed as a part of the transatlantic slave trade. Once we know that then the untold suffering unleashed on the world as a result of those practices becomes not an aberration but entirely understandable, expected and predictable. Ian Baucom’s book, *Specters of the Atlantic*, explores this idea of the recurring moment that the *Zong* incident signified. I also think that modern society is steeped in amnesia, which is the flip side of the haunting mentioned above, and is, perhaps, one of its progenitors. This social amnesia is an integral part of the warp and woof of modern society, and I would suggest Russell Jacoby’s work by the same name for an exploration of this idea. I am talking here of a cultivated amnesia, carefully nurtured by the media and western capitalist governments, which makes it easy to disrupt bonds of connections and relationships, which, in turn, hurls us into spaces where consumerism trumps all, even as we move irrevocably ever closer towards the destruction of the world as we know it. It is the amnesia that, in part, generates the haunting.

There has to be a hauntological pedagogy, as you call it, to my work because of the erasures of the histories of Africans in the so-called New World. We have been severed from indigenous cultures, names lost, spiritual practices outlawed; there is a sense in which you could say that shorn of all those things that make humans human, we become ghosts of ourselves, haunted by all that we know we know but can’t remember, as well as by what we know we don’t know and, simultaneously, spectral beings—duplicates, zombies, or jumbies, inhabiting a world that is not truly ours—aware that somewhere out there in a parallel universe there is another world where we could become truly embodied, with embodied addresses, so to speak. When I perform *Zong!* the distance between these two worlds becomes smaller. (“We Can Never”)

Philip’s response to my reading of the poem is loaded with the various hauntings of modernity and recalls the devastating effects of slavery on the present, as well as the collective amnesia that persists by Western capitalist governments and hegemonic forces that continue to, as Philip puts it, “disrupt bonds of connections and relationships,” echoing the horrors of the past. Philip’s hauntological pedagogy provides a fictionalized poetic rendition of the real and devastating massacre of slaves in order to find an opportunity, a strategy, that as Timothy A. Spaulding states, functions “to claim authority over the narrative construction of the past” (2). *Zong!* provides a counter-history through its anti-narrative, and its haunting is concerned with no less than the inscription and remembering of those erased voices and histories carelessly thrown into the sea of slavery.

Such remembering is an act of historical resistance, and pertinently signifies the power of song to recall the past, as Kwame Dawes describes in his poem “Ska Memory”: “You told me once to listen to the way / a melody could collect memories, could flesh and swell / and bleed, and though you are long dead, I thank you for it” (*Midland* 15). Hence, the song of *Zong!* is a metaphorical
digging up of lost melodies, and even though it is impossible to obtain the bones at the bottom of the Atlantic, Philip can, as she insists through the medium of the poem, “re-transform” these bones “miraculously, back into human” (“Notanda” 196). The fracturing of history echoed in the fractured indices and aesthetics of Zong! is ironically about making history and voice whole again. All the more so since slaves were considered property, like words, recorded in the ledger alongside china and other perishable commodities. And so we can ask, what can Zong! and the historical recording of the Zong incident teach us about citizenship and community within the present? For starters, as a hauntological pedagogy Zong! contests the spurious categories of citizenship as a conferred privilege of ownership and extends the ideology of citizenship to include all those who sound or who have sounded—thus making citizenship an inalienable human right. It is the slavers aboard the Zong who become less than human in their capitalistic and machine-like culpability while the dead (of the Zong) continue to haunt the living and sound a personhood that defies the barbaric practices of modernity and its attendant disavowals of the past. While the bones of the dead can never be physically recovered the repatriation happens when we find a place, as Philip contends, for the bones within ourselves:

The bones of the undead can find a resting place within us. Each time I perform Zong!, it manifests as Ceremony, and there is a sense in which the living and the dead are both interested in the future, albeit in different ways, and here I am drawing on the brilliant essay by the Caribbean novelist, George Lamming, on this subject.

Within African cosmologies this is not at all unusual, since the Ancestors, albeit no longer alive, are a living force. When we engage with them they repay us by releasing their grip on us. The grip, I maintain, is because of the haunting, and when released we can be in a more playful relationship with them. They find a resting place with us not necessarily within us, and it is in the remembering that we give them peace. (“We Can Never”)

As readers we provide voice to some of the historical gaps and silences in the text, enacting a transpatial and transnational citizenship that is aware of the need to avow our own identity through a performative adherence to understanding and reworking the past.

What often appears as silence, or a concern with silence, in Philip’s work is actually a sounding, an improvised dub chant that punctuates the narrative gaps of history with the possibility of what has been left out of the narrative. This dub sounding in Philip’s poem “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks” is about “break[ing] the culture of silence / in the ordeal of
testimony; in the history of circles” (94) so that she might find voice, where history has only inserted silence, or erasure:

…Silence
Song  word  speech
Might I…like Philomela…sing
continue
over
into

…pure utterance. (96)

In Zong!, as in She Tries Her Tongue, Philip performs and chants agency against a history written by the victors who have inserted silence where black voices and histories should be present, sounding. We chant along with the various polyphonies, cacophonies, and shouts in Zong!, and while we can never witness for the witness, we can listen. Zong! models how we can listen better to consider the effects our reinterpretations of history have on changing the perception of the past, interwoven with the possibilities of our futures. Resistance is about the possible, especially when change seems insurmountable. Àse, an affirmative dubbing in Zong!, refers to a Yoruba concept meaning, “may it manifest,” which signifies the power to enact change, and relates to everything from ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, rivers, songs, etc. Further, according to Yoruba consciousness, our very existence is dependent upon àse. Through an improvised dub chant Philip incinerates the apparent orthodoxy of the legal text, sings the story that cannot be told, and provides a voice to the bones of the Zong massacre to create a future where pure utterance can be possible, doing all this at the edge of new meanings. Àse.

REMIX 2

Dub as an ideology, a theory (or anti-theory) helps us conceive of some of the larger strands in Soundin’ Canaan. Dub was the larger riddim I used to examine and stretch some of the concepts in this thesis around community, citizenship, and resistance, particularly using Zong! to test the limits of the dub aesthetic. Such adaptability, and yet heightened specificity, is a reminder of the universality of music and poetry, as well as the unique ability of (mostly) black artists across the diaspora to maintain traditions that in many instances date back to ancestral roots in Africa. As Brenda Carr importantly insists, “dub aesthetics are deeply community rooted and accountable” (7), and Philip’s Zong! is about making history and the murderers aboard the Zong accountable for their actions.
While I focus on multiple dub works in this chapter, I hope the omnipresent nature of music allows readers to make their own conclusions about how to read or listen to a dub poem. Whether or not *Zong!* is dub in the strictest sense—or, as I argue, a hybrid form of dub chant—dub remains an important postcolonial aesthetic for interrogating the past to build a more sustainable future.

Symbolically dub chants are about more than creating poetic music for people to enjoy—although dub is thoroughly enjoyable—because dub is largely renegade and rebel art. As Lillian Allen affirms: “We believe that art in itself is symbolic and although it can play a major role in people’s lives and in social and political movements, it cannot change the structure of social relations. Our work extends beyond merely creating art; we take our poetry and our conviction into the community” (“De Dub” 19). As readers and listeners of dub, we can work as co-creators of forming communities that are more aware of the violence of the past with the intention to build and sound more inclusive communities. Philip’s fragmented dub poetics in *Zong!* contest the legal document on which Philip riffs, as words have the power to instrumentally determine people’s futures. And so while a passport might not *actually* define citizenship, legally, in the letters of the law it does. By altering the legal document through a dub chant Philip reminds us of the process and power of words to remodel and build more equitable communities.

*Zong!* is not evidentially about Canada, and yet the duppies of the text animate the transnational slave trade which is very much part of the nexus of Canada’s own imperialism as a colonial satellite and settler colony. Symbolically, we can read Zong as a universal diaspora that includes a Canada still suffering from a collective amnesia of the brutal genocide represented by the Middle Passage. Philip’s reworking of language in search of mother tongue—dub tongue—is symbolic of Canaan as a land to be reworked, as Philip describes, “‘We ent going nowhere. We here and is right here we staying.’ In Canada. In this world so new. To criticize, needle and demand; to work hard for; to give to; to love; to hate—for better or worse—till death do we part” (“Echoes” 20). The mere fact that Philip writes a text like *Zong!* in the first place, or that Ahdri Zhina Mandiela’s *dark diaspora... in dub* is so transnationally political, or that Giller prize winner Esi Edugyan’s *Half-Blood Blues* is about Americans and Afro-Germans and Jews playing jazz in Nazi Germany, is indicative that African Canadians’ historical concerns are diverse—that diaspora and duppy states of mind are as prevalent in Canada as anywhere else on the globe. *Zong!* is thus an affirmation of the connective tissues and accumulated bones that bind us together in the matrix of our common humanity: it is a universal sounding for the value of human life and citizenship in the snare of global commerce, slave labour, and historical silence.

As a scholar who self identifies with Black politics and unifying strategies I find incredible
importance in the coalition politics of valuing difference, however wide the gaps might appear. Dub as a mix brings us a little closer to understanding our common humanity while also challenging the vestiges of colonial practices, very much alive, even as they remain visibly hidden. As Himani Bannerji explains: “this story of neo-colonialism, of exploitation, racism, discrimination and hierarchical citizenship never gains much credibility or publicity with the Canadian state, the public or the media” (“Paradox” 47). Dub, pivotal to the poetic movement in Canada, unabashedly announces these discriminatory practices and hierarchical citizenships by their very name: injustice. We need to remember that with the exception of Aboriginal people in Canada, we are all immigrants and have no realistic alternative than to embrace difference and understand the past.128

How fertile to think that the ground we walk on, and the people we walk as, are interconnected in the vegetative possibilities of eco-co-existence? Further, how more metaphorically generative is it to think that the foliage from these roots is the stuff of poetry—a poetry that still matters in shaping identity, community, and the improvisationally defined self. Zong! is a cacophonous chant where poetry can function as a textiling that connects the past and present together to create a more sustainable—and ethically viable—future. Zong! is an improvised script, chant, and temple of transformative possibility: a tall, yet ineluctable order for poetry. Chanting along with Zong!, and the various dub texts discussed earlier, improvising the manifold meanings, not only challenges the printed logocentric understanding of language, but also asks us to concede that poems, like everything else in life, are ephemeral. The ephemerality of life reminds us that we can also challenge and rewrite more equitable histories, and we can do so with an improvisatory spirit. This improvisatory spirit is taken up in the next chapter as we shift melodies to George Elliott Clarke’s shantytown vernacular and formalized poetics—mixing together blues vernacular and jazz phraseology—against the larger canon. Clarke’s trilogy of poetic colouring books—Blue, Black, and Red—provides a subversive and ekphrastic poetics that remolds and blackens the canon, providing new conceptions with which to conceive of identity, which for Clarke is inexorably linked into the tradition of poetry and song. You can’t conceive of Canaan without first tossing the canon into the fire. In this chapter we beheld voices as if rising from the sea, and in the next we shall behold beauty, like a phoenix, arising from the flames.
CHAPTER THREE

POLYPHONIC COLOURING AND INFRAPOETICS IN GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE’S BLUE, BLACK, AND RED

“Good poems should rage like a fire
Burning all things, burning them with a great splendour”
—Irving Layton, A Red Carpet for the Sun, “Esthetique”

“Bebop was about change, about evolution. It wasn’t about standing still and becoming safe. If anybody wants to keep creating they have to be about change.”
—Miles Davis, Miles: The Autobiography 394

I. A BLUES LYRICISM

Blues and Folk Vernacular

“There is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave.”
—Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk 7

“Canada suffers from the same ‘solidarity blues.’ A primary measure of a social movement’s validity, after all, is the degree to which society’s most marginalized and dispossessed are part of and genuinely reflected in the social vision proposed by the movement.”
—David Austin, Fear of a Black Nation 12

This chapter focuses on the blues matrix of George Elliott Clarke’s poetic trilogy: principally on Blue, although both Black and Red are examined. While Clarke incorporates as much jazz phraseology as he does a blues lyricism, within the trajectory of Soundin’ Canaan, the blues is a good place to open our discussion on Clarke’s poetics. In fact, such a blues reading of Clarke’s poetry is the overarching framework used by Nigel Thomas in his exploration of Clarke’s speakerly text, Whylah Falls. Thomas contends, “blues music and music-making by the characters, not to mention the music, often blues-jazz inspired, engendered by Clarke’s own subtle word combinations, furnish a considerable part of this work’s texture” (“Blues Use”). In Chapter Two, I looked at reggae and dub poetry with the intention to outline many of the larger musical and political indices of the thesis: NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! takes us back to slavery and the province of musical resistance within that realm. Iteratively, the blues and folk vernacular provide formal strategies to think through the value that canon formation and the deformation of canons play in the national Canadian and larger diaspora narrative. The blues (and the colour blue) is a word that signifies Blackness, as separation, translation, and survival. Most modern musics owe something to the blues (and the slave music that preceded it): a music that began primarily in African American communities in the nineteenth-century “Deep South” of United States.
The form of the blues comprises work songs, spirituals, field hollers, shouts, chants, and ballads, among other styles. However, it took some time before the blues were as classically ubiquitous and cross-cultural as they are today. As the Du Bois epigraph elucidates, and as James Weldon Johnson accurately predicted, “The day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro” (*Autobiography* 1197). There are a lot of great texts that trace the origins of the blues, and a good place to start is understanding the spirituals/sorrow songs, which are depicted in great philosophical and sociological detail by W. E. B. Du Bois in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays on race that champion his metaphor of the veil (a manifestation of the colour line), and his theory of double consciousness: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2). Du Bois’s *Souls* is a revolutionary text because in many ways it not only anticipates The New Negro Movement, but it anticipates Black American culture (as well as diasporic African culture) through its unique pastiche of forms. Through a “mix,” or bricolage of the slave song notation that opens up each chapter, to his unique articulations of the veil and double-consciousness, Du Bois’s *Souls* shows how amalgamation is itself an inherent form of political engagement in African American literature, and is central to the blues.

Alexander Weheliye provides a valuable re-reading of Du Bois’s *Souls* from a techno-auditory standpoint akin to disc jockeying as an art form of contemporary (Black) musical culture, looking at how Du Bois, like a DJ, is able to blend together “history, eulogy, sociology, personal anecdote, economics, lyricism, ethnography, fiction, and cultural criticism of black music […] Du Bois’s textual practice emphasizes the fissures in the mix in the same manner that hip-hop DJs call attention to their mixes through the rhythmical scratching of records, a result of being played with and against the groove” (82). And while some might not want to read the spirituals, or the blues, as doing something similar to a hip-hop DJ,¹²⁹ what is affirmative about Weheliye’s argument is that it demonstrates how blues music and folk culture are hardly static or perennially folksy. For, as Robin D.G. Kelley instructively points out, what is commonly thought of as “‘folk’ culture—especially during the past century— is actually *bricolage*, a cutting, pasting, and incorporating of various cultural forms that then become categorized into a racially or ethically coded aesthetic hierarchy” (“Notes on Deconstructing” 1402). Once again, the emphasis is on how the past is neither stagnant nor dissociated from the contemporary moment.

The blues plants the roots of much music: it is pervasive in *jazz*, provides the foundation of rhythm and blues, and the twelve-bar blues progression can even be heard throughout rock and roll. One particularly common feature of blues music is the blue note, which for expressive function is
sung or played flattened or bent (from the minor 3rd to the major 3rd) relative to the pitch of the major scale. The idiom itself, “the blues,” refers to the “blue devils,” implicating melancholy and sadness with an early use of the term appearing in George Colman’s one-act farce Blue Devils. Some early innovators of the blues are W.C. Handy (known as the Father of Blues), Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Mamie Smith, Lead Belly, Robert Johnson, and too many others to list here. What is interesting to notice about this tentative list is how prominent women blues figures were in the creation, innovation, and dissemination of the blues, as female vaudeville blues singers were eminently popular in the 1920s. For example, Mamie Smith was the first African American to record a blues record in 1920; her second record, “Crazy Blues,” sold 75,000 copies in its first month (Gioia 38). In this way, the blues, and even the spirituals before them, have always been a popular and enduring music performed across time and gender lines. “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith represent, as observed by Angela Davis, a “black working-class social consciousness,” while moreover they “foreshadowed a brand of protest that refused to privilege racism over sexism, or the conventional public realm over the private as the preeminent domain of power” (Blues Legacies 42). And so, (in tandem with its often-bawdy nature), the blues genre was, as Davis concludes, “responsible for the dissemination of attitudes toward male supremacy that had decidedly feminist implications” (55).

The blues genre—and the spirituals preceding it—helped materialize a classical African American canon of music (a formal counter canon to the European classical tradition), which provided potent standards off of which other artists could riff, beginning with the early spirituals.

Case in point: the Negro Spirituals “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Go Down Moses” have been covered and recorded on thousands of records, becoming standards, with everyone from Louis Armstrong, Etta James, Duke Ellington, Johnny Cash, Parliament, The Grateful Dead, and hip-hop group Bone Thugs and Harmony covering the former, to everyone from Grant Green, Fats Waller, Archie Shepp, and Will Smith on the sitcom The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air covering the latter. The blues have the power to connect people across diverse backgrounds and time periods, and represents, as Black liberation theologian James H. Cone argues in The Spirituals and the Blues, “The power of the song in the struggle for black survival—that is what the spirituals and blues are about” (1). They also exemplify, as Cone declares, “unity music: black existence affirmed through a communal context” (5). This communal articulation of shared humanity in the blues sounds a citizenship that transcends the spurious markers of race, asserting cultural, individual, and communal survival against the hardships faced in the New World, primarily, but not exclusively, by African Americans. The blues, like the spirituals before them, are about community, humanity, citizenship status, and survival in the face of the horrible legacy of slavery—the blues articulate a painful truth.
This painful, yet playful, truth, is why Langston Hughes describes the blues as *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (the title of one of his collections of short stories), echoed by Ralph Ellison’s description of the blues as a consciousness squeezed from a “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 8). Even Malcolm X, in his *Autobiography*, while reflecting upon his younger self before he joined the Nation of Islam, describes how Billie Holiday (“Lady Day”) “sang with the soul of Negroes from the centuries of sorrow and oppression. What a shame that proud, fine, black woman never lived where the true greatness of the black race was appreciated!” (129). Such an existential ethos is central to the blues, but it is also vital to the African American experience, which is why blues music and expression are a fit style for writers across the diaspora working in poetry, song, and prose. The seemingly simple structure of the blues allows for immense feeling and vocal intonation, which is also why Cone believes that you “don’t study to write the blues, you feel them” (111). This is not to say that the blues lack complexity in performance, or that they cannot be imitated, as I argue that Clarke is a master riffer not only of blues, jazz, and folk idioms, but also of multiple poetic traditions. Further, the blues iteratively function in Canada in a similar—yet unique—fashion as the playful, yet painful truth Hughes and Ellison articulate, and yet, the blues invite significant stylistic innovations across borders. Blues are about grit, voice, tragedy, and personal loss, as they are equally about liberation and revolt. Such signifiers are why the blues are so semiotically charged for African Americans—as Baker, Jr. contends, “The sound is the sign” (*Blues, Ideology* 8)—but this is not to say the blues are only about suffering, revolt, and personal catastrophe, for they are regularly about humanity and understanding, a fact which has been lost on many white music critics and musicians over the years. For example, Ma Rainey, in August Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984) says: “White folks don’t understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life” (82). While I think we need to be careful in claiming any music as a cultural absolute, the blues have been a valuable source of self-expression for African Americans, and for those who identify with the blues across the planet.

*A Blues Matrix: Clarke’s Signifyin(g) Poetics*

“No matter how comically meticulous / My canvas is the blues.”
—George Elliott Clarke, *Black*, “IV Confessions” 38

Clarke’s modeling of his creative voice in relation to a variety of artist-intellectuals across borders (with personal anecdotes) allows for his poetry to be read in the same way that Houston A. Baker, Jr. reads the blues (articulated first in the Introduction): as a matrix, a “point of ceaseless input
and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit” (Blues, Ideology 3). The matrix metaphor befits Clarke’s trilogy of poetic colouring books—Blue, Black, and his latest in the continuum, Red: the colour that scatters the least of the visible spectrum of colours, and can be seen from the greatest distance. Clarke’s poetics consist of crisscrossing inputs and outputs that combine the rhythms of gospel and blues and shantytown vernacular within the highly aesthetic poetic tradition of Western literature. Clarke riffs on nearly every literary tradition—with a particular reverence for and mastery of African American and African Canadian cultural contexts and texts, and the larger European canon—in order to create a dazzling, loud, raucous “poetics of arson” (Blue 7): a poetics of arson because it sets fire to past traditions to create new ones from the ashes. Further, the blues metaphor, given the large amount of poetic dedication and riffing that take place in Clarke’s texts, offers what Baker terms “phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associate, nonsequential meditation—of species experience” (5), reminding us that blues help give shape to life, even if that shape is an improvised association upon a standard rhythmic pattern. The blues are perhaps not all that different from jazz: as Ellison writes, much of (American) life is “jazz-shaped.”

We can read Clarke’s poetry—although within a specific African Canadian context—as critics read Langston Hughes and his shifting registers of deformative folk sound. Amiri Baraka calls Hughes “the Jazz Poet” and “one of the first writers to seriously consider the blues as a laudable and important part of American culture” (qtd. in Wallace 68). Further, Hughes was able, through his collaborations with blues and jazz musicians, to show that blackness was boundless, without limits, and articulated with music. Clarke’s own poetics highlight the cosmopolitan—yet fiercely regional—articulation of his own Blackness, which “is not just skin colour, but a polysemous consciousness” (Odysseys 188): a consciousness that like Hughes’s own poetry is marked by conflicting changes, divergent traditions, sudden improvisational nuances, broken rhythms, traditional formats, punctuations of riffings, giving voice to the poetry and music of an evolving community. In the way that Ezra Pound, in “How to Read,” talks of melopoeia as a poetry on the borders of music, Clarke’s own poetry straddles this border. The intermediacy of Clarke’s infrapoetics (a term introduced in Chapter One) acknowledges signifying as a central component of not only African American poets, but Canadian ones as well.

There are few books as insightful on the signifying tradition as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. First published in 1988, the work is a watershed manifesto about the African American practice of signifying, which Gates uses to examine an interplay between African American writers, particularly Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, and Ishmael Reed. Gates relates the black signifyin(g) tradition to the
double-talk, mischief, play, and deceit of the Monkey in these narratives, and yet it is, as Gates
describes, “difficult to arrive at a consensus of definitions of Signifyin(g)” (81). Such elusion of clear
unitary definitions is the greatest strength of such a tradition, for it allows for more interplay,
intertextuality, and awareness of form, emphasized not just in the literature, but in the literature’s
relation to and drawing from the well of music, such as the jazz riff, which “is a central component of
jazz improvisation and Signifyin(g) and serves as an especially appropriate synonym for troping and
revision” (105). We hear such techniques used throughout African American literature: in the
opening sermon of Ellison’s Invisible Man, the unnamed narrator riffs on Dostoevsky’s Notes from
Underground and parodies Melville’s passage in Moby Dick about the “‘Blackness of Blackness’”
(9); Hughes’s Ask Your Mamma incorporates the Dozens (a game common in African American
communities of spoken word combat between two contestants, where participants insult each other
until one gives up); Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s line “I know why the caged bird sings” from his poem,
“Sympathy,” is turned into the title of Maya Angelou’s first autobiography; Lorraine Hansberry’s A
Raisin in the Sun opens with a reference to Hughes’s poem, “A Dream Deferred.” These are but a
few examples among myriads of black signifyin(g) traditions that signify on the very act itself, for
the tradition, like the prison chain in Ellison’s Invisible Man, “signifies a heap” (388).

Clarke’s poetics highlight that the same signifyin(g) practices are, and have been for some
time, happening in Canada, as Clarke not only talks to his brethren and sistren across the border, but
often very directly to a congregation of African Canadian writers (Wayde Compton, Dionne Brand,
Danny Laferrière, and Lawrence Hill, to name a few) among other Canadian figureheads (Trudeau
and Irving Layton, to name but two), whether in style, dedication, riffing, homage, parody, or
reference. In fact, there’s no stopping Clarke from imagining and signifyin(g) an African American
bassist, Charles Mingus, as Canadian, as he does in Red—riffing within a tradition that welcomes
and encourages such play. Reworking the algorithm of signified/signifier, Clarke’s poetry, like the
two trickster figures Gates invokes, Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, is a meta-discourse, a
double-voiced discourse about itself, “because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual
relation, and because of Esu’s double-voiced representation in art” (Signifying 51). Similar to how
signifyin(g) in blues and jazz is characterized by pastiche, Clarke’s poetics, as well as his own
chronicling of an African Canadian tradition, searches for truth and does so through a lyricism that is
not afraid to blur borders and cross literary lines, which Clarke argues the diversity of selected
writers do in Eying the North Star, his first collection of contemporary and historical African
Canadian works: “Theses writers avoid nothing. They speak the raw blues of truth, no matter how
raucous, hideous, odious, bitter, or sore” (xxiv). I hear the same “raw blues of truth” in much of
Clarke’s early poetry (1978-1993). Although his poetic voice is not as refined as it is now (is any writer’s early voice?), it freely absorbs multiple poetic and music traditions to enact a tapestry that is clearly aligned with blues, jazz, and larger signifying strategies.

In Clarke’s Lush Dreams, Blue Exile (a collection of his poetry from 1978-1993, published in 1994) we see/hear/witness the same engaged signifying poetics that we see/hear/witness in Blue, Black, and Red. An early poem, “Watercolours for Negro Expatriates in France” (14), is full of African American references (from Du Bois, Josephine Baker, Lead Belly, Richard Wright, Ellington) in convoy with European or American writers (Eliot, Hemingway, Stein) that accentuate this thesis’s core theme of music and poetry as a border crossing practice—an engaged form of citizenship: “You have heard Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith. / You need no passports” (16). Clarke’s poem provides an alternative model to citizenship, for although the expatriate is technically without citizenship status, citizenship (as an open metaphor) should be conferred as a mosaic of identities and cosmopolitan allegiances, especially for those who are exiled, or with immigrant status. Such immigrant status reflects the experience of those Black Loyalists who arrived in Nova Scotia in 1782 after the British lost the American Revolutionary War, and then repatriated to Sierra Leone in 1792.

A tentative citizenship in flux was the reality of those escaped slaves who followed the North Star into Canada, emphasized in the local Africadian history (“Halifax Blues,” or a “Hymn for Portia White,” an Africadian blues singer) that Clarke depicts in Africadia, opening with an epigraph from the spiritual “Go Down Moses,” and which includes African Canadian infused blues and odes to Africville and Canaan land: “to this birchbark Canaan, to this Nova Scotia” (“Invocation of the Prophet” 57); or, “beautiful Canaan of stained glass and faith” (“Campbell Road Church” 73).

Clarke’s spiritual remapping (within Nova Scotia) through ancestral modes and various diasporic traditions is described by Wayde Compton as a poetic syncretism and a “necessary act of making culture” and ultimately community (“Historical Motion”). Some of the signifying poetics are even inadvertent, as “Violets for Your Furs” (41) riffs on A.J.M Smith’s line “a loaded violet / […] in your fur,” which Clarke mentions to Anne Compton was an unintentional resonance: “I didn’t know about that echo. I read Smith a long, long time ago. If I read that line, I completely forgot about it. In fact, what I was referring to with that title was a jazz standard of the ‘50s, John Coltrane’s, who is one of my jazz heroes” (“Standing Your Ground”).

Signifying poetics allow for expansive references, and for Clarke these signifying practices extend beyond the page and into performance.

I will discuss Clarke’s music and conscious choice to blur his role as a poet and a songwriter, but for the purpose of understanding the matrix of Clarke’s signifying poetics, it’s worth noting that a formative part of signifying in the African tradition is oral, and performance and community are
central to the ethos of Clarke’s desire to speak to his community—however broadly defined. The
discography that appears at the back of Lush Dreams, Blue Exile (like the one in Whylah Falls) is
reflective of the matrix that Clarke draws from (a wide range of albums are drawn into the mix,
including Gil Scott-Heron’s Secrets, Miles Davis’s The Man with the Horn, Glenn Gould’s The
Goldberg Variations, Anthony Braxton’s Four Compositions, Prince and the Revolution’s Purple
Rain, Africadian artist Faith Nolan’s Africville, among many others). Clarke presents an afro-sonic
mix that emphasizes that signifying is less a textual medium than an oral one: resonating most
profoundly in auditory spaces and soundings. Like Langston Hughes, Clarke wants to be sounded in
multiple formats, as he shares his need with Anne Compton to speak to his local (mostly black)
community beyond a (European) traditional written framework:

In the spring of 1986, I was invited to take part in a fund-raising event put on by the
Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia. I was the only poet on the program. Everyone
else was a performer. I was there as the poet. I read in the way I had been taught to
read in the university, which is very formal and very Atwood-like in terms of being
very plain, no emotion, just straightforward recitation. But this was in front of an
audience of my peers, of my own community. So people started yelling at me: “Get
off the stage.” It was very direct: “You’re boring. Go home.” The people didn’t want
to hear some dry shit. […] I was, of course, shocked, but luckily I had just written a
piece, “Love Letter to an African Woman,” which is in Whylah Falls (58-59), and I
read that, and they loved it. The people got quiet and they started to say, “Preach it!
Testify! That’s it brother!” And the applause at the end was rich. It was intense. And I
said to myself, I will never write again anything I cannot read before my own
community.

Clarke’s experience with trying to find a voice, in writing technically challenging and engaging
poems on the page that can also be sounded for performance, recalls the challenges facing readers
who encounter Philip’s epic poem, Zong!. In the way that blues represent culture and music at a
crossroads, much of African Canadian poetry is an act of negotiation, for the very act of writing a
work with oral imperatives is signifying in a postmodern way. What’s challenging and eminent about
reading works like Philip’s Zong!, or Clarke’s poetry, is that they are disreputantly engaged with
experimental forms, as much as they are betrothed with voice and performance as signifiers of
communal affiliation. It is through this communal association that Clarke sounds his blues
citizenship: blues because his poetry articulates a painful truth, while also celebrating a larger kinship
with past and present writers that seeks out liberation and gives voice to his own experience as an
African Canadian. At much of the heart of Clarke’s *potesis* is a reverence for the past, a dediative kinship, and yet, there is newness in Clarke’s poetry that results from unabashedly, and unapologetically, revising tradition.

**II. BLACKENING THE CANON, SINGING CANAAN**

*Emotion Recollected in Hybridity: Clarke’s Dedicative Poetics*

“The effect of mimicry is camouflage […] It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled— exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.”


Clarke’s incredible ability to signify, to mimic, to use ironic compromise, to bolster, and engage with multiple canons and writers is an act of homage: a form of dediative sampling. In a public onstage interview I did with Clarke and scholar Katherine McLeod, I asked Clarke about his dediative poetics, to which he responded that homage and dedication function as acts of creative kinship:

It’s important for me to recognize forbearers, ancestors, artistic genealogical family and song, because none of us is here solo, or alone in a sense. We all come from a context. There is a genealogical context, cultural context, and there’s also an artistic context. And one has many artistic relatives so to speak and you want to claim kinship at least with different folks. And, so that was a way for me to say, “ok, here is someone whose work has been important to me in some way, or whose work I’ve enjoyed in some way, let me dedicate a poem to him or her, or let me riff off his or her style as I perceive it.” And… again as a kind of act of homage. But at the same time an act of tacit appropriation or attempted appropriation […] And so, again on one hand it’s an act of homage, and on the other it’s also a conversation I’m trying to have with those personages from the past or from the present: contemporaries, artists I’ve admired, and admire, and trying to stake out my relationship to them in my own work. […] I’m going to tie this back into jazz and improvisation, and so on, by saying that I think that maybe one of the strongest appeals of jazz as an art form—for many of us—is that it is automatically at its roots: cosmopolitan, multicultural, polyphonic, and all of those notions of diversity and diverse engagements are important to me.

(“Your Bass” 4)
For Clarke, dedication, signifying, mimicry, riffing—whatever else we may call it—are forms of active poetics: an engaged citizenship where difference, juxtaposition, and collage allow for greater diversity and soundings in his work. Repetition and difference allow Clarke’s poetics to be read as genealogically belonging to blues and jazz traditions, under a unique hybridity of forms. Such hybrid and postmodern approaches are closely aligned, as Clarke argues, with African Canadian literary forms. In *Eyeing the North Star*, Clarke describes African Canadian literature to be a species of hybridity: “King James scriptures melded with East Coast spirituals, New Orleans jazz, Bajan calypso, and Nigerian jit-jive” (xii). The heteroglossic mixing and styling of African Canadian literature is indicative of the coalition of identities that African Canadians themselves embody and write out of, from the Black Loyalists, to the Rastafarian dubbists, and across the diaspora. As Ayanna Black posits, “we [African Canadian and black writers] write out of a collective African consciousness—a consciousness embodied in the fabric of oral traditions, storytelling, fables, proverbs, rituals, work-songs and sermons meshed with Western literary forms” (qtd. in *Eyeing the North Star* xix). Clarke’s own identity is one of multiple allegiances and histories, which he traces back to the Black Loyalists who settled in Africville, cross-pollinated with the Mi’kmaq in the area: “They were clear Negro, and semi-Micmac” (*Execution Poems*, “George & Rue” 12).

Clarke’s hybrid poetics and identity work against Canada’s early fears of miscegenation. Such fears are novelistically exemplified, for example, towards the end of Morley Callaghan’s *The Loved and the Lost*, as the white jazz-loving Peggy becomes, as the police officer Bouchard claims, a victim of interracial conflation: “when white and black get mixed up, there is a field of many strange, perverted tastes for a white girl to develop” (262). The Jewish bar-owner Wolgast describes Peggy as a “nigger lover” (153) who “likes dark meat” (155), not wanting her to bring black patrons into his bar because he does not want to run “a nigger joint and [lose his] fine class of customer” (182). Even more threatening than Blackness in *The Loved and the Lost* is the eradication of race altogether; the liminal, ambiguous space that Peggy chooses to occupy, moving freely among domesticated white and black heterotopic spaces, confounds the black and white characters alike. I’ve drawn from *The Loved and the Lost* because I think that Clarke—like Peggy—continues to challenge racial and literary characters in his ability to mix/miscegenate literary spaces and social norms.

Clarke unapologetically writes and masters multiple traditions into dialogical synthesis, and he does so in a way that I believe is akin to blues multiculturalism, challenging any simple reduction of his own blackness, or poetic styling through an emotion recollected in hybridity. As philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy contends, “The *mélange* does not exist any more than purity exists. There is no pure *mélange*, nor is there any purity that is intact” (*Being Singular* 156). In *The Location of Culture,*
Homi K. Bhabha uses concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and liminality to argue that cultural production is most dynamic where it is most ambivalent. In creating ambivalent works of poetry—as Blue, Black, and Red are—unsettled and worried like blue notes, Clarke examines history as a palimpsest where multiple inscriptions are possible. These reinscriptions resemble the tactics of translation present in the Black musical tradition, particularly noticeable today in sample-based music, but also present in blues, and jazz, where one artist’s revising of another’s work is an act of conservative recuperation and cultural homage. The epigraphs and song-infused poetry (composed of highly structured vernacular) allocate multiple levels of hybridity between poems, often resisting dominant representations of poetry, functioning as a postcolonial critique of hegemonic discourse.

Clarke’s dialogic epigraphing of (or in the style of) other poets, the declamation of past figures (like Titus Andronicus, the historical and Shakespearean tragic figure), among other hybrid forms of mixed poetics—of blues experience—fit iteratively with Soundin’ Canaan’s own desire to use quotation and signifying as a didactic and dialogic mode to resist simple colonial representations, preferring the space of the in-between where new knowledges can form. Clarke, through his own listening to other (mostly) black poets and writers (many of whom are Canadian), challenges dominant discourses through a polytextured dialogue, both within and outside the text. Whether invoking Dionne Brand in “Bio-Black Baptist/Bastard” (Blue), or writing à la manière de Miles Davis in “Bluing Green” (Black), or loosely attempting to write à la manière de Amiri Baraka in “Calculated Offensive” (Blue), Clarke creates a polyphony of voices from a variety of social margins to interrogate mass culture, particularly in regards to academia’s valorizing of British canonicity.

In looking at history as anachronistically interpretive, and yet grounded in specific veritable histories, Clarke is able to place his poetics within an Africanist model that connects voice (song) to text; he argues: “one must appreciate the inseparable union of text and voice music—as in transcriptions of spirituals (or blues, rap, samba, soca, etc)” (Odysseys Home 12). Reading history and literature through an interpretive lens recalls Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (“Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 37). That doubleness is generally much more tactically and phonetically represented in African American literature than in European derived print cultures. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. depicts intertextuality as not only a textual act, but one that relates directly to orality, what Gates describes as an “ability to group together two lines that end in words that sound alike, that bear a phonetic similarity to each other” (Signifying Monkey 61). However, Blue, Black, and Red are much more concerned with representing cultural and poetic ambiguity than they are in
being fully steeped in any one tradition that favours literacy or orality. In many ways the gumbo concoction of Clarke’s poetry and scholarship is an accurate portrayal of postmodern Blackness across the Atlantic, which according to Paul Gilroy, can be looked at as “one single, complex unit of analysis […] explicitly transnational and intercultural” (*Black Atlantic* 15).

It is important to realize that the last thing Clarke is doing is evading specific African Canadian histories; in fact, he is doing quite the opposite. While Clarke works carefully to dig up and engage with Canada’s past, he also engages in a cross-border politics and poetics, particularly in *Blue, Black, and Red*. Clarke deconstructs (while reconstructing) poetic tradition to pose difficult marginal questions that reinscribe and reveal—like a palimpsest—identity, challenging what makes a poem American, British, or African. Clarke’s poetry investigates questions of ethnicity through imitation of revered poets while simultaneously denouncing their influence; the result is a highly dialogical and hybridized expression of what it means to write poetry from a marginalized space. For this reason, in the introduction to *Blue*, Clarke lists poets such as Pound, Layton, and Ginsberg as inspirations: poets unafraid to put themselves into the “inferno of witnessing” (7). Witnessing, as exemplified in countless slave narratives, is a process of identity formation, and a process Clarke utilizes to define Blackness. Chris Jennings argues in his interpretation of *Blue* that “Blackness does not define the speaker; the speaker achieves blackness by re-inscribing it, by applying flame” (“A Review of *Blue*” 145). Through multivalent listenings of poetic history, Clarke negotiates cultural space through adherence to and revision of tradition.

**Towards a Multicultural Canadian Black Nationalism**

This April 1968:
Two days past, Martin Luther King
Was shot through his throat, just for dreaming
Of a truly Just Society—
Exactly what Canada must be.
—George Elliott Clarke, *Trudeau* 72

The zeal of the Canadian nationalist movement reached an apex in the cross-national centennial celebrations of 1967 (memorializing the 100th anniversary of Confederation), along with the global success of Expo 67 in Montreal, helping to set the tone of Canada as *other* to the United States. This anti-Americanism was as much a response to American neo-liberalism and the US’s involvement in the Vietnam War (which lasted from 1965-1973), as it was a garrison to protect Canada’s cultural and national narrative (largely routing/rooting back to the 1951 Massey Report). In the 1960s and ‘70s Canada’s literary community fought against the American cultural, economic, and
political sphere in works that express concern about the destructive superpower (America) and its frightening proximity to us: George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation* (1965, which provides a short history of conservatism, and provides an analysis of Canada’s changing place in the world during the Cold War); Dennis Lee’s “Cadence, Country, Silence” (1972, which explores the twofold dilemma of writers who are both colonizer and colonized); and poems like Margaret Atwood’s “Backdrop Addresses Cowboys” (1968, an exploration of North American imperialism); Earle Birney’s “I accuse us” (1973, a critique of Canada’s collusion in the atrocities of the Vietnam War); and many African Canadian writers who were fighting for the right to even have a literary presence, especially within an African Canadian context, such as Liz Cromwell’s *Jungle Tea Poems* in 1975, or any of the poets published in Harold Head’s 1976 anthology, *Canada in Us Now*. Much of the fervor for Canadian nationalism (with nationalisms within nationalism, such as the separatist movement in Quebec) was a response to the Vietnam War, but it was also a time of revolution and anti-imperialism, manifested in North America in the 1960’s crusade for social equality—represented so well in Bob Dylan’s social change anthem, “The Times They are A-Changin.” The energy of ‘60s culture was funneled into the literature (new forms emerged, sound poetry, concrete poetry, folk music, pop art, free jazz, etc.), which helped launch what we now call postmodernism, and critical theory (feminist theory, queer theory, black studies, etc.).

Finally, in 1960 Aboriginal people won the right to vote in federal elections without losing their status rights. Yet, for all the human rights gained in the 1960s, of which we are now benefactors, there were many great losses in the struggle for new civil liberties. As mentioned, the Vietnam War is a case in point, and yet over 20,000 American draft dodgers made their home in Canada, many staying on even after the war. Canada was, as Frank Davey writes, “in some important ways an ‘un-American’ place” (*From There to Here* 16). Such migration recalls runaway slaves who made their underground exodus into Canada, as well as the United Empire Loyalists (including those American Blacks who fought on the British side) who made their way into Canada after the American Revolution. Canada has always been a country whose national narrative and people are in constant flux. Thus, Canada has always lived the blues in the tragedy of trying to negotiate difference, especially for those who are pushed to the margins, or politically denied the full benefits of citizenship. The world was changing and Canada’s sense of its place as a peaceful Nation was largely in contrast to America’s more openly confrontational politics and civil unrest, which culminated in Memphis on April 4th, 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. 150,000 people attended King’s funeral, a global wakeup call to the injustices in the world (including the Vietnam War and the struggle for racial equality), which Pierre Elliott Trudeau outlined in his
envisioning of a more just society. Laura Moss and Cynthia Sugars nicely sum up several factors of the Nationalist fervor of the 1960s and ‘70s:

- global decolonization movements,
- post-Second World War affluence,
- a public that was eager to read and hear more about themselves,
- the centennial celebrations of 1967,
- the Vietnam War,
- a loosening of immigration restrictions,
- increased subsidization of the arts in Canada,
- and the election, in 1968, of a prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who was flamboyant, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, yet also an avid Canadian nationalist. (220)

For all those reasons, including a growing middle class and the opening of the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962 (which made travel from St. John’s, Newfoundland, to Victoria, B.C., by car, possible), the collective and unified national narrative of Canada was solidified. And yet, this was a national narrative that, although multicultural under Trudeau’s projection, was largely exclusionary, and dramatically white. Clarke’s own anti-imperialist African Canadian nationalism comes out of much of this backstory.

Despite how cosmopolitan and hybridized Clarke’s poetics are, it is a tradition defined within a nationalist framework. As Clarke contends, largely in defense to critiques leveled against his nationalist stance, “If I am a cultural nationalist, I embrace that sign with a cosmopolitan passion” (*Directions Home* 6). Clarke argues in *Odysseys Home* that there is not only a deep history of African Canadian literature, but there is also a sense of nationalism around Black Canadian literature. Since *Odysseys Home*, a plethora of archived material, often in the form of anthologies, has appeared, mostly by Black Canadian writers, many who have taken Clarke’s emblazoned approach into exciting, diverse, and contemporary excavations of black writing and history in Canada. But does an archive alone constitute nationalism? Yes, and no. The archive constitutes a sense of shared heritage, history, and belonging, but nationalism is an act of imagination, and, like multiculturalism, an act of faith. Many theorists have critiqued nationalism because the Nation is often defined by those who wield power—akin to a kind of fascism—but as mentioned in the Introduction, Clarke’s nationalism, like Richard Iton’s “geo-heterodoxy,” in its “capacity to imagine and operate simultaneously within, against, and outside the nation-state” (202), is largely anathemic to the current model of nationalism in place: “This nationalism enacts a counter-influence to the pervasive identification of Canada as a northern, white, wanna-be empire, a pseudo-imperial self-image which reduces blackness to the status of problematic and pitiable Other” (*Odysseys Home* 45). In *Odysseys Home, Eyeing the North Star*, and *Directions Home*, Clarke uncovers an African (and diasporic) presence in Canada that dates back to 1605, naming early Canadian texts like John Marrant’s *Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful
Dealings with John Marrant (1785), Josiah Henson’s Life of Josiah Henson (1849), which prepared the way for Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Mary Ann Shadd’s Condition of Colored People (1849), John William Robertson’s The Book of the Bible Against Slavery (1854), and names M.E. Lampert as the first African Canadian woman poet. Clarke fiercely maintains his polemical stance that African Canadian literature and culture is no mere echo of African American literature and culture. For example, works presented in America are often engaged with differently when they are presented in Canada, exemplified as Clarke, NourbeSe Philip, and others have intensely argued in their responses to Show Boat, Huckleberry Finn, and the Into the Heart of Africa exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, which was vehemently rejected as flagrantly and viciously racist.

Clarke’s choice to frame Black literature and resistance in Canada as distinct from the larger superpower across the border (like Atwood’s claim for Canadian literature more broadly in Survival) is a response to a history typically ignored by historians and scholars, just like Canada’s shameful history of slavery. By framing Black Canada as resistive and other to the US, Clarke both draws on the universalism of Black Nationalism within an explicitly Canadian context (specifically regional and different in each province), and does so to work against the notion that to be black and Canadian “was to suffer the erasure of Canadian as a legitimate expression of black identity” (Odysseys 5). Clarke’s Directions Home succeeds his critically acclaimed Odysseys Home, a work which began mapping the tremendous depth of African Canadian literature upon Clarke’s revelation of “the existence of a canon of texts dating back to 1785” (Odysseys Home 6). Directions Home responds to its own call with fifteen diverse essays on Black Nova Scotian and West Indian-Canadian literature. The collection expands upon the map begun in Odysseys Home in its consideration of national, bilingual, and historical perspectives from a varied trajectory of African Canadian literature and history, showcasing a multiplicity of texts. Clarke includes everything from poetry to autobiography, church histories, and slave narratives. Like George Grant, Clarke upholds the essentialist view that “no minority culture can articulate or preserve itself without endorsing a degree of nationalism” (Directions 5). Of course, African Canadian writing is diverse, and many writers think of themselves outside a Canadian nationalist framework, preferring various diasporic or regional identifications.

Even deciding what constitutes a literary starting point in African Canadian literature is a matter of contention. While Clarke has celebrated the long literary tradition of African Canadian literature as a framework for African Canadian nationalism, M. NourbeSe Philip has argued that when she began writing in Canada she felt there wasn’t much of a tradition, certainly not a modern nationalist one, as she tells Nigel Thomas: “George Elliott Clarke and I disagree on this, and he has critiqued me on this: the feeling that when I began writing here in Canada, there was no body of
literature by African Canadians ahead of me to follow or not follow; to write with or against, as there exists in the US or Britain” (Why We Write 207). Philip goes on to talk about the beauty of written sermons in Nova Scotia, among other early traditions, but for her they do not constitute a literature, certainly they do not foster a sense of nationalism. It seems to me that part of the dissonance between Clarke and other Black Canadian writers, who either agree or disagree with him, is that they don’t realize that Clarke believes it is possible to have it both ways—you can adhere to nationalism and be diasporic. In his interview with Anne Compton, Clarke outlines his Red Toryism (like Grant’s own conservatism and garrison against globalization), and describes how one needs both revolution and tradition, “as long as it’s not oppressive, because it’s a way of defining one’s existence, as a group, as a people. So there is this Janus-faced approach one has to have, or one should have, as a poet.” Compton responds to Clarke’s strong nationalist position, by asking, “doesn’t that very nationalism, at the same time, make it difficult for the Maritimes to have, and to express, its uniqueness? You can’t have it both ways,” to which we get a depiction of the kind of nationalism Clarke has in mind:

I think you can have it both ways. There’s a difference between nationalism and patriotism, love of one’s own place. I think you have to manifest that love of place. There is no way you can simply be a bland poet. I was looking at an anthology of love poems, and John Clare was there. It gladdened me that he was there. Clare’s work is very local. I love the fact that he is willing to celebrate the woman who lives across the field. The language reflects that; it’s an everyday, workaday language of the rural people of England in his time (1793-1864). His language is homely, even frumpy, bumpy and lumpy.

Clarke’s nationalism is a patriotic one, but unlike the early ‘60s Black Nationalism of the Panthers and antecedents of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, Clarke’s love not only avows specific regional histories, but thinks of a nationalism alongside, or as part of, the Canadian multicultural landscape, a landscape which Trudeau, one of Clarke’s championed heroes, had in mind for the Canadian mosaic. As Clarke told the Toronto Star after becoming the poet laureate of Toronto, “Toronto has become a magnet for immigrants around the world and migrants from other parts of the country because it offers so many opportunities to get ahead, and to live together in something like harmony […] I’d like to be one of the voices summoning us to recognize the great dynamism of our diversity” (“Poet Laureate”). Although it is important to critique nationalisms that exclude or limit cultural difference—even within a given cultural ethnicity—Clarke is interested in a nationalism that counters global and local superstructures that continue to erase the history of African Canadians and their long standing presence in Canada. While nationalism feels like the wrong word for Clarke’s
larger project, perhaps, like Clarke’s desire for counter-canonicity, it is an act of reclamation, a *nóstos* for those who have been branded as marginal to the nation, or the literary canon.

**Blackening the Sonnet and Canoning the Canon**

One of the strange conditions of being Black Nova Scotian is that one is colonized in three different ways—by British culture, by American, and also by Canadian. We have to tussle with the Canadian, as well. From the standpoint of Toronto, my little community that numbers 30,000 people, which counts for about 10% of the Black Canadian total population, has little to contribute to the history and discussion of an African-Canadian presence. We literally do not count. So, part of my strategy as a writer, in responding to my status as the scribe of a marginal and colonized community, is to sack and plunder all those larger literatures—British, American, Canadian, French, African-American, Caribbean—and to domesticate their authors and their most famous or noted lines. In other words, my acts of homage are acts of damage.

—George Elliott Clarke in conversation with Anne Compton

Working against the tripartite colonization Clarke describes in the above epigraph, Clarke’s use of counter-canonicity, and his riffing on established English literary forms, are “acts of damage” that blacken the Western literary tradition in order to assert agency, noticeably where black voices have been historically absent. In the way that Clarke uses nationalism as a conservative ideology that privileges order and cultural difference, Clarke’s desire to blacken inherited traditions and to establish an African Canadian canon is motivated by the political fact that there is not a solidified African Canadian canon in place (*Odysseys Home* 16). For Clarke, the establishment of the African Canadian archive is a reminder of the long history of people of African descent in Canada, as well as a tactic to locate historical lacunae, deliberate omissions, and to create a feeling of unity (national pride) around the history of black people in Canada. Like the word *sankofa*, a word in the Akan language of Ghana that refers to excavating the past in order to conceive of the future, in acts of engaged citizenship, Clarke reaches into the archives of the past in order to think of a more equitable future for African Canadian people. By using the sonnet form in much of his poetry (along with other conventional poetic forms in *Blue, Black, and Red*), Clarke engages with multiple writers and histories across cultural lines to create a complex mix that keeps blackness wide open, like jazz.

Clarke’s strategies recall Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, where Baker argues, “The blending of […] class and mass—poetic mastery discovered as a function of deformative *folk* sound – constitutes the essence of black discursive modernism” (93). Building on Amiri Baraka’s notion of the “changing same”—Baraka’s designation for the interplay between tradition and the individual talent in Afro-American music—Baker designates the *mastery of form* and *the deformation of mastery* as black strategies of resistance and subversion. Essentially, these
terms are biological masks, elusive constellations, and the difference between the two forms is like that between a praying mantis (mastery of form) and a gorilla (deformation of mastery). Baker elaborates: “The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, is Morris Day singing ‘Jungle Love,’ advertising, with certainty, his unabashed badness—which is not always conjoined with violence. Deformation is gorilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” (50). And so while it could be argued that Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay does not re-modernize the sonnet, that he simply uses it just exactly as Shakespeare did and for exactly the same purposes, I would contend that he does in fact newly engage with the sonnet by effectively blackening it, mastering the form.\footnote{139} Comparatively, a poem like Amiri Baraka’s “Black Arts” charges forth like a gorilla, unabashedly announcing its badness. Like Derek Walcott (a major influence of Clarke’s), Clarke’s sonnets display a mastery of form and a deformation of mastery. In his interview with Anne Compton, Clarke defends his relation to the larger canon and his negotiation with the master tropes, genres, and languages in which he writes and works against: “Another point to make about the canon is that it is our canon too. Even though it was imposed on us, it still belongs to us […] perhaps we can take these models and blacken them […] In order to survive, in order to maintain some specificity for ourselves, we have no choice but to try to claim it for ourselves, to pretend that Shakespeare comes from Weymouth Falls or that Virginia Woolf comes from North End Halifax. I mean, why not?” In this 1998 interview, Clarke displays the value of blackening the canon, as an act of writing back to the Empire, as well as creating an “authentic” or “new” voice.

Ezra Pound and Derek Walcott, converging on the concept of newness, become ideal replicas of mimicry for Clarke, particularly Walcott’s ability to code-switch between traditions. Clarke describes his gratitude to Walcott, saying “I thank you for pioneering a way of blackening English, of roasting syllables upon the righteous fires of your anger and your love until they split and crack. You cannibalize the Canon and invite your brethren and sistren to the intoxicating, exhilarating feast” (“Open Letter” 16-17). Gates—revisiting Houston A. Baker, Jr.—echoes Walcott’s notion, describing “black English vernacular” as “a sign of black difference, blackness of the tongue. It is not surprising that the vernacular is the source from which black theory springs” (Signifying 92). Ashcroft et al. argue in The Empire Writes Back that code-switching between vernaculars of English is a strategy of the postcolonial writer: “Writers in this continuum employ highly developed strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, which achieve the dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating an English as a culturally significant discourse” (45). Through code-switching and a reappropriation of poetic language, Clarke creates a blackening of
English that places himself as other within the poetic tradition that he has been instructed in as both a poet and an academic, writing as a postcolonial poet back to the canon.

We, as critics or readers, could read much of Clarke’s work (particularly his poetic colouring trilogy) as expressing an elegiac longing for an African Canadian history that acknowledges a past that has been lost. Clarke’s poetry can be viewed as recuperative history. Clarke argues, “history is a poetry that we speak and write against our wills, resurrecting ad[e] terms and philosophies in the guise of new” (“Cool Politics”). Clarke’s “newness” helps to bestow a voice for the unsung, such as the “chalk-poisoned black men who watched gypsum / Choke off roses” (Blue, “Antiphony” 21), in much the same way that early hip-hop music bespeaks an unwillingness by certain members of an urban minority to be rendered voiceless by a dominant population. An astonishing aspect of Clarke’s Odysseys Home is the way it remaps the African Diaspora, with an approach that strongly challenges Paul Gilroy’s transnational approach: “Hence, his Black Atlantic is really a vast Bermuda Triangle into which Canada—read as British North America or Nouvelle-France or even as an American satellite—vanishes” (9). In this sense, Clarke is interested in translating black experience across the diaspora with a particular specificity, arguing for regional blackness within different Canadian provinces: “I will, to my dying breath, say that black Canadian writing is as regional as Canadian writing in general” (“Crime of Poetry” 62). It is this specificity of Clarke’s poïesis, as well as his relation to the larger diaspora, that allows him to assert an ambivalent black identity.

Clarke claims that “[y]ou are black Canadian as you wish, more or less, in our context. And that makes for a far more heteroglot, far more diverse, far more democratic community […] than you have with African Americans” (“Crime of Poetry” 57). Clarke is setting up yet another difference by arguing that Black Canadians have more freedom in defining Blackness than African Americans (whose struggles such as the Civil Rights movement lead to clearer notions of identity), rather than arguing that an ambivalent, hybridized identity is potentially just as totalizing in theory. From this viewpoint, Clarke attempts to inscribe an identity that is formed by virtue of otherness, by virtue of it not representing any single Black Canadian experience. Paralleling the music of Miles Davis, Clarke breaks away from previously defined traditions, while still relying on their form (such as the sonnet) to create new and more heteroglot identities. In the liner notes of Bitches Brew, Ralph Gleason argues that “electric music is the music of this culture and in the breaking away (not breaking down) from previously assumed forms a new kind of music is emerging.”140 Perhaps Miles Davis is the perfect archetype in understanding how “Calculated Offensive” works in Blue to create new forms, and challenge old poetic traditions: not merely by parodying them, but by perfecting them in dissonant harmony (an inherent paradox), pushing poetry and music into new contexts. The
hybridization of European and African culture in poems like “Black Sonnet” (*Black*) and “Antiphony” (*Blue*) can be read as the diverse construction of a poetic community that celebrates its people, its place, and its polyvalence. Clarke works against the notion that “Brit professors and cracker cops harrumphed, in perfect / Sneering grammar, again and again, ‘You have NO history’” (*Black*, “Towards a Geography of Three Miles Plains, N.S.” 56). Similarly, in “The Reinventing Wheel,” Wayde Compton states that “those who have no history are doomed” (*Performance Bond* 105). In dialogism with other marginalized black writers across the diaspora, Clarke’s poetics formulate a case for Black history (and African Canadian history) and poetry alongside the existing canon that suppressed black voices by presenting them as metaphorically inferior to “white” ones. Clarke does so as witness, arguing that black poetics and poets exist in similar capacities to the canon already in place, yet with their own sense of identity and complex (and storied) histories, thus prompting polyphonies of cultural listening from his readership. By setting the canon on fire, from the ashes Clarke underscores music as a unifying element across the diaspora, integral to national identification, canon-formation, and most importantly, poetic form.

*Incendiary Music*

“Make every lyric a work of treason, / A Criminal’s code, an arsonist’s song”
—George Elliott Clarke, *Blue*, “To X. X.” 40

Like “Purple Haze” trailblazer Jimi Hendrix, or the young firebrand Archie Shepp, whose fire music ignited the 1960’s free jazz scene, Clarke’s poetics can be thought of as an incendiary music that ignites the personal, interpersonal, and communal through song. Before the many poetic accolades, Clarke describes how he “became a songwriter—a lyricist—before [he] became, indelibly, a poet” (“Epiphanies” 60). I asked Clarke about his role as a musician/songwriter in relation to his poetry, and he related his love of music to his early experiences in the Baptist church:

Well, I am a frustrated musician. And singer for that matter. And one of the most traumatic incidents of my adolescence was when I was 12. And I was sent by my parents to join the Baptist church choir, and I got sent home the same night, because the choir director said, “No, we can’t use you... you go home.” So that was... it was a memorable experience because I was convinced I couldn’t sing. And I probably can’t sing. On the other hand, I feel that impulse towards song, and towards music, and I’m finding now in my life that when I come to read work, I find myself moving more towards that song style, speaking, singing kind of together at the same time. Which actually is—and you fall into all kinds of clichés and stereotypes—but some
preachers, or testifiers, in the black church tradition, present their sermons in exactly that way. I’m not trying to be one of those guys, or women—I’m not—but I do realize that I grew up in that tradition, and there’s a sense in which the sermon is supposed to be chanted, almost—almost chanted as much as it is spoken. And there’s room for the audience, the congregation, for the antiphonal response. (“Your Bass” 3)

Clarke’s response to my question echoes the response he gave to Nigel Thomas some years back, which is that he writes because he can’t sing and is not really a musician, “which is what I would have preferred to be, and I’ve elected not to be a preacher” (36). Thus, just like it is for Barbadian Canadian writer Austin Clarke, music largely structures and thematizes Clarke’s work, what he describes to Thomas as a jazz structure: “You know, the basic structure with someone taking off on a solo performance. The improvisations, the riffs. So we have the universals, but we also have the particulars. I have seen this fluidity, not just in jazz but also in calypso and gospel music […] in each new setting it changes form” (113). The fluidity and malleability of Clarke’s style, rooted in African American and Black disporic musics, provides an entry point to Clarke’s writing process, even if his poetry feels more formalized than free.

While Clarke is interested in a poetry that emulates jazz and blues improvisation (Whylah Falls xi),141 his poetry often reads as incredibly structured vernacular;142 nevertheless, it is in playing upon the old standards with new creations that Clarke creates a bricolage of styles, often stealing or parodying musical and poetic traditions. Doing so, Clarke creates an interpretive space for his poetry to function as improvisation—as an incendiary music that both pays homage and sets fire to prior traditions. Thus, Clarke can sing Nova Scotia in Whylah Falls with “bass blue notes” (171), and then imagine Oscar Peterson (known as Robertson in Clarke’s Trudeau) describing Pierre Elliott Trudeau as an iconoclast who’s as unpredictable as free jazz: “Unpredictable as free jazz. / From Native Son to Invisible Man, / He shifts like ectoplasm—or Peter Pan. / His life is his art; a canvas / Shimmering black-and-white contrasts” (Trudeau 53). While we can conceive of much of Clarke’s work through the blues matrix unpacked earlier, Clarke’s opus is open to revision like jazz, mixing styles, histories, materials, and cultures together to enact an oral fusion: “Jazz: It is women who open / The gates to Canaan or Eden” (Illuminated Verses 32); “Jazz is indelible rainbow aquarelles” […] Jazz is multiculti-Aboriginal-Semitic-Afro-Asian-Caucasian (Québécité 36); “Yes, jazz is black-market, black-magic Music: / Its Voodoo fuses Malcolm X and Confucius” (77). The numerous references to master musicians and orators resonate with Clarke’s own Baptist upbringing, reflecting his desire to be sounded, rather than simply read.
As Clarke tells Anne Compton, “For me, poetry is not only a printed form, a printed art. It is also an oral art, and it should always be. The two should never be separated. One should have a poem that reads silently as well as it does vocally.” Clarke has a point, for rhyme is an ancient form of both poetry and music, and yet most strands of modern and postmodern poetry disavow rhyme—and lyrical voice—as outdated and unsuited to contemporary verse and the faulty pretence that (post)modern poetry must challenge all subject positions. Of course, European poets’ desire to kill tradition differs greatly from a black poet who desperately needs tradition, especially when one’s ancestors barely survived the Middle Passage. In an interview, Clarke told me and McLeod that working directly with jazz musicians on “multicultural relationships in Quebec City circa 2000” inspired him to work more with rhyme:

And the interesting thing for me, working with D. D. [Jackson] on that project [Québécité] is, that we first began to work on it, I sent him basically free verse material and he rejected it. And said I need rhyme! I need rhyme! Now, if you’re coming from any kind of contemporary school of Canadian poetics rhyme is something you don’t do. [Laughs]. It’s like, no rhyme. We do not do rhyme here! Alright, this is modernism—in fact, it’s post-modernism! We just don’t touch it. We don’t like it, we don’t understand it, and we disavow it because we know it’s stupid. Rhyme is ridiculous. Right? So it was really interesting that that project and D. D. in particular forced me to work with rhyme. And I found it very liberating actually. (3)

Clarke goes on to describe that his early experiences with poetry were through trying to write songs, further influenced by his listening to the poet-songwriters of that era: Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and others. For Clarke, “This is the way poetry was supposed to be produced—in the context of song” (“Your Bass” 10). The challenge was to expand on that format to create poems that were just as complex when read, a task Clarke has done better than most of his peers, largely because he does not usually clearly demarcate the territory where a “poem” or “song” begins and ends. Like Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poetry, Clarke’s poems are musical, although they are not nearly as solecistic as Dunbar’s. One of the reasons Clarke writes so many sonnets (little songs) is that the form, like a song, suits a direct message and style, making the words effectively present and resonant for readers. Clarke’s use of iambic pentameter in his sonnets matches the da-DUM (rhythm) of a human heartbeat, which is a similar pulsing found in the bass line of many jazz standards. Responding to postmodern critiques of rhyme, Clarke asserts, “one reason why rhyme has been so discounted because as soon as you add rhyme you add the context of potential song. ‘Oh my god, that poem could be a song!’ And then people get really afraid, really fearful” (10). Clarke’s
incendiary—incendiary because it burns down traditions to create new ones from the flames—poem-songs reject the simple segregation between song and poem—although the formalism of some of the work certainly makes it feel page-bound—with the same fierceness with which Ginsberg, Creeley, Amiri Baraka, and others largely changed the literary academy: a poetry rooted in the people.

In my same interview Clarke goes on to describe rap—the decisive postmodern poetic form of our generation, as I argue in Chapter Six—as the closest popular movement to the beat generation’s ability to fuse song and poetry: “Rap and calypso and reggae, all these forms of popular music have moved very close towards a ‘conscious poetics,’ while at the same time trying to reach a mass audience” (10). Rap is a complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology, and while I’ve argued that Clarke uses traditional forms and can write rather formally, he equally can be read under the lens of postmodernism, at least in how I’ve used the term as a movement that doesn’t necessarily follow modernism, and is less a surface style or historical period than it is an open attitude towards newness, innovation, and risk-taking, which I find ubiquitous in Clarke’s musico-poetics. Thus, while John Zorn might typically be thought of as more of a postmodernist than Miles Davis (given Zorn’s use of deconstruction), they both are, since each is about change, reciprocity, and barrier crossing, and not necessarily about disavowing tradition. By contrast someone like Wynton Marsalis or Stanley Crouch clearly do not belong to a postmodern tradition since history for them is largely static, verifiable, and (while there’s always room for improvisation) somewhat unchanging. While Clarke’s cultural nationalism certainly situates him outside of most strands of postmodernism, his own poetics, and his search for polyphony and multiple voices allow for him to be read with the same polyvocal literacy required to listen to and feel much of jazz. Clarke quotes from Arthur Jafa’s theory of polyventiality in his complex reading of jazz poet Frederick Ward, and given Clarke’s admiration for Ward’s own improvisational—yet formal—poetics, I think the definition suits Clarke’s own work well: “Polyventiality’ just means multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity” (qtd. in Directions Home 195). To read, to hear, and to feel Clarke, we need the combined listening skills of the musicologist, the historian, the performer, and the poet. Now, let’s turn to Clarke’s poetic trilogy (with a particularly in depth analysis of Blue) and see if such “polyventiality,” and postmodern poetics are indeed sounded (like citizenship) on the page.
III. CLARKE’S POETIC COLOURING BOOK TRILOGY: BLUE, BLACK, AND RED

Colouring in an Epic

Taking up the ontological priorities of repetition, Clarke dialogically remaps poetic traditions, interrogates sub-imperialist notions of canonicity, and creates multiple planes of ambivalent listening. Within these planes of ambivalence, Clarke is free to colour in an epic—much like Pound’s ongoing and uncompleted *Cantos*—as *Blue, Black,* and *Red* are stand-alone works, and yet many of the same principles connect the works together (such as the Roman Numeral series that began in *Blue* and continues in *Black,* and elsewhere). In *Blue,* *Black,* and *Red,* newness, as a contemporary interrogation of otherness, is explored through the splitting of modernity as event and enunciation, as these works look at the poetics of the epochal, as well as the poetic praxis of the everyday. As Bhabha argues, newness is defined at the borderlines of cultures in a continual process of recuperation: “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (*Culture* 10). Through parody and provocative offence Clarke creates a cultural hybridity and ambivalence that reinscribes new cultural meanings that force the reader to enter into the parody. For Gates, the reader is an important element in parody: “the reader must supply the model, of which the author’s text is a distorted image, mirrored in some way. This looking glass reflection can involve relations of content and relations of form, both, or neither” (*Signifying* 110). Further, Gates engages with Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay “Discourse Typology in Prose” to show how parody functions within a performative space of appropriating another’s speech into an antagonistic space. Gates quotes Bakhtin:

> The second voice, having lodged in the other speech, clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims. Speech becomes a battlefield for opposing intentions […] Parody allows considerable variety: one can parody another’s style as style, or parody another’s socially typical or individually characteristic manner of observing, thinking, and speaking. Furthermore, the depth of parody may vary: one can limit parody to the forms that make up the verbal software, but one can also parody even the deepest principles of the other speech act.
>
> (qtd. in Gates 110)

Within these spaces of parody, Clarke provides a voice for those who have been rendered voiceless, doing so self-reflexively: “For a nigger, niggling with English… / (A tinny Walcott, I would like, I’d like, / Black English to sound more like tempered steel)” (*Black,* “Of Black English, or Pig Iron
Latin” 21). These in-between spaces, where Black and White English is recontextualized, provide multiple terrains that examine identity—singular or communal—where imitation becomes a tactic to spatially impose new meanings and define poetry under Clarke’s own guise of modernity.

It is in resisting, abrogating, and appropriating a multitude of poetic forms that Clarke is able to reinscribe meaning, creating new hybridized poetic forms and an aesthetic that can be described as “new,” even if the vernacular is highly formalized. In Aesthetic Theory Adorno argues that the “[a]esthetic rationally demands that all artistic means reach the utmost determinacy in themselves and according to their own function so as to be able to perform what traditional means can no longer fulfill” (35). So while Clarke’s poetry might be viewed as neoclassic in its highly formalized vernacular, it is also spontaneous because of its open posture to the hybridized experimentation mirrored in jazz’s remarkably electrifying and unpredictable history of improvisation and innovation. Further, technique brings a type of mechanics to bear on the spontaneity of Clarke’s aesthetic. Jonathan Sterne argues that “technique connotes practice, virtuosity, and the possibility of failure and accident, as in a musician’s technique with a musical instrument” (Audible Past 92). Along this mode of inquiry, improvisation becomes synonymous with experimentation. Clarke’s approach, as well, is classical and traditional within Black artistic spaces, which is why Philip Larkin (All that Jazz) and others like Amiri Baraka describe jazz as America’s classical music. Hence, the experimentation/improvisation, tradition, parody, rhetoric, and newness that Clarke is interested in largely relates to the bravado and cool politics of figures like Miles Davis and Malcolm X, who both appear frequently—almost like muses—in Blue, Black, and Red.

Clarke argues in his article, “Cool Politics: Styles of Honour in Malcolm X and Miles Davis,” that “X and Davis illustrate, despite their flaws, the possibility for the revitalization of non-sexist and life-enhancing chivalric-martial concepts such as virtue, gallantry, and honour, all of which can be used to ‘fight the powers that be.’ But my other major reason for wishing to reactivate these concepts is that they continue to motivate many black males, including intellectuals.” Clarke works against the reification of these figures into “Warhol-like pop idols,” as well as the phallocentrism and violence associated with X and Davis that leads to them being blamed—like modern day rappers—for the various ills for which young black-delineated youths in urban environments are often held responsible. Rather, as protean figures of cool styling, X and Davis are able to relate to and inspire alienated constituencies; they become, as Clarke contends, exemplary and archetypal champions for young black males to model themselves after in spheres of black religion and music, “spheres in which the masterful and the triumphant exude confidence, poise, purpose, style—in short, ‘cool.’” Ultimately, these modes of behaviour, within visions of justice that
determine masculine ideals, while problematic at times (such as Miles Davis’s physical abuse of various women, explored further in the subsequent chapter), provide masculine codes (and signs of the “cool”) in a manner that “might assist survival.” Given that Clarke’s poetic trilogy dually interrogates and embraces various styles of black masculinity, Davis and X, among other figures, are important signifiers for black creativity, and given that I agree (as Clarke assumingly would) with Paul Gilroy, and others, that race is not episteme, Davis and X are important as global signifiers—in Canada, even—of the power of radical thought to produce alternative possibilities for creative citizenship and principles that challenge alienation or, in Clarke’s case, white poetic convention.

For Clarke, X’s and Davis’s principles and ideals are vaguely manifested as a fluid Black dialogue even as they have been suppressed by the pages of history. It is in this negotiation of traditions, of written and oral culture, and of a diversity of speakers that Clarke asserts an “ethics of antiphony”—a kind of ideal communicative moment in the relationship between the performer and the crowd that we find in blues, jazz, hip-hop, and other African American and black diasporic musics. Paul Gilroy contends that “black music cannot be reduced to a fixed dialogue between a thinking racial self and a stable racial community […] the calls and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue” (Black Atlantic 110). In creating an assemblage of poetic voices, Clarke allows for collections of meaning, setting himself up as witness and cultural translator. The act of reading becomes the act of listening, as good listening creates good critics or, vis-à-vis Clarke’s own listening, good dialogic poets.

It is this very polyphony and cosmopolitan Blackness, as well as the common aesthetic qualities of each work, which connect the elements of Clarke’s colouring oeuvre together. On a large-scale reverberation, Blue, Black, and Red are laid out with similar sections (each collection contains different representational aspects of its colour). Furthermore, stylistic similarities echo through each work: each collection contains figures who make reappearances and then exit stage left (for instance, Ezra Pound, Miles Davis, and Malcolm X); sonnets and other traditional verse poems appear; the dedicative poetics and signifying strategies remain the same; blues and jazz vernaculars and “cool” stylings soundtrack each work; all contain visual images (photos), explanations and inspirations are outlined in each work; and a consummate concern with beauty—a preoccupation in Clarke’s work, notably in Whylah Falls—appears in each book, as Clarke’s concern is “to recognize beauty when you see it and to not be afraid” (Black, “Africadian Experience” 60). Many other themes and styles are apparent as we work through each colour in the subsequent sections, but Clarke’s preoccupation with beauty in his work remains connected to an age-old concern tied to the Romantic intervention:
What is beauty? What is truth? The age-old concerns. I think the Romantic intervention, which said, “we have to make art out of some understanding of beauty,” and also a political art out of some understanding of beauty, remains germane, remains absolutely de rigueur for artists and writers today. The question has not been answered yet [laughs]… in any kind of final way. Maybe it can’t be answered in any kind of final way or final satisfactory way. So that’s really what I’m pursuing. (“Your Voice” 5)

It is this search for beauty as truth and the ambivalence of resolve for any clear resolutions that makes Clarke’s poetics (particularly his colouring trilogy) so provocative and politically engaging.

For Clarke, the poems in each book suit their elemental colouring, much in the way that a Chinese poem is always a word-painting (the calligraphy carries meaning), or even more when connected with sound, a “word-picture-time-music” (Hui-Ming 1). Clarke is interested in the representational possibilities of the colour red for instance, citing Mao as one word-painting figure, which given Mao’s own writing of Chinese lyric poetry is elusive. In Mao’s poems and lyrics, and Chinese lyrics more generally, the lyric is a translation of t’zu, which is a particular style of poetry written to fit a melody. And while we need to be careful to not reduce Clarke’s Africadianess to Chinese poetry, and vice versa, thinking of Clarke’s poetry as entwined with multiple senses—namely, the visual and the auditory—is not only telling, but at the heart of Clarke’s engaged practice. Listen: “Art neutralizes our pain / til only strong Beauty’s left” (Blue, “Secret History” 79).

Blue lyrics

“Blue is John Coltrane—immortal Coltrane—recording Blue Trane”
—Clarke, Blue, “I. i” 108

The colour blue signifies much in Blue. With an icy blueness/coolness and a black-blues lyricism, Clarke dabs his poetic brush in a sinuous palette of blues: indigo, ultramarine, and cobalt walls, with filaments of sapphire, azure, and blue-red veins. Expansively put, Blue confounds its own blueness. Perhaps nowhere in Clarke’s large poetic catalogue is the matrix more apparent than in Blue: a work in five poetic spectrums (“Black Eclogues,” “Red Satires,” “Gold Sapphics,” “Blue Elegies,” and “Ashen Blues”) that combines the rhythms of gospel and blues and shantytown vernacular within the highly aesthetic poetic tradition of Western literature. Rhapsodic and polyphonic in its composition, Blue can be read according to its ability to perform poetic difference: with performative virtuosity Clarke navigates the alteration between the self and the other within the subjectivity of one poetic voice (Fiorentino). Hybridizing both the British poetic tradition alongside
Black vernacularism and the music of blues and jazz, using the poetic voice as a palimpsest, Clark explores, parodies, and interrogates the aesthetics of poetic history with interpretative renditions (reminiscent of an extended jazz solo). Clarke’s self-reflexive, often self-aggrandizing approach to the politics of poetic representation allows him to assert a hybridic identity of otherness (like the wild, yet well-spoken Caliban of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*), often ambivalently through negation, to challenge dominant discourses of the Western literary canon.

Clarke’s challenging of dominant discourses involves a syncretism of forms, such as his infusing the traditional sonnet with blues rhythms in the opening poem to *Blue*. “Negation,” from the “Black Eclogues” section, opens the collection of poems with Clarke painting himself as other (turning xenophobic fear to poetic advantage), describing himself as a “Denigrated, negative, a local / Caliban […] Nofaskoshan Negro,” creating a marginalized space to perform poetic surgery: “To take apart poetry like a heart” (13). In negotiating poetic otherness, *Blue* engages with cultural hybridity, as a poetic act that creates multivalent levels of listening from its audience without clear resolution, preferring troubling language and poetic aporia in order to weave a song-text that mimics and masters the Western poetical tradition, while simultaneously mocking and revising the tradition with Africanist—and Canadian—priorities, to provide a voice for the historically marginalized.

“Negation,” like many poems in *Blue* (and *Black* and *Red*) is full of consonance, alliteration, and uses the sonnet form to emphasize the ideas of succession, resistance, and reclamation. Clarke’s accentuation on the consonants “n” and “m” in the opening lines of “Negation,” “Le nègre negated, meager, c’est moi: / Denigrated, negative” does more than stress the beat. These lines play with the French etymology of nègre, which can pejoratively be reduced from Negro to “nigger.” Working against the grotesque and racist assertion of the word, Clarke aligns with the reclamation of nègre, particularly negritude—as discussed in Chapter One—as used by Fanon, Césaire, and others. Although this process can be overwhelming and grotesquely assertive, it is important to recognize that Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire—respectively in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *A Tempest*—use negation/negritude in order to renounce colonial connotations, reclaim identity, and usurp imperialism in all forms through a series of inversions and dialectics. The opening poem of *Blue* establishes that Clarke will negate and master received traditions and identities, editing in a hybrid poetics and mixed politics with an improvisatory spirit.

While it might be hard to read the collection of poems presented in *Blue* as similar to the hybridity of improvised techniques found in jazz records, notably in Miles Davis’s *On the Corner*, which fuses electronic and synthesized funk with modal jazz, it does help to frame the type of tactility and freedom that Clarke’s visceral poetry attempts to represent by fusing blues, jazz, and
folk rhythms within Africanist and British poetic aesthetics. Further, we can think of Clarke’s own editing and poetic process as part of the performance, similar to the ways Teo Macero’s editing in Davis’s *On The Corner and Bitches Brew* is central to the work as bricolage. In blending the oral within the textual (using heavy amounts of alliteration and internal rhyme) Clarke congruently highlights the form of the page-poem, as well as the phonetics of sound-poetry, to create a listening experience that marries song with text. Clarke’s poetry aims towards *skaz*, which is when a text aspires to the status of oral narration/song. Clarke describes that [his] strength[s] as a poet, whatever they are, derive from the sonic universe of African American verse and song” (“Epiphanies” 60). As popular song often weaves multiple instruments, voices, and chords into a sonic holism, so does the poetry of *Blue* through epigraphs addressed to primarily black writers in an intricate web of dialogism and negation.

Through negation, *Blue* interrogates blackness—as well as whiteness—as politically and culturally constructed categories. *Blue* manifests a multitude of speech acts, where a “speaker actualizes and appropriates his mother tongue in a particular situation or exchange or contract” (de Certeau, *Practice* 19). In appropriating voice freely, Clarke describes his ability to explore a heteroglot Blackness, illuminating the multiplicitous (and multicultural) nature of Black identity in Canada, riffing on Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*: “In Canada, some are born black, some acquire blackness, and others have blackness thrust upon them” (*Odysseys Home* 16). It is this variety of styles that Clarke uses to create an in-between, hybridized identity formed through his understanding and appropriation of British, American, black, white, and other potentially disparate voices. Clarke invokes a plurality of voices in order to create an intentionally troubling, often ambivalent approach to otherness, ultimately making the past more resonant.

For all the play with language, history, and identity, there is a rooted desire in Clarke’s work to have ignored histories sounded in the present. In poems like “African Petition (1783),” “1933,” “Bio: Black Baptist/Bastard,” and “Antiphony,” Clarke provides historical accounts of Canada’s mistreatment of blacks in order to establish the type of recuperative poetics *Blue* is interested in. Sure, there are historical flourishes throughout *Blue*, as in all of Clarke’s work, but it is no coincidence that the most historical poems in *Blue* immediately follow “Negation,” a poem about the reclamation of poetry from *othered* spaces. In these poems Clarke bears witness to Canada’s own tumultuous history and malignant treatment of African Canadian people. “African Petition (1783),” which directly follows “Negation,” comes out of the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and deals explicitly with the Black Loyalists (the Nova Scotians/ Nofaskoshans) who settled in Nova Scotia (Africville) after the Revolutionary War. Clarke works with actual phrases extracted from
letters written by Black Nova Scotians after they settled in Sierra Leone in 1792, except he imagines these Black Loyalists writing to the colonial powers in Nova Scotia. The poetics here are very controlled (written almost entirely in quintains) and the language is particular solemistic, capturing the everyday voices of those who are angered by the lies of a government that promised them prosperity: “We’s Dis Gusted by govermint, / Discomfotable […] You forgit us, so we be Nothing— […] your Cownsil’s muddying Lyes?” (14-15). Throughout the poems in the “Black Eclogues” section of Blue I am reminded of Caribbean-American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde’s statement and title of one her essays, “Poetry is not a Luxury” (Sister Outsider). What is poetry to those who are simply trying to survive? Clearly, Clarke makes the argument that these early African Canadian experiences are the stuff of poetry, that their “salvos of pain and rough joy” (21) are made of a grainy blues truth that is as Miltonic as Milton is poetic.

“1933,” the poem that follows “African Petition (1783),” concerns another historical date—not only 1933, but also 1917: the year of the Halifax explosion. On a December morning in 1917, the SS Mont-Blanc, a French cargo ship loaded with wartime explosives collided with the Norwegian vessel, the SS IMO in the Narrows, a straight connecting the Halifax Harbour to Bedford Basin. The cataclysmic explosion killed 2000 people in debris, fire, and collapsed buildings, injuring another 9000. While Africville, just north of the explosion, marginally dodged the brunt of the explosion, the small and frail homes were heavily damaged—still standing, but essentially in ruins. Hugh MacLennan’s canonical Barometer Rising (1941), which surrounds the Halifax explosion, skips over the devastating effects this explosion had on the already neglected Africville. Clarke uses the explosion—through a stanza long hypotactic description of the “rancid, gamy houses […] left-over dying / from ‘17’s Explosion” (16) to tell the story of “Indigo Sampson”: “pop-eyed drunkard” (16) who allegedly killed two white boys. On 19 July 1933, the bodies of two young brothers were found a short distance from one another by the railroad tracks that ran near their home on the outskirts of Nova Scotia. After months of inclusive corner’s inquest—the kids might have very likely been killed by the train—the police and RCMP arrest Daniel Perry Sampson, an Africadian and veteran of WWI for the murder of the two boys. Clarke’s poem details the racism surrounding the event and reimages the incident as “two white small boys who accost him, zestfully, / as “n-i-g-g-e-r” (16). The event recalls Fanon’s being called a “nigger” (“Look at the nigger! ... Mama, a Negro!” [113] by a young white boy with his mother, and Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, who “in the end,” writes Fanon, “acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world’s anticipation” (139). The casual execution of Sampson at the end of “1933” recalls the casual displacement and disempowerment of African Canadian people and the provoked violent response to their disempowered position by some
African Canadians (see Clarke’s *Execution Poems*); further, the poem also hinges on the advent of WWII and the casual killing of Jews and racial others by the Nazi regime. Clarke’s poems—for all their Tarantino-esque revisionism—are about historical witness, for Clarke works explicitly with a “History [that] fell upon us [African Canadians] like the lash” (“Bio: Black Baptist/Bastard” 19). As Clarke states at the end of “Bio: Black Baptist/Bastard”: “Listen closely: I am trying to cry / That’s my condemned blood on the page” (20). But Clarke does more than witness and listen to history—he responds, rewrites, and resists.

*Performing a calculated offensive*

In 2012, *Blue* was reissued by Gaspereau Press, and in reviewing the work for *The Chronicle Herald*, critic Philip K. Thompson expresses his fear that much of Clarke’s resistance borders on “hate speech.” He claims:

> Despite vocabularic genius, and his personal kindness and warmth, there is a Malcolm X violence in some of the more powerful racial rants, which properly decry horrific treatment of blacks in America (and even “Nofaskosha”) but sometimes approach “hate speech” toward the white race. For some readers, regardless of colour, these poems may cross the line. Anger is legitimate poetic expression, but unhealed anger between races through the millennia causes great destruction still.

Set aside Thompson’s spurious reading of race, Malcolm X, his choice not to focus on the love poems for “white” women, and his lack of understanding how irony/parody (which, Bakhtin argued “exists even in the deepest principles of the other speech act”) functions in *Blue*, let’s focus on what led Thompson to make such a (mostly misguided) claim. Thompson does not even commit to commenting on which poems border on “hate speech,” although he is likely referring to poems such as “Miles Davis: An Autobiography,” whose title indicates a clash with an original host voice, or “Calculated Offensive,” a poem with a clearly ironic title, which is one of Clarke’s most virulent—and polemical—poems in *Blue*. Having assigned “Calculated Offensive” as a poem for close reading to my own students, I can see how a few students in the mostly “white” class also made the assumption that Clarke might hate white people. Clarke, of course, does not hate white people, all the more so given not only his academic position in a liberal university, but his clear love—dedication even—to many “white” canonical figures, such as Ezra Pound, Irving Layton, and Trudeau. Further, if poems can only be taken literally, they are either not poems, or they are poorly written ones. Many of the poems in *Blue* are urgent and ekphrastic engagements at the level of language: they draw in and negotiate a blues nexus of meaning.
In Blue, Clarke often enacts Judith Butler’s insistence on the importance of “troubling” language, of making “troubling” the active verb. In “Calculated Offensive” he puts diverse poetic practices (English and African American/Canadian) into juxtaposed dialogues (tossing European praxis into a poetic fire in order to blacken it), often with corporeal manifestations that are intended to offend many of his readers: “Put Europe to the torch / All of Michelangelo’s dripping, syphilitic saints, / all of Sappho’s insipid, anorexic virgins” (24). Sure, there is virulence here, but there is also musical play with language. Notice the clever rhyming of “syphilitic” and “insipid.” Perhaps most elusively, Clarke weaves his voice of poetic otherness though engendered imagery, molding the type of poems that are composed “when two sick melodies fuck” (“Miles Davis: an Autobiography” 73) referring to Davis’s own mixing of classical and jazz traditions, as well as black and white musicians (such as Bill Evans) in his group. The visceral and violent imagery in “Miles Davis” often deconstructs masculinity (while affirming its creative and social milieu vis-à-vis an archetypal character such as Miles Davis) by performing gender in its most sadistic and primal constructions of social hegemony. Clarke describes a type (not the only one) of rhythm he craves in “L’Assassinat” (“Miles Davis”) as a “Roaring whore whose left eye was / Ripped, who took three skull fractures, a cracked / Jawbone, whose cussed clit was severed […] because of evil love” (73). The reader encountering Clarke’s visceraally engendered language will undoubtedly question its function, wondering how the paradox of “evil love” functions didactically. Butler argues that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Gender Trouble 33). In performing gender, race, or otherness, Clarke confronts vicissitudes of constructed identities. Clarke performs/lampoons and draws energy from the proximity between unfettered masculine bravado (such as in Davis’s own autobiography) and a creative spirit of resistance.

The performative aspect of Clarke’s often-hyperbolic poetry, simultaneously engaged in itself and the other, comes to full fruition in the elegy for Japanese writer Mishima Yukio, who committed ritualistic suicide (seppuku) in 1970. The poem “II. i” helps to flesh out (in the tactility of text and the physical embodiment of lived experience) the practice of listening and performance as an inherently embodied act—“a corporeal style” (Butler, Gender). By performing double articulation, relating a corporeal pun on the act of seppuku (which involves gutting oneself), as well as poetry as an embodied intuition, Clarke’s poem constructs and negates the physiognomic creating of poetry within its destructive potential: “the agitated, salacious fire / of Poetry in the gut” (“II. i” 124). As readers, we are left feeling Blue in the pit of our guts, as an embodied act of listening, which reflects our most constructed and reconstructed social acts of meaning, with poetry at the forefront, highlighting that all poetic constructions of identity are in flux, constantly fleeting and changing in
the construction of “new.” This newness challenges modernity and its attendant disavowals of the past in favour of a poetics that not only takes on the past but embodies it. Hence, one of Clarke’s poetic idols, the modernist par excellence, Ezra Pound, becomes “unsavoury Pound, who liked / to put ‘negros’ in lower-case (in their place)” (“Onerous Canon” 67). Clarke extracts a blues truth from an onerous canon (and an anxiety of influence) that plays with the words and prejudices of dead white men even as he feels indebted largely to that tradition. “Onerous Canon” is suitably dedicated to Derek Walcott who, like Clarke, blackened the canon he inherited, while making room for black voices to be heard, as Walcott (like Clarke), poets with “a veriloquous, unadulterated voice, / extracting black blues from a yellowed Oxford” (68). The various dedications in Blue, or poems written in “à la manière de,” are telling signs that a level of parody, retrospect, performance, or embodiment is at work, which is why we need to be careful when reading Clarke—or most art—not to judge him (as a preacher of hate) too quickly without knowing the history a given piece draws, or performs from, and for what purpose(s).

For example, a poem à la manière de Malcolm X, or Miles Davis, without sampling their style (lodged with Clarke’s own poetic persona) would fall rather flat. Writing à la manière de Amiri Baraka in “Calculated Offensive” lets us know that there is a certain counter-canonicity and Black Arts Nationalism at work in the poem; it also lets us know that Clarke is having a little fun with a tradition that Africans in the New World were forced to learn at the suppression of their own. Baraka’s poetry provides a good example of how poetry can move through blues and jazz to black chant and graphic sound. As M.L. Rosenthal wrote, “No American poet since Pound has come closer to making poetry and politics reciprocal forms of action” (qtd. in Baraka Reader xxii). For Baraka, art was a weapon of revolution. Along with “Somebody Blew Up America,” Baraka’s poem “Black Art,” provides an Umwalzung—that is, revolution—through a complete overturning of prior poetic systems, enacting one of the most ferocious black chants ever to appear on the page. Anti-Semitism aside, which sadly the poem has in abundance, “Black Art” provides an improvisatory chant in the form of a free jazz poem. Baraka’s poetic violence disavows lyric voice in favour of a gruffer, more militant poetics: “Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or tress or lemons piled / on a step […] Fuck poems […] We want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems” (Transbluesency 142). The onomatopoeic chanting machine guns is informed by the free jazz tradition (he performed this poem on different occasions with improvising musicians) as the language itself often breaks down into black chant, into anacrusis, into the very sounds of violence enacted upon the poem: “Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
form, along with Baraka’s opus, altered the course of African American literary culture. It didn’t merely blacken the canon: it blew it into a million pieces.

Ultimately, compared to Baraka’s “Black Arts,” Clarke’s “Calculated Offensive” is timid; it is certainly less violent, and certainly it is not racist “hate speech.” Rather, it performs an anti-racism through parody and an extremely furious male voice; further, it is important to remember that poetic violence (the burning of a canon) is a perfectly natural response to the very real violence African Americans/Canadians faced at the hands of crude slave masters, colonialists, and imperialists. Both poems retain the need to establish counter canons (for Baraka it was the establishment of a Black Arts movement) that can be defined without non-black sources. Counter canons can, as Gates, Jr. writes, “create a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it” (Loose Canons 31). All canons are by nature exclusionary, but sometimes that exclusion is a response to historical omission. Essentially, Baraka, using the pronoun “we” throughout “Black Arts” to connect to a larger Black community searches for “a black poem / And a / Black World. / Let the world be a Black Poem / And let All Black People Speak This poem / Silently / or LOUD” (143). The full irony of the opening line of Clarke’s “Calculated Offensive,” “To hell with Pound! / What we desire is African: / Europe is so septic, it seeps poisons” (23), is hypocritically felt, along lines of parody, in the “Red Satires” section where Clarke literally reads Pound (and writes a sonnet about it) at his tomb (with an analogous picture of Clarke at the actual tomb of Pound, reading his [or Pound’s] cantos in deep contemplation), sifting his “Cantos, pound for pound, / To ferret out fresh, untainted measures” (“Au Tombeau de Pound” 52).

Such contradictions of ambiguity, where we find Clarke denouncing the European canon while pages later expressing his reverence for those whom he emulates, create liminalities of shifting personas. At these moments in the text the reader (or reading critic) might be tempted to denounce Clarke’s hybridity as a totalizing principle that prevents him from having to make clear ethically grounded statements. However, Clarke does not believe that abrogating a form, especially if inherited, is necessarily totalizing, saying that the sonnet form is in fact postcolonial, asking, “now what can we do with it?” (Compton, “Standing Ground”). Essentially, Clarke, like Baraka often did, is free to adapt, revise, and combine traditions in order to establish his own polysemous version of Blackness. If Clarke’s poetry carried an ID card it would read something like, “Multicultural Jazz Man.” Not that such polyphony allows Clarke to evade critical engagement of or criticism for his choice of language, for it is such contradictions in Blue that make our reading of his poems enticing, engaging, humourous, calculatedly offensive, and often very confrontational.
Kevin McNeill describes Clarke’s poetry as an “enticing tangle of contradictions and confrontations, things like a vicious delicacy or a brutal lyricism” (“The Crime of Poetry” 53). When I asked Clarke about his confrontational poetics, I unintentionally asked him to defend himself as poet, in response to which he described his lineage and confrontational style, notably in Blue:

I still feel, or at least I felt at the time I was working on Blue, especially, that if there is such a thing as a Canadian poetics, an Anglo-Canadian poetics, that it was still a little bit sedate, a little bit. And that’s despite the interventions of Michael Ondaatje and Irving Layton, etcetera, etcetera. And, I felt, maybe wrongly, at that point in my life in the 1990s, and maybe because of the fact I was in the United States—land of the free, home of the brave, blah, blah, blah—that it was ok to strike out and attempt a more visceral, a more vivid, a louder, a more gruff, a more in your face kind of poetic. It was partially a reaction for myself; I mean, I was the one who imbibed too much that I couldn’t say certain things, or that I couldn’t write certain things, that I had to be really careful what I said, and what I wanted to say in my work […] But the experience of writing Blue, in particular, was an effort to break away from what I had considered an imprisoning mode of discourse that almost insisted on politesse—on being polite—in our poetry. And I really wanted—for myself—to break away from that, and be more open and also more “honest” […] to write a more aggressive poetic that would allow me to say whatever I wanted to say… hopefully, well. But, to claim that kind of freedom. And it might be odd to credit the United States of America [laughs] with that, given its history and its awful foreign policy in so many ways. […] I had an audience here that might question or might be bothered by some of the things I chose to write. But… that was the whole point: particularly, Blue, Black, and maybe a little bit of Red. Saying: “Yeah, we can claim this space.” (“Your Bass” 6)

Clarke’s need to write a gruffer poetics—to work against the polite Canadian veneer of established acceptability—is a reminder of the various possibilities that poetic expression can manifest, all the more so for a black poet who feels the need to draw from cross-cultural and diasporic traditions that have a militant history of resistance. Clarke went on to describe to me that as a black poet he should be allowed “to speak forthrightly out of the cultural traditions that are important to [him]” (6) and to inject that voice, sensibility, and musicality into Canadian poetry. What is ultimately disturbing about Philip K. Thompson’s review of Blue is that he reads Clarke too literally, falling into the clichéd stereotyped camp that black poets write very literal performance pieces, when in truth there is a lot of play, revision, and high intellect, even in Clarke’s most offensive poems. Further, using the sonnet and European traditions as he masters them, or effectively blackens them, creates an aesthetic that allows for both cerebral and performative engagement. Clarke’s aesthetic is both neoclassical as well as postmodern, a quasi-improvisation and quasi-stylized vernacular, composed from 60% Miles Davis and 40% Wynton Marsalis.155
Such experimentation and syncretism among poetic forms (European and African American/Canadian) situate *Blue* in an aesthetic of constant revision that could be accused of catering to the popular. Similarly, Miles Davis’s rock-jazz fusion record *Bitches Brew* was viewed by neoclassicists upon its release “as selling out jazz’s cultural dignity and musical seriousness to the prurient vagaries of a craven popular music business eager to cater to the worst longings of the youth culture market” (Anderson, “Cultural Difference” 179). Clarke explores poetic authenticity in *Blue* with modernist priorities in his melding of different traditions, echoing Pound’s notion to, “Day by day make it new / cut underbrush, / pile the logs / keep it growing” (*Selected*, “Canto LIII” 65). In his poem “Nu(is)ance,” which is dedicated to Wayde Compton, Clarke asserts that his poetic aesthetic is at least doubled: “Jabbering double-crossing doubletalk,” and that he would “rather stutter a bastard’s language / Only spoken in gutters, a broken, / Vulgar, Creole screech, loud with bawling, slurring” because it is “literal, guttural Poetry” (38). In claiming his (and Compton’s) poetic technique as a cross-fertilization of languages, code-switching between forms, reduced even to auditory screeches, Clarke inscribes a *modus operandi* that assembles and gathers new forms of poetic vernacular. The epigraph to Wayde Compton is apt, given that Compton’s work often dialogically creates poetry out of a variety of styles, similar to the way that turntablism assembles a polyvocality of voices in hip-hop. Home, for Clarke, is both a diasporic experience that cuts across borders, as well as a rooting in the specificity of an African Canadian context.

**Antiphony**

Even though Clarke’s poetry is full of polyphony, as a poetic and cultural negotiator Clarke’s complex and interpretive approach to history might not directly speak to all of his listeners. Like Baraka he often uses the collective “we” as a rhetorical device that draws in or excludes the reader depending on his or her ethnicity or political identification (Fiorentino). However, by including both the history of Black Canadians and their relation to the poetic canon (or Clarke’s uneasy relation to it), academics and a larger listening audience are brought into Clarke’s ambivalent negotiation of poetic traditions. Like an antiphon—the ritual responsory by a choir or congregation, or the call and response in music—Clarke’s poetics respond to history and literary canons. In “Antiphony” the works of canonized poets such as Wordsworth, Yeats, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Hopkins are reduced to dusty, purposeless words that lack direct antiphony because they no longer participate in the dialogic method that Clarke’s speaker invokes. “Antiphony” is a calling back on educational colonization that “bash[es] grammar into gravel” with a speaker that pronounces “tragedy was our
slavery” (21-22). It is this aspect of witnessing that evokes the DuBoisian idea of double consciousness (Clarke as black poet and academic working within and outside the literary canon), redressing the institution of academicized literature by throwing words into a poetic fire and reshaping them with an outstretched diction directed towards a larger community. The dedicated epigraph to Austin C. Clarke, the first black writer to publish a novel in mainstream Canada, in “Antiphony,” is an antiphonic moment that highlights Clarke’s imperative to speak to a community of common interest, not necessarily dependant on race, but rather on anti-racist principles.

Like the poem “Blank Sonnet” (from Whylah Falls), “Antiphony” utilizes a call and response technique, with Clarke at the centre of the dialogue as witness, to juxtapose stark images of perceived whiteness and blackness with the English poetic canon. “Blank Sonnet,” which emulates the traditional Shakespearian sonnet form, collapses on itself as the antithetical love letter because it becomes the very thing it renounces: beautifully crafted love poetry, evoking a quasi-blackness from its flames. Xavier, the speaker of the poem, desires the “slow, sure collapse of language / Washed out by alcohol” (23) rather than the cadenced verse of English poets. Similarly, “Onerous Canon,” epigraphed to Derek Walcott, highlights the anxiety of influence that Clarke’s poetic project confronts, as well as Walcott’s, and postcolonial black writers in general. The poem situates archetypal poets of the Western canon (Yeats, Keats, Claire, and Pound) in defamiliarized positions that compromise their authority: “whiny, beseeching Keats, / who should’ve drunk some Alexander Keith’s” (67). However, “Onerous Canon” is not solely occupied with the anxiety of influence, or notions of lateness, so much as in how an ambiguous abrogation of poetic figures can function to render Clarke’s voice as distinctly and uniquely Other. By negating the voices of canonized poets, “(Auden in the margins, / Eliot, Yeats, and Pound in the dungeon)” (68), Clarke creates an ambivalent space (his voiced fused with Walcott’s) that allows him to interrogate the act of writing from a space of Blackness within a tradition of whiteness, cross-mixing both polarities.

Antiphony in Clarke’s poetics—like the poem of the same title—anticipates the response of the reader, as well as a symbolic larger Black community whose voices have been suppressed intentionally by mainstream society. Toni Morrison describes the practice of antiphony as that “which symbolizes and anticipates” (qtd. in Gilroy, Black Atlantic 79), which is what Clarke does when he responds to the call of Black Nova Scotians who could care less about British poetry. For the labourers and gypsum miners described in “Antiphony,” Shakespeare meant nothing, for how could he? Rather, “Shakespeare came down to us as Black Horse beer” (22), reminding us of Lorde’s refrain: poetry is not a luxury. The fact that the poem uses imperfect iambic and much alliteration and inner rhyme accentuates the musicality of a seemingly quotidian people whose unrecorded
traditions prove just as musical as any written down one. As Clarke told *Canadian Literature*, “In the poem, I question the value of my allegiance to British poetry when my community has been illiterate—and exploited and oppressed by British imperialists and their Canadian descendants.” Clarke’s investigation of his dual inheritance as a poet and the more *blue* vernacular of his Africadian inheritance—using improvisation as a strategy to find synthesis between the two—are what makes the conversation between divergent cultures most fruitful in *Blue*, and elsewhere. As Clarke writes, “I also, suddenly, heard all those countrified, Negro voices as Miltonic, Shakespearean, bluesy, epic, classical, and simply, lyrical” (“Epiphanies” 61). Clarke is no L=A=N=G=A=E poet, as his desire to pen poems like songs is ultimately a hope to respond and be heard (to get response) in his own voice in acts of antiphonic community building.

Such poetic antiphony is why in one moment Clarke can write a bawdy blues poem about interracial sex, “À Dany Laferrière,” à la manière de Sade, that speaks, “Christ, I’d rather torch a Church and sink in Hell / To sink in her just once, that blond slut […] Her ass, her white panties winking swank cunt” (29), and then write a sweet sensual poem that connects beauty to poetry, similar to how Coltrane plays, in “Naima”:  

Naima…
Lawd, have mercy,
Lawd, have mercy, gal.

Either our *Poetry* closes
aflame—

or

a-flowering. (85)

Clarke’s poetics in *Blue* either closes “aflame,” or opens “a-flowering”—both tell us something about the poetic act. In reinscribing and reclaiming otherness from the margins of history by weaving a plurality of black voices, Clarke challenges us as readers, and more distinctively as listeners, to relisten to history, and in doing so to relisten to poetry. It is through listening, which Susan Stuart argues has “no limit, no articulation, but waits in the silence that fills the future lying all about the utterance” (101), that we make sense of the ambivalent, seemingly inconsequential moments in *Blue*. In this sense, listening as a sense is described by Jean-Luc Nancy as “always to be on the edge of meaning” (7). In negotiating hybridity in *Blue*, we participate as listeners in making sense of the act
of sense-making. These moments of sense-negotiation are tactically represented on the page: “A pen burns paper” (157). However, like any listening practice, words (or sounds) are constantly going out of existence even as they are grasped, as Clarke’s final words in the collection acknowledge the transitory nature of all human expression with a polemic finish, and inevitable rise from the flames: “Every poem is its own pyre, flamboyant, / The smoking words laying waste to Time” (“Burning Poems” 157). To return to some my students’ own confused readings of “Calculated Offensive,” it should be noted that for the few students who felt either hurt or confused by Clarke’s poem, the majority found the poem, along with Blue, engaging for the fiery nature of Clarke’s nuanced poetics. The calculated offensives and antiphonic moments in Blue are, like every book, a closing and an opening: Clarke’s Blue somehow manages to open “a-flowering” even when it closes “aflame.”

**Black power**

“and I know how various yet unchanging / Blackness is”
—Carolyn M. Rodgers, “What Color is Lonely” 266.

Black is the colour of coal, of humanity, of ebony, of the outer limits of outer space. It is the opposite of white finality. The poems in Black (told in eight sections riffing on “black”) are bold, brash, boisterous, and continue much of the layered work in Blue. Again, we encounter poems about poetry and Blackness, the Roman Numeral series continues (IV–VII), Miles Davis reappears, Clarke reads another poem at Pound’s tomb; yet, the collection gets a little more personal than Blue, and given that Malcolm X is one of Black’s central symbolic figures, the lyricism is surprisingly less vicious—the offenses softer. Nevertheless, Black begins with a hanging (“George & Rue: Coda”) that picks up from Execution Poems, dedicated to the hanging of George and Rufus Hamilton in 1949. Established early in Black is a concern again with reexamining history—for example, the racism, poverty, and vindictive justice system is more central than the Hamiltons’ actual crime—as well as a musical play with language: “The Two young Negro men, unhinged, / Swing lazily to a bluesgrass, Dixieland tune” (16). While Blue focused more on the past, influenced by Clarke’s experience growing up in the 1960s in Nova Scotia and living and teaching in the United States, Black feels a little more confessional (George and Rue are his cousins), and of the present with an eye towards the future. In all three colouring books, Clarke manages to capture the experience of the black man’s political and personal indignation at the injustices of history. He also pauses often—equivalent to a fermata in music—to appreciate the accumulated beauty of art over the (p)ages. In
we hear the many musics of Clarke: the black neo-protestant Baptist, influenced by gospel; the expert listener of African American musics; and the operatic classicist who writes librettos.

Aside from the musicality in Blue, Black, and Red, there are unique emotional resonances that are the harvest of working with the temporal space and realm of each colour. Blue might be canvassed on censorship, Black on race, and Red on the erotic, yet all three colours work towards a larger painting that contributes to the self-reflexive act of writing poetry—creating an irresolute epic like Pound’s own Cantos. As Clarke told CBC Books in 2013,

I have tended to write narrative poems, narrative collections, and plays and libretti for operas. Those projects have tended to dominate most of my output […] But I also find myself writing the nature poems, the love poems, the political poems, the historical poems, and then the question is, what do I do with them? They don’t belong in the projects, so these colouring books, as I’m now calling them, just seemed to be the right place to put them […] I’m not a painter, I’m not an artist, but colours speak to me in a literary and psychological way.

Further, I think we can expand Baker’s blues matrix to include the semiotics of colour, and the crisscrossing impulses between the colours that bleed into each work. The colours, like the blues music Baker draws from, are indeed powerful for their freely associative and open models of representation: black is too expansive to be any one thing, certainly it defies the confines of skin colour. Like Robin Kelley’s notion of “infrapolitics” (Race 8)—the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups who function beyond the visible spectrum—discussed in Chapter One, I reintroduce my borrowing of the term to discuss what I term infrapoetics, a discursive and creative language practice that challenges centre/margin positions. Blue, Black, and Red (the colour that scatters the least of the visible spectrum of colours), operate beyond the visible end of the spectrum to take poetic voice into “new” territory. Black, and Blackness, for all its visibility and nuanced shading, often remains static—or worse, invisible.

Black presents the limitlessness of Blackness, for all the limits our society places on the colour. Historically being raced as black is akin to invisibility or colourlessness, like Ellison’s Invisible Man, or Mos Def (now Yasin Bey) who animates this reality when he raps, “I’m dark like the side of the moon you don’t see” (Black Star, “Astronomy”). Consequently, in Black, Clarke describes that his “‘belonging’ carries an asterisk, one shaped like a—ragged—maple leaf,” painting himself as, “A sort-of African-American and a so-so English Canadian, I read Irving Layton through the lens of Jean Toomer—without jive, without apology. The blackness of my English be that of ice” (7). Although Clarke’s citizenship is a Black Canadian nationalist one, he once again
unapologetically mixes traditions and writers (here an outspoken white Canadian poet with a Harlem Renaissance writer) and presents poetry with a tongue that “cannibalizes all other tongues […] it even fucks up Black English badly” (“Language” 18). The poem, “Language,” whose first section is appropriately dedicated to hip-hop wordsmith Wendy “Motion” Braithwaite, provides resistance, parody even, in order to challenge the margin/border that Clarke, as a black academic poet, feels confined by, and so he spoils “Her Majesty’s English” (19). Like the Caliban of “Negation” (Blue), Clarke’s speaker takes on “Creole verse” (20), “second-hand grammar” (“Of Black English” 21), and other “niggerish” (“Spoken word” 22) speech in order to assert a space where hybridity—historical humour even—can transcend reified cultural borders. Further, the near-sonnet poem, “Letter to a Young Poet,” chastises a young poet for wanting to write love poems, since “Poetry eats its lovers alive” (17). Rather, Clarke prefers a confrontational love (“All true songs acknowledge Pain, / But Love is everything” 38) in the complex warring of his poetic psyche, one that can reclaim language and poetic positioning. Similar interstices are used by Césaire in A Tempest, as Caliban negates Prospero’s power through his reclamation of identity and naming: “Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name” (“I. ii” 15). Similar to Malcolm X, whose own act of renaming was an act of reclamation, Clarke’s Blackness is recuperative and expansive—like the known universe.

Like the multipage poem/universe dedicated to Blue (most explicitly in “I. i”), Clarke provides a nuanced reading, once again in the Roman Numeral series, beginning with the negated and the darkest, most racially and racistly codified representations of black:

Black is black and black and black
Black is a nègre nigger, a negrita nigger, a schwartz nigger
Black is a mulatto, sambo, negro, quadroon, octoroon,
Black is Africa, as photographed by Leni Riefenstahl (“IV. iii” 28)

The reference to Leni Riefenstahl, the Nazi photographer who filmed the propaganda film Triumph of the Will, and whose bold colour photographs of Africa (and African tribes) were international bestsellers, is a prime example of the anthropophagic (cannibalizing) lens through which racists often-dilute Blackness. While many praised Riefenstahl’s photographs, they were rightly criticized by Susan Sontag as further proof of Riefenstahl’s “fascist aesthetics” (“Fascinating Fascism” 90). Clarke then negates such fascist renderings of Blackness by providing more plural and expansive semiotic representations, such as a bawdy line to blues singer and black feminist Bessie Smith, before taking us into a combative realm where Wynton Marsalis’s blackness is hardly the same as Davis’s: “Black is Bessie Smith’s black bottom you are invited, politely, to kiss / Black is Wynton Marsalis trying desperately to equal Miles Davis” (28). Black, as “IV. iii” indicates, is hardly a single
entity and such creative kinship and inventive improvisation upon the blackness of blackness works against the subtle intricacies of racism. Like “I. i” in Blue, where Clarke reflects on his own penned blueness, “Blue is Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues; Lush Dreams, / Blue Exile; and Blue / Fatal, foolhardy poetry” (108), Black continues to draw in a nexus of self-reflection upon Clarke’s own lineage as a writer: “Black is the future of Blue / Black is Whylah Falls, Beatrice Chancy, Execution Poems, and Black— / Choirs of light” (“IV. iii” 29). One of the elements that separates the colouring books from Clarke’s other works is the ability of each colouring book to provide self-reflection upon Clarke’s own writing process, to stand outside the larger and more singularly themed works and to infrapoetically colour Canada with the vast palette of Blackness. Clarke’s choosing to end “IV. iii” by referring to his works as “Choirs of light” contests the Enlightenment model of lightness as good and Blackness as evil by stating that Blackness is actually most luminescent.

The mixing of colours—happening within each colouring book—fits the resonant and redolent remix project I’ve been arguing happens in Black music, which for Clarke is central to his own poetic identity. In Black, the “canvas is [still] the blues” (38), but it is more representationally squawk-like and dissonant—at times—than it is in Blue: “This voice, my very own, / Be a saxophone disrupting sirens” (“Poetry: 1/7/75—1/7/05” 37). The internal rhyme between “own” and “saxophone” ties jazz, identity, and poetic ownership together, much like the clever homophone that connects aesthetic and identity in the poem: “By iambs / (or ‘I am’s’)” (34). In the same poem, in section II, “The Canon,” Clarke once again smashes and praises canons (Chaucer, Milton, Donne, Blake, Baudelaire, Hopkins, Li Po, Thomas, Toomer, Walcott, etc.) with his rhetorical hammer, in order to establish that a good poem (sounding rather Barakian), “stabs like a dagger now, / Explodes later like a grenade” (34). Such ambivalent blending between music, identity, history, and poetic self-representation is what makes Clarke’s poetics particularly engaging, for Clarke contends that “every good song is ambivalent” (38)—such is also Baker’s argument for the power of discursive black modernisms. While the overarching architecture of Blue is more blues than jazz—although both styles continue a flexible postmodern praxis—in Black the design is more jazz, and while hardly free jazz, it is, under Clarke’s pronouncement, a jazz model that allows him to speak freely, to be representationally as unbound as possible: “Composing a jazz of randomness—just like / Our never-finished lines, leaping from direction / To direction: a vers libre architecture” (“VI. i” 59).

While the sonnets in much of Clarke’s work, or even his formal vernacular might make it feel that his poetry is page-bound, the truth of the matter is Clarke’s compositional poetics are actually quite varied, as are his writing styles—he writes jazz librettos for heaven’s sake! Clarke’s ability to sample different styles (his poems in the colouring books range from sonnets, vers libre, blues, “uta”
[Japanese verse form], decima, sestina, among various other samplings and paratextual referencing) make him a master DJ, reviving and reworking the past, selecting samples from varied sonic crates, as Clarke contends that the “the poet is / A gardener in a graveyard” (59). While the anxiety of influence is enough to frighten most poets into not becoming poets, for Clarke it is the force that soundtracks his own shifting poetic persona. Clarke manages to do all the things Eliot’s often-quoted claim suggests, blurring the line between immaturity/badness and maturity/goodness: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (Sacred 104). Clarke’s ability to manipulate and reposition disparate traditions, rethinking cultural products, is largely how we can view his work as improvisational, as mixed, as bluing green.

As colours blend in Black, so does Clarke’s poetic identity. Clarke’s experience as the marginal Africadian poet (although margin/centre borders are a matter of perspective) acknowledges the plurality of transfigurative voices that historically comprise Nova Scotia’s mixing: immigrants, refugees, West Indian, African American, and First Nations. In Black, Clarke describes his racial mixing in relation to his own defamilirization as a black Mi’kmaq poet—his bluing green: “I am, I guess, strange, foreign, Negro” (“À Bellagio”); “Indo-Gypsy, mocha-black Mi’kmaq” (“Gynography” 86: what a fortunate internal rhyme between “black” and “Mi’kmaq”!); and most personally, in a “A Discourse on My Name”: “George is English / Elliott Scottish, and Clarke Irish. / Of course, this makes it a misnomer, / For I am an Africadian— / A Black Nova Scotian of African-American / And Mi’kmaq roots” (125). As Clarke contends in his essay on “zebra” poetics, “all African diasporic writing, African-Canadian literature engages the symbol and the image of the mixed-race black because this figure violates the sanctity of racial polarities, thus reminding Africans and Europeans of the white-initiated sexual violence against black women that ensured the sadism of slavery” (“Zebra” 203). With this in mind, the images of black women by photographer Richard Scipio that appear in Black (and many in colour in Illuminated Verses) are semiotic acts that attempt to reclaim the black female body, still sexualized, but with the intent to work against “white-initiated sexual violence.” These images illuminate Blackness, and work against elect whiteness, which is likely why Clarke’s Illuminated Verses took eleven years to find a publisher willing to include the “unclothed black feminine” presence (Illuminated viii). The feminine is often under attack in Black, through phallocentric black presences, but such mixings—bluing green—like Miles Davis’s continued presence in the colouring books, animate the risk and danger of mixed performances.
**Autobiographical resonances**

Miles Davis’s representational power (like that of Trudeau and Malcolm X) in Clarke’s work is immense, particularly for his consummate skill as an improviser who blends traditions (and colours), as well as for his brash and outspoken nature. As Davis says in his *Autobiography*, “I’ve always liked honesty and can’t stand people being any other way” (38). The tonal language of his music and speech—his ability to use *motherfucker* to compliment someone or simply as punctuation—are forces that speak to the kind of freedom—*vers libre*—Clarke strives for in his work. Miles Davis’s occasional vulgarity make him an even more lucrative figure for complex representation and negotiation, for Davis could make incredibly tender music and then—to put it bluntly—go and beat the crap out of a woman: “I thought that I was still in my Ferrari, so I told her, ‘Bitch, what are you doing in my goddamn car!’ And then I slapped her and ran out of the building” (*Miles* 338). On the flip, while in Paris Davis learns what love is from Juliette Greco who is “the first woman [he] loved as an equal human being” (127); even, Paris, and Europe more largely, teach him a kind of freedom the pre-civil rights US cannot: “I had never felt that way in my life. It was the freedom of being in France and being treated like a human being, like someone important” (126).

Clarke does not whitewash over the power of violence to instruct his readers to historical injustices, even when they are complex (even tinged with a level of misogyny) such as in Davis’s case, or in the inclusions of such as figures as Mao, Malcolm X, Titus Andronicus, Marquis de Sade, and others. Working in the in-between space between love and hate, violence and beauty, Clarke’s poetics, like Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, use historical frameworks to craft sound paintings, even if the framework is simply a reference off of which to riff. As Bill Evans writes in the liner notes to *Kind of Blue*, in allusion to the spontaneity of Japanese visual art forms, “the painter needs his framework of parchment, the improvising musical group needs its framework in time.” Such a modal framework, when applied to Clarke’s praxis, allows Clarke to mix traditions and styles within a single poem in an honest way.

The poem, “Bluing Green” (from the “Black Eye” section) named after the recording “Blue in Green” from *Kind of Blue*, a piece with a measured and film noir-esque presence, is an example of cannibalization, of mixing and consuming traditions, which is why the poem begins by posing a question (as a statement) on the ramifications of such practice: “‘The problem with jazz is miscegenation’?” (94). The inverse, as the poem shows, is true: the *power* of jazz is miscegenation—mixture. Miles Davis, like Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong before him, had a knack for mixing and reappropriating classical music, showtunes, and anything really, all within the larger nexus of jazz praxis. The 10-measure circular melody for “Blue in Green” is incredibly modal,
drawing in Dorian, Mixolydian, and Lydian modes, similar to how Clarke draws in various modes of Davis’s persona and musical composition within his own poetic presence. Hence, we get a Miles Davis-sounding line like, “So that, if I failed, a motherfucker could / Smash me in the face with my trumpet,” followed a little later by a line that sounds like it could only come from Clarke: “Don’t I crave a cinematic albescence— / Like lightning rum scorching the throat” (94). The poem’s consideration of racial mixing, of the risk that black poetry accedes into whiteness, is markedly complex in the poem and music as it has long been speculated that the white pianist Bill Evans actually wrote, or at least very likely co-wrote the sketch for the composition.160

Spinning the record back to Blue, we see that Clarke creates a bit of a fabricated misnomer when Davis calls “E.” (Bill Evans) a “Jive motherfucker, messed-up-looking white / Boy” who “plays too much D natural on E-flat blues” (“L’Assassinat” 73). Of course, the two musicians did clash at times, both suffered serious bouts of heroin addiction, but the fact remains that one of the great things about Bill Evans and Miles Davis was their ability to incorporate different styles as well as both white and black musicians in their circles. As Davis says in his Autobiography, it is completely false that he asked Evans to leave the band because he was white, and such speculation deeply hurt both Evans and Davis, as he insists: “I don’t go for that kind of shit; I have always wanted the best players in my group and I don’t care about whether they’re black, white, blue, red, or yellow” (231). Evans was a huge influence on Davis, introducing him to European classical music. More important than the speculation of who wrote “Blue in Green” is the ability of the larger group (which included a young Coltrane) to come together to improvise a sketch into something much larger. Clarke wholly gets this, as “Bluing Green” ultimately becomes a poem about how the inauthentic act becomes the authenticity, for: “We are only as pure / As the blue inside green” (95).

When mixed, blue and green make cyan: the colour of deep water, and cyanide. Appropriately, under the poem is a black and white picture of two dolls: one black, one white—a poetic multicultural mix.

In the subsequent section, “Black Ice,” mixed-race and Blackness are examined through the revolutionary spirit and assassination of black radical Malcolm X, as well as a poem about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, whose tragic death is fit subject for “pure poetry”: “a head-shot president / spilling a brain-matter rainbow / over a backseat of flowers” (104). Clarke’s poetry comes largely out of the political fervor of the 1960s around American and Canadian nationalism, the assassination of two Kennedys, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the rise of robust Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Malcolm X is a powerful semiotic figure who is repeated and canoned in each colouring book, especially in Black and with good reason. As black activists became more radical in the late 1960s with groups like the Black Panthers, Malcolm X and
his teachings were part of the groundwork upon which they built their movements. The Black Power movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the international adoption of the slogan, “Black is Beautiful” all convene with roots in Malcolm X. The resurgence of interest in Malcolm X among young people in the 1980s and early 1990s was fueled, in part, by his use as a cultural icon by hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy. In many ways, Malcolm X was Marcus Garvey’s ideological heir, who Clarke describes as being no ironically less “wary of mixed-race blacks,” quoting a 1963 interview with Barbadian-Canadian novelist Austin Clarke, where X describes how the white man always rejects mixed-race marriages, and that “as far as we are concerned, as long as we can tell that you have black blood, you are one of our brothers and when you get in that borderline […] then it’s best for you to get some papers, especially nowadays, because you are going into an era today where the color of your skin might. [sic] Save your life” (qtd. in “Zebra” 209). George Elliott Clarke points out the icy realpolitik nature of X’s response, which fits with much of Malcolm X’s own problematic views on race articulated in his Autobiography.

Despite Malcolm X’s somewhat early redacted views of race, and his sexist belief that “a woman’s true nature is to be weak” (Autobiography 226), X, as Clarke pens, “forced us to be beautiful for the first time” (“Assassination of Malcolm X (II)” 107). Particularly relevant in X’s growing consciousness was his more complex reading of race that hinged racial experiences upon oppression, arguing that “the white man is not inherently evil, but America’s racist society influences him to act evilly” (Autobiography 371). Thus X became a man who worked to, as he put it himself, “destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America” (382). True, he was about violence in the pursuit of greater civil liberty, but his approach was ultimately about civil liberties for oppressed black people. Clarke’s choice to write two poems focusing on the assassination of X, the first written à la manière de Clément Virgo (a Black Canadian filmmaker), displays the cinematic presence of the death scene, as well as the potential once again for pure poetry “from the holes in the orator’s chest, / his multiplied mouths” (106). Following, the poems on X’s assassination is “IX/XI,” which serves to remind us that history continues to repeat itself, and that we need to continue to visit the thinking, the violence even, of radicals like Malcolm X to understand how to break cycles. “IX/XI,” which fittingly mirrors the letter “X,” is a gravitas poem comprised of five-line stanzas that explores the cyclic nature of violence, including the global catastrophe from the ruins of 911: “History shook that city that said, ‘History is history.’ / A Malcolm X prophecy came to a fiery, smoking life / In a King Kong apocalypse of planes hitting towers” (111). New York is part of a lineage of exploded cities that in Clarke’s poem also include “London, Hiroshima, Baghdad, / And Halifax, Nova Scotia, on December 6, 1917” (112). From this epic cataloguing of violence and
historical destruction, the red flames of Black arise: from the ashes might hope for a better society
arise?

Irrespective of race we have a responsibility to change the world for the better. Towards the
two modes of his life Malcolm X realized this potential, dispelling the widely held belief that he harnessed a
blanket of white-hatred. In the “Epilogue” to The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Alex Haley describes
how X left a mostly white college student body and told Haley that the “young whites, and blacks,
too, are the only hope that America has […] The rest of us have always been living a lie” (qtd. in
“Epilogue” 400). Clarke’s desire to tell the truth, often through a lie, is where the personal and
historical often meet and where change is possible in Black. In Clarke’s own “Autobiography (II)” he
describes himself as “[a] book-toothed, loud-laughing, so-called poet: / Ink on my hands like bomb
residue” (129). This sly and somewhat self-deprecating line completes the earlier reference that a
good poem “[e]xplodes later like a grenade” (34). Further, the final poem in the collection, “Will,”
contemplates the poet’s own funeral scene, which is more salubrious than it is tragic: “Let there be
music—lots, lots! […] Let poetry be read […] Burial must be at Maplewood Cemetery, / In Windsor,
Nova Scotia, / Right beside my mother, / And someone, please, plant Lombardy poplars nearby”
(141). Underneath the poem—growing—is a picture of a flower, recalling the line in “Naima” (Blue)
that poetry opens “a-flowering” (85). And so Black begins with arresting images of death (an
execution) and closes with the poet’s own death. Essentially, black/Black, as death, allows us to
really understand life and why it matters so much. From the modal representations of identity to the
infraapoetic sounding that makes diverse notions of citizenships more visible, Black is perhaps more
than anything, about transformation.

infraRedpoetics

“Beauty must never be explained.”
—Ezra Pound qtd. in Red 7

So states the Ezra Pound epigraph (which is placed beside another epigraph about beauty
from Fanon) that prefaces George Elliott Clarke’s Red. In his latest book in the spectrum of colours,
Clarke follows Pound’s maxim with a collection of poems that once again challenge convention and
open up the poetic possibilities of red: the colour of blood, rubies, communism, anger, fire, and roses.
Red (comprised of 12 sections), through an infraapoetics, continues to make the hidden, the forgotten,
the downtrodden, the bass notes, more visible and audible. In Red, Clarke’s words pop with the
punctuated scarlet elegance of a Duke Ellington tone poem. The poems brazenly and blazingly
incorporate the mixed Odyssean waters of sex-infused pre-Christian Rome, the crimson violence of Titus Andronicus, the rhetorical syncopation of James Brown, the metaphysical cadence of Pushkin’s verse, and the insurgent politics of Mao Zedong and Malcolm X. And Clarke’s collection crescendos with its reimagination of the great African American jazz bassist Charles Mingus as a Canadian. Despite these diverse voices and characters, Clarke’s latest collection of poetry is candidly self-reflexive. He works to self-identify: he describes himself as part-Aboriginal, as a “noir ‘peau rouge’” (9) whose “typed face glows” (“Veil’d Devil” 30) like “a portrait etched in lye” (“17, 34, 51” 157). Homage remains important in Red, as Clarke dedicates this collection to his polymath father, William Lloyd Clarke, whose artwork appears on the cover of Red and throughout the volume.

In “Taxi,” the reader is situated in his father’s Halifax cab where Clarke’s father speaks with “suave grammar / And stunning puns […] fathering a son / Who could credibly be crowned a poet” (68). In the poem his poem drives white passengers around who read Clarke’s father under drab clichés of a black working man who is “not expected to sire any bard” (67). In the final stanza, Clarke (the poet) enters the poem (enters history) and “taxi’d a book into their hands, / And spoke almost as graciously, graceful, / As my unparalleled father would have” (68). The clever usage of taxi’d as a verb is the type of wordplay Clarke assumingly inherits from his father, as well as his grace. Clarke implies that he is where he is because traditions include more than those who are privileged enough to publish poems. With every colouring book Clarke gets a little more personal and reveals more about his own history, which is the genesis of an aging poet looking back on his work. There is a less militant presence in Red than its predecessors, and even though the context is different from the initial usage of the ‘60s feminist rally cry, “the personal is political,” there is an absorbing political and cosmopolitan presence in Red. Red is more international in scope than Blue or Black as we get personal poems like “Going to Halifax,” as well as poems set in Mexico, France, Italy, and the US. Red has a wide gamut of personal associations for Clarke, being part aboriginal, as well as the returning presence of Malcolm X, who was known as Detroit Red in his 20s.

This infrapoetically expansive territory is aptly displayed in Clarke’s “Other Angles,” an epic catalogue of red’s representational possibilities. Yet, different from Blue and Black is that the colour catalogue doesn’t appear as part of the Roman Numeral series, perhaps reaching their conclusion in Black. The poem “Other Angles” ranges from the scatological “[r]ed is a bloody shit” (19) to Clarke’s own red-infused poetic catalogue:

Red is Aboriginal and African and Chinese and Cuban and Nova Scotian
Red is George & Rue, Illuminated Verses, Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path,
Blues and Bliss, I & I, and Red—
Poetry in the blood. (20)

Again, red and Red, like blue and Blue, and black and Black, absorbs traditions, and self-reflexively considers Clarke’s own oeuvre. Red is a “tongue accustomed to corruption” (19) that draws other works into its matrix of its signifying potential. The poetic catalogue also functions antithetically to an ordered epic catalogue, since red can represent everything from red label scotch to a “fragrant flaming violent Klansmen barbecued on a blazing cross” (20). Part of the work happening in the colouring books is an opening where boundaries are explored, exploded, in favour of creative expression. As Miles Davis once said, “I always thought that good music had no boundaries, no limits to where it could grow and go, no restrictions on its creativity […] And I always hated categories. Always. Never thought it had any place in music” (Miles 205). Clarke suggests the same for “good” poetry. Like any fiery, fervid artist dedicated to his or her techné, Clarke—drawing from the polyphonic matrix that comprises Red—unapologetically makes contradiction a poetic act.

In “Poor Imitation,” Clarke quotes Miles Davis as a proxy—and perhaps parodic—voice that asks, “Why should some motherfucker make me feel bad because of their ignorance?” (71). The poem explores the heterogeneous possibilities of racial/poetic misreadings that the poet encounters at home and abroad. In Havana the poet is Cuban, while in Canada he is “comfortably / American in every cafè, / but suspiciously Arab at every airport” (71). Within these in-between spaces, Clarke avows a heteroglot African Canadian identity that “muck[s] up black and white states,” for “Negro experience transgresses all borders” (“Red Tape” 149). In “Malcolm X: The Last Interview,” Clarke imagines that Malcolm X gave a final uncensored and improvised interview to James Baldwin immediately before he was assassinated, speaking in a terse blues-prose: “The blues are my only language— / each elegant, crisp text” (127). Playing once again with the standard figures of Blue and Black, Clarke continues to create new spaces of play using similar tropes. This is executed more than any other poem in Red when Clarke reimages African American jazz bassist, improviser, and composer Charles Mingus as an “Africadian” poet/musician. Engaging in an act of mythopoetics, Clarke compares Mingus to the mythological figure of Odysseus and also Ulysses, the Roman name for Odysseus, as well as the name of a Tennyson poem and a novel by James Joyce; Clarke writes, “Your bass sounds like a typewriter / Punctuating Ulysses, / Or like a shotgun puncturing Odysseus” (143). These lines highlight the phonetics of sound-poetry through sibilance (or alliterative paronomasia), creating a listening experience that synchs song with text and myth/myth-making. Clarke is not only a poet, but also a songwriter intent on an Odyssean quest to scribe beauty.

“Charles Mingus: An Autobiography” (notice Clarke’s ongoing affinity for mixing personal truths with imaged acts) is largely a manifestation of a freer poetics that crosses borders: “But you
are as free as music” (144). Even though the poem is carefully composed in tercets—giving it a Dantean epic quality—the poem is about resisting confinement through play and revision. The poem is dedicated to Ayanna Black—a Black Canadian feminist, jazz poet, and arts advocate who passed in 2009—as homage becomes a way to live on, as songs and poems often outlive the more temporal body. Through an extemporaneous approach to living, the Halifax-born Mingus takes “Jazz lessons with dark rum—/ ‘Mmmmmmmm, well, uh huh….’ / Fuck ideas” (140). Ideas keep the dialogue stagnant and so Clarke’s Mingus pulls off “a beaucoup blues coup, suh!” (141). The homophonic echo and internal rhyme between “beaucoup,” “blues,” and “coup” is an improvising act that highlights Clarke’s ability to play with words in the way that Mingus played with convention, often putting major sevenths with minor sevenths, playing a fourth away from the key, and things like that long before it was called avant-garde, which is largely Clarke’s point: that he himself is Mingus, participating in a tradition of riffing long before postmodernism called it so. Useful, from Mingus’s autobiographical *Beneath the Underdog*, is his conception of “rotary perception”: “imagine a circle surrounding each beat—each guy can play his notes anywhere in that circle and it gives him more free space” (350-351). Clarke’s poetic colouring books are about dancing within the circle of his larger works, creating more room of experimentation and potentially greater improvisation.

Clarke’s vernacular formalism makes his poetry feel somewhat constricted at times, but upon listening to Clarke read his work that pretension diminishes, for Clark wants his poems to sound: Have the texts that are *speakerly*, that are performance-orientated, that can be read aloud, and that can be sung. To have the teenagers in high school snap their fingers, or tap their feet, or clap their hands in rhythm with me as I’m reading. I like that, I think that’s really important. But, at the same time I also want to have the poems that demand silence, concentration, and attentiveness, and so on. But at the same time why can’t we have those poems that do both. That are good performed but that also demand some kind of attentiveness and scrutiny. (“Your Bass” 7)

In *Red* we get plenty of poems that do both, often simultaneously. Some poems are sonnets (“Veil’d Devil”), others are bawdy and raucous blues with clear blues structures (“First Light Blues” and “Tomcat/Pussycat Blues”), and some are straight up pop songs, such as the poem “James Brown’s Rhetoric,” syncopated exclusively from sampling actual James Brown song titles to form a five-stanza poem/song. The last poem in the collection, “17, 34, 51,” reads like a folk ballad as Clarke contemplates how he has been a poet for two thirds of his life: “Two thirds my life a poet, I / Gleam—like a portrait etched in lye....” (157). The ellipsis at the end of the poem indicates that Clarke will assuredly go on being a poet, and as *Red* makes clear, an international one at that.
There is a certain internationalism and cross-culturalism at work in *Red*, in part due to Clarke’s popularity as a poet outside of Canada, as well as his praxis of writing poems on the go in hotel rooms or cafés. We are given poems that once again translate Blackness, except in *Red* Blackness is negritude gone global, as Russian poet Alexander Pushkin’s verse and character in translation/transculturalism make various appearances, writing in the spirit of Blackness: “A white-faced Black Russian, and vigorous— / Verse as rigorous as a “nigger” is—” who writes “Rudely bittersweet or sour, sickly dour” (“Pushkin” 105). If *Blue*’s poet-spirit is part Pound, part Walcott, *Black*’s part Toomer, part Layton, then *Red* is certainly part Pushkin, part Mao. In “À Bellagio (III),” building on a sequence started in *Black*, Clarke continues his corruption of language in the service of poetry: “I’s still a black bastard bastardizing English. / There is no freedom outside Poetry” (77).

There is a great deal of editing in taking place, as Clarke’s bastardizing poetic praxis remains a response to historic silences. In the poem, “Looking at Alma Duncan’s Young Black Girl” (1940), Clarke provides a serious examination of Duncan’s painting and asks, “Does painter Duncan tell herself, ‘Negresses are so much stronger / than we white ladies’? / Maybe” (99). Clarke’s blurred impression imagines what the young black girl’s life might have been like and edits in details like she’s “studying jazz lingo— / to backtalk and lindy hop” (101), and reminds us that (to echo Lorde again), “Her world isn’t poetry / (Negroes can’t afford that yet); it’s potatoes” (100). Edited in are important figures of Black history, from Malcolm X (who shouts, “There is no accidental lyricism” 102), Angela Davis, and Rosa Parks (women the girl might become), dedicating the poem to Viola Desmond (the Rosa Parks pre-Rosa Parks of Canada). Clarke’s reading is sensitive to the time period of the image, as he attributes Duncan’s “signature of crayon and ash” to the “lightning of prophecy” (102). History (as a story in need of revision) continues to teach us lessons if we are willing to listen.

As readers, we are left feeling *Red* as an embodied act of listening to beauty, even when it’s corporeally violent and ugly: “Exeunt omnes with the two cadavers— / Throats split like vaginas” (“The Most Lamentable Roman Tragedy of Titus Andronicus”). Like much of Clarke’s work, the moments when we feel beauty eclipsed by brute violence, as in the case of Clarke’s stage directions to *Titus Andronicus* in the section titled “Red Arsenic,” complete with an epigraph from Mao Zedong, are opportunities to ask what’s happening and why? There is something oddly beautiful about tragedy and let’s face it, history is often brutal, and should poetry not try to encompass that? Clarke’s fearless bravado and willingness to materialize difficult poetry is what really makes beauty productively complex in *Red* (and *Blue* and *Black*), and the poetry worth reading, listening to, digesting, and rereading. Clarke’s search for beauty is similar to Amiri Baraka’s, who when asked by Saul Williams in 2004 the function of the artist, responded, “I believe what Keats and DuBois [sic]
believed: Truth and beauty… There’s no sense in being an artist except to tell the truth and to make the world more beautiful than it is” (*Fader*). *Red* is another great collection of fiery poems that make the world more beautiful, sung full-throated by one of Canada’s most prolific poets. The colouring books succeed—despite and because of all their scatting across historical timeframes—in thinking through the issues of belonging, citizenship, and the role of the poet as a discursive trickster and community builder. Clarke tells Nigel Thomas that community should be an act of mixing, border crossing, blurring traditions, and starting new conversations, “Because a community is not just one thing; it’s a whole bunch of discourses that are taking place” (50)—it’s a full spectrum of colours.

**REMIX 3**

While *Blue*, *Black*, and *Red* are highly ambivalent and hybridized works that assert poetic difference, they affirm an identity/citizenship that is in flux, creating a poetry formed in the in-between spaces (the spaces between culture, poetry, and history). The in-between spaces in the poetic colouring books, where listening is most crucially negotiated on multiple-planes of meaning (double or polyphonic), are the places in the text where readers too find their voices echoed within their own conceptions of *blueness*, *blackness*, or *redness*—of shifting identities. The encounter between seemingly divergent traditions (European and African) creates the reality of Otherness, as an ambiguous space that requires careful negotiation, mimicry, and abrogation to make sense, to make anew the past. In this way Clarke embodies a sense of post/modernism—that he moves between the past and present as a larger interdependent framing—that ascribes difference, analogous to Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, and poets Ezra Pound and Derek Walcott, who all play upon an inherited standard. The difference that Clarke asserts is not simply a generic difference, but rather a highly didactic difference formed in resistance to the dominant poetic and Eurocentric tradition that subjugated his own voice by marginalizing black voices across the Atlantic, focusing most topically on Canada. Clarke’s primary role as a poet is one who listens carefully to history and invites his readers to listen to his own thinking, often through direct invocations.

Clarke challenges us to listen to his own discursive listening practice: “Listen: An unflinching clarity will issue in the only legitimate / response: scabrous, scatological, flamboyantly raw poems” (*Blue*, “III. iii” 137); “Listen: his lies hiss / Mussolini’s lines” (*Black*, “V. i” 48); “Listen: Rainwater cries, ‘Red October!’” (*Red*, “Autumnal” 28). Such direct invocations to the reader to “listen” appear frequently in Clarke’s work. As Katherine McLeod offers in “Listening to Multi-Vocality in George Elliott Clarke’s *Jazz Opera Québécité,*” “Listening, as a critical practice,
fundamentally alters the interaction between audience and text from passive to participatory” creating a dialogue that Sneja Gunew refers to as “transcultural improvisations” (125). As Clarke continues to improvise his identity across cultural frameworks and traditions, we as readers are invited into the sensuous feast of musics—we are called to participate in the unfolding of meaning. For Clarke meaning is never closed, and despite what seems like a closed nationalism, Clarke states, in his early anthology, *Eyeing the North Star*: “I testify: African-Canadian literature has always been international” (xv). There will always be historical gaps, Clarke is aware of this, and as much as he establishes registers and canons for understanding African Canadian writing he acknowledges the very nature of flux in Black Canadian history.

Even Clarke’s early works, like *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) display a self-reflexive concern with the poet’s role in history, and emerge in a tradition of Black Nova Scotian music, literature, orality/preaching, and various arts of homegrown black expression. In *Whylah Falls* Clarke fuses the African diasporic with the European Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian traditions while in the poetic colouring books he reexamines those fusions to assert a poetics that can be adequately thought of as a representation of multiculturalism. Clarke remains a zealous supporter of multiculturalism, asking that we think of plural identities and communities through the possibilities of the hyphen, which should not be understood “as a minus sign, but as a bridge; it is joining things together. Take it as a plus sign” (qtd. in Richter). Often in this chapter I applied the DJ form by fusing diverse, yet often incommensurate, theorists together to think through Clarke’s poetry since Clarke’s own sampling opens his poetics up to ziggurats of polyphonic soundings. My approach is hardly an evasion of the critical and historical work happening in Clarke’s poetics, for I agree with Clarke’s point, in reference to his cosmopolitan nationalism, that you can have it both ways: it is, after all, largely the premise of this thesis to proudly straddle and confound borders. Similarly, Clarke constantly explores and explodes genres, as he writes novels, operas, poems, play-poems, criticism, and various musical styles, orature, and even creates/uncovers some new canons in the process, adding himself into the mix.

Read vis-à-vis the blues matrix we can understand Clarke’s poetry as an ongoing dialogue in unity with a fractured community holding onto and revising tradition. Through an *infrapoetics* (similar to Baker’s notion of phylogenetic property), Clarke looks deep into the past and provides a blues truth that is often buried, forgotten, or needing to be (re)sounded. For all the repetition and blues-jazz riffing in the texts, Clarke always makes the past and music his own, a testament to his poetic talent. The tripartite colouring books offer a journey that illuminates Clarke’s own progress as a poet in search of beauty and a more expansive community. The colouring books reflect his
dramatic ascent as one of Canada’s most prolific poets, as well as his various rhetorical posturings: *Blue* might be his inferno, *Black* his purgatory, and *Red* his heaven, although Clarke’s approach to divinity is more cyclical than straight up. His poetry and music aspire towards the divine: “Subtle blues, supple blues […] But worms can’t eat music. / It exists like light— / Up in the air, divine— To be divined / Like tears / Dissolved in the snow” (*Red*, “Charles Mingus” 145). We can only speculate on what *Gold* will be, the next proposed shade in the series, but certainly music will be the force that moves the gold stars like speckled words. Perhaps, *Gold* will be Clarke’s moon landing back on earth to play with the themes and mix them up once again for us.

As multiculturalism, like jazz, incorporates difference, Clarke continues to expand our concept of citizenship, not just in his poetry, but also by providing literary maps of African Canadian literature—sadly often omitted elsewhere—in works like *Odysseys Home* and *Directions Home*. Canada’s literary landscape, like Clarke’s blues poetics, is limitless. We now turn to Dionne Brand’s “outer space sounding” (60) in her latest poetic work, *Ossuaries*. Brand, through the mobility of Yasmine, rewrites the performance(s) of improvised jazz musicians in order to subvert Western traditions, much like Clarke does, but from the perspective of a black radical feminist. As Lorde makes even more clear, “for women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (37). Let’s listen as Brand’s ideas in *Ossuaries* manifest into language, and then call us into action.
CHAPTER FOUR

LISTENING TO A LISTENING: THE DISRUPTIVE JAZZ POETICS OF DIONNE BRAND’S OSSUARIES (A CALL TOWARDS FREEDOM)

“in order to draw a map only the skill of listening may be necessary.”
—Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return 18

“I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths.”
—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man 9

I. JAZZ

Jazz is a mode of democratic action, just as the blues is a mode of deep, tear-soaked individuality. Charlie Parker didn’t give a damn. Jazz is the middle road between invisibility and anger. It is where self-confident creativity resides. Black music is the paradigm for how black people have best dealt with their humanity, their complexity, their good and bad, negative and positive aspects, without being excessively preoccupied with whites. Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Coltrane were just being themselves. And for whites interested in the humanity of the “other,” jazz—a purely American form—provides them with examples of sheer and rare genius.
—Cornel West, Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom 102-103

Cornel West, ever the evocative writer, champions jazz as a powerful reaction by black people to their “radical conditionedness,” as well as an expression of humanity on individual and collective terms. Like the previous section on blues music it is hardly possible within the scope of this thesis to define and outline the entire history of jazz. Rather, I hope to provide context for how jazz is broadly conceived in Soundin’ Canaan and some background that might prove useful when encountering a jazz text, such as Dionne Brand’s Ossuaries: a jazz text, largely for its incorporation of jazz artists and jazz phraseology, which allow Brand and her central character, Yasmine, to move between the past and present and think through the improvisationally defined global citizen. Jazz, similar to the blues, is a distinct musical form, prominently of African American origin, which emerged in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, although ragtime from the 1890s is also a type of jazz. Similar to the blues, jazz incorporates, adapts, and subverts other musical elements, with early influences including “African and European music, American folk music, marching band music, plantation songs, spirituals and gospel music, minstrelsy, ragtime and the blues” (Stanbridge 286). Jazz is largely defined by its ability to amalgamate other forms, along with the music’s broader techniques, which include various rhythmic properties, from swing and syncopation to complex harmonic languages, as well as an overarching focus on improvisation.

Jazz artists took various instruments, in the way that DJs would later repurpose the turntable, to make a new (often improvised) music that would have very likely confounded the inventors of
those particular instruments. African novelist Chinua Achebe poses useful rhetorical questions in his essay, “Colonialist Criticism,” that surge to the heart of the matter:

But, in any case, did not the black people in America, deprived of their own musical instruments, take the trumpet and the trombone and blow them as they had never been blown before, as indeed they were not designed to be blown? And the result, was it not jazz? Is any one going to say that this was a loss to the world or that those first Negro slaves who began to play around with the discarded instruments of their masters should have played waltzes and foxtrots? No! Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings. (76)

Achebe uses the example of jazz to articulate his right and necessity to use the Western novel form to express the particular experience of African people. Achebe’s argument, with his cross-cultural and anticolonial positioning, describes how African Americans utilized the instruments they had access to in order to create a music that was uniquely their own: a music contributing to the “world’s cultural harvest,” growing and taking root in a variety of musics, cultures, and soils. This is not to argue that jazz is not about tradition—far from it—but it is about a tradition that can be modulated, although never possessed, once learned. As Ellison argues, “For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz—the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles—he must then find ‘himself,’ must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul” (Shadow 208). Hence, jazz and, more ubiquitously, improvisation are about finding alternatives to dominant modes of being. As Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz contend, improvisation is a means to speak free of constraint, to assemble alternative communities, and improvisation provides a critique “of dominant structures of thought” (Fierce 4).

For jazz, like all musical genres/styles, if we listen closely enough, is about finding spaces to reinterpret the self, dreaming the future in meaningful ways. Jazz was one of the first musical styles to break away from monolithic conceptions of performance, creating music, especially in the bebop and free jazz era, which was particularly hard to emulate unless you belonged to the sphere fashioning and digging the music. Jazz encourages its performers to take chances, to step out on the ledge, and to blow freely, without restriction. In previous chapters we saw how blues, jazz, and other genres were adapted by poets like NourbeSe Philip and George Elliott Clarke to play with language and worry the line, as well as to envision the self/citizen in relation to a larger community. Jazz remains an important stylistic innovation not only for music, but for poetry as well, as Charles Olson in an interview once claimed: “Black Mountain Poetics” did not define the postmodern for the
decade of the 1950s, for “there was no poetic. It was Charlie Parker” (*Muthologos* 72). Further, there were entire movements in African American culture that linked poetry and music/jazz together, evidenced in the work of the Last Poets, or poet-musicians such as Gil Scott-Heron. This is not to equate and conflate jazz and poetry as unequivocally homologous, but it is to acknowledge that the two forms are often found together because in modernity and postmodernity the idea of unstable sonic frequencies usefully contests sound or poetic language as a fixed phenomenon. Thus Euro-classical concepts, such as lyric voice in poetry, are brought into question and made to swing, or sing in a “new” tongue/form. Such innovations, depending on one’s initiation, can make music-inflected poetry challenging to read, but as Clarke argues in his reading of the highly skilled African Canadian-American jazz poet, Frederick Ward, “difficulty in poetry is akin to dissonance in jazz” (*Directions* 193). Ward is a crucial example of how Canadian poets, or poets writing about or living in Canada, have used jazz in literature to speak about the diverse experience of living in Canada.

Jazz music has a long history in Canada. The earliest jazz musicians heard in Canada were from the United States and appeared around the mid 1910s on vaudeville stages across the country. For example, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* describes how The Original Creole Orchestra, which “was a New Orleans ensemble that included the cornetist Freddie Keppard, toured the Pantages circuit in western Canada in 1914 and 1916, and Jelly Roll Morton, the self-proclaimed inventor of jazz worked in Vancouver cabarets as early as 1919 and as late as 1921.” In fact, there are a number of excellent critical works that trace the diverse history of jazz in Canada, including its various innovators, with many informative books on the subject by Canadian jazz historian Mark Miller.162 Miller’s excellent work covers a wide range of material from numerous historical moments, Canadian jazz personalities (such as Oscar Peterson, Kenny Wheeler, and hundreds of others), and various jazz beginnings in Canada. Simply stated, there are long local traditions in Canadian jazz, as well as Canadian jazz musicians who have often equally inspired or rivaled various admired US jazz musicians as formative influences for young Canadian musicians. And while jazz is now part of the music curriculum at many schools, jazz in Canada for a long time, like in the US, was often viewed as a danger, a threat, and a perversion not only of music, but of morals, as Sarah-Jane Mathieu contends in her book, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*. And yet, despite or because of this lucrative threat, jazz thrived in nearly every Canadian city.

In Winnipeg, a jazz ensemble appropriately named the Porter’s Music Band was made up of porters, masons, and Garveyites. Montreal, as Grizzle describes in *My Name’s Not George*, was an important hangout for porters, being described as “Paris of the North” and “Harlem of the North” with the most popular joint being Rockhead’s Paradise, which was opened in 1928 by former porter,
Rufus Rockhead. Largely because jazz was thought to be a threat to institutions of whiteness, especially since jazz often flourished in populous urban eras where young people gathered, Mathieu describes how popular belief and law “concurred that jazz, drugs, and alcohol, presumably peddled by black porters and entertainers, jeopardized white Canadians’ morality and white womanhood in particular” (6). Jazz, while it represented freedom and mobility for many, was often seen by mainstream media as a demoralizing threat to nationalism, for the dances it inspired and the racial intermingling that sometimes happened, with the *New York American* reporting that “[m]oral disaster is coming to hundreds of young American girls through the pathological, nerve-irritating, sex-exciting music of jazz orchestras.” Such early rhetoric about the demoralizing effects of jazz were common, for as early as 1900 American magazine, *Etude*, wrote: “the counters of the music store are loaded with this virulent poison which, in the form of a malarious epidemic, is finding its way into the homes and brains of youth to such an extent as to arouse one’s suspicions of their sanity” (16). Esi Edugyan’s novel *Half-Blood Blues* examines the notion of jazz and racial others as parasitic to Nazism, as narrator Sid states with fierce satire:

> Jazz. Here in Germany it become something worse than a virus. We was all of us damn fleas, us Negroes and Jews and low-life hoodlums, set on playing that vulgar racket, seducing sweet blond kids into corruption and sex. It was a plague sent out by the dread black hordes, engineered by the Jews. Us Negroes, see, we was only half to blame—we just can’t help it. Savages just got a natural feel for filthy rhythms […]

> We was officially degenerate. (76-77)

Such moral panic around jazz and miscegenation was hardly limited to Nazi racial purity, as jazz novels set in Canada deal with the same fears of the degenerate potential of jazz music.

This notion of moral disaster is found and grappled with in Morley Callaghan’s *The Loved and the Lost*, a Canadian novel first published in 1951 that deals with the relationship between blacks and whites in Canada and the anxieties that surround miscegenation. Set during the early fifties in Montreal, the novel primarily concerns young inscrutable Peggy Sanderson who unabashedly consorts with both white and black men in jazz clubs. Winfried Siemerling in “Jazz, Diaspora, and the Writing of Black Anglophone Montreal” argues that in Callaghan’s *The Loved and the Lost*, “the black jazz milieu of Saint-Antoine district appears as the other, dark side—and ultimately downfall—of the white hero’s quest for wealth and social standing in Westmount” (5). In *The Loved and the Lost*, Montreal becomes a heterotopic space where its music and spatialization are ambivalent, “both threatening and sometimes hinting at a utopian chronotope of otherness and interracial possibility” (5). Siemerling has generatively hinted that it is in these liminal border spaces,
often in interactions between cultures, that real interracial possibility is displayed. And, as we will see, jazz, as a creative force, in *Ossuaries* emphasizes the potential of the music to cross all sorts of physical and psychological borders. However, to return to *The Loved and the Lost*, it is important to note that any interracial possibilities in the text are strongly juxtaposed between the “peaceful pure whiteness of the snowbound city” (*Lost* 68) and the “Nigger nightclubs” (55) within the city. It is as if, as Toni Morrison narrates in *Jazz*, “Just hearing it [jazz] was like violating the law” (58).

Or just reading it, as Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks’ influential poem, “We Real Cool” (1960), with the rhyming lines, “We / Jazz June. We / Die soon” (*Selected* 73), was occasionally banned simply because it mentioned the word “jazz.” Further, there are few literary trials more incendiary than the 1957 obscenity trial over Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl*, with part one of the poem containing various references to jazz. Additionally, the Brooks example reminds us that women poets and musicians have been doubly subjected to marginalization and policing from both mainstream critics and within the larger literary spheres to which they belong. In the early days of jazz, ridicule was placed on the very notion that there could be women instrumentalists working in the medium. In a 1938 editorial in *Down Beat*, under the headline “Why Women Musicians Are Inferior,” the article stated, with clear misogynistic and racial parody, that there “[s]hould be women in jazz, but there is not. Why is it that outside a few sepia female, the woman musician never was born capable of sending anyone anywhere but to the nearest exit […] You can forgive them for lacking guts in their playing but even women should be able to play with feeling and expression and they never do it.”

The same pressures that faced women jazz instrumentalists often faced women writers. For instance, Brooks’s powerfully blunt poem, “The Mother,” which deals with abortion, was nearly removed from the collection *A Street in Bronzeville* by African American writer and editor of the collection, Richard Wright. Wright argued it was not fit subject for poetry, yet Brooks did not back down, assuring him it was. I argue that Brand and Philip continue to find new ways to articulate jazz on the page. In fact, Brand’s and Philip’s careful and improvised use of jazz in their work demonstrates that gender as a classification of the poet, or the poet-musician’s abilities, need not only be questioned, but perhaps done away with completely for freer possibilities.

Still, I have not answered what jazz is; I doubt I could even if I devoted this entire thesis to that question. Perhaps jazz, in all its ubiquity, tells us that it doesn’t matter what it is, so long as the music continues to inspire people around the world. Thus, to return to my preoccupation with definitions that opened this thesis, we are reminded that definitions are useful in drafting strategies to clarify our objects/subjects of study, but that they are hardly *definite*. As bassist and writer William Parker reminds us, definitions are mutable, context dependent, and often don’t translate into the real
world: “Who cares what jazz is? Jazz is nothing. If jazz enlightens us and uplifts us, then it has value; if it dulls us and makes us less alive, then it has no value. Ask a starving child, ‘What is jazz?’ The child might say jazz is a hot plate of food” (61). I don’t want to expel definitions completely from the literary garden, for I think they have instructive value, especially if we grapple to redefine them, but Parker’s exemplar of how language is sometimes disconnected from the real is a valuable reminder that if jazz, or poetry, is to mean anything it must account for the divide between experience and aesthetic intangibility. Jazz functions as a broad signifying aesthetic, and it is not just about sounds, or how words appear on a page, but also about how those sounds and/or words function as tools to uplift and enlighten people willing to march to a different beat. In Ossuaries, Brand does just that. She looks at the complexities of our age and turns them into jazz music with a ferocious intensity and a lulling sensitivity that grabs us from the first loaded note.

II. “HISTORY WILL ENTER HERE”

“My body is history, fossil, passé.”
—Dionne Brand, Sans Souci, “I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys” 128

“I want nothing that enters me / screaming / claiming to be history”
—Dionne Brand, “I am not that strong woman” 123

Ossuaries, an urgent long poem and a vital listening of the modern crises of culture and ideas, concerns a revolutionary protagonist named Yasmine on the run after robbing a bank. The text charts Yasmine’s personal history over some 30 odd years, and deals explicitly with history as a story to be reworked and recovered. In much of the work of Brand, from No Language Is Neutral to A Map to the Door of No Return, history is largely fiction, in many ways a distortion that requires the poet’s moulding. History can also be a great burden, particularly for people who have been subjected to or ruptured by its imaginative and corporeal machinations. Like the ostranenie effects of poetry, the poetic notation and explication of history in Brand’s work is often disjunctive, disruptive, and free from linearity. Fred Wah, in his essay “Strang(l)ed Poetics,” connects the open-ended approach of jazz and its free moving lines as an aesthetic model suitable to the ostranenie effect of avant-garde poetics: “Certainly the jazz model of a freely moving line playing off of and against the bound chord progressions showed me the delight of distortion and surprise” (25). It is precisely this free movement of ruptured lines throughout time that Ossuaries—as well as A Map to the Door of No Return—encompasses in its sounding, tracing the absences of untraceable absences: “It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being […] Blacks in the New World Diaspora […] signified the end of traceable beginnings” (Map 5). Like jazz artists creating new lines of play upon a standard,
“reshap[ing] time” (*Ossuaries* 53), to live in the diaspora is an act of constant self-creation within its narrative: “To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation” (*Map* 18). In writing against the oppressive violence of history, Yasmine attempts a renaming, an opening up of the historic, much like “the arms wide as Olaudah Equiano” (11.83).

Like the slave narrative of Equiano, which provides a voice for “the poor creature [who is] cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines” (*Equiano* 63), including an iron muzzle to prevent speech, Yasmine and the unnamed narrator provide a voice to the historically silenced. This widening of history to a genealogy of lived communal experience, of a writing against a written history to avow an upward mobility to a community that has been immobilized, is a generative act of opening up space. As a poet, Yasmine attempts to render her own history palpable by tracing its various subversive inscriptions from an underground position to enact a citizenship that is poetically bound in the enactment of rereading and relistening—of a citizenship freely and extemporaneously moving across borders.

Yasmine thus works against simple constructions of linear narratives that prioritize the Hegelian process of dialectics and participates in what Kamau Brathwaite terms *tidalectics*, which provides an Africanist model for thinking about history and which, as described in Chapter One, provides a cyclical approach to history rather than a linear one. Our own histories are never static and are always to be recovered or engaged with. As Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*, we are products of historical processes to date, which have left in us numerous traces, without a precise inventory. Therefore there is importance to creating historical inventories, all the more for minority and disenfranchised subjects who have to work through the traces of imperial domination, gender, race, and class. The jazz strategies that Brand and Yasmine apply in *Ossuaries* are acts of historical recovery. Yasmine’s jazz sounding and circular narrative is a process that works through her, responds, and creates her own subject position. In this fashion, repetition, a type of circulation, is one of the central tools of the jazz performer and improviser; it allows its user to connect to a larger global community while permitting, albeit from a liminal space of difference, critiques of power structures, even while the unequivocal grip of history asserts itself: “history will enter here” (12.102).

In moving between and among various geographies (Algiers, Cuba, Canada) and periodic crises (most topically, the Iraq war), Yasmine asserts a politics of dissent, of timeless struggle, and claims a difference in relation to Western historiography, thus also rewriting herself as an improvised Other.

I am using historiography loosely here within the borders of a poetic that enacts jazz paradigms that shift with the historical. *Ossuaries* moves freely from “Bird” to Monk to Mingus, to
the far out regions of Coltrane’s free jazz. But, rather than a static written or recorded historiography, the text and recorded media insist on being sounded and listened to. The eruptive and beautiful outer space keening of Coltrane’s playing on “Venus” reflects the notion that there is particular value in a history of disunity—a disunity that Yasmine tries to recover through her own mnemonic jazz historiography. Figuratively, this is a history that can never be fully recovered, for as Sharon Morgan Beckford has argued, “New World Africans’ history is one of adoption: slaves being adopted into a new family, left without a full history” (88). Brand (and Yasmine) turns this disunity into an opportunity to respond to the silences of history through acts of historical reimagining and careful engagement. Hence, as playwright Suzan-Lori Parks argues, history is always open to rewritings, especially in cases where the disenfranchised have been written out of history. Challenging written history and a dominant centre through remix, Park says: “Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history—that is, because so much African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to […] locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (“Possession” 4). I like this notion of digging up bones (a fitting comparison given that an “ossuary” is a container for bones), which reminds us that the jazz historiography participates in a polyrhythmic archeological digging up of the repressed bones that consume Yasmine. Nevertheless, despite such containment, Ossuaries, and African Canadian literature more generally, is about recovery. This recovery involves reclaiming the black female body from the ossuaries of history.

Marlene Goldman describes how the body, particularly the black female body, is often a figurative symbol of oppression, which “signal[s] ‘a form of memory that is lived only though the body’” (“Spirit Possession” 5). Further, as Brand suggests, to live in a black body is to embody a history situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the diaspora: “They remain fixed in the ether of history” (Map 35). Despite the philosophy of dualism, which sees the mind and body as separate, the mind and body are indivisible, as both the physiological and psychological confront the past and present through embodied experiences. Johanna Garvey, in writing about the themes of exile and diaspora in Brand’s writing, describes how Brand’s characters (and Brand) struggle with the consequences of a colonized past, as well as the realities of global economics, and therefore the “women [in Brand’s writing] express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy […] and to find a space of empowerment” (486). In Ossuaries this is reflected in Yasmine’s constant need to be on the run to wherever “the sonorous oceans took [her]” (3.31). The ocean and water metaphors throughout the text recall the trauma of the Middle Passage, as Yasmine thinks of “the deepest suicidal blue waters” (3.35), “‘shipping out’ […] like this passages continuum […] as if we
could exhume ourselves from these mass graves’’ (11.81). Water in *Ossuaries* is both assault and healing, for even though “she’s not coastal” (63), like sediment washing Yasmine’s past along with the larger injustices of history (such as slavery) ashore, Yasmine is able to take control of her own destiny. As Katie Mullins details, in her reading of Brand’s short story collection, *Sans Souci*, “it is only when one has the power to feel pain, to confront a violent and oppressive history, that one can gain the power to heal” (14). Further, in a rather salient reading of Brand’s relationship with the body and history, Mullins elaborates: “By making the bodies of black women sites of inscription for past, present, and possible future events, these bodies ultimately assume an overwhelming [...] power that is liberatory for black women who re-claim their past” (20). As an ossuary is a container or room in which the bones of dead people are placed, the larger metaphor of an ossuary contains history, as well as sediments, repositories, and traces of bones to be recovered and made into inventory.

The notion of the container represents Yasmine’s confinement in and subjugation to the boundaries of a world that pushes her into the necessitated response of robbing a bank. The structure of *Ossuaries* illustrates the notion of containment, as the long poem is divided into fifteen different ossuaries, or containers. In “Ossuary XI” the world is described as a giant Ossuary (82). History as containment is all the more corporeal and fixed for those who remain haunted by the past, much like NourbeSe’s description of the Zong massacre as “hauntological.” Brand’s writing complicates Northrop Frye’s question, “Where is Here?,” which in the context of the African diaspora recalls dislocation and loss. Leslie Sanders writes: “for those who came in chains, history is a haunting” (“Introduction” ix)—it is “hauntological.” The poet’s task, then, “is to render history palpable, trace its inscription in and through personal narrative in order to unfold its wider significance” (Sanders, “Introduction” x). Because history resides in language, Brand’s dealing with the language of history—of historical inventories, many of which are extremely oppressive and which appear throughout *Ossuaries*—is about confronting lived genealogy. In “Ossuary XI” Yasmine sits in a museum and reads/contemplates Jacob Lawrence’s *War Series*, particularly “victory,” which actually “looked like defeat” (80), even though history might paint war as glorious for the victors.

Lawrence—a beloved African American painter, whose paintings Yasmine reads like poems, engulfed in their “stanzaic and raw elations” (81)—envisions what war actually looks like in his gouache *War Series*: “their painter knew the rimlessness of any hopes” (83). No history is impartial, just as no language is neutral. The speaker of Brand’s *No Language is Neutral* writes herself into a canon that fails to see her:
History will only hear you if you give birth to a woman who smoothes starched linen in the wardrobe drawer, trembles when she walks and who gives birth to another woman who cries near a river and vanishes and who gives birth to a woman who is a poet, and, even then. (23)

From an underground space, and against a history of oppression, or worse, of utter invisibility, Yasmine engages with the recurring catastrophes of living in the “iron cage” of the contained world. Against the impossibilities of living and loving congruently, the jazz soundings in the text provide a way through the chaos into a space where inventory and tradition can be recollected, and where hope for the future, however faint, is possible.

III: OSSUARIES

Writing Jazz

“But the chaos is always resolved into order […] the trumpet calls, the ensemble answers, comforts, screams out its tight collective protest against the (white) withholding world.”
—Kamau Brathwaite, “Jazz and the West Indian Novel” 277

In the introduction to his work A Poetics, a title that recalls Aristotle’s Poetics, Charles Bernstein asserts that “Poetry is an aversion in the pursuit of new forms, or can be” (1). While Bernstein’s statement is endued with a tone of negative capability and modernist sentiment, it serves as a reminder that poetry, or art for that matter, is at best an alacritous and polemical pursuit of “dissent” (2) that seeks out alternative possibilities. Dionne Brand’s long poem Ossuaries, like Charles Mingus’s jazz tone poem “Pithecanthropus Erectus”—a meshing of sumptuous and disparate sounds, rich in sonic adventurism, which Brand intertextually references—is an urgent aversion and ekphrastic sounding for freedom amidst the ruins of an often-oppressive world. Jazz, given the exigency of the political, cultural, and sonic soundscape from which it was shaped, is the paragon modal—in the jazz sense—to score Ossuaries. In her essay “Jazz” (from Bread Out of Stone) Brand describes how jazz and literature were part and parcel of her developing consciousness when she was growing up, reading literary classics while listening to jazz on the radio. She describes: “This is where I end up each night with Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Duke Ellington and Count Basie. This music has a cool quality. Makes me feel older and more intelligent than I am at nine or ten […] I read Little Women to Miles Davis, Wuthering Heights and The Year in San
Fernando to John Coltrane and Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Mills and Boon Romances to Mary Lou Williams” (155, 158). Listening at the radio, Brand asserts, “jazz and literature melded into big people’s lives, a life I was going to have” (158). Both jazz and literature are sets of arranged sounds, and given her experience with jazz music at such a young age, it is only natural, improvisational even, that Brand would make use of music to articulate the inner consciousness of her characters, as well as her own critical thinking.

After all, as Brand asserts in “Jazz,” jazz artists’ “gift of improvisation is their open invitation for joining and resolution, their proposition for oneness and union, but I feel that their proposition hasn’t been risen to, appreciated or paid back” (153). In this way, Ossuaries not only pays these artists back by using their artistry as a laudable poetic form for the global oppressed citizen (which for Brand is often indicative of the black female body or, more self-reflexively, the black Canadian Caribbean female poet), but it also employs jazz as a metaphor for a “coming community” that is able, through improvisation, to function along a contingent axis of meaning across different spheres of race relations, music, time, and possibility. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz’s groundbreaking The Fierce Urgency of Now rightfully, and urgently, links musical improvisation to social rights, outlining throughout the book how “[b]oth rights and improvisation call into being what [they] call an ethics of cocreation, an understanding that all things are interconnected cocreatively” (xi). Blackness, for Brand in Ossuaries, is always in process, cocreative, interconnected, freely malleable and open-ended, socially minded, and far exceeds categories of the biological or the ethnic. To borrow from Rinaldo Walcott’s description of blackness, Brand’s Ossuaries functions in an in-between space where politics and ethics refuse “the boundaries of national discourses. To be black and at home in Canada is to both belong and not belong” (50). Thus Yasmine, the central character of Ossuaries, is a (presumably African American) woman who lives an underground life (like Dante, Dostoevsky’s narrator in Notes from Underground, and Ellison’s unnamed protagonist before her) of constant malleability and movement—belonging and (un)belonging at times—as she crosses tangible borders (from Algiers, Cuba, New York, and Canada) and anachronistically weaves through time vis-à-vis the text’s sonic jazz verbings. In Ossuaries, Brand once again writes about the experience of the refugee and takes the issue of belonging—or not belonging, which can be positive at times—into complex boundaries that challenge any simple understanding of identity or community within a globalized framework. Yasmine is exemplary of the ebb of globalization and is par excellence the world citizen who, like a jazz artist, is always responding to change. As a result, like the work of the jazz artists invoked throughout Ossuaries (Charlie “Bird” Parker being at the epicentre of the work), Brand’s text can be read as an extended jazz solo that draws improvisation from the margins of
history to assert a poetics of dissent, difference, and disruption, which emboldens the rights of a shifting community that has been othered.

Brand’s direct invocation of jazz artists Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker—musicians who themselves employ disruptive techniques, as well as repetition, epistrophe, blue notes, contrafacts, and improvisation in their compositions—highlights both the formal and deconstructive lexical approach that Brand takes to remapping a historically marginalized community onto a parallel present, creating a fluid community of resistance. This community of repetition and difference recalls what poet and scholar Amiri Baraka calls the resistive, anti-simulacrum power of bebop: the “willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound of bebop” (Blues People 181-182). Ossuaries’s antiphonic calling upon a musically and historically displaced community, through constant interplay and musical intertextuality (a polyphonic layering), opens the text to polysemic interpretations from its readers; thus, it enacts within its own unfolding a listening praxis that is ethically grounded in the possibilities of a better future. Jazz, as a methodological reading lens, provides a creative articulation for the possibility of a more inclusive future; as bell hooks declares: “African American performance has been a site for the imagination of future possibilities” (“Performance” 220). The text, read as a call towards freedom—like Coltrane’s Ascension or Interstellar Space, and like Parker’s improvised and groundbreaking use of rhythmic dissonance in songs such as “Ornithology” and “Ko-ko”—offers the reader an opportunity to hear the world anew, even if it is vis-à-vis an eruptive, often discombobulated and fissured warning “to a fatal future” (Ossuaries 2.27).

In fact, the act of listening, metaphorically enacted as an extended jazz solo, becomes a central trope of Ossuaries as the text weaves in and out of diachronic and synchronic temporalities to assert a poetic politics that values difference, yet looks for hope in subversive political manifestos (often with Marxist tendencies) and innovative jazz artists to provide a theoretical framework to cope with the anxieties of existing in a globalized and often alienating (and xenophobic) world, particularly for Brand’s global citizen and protagonist, Yasmine. Ossuaries’s polyphonic weaving of genre allows for multiple passageways into the text, challenging its readers to participate in a polyrhythmic historiography and archaeological digging up of the repressed bones that consume Yasmine: she says, “I was caged in bone spur endlessly” (3.38). The provoked and provocative dialogics conjoin with jazz as an interpretive form for Brand’s own jazz-like poetics. Brand’s approach to her long poem Ossuaries is reminiscent of an extended jazz solo, as the only concrete punctuation marks in the text are commas; the text does not even end with a period, suggesting that its enactment persists even after we put the book down. Furthermore, the play between the narrator
(who is very possibly a version of Brand herself) and Yasmine, who take turns soloing over each “Ossuary” (Yasmine on the odd numbers, the narrator on the even), adds to the antiphonic nature that draws the reader into the performance. While Brand’s poetry often reads as an incredibly structured vernacular, only deviating from the tercet form twice, in many ways so too does improvisation, in that it allows you to create compound spaces of play and revision over former models. The inclusion of Coltrane’s free-improvised “Venus” in the acknowledgements is perhaps an entryway into the text: “Venus” is a sounding of space that literally takes us beyond the space of the poem and into “unknown galaxies” (3.33). The text is controlled and free, as well as virtuosic in its ability to simultaneously be both. As readers, we are drawn into the text’s sounding, as we try to uncover what Jean Cocteau would most likely call an alphabet in “disorder” (qtd. in Wah 23), and what Yasmine herself describes as a “violent syntax and the beginning syllabi of verblessness” (Brand, Ossuaries 1.20). However, readers less familiar with jazz might find the references to jazz texts and artists disorienting, but such disorientation helps to assert the poetic marginality of the text in relation to more popularly consumed genres, as well as its resounding call for freedom to a global community of fragmentary—possibly exiled, or on the run—listeners.

The question of whether or not Ossuaries is a jazz poem, or an avant-garde poem for that matter, is more generatively focused by asking how it participates in the jazz form, and how it utilizes jazz (as an avant-garde manifesto and motif) to assert its difference. Ossuaries not only contains a jazz structure, but it employs jazz in theme, as identity, history, culture, and Yasmine’s own fractured narrative skips and jumps like a soloist over the chord progressions of the tercet. Jazz is the sonic zeitgeist of the twentieth century, appearing in everything from “The Jazz Age” writers such as Fitzgerald, Harlem Renaissance writers such as Ishmael Reed’s boisterous/cutup jazz fantasy, Mumbo Jumbo, to texts by Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and more contemporary texts like Toni Morrison’s Jazz. In Jazz, for example, Morrison uses jazz as a larger metaphor for the lifeblood of the city: “It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That’s the way the city spins you” (120). Brand’s novel What We All Long For describes the city using comparable jazz-influenced language: “Yes, that was the beauty of this city, it’s polyphonic, murmuring [...] that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable” (149). Despite the fact that Ossuaries employs some of jazz’s most important—as well as lesser known—pieces, like Coltrane’s “Venus,” it is easy to mistake Brand’s writing as overly traditional, since she employs lingering metaphors and sustains narrative throughout her work, and especially since there are but two deviations from the tercet in Ossuaries.
Lynette Hunter in “After Modernism” applies misguided criticism which not only reads Brand’s work under a neat modernist guise, but elevates her to the level of a sociologist whose politics are effective because her work is traditional: “Politically the most assertive of the three writers discussed here [Brand, Claire Harris, and NourbeSe Philip], Brand is poetically the most traditional” (269). Comparing the political utility of black women writers against one another is unproductive; moreover, Hunter’s labeling of Brand as overtly traditional overshadows Brand’s innovations and interest in contemporary dilemmas—finding new ways to speak and challenge authority. Andreas Huyssen argues, “rather than privilege the radically new in Western avant-gardist fashion, we may want to focus on the complexity of repetition and rewriting, bricolage and translation, thus expanding our understanding of innovation” (“Geographies” 15). Brand actively participates in the African American avant-garde movement that Nathaniel Mackey (Discrepant Engagement) and Aldon Nielsen (Black Chant) outline in their breakthrough works on African American avant-garde poetry, in which aesthetic and social dissent are inseparably and strangely harmonious. In Race and the Avant-Garde, Timothy Yu defines the analytic power of the avant-garde as that which “reminds us that the aesthetic and the social are inseparable […] defined as much by a distinctive kind of community as by its revolutionary aesthetics” (2). The blending, the improvising even, of tradition and innovation, of revolutionary politics and aesthetics, are effusively articulated throughout Brand’s Ossuaries, her most fully realized jazz sounding.

**Ornithology: New Languages**

“Charlie Parker tears through the night. A heavy, humid Tristes Tropiques kind of night. Jazz always makes me think of New Orleans, and that makes a Negro nostalgic.”
—Dany Laferrière, How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired

Like Charlie “Bird” Parker, a great improviser invoked directly and symbolically throughout the text (see 27, 29, 45, 57, 67, 119), Ossuaries challenges notions of canonicity (what fits) by constantly rewriting itself. What is not written in Ossuaries, the in-between spaces of silence, as well as the palimpsestic reverberations throughout, are apostrophic callings towards the malleability of any singular interpretation. Like Bird’s “Ornithology,” one of the acknowledged sources in the appendix, which is a contrafact—that is, a newly created melody written over the chord progressions of another song, in this instance the standard “How High the Moon”—Yasmine constantly writes over herself. Parker’s “Ornithology,” which remains one of the most popular and frequently performed bebop tunes, is emblematic of the jazz tradition; further, Charlie Parker afforded writers
more innovative modes of expression to emulate in their writing, particularly marginalized writers who related to the dissonant notes, repetition, and energy in “Bird’s” emotive and evocative playing and revising of tradition.

In the spirit of Charlie Parker, *Ossuaries*, along with its extemporal and on-the-go Yasmine, wobbles like a blue note, a worried or unsettled note that is sung or played at a slightly slower pitch than that of the major scale for expressive tension: “being there out of her elemental America / unsettles her, untethers her” (8.63). Brand wields disorder, paradoxically, as an unsettled ordering, packing her lines with energy and freedom, expert control, replete with repetitions and cadences that articulate the cacophonous history of Yasmine, who is “discomfited” (8.63), and whose own lyrical “I” is fissured as an ambivalent “slippery pronoun” (2.22). The disharmony of the text recalls a larger tradition of dissonance in jazz; for example, Duke Ellington equated dissonance in jazz with the African American experience: “Hear that chord. That’s us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part” (qtd. in Ulanov 276). Under this rubric, the jazz modal offers an aesthetic form to animate the revolutionary and discordant nature of Yasmine. As Timothy Yu asserts in *Race and the Avant-Garde*, “racial others [such as Charlie Parker] offered an escape from Western aesthetics, serving as a source for the revolutionary breakthroughs that have characterized the twentieth-century avant-garde” (1). Yu’s assertion of racial otherness as aesthetically radical reminds us that the aesthetic form of jazz and the politics of dissent are inseparable in a text such as *Ossuaries*. Yet *Ossuaries* is also unique in creating polyphonic melodies that engage in a critical reading praxis of its own sounding: reflexively aware that it is a text built around other texts, and aware of itself, from its opening moments, as a “looking back” (*Ossuaries* 9), a reflection upon its own unreadability.

*Ossuaries*, swimming within the language currents of incomprehensibility, asserts its polyglossic untranslatability throughout: “each bone has its lost dialect now, / untranslated though I had so many languages” (5.50); “here she is a polyglot” (5.54); “so first the language she would never quite learn” (8.64). Despite these challenges, “we listen” (5.50). Essentially, the text, in reading itself, intimates that no single or authoritative reading is possible; rather, it provokes pluralities of meanderings and intersecting possibilities that are consonant with the assembling qualities that typify readings of the long poem, as well as improvisatory and avant-garde performances in jazz. In *On the Edge of Genre*, Smaro Kamboureli makes the compelling argument that “The inclusiveness of the long poem does not presuppose a harmonious interrelationship among its mixed literary kinds, nor does it necessitate a complete cancelling out of their idiosyncratic generic elements” (45-46). Kamboureli’s reading of the inclusive, yet often disruptive, assembling of the long poem is distinctly
the pursuit that compels the metanarrative unfolding between the narrator (unnamed), Yasmine, the speaking text, and the reader, in a creative and destructive plurality of contrasting interpretations that assemble and dissemble generic prefixes. Beyond jazz, a number of genres push and pull against readings of the text, such as the mock-epic, not only in encompassing and critiquing epic form, but also in Yasmine’s own purgative journey (epic quest) towards redemption in the hopes for a better future. *Ossuaries* not only plays upon the epic form, as a jazz improviser plays upon a standard, but in calling the epic form into recognition it doubly subverts the epic form and meaning while paying homage to the epic’s inherent referentiality.

The most direct epic at hand in *Ossuaries*, as I read it, is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, whose form is also built around a variation of the tercet (*terza rima*), and whose own speaker, like Yasmine, struggles to redeem his lost love amid the depths of hell while living in the present. In many ways, Dante Alighieri, as poet and citizen, and poet and traveller in his text, provides a poignant counterpoint to Brand and her Yasmine. Both Dante and Yasmine are exiled (Brand can be read as a self-exiled poet from her own Trinidad) and like Dante, Yasmine must find a new language to express her epic travel into an underground while struggling between the occupations of living and loving. In “Ossuary III,” Yasmine tells us that to live and love are simultaneously impossible: that we can only truly do (or perform) one at a time: “lived and loved, common oxymoron, / if I have lived, I have not loved, / and if I have loved, I cannot have lived” (33). Yet Yasmine is no Dante, and certainly she is no Beatrice, being closer to a Charlie Parker figure of a jazz underworld, whose love is moved by dissent: a dissent that is a descent like Dante’s (or Ellison’s nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man*) into the uncharted realms of inward and outward revolutionary action. These Dantean allusions, within the shifting jazz intertextualities, allow *Ossuaries* to be read as modelling a reading practice where disparate traditions are read in relation to and against one another, moving the text into an expressive reappropriation of history:

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this genealogy she’s made by hand, this good silk lace,
Engels plaited to Bird, Claudia Jones edgestitched
to Monk, Rosa Luxemburg braids Coltrane
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as far as she’s concerned these names reshaped time (6.52-53)

The genealogy the text constructs, reading jazz giants in relation to feminist activists, invites the type of play that happens in both discordant political and jazz arenas. Further, the above passage reveals that in *Ossuaries* the jazz textuality is inseparable from the political textuality: Yasmine’s
dissent and embodiment of multiple topoi function congruently within a variety of social and aesthetic margins. This heterogenic approach is played out as Yasmine and the narrator trade off between each “Ossuary,” often blurring the lines of who is speaking. The metaphoric constituencies (between Brand and Yasmine, as exemplified in the above passage) are utterances put into a figurally coded language that further distorts and asserts the dilemma that we have, as readers and listeners, to untangle the polyphony of voices presented to us.

As avant-garde jazz musician Ornette Coleman asserts, in his description of harmolodic music, it is “The kind of music we play, no one player has the lead” (“Science Fiction”), signifying that meaning is a patchwork of disparate speaking voices. Aldon Lynn Nielsen asserts in Black Chant that “harmolodic music destroys the conventional view of the relationship between melody line and background musician” (236). The issue of who is speaking is overshadowed by the reflexive impulse to simply listen, which ultimately defers absolute meaning or ending. Ossuaries does not preclude ending, but rather suggests “new” possibilities for movement that are largely antithetical to modernist innovation, yet that fit within a radicalism that invites critiques of the past. Even though Brand’s poetic form in Ossuaries contains (like an ossuary contains a skeleton) highly formalized vernacular (the tercet formalism of the poem perhaps seeming like an odd choice for innovative delivery) it is also spontaneous. Ossuaries is improvisatory because of its open posture to hybridist experimentation, which is mirrored in jazz’s remarkably exciting and unpredictable history of improvisation and innovation, even within a perceived standard. Brand displays virtuosic delivery upon the received standard of the tercet, somewhat echoing Ezra Pound’s notion to “day by day make it new / cut underbrush, / pile the logs / keep it growing” (“Canto LIII”). In spite of this analogy, her poetics are not quite the “make it new” that Pound has in mind, though the concept of making it new is hardly a sole Euro-poetic construct of modernism.

Brand, via Yasmine, displays a scathing cynicism towards some of the exclusionary practices of modernism, using Miles Davis as a signified phallic and misogynistic innovator and a counterpoint to the positive portrayals of other jazz artists in the text. Such a reading of Davis’s innovative virtuosity is supported by Ralph Gleason who argues, as discussed in Chapter Three on Clarke, that Davis’s eclectic use of electronics in Bitches Brew is a hybrid and patchwork performance within a tradition of productive emergence. However, for Yasmine, Miles Davis is also an oppressive force, like that of her male comrade and lover, particularly for his misogynistic views, which are displayed openly in the title Bitches Brew. With a political reverence for Fanon and an abhorrence for Davis, Yasmine muses, “Miles’s ‘Bitches Brew’ on the stereo and Fanon / like a double-edged knife in her teeth […] the thin mean horn she hated / […] the cynicism and who gives a fuck trumpet” (5.44).
While Davis is certainly one of the great jazz innovators of the twentieth century, innovation, as well as modernism and “newness,” are subjective terms for the multiple speaking voices in the text. Innovation therefore becomes a site of contestation, where ‘newness’ itself is a term up for grabs: newness defined as a space of subjectivity, whereby a “music still unheard” (11.84) remains a generative possibility. Fitting with the indexes of the long poem, Kamboureli argues, “‘new’ [should be placed] in quotation marks, for newness and originality is a relative and suspect term, especially when applied to such contemporary literary texts as the long poem” (On the Edge xiii). Despite Ossuaries’ newness, which is built upon a jazz tradition situated in the past, the text does not provide agency to the past over the present so much as it looks towards the freedom the future may hold.

Returning back to the jazz poetics this chapter uses as a modal for critical practice, as well as the recognition of emotive confession that the text enacts in it own reading, this chapter reads Ossuaries as a search for new grammars, for new symbolically coded speech. William Harris, in his work The Jazz Aesthetic, writes, “It is not an improvement or modification of available techniques that the black artist requests; rather, his call is for an entirely new grammar” (26). Like the work of fellow Afrosporic (Trinidadian-Canadian) poet, M. NourbeSe Philip, the grammar of Ossuaries might aptly be described under what Philip terms kinopoeia: “the kinetic quality of language which […] is best exhibited by those vernaculars that combine the African with (in this case) English” (51). Throughout the text, Yasmine is forced to speak a “new sign language” (Ossuaries 66) in order to regain mobility, to regain voice and agency, in the same way that the poem asserts an anarchistic approach to received standards, paralleling jazz’s value in the repetition of difference. In the changing of forms, in the reworking of language through the acknowledgement of its limitations, and in her “dim-lit ambiguous” (3.35) stanzas, Yasmine, along with the narrator, values the form of constant transmutability, trying to balance the cultural and the anarchistic. Parallel to Charlie Parker, Yasmine is hardly concerned with determinism and static traditionalism, as she freely and virtuosically improvises the self. Parker ideally represents another “order” beyond the realm of the popular: Parker was notorious for turning his back on his audience while he soloed. It’s not that Yasmine or Parker don’t reproduce tradition, it’s that they break the mould of expectations, which is why it is ridiculous that so many of Parker’s improvised solos have been transcribed for “exact” performance and popular consumption. The various repetitions in Ossuaries, and there are many, are always performed with a difference.
“There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.”

The above epigraph taken from then President Lyndon B. Johnson’s address to Congress to remove the barriers that prevented all Americans from voting, and a response to the torrid and entropic civil rights movement, is an epistrophe: an emphatic device that places emphasis on the last word in a phrase or sentence. The device is also used by Thelonious Monk—and by Brand throughout Ossuaries—in his song “Epistrophy,” a composition built on 32 bars that does not follow the standard AABA form, as bars 9-12 are a repeat of 5-9, and bars 13-16 repeat bars 1-4. Monk’s “Epistrophy” undoes and repeats itself, much like Yasmine’s constant writing over herself in a perpetual undoing: “to undo, to undo and undo and undo this infinitive” (2.21). This undoing, within the infiniteness of the infinitive, is also a redoing, a series of repetitions that address the reader by way of redressing meaning. The formal technique of epistrophe functioning somewhat like an antistrophe (the return to a movement), is a direct reference to the song “Epistrophy,” by Thelonious Monk, which is acknowledged while putting its maxim into praxis: “I’ve got no time, no time, this epistrophe, no time, / wind’s coming, no time, / one sunrise to the next is too long, no time” (7.61). “No time,” ironically, is repeated time and time again, highlighting the form of epistrophe, which is the repetition of the same words at the end of successive phrases, clauses or sentences, which is precisely how it functions in Monk’s imbued, emotive, and disruptively timed playing. Time and disruption are crucial to the jazz allusions in the text, as the text’s localities shift in and out of time, trying to escape the grips of history with epistrophic urgency and a constant yearning for newness: “or are we still slaves in this old city, / back then, back then, always back then” (12.94). The use of epistrophe by Brand recalls how variation and repetition are important in the jazz tradition.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in The Signifying Monkey elucidates, “Repetition of a form and then inversion of the same through a process of variation is central to jazz” (104). Thus, repetition is always different in each of its sonic iterations, an idea supported by Jeffery T. Nealon who states, “African-American traditions have deployed ‘repetition with a difference’ as a key concept in maintaining a vibrant culture on the margins of the American mainstream” (83). Ossuaries is full of repetitions, but they are not merely a technique of asserting rhythmic permutations that affirm Blackness, for Yasmine is not necessarily semiotically charged as a purveyor of African-American culture (her name is after all Arabic and Persian in origin), so much as she signifies difference: the repetition of the violent gazes throughout the text signifies Yasmine’s alterity to hegemonic culture.
It is precisely her somatic and linguistic differences that alienate Yasmine as she travels abroad. While in Havana, as a foreigner who is doubly alienated, culturally and grammatically, Yasmine can only live “on rations of diction, / shortened syntax” (8.65), a partial language that turns her, in her viewing and anthropophagic (cannibalistic) consumption by others, into a scopophilia of alterity, into language itself: “she became allegorical, she lost metaphor” (65). Yasmine is anthropophagically consumed as an “other,” as a “specimen, / at the anthropometric spectacle” (1.13), “in the museum of spectacle” (15.124), recalling the dehumanizing processes of colonization, slavery, and subjugations of difference. Difference with repetition becomes a theme of *Ossuaries*, one that challenges us to consider how Yasmine fits within the social vicissitudes of various resistive cultures, such as *deterritorializing* jazz, African-American culture, as well as globalized alterity; further, her repetitions provide the framework for her various flights across time and space to assert a polyphonic identity (free, yet contained with the container of each poetic ossuary). The difference that Brand evokes can be a repetition of the same, yet a difference that differentiates itself as such via jazz aesthetics. As Gilles Deleuze conveys in *Difference and Repetition*, there are conceivably two categories of repetition: the static, “reterritorializing” of repetition-as-representation, and the dynamic, “deterritorializing” of repetition with a difference: “The first repetition is repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept or representation; the second includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an ‘a-presentation’” (24). For example, when John Coltrane covers “My Favorite Things,” it is not simply a repetition of the Julie Andrews version, but what Deleuze calls “a-presentation”: an arrangement that inscribes and includes difference, rather than an eradication of the original. Similarly, when Brand evokes and uses the form and spirit of Monk’s “Epistrophy,” it is no mere simulacrum of the piece, but rather an “a-presentation” that includes difference, emphasizing Yasmine’s own identity, which is always being destroyed and rebuilt again.

**Pithecanthropus Erectus: De/constructing the Self**

“It’s not only a question of color anymore […] It’s getting deeper than that. I mean it’s getting more and more difficult for a man and a woman to just love. People are getting fragmented, and part of that is that fewer and fewer people are making a real effort anymore to find out exactly who the y are and to build on that knowledge […] We create our own slavery.”

—Charles Mingus qtd. in Hentoff, liner notes, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*

“Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.”

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 307
The title cut of Charles Mingus’s classic *Pithecanthropus Erectus* is one of his most powerful pieces: a four-movement tone poem depicting humankind’s evolution from pride and success to hubris and slavery and finally to ultimate destruction. The piece is held together by a recurring theme and is fragmented by chaotic interludes as humankind’s spirit sinks lower. Aside from evolution, the song’s title, which roughly translates as “Upright Ape Man,” refers to Mingus and his upright bass. In *Ossuaries*, Mingus’s “Pithecanthropus Erectus” parallels Yasmine’s own sense of false security and her struggles to escape her own oppressive past. In an attempt to escape the oppressiveness of “back then” (which can be read as a historic racism that exists as right now), Yasmine yearns for a parallel present that without constant struggle is unattainable, because of all the accumulated errors—the accumulated bones—that now make her, and us, who we are (Larisa Lai). Yasmine’s yearning is also the yearning for the possibilities of a better future, wanting to escape the oppressive structures even within her own revolutionary sphere, as her male comrade and lover claims, “‘You’re nothing, Yas, / I made you something by fucking you, / other than that, you’re nothing’” (4.41). Momentarily she can only find solace and escape this temporality through the movement of music, imagining, “as if she should hear instead Monk’s / ‘Crepuscule with Nellie,’ its deliberate / and loving notes scoring her back” (41); and later,

Charles Mingus recovers her, ‘Pithecanthropus Erectus,’ and he does, then she was
three and her mother lifted the needle on the record,
the rushing out and out her feet tingling (42)

These movements and moments of the jazz manifestos that score Yasmine in and out of time exemplify how the text constructs itself in relation to the often physical manifestation of memory. Memory, together with the liberating dissent that encompasses the political vernacular of her jazz musings, is in many ways the type of poetic flight the text enacts. The deep anguish produced by Yasmine’s constant failures within her insurgent politics leaves her a disenfranchised global citizen; further, it sets the stage for her performative flight from the law in a poetic narrative of movement through borders that are personally delicate as well as politically charged. The notion of flight as a returning back to, as well as an escape from, a disjunctive present towards a communal narrative, are common fictive motifs of Brand’s poetic writing. Moreover, as Leslie Sanders argues, “slaves flying back to Africa people the folklore of the enslaved Caribbean and North American” (xii). Like Charlie “Bird” Parker, who melodically moves through the text as a representation of expressive (and at
times excessive) flight and freedom, the poet’s (whether Brand, Yasmine, or the unnamed narrator) own birdlike flight can be read as palimpsest—as an articulation of the repetitions that come in acknowledging difference. Yasmine’s difference is all the more potent given that she defies and confounds gender and machismo, largely taking over the action in the robbery, “newly awakened to her violence” (10.77). For while there are moments where history forcefully enters the text, the robbery, and her subsequent movement across geographical borders, the bank heist is one instance in the text where “history will see” (10.72). Her unforgivable Blackness and gender bending is possibly why her comrade, six ossuaries earlier, attempts to control her through sexual violence. As in Toni Morrison’s Sula, Yasmine defies all expectations of what a black woman is supposed to be, travelling dangerous grounds; as Nel warns Sula: “You can’t do it all. You a woman and colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (142). Like Sula’s feminism, Yasmine’s extends beyond gender and race, as her various dissents/descents are acts of defiant citizenship that resist and challenge the structural systems of oppression in place.

The politics of dissent are (self-reflexively) asserted as the narrator describes that Yasmine is on the side of the marginalized: “Yasmine knows in her hardest heart, / that truth is worked and organized by some, / and she’s on the wrong side always” (6.53). It is from the position of being on the wrong side, what Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble describe in jazz as the “other side of nowhere,” that Yasmine can speak from her informed global position as “a body out of time, moving at a constant angle” (11.86) like a discordant note, arriving wherever “the sonorous oceans” (3.31) take her. In The Other Side of Nowhere, Fischlin and Heble describe how Dave Douglas and Charles Mingus herald the improviser as a site for locating resistant critiques, “iterative consciences that directly address injustice, the meaning of democratic values (often in so-called democratic spaces where those values have been forgotten or lie dormant), and the transcultural importance of these sorts of resistances” (4). Yasmine fits within this continuum of the global improviser, moving freely between borders, while using the various tropes of jazz to articulate a global sounding, like Mingus’s “erectus / [with its] fierce bright timbals” (7.60), which ventures most outwardly towards an “outer space sounding” (60). Brand, through the mobility of her diegetic Yasmine, rewrites the performance(s) of improvised jazz musicians in order to subvert Western traditions. This results in a contractual edifying of both the destructive and generative potentialities of constant self-creation in the face of horrifying atrocities and auto-critiques that signal “the inabilities to live” (13.111). It is through the destructive genesis of rewriting, repetition, bricolaging, and translation, that Yasmine (and by extension the readers of the text) is drawn into the text’s disruptive poetics—into its jazz
undertones—and into the politics of the exiled individual in relation to utopian hopes for a “coming community,” perhaps a considerably socialist community, as Yasmine is markedly Marxist.

For example, Engels’s *The Origin of the Family* and Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (see “Ossuary IV” where Yasmine reads them at the same time) serve as reminders that the future cannot be built upon the past, but the past with its proclivities towards injustice contains many of the answers leading to a more utopian future (which for Yasmine may or may not be equated with socialism). While the constant ruptures and eruptions of gloom throughout the text might signal that *Ossuaries* is hardly concerned with utopian principles, its undertones are “sincere explosions” (15.124) forewarning of ecological destruction—much like Mingus’s “Pithecanthropus Erectus”—towards the eradication of the individual, or life itself: “she reads later that Mingus said the last movement / suggests the ‘frantic burst of a dying organism’” (4.43). Yasmine’s constant rereading and her perpetual feelings of displacement underpin the notion of a disruptive or “inoperative community” (Nancy), which is always potentially a “coming community” where people do not belong to this or that universal, but to a “whatever” category: “the coming being is whatever being” (Agamben, *Community* 1). To restate from an earlier chapter, Georgio Agamben argues in *The Coming Community*, the “whatever” simply belongs, since it is the condition of belonging itself (1-2). Further, Agamben explains, the Latin word for whatever, *quodlibet*, refers to an expression that emphasizes not merely “it does not matter which,” so much as “being such that it always matters” (1), as well as to a polyphonic piece of music in which several melodies are combined in an often playful mode. In this way, Agamben’s theory of the “whatever,” in relation to a heteroglot being, as well as a coming community, provides a poignant philosophical adage to the notions of jazz, polyphonic listening, and disruptive communities. It is the normalizing concepts of all-inclusive communities that Brand’s *Ossuaries* deconstructs.

In *Grammar of Dissent*, Carol Morrell argues that “‘universalizing’ on the part of writer and/or reader affirms a traditional cultural hegemony that actually erases the particular experiences of various less-powerful groups” (11). Deferring universalism, space becomes a hostile gap for Brand’s Yasmine, and community becomes a reinvented concept that takes root in a diversity of soils. In his article “The jazz diaspora,” Bruce Johnson argues that the “semiosis in the US pervaded the international diaspora, traversing all local differences. The jazz migration coincided with an emancipative reaction against nineteenth-century traditions, and the musical marker was provided by the ‘New World’” (41). In the way that jazz—an undeniably American music—is rooted in a variety of Pan-African soils that often incorporate African elements and a thematic return to Africa, Brand’s Yasmine moves through multiple spaces as she searches (though often impossibly) for some
sense of permanence (of community) while abhorring such fixity: “how to say I wish for permanence, / then I cast it off as dullness, stupidity, / then wish again for certainty” (12.107). As Sanders argues, “a diasporic consciousness, by definition, imagines itself rooted in an elsewhere, or believes that rootedness, and so safety, is elsewhere possible” (xi). This space of elsewhere possibilities, of transitory hope, produces a culturally transnational narrative, a craved movement, where Yasmine is constantly reinventing herself, wanting to fly like a bird (musically like Charlie Parker), yet is immobilized by such deceit: “in other people’s passports, / in mathematical theorems of trust / in her vigilant skin and feathery, feathery deceit” (2.28). Yasmine’s translation between passports, temporalities, and various localities becomes a performance, enacting or enunciating cultural communication, and promoting multiple levels of shifting perspective via dialogue. Conceptually, cultural translation read through Yasmine’s various diasporic flights across time is productive because it prescribes an ethical responsibility to reading and theorizing literature within the framework of cultural specificity and shifting perspectives of modernity. On the ground, as readers, we consider the shifting and multiple perspectives, as deep bass notes ripple through the text, disturbing notions of subjectivity, particularly any simple acceptance of the self/lyrical “I.”

**Venus: Outer Space Soundings**

“I’m playing intergalactic music, which is beyond the other idea of space music, because it is of the natural infinity of the eternal universe … Music is a universal language […] The intergalactic music is in hieroglyphic sound: an abstract analysis and synthesis of man’s relationship to the universe, visible and invisible first man and second man.”

—Sun Ra qtd. in Jost 181

Sun Ra, who thought of himself as much a scientist as a musician, used space, music and improvisation as ways to escape the material world and, to contemplate cosmic realities. Similarly, John Coltrane used improvisation as a way to develop spirituality and contemplate the divine. Aptly, in 1966 when Coltrane was asked what he would like to be in “ten or twenty years,” he responded, “I would like to be a saint” (Devito 270), which is fitting since after his death the African Orthodox Church canonized him as Saint John William Coltrane. Space: physical, intergalactic, spiritual, and cosmological for both Sun Ra and Coltrane, was a way to transcend the earth for, as Ra’s trumpet player Phil Cohran put it, “You had to think space. Had to expand beyond the earth plane” (Szwed 141). Nowhere in Coltrane’s oeuvre is space, particularly cosmological, as a theme more present than in *Interstellar Space* (recorded in 1967), released posthumously in 1974. Coltrane and drummer Rashied Ali are the only musicians on the recording, on which the almost folksy “Venus,” which Brand references, first appears. Coltrane alternates quiet moments with sections of great intensity,
showing off his phenomenal technique and ability to improvise without the need for chordal instruments. Coltrane’s “Venus” provides a powerful metaphor of space as transcendence, present throughout Ossuaries as Yasmine improvises in each space she encounters while trying to move beyond the limits imposed upon her. Further, the cosmos itself is not stable, and rather than the spiritual impetus of Coltrane’s search for the divine, Brand is interested in how improvisation is used to survive an often cruel world; poetically, the space metaphor challenges simplistic notions of identity: the “I” of the text.

In Ossuaries, the lyrical “I” is a contested site, full of narrative multiplicities and contradictions, as the narrator in the second Ossuary exclaims, “I, the slippery pronoun, the ambivalent, glistening, / long sheath of the alphabet flares beyond her reach” (2.22). Here, as well as in other places in the text, the unnamed narrator (which I have suggested might be a performative enactment by Brand of her poet-self), the “I” of the text, is muddled within Yasmine’s own sounding, highlighting that the ambiguity of identity, even while claiming an “I,” is the reality of the exiled, or globally defined, jazz poet and citizen. In describing the ambiguities of a solidified personality, of the failures of language to describe the multiplicities of identity, the unnamed narrator of Ossuaries reminds us that truth in the text is indiscernible from the falsities of language, emphasizing that the unreadability of Yasmine is what defines her ability to exist outside of language, outside of determinate sign systems, blowing freely like “the Venusian winds” (11.81)—a reference to Coltrane’s “Venus.” Salim Washington argues that with a recording such as Interstellar Space, “Coltrane was able to play more freely than ever before, dipping into his unconscious and streaming consciousness to produce works that were at once primal and unsettling as well as intricate and dense” (150). Unsettling, like the musical undertones of “Venus,” Ossuaries challenges the notion of a clearly definable self or community, using the disturbed moments of identity to transform definable immanences of character into a whatever space.

In Brand’s novel What We All Long For, Coltrane’s “Venus” represents both the tender feelings the character Oku feels towards his love interest, Jackie, as well as the uncertainty of the boundaries and spaces that lie between them: “And he played her ‘Venus’ more times than he could recall because he felt that tender, that undone with her, that out in space, that uncertain of boundaries, and that much in peril if she didn’t love him back” (184). In a rare moment of poetic praise, Emmanuel Levinas argues that “Poetry can be said to transform words, the tokens of a whole, the moments of a totality, into unfettered signs, breaking the walls of immanence, disrupting order” (156). In “breaking the walls of immanence,” Ossuaries states that community and identity are processes continually made, unable to be totalized by universalizing language or globalization. Fischlin
and Heble argue that the “very tensions operative in improvisation as a social practice are those that are at stake in the making of community as an ongoing and dynamic interrelational practice” (17). In viewing Yasmine’s identity as an unfixed metaphor, as movement, as bluenote, as contrafact, as perpetually reread and relistened to, we move into an understanding of community as fiction (as narrative), of self as fiction, of history as fiction, of fiction as history, of the reader as woven into the fabric of meaning. Yasmine envisions and writes herself into the type of community in which she would like to belong, finding individual freedom while desiring a larger cosmological community.

In challenging dominant culture while striving towards a personal freedom of mobility, Yasmine embodies many of the resonances of improvisational practices in jazz and black musical culture more generally. Nathaniel Mackey, in Discrepant Engagement, describes the drive of black music, most focally in free jazz, as an aesthetic striving towards an individual and collective freedom:

During the sixties, assertions were often made to the effect that jazz groups provided glimpses into the future. What was meant by this was that black music—especially that of the sixties, with its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context—proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands. (34)

Mackey’s description of the collective individuality of an improvised jazz context helps edify Yasmine’s own citizenship, which is defined both in her ability to improvise individually as well as within the groups and cultures of each topographic surrounding in which she finds herself, always rereading her “disorderly” (14.115) self and each “constellation of bodies” (120). Her enactment is spatial, travelling via sound, as her very name is interpellated musically: “Yasmine, some long-fingered horn player, / could blow confessions over those two cool syllables” (119). That cool horn player blowing confessions is Yasmine, who is in many ways that “anonymous bird” (119): a Charlie Parker enactment improvising a painful truth as we listen. Yasmine is that very enactment of historicized sound. Avant-garde poet Erin Mouré asks the very poignant question: “How can any of us write again without considering the sound of what we do?” (Wager 24). Further, it can be asked: as listeners, how can any of us read without considering the listening of our own listenings?

The text demands that we move beyond a logocentric definition of reading as a discovery of the inherent meaning of a text and into a reading that produces ambiguous and polysemic meanings in the act of (un)reading and (re)listening. In many ways, Ossuaries enacts such embodied hermeneutics, valuing repetitions of difference over repetitions of sameness. For a moment, like the moments when we become lost within the free moving lines of a piece of music, we embody the
book, “for a book asks us to embody, which at once takes us across borders of all kinds” (*Map* 190). In listening to the performance of the text, of the polyphonic confessional nature of *Ossuaries*, we become a part of the book’s various musicings. Every listening act is a reopening of space, a space of translatory possibilities. Thus, translation can be an opening process, which enacts a fluidity between borders (real or metaphorical). As readers we enact translation via listening continually as we read and reread a text. *Ossuaries*, replete with listenings of listenings, is a call towards a diacritical reading praxis that invites participation in a tapestry of different and shifting world views and epistemologies. If *Ossuaries* moves along any linearity, it propels itself towards the possibility of a better, perhaps more just, more freely moving globalized community (with communities of difference within communities of difference). *Ossuaries* has intertextual references to Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (it appears in the acknowledgments), a text that states, “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past” (149); Brand similarly engages directly with the confrontations (wars and injustices) of a shifting present. As Bernstein states, “we can’t rely only on the tools and forms of the past, even the recent past, but must invent new tools and forms that begin to meet the challenges of the ever-changing present” (3). Like the music of Sun Ra, which proposes outer space as a more just place,193 or Coltrane’s *Interstellar Space*, *Ossuaries* constantly invites the possibilities of a “music still unheard” (11.84), ultimately presenting the present as a place that is ethically challenging to live in: “who could have lived each day knowing / some massacre was underway” (15.123).

Nevertheless, the speaking text announces, “I do, I do / anyone, I’m not unique” (123),194 implying a collaborative guilt and a sincere approach to the responsibilities of being a citizen every day of one’s life (and the burden that comes with perpetual struggle). While Yasmine steps into “another country, another / constellation of bodies” (14.120) and becomes part of the commonplace ennui of killing chickens on a Maple Leaf farm in Canada, we are reminded that despite some of Yasmine’s best efforts it is difficult to completely escape the periodic crises of the modern world. Nevertheless, Yasmine continues to imagine the future with a global consciousness, just as Coltrane framed “his music as an act of transnational imagination” (Saul, *Freedom Is* 210). Ultimately, like the sonic undulations of the text, the Marxist musings, and Brand’s (and Yasmine’s) constant rerelistenings of jazz, there is always hope.
REMIX 4

Brand’s *Ossuaries* is a jazz sounding of deep listening. American accordionist, electronic innovator, and improvising musician Pauline Oliveros defines “Deep Listening” as “learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound—encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible” (xxiii). Brand recalls much and “edits in” plenty in *Ossuaries*, like her Yasmine whose deep listening is so overwhelming that she finds it hard to even mourn as she watches the “powdering towers [9/11]” fall before her eyes on “the grey blood of television (2.26): “her whole existence was mourning, so what?” (2.30). It is precisely this type of “editing in”—from the epic cataloging to the modern day existential crises of the text—that would impress poet-critic Charles Bernstein: “What interests me is a poetry and a poetics that do not edit out so much as edit in: that include multiple conflicting perspectives and types of languages and styles in the same poetic work […] A poetry—a poetic—that expresses the states of the art as it moves beyond the twentieth century, beyond the modern and postmodern” (2). Brand’s *Ossuaries* is a poetics of recollection, of constant movement (again, like *The Divine Comedy*), and a text of hypertextuality that, like jazz, edits in forms (other genres) to suggest a multiplicity that defers absolute authority; in this way it is unlike *The Divine Comedy*, which affirms authority in God. Rather, in *Ossuaries*, God/gods is/are part of the “iron cage” and regime that limits human freedom—another instance where we “deliver ourselves / to the sharp instruments for butchering, / to appease which rain god, which government god, which engine god” (15.123). It is from the rubble of fallen towers, despite the massacres, that we must, as Yasmine does, go on living, even loving.

*Ossuaries* is another instance, like Philip’s *Zong!*, where Canada does not figure predominately in the text, although it is in Canada, on the Maple Leaf farm, that Yasmine finishes her journey. Canada’s presence at the end of the text sustains a dialogue within a Canadian national space that speaks to the larger contours of globalism and transnationalism: Canada practices the same exclusionary practices as other nations that divide the wealthy from the poor, and the citizen from the immigrant. However, cities within national boundaries tend to confound ideological borders, as the various cities Yasmine travels to serve as opportunities to rediscover the self, proving moments where origins become intricate and blurred. Brand imbues the city as a whatever space, a place of possibility, polyphony, and forgetfulness, as “a place where the old migrants transmogrify into citizens with disappeared origins who look at new migrants as if at strangers, forgetting their own flights. And the new migrants remain immigrants until they too can disappear their origins” (Map 63). *Ossuaries* problematizes origins and it uses the globality of music as an example for how easy
border-crossing can be, since it is music, especially African American music and culture, which “pervades the lives of people of all backgrounds in North America” (Brand, “Jazz” 149). Music connects the various fragmented Ossuaries (or contained songs) together to sound more inclusive communities, while serving as a tool in the text to redress colonial racism and western neoliberal ideologies. Jazz is an improvisatory gift because it brings together people of different backgrounds, making space for community, however tangled. Jazz “leaves you up and open and in the air and this is the space that some of us need, an opening to another life tangled up in this one but opening” (“Jazz” 161). Such an opening is possible through deep listening, and is the type of opening that Brand’s poetry enacts.

Ossuaries, like Zong!, and some of Brand’s other poetic works, as well as texts by other black female writers in Canada, is sounded as a long poem because the format provides substantial space to work through complex ideas. Canada’s most prominent Black feminist writers, such as Brand, Philip, and Harris, continue to choose the long poem because it remains a space for emergent voices, as well as for racially/ethnically disenfranchised people to connect with a communal voice signified by early long poems like The Odyssey. Ossuaries is concerned with nothing less than the liberation of a community, even if that community is but a small group of people who still read poems. Yasmine has completely devoted herself in a constant physical and intellectual struggle to create a better future, one we might get to inherit, and one that has left her cynical in the process, although that does not thwart her (or Brand’s) desire for change. Like the revolutionary undulations that permeate the sonorous textures of the text—from revolutionaries actual, to theorists of the revolution, to the jazz manifestos that swing the notation of the text—we are called to listen, and then listen again. Beyond that, like the insurgent soundings of the text, and the glaring inequalities that subjugate (yet do not defeat) Yasmine, we are called to act—a broadly conceived enactment—in the struggle for greater citizenship rights for all people on a local, national, and global scale.

Wayde Compton too takes up such an active citizenship in the next chapter through his sonic mixing of the past. Compton’s own DJ poetics, like Brand’s jazz soundings, compel slower and more nuanced readings, suggesting a plurality of interpretative possibilities for the reader. However, while Compton’s sampling and global hip-hop format is informed by a varied diasporic consciousness, he is, like Clarke, ultimately concerned about what it means to be black in Canada. For Compton, that means turning his reinventing wheels on the local history of the Vancouver community he grew up in, pulling out, discovering, and spinning truths recovered from the misplaced crates of history.
CHAPTER FIVE

IN THE MIX: THE SCHIZOPHONOPHILIC POETICS OF WAYDE COMPTON’S
PERFORMANCE BOND

I. SPINNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE: THE RISE OF THE DJ

“The future is always here in the past.”
—Amiri Baraka, “Jazzmen: Diz & Sun Ra” 255

Sonic Anecdotes: From an Ear to Here

“Every ear shall here. Every eye shall sea”
—Wayde Compton, Performance Bond, “The Reinventing Wheel” 106

It could be argued that Alexander Graham Bell’s 1874 ear phonautograph, which used an actual human ear and part of a skull of a dead man obtained by an associate, was intentionally about repetition as simulacrum, rather than repetition as difference. Sound waves coming into the eardrum were traced on smoked glass by means of a bristle brush, as determined by the ossicles (a group of three small bones in the human ear). The machine was designed with the hope of educating the deaf to replicate the speech of others, which for Bell was, as cultural theorist Jonathan Sterne states, “about the eradication of linguistic difference” (39). Ironically then, deafness marks the beginning of sound reproduction (41), and yet, sound reproduction has always been concerned with a reproduction, or a repetition, of the human, especially since Bell’s phonautograph used a tangible human ear. A few years later Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, which would become the model for the gramophone and ultimately the turntable. The phonograph played sound from wavy lines scratched, engraved, or grooved onto a rotating cylinder or disc. As the cylinder or disc rotates, a stylus or needle traces the wavy lines and vibrates to reproduce the recorded sound waves. In 1887 Emile Berliner patented the gramophone, a device that implies a blend between speech and writing. With the gramophone came sound recordings of music, and by 1900 there were some 5,000 advertised choices of records one could purchase; by 1930, 60% of homes had radios. As book publishing changed the way we think about and read books—certainly our accessibility to them—so too did the recording industry—physical and then digital—alter our approach to music and even literature.
“The ear phonautograph embodies a very simple principle: the ear is a mechanism that can be used—instrumentally—to a variety of ends.”
—Jonathan Sterne 34

Figure 3: Bell and Blake’s ear phonautograph.

Although approaching cliché today, there was prescient truth in Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism “the medium is the message” (or “massage” or “mass age”), particularly the notion that today’s virtual media can be an ample substitute for actuality. There is more being reproduced than ever before, which has led many cultural theorists to view repetition as a loss of the aura. Before mechanical reproduction the line was certainly much clearer between an original and a copy. Walter Benjamin, in his influential “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” argues that “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (220), going on to say, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction undermines the special quality authenticity gives to an original work of art. In the age of mechanical reproduction, an art that doesn’t reproduce well is going to become devalued when reproduced. Benjamin’s essay remains enigmatic because it endeavors to describe the characteristics not of something he has found but of something he has lost. To put it more directly, conflating McLuhan and Benjamin, modern means of production—the medium/mass age—have destroyed the authority/authenticity of art, as images and sounds are more ephemeral, ubiquitous, and freer (in both meanings of the word) than ever before. This I would argue, in concord with McLuhan, Glenn Gould, Benjamin, DJ Spooky, Ai Weiwei197 and others, allows for people—especially the disenfranchised—to be more participatory in the process of making art, as Benjamin’s essay was largely written to contest Nazism and provide the formulation of a revolutionary politics in art. Of course, Benjamin was also worried about the capitalist control and reproduction of art, but he welcomed the possibility of an art that the people had access to and could transform, which I contend is indeed done by the best DJ mixes.

Like Alexander G. Weheliye’s contention that modernity involves cultural and sonic confluences between sound, sight, and text, thinking through Western modernity under the influence
of “sonic Afro-modernity,” the DJ, visual/graffiti artists like Banksy, or, as I’ll argue in this chapter, poet-DJs like Wayde Compton are able to respond to the changes in technology and create mixes that are aware of how history is shaped and remixed, often in the present and with an ear towards the past. In an interview I conducted with Compton, he described how changes in technology are swift, while also asserting the value of traditions, which are never static and are always technological: “There are new things so quickly that I want to engage with. That’s the other beauty, the beauty of hip-hop. Kid Koala, he’s still vinyl. He’s still a vinyl guy, a vinyl and turntables guy. It’s all still there. So talking about tradition, he is working with the traditional tools that are old, old tools now, forty-year-old tools. Well, older than that” (“Audio-interplay” 10). Kid Koala is a Canadian DJ, turntablist, musician and author/illustrator, among other things, who is known for his incredible tactile manipulations on the turntables. Koala popularized a method of playing the turntable like a melodic instrument, where a long, single note is dragged under the needle at different speeds, creating distinctive pitches. This effect can be heard on his mix of “Moon River,” where he creates and edits in an extended violin solo by playing various long violin notes from the song’s instrumental section at different pitches on four turntables, all live. Compton was enraptured by Koala’s performance—“There were certain points where I was looking at it, saying, ‘You can’t do that. You can’t do the thing I’m watching you do. It just can’t be done. And yet you’re doing it’” (8)—describing the story to me as how “his [Koala’s] mom couldn’t understand that he could be doing this, how this was his job. And so he said, ‘What’s your favorite song? I’ll do a version of it. And we’ll meet here, somewhere. You’ll understand.’ And then he did it, and it’s the most beautiful thing he’s done” (“Audio-interplay” 10). It is precisely Kid Koala’s version of a 1961 easy listening song—far removed from the context of hip-hop and remix culture—that highlights how the past is a network for DJs to plumb: new acoustic spaces emerge out of the complex synthesis/antithesis of the black electronic tradition, recorded history, and a variety of cultural spaces.

Glenn Gould anticipates DJ culture when he writes: “Recordings deal with concepts through which the past is reevaluated, and they concern notions about the future which will ultimately question even the validity of evaluation” (“Prospects”). Similarly, Pauline Oliveros states, “All recordings are sources for improvisation. Rather than frozen historical objects, recordings become live material through DJ scratching and remixing” (“Quantum” 121). Oliveros’s analysis of remix culture recalls Diana Taylor’s need to view the past as a “living repertoire,” as well as John Cage—who did his own experiments with turntables as early as 1939 in a piece called Imaginary Landscape No. 1—who said, “In musical terms, any sounds may occur in any combination and in any continuity” (Silence 8). Of course, sampling laws limit what and how much of a sound a DJ/producer...
can use in a mix, but Oliveros and Cage contend that sound as an idea must be free to adapt if it is to have any hope to present something new or challenge authority/authenticity/authorship/autonomy. Even before these cultural theorists asserted the value of blurring the lines and contesting power through creative responses and remix, American President Thomas Jefferson, back in 1813 in a letter to Isaac McPherson, asserted that information (such as music) is not a material good like property and should be allowed to freely spread:

That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions then cannot, in nature, be a subject of property.

(qtd. in Keller 136)

No one owns music, although I do see how issues of cultural appropriation are damaging and at times devastating. Nevertheless, criminality for sampling is censorship at its most fierce, problematic, classist, and often, racist, given that sampling laws have historically marginalized youth the most.  

Like most art, hip-hop music is a gestalt of samples and found elements. Imagine if Shakespeare never borrowed or adapted from other sources to pen his plays because he was worried he would get sued. Although observable now, McLuhan was correct in pronouncing how changes in technology change culture, describing how plagiarism was inconceivable in older societies, since cultural survival was largely dependent upon repetition. Perhaps, the greatest misnomer about DJs is that they want to destroy traditions. Rather, the DJ is often one of the most studious students of musical history and tradition. His or her ear—like Bell’s phonautograph—is glued to the past.

**DJism**

“We used to play a lot of Fela Kuti in the early days of hip-hop. In my DJ sets I’ll jump off into rock, salsa, African. I like to play some crazy stuff and see the vibrations of the people.”

—Afrika Bambaataa qtd. in Richards, *The Guardian*

The central role of a DJ (a disc jockey) is a person who plays recorded music for an audience. This can be as basic as putting on records to create a musical mix, to much more complex forms of turntablism, where turntable artists (turntablists) play records, beat match, scratch, beat juggle, among other techniques, while using the needle like a plectrum to produce sounds which are unique, yet not reproduced (Oswald 132), turning the turntable into a live instrument where improvisation is
possible. The word “DJ” comes from disc jockey (“disc” referring to phonograph records, not CDs, and “jockey” to an operator of a machine) and was first used by American radio commentator Walter Winchell back in 1935 to describe the first star DJ, radio announcer, Martin Block. Since then, the word “DJ,” along with the culture, has continued to evolve alongside musical innovations, many of which came at the hands of hip-hop DJs. For example, in 1975, Grand Wizard Theodore invented scratching by accident. Playing his music loudly in his room while his mother was trying to talk to him downstairs Theodore placed his hand on the record so he could hear his mother speaking, and as she spoke he moved the record back and forth to the rhythm of his mother’s words: the art of scratching was born. Innovation is often a result of chance, such as Louis Armstrong’s impromptu scatting in “Heebie Jeebies” (the first scat caught on a recording), which was the result of a mistake: as the legend goes, Armstrong’s lyric sheet fell while recording and so he began to scat/improvise. In Embouchure, poet and critic Kevin McNeilly describes the mistake in “Heebie Jeebies” as a poetic act: “Fumbled leads, obbie scat / and pig Latin / aren’t just mistakes: / they make their own music” (“[Heebie-Jeebies: Louis Take Two]” 40). More important than whether or not either story is verifiable is how these narratives attest to the creative spirit of young black musicians who changed the template for how we listen to and understand creative music making.

The most significant DJ is Jamaican-born American DJ Kool Herc who developed the blueprint for hip-hop music in the early 1970s in The Bronx, New York City. What was so innovative about Herc is that he used the record to focus on the short heavily percussive part in a track, referred to as the “break,” and isolated it going back and forth between two turntables (cueing the same record on the other turntable while the first was playing) in order to sustain the music in a loop so that breakers could dance longer, which in turn led to more inventive dance moves. These early dance parties are the stuff of legend, and while the MC (Master of Ceremonies) is the central figure in popular hip-hop music today, the DJ, in Hip Hop’s inception, was the prime signifier of the music, creating community with little more than two turntables and some records. Recalling an early impromptu schoolyard party music critic Nelson George writes:

The sun hadn’t gone down yet, and kids were just hanging out, waiting for something to happen. Van pulls up, a bunch of guys come out with a table, crates of records. They unscrew the base of the light pole, take their equipment, attach it to that, get the electricity–Boom! We got a concert right here in the schoolyard and it’s this guy Kool Herc. And he’s just standing with the turntable, and the guys were studying his hands. There are people dancing, but there’s as many people standing, just watching
what he’s doing. That was my first introduction to in-the-street, hip hop DJing (qtd. in Ogg 17).

The do-it-yourself mentality of Hip Hop music and culture, building on the two turntables setup of disco DJs, is central to the Hip Hop ethos, the two spinning records signifying that sonic and cultural confluence is the new music. Early DJs mixed disco with hard funk, rock, and Latin percussion, among other elements, as pan-Africanist and Afro-futurist DJ Afrika Bambaataa describes how he likes “to play some crazy stuff and see the vibrations of the people.” Additionally, Herc drew from his own Jamaican background of “toasting,” punctuating his mixes by shouting out various phrases to keep the party going, such as “To the beat, y’all!” and “You don’t stop!” Herc remains a nascent cultural icon who inspired everyone from DJs like Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash to hip-hop’s first rappers who drew on his style of toasting. Herc is instrumental in how we conceive of the role of a DJ, and it is said he left the hip-hop scene after being stabbed one night while trying to intervene in a fight. Playing the role of Hip Hop’s tragic hero, by 1980 Herc had stopped DJing and was working in a record shop in the Bronx. For a period in the mid-80s Herc was addicted to crack-cocaine. Despite these unfortunate struggles, Herc used his wheels to set history in motion, as DJ culture was only now taking its first steps into becoming a respected art form.

Turntablism developed out of a long tradition of hip-hop, reggae, disco, radio DJs, and recording innovations, where the possibilities of vinyl manipulation became gradually apparent. This is nothing new, although it is certainly the unintended outcome of the turntable. As Zora Neale Hurston writes in her “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “what we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas” (267). Weheliye contends, even repetition with difference might be more difference than repetition: “difference will, indeed, be different in each of its incarnations” (32), suggesting “not repetition with a difference so much as repetition of difference, wherein the original/copy vanishes” (32) so that only the sui generis of the original remains. Sampling, as we will see in the poetry of Wayde Compton, helps to provide the power of focus and recontextualization.

Repetition as a cultural tactic, however, is often viewed negatively by cultural theorists as a byproduct of capitalism, rather than perceived as part of African American aestheticism or as part of the continuum of modern poetic innovation. Jacques Attali argues that repetition is primarily considered a manifestation of mass culture, characteristic of the age of sound reproduction (Noise 21). Early in his career, Adorno describes the pre-swing jazz “break” as nothing other than a disguised cadence: “The cult of the machine which is represented by unabating jazz beats involves a self-renunciation that cannot take root in the form of a fluctuating uneasiness somewhere in the personality of the obedient” (“On Popular Music” 265). By contrast, Paul Anderson argues that Paul
Gilroy’s concept of repetition in *The Black Atlantic* provides a pointed countertype to Adorno’s antipopulist modernism, with “its thin hope that the elite and oppositional ‘autonomous work of art’ might fuel the critical utopian imagination in the battle against the politically and aesthetically futile commodity pleasures of mass culture entertainments” (“Cultural Difference” 196). Wayde Compton defends the function of repetition as a Black ontological priority in the creation of newness: “Repetition whether in the form of ancestor worship or the poem-histories of the *griot*, informs black ontologies more than does the Europeanist drive for perpetual innovation, with its concomitant disavowals of the past” (*Bluesprint* 17). Taking up these ontological priorities of repetition, Compton carefully manipulates words to create multiple planes of ambivalent listening through a disruptive practice of interpretation: it is repetition replete with difference, or as difference.

Because the archive of recorded material is so vast the creative possibilities of endless recontextualization are apparent. Sampling is a new way of doing something that has been with us for a long time, creating meaning with found objects. Hip-hop groups and DJs use samples as tactics that create space, as old school rap group Stetsasonic states: “You see, you misunderstood / A sample is just a tactic, / A portion of my method, a tool” (“Taking all that Jazz”). Sampling, like quotation, provides diacritical difference, detournment, carnival, wildstyle, parade, and allows, as DJ Spooky suggests, “people to replay their own memories of the sounds and situations of their lives […] sampling is dematerialized sculpture” (*Rhythm* 28-29). Basically, creativity, resonant to a degree in all artistic forms, rests in how you recontextualize the previous expression of others (33). The DJ, much like the scholar, is a cultural archivist. DJs collect 1000s of pieces of recorded material to construct a present from the vast archive of recorded material. As Jonathan Sterne attests, “Countless hip hop producers, DJs, and audio collage artists have claimed that the use of prerecorded material to make new sound art is a self-consciously political and historiographic project” (350-351). I would say this is hardly a claim—it is a fact. Various DJs, producers, and archivists use recorded material in inventive ways that show they are highly aware of the improvised nature of history and cultural practice. Is life not a collage and patchwork of memories constantly being remixed and archived?

The rise of the DJ fits within the postmodern desire of contemporary masses to bring things closer. Technology changes culture and the invention of the Technics 1200 series of turntables, manufactured from October 1972 until 2010 by Matsushita, made DJ culture largely possible in the first place, even though the Technics 1200 was never intended to be repurposed as a musical instrument. Then again, Adolphe Sax, who invented the saxophone in 1846, would probably never have imagined Charlie Parker playing “Koko” or Coltrane playing “Giant Steps” on his instrument. The Technics 1200 (in Hip Hop they are often referred to as “Tec 12’s,” “Wheels of Steel” and the
“Ones & Twos”) with its direct drive high torque motor design initially made it suitable for cueing and starting tracks on the radio, although young DJs in New York would soon realize just how much you could do with a turntable and some records. As Compton writes in “The Reinventing Wheel,” “the author was born in 1972” (106), a direct reference to the invention of the Technics 1200 turntable, the primary signifier of hip-hop and remix culture. The author was born, or as Barthes might contend, the author died, since Barthes suggests that the notion of single authorship imposes limits on a text. A text is a culmination of voices, or in a landmark work like DJ Shadow’s 1996 Entroducing—renowned for being entirely composed of sampled content and created with two turntables and a sampler—a mashing and mixing of samples. DJ culture insinuates that nothing, especially music, is fixed: the whole world is manipulateable. African American writer Ralph Ellison, who was able to read T.S. Eliot’s 1922 poem The Waste Land and hear jazz, understood how music is largely about modulation.

For instance, Ellison’s Invisible Man opens with the unnamed protagonist getting into the “grooves of history,” listening to Louis Armstrong’s “Black and Blue” on the phonograph—locating the music’s aura, as Alexander Wehelyie argues, “not in the original musical utterance but in the mode of mechanical reproduction itself, making him one of the foremost intellectual architects of sonic Afro-modernity” (47). Ellison’s unnamed narrator states: “Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing ‘What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue’—all at the same time” (7-8). Ellison’s choice to foreground Armstrong’s performance of “Black and Blue” (initially composed by Fats Waller) in the prologue to his circulatory text highlights how one articulates one’s historical somatic experience through the performance of identity. The surreal hallucinatory episode of listening to the nodes of music via Armstrong’s own listening and discord of identity—with the aid of some reefer—becomes the act of improvised identity-performance for the narrator. The Invisible Man’s reimagining of the performance through a recorded performance—with a desire for simultaneous recordings—is the “authentic act” (in the non-authentic sense: that is, there is no single representation of sonic-identity performance, and so the multiplicity of that identity by Ellison approaches a realistic representation), where the grooves take the narrator inside and outside of history. Ellison—like a DJ mixing records to navigate a murky topology—creates a “mix” and becomes an innovator of “sonic Afro-modernity.” I use this example to show how there can be a politics at work in the DJ’s mixing (that “the mix” can articulate the mixed nature of history, identity performance, and racial politics), and to emphasize that the DJ mix—certainly for Ellison, as well as
for Compton, as well as structurally in this thesis—is an act of identity and citizenship, since both, like a sound recording, are mutable.

The mutability of a DJ performance—we DJ our citizenship—provides a valid enactment against the notion of fixity. Even though we are dealing with abstract concepts like sound, it is important to remember that we all make sound. A Latin transcription of the word person is “being of sound.” Those who claim that the DJ removes the human from the music making process, would have a hard time validating their claim if they were at a show where hundreds of people were dancing to a live mix, since the body is ever present in DJ music. Within a DJ mix, songs, as David Toop evocatively writes in *Ocean of Sound*, “became liquid. They [songs] became vehicles for improvisation, or source materials, field recordings almost, that could be reconfigured or remixed to suit the future [...] At the front end of the medium was the DJ [...] playing music and people as one fluid substance” (43). Of course, laptop DJs often leave something to be desired, such as a more tactile approach to *musicking*, but a valuable way to assess a DJ performance would be to focus on how it engages with the human, since improvisation, from blues to DJing, remains a central component for how music is received. As improviser Bob Ostertag writes:

So one of the things that improvisation has come to mean in the context of highly technological performance is that improvisation is the last claim to the legitimate presence of a human in the performance of music. This is what I think: DJs are actually, the reason we have a DJ, why don’t we just have Ipod mixes at all these places where fundamentally what they’re doing is playing back previously recorded music? The DJ’s claim to a legitimate role in the whole ordeal is that he or she is improvising, so without the claim of improvising there’d be no reason to have a human involved in the process at all. (“Interview” 2)

Certainly you can have programmed machines make music without a human presence, but Ostertag’s point about improvisation takes us back to the idea of the aura, and improvisation serves as a strategy to maintain that connection. Glenn Gould quit performing live music in 1964 and the Beatles did the same thing in 1966, both feeling that the concert had become a place where people go to remember a performance (a recording) rather than experience a new sound event. Both Gould and The Beatles were interested in the possibilities that technology could provide for their music, which is why I contend that a well crafted and improvised DJ performance is a place we go to listen to our memories become fractured, since life, identity, and our memories are unstable and changing. Like forgers, the new listener is a discerning DJ, and although we often encounter rhetoric about jazz as a herald of
social change, there is much to be said about the democratic possibilities that configurable music
affords a culture reexamining the past to conceive of a more participatory future.

II. “THE CHANGING SAME”

“All that is solid melts into air”
—Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto 68

DJing in Writing

“DJ-ing is writing, writing is DJ-ing. Writing is music, I cannot explain this any other way. Take
Nietzsche, for instance, whose brilliant texts are almost musical. Obviously, you feel the rhythm inside a
great poet’s stanzas, but it’s there within the great philosopher’s paragraphs as well.”
—DJ Spooky, Rhythm Science 57

Listen to Thelonious Monk’s Underground, and then flip the script and hear Dostoevsky’s
Notes from Underground. Then read Ellison who was reading Dostoevsky who likely was reading
Dante and read Amiri Baraka’s Systems of Dante’s Hell, as he was probably reading Richard
Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground,” along with the other three. The changing same,
flipped again, as Brand’s Yasmine in Ossuaries listens to Monk in an underground space—they all
sing bass. We’ve been sampling one another since we’ve been writing, speaking even, but the
anxiety around the practice, not just in the recording industry, but especially in academia, is
heightened by the neoliberal belief in the ownership of ideas. Ideas flow freely, especially in today’s
virtual age where ideas coexist and interpretive methods intersect, as we read, watch, listen, dance,
and engage in various textual/sonic synesthesia all the time. As DJ Spooky proclaims, “DJ-ing is
writing, writing is DJ-ing”, as writing takes the voice and captures it through the technology of a
written tradition that grooves within the impetus of the oral tradition. Music recording and live
performance engage this split, and the word phonograph acknowledges this juncture in its very name:
phone, in Greek, denotes sound and voice, and graph, on the other hand, signifies writing. Thus, we
can think of a phonograph and later machines like the turntable or a computer as sound writers—
essentially: inscription is at the root of any kind of writing.

What makes Wayde Compton’s writing so engaging is his ability to create a unique mix that
plays with various traditions—oral and written, sonic and visual, African and European, black and
white, local and global, Canadian and American—in order to provide more nuanced critiques of
power, identity, and history. I don’t think Compton fully rejects the notion of the author—I’ve
argued earlier the importance in African Canadian literature to maintain subject position—since, for
example, the only capitals in the opening poem of *Performance Bond*, “Declaration of the Halfrican Nation” are the author’s “I.” Nevertheless, given the constant mixing and hip-hop structural metaphors in *Performance Bond*, we can think about how the work is intertextual, a postmodern function that Linda Hutcheon argues rejects the role of the author, which she then says functions a little differently in her *A Theory of Parody*, noting how parody always features an author actively encoding a text as an imitation with critical difference. I think Compton engages both author functions, using parody/pastiche as diacritical difference, while maintaining traditional voices and communities, but always through engaged and dialogic means. Hence, Compton continually contests how an image or sound signifies in his work, often through split or reappropriated representations, bonding as in one poem the word “Afro” to “Saxon,” writing: “own rose-coloured lenses: black roses. / own a cat named Dialectic: mirror smoked grey” (“Afro-Saxon” 17). By using various intertexts, like a vessel/DJ, Compton challenges existing discourses and introduces neglected histories (such as the black community of Hogan’s Alley) and connects these various voices together like the meta-turntable, which dually functions as a traditional and postmodern signifier. In an email conversation, Compton told me that he borrows “from the history of turntablism to create poetry in the way that early hip hop deejays began to create music out of a medium that was not meant to create music, but rather to merely be a vessel for it” (“Email” 2009). As a vessel for the many voices—across the diaspora—that appear in *Performance Bond*, Compton confronts globalization and the commodification of black culture, improvising his own conception of Blackness.

In an interview I conducted with Compton, I asked him how the cadences of jazz, hip-hop, and improvised practices relate to the politics in *Performance Bond*, to which he responded:

So improvising Blackness here, that’s a lot of what it’s all been about for me, figuring out what is this place, what is my relationship to it, what is my relationship to the tradition, what’s my relationship to race, racism, racial law, black solidarity and diaspora, and the movements that come out of that, all of those things. That’s all improvisational. And I think it’s why I’ve gravitated towards forms that are more experimental or forms that are probing possibilities, and looking around for different ways of doing things (“Audio-Interplay” 1).

Blackness for Compton, like other writers in the thesis, is not an *a priori* meaning, but rather a valuable way to conceive of identity, as well as interrogate “black” as a politically and culturally constructed category. In his article “The Lost Tribe of a Lost Tribe: Black British Columbia and the Poetics of Space,” Peter Hudson contends Compton’s “Afroperipheralism,” along with his “sense of isolation and alienation” in British Columbia allows his work to challenge “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” (156). By challenging a narrow set of perceived traditions, but in thinking of traditions as circular, like historical waves washing over the past, present, and future, in relation to Kamau Braithwaite’s *tidalectics* (discussed earlier), Compton told me that he is comfortable with thinking of his writing as postmodern. Moreover, like Braithwaite, Compton is trying to “find non-clichéd ways to describe what a lot of people call experimental, or avant-garde, just work that doesn’t just happily receive and then carry on” (“Audio-Interplay” 3).

I first encountered the term *tidalectic* in reading Comton’s engagement with Braithwaite’s useful neologism; further, Compton told me that Braithwaite is the most important writer for him: “Braithwaite is just vitally important to me […] His writing is the biggest influence on my writing, and my thinking. I’m attracted to formal innovation, and experimentation, and concept, and writing that tries to go to the root of what it’s doing and, in a lot of ways, start all over again every time you’re creating something, trying to figure out what’s possible every time” (3). The impossible becomes the possible in the push and pull of analogue versus digital or, put another way: between oral and written traditions. The aesthetic form of Compton’s poetry effectively creates a DJ mix where various complex repetitions and cryptic messages transform or respond to an analogue literature that is becoming more digitized. In the poem “DJ,” from Comton’s first poetry collection, *49th Parallel Psalm*, the short enjambed lines recall a DJ scratching: “conduit of the herd / shepherd of the unheard / hands on vinyl […] scratches ‘bring that beat back’ / catches / the loop on the off / beat matches / that per minute mix like magic” (24). The book, which is often a prosthesis for the various human senses is replaced with the prosthesis of the phantom limb: the turntable. In fact, the turntable, or the vinyl record, is very much like the book in that it needs a reader or listener to make it sound and in that it distresses over time. We are invited into the play of the performance, taking on Glenn Gould’s enduring hope that “The audience would be the artist and their life would be art” (“Prospects”). The poem “DJ” is itself a flip, a reverse, a mirror image of the earlier poem “JD” (*Psalm*), which looks at James Douglas, first governor of British Columbia, as mixed-race (“father Scottish, mother from British Guyana” 18), and who passed as white. Compton asks: “O James Douglas, / did you ever see yourself / in us? / did you ever stop / in your war versus the wilderness / and think / we?” (19). The poem mixes black and white identifications as the crossfader blends “shuffling passports” (18), a balancing act too much for nineteenth-century Douglas who encouraged blacks to come to BC from California but then withdrew his support when they arrived. A few poems later, Compton inverses the title “JD” as “DJ,” inviting the reader into the mix as a co-performer of the poem. As DJ/archivist/griot/trickster, Compton digs into the crates of the past and finds that there
are unlimited samples/stories to be played and remixed, writing/scratching: “more singles in the crates than scrolls in the ancient library / of Alexandria” (25). Dropping the stylus on the body of the past—an act of historical revision at the crossroads/crossfader—is about vibration and resonance in the present, as DJing is an apt metaphor for (re)writing.

Simply put: all aspects of life can be reflected in music and literature and refracted back in a cylinder of cyclical reverberations. Different wholes can occupy the same space, allowing for new connections to be forged. As Alfonso Lingis eloquently puts it in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*: “It is the rumble and rasping of the inert things that provokes the vocalization of the animals; fish hum with the streams and birds chatter in the crackling of the windy forest. To live is to echo the vibrancy of things. To be, for material things, is to resonate” (96). Meaning is about how something resonates with something else. Jan Zwicky, in her aphoristic philosophical text, *Wisdom and Metaphor*, espouses: “Metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another” (L 6). While I’ve written how Compton’s use of repetition challenges Adorno’s antipopulist rhetoric, I also think Compton participates in the aesthetic criteria by which Theodor Adorno judges a conception: “the soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another” (*Minima Moralia* 87). Loosely drawing divergent traditions together is the act of the DJ, as well as the reality of those who belong to multiple traditions and cultures, and engage with numerous canons. Poetry itself can be thought of as a mix; certainly this is how William Carlos Williams thought of poetry, suggesting that a poem “is a small (or large) machine made of words” (“Introduction” 54). Like a well-made machine there is no part in a well-made poem that is redundant, as each intertext, riffing, and sounding in Compton’s work is an act of reverb/recall. History, like language is always reworking itself, as the words hippies used in the 1960s (like groovy) were first used by jazz communities, just as the youth of today repurpose words of their parents’ generations for new expressive purposes. Compton’s splitting of traditions, allowing multiple voices/samples to be heard, is an act, as it functions in Brathwaite’s writing, of versifying, which Compton explains to Nigel Thomas is an intentionally disruptive force: “It forces a slower reading, and suggests multiple meanings, and asks for full reader participation” (62). Compton’s metafictional/postmodern poetics, such as in his poem “The Commodore” (*49th Parallel Psalm*) about a paddle steamer which transported British Columbia’s first black settlers from San Francisco to Victoria during the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush, are about transformation and intersection, as the poem provides many voices in short bursts, like quick samples, asking: “I wonder how / our blues will rhyme with Vancouver” (47). There is no simple transportation of culture: in this case African American histories moved into Vancouver soil. Music (and the blues), like writing,
crosses borders, as Compton reminds us that culture—and poetry—is always a miscellaneous act. Language, like music, creates virtual space and takes us there as readers, recalling Henri Lefebvre’s 1974 text *The Production of Space*, in which he writes: “Rhythms in all their multiplicity interpenetrate one another. In the body and around it, as on the surface of water, rhythms are forever crossing and recrossing, superimposing themselves upon each other, always bound to space” (205). Since Compton’s own “family history is fractured, impure” (“The Reinventing Wheel” 106), his use of intersecting rhythms, complex mixes of the past, as well his consummate blurring of written, sonic, and oral traditions, allow him to create new spaces and entry points into “A spiral lineage” (110) that changes over time, and yet remains the same. History becomes an act of performance as Compton spins history at the crossroads of bonded reimaginings.

**History as Remix**

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
—George Santayana qtd. in *Rhythm Science* 9

“If you don’t know your past, you don’t know your future.”
—Ziggy Marley & The Melody Makers, “Tomorrow People”

In his poem “The Reinventing Wheel” Compton samples Ziggy Marley’s words from “Tomorrow People,” or perhaps he samples Public Enemy, since a vocal clip in the opening of *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) contains the same phrase. Compton writes: “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. / History imperative” (106-107). The alliterative “warp and weft” refers to weaving (the weft [yarn] is drawn through the warp [lengthwise yarn]), which is a perfect metaphor for how Compton spins and weaves histories together. Compton’s interwoven approach to history lends an immediacy and discrepant engagement to the past that makes it active, rather than passive, as Compton acknowledges that history, especially African Canadian, is always “fractured” and “impure.” Peter Hudson states that “[t]he motto of black revisionist historiographers—‘you can’t know your future if you don’t know your past’—has produced little more than the magical empiricism of Afrocentrism” (*Bluesprint* 270). Rather, by contrast, Compton’s “Afroperipheralism” allows him to see the various ways that history is constructed while simultaneously rejecting the notion that postmodern means forgetting the past. African Canadian history as remembering—even if that history is fractured and then run through machines, samplers, and turntables—is a creative act that urgently seeks innovative ways to remember and recreate the past since the popular version, or omission of disenfranchised peoples’ pasts, is usually an artifact of the oppressor’s remembering.
Compton told me that white writers in Canada often infuriate him since they deem the past as an absolute, oppressive, or static event to be destroyed in order to conceive of the future, often ignoring that marginalized writers desperately need tradition as it was taken from them:

So you look at writers in this country, conceptual writers, and conceptual poets right now. To me white writers drive me mad because they can’t see around themselves so often, and they don’t recognize that they’re an ethnic group. One of the issues of their ethnicity is that their people took over the world, so they tend to think that the stuff they’re doing is the universal. So whatever they’re doing which is their specific business they proclaim as universal movements. Conceptual poetry, they call it, and it’s really just white folks’ concerns when they become poets. And white folk’s concerns are to kill their parents. They are punk rockers at heart. Counterculture is their core. And that doesn’t work for us. That doesn’t work for us at all. We don’t want to kill our parents. Because our parents barely survived and they carry the means of our liberation in their everyday business. So that conceptual stuff doesn’t work for us because it wants to destroy tradition. (3)

Hence, Compton is “[p]erpetually beat juggling history and ethnicity” (“Reinventing Wheel” 102) to respond to “the brokenness [of] the tradition” (103). History and tradition are imperative to Compton’s DJ poetics because, for him, his postmodern panache is about the repetition of traditions that survive insurmountable odds that date back to the slave ships. Hence, Compton writes, “We have archived ourselves” (104), as Black history becomes an act of echo/feedback/repetition that survives in the “intractable track / of the word” (105). Compton hears sonic Black traditions from the ancients to Jimi Hendrix as he plugs himself into his mixer: “I / am plugged into my mixer, lashed, with wax / stopping my ears. Tracking / into Tradition […] I am plugged into the tradition” (104; 105). So, while conceptual poetry uses appropriation as a means to create a “new” work focused largely on the concept rather than the final product, Compton’s appropriations (more accurately, samplings and traditional methods) are invested in the creation/memory of histories that mesh to recover the past.

For Compton, his liberation is largely, although not exclusively, directed towards the forgotten, neglected, and rooted/re-routed history of Black British Columbia (BC).

Compton’s *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* was the first literary anthology of its kind to archive BC’s black communities—which were formed starting in 1858 when some 600 black people moved from San Francisco to what would become BC, and later developed into communities such as Hogan’s Alley—through history, storytelling, and poetry. In *Blueprint* Compton describes how “black pioneers had come to Canada not only for economic relief, but to
fulfill their dreams of full citizenship and equality under British law, which was—on paper, at least—non discriminatory” (18). The stories in *Bluesprint* document that in BC black people encountered segregation, racism, and political corruption “that accounted for such things as the spurious cancellation of black ballots in an election” (18). Once again, the notion of Canaan/Canada as a site of magical transformation that erased the trials of the past proved painfully untrue, even though the situation was better than the more outwardly maligned US, for those early settlers who arrived with the hopes of full citizenship. Thus, after the American Civil War, and as the US relaxed some of its citizenship laws, and even later in the 1960s when Hogan’s Alley was destroyed for an urban renewal project, what Compton refers to as “Negro removal” (“Seven Routes” 84), many of the original San Francisco blacks returned to the States, while others stayed or moved elsewhere in BC, or spread amongst other regions of Canada. As Compton describes, “B.C.’s black history has been one of continued exodus, immigration, settlement, exploration, miscegenation, communitarianism, integration, segregation, agitation, uprooting and re-rooting and re-routing” (*Bluesprint* 20). Travel and exodus is an essential part of Canada’s immigrant history, and we can think of Compton’s scratching—his poetic dissonance and versifying—as lines of ruptured movement that inscribe over written histories that write/white out black histories in BC.

Peter Hudson notes that the first baby born in BC was actually of mixed race, even though the papers documented the baby as white: “There is no memory of Vancouver before 1873. In that year, according to the late journalist Alan Morley, the city’s first white baby was born […] In the Vancouver City Archives, a scratched microfiche preserving the typewritten notes of Major Matthews, the city’s first archivist, hold this record. “FIRST WHITE CHILD WAS BLACK” […] The Child was born to a mixed couple and was light enough to pass […] History is a funny thing” (*Bluesprint* 269). As Compton writes in the poem “Performance Bond”: “The history of BC is the history of whiteness” (43). Moreover—James Douglas’s own blackness was the subject of rumour and speculation—the historical records show that governor Douglas was indeed of mixed race ancestry, but passed as white his entire life. Like the “scratched” microfiche that screams out BC’s own mixed history, Compton’s “JD,” which scratches over rumour with historical imperative and record (like a vinyl record), and his larger historical project, sounds a potent reminder that history itself is always mixed (between written and oral accounts and differing cultural perspectives).

Although First Nations people were in BC tens of thousands of years before Europeans arrived, like Black history in BC, First Nations history (by some scholars) has in the past been reduced to footnotes. To ignore these histories is, as Compton writes, an act of condemnation to the hell of non-history and non-citizenship: “Those who have no history are doomed” (“Reinventing Wheel” 105).
The issue of citizenship, identity, white/black/mixed-race, and Canadian and American borders is much more complex once you realize that BC’s—and Canada’s—“geo-heterodoxy” (Iton) was, and is, a site of diasporic and transnational identifications. As the monoliths and institutions of Vancouver’s Black history are glossed over, or demolished as in the case of Hogan’s Alley, diasporic spaces become increasingly important representations, particularly in the mixed-race identities Compton circumspectly explores, in the outer peripheries of cultural geography and group solidarity.

The cadences of jazz and hip-hop in Performance Bond function as a type of historical revisionism, diasporic consciousness, as well as a soundtracking of historical record. Vancouver’s own musical history has its share of cross-cultural musical mavericks who, for a period, made the Downtown Eastside (what would be classified as Hogan’s Alley) in Vancouver their home. At the Patricia Hotel, jazz legend Jelly Roll Morton joined the house band and played there between 1919 and 1921. He played piano, gambled, drank, told bawdy jokes, and sang during his residency at the Patricia. Nora Hendrix, a former vaudeville dancer and the paternal grandmother of Jimi Hendrix, immigrated to Vancouver in 1911 and helped found the church in Hogan’s Alley. Jimi Hendrix would often visit Vancouver and even lived there during the winter of 1962-1963 where he practiced and often played in nightclubs. Today, in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside there is a shrine dedicated to Jimi Hendrix. Both Jelly Roll Morton and Jimi Hendrix deserve honorary Canuck status, despite their American origins; vitally, both musicians defied the negative status of their mixed-race blackness and often skillfully passed between white and black worlds, but, nevertheless remained semiotically black. Morton was born to creole (mixed-race) parents in New Orleans in 1890, and Hendrix’s ancestry included African American, Irish, and Cherokee. These mixed-race histories challenge the spurious notion of racial purity as a marker of citizenship, since it is impossible to deny the musical prowess of either Morton or Hendrix. Like BC’s own history of flux, both musicians represent music as a diasporic crossing of unbound possibility.

Compton’s “Declaration of the Halfrican Nation,” the poem which opens Performance Bond, asks, “is a black / rose natural? is it indigenous to this / coast? my grammar teacher said a semi- / colon is just a gutless colon” (15). The enjambment in the poem recalls scratching, but most central to the purpose of enjambment here, I think, is that the split words animate a divided consciousness battling against a racist historical impetus that attempts to racially codify people, and expects, “one drop rules aside” (15), mixed-race people to identify as black, or if they can, pass as white. Existing in this in-between state speaks to the complexities of mixed-race identity expressed by theorist Diana Taylor as “the double-coded neither/nor subjectivity” (Archive 96). Compton complicates such redacted and reductive readings of race by asking his “fellow mixed sisters and brothers [to] mount /
an offensive for our state” (16). Compton further interrogates race by inflating the heterogeneity of culture as a disease itself that often makes race appear as forged and culturally conflated, describing “black hippies,” “black punk rockers,” and “black goths with white masks literally” (16) who obscure definitions of blackness. Describing mixed-race as “Halfrican,” and by turning the poem into a nationalist manifesto of sorts, Compton resists, “Like a motherless child” (traditional Negro spiritual) a history that feels like it “got [him] / by the throat” (16). In “Declaration,” as elsewhere in Performance Bond, Compton takes cultural assumptions and remixes and challenges them in order to recall what is lost and what is excluded under such practices. I read Compton’s work here as multicultural, as culture always involves a previous acculturation, and his term “Halfrican” challenges racial epithets by using his own agency to self-identify. The term “Halfrican” is, as Compton describes in an essay written some years after his twenty-four year old self in “Halfrican,” “facetious, a satirical tonic for the problem of a disunified identity” (Canaan 216). The poem both contests monoracial identity while also paradoxically desiring a stable identity. The poem powerfully ends by desiring its own declarative history of value for those who belong between categories, at least within language: “I know more than enough who’ve ex- / pressed an interest in dying on the wire just for the victory / of being an agreed upon noun” (16). In longing for an established racial identity (at least an identifier with which to refer to himself) while obscuring the fallacious languages of mixed-race nouns, Compton enacts a history—like Ellison’s Invisible Man—from below.

Compton’s history ripples in time and his tidalectical approach is about historical synthesis that includes the claims and voices that various ethnic groups have made over time. As Compton explained to me in regards to his valuing of Braithwaite’s tidalectics,

To me, Braithwaite has it right. It’s not a dialectic. And I think that conceptual position most of the time—when you can pin them down to actually say what they’re trying to do—it’ll reveal the dialectic. They’re working in the dialectic still: the thesis, antithesis, synthesis. They’re working toward some kind of synthesis. And I like that Braithwaite liberates us from that, says, “No, you’re just part of the chain, your just part of this long chain of things. Even if you’re innovating, you are still part of this long series of things.” And you can flip it to be almost completely opposite. In fact, there are points when you probably should, but it still gets folded back, like that tide, it still gets folded back into what came before it, and then the next thing you did, and somebody else brings it back, and brings it up again. (“Audio-Interplay” 4)

And so while Compton’s Performance Bond most explicitly concerns the history of BC it does so within the tidalectic nexus—sort of like Baker’s blues matrix—that considers and welcomes the
larger diaspora and memories of geo-political black thinking across time and borders/continents. As Joanne Leow writes in her article, “Mis-Mappings and Mis-Duplications: Interdiscursivity and the Poetry of Wayde Compton,” Compton’s poetics enact “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.” In effect, Compton’s diasporic writing connects the past and present together to engage in a fluid transnational approach to both history and identity. “If the recent past,” as Ashok Mathur writes, “is a palimpsest, partially erased but readable in its remnants, then we cannot help but view the identity movements of the nineties—full of bombast and righteousness as well as acute criticality and political awareness—as historically significant and omnipresent” (149). Compton’s Performance Bond, written in 2004—certainly informed by the identity movements of the nineties, as well as the DJ culture of that period—confronts and challenges the globalization of culture while using the cadences of Black diasporic practices to manifest historical underpinnings of identity, and regional understanding of place and space. By turning history into an unstable sonic frequency, as sound with which to be organized and politically engaged, Compton shows how it is vital to remember the past in order to build the foundations for a more sustainable future.

**Schizophrenophilia and Mixed-Race**

“in African music there are always two rhythms going on”

“James Brown never said, ‘Say it loud, / I’m mixed-race in a satellite of the U.S. and proud.’”
—Compton, “The Reinventing Wheel” 106

Chernoff’s influential and essential work on African drumming, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, outlines how African polymetric music employs multiple rhythms that compete for our attention. As soon as we seize one rhythm we lose track and hear another. The goal of the listener is to grasp as many rhythms working together while hearing each rhythm as individually distinct. African drumming tells us something about the DJ mix, as well as the mix of mixed-race identity, since in both instances competing rhythms or epistemologies vie for authenticity. Authenticity—as an abstract concept—exists in the fragmentation and plurality of things, certainly it does so within Compton’s own connection between turntable poetry and his mixed-race identity. In his essay, “Turntable Poetry, Mixed-Race, and Schizophrenophilia,” Compton describes “schizophrenophilia” as the “love of audio interplay, the pleasure of critical disruptions to natural audition, the counter-hegemonic affirmation that can be achieved through acoustic intervention” (199). I particularly like
the notion of acoustic intervention, of disrupting the pretense of naturalism, which for Compton is relevant in a context where race and mixed-race are being explicitly addressed. In 2010 in Vancouver I saw Compton cast his own poetry from *Performance Bond* in *tidalectical* relation to other works that deal with notions of hybridity, DJ Culture, and Canadian citizenship, emulated via the music’s own polyphonic and hybridized layering of sound and thematic. This performance involved a sampler and three turntables: the sampler plays a vocal sample of Compton reading from his poem “The Reinventing Wheel,” while the entire performance is cued to various electro and hip-hop beats with the aid of co-performer and turntablist Jason de Couto. The performance was bookended by an out-of-print vinyl of Alex Haley *Tells the Story of His Search for Roots*, and followed directly on another turntable by an excerpt from Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, read by actress Mia Anderson. The excerpt focused on a moment where Atwood’s Moodie re-perceives her whiteness (197). Here, as Compton suggests, sampling provides the power of focus and re-contextualization (197) and reminds us that identity is a remix project.

Envisioning rupture as a creative act, Compton employs postmodern remix culture as a democratic principle that polymetrically sounds citizenship. Compton’s useful neologism, “schizophrenophilia,” appropriates and contests what Canadian acoustic ecologist and composer R. Murray Schafer terms “schizophrenia.” Schafer defines “schizophrenia” as a “dislocation of the voice from the body through recording technologies, and electronic amplification” (194). Schafer views such technological manipulations as negative; Compton argues that Schafer believes “schizophrenia” “disrupts the natural flow of life and breaks our connection to an ecologically contiguous world” (194). However, through the unsettling nature of being mixed-race in North America, Compton embraces this rupture between the natural world and the decentralized body and author precisely “because it is unsettling” (195). Like a body split from its sources—neither belonging fully to European, Canadian, or African culture—mixed-race identity is about challenging expectations, and resisting the binaries Compton writes about in “The Reinventing Wheel”:

mulatto
mestizo
métis
cabra
eurasian
creole,
coloured,
colored
split. (105)
Even language subjugates as Compton separates the American English spelling of “colored” from the British/Canadian spelling, “coloured”: authenticity is often wrapped up in the symbolic world of language. Compton’s mix doesn’t merely receive, but it anachronistically troubles, like a cueing/back-cueing scratch, race and nation. Schafer points out that the “Nazis were among the earliest adopters of the loudspeaker, and he suggests that imperialism is a radiophonic ideology” (“Schizophrenophilia” 198). However, Compton, for the most part, finds Shafer’s concerns (he was writing in the mid-70s) have been undercut by DJs who recombine sounds split from their sources: all the more relevant, since these sonic splits were largely articulated by a disenfranchised population trying to find a voice that articulated their experience of feeling disembodied. The phonograph/turntable is the perfect medium for this split/disembodied message of acoustic intervention, as Compton describes the phonograph as “a machine turned inside-out; a machine whose workings are always visible, whose interface is literally tangible, and whose production of sound is visceral. The body of the phonograph, like the body of a racialized object, can never close” (199). Through the medium of disembodied sound, yet always of the body (think of the human ear of Bell’s phonograph), the experience of mixed-race subjectivity is made sonically tangible by showing how race and identity formation never fully close. Schizophrenophilia, in terms of mixed-race individuals, is an opening; the DJ-poet digs into the crates of the past to recover soundscapes and to assert the notion that neither sounds nor identities are stable.

Compton told me about an interview he did with writer George Bowering who told him that sounds are always going extinct, reflecting on his days using a typewriter: “He said at night—because there are so many writers in Kitsilano—you’d be coming from the bar and you’d walk down the street, and it was summer and people’s windows were open, and you could just hear typewriters […] Walking down the street, chk chk chk chk, typewriters. And R. Murray Schafer talks about this specifically in The Tuning of the World, about how there are lost sounds. We won’t remember that apart from the oral history because it doesn’t get recorded anymore. And if you think further back, before recording, there are all sorts of sounds that are just lost” (“Audio-interplay” 6). In line with Schafer’s concerns, we can actually think of DJing as creating an ecological soundscape that preserves forgotten recordings, even if they are mixed with concurrent rhythms. Hence, there is particular value in the DJ, poet, or scholar who archives, cues, and improvises over previously arranged sounds. Unsurprisingly, it’s difficult for many mixed-raced individuals to feel a strong connection to place or tradition —to a natural acoustic environment—when their environment has been one of dissonance, rupture, and continually lost or forgotten sounds. Compton describes this rupture between tradition and the present as an identity crisis:
an unstable relationship to any tradition, or just any clarity around identity. And so I feel like that’s the core for improvisation, just figuring out where I fit in things, what I can pick up as an inheritance, and what I haven’t been able to, or what’s been an approximation of a tradition, just my general relationship to authenticity […] And when I look back at some of my early writing, I realize that very early on I’d already accepted that the truth of it all was somewhere in the inauthenticity, the inauthenticity, and that that was okay. I mean I look back on it and I remember being motivated by wanting something more stable, but when I look back again, when I reread myself early on, I realize I kind of knew. (“Audio-Interplay” 1)

The genuineness as Compton puts it is somewhere in the inauthenticity much like the sonic inauthenticities found in turntablism. The DJ is the person, as Compton tells me, “who notices sounds, but electronic sounds, recorded sounds and the pastiche of all that. I love how DJs are just these creatures of the crates” (7). Compton’s Performance Bond engages in renewal, resistance, and revival precisely because it mines the crates of the past, ultimately showing that music is finding patterns in random sounds, much like the random visual patterns by which we race others.

Winfried Siemerling suggests hip-hop in Compton’s work functions as a “literary structural metaphor and practiced improvisational form” (“Transcultural” 32), and through the improvisational form of hip-hop and remix, Compton effectively deconstructs the concept of race. Race, like pure representation or exact repetition, is an imaginative act, something we perform onto others. Compton describes race as pareidolia, “a trick of the eyes, an imposition of the imagination” (“Schizophonophilia” 184). “Pareidolia” is the innate human susceptibility to finding patterns in naturally random stimulus. Trying to find homogeneity or sameness of repetition is an act of imagination, and often a very destructive one, fascism largely coming out of a desire to control and read bodies as ineluctably and ontologically raced and unchanging. Rather, by contrast, Compton’s schizophrenophilic poetics are full of “a-presentations” (to borrow from Deleuze again) that value the polyphonic nature of being mixed-race, sounding the differentiated self in a world that often promotes sameness, emphasized more than ever by the digital copy. Race, like astrology, is a kind of a pseudo-science, and as critical thinkers we must continue to contest race as an absolute for, as Compton suggests, “to speak against, perhaps, is the only way to speak at all of race—after, or not—and into lasting liberation” (Canaan 218). By constantly remixing race Compton’s poetics are marked anti-racist.

Like a border, race is to be transgressed and challenged, and yet we cannot ignore that darker skin colour somehow gets irreducibly tied into Blackness, which I’ve argued in this thesis functions
beyond race, beyond borders, and represents the colour of our shared humanity. Compton’s poems often engage with the pervasive sway and trend of Blackness and challenges—through his schizophrenophilic poetics—any simple or “authentic” expression of Blackness. In the poem “Bluer Blues,” from 49th Parallel Psalm, Compton writes of his own uncertainly around his conception of his Blackness: “I’m still ambiv / alently coloured and liv / ing in Xanada, / trying to spell and accent Santeria and Aime Cesaire, / trying to pronounce houngan, trying to try, trying to care […] trying / to keep my / self smouldering, thinking, / ‘Halfrican’” (166). For Compton, Blackness is about mixedness and play, similarly found in an earlier section titled “Diamond,” which puns on hip-hop acts with names like N.W.N (Niggas With Négritude), DJ Osiris, and Grand Master Narrative. Yet, throughout Compton’s poetry there is a pervasive danger being articulated that Blackness risks becoming reified and disembodied sound, traded like stock sound bites without context, as in Compton’s poem, “49th Parallel Psalm” (49th Parallel Psalm), which depicts a white DJ manipulating the word “nigga,” seemingly disconnected from the subject and historical positioning of the word:

white b-boy
at the turntables
cutting up the track,
cutting on the word (((nigga))) on the
cross
cross
fader. (169)

The crossfader—moving back and forth like tidalectical waves—hints at a metaphorical border crossing, echoing sounds that carry meaning beyond the body cutting the sample on the turntable. Given my own tidalectic trajectory and valorization of the DJ methodology—a kind of disembodied sound—Compton’s words are a reminder of the importance of context, and to which this thesis can only claim to be creating one mix among many. Context is important, and race matters because the fiction of race often dehumanizes the Other and represents those as non-white or non-black as lesser, inferior, and impure. Compton’s schizophrenophilic poetics are an effective tool to resist, reclaim, and disengage racial markers by embodying personhood as being between sounds and virtual borders like a DJ cutting up a record, directly addressing us—the listener—in a matrix of possibilities.
III. WORD IS BOND: WAYDE COMPTON’S PERFORMANCE BOND

“Word is bond I go on and on
For you it’s tragic, I got magic like wands.”
—Gang Starr, “Mass Appeal”

Legba: Trickster Narratives

“James Douglas, / you held the keys / like a lesser Legba—laughing, shuffling passports, passing”
—Wayde Compton, “JD” 18

“[Eshu/Legba] knows that the power of ambiguity and the multiplicity of perspectives can change the fixed into the free. New connections always create a new world, and Eshu/Legba puts creative chaos in the heart of tradition and shows what advantages can be taken of it.”
—Erik Davis, “Trickster at the Crossroads”

Vodou (religion)/ hoodoo (folk magic) has been eruditely incorporated (and practiced) by African American/Canadian writers into their texts. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote back in 1935:

“Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale” (Mules 183). Vodou’s ability to adapt and change accords with its central figure—found, as Hurston describes, at the centre of the black diasporic vodou/hoodoo tradition—who is the first and last spirit evoked in any ceremony: the multi-faceted Papa Legba. In Haitian Vodou, Papa Legba is the loa (spirit) of the crossroads who serves as the intermediary between the loa and humanity. Guarding the spiritual crossroads Legba permits or denies passage, and is thus a messenger god—an opener and closer of gateways—who we can think of as a West African/African American equivalent of Hermes/Mercury, or perhaps the Hindu lord Ganesh (a remover of obstacles). Furthermore, Papa Legba is a trickster figure who not only creates chaos, but escapes the codes of the world. Like Eshu (the Yoruba name of Legba) who, as Gates argues in Signifying, “serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance” (xxi), Papa Legba embodies a complex metaphysics of change and communication at the crossroads.

We find the very same Papa Legba represented as the character of Papa La Bas in Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo as we do in Hurston’s anthropological work, or in Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” when he sings about the crossroads in Mississippi: “I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.” Papa Legba, in a poorly appropriated version, even appeared in TV’s American Horror Story: Coven dressed in a top hat and black tuxedo. Legba remains an adaptable spirit whose skillful ability to change and improvise contests stasis. As Baker so eloquently writes on the value of
change to contest fixity (power): “Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The ‘placeless,’ by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional […] Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at the junction” (Blues 202). Hence, Compton’s usage of Legba throughout his work as a structural force resists the “function of power” and, from the space of the “placeless,” asserts creative chaos, change, and transience, which Erik Davis says can even “change the fixed into the free.” Compton/ Legba are trickster turntablists providing passage at the crossroads.

Describing his role within a trickster tradition, Compton tells Nigel Thomas in an interview that his first encounter with Legba was through Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo and then later in works like Gates’s Signifying Monkey, which uses Eshu/Legba to formulate critical theory. Compton, however, departs from Reed’s politics and uses Legba to open his work up: “I don’t share Reed’s right wing politics. He seems to get in trouble with his fetishization of Voodoo, his praising of the Duvalier regime in Haiti […] I like the way you can use Legba to undercut: he’s a sort of satirical figure […] The trickster gives you good and bad things […] It’s never how you intended it” (Write 69).

Compton goes on to describe how the “contrasting openness and materiality” (70) of Vodou spirits provides a nice contrast to his own Christian background, asserting in another interview that Legba “provides a cue to a literary method, a heuristic process” that allows for “indeterminacy, the crossroads, and chance,” which Compton finds “useful in terms of politics and aesthetics […] as a good basis for culture-producing praxis” (“The Epic Moment” 138). The literary potential of Legba is colossal, and both Winfried Siemerling (2010) and Joanne Leow (2012) have written about Compton’s use of Legba as a tool and structural metaphor to disrupt Euro-American narratives, providing an alternative narrative strategy to allow elided Black histories to enter into the mix. I agree with Siemerling that “Turntablism thus becomes the sign and the medium of the DJ-Legba and of tidalectics: two circles doubling, mixing time at the crossroads between past and present, turning horizontal progression and dialectics into vertical repetition and counter-clockwiseness” (“Transcultural” 36). DJ-Compton-Legba’s mixing provides both agency and chance, but it also suggests that border crossing is a process of disruption, dissonance, and displacement.

In Compton’s poem “Legba Landed” (49th Parallel Psalm), Legba represents the various “liminal” (105) crossings of migrant/immigrant/slave experiences, particularly crossing “the border / line in a northern corner” (105) into “Canada, land” (106), and the xenophobic encounters the newly arrived migrant faces as a non-citizen: “here eyes bear the white burden / of watchful wardens / dutiful citizens in / lower mainlands / patrol each shade of un / white” (106). “Legba Landed” exposes the rhetoric of tolerance associated with multiculturalism, which often falls flat in the eyes of
the non-citizen and complicates the issue of belonging and citizenship for those who, like Legba, are liminal and exist, as a custom officer declares, “in the razor-thin space between my lines, / you may fit in” (106). Compton uses Legba—who provides passage between worlds—to expose the white gaze and the damaging effects of Canada’s hostility towards immigrants and non-citizens. The poem “Vévé” (Performance Bond) features a dialogue (like a play script) between Analogue and Digital beside the Georgia Viaduct, the former site of Hogan’s Alley, and once again concerns the liminal space between worlds and technology, mixing the past and present together in *tidalectical* fashion to explore how boundaries limit fruitful dialogue. Vévé is a Vodou religious symbol, and in the poem, using Digital’s bag of trail mix, Analogue draws a version of Legba’s symbol on the sidewalk:

![Figure 4: Lega’s Symbol. Wayde Compton, Performance Bond 108.](image)

Within a few minutes pigeons come by and eat the symbol, which causes Digital to inquire about more permanent types of writing, such as ink; they discuss Brathwaite’s poem, also titled “Vévé,” and the ritual power of writing and culture. As Brathwaite writes in his poem: “So on this ground, / write: / within the sound / of this white limestone *vévé*, talk / of the empty roads, vessels of your head, claypots, shards, ruins” (Arrivants 265). For Brathwaite, whose poem invokes earthy and ephemeral images, Vévé becomes a poetic rite and figure of the act of writing. Digital states that the problem with that kind of writing is it “will eventually get mussed up” (Compton, “Vévé” 119), while Analogue states that it’s not quite writing but, more specifically, what “Brathwaite means is that it’s the *beginning* of writing, or the urge to make a new kind of language to the New World” (119). The poem suggests that both analogue and digital offer creative potentials and that both are kinds of portals—that digital technology is, according to Analogue, “nothing new […] They just needed the tools to make you real” (121). “Vévé” thus opens a portal to remix the past, the poem appearing in the section “Rune,” which remixes Hogan’s Alley narratives, and provides, as
Siemerling states, “a conjuring that invokes a new language with transforming powers, crossing borders from a past that elides Black histories into new history and future mediated by acts of tidalectic writing” (37). Like a trickster, much like the coyote who is misrecognized as a dog by Digital and Analogue in the same poem, Compton’s performance—his bonding of technologies—crafts new spaces and alternatives to think about the past and space, and to envision how new and traditional methods are needed to create the future.

The application of various DJ technologies in both Compton’s writing and performances allow him to craft a sonic space characterized by a careful and evocative blending of traditions such as hip-hop and Haitian mythology, and he does so at the margins of Black Canadian identity, most specifically through the historically peripheral voice of black Vancouverites. I agree with Leow’s assessment that in *Performance Bond* Compton moves “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.” And so Legba, and the larger DJ and hip-hop structural metaphors that sound *Performance Bond*, allow Compton, and us, as readers, to explore the various tensions between the past and present, as well as the various received ideas of tradition and multiculturalism and the larger influence of Afro-diasporic narratives that punctuate the work. The multiple reference points and intertexts, the technologies within Compton’s “Vévé” discussing Brathwaite’s “Vévé,” infer that tradition needs to be active, preserved, and (at times) remade. *Performance Bond* remains at the crossroad of meaning because Compton effectively blurs where analogue stops and digital begins, or when they are in effect simultaneously sounding. Like the generations of Three-Card Monte men before him, telling us how the trick works even as they pull it off, or like rappers rapping about rapping, Compton’s narrative is fluid because the improvisatory nature of his schizophrenophilic poetics allows for both concrete meaning and contradiction to emerge—his poetics are experimental, and yet, as old as magic.

Compton’s schizophrenophilic poetics remain improvisational, because they engage with the ancestors as present, much as NourbeSe Philip told me: “Within African cosmologies this is not at all unusual, since the Ancestors, albeit no longer alive, are a living force. When we engage with them they repay us by releasing their grip on us. The grip, I maintain, is because of the haunting, and when released we can be in a more playful relationship with them” (“We Can Never”). Like Philip’s own visually challenging and playful text, *Zong!*, Compton’s poetics allow new meanings to (e)merge as he engages multiple traditions at once. It is for this reason that Winfried Siemerling reads Compton’s
work as improvisatory, writing in response to Compton’s oeuvre: “Improvisation is one of the responses to transcultural liminality in the contact zones of diasporic and transnational cultures. Through adaptation, appropriation, and sampling materials, backgrounds, and techniques, earlier repositories and the local present are combined to produce new effects and performance” (“Transcultural” 31). By contrast, Joanne Leow directly contests Siermerling’s assessment of the improvisational quality of Compton’s work, preferring to qualify Compton’s poetics as constructed and carefully considered: “I argue that Compton’s more recent work presents a more carefully considered [rather than improvised], constructed, and performed approach to black identity, history, and memory in Canada.” The problem with Leow’s assessment is that she reads improvisation under too rigid a definition, assuming that improvisation lacks nuance or consideration, as if it is happenstance. Leow falls into the myth that improvised music, as critiqued in The Other Side of Nowhere, “involves adherence to neither convention nor protocol, that it tolerates no system of constraint” (23), which, as I have argued, is patently not true. Thinking of Compton’s work as improvisational actually opens it up to a larger and more diasporic consciousness and places participatory onus on the reader who is part of the process, which is precisely what I think Compton wants. By constantly changing up styles, and incorporating trickster narratives, Compton challenges us, particularly through his use of music—Performance Bond even includes a performance CD—to do our own research and make decisions as listeners in the moment. Writing on improvisation and embodiment, pianist and scholar Vijay Iyer describes music as a consequence of active listening: he writes, “Placing the skillful listener in such an active role explodes the category of experiences that we call listening to music, because it allows the listener the improvisatory freedom to frame any moment or any experience as a musical one. The improviser is always listening: the listener is always improvising” (285). While I understand Leow’s concern that a term such as improvisation might evade the careful placement of history and words in Compton’s poetry, as Iyer and others have shown in this thesis, improvisation, framed against more stagnant systems of knowledge production, provides an emancipatory source that embodies multiple perspectives and real-time decision making.

Compton’s schizophrenic poetics remain active, both through the various images and graphic representations (Compton writes in 49th Parallel Psalm: “here we speak / in pictographs, glyphs” [“Red Light Blues” 146]) which appear in 49th Parallel Psalm and Performance Bond, as well as in how the poetry welcomes embodied and engaged readings, largely through the various rhythmic effects Compton employs, from caesuras and enjambments to puns and other oral/aural qualities. Compton’s poetics engage in both rupture and flow and by abrogating his samples, essentially by chopping them up the way a DJ cuts over a sample, Compton shows how a reference
can be lifted to complicate our understanding of how we remember the past. Compton’s poem “Performance Bond” opens with a reference to the song “As Time Goes By,” made popular in the film *Casablanca*, by substituting the word “fundamental” with “multicultural”: “The multicultural things apply / as time goes by” (42). This mis-duplication (Leow) of the chorus of “As Times Goes By,” further recalls the famous opening line, “You must remember this,” which emphasizes that as time goes by, immigrant and migrant histories are often written over or forgotten. Compton reminds us that in BC—and in Canada, with the exception of First Nations—“Everybody’s a migrant. Everybody gyrates / to the global bigbeat […] and multiculturalism can’t arrive / by forgetting, but remembering […] because those who don’t remember / repeat” (42). Disturbing the punctum of official state history and state sponsored multiculturalism, Compton connects the migrant and multicultural experience to the diasporic embodiment of the “global bigbeat.” Using the cut up method (although more Grandmaster Flash than Burroughs), Compton emphasizes, through a synecdoche where “Everybody” embodies a physical “body” that gyrates, and even though Vancouver exists on the peripheries “of empire, and time has / gone by” (42), that bodies and physical stories still inhabit the geography and are in need of recovery/sounding. As Leow writes, in relation to “Performance Bond,” “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.” Remembering becomes a transnational act of recovery at the crossroads of erasure, and while Compton’s poetics are cadenced with sonic repetitions, by contrast, forgetting signifies an illusory broadcasting of multiculturalism that dooms one to repeat the mistakes of the past. Like Legba, standing at the crossroads of the past and providing entry into the future, Compton finds innovative ways to cross borders to allow more space for the citizen. By confounding and circling within defined borders Compton’s poetics asks, “What does Citizenship sound like in BC?”

**Citizenship Sounded**

“If we were not so wedded to the arcane notions of blood, we would be freer to celebrate our various, complex, and divergent identities relating to family and notions of talent and ability, citizenship, and race. We would be more whole, self-accepting people, and less judgmental of others.”  
—Lawrence Hill, *Blood: The Stuff of Life* 194

Lawrence Hill’s 2013 Massey Lectures, entitled *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, explore how blood discursively functions as a historical and contemporary marker of identity, race, gender, belonging, nationhood, citizenship, and much more. Hill challenges the idea that connects authenticity to race, arguing that the notion of authenticity of the blood is pseudoscience at best, and race, like our
identities, is constructed. Hill hopes that blood, like citizenship, will eventually unite us. In the way blood fills our imagination, as it does our veins, so too does citizenship: another imaginative marker that bonds us together as a larger group connected to a nation. The nation state is a collective sampling, an imaginative act that bounds and bonds us together. Compton’s *Performance Bond* riffs on the word “bond,” from an “appearance bond” (to appear in court), to the various performative acts that bond us together, often across geographical and imaginative spaces. The collection opens with a Chapter from the Enforcement on Detention from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, referencing *the Performance Bond form*, required when a guarantor is necessary to ensure compliance. The Chapter (ENF 20: Detention) puts emphasis on establishing a detainee’s identity, providing steps of how to do so, particularly for a foreign national. By opening a highly performative text with a document that suggests how citizenship is both performed and surveilled in Canada, Compton establishes that citizenship is something that is conferred by official law, and then undermines the law and state by complicating what exactly comprises a citizen, especially for those whose citizenship status is historically in flux. For those in the process of immigrating to Canada it remains a mystery for them whether or not they will be granted entry and passage to become a citizen, or will have their status deemed as “illegal,” or as a deportable person.

In the summer of 1999, nearly 600 Chinese migrants arrived in BC in four dilapidated boats and one shipping container. The majority had paid at least $30,000 to smugglers for their passage, and many did not survive the trip. While every migrant got due process (although certainly not fair process), 444 of the 577 refugee claims were rejected. Most were sent back home—a home they had fled in desperation in the first place. Larissa Lai, in her article “Asian Invasion vs. the Pristine Nation: Migrants Entering the Canadian Imaginary,” outlines the grassroots efforts in Vancouver to contest the media backlash against the Fujianese migrants who arrived in Canada by ship in 1999. Lai addresses the crisis as one around legitimacy, particularly asking, who has the right to say who comes and goes? Compton remixes this incident in a poem dedicated to the Chinese maroons, writing in “Illegalese: Floodgate Dub”: “if you arrive in the belly of a rusting imagination, there are grounds to outlaw you” (31). Compton goes on to depict how both identity and status are imaginative acts, and that democracy and inclusiveness in Canada can quickly become racism and exclusiveness when outsiders try to enter the nation, which is still very much like Frye’s garrison. Compton writes:

> when jurisdiction cuts the earth to the bone,
> the proper diction is the unspoken issue, and the flesh of the people’s colour in the boats in the hull in the belly of a dream without papers or definition, in quotations, “refugee,” a penstroke
from relief. languishing in the languaged exile of illegalese. (31)

Compton points out the hypocrisy of Canada’s supposed inclusivity, as Canada likes to heroically remember itself as a haven for the runaway slave, but then asks, “why is it villifiable for Chinese migrants to hide in the belly of a dream / now?” (31). If, in the most literal and legal sense, one is only a citizen by virtue of *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by inheritance), or by *jus soli* (citizenship by state territory), then where do the stateless fit? *Performance Bond* provides voice to those who are considered illegal and without citizenship status, interrogating Canada’s history of exclusion.

I’ve mentioned that Canada has a tendency to congratulate itself as a country that did not practice slavery (even though it did), and Stephen Harper once falsely claimed that Canada has no history of colonialism. Given that colonialism basically involves one society seeking to conquer another and then rule over it, Harper might as well have said that Canada has no history of Aboriginal peoples. First Nations people only won the right to vote in federal elections without losing their status rights in 1960. Harper’s distorted view of history is unfortunately one that remains embedded in the minds of many Canadians today. We like to think of Canada as a place that grants citizenship status to refugees or those who want to take part in the nation, but historically the government has been tough on migrants, immigrants, racial others, and the foreign-born, stripping hundreds of naturalized Canadians in the 1920s of their citizenship status simply because they were suspected of being Communists. In 1974 a law (since repealed) allowed the government to revoke the citizenship status of any foreign-born Canadian convicted of treason, potentially making them stateless. These are hardly issues of the past, as a recent citizenship law, Bill C-24, provides the Canadian government with unprecedented authority to remove Canadians—including those born in the country—of their citizenship if they have been convicted of treason, terrorism, or espionage.

More frightening, however, is that the cabinet would make the decisions in these matters rather than a court. The only caveat is that the person in question could not be left stateless. *Performance Bond* contests official citizenship status, while seeking it for those who have historically been deemed as non-or second-class citizens. To reiterate, *Soundin’ Canaan* takes the stance that the poetic is an act of citizenship, and that for citizenship to have real meaning it needs to be performed, although there are infinite representations of that performance. The concept of a single citizenship needs to be challenged, and defined from below—those subsonic bass notes—for those people whose presence is often felt, but rarely heard. For Compton, that relates specifically—although hardly exclusively—to the history of black people in British Columbia.

The history of black immigrants arriving in British Columbia, mostly from California, dates back to 1858. Most of these black settlers initially settled in Victoria and on Salt Spring Island, but
eventually many moved to Vancouver, as it gradually became the economic epicenter of BC. In Vancouver, they made their homes on the East Side in the southern part of Strathcona, a working-class neighbourhood that would become known as Hogan’s Alley. By the 1920s the black community had built an African Methodist Episcopal Church and opened various businesses, and by 1940 the black population had reached some eight hundred people. While Vancouver provided a more hospitable environment to black people than the US, with some even achieving a level of societal appreciation that rivaled whites, such as Joe Fortes, as Compton and others have depicted in their work, Vancouver could be particularly hostile to racial others. Compton’s first poetic collection, 49th Parallel Psalm, depicts border crossing over the 49th Parallel North by San Francisco blacks into Canada, as an entropic act that symbolized freedom, as if “literally setting foot / on its soil = citizenship, freedom” (“The Chief Factor” 43). Compton then disrupts this reading by showing how racist Canada could be, and still is, hence the shift of racism from African Canadians to the current flux of Chinese immigrants, calling together the voices of a marginalized collective striving for greater citizenship within the context of Canadian cultural history.

As Compton depicts throughout 49th Parallel Psalm, somatic identifiers, such as skin colour, often effect one’s citizenship status: “your skin is your ID. You are what you wear” (“Jamb” 123); “getting eyed. ID’ed.” (“The Book” 109). Citizenship is eons more than skin colour, and certainly it is much more than a passport photo, as the speaker of Compton’s “The Book” keeps his “passport-photo-wide smile / I’s artfully averted” (109) as he attempts to cross into Canada, only to be turned away by the gatekeeper who asserts, “you won’t be coming into my country today” (110). The speaker must avert his own multiplicity (his various “I’s” and eyes) from a gatekeeper who, despite the illusory reality of a border on a map, claims ownership over a space, referring to Canada as, “my country.” Ultimately, Compton imagines, much like those singing immigrants who left San Francisco from BC in 1858, and much like this thesis does, “borders giving way just the same / as a read sea” (“49th Parallel Psalm” 175). The red/read sea is an act of reading between malleable/tidalectical spaces—“we read be / tween […] be be / tween / the lines” (“The Mirror of the Times” 34)—in order to draw strength from the past to assert an active citizenship. Compton draws strength from his ancestral connection to the history of Black communities in BC and like Papa Legba he finds ways to cross and “read between the lines” (Performance, “Afro-Saxon” 18). In “Inlet Holler,” from Performance Bond, Compton further implicates his own unease as a settler—his ancestors did not arrive as slaves—viewing the Vancouver inlet as “no more mine than yours” (21), a direct contrast to the possessive “my” of the border guard in “The Book” by viewing geographical space as a conglomeration of peoples, writing that like others he just happens to be here: “I am a settler / I am
uneasy / there is nowhere to go” (21). Compton’s geographical and ethnic origins are split. In *Performance Bond* he describes himself as “Halfrican” and “Afro-Saxon,” and it is his sense of splitness, of the in-between, that defines Canada’s own mixed identity. Compton further complicates place by viewing citizenship under international identifications, identifying with figures such as Sidney Poitier and Charley Pride.

*Performance Bond* consists of four sections, and the first is aptly titled “Stations,” recalling a tableau of locations, identifications, sounds, and geographical places/ neighbourhoods where we arrive and depart at various transit stops. Like transit stations, radio stations, or even, stations of the cross, Compton, the DJ-conductor of the mix/train, takes us from BC specific poems in “Stations,” such as “Declaration of the Halfrican Nation” and “Illegalease: Floodgate Dub,” to poems a few pages later, such as “To Poitier” and “The Essential Charley Pride,” which enact a “geo-heterodoxy” (Iton) that cadences citizenship as partly global, especially for those whose roots are scattered. By moving from the specific to the transnational, Compton’s sounding displays how one’s identity and citizenship is always mixed (despite a single country of origin or birthplace)—to suggest otherwise is to elide the reality of the evolution of the self in relation to contemporary media. In “To Poitier,” Compton writes a polemical ode to actor Sidney Poitier and intimately calls the actor by his first name, proclaiming: “Sidney: I am a creation of the *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*?-generation, / of the post-first-on-screen-interracial-kiss baby boom. In age and features, I am the offspring of those flickering images. / And the disembodied voice of me” (36). Like a Legba figure, Poitier fearlessly crossed borders—he was the first black actor to win the Academy Award for best actor in *Lilies of the Field* in 1963—and represents, for Compton, a global “ambassador of Integration for the Black Diaspora, the representative / of every black on the planet” (35). As a global ambassador, Poitier qualms white “fear / of a black planet” (35), and does so as “the exception / to every stereotype” (35), even getting to “get with Katharine Houghton” (35). Tactically, Compton displays Poitier as more than a passive representative of black and white solidarity or interracial relations, but rather one who “colonized English in reverse, teaching / a classroom full of Cockney racists / how to speak BBC English” (36), a reference to the film, *To Sir with Love*. Such intertextual references (or sampling) appear throughout the poem, such as “and we got to move to the suburbs,” referring to Poitier’s role in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and provides examples of how Poitier was able to undercut—via “a mastery of form” (Baker)—racist values by remaining stoic and challenging previous stereotypes of black characters in cinema. The lack of ambivalence or critique of Poitier in Compton’s poem sets Poitier up as an ideal entropic force for how borders are often crossed. Strides in citizenship status are often
made through calculated subversions, and “flickering images,” which Compton feels thankful to be the offspring of, figuratively and in his own parents’ interracial marriage.

Poitier helped expand the visual range of Black representation by not adhering to white expectations of how a black man should act on film, even though it could be argued that the roles he played were safe and ethical portrayals, rather than displaying more fraught characters (more a product of Hollywood than Poitier’s own making). Similarly, “The Essential Charley Pride,” a poem about the African American (of mixed-race) country singer, confronts black ethos by not adhering to black expectations. Given how white country music was (and still is) in the 1960s, for the first few years of Pride’s career no pictures of him were distributed in order to avoid Jim Crow backlashes. Hence, Compton’s poem opens with the following lines:

There is a Church of John Coltrane;
Charley Pride is a heretic.

There is a Funkadelic Parliament;
Charley Pride is Guy Fawkes. (37)

By calling Pride a heretic and comparing him to Guy Fawkes (a man who tried to kill the King and was hanged for treason), Compton sets up how radical the concept of a black country singer was in the 1960s, even though country is actually the music of black and white people playing together in the rural south. Compton calls Pride “the Jackie Robinson of country and western” (37) and claims him as part of the black nexus, even “though the Afrocentrists won’t even have him” (38). Compton goes on to write that the “first black person in the Country / Music Hall of Fame ranks somewhere lower / than the seventh black astronaut in space” (38). Pride’s crossing over into a predominately white genre, and Compton’s assertion of the value of that crossing, defies the specious notion that skin colour determines identity, or citizenship for that matter. “The Essential Charley Pride” references (samples) essential Charley Pride recordings throughout, much in the way that “To Poitier” samples various Poitier films, in order to represent the diaspora and Blackness as boundless. “The Essential Charley Pride” contests race profiling and highlights the pervasive nature of music, showing how citizenship and identity—which are often entwined—can never be any one thing, as both essentially function, exist really, only by reference to a larger collective. Essential figures like Poitier and Pride animate the possibilities of layered citizenship, discordant notions of democracy, and the reality of multicultural exchange and reciprocity.

Such boundless conceptions of black identity (and lack of a singular or cohesive linear narrative) is what leads many of the detractors of multicultural policies, such as Neil Bissoondath, to
argue that multiculturalism creates “idealized Blackness that is chaos and fragmentation with no clear sense of common unity, history or culture” (qtd. in Foster, Blackness 373). Bissoondath’s concern is really a desire for an organized cultural narrative, as citizenship and multiculturalism inherently affirm perennial alterations that deny simple reconciliations in favour of discordant possibilities. Such cacophonous possibilities are what Sheldon S. Wolin describes as a discordant democracy embodied in one’s civic responsibility to embrace and negotiate dissonance: “The central challenge at this moment is not about reconciliation but about dissonance, not about democracy’s supplying legitimacy to totality but about nurturing a discordant democracy—discordant not in the flashy but empty ways of latter-day Nietzscheans but discordant because, in being rooted in the ordinary, it affirms the value of limits” (Politics 605-6). In fact, citizenship itself, as Wolin argues, lives in the “ebb-and-flow of everyday activities, responsibilities and relationships” (604). The efficacy of Wolin’s “discordant democracy” is really what many DJs, jazz artists, and multicultural citizens attempt when negotiating differences by polemically critiquing hegemonic forces through creative and resistive improvisations upon the standards set before them. Poitier and Pride essentially improvise their citizenship by rejecting the second-class status that was handed to them, or the borders they are expected to remain confined within.

Poitier and Pride, who often symbolize accommodation rather than resistance, are indeed, as Compton shows, effective oppositional forces that open up Black identity and challenge the notion of a closed concept of citizenship. Through oppositional forces, Compton’s own schizophrenophilic poetics—his discordant democratic collages—recall Edward Said’s challenge for intellectuals to remain productively inspired and engaged by disadvantaged groups. Said’s words are particularly redolent with my own hopes: “It is a spirit in opposition, rather than accommodation, that grips me, because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them” (Representations xvii). All the more reason that Compton finds value in oppositional figures outside of Canada to think through the very specific and regional issues that face black people and Black history in BC; simply put, such forces spiral through regional identifications. Black citizenship, and citizenship at large, must consider multiple allegiances and cross-border/continent pollinations while remaining simultaneously engaged with those individual and group rights alongside the larger rights that protect all Canadians under equal citizenship. If Canada and Canadians can manage this, then citizenship will hold real value, particularly for migrants, immigrants, and refugees who still actively seek such status; otherwise, citizenship remains closer to stasis and provides room in the nation only for those who adhere to stringent guidelines.
Hence, by making history more dissonant we can challenge homogenous constructions of Canadian identity and citizenship that are based on old models which privilege white history and identity as normative. As Ajay Heble usefully suggests in “Sounds of Change,” “What dissonance offers, then, is the chance to hear the world anew, the opportunity for encounters with radically different orders of historical experience.” Poetry in Soundin’ Canaan engages us as readers so that we may “hear the word anew,” not solely in the context of African Canadian poetry, but of citizenship, and by that I mean learning how to read others under their own terms in order to deconstruct the garrison and make more space for inclusivity. As Rinaldo Walcott usefully asks, “Can CanLit read me? That is, Black faggot, dual citizen, sociologist, cultural critic? How would CanLit read me if it could? As exceptional? Who wants to be that? I take everything ‘trans’ seriously, and therefore I understand that much is at stake when trans is invoked—the very foundation of the human becomes at stake, in my view” (“Against Institution” 23). Walcott’s thinking through the possibility of fitting within a transnational Canadian framework, articulating what we might think of as a transhumanism of ideas, is about making space for new conceptual frameworks and discordant democracies, even if we are using new tools to think through the past as Compton often does. People, like language, are heterogeneous, and citizenship in relation to a truly or genuinely multicultural country must reflect that, even if the wheel has to be reinvented in the process.

**Backspin: “The Reinventing Wheel”**

“You can blame / all ignorance on the failure to feed / the ghosts in these Technics”
—Wayde Compton, “The Reinventing Wheel” 103

In Moodie’s Roughing It in The Bush, Mr. D—notoriously states, “There are no ghosts in Canada” because “[t]he country is too new for ghosts!” (286). Moodie then attributes Canada’s shortage of ghosts to what she believes Canada lacks: “a foundation in the consciousness of guilt” (287). Of course, Canada, as a country populated by a wide spectrum of people, should feel some connection, at least empathy (however far removed) regarding Canada’s colonial past. Case in point, even as Moodie wrote her words the genocide of First Nations people was taking place; if you listen closely you will realize Canada is “hauntological.” Compton’s most fully realized single poem in Performance Bond, “The Reinventing Wheel,” is populated by ghosts and spirits of the past, even as it uses new forms and technologies to reinvent the wheel: a larger symbolic metaphor for the turntable, or “the wheels of steel.” Ghosts haunt/embody Compton’s Technics (turntables) and the “drum / has gotten ghost” (103), as Compton works through the “brokenness the tradition” (103) in order to make the past immediate, palpable, dissonant, and repeated.
Compton’s own inspirational home/community/hood of Hogan’s Alley exists only in the ghosting of history and the portals of retold stories; he tells: “It’s a thin lane / between Hogan’s Alley and self-hatred. / My ghosthood, those old standards” (108). Compton’s own disembodied voice—he often performs “The Reinventing Wheel” by manipulating a recording of himself reading sections of the poem—speaks to the loss of a community that was put under erasure; through a resampling/ghosting process that community can never be erased. Furthermore, the ghosting/sampling of voices in the poem is not only a symbol for the recovery of Hogan’s Alley, but it is a larger metaphor for repetition and *tidalectical* variation: for the authenticity of the right/write/rite for the inauthenticity of Black creative expression. Compton isn’t preserving so much as he is celebrating repetition and mis-duplications of the past as an achievable version of history and self-awareness, spinning together a wide-range of ghost-like voices that make the poetic mix immediate and polyphonomous. Compton quotes and draws inspiration as “The descendant’s [sic] speak / unsheathing the record” (103), invoking: Damballah (the Vodou Sky God and creator of life), Jimi Hendrix, Chuck D, Shango (the Yoruba god of fire, lightning, and thunder), Osiris (Egyptian god of the afterlife), James Brown, Raiju (a thunder animal of Japanese mythology), Thoth (the Egyptian god of knowledge), Kurtis Blow, Legba (“Legba’s rood cock-rockism, / forever coming” [104]), Prometheus, and others. From a genealogy that stretches across borders, cultures, and centuries, melding biblical and Vodou stories with hip-hop aesthetics, Compton stereophonically represents his sphere of influence as an African Canadian poet situated in Vancouver. Compton performs with *tidalectical* reverence for the cyclical nature of influence: “The ancestors we have honoured / will be born as our descendants / to remember us” (104). His strategy is Hip Hop inspired.

In his article, “The Reinventing Wheel: On Blending the Poetry of Cultures Through Hip Hop Turntablism,” Compton writes how Hip Hop has changed the world, describing how “hip hop is the conduit of a new kind of black American voice, and therefore a new globally-known black voice. I believe that hip hop’s forms are reflective of (to name a few important things) the failure of the American Civil Rights movement, and the near totalization of electronic media in black expressive life in the first world.” For Compton, such conditions constitute a new relationship to orality and collective memory, and Hip Hop functions concomitantly to the blues and jazz, as it too is an expression of lived experience expressed through contemporary orality. However, Compton remains particularly skeptical about the emancipatory potential of hip-hop music, even as he applies Hip Hop aesthetics to his writing, largely because he finds that the influence of hip-hop on small culturally isolated communities, such as in BC, is not only overly pervasive, but might, at times, be a form of American imperialism. As he told Nigel Thomas, his poem “The Reinventing Wheel” (which he
hadn’t published yet) is actually, “anti-hip-hop in certain ways, and most of what has come out of it are my criticisms of hip-hop and of the passive reception of hip-hop in Canada. It has forced me to think more and more about American culture” (Write 71). Compton particularly embraces many of the cultural aspects of Hip Hop, notably hip-hop turntablism as a possible metaphor “in and of itself, for a reflective mise-en-abyme of influences” (“On Blending”), but critiques the tone of much of hip-hop as emotionally limited, citing anger as the primary expression. Much of the hip-hop lingo in the poem both connects and intentionally falls a little flat when situated in the geographical and psychological experience of Vancouver: “Take us home. Keep it real. Word is bond” (102). Some ten years after his interview with Thomas, Compton again affirmed to me that he is disturbed by the childish tone of hip-hop: “I don’t understand the origins of it, the childishness of hip-hop, which has turned me away from it in recent years. I don’t understand why it’s such a childish culture... action movies and nostalgia. If you compare hip-hop to jazz, and look at it, black men of this generation compared to black men of the sixties, and you look at those guys, they seem so mature by comparison, in their subject matter, and how they were on the world stage. They were also underground. They were all underground artists” (“Audio-Interplay” 8-9). In my opinion, Compton is a little too hard on hip-hop, and in the interview I pushed him to think about how artists like Miles Davis and Charles Mingus, as written in their biographies, could express the same gruffness and anger that fuels much of hip-hop music, to which Compton responded that the hip-hop aesthetic is at times itself unambitious in terms of content, but very ambitious in terms of sound.

Compton’s concerns reflect both his anxiety around the influence of Hip Hop, as well as his own self-reflexive critique and desire to use contemporary media to bring the masses and past closer to the present. In another interview he describes hip-hop music as foreign to his own “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). While hip-hop might be more indigenous to Vancouver than Compton allows (he critically describes “Hip hop [a]s black Canada’s CNN [sic]” [102]) his point about hip-hop overshadowing the indigenous experiences and stories of Black Vancouverites is taken, and is, like Clarke’s own autochthon approach to blackness in Nova Scotia, rather conservative. Of course, Compton’s self-critique of a medium he applies throughout Performance Bond, especially in “The Reinventing Wheel,” highlights Compton’s desire to provide a mix that eloquently confronts the globalization of black culture while finding the value in that very same globalization along with “the
literary potential for hip hop” (*After Canaan* 14). His use, clear understanding, love, and uncertainty of hip-hop, speaks to his multilayered approach towards understanding contemporary Black politics. “The Reinventing Wheel” opens with some very hip-hop-esque lines that read the red sea and place the reader in a border-crossing: “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” (101). “Parable” transforms into “parabola,” a mathematical concept that engages with numerous possibilities since a “parabola can open up in any geometrical direction” (Leow). Further, in this instance, the rhetoric of a parable (the parting of the Red Sea) and aesthetics of its visual representation in the poem as parabola (symmetrically shaped like a parted sea) are cognate, nearly part and parcel. The term “Bolongo” in Mandinka (a West African language), which represents a flowing of water such as a river, is likely a reference to Alex Haley’s *Roots*, one of the vinyl records that Compton often plays in his performances of the poem.

Sampling, a key component of hip-hop production, is used throughout “The Reinventing Wheel,” often at times as a self-reflexive *mise en abyme* for how culture repeats itself. The second stanza of the poem connects blues to hip-hop and states: “‘Snatch it Back and Hold / It,’ Junior Wells told us, / and Arrested Development sampled / it” (101). The line is directly followed by a reference to the biblical Moses and passing/passage which shows the *tidalectical* trajectory of Compton’s reinventions, as Moses is implicated in “The groove / moving the text” (103), as he “Snatched back and held” (101) and took the people to the bridge. Literature sampling music is hardly new, nor is hip-hop sampling literature, but Compton’s desire to make an entire poetry framed on the back and forth of the turntables, mixing elements of vestigial African culture with contemporary hip-hop, is unique in Can Lit. Compton describes the poetic power of the “ones and twos” of the turntables: “the cornerstones of hip hop, the DJ’s materials—the left and the right turntable, two halves of a dichotomy. The poetry would arise through the cultural ‘feedback’ these loops would spark” (“On Blending”). Compton then describes that the agency in the poem is perhaps found in the doubling, describing how he enjoys the idea of transforming his voice into a static disc to be manipulated by himself later: “remix is a way of—in one moment and one performance—re-enacting the manipulation of history and source culture. In *The Reinventing Wheel*, this happens in the body of one man made into two voices by the turntables” (“On Blending”). Taking his “cue out of crates and boxes” (108), the speaker in the poem, amplified in Compton’s real time mixes of the poem, intentionally mis-duplicates the text. These mis-duplications and palimpsestic soundings highlight the improvisational and embodied nature of interpretation.
Compton truly does embody his performative poetics by continuing to reinvent the poems in *Performance Bond*, particularly “The Reinventing Wheel,” which has gone through numerous incarnations, including the first digital/CD version (which remixes and further fractures the poem), included as an audio companion with the book. The recording of the poem, “The Reinventing Wheel”—originally mixed with beats and breaks by Trevor Thompson—is about “call and response” and antiphonic counterpoint, with the doubling of Compton’s own voice in recorded form, different in each incarnation, which insinuates the loss of aura in the repetition of the text. Compton told me in an email that his spoken word vinyl recording of “The Reinventing Wheel” is “close to unplayable now, but I sort of like the scratched up effect. They are about 13 years old now, and have travelled with me to Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, etc. Just the two. In the age of increasing digitization, I love the fact that these two objects [records] are so fragile and rare in their tenuous physicality” (2012). With every “live” performance the record changes as perhaps does its aura, if we dare to call it that. Compton’s poetry, using the cadences of repetition in jazz and hip-hop, are reminders that repetition—like Compton’s desire to hold onto the tangible form of a dub plate—can never escape its ascension or atrophy into difference. The rupturing effect of using creative performance and music—via rewriting, bricolage, repetition and difference—in settings that typically nullify such approaches to page-bound poetry, compels us to think about how creative disruption can function as a model for critical innovative practice. In essence, we are reminded of a question I asked earlier in this thesis: what happens when you put a mixer (and crossfader) between multiple diverse cultural realities? I repeat: certainly not a repetition of the same.

Since the performance is always changing, which includes our reading of the poem, the wheel is an apt metaphor for wider interventions, considerations, and discussions around Canada’s own socially, sonically, and culturally remixed character. Compton’s conscious choice to include the CD (a kind of wheel) opens up the text as a hyperreal space that attests that black creative voices can also repurpose textual and poetic mediums supposedly reserved for a certain kind of poetry. Compton’s decision to include a recording of “The Reinventing Wheel” is a resistive act that claims sonic and visual confluence not merely as part of Black Canadian experiences, but also as a literary reclamation for inclusion within the larger Canadian literary sphere that often disavows performance in favour of silent page-bound contemplation. Sonic and visual confluences appear throughout the poem, with numerous repetitions between hearing, seeing, and spatial embodiment: “every ear here” (104); “Every ear shall here. / The words of the prophets are written in graf” (106); “Every ear shall here. Every eye shall sea” (106). Both the sea and seeing recall the passing of the Middle Passage, and remain and echo like the static of a heavily scratched and distressed vinyl record. Compton, like
DJ Osiris (“The word is the body / of Osiris, it’s spliced” [106]), gives words new afterlife: by splicing visual and sonic properties together in an audio synesthesia, Compton shows the mutability of words and history—further complicated since the homophone between “here” and “hear” appear clearly on the page, but not in a recording or a performance. In blurring the division between text, orality, aurality, recorded, and performed, “The Reinventing Wheel” interdiscursively presents Blackness as something that cannot be fully commoditized as citizenship rights will continue to resist a single unitary understanding.

Meaning is to be shaped, and Blackness itself, for Compton and his own mixed-race lineage, is perpetually beat juggled and remixed, which is why wheels, discs, records, ghosts, samples, and various historical anachronisms cross into the mix, plugged into the speaker: the person who is transmitting sound. The DJ (Compton) drifts between meaning and ambiguity and spins the wheel by quick turns, changing, yet staying the same (“the changing same”), drifting in and out of time like a shaman: “Virtuosos / of the used record. In the out there, somewhere, / drifting, / dreaming, / backcuing” (107). The drift and the flow are key components of Compton’s schizophonophilic poetics, which operates through repetition as difference. Compton’s call to the collective through dialogic process finds valuable feedback in the cadences of jazz and hip-hop, apt tools as Compton mashes together language, history, and the politics of race to create a sonic and literary mix. It is “miscellany culture” (109), and yet the DJ approach allows Compton to be hyper specific to Black British Columbian history in his proclamations. He is, after all, essentially telling stories, which Compton nicely connects with a quotation from George Bowering, a literary influence of his: “Stories are open like doors, and no one can shut them ever” (107). The methods for how we tell stories might change, but the messages, particularly ones around cultural survival and ancestral rooting/routing, remain the same, as Compton effectively shows by drifting sonically between scores of diasporic connections and mis-duplications. Like a modern day Prometheus with his hands touching down on the turntable platters, Compton calls other remixers, lost at the sea of fractured history, to join him in creating languages that speak across generational and cultural divides: “All my fellow postsufferers / at the sea in the new lingua franca, the stutter: we are a cargo cult / a reception” (109). Through a trick of the eyes/I’s—a pareidolia—Compton goes far out in the future to only really take us to the past, for it is only in understanding and reclaiming the past that the future can have any real meaning. Compton backcues the historical record, spinning “the ready-made blues in the backwoods, backwards” to find a spiral “root through” (110). It is fitting that his most Afrofuturist poem sets up the framework to allow us, in the section immediately following “The
Reinventing Wheel,” to time travel with him back through the archives of Hogan’s Alley. With plenty of ghosts and anachronistic riffings, the wheel spins again.

*From Analogue to Digital: “Rune”*

“A revolution is first and foremost a movement from the old to the new, and needs above all new words, new verse, new passwords—all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible.”
—C. L. R James qtd. in Ransby 374

Politics and poetics are mutually reciprocal acts for the poets in *Soundin’ Canaan.* Compton’s recovery of Hogan’s Alley through his turntable poetics is a political act, particularly via his resolute desire to tell the stories that do not get told. None of us living in society can avoid politics. As Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi said, “Even if you are not political, politics will come to you” (*Telegraph,* “Aung San”). We cannot escape politics because we live in systems that are inherently built within political structures; histories within those systems are innately political, and everyday we choose whether to remember, forget, interrogate, or re-envision the past. We are agents of change and citizens who can choose either to remain silent about injustices—for whatever reasons—or to speak up and against dominant or dormant inequalities. Using the tools of the new, moving between analogue and digital as emphasized in Compton’s “Vévé,” what C. L. R. James calls “new verse, new passwords,” Compton’s recovery of Hogan’s Alley is an act, much like the formation of hip-hop communities that Tricia Rose describes as “black urban renewal” (*Noise* 61). Hip Hop, as “black urban renewal,” is a style that Rose says “cannot be easily understood or erased, a style that has the reflexivity to create counterdominant narratives against a mobile and shifting enemy […] to fortify communities of resistance and simultaneously reserve the right to communal pleasure” (61). Compton’s imaginative and schizophonophilic engagement with Vancouver’s Black history (specifically in “Rune,” the final section of *Performance Bond*), contests the historical and physical erasure of Hogan’s Alley (an act of “Negro removal”) by providing counter narratives that refortify that community.

Compton writes in his essay, “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley and Vancouver’s Black Community,” that “Vancouver’s black community suffered what their American cousins, punning on the term ‘urban renewal,’ called ‘Negro removal’—the destruction of the politically weakest community of a city for large modernist planning schemes” (84). Compton’s renewal is the antithesis to the forced removal of Vancouver’s historic Black community. Hogan’s Alley is named after Richard Outcault’s cartoon entitled *Hogan’s Alley,* published between 1894-96, which featured a fictional New York ghetto with crowded streets and urban squalor (92). This depiction fits the public...
perception of Hogan’s Alley, described by journalist Jack Stepler as standing for three things: “squalor, immorality and crime” (qtd. in Compton 91). And while Hogan’s Alley was hardly perfect—Compton reminds readers we must be careful not to romanticize Hogan’s Alley, having been told he was lucky to have not grown up there (109)—despite the poor living conditions, Hogan’s Alley was brimming with honest labourers, Black businesses, a newspaper press, and a church. The removal of the community under the guise of an “urban renewal” project—the proposed building of an overpass—was as Compton describes, “old-fashioned racism: freeways were invariably run through black neighbourhoods or Chinatowns, poor districts whose populations were least able to lobby civic governments” (93). Hence, citizenship afforded different rights for those living in the more prosperous (predominantly white) West End of downtown Vancouver than it did for those living in Vancouver’s East Side.

In my interview with Compton, I probed him to think about the trajectory of his work around Hogan’s Alley and Black British Columbian history, particularly in relation to a larger national or transnational project. Compton explained that a part of what he has to do is situate himself “in a history that wants to forget our past” (“Audio-Interplay” 4), recounting that his initial need to work on the recovery of Black British Columbian history came out of a raw necessity:

Around the year 2000 was kind of the peak […] of my need for this stuff, just an aching, raw need to understand black history in the province, in Western Canada, just the basic understanding. And that really came out of ignorance. I think that’s where the raw need comes from, just out of a blank space that’s despair. It’s just a despairing feeling to have completely no understanding of how you got here, how this happened, and how it all works, why it works like this. So I did years and years of that work, of trying to bring the city up to speed at least. Early on it was about getting a basic understanding myself. Then it was an activist project; it was a collective project with a bunch of other people, which was the Hogan’s Alley Memorial Project. We were at first focused on a memorial, a public memorial, and then as we got rolling we quickly realized we didn’t know much. So then it became more about information, consciousness raising, and information gathering. (4)

Compton goes on to describe that the project was always intended to be a multicultural one that is not merely for “black folks,” but rather is “a history of the city, and we got a lot of help from non-black people, and I thought that was right, that was how it should be” (5). Compton’s performance of making Hogan’s Alley come to life again is hardly a passive approach or merely a Black Nationalist one; rather, it is, as he describes, a historical—even if he uses anachronistic tools like collage and
sampling—imperative to present a fuller picture of Vancouver’s history, which is much more multicultural than history books or newspaper records depict.

“Rune,” the title of the final section of *Performance Bond*, is a word with multiple meanings that appropriately animate Compton’s magical, cryptic, and performative lament for Hogan’s Alley: “onward movement”; any “of the letters or characters of the earliest Germanic alphabet”; “a similar character or mark believed to have mysterious or magical powers”; or, as a verb: “To compose or perform poetry or songs; to lament” (OED). “Rune” also sounds apocalyptically close to ruin, recalling the ruins and visual remains of Hogan’s Alley. “Rune,” as Jonathan Dale Sherman contends in his MA project, “The Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Visual Poetry of Wayde Compton’s *Performance Bond,*” “creates a union of hip-hop aesthetics and visual poetry to create a space for Vancouver’s historical and present black community” (ii). Essentially, Compton creates visual poetry by including graffiti signs, Vodou symbols, pictures, a simulated newspaper facsimile of a *Vancouver Daily Province* article, and various typographic characters that don’t necessarily come from written words. In the acknowledgements section of *Performance Bond*, Compton writes that while much of “Rune” riffs on historical record, the section contains some “fictitious elements: a newspaper article, four landmarks, and two transcribed interviews” (10). Compton elaborates that “Rune” is “about the memory of Hogan’s Alley, and specifically the problem of how to remember Hogan’s Alley […] The poem deals with the ambivalences of looking back, and the enduring curiosity of those times and conditions” (“Seven Routes” 112). Compton opts for an elliptical remembering (“semi-hoaxes” based on “actual corollary” [113]), rather than a realistic representation, since a realistic representation is itself a kind of imaginative impossibility. By staging and mis-duplicating various historical works (articles, oral histories, and so on) on Hogan’s Alley, Compton’s “Rune” provides, as Leow suggests, “dense layers of historical, literary, and theoretical intertexts” that allow Compton “to have them interact and create new ways of understanding his contemporary contexts.” Hence, it makes sense that the first poem in “Rune” concerns the various historical and physical blank spaces of Hogan’s Alley. Though creative interplay, Compton imaginatively fills those lacunas.

“Blight” opens with an invitation to the reader to fill in the empty and abandoned spaces of the poem, much like the missing landmarks of Hogan’s Alley: “When _____ take _____ pictures of _____, there are no people there; the decay will speak for itself” (113). Compton cleverly uses blank spaces—silence—to show how Hogan’s Alley has been historically blighted. Blank spaces in the poem represent missing details, abandonment, and erasure, as well as a certain historical whitewashing as words in black ink have been replaced by white spaces that Compton then rebuilds into new structures and sites of performance: “There are whole languages built out of how _____
aren’t. / Absences chopped down, hewn into beams, and raised” (113). The blank spaces in the poem also function like a “cloze test,” a psychological exercise “in which a person is required to supply words which have been deliberately omitted from a passage” (OED). Hence, historians might deliberately omit important passages of a people’s history, but those deliberate omissions can, at times, be creatively recovered, providing an opening or a closing: “instead of a shutter / it could have been an opener. / A closer. A closure. A cloze test. / A flutter” (113). Compton’s playful literary consonance, arriving at a cloze test that then erupts into a flutter—a taking off—recalls how easily portals, like a shutter (a screen, or a camera device allowing light to pass) are closed and opened. And while Compton sings an “occlusion blues,” a closure in the vocal tract, “Blight” is ultimately about reinscription and remix “in / ____ ever-lovin way” (114). Like the DJ improvising a mix, inviting listeners to put their own interpretive mix together—each person will, after all, fill the blank spaces differently—Compton’s recovery poetics, his audio-interplay, has more meaning when we participate in the imaginative performance of Hogan’s Alley.

The same creative act of filling in blanks is displayed in Compton’s visual poems/ re-creations of “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver.” By including visual images within “Rune,” such as in “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver,” the mirror images of “Forme and Chase,” a photograph titled “Vividuct,” as well the graffiti tag of “Rev. Oz” taking up an entire white page in “Ghetto Fabulous Ozymandias,” and the various runes throughout Performance Bond, Compton creates a visual poetry that resists typical poetic inscription, since visual poetry, according to painter Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, seeks to “liberate literature from the disparateness of eye and ear, from the monotony connected with the dullness of regular typography” (qtd. in Bohn, Modern 20). Compton’s photographic staging of Black Vancouver is not intended, as he explains, “to hoax readers, but rather to at once allegorize the ontological feelings emanating from the social and historical conditions […] to experiment formally with cultural memorialization as a representational act” (“Seven Routes” 117). Understandably, Compton feels anxious creating manufactured images “of a community in the midst of a difficult ‘real’ memorialization” (117), but the process, much like the “cloze test,” is intended to engage and implicate readers in the process of fiction, which imitates history and a lack of action by official city councilors around what they have come to believe is an ambiguous black populace. Despite the apparent invisibility of the experience of black people in Vancouver—past and present—photography represents one way to remember that actual people made Hogan’s Alley home.

The physical rupture and displacement of the inhabitants of Hogan’s Alley for an overpass remains in the ruins of the failed “urban renewal” project. The entire renewal project was eventually
scrapped due to its overwhelming unpopularity, leaving only viaducts as the vestiges of the failed plan. However, the damage was done and Vancouver would never again have such a concentrated black community. Compton’s concrete poem “Forme and Chase” mirrors the image of two viaducts in a piece titled “Vividuct” on the page beside the poem and, like a viaduct, provides a crossing, a ghosting, between the past and present. “Forme and Chase” mirrors the viaduct and uses a typewritten font to emphasize the loss of an entire analogue community, as if Hogan’s Alley’s history has been buried under the bridge:

Forme and Chase

‘A spectre is haunting this font. In the attic of speech, here, boxed up, is where accents go when you migrate, marry, or while them away. I am the shepherd in the yard of mended inflections, the first person buried under the plain of sepulchral dictions. My hands of breath lift, transpose lode letters. I am

Figure 5: Wayde Compton, Peformance Bond 144

Consisting of two stanzas (the first above) that parallel two viaducts on the photo on the next page, Compton’s poem depicts that while structures degenerate and cities change, memories and the histories of people continue to phantom the present, like the spectre haunting Compton’s font and dictation, much like “the ghosts in these Technics” (103) embodying Compton’s turntable poetics. Compton’s choice to use the archaic spelling of form, “Forme,” with the word “Chase,” a printing term referring to the arrangement of text, emphasizes that while Compton is concerned with finding new ways to speak to the past, his “bastard grapholect” (144) shows that written words are but a bridge, a portal, that often mimics what can only be partially recovered. Then again, the image of the viaducts is itself a graphic representation of where a vibrant community once lived, which remains alive, like the graffiti written on the viaducts: erased, and then rewritten, since Compton’s neologicist spelling of viaduct, as “Vividuct,” comes from the Latin, vivi: to live, to be alive, to survive.

Compton’s tidallectical spinning of the past with the present is, as he describes in “The New Station,” “alchemical work, spinning / meaning out of meandering […] I go over / the remains; I transform, / I translate” (150). Compton’s translation is very much an analogue one into a digital
present; that is, he takes the absences of a faded past and transforms the remains/ruins/runes into a digital mix that speaks to the very mixedness of his own arrival. The poem “The New Station” is dedicated to “Clarence Clemons, a black longshoreman beaten to death by Vancouver police in the alley behind New Station Café in 1952,” “Kary Taylor, a black dentist beaten by Burnaby RCMP in 1999,” and for “my high school buddies […] who became Lower Mainland police officers, all of them Asian” (150). In the poem Compton takes us through various stations, describing a near collision experience in a car at age 17, recalling the experience “every time I cross this overpass. I’m keying / on my PC now towards this terminus […] between the old train station rising / at Terminal Ave. and the vanished / New Station Café” (150-151). Stations vanish and new ones crop up, recalling the passage of runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad towards their terminus stop in Canada. Time changes the stations, and given that Kary Taylor was beaten because the officer responsible (in his words) “saw a black man in a nice car with an Oriental female, and, given the area, he wasn’t sure if it was possibly a prostitute-pimp situation” (150), it is one fitting justice that Compton’s Asian Canadian friends are now police officers; time, like bigotry and racism, also decays like the ruins of the past. Racism in Vancouver still exists; Compton’s “Illegalese: Floodgate Dub” and other poems announce this much, but we have also entered a multicultural era: many of the stations are now liminal spaces between worlds, spaces of possibility, hope—digital spaces of remix.

The final poem in “Rune,” and in Performance Bond, “Ghetto Fabulous Ozymandias” riffs on Percy Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias,” even reading the poem within the poem. Shelley’s poem contrasts the inevitable decline of leaders and empires with the lasting power of art and contains the often quoted lines engraved on the statue of Ozymandias: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” Around the colossal wreck of Ozymandias nothing remains, as the poem speaks to the arrogance of empire, except that the site of ruin for Compton is Hogan’s Alley. In Compton’s poem, the speaker, who is in dialogue with Rev. Oz, a homeless preacher, describes that “Shelley’s poem was about arrogance” while “this place—the community that was here—they were driven / out. Their neighbourhood was flattened by the City. There’s nothing / left here because of an injustice. It doesn’t make sense / to call the targets of this unfairness “arrogant”” (156). Rev. Oz replies, in one of the most telling moments in Performance Bond, that it does make sense, since “It is arrogant to disappear” (156). We can try to forget the past, but as Compton poignantly puts it, such a gesture would be an act of extreme arrogance.

Today Vancouver has over 20,000 blacks. Compton points out that the “perceived absence of blacks in Vancouver is an optical illusion: black people today represent a higher percentage of the total population than they did fifty or a hundred years ago” (“Seven Routes” 105). Yet, the majority
of Vancouver’s population, black people included, understands very little of the history—or existence even—of Hogan’s Alley. Compton, as “a person who has more white than black biological ancestry” and few direct familial ties to the area of Hogan’s Alley (108) has devoted so much time to the Hogan’s Alley memorial project because he sees himself as “an afterimage of our history” (112). The work of Compton and others hasn’t gone unnoticed: Canada Post, as part of Black history month (2014) commemorated Hogan’s Alley on a stamp, which Compton described as a substantial success: “knowing that generations that are coming up now are going to have this as part of the regular landscape is very satisfying” (CBC, “Black History”). The past matters because Compton, and because all of us, remember in the present tense. To think that a historically black community in BC (however small) that was forcibly removed doesn’t matter to everyone is arrogant. We can only build a more multicultural future, a more nuanced remix, by first standing at the crossroads and understanding what has come to pass, but which is never fully past.

REMIX 5

“The key questions come when we try to discern the consequences of cultural collusion and collision: which kinds of cross-cultural identification advance emancipatory ends and which ones reinforce existing structures of power and domination.”
—George Lipsitz, Dangerous Crossroads 56

The above quotation from George Lipsitz engages with the hope of Soundin’ Canaan, which is to create and challenge existing power structures through acts of cultural collusion and collision to show how Canadian citizenship, when looked at from below, can (and should) be more inclusive. Such engaged and cross-cultural practice is also at the heart of Wayde Compton’s schizophrenophilic poetics, as Compton remixes the past and combines various historical, theoretical, and literary intertexts (from the bible to Vodou) to sound a more inclusive version of Canadian citizenship that opens up space for those—like the historical Black community of Hogan’s Alley—who have been pushed aside from official history. If the past is represented as “analogue” and the present as “digital” then we must consider both as part of the tidallectical process of creating the future, especially since, as Baraka puts it, “The future is always here in the past” (“Jazzmen” 255). The ubiquity of digital culture colliding with the past continues to alter how we interact with others, but it also dramatically changes our approach to reading, as evidenced throughout Compton’s work. In both analogue and digital spaces there are always connections to be made—we can never get away from embodied experience (like Bell’s phonautograph).
Compton’s own mixed-race identity informs his turntable poetics and makes the discordant collision of differing epistemologies essential to his desire to eradicate spurious notions of race that divide people; Compton uses technology to map, blur, spread ideas freely, and cross racial borders. One need only to think of how effective digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and others can be in helping to mobilize political youth movements like Occupy, Idle No More, and the Egyptian Revolution (2011, Tahrir Square), which used technology to connect various people and global media outlets together. As Marshall McLuhan says, “Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories—for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result” (Medium 10). McLuhan could have easily been talking about how people use and bond technologies with political movements as reciprocal forms of action. Or, McLuhan could have been anticipating the art of DJing—put two disparate records together, say Gil-Scott Heron over Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit”—to forge new connections. Or, McLuhan could even have been speaking of the past as signified by Papa Legba who has always represented the improvisational impetus to cross barriers in order to make new connections and discoveries. The past remains a vast network for DJs/poets to plumb, allowing new acoustic spaces to emerge out of the complex synthesis/antithesis of colliding cultural spaces. For Compton, the past is immediate because we always think through the past in the present tense. The practice of DJing is the appropriate metaphor for the modern griot finding new ways to tell the old stories to bring the past closer to contemporary audiences.

The past is important in helping sound who we are in the now, but as Compton’s experimental and postmodern poems show, sometimes the old metaphors and institutions need to be challenged as we shift to new modes of cultural production. It is through music, notably Compton’s metaphor of schizophonophilia, that we can begin to remap the concept of identity, creating a sonic mix of Blackness that affirms the value of difference and dissonance, which enacts more malleable conceptions of citizenship. Discordance—or what Wolin terms “discordant democracy”—is important because there are competing cultural narratives in Canada all vying for authenticity. More useful and productive than the illusion of an authentic cultural narrative is imagining how the DJ metaphor provides a sonic representation of multiple competing narratives all sounding together, not necessarily in unison, but polymetrically in the sonic remix that is Canada. Compton’s use of multimodal and turntable poetics is dually, like a trickster at the crossroads, a postmodern technique that allows Compton to use the turntable (a hip-hop signifier) to explore the form’s literary potential.

Similar to what Ralph Ellison does in Invisible Man, Compton highlights—through revision and repetition with difference—how inherently unstable sonic frequencies, like identities, can be
productive, working against the standard Western treatment of notes as a fixed phenomenon. While the music that opens each chapter might be the best fit for the poet discussed, the music is intended to animate conceptions of larger narratives sounding on the peripheries of the thesis. Sure, blues, jazz, and other musics appear in Compton’s work, but turntablism fits the larger medium through which I am creating my own version of a mix of Compton’s work. The music often takes us outside the text only to take us back into it, just as Compton’s use of visual images intends to get us thinking outside the context of words on the page. The bonds in Performance Bond are multiple, and once we cross over the borders of a fixed book, we go out into the living world and engage with the heterogeneous sounding of ourselves, always changing like the reinventing wheel. Canaan itself is a project to be remixed, and so we turn now to K’naan to listen to how that might sound as voiced from the perspective of someone who came to Canada with many of the same hopes as the escaped slaves who followed the North Star with little more than the clothes on their backs, some songs, and dreams of the possible.
CHAPTER SIX

WAVIN’ THE MULTICULTURAL FLAG: HIP HOP AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN K’NAAN’S POETIC RAP PROTEST

I. IT’S BIGGER THAN HIP, OR HOP, OR US

“You would rather have a Lexus or justice? / A dream, or some substance? / A beamer, a necklace, or freedom? […] It’s bigger than hip-hop.”
—Dead Prez, “Hip-Hop”

**Hip Hop Legacies**

        We went from pickin’ cotton
        To chain gang line choppin’
        To Be-Boppin’
        To Hip-Hoppin’
        Blues people got the blue chip stock option
        Invisible man, got the whole world watching
        (where ya at) I’m high, low, east, west,
        All over your map
        I’m getting big props, with this thing called Hip Hop
—Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*, “Hip Hop”

Hip. Hop. Hip Hop. *Hipi*, meaning “‘to open one’s eyes and see’” (Asante 250). *Hop*, from old English, meaning “‘to spring into action” (255). Hip Hop: an opening. The legacy of slavery has produced extreme cultural confusion, and the same could be said about rap. Rap’s obfuscation confounds us and remains a controversial art. After all, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contends in *The Anthology of Rap*, in reference to democracy and freedom of speech, “censorship is to art as lynching is to justice” (xxv). Art is (almost) always representation: there’s a difference between rap lyrics and the hate speech of the Westboro Baptist Church. Rap remains a noisy element of contemporary culture. Yet, many cultural critics of rap and Hip Hop culture praise hip-hop music for its ability to function as an education tool, citing black women, Aboriginal rappers, and/or LGBT rappers as nuanced examples that draw attention to racism, sexism, and the entire spectrum of oppressions. Still, on the other hand, media attention fixates on violence at rap concerts, the criminal use of samples, lurid fantasies of killing cops, homophobia and misogyny, and Black nationalism, often marring much more fruitful dialogues that should be happening. It is the various contradictions that make Hip Hop and rap music particularly ripe for scholarly analysis.

Hip Hop music and culture is a chiaroscuro of social consciousness and mainstream
commodification, a chameleonesque art form that adapts to every environment it encounters, a personal saviour and communitarian mobilizer born out of a disenfranchised youth movement in the postindustrial urban nightmare of America’s neglected ghettos. Hip Hop’s lineage of hagiography consists of graffiti writers, breakers, DJs, and MCs who animate the black postmodern ethos through raps that contain ad-lib logorrhea, near-assonance, and gritty vocab with gunfire punctuation, announcing with bravado to an oppressive white world that the carcinoid Other has adopted the master’s tools and things will never be the same. Hip Hop is without doubt the most popular and influential musical movement since jazz, and like jazz, rap (as firebrand Archie Shepp describes) contains a “blues element. It’s physical, almost gymnastic. It speaks to you organically. Rap grows out of what young people really are today, not only black youth, but white – everybody” (“Dialogue”). The allure of rap music’s organic and gruff poetics has captivated me for over two thirds of my life.

I encountered hip-hop music for the first time when I was ten years old. I remember bringing home a cassette tape of Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle; the album’s iconography was brash in its explicit display of “pugilistic eroticism.” Aesthetically, the music was smooth, full of funk-infused hard-thumping gangster rhythms. Shortly afterwards, my parents found the cassette and took it away; therefore this experience was also my introduction into the world of censorship. To listen to hip-hop is to enter a world of intricacy and contradiction. The music has sparked fierce debates about its validity and effect on its listeners (see Tricia Rose’s The Style Wars); and while mainstream or commercial hip-hop music is at times misogynistic or glorifies violence, much of Hip Hop culture and the larger movement of rap music has formulated its own critiques of sexism, misogyny, and violence. A more productive approach is to examine how misogyny and sexism in gangster rap are, as bell hooks writes, “a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values sustained by White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (Outlaw 135). Hip-hop music is hardly representative of one style or movement; rather, it has been used by many aggrieved populations around the world as an oppositional form that reaffirms community ties and challenges dominant modes of discourse.

Hip Hop is a secondary oral culture that is made up of four elements: hip-hop dance (notably breaking), urban inspired art (markedly graffiti), DJing (turntablism), and beatboxing/MCing (rapping). Paul Gilroy, in The Black Atlantic, describes the genesis of Hip Hop culture as growing “out of cross-fertilization of African-American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents rather than springing fully formed from the entrails of the blues” (103). As hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose poignantly suggests, “to interpret rap as a direct or natural outgrowth of oral African-American forms is to romanticize and decontextualize rap as a cultural form” (Noise
95). While hip-hop music certainly incorporates forms of oral storytelling, it is also infused with, and informed by, modern technology: “rap simultaneously makes technology oral and technologizes orality” (Rose 86). Friedrich Kittler states that “technology literally makes the unheard-of possible” (36) as the symbolic becomes the real, and the human becomes the machine. Hip Hop is technological and traditional, which is appropriate since the music is an expansive conglomerate of artistic forms and styles that most specifically originated as a street subculture within African American communities in 1970s New York City, predominantly in The Bronx, Morris Heights, and later in Latin American communities, and is now a transnational art form.

Hip Hop, as Alexander Weheliye argues, has come to define what “it means to be black and ‘modern’ within a global context and particularly in youth cultures” (146). Hip Hop is found almost anywhere on the planet, which is why Saul Williams in *The Dead Emcee Scrolls* advocates that “No other music so purely demands an instant affirmation on such a global scale” (xi). The global consciousness of Hip Hop allows the music to be particularly transferable to diverse cultures as a mode of expressive possibility, especially against oppressive systems that attempt to silence marginal voices. Hip Hop continues to play a central role in African American, Hispanic, and Caribbean based Hip Hop practices in the US, and continues to be a core element in hip-hop music, dance, and visual art across the globalized forms of this interdisciplinary art practice. Further, hip-hop music and rap have been used, as rapper and Hip Hop historian Chuck D explains, to help “Brazilian kids learn English when school systems failed to bridge the difficult language gap of Portuguese and Patois to American English” (*Anthology of Rap* 794); in Africa, South Sudanese musician Emmanuel Jal uses hip-hop to heal war torn African youth; and as I contend in “Voice in Text,” “First Nations group War Party employs Hip Hop as a didactic medium to tell traditional and modern stories” (2). Music journalist Patrick Neate claims the only condition required for Hip Hop to emerge in a given culture (he travels from New York to Tokyo to Johannesburg and Rio Janeiro) is an alienated youth looking for representation, or a creative outlet to express themselves (66). Hip Hop provides powerful tools—through beats, voice, and culture—to help the silenced (rap was formed as a prophetic language that addresses silence, the silenced, and the state of feeling like a non-citizen) gain a voice and be heard in their own terms, often crushing canons in the process. Not that Hip Hop is without a canon, but its canonicity has been one levied against and in relation to prior traditions, not initially as a lack of regard for the past, but necessitated by the postmodern desire to make art with the tools at hand, whether a turntable or some spray paint and the side of a train.
**Signifying postmodernism**

Postmodernism—a mode of operating and style as Umberto Eco defines it—has credence with how Houston A. Baker, Jr. defines the postmodern in Hip Hop, as “nonauthorative collaging or archiving of sound and styles that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity” (*Rap* 89). Such “nonauthorative collaging” is useful in thinking about how Hip Hop works and unworks with prior canons in a creative legacy. As hip-hop artist Common states, Hip Hop carries “on the tradition not just of Afrika Bambaataa, but the tradition of Miles Davis, James Baldwin, Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, too. We are the children of jazz. We are the children of all black art around the globe” (*Anthology of Rap* 799). Hip-hop freely borrows from all genres with the rapper’s lyrics signifying in a postmodern context, and musical sampling functioning much like an intertextual reference. In *Signifying Rappers*, David Foster Wallace provides an evocative description of the purely aesthetic and postmodern quality of hip-hop, poetically writing:

> Like the drum machine and scratch, sample and backbeat, the rapper’s ‘song’ is essentially an upper layer in the dense weave of rhythm that, in rap, usurps melody and harmony’s essential functions of identification, call, counterpoint, movement, and progression, the play of woven notes…until ‘rhythm’ comprises the essential definitions of rap itself: dance beats that afford unlimited bodily possibility, married rhythmically to complexly stressed lyrics that assert, both in message and meter, that things can now never be other than what IS (57-58).

While Wallace’s hypotactic depiction doesn’t directly mention postmodernism, his description of hip-hop’s deconstructive capacity to create new art through the use of modern recording technologies is (as Wallace mentions elsewhere in *Signifying*) postmodern.

While I’ve argued in *Soundin’ Canaan* that we need to remove postmodernism from the grip of chronologists, Hip Hop—even if it does borrow from older signifying traditions—is made possible by technological and urban deindustrial conditions. As Rose articulates: “Hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect. Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community” (*Noise* 21). Hence, there is a political aspect—lyrics aside—to the very sound and form that hip-hop manifests. While I’ve intentionally left the topic of postmodernism fairly open in this thesis—since it could be contended that what traditional African drummers or storytellers do is postmodern—I think that sociologist Todd Gitlin (in 1988, at a time
when hip-hop was gaining traction as an art form) provides a rather salient definition of postmodernism that fits within the sonic pastiche of hip-hop praxis: “Post-modernism […] is indifferent to consistency and continuity altogether. It self-consciously splices genres, attitudes, styles. It relishes the blurring or juxtaposition of forms (fiction-nonfiction), stances (straight-ironic), moods (violent-comic), cultural levels (high-low). It disdains originality and fancies copies, repetition, the recombination of hand-me-down scraps. It neither embraces nor criticizes, but beholds the world blankly, with a knowingness that dissolves feeling and commitment into irony. It pulls the rug out from under itself, displaying an acute self-consciousness about the work’s constructed nature” (“Hip-Deep”). While I disagree that postmodernism “disdains originality”—can not a highly modified version of a past cultural object be wholly original?—or that it lacks critique, the notion of being in-between things and recombining “hand-me-down scraps” is a useful representation to think through hip-hop music as sonically dependent on earlier creations, which when you think about it is actually how tradition and culture travel and adapt to new environments. When Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Cage, or Brian Eno—all white minimalist composers of the 20th century—use sampling and postmodern techniques it is considered art, but when Hip Hop artists do it everyday it is considered less radical and as a threat to intellectual property, even though the practices themselves are older than copyright law.

Hip-hop is intertextual, informed by tradition, and postmodern. Hip-hop innovator DJ Kool Herc, who took many of the music styles of toasting and dancehall with him when he immigrated to New York City from Jamaica, has said, “Hip hop, the whole chemistry of that came from Nigeria, Africa” (qtd. in Asante 79). Hip-Hop’s use of repetition belongs to an African continuum, a continuum that poet Amiri Baraka states is part of “Rhythm and Blues, and the poetry of the real. Rap, as old as how we spoke across space, beating the log” (Digging 115); however, we must acknowledge that Hip Hop’s use of technology also situates it within a North American technological and urban postmodern framework. As Robin D. G. Kelley notes, “hip hop’s hybridity reflected, in part, the increasingly international character of America’s inner cities resulting from immigration, demographic change, and new forms of information, as well as the inventive employment of technology in creating rap music” (Yo’ Mama’s Dysfunctional 39). In “true Afro-modernist fashion,” hip-hop artists reject the standard parameters of musical convention (Ramsey 192), and like all new postmodern art forms, the status of whether the music is even music, or art, is disputed. By drawing from African, European, and North American deindustrialization, Hip Hop’s brand of postmodernism has always been global and regional, since it was, after all, crafted by a Jamaican (Kool Herc) and then fashioned into new forms—that even included disco and European techno—by
a Bronxite (Afrika Bambaataa) who was influenced by the formative experiences he had in his travels to Africa and Europe. This is why it is unsurprising, to me at least, that hip-hop music samples from the massive archive of previously recorded material, establishing a dialogue between the original and its new context. Thus, an artist like K’naan is able to draw from the full range of the African diaspora, taking sounds and language from his own Somalian culture and language, fusing them with his North American—particularly Torontonian—experience to create a hybridized style of expression that reflects the diverse reality of the globally conscious citizen.

The new poetic beat of Black Studies

K’naan, an artist who used Hip Hop as an educational tool to teach himself English, now engages with politics on an international stage, including a performance of a spoken word piece at an appearance before the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1999 that criticized the UN for its failed aid missions to Somalia. Hip-hop music like reggae lends itself to vocal accompaniment, as the beats are almost always in the 4/4 time signature and close to 90 beats per minute tempo, making each sixteen bar verse somewhat similar to the format of a sonnet. As David Foster Wallace writes, “rap, like funk music appropriates jazz’s bass melodies’ hypnotic drive and 4/4 adrenaline, but narrows the wide range of 4/4 pulse patterns to the staccot’d 4/4-cut that makes all great rock easy to move to” (*Signifying* 94). Just as Langston Hughes celebrated the blues for the poetry that is inherent in the music, using the form as a model for his own verse, hip-hop’s hard-hitting beats (the thumping 2s and 4s) invite poetry. One of the challenges in writing about hip-hop is that unlike poetry, which is often in page form before it is performed, hip-hop is primarily presented in an oral medium, which makes it a challenge to orthographically represent the distinctive sound and accent of a rapper’s speech. We must think of rap as poetry, for what else is poetry but the voice of a people channeled through the verse of a poet? As Baker argues in *Rap and the Academy*, “poetry belongs in our era to a telecommunal, popular space in which a global audience interacts with performative artists. A link between music and performance—seems determinative in their definition of the current and future function of poetry” (94). Hip Hop culture and music is largely about this space between music and poetry, which is why I’ve spent so much time at the opening of each chapter focusing on music before delving into the poetry—once we hear music in culture, we can hear it more easily in poetic form. Hip Hop, like poetry, provides artists with a means to articulate their unique experience in the world, speak to injustice, and to find pleasure in wordplay. As M. K. Asante states, “No movement is about beats and rhymes. Beats and rhymes are tools—tools that if
held the right way can help articulate the world, a new world, in which we want to live” (71). So if blues and jazz shape life, then Hip Hop, for many, makes life livable.

For scholars, hip-hop presents a new field—even if some scholars criticize hip-hop for its newness, or as Aldon Lynn Nielsen contends, for being poetically conservative. In *Black Chant*, Nielsen does not include rap within the tradition of African-American experimental postmodern poetics that he champions in his text. He does quite the opposite, contrasting the works of these artists “which have tested the limits of writing and musical languages and have found new things to do with sound and signification” with “the actually quite conservative (perhaps even reactionary) poetic forms of much Rap” (235).223 Nielsen, in an otherwise masterwork on African American experimental poetics, uses rap as a straw man—which is too bad since actual poetic analysis of the best of rap lyrics (which doesn’t happen in *Black Chant*) fits within Nielsen’s aesthetic continuum of poetic innovation. Unfortunately, Nielsen displays his generational bias towards what was hardly a new music in the late ‘90s when *Black Chant* was written. Nielsen’s lack of close listening to hip-hop music shows that even the best critics sometimes wear their biases on their sleeves—I’m doing the same somewhat in my defense of the music—and recalls Baker’s hope that critics of rap music be “at least as exacting in their knowledge of rap as the rappers they pretend to discuss, defend, categorize, or witness for” (81). Perhaps Nielsen should simply have not even mentioned rap, since it doesn’t do much to push his argument further; ultimately, what Nielsen apparently fears is Jazz Studies having to cater to the examination of rap and its cultural contexts (176), assuming critics will stop writing about “jazz-poetry because it is unpopular” (235). Just as I am more inspired by Nikki Giovanni getting “Thug Life” tattooed on her arm in support of rapper Tupac (2pac) and youth culture than I am by a traditionalist who disengages from the younger generation, I am equally inspired by young artists who look to the past in order to inspire the present generation. Given all the change and improvisation that Nielsen rightfully attests happens in contemporary Black poetry, it is unfortunate that he depicts Blackness in terms of hip-hop as uninspired and unchanging, failing to see the music as one facet in the larger spectrum of Black Studies.

While there are no Black Studies departments (what might be called African Canadian Studies) in Canada,224 the field in relation to hip-hop is illuminating since African Canadian poetry, like hip-hop, has had to fight for its recognition. Hip Hop was initially about contesting public space, causing fear for some citizens in what they perceived as noise pollution by sonic Others. Black Studies, as Baker asserts in *Rap and the Academy*, “as a sign became not only a real ground of contestation, but also a coded and generative space of values that encompassed both past and proximate, inside and outside, confrontations” (12). While Nielsen’s point is taken that hip-hop’s
status as the new thing can lead to other fringe poetics being ignored, what he fails to account for is
that rap lyrics didn’t even have an official anthology until 2011 when Yale released *The Anthology of Rap*. While *The Anthology of Rap* is not without its faults—once again peripheral/underground artists are largely ignored and many of the mistakes in the lyrics are copied and pasted from the internet—225—the collection provides, as hip-hop pioneer Chuck D writes, “the tools to make meaning of those lyrics in relation to one another, to think about rap both in terms of particular rhymes, but also in terms of an art form. Every great literature deserves an anthology” (789). The seven hundred page *Anthology* exhibits the vast variety within hip-hop and recalls the arguments outlined in the Introduction about the dangers and values of canon formation. Gayatri Spivak’s comment that “Canons are the condition of institutions” (*Outside* 304) is particularly relevant given the anthology was released by an Ivy League institution like Yale. Further, an institution with the status of Yale releasing a rap anthology lets us know just how much the outside world influences the institution—the popular inserting itself into the scholarly imagination. As a discipline of organization and understanding, canons and anthologies are useful, as long as we do not take them to be complete or fully representative of a given medium or culture. By the ‘90s hip-hop went global, but by the 2000s Nielsen’s fears of hip-hop as an academic offshoot of Black Studies were confirmed. You can now get a diploma in Hip-Hop Studies (McNally Smith College of Music) and hip-hop courses are offered in universities in the US and Canada. Even American president Obama is versed in hip-hop lingo and culture. Welcome to the Hip Hop planet.

**Resistant Communities**

“I’m on the microphone / Saying 1555, how I’m livin’”226

—Public Enemy, “Can’t Truss It”

When thinking of hip-hop music and culture there is a tendency to focus on the subversive qualities of the music, more than on how it is the most commodified music in today’s global music market. This is understandable, especially if one is providing a methodology for how hip-hop can be used for radical and resistive models of thinking. Hip-hop, like other black musics, relates to a long history involving an “economics of slavery” (Baker, Jr.) that dates back to the plantation: an institution that yielded return rates that compared with the most outstanding of investment opportunities in manufacturing (Fogel, *Time on the Cross*), which helped drive the economic expansion of America, Canada, the UK, and other countries who adopted the slave model. Hence, Chuck D of Public Enemy in “Can’t Truss It” makes the apt comparison between the current music business and the slave model, where mostly white moguls at the top exploit black musicians. Chuck
D even raps that there is a “holocaust […] still goin’ on.” Explaining the song, Chuck D told the music magazine *Melody Maker* that, “We don’t control what we create. And because of the media, we don’t control the way we think or run our lives.” Ornette Coleman talks about jazz and capitalism in a similar vein and relates the market system of the recording industry to a system of exploitation: “the problem in this business is that you don’t own your own product. If you record, it’s the record company that owns it […] What I mean is, in jazz the Negro is the product” (qtd. in Spellman 129-131). Both Chuck D and Coleman describe how Black music has been sold as goods and services, much like the production of cotton on a plantation, and thus both icons use their music as an alternative structure to the system in place. While an entire thesis could focus on hip-hop, exploitation, and capitalism, I bring up the capitalist framework that artists work within to highlight that resistance is always multilayered within the push and pull of capitalism. Hip-hop since its recorded inception has dealt with trying to meet market demands, even as the best of hip-hop confounds expectations and provides resistance at the level of lyrics, organization, and sound.

In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose provides a complex investigation of the resistive history and musical development of Hip Hop as an art form working within the politics of culture. Rose’s compelling analysis examines rap’s language, iconography, diegesis, oral elements, storytelling forms, black marginality, and aesthetics in post-industrial America. She describes Hip Hop as “a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history” (21). Importantly, Rose maintains that the critical force of Hip Hop “grows out of the cultural potency that racially segregated conditions foster” (xiii). Essentially, Hip Hop is resistive because it prioritizes black and marginal voices that have been pushed to the boundaries of urban America, which is why much of hip-hop music is fueled by anger, and yet sustained by fluidity, or what Rose refers to as “flow, layering, and ruptures in line” (38). Rose puts forth the idea that in Hip Hop, visual, physical, musical, and lyrical lines are set in motion and broken abruptly with sharp angular breaks, yet they sustain motion and energy through fluidity and flow. Rose describes how “rappers speak of flow explicitly in lyrics, referring to an ability to move easily and powerfully through complex lyrics as well as of the flow in music” (39). Thus, in the way that bebop’s argot was focused on playing fast and displaying instrumental virtuosity in order to confound white markets and assert difference, the linguistic and sonic collisions in hip-hop lyrics demonstrate that alienated youth around the world possess astonishing linguistic capability.

Adisa Alkbulan states that in African American communities there is no line drawn between a speech act and a performance: simply, to speak is to perform (*African Rhetoric* 33). The frequent
use of figurative performance in language composition by African Americans, copied by people around the world, emphasizes the highly performative nature of language. Hip-hop verbiage remains a multifarious branch of the music, imbedded within a tradition of signifying and parody, and “parody is one of the most venerated forms of art” (Gates, *Anthology* xxv). Resistance subcultures often, particularly in Hip Hop, challenge the patriarchal conquest of language through grammatical reforms, recontextualizing standardized English into Black Talk via Hip Hop. For the marginalized speaker this reformation of language provides an opportunity to assert identity against a perceived standard. In the song “Somalia” (quoted in Chapter Two, but worth mentioning again here) K’naan challenges the notion that education is only a product of institutional learning by asserting how hip-hop not only helped him learn English, but also facilitated his escape from the physical and psychological prison of poverty:

Do you see why it’s amazing,

When someone comes out of such a dire situation

And learns the English language,

Just to share his observation.

Probably get a Grammy without a grammar education.

So fuck you school and fuck you immigration!

Through hip-hop, a metonym for resistance and freedom in K’naan’s music, K’naan defies his immigrant status as one who has newly arrived in Canada, and uses his lyrical skill to connect with those in “the slums and in the Native reservations” (“Somalia”). Further, K’naan uses English against the very system that would impose Standard English upon an immigrant as a test for citizenship. By transforming English, in the way that bell hooks describes, possessing the language “as a space of resistance” (*Teaching to Transgress* 168), hip-hop artists, like slaves before them, use linguistic maneuvering to resist and spatially re-impose upon the terrain that has been forced on them.

No surprise then that there are thousands of references to slavery by rappers who locate their verbal boomerangs of resistance against such historically oppressive systems that date back to slavery. Talib Kweli asserts, using rap battling—verbally outwitting an opponent through linguistic means—how his own resistive raps stem from ontologically being situated in a country where his ancestors were sold into bondage: “I was sold to a sick European by a rich African battlin’ / Middle Passages, I can’t go back again / Battlin’ years of denied history, lies and mysteries / Wives with misty eyes watchin’ their husbands be beaten viciously” (“Going Hard”). The effects of slavery continue, and hip-hop is particularly conscious of the consequences slavery continues to inflict upon
poor urban communities born into that legacy. Hear Dead Prez: “Yo, this world is oh so cold / I think about my ancestors being sold / And it make me wanna break the mould” (“We Want Freedom”). Black Canadian rap artist Shad relates the crazed infatuation with Blackness to the roles he is expected to perform as a black man in Canada as a form of mental slavery: “With mental slavery, the shackles is loose / And it’s hard to cut chains when they attached at the roots” (Prince, “Brother Watching”). This very resistance in politically conscious hip-hop contests the values of judgment placed upon the music and culture and the rappers who resist not only language, but history. Hence, the anger in hip-hop is often perceived as inaudible noise—as Rose aptly titles her Hip Hop manifesto, Black Noise—with the subtonic bass and hard hitting drums couching lyrics in a grenade thrown directly into the mainstream’s codes of value. The noisiness of hip-hop music—at least in how hip-hop was initially heard as outlaw music before it was largely commoditized—is an affront to those who hold the guarded keys to what classifies as serious music, which is the same confusion slave masters encountered around the spirituals, as “unmeaning jargon” (Douglass, Narrative 57).

George E. Lewis in his seminal work on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music, describes how—in reference to the AACM’s experimental music—“The criticism of the new music as ‘just noise’ can be seen as a holdover from antebellum days, when the music of black slaves, as historian Jon Cruz notes, ‘appears to have been heard by captors and overseers primarily as noise—that is, as strange, unfathomable, and incomprehensible’” (44). In fact, the AACM, whose history Lewis vigorously outlines, “developed new and influential ideas about timbre, sound, collectivity, extended technique and instrumentation, performance practice, intermedia, the relationship of improvisation to composition, form, scores, computer music technologies, invented acoustic instruments, installations, and kinetic sculptures” (ix). While stylistically, at least metrically, fairly different from the sounds of the AACM, hip-hop music too afforded the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised alternative methods and strategies to assert their own version of freedom and what qualifies as sound. As Heble, Fischlin, and Lipsitz put it: “One person’s ‘noise’ is another person’s sophisticated signifying system” (24), even if it does sound like “unmeaning jargon” to many white listeners.

Hip Hop’s noisy margins’ infiltrating the centre presents a similar threat to those in the 1920s who feared the “evil or wicked powers that jazz could extort over human behavior, especially the young” (Orgen 156). Hence, like jazz, as Wallace states, “Serious Hard raps afford white listeners genuine, horse’s-mouth access to life-and-death plight and mood of an American community on the genuine edge of im-/explosion, an ugly new subnation we’ve been heretofore conditioned to avoid,
remand to the margins, not even see except through certain carefully abstract, attenuating filters” (Signifying 35). While I think we should disparage notions of “serious” rap versus “unserious” rap and focus more on how an individual song, album, or larger movement functions, Wallace’s point that the sonic Other in hip-hop charges urgently forth towards mainstream culture (in what Baker calls a “deformation of mastery”) is spot on, which is why groups like Public Enemy, 2 Live Crew, and director Spike Lee are described by African American cultural critic, jazz purist, and self-described “radical pragmatist” Stanley Crouch as “Afro-Facists.” True, the “Afro”-mentioned artists were seen as a pervasive threat to the mainstream in the late ’80s and early ’90s, and while songs like Slick Rick’s “Treat Her Like a Prostitute” or Eminem’s recent “Rap God” are intentionally offensive, the vehement reactions to much of rap’s sexism, misogyny, and homophobia deny the vast existence of accepted sexist social practices that endue the male gender role, especially since such heterosexual, heteronormative, and misogynistic behaviors are often propagated by mainstream culture and media as acceptable. More productive analysis is focused on how rap music affronts popular reception, and even provides a voice for artists using the hip-hop medium to fashion new expressive possibilities. “When I was young,” as female rapper MC Lyte recalls, “I was like, how else can a young black girl of my age be heard all around the world? I gotta rap” (qtd. in Anthology of Rap xxxviii). True, the recognized dearth of women (and gender disparity, often addressed by women MCs like Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Jean Grae) or openly gay MCs (there are some, such as Medusa and Deep Dickollective) in the mainstream is troubling, but any movement is larger than how it is popularly received.

Hip-hop’s didactic function is largely its ability to trouble, as heard in NWA’s (Niggaz With Attitude) anti-police brutality anthem “Fuck tha Police,” which drew the ire of the FBI and which repeats the phrase “fuck tha police” multiple times in the chorus. The song’s violent and anti-authoritarian message provokes response by claiming, and with some reason, that the Compton police “have the authority to kill a minority.” Rather than simply dismiss an intentionally provoking song, it is better to look at the ethos that creates anger towards the establishment in the first place, recalling Curtis Mayfield’s defense of the honest depiction of poverty and social violence in blaxploitation films; he believes that “the way you clean up the films is by cleaning up the street. The music and movies of today are the conditions that exist. You change music and movies by changing the conditions” (qtd. in “Gangster Boogie” 88). It is no surprise that young militant hip-hop artists, especially in the ‘80s and ‘90s look to Malcolm X for inspiration, as X and hip-hop go together like the needle in the groove. Malcolm X featured prominently in the music of Public Enemy, Bambaataa played Malcolm X over his breakbeats, and 2pac responded to systematic educational racism by
rapping: “No Malcolm X in my history text, why is that? / Cause he tried to educate and liberate all blacks” (2pacalypse, “Words of Wisdom”). Of course, some youth of today, like hip-hop, have moved outside the postindustrial movement and civil rights fervor, and have grossly appropriated civil rights figures like Malcolm X and Emmett Till, with little understanding of the politics of the Civil Rights Movement, or the Black Nationalist movement. For example, Lil Wayne invokes civil rights martyr Emmett Till in a highly offensive sexual metaphor: “Beat that pussy up like Emmett Till” (Future, “Karate Chop (Remix)”). Similarly, Kanye West shows the same—although more complicated—disregard for the past, and women: “Uh, black girl sippin’ white wine / Put my fist in her like a civil rights sign / And grabbed it with a slight grind / And held it till the right time / Then she came like AAAAAHHH!” (Yeezus, “I’m in It”). No song is more captivating and explicitly concentrated on West’s Yeezus then “Blood on the Leaves” whose title riffs on a line from “Strange Fruit,” referring to lynched black bodies. The track samples Nina Simone (particularly the chosen lines: “Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”; “Blood on the leaves”; “Black bodies, swinging in the summer breeze”), and only Kanye would think that divorce, betrayal, and the dilemma of dealing with a mistress who evidently will not abort your baby are akin to lynching. Or perhaps, in the way that “Strange Fruit” was an anti-lynching anthem, the song is, although it’s quite the stretch, as Nicholas Troester describes, an “anti-abortion anthem” (“Anti-Abortion”). Conceivably, the inherent juxtaposition and grotesque discomfort experienced by the listener from the “Strange Fruit” sample with West’s lyrics is an intentional point—but is it the right point and is it lost on his listeners? I hardly have the space here to draw out these debates, but I point to these historical continuums and distortions to emphasize that hip-hop’s ability to resist is also its ability to offend, to remain consciously unified, or to draw the listener—often a white suburban teenager—into the subaltern mix and cornucopia of colliding worldviews.

Jason Tanz writes that “the desire of white teenagers to identify themselves with the African American struggle represents an urge to connect and overcome the artificial separation of our past. At its worst, it is a fantasy that equates garden-variety suburban alienation with the struggle of ghetto life, and that defines the black experience by the cartoonish swagger of paid entertainers” (qtd. in Anthology of Rap 329). Hip-hop is part contradiction and part affirmation, which is why hip-hop can take root across the border in Canada and thrive, finding as many white, black, Asian, and First Nations listeners who locate community in the resistive, multicultural, and anti-assimilative sound of the music. Furthermore, there is a longer tradition of resistance in Canada than is often thought. While hip-hop pays homage to Rosa Parks (as in OutKast’s funky, “Rosa Parks”), Canada has its own black heroes who resisted Canada’s truncated racism, which could be just as damaging as across
the border. Case in point, in 1946, nine years before the Parks incident, Viola Desmond sat in a “whites only” section in a theatre in Nova Scotia, and was charged not with creating a disturbance, or sitting in the white only section of the theatre (there was no actual law), but rather the authorities insisted she hadn’t paid the extra fee for a downstairs ticket—a ticket she was never allowed to actually buy. She spent the night in jail with male prisoners, and as the story goes, she left her white gloves on and sat upright all night long. Her audacity to challenge racial segregation in Nova Scotia helped Black Nova Scotians seek and demand full citizenship status. We can call this an early hip-hop moment in Canada’s history: a hip-hop moment because in the *tidalectic* wave of history, Desmond was willing to create a sonic social disturbance in order to assert her right to equality. That is, Desmond disturbs the notion of how a black woman was supposed to behave (sound) in society, but choosing to sound off against the racism of her time. In “Towards a Methodology for Reading Hip Hop Canada,” Rinaldo Walcott rebukes George Elliot Clarke’s claim, as he reads it, that black Canadian culture is fundamentally conservative and alternatively suggests, “black Canadian culture is far more insubordinate than it is often given credit for” (239). Desmond is one example of many of these resistive (hip-hop) moments in Canada’s history, and hip-hop remains prevalent for youth expression in Canada, as both a global signifier of citizenship, and an act of solidarity where Hip Hop culture functions as a cross-border anti-oppression movement, even as it gets resold into the bondage of the current market system.

**Hip Hop Canada**

There is a long history of Hip Hop culture and music in Canada—far more than I could ever cover in the space of a few pages. The Canadian hip-hop scene dates back to the early 1980s and remained a mostly underground phenomenon until the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first known Canadian single was the not so great, but overtly political, “The Bum Rap” by the Singing Fools. In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s a few Canadian acts, such as Maestro Fresh-Wes, Main Source, and Dream Warriors enjoyed some international success, along with a significant recording entitled *Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style* (1992) by Canada’s first notable female MC and hip-hop pioneer, Michie Mee (with production from L. A. Luv). Michie Mee was born in Jamaica and later moved to Toronto, and the Jamaican (dancehall, reggae, dub) sound is particularly evident on the single and in the colourful video for “Jamaican Funk (Canadian Style),” and yet for some reason—given one of the editors is Canadian—no Michie Mee lyrics appear in the *Anthology of Rap*. Nevertheless, Mee’s impact cannot be underestimated: in 1985 at the age of 15 she performed on stage with Boogie Down
Productions, and she was the first rapper to sign a deal with a major US record label in 1988. Mee’s work continues to showcase Canada—as Maestro Fresh-Wes and others did—as a nexus of hip-hop originality and a global identifier of diversity. Mee opens her track “Canada Large” (from Jamaican Funk) by celebrating Canada as a gateway of possibilities for the young artist: “Step off, you wanna know where I come from, Canada.” She then moves on to list local neighbourhoods in Toronto, particularly her own area of Jane and Finch, and raps, “Looking for Jamaicans, Toronto’s got nough.” While Mee states, “We were the first, we opened doors,” “Canada Large” is a celebratory anthem for hip-hop in Canada, which Mee outlines as unique from the America scene, largely because of Toronto’s Caribbean identity. Michie Mee’s music negotiates multiple identities and national frameworks, particularly an American art form (hip-hop) with her own Jamaican background, and a Toronto-based positioning. Hip-hop has always embodied multicultural citizenship (without a policy or act), challenging where one resides, recalling the popular hip-hop mantra: “It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at” (Rakim, “I Know You Got Soul”).

Not that place is unimportant in hip-hop—rappers wouldn’t always be calling their hometowns out if it wasn’t; equally, if not more important, is hip-hop’s ability to draw together various fractured communities across regional, national, and continental boundaries. As Mark Anthony Neal insists: “I maintain that the emergence of hip-hop […] was representative of a concerted effort by young urban blacks to use mass culture to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured and dislocated national community” (Music Said 136). Today rap is more globally assimilated and yet fiercely regional, which is why hip-hop fits local grassroots movements, and can sound diversely different between Canadian provinces. Rinaldo Walcott usefully contends that “what is at stake in Canadian hip hop is a refiguring of an elaboration of the urban landscape of Canada and by extension the urban landscape of North America—black and otherwise” (“Methodology” 239). In Canadian hip-hop, narratives of belonging and unbelonging resist simple reductions of multiculturalism, and ask us to reconsider racial, nation-state, and geographical boundaries, participating in what Walcott refers to as “diasporic connectivity.” By 1998, hip-hop in Canada was hyperaware of its own national borders, evidenced in the various events that impelled the anthemic and collaborative track, “Northern Touch” (winner of the 1999 rap Juno), which put Canadian hip-hop into the mainstream consciousness as a resilient art of determination. “Northern Touch” featured MCs from across Canada (Razcalz, Checkmate, Kardinal Offishall, Thrust, and Choclair) and was intended to bridge the regional on a national front that displays Canada’s diversity: “all the way from T-dot [Toronto] to the Van City [Vancouver] all stars.” It is in the in-between spaces of nation and diaspora that hip-hop in Canada displays its multicultural stride and challenges the old narrative of
Canada as another white satellite of the British motherland. Connecting Vancouver to Toronto and the larger Hip Hop nation, “Northern Touch” is, as Walcott suggests, “a sound that announces the indelible pleasure of the in-between” (“Methodology” 248-49). The year before the Razcalz won the 1998 Juno for Best Rap Recording for *Cash Crop*, which they declined on the basis of racism, since in the first eight years (1991-1998) the Rap Juno was not televised. The Razcalz issued the statement that the award was “a token gesture towards honoring the real impact of urban music in Canada” (LeBlanc “Razcalz”). Shortly after this event hip-hop music in Canada was not only aware of its regional diversity, but it was sentient that the impact ethno-racial minorities were having on Canada’s urban landscape was underappreciated by the hegemonic Canadian music industry.

The following year, hip-hop had gone mainstream in Canada. The Juno Awards not only televised the Best Rap Recording, which rightfully went, given its critical impact and sales, to the Razcalz for “Northern Touch.” Additionally, the Razcalz performed “Northern Touch” live during the ceremony. “Northern Touch” is a celebration of Canadian hip-hop’s ability to function across regional borders while maintaining local specificity, dually negotiating the larger milieu of global hip-hop aesthetics and politics, as “Canadian hip hop is forced to be more double voiced than most” (“Methodology” 250). Given that hip-hop is an immigrant art form, it makes sense that most of Canada’s major hip-hop artists have negotiated various locales of citizenship: k-os (locales as disparate as Toronto and Trinidad), Shad (born in Kenya, of Rwandan parents, and raised in Ontario), Michie Mee (born in Jamaica), Maestro Fresh-Wes (of Guyanese parents), Kardinal Offishall (raised by Jamaican immigrant parents), and K’naan (born, and spent his childhood in Mogadishu, Somalia).

Given that Toronto is the most multicultural space on the planet, with over 50% of its citizens being foreign born, it makes sense that even the breaking down of Blackness in Toronto is a roll call of Canada’s multicultural makeup.

In his track “Bakardi Slang” (*Quest for Fire*), Kardinal Offishall breaks down T-Dot as a unique heterotopia where black difference makes Toronto one of a kind:

Ya’ll think we all Jamaican, when nuff man are Trinis
Bajans, Grenadians and a whole heap of Haitians
Guyanese and all of the West Indies combined
To make the T-dot, O-dot, one of a kind

And it’s hardly only black artists creating Hip Hop Canada, as Canada’s hip-hop communities readily disavow skin colour in favour of more diverse notions of community, and hip-hop aptitude, which is why white artists like Buck 65, Classified, and D-Sisive (who won the 2013 Rap Juno) are considered some of Canada’s most important hip-hop emissaries, along with a slew of bilingual,
mixed-race, and other non-black artists who’ve been making hip-hop music in Canada for some time, including: bilingual and interracial Montreal trio Laymen Twaist (popular in 1990); the large political rap collective Sweatshop Union; Japanese Canadian Kish; Chinese Canadian turntablist Kid Koala; Japanese, white, black, and mixed-race rap group Swollen Members; hip-hop influenced jazz group The Shuffle Demons; mixed-race female rapper Eternia; and a wide variety of French artists including the separatist rap group Loco Locass whose 2004 single, “Liberez-Nous des Liberaux” (Liberate us from the Liberals) scrutinized the Quebec government and became an unofficial separatist anthem. The diversity of Canadian hip-hop reflects Canada’s multiculturalism, which allows for the possibility of separatism and cultural collision, and as a medium is effective in articulating marginality, poverty, and injustice, particularly in its adoption by First Nations groups.

By applying Hip Hop, First Nations groups like War Party, Tru Rez Crew, female rapper Kinnie Starr, Winnipeg’s Most, A Tribe Called Red, and others, effectively articulate the struggle of First Nations on the reserve and in postcolonial Canada. War Party’s first album, The Reign, put First Nations rappers on the Canadian Hip Hop radar: their song “Feelin’ Reserved,” was the first major First Nations Hip Hop music video to get rotation on Much Music; furthermore, War Party won the Aboriginal Music Award for best rap album in 2000. In a conversation with Tara Henley of Vancouver’s Georgia Straight, Rex Smallboy (the de facto leader of War Party) states that it was natural for First Nations youth to adopt Hip Hop as a mode of expression: “When I heard a lot of the African-American artists talking about what they saw in their communities, the social conditions, that made me take a look at what was going on in my own neighborhood […] This is the reserve—this is not Compton; this is not the Bronx” (“Beyond the Reserve”). In War Party’s The Reign, there is no romanticizing of life on the reserve: “it is depicted as a place of loss, degradation, and ultimately as an endless reminder of the effects of colonization” (“Voice in Text” 64). By transforming spaces like the reserve into a place of power, and in using various mediums with traditional culture, such as A Tribe Called Red’s fusing of electronic and hip-hop music with customary chant and drumming, creating a style referred to as “powwow-step,” First Nations artists and groups effectively yield activism and create new opportunities, bringing First Nations culture directly into the mainstream. Shifting dispositions of power, hip-hop creates a collective space where contemporary issues of injustice along with ancestral forces are negotiated on a popular stage—the precise negotiation I hear in much of K’naan’s protest poetry.

Few Canadian hip-hop artists (other than Drake) have had the level of international success that rapper/ poet K’naan has, and few Canadian hip-hop songs—with the exception of Maestro Fresh Wes’s 1989 “Let Your Backbone Slide,” which was the first Canadian hip-hop single to break into
the US Billboard charts—are as well known as K’naan’s song of global fraternity, “Wavin’ Flag.”

And yet, this chapter is but one of a few resolutely scholarly pursuits to examine K’naan’s oeuvre. K’naan was born in Somalia in 1978 and grew up in the violent capital of Mogadishu until the Somali Civil War struck in 1991. The 13-year-old K’naan first settled in New York, before moving with his family to the Rexdale neighbourhood in Toronto, which has a large Somali community. As he raps on “Coming to America,” a track about his continual exodus and eventual post-“Wavin’ Flag” settlement in America: “Mogadishu was my cage […] T-dot to the motherfucking dot B / And the Rexdale lobby […] I’m tired of always going through barriers […] So I’m coming, coming to America” (Country). How appropriate then that K’naan’s birth name (Keynaan) means “traveler” in Somali, which holds homophonic reverb with Canaan. Calling himself the dusty foot philosopher, K’naan rhymes: “They call me dusty cause my feet have been through a lot / The wisdom of my survival that’s just due to Allah” (“Dusty Foot Philosopher”). Like the themes of travel, improvisation, flight, hope, resistance, and citizenship status that tunnel through Soundin’ Canaan, K’naan’s music tenaciously affirms the self and community in the face of injustice and immigrant status. K’naan’s musical and poetic roots are deep, as his aunt Magool was a well known Somali singer, and his grandfather, Haji Mohammad was a poet. Through listening to hip-hop records—which his father, living in America, sent him in Somalia—K’naan learnt English and began to use hip-hop and words as a weapon to fight oppression, and draw attention to the plight of his people: “Music is my ammo, I’m ready for battle” (Country, “Better”). Building on the political energy of the 1999 incident where K’naan spoke before the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees, critiquing the UN for its failed aid mission to Somalia, K’naan’s debut record, The Dusty Foot Philosopher (2005), presents conscious lyrics concerning the nature of injustice and hope, complemented by production that draws from K’naan’s diasporic background with elements of Somali music, hip-hop, and world music. Certainly in K’naan’s music, “consciousness and craft combine” (Anthology of Rap 656). Through his rap poetics of protest, K’naan uses hip-hop as a global signifier of citizenship status.
II. K’NAAN: WAVIN’ THE MULTICULTURAL FLAG

“It’s a kingdom that we gotta construct
Who’s ready to build from the ground up?
‘Every last one of us!’”
—Common Market, “Every Last One”

Dusty Foot Troubadour: Hip Hop as Protest Poetry

My poetry hails within the streets
My poetry fails to be discrete
It travels across the earth and seas
From Eritrea to the West Indies
It knows no boundaries
—K’naan, Dusty Foot Philosopher, “Until the Lion Speaks”

“[W]hen a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no choice but to become an outlaw.”
—Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom 256

By being considered less than a full citizen by the South African government of the time, did Nelson Mandela have any choice when resisting that system other than to become an outlaw? Politically an African Nationalist and a democratic socialist, Mandela spent 27 years in prison for his unrelenting and activist position towards the abolition of apartheid. It is figures like Mandela and Gandhi who, through both their words and actions, inspired K’naan’s desire to write politically charged rap songs like “Take a Minute”: “How did Mandela get the will to surpass the everyday / when injustice had ‘em caged and trapped in everyway? / how did Gandhi ever withstand the hunger strikes at all? / didn’t do it to gain power or money if I recall / It’s the gift, I guess I’ll pass it on / Mother thinks it’ll lift the stress of Babylon” (Troubadour). K’naan’s first two albums, The Dusty Foot Philosopher and Troubadour reflect his role as a poet who has witnessed and resisted much in order to get to where he is today. Like a poet philosopher, and rap troubadour, K’naan uses his “surviv[al] [of] such violent episodes” in his past to create “medication out [his] own tribulations” (“Take a Minute”). K’naan’s rap protests both heal and confront the malaise of bloodshed that haunts his old home of Mogadishu, as well as the violence he witnessed in Toronto’s Rexdale community, condemning those who use hip-hop to glorify violence without truly experiencing hardship. These struggles take place at the level of language in K’naan’s lyrics. Given language is a site of struggle, bell hooks writes that the “oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is […] a place of struggle” (Talking Back 28). While not an armed revolutionary with a machine gun,
K’naan’s words are themselves full of meaning as he negotiates an internal struggle with his own past and current more privileged position, resisting the “murders [who] hold post in [his] old home” (“My Old Home”). Given the postindustrial anti-oppressive format that hip-hop affords, emerging as remarkable protest music in the relentless tundra of homogenous pop music that consumed the 1980s, it is no surprise that K’naan uses the medium as the quintessential weapon to renegotiate cultural space, synthesizing tradition with postmodern rap.

Using the hip-hop format as protest poetry, K’naan is able to speak about both local and global inequalities, drawing from the American post-civil rights hip-hop resistance and his own Somali background, using rap as poetry, which Gates contends functions as “the art form par excellence of synthesis and recombination” (Anthology xxiv). This synthesis and recombination creates spaces in which one can apply resistance through new creations or hybridization, as both the lyrics and sonic qualities function in rap, as “signifying in a postmodern way” (xxii)—even though the lyrical structure of rap is quite formal. It is the lyrics, as Anthology of Rap editors Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois contend, which allow for formal analysis, distinguishing between end rhymes, internal rhymes, and effective enjambment, to notice the caesural pauses within lines, along with a host of other formal elements used in poetic analysis. I appreciate the efforts of Bradley and DuBois to establish rap’s poetic tradition within the larger African American and Western poetic heritage, but I disagree with their notion that to “read rap lyrics in print […] is most often to restore them to their original form” (xxxiv). Given hip-hop is largely an oral poetic expression, dependent on the flow of lyrics over the syncopated rhythm of the beat (rhythm from the Greek word rheo, meaning flow), and since some of hip-hop’s best rappers have said they don’t even write their lyrics down, such as Jay-Z who is known for his remarkable lyrical dexterity, rap lyrics are but one representation of rap’s poetic quality. The other attribute is the realization of those lyrics in the performance of them, for prosody and flow are as important in hip-hop as the lyrics themselves, which is why rap both conforms to a poetic standard and simultaneously rejects traditional hermeneutic analysis. Nevertheless, by focusing on the discrete elements of rap’s poetic form, The Anthology offers insight into rap’s poetic quality, displaying how complex rap lyrics can be seen in polysyllable rhymes and periodic sentences that rappers like Rakim, Nas, Eminem, and Talib Kweli use for dramatic and acrobatic effect.

The vernacular in Hip Hop often has the ability to resist conformity, with the immediacy that linguist Geneva Smitherman describes as the “capacity to accommodate new situations and changing realities” (Testifyin 73). Mos Def says the “delivery is passionate / The whole and not the half of it, vocab and not the math of it” (“Definition”), impressing the belief upon his audience that reducing language to a mathematical system takes away its pathos—thus Hip Hop resists mere symbolic
representation. To return to K’naan, the rapper’s lyrics are technically quite straightforward, but his intonation and his use of narrative adds to the need for K’naan’s music to be heard with the melody he writes it to, and must be felt to achieve its full effect: for how does one feel the words, “The pain in my song is crazy” (“Strugglin’”) without hearing K’naan’s voice teeter between despair and self-determination? Reading poetry or rap lyrics silently is another turn of modernity and a result of print culture. It is not lost on me that without print culture this thesis might not exist. Rather, since poetry in this thesis is the mode by which the discussed writers resist oppression, find new forms of self-expression, and poeticize what it means to actively engage with the world as a citizen, K’naan’s lyrics fit within the apropos poetic nexus of Soundin’ Canaan—particularly his active sounding of citizenship status. Additionally, I’d like to suggest that listening to and reading K’naan’s lyrics—or transcribing parts as I do here—is an invitation for the reader both to liberate and to embody the inherent sound and resistive powers of the song on the page, the poetry in the song: “this song is a poem and the whole poem is a tear / dropped in your ear” (“I Was Stabbed by Satan”). Lyrical analysis reminds us that words are always partly ambivalent and open to interpretation.  

K’naan’s self-referential role as witness, poet, and “lyricist before [he] even spoke a word of English” (Troubadour, “The African Way”), invites co-performative analysis of what it means to exist in a world that is ambivalent, which poetically manifests in his own mixed feelings about his old home. In “My Old Home,” which plays out in what feels like two long stanzas that build in intensity, K’naan provides a richly poetic portrait of his native Somalia, and asks us to “Peep my poem.” In viewing language as bell hooks suggests as “a place of struggle,” “My Old Home” presents K’naan’s internal struggle as he starts off by fondly describing his old home:

My old home smelled of good birth  
Boiled beans, kernel oil, and hand me down poetry  
Its brick whitewashed walls widowed by first paint  
The tin rooftop humming songs of promise while time is  

As the song progresses, K’naan’s words become more angry and elegiac as the track builds to a mantra-like lament where every line ends with “in my old home,” emphasizing K’naan’s discomfort, self-exile, and the ghost-like personification of evil that haunts his consciousness:

Goodwill is looted (in my old home)  
Religion is burned down (in my old home)  
Kindness is shackled (in my old home)  
Justice has been raped (in my old home)  
Murderers hold post (in my old home)
The land vomits ghosts (in my old home)

“My Old Home” opens with references to food and poetry, elements of tradition, and then in a volta moment in the song, K’naan complicates the very idea of home, made grotesque through the corruption of justice and the family unit, describing how murders and rapists are celebrated in his old home. Given that recently (in 2013) a nineteen-year-old Somali woman was sentenced to a six-month jail term for reporting her rape, and that two journalists were also sentenced for publishing the story (“Somali Woman”), it is no surprise that K’naan is haunted by the “ghosts” of his past. K’naan’s fond memories of his childhood, synthesized with the corruption of the family space—the raping of his culture—is emphasized first by the euphony of thinking lovingly of the earlier sensations of his motherland, but is then fractured through paradigms of injustice that precede the incantation phrase: “in my old home.” In an act of poïesis—a making—K’naan constructs home as tradition and familial dwelling, then takes the listener directly into the quarters of those whose notions of home and nation are full of cacophonous contradiction.

Tactical maneuvering, from finding the good in the bad, his troubadourian moving from village to village (between Somalia, Canada, the US, and the larger diasporic village), along with his ability to quickly adapt and survive in each environment, is part of K’naan’s poetic drift. K’naan’s ability to improvise in new environments is part of his resistance. The emotion and horror of his experiences provide the framework by which he contests rappers who glamorize thug violence with the brutal violence and truncated opportunities he witnessed growing up in war-torn Mogadishu. “What’s Hardcore?” is a lyrical barrage against thug posturing that again opens up with K’naan using the image of the writer to evoke the craft of telling stories, however horrific: “I put a pen to the paper, this time as visual as possible / Guns blast at the hospital” (Dusty). By being as “visual as possible,” allowing the listener to picture his poetic tale of horror, depicting a scene he describes as “harder than Harlem and Compton intertwined,” K’naan makes space for other narratives of young struggling people who exist outside the primary frameworks for those representations in hip-hop. Thus, K’naan adapts the hip-hop ghetto narrative and flips it to re-impose upon that space.

Michel de Certeau defines tactics as belonging to the Other, which indicates that rappers who use English, changing its intonations and meanings through grammatical reformation, and contest spatial representations, participate in a semiotic form of resistance: “A space of a tactic is the space of the other […] play on and with a terrain imposed on it […] tactic is an art of the weak” (Practice 37). While describing the marginalized and disenfranchised as “weak” is an unfortunate word choice on de Certeau’s part, the notion that the Other is always appropriating and challenging that which has been imposed upon them is a powerful representation for how protest works in K’naan’s poetics.
Taking on the role of the outlaw, a role K’naan was forced to adopt as a disenfranchised Somalian man living in a poverty-stricken area of Toronto, K’naan displays how tactical maneuvering is largely about how you choose to reveal yourself. In “Smile” (Dusty), K’naan embodies Baker’s notion of the “mastery of form,” which “conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee” (50), by asking his listeners (in a Gandhi, Mandela, and King, Jr. inspired tactic) to smile in the face of oppression and adversity: “(Smile) When you’re strugglin’ / (Smile) When you’re in jail / (Smile) When you’re dead broke / (Smile) And the rent’s due / (Smile) You ain’t got friends now / (Smile) And no one knows you / Never let ‘em see you down, smile while you’re bleedin’.” In “Smile,” K’naan endures various hardships, describing that he never thought he would “make it to fourteen,” and imparts the knowledge that despite the wars and violence he has witnessed, you need to find reasons to overcome adversity and find joy. “Smile” stings like a bee because the oppressor continues to view the oppressed as victims, when K’naan is calling a community of sufferers together to resist their outlaw status by tactfully finding hope and unity in the power of self-determination and community.

K’naan brings us directly into the struggle that he embodies, even in a supposedly safe space like Toronto (particularly, Rexdale), and calls together a community of post-sufferers in the anthemic track, “Strugglin’,” one of K’naan’s first singles from The Dusty Foot Philosopher. The music video opens with K’naan performing part of “Until the Lion Learns to Speak,” the words appearing in the epigraph to this section, with traditional Somali clothing, drumming, and women and children smiling and clapping along to the rhythm. Rather than perform with a DJ, K’naan prefers to draw from the oral poetic traditions of Somalia, and having seen him perform before, I know he often plays guitar or the traditional African djembe. After K’naan sings that his poetry “knows no boundaries” we are transported directly into the concrete jungle and local space of Toronto’s Somali community and “Strugglin’” begins, binding the traditional Somali rhythms of “Lion” to the North American folk-rap sound of “Strugglin’.” Yet it is the lyrics and global politics that guide K’naan, as he raps that he is “Forced by the loop and the guitar, but I’m the boss of the groove.” K’naan, like an ambassador for displaced people who are exiled from their Somalian—or elsewhere located—homes, guides us through the struggles he and others endure on a daily basis. “Strugglin’” is largely about surviving in a new environment and culture (here, Canada) where gang violence presents its own challenge. The song is written from K’naan’s perspective, using the lyrical pronoun “I” throughout: “I know struggle, and struggle knows me, / My life owes me, like an overdose / I’m slowly, drifting in the arms of trouble / Then trouble holds me.” The enjambment and simile comparing trouble to an overdose underscores the constant groove of pain for K’naan, describing how “nothing else is close
to me / More than pain unfortunately.” Despite the personal nature of the song, the video for “Strugglin’” focuses closely on various disenfranchised people in K’naan’s community who not only struggle, but remain resolved to maintain cultural identity.

In the video, the struggle is shown through group affiliation: the local connotes communal identity, and those who march with K’naan in the video signify unification in numbers. Acts of rallying and protesting function as ways to denote meaning; identity is formed through communal struggle, and for K’naan that means drawing his audience in by depicting how ubiquitous oppression is with pertinent cultural references, including then American President George W. Bush: “‘And ain’t much changed / Bobby is still troubling Whitney / And Bush is still bombing poor people, yo he’s deadly / And me I got a little recording gig, but evidently I’m / Strugglin’.’” Even though K’naan had a freshly signed record deal, he remains immersed within the struggle, largely because the fight for him is both personal and globally manifested in communal identification, which is much more of a threat to the oppressor than if K’naan simply detached himself from his people and played the role of solitary thug: a figure he vehemently disavows in his music. K’naan remains rooted through his various re-routings in the cyclical nature of community and tradition, which is why the video ends with a new baby that K’naan watches over, as if that child embodies the hope of a greater citizenship status, one where his people—Somalis and other oppressed peoples—struggle less. Through a poetry that knows no boundaries, “From Eritrea to the West Indies,” K’naan shows how struggle, like poetry, is something we all endure and fight to overcome—from Africa to Canada.

This is AfriCa/nada

Captain Richard Phillips: There’s got to be something other than being a fisherman or kidnapping people.

Muse: Maybe in America, Irish, maybe in America.
—Captain Philips (film)

“Dear Africa, you helped me write this / by showin’ me to give is priceless.”
—K’naan, Troubadour, “Take a Minute”

In “Talking Back to the Empire” K’naan describes how “Watching events in Africa, it’s so easy, surveying the hunger and the war, to forget how the dilemma faced by blacks today was all structured long ago at a conference table in Germany.” K’naan alludes to the Scramble for Africa, which was the invasion, colonization, and annexation of African territory by European powers, initially decided upon at the Berlin Conference of 1884. K’naan tells how Europeans invaded Africa and imposed a map on the continent to suit their geographical needs, dividing tribes and
communities and creating many of the problems that persist in modern Somalia. K’naan then responds to being asked at workshops whether or not there is a unified black community in Toronto, saying: “I was living in one, Jamestown (Rexdale), where we were dealing with weightier questions like ‘Where are the guns coming from?’” K’naan works to negotiate both the local problems he faces around identity, citizenship status, and gang violence, with the issues of global injustice that his brethren and sistren face in a Somalia, Africa at large, and elsewhere. K’naan’s choice to focus directly on life in Somalia, more so than life in Toronto, although he does touch on his immigrant experiences, is an effort to bring into greater focus those who exist outside the typical Canadian narrative—the immigrants, the plight of Somali people, essentially: the disposable—as fuller people, and therefore, more dynamic citizens. K’naan complicates the North American dream by depicting how people often speak on behalf of others who suffer outside that dream space.

While American thriller and 2013 summer blockbuster *Captain Philips*—starring Tom Hanks and Barkhad Abdi, based on the true story of a 2009 hijacking in which a merchant mariner named Captain Philips was taken hostage by Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean—does a poor job rendering the Somali characters as fully human (for example, the central Somali lead doesn’t get as much of a back story as Philips), the glaring differences between opportunity in America and Somalia are emphasized when Philips asks Muse (the central pirate): “There’s got to be something other than being a fisherman or kidnapping people.” Muse responds, “Maybe in America, Irish, maybe in America.” As K’naan asks in the chorus of his track “Somalia”: “So what you know bout the pirates terrorize the ocean? To never know a simple day without a big commotion.” On numerous occasions, K’naan has defended Somali pirates, telling the *Los Angeles Times*: “The west is completely ignoring the basis for piracy in Somalia. The pirates are in the water because there is a nationwide complaint about the illegal mass fishing going on in Somali waters. And nuclear toxic waste is illegally being dumped on our shores. People in Somalia know about this” (“SXSW”). By contrast, the film, mostly intent on providing a theatrical experience within market expectations is not actually concerned about what those glaring inequalities might be, for if it was it would be obliged to examine the events that led to the civil war in Somali, as well as depict (even a little) how foreign fishing destroyed the Somali fishing industry and spurred the initial insurgence of pirates. Never mind the fact that a film with a 55 million dollar budget (and which grossed over 100 million dollars) only paid the lead Somali American actor Barkhad Abdi $65,000.

In contrast, K’naan uses hip-hop to paint a fuller picture of Somali culture and tribulations, as discussed earlier in “My Old Home.” K’naan then undermines the superiority complex of “white” culture as the signifying category of Western society by providing examples of how in Canada he is
still read under the racial construction of the black/African outlaw, using that image to empower others. In “I Come Prepared” (Troubadour), K’naan depicts an instance—there are hundreds in rap lyrics, including Jay-Z’s well known “99 Problems”—where he is pulled over because he looks foreign (or black) and therefore dangerous: “How many immigrants are in this here Sedan / And is anyone carryin’ any contraband / Not really but I’m late for my concert man / And here’s a card for my lawyer Mr. Sam Goldman.” Despite being racially profiled, K’naan proudly announces his difference and Africanness, telling us straightforwardly that he was poor and is “a refugee been in prison and survived the war” (Dusty, “If Rap Gets Jealous”). K’naan assumes his prior refugee status to bring Africa into mainstream consciousness.

K’naan’s official debut, The Dusty Foot Philosopher was a critical success, winning the Juno Award for Rap Recording of the Year in 2006, and was shortlisted the same year for the Polaris Music Prize. The polished sound of the album—along with the follow up, Troubadour—and its unique vision comes from K’naan’s inclusions of traditional African rhythms and Somali lyrics, with carefully attuned production from well known Canadian music icon Jarvis Church, notorious for propelling Portuguese Canadian singer Nelly Furtado to fame. The title of the album is a resignifying of how Africans are typically displayed on television (most typically in charity programs), as K’naan reclaims the stereotypes that plague African representations in Western society:

the camera always kind of pans to the feet, and the feet are always dusty from these kids. What they’re trying to portray is a certain bias connected to their own historical reasoning, and what I saw though instead, was that that child with the dusty feet himself is not a beggar, and he’s not an undignified struggler, but he’s the dusty foot philosopher. He articulates more than the cameraman can imagine, at that point in his life. But he has nothing; he has no way to dream, even. He just is who he is. (qtd. in Pennycook, “Dusty Foot” 25)

In the track “For Mohamoud (Soviet),” from Dusty Foot, K’naan elaborates: “Dusty foot philosopher means the one that’s poor, lives in poverty but lives in a dignified manner and philosophizes about the universe and they talk about things that well-read people talk about, but they’ve never read or been on a plane, but they can tell you what’s beyond the clouds.” Consequently, K’naan deconstructs what defines education (as more than reading books) and Africanness (as more than dirty feet), and uses the dusty foot philosopher, as Alastair Pennycook and Tony Mitchell suggest in “Hip Hop as Dusty Foot Philosophy,” as a metaphor for how we can think about global politics and locality: “To have one’s feet in the dust is an image of localization that goes beyond appropriation of sounds, or references to local contexts. It speaks to a particular groundedness, a relationship to the earth that is
about both pleasure and politics. To walk barefoot is to be located in a particular way. In his adopted home, Canada, the impossibility of walking barefoot makes him “feel like a foreigner” (25-26). As K’naan puts it, and I concur with Pennycook and Mitchell, the image of the dusty foot philosopher provides a potent metaphor to rethink what we mean when we use words like impoverished.

Many of K’naan’s songs and videos are intended to take the listener and viewer directly inside an African space where language, hip-hop, community, and identity coalesce. K’naan’s music is part of a larger global hip-hop movement, and yet his concerted focus on the local experiences of his community in Somalia (Mogadishu) and Toronto (Rexdale) rejects the contemporary American imperialist form of hip-hop that focuses on club music and gangster posturing. Hip-hop remains a globally marketed phenomenon, adapting via a wide range of flowing circuits; further, as far as Hip Hop’s origins are concerned, the argument states that the music is equal parts black and Latino—Latino rappers could trace their cultural roots back to ancient Aztec warrior poets of Mexico (Brinkman 11)—and one could even make the case, as K’naan does, that Hip-hop is part of the African griot tradition. Pennycook and Mitchell propose that K’naan uses “Hip Hop to revive oral traditions in Somalia. From this point of view, then, Hip Hop can be a tool not so much of cultural imperialism, nor even of cultural affiliation or appropriation, but rather of cultural revival” (33).

While K’naan’s music is usually composed with live musicians, the samples that he does use are telling, since they often connect to Africa and the larger diaspora. The samples on Troubadour depict the complex African architecture of K’naan’s deliberate choice to use sound to carry ideas: Bob Marley and The Wailers’s “Simmer Down” on “T.I.A [This is Africa]”; Mulatu Astatke’s “Kasalefkut Hulu” on “ABCs”; Alemayehu Eshete’s “Tey Gedyeleshem” on “Dreamer”; Getatchew Mekurya’s “Shellela” on “I Come Prepared,” a track featuring Damien Marley; Tlahoun Gessesse’s “Yene Mastawesha” on “Somalia”; Tlahoun Gessesse’s “Lantchi” on “America”; and Tlahoun Gessesse’s “Yene Felagote” on “15 Minutes Away.” The strong African presence, particularly three renditions of songs from Ethiopian artist Tlahoun Gessesse (Ethiopia borders Somalia), depicts K’naan’s desire to have his sound nexus within popular musics and traditional African music.

In “The African Way” (Dusty) K’naan describes hip-hop as powerful tool for the poor, connecting various African countries and cultures in a united front:

I understood it [hip-hop] as the new poor people’s weapon
But now it tap ass like a chick with one butt cheek
Dusty foot philosopher came to change things, trust me
From Ethiopia, Tanzania, Somalia
Heathrow airport and customs in LaGuardia
Uganda, Kenya, my people, up in Ghana
Kingston, Jamaica, big up, because you know its time for
The African way

“The African Way” features Kenyan rapper Mwafrika who raps an entire verse in Swahili and Sheng (a slang combination of English and Swahili), which fits within K’naan’s larger desire to display the reciprocal loop of hip-hop, from, as K’naan raps, “Kenya to Canada.” By blurring the lines of comprehension for his largely North American audience, K’naan preserves cultural context (and language), displaying cultural distinctiveness, challenging his listeners to situate themselves beyond a typical English hip-hop framework. K’naan often raps in Somali, as in the chorus of “Soobax” (a word meaning “come with it”) from Dusty:

Nogala soobax, nogala soobax
Dadkii waa dhibtee, nagala soobax
Dhibkii waa batee, nagla soobax
Dhiigi waad qubtee, nagala soobax
Nagala soobax, nagala soobax

“Soobax” is a calling out of the various injustices taking place in “Somalia,” as K’naan relates that he works “for the struggle / I don’t do it for dough / I mean what I say / I don’t do it for show / Somalia needs all gunmen right out tha door.” The song depicts the degradation of Mogadishu and explains K’naan’s choice to remain a “refugee,” describing a puppet Somali government with no cards left to show. From Canada, K’naan is able to celebrate Africa and remain critical of the oppressive regime that forced him into exile: a negotiation very much like his conciliation of dual cultural identities, expressed in his blending of English and Somali. Lamenting the paucity of English, K’naan tells Pennycook he prefers Somali for its poetic quality, but ultimately blends the two because English is a language that crosses borders: “I mean, even if I was to speak to you in Somali just in conversation, you’d hear rhythm, and you’d hear rhyme, and most of the words I would use would have to begin in the same letter. It’s just because it is set up in poetry. So, when I compare it to Somali, English is very dry, and also very young sounding” (qtd. in “Hip Hop as Dusty Foot” 37). By using English, K’naan can reach a wider audience—not just in North American, but also in Africa—about the desperation facing life in Mogadishu; by including Somali lyrics throughout Dusty Foot and Troubadour, K’naan allows for a hip-hop of “synthesis and recombination” (Anthology xxiv): a hybrid reality not only of North America, but of the mixed cultural art practices in Africa.

K’naan’s use of Africa in his music is vast, from slumdog millionaire tales like “ABCs” (Troubadour), which presents Africa as a land of conflicting priorities where survival is more
essential than education, or in “15 Minutes” (*Troubadour*), which describes how receiving and then sending much-needed wired money transfers can save lives in Africa, to very direct depictions of Africa in the opening track “T.I.A” from *Troubadour*. The choice of Bob Marley and The Wailers’ first single, “Simmer Down” as the sample in “T.I.A” is illuminating, since The Wailers song is directed to the Rude Boys of the ghettos of Jamaica to simmer (calm) down; similarly, K’naan’s track condemns American rappers’ fabricated depictions of violence and hedonism, as well as Africa’s own dark history of aggression and bloodshed. The video for “T.I.A” opens with a T.V. screen depicting typical gangster rap videos and the subjective fantasy of an Africa formulated vis-à-vis the phantasmagorical West. The viewer’s own gaze is transported into the screen, as K’naan guides us “on a field trip” to Africa in a blending of mirage and reality to create the popular African space, stating at the opening that he “hopes [we] got our passports and vaccine shots.” In the video for “Soobax,” K’naan literally takes us to Africa, performing alongside Kenyan musicians and Somali exiles in Mobassa and Nairobi. The video for “Soobax” led fellow Toronto hip-hop artist k-os to call the video an act of colonialism, largely for what k-os saw as the manufacturing of cultural authenticity, rapping in “B-boy Stance” (*Joyful*): “Oh yes, the great pretenders / Religious entertainers who want to be life savers.” K’naan responded by releasing the track “Revolutionary Avocado,” which describes his own struggles to promote peace along with his impetus to fight injustice, calling k-os a “Suburban negro turned Hip Hop hero,” asking: “Is there a reason he really hates me, though?” The beef has since been squashed between k-os and K’naan, and they have since performed together. Essentially, the feud points to the challenge of representing or trying to speak about, or for, Africa—even for an exiled African—in a Canadian/ North American setting.

From within the cultural milieu of Toronto, K’naan is largely free to create a brand of hip-hop that mixes a variety of stylistic influences, from American hip-hop to traditional African rhythms in order to bring the struggle of Africa directly to Canada and beyond. K’naan told CBC that going to Toronto fit all the textbook expectations of Canada as a just society, qualifying that in practice justice is not necessarily the same for all people: “Here was a place where you weren’t in war. Great quality of life, good culture, good schools, but you have to understand that that is relative. Those checked boxes and dreams don’t apply to people equally in Canada. When you are an immigrant and a black immigrant where your parents don’t come with a certain education and you are running from war and you have nothing, you are at the mercy of society” (“Soccer and Song”). By bringing Africa to Canada and by discussing immigrant and refugee experiences, K’naan opens up new psychological facets for black marginality in Canada and shows that identity for the newly transported is markedly complex. Identity and identification within place, is, as Stuart Hall contends, a progression never
completed, and always in process: “actual identities are about questions of using the resources of
history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being” (“Introduction” 4). Like
Julia Kristeva’s notion of “le sujet en procès”—the subject in a continuous act of becoming—the
identity of the dusty foot philosopher, like the tumultuous history of Africa, is never static. K’naan’s
transferring—his cross-continental shipping—of his African past into a Canadian space says not only
T.I.A (this is Africa), but this is me—infinitely complex and mixed like the waters of the Atlantic
crossing from Africa to Canada, freely flowing like music.

H₂O Mix: “Music is Water”

The rich and poor, black and white got need for it (That’s right)
And everybody in the world can agree with this (Let em know)
Consumption promotes health and easiness (That’s right)
Go too long without it on this earth and you leavin’ it (Shout it out)
Americans wastin’ it on some leisure shit (Say word?)
And other nations be desperately seekin’ it (Let em know)
—Mos Def, Black on Both Sides, “New World Water”

Water: H₂O. In nearly every religion and culture around the world water is a purifier and an
act of creation. Peter mentions in the Bible that through the word of God “The earth standing out of
the water and in the water” (2 Peter 3:5). The Ancient Greek philosopher Emepocles listed water as
one of the classical elements. In literature, references to and metaphors about water are common,
from Homer’s “wine dark sea” to the drowning of Ophelia in Hamlet. Arthur Conan Doyle’s
Sherlock Holmes deemed that “‘From a drop of water […] ‘a logician could infer the possibility of
an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other” (Scarlet 19). Large
metropolises like Paris, Montreal, London, Vancouver, Chicago, Tokyo, and Hong Kong owe their
flourishing as cities in part to their accessibility to water, which allowed for greater and more diverse
trade. Simply put, water sustains life and without it the earth would be a dry wasteland—a cold
lifeless rocky planet hurtling through the vastness of space. Lacking water, life withers, and yet it
was paradoxically through water that the transatlantic slave trade prospered, and it was due to a lack
of water, as described in Chapter Two, the result of a navigational error aboard the slave ship the
Zong, that slavers felt justified in throwing African “cargo” into the sea in order to claim insurance
for them. How many bodies have been lost to the sea? Or equally as frightening, how many die every
year for want of clean water? According to the website Water.org, 780 million people lack access to
clean water, and a staggering—frightening, incomprehensible, reprehensible—more than 3.4 million
people die every year from “water, sanitation, and hygiene-related causes […] 99 percent, occur in
the developing world” (water.org). People die every day fighting for water, or worse, they die by
being denied access, sometimes by multinational corporations, to clean drinking water. The reality remains that water washes and sustains all people just the same; as Mos Def puts it: “The rich and poor, black and white got need for it.” Yet, water within the so-called developed world remains a common element of little value.

In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith provides a reading on the notion of value and measurement through the paradox of water and diamonds. Smith describes how diamonds, due to their scarcity, are very highly valued, while something essential to life like water is taken for granted (from a North American perspective). Smith writes: “The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water; but it will purchase scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it” (30). While much of Smith’s view of Africa was in regards to colonialism and slavery, describing Africa as a “barbarous nation” (516), his diamond and water analogy still, so to speak, holds water, especially in terms of modern globalism. Water is devalued in North America because it is common while diamonds are less ubiquitous, although due to the conflict diamond (blood diamond) trade during civil wars in countries like Angola and Sierra Leone they are certainly more customary than they were in the past. Capitalism almost always gives someone/a nation more at the expense of taking from someone else, or another nation.

This ambiguity surrounding diamonds as a signifier of value (in rap, “flossing”), as well as a symbol of oppression is explored in Kanye West’s “Diamonds From Sierra Leone” (*Late Registration*), a track that samples the theme from James Bond’s *Diamonds are Forever* by Shirley Bassey. In the track Kanye asks us to “Throw your diamonds in the sky if you feel the vibe,” a reference to the Roc-A-Fella (the label Kanye is signed to) hand sign, which is in the shape of diamond. The remix version of the track (featuring Jay-Z) opens with Kanye rhyming, “Good morning, this ain’t Vietnam, still / People lose hands, legs, arms, for real / Little was known on Sierra Leone / And how it connect to the diamonds we own.” While the original and remix of Kanye’s “Diamonds” touches on the notion of conflict diamonds with a level of ambiguity—the message at the end of music video for “Diamonds” asks us to buy conflict free diamonds—Kanye only scratches the surface of the conflict diamond problem, which is why rapper Lupe Fiasco, using the same beat, recorded a more political version titled, “Conflict Diamonds.” Fiasco’s adaptation calls out ruthless businessmen and racists like Cecil Rhodes (founder of De Beers) for his company’s plundering and modern day enslavement of Africans: “Cecil Rhodes sowed war and genocide / Into the countryside
just to get his shine on / I fear what De Beers and his peers used to do / Before the world really knew, just to get their mine on / Making paper with slave labour.” The agricultural metaphor of “sowing” volatility into the African countryside is telling of how the actions of colonialists and imperialists continue to plant malevolent gardens in Africa.\(^{2}\) Fiasco’s reference to making “paper” (money) from slave labour, the Africans who do the actual mining and yet get paid nearly nothing, further insinuates the colonial mentality that creates the economy of scarcity in the first place.

My digression into the paradox between diamonds and water is a roundabout way to think about how water inverts the diamond-water paradox in K’naan’s poetic “Wash it Down.” K’naan’s “Wash it Down,” the first track from Dusty, inscribes the value of water from both the African and human perspective as tantamount to sustaining life, as K’naan uses water as a metaphor and manifesto that relates to music and ultimately to freedom. The only instrumentation in the track is the rhythmic splashing sound of water made by women washing clothes in a river. K’naan’s voice—pitched higher than most rappers—smoothly flows over and within the rhythm of water as the rapper/poet reminds us of the magnitude of the importance of water for people in Africa (water based diarrheal diseases kill over a million children every year in Africa) in contrast to those citizens of capitalist democracies who deal with their own stress and take water for granted. In the North American framework of the track’s opening, water is referred to as purifier to release stress:

When you here in the water
You feel like it’s sorta
Releasin’ the tension, distress and disorder
Is big in America
Stephanie, Erica, both of them suffer from livin’ in here
Because
Livin’ is very competitive:
Hasslin’ creditors, hazardous accidents
Drivin’ with negligence
Too many beverages
People got too many things on they lettuces
TV’s deadliest professin’: the ugliest war, war, war, WAR!
What the hell you keep on killin’ me for?

Being within the water of the track releases the daily stress and disorder of simply trying to live, as people in America (and the Americas) are immersed in a life of stress from competition (“Livin’ is very competitive”), credit debt (“hasslin’ creditors”), reckless driving (“drivin’ with negligence”),
alcohol and soft drink consumption (“too many beverages”), obesity (“too many things on them lettuces”), and the constant bombardment of wars on their TV (Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, poverty, drugs, etc.). The “distress and disorder” is killing people emotionally, K’naan included, as the daily flood of media-based living devalues life and leaves many people emotionally etherized.

The next stanza within the single verse song takes us across the ocean to K’naan’s war-torn homeland of Somalia where he describes how he was “born in a pot boilin’ black and hot / Waitin’ to be tasted and rappin’ a lot / But justice would not come and eat my flesh / Instead, I had poverty to feed my stress […] So, I thought I was just made to exist / Not to live or change and resist.” K’naan’s trauma of growing up during a civil war is juxtaposed with the disorder and anxiety that consumes people in North America, not as more “authentic,” but as an example of the endurance of the human spirit. It is through music (that flows like water) that K’naan finds the strength to change and resist, calling others into the purification mix: “This is the therapy needed, so use it / People need music like they need excuses / People need water like Kanye needs Jesus / So wash it down.” The mention of Kanye—similar to a reference to “J-lo” in “My Old Home” uses a popular music source, here a simile referring to Kanye’s “Jesus Walks,” as a global identifier for people around the world. It also recalls, for me, the following line from Kanye’s “Diamonds”: “My father been said I need Jesus / So he took me to church and let the water wash over my Caesar.” Here again, water represents purification as the church water washes over Kanye’s “Caesar” (a type of haircut) and inverts the diamond and water paradox. Water and music have healing properties and both bind us together as people and citizens of the earth.

The chorus at the end of “Wash it Down,” “So wash it down,” is repeated like a mantra, and, as K’naan says in a spoken word moment, provides a “meditation for you to relax.” The onomatopoeic “wash it down” over the splashing rhythm of water allows K’naan’s meditative poetics to wash over us and invites cleansing from absolute difference in favour of our common humanity. K’naan then shifts the focus back to the importance of water to the Somali people as an instrument of music, life-substance, and even war and death: “My people drum on water / Drink on water / Live on water / Die for water.” Water affirms life and because of the lack of access to it, Somalia has had droughts that have left thousands dead; water too represents cultural struggle to attain value. By only using the sound of water to score “Wash it Down,” K’naan shows how water itself is instrumental to all people—it is the starting point of life and music. Music like water carries information and serves as a border crossing-praxis. It was hip-hop, sent to him across the ocean by his father in America, that K’naan describes as one of the forces that sustained his life and gave him strength to overcome his struggles. We create borders and maps, decide who merits clean drinking water, and yet even
something that appears stable like continents “are fluid and malleable assemblages whose boundaries have shifted over time” (Adams, *Continental 7*). With time the value of a diamond and water can shift, especially if people find themselves suddenly without access to one or the other.

Access to water is access to creative potential and freedom. For K’naan, the concept of music is fluid and malleable like water, and since no one owns water (or should), no one owns music (or should). When asked about the various remixes of his anthemic “Wavin’ Flag,” particularly the remix with 50 different Canadian musicians, K’naan relates how the song started off as part of something he began, but as in Somali tradition, once a song is released it no longer belongs to the artist who first performed it: “It was an incredible experience, and I remember not even being able to register that it was a song that I wrote. The Somalis have a great tradition in music where when you write and release a great song, everyone in the Somali artist community makes a rendition of it and sings it back to you. No one ever owns publishing on any Somali song, because an artist knows it no longer belongs to him. So a part of me feels like a guest of this song, like it’s this rare find, and I’m just fortunate to be the artist that first sang it” (“Interview”). K’naan’s humble approach to his most popular song is a reminder that the value of his music is hardly his alone, but that it belongs to all people in the way that citizenship is an inalienable right to all those who belong to a nation. Yet, we must remember the nation is imaginary (see Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*), but the effects that imagination places upon its colonial or subjugated occupants/denizens/citizens have very real physical and psychological consequences, especially in moments of national crisis. We can see these horrific physical and psychological consequences in Clyde Woods’ assessment of the Katrina hurricane in New Orleans as a blues moment: a blues moment because it stripped away all the veneer of acceptance and tolerance and showed that racism is still really alive in the United States. The Katrina moment—which is the response to Katrina, not the hurricane itself—compels us to consider, especially for those in the United States, what citizenship actually means for those who are disposed, who suffer in the waters we once again ignore, for the “thousands of people ain’t got no place to go” in Bessie Smith’s “Back Water Blues.” We turn from muddy waters to another purification moment that works against and within a blues moment, using K’naan’s song of global fraternity as another case study to explore the complicated notion of what it means to be a citizen within multicultural Canada, and more universally: what citizenship sounds like as voiced by disparate nations seeking to coexist within the larger global politics that connect us together—once again, like water.
“Wavin’ Flag”: Multicultural Planet

“On a planet of finite size, the most desirable of all characteristics is the ability and desire to cohabit with persons of differing backgrounds, and to benefit from the opportunities which this offers […] Every single person in Canada is now a member of a minority group […] We have no alternative but to be tolerant of one another’s differences.”
—Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Essential 145

The global phenomenon of “Wavin’ Flag”

Trudeau’s desire for a truly just society—one that is pluralistic and multicultural—is largely the same desire that K’naan articulates in his global smash hit, “Wavin’ Flag.” I think we need to move beyond the tolerance of the other’s difference, for there is also, as Trudeau states, “no such things as a model or ideal Canadian” (Essential 146), since it is in difference, in the space of whatever (Agamben)—where it doesn’t matter who we are so much as how we participate in celebrating diversity—that we can truly be free. Of course, unless you want to practice hate, intolerance, or inflict harm on others, in which case you will not fit within a truly and genuinely multicultural society. K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag” (from Troubadour) and its various remixes articulate the desire for the individual to belong to the larger collective of the nation, along with the desire to fit within a concept of united nations, much like the United Nations model in place. In one possible reading, “Wavin’ Flag” articulates multiculturalism as a sedative politics used to normalize ethnic diversity and to create tolerance rather than intercultural dialogue. In a more fruitful reading, “Wavin’ Flag” expresses the desire of multiculturalism to unite us despite our vast differences, and that regardless of our own inter- and multi-nationhood we can come together as a holistic group to celebrate and imagine what a truly just society might sound like, particularly in a heterotopic space like Canada—the only official multicultural country on the planet. For me, multiculturalism is an open signifier that changes depending on how we read its historical manifestations, which canons well with K’naan’s own desire for his “Wavin’ Flag” to enter the larger community who then “makes a rendition of it and sings it back to you” (Macleans). The various remixes of “Wavin’ Flag” indicate that through the death of the original song (along with the individual), a new creation/individual/state is born. Like multiculturalism, which is itself always changing—or idealistically, should be—“Wavin’ Flag” is a call to resist (particularly in the original version), or to celebrate difference and diversity (as in the “Celebration Mix”).

While The Dusty Foot Philosopher gained K’naan the recognition of critics as a gifted poet/MC, it was his song “Wavin’ Flag” from his follow up album, Troubadour, and its subsequent versions that propelled him to the level of one of Canada’s most internationally recognizable names
in music. Aside from the original version that appeared on the album, there have been three official English-language remixes, each with a music video (each with millions of YouTube views), and dozens of bilingual mixes in multiple languages, including the particularly popular Spanish cover featuring David Bisbal, which received its own music video. K’naan even published a children’s book, *When I Get Older: The Story Behind Wavin’ Flag* (2012), which covers the meaning behind the lyrics and the song’s history. In 2010, three English language music videos of the song were released and each with a different audience in mind. The original version (audio only) focuses on the struggles of refugees displaced by war with direct references to K’naan’s native Somalia, while later mixes, such as the World Cup version focus on celebration and global unity, which Coca-Cola calculatedly used to represent its global brand. The first remix, the Young Artists for Haiti version, was made as a response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake and featured an ad hoc group of 50 Canadian artists performing a line or two of the lyrics. The song became a charity single in Canada and featured everyone from Nelly Furtado, Sam Roberts, and Broken Social Scene, to Kardinal Offishall, Avril Lavine, and a rap verse from Drake. The popularity of this version—which reached number one in Canada—was followed a few months later when Coca-Cola decided to use a new “Celebration Mix” as a promotional anthem for FIFA World Cup 2010, hosted in South Africa. This version remains the most popular rendering and reached number one in Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, and number two in Italy, the United Kingdom, and Ireland (“Wavin’ Flag,” *Wikipedia*). Coca-Cola integrated the song with its own well-known jingle into its commercials, as an act I am terming corporate multiculturalism. Lastly, a remix of “Wavin’ Flag,” featuring French electronic music producer David Guetta and American rapper will.i.am was made for an international audience (mostly American) with parts of the lyrics once again amended. The multiple versions of a straightforward song attest to how pop markets will get as much traction (money) as possible from a given single. A less skeptical reading, fitting within the various indices of *Soundin’ Canaan*, sees the value of remixing, particularly given that the song was catchy enough to allow for cultural transference many times over (there are Japanese, Arab, and Nigerian mixes, among many others), and considers such transferences as a polyvalent assertion of the inherent multicultural nature of inter-nationhood and creation. As a hip-hop and folk anthem, “Wavin’ Flag” showcases how hip-hop as a global phenomenon, not only with international audiences, but also for a host of other cross-cultural identifications, provides a global forum though which displaced subjects can negotiate multiple concepts of identity/citizenship. Rap is more globally integrated and yet more powerfully regional than it has ever been, and the manifold versions of “Wavin’ Flag” display how easy it is to use hip-hop to form allegiances—however sound or
untenable—to fight injustice or claim cosmopolitan solidarity. The original captures the dissonance of being outside the dominant order and demands justice, describing the “violent prone, poor people zone” K’naan comes from, where Somalis are “struggling, fighting to eat / And we wondering, when we’ll be free.” The “Celebration Mix,” despite being made with opulent organizations such as World Cup and Coca-Cola in mind, envisions a society where freedom is achieved and where difference and poverty are overcome. In an interview with Macleans, K’naan seizes the opportunity to find celebration “from the melancholy nature of the original, which is about emerging from darkness, to one that considered what would happen if we actually acquired that freedom. Then it becomes a celebration.” Both versions articulate the tragedy and comedy of living in a society, envisioning a world where nations are no longer at war with their people, or other nations.

As K’naan describes, the initial song was about struggle, while the “Celebration Mix” signifies “the world coming together [rather] than a land coming apart” (“Anthem,” Toronto Star). Read in juxtaposition with one another, the original version captures the feeling of displacement and dissonance that comes with feelings of ambiguity towards belonging to the nation (Somalia/North America), along with K’naan’s own shifting refugee status, while the celebratory version is idealistic and assumes a level of homogeneity to the global construction of an international sport like soccer:

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Born to a throne, stronger than Rome
A violent prone, poor people zone
But it’s my home, all I have known
Where I got grown, streets we would roam
Out of the darkness, I came the farthest
Among the hardest survivors
Learn from these streets, it can be bleak
Accept no defeat, surrender, retreat
(Original)

Give me freedom, give me fire
Give me reason, take me higher
See the champions take the field now
You define us, make us feel proud
In the streets our heads are liftin’
As we lose our inhibition
Celebration, it surrounds us
Every nation, all around us
(Celebration Mix)
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While the celebration mix feels somewhat disingenuous, particularly since it was used throughout Coca-Cola’s entire campaign, from commercials to the FIFA World Cup Trophy Tour by Coca-Cola, when read beside the original, the remixes dually articulate what Cecil Foster in Genuine Multiculturalism calls the tragedy and comedy of multiculturalism. Essentially, the tragedy is society’s inability to bridge the differences of its diverse citizens (as in the original version), while the comedy is the imagining that it is possible to organically progress towards fraternity and solidarity among disparate groups of people, which K’naan uses through the international game of
soccer: “See the champions take the field now […] Celebration, it surrounds us.” The music video for the “Haiti mix” maintains the original lyrics (with some amendments and a rap verse from Drake), using video footage of the devastation caused by the earthquake to elicit sympathy, encouraging audiences to donate and participate in the crucial comedy of rebuilding tragedy-stricken communities; by contrast, the “Celebration Mix” video uses the implied multicultural format of FIFA to assume unity. Gone is the minor tone of the original, which is replaced by kids of various ethnic backgrounds playing soccer.

Like state-sponsored multiculturalism, Coca-Cola’s corporate multiculturalism is particularly limited in what it actually manifests in the real world. During the Trophy Tour, K’naan worked hard with the FBI, Coca-Cola, and the Somali government to find a safe place for the cup to land in Somalia, describing how when “Coke and FIFA decided they couldn’t do it, I was so disappointed I actually considered not going on the trophy tour at all” (Maclean). Once again, here is the tragedy of trying to promote unity through a corporate framework: a corporate structure that is only marginally interested in the hopes of an artist whose own country remains on the borders of the very celebration K’naan promotes. K’naan tells Maclean that he decided not to drop off the tour because he would “only be denying myself. What I was doing on the trophy tour was a great thing—exploring different parts of the world, getting to know my continent that I was born in. But, literally the day after the African portion of the trophy tour ended, I took the plane back home and I decided to go to Somalia myself.” K’naan’s adapting his lyrics for Coca-Cola and FIFA is certainly problematic, especially since Coca-Cola’s corporate profile reads like a list of crimes against humanity: from the health effects and pesticides in their products, exploitative labour practices, environmental degradation, monopolistic business practices, to building plants in Nazi Germany which employed slave labour, and much more that could be explored beyond the scope of this brief critique. Coca-Cola asked K’naan to change his lyrics chiefly because the references to “a violent prone, poor people zone,” and people “struggling, fighting to eat,” didn’t fit the campaign’s themes (Prince, “World Cup”). However, for K’naan Coca-Cola is a mechanism in a larger transnational framework that allows his mix to be more widely heard: a mix that imagines conflict and poverty are momentarily put aside to celebrate a more diverse society.

The same challenges arise in “Young Artists for Haiti” where a large group of mostly privileged Canadian musicians create a multicultural and bilingual mix to raise awareness and send relief aid to Haiti. I think this version, especially since it maintains some of the original lyrics and feel, is more successful than the “Celebration Mix” in articulating the tragedy and comedy of multiculturalism. The song uses the flag—kids in the video hold the Haitian flag, rather than the
Canadian one—as a unifying element that promotes the right to equal citizenship, recalling that the Canadian flag represents, for most Canadians, an inalienable right to citizenship status and equality. More widely, Drake’s rap verse places responsibility on Canadian citizens to think of themselves as part of a larger global network (something Canadians imagine themselves being good at) to help those in need: “How come when the media stops covering / And there’s a little help from the government / We forget about the people still struggling.” The video displays a united front (a chorus) of Canadian musicians of all genres and ethnic backgrounds, and the video incorporates clips from the Haiti disaster to facilitate a cross-neighborhood and transnational dialogue that assumes joint responsibility for creating the world we want to imagine. As Tricia Rose describes, the “Music video is a collaboration in the production of popular music; it revises meanings, provides preferred interpretations of lyrics, creates a stylistic and physical context for reception; and valorizes the iconic presence of the artist” (*Noise* 8-9). Each video for “Wavin’ Flag” is a reinterpretation of the universality of struggle and coalition politics, and an example of how the popular appropriates the margin to the centre. “Wavin’ Flag” becomes even more unrecognizable in the international and uptempo version featuring will.i.am and David Guetta, which uses a solid black flag to further abstract the concept of (inter)nationalism. This is partly how global multiculturalism works: by removing specificity it allows for more diversity and accommodation, but therefore greater abstraction of individualism and regionalism—although, as individuals, we can still resist and change. As K’naan suggests in the original, people are stronger than the attempts to control them by the leaders of conflict, and we are capable to “move forward like Buffalo Soldiers.” To be truly multicultural is to be *in process* and to resist the old orders that K’naan believes “can’t hold us.” Like a flag, moving back and forth in the wind, or like the mix moving back and forth on the turntable platter, to be a citizen within the imaginative act of a country represented by its flag is a multicultural process—by which I mean, we are not fatally determined by our pasts, however “violent prone.”

*Multicultural citizenship: an exercise in Blackness*

So far I’ve used “Wavin’ Flag” as a global anthem that imagines that we are united by our individual connections to the nation within the larger cosmopolitan—perhaps cosmological even—imagining of transnational unity between nations. This negotiation between the self, the larger nation, and the larger global sphere is represented by hip-hop’s own glocal framework—a specific form of creolization and mix that recalls the process of multiculturalism. Thinking of multiculturalism as an unfixed variable locus of culture is useful in considering that wherever there is culture, acculturation, and contact zones, there is multiculturalism. Canada itself, the only officially multicultural country at
the level of policy, provides a unique locus that allows acculturation to occur, providing space for a Liberal Prime Minister like Trudeau to imagine Canada as a just society comprised of many diverse people who are all immigrants to the larger project of constructing a Canada that is always changing. In 1971 Trudeau declared Canada would have a multicultural policy, and in 1972 Trudeau formed the Multiculturalism Directorate, followed by the Race Relations Unit in 1982, although The Multiculturalism Act was not passed until 1988 when Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister.

At its most basic level, The Act recognizes Canada’s multicultural heritage, the need to preserve that heritage, Aboriginal rights, English and French as the official languages, equality rights regardless of skin colour, religion, and the right of minorities to honour their cultures. Uniquely, the policy as envisioned by Trudeau merges—like a DJ mixing records—discourse around nation, community, minority rights, diversity, and language. Trudeau, working with the “desire to cohabit with persons of differing backgrounds” (Essential 145) strove, as the Act proper states, to “3. (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.” The initial enunciation was also a strategy on Trudeau’s part to ensure English and French languages remained central to Canada’s heritage, directly confronting the schism in Quebec between the English and French; more subversively, as a policy, the Act provided support—even if largely in discourse—to immigrants and migrants and the job discrimination and language conflicts that were endemic to those experiences. Under this conception, multiculturalism, which began as an official and institutional discourse, is a hope to bring greater citizenship status to those who have been viewed outside the aged and static Canadian narrative that I have argued elsewhere in the thesis is neo-mythically white. Further, critiquing multiculturalism, Himani Bannerji maintains that because the ethnicities of English and French Canada are not acknowledged in the policy, “the whiteness in the ‘self’ of ‘Canada’s’ state and nationhood” is left anonymous (“Dark Side” 110), making the white centre transparent and universal while marked and visible cultures are placed along the margins. Others read multiculturalism as a response to the demographic hysteria of immigration that continues to invoke fear for the gatekeepers of Canada who want to hold onto the garrison mentality of Canada as a white settler nation. At best, as Mark V. Campbell has suggested, “Canadian Multiculturalism is a utopian governmental ideal, an unfinished project that is always in process” (“‘Connect the T.Dots’” 265). Yet, given Canada’s history of exclusion, it is no surprise that many immigrants, or First Nations people, do not see themselves as Canadian, preferring absolute difference, rather than something along the lines of K’naan’s “Celebration Mix,” which is perhaps founded on tolerance when what is needed is a more
discordant sounding that acknowledges the improvisatory process of sounding citizenship.

Critiques of multiculturalism are numerous—I outline many of them in Chapter One—and are often framed by those who have lived through immigrant or refugee experiences in Canada and find multiculturalism little more than a discursive strategy of tolerance that, as Mark V. Campbell warns, “positions social difference as deviant from the ‘norm,’ creating a hierarchy where the ‘norm’ must put up with people who are not deemed normal” (256). In Making a Difference, Smaro Kamboureli states that for “some Canadians, then, the tolerance they see multiculturalism advocating threatens their understanding of Canadian history and augurs against the development of a cohesive Canadian identity, which they think should be the goal of the nation” (xxix). Tolerance can promote sameness; diametrically, it can represent the fear that the nation itself will not be cohesive, but rather will manifest a variety of dissonant soundings without harmony. In addition, Peter S. Li, in “The Multiculturalism Debate,” views multiculturalism as a muddled policy that lacks lucidity since its policy seems to change with its political emphasis, without precise or substantial content. I argue, in accordance with Cecil Foster’s radical imaginings of multiculturalism, that it is precisely this lack of definitive terms that allows multiculturalism in Canada to function idealistically as a hope that individuals can overcome the finite limits of geographical boundaries and social stratification to imagine a more inclusive version of the nation: the imagined holding place we belong to as Canadian citizens. K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag” complicates the official Canadian multicultural model by asking us to consider what happens when you take that idealistic model and think it through on a global level.

Sabine Milz thinks through the connection between multiculturalism and global and national capitalism to provide a reading that views multiculturalism as the latest buzz word to sell neo-liberal politics and identity to masses: “global capitalism has increasingly legitimized multicultural politics as a means to create economic progress and identity […] Canadian multiculturalism has become a positive guise for Canadian neoliberal capitalism and English- and French-Canadian cultural hegemony” (“Multicultural Canadian” 153). Milz’s argument is not without its merit, as she presents a frightening prospect of multiculturalism as a sedative model, especially when we comparatively examine how drastically hip-hop has changed as capitalism has appropriated the music and culture closer to the norm and less as a productive voice of cultural agency belonging to the oppressed. In fact, the more that “Wavin’ Flag” is played on the radio, and the more it is sonically used for Coca-Cola’s own brand recognition, the more the song begins to feel like advertising from the corporate multicultural machine. In an interview, K’naan was asked if he thought that Coca-Cola, “that great emblem of economic imperialism,” compromises his message, to which he, somewhat evasively, responded: “No. I know how I got to where I am, and I’ve never had to adapt to become something
else. I write my songs, I play them and I’m very honest about my stage presence” (*Macleans*). While I hardly want to chastise an artist who has given so much of himself to his music and continues to inspire people, K’naan himself, in a confessional piece, after recording his latest record, *Country, God or the Girl* (2012), described in the *New York Times* how the pressure of the music industry altered the socio-political content of his latest music: “Right now, the pressures of the music industry encourage me to change the walk of my songs […] So some songs became far more Top 40 friendly, but infinitely cheaper […] I come with all the baggage of Somalia — of my grandfather’s poetry, of pounding rhythms, of the war, of being an immigrant, of being an artist, of needing to explain a few things […] I may never find my old walk again, but I hope someday to see beauty in the graceless limp back toward it” (“Censoring”). It is in a charged confessional moment like the one that K’naan shares with the *New York Times* that the corporate machine’s machinations become more visible, as a company like Coca-Cola, whether K’naan intends it or not, subsumes multiculturalism and Blackness as *authentic* signposts to essentially sell more soft drinks. Fortunately, multiculturalism, or music, which although paid for by consumers on digital platforms like iTunes, or on physical formats like CDs, can never actually be sold. For how can you sell a dream?

While I’ve outlined some of the qualms around state multiculturalism and the appropriation of multicultural ideals by major corporations like Coca-Cola, I’d now like to turn to the notion that multiculturalism idealistically declares that people can live freely and imagine, as K’naan, and as a Canadian critic like Cecil Foster does, that there is value in dreaming a raceless society. Official multiculturalism in Canada has helped a number of writers and artists who have become more visible in the Canadian arts scene through multicultural grants, which, as a result, affirms that “Canadian literature displays a vibrancy and diversity that derives from a real mixing of sources, influences, and origins” (Young 109). Yes, Canadian literature, and Canada more generally, is productively mixed: multicultural Canada is a fragmented collective of many ethnic and racialized groups who are held together by a notion to believe in what is good and what is right. I think it is right to herald that the death of whiteness in Canada has already passed—even if it discursively survives as I’ve argued in various places in *Soundin’ Canaan*—as we now live in a multicultural reality. Multiculturalism is, as Foster suggests, “part of the consciousness of Blackness and that, at least ontologically, epistemologically, and ethically, multiculturalism is Black and an exercise in Blackness” (*Blackness* xiv). Consequently, multiculturalism presents an opportunity for creative and iconoclastic destruction of the old structures, hierarchies, and even some individual rights, in the creation of more non-authoritarian soundings that embrace difference and allow more citizens to sound with or against one another in a polyphonous mix. Thus, my imagining of the potential of multiculturalism is far from
what Cecil Foster describes as a tragedy, but participates in the comedy that he foresees: “*genuine multiculturalism* is that it assumes that nations and states are constructed mechanically, indeed pragmatically, in the moment, by the people, for the people, and of the people—that is, *citizens*” ([Genuine 3](#)). The only constant in life is change, which is why even the original darker version of “Wavin’ Flag” is predicated on the hope that one day justice and universal citizenship rights can become a multicultural reality for all people: “But we struggling, fighting to eat / And we wondering, when we’ll be free / So we patiently wait for that faithful day / It’s not far away, but for now we say.” K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag,” in its various manifestations, tells the story of a world that changes organically if the people are willing to fight for what they believe in.

Foster’s notion of genuine multiculturalism is “about telling tales of a coming time when tragedy will end” (15): it “is about clinging to humanity in the face of unimaginable alternatives” (22). The very notion of multiculturalism is subversive and chaotic since it implies that the modern nation and the self is always a process and an exercise that involves improvising with others and cultures that appear foreign to our own ways of life—it is a stepping outside of ourselves to allow for the greatest amount of freedom for all people in a society. Given that Canada is so new—not as a land mass, or as a place to live (it’s been inhabited by Aboriginal nations for thousands of years), but as a country called Canada—we are presented with a unique opportunity to model what multicultural citizenship might sound like, drawing inspiration from the diverse cultural composition of Canada, particularly in a city like Toronto. Multicultural citizenship acknowledges that our identities in multiculturalism are not fixed, but are always changing. Just to live is, as Foster articulates, inauthentic (41), so why not embrace the beautiful *inauthenticities*? “Wavin’ Flag”’s chorus, “When I get older / I will be stronger / They’ll call me freedom just like a waving’ flag,” is an act of faith that assumes not only that we can change, dreaming what we can be, but that the larger society can continue to work towards the ideal that both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Trudeau imagined as the just society. At the end of “Wavin’ Flag,” K’naan sings about the ultimate goal of multiculturalism, which is a vision that imagines global fraternity between all people: “And everybody will be singing it / And you and I will be singing it / And we all will be singing it.” While I’ve argued throughout *Soundin’ Canaan* for the value of what Ajay Heble calls “things not in harmony” (“Sounds of Change”), there is also value in imagining what harmony itself might sound like, for even dissonance can promote a kind of social concord.

A multicultural citizenship is more than tolerance, and it is certainly more than integration. It is about learning to improvise and build the Canada we all want to imagine, which means reworking and revisiting what that might mean every couple of years: a good reason we have political elections
in democratic countries, and a good reason that people should actively vote and participate in the construction of the imagined nation. As Will Kymlicka compellingly affirms, “The fact that community rights exist alongside individual rights goes to the very heart of what Canada is all about” (27). The highest expression of our connection to others is our shared status that comes with equal citizenship, which is why Trudeau articulates we are all “a member of a minority group” in the remix project of Canada, and why Foster describes citizenship as that which “renders meaningless stratification and socialization according to such categories as ethnicity, gender, language, place of birth, sexuality—indeed of all social categorizations other than citizenship itself” (Genuine 5). Canada represents a possible—put on the world stage through K’naan’s own multicultural “Wavin’ Flag”—opportunity to model what that citizenship might sound like, even though “Canada has played,” as K’naan suggests for the immigrant, “both the saviour and the villain, especially at the beginning, during the time of integration and assimilation” (Macleans). By embracing immigrants and social Others more fully into the multicultural mix—by no longer racially stratifying people in relation to their citizenship—we can move beyond Canada as a closed homogenous national community, and into, as Heble suggests, “a recognition of the role that multiple other histories have played in the construction of Canadian identity, to move beyond nationalism into a consideration of the complex traffic between and within cultures and regions” (“Sounds”). I’m not sure exactly what this might sound like in the context of Canada’s multicultural future, but we will be stronger, “And we all will be singing it.”

**Remix 6**

To the guys that draw lines and make the borders real  
But then bend the rules when there’s more to drill  
Don’t turn away the stateless, think of the waste  
If one in three refugees is a Lauryn Hill  
—Shad, Flying Colours, “Fam Jam”

Hip-hop, much like multiculturalism, remains an important immigrant-inspired medium that resists the old hierarchies and promotes new opportunities to negotiate dissonant communities that feel out of tune with the normalized production of the nation-state. Hip Hop as a culture is also, once again like multiculturalism, an organic process that is itself dialogic, much like the image of the hip-hop cypher: a charged circular space where different MCs extemporaneously exchange verses in the construction of the mix. I contend that both hip-hop and multiculturalism are not dead, certainly not in Canada, and that both are concerned with the hopes and struggles of existing in a modern world
that is becoming increasingly digitized and global in its politics. More than any other musical genre today, hip-hop music is embraced by youth cultures around the world who are interested in the form for its storytelling potential, its resistance, and the entertaining reprieve from the daily grind that hip-hop affords many people. Hip Hop itself is a learning tool and conduit to enhance cultural competence and the fact that youth culture has embraced the medium for nearly 40 years is an indication that there is value in learning how to incorporate hip-hop pedagogies into our teaching; yes, even in Canadian Literature. Hip-hop remains an effective tool for political mobilization and action, although in America and Canada this is rarely the case since major corporations often subsume Black culture as a commodity to sell to white kids in the suburbs.

All the more reason that we need to provide young people with the tools to read the popular, since Hip Hop requires active listening on a level surpassed by few, if any, popular mediums. It is self-referential, highly dialogic, and woven together by a matrix of cultural signifiers. The act of listening for hip-hop artists is often the act of reading: “You can play us and repeat us and then take us home and read us” (Black Star, “Definition”). Hip Hop music might just be the ideal starting place for the Cultural Revolution. In the words of bell hooks, “cultural criticism can be and is a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies” (Outlaw 7). I think hip-hop can simultaneously signify both, especially if we dually read the type of hip-hop interested in tearing down the old garrisons in order to form new allegiances. As Mark Anthony Neale writes in “Jazz, Hip-Hop, and Black Social Improvisation,” “hip-hop provides powerful evidence of the ability of black youth to use their improvisatory musical practice(s) to also create and improvise opportunities in their social, political, and cultural lives” (220). Black youth (although hardly exclusively), particularly in Toronto, continue to use hip-hop to improvise meaning from the unmeaning status they’ve been assigned.

For example, Shad’s recent single “Fam Jam (Fe Sum Immigrins)” —a throwback and toast to the trials of immigrant experience in Canada—deconstructs the faulty notion that immigrants contribute little to Canadian society by providing potent examples of how immigrants construct the new Canada, consisting of the catchy hook, “Not bad, huh, for some immigrants?” The hook is a direct sampling of Jay-Z’s identical line in the track “Otis,” which itself was taken from the movie Scarface: a film about the perversion of the American dream. In the Canadian context, the line sounds the possibility of the Canadian dream within the larger multicultural project. Shad describes that on working on “Fam Jam” (from Flying Colours) “in the city of Toronto offered a daily reminder of the diversity of stories in our midst. This diversity is often and rightly celebrated, but the innumerable stories that comprise our treasured multiculturalism here in Canada can also hold a lot
[sic] pain, as well as some complicated questions around what it means to succeed, and what it means to belong” (Blog, “Fam Jam”). The feeling of not fully belonging is manifested when Shad raps, “Don’t turn away the stateless, think of the waste / If one in three refugees is a Lauryn Hill,” referring to the Grammy winning artist who was part of the group The Fugees, a word derived from refugee, which was a derogatory term for Haitian Americans. The video for “Fam Jam” provides a celebratory mix where the larger community gathers—family, friends, children—in order to throw a large party that celebrates diversity. Like K’naan’s negotiation between borders and two worlds—Somalia and North America—Shad confronts his own negotiation of borders: “Now when you’re Third World born, but First World formed / Sometimes you feel pride, sometimes you feel torn / See my Mother’s tongue is not what they speak where my Mother’s from / She moved to London with her husband when their son was 1.” Shad, who was born in Kenya of Rwandan parents, uses his own story as an example of how much an immigrant can achieve in order to remove the negative connotations of the word, suggesting that Canada should allow for dual identities and cultural allegiances if it is to work against global colonialism and be a truly multicultural society.

K’naan’s music, the primary focus of this chapter, uses hip-hop and Somali culture as an imperative mix for social change. K’naan thinks of himself as a cultural translator, since he has lived “in both worlds and truly understand them. I understand the discontent that comes from not having. But I also understand the anxiety that comes from wealth and convenience” (Macleans). Hip Hop incites cultural translation, teaching people about the struggles of others they might otherwise never consider, most fecundly bringing marginalized voices more into the citizenship and socio-cultural mix. Describing himself as “something like Gil Scott-Heron” with the “bitterness in the killer the poet” (Dusty, “Voices in My Head”), K’naan remains resolute in his desire to tell his story as an inspiration to others who suffer on a daily basis. While many of K’naan’s lyrics are politically charged—from depicting the challenges of home/homeland and war in “My Old Home,” to songs of personal crisis such as in “Fatima” (Troubadour), which describes the true story of a girl he was incredibly close to named Fatima who was left behind in Somalia, and who was shot and killed only a few days after he left the country—the production of his songs, for the most part, are not particularly dissonant, or sonically challenging. The production of his music lacks much of the militancy heard in groups like Public Enemy or Dead Prez, or heard in a rapper like Immortal Technique, but it is actually the pop structure, mixed with the traditional Somali elements that allow K’naan—once again using a mastery of form—to bring his message to a varied audience. By looking at citizenship through the lens of music in hip-hop poetics as an often dissonant site of struggle and identity formation, we can see how hip-hop participates (at least for K’naan) in much of
contemporary CanLit’s occupation to challenge social norms, provide critical interventions, and enact social change. We have come full circle—or better yet, I’ve played all the records I intended—in my version of an African Canadian celebration mix. But, just like a waving flag, “then it goes back,” as we head into a final remix to reconsider the various resonances of *Soundin’ Canaan*: as new listening communities dreaming the Canadian community still to come.
OUTRO

what elders and children
walk with old-time knowledge […]
tell me who
and I will sit suddenly
by the rivers of their feet
washing away all the unknowing I have come to know
relearning a language of integrity honesty and compassion
scribed on our heart’s tongue
by the ancients
whom I have forgotten
—d’bi.young anitafrika, “rivers and other blackness between us”

I. THE CRITIC AS POET & CITIZEN—or—THE POET AS CITIZEN & CRITIC

Remixing CanLit

“The journey is the destination”
—Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return 203

In music, the final section of a composition is referred to as the coda (the tail), or in slang, as the outro. I prefer the slang term given that it takes the reverse of the “in” in “intro” and provides an “out”—a circular closing in relation to the beginning, like bookends. The closure in an outro is usually provided by thematic repetitions, as in the exposition in the tonic key in classical music, or repetition of the chorus or a gradually fading out in pop music. Like Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, we have reached our epilogue moment and now return underground to think through our experience before emerging back into the world. I’ve mixed a lot of different records and theorists together with a desire to play them like Ellison’s unnamed narrator “all at the same time” (8). I’m aware that this level of eclecticism in a thesis likely produces some abstraction, theoretical dissipation, and incommensurability, but my dialogic approach reflects the various poets’ desire to create—as poetry is always a making—texts that echo (canon) a vast sonic world of other soundings. I’ve applied music and poetry as unifying elements to examine larger contours like citizenship and identity, believing that both music and poetry are dialogic modes of thought that value difference and dissonance, and inherently allow for malleable conceptions of citizenship.

The dialogic model welcomes an ongoing conversation and (as Mikhail Bakhtin compellingly suggests) all speech, even when composed by a single speaker, “actually contains
mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two languages, two semantic and axiological systems (Dialogic 304). Bakhtin’s dialogic model is an opening that acknowledges the competing axiological systems we negotiate on a daily basis, and which fits well with my own notion of the polyphonic mix a DJ provides. By inviting multiple theorists, poets, and sonic confluences into the mix, Soudin’ Canaan provides varied points of entry into the literature, and makes the bridge between literary and social models perhaps more possible to envision. This doesn’t mean we can do away with specificity, as I focus on the particulars and cultural framework of a text throughout the thesis—synthesizing the old with the new, the analogue with the digital. In Decolonising the Mind, Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts that we need to study African literatures in context, focusing on the particular oral traditions and languages from which Africans frame their narratives. I’ve tried to remain attuned in each chapter to what those cultural particulars are for the writers discussed, providing notes where possible, to offer the listener/reader some grounding of how we can approach African Canadian literature and culture, while also applying African American and diasporic frameworks to the discussed writers who use these frameworks themselves.

Some of the soundings by the poets are resistive, hostile even, and what is in fact polyphonic might sound rather monologic to readers if they feel closed out. Part of the need for, and manifestation of, resistive literature on the part of African Canadian writers is an unforgiving desire to reclaim history and that which has been taken from an entire group of people for over 400 years, which is why I’ve included debates in the thesis around naming (Black Canadian vs- African Canadian, or some other more specific identification), (mother tongue -vs- father tongue), nation and transnationalism, gender, race, and approaches to history, among other multifarious debates and discussions. Many of these debates begin at the level of language, because as Angela Davis observes in the film, Black is... Black Ain’t, “we have an obsession with naming ourselves because for most of our lives we have been named by other people.” Historically, African Canadians have struggled for equal citizenship and the right to control their cultural depictions: one need only look at French Canadian artist François Malépart de Beaucourt’s 1786 painting Portrait of a Negro Slave or Negress, now known as Portrait of a Haitian Woman, to visually see how black people have historically had their representations depicted for them. Thus, there is particular value to disturbing certain historical representations, and music, as I’ve argued, provides a veritable locus to disturb history since it invites play, interpretation, and, like a jazz group, allows for individual creativity within a larger collective.

In “Sounds of Change” Ajay Heble uses a similar framework, focusing particularly on free jazz, “to suggest that music—especially dissonant music—has a valuable, if unsuspected, role to play
for theorists of Canadian literature, culture, and history and that its modalities and modulations can provide a useful way of reinvigorating our understanding not only of where Canadian literature has been but also of where the discipline might be heading.” Dissonance can be particularly enabling, especially if we can still come together and create a truly multicultural society despite our differences. As a critical lens to explore Canadian literature—for me, African Canadian literature, but it is useful beyond that context—I too find that music, like any human universal, is useful in thinking about literatures “out of tune” with the larger body of the so-called Canadian canon—if there is even such a homogenous thing. Therefore, while K’naan’s rap poetry is customary to most rap songs, yet blended with unique Somali elements, and while NourbeSe Philip’s poetry is fragmented and improvisationally dissonant, both approaches succeed in using music to sound a past that haunts the present. K’naan might have a larger audience than the other poets explored, but his desire to provide new ways of seeing the world and to create more space for marginalized voices through hip-hop is virtually the same longing Philip expresses through her dub chant; Clarke through his blackening of the sonnet and infrapoetic blues; Brand via her disruptive jazz poetics; and Compton vis-à-vis his schizophrenophilic and Legba-trickster approach. It is through music and poetry that new ideas come into the world, which is why Lillian Allen describes poetry as an act of motherly love in “The Poetry of Things”: “Giving birth is the model for all new and revolutionary ideas. When we create a poem, we also give birth to new vibrations, new rhythms, new ways of seeing, new ways of knowing and new possibilities in the world. The work of the poet is that of midwife and birth mother” (Psychic Unrest 13). Poetry then—and I extend this analogy to music—is a form of citizenship that is active, like labour, where ideas are wrangled with, shaped, dreamed up, and brought into the world. It’s not as important that we merely arrive at a destination—as Brand writes, “The journey is the destination”—but that we continue to find new places to go.

As readers and critics of Canadian literature we too are engaged in the poetic, since it is through a making—that is, a dreaming—that we imagine the type of future we want for Canadian literature. Largely gone from Canadian Literature are the old xenophobic myths of Canada as a white androcentric settler nation (although David Gilmour might suggest otherwise); rather, being born in CanLit are multiple genuinely authored multicultural texts that interrogate Canada’s past to dream of a more just society. Philip’s Zong!, Clarke’s Blue, Black, and Red, Brand’s Ossuaries, Compton’s Performance Bond, and K’naan’s Dusty Foot Philosopher and Troubadour don’t just teach us to be better listeners (citizens even), but they make us more Canadian—that is, they take us more into Canada’s margins to show there never were margins to begin with, only limited perspectives of where we historically place value. I’ve provided ways in each chapter we can read these texts,
because there is no criticism—and there are certainly no CanLit critics—without ideology. The type of theory I’ve mixed together is akin to the critique which contests models that are Eurocentric, rooted in sexism, and racially biased frameworks of old. This improvisatory mix—since I freely adapt and combine theories as I go—focuses on the value of dissensus and process rather than providing clear-cut answers. There are rarely singular interpretations in good poetry, and Canada continues to gift the world with first-rate poetry. In the process of Soundin’ Canaan I’ve argued for the value of canons as frameworks for literary organization and understanding, selecting a group of African Canadian writers who should be included in any contemporary Canadian canon, suggesting that canons—that Canaan—can aid in making judicious links between a larger nexus of materials intersecting within the field of Canadian literature.

Hopefully students of African Canadian literature, and CanLit more broadly, along with students of cultural studies, find the material herein (hear in) useful in understanding the complex process of cultural production, finding new tools with which to interpret texts and think through social movements, popular culture, and broader struggles for social justice, particularly as articulated by the writers explored. Part of my intention was to enliven the criticism around Canadian literature, and to defamiliarize what is a common approach in African American studies by transplanting it into a Canadian framework. The engagement and egalitarian willingness of the poets to share their processes with me (Cecil Foster, M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, d’bi.young, and Wayde Compton) have made this thesis infinitely richer. It is an educational blight that students can go through entire English programs in Canada—even specializing in Canadian Literature—and never encounter an African Canadian text (Brand, No Burden 29; Mensah 25; Walker 3). While American students can specialize in African American Literature—you can even get a degree in hip-hop studies—a student in Canada cannot even get a minor in African Canadian literature. It is no surprise that when questioning the students in a second year university course I taught, most students had never heard of George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Wayde Compton, or Esi Edugyan—despite the accolades those writers have all received within the Canadian cultural merit system. They had unsurprisingly heard of K’naan, also on the syllabus, but they lacked the tools to engage critically—particular in a Canadian context—with the historical intricacies that intersect with Black Canadian literature. According to many of their evaluations they felt that their high school educations (some of their university experiences) had done them a disservice by not introducing them to black-authored texts or Black history in Canada (along with other marginalized literatures). We need to continue to view our role as CanLit critics to be one of citizens who are engaged with what Smaro Kamboureli describes as a collaborative rethinking of “the disciplinary and institutional frameworks
within which Canadian literature is produced, disseminated, studied, and taught” (Trans.Can.Lit xv). The university continues to change immensely, and there are many professors who do teach the wide variety of CanLit, but there is an ongoing need to challenge whiteness—even though we’ve done a good job of destabilizing it via poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, Critical Whiteness studies, and CanLit studies—because for many students and Canadians whiteness remains normative.

Another summary...

At the crux of my investigation was a concern with how multiculturalism, interculturalism, and identity are negotiated. Hence, it is unsurprising to find a poet like George Elliott Clarke modeling his creative voice in relation to a variety of artist-intellectuals across borders—from jazz trumpeter Miles Davis and bassist Charles Mingus, to troubadour-bard Bob Dylan, reactionary modernist Ezra Pound, Black Power orator Malcolm X, and Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (with Clarke asserting that no Canadian stood more for liberation than Trudeau, calling him “a pur-et-dur internationalist” [Trudeau 21]). Such cross-culturality via disruptive poetics is pivotal to worrying homogenized ideologies of citizenship. Further, in recognizing differing cultural epistemologies, particularly among African Canadian poets, I applied musical performance and oral praxis against Western notions of textual supremacy to highlight how African Canadian poets improvise identity and community in relation to exile across the diaspora. Taking up Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept that “I” does not exist without “we” (2001) and Kit Dobson’s connection of globalization to Canadian literature (2009), it is my hope that the dissertation made judicious links between poetic fluidity in African Canadian multimodal practices (particularly orality and music) and those of African Americans and the larger diaspora.

Since African Canadian literature and history have often been stymied in academia in favour of more mainstream histories and literatures, I felt I would be doing the literature a disservice if I did not work through, at the very least, a cursory mapping of the concerns and histories engaged within the larger literary body. And so I spent a great deal of time engaging with the larger musical practices—the majority of which were created by African Americans—that have been adopted or applied in African Canadian poetry for expressive and historical purposes. The lack of classes in universities specifically devoted to African Canadian literature is hardly indicative of the quality of the literature. Rather, it speaks to the systemic racism and myopic blind spots of academia. There is a need for scholars to change the conversation, and to join in the complex dialogues that have been taking place about African Canadian literature inside and outside the walls of academia for quite some time now in Canada and globally. Hopefully this thesis actively joins those conversations and
provides some valuable interventions and new approaches to the literature. If successful in doing so, the thesis will have served its purpose.

Against Isolation: Blackening the Maple Leaf

“And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world.” —Martin Luther King Jr., Trumpet, “A Christmas Sermon for Peace” 72

In “Declaration of the Halfrican Nation,” Wayde Compton asks “is a black / rose natural? is it indigenous to this / coast? (15). What if we look at a black rose as natural—that is, as organically and ontologically Canadian as anything else that is inauthentically authentic in Canada—and view Blackness itself as endemic to the construction of the Canada nation? What if we acknowledge that Canada has always been multi-coded—multicultural—and view the amorphous signs of the nation as semiotically Black? I’ve argued throughout this thesis that my affinity with Blackness is used as a post-racial creative force to think through both the international and local experience of imaging the construction of the Canadian nation within the membrane of African Canadian literature. My use of Blackness—as improvisation and hope—is an in-the-moment antiphon to the racism and the imperialism of whiteness, both within and outside the “True North strong and free.” By troubling the past, and by looking at how Blackness has always been present in Canadian literature—even when seen by white writers as a threat—we can envisage how Blackness (as one powerful representational quality) allows us to trouble the image of Canada as a white settler nation. CanLit itself, as Kamboureli suggests, is “at once a troubled and a troubling sign,” that risks co-opting “difference and otherness into a Canadian trope: rendering otherness as familiar and familial” (Trans.Can.Lit ix). This also, thanks to its multi-vocality, contains the “potential to challenge the presumption of its intelligibility and, in turn, defy the notion that Canada is an imagined community” (ix). Canadian literature today is incredibly mixed and varied, so much so that Kamboureli warns of the danger of normalizing the Other to the point where they are made invisible and amalgamated into the later Canadian nation, thus losing the very difference that is important to that counter-representation. At best, and I agree, Canadian literature helps us see that while the nation is always imagined, this imagining consists of real people who live and embody the very construction that we are imagining. For me, Blackness is imperative to my work because it dually represents the regional and international ethos of writers and people who use the creative potential of Blackness to construct a more equitable society for all people within the space of the real.

In the Introduction, I refer to myself as “Cosmopolitan Humanist,” which I define as an ideology that views all human groups as belonging to a shared (allowing for dissonance)
community—including a spectrum of communities within communities—and which emphasizes the agency of human beings, both individually and collectively, preferring individual thought and evidence over established dogmas. I believe as critics that we are interrelated custodians of the communities out of which we write, and I’ve emphasized the value of music and poetry throughout the thesis as tools to visualize the impossible as possible. Black music is valuable to African Canadian literature because it shows that coalition politics often move within and outside the nation, allowing for greater lines of affinity that contest the faulty lines on a map that can never fully contain people. While in prison Nelson Mandela, as we have seen, drew strength—momentarily dissolving the prison walls—while listening to Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” that great anti-war (Vietnam), anti-poverty, and anti-injustice post-Civil Rights anthem. Mandela was able to draw power from the energy of the Civil Rights Movement in the States and relate it to his own struggles in apartheid South Africa. Music travels across borders, and through such sonic imagining, the value of a global (yet often still regional) citizenship is avowed. Fraternity knows few borders, which is why a Black Canadian like Oscar Peterson was able to conceive of “Hymn to Freedom,” which drew on the energy of the black church and was sung in various places in the States as an anthem to the Civil Rights Movement. Both Peterson and Gaye used music to blur borders, displaying a global anti-oppressive alliance at work. It is precisely this creative force in Black music and culture that I find exemplary to how we can model more inclusive societies, not only in Canada, but in pointing to how we define regional experiences that are entrenched in relation to the global.

This growing and scattered black consciousness is what led Martin Luther King, Jr.—a seminal figure of Soundin’ Canaan who I’ve contended inspired Trudeau’s vision of multicultural Canada—to reach out to other, often international, audiences given the growing scope of his message for world peace through the mobilization of united people around the world. While King is often remembered for his approaches to civil liberty through nonviolence, his Massey Lectures display how his approach towards justice became more radical and layered, avowing civil disobedience: “Massive civil disobedience is a strategy for social change” (Trumpet 55). Some attribute King’s assassination on April 4, 1968 to his outspoken stance against the American government as being “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” (24), stating that the “war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit” (32). In “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” he articulates his vision of peace as antiwar, criticizing then President Johnson for his hypocritical stance towards achieving peace: “Every time we drop our bombs in North Vietnam, President Johnson talks eloquently about peace. What is the problem? They are talking about peace as a distant goal, as an end we seek, but one day we must come to see that peace is not merely a
distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal” (73). Many applaud the
King who was opposed to violence, but then ignore the King who called for massive (still
nonviolent) demonstrations to end war and poverty in America and throughout the world. As he says
in “Christmas Sermon”: “I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess
to you today that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare”
(78). That nightmare came just a few weeks after King’s speech when four innocent black girls were
murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. Once the Civil Rights Act was signed in 1964, for
which King was present and instrumental in bringing about, he noticed that while much had changed
in America, the larger racist and globally oppressive systems of injustice remained intact. Hence, in
“Christmas Sermon” his ideological compass was much more international, as he described how
more “than half a million sleep on the sidewalks of Calcutta every night,” declaring: “No individual
can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in
this world” (70). This sounds rather similar to Trudeau’s pronouncement (quoted earlier in Chapter
One) that societies must consider the interests of all people who inhabit them: “no individual, no
government, no nation is capable of living in isolation, or of pursuing policies inconsistent with the
interests—both present and future—of others” (qtd. in Axworthy 29). Both King’s and Trudeau’s
messages—founded in the creative and fraternal spirit of Blackness—are based on the notion that all
life is interrelated.

In the “Christmas Sermon” speech King said: “all life is interrelated. We are all caught up in
an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one
directly, affects all indirectly” (71). Given the global economy we now live in, and depend upon,
King hit the nail on the head with the lightning of prophecy. He optimistically argued that solving
these ever growing problems was perfectly achievable, since the wealth of the United States alone
makes the elimination of poverty perfectly practicable. Hence, multiculturalism in Canada is itself an
act of Blackness and goodwill—love even, what King calls Agāpe251—because it promotes “the
understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of
different origins” (“Multicultural Act” 3 (g)). While official multicultural policy is intended to
function at the level of the nation, Trudeau rejected the sociological sense of the nation, arguing that
the concept of the nation “is retrograde,” since “it is the idea that the nation must necessarily be
sovereign” (Essential 99). He contended that a particular nationality having sovereign power was
self-destructive—I’ve argued how this is complicated given First Nations sovereign nation rights—and was in favour of a modern state that is a “a pluralistic society whose citizens must come together
on the basis of their citizenship, as individuals with equal rights and mutual tolerance, not on the
basis of their ethnicity or background or religion” (100). Trudeau was against the notion of uniformity, since it creates intolerance and hate, and envisioned Canada as a pluralistic and polyethnic society. Trudeau viewed federalism as a necessary compromise and pact, and given his individualist stance he was against anyone—government included—deciding who speaks for Canada, since “Our strength lies in our national will to live and work together as a people” (183). Trudeau draws from King’s own vision of the just society and I contend that both were operating in the spirit of Blackness: the antithesis to the homogeneity that many white settlers sought out when they came to America and Canada. Multiculturalism in Canada acknowledges—at least as ideology—that Canada is comprised of citizens who have come from all over the world and therefore must negotiate their differences within the regional spaces—never quite abstracting from larger global identifications—of Canada. The challenge remains: how can we foster and appreciate cultural interactions between Canada’s diverse cultures with so many people sounding, often disharmoniously? If the discussed literature (and perhaps literature more broadly) does anything, it teaches us to be more attentive listeners.

II. NEW LISTENING COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

Listen: “There are Other Worlds”

“...you realize nobody’s listening. So you’ve got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.”
—James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” 72

Hearing is, as Roland Barthes states, a physiological phenomenon, while listening is a psychological act—listening today is granted the power of “playing over unknown spaces” (Responsibility 249). It is in these unknown spaces, taking us, as Brand does, beyond the space of the poem and into “unknown galaxies” (Ossuaries 3.33) that the impossible becomes possible. Or, as Sun Ra phrases it: “The possible has been tried and failed; now I want to try the impossible” (qtd. in Szwed 192). Listening is an active psychological act in which we constantly improvise with others, and it can provide an opening towards alternative forms of community—to other worlds, as one of Ra’s song’s from Lanquidity insinuates: “There Are Other Worlds (They Have Not Told You Of)” Under these alternative models, I envision engaged listening not merely as a physiological function, but rather as a potential social responsibility with an impetus towards social change. It is from these lower “bass notes”—the bottoming of the work from which the various poet-musicians perform—that engaged listening (in French, entendre means both “to hear” and “to understand”) can take shape
and gesture towards more inclusive communities. As Sun Ra so well articulated in his music, the entire universe is listening. Ultimately, listening involves the precarious act of yielding to others’ voices, which is at the crux of genuine multiculturalism and, often, interesting music. The challenge is to deeply listen (Oliveros), as the narrator of James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” does: “you got to find a way to listen” (72). For it is at the rivers of the various poets’ feet—as d’bi.young suggests—that we can recover the old stories and create other worlds.

The various poets in Soundin’ Canaan, like the call and response of instruments and players talking back and forth in a jazz combo, constantly call on us to pay attention, inviting us to improvise a text’s attendant dialogues and histories with each listening. Often the invocations in African Canadian literature are particularly direct, invoking the reader as an interlocutor, much in the way that jazz-poet Frederick Ward cries out: ‘o listen to me / listen!’ (Riverslip 68). Listen—in a few instances, relisten—to some of the many listenings of the primary poets in the thesis: in M. NourbeSe Philip’s She Tries Her Tongue, the speaker acutely listens throughout history, “the listening / breadth of my walk” (“Adoption Bureau” 27); Clarke, in “Bio: Black Baptist/Bastard,” etches the plea, “Listen closely: I am trying to cry / That’s my condemned blood on the page” (20); despite the “many languages” (5.50) and discordant moments of Brand’s Ossuaries, we gather and “we listen” (5.50); or, as Compton asks us in “Berth Prayer” (Psalm), “listen. my song / is an answer, an imperative am / putation. Listen” (53); and lastly, K’naan opens his track “Voices in My Head” by stating: “Eh yo, welcome to my world, please listen.” These pleas are examples of the poet’s desire to draw the reader into direct relation with the work. We are called and challenged through the poet’s personal invocations to listen to the echoes of the past recontextualized and reverberated in the present. These invitations to listen closely, to step into the book, are performative soundings that reveal the complexity of identity, community, and citizenship.

The music that opens each chapter is itself another invitation to listen. For example, jazz performances provide formal models for numerous writers and theorists to approach the complex interweaving textures and soundings of Canadian culture and community. I would also encourage readers to directly listen to the selected musical material, which comprises key intertextual soundings in the texts themselves. The musical digressions—a strategy of the larger DJ methodology—provide the underlying bass track for the poets to solo over. And while I’ve placed a certain value on this approach, as outlined in the introductory chapters, I can’t stress enough that music and listening are not the only strategies to reading black writers in Canada. We need to be careful to avoid subsuming all black writers as musicians, for as d’bi.young writes in her poem “young black”: “because I play ball like a ballah […] does not mean / my own dream / is to becomes a basketball star / a track-and-
field negro / or soul-singing sambo / I can be an athlete or storyteller if I choose / knowing these are NOT my only options” (rivers 3-4). While I think the music and poetry go together and animate the varied soundings of citizenship from the selected poets, I’ve tried to focus on other areas, such as Clarke’s proficiency with the sonnet, or Brand’s use of the long poem, to suggest there are a variety of possible readings. Perhaps, other “white” critics of African Canadian literature have stayed away from the clear connection of these writers to Black music to avoid sounding like Jan and Mary Dalton when they ask Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native Son to sing “Swing low, sweet chariot” so they can get the real feel of the song; or worse, sound like the pack of vigilante racists who humiliate Bennett Bradshaw in William Melvin Kelley’s A Different Drummer by making him sing “Curly-Headed Pickaninny Boy” before they kill him. In these instances, music becomes a form of oppression, but I would also point out that, in the listed examples, the music and self-determination is actually taken away from the black characters who are made to fit into the white racist registers of the black entertainer. Alternatively, my use of music is as a universal—like poetry—that invites close cultural listening to hear how African Canadian poets provide polyphonic models to affirm the self within the communal in the quest for a genuinely multicultural society.

Music is thus a discursive practice—within the larger DJ theory of amalgamated discursive practices—that views the poet as a musician whose identity is “a process never completed—always ‘in process’” (Hall, “Identity” 4). It is through difference that our identities are constructed, and it is through deep listening that we can appreciate the many voices that combine to sound Canada. Just as there is no such thing as a pure music or sound—any combination of sounds creates music—identity is never fixed; rather, it is, as Ajay Heble proposes, “constructed, negotiated, improvised, and performed in relation to the demands of the moments and to institutionalized frameworks” (Landing 102). Improvising the self is like creating a piece of music: no musical work is an autonomous creation of one-way interaction between creator and audience, but rather a social undertaking where musical works ultimately exist in order to give performers something to perform (see Small, Musicking). There is no correct way to play music just as there is no one way to define the self in relation to the citizenship status that comes with belonging to a larger nation/community.

Being singular plural, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, “means the essence of Being is only as co-essence […] if Being is being-with, then it is, in its being-with, the ‘with’ that constitutes Being; the with is not simply an addition” (Plural 30). For Nancy, his “being with” is not about residing amongst those who are most like us—the familiar and the safe—but is about exposure to the unfamiliar in one another and the world around us. Sounds like multiculturalism, right? There is no escaping the “being-with” since we all belong to society even when we try pull away (we still have to
pay taxes), evidenced as Brand’s Yasmine in *Ossuaries* searches for the possibilities of an ethical citizenship within the ebb of globalism that consumes her, often swimming in the incommensurability of her encounters with others. The beauty of always having our identities sounded in relation to others is we have to concede that there is no authenticity: no one-way to be a human. Nancy concludes that a pure identity, if it exists, “would not only be inert, empty, colorless, and flavorless (as those who lay claim to a pure identity so often are), it would be an absurdity” (153). As Frantz Fanon states: “In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself” (*Black Skin* 229). From there we can have community and create other worlds. Once we realize that we are part of the enormous jazz parade that comprises Canada and the larger world we can move beyond historical determination and make the impossible, even for just a moment, possible.

**Community Still to Come**

“I can imagine a community with as loose a form as you will—even formless: the only condition is that an experience of moral freedom be shared in common, and not reduced to the flat, self-cancelling, self-denying meaning of a particular freedom.”

—Georges Bataille qtd. in Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 21

Community is a process that is never static and, like the self, it is always *to come*. As Jean-Luc Nancy states, community “is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity (because it never stops coming, it ceaselessly rejects collectivity itself as it rejects the individual)” (*Inoperative* 71). Building on the work of philosopher Georges Bataille, Nancy works to describe a community that welcomes dissonance—the unworking of itself—for it is our unsharable finitude that creates the very condition for our commonality. Value comes not from what we have in common with each other, but as Alphonso Lingis suggests in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, from what makes us different. Any community that aims towards singularity (a fatherland, a body) loses the “being-with” and “being-in” that allows community to continually and improvisationally form (in its formlessness) with only the principle of shared moral freedoms (in Canada, for example, The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). The various poets in *Soundin’ Canaan* envision a diversity of regional and globally aligned communities: M. NourbeSe Philip’s afrosporic community, which finds transnational identification in and across time via the ebora (spirits) who drowned during the Zong massacre; George Elliott Clarke’s cultural—yet cosmopolitan—African Canadian nationalism; Dionne Brand’s improvised and coming community within a globalized framework; Wayde Compton’s schizophrenophilic community that moves between historic analogue (the past) and digital (the present) communities to recover (Hogan’s Alley).
and imagine new communal identifications; and K’naan’s global multicultural community that moves across waters from Somalia to Canada. These communal manifestations are infinitely complex, even though the majority of the writers are based in Toronto, which attests that Canada remains a heterotopic space where the just society is still a place we can, and should, imagine.

There is no singular, unitary community, nor should there be. There is, however, a larger national and federal framework at work in Canada. It is this framework that connects us together—despite how atypical our imaginings of community are—and it is precisely our differences that lead to a more musical and poetic society, teaching us to be attentive listeners—musicians and poets, even. We die in one moment only “to be reborn as states and new individuals in the next” (Foster, Blackness 331). Canada is like one large potluck, where each person brings a different food to the cultural feast, recalling the line from Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters, that “You never really know a person until you’ve eaten salt together” (147). As I’ve argued, we need to make additional room in the enormous jazz parade for those who continue to undo community, particularly new immigrants and refugees, because they put the modern fiction of sovereignty into crisis and challenge us to rebuild more inclusive communities. I agree we still need to, as King, Jr. said over 45 years ago, “work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship” (Trumpet 76). Community continues to come—that is, to undo itself—when, as Lingis insists, “one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one” (Community 12). There is no essence to community, because if there was it would close; rather, community is something that, as Nancy suggests, has not taken place, it is: “what happens to us—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society” (Inoperative 11). By unworking community, by realizing that Canada presents a real opportunity—and I realize I am being rather idealistic here—for a model of first-class citizenship, we can build on the dreams of the escaped slaves who crossed over into Canaan land.

Many diverse enactments of citizenship and community are performed on the local level, even as those enactments dream up models for genuine multiculturalism beyond those regional specificities. For example, the last four years I’ve attended, sat on the Board of Directors, and participated in the Guelph Jazz Festival, which is a significant improvised and creative music festival where thousands of creative music listeners congregate in the small town of Guelph, Ontario. In Guelph, community’s meaning is always to come, as people gather over a five-day period for an array of activities and free community offerings, including the random and nomadic performances taking place in seemingly accidental places such as the streets and parks of the city. A centerpiece of the Guelph Jazz Festival for many years has been the popular open-air jazz tent, where the festival closes down one of the city’s most vibrant streets for a day, to offer hours of free music a central and
public location. The Guelph Jazz Festival has come a long way since its humble beginning in 1994 by a small group of friends who shared a love of jazz and a commitment to the community of Guelph. Their ardor for the music and love for the community has allowed the Guelph Jazz Festival to grow into one of the premiere avant-garde music festivals in all of North America. Ever year artists come to Guelph from countries as far away as South Africa, Norway, Switzerland, Germany, Israel, India, and Brazil, as well as close as the United States and Canada, and, of course, many are featured who hail from the home community of Guelph. One year the festival will commission a jazz opera like George Elliott Clarke’s *Québécité* (2003), while another it features a rare North American appearance by the legendary South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (2012). Ajay Heble, Artistic Director and founder of the Guelph Jazz Festival, describes the acts of planning, programming, organizing, and putting on a jazz festival as engaging in acts of “meaning-making: in constructing narratives, histories, identities, and epistemologies that—sometimes modestly, sometimes profoundly—shape the way in which the music gets understood, listened to, and talked about” (*Landing* 231). The music at the Guelph Jazz Festival functions, as it does in this thesis, as “a vehicle for facilitating other social formations” (233). Jazz and the other music in this thesis, and places like the Guelph Jazz Festival, fashion new epistemologies that allow us to improvise with others in the creation (and unmaking) of community.

*Soundin’ Canaan*’s poets use Black music, from reggae, blues, jazz, DJ culture and hip-hop, and other styles, so ubiquitously because these musics at their roots are tenaciously democratic and Black musics have been used since slavery in North American to show both the resilience and celebration of the human spirit. This is why Frederick Douglass declares the slave song as the final realm of resistance to slavery, and it is more generally why I use Blackness throughout the thesis as a prefiguring and sonic counterpoint for multiculturalism, identity formation, modes of belonging, and citizenship. One need only to get lost in the *riddim* at Caribana in Toronto, attend a poetry slam, or fall into the fold of multiple, often discordant sounds at the Guelph Jazz Festival to realize that it’s only when you let go that community—and poetry—is possible. Caribana, The Guelph Jazz Festival, and the various communities that the explored poets envision in their texts, are spontaneous acts of community enactment. I firmly believe that once we reconcile ourselves, “we” can enact a multiculturalism formed cross-culturally and within a multiplicity of shared and intersecting cultural spaces. If we get over the idea that we can all speak to each other in an “authentic” universal way, I think it will begin to be possible, as it always has been, to listen to one another, one at a time, and in the various clusters that present themselves.
**FINAL REMIX**

I have, like all of you, on a thousand occasions seen indescribable displays of man’s very real inhumanity to man […] I say all of this to say that one cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know and react to the miseries which afflict this world […] I think that the human race does command its own destiny, and that that destiny can eventually embrace the stars.
—Lorraine Hansberry, “The Negro Writer and His Roots: Towards a New Romanticism” 11-12

The epigraph from Lorraine Hansberry describes the tragedy we live with everyday knowing that there are wars, hate crimes, sexism, poverty, ecological destruction, intolerances, bigotry, racism, and other perversions of the human spirit, and yet Hansberry moves past those inhumanities to imagine that we can one day arrive at a more just society and “embrace the stars” (12). Similarly, Gwendolyn Brooks, at the end of *Maud Martha*, finds realist hope, despite “the latest of the Georgia and Mississippi lynchings” by contemplating that “the sun was shining, and some of the people in the world had been left alive, and it was doubtful whether the ridiculousness of man would ever completely succeed in destroying the world […] was not this something to be thankful for? And, in the meantime, while people did live they would be grand, would be glorious and brave, would have nimble hearts that would beat and beat” (179). Both Hansberry and Brooks managed to remain optimistic about the perseverance of the human spirit, manifested in the goodwill and creativity of Blackness, even though—and remarkably so—they were writing in pre-Civil Rights 1950’s Chicago, facing all sorts of inequalities, being not only black and women, but black women writers. Their message is a simple, yet an important and universal one: despite the struggle of human existence, beauty and the capacity to overcome tyranny exists in all of us. Sometimes that beauty is found in the quotidian and cacophonic murmuring of the world, or in the bonds we form with those closest to us. The poet’s role, as M. NourbeSe Philip, Clarke, Brand, Compton, and K’naan show, is to translate both the beauty and ugliness of humanity and craft poems that move us, change our perceptions about the world, even occasionally persuading us—if that be the intent—that we are not doing as much as we should to create a better world.

All the poets in *Soundin’ Canaan* provide textual spaces for us to engage with, allowing us to dream that we may one day reach a more equitable society for all people—recovering the parts of the past we want to keep, disregarding the rest, and allowing for new dreams to take shape. This ideological manifesto of hope has been the larger grand narrative of the thesis, believing in a pedagogy of hope that affirms when we stand on the side of justice, as bell hooks avows, “we refuse
simplistic binaries [...] acknowledge the limits of what we know” (Community 10). It is in the space of unknowing that we can create a more inclusive Canada. I don’t have all the answers, not even close; hopefully Soundin’ Canaan provides a few worthwhile interventions, fruitfully participates in the vast conversations already taking place about African Canadian literature, and bestows a few new tracks to make the journey along the chosen literature a little more rewarding. Poetry remains, as I think the poets and my interpretations have shown, an essential medium in which to articulate engaged soundings of citizenship that are always negotiated in relation to others.

The DJ analogy permitted deeper critical and literary analysis by allowing me to move through a vast forest of topics, tropics, and textiles to mix together numerous fields and spheres of influence. Even resistance—to traditional hermeneutic interpretations, or by the explored writers’ rejection of hegemony in all forms—is integral to the multicultural society I articulate, since discordance is one of the most essential and healthy functions of a truly democratic society. The Outro brings the primary themes back into the mix, examining how citizenship, the self, and nationality are articulated in African Canadian poetry and literature. We need to continue to define the role of the citizen—an exact definition would cancel itself out—by remaining engaged listeners, since citizenship is an ad hoc performance always happening, like listening, moment to moment.

Canada itself is, and has always been a remix project. The settlers arrived and found they had to improvise with the Aboriginals, a people who were already autochthon to the land. When people arrived from all around the world to work on the railroad, or for the gold rush, they were engaged in acts of multiculturalism without even realizing it—even if the society was truncated by its inherent racism. When fugitive slaves travelled the underground railroad and entered into Canada (Canaan land) they encountered (“subtle”) racism and faced new hardships, having to rethink what Canada could be for them, forming diverse communities such as Africville and Hogan’s Alley. “Canada is,” as Compton writes in “Illegalese: Floodgate Dub,” “a remix B-side chorus in the globalization loop” (31). Compton’s words depict the negative ethos of globalization, as well as the possibility for continued remix in the musical loop of a Canada that is always changing as new people and ideas enter into the mix. Not necessarily in practice, but in theory (even in legislation), Canada belongs equally to all of its citizens. It is only through fraternity and collective understanding, allowing for ruptures, divergences of thought, and a cacophony of diverse ideas of what Canada should be, that we will arrive at that place the African American spirituals coded as heaven. We have crossed many borders, and yet we might still ask, where is here, or more importantly, where might we want here to be? What might that future sound like? We continue to imagine that dream along with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and before them, like the escaped slaves following the North
Star, like Coltrane playing “Song of the Underground Railroad” on *Africa/Brass*, like the various poets of *Soundin’ Canaan* making the impossible possible for a moment, stepping out of the tragedy we so casually inflict on others, and into the light to hear the echo of the ancestors along with Frederick Douglass, reaching for that imaginary, but necessary heaven on earth—that just society—singing, with sadness and hope: “‘O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan’” (*Bondage*).
POSTSCRIPT: OUTER SCRIPTS

“Soundin’ Canaan” (poem)

“In the whole world no poor devil is lynched, no wretched is tortured, in whom I too am not degraded and murdered.”
— Aimé Cesairé

Columbus was no intrepid hero,
He was an insipid & syphilic-vaquero hearing the “indios” like cargo
& John Hawkins was no Stephen Hawkins.
He was the English dastard & coward who brought the first slave ship to the “New World.”
They merely discovered the already there.
Hypocrites like John Hammond claiming he discovered Bessie Smith,
Counterfeit prophets racketeering off the backs of blacks, Chinese, Natives, navies
— human life for profit.

A collective amnesia persists: some 20 million Africans loaded on ships,
mothers torn from babies,
whipped & sold into slavery.
Some Canadians are unaware slavery existed in this country.
Slavery, à la Canadian style,
Listen: hear a history of violence, textured & composite.
Listen: hear a literature of Black Canadians— oral, written, & infinitely rich.
Listen: hear whistle blow, porter train riff.
Listen: hear makeshift improvisers providing a needed spiritual lift.

Mattieu da Costa, circa 1605, first African guide & translator to set foot in Canada,
Olivier Le Jeune, taken from Madagascar, first recorded slave purchased at age 8 in Quebec, New France, before it was Canada.
A hundred years later, after she learnt her slave mistress was gonna sell her, Marie-Josèphe Angélique burned down Montreal: they tortured her, hung her, tossed her to the fire, her scattered ashes to the wind, a feminist rebel before radical feminism was drawn.
We must not forget Josiah Henson who helped form the Canaan of Dawn,
he inspired Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
We must not forget Harriet Tubman, dubbed “Black Moses,” she led escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad to its terminus in Chatham.

We must remember John Brown & Osborne Anderson, who accompanied Brown on his raid on Harper’s Ferry; Anderson fled & wrote a pamphlet, history demanded it.
Had help from Mary Ann Shadd, full time editor & first woman publisher of a newspaper in Canada, her history we inherit.
Along with Thomas Peters who helped lead some 1200 blacks from Canada back to Sierra Leone Africa in 1792, a black loyalist & a Yoruba too, he wore a poly-identity before it was cool.
We must remember the great Rufus Rockhead, bootlegger, former porter, who opened the jazz club Rockhead’s Paradise in 1928 in St. Antoine, Montreal.
We must remember John Arthur Robinson who helped form the Order of Sleeping Car Porters &
George V. Garraway who became the first black conductor on the Canadian Railway.

We must remember Joe Fortes who taught children to swim while patrolling the beach at English Bay, there’s a restaurant & a library named after him today.
& Leonard A. Braithwaite, first elected Black Canadian to the Ontario Legislature.
& Stanley Grizzle too, former porter & Canada’s first Black Citizen Judge, civis litigator!—these are to name, mostly by name, but at least to start to name, some of the historic figures that are part of Canadian history.

Is it true, we be a people without a literature?
Were all of Canada’s early “white” writers performing in blackface?
Murphy’s Black Candle clearly states:
racial mixing is a fear in losing the docility of the social body, the female body, the cult of true womanhood replaced by the cult of the drug. The fear of the white passive female body becoming possessed. The body as text, the black pen as sex.
& Haliburton’s Sam Slick was sure some son-of-a-racist-prick. But this history ain’t just bullshit, we inherit it.

The Canada of many Canaanadas for many Canadians.
In 1834 the mere touching of Canadian soil made the runaway slave free. The continued exodus & disappearing of borders. Canada: the North Star, “heaven,” the Underground Railroad starting in the south & heading North to Canaan land, simply follow the Drinking Gourd. Survivors of the crossing who found Philistines replacing the Egyptians. The volatility of human borders, escaping fugitive slave law & hoping to find freedom under the lion’s paw, forming the Canadian Canaans: Wilberforce, Dawn, The Refugee Home Society, & Elgin Escapin’ plantation cottin’ pickin’ only to find a more subtle racism, which kept people on the go, poly-identities in motion before postmodernism called it so. Like Boston King moving from America to Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone then England & back to Sierra Leone; did he ever really feel at home? Hear Nina Simone singing, “Ain’t got No…” To be in another place, not here. Fiction “here” is the transcription of history, reworking tradition, History: a making. History: a kind of philosophical lab. A tidalected wave crashing back & forth, into the torn & new of this host country.

Mr. D, in Susanna Moodie’s Roughing It in The Bush notoriously states: “there are no ghosts in Canada” because “the country is too new for ghosts.” But if you put your ear to a tree, or stand still in one place, you’ll realize this land is “hauntological.” The silences echo with the whispers of ghosts in the corridors of history. Fighting for survival since arrival is enough to make anyone suicidal.
& where is here really? Here is simply here for those who ended up here, or for those who’ve always been here. To First Nations people the question is absurd. It’s apparent we exclude all others when we construct a garrison. Especially when that construction is at the expense of a community. “We” tore down Africville & bulldozed Hogan’s Alley to make room for a highway. & they call it urban renewal, more like “Negro” removal.

My education was one of white-faced white-studies effacing my white face with white paint. If I encountered a black text it was usually as subtext, prefix, or preface to the rest. As critics we need to flip the script proper with a provisional manuscript & avoid creating bordered realities like the Gaza strip, or the whole world really, when you get down to it.

Rather, DJ take us into an “indexical present.” The DJ as cultural archivist & resistive resident, Moving the fader, back & forth between diverse cultural realities, Using beats, rhymes, & counter rhythms like swords. Poetry working & un/working on the edge, Like Rakim said: “Standing on shaky grounds too close to the edge, Let’s see if I know the ledge.”

An edging towards the just society. A tapestry entwined within Trudeau’s notions of a pluralistic & polyethnic society. For multiculturalism is an exercise in blackness: an acculturation of forms, a creative destruction of old selves into new states.

Canada is an archipelago of blackness: For whiteness is death & only when we let go of our possessive investment in it, can we truly unravel the shells holding in the outer limits of our outer selves. Discover: the heteroglot, the polyglot, the polyphonic improvised being who is always a listening being. Are you listening Canada? Where is H/ear? Or, Where are you from?

Canada can never claim to be a homogenous culture. So paint phonemes on canvas, over this Canaan land, soundin’ Canada, chant, grunt, shout, & sing a callaloo of aquarelles, a gumbo-concoction with rhythms that be boppin’ & hip-hopin’ on the Canadian kazoo, & find: George Elliott Clarke soundin’ Miles Davis with a blues beaucoup in Blue. Wayde Compton entwining Grandmaster Flash in his legba-trickster brew. Dionne Brand phrasing Coltrane with a jazz text sonically riffing through. M. NourbeSe Philip turning the echoes of Zong into song with poetry guiding her through. K’naan taking us through Babylon wavin’ a flag with the force of a million literary reviews. & these are to name but a few of the artists improvising consciousnesses in the liminality of contact zones.

Hear: the spirituals & blues augmenting a salacious truth that speaks Canada with an icy cool blue. Hear: jazz, the flattened 5th of devil’s music, blowing freely in Canada too.
Hear: funk, r&b, & rock syncopating the electric past into the reclamation of bodies. Everybody, hear the dub of the duppy, mystics using a West Indian aesthetic to heal the present. Hear: Hip Hop urban youths speakin’ beats & rhymes—& more than just music—the movement. Hear: DJs recontextualizing all material, for sonic frequencies are not a fixed phenomenon.

Legein: the layering out, gathering, collecting, reading, the “mix” of the mixedness of all things. Improvisation: the open-ended possibility for polyglossic polyventiality, for survival. Speak as a prophet or profess like a professor: it does mean after all, “To declare openly.” Laurier, MacKenzie King, & Harper aren’t my prime ministers. Administer a protesting crescendo with a glissando like Oscar Peterson on the piano, pushing the keys with love.

Sing Canaan, chant it, shout it, play it, pluck it, howl it, honk it, scream it, into pure utterance & possibility—freely imagine what a truly just society could sound like & be.
Partial Discography

Oscar Peterson, *Night Train* (1962)
Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (1959)
Thelonious Monk, *Genius of Modern Music* (Volume I and II [1951])
Kid Koala, *12 Bit Blues* (2012)
Nina Simone, *Pastel Blues* (1965)
Tom Waits, *Small Change* (1976)
Charlie Parker, *One Night at Birdland* (1950)
Fela Kuti, *Expensive Shit* (1975)
Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956)
Ornette Coleman, *Science Fiction* (1971)
Charles Mingus, *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (1956)
Shad, *TSOL* (2010)
Mary Lou Williams, *The Zodiac Suite* (1945)
Rascalz, *Cash Crop* (1997)
Sun Ra, *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* (1961)
ENDNOTES

1 See Mary A. Shadd’s *A Plea for Emigration, Or Notes of Canada West*. While settler’s guides like Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) have been studied as paradigmatically Canadian, Shadd’s *Plea For Emigration*, published roughly around the same time (1853), sheds new light on lived African Canadian realities in the nineteenth century. Often Shadd does suggest, given the dangers of the Fugitive Slave Law, which made life dangerous for American Blacks, that Canada West is an ideal place to start a new life—a just society and a good place to earn a decent living: “If a coloured man understands his business, he receives the public patronage the same as a white man […] There is no degraded class to identify him with, therefore every man’s work stands or falls according to merit, not as is his colour […] [Canada is] a country in which slavery is not tolerated, and prejudice of colour has no existence whatsoever” (59-60). Shadd’s rhetoric is largely about the possibilities for Canada as other to the United States, and often the realities of Canadian racism very clearly manifest in her straightforward prose as she describes white residents moving away from black residents as they formed the settlement of Elgin, about ten miles from Chatham, Ontario: “When purchase was made of these lands many white families were residents […] At first, a few sold out, fearing that such neighbours might not be agreeable” (68). And so, white Canadian racism remains subtly—and yet very clearly—couched within Shadd’s text.

2 As Northrop Frye states in *The Bush Garden*, “It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (222).

3 In *The Event of Literature* Terry Eagleton has gone so far as to question whether “literature actually exists.” I agree with Eagleton that literature cannot sustain an overarching definition, since there is no set of features shared by all literary theories, which is why literature is an open-ended mode of engagement between writers, readers, and the imagined communities formed in the process.

4 As Cornel West writes, jazz is not so much “a term for a musical art form but for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid and flexible disposition toward reality suspicious of ‘either/or’ viewpoints” (*Race* 105).

5 By contrast, poet Ralph Gustafson wrote that poetry is “an instrument of morality” that digs deep into the nature of the real (27).

6 Unlike utopias, which are not real places, Foucault argues that heterotopias are existent places that are negotiated within a culture: “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (“Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias” 3). Georges Teyssot in “Heterotopias and the History of Spaces” does a great job of summarizing the six characteristics of heterotopias that Foucault outlines, which I resummarize as follows: (1.) heterotopias are a constant failure of all societies; (2.) over the course of its history, a society may take an existing heterotopia and make it function differently; (3.) the heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different incompatible spaces; (4.) heterotopias are linked to time, and enter fully into function when traditional time is breached, such as at a cemetery when the ephemeral and eternal meet; (5.) one does not typically enter a heterotopia by one’s own will: even when entering a prison as a guest one must still perform certain gestures; (6.) heterotopias perform the contradictory function of revealing the illusory quality of all space, and compensating for that illusion with a meticulously ordered and idealized space.

7 It is worth noting that the Ohio River as Jordan figures in various African American novels concerning slavery, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which both contain scenes of slave mothers making incredible escapes across the river with children in tow. Also
worth referencing is the title of Cecil Foster’s *A Place Called Heaven*, since heaven was what many escaped slaves thought of Canada until fierce racist encounters proved them unfortunately wrong.

8 The 2006 census shows that 49.9% of Toronto’s population is foreign-born.

9 Cornel West also articulates that in jazz collectives “individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the creative tension within the group—a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective” (*Race* 105). Jazz critic Ekkehard Jost, in *Free Jazz*, emphasizes a similar sentiment: “One of the emancipatory effects of free jazz throughout its evolution, is that each and every member of a group is theoretically equal to all the others” (195). We also find an emphasis upon the notion of jazz collectivity in Ralph Ellison’s collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, where he states, “The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization” (189).

10 Gayatri Spivak observes that “[w]hen a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validity from the centre” (*Outside* 55). The public conception of the margin is semiotically codified by what the “centre” considers outside the norm.

11 George Elliott Clarke takes a similar position to Thomas, tying African Canadian history to identity: “Our history is nothing less than the problem of the definition of our identity” (*Odysseys* 189). While I occasionally apply quotations when possible from the living authors whose work is examined in this thesis, opinions in interviews are hardly the sole focus; rather, they provide another layer of polyphonic dialogue or antiphonic response to “the mix” of *Soundin’ Canaan*. Also, see Nigel Thomas’s conversations with various African Canadian writers in *Why We Write*.

12 I’ve settled on this term, even though no label can or should unequivocally speak to all people of African descent in Canada, because it acknowledges the hyphenated/split nature of the African Canadian experience (although I’ve chosen to leave African Canadian unhyphenated to avoid any association with the word as a hyphenated epithet, such as was common in the early twentieth century for those of foreign birth) emphasized in many of the texts I explore, and largely for the three reasons Nigel Thomas does: (1.) On a literal level, people in Canada choose to hold a Canadian passport, or at least remain here; (2.) the embracing of Canadian values, particularly the right of children to grow up in a safe environment free from a fear of violence and (3.) for the strong belief and value in community.

13 Clarke deliberately hyphenates “African-Canadian” to emphasize the split nature of the term. I personally think the term could be used either way, but have chosen “African Canadian” for the reasons in the previous endnote and to remain stylistically consistent.

14 It is also important to remember—and these tensions get fleshed out more in the chapter on (and in my interview with) George Elliott Clarke—that Clarke’s ideas expressed in “Treason of the Black Intellectuals?” has changed over the years and that the essay itself is intended to spark debate and open up new conversations regarding scholarship from black intellectuals.

15 I use (and coin, I believe) “Cosmopolitan Humanist” as an ideology that views all human groups as belonging to a shared community—although this hardly limits the spectrum of communities within communities—and which emphasizes the agency of human beings, both individually and collectively, preferring individual thought and evidence over established dogmas. Such a term as “cosmopolitan humanist” appears somewhat contradictory, but as Chapter One’s section on citizenship, which attempts to merge elements of both the liberal and republican tradition highlights, my desire is to connect the individualist within a much larger framework. In fact, cosmopolitan could even be expanded to *cosmopolitan*, reflecting our custodian and interrelated role in the larger universe to which we all belong.

16 Judith Leggatt describes postcolonialism as “an ongoing attempt to find means of cross-cultural communication that escape the repressive hierarchies of colonial encounters” (“Academic Theory” 111).

17 I should note that this methodology is greatly inspired and in many ways borrows from Alexander G. Weheliye’s DJ approach in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (203).

18 While the archive is certainly important to scholarly work, Taylor usefully argues that performance (from plays to grassroots movements) must be taken as critical forms of knowledge transmission, a
transmission which is conveyed in the “embodied memory” of spoken word, movement, dance, song, and various gestures. Performance provides alternative perspectives to those of the written archive, which I’ve conflated via the DJ metaphor to highlight the active nature of how an archive can be sounded in a variety of media in the liminality of transnational contact zones.

20 This is not to downplay the powerful, essential, and critical engagement between black writers, as, for instance, Donna Bailey Nurse works against the notion that by default the critic is white or male, and contends that for black writers race remains “an important aspect of who they are, and often an intrinsic element of their work” (Black Critic 13). Nurse’s concern is not that black writers need to only critique black writers—quite the opposite—but that the mainstream’s de-emphasizing of “the significance of race,” especially from the perspective of black critics who discuss racism outright, often deters black critics from engaging with “their own cultural figures” (208).

21 African American liberation scholar James H. Cone echoes Douglass when he states: “Through music black slaves ritualized their existence and gave to their lives a dimension of promise and new reality that could not be contained in human theologies and philosophies” (90).

22 For example, Fredric Jameson’s contention that postmodern art is historically free to the point of “schizophrenia” (26), has led Frank Davey to write that Jameson misreads postmodernity (the cultural condition of global capitalism) with postmodernism (the artistic response to that condition) in a way that depoliticizes the cultural work of postmodernism—a response to conditions of late capitalism. Davey writes: “Postmodernism was ‘post’ modernism—ie. it signaled where it had come from—but it was not arguing any one route toward the future. It opened into a field of possibilities” (“Contesting ‘Post(-)modernism’” 253).


24 Jean Toomer’s Cane is a radical text that heralds the Harlem Renaissance. Cane moves from aesthetically simpler forms to more complex ones (dancing between prose, poetry, and play-like dialogue), as it moves South to North, and North to South through a series of beautiful and very musical vignettes. The creative novel inspired Gil Scott-Heron’s song “Cane,” where he sings about two main characters of the novel: Karintha and Becky.

25 Eagleton openly expresses his love for and bias towards older Marxist theorists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Walter Benjamin: “There is arguably no richer heritage of such thought in the twentieth century. It was from this heritage that modern-day cultural studies took its cue, though much of it is a pale shadow of its predecessors” (After Theory 30).

26 Another important point in my undertaking is that very few postmodernists study poetry. For example, Hutcheon, in “History and/as Intertext,” writes: “What we usually label as postmodernist in literature today [...] is generally limited to fiction that is self-consciously metafictional” (169). In response, a number of years later, Davey notes, “Almost all of the books on postmodernist literature, including Hutcheon’s, focus mostly if not entirely on prose fiction [...] What if most postmodernist writing has been done—as it has been in Canada—in poetry?” (Canadian Postmodernisms 24).

27 See French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s The Savage Mind where he uses “bricolage” to discuss the patterns of mythological thought and its ability to re-use available materials to tackle new problems. In the chapter on dub I emphasize the dub poet’s ability—pushing the possibilities of the form—to incorporate a variety of materials to engage with the problems of belonging in Canada.

28 M. NourbeSe Philip examines her work as belonging to the jazz aesthetic, where “word jazz, perhaps—where different themes are working with and against each other” (Genealogy 127).

29 See McNeilly’s “La beauté est nue” in the Works Cited.

30 Hip Hop scholar M.K. Asante terms “artistivist” as the artist who uses his or her “artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary” (Rise 203).
Many scholars doing research in both Greek and African rhetorical traditions admit the likelihood that Greek culture was decisively influenced by Egyptian culture (Asante, Race 41; Kennedy 4). The Instruction of Ptahhotep (the oldest complete text in the world, and also the oldest rhetorical treatise in the world), written in Egypt in the early second millennium B.C.E, is sometimes regarded as the earliest handbook of public speaking (Kennedy 4). Herodotus, who was a Greek historian, claims that much of Greek culture was taken from Egypt (Histories B11).

Bloom’s woes with the current state of academia read like a Jeremiad, from his complaints about multiculturalism for replacing Shakespeare and Cervantes with “fifth-rate work by people full of resentment, who happen to be women, or who happen to be Chicano or Puerto-Rican, or who happen to be African-American, and they are by no means the best writers who are African-American, or women, or so on. They are simply the most resentful and the most ideological” (Bloom, “Interview with Eleanor Wachtel”) to his being surrounded by professors interested in “social change […] pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists […] I am surrounded by professors far more interested in various articles on the compost heap of so-called popular culture than in Proust or Shakespeare or Tolstoy” (Bloom, “Interview with Ken Shulman” 75). Bloom would likely find dub poetry distasteful, since he has on numerous occasions called slam poetry the death of art. It is for reasons such as this, even though I am clearly using Bloom as a straw man, and a good one he is, that I find value in the literatures I study while trying to leave any singular aesthetic taste out of my analysis. As Marcel Duchamp said: “I consider taste—good or bad—the great enemy of art (qtd. in Artist’s Voice 94).

Frye’s view of poetry was a modernist view about form: “the poet’s quest is for form” (Bush 179).

In “Frye Recoded” Hutcheon writes: “We cannot simply argue that Frye was a closet postmodernist. But there are perhaps postmodern moments in his writing, most especially in his Canadian writing. These are moments in which the postmodern erupts into the systematic and rational order of modernity—moments in which both/and thinking is the only way to explain (without explaining away) the paradoxes and the contradictions, what I have been calling the tensions between autonomy and historical/social context, between evaluation and explication, between detachment and engagement, between the universal and the local, between the international and the national” (244).

It should be noted that both Du Bois and Baraka have been interested in socialist causes throughout their lives, putting what they write into practice. I certainly hear an echo with Mao Zedong, who wrote, “[our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind” (Selected Works 70). While I advocate for group rights and revolutionary thought, some of Mao’s militaristic language makes me slightly concerned about individual rights. Further, while I am encouraging a mixture of art and aesthetics there remains a danger that political rhetoric might impose a limited standard upon beauty, turning what is interpreted as beautiful into a civilizing project to create desired citizens, as communist (and fascist, Hitler loved art) revolutions, for instance, often ban certain art in the name of ideology. Still, it is my intention that the mixing of beauty and propaganda can open up more inclusive notions of citizenship and belonging. Once again, this is where poetics and hermeneutics come back into the mix and where I remind my reader that this thesis is both an interpretation of a body of textual work, as well a theoretical manifesto of hope.

As well, it is a continuum of Ezra Pound’s asking poets to “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (“A Retrospect”).

Winks’s The Blacks in Canada was originally published in 1971 with a second edition containing a new introduction by Winks and his thoughts on the impact of his work (published by McGill-Queen’s UP in 1997).

See Trudel’s L’esclavage au Canada français.
Canada was not a slave economy, but there were both slaves and slavery in Canada. Read the first two chapters to Winks’s *The Blacks in Canada* for a detailed account of how prevalent, rampant, manifest, and yet subversively subdued slavery was and is in the canals of early Canadian history.

First Nations is the current and most politically correct term to use when referring to people of Aboriginal descent in Canada. It also acknowledges First Nations’ presence in Canada before colonial encounters. Nevertheless, “Indian” was the word Columbus used, thinking he was in India, to refer to the Aboriginal people, a term solidified in the various manifestations of The Indian Act.

Unsurprisingly then, many social Darwinists and public orators spoke of the danger of miscegenation. For example, John Alfred Mjøen, a pseudo-scientist, anti-Semitic, and supporter of eugenics in 1920s Norway, warned of the dangers that race-crossing could have upon whiteness: “Until we have a more definite knowledge of the effect of race-crossings we shall certainly do best to avoid crossing between different races” (“Harmonic” 60).

*Chronotope* is a term from literary philologist M.M. Bakhtin that connotes “time-space”: an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the cultural systems from which they emerge.

Angélique’s symbolic act of rebellion and her subsequent public torture have made her an important inspiration for a variety of African Canadian intellectuals and writers. See Afua Cooper’s *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal*, as well as her poem, “Confessions of a Woman who Burnt Down a Town” (from *Copper Woman*).

*The Provincial Freeman* was published from March 24, 1853 to September 20, 1857, first in Windsor, then in Toronto and Chatham. Published weekly, it advocated equality, integration, and self-education for black people in Canada and the United States. The tone of the paper toward *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (and white North America generally) was more critically fervent than most African Americans and African Canadians living at the time, including Frederick Douglass, allowed themselves to be.

Winks makes the point that recent investigations of southern slave songs show that Canaan, the promised Land, was equated most often with Africa and seldom with Canada (237). However, theologian and scholar James H. Cone argues that Canaan had multiple associations: “Heaven referred to Africa, Canada, and the northern United States” (80). Whether or not the slave songs—the spirituals—were directly associated with Canada or not, the use of Canaan to refer to Canada as heaven continues to this day and carries important mythic value for African Canadian writers.

There have been a variety of racist immigration policies and Acts that emphasize Canada’s desire to remain a white settler nation, including the following: *Canada West’s Common Schools Act of 1850*, which reinforced segregated education; *Immigration Act of 1906*, which prohibited the landing of the “feeble-minded,” “beggars,” etc; *Immigration Act of 1910*, which empowered the government to prohibit the entry of “any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada”; *Immigration Act of 1952*, which allowed the minister to prohibit the entry of any immigrant because of nationality, ethnic group, citizenship, occupation, class, climatic criterion, and so on. It wasn’t until the 1940s that Canada began to undo some of the damage of its early racist policies with acts such as the *Racial Discrimination Act of 1944*, which in Ontario prohibited any sign or publication that expressed racial or religious discrimination. The West Indian Domestic Scheme of 1955-67 allowed Caribbean women to come to Canada, many of whom would go on to pursue other professions. The *Immigration Act of 1976* placed emphasis on family unification and settlement of refugees, leading to an influx of blacks in Canada. In 1971 the Trudeau government made the proclamation of official multiculturalism.

George Grant (1918-1988) was a Canadian philosopher and scholar known for his political conservatism, particularly for his views as a Red Tory on nationalism. His most popular text, *Lament for a Nation* (1965), deplored what he claimed was Canada’s inevitable cultural absorption by the United States. In *Lament*, Grant promotes the collectivist and communitarian aspects of an older English conservative tradition, which stands in direct opposition to the individualist traditions of liberalism.

Philip’s position towards non-lineararity is in clear opposition to George Elliott Clarke’s desire to record a specific African Canadian history that informs his nationalist stance towards black writing in
Canada. Philip’s general approach towards history sounds rather postmodern—although it is informed by African conceptions of time—which is why she took issue to people interpreting 12 Years a Slave as historical vérité. As she told me in an interview: “It is, for instance, one of the reasons I find 12 Years a Slave a profoundly problematic film. A throw back and I was amused to read in a Guardian interview with the filmmaker that he didn’t look at any pre-existing films on slavery. I am surprised that he wouldn’t have seen a film such as a Sankofa, for instance. A film which flew under the radar. I understand this urge and even the need to ‘tell the story’—as if in telling the story as realistically as possible will accomplish something—make it more real, perhaps? 12 Years a Slave remains trapped in that belief, locked in the hold of a sort of historical vérité approach—a belief that you can tell the story. This is what gives it the Slavery 101 feel—every trope of slavery must be hit, and then we all go off believing that all is well with the world. We understand how horrible slavery was and, therefore, are all the better for it. I say there must be more and less to the process than that” (“We Can Never Tell”).

49 As Christian Habekost argues in Verbal Riddim, “the black tradition emphasizes [time] as crucial means of distinct improvisation and extemporization […] circulation and cyclical development, as opposed to the European principle of progression” (94).

50 Kanye West’s album Yeezus employs similar grotesque (and misogynistic) language as a response to the historic racism surrounding intercourse between black men and white women: “Uh, black girl sippin’ white wine / Put my fist in her like a civil rights sign / And grabbed it with a slight grind / And held it till the right time / Then she came like AAAAAHHH!” (“I’m in It”). Given the historical arch on songs like “Black Skinhead,” “New Slaves,” and “Blood on the Leaves,” sex and miscegenation are put into a historical present where Kanye’s own relationship with Kim Kardashian is a case example of the negative attention he gets (in his opinion) in the spotlight for dating and having a child with a “white” girl.

51 Compton is riffing upon Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” (written in 1925) which asks: “What is Africa to me?”

52 See Cecil Foster’s arguments in Blackness and Modernity where he outlines in detail the modernist tropes of Blackness and whiteness. Since those in power tell the history of whiteness, Foster contends that the narrative of nation-statehood has been historically conceived in the West as a quest to achieve whiteness (66). Thus, historically speaking, only those who are white can be full members of the state. Foster then equates whiteness with the rigidity of death, since it works towards a final unchanging state, while, by contrast, Blackness represents the continuous construction that is part of cultures and nations that are always works-in-progress.

53 One need only read St. Augustine to comprehend that this separation between lightness and darkness is an early theological concept that profoundly influenced medieval and then modernist worldviews. In The City of God, Augustine writes: “To me it does not seem incongruous with the working of God, if we understand that the angels were created when that first light was made, and that a separation was made between the holy and the unclean angels, when, as is said, ‘God divided the light from the darkness; and God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night.’ For He alone could make this discrimination, who was able also before they fell, to foreknow that they would fall, and that, being deprived of the light of truth, they would abide in the darkness of pride” (326).

54 The semiotics of heterotopic Nova Scotia that Haliburton attempts to establish relate to what poststructuralist Julia Kristeva calls the symbolic, which is an entry into sign, syntax, and the law of the father (the social order, the republic, the polis); by contrast, Blackness presents a threat to this social order and modernist site, what Kristeva calls the semiotic (Platonic) chora: a space anterior to space/time/law, and a structure imprinted in relation to the maternal body (“Revolution in Poetic Language”). For a more recent (1994) discussion of the chora in relation to the social construct of sexually specific bodies—as a force that further blurs boundaries and binaries—see Elizabeth Grosz’s Volatile Bodies.

55 Some works I have in mind are Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (collected in Image, Music, Text) and Foucault’s response in his lecture “What is an Author?” Both Barthes and Foucault examine the
author as an ideological figure and argue that traditional approaches to authorship (such as biographical context) are outmoded.

In the new preface to *Survival*, Atwood argues in regards to Canadian literature that “still today, we have to start with the same axioms: i) it exists, and ii) it’s distinct” (7).

For an example, see his poem “If We Must Die,” which uses the form to call together a Black mass into unified action against the horrible practice of lynching and racist violence. While the poem is certainly contained within the “little song” of the sonnet, the form allows for it to be readily memorized, and reappropriated for reciprocal poetic action. The poem is McKay’s response to the racial violence known as the Red Summer of 1919: some 70 lynchings occurred that year, and racial violence reached an apex after a young black boy swam across the segregated section of a lake in Chicago and was subsequently murdered. After the volta, the opening “if” (1) of the poem becomes a “must” (8) as the poetic speaker switches metrical modes from iambic to trochaic, providing a rolling rhythmic sense of the need for immediate communal action: “Oh kinsmen! We must meet the common foe / Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave” (9-10). The switch from iamb to trochee meter was common among Harlem Renaissance poets (see Cullen’s “Heritage” or Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks “The Anniad”) and it indicates how Black modernism revises form through revision. The very action/form of the poem itself is a revision of the sonnet’s typical lyrical voice, traditionally asserted through a distinctive “I” speaking to a beloved; rather, the poem speaks to the communal folk class, albeit, a masculine group of “Kinsmen!”

To elaborate on Frye’s garrison mentality: “Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological ‘frontier,’ separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality” (342). African Canadians have had to dually ask themselves “Where is Here?,” as well as “Who am I?”

Sadly many are of texts are difficult to find or have not been reissued, with the exception of Laferrière’s popular text, which was made into a feature film and has been translated into several languages.

As Paul Gilroy rightfully attests, the “specious ontoologies” of race “are anything but spontaneous and natural. They should be awarded no impunity from prosecution” (*Between Camps* 53).

While I single out Stephen Harper, it should be noted that Canadian politicians, particularly since the 1950s, have been aware of issues of racism affecting this country, as shown in various political acts. For example, John Diefenbaker brought the Bill of Rights to fight racism in the ‘50s-‘60s, and since 1969 Trudeau has discussed race, evidenced in his ideas for Multicultural Canada championed in this thesis. Canadian policy behind the Immigration and Citizenship Acts of the 1970s were designed to recognize systematic racism in Canada and gradually change it.

The argument could be made, as Cecil Foster does, that the apartheid model in South Africa was largely based on Canada’s successful colonization of First Nations people with the Canadian constitution providing a model to control the undesirables (*Race* 41, 95).

King illustrates the horrors of Residential schools in Canada, as some 150,000 students were forbidden to speak their languages or practice any aspect of their culture: “Up to 50 percent of them lost their lives to disease, malnutrition, neglect, and abuse—50 percent. One in two. If residential schools were a virulent disease, they would have been in the same category as smallpox and Ebola” (*Inconvenient* 120). Given 60% of Residential schools in Canada were Catholic run, King describes Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 expression of “sorrow” as, like Harper’s, “nothing more than a sympathetic lament” (121). Apologies might be significant symbolic gestures, but too often the apologist assumes the problems of the past are past. Further, it should be noted that the recent First Nations Idle No More movement was the result of legislation (most directly Bill C-45) introduced by the Harper government, which violated treaty and land rights. Bill C-45 passed without Indigenous consultation, and greatly reduced the number of protected Canadian waterways from the millions to the hundreds. For an informative representation of the Idle No
More movement—including a letter to Stephen Harper from the Indigenous women of Turtle Island—see *The Winter we Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*.

As comedian Chris Rock once said, “But it’s all right, ’cause it’s all white.”

Further, I agree with Mason Stokes who, in *The Colour of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*, argues: “The fact that these novels [Stokes is writing from an American context] are explicitly and proudly racist does not justify our lack of attention to them. Rather, their racial hatred actually requires our attention” (11).

It is worth mentioning that Emily Murphy was part of what is known as the famous five: the five women who helped officially pass the legislation that recognized women as people. This group of women has been commemorated with a statue outside Parliament Hill in Ottawa; they also appeared on the back of the Canadian fifty-dollar bill from 2004-2012.

I use Empire didactically to refer to the larger British colonial project. But like Henderson in *Settler Feminism*, I believe that Canada represented for many settler Anglo-Saxons the new hopes for Empire.

I think more could be made about the connection between the body and racism. Foucault argues that the concern with the body and sex is akin to a “dynamic racism” [and] a racism of expansion” (*History* 125), a belief mythically predicated upon a “concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the human race” (149). It is a shame really that Foucault does not bring slavery, race, and colonialism together since slavery and colonialism are central to the capitalist formulation of Europe and North America. See Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire*, which challenges Foucault’s limited Western approach and his marginalization of Empire.

Lipsitz describes the devastating effects of racism: “Environmental racism makes the possessive investment in whiteness literally a matter of life and death; if African Americans had access to the nutrition, health care, and protection against environmental hazards offered routinely to whites, seventy-five thousand fewer of them would die each year” (10).

One of the primary reasons Sylvia provides is that at least in the US blacks could find jobs in the police force, as hotel bellhops, or elevator boys, which doesn’t seem to be the case in Canada.

By describing the “cultural utility” of the now, Butling somewhat undermines her otherwise well thought out approach to avant-garde poetics. By focusing on the cultural utility of a radical movement Butling places the radical into a market of values, while the old and the new sets up a binary that is not really rhizomatic. Despite this critique, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the rhizome is illuminating to the avant-garde movement, as a rhizome functions beyond culturally or politically defined borders: “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 7).

Dick Hebdige terms “subculture” a counterculture that breaks away from the natural order of society: “Subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (*Subculture* 90).

The off-rhyme between “English” and “dis” can be read as an engagement with otherness because standardized “English” is transformed into African American vernacular, as emphasized in “dis,” negating the colonial power while using it as a tactic, as a hybridized form of speech. Homi K Bhabha’s description of hybridity is illuminating: “hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (*The Location of Culture* 162).

Kelley’s *Race Rebels* further provides an interesting reassessment of what we traditionally consider viable political action, moving from the struggles waged by factory workers, to the insurgent politics of Malcolm X (while he was still Malcolm Little), to the modern gangster lyricism of present day rappers.

These binaries are not quite as simple as I’ve outlined. See Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* for its diasporic geography and “countermemory” to the tradition of European Enlightenment thought.
Further, in an interview with Thomas, Foster argues, “I discredit the notion of ethnicity […] I don’t consider Blackness to be ethnicity” (109).

My stance here is anthropological, but as I’ve stated in earlier examples, race is a social construct that places people into positions within the state that provide them superiority or inferiority.

For example, see Foucault’s Archeology of Knowledge, which in brief, discusses how systems of thought are governed by grammar and logic rules that define the conceptual possibilities of an individual’s thinking in a given period and domain.

By providing a critique of a standardized practice, or in addressing injustice, or simply expressing the individual capacity for perpetual change, musical improvisation is playing music on the edge: it is that space that Fischlin and Heble (inadvertently drawing on a phrase they later realized was first coined by Sun Ra) address as “the other side of nowhere” which, as any improviser will tell you, is an exciting place to be. By allowing improvisation to be part of academic knowledges, particularly in classroom settings, we reflect the plurality that knowledge production and theoretical ideas often innately celebrate.

This claim fits with arguments advanced by an evolving body of research and scholarship, loosely defined as Critical Studies in Improvisation, which sees in improvisational artistic practices a vital model for social practice and social change. Most recently, this research culminated in the release of pivotal books in critical improvisation studies through the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice Book Series, a series of six co-authored and co-edited volumes with Duke University Press. Further, readers might want to familiarize themselves with new and exciting research in critical improvisation studies by looking at the free online journal, Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critique en improvisation.

One example of such an approach is Rob Wallace’s Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism which analyzes how modernist writing was influenced by or engaged with improvisation—perhaps the central feature of twentieth century American music—by looking at four modernist poets: Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Another example is Philip James Pastras’s unpublished dissertation, A Clear Field: The Idea of Improvisation in Modern Poetry which, although written in 1981, still rings true in literary studies today: “scholarship has been silent on the subject of improvisation” (v).

Similarly, citizenship as inclusion or exclusion, as Giorgio Agamben argues in Homo Sacer, “names the new status of life as origin and ground of sovereignty and, therefore, literally identifies […] ‘the members of the sovereign’” (129).

It is relevant to mention that this was not as much an issue of Canadian citizenship, but rather of British Empire citizenships. There was no Canadian citizenship until 1946 when the Canadian parliament passed the Canadian Citizenship Act, which established the basis of Canadian citizenship.

While the emphasis here is on ethnic minorities, included in this concept is racial minorities, language minorities, disability minorities, religious minorities, and so on. By minorities I include all groups who hold few positions of social power.

Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857), also known as the Dred Scott Decision, was a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court that made two primary rulings: first, that African Americans were not citizens, and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court, and second, that the federal government did not have the power to regulate slavery in any territory of the United States (Wikipedia).

To see this concept in practice visit the World Citizens’ Registry, founded by American Garry Davis in 1949, and still in use today: http://www.recim.org/edm/registry.htm

While rights are fundamentally about principles of freedom and entitlement, I raise the question about animal and environmental rights, even if these issues are too far outside the scope of the thesis to engage, merely because once we start thinking about global citizenship we must consider not only how our actions on the environment affect animals, but also how pollution, or the dumping of waste in the surrounding sea of poor countries, directly affects the delicate ecosystem that binds us all together.

Quoted in The Massey Report (xxiii) and from The City of God. English Translation from Massey Report: “A nation is an association of reasonable beings united in a peaceful sharing of the things they
cherish; therefore, to determine the quality of a nation, you must consider what those things are.” I’ve included the Latin because it is in the Massey Report, and thus tells us something about the importance, at the time, placed on Latin while Canada’s literary elite debate whether or not Canada had even produced a body of literature. It is also worth mentioning that while the Augustine quotation is inclusive sounding, and provides a good place to start thinking about what comprises a nation, Augustine himself ultimately believed that Rome fell due to its lack of belief in God. By Augustine’s standards, the true nation was the Christian patria: a model that is both ethereal and patriarchal.

89 Once again, the influence of King, Jr. on Trudeau seems obvious. As King says in “A Christmas Sermon on Peace”: “No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world” (Trumpet 70).

90 See Foucault’s Discipline and Punish.

91 While I occasionally refer to certain people as racially black or white, which I acknowledge to be little more than somatic markers and constructed identities, I do so with a strategic essentialism to typify how one’s identity is often read within the neo-mythic (discursive) or ethno-racial (semiotic) registers with real implications and consequences in society.

92 In my interview with Foster, he articulates: “Trudeau was the only candidate to mention Martin Luther King, to mention the importance of what was happening, and the fact that there were weapons in the street. And he would then go on to argue in much of his speeches, especially when he was facing down the nationalists in Quebec, that the kind of violence that they were suggesting—he said, ‘there is a right way or wrong way,’ and I’m not passing judgment on that—he said that kind of violence was the same kind of violence that had resulted in the death of Kennedy, the second Kennedy, Robert, and Martin Luther King. So he always had those frames of reference” (7).

93 John Stuart Mill first asked the question, “What is a just society?” The Just Society was a rhetorical device used by Trudeau to depict his vision for the Nation. It was part and parcel of his governmental ideology and was used in all of his policies from multiculturalism to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). Although The Just Society was intended to provide more freedom to all Canadians—as Trudeau argued, “The Just society will be one in which our Indian and Inuit population will be encouraged to assume the full rights of citizenship” (Essential 19)—many First Nations saw the policy as yet another governmental policy for assimilation of Native people into Canadian society. Native leader Harold Cardinal turned the phrase around in his book, The Unjust Society to argue against the assimilation of First Nations into white Canadian society.

94 Philip’s sentiment is echoed by Jack Wilson’s 1982 article on “Rastafarianism,” in which he argues that as long as Canadian multiculturalism fails to “realize the mosaic is vertically organized. It does not speak to injustice” (Black Presence in Multi-Ethnic Canada 129).

95 My notion of Canada as a tapestry comes from Trudeau’s later rejection of the mosaic model in preference for the tapestry image: “Canada has been called a mosaic, but I prefer the image of a tapestry, with its many threads and colours, its beautiful shapes, its intricate subtlety” (177).


97 This is precisely what one government commission, The Citizen’s Forum on Canada’s Future, set out to define in identifying valued beliefs in all regions of Canada and in all walks of life. The commission developed a list of seven values that attest to a concern with the well-being of the Canadian community: (1) belief in equality and fairness; (2) belief in consultation and dialogue; (3) the importance of accommodation and tolerance; (4) support for diversity; (5) compassion and generosity; (6) attachment to the natural environment; (7) commitment to freedom, peace, and non-violent change (Citizen’s Forum 1991: 34–44). Such values define the attributes of a healthy Canadian community, despite our frequent failure as Canadians to uphold such ideals.

98 See Robert Kroestch’s essay “Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy,” which contends that Canadians cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is and suggests that “this very falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together” (61).
Nothing in life is certain, and yet everything is, even at an atomic level. Werner Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” is about the placement in space of an electron as it circulates an atom: we can never see where it is and therefore its probability of being in any one location is 100%—it is technically everywhere. Quantum mechanics is far beyond my technical scope, but I make this comparison as a reminder that being is everywhere and that as “whatever beings” we simply belong, which recalls Robert Brighurst’s principle that “everything is related to everything else” (see Everywhere Being is Dancing).

The Niyabinghi Order is the oldest of all the Rastafari mansions, and the term translates as “black victory” (niy = black, binghi = victory). The Niyabinghi resistance inspired a number of Jamaican Rastafarians, who incorporated Niyabinghi chants into their celebrations (“Mansions of Rastafari”). The rhythms of these chants—full of improvised syncopation—greatly influenced popular ska, rocksteady, and reggae music.

d’bi uses all eight principles to form the acronym s.o.r.p.l.u.s.i.: “representing self-knowledge, orality, rhythm, political content and context, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity” (27).

I use “with an asterisk” to emphasize that Philip’s belonging in any tradition remains liminal, as she does not neatly fit within the L=A=N=G=U=A= =E poetry tradition, or within dub poetry; this is, I think, how Philip wants it. While Philip’s work is very much part of the African Caribbean aesthetic she describes that she does not do performance poetry, although “performance, albeit unrealized, is very much part of my work” (Genealogy 131). Performance is as Philip states, “the completion of poetry. Without it poetry is the sound of one hand clapping” (118). Further, Philip describes her non-literary sources as the poets of the Caribbean, “the calypsonians like the Mighty Sparrow, Kitchener, and Calypso Rose, and the Rastafarian prophet-musicians—Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff and others” (131).

d’bi.young told me that Mandiela “has been a very important part of my growth as an artist and has mentored me […] Ahdri coined the term ‘dub theatre’ and my mom coined the term ‘dubbin theatre,’ and so I’m somewhere in the middle” (“we tellin’ stories” 5). d’bi.young has performed 9 different dub theatre pieces: solitary, yagayah, androgyne, she, domestic, the sankofa trilogy (featuring the award winning monodramas blood.claat, benu, and word! sound! powah!), and nanny: maroon warrior queen.

The additional slashes (/) touching the words duplicate the original text.

Fanon argues that to “speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (38).

Philip derives kinopeia from what she describes as Ezra Pound’s omission in his discussion of logopoeia—the logical, phanopoeia—the visual, and melopoeia—the auditory: the three qualities of language best exhibited in English, Chinese, and Greek.

A duppy is a Jamaican Patois word that means ghost, human vampire, or spirit, and has been used in many musical works of Caribbean origin. I occasionally use the word, as it has been used at times, to refer to dub, for dub uses improvisation, adaptation, as well as echo and reverb as a kind of ghosting, as Timothy White puts it, “to enhance the ‘haunted house’ effect” (230).

The line “you are accused,” as I hear it, recalls Earl Birney’s polemical poem, “I Accuse Us” (see Canadian Literature in English 121-124).

The idea of a “pure” gender would be inert and lifeless. There is no such thing as “pure” race or gender. Like community and the self, gender is a process to be reclaimed, reworked, adapted, and for the poet, expressed in a sounding text, all the more complex in its textualization and subsequent interpretation by readers. d’bi.young told me: “being able to think outside of gender, that that’s a part I feel of what our responsibility is that we recognize that ALL of this is a construction, right?” (“we tellin’ stories” 2).

In Outlaw Culture bell hooks examines sex and misogyny from a cultural perspective and provides examples to show that such ideologies do not appear in a cultural vacuum. hooks examines the blatant cultural appropriation and the fetishization of race that appears in Madonna’s Sex book, her videos, as well as her film Truth or Dare. Further, she critiques the misogyny and sexist attitudes portrayed in gangster rap as “a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (135). Such misogyny and “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” are hardly a bygone product of ‘90s music videos, because as I write this note there have been thousands of responses.
in defense or chastisement of the highly sexualized performance by pop star Miley Cyrus at the 2013 VMAs, as well as for the overt and provocatively sexual images in her video, “Wrecking Ball.” While many of these critiques or defenses have noted the sexist and patriarchal nature of the music industry, few focused on the fetishization of race in Cyrus’s work, particularly her appropriation of twerking—a sexually provocative dance move created by black women—and her reduction of black women (who appear as sexualized props in the background of that performance), as “lewd, lascivious, and uncontrollably sexualized” (“Solidarity is for Miley Cyrus”). As an unidentified author of a piece on the website Jezebel states, “the subsequent ignoring of the racial implications of what she did is just the latest incident in the long line of things that shows me as a black woman, that white feminism does not want me, or care to have me” (“Solidarity”).

We see similar strategies of abrogated English in the work of 19th Century African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar whose poems cover everything from music (his instrument was the banjo), spirituals, religion, coloured soldiers who fought in the civil war, race relations in America, odes to Ethiopia (in his Lyrics of Lowly Life, 1896) and the American South. His poems are replete with repetitions, abrogative language, neologisms, listenings, religious allusions, and refrains. Further, Dunbar’s proximity to poets whose literary blackface defined the meaning of blackface for white culture, has led some early scholars and readers to place his work in the minstrel tradition. Even though Dunbar was often embarrassed by the solecistic dialect in many of his poems, he has become the prototype of the poet with two distinct speaking voices. Like many dub poems, his poems seem to break into song when read aloud.

d’bi.young explains that her “use of the term biomyth refers to the abbreviation of the words biography and mythology. I first encountered the term reading audre lorde’s zami, which she refers to as a biomythography […] biography-mythology or biomyth, therefore, is the poetic space between what we interpret as real and what we deem make-believe. monodrama is theatrical solo-performance work” (29). As Maya Angelou poignantly observes: “my education and that of my Black associates were quite different from the education of our white schoolmates. In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop s’s from plurals and suffixes from past-tense verbs. We were alert of the gap separating the written word form the colloquial […] It be’s like that sometimes” (Caged Bird 225).

Zora Neale Hurston remains an important figure in both anthropology and literature, particularly for black women writers, for as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. emphasizes in “A Negro Way of Saying” (the afterword to Mules and Men): “several black women writers, among whom are some of the most accomplished writers in America today, have openly turned to her works as sources of narrative strategies, to be repeated, imitated, and revised, in acts of textual bonding” (292). The process of exile, while often painful, is often about pleasure, or finding hope in the possibilities of living elsewhere as Dionne Brand and others in this thesis do. For example, see George Lamming’s seminal (pre)post-colonial text, The Pleasures of Exile, in which he places the West Indian in the post-colonial world and reflects on the possibilities of that experience. The Language poets (often referred to as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, after the magazine of that name) are an avant-garde group of poets who emerged in the late ‘60s and ‘70s in the US and then elsewhere. Language poetry emphasizes the reader’s role in bringing meaning out of a work, viewing the poem as an inherent construction in and of language itself. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement built upon the modernist poetics of Gertrude Stein and its precursors, including the New American poets, the Black Mountain school, the Beat poets, and others, with later affiliations in Canada with the Kootenay School of Writing (in Vancouver).

As Cecil Foster informatively pointed out to me, not all duppies are evil or haunt the living. In fact, many duppies are considered good, and are part of a West African cosmology that views the world as comprised of eternal spirits and temporal corporeal beings. It is a world where eternal spirits can manifest themselves in bodies that die. In death, one’s spirit is released, but they maintain their presence in society, occasionally taking shape so they can manifest to the still embodied. They might even take the form of a
sound, or silence, or even the smells of perfume or flowers. Often duppies can be quite happy, which is why in death—the flying “back home” theme we encounter in Toni Morrison, Dionne Brand, and others—is often a return to the spirit world of ancestors. Furthermore, I acknowledge that Richard Iton’s definition of duppy is an unusual definition, but it does somewhat fit with the authoritative Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage, by Richard Allsopp, which in one definition describes a duppy as “a malevolent spirit that may be kept in a bottle, to be released to do harm to sb; a malevolent spirit that may take some frightening animal form or other form” (208). Further, as Cecil Foster pointed out in an email note, “in this cosmology, a truly free person is one who is totally freed of memories and impressions of the current embodied generations, so that there is no real interaction between those of a current embodied status and those without.” My use of haunting, borrowed from Iton, is largely to emphasize the nature of the underwater spirits in Zong! who continue to embody (and even haunt) our memories.

118 See Jacques Derrida’s 1993 Specters of Marx for the origination of this neologism.

119 While known primarily as a writer, Philip studied law at the University of Western Ontario, practicing law for a number of years in Toronto before becoming a full-time writer in the mid-80s.

120 The exact number of drowned Africans aboard the Zong is a slippery number as the legal case mentions 150 killed, Walvin in Black Ivory mentions 131, and others 130 and 132. Philip decides on the number 150, although concludes the number of the “murdered remains a slippery signifier of what was undoubtedly a massacre” (“Notanda” 208); nevertheless, the legal document cites the number as 150 (210). It is noted in some accounts that one survived and crawled back onto the ship.

121 Where possible I’ve tried to represent the original’s typographic appearance, although Zong! often makes such reproduction, without the aid of fascimille, virtually impossible.

122 Avantgarden is a Toronto-based performance series that seeks to provide a space for innovative and experimental poetry. To listen to Philip read from her work, including Zong!, see the video from the “North of Invention: A Festival of Canadian Poetry” available online at PennSound: http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/North-Of-Invention.php.

123 I’ve since had the chance to take part in book length reading/performance/version of Zong! with live musicians. It was a profound experience, although I wish I lasted until the end. The event appropriately took place on November 29th, 2013, which is the anniversary date of the 1781 massacre that occurred somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean between the coast of West Africa and the island of Jamaica.

124 The epigraph by Thomas More to the section “Ventus” (Latin for wind) is telling: “The poet is the detective and the detective a poet” (78).

125 Naming remains an important form of identity in African Canadian literature, as Shad raps, “I’ve got a good name, my first name came from slave in Babylon, back in the day, rat in a cage / Raised in chains, he trained like Rocky, but I mean his brain not boxing” (TSOL, “A Good Name”). Similarly, Clarke in “A Discourse on My Name” pens: “George is English / Elliott Scottish, and Clarke Irish. / Of course, this makes it a misnomer, / For I am an Africadian— / A Black Nova Scotian of African-American / And Mi’kmaq roots” (Black 125).

126 Demotic English or Demotic Caribbean English are terms that Philip uses to describe her language experience. She writes: “King’s English is in my head, demotic english of the Caribbean in my body” (Genealogy 50).

127 In an interview between Philip and Myriam Moïse, Philip explains, “the slave ship was a globalised world, a multilingual globalised prison on the sea that was a part of the first globalisation - the globalisation grounded on black skin and bills of exchange that fuelled and initiated speculative financing.” Similarly, rethinking the crammed multicultural slave ship in terms of a subway propelled by the economics of slavery, political rapper Immortal Technique asserts: “The subway stays packed like a multicultural slave ship / It’s rush hour, 2:30 to 8, non stoppin’ / And people comin’ home after corporate share croppin’” (“Harlem Streets”).

128 Allen’s poem, “In These Canadian Bones,” sums up this immigrant diversity and poetics:

In these Canadian bones
where Africa landed
and Jamaica bubble
inna reggae redstripe
and calypso proddings of culture
We are creating this very landscape
we walk on (Psychic 65)

One recent example of a DJ mixing the blues in a hip-hop format is Montreal DJ and consummate innovator of the art of DJing, Kid Koala. Koala’s album *12 Bit Blues* (2012) reshapes, mashes, and remixes the blues, while keeping it simple by primarily using an SP1200 sampler and turntable to craft the album. Over three days Kid Koala cut up and reassembled the bed tracks for *12 Bit Blues* without the aid of sequencing software, often playing each part in real time, before finally returning and adding cuts overttop. *12 Bit Blues* is postmodern blues music, ripped and scratched, distressed and mashed, and squeezed from a near-tragic lyricism at the edge of the crossroads where new meanings are forged. Kid Koala’s practice is also a reminder that the blues continue to be used by artists in all sorts of improvisatory ways. The blues have always been about making it work with what you have at hand.

It is important to remember that black writers did not unequivocally appreciate Hughes’s contributions, as James Baldwin criticized “The Weary Blues,” saying it “copies, rather than exploits, the cadences of the blues” (qtd. in Wallace 96). Hughes’s performances were often thought of as more like a musician reading a score, rather than improvising. Harold Bloom also had a distaste for Hughes, but Bloom’s cantankerous disposition towards change (as mentioned, he also dislikes slam poetry) renders his opinion rather conservative and institutional.

Semiotics, most commonly referred to as the interpretation of signs, has moved through both structural and post-structural applications. The application of the term as a science of signs relating to human language was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure argues that the world exists but the meanings which are conferred upon it by language are determined by the meanings inherent in language as an objective structure of rules and relations. As argued by Saussure, and later taken up by Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies*, which examines the ideological coding of modern mythos, the signifier is the sound image, spoken or written, while the signified is the concept of the object or the idea that is being referred to by the sign. What is foundational in Saussure is that the sign is both arbitrary and differential, and thus we can distinguish between signs. As Gates points out, in Standard English signification denotes meaning and in the black tradition it denotes ways of meaning, thus allowing the sign/signified more malleability for how it means.

Much of Clarke’s work explores and chronicles the experience and history of the black Canadian community of Nova Scotia, creating a cultural geography that Clarke refers to as “Africadia.”

Coltrane performed “Violets for Your Furs” on his 1957 debut, *Coltrane*. Originally a 1941 song written by Matt Dennis, with words by Tom Adair, it was made popular by Frank Sinatra on his 1954 record, *Songs For Young Lovers*.

I disagree with Almonte’s claim that in Callaghan’s *The Loved and the Lost* “the colonial sensibility of the four early Canadian works [he explores] is absent; Canadian literature has by the fifties donned the guise of modernism” (23). While Callaghan participated in the modernist movement with writers like Hemingway, the machinations and vestiges of colonial logic still permeate many of the characters’—noticeably those characters from minority positions—racist voicings in the text.

This is a pun on Wordsworth’s theory of “emotion recollected in tranquility” (“Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” 1447) based on the notion of the “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (1447), that allows the poet to write and reflect on a past experience. Clarke is interested in something akin to Wordsworth’s monumental observations through past experiences, such as “we see into the life of all things” (*Tintern Abbey* 1449).
I am particularly thinking of cultural translation and abrogation upon standardized forms of practice. Michel de Certeau argues that a “tactic is the space of the other […] play on and with a terrain imposed on it” (The Practice of Everyday Life 37).

Madlib’s Shades of Blue infuses old jazz records from the Blue Note catalogue with hip-hop production, cuts, and new contexts, translating original pieces into new creations.

In “Cool Politics,” Clarke argues that there is “no essential divorce between African-American Studies and postcolonial theory.”

McKay and Clarke might use the sonnet just as Shakespeare does (examining the passage of time, beauty, love, and mortality), the form being a perfect battlefield for warring ideas, and yet they explore issues of race, gender, and regionalism, which, although were also concerns of Shakespeare, are presented in wholly new ways influenced by the experience of being raced in a modern/postmodern context far outside Shakespeare’s universalism.

This sentiment is echoed by Davis in his Autobiography, where he argues that electric instruments have nothing to do with bad or good music: “All these purists are walking around talking about how electronic instruments will ruin music. Bad music is what will ruin music, not the instruments the musicians choose to play” (295).

Whylah Falls, like Blue, Black, and Red, uses a language closely aligned with the lyricism of blues music: “Whylah Falls was born in the blues” (xxiii).

Clarke does not seem to care too much about being described as a formalist, so long as he is read or, as he describes, sung: “Say I scribe “vernacular formalism” (McNeilly) I don’t care—so long as I be sounded, recited, sung” (“Epiphanies” 63).

The Hip Hop group The Perceptionists, in their song “Black Dialogue,” address the issue of silencing Black voices in the pages of history, and use prominent Black figures, as well as Hip Hop, as a means of reclaiming history through the pervasive popularity of modern Black culture.

Yeah, it was written in the books of Europeans we were savage
That our history was insignificant and minds below average
But how can one diminish the work
Of the most imitated culture on this earth
Fast forward to 2000 and now
You see it everywhere you look, speech, music, fashion and style
It’s black dialogue
Go ahead kid, try it on
It’s much harder to master than precision with firearms

From Whylah Falls: “The end of this world is beauty” (21); “How can any poem / picture my beauty?” (70); “Is our fate / to become beautiful / only after tremendous pain” (109); “Every act must reveal Beauty. / Hence, under the orange moon/ of Whylah Falls, / I am plucking this poem” (180).

Throughout Clarke’s work there is a preoccupation with beauty, often displayed in Clarke’s choice of epigraphs. In Blue there is an epigraph from Keats, “what the imagination ceases as beauty must be truth.” In Trudeau we get a quotation from Pound, “beauty is difficult.” In I&I, the epigraph from Pain Not Bread, a collection of poets with Roo Borson and Kim Maltman, which starts off the book reads, “This world is too beautiful to be true, and too beautiful not to be true.” Finally, in Red, we get two more epigraphs, one by Frantz Fanon, “I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is,” and also, Ezra Pound: “Beauty must never be explained.” These are some of the epigraphs in Clarke’s work that demonstrate his occupation with beauty as a theme.

C. L. R. James refers to himself, and by extension West Indians, as Caliban in the preface to his Beyond a Boundary. James argues, “To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew” (9). Caesar is a metaphor for the British colonialists.

The opening section of Clarke’s Blue, “Black Elogues,” is an allusion to the three major works by Latin poet Virgil. The works are dramatic and mythic interpretations of revolutionary change in Rome
between 44-38 BC. In staging the opening of his work with this title, Clarke is being suggestive that his poetry dramatizes a type of poetic and historic change.

148 Thanks to my former student, Kent Smith, for helping to flesh out some of these connections. In an interview with René Despestre in 1967 Césaire defines Negritude “as an awareness of the solidarity among blacks […] I have a feeling that it was somewhat of a collective creation. I used the term first, that's true. But it’s possible we talked about it in our group. It was really a resistance […] adopt[ing] the word nègre as a term of defiance […] found[ing] a violent affirmation in the words nègre and Negritude […] above all it is a concrete rather than abstract coming to consciousness” (23-25).

149 Clarke often mentions his indebtedness to Bob Dylan. In reformulating T.S. Eliot’s self-identification he describes himself as a tyro bard, “Poundian in poetics, Dylanesque in politics, and African American in faith” (“Epiphanies” 60).

150 In “III. i” Clarke self-reflexively confronts assumptions of appropriateness for poetic voice, highlighting xenophobic hegemonies towards Black Talk: “Your black mouth ought to be elegant with snow— / So words emerge icy, paralyzed: Britannic / They say, ‘Put away all that alliteration. It’s too much jazz, or other Negro musics’” (133).

151 Appropriation is defined by M. NourbeSe Philip “to mean the abuse of power by one group in exploiting indiscriminately, for their own economic advantage, the cultural resources of other groups” (qtd. in Moss and Sugars, Canadian Literature 531).

152 Some of the ideas for my reading of Blue are adapted from Jon Paul Fiorentino’s reading of Clarke’s work (see the Works Cited).

153 Jean-Luc Nancy describes listening as an embodied act, tactile in nature: “To listen, as well as to look or to contemplate, is to touch the work in each part— or else to be touched by it, which comes to the same thing” (Listening 65).

154 While I only point to it, it is worth mentioning that there are a lot of racist images in the poem, which we should rightfully condemn. An entire chapter of this thesis could be devoted to Baraka’s poem, but I focus on the kinship between the poems. To my ear, there is no racism anywhere in Clarke’s work.

155 Wynton Marsalis is often viewed as a traditionalist whose style reflects and attempts to preserve neoclassical approaches to jazz, while Miles Davis is generally viewed as a jazz innovator, whose own music was infused with high levels of hybridity, especially in the later part of his career.

156 Clarke does not include T.S. Eliot in this list, but by virtue of mentioning canonical poets he invokes the entire spectrum. Perhaps Pound and Eliot need not be mentioned because they participate in the dialogue by virtue of their own recuperative approaches to resurrecting dead poets. Eliot writes: “We shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet’s] work, may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (“Tradition” 40).

157 “Naima” is a ballad composed by John Coltrane in 1959 from the album, Giant Steps. The piece was named after his wife at the time, Juanita Naima Grubbs. Compared to the other pieces on Giant Steps, “Naima” is particularly restrained, comprised of a slow melody with a brief piano solo.

158 The murder is described as “Rufus slammed the hammer […] into Burgundy’s head” (13), which is riffed on in the larger coda of the collection, “Black Mail,” where Clarke relates the Hamiltons’s killing of a taxi driver to a black boy who was “slain by a blow from a hammer wielded by his master” in Nova Scotia during slavery (143). Interestingly, Execution Poems opens with a reduced version of “Negation” (Blue), playing once again with race construction and trespassing (George and Rue were after all, clearly, “Negro, and semi-Micmac” [Execution Poems 12]), tragedy, and redemption.

159 Clarke’s librettos are Beatrice Chancy (libretto 1998; verse-play 1999), Québécité, and Trudeau: Long March/Shinning Path. Many of Clarke’s works have also been produced as plays, often in international/multicultural settings. Notably, in 2002 Whylah Falls was staged and translated into Italian in Venice.

Joseph Pivato describes the irony and international prowess of the work being performed in Italy, as “the Italian chorus sang jazz, blues, and spirituals in an ornate Venetian theatre named after Carlo Goldoni.” Lastly, Clarke told me in an email that “If [he] ever got to do another opera libretto, the subject will be the
imagined meeting of Brown, Hendrix, and Miles Davis: The trio had actually been on the cusp of collaboration before Hendrix’s untimely death.” In that case, we can only hope he writes another libretto.  

The notes to Bill Evans’s *The Complete Riverside Recordings* (1984) give credit to both Evans and Davis. In the 1993 Fall issue of *Letter from Evans* Earl Zindars claims that the piece is 100% Bill Evans’s “because he wrote it over at my pad where I was staying in East Harlem, 5th floor walkup, and he stayed until 3 o’clock in the morning playing these six bars over and over” (qtd. in Hinkle 20).  

It is worth noting that Malcolm X eventually conceded that interracial marriage is a spurious term and should be a personal choice and right: “I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being—neither white, black, brown, or red; and when you are dealing with humanity as a family there’s no question of integration or intermarriage” (*Autobiography*, “Epilogue” 424).  

While Miller is hardly the only scholar writing on this topic, he is the most prolific. See his works *Jazz in Canada: Fourteen Lives* (Toronto 1982); *Boogie, Pete & The Senator: Canadian Musicians in Jazz: the Eighties* (Toronto 1987); *Cool Blues: Charlie Parker in Canada, 1953* (Toronto 1989); *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949* (Toronto 1997); and *The Miller Companion to Jazz in Canada and Canadians in Jazz* (Toronto 2001).  

Rockhead’s Paradise—along with other jazz clubs in Montreal, such as The Nederoloc Club [colored men spelled backwards], The Boston Café, and The Terminal Club—helped established Montreal’s reputation as “Harlem of the North” (See Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*). The club was located in Little Burgundy, an area known for producing talented jazz musicians, most notably Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones. The three-story club was founded in 1928 by Rufus Rockhead, a Jamaican-born railway porter who was able to draw some of the biggest names in blues and jazz during Montreal’s Sin City heyday from the 1930s to the 1950s (Brownstein). Rufus Rockhead opened the club with the income he earned on the rails as a porter, and then later as a bootlegger, allegedly running booze for Al Capone (Mathieu, *North*; 201; 240). Of all the jazz clubs in Montreal throughout the twentieth century Rockhead’s Paradise, located at 1254 St. Antoine Street, was the most popular until it closed its doors permanently in 1980 when it was sold and then shortly thereafter demolished, followed by the creation of the Ville Marie Expressway overhead which solidified the club’s demise (Brownstein). During its fifty year tenure numerous renowned jazz players were drawn to Rockhead’s Paradise, located at 1254 St. Antoine Street, was the most popular until it closed its doors permanently in 1980 when it was sold and then shortly thereafter demolished, followed by the creation of the Ville Marie Expressway overhead which solidified the club’s demise (Brownstein). During its fifty year tenure numerous renowned jazz players were drawn to Rockhead’s Paradise, including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Lead Belly, Nina Simone, Dizzy Gillespie, and Sammy Davis Jr., among countless others. Much of this information now appears in my *Wikipedia* page on “Rockhead’s Paradise.”  

I’ve acquired permission from Siemerling to quote from portions of it here based on a paper he gave at the TransCanada Institute in Guelph on Tuesday November 30th 2010.  

Also worth mentioning is the 1969 broadcast controversy in Finland where a group of three actors read Ginsberg’s *Howl* with jazz music specially composed for radio broadcast. The broadcast led to a criminal investigation by the department of Helsinki police because of the poem’s alleged obscenity, particularly the references to homosexuality.  

In April 1938 instrumentalist Peggy Gilbert responded to *Down Beat*’s “Why Women Musicians are Inferior” with her own reaction to the era’s infamous discrimination against women musicians. While the article was published, much to her disappointment *Down Beat* renamed her article, “How Can You Blow a Horn With a Brassiere?” Nevertheless, Gilbert gained a reputation as an advocate for the voices of women instrumentalists. Further, *Down Beat*’s argument holds little weight considering there were incredibly talented women jazz instrumentalists working at the time. Among the most influential was Mary Lou Williams who was revered and in demand for her compositional skills by jazz artists like Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. In the ‘40s Williams would go on to inspire a whole generation of bebop artists, serving as a mentor to Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, among many others.
Defamiliarization or *ostranenie* (остранение) is the artistic technique of persuading the audience to see familiar things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar; essentially, the process or result of rendering unfamiliar (OED).

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) was one of the most prominent Africans involved in the British movement of the abolition for the slave trade. His *Interesting Narrative* is also one of the staples of slave narratives, popularly read, much like Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative and Life and Times*.

“Poethical” is a useful neologism that combines ethics with poetics. It comes from Joan Retallack’s *The Poethical Wager*, and is a term “that beckons towards the reader for help” (62).

Lawrence referred to his style as “dynamic cubism,” though by his own account the primary influence was not so much French art as the shapes and colours of Harlem.

Max Weber’s sociological concept of the “iron cage” refers to the growing rationalization of social life, particularly in capitalist societies. Essentially, our actions become more and more governed by bureaucratization, which puts us in an “iron cage” and limits our freedom to make informed choices.

By way of a gloss, the concept of negative capability comes from poet John Keats. It is a theory that describes the capacity for accepting uncertainty and irresolution in life and was primarily applied by Keats to his analysis of Shakespeare.

Rather than a model, I am using modal to refer to modal jazz—as discussed in the prior chapter in regards to Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, and a kind of jazz that uses modes rather than chord progressions—to emphasize the emotive and improvisational framework of Yasmine’s character and Brand’s larger structural goals.

*Verbings*, because the jazz not only helps aestheticize the text, but it also actively pushes it forward.

Pivotal jazz figures appear elsewhere in the work of Dionne Brand, notably in her novel, *What We All Long For*, including artists such as Miles Davis, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Thelonious Monk (particularly his “Epistrophy,” which is an important recording in *Ossuaries*), John Coltrane (particularly his “Venus,” which is also one of the key jazz recordings that animates *Ossuaries*), Ornette Coleman, Billie Holiday, and Cecil Taylor, among others.

These are some of Coltrane’s most improvised and avant-garde works with a direct political context. Heble and Fischlin argue that Coltrane’s 1965 collective improvisation for *Ascension* can audibly be heard as a sonic approximation of the spirit and the movement that has historically animated the narratives and struggles of African Americans (*Other Side* 26).

The text references the work of Karl Marx (particularly *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) and Friedrich Engels (particularly *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*).

The first deviation occurs on page 42 with a description of Yasmine’s lover’s “motionless face,” the two lines (less the third) perhaps denying him of agency. The second deviation occurs on page 111 with a quartet and during a poetic tirade that presents a catalogue of disembodied parts; the extra line perhaps balancing out the former line lost, paradoxically through the embodiment of destroyed form: in this case the description of dismembered body parts.

There are numerous avant-garde poets who commonly employ the disjunctive jazz form and content to their poetics, including Amiri Baraka, Charles Simic, Michael Harper, Yusef Komunyakaa, William Corbett, Al Young, Robert Creeley, and Jack Kerouac, who applied improvised jazz licks to his poetics, among countless others. In Canada, Christian Bök, a virtuoso sound poet, also incorporates many elements of jazz into his poetry. Bök’s *Eonoia*, a musical texture of rhymes and echolocations that uses the pallet of the vowels from “Eunoia,” displays many lines replete with jazz reverberations, such as the following: “Rapt / fans at a bandstand can watch jazzbands that scat a / waltz and a samba” (15).

In many ways the poem participates in and deviates from the epic form. While epics often open in *media res*, *Ossuaries* opens in a liminal space of recollection, in an unfixed time frame. The setting is vast, also like the epic, moving across countries and motioning towards uncharted territories, such as outer space. While there is no invocation to a muse, the jazz invocations throughout can be read as inspiration for the text’s melodic sounding. In working somewhat against the epic, the text does not
announce its theme from an onset, but rather continually takes part in numerous thematic undercurrents. Perhaps one of the poem’s strongest deviations from the epic genre is its avoidance of divine intervention; nevertheless, the divine is still a powerfully symbolic system of destruction in the text: “the sharp instruments for butchering, / to appease which rain god, / which government god, which engine god” (123). Similar to many epics, Ossuaries makes much use of repetition and epithets, one example being the colour blue and its repetitions throughout the text: see pages 20, 35, 36, 46, 53, 86 for examples. The text also contains the epic’s use of cataloguing, “Ossuary XIII” containing a long list of body parts. Another characteristic of the epic is its use of long or formal speeches; while Ossuaries avoids many of the formalisms of address, its does contain many long stream-of-consciousness speeches that can go on for pages. Lastly, Ossuaries doesn’t contain any simple representation of a hero, as Yasmine is more of an outcast or an antihero, incredulous of absolutes, and always in process.

181 Claudia Jones (1915-1964) was a black nationalist, political activist, and communist in the United States. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was a Marxist theorist, philosopher, and a political activist of Polish Jewish descent who became a naturalized German citizen. 

182 Harmolodics is the musical philosophy of Ornette Coleman and is associated primarily with the jazz avant-garde movement, although many of its implications extend beyond these limits. Coleman defines harmolodics as the use of one’s physical and logical components into an expression of sound. Applied to the particulars of music, harmolodics means that “harmony, melody, speed, rhythm, time and phrases all have equal position in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas” (“Prime Time” 54-55).

183 Amiri Baraka argues that Pound’s poetic dictum to “make it new” is fundamentally African: “Make it New attributed to Ezra Pound is Eastern. It is the African (and Sufi) explanation of why life, even though contained by an endless cycle, or not contained, is an endless cycle” (“Notes” 46).

184 In her book Mad at Miles, Pearl Cleage makes the argument that she was not able to listen to Miles Davis’s softly muted trumpet without hearing the muted screams of the women he blatantly abused.

185 Sean B. Carroll’s Endless Forms Most Beautiful, a text Brand references in her acknowledgements, contains the hypothesis that “it is through changes in embryos that changes in form arise” (x).

186 “Epistrophy” was once even called, as Robin D. G. Kelley details, “Iambic Pentameter” (Life 564), which suits the cadenced meter of Monk’s composition.

187 In Jazz Text, Carl Hartman argues: “Another name for antistrophe, pretty nearly, is epistrophic. ‘Epistrophy’ is also the name of an important bebop tune written by Kenny Clarke and Thelonious Monk. Its melody is constructed almost entirely from variations and inversion of a single four-note theme” (163).

188 See Watkins, “Disruptive Dialogics,” for a fuller discussion of repetition with a difference, and how improvising upon a standard can function in postmodern musical forms (Hip Hop for instance) within an iterative, yet distinct, context.

189 Ossuaries is full of repetitions, but they are not merely a technique of asserting rhythmic permeations that affirm blackness, for Yasmine is not necessarily semiotically charged as a purveyor of African-American culture (her name is after all Arabic and Persian in origin).

190 Scopophilia is derived from Greek and refers to the “love of looking”—generally, one’s deriving pleasure from looking at someone. The term has been used by psychoanalysts, such as Jacques Lacan, and was borrowed by cinema psychoanalysts (such as in Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) of the 1970s to describe pleasures in spectators when they watch films. Further, critical race theorists such as bell hooks have taken up the term as a mechanism to describe racial othering.

191 The showcasing of Africans as spectacle recalls the captivity of Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), who was the most famous of Khoikhoi women who were exhibited as sideshow attractions in 19th century Europe under the name “Hottentot Venus” (Wikipedia).

192 Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly Dollar Brand), who was born in Cape Town, has many songs/albums that thematize Africa (see African Sketchbook and African Marketplace); Randy Weston, who was born in Brooklyn, incorporates many African elements into his music, and eventually settled in Morocco.
In “Destinations Out,” Ajay Heble argues that “outer space functions for Ra as a metaphor for possibility (or perhaps for performing the impossible), for alternatives to dominant systems of knowledge production, and that this was particularly important for aggrieved populations sounding off against systems of oppression and racist constraint” (1).

The speaker of Brand’s *Thirsty* takes a similar humbling approach to her citizenship at the end of the text: “Look it’s like this, I’m just like the rest, / limping across the city, flying where I can” (30). Her commonness calls the reader into the implicit construction of meaning: if the poet is ordinary, and can attempt change, then why not us?

*Dante’s Divine Comedy* (Paradise) ends with Dante becoming like a wheel in the whole universe, moved by the same love that moves the sun and the other stars” (33. 145).

Like Brand and Achebe, Claire Harris describes music as a gift that connects various cultures together: “Some years ago our consul in Switzerland told me there were twenty-five steelbands in Switzerland. I asked if there were Trinidadians in Switzerland. She said no; moreover, the pans are imported from Japan. Black Trinidad and Tobago has given the world a great deal” (qtd. in Thomas 123).

Dissident artist Ai Weiwei remains relentless in his pursuit of free expression through art, social media, and political protest. For Ai Weiwei there is no clear division between art and politics: art is a vehicle for social change, and a vehicle for the possible. Taking the old and making it new is a large part of Ai Weiwei’s approach, which speaks to improvisation and DJ culture. Through his art he advocates for freedom of expression and places value in individual lives within the totalitarian state. Since an earthquake in China’s Sichuan province in 2008 killed more than 5,000 children he has become ever more outspoken in his criticism of the Chinese government. His activism and controversial artwork has led to the seizure of his passport and he is currently not allowed to travel outside of China. Ai Weiwei views the past as something we have an ethical responsibility to dismantle and transform: “A historical property has morals and ethics of the society that created it and can be revived. What I mean is that we can discover new possibilities from the process of dismantling, transforming, and recreating” (AGO).

Banksy is a United Kingdom-based graffiti artist and political activist known around the world for his subversive and satirical street art conducted in his distinctive stenciling technique.

Henry Mancini initially composed “Moon River” with lyrics written by Johnny Mercer. The song received an Academy Award for Best Original Song for Audrey Hepburn’s performance of the piece in the 1961 movie *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. It’s been covered thousands of times, although Kid Koala’s version is the most adventurous.

It’s beyond the scope of this chapter to outline the various legal battles over sampling, but the reader might like to examine some well known cases: De La Soul vs. The Turtles; Vanilla Ice vs. Queen; Biz Markie vs. Gilbert Sullivan; and the Beastie Boys vs. pretty much everyone. Sampling has a long history from Kraftwerk’s “Trans Europe Express” being sampled in Afrika Bambaataa and Soul Sonic Force’s “Planet Rock” to more current examples like Twin Sisters’ “Meet the Frownies” being sampled in Kendrick Lamar’s “The Recipe.” A James Brown sample might become unrecognizable in the pastiche of a Public Enemy track containing some 80 different samples.

Canadian composer John Oswald describes the art of turntablism: “A phonograph in the hands of a ‘hiphop/scratch’ artist who plays a record like an electronic washboard with a phonographic needle as a plectrum, produces sounds which are unique and not reproduced—the record player becomes a musical instrument” (132).

The turntables are often referred to as the wheels of steel. See Grandmaster Flash’s breakthrough “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel,” released in 1981, and which over the course of 7 minutes displays Flash’s virtuosic turntable skills.

Also see The Avalanches *Since I Left You*, which is reportedly comprised of some 3,500-vinyl samples (Pytlik, “The Avalanches”).

In an email conversation I had with Compton, I asked him about his usage of hip-hop as a medium, and he responded by saying: “I can say that I place my audio art within the long tradition of black
diasporic orality more so than the more limited and recent innovation of hip hop. *Performance Bond* is largely about the anxiety of the globalization of hip hop. Is it a form of American sub-imperialism? Or does the diaspora cut across borders in a way that makes hip hop identification political resistance? However, given that Hip Hop has more than 40 years of history, and shows no signs of slowing down, I would have to say that the larger cultural practice of Hip Hop is not limited in its approach as a diasporic orality.

In *After Canaan*, Compton describes “Afroperipheralism” in contrast to the redemptive drive of Afrocentricism, which iterates everything but a narrow set of perceived traditions as inauthentic and culturally ersatz” (15).

While I find Adorno to be an elusive and captivating theorist (hence my use of his theories several times throughout this thesis), it must be acknowledged that Adorno, himself a purveyor of avant-garde atonal music, was quite averse to jazz, and viewed the music as populist, repetitious, and ultimately as a product of capitalism. However, later in his career it seemed as if he avoided responding to free jazz, perhaps being somewhat haunted by his older critiques of jazz.

By focusing on the language politics of being mixed race, Compton embraces difference so that he may name the oppression being named upon him. He self-reflexively writes, in relation to the word mulatto, “Without it [mulatto], it’s very difficult to identify my lived racialized experience [...] Like when someone looks at me and sees this sentence: ‘A black person slept with a white person.’ Those are mulatto moments, and without that word, it’s hard to even articulate that they’re happening to you. Naming an oppression, or a response to it, is important. I’ll keep the word, thanks” (“Self-Interview” 83).

I avoid the use of the term voodoo since many find it offensive, especially the way the word “voodoo” has been used in Western society to mock and denigrate a religion and lifestyle many hardly bother to understand. Is Jesus in Christianity, like a zombie risen from the dead, that different from the zombies in vodou? It’s also worth mentioning that the word voodoo is still used in association with Louisiana Voodoo/ New Orleans Voodoo.

This line likely refers to the lines Compton is writing, creating a space for the migrant in the poetry.

See the interactive website Black Strathcona (http://blackstrathcona.com/) for pictures, a chronology, video links, and a detailed history of Vancouver’s Black community.

Joe Fortes (1863-1922), born in Bridgetown, Barbados, devoted much his free time to teaching children to swim and to patrolling the beach at English Bay in Vancouver. In February 2013, Canada Post released a postage stamp to commemorate Joe Fortes during Black History Month. There is also a popular upscale restaurant named after him in Vancouver.

For example, the American group, The Incredible Bongo Band, recorded the song “Apache” in Vancouver in 1973, arguably the most influential sample in all of hip-hop music. Further, in the 1990s, Vancouver hip-hop group The Rascalz provide an example of how important Hip Hop was to marginalized youth looking for a creative outlet such as hip-hop. The Rascalz are anthologized in Compton’s *Bluesprint*.

The “[sic]” appears in the original poem and the “sic” might refer to Canada’s National Railway, which is abbreviated as CN.

For example, the line “Young man, yo’ arm’s too short to box wid God!” (1194) from James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography*, appears in numerous hip-hop songs with some minor repurposings: Black Star’s “Thieves in the Night”: “Your firearms are too short to box with God”; the line appears in “Mortal Combat” by Big Daddy Kane; Nas uses the line in his song “You’re Da Man” from *Stillmatic* (2001); and GZA of the Wu-Tang Clan also used a variation of the line on his song “Paper Plates”: “Rhymes too short to box with God.” In fact Black Star’s entire concept for their fantastic song, “Thieves in the Night,” was inspired by Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. In the album’s liner notes, Talib Kweli explains that the paragraph “struck me as one of the truest critiques of our society, and I read that in high school when I was 15 years old. I think it is especially true in the world of hip hop, because we get blinded by these illusions.” The excerpt interpolated in the song is as follows: “And fantasy it was, for we were not strong,
only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good but well-behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life” (205). The chorus on the track is a clear homage: “Not strong, only aggressive / Not free, we only licensed / Not compassionate, only polite (now who the nicest?) / Not good but well-behaved / Chasin’ after death so we could call ourselves brave, still livin’ like mental slaves / Hiding like thieves in the night from life / Illusions of oasis making you look twice.”

Blight refers to any “baleful influence of atmospheric or invisible origin, that suddenly blasts, nips, or destroys plants,” as well as any “malignant influence of obscure or mysterious origin” that causes destruction (OED).

It might surprise some to learn that there are more black people in BC than in Nova Scotia.

To even the casual observer it should be obvious I am making a distinction between rap, hip-hop, and Hip Hop. Such obfuscation around Hip Hop terminology is hardly an academic concern, as various MCs (emcees/master of ceremonies) engage with these slippages in their lyrics. KRS-ONE has a song called “Hip Hop vs. Rap” in which he raps, “Rap is something you do / Hip Hop is something you live.” On a more pedantic scholarly level, as I state in an endnote in “Disruptive Dialogues”: “While I choose not to capitalize any of the musical genres (because they are not proper nouns) it might seem a little slippery that I capitalize Hip Hop. The reason for this is not that I think Hip Hop deserves capitalization over other genres; rather, I use the capitalization to refer to the larger culture that encompasses Hip Hop.” To clarify, I use the lower case hyphenated “hip-hop” to refer to the musical form, “rap” to refer to mainstream hip-hop and the act of rhythmically delivering lyrics, usually to a beat, and I use the capitalized “Hip Hop” to refer to the larger cultural movement that birthed the music and it various cultural offshoots.

It’s particularly interesting to hear a free jazz pioneer continually speak in support of rap music. In an interview with Ollie Bivens for All Music, Shepp states: “What youngster in the ghetto is going to be able to buy a saxophone? Of course, they buy records and turntables and they created new instruments. They’re making something out of nothing. I’m all for these young people. In fact, I think we have to come over to their side. We should begin to make connections with their lifestyle, their culture and their music. I would love to have heard Coltrane play with Digable Planets or James Brown. Those things just never happened because our people never saw the connection.” Shepp throws himself into the hybrid jazz-rap mix on his Phat Jam in Milano (2005), which features Shepp playing with Oliver Lake, Hamid Drake, Joe Fonda, and rapper/poet Napoleon Maddox.

My listening to hip-hop music at a young age in a community far removed from the initial movement is hardly a product of the early ‘90s, given how pervasive hip-hop music is these days. A 2005 American study describes that hip-hop and rap music are immensely popular among seven through twelfth-graders with 65% of youths of all backgrounds listening to the music in a typical day (Rideout et al.).

I borrow this term from a bell hooks film entitled Cultural Criticism and Transformation.

As Walter Ong states in his pioneering book Orality and Literacy: “we can style writing a ‘secondary modeling system,’ dependent on a prior primary system, spoken language” (8). Hip Hop in North America is secondary because it exists in a society that knows and utilizes writing and technology; in a society without writing it would be a primary system (if such exists).

African American Vernacular English speakers largely provide Hip Hop’s lexicon, with some words donated from Spanish, Caribbean Englishes, and from graffiti vocabulary (argot) (Richardson 11).

Nielsen’s argument consists of six essentialist critiques of rap, using the music as a straw man to assert his preference for jazz-infused poetry: (1.) He contends that the current academic fetishization of rap has served to obscure further the continuing experimentation with text by jazz composers (174), which seems like a strange statement given that music departments encourage these types of cross-pollinations with poetry and jazz more readily than they do with hip-hop and jazz; (2.) He seems disturbed that critics have devoted entire volumes to the examination of rap and its cultural contexts (176), but I’m not quite sure why; (3.) He unconvincingly outlines the difference between “black rapping” and “black poetry” (176); (4.) He insists that jazz-rap fusion often trivializes rap, citing an early example such as Miles Davis’s
Doo-Bop, rather than focus on any contemporary moments or more successful earlier ones (184); (5.) He insists critics (especially cultural studies critics) have little interest in jazz-poetry because it is unpopular (235), which is somewhat ridiculous since a quick search on Google Scholar retrieves over three times the results for “jazz poetry” than it does for “hip-hop poetry”; (6.) And finally, in perhaps the most sweeping generalization in an otherwise tour de force work on experimental poetics, he describes rap as conservative, which he leaves unqualified and without real engagement (235).

It is, however, important to note that various efforts to recognize Black Studies in Canada do exist, such as the Centre for the Study of Black Cultures in Canada at York University and the Black Canadian Studies Association (BSCA), both of which create forums to discuss Black Canada and the diaspora.

The Anthology of Rap, somewhat loosely (since movements are never so neatly divisible by dates) looks at hip-hop lyrics based on four time periods: 1978-1984 (The Old School); 1985-1992 (The Golden Age); 1993-1999 (Rap Goes Mainstream); and 2000-2010 (New Millennium Rap).

The date 1555 is probably a reference to a group of Africans who were brought from Ghana as slaves to London by a London merchant ship. The referenced date sets the tone for the early slave trade.

In 2010, ten years after the original statement, Chuck D’s vehemence towards corporate hip-hop remains largely the same: “Major-owned hip hop is now about as packaged as Kraft Cheese with some suited asshole waiting for the results from the registers” (“Death of a Nation” 268).

Black resistance is much older than Hip Hop. For instance, the notion that slaves were passive victims of slavery is patently false. The complex organization— with or without the help of whites—of the Underground Railroad is one example among many of slaves’ resistance to slavery. Even on the plantation, slaves created and maintained their own religious observances without the supervision of their white masters or ministers. Today many of the African American spirituals survive as a testament of the slave’s will to transcend victimization. Lastly, the notion that slaves did not fight back is ostensibly untrue, evidenced most popularly by Nat Turner’s Rebellion. Nat Turner and his followers killed nearly sixty white inhabitants. Eventually Turner and seventeen other rebels were captured and hung, and Turner’s body was flayed.

William Labov’s studies reveal that speakers pay little attention to their own speech when engaged in causal conversation, and that stylized speech is often context based (Alim 43); this is exemplified in Hip Hop, which is highly stylized and performative by the nature of its genre. However, rhetoricians such as Richard Weaver have argued that all speech is sermonic, or performative in both public and private capacities (Language is Sermonic).

Crouch strongly criticizes those who associate with Malcolm X and the Black Nationalist movement, such as Cornel West, Amiri Baraka, and Tupac, who he called “dredged-up scum” (“Tupac”).

“Fuck tha Police” appears on the group’s 1988 album, Straight Outta Compton: the song portrays a mock court scene, in which the Police Department is put on trial. The song itself has been translated into other mediums and genres, and was covered by the alternative rock group Rage Against the Machine.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who was killed in 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Till was taken, tortured, and thrown in a river by two white men for apparently whistling at a white woman. The young mother refused a closed casket, allowing the world to see her son’s disfigured and unrecognizable face. Sadly, his brutal murderers were acquitted of all charges after a jury deliberated for slightly over an hour. Clearly, Wayne’s lyrics are offensive, and even though he issued an apology to the Till family (which they refused) the wounds were already reopened.

Kanye West’s Yeezus certainly does defy genre expectation. Who would have thought that Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit” (most famously sung by Billie Holiday and written by Jewish teacher Abel Meeropol as a poem) would be remixed into a piercing electro-pop anthem about consumption, alimony, and abortion with West’s emblematic and dichotomic blending of the sacred and profane?

OutKast’s “Rosa Parks” provides another instance of disconnect between the prior Civil Rights generation and the current hip-hop youth movement. In 1999, Rosa Parks sued OutKast, objecting to the song’s vulgar language and the appropriation of her name in the song’s title.
Having been on the rap scene myself and having spoken and performed with black, white, and other “raced” artists in Canada, I can attest that race in Canadian hip-hop is for the most part, post-racial. As female rapper Eternia told SixShot in an interview in regards to her gender and mixed-race heritage: “In Canada it was never really that much of a big deal because it’s a very multi-cultural place, so everyone hung together and it was just a case of if you’re dope, you’re dope. But since moving to New York it’s definitely been made very apparent to me that my gender and race can be an issue for some people and others are just shocked to learn that someone like me even exists, a half-white, half-middle-eastern female who loves hip-hop and is good at it” (“Eternia”).

An early instance of polysyllabic rhyme delivery is heard throughout Rakim’s lyrics, for instance:

“Write a rhyme in graffiti and, every show you see me in / Deep concentration, cause I’m no comedian / Jokers are wild, if you wanna be tamed / I treat you like a child, then you’re gonna be named” (“I Ain’t no Joke,” emphasis added).

Some rap lyrics seem to offer no space for ambivalent interpretation, such as the chorus of Lil Wayne’s “Lollipop,” which highlights the lackluster poesies and lack of textual ingenuity in the song:

“Shawty want a thug / Bottles in the club / Shawty wanna a hump / You know I love to touch her lovely lady lumps.” Lollipop becomes an obvious sexual innuendo for fellatio, as girls in the music video are portrayed as objects either to be licked (there are some indications of heterosexual mutuality), or licking Wayne’s lollipop. Sometimes rap is just crass entertainment.

Similarly, in a radio interview, K’naan stated: “Massive western companies would come to Somalia and dump nuclear toxic waste containers on the shore because there was no government controlling the shorelines. So these pirates initially went into the ocean to make them pay for that sort of thing. So they just take everything for ransom. That actually helped us clear our environment” (qtd. in “SWSX Thursday Preview: K’naan”).

It was reported that even though Abdi was nominated for Best Supporting Actor at the Academy Awards he showed up wearing a rented tux and stayed at the airport so he could be near a friend who could drive him to the show.

Which roughly translates as, according to users on the website “Rap Genius”: “You have exasperated the people, so come out with it / The troubles have increased, so come out with it / You’ve spilled the blood so that it drains on the roads, so come out with it / You’ve burnt the root of the earth, so come out with it / Come out with it, come out with it.”

In hip-hop, a feud between different crews or rappers is referred to as “beef” and involves rappers and/ or crews defaming the other in numerous ways, most notoriously in the East Coast and West Coast beef between Notorious B.I.G. and 2pac.

Fiasco pronounces “war” phonetically close to “woe” to emphasize the rhyme with “sow.”

K’naan often uses pop star references in his music to draw the audience into his story. In “What’s Hardcore,” he raps that if he rhymed “about home and got descriptive / I’d make 50 Cent look like Limp Bizkit.”


For more on the history of Coca-Cola see Mark Pendergrast’s For God, Country, and Coca-Cola.

Originally, Buffalo Soldiers were an all black cavalry unit that was part of the U.S. 10th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army, formed on September 21, 1866 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (Wikipedia). Buffalo Soldiers provided an example of honour and courage in a field dominated by white men. “Buffalo Soldiers” appear through popular music, notably in Bob Marley’s well-known, “Buffalo Soldier,” which recasts the image of the buffalo soldier as a symbol of black resistance.

For another argument along this line see Walcott’s Black Like Who?, in which he contends that the “multicultural narrative is constituted through a positioning of white Anglophone and Francophone Canadians as the founding peoples of the nation, with a ‘special’ reference to Native Canadians. All Others constitute the Canadian ethnic mix or multicultural character. Thus, the colonizing English and French are left textually intact as ‘real’ Canadians while legislation is needed to imagine other folks as
Canadian” (118). Further, Kerstin Knopf maintains that multiculturalism “thus creates a national myth of equality and integration that also deceives the majority of French and English Canadians of good-will” (97).

248 For a detailed reading of the painting see Charmaine A. Nelson’s Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art in the Works Cited.

249 Canadian novelist David Gilmour incited incendiary debate in Canadian Literature when he made the statement that he does not teach works by women, gay individuals, or those of Chinese ethnicity. In the interview with Shelf Esteem (Hazlitt) for Random House, Gilmour stated, “What I teach is guys. Serious heterosexual guys.” Gilmour’s comments led to several editorial pieces, with few defenders of his comments, other than conservative thinker Margaret Wente, which ultimately showed that the literature taught in Canada is far from what Gilmour calls, “Serious heterosexual males.”

250 I do, however, think it is fantastic that M. NourbeSe Philip’s first novel, Harriet’s Daughter (1988) is widely used in Ontario high school curricula to replace Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. To Kill a Mockingbird is essentially about white guilt, rather than black history, and it would be great if more African Canadian—among First Nations, Chinese Canadian, Japanese Canadian, etc.—literature was taught as well.

251 ἀγάπη basically translates as “unconditional love.” King describes ἀγάπη as “understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill towards all men. Agapē is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return” (Trumpet 75).
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