

ENVOI

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South by Northwest

Southern / Comfort; west coast ease. (Compton 167)

Waldemar Zacharasiewicz's two primary research interests make for what at first seems an odd juxtaposition. That oddness speaks a tribute to his intellectual adventuring, and to his inaugurating, even on the occasion of his (nominal) retiring, a novel field of inquiry.

While Canadian-American comparisons are inevitable – and in Canada apparently *essential* to a sense of selfhood – Canadian connections to the capital S South might seem the least obvious or productive. That region's clichéd associations with heat, horses, plantation decorum, cross-burning, and swamps perhaps deter us. The prairies/Great Plains share a topography; the Maritimes and New England share a history; the central provinces and states share some really big lakes and a seaway; salal and Sasquatch thrive in the Pacific Northwest on either side of the 49th parallel. But what connects us to the big South?

In September 2010, the most obvious answer might be big oil. Tar sands oil is really dirty and hard to refine without using way too much water, water becomes “waste” stored, inadequately, in big swamps; Gulf oil comes to the surface way too easily, even from miles deep in the ocean, and can't be contained. We have the big oil blues. And it sounds not only south to north but everywhere on our blue planet.

This musing trends to apology because the South-in-Canada topic that seems most engaging to me requires writing about a form, the blues, I'd only thought about for maybe thirty minutes (preparing to teach Dionne Brand's “Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater”) before I started formulating these comments. Moreover, I do not read music, have never played an instrument (other than my vocal chords), and have shied away from teaching much African American writing. But Wayde Compton's 49th *Parallel Psalm* fascinated me from the day I opened it. Where and how did it fit with the misted evergreen of my Cascadian region? Blues was obviously a crucial motif – why and how? Before I get to Compton, let me review some of the connections that at first I thought might someday grow up to become essays on the topic assigned for the colloquium.

THE BLUENESS BLUES

Frankie Thibidault, the narrator of Clarke Blaise's story "The Salesman's Son Grows Older," could have been a Montrealer, enriched in "both . . . languages," or a Duke University Southerner, "a man of breeding." Instead, he grows – not *up* but only *older* – bewildered:

What calamity made me a reader of back issues, defunct Atlases, and foreign grammars? The loss, the loss! To leave Montreal for places like Georgia and Florida; to leave Florida for Saskatchewan; to leave the prairies for places like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh and, finally, to stumble back to Montreal. . . . (155)

In another guise, as Paul Keeler, Blaise's lost narrator reads Faulkner for hours on end intent on avoiding thinking of winter (42). When Keeler travels to Europe, he finds it "too open"; he "can't handle it." As he explains, "I'm just not ready for someone to call '*Guten Morgen*' when I think I'm alone" (127).

Well, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz is a Montrealer, and a Southerner, at home in Georgia and Florida, reads Faulkner to find his way up north, and is always receptive to a hearty *Guten Morgen*. Crossing borders has not left him bewildered but has instead challenged him to give the world a North American education. Like Frankie learning to swim in Fort Lauderdale, Waldemar, student of southern writing, exults at "sink[ing] into the dancing blueness, the cold Canadianness of the water" (136).

WINGHAM BLUES

Robert Thacker, tentatively teasing out some "shared sympathy of place," in citing a 1972 interview with John Metcalf reminds us that Alice Munro identifies primary influences among "'writers of the American South . . . Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers . . . Reynolds Price . . . Wright Morris.'" Why, he asks, have influences so explicitly identified by Munro received so little attention? (A neglect which I note is extensively addressed in these proceedings. . . .) And Thacker goes on to wonder (note the comments were written in 1994) "if this gap is not in some way a reflection of anti-American attitudes on the part of many Canadian critics" (La Bossière 134, 137).

In a 2001 interview, Munro raves about Welty's *The Golden Apples*: "It is so good, it is so good, and I read it over and over again. And not really to find out how she did it, just to sink into it. . . . I don't know what I read it for.

I read it for just transcendence, almost to get into that world.” But then the blues set in: “I even felt, as I got older, that I shouldn’t read it too often, because there are writers who can absolutely mesmerize you so you’re echoing things they do without even knowing it, so you stay away from them when you’re writing. When I was writing *Lives of Girls and Women*, I felt that especially, and I would read Time Magazine instead of reading a book then. Because I guess I felt so unsure of my voice. . . . You know, the thing about writing is. . . . It’s just constant despair.” (Thacker 2005, 141-42) How would we describe influence in a sentence? Maybe it’s that muted sense of rural and small town inbreeding, a lingering social veneer of unthinking gentility, and yet somewhere suppressed, ignored, even willfully undetected, a tormenting mystery hiding in apparently unremarkable, ignorable solitude. Alice Munro has got the Welty Wingham blues.

JELLY ROLL BLUES

The Patricia Café was established in 1917, and is known in 2010 as Pat’s Pub and Brewhouse. The Patricia Hotel is at 403 E Hastings Street, in Strathcona, one of Vancouver’s oldest neighborhoods. East Hastings is the center of Canada’s poorest community. Jelly Roll Morton lived in the hotel from August 1919 to January 1921 and performed regularly in the Café. As Vancouver had, Canadian literature adopted Jelly Roll in 1962 when A. J. M. Smith twisted syntax to jam improvisational piano into the confines of the Shakespearean sonnet.

‘Cry at the birth

Rejoice at the death,’ old Jelly Roll said,

Being on whisky, ragtime, chicken, and the scriptures fed. (96)

“[D]eath . . . makes life’s worth” is the core of Jelly Roll’s wisdom: but to cry at the birth is the essential message of the blues, the song of a life of woe.

Jelly Roll comes from New Orleans and California to play the blues on East Hastings, in some sense following the road south to northwest variably complicated in Compton’s poem. It remembers perhaps the journey of Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, prominent black business man and politician in British Columbia whose life journey Compton documents in a stark poem consisting

solely of dates and place names: “Philadelphia 1823 // San Francisco 1850 / Victoria 1858 // Little Rock 1871” (68).

WAVIN’ FLAG BLUES

K’naan, Somalia-born, Canadian rap artist takes hip hop music (derived from the traveling singer/poets of Africa via oral traditions of trans-Atlantic slave culture) back to South Africa, where one of his songs became the unofficial anthem of the 2010 World Cup. Born in 1978, he left Somalia at age 13 fleeing the civil war, settled in New York, and then moved on to become part of the Somalia-Canadian community in Rexdale, Ontario.

Out of the darkness, I came the farthest
Among the hardest survival
Learn from the streets, it can be bleak
Accept no defeat, surrender, defeat

When I get older, I will be stronger
They’ll call me freedom, just like a wavin’ flag
And then it goes back, and then it goes back
And then it goes back (K’Naan)

HUC(K)ANUCK BLUES

Silvia Söderlind, meticulously unpacking the complex presence of *Huckleberry Finn* in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, concludes that “frontier and its promise of freedom are illusory”: “could we not propose that, under his many disguises, Huck was always a Canuck?” (La Bossière 86). How would we describe the influence in a sentence? Maybe it’s that muted sense of rural and small town inbreeding, a lingering social veneer of unthinking gentility, and yet somewhere suppressed, ignored, even willfully undetected, a tormenting mystery hiding in apparently unremarkable ignorable solitude.

And it’s a Canuck, the Canadian Shreve, who asks in *Absalom, Absalom!* “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. [even] Why do they live at all” (174).

THE GREAT DISRUPTION BLUES

Pelagie Bourg, called Le Blanc, suffered “fifteen years in the fields [of Georgia] under a heavy southern sun and the boot of a brutal cotton planter, who swung his whip with the same contempt on his black slaves and the poor whites,” to purchase “a cart and three teams of oxen” in order to carry her people home to Acadie (2004,13). In a tintamarre of hundreds of multiplying, varying stories, Antonine Maillet celebrates our heroine of ancestral return. “It had been a long journey to the south, yes,” reflects Pelagie-la-Charette near the end of the novel, “but [you know within the babble] the circle was closing again.” (2004,240) Or, with a distinctly more ambiguous bluesy view in French: “un long voyage dans le Sud, eh oui, mais la boucle se refermait” (1979, 326).

49TH PARALLEL BLUES

the counter
conspiracy
to make a black northwest be. (Compton 18)

So, evidently, the U.S. American South, its writers, cultures, and artists, echo in Canadian literature in more ways than my initially puzzled reaction to our theme – “how bizarre!” – would allow. And we heard of many more, more tellingly, over the three days of our meeting in Vienna.

Wayde Compton’s book-length poem is rooted – however rootless it might be – in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest where I have concentrated most of my work on literary regionalism in the past 25 years. Yet, it is a poem that disrupts almost every conception of region, and literary region, that I might have had prior to opening the book. And it does so, if obliquely, by listening to the African American voice(s) in British Columbia.

49th Parallel Psalm is a compendium of forms and styles. It would take more than these pages just to list them, let alone discuss and celebrate them. But we can get a sense of the core and zest of Compton’s work by concentrating on the subject and strategy of the Blues in the book. By so doing, South goes Northwest: a defining musical idiom migrates, tracking and covering the Black diaspora, Africa to the Deep South to Pacific shores and then to Canada.

The poem shuffles the history of the black community in British Columbia along a rough chronological line. It's a history that distrusts history,¹ and the best history of its subject – by which I don't mean the most factual or thorough, but the most involving, the most challenging, and especially the most surprising. Compton's history begins with the repressive, racist legislation passed in California in the 1840s, follows the migration of blacks to British Columbia in 1858, and later uncovers in that utopian destination yet another growth of racist culture and policy, recreates the black music scene in 20th century Vancouver, and ends in more dreaming near its date of publication (it's dedicated to two black men who died in 1998). The Pacific history is primary, but inevitably Compton must incorporate the history of slavery, the African diaspora – and the millennia long dream of home (including the Northern Kingdom as a version of Zion).

Often documentary, and sometimes a file of quotations, the poem embraces story, fantasy, myth, found poems, a host of lyrical variations, and much concrete and non-verbal signing. One page reproduces the author's (suspect? criminal?) fingerprints; some pages have no words, only numerals. So, when I foreground the blues in this appreciation, I do so recognizing the hybrid and polyvocalic conception of the book – and by implication the capaciousness of blues as a form.²

The poem is in seven sections. The opening section, "Cast," implies a dramatic structure for the whole: a *dramatis personae*, five acts, plus an embedded story that might parallel the function of intermission in the theatre. "Cast" introduces us to seven characters. If we include the fantasy prose parable, "The Blue Road: A Fairy Tale," the poem shapes and plays seven titular blues. The sevens (do they have a function in blues? in a 7-tone scale, as Newton wanting seven colors in his harmony? in voodoo?) keep reminding the reader of the spectrum, of the colors in a rainbow, a repeated, if compromised, symbol of covenant and hope (and diversity) in the poem.

Compton titles six of the songs (and one story) in the book as "Blues," and uses the term blue/blues over 65 times elsewhere in the work. Most musical histories locate an uncertain origin (because blues is purely an oral

¹ The epigraph to Part 2 is from Derek Walcott: "I met History once, but he ain't recognize me" (29).

² The first African slaves were brought to the United States in 1619, so the blues synthesizes and absorbs many languages, cultures, experiences, and periods of the African Diaspora (Weissman).

form) in the late 19th and very early 20th century, a time when post-Civil War reconstruction ended and federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877. Whatever the complexities and unknowns, some prominent aspects of blues reverberate powerfully in Compton. The blues arose in an atmosphere “of suffering, privation, and inequality.” At its heart, blues is therefore the music of “complaint. Blues are “functional,” often work songs, rather than solely or primarily aesthetic. They are closely tied to the African American spiritual, and hence, for an oppressed people, packed with the “imagery of freedom from bondage on earth, and ‘escaping’ to a promised land.” Its voice, often unaccompanied, is more talky than melodic (Weissman).

THE BLUES AS FORM

Genres stretch and absorb. The blues, like a “poem” or “bildungsroman,” grows eclectic and capacious.³ But let me isolate some formal and thematic features that might inform the Northwest’s South. Not that I want to claim Compton deliberately sets out to mimic such features. Indeed, so parodic and irreverent and visionary is the poem – and so clearly does it reach toward Black forms that succeed and extend Blues, such as hip hop and sampling (the first character to appear in the poem is DJ) – that homage rather than formal model is more applicable.

Yet testing Compton’s blues pieces against some generally received characteristics of the form provides a way of probing his method and message. Overarching is the poetics of representing an exclusively and purely oral form on the page, a commonplace challenge, at least since Robert Browning. Blues typically depends on a call and response form. Peter Muir quotes William Handy’s definition: “‘the performance of musical phrases or longer passages in alternation by different voices or distinct groups, used in opposition in such a way as to suggest that they answer one another.’ . . . Each vocal line of the stanza is responded to by an instrument” (205). “Blues,” Muir goes on to explain,

is internal: it describes, or at least is generated by, the singer’s inner turmoil. . . . Blues . . . incorporated emotive aspects of the black musical idiom. One of these was call and

³ Peter Muir, in his study of popular blues, defines his focus as “titular blues,” that is any work “titled (or subtitled) blues” (2).

response, a device carried over from Africa into African American slave society and manifested in a variety of cathartic genres, such as the field holler, ring shout, and spiritual. (206)

While historically an individual calls and a group responds – and this convention is surely adapted in Compton's choice of *psalm* as the title of his poem – Muir notes that the individual voice in blues often answers his own call with a response, usually instrumental, and maybe vocally tormented.

I suppose the basic pattern of three line, two phrases per line (Muir gives the example "Frankie and Johnny were lovers / O, Lordy how they could love") where each line might be thought to have a call and internalized response (205), fits. But, and the observation might reflect my limited knowledge of music, Compton seems little concerned with closely following traditional formal patterns (for example, the Blues' preference for an AAB rhyme scheme). His use of mnemonic patterns of repetition and his preference for short lines do link his print blues to oral blues singing (204-5).

FRAMEWORK BLUES

"Crucial Blues," the first of the titled blues pieces in the book, is, as the poem phrases it "recalcitrant / in lamentation" (40). There is some repetition of phrases (as in the opening lines of the standard blues) but nothing of a consistent pattern and no rhyme scheme. Compton does quote and parody an R and B classic: "sittin on the dock of the bay wastin time" (40). The lamentation evokes the primary narrative of the poem (recall that the Otis Redding song leaves home in Georgia headed for Frisco Bay), a state of continuous crossing (hence the Latinate pun on crucial). The Pioneer Committee, the group of blacks originally seeking to migrate from San Francisco to British Columbia, proposed to "un / earth us some new some / where," but the singer immediately observes ruefully that "no one uses the word *home*" (41).

That suspended "un-" at the end of a line, the negating suffix that becomes reified, a noun, a universal, is a recurring strategy. Compton keeps foregrounding negativity and denial, however zestily (think blues!). "Crooked Blues" (crucial, crux, cross) is the most sustained song of deprivation:

ain't no God
damned Moses
come to this here parting of sorrows.
ain't no flock, no con

gregation, ain't got
nothing (127)

"Alley Blues" is the sparest blues in the poem. It might be nostalgia blues, a longing song for the vitality of the lost Hogan's Alley, center of black music in British Columbia. The poem opens with a version of the two-part line; it then repeats the rhyme or half rhyme abab' xx bb:

no congregation. pasts to shake.
to lose.

.....

fools

running

the place. renting us
ramshackle truths.

alley blues. (132)

GEORGIA (STRAIT) ON MY MIND

One of the 49s at play in Compton is the 49ers, the defining date of California's Gold Rush, maybe most prominent in the poem "Pyrites," and its storying of fool's gold. Southern blacks go west in this period, dreaming. As Compton has it:

folks dropped their to
ols in the field to run. some
from as far as Mississippi, Carolina, Tennessee. re
moved out to California, (75)

No home in Georgia; no home in Frisco; the black community brings its music to British Columbia to realize a new *where*. Compton's poem both documents the presence of that music, and uses it to extend the community's search.

Connected here in mobility, inevitability, and maybe naturalness are the birds and plants in Compton's poem. The customs officer who asks at the border "are you moving any fruits or seeds or trees / of knowledge" (106) is monitoring a losing battle. The weeds know no border. So the Canada Geese the blues singer empathizes with in this poem are resident, we know, in New

Orleans City Park in winter. And the Canada Geese in Georgia, that used to be migratory, en route to Florida, are now, at least 45,000 of them, permanent residents in the state. Horrifyingly, perhaps because they are known as such a pest, a border guard sighting a tiny starling “chop[s] the bird in half in mid-flight” (88). Since its introduction to North America in the early 1890s this bird has thrived, numbering some 200 million from Alaska to Mexico. To my mind that halved starling is a survivor, maybe especially because its plumage is glossy black *blue*, and it is one of the fabulous mimics able to sing the songs of at least twenty other species. It is allied with the other crucial bird in the poem, “the bohemian waxwings . . . whistling / their words / tween up and down” (22). The waxwing (*Bombicilla garrulus*) is seldom sighted in the south. Maybe it appeals for its nomadic nature, and surely for its Icarian association with flying too close to the sun – another blues motif.

CROSSING BLUES

“Red Light Blues” is the fourth (or fifth) titular blues in *Psalms*. Playing riffs on the semiotics of traffic lights and crosswalks, it may be the most pedestrian, quotidian of the named blues in the series. Each of the blues in the book sings a lament about being in transit. The singer is always in between as is his community, enroute to some uncertain destination, moaning that the place left behind, the shifting place through which they move, and the destination, cannot be a home. Characteristically, the blues will sing some ordinary, banal experience as an emblem of desperation; in this poem the routine anxious boredom of crossing through urban traffic calls up, if obliquely, the torment of the Middle Passage, the callous trafficking of African slaves across the Atlantic. The core theme of “Red Light Blues” is that “your destination / is the crossing” (146), an ambiguous state or narrative that incorporates the complex motif of the cross throughout the poem: Christianity, crucifixion, Ku Klux Klan, anger, the x of unknown quantity, the x of identification and signature, the x of error.

That the poem begins with a red light, hinting at prostitution, but the title also invokes a “light” blues, and hence one of the most playful poems in the book. The in-betweenness of the crossing is extended – and layered in meanings – by the in-betweenness of the poetic. Compton is constantly alert for the fragmenting of syntax and segmenting of morphemes that will reveal a

concealed alternative. At the end of the first stanza he splits the verb *invoking*: “in // voking blood perhaps” (146), and so pushes us to read the Latin root (the poem is full of attention to Latin, as it is to Classical mythology), meaning “to call.” Here, it’s a calling for blood, a revenge theme, and a reminder of racism rooted in appeal to bloodlines. Toward the end of this poem, Compton reinforces vengeance: he invokes, if you wish, the originary pattern of the blues (explicit in “Jump Rope Rhyme,” 39). The singer laments and identifies with “the wild / goose chasers, after // rainbows and cauldrons of response / and arrival” (147). Splitting the syllables of cauldron, itself an instrument of testing, allows us to hear the call and response running through the poem:

the hand offends me. [call]
the white man eternally gives the go a
head. [response] (146)

The traffic light signals STOP with the color red. No yellow caution, or green for “go” appears. In this environment, no blues. Hence the blues: the signal is always to inhibit and prevent. The sign allowing the pedestrian to proceed is a *white* walking figure, but the signal seems here to show always the red (read) hand (and hence the literate print society). Indeed, as the poem notes, the communication here is *not spoken*, no call or response. The meaning is solely in the *un*words: “in pictographs, glyphs, i / cons. X.” Even if you don’t speak the language, you know the message: deception, and imprisonment, and always negative “con-” (146-47).

MUD DOG BLUES: A CON-CLUSION

The Yale Hotel on Granville Street bills itself as Vancouver’s home for rhythm and blues. On a September Monday night, the audience is sparse – “the joint was packed last time we played here” the group begins – but Mud Dog is giving it as if this were the duo’s last performance. As in one of Mud Dog’s own compositions from their first CD, it’s a “Devil’s Ride” they’re on, a frenzied holding on to a precarious balance, bodies twisting in response to the guitar’s contortions.

Just a few meters from us is a solo dancer, dressed all in black, black ball cap backwards on his head. Black white man absorbs the frenzy, moving in several directions at once, now thumping his hands on the wooden rail, now

shimmying low near limbo land. But after three numbers he steps down from his platform, staggers out on to the sidewalk, leaving most of a full pint on the table. He's on the road, and we see no more of him.

A dapper Colonel Sanders sits just in front of us, eyes fixed on the band. For white guys in search of the moody blues, this southern gentleman fits our expectation. He's sporting a wholly coral-colored suit – with matching fedora, and cherry red patent leather shoes – ample enough for his ample body. Black shirt, black pocket handkerchief, coral tie patterned in waves. Now Sanders is up at the bar flirting, first turning to the woman on his right, then to his left; now he's back lounging against a post grooving on Mud Dog; then he's off to the far back corner to regale a full table of visitors. I ask a young German woman at the next table – she's been talking to him at the bar – who this icon is. "He's from Scotland," she tells us, "on his way to Alaska." Now he's back at the bar: either everyone knows him, or wants to know him. Now he sits at table by himself for five minutes, and then he's over at the pool table. Maybe we are the only ones in the bar staying put? The blues audiences are as restless as the bluesman on his endless road.

The younger member of the duo, Steve Sainas, has apparently just bought a new/old guitar, a '74 Dobro, and he's really lovin' the brassy banjoish sound he's getting out of it. He spends most of the intermission break playing little meditative riffs to himself, testing each of the four or five guitars he has lined up beside him. Mud Dog Senior, Christopher Allen, has a drawerful of harmonicas at his elbow, and he often switches instruments (and voices) four or five times during a single piece. Mouth organ and voice seem to be his only instruments. But with instrument and microphone wrapped tightly in his big hand, he produces an astonishing range of sounds. In the second set, Mud Dog covers Neil Young; then gives us a charged version of "Take a Load off Fannie." Allen leans into Sainas's throbbing guitar, almost brushing against it, generating a wailing, ebullient, yearning response to the guitar's call, drumming, dancing, dynamic. Then a relentless version of The Doors' "You can't always get what you want." This bit of ethical wisdom seems just right – and not quite. Where Compton calls on blues, directly and obliquely, he acknowledges as well the limitations of his own voice – maybe he doesn't quite achieve what he wants. And reading the whole book as a "long" blues, a song that celebrates and documents the African diaspora, and that laments the ongoing exile that in subtle ways sustains the persecution and confinement of the slave experience of the U.S. South. We're still a long way from what we want. At the 49th parallel, sound parallel blues.

Still, we novices are surprised at both the quality and intimacy of the music. As we get up to leave, we shout thank yous. And the guitarist calls us to more blues. “We’ll be back here October 1st and 2nd – with a full band.”⁴

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