

The Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Visual Poetry of Wayde Compton's *Performance Bond*:
Claiming Black Space in Contemporary Canada

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Abstract

Wayde Compton's poetry collection *Performance Bond* is a union of hip-hop aesthetics and visual poetry to create a space for Vancouver's black community. Although the majority of the poems in *Performance Bond* are lyric, visual poems have a significant and varied presence in the book. Compton creates his visual poetry by including such materials as photographs and signs, concrete poetry and pseudo-concrete poetry, graffiti, a simulated newspaper facsimile of an original *Vancouver Daily Province* article, voodoo symbols, and typed characters that do not necessarily form words. Despite a contemporary population of over two million people, the greater Vancouver area of today does not have a centralized black community similar to that found in other North American cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, or Halifax. To reconcile the absence of a centralized black community in Vancouver, Compton turns to sampling black culture from across the world (with an obvious concentration on the United States) in order to develop and represent his own black identity. The similarities between visual poetry and hip-hop culture, particularly their emphasis on spatial representation, facilitate Compton's continuing project to create a place for the black community in Vancouver.

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Dedication

Everything, always, for Kendra.

Wayde Compton's poetry collection *Performance Bond* is a union of contemporary visual poetry and hip-hop aesthetics. Although the majority of the poems in *Performance Bond* are lyric, visual poems have a significant and varied presence in the book, including such matter as the staged photographs of the artificial doorways and step of "Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver," the mirror images of "Forme and Chase" and the photograph titled "Vividuct," and the graffiti tag of "Rev.Oz" across an otherwise white page. Compton combines words and images in *Performance Bond* via photographs and signs, concrete poetry and pseudo-concrete poetry, graffiti, a simulated newspaper facsimile of an original *Vancouver Daily Province* article, voodoo symbols, and typed characters (some that combine to resemble words and others that do not), all influenced strongly by hip-hop aesthetics. The spatial emphasis found in both hip-hop and visual poetry facilitate Compton's continuing project to create an imaginative place (and reclaim the geographic space) for the black community in Vancouver.

Despite a population of over two million people, the greater Vancouver area of today does not have a centralized black community similar to that found in other North American cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, or Halifax. To reconcile the absence of a centralized black community in Vancouver, Compton turns to sampling black culture from across the world (with an obvious concentration on the United States) in order to develop and represent his own black identity in a way common to hip-hop practice, as will be discussed later in this paper. *Performance Bond* follows a similar vein to Compton's previous poetic, academic, historical, and activist work, which focused on historicizing and marking the contemporary presence of black people in British Columbia, thus attempting to address the situation that Rinaldo Walcott points to in claiming, "National historical narratives render these [black Canadian] racial geographies invisible, and many people continue to believe that any black presence in Canada is...recent" (277). Compton's anthology *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* aims to illuminate the "144-year history of [black] presence in the province" (27) through a catalogue of black British Columbian writing. Compton's anthology is modeled after George Elliot Clarke's two-volume anthology of Black Nova Scotian literature, *Fire and Water* ("Crime" 61) and functions to promote the recognition of what Clarke calls an "aboriginal blackness" ("Embarkation" 13) in Canada. Similarly, Compton's first book of poetry, *49th Parallel Psalms*, represents a "historical revision of the migration of blacks to Canada" (back cover). Compton's academic work is also designed to raise awareness of the

black Vancouver community, including, as that scholarship does, articles such as “Blackvoice and Stately Ways: Isaac Dickson, Mifflin Gibbs and Black British Columbia’s First Trials of Authenticity,” which argues for a focus on the aesthetic value of black literature rather than an anthropological approach (26). Also, Compton’s “Culture at the Crossroads: Voodoo Aesthetics and the Axis of Blackness in Literature of the Black Diaspora” investigates the far-reaching influences that contribute to black British Columbian writing as part of black global diasporic cultural production. As part of his continued community activism, Compton is involved in the Hogan’s Alley Memorial Project, “founded in 2002 with the goal of preserving the public memory of Vancouver’s original black neighbourhood” (*WaydeCompton.com*), which further demonstrates his desire to create a place for black Vancouver. Whether it is academic or poetic, Compton’s focus on black writing, specifically of the Canadian West Coast, is designed, in part, to create visibility for an often overlooked group within the study of North American literatures and especially Canadian literature.

What distinguishes *Performance Bond* from Compton’s other projects is its presentation of several visual components along with more standard lyrical poetry. With the inclusion of images in *Performance Bond*, Compton pushes closer to an avant-garde artistic expression that challenges the conventions of standard poetic discourse. According to Richard Kostelantez, a work is avant-garde if it “transcends current conventions in critical respects...[takes] considerable time to find its maximum audience...[and inspires] future, comparably advanced [endeavours]” (3). Although insufficient time has passed for Compton to inspire substantial advancements in poetics, his incorporation of images and hip-hop aesthetics suggests a considerable deviation from traditional Western poetry. Whether it is concrete poetry,¹ in which the form of the lines and words create meaning, or the more audacious forms of visual representations that emphasise the image over word, visual poetry is at the forefront of the avant-garde literature movement because it breaks traditional poetic conventions such as metre, rhyme, standard line lengths and, most importantly, a linear-temporal sequence of words. Willard Bohn paraphrases Jean-Pierre Goldenstein in arguing that “visual poetry represents the most successful attempt to free poetic discourse from its linear constraints” (*Modern* 31). Effecting this liberation deemphasised the word and the line in favour of the image, connecting poetry intimately with spatial representation rather than a temporal sequence of events necessary for understanding written or oral language. Furthermore, “visual poetry strives to ‘liberate literature from the

disparateness of eye and ear, from the monotony connected with the dullness of regular typography” (Lazlo Moholy-Nagy qtd. in *Modern* 20). In their effort to break the perceived constricting effect of traditional writing styles, practitioners of visual poetry manipulate calligraphy and placement of words to create meanings beyond those conveyed by the semantic value of the written language alone.

The visual components in *Performance Bond* are also highly influenced by hip-hop aesthetics. What is hip-hop aesthetics? Of course, various attempts to define a term as broad as hip-hop produce differing opinions of what constitutes this art form – and even about whether hip-hop is a legitimate art form at all. Although hip-hop has been the focus of recent study – Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang, and Murray Forman have given the form scholarly and/or journalistic attention – its place in academic studies is still in its infancy, increasing the difficulty in finding concise definitions for the art form.² In, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry connects hip-hop to black culture as an “iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture. Hip hop music, or rap...is an art often culturally rich and economically impoverished, and, sometimes recently, artistically impoverished but backed by huge corporate dollars. At its best, it is compelling art and culture” (2). One of the pioneering figures of hip-hop, Afrika Bambaataa, effectively identifies the four elements that compose hip-hop as graffiti, b-boying/b-girling,³ DJ-ing, and MC-ing (Chang x). While Bambaataa gives us a key practitioner’s take on the elements of hip-hop culture, and Perry asserts hip-hop’s connection to black culture, this mode’s aesthetic is more difficult to define. Danny Hoch attempts such explanation in “Toward a Hip-Hop Aesthetic,” in which he describes each element of hip-hop in terms of its aesthetic components. Hoch offers aesthetic descriptions of each of the four elements; for example, graffiti are described as “enforced [use of] block letters, reclaiming of public space, codified ownership, train-as-canvas, 1970s-’80s art supplies (and [colours]), and criminalization of the form” (352). Adam Mansbach explains hip-hop aesthetics in relation to literature and his novel *Angry Black White Boy* as effecting an “*intellectual democracy through collage*: the idea that whatever’s hot is worthy of adoption regardless of its location or context” (93, emphasis in original). Collage also corresponds with visual poetry and its ability to incorporate a range of textual and visual components to create a single piece of art.

Hip-hop’s influence is clearly evident in *Performance Bond* and Compton’s other artistic endeavours. According to *ABC Bookworld*,⁴ Compton is a “[p]oet, historian and

turntablist...determined to make a stand that is rooted in history.” A self-taught DJ and a member of the academic community, Compton is familiar with both the practical aspects of hip-hop and the critical theory behind this art form. *Performance Bond* may be described as an exercise in “lit-hop”— literature with a hip-hop aesthetic (Mansbach 93). Compton explains in “The Reinventing Wheel: On Blending the Poetry of Cultures Through Hip Hop Turntablism” that “If I could find a way to make poetry on the turntables, then elements of ancient, non-literate, vestigial African culture could be blended directly into textual poetry, and both could be blended back into hip hop.” Of course, Compton’s *Performance Bond* is lit-hop on at least two levels: it is *about* hip-hop culture as much as it is *influenced* by hip-hop culture aesthetically. *Performance Bond* adheres to Mansbach’s principle of “intellectual democracy through collage” as is shown by references to mulatto country singer Charley Pride (37); Caribbean-born poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite (58); Jamaican social activist and journalist Marcus Garvey (56); hippies, punks, and Goths (16); Ebonics, scat, Hegel, and American rapper, author, and producer Chuck D (102); and, of course, the incorporation of photographs, vèvè,⁵ lyrical poetry, audio recording, and concrete poetry. All represent an aesthetic sampling from in and outside of hip-hop, but all are part of black cultural history. Compton’s visual poetry, images, and graffiti demonstrate different aspects of this hip-hop aesthetic and form a link between hip-hop and visual poetry. Furthermore, Compton’s sampling of global black culture speaks to the aesthetics of Canadian blackness as defined by Clarke. In his article “Contesting a Model Blackness,” Clarke explains that “one culture’s borrowings of ideas, personalities, and goods from another culture can serve to structure its own sense of itself” (39). Therefore, Compton’s evocation of the prominent black figures listed above is an exercise, not only in hip-hop aesthetics but also in Canadian black aesthetics. Although Compton’s project of reclaiming a space for black Vancouver is a local one, the implications of his work have the potential to extend beyond British Columbia to other regions in Canada where long term black communities have suffered a similar lack of recognition.

In a similar way to visual poetry, hip-hop pushes the boundaries of contemporary Western culture to give voice to the marginalized. In her study of hip-hop’s African-American roots and development, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose explains that “[h]ip 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” (21). Although hip-hop originated in the mid-1970s Bronx area of New York City as a result of specific cultural, racial, technological, and socio-economic factors (Rose 3, Chang 3), its influence is now global. Peter Chang explains in his 2006 book, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, that “hip-hop has become one of the most far-reaching and transformative arts movements of the past two decades,” with influences on everything from poetry and other genres of literature to film and video games (ix). Hip-hop is part of contemporary global culture with style that “defines the look of global youth cool, whether in magazines, album covers, or clothing, the rarefied boutique markets of toys and shoes, even high-end goods such as cars and motorcycles, and jewellery” (Chang 117). Although hip-hop culture has entered the global cultural marketplace, Compton’s challenge, according to Clarke, is to “reconfigure [hip-hop] in [his] own way in order to have it be useful for [his] life [in Canada]” (“Crime” 63). Despite its current popularity, hip-hop began as an avant-garde, grass-roots movement, which Compton hybridizes in *Performance Bond*, infusing this urban art form with the more academically established forms of visual poetry.

As its name suggests, visual poetry depends heavily on image to transmit meaning. John M. Bennett explains in *Visual Poetry in the Avant Writing Collection* that “[visuality] in poetry starts with the simple fact that there are blank spaces at the end of lines, which is perhaps the most consistent factor that distinguishes poetry from prose” (1). Visual poetry itself, however, requires the reader-viewer to change the way he or she thinks about and therefore reads poetry. In *Modern Visual Poetry* Willard Bohn suggests that “[w]hat impresses the reader invariably is not that the poem consists of words but that these are arranged to form a visual pattern” (22). The hierarchy that is created in visual poetry of the image over the word (because the image is seen before reading of the words take place) is one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes visual poetry from lyric poetry. In visual poetry, meaning is not created solely through the cognitive processing of words in the mind of the reader, but also through the interpretation of the image and its relationship to text. Bohn explains this phenomenon: “Unlike conventional poetry, visual poetry utilizes a dual sign. As such it comprises two sets of signifiers and signified – one verbal, the other visual. The linguistic sign, which constitutes a complete system in itself, functions as the first term of the visual sign, which expands to encompass a second signified at the visual level” (*Aesthetics* 5). William Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence, in *Photographic Encounters: The Edges and Edginess of Reading Prose Pictures and Visual Fictions*, advocate

for an approach to artistic criticism that opposes the “the literary bias (or blindness)” and reading practices that privilege only the written word and ignore the value of the image (2). Garrett-Petts and Lawrence argue that “[a]ny integration of visual and verbal literacies, photographic or otherwise, presents a potentially disruptive challenge to the hegemony of word over image— and openly suspicious (even hostile) characterizations of the visual should be seen, at least in part, as an anxious reaction to that challenge” (3). Invariably the meaning or purpose of a visual poem becomes more difficult to determine without the help of words arranged in a linear-temporal pattern. Garrett-Petts and Lawrence further explain that “[a]lthough literature is essentially a temporal art, like music,” the works that they consider in their study “aspire to the condition of painting or sculpture. While in many cases they retain certain temporal features, they are first and foremost constructions in space” (22). The very nature of an image, even one created by words, as in concrete poetry, lessens the linear-temporal pattern that potentially guides readers in their understanding of literature, forcing reader-viewers to change how they read a poem constructed primarily in the visual mode. The decoding of the visual poem is not bound to a sequence of events as is reading literature; rather, a visual poem becomes predominantly a function of space rather than time. As Garrett-Petts and Lawrence point out, unlike strictly

AFRO-SAXON

own rose-coloured lenses: black roses.
own a cat named Dialectic: mirror-smoke grey.

hear for fear. see? keep

eyes under lids
when dancing in the smoke
machine. emulating dry
ice. eyes
shut to shut out
the black light. when you're Christ,
everything looks like a nail. sailing

the floor. in pencil-thin
dreads. punk
as a Monk rhyme. see

don't need no i
cons. no sir-ee. cut a deft keel.
heel of foot and cleft of imagery. blood
less and only ashy, noting got to read *Beige Skins*,
Black Masks before the movie comes
out. another role Grace

Figure 1: “Afro-Saxon” (*Performance Bond* 17)

written or oral poetry, “[r]eading image and text together, like viewing a collage, requires a reorientation to textual space: it challenges us to think about reading in spatial terms” (13).

It is this connection to space that makes visual poetry so attractive to Compton and his efforts to create a place for black people in Vancouver.

Following Bennett’s previous discussion regarding visual dimension of white space in poetry, a fairly conventional poem such as Compton’s “Afro-Saxon” (Figure 1), with its varying line-lengths and spaces between stanzas, has visual elements, although its visual impact is minimal compared to other works in *Performance Bond*. Bohn explains that “the balance between visual and verbal elements can vary

tremendously from one visual poem to the next” (21). This range is apparent in *Performance Bond* from poems such as “]Ĭηx,” which is composed of typographic characters surrounding English words and phrases (Figure 2), to the almost entirely photographic “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver,” which uses only a few words to contextualize the image. Visual poems require a determined decoding of the interplay of visual and semantic elements constituting what the poem actually “says” before critical analysis begins. Compton’s “Lost-Found Landmarks” (see, for examples, Figures 7 and 8) is composed mainly of photographs with minimal text both preceding the images in the form of titles and within the images as signs on buildings. While these photographs still include written English, in a spectrum of modes of meaning-making, they cross the line from decidedly privileging the word to privileging the image. This interplay of verbal and visual elements forces reader-viewers into a dual function of both looking at a picture and cognitively processing the information represented in the interaction of image and text.

Visual poetry is by definition a physical artefact that exists in the spatial realm so the poem may be seen by the reader-viewer. Therefore, a claim like Bennett’s “[all] poetry is visual...[and] also aural” (1) is difficult to accept. How is an *oral* poem without a written script visual? One could imagine a performance as a type of visual poem when being viewed by an audience, but unless one is prepared to make recourse to a concept such as the theatre of the mind, the question remains: how does an audio performance such as “The Reinventing Wheel,” when recorded on a compact disc and placed in the back of *Performance Bond*, behave as a visual poem when it is played and listened to? That is not to say that any poem could be purely visual either. As W.J.T. Mitchell explains in *Picture Theory*, “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the cultural utopian gestures of modernism” (5). Although generic purity is impossible, especially when considering an art form



Figure 2: Opening page of “]Ĭηx” (*Performance Bond* 24)

that incorporates images and texts, a more precise definition of visual poetry would be valuable when considering Compton’s work. Bohn explains that “visual poetry can be defined as poetry that is *meant* to be *seen* – poetry that presupposes a viewer as well as a reader” (15; emphasis added). First, Bohn incorporates sight into the definition of visual poetry. Second, Bohn includes authorial intention in his definition, which places the first responsibility for generic identification in the author’s hands rather than those of the reader-viewer or critic. Emphasising the role of the artist in artistic expression when considering two avant-garde forms such as visual poetry and hip-hop, rather than foregrounding the role of the reader as the contemporary academy often does, is a political gesture. Given that the academy is traditionally white, male, and heterosexually dominated, the retention of the artist’s agency is relevant because the power is retained by the artist – regardless of his or her class or education.

Distinguishing between concrete poetry and visual poetry is perhaps necessary at this point because of the varying degrees to which these classifications function with respect to words and images. While it remains a sub-set of visual

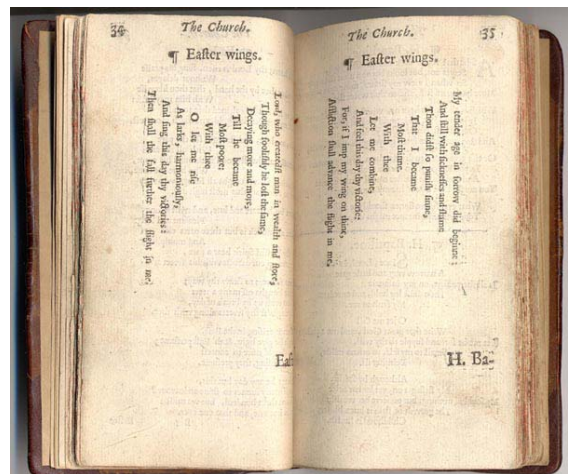


Figure 3: “Easter Wings” George Herbert 1633



Figure 4: “Visual Poets’ Picnic” 2001 K. S. Ernst from *Visual Poetry in the Avant Writing Collection* (61)

poetry, concrete poetry commonly uses letters or words to construct a shape through the lineation in the typography of the poem so that the shape corresponds to its meaning, whereas visual poetry, in general, does not necessarily require the shape of the poem (letters or type) to correspond to its meaning. One of the most often cited examples of concrete poetry is George Herbert’s “Easter Wings,” printed on two separate pages in the 1633 edition of *The Temple* (Figure 3). As the image demonstrates, the poem’s lines construct two sets of wing-shaped objects that relate to the verbal references to

flight, larks, and wings (on a purely literal level, there are of course countless interpretations possible) in the text. However, with “Easter Wings” the written words of the poem are still at the centre of the meaning – the poem is foremost meant to be decoded verbally with the form of the wings supplementing, but not dominating, the poem’s message.

Artists such as American K.S. Ernst demonstrate the predominance of the image in visual poetry. For example, in the poem “Visual Poets’ Picnic” the majority of the piece is dominated by the digital images of bowls, some containing words and others only pictures (Figure 4). The difference in the dominance of image or verbal text is evident when “Visual Poets’ Picnic” is compared to “Easter Wings,” and is replicated in the visual poems of *Performance Bond* that will be discussed in this essay.

Several of Compton’s poems in *Performance Bond* have characteristics of concrete poetry. The most recognizable candidate for classification as a concrete poem is “ailing” (Figure 5), which visually

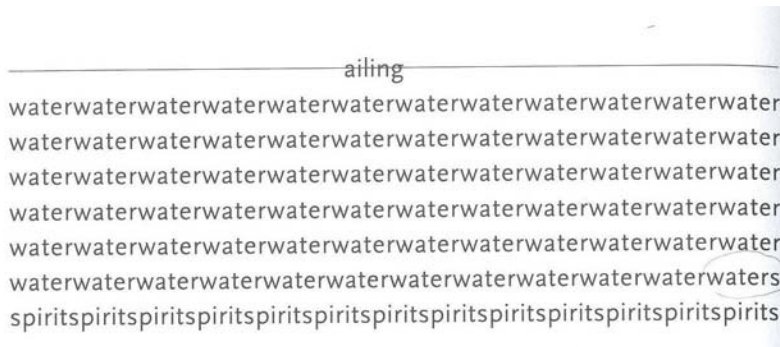


Figure 5: “ailing” (*Performance Bond* 82)

corresponds to the black diaspora’s removal from the African continent to the Americas as part of the slave trade. Compton’s “Forme and Chase,” which mirrors a photograph in his book of Vancouver’s Georgia Viaduct in a visual poem titled “Vividuct” (Figure 6), also exhibits

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

the bastard grapholect offspring of *Jane Eyre* and the Rosetta Stone. The fading tones of improbable connexions, fricative, glottal, remedial, settle here. My ectoplasmic ear notes the Chinese next door shuffling mah jong; I mimic with lead ABCs: This is a Pearl that was my tongue.'

VIVIDUCT

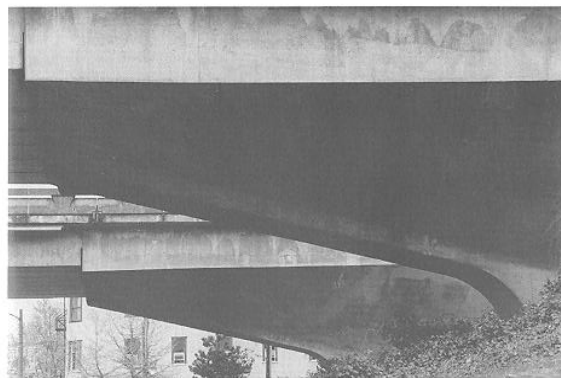


Figure 6: “Forme and Chase” and “Vividuct” (*Performance Bond* 144-45)

concrete poetry characteristics; the text of the former gradually descends in each of two stanzas from twelve- and eleven-syllable opening lines, respectively, to two-syllable closing lines, literally mirroring the image of the double-wedge-shaped underside of the viaduct in the photograph on the opposite page. An etymological analysis of *forme* and *chase*, respectively, illuminates the concrete structure of the poem. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *chase* is defined as “The action of chasing or pursuing with intent to catch; pursuit; hunting” (1n.a), which reflects the progression of lines as they descend down the page from in pursuit of the persona “I am” (ll. 11) and “my tongue” (ll. 22). A *chase* is also a term used in printing to refer to “The quadrangular iron frame in which the composed type for a page or sheet is arranged in columns or pages, and ‘locked up’ by the quoins or wedges, so as to be placed in the press” (*OED* “chase” 2n.2). The lines of each stanza fit within a quadrangular shape, such as that of the chase, and in combination with the typed font Compton uses, evoke print culture. The word *chase* also refers to “A lengthened hollow, groove, or furrow” (*OED* “chase” 3n.General sense), which corresponds to the shape of the white space in the poem and the reflected image of the Georgia Viaduct on the following page. Of course, *forme* is the obsolete spelling of the word *form*, suggesting the importance of the poem’s shape in its meaning; however, it also refers to the “Earliest in time or serial order, first; also, the first of two, former” (*OED* “forme” 1.a), which corresponds to the order of the title “Forme and Chase” and perhaps indicates that the first stanza refers to *forme* and the second, by default, corresponds to *chase*. Finally, the French derivative of *forme*, *formé*, is defined as “Of a cross: Narrow in the centre and broad at the extremities” (*OED* “formé” 1.a), and may refer to the crossing of Hogan’s Alley by the Georgia Viaduct depicted on the following page. Hogan’s Alley was the centre of the black community in Vancouver for over sixty years. Although it was destroyed in 1970 to construct the Georgia Viaduct, it stands today in the collective memory of the black community (along with various other immigrant groups) and in the Vancouver city archives. The significance of the Georgia Viaduct as it intersects with the locations of what was once the only centralized black community in Vancouver, Hogan’s Alley is vital to an understanding of “Vividuct” and will be discussed later on.

However, Compton’s boldest experiment in concrete poetry in this collection is “jłŋx” (Figure 2), which incorporates recognizable English words and phrases with typed characters that border on hieroglyphic symbols, but have no apparent meaning. The poem may be interpreted as a “typographical hijinks” (*Aug. Gingell*) played out on the reader by the author;

however, the poem may also be read/viewed as background noise surrounding the readable English words and sentences, thus producing a visual and oral representation within the structure of the poem. Compton gives a clue to the meaning of these inserted characters in the line “equilibrium of white noise to black vinyl” (24), suggesting that the typed characters represent white noise surrounding the black English referred to as ghosted within the poem by the English grapholect spread by the print medium. Other references including “DJ” (24) and Jazz (25 and 26) allude to what are traditionally considered forms of African-American music. Furthermore, when the character Jazz itself has the opportunity to speak, it is in a black vernacular, “Instead of bullshit ‘bagpipes’ we be calling those things ‘skin boxes’ or some shit” (25). The “white” noise within “]İηx” is perhaps the traditionally white avant-garde that often plays with the balance of semantic and visual elements, and the black language spoken by Jazz itself, a personification of an important influence on hip-hop, is made up of the discernible words and sentences within the poem. Considering the roots of hip-hop and their connection to jazz music along with Compton’s own evocation of DJ-ing and Jazz, readers/viewers may conclude that the poet is applying hip-hop aesthetics within a visual poetry form. It would be inaccurate to call “]İηx” a hip-hop poem simply because of its content, just as it would be wrong to overlook its visual poetry form and ignore the hip-hop aesthetics present in this poem. Such a reading would lead to the kind of “anthropological gaze” (*Blackvoice* 26) that Compton warns against in his scholarly article, a gaze that distracts the reader from the aesthetic value and sophistication of black literature. In “]İηx,” Compton writes a poem that simultaneously exists in both hip-hop and concrete poetry traditions. Therefore, to avoid privileging either of the two forms mentioned here, we might regard “]İηx” as a hybrid form, “hip-hop visual poetry,” that gives priority to neither one nor the other.



Figure 7: “Strathcona Coloured People’s Benevolent of Vancouver” (*Performance Bond* 125)

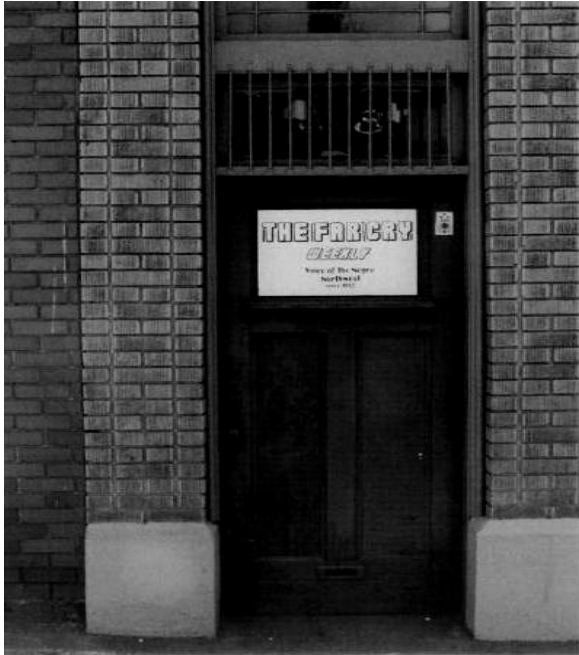


Figure 8: “The Far Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Society Northwest (since 1957)” (*Performance Bond* 129)

seen (or read) as deteriorating doorways without particular cultural significance. The words in combination with the images, however, create meaning from, and establish a black place in, the generic urban space depicted.

Compton includes several titled photographs of urban Vancouver in the text that function as visual poetry. Such locations as the “Strathcona Coloured People’s Benevolent Society of Vancouver” (Figure 7) or “The Far Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Northwest” (Figure 8) are represented as black places in the space of urban Vancouver. The titles and addresses on the facing page and the signs in the four photographs that compose “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver” along with their presence in a book of poems encourage viewers to read these photographs as visual poems.⁶ Without the accompanying words the images may simply be



Figure 9: Melinda Mollineaux *Cadboro Bay* sample image

celebrate Emancipation Day⁷ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fatona 227, Hudson 229). In “The Past Names Nothing Anyplace,” Peter Hudson describes the images and interprets their purpose:

Compton is not the only artist to use photography to lay claim to black places; in *Cadboro Bay: Index of an Incomplete History* (Figure 9), Melinda Mollineaux demonstrates the potential impact of certain images in claiming a place for black Canadians. Mollineaux chooses Cadboro Bay on Vancouver Island because of its significance in the black history of British Columbia as the place where this community gathered to

It is fitting that Mollineaux's images contain no visible trace of these settlers and barely a sign of any form of human habitation. Instead, we see a series of deceptively simple West Coast landscapes: a listless bay: haphazardly stacked driftwood; charcoal mud exposed by low tide and littered with stones and autumn leaves; close-ups of sea grass, vine maple, wild flowers, salal, echinacea, ivy, and other temperate foliage. Mollineaux uses this pastoral space as a corrective to the archival neglect and narrative exclusion of the forgotten histories of black Canadian settlers and their kin. (230-31)

Mollineaux creates a black place out of the assumed white-dominated space of Vancouver Island, ironically, by removing the black body. Andrea Fatona explains in "The Presence of Absence: Invisibility, Black Canadian History, and Melinda Mollineaux's Pinhole Photography" that Mollineaux's images "re-present, re-imagine, and re-inscribe the black body into the Canadian cultural imaginary...by calling attention to the invisibility of Black persons as subjects within Canadian cultural discourses" (228). Her photographs document an absence of the black body, which is a reality in terms of contemporary British Columbia's lack of recognition of the black community; however, that absence does not mean the place is insignificant to the black community, or in fact that the body is not there – it is simply unseen. The body inhabits the space behind the camera, not as an object, but as the photographer, as the storyteller, as the historian and as black citizen of British Columbia, a gesture which prevents the "[objectification of] the Black body through a domineering and objectifying gaze" (Fatona 229).

Comparing Compton and Mollineaux's use of photography helps to clarify both the need for reclaiming black British Columbian spaces and political aspects of Compton's own practice in *Performance Bond*. Compton and Mollineaux both are participating in the widely-adopted cultural practice among black artists of "[s]taking claim through naming" a process "crucial to the project of redrawing the urban landscape of Canada" (Walcott 284) and one achieved as black artists "(re)name" spaces previously lost to their respective black communities. Although Hudson discusses Compton's 49th *Parallel Psalms* as entering "the metaphorical space of Mollineaux's landscapes to reconstruct Black British Columbian history and geography" (230), obviously because Hudson's article was written before *Performance Bond*'s release, he does not discuss the images found in Compton's later text.

In Compton's "Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver," we find a similar absence

of the black body, despite its importance in Compton's work. For Compton, the black body is intimately connected to the history of British Columbia and thus the history of black people in the region. The first governor of British Columbia was James Douglas, a British subject and son of a white father, a Glasgow-born merchant, and a Creole (mixed white and African ancestry) mother (Kilian 24). It was Douglas who invited the blacks of San Francisco to come and settle in British Columbia and prompted the first arrival of American black settlers on April 25, 1858, in Victoria harbour (Kilian 30). It is Douglas's own black ancestry that prompts Compton to claim the former governor as part of the Vancouver black community: "You could say that [James] Douglas's raced body is like a piece of land over which wars have been fought and front lines have been reinscribed backward and forward" (qtd. in Stouck 59). Compton goes on to explain his efforts to reappropriate Douglas for British Columbia's black community: "What is happening now, and the movement that I belong to, which is claiming Douglas as a black man, shows another kind of power shift" that demonstrates blacks insisting the Canadian public recognize aboriginal blackness in Canada (qtd. in Stouck 60).

Compton's titled and explicitly located photographs may be explained in relation to the larger field of visual poetry. In each of the four photographs of "Lost-Found Landmarks," a sign defines the space as part of the black community's history while the addresses situate each image in Hogan's Alley's previous location. Similar to Compton's inclusion of signs in the images of "Lost-Found Landmarks," the placards accompanying each of Mollineaux's photographs ascribe meaning to the photographs. Fatona explains that "[i]n combination with her writings, which invoke the textual traces of lost voices, Mollineaux's installation sets up the conditions in which we may witness and enter into the presence of absence" (230). The writing on the placard contains references to the Vancouver Island black community:

John Craven Jones predicted rain. J.J. Moore spoke in tongues. Elizabeth Lenard realised her betrayal. Rebecca Gibbs tended fires. Sarah Jane Douglas Moses knew she would leave. Willis Bond gave libations. Samuel Booth wanted more. Emma Stark laughed to tears. Samuel Ramsay who usually worked feverishly fell asleep. Pricilla Stewart gathered shells for no reason. Nancy Alexander tended to children. Samuel Ringo listened to birdsongs. Nathan Pointer resurrected himself. Fortune Richard scanned the horizon. Sarah Lester dreamed in music. Mifflin Wistar Gibbs' bones ached. Mary

Lowe Barnswell knew ecstasy. Stephen Whitley folded the surface. Cornelius
Charity discerned a truth. (Mollineaux qtd. Fatona 230)

Although there is no indication as to the identity of the people listed on this placard, Mollineaux appears to be consistently evoking notable historical figures from the Vancouver Island area. The majority of these names may be found in Crawford Kilian's *Go Do Some Great Thing: The Black Pioneers of British Columbia*.⁸ Mollineaux's writing literally contextualizes the photographs it accompanies, encouraging each set of words and the related photograph to be taken as a single experience – a visual poem that would lose meaning were either component to be removed. Fatona explains, “[t]he inclusion of text allows for new meanings and identities to emerge out of the work” (235). Awareness of the means of creating that meaning can help us read Compton's *Performance Bond* as a whole.

Once we understand how the relationship between the word and image in the *Cadboro Bay* exhibit functions, the images of “Lost-Found Landmarks” may be understood, not simply as visual representations, but as constituting a kind of visual poetry. The titles on the page facing the images mirror the signs that Compton had placed in the physical photographs and these titles function similarly to Mollineaux's text by ascribing a signifying human presence to an otherwise unoccupied space. Indeed, the other photograph in *Performance Bond*, “Vividuct,” also presents the under-structure of the Georgia Viaduct, which passes over the space previously occupied by a substantial black community called Hogan's Alley, destroyed in the construction of the bridge, thus emptying the space of black bodies. The black bodies eliminated from the space in the images of “Lost-Found Landmarks” are signified by the text that accompanies the images. It is this combination of text and image that invites the reader-viewer to recognize the presence of the black body behind the camera and within the space created by the image.

There is one important difference, however, between Compton's “Lost-Found Landmarks” and Mollineaux's *Cadboro Bay* exhibit: Compton's photographs are locations of imagined organizations while Mollineaux captures a historically real place. Jean Baudrillard's understanding of what he calls the “hyperreal” may provide some insight as to how Compton's simulations of black place function in the space of urban Vancouver. Unlike dissimulation, which “is to pretend not to have what one has,” simulation “is to feign to have what one doesn't have,” and therefore, the latter “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’” (3). Simulation leads to the creation of the hyperreal, which “is the

generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). Therefore, Compton creates a hyperreal space by simulating African-Canadian organizations that have no historical original in the place of Vancouver. Compton is trying to inscribe a sense of history on the places he creates. Each photograph is taken of an aged building located on streets such as “Main” or “East Georgia Street” in Downtown Vancouver and the former site of Hogan’s Alley. In positioning the fictional landmarks at the epicentre of Vancouver, Compton makes a claim on the geography of a space rarely associated with black Canada as well as claiming the place lost to this community by the destruction of Hogan’s Alley. Although the simulation of such locations blur the boundary between real and imaginary, Compton’s exercise is necessary in order to rebuild a centralized black community in Vancouver because real, historical locations are currently absent from the geography.

One explanation for Compton’s willingness to create a hyperreal place in *Performance Bond* compared to Mollineaux’s dedication to the interpretation of historical facts may lie in Compton’s hip-hop influences. Compton’s inclusion of a compact disc presents part of the text (specifically “The Reinventing Wheel”) as a hip-hop performance, while representing the oral/aural dimension of his poetry. Chang explains the contribution that he perceives hip-hop makes to the creation of place for an oppressed group: “what’s unique is not just the reclamation of public space on behalf of marginalized peoples and purposes but the audacious brilliance of jimmying open lampposts to steal electricity to run sound systems, thus literally reclaiming power from the city that had denied it” (93). Compton’s use of the hyperreal is an example of this “audacity” that goes beyond simply *claiming* space toward the *creation* of a hyperreal place for the black community. We might say of his creation of some images, history, and people in *Performance Bond* what Gunnar Akesson, one of Byrna Barclay’s historical sources in her novel *The Last Echo*, said of her reimagining of Swedish immigrant history in that novel: “‘It didn’t happen, but might have’” (157). Compton effectively manipulates historical fact to recreate a cultural space that is needed because of the present absence, whereas Mollineaux has the luxury (not to devalue her work) of history as a method of claiming a place that still exists in British Columbia’s geography. While the spaces that Compton depicts in “Lost-Found Landmarks” are actual geographic locations in contemporary Vancouver, their importance to the black community is constructed through the act of naming these spaces with the titles of organizations that never existed in history.

Compton's images also demonstrate a close affinity to hip-hop aesthetics because of their close relation to place. According to Bill Adler in "Who Shot Ya: A History of Hip-Hop Photography," Marty Cooper and Henry Chalfant are the mother and father of hip-hop photography, respectively (102). In 1984, they



Figure 10: *Performance Bond* back cover image of Wayde Compton

collaborated on *Subway Art*, which documented the then-contemporary graffiti of New York, and the book remains the only record of these particular works of art (103). In its beginning, hip-hop photography was a documentary genre that captured the images of the traditional four elements of hip-hop. The graffiti behind Compton in a photograph reproduced on the back cover of *Performance Bond* (Figure 10) is documentary because it appears on the book authored by Compton. Regardless of this particular graffiti's fate, the image records the painting's historical reality. Adler states that photography "was also critical in legitimating graffiti as art" (103), a statement which demonstrates a historical relationship between the photograph and graffiti. Unlike the four elements of hip-hop, photography appears to have no particular aesthetic that makes it distinctively hip-hop; it depends on content to express its cultural significance. This is, perhaps, a result of hip-hop photography's documentary style, which relies so heavily on the captured subject to create meaning. Also, many of the practitioners of hip-hop photography were either documentary-based or untrained entirely in the art-form, resulting in the absence of a significant avant-garde movement in this particular genre of photography. However, what has resulted, according to Alder, is that hip-hop photography of the New York scene "[has] collectively created an almost complete visual record of the culture from its birth in the early seventies through the present moment" (102).

Initially, the photographs in Compton's *Performance Bond* appear limited to the documentary style of hip-hop photography. Both images from "Lost-Found Landmarks" and "Vividuct" are by most standards unremarkable pictures of city structures in black and white,



Figure 11: “Rev. Oz” (*Performance Bond 154*)

embedded in the poem “Ghetto Fabulous Ozymandias,” Compton alludes in the lineated part of the poetic text to a camera capturing the image: “He had a camera, a portable eye, he thought, / and he aimed it up / at a forty-five degree angle, a forty-six, a forty-seven, and so forth / and back, snapping with his index digit’s tip” (153). Rose explains that “Graffiti artists spraypainted [sic] murals and (name) ‘tags’ on trains, trucks, and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property” (22). “Lost-Found Landmarks” is not entirely conventional documentary photography, but might better be understood as an avant-garde form of graffiti. While the writing in the photographs does not incorporate block letters or 1970’s-80’s art supplies and colours (Hoch 352), Compton’s images function to reclaim urban space and are written on buildings like much of graffiti art composed in the past and today.

In “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City: Hip-Hop, Space, and Place,” Murray Forman explains the relationship between hip-hop and place:

Space and place are important factors that influence identity formation as they relate to localized practices of the self. For instance, graffiti has traditionally been integrated as a spatial practice and among the impressive features of the handwritten tag “TAKI 183” that proliferated in New York in the early 1970s is its emphasis on locality (celebrating 183 Street as the young writer’s home turf) and its ubiquity throughout the city. (155)

Like Taki 183, Compton claims ownership on behalf of black Vancouver by placing signs on the outside of buildings in the Strathcona area. Compton’s collaboration with fellow artists (see note 5) to create “Lost-Found Landmarks” is similar to the politically motivated actions of black youths in the 1960s who “started to make a habit of writing their names in public places, not just to let everyone know that they were there, but to lay claim to public property in the face of poverty and powerlessness” (Hoch 351). The signage of Compton’s four photographs that

constitute “Lost-Found Landmarks” functions in a similar political way to graffiti. First, the signs indicate that the Vancouver black community was (or still is) in the space of Vancouver’s urban landscape. While the signage appears, perhaps, more sophisticated than a scribbled graffiti tag such as “Taki 183” (Figure 12), the signs function in the same way by stating presence and claiming ownership over a place previously appropriated from the black community by city planners. Furthermore, in addition to tagging urban buildings and train cars “[breakdancers], DJs, and rappers wore graffiti-painted jackets and tee-shirts” (Rose 35) (also found in *Subway Art* Figure 13) laying claim to their own bodies through the art of graffiti. Thus we can see an interesting parallel between Compton’s literary claim to space through the black body (its presence and absence) and hip-hop’s similar desire for a physical control over space and body.



Figure 12: “‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals”
New York Times, 1971, 37

While the images in “Lost-Found Landmarks” represent both a hyperreal and hip-hop performance, they are nonetheless based on an historical place in the city of Vancouver. As previously mentioned, Compton is active in the *Hogan’s Alley Memorial Project*, an undertaking that reflects both the “public action” of hip-hop (Forman 155) and Compton’s continued efforts to make black Vancouver visible to the general public. The promotion of black Vancouver’s presence is also dependent on work such as Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter’s *Opening Doors: Vancouver’s East End*, which contains several interviews of former Hogan’s Alley residents and visitors (also reprinted in Compton’s *Bluesprint*). According to one former resident, Austin Phillips, Hogan’s Alley was located at “Park Lane and it ran right straight up between Prior and Union, ended around Jackson Avenue” (*Opening Doors* 140). While it was renowned as a place of

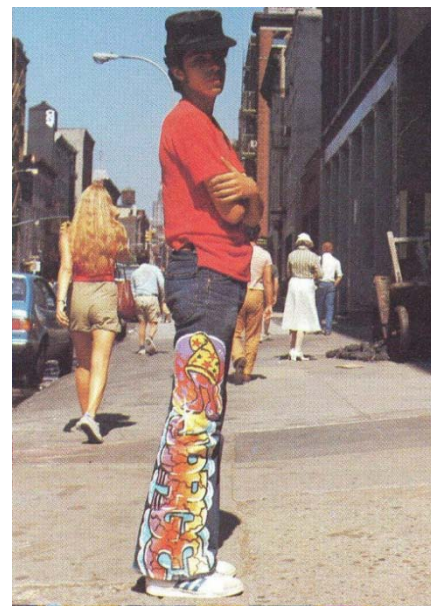


Figure 13: Graffiti adorned clothing
from *Subway Art*

bootlegging (143) and prostitution (81), Phillips emphasises that “There was more killing in the West End, even at that time, than there were [sic] in the Alley” (142) despite its reputation for violence. Peter Battistoni’s perspective further reveals the complicated space that was Hogan’s Alley as it incorporated “Hindus and Negroes and white people” (51). Battistoni recounts his confusion as to why others were afraid of venturing into Hogan’s Alley: “There’s nothing wrong with this Alley,” suggesting that the residents of the Alley were “all good in a way” (51) and that “[m]ost of the evil would come from the outside” (51).

Compton’s evocation of Hogan’s Alley is not limited to photography. The section of *Performance Bond* entitled “Rune” contains entries that are inspired by this particular Vancouver location: the “re-imagined” newspaper story “Whither Hogan’s Alley?” is based on an April 21st 1939 article published in *The Vancouver Daily Province* (*Performance* 10); a conversation between personifications of Digital and Analogue technologies in “Vèvè” takes place “beside the Georgia Viaduct” (116), the same space once occupied by Hogan’s Alley; and as previously mentioned, “Forme and Chase” mirrors a photographic image of the Georgia Viaduct in the visual poem entitled “Vividuct.” In each representation of Hogan’s Alley, Compton takes varying liberties with historical fact, in accordance with the hip-hop aesthetic of collage Mansbach identified, as previously discussed. Compton’s newspaper article is modeled on a historical document (details of the relationship between the two texts follow on 20-22 of this essay), giving it some real connection to the past. However, the cultural organizations depicted in “Lost-Found Landmarks” have no specific historical reference and the Georgia Viaduct in “Vividuct” is not only historical, but still exists in Vancouver today. For most Vancouverites, though, the top rather than the underside of the viaduct is of greater significance – they literally pass over the former black place as they drive or walk over the Georgia Viaduct. Any significant connection of these locations is due in no small part to efforts such as Compton’s expressed through his poetry, academic writing, and historical studies.

Hogan’s Alley is at the centre of Compton’s project to create a black place in Vancouver’s urban landscape and relates to his understanding of hip-hop aesthetics. Forman explains that “[i]f space is a broadly configured dimension, place, as framed within discourses of the ’hood, constitutes a micro-scale of experience that has, since roughly 1988, achieved greater significance within hip-hop” (Forman 156). Furthermore, Forman argues that:

Themes of space and place are profoundly important in hip-hop. Virtually all of the early

descriptions of hip-hop practices identify territory and the public sphere as significant factors, whether in the visible artistic expression and appropriation of public space via graffiti or B-boying, the sonic impact of a pounding bass line, or the discursive articulation of urban geography in rap lyrics....(155)

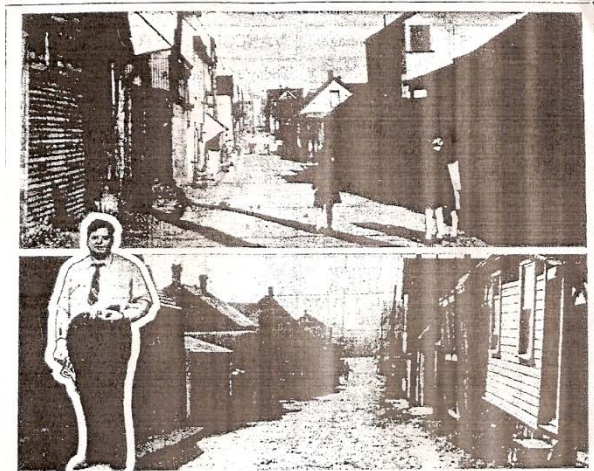
Hogan's Alley appears to function similarly for Compton as his territory for depicting the presence of Vancouver's black community. Hogan's Alley is further articulated visually in *Performance Bond* in a re-imagining of a nearly seventy-year-old newspaper article. Compton's "Whither Hogan's Alley?" (Figure 14) is a re-writing of Jack Stepler's 1939 "Hogan's Alley Fate at Stake" (Figure 15), and the former is visually presented as a newspaper article in *Performance Bond*. Both Stepler and Compton acknowledge the same physical location between "Union and Prior streets," offer similar descriptions of run-down "tenements" and "shacks" and the adjacent



Figure 14: "Whither Hogan's Alley?" (*Performance Bond* 115)

stable. The first significant difference between Compton's and Stepler's articles is that the former expands the social issue to the "entire metropole" rather than confining its significance to urban development efforts "directed at the district for blocks around" (115). By bringing in the entire Vancouver area, Compton rejects the demonization of Hogan's Alley and its historical ghettoization from the larger metropolis, essentially asserting the Alley's place in the space of Vancouver and its history.

In keeping with the antagonistic relationship between hip-hop and legal authorities, Compton also paints a picture of law enforcement that shows little regard for the inhabitants of Hogan's Alley. As Clarence Lusane explains, "[d]ebates over police brutality were also forced into the public arena as a result of rap songs" (358). Compton's Constable Mark Macfie "offers without hesitation" an image of Hogan's Alley full of bootleggers, prostitutes, gamblers, loiters,



AREA'S FATE IN BALANCE—The scenes above show Hogan's Alley, the district surveyed this afternoon by city inspectors for building and sanitation. A report will be made to the City Hall on the conditions prevailing in the area. It has been described by court, civic and police officials as a crime-breeding area. Inset at the left shows Carl Marchi, known as the "mayor" of the district.

"MAYOR" MAKES DEFENSE
HOGAN'S ALLEY FATE AT STAKE

Civic Body Inspects Scene of Long Criminal History
 By JACK STEPLER

HOGAN'S Alley—street of mystery to Vancouver's gentile—today—runs from Station street to Gore avenue between Union and Pritz streets. On this block-long dirt lane look the windows of tumble-down shacks, squalid tenements, a stable and—out of tune with surroundings—the odd trim cottage.

To the average citizen, Hogan's Alley stands for three things—squalor, immorality and crime. But is Hogan's Alley the blight on the face of this city it is claimed to be? Or is it only the focal point of criticism directed at the district for blocks around?

According to officials, the answer is in the affirmative in both cases. It has also been called a breeding place for crime. Because of such criticism, arising out of an Assize Court visit to the alley was made today by members of the city's departments of housing and sanitation.

To the police, however, Hogan's Alley is representative of the district in which it is located, a district of tenements, cheap houses, cheap and tumble-down houses, which extends for blocks around.

MUCH TROUBLE THERE.

"The whole district is one in which police have a great deal of their trouble," said Chief Constable Col. W. W. Foster, in a discussion on the alley. "There are many people in the alley who are law-abiding, but there are many, of course, who are called to deal with."

Hogan's Alley has the name which conjures up images of investigators, canned heaters, press-trusses and all types of criminals. Police records bear this out.

But detectives are puzzled to figure out the thought of the centre of crime since one small

months, to run concurrently, for the assault of Mrs. Emma Kilken in her cabin at 2522 Main street. The assault took place the night before last.

The fate of this one-block-long dirt lane and the inhabitants of its tenements may rest in the hands of the officials, who are investigating the buildings today.

But whatever is decided, it is the homes of both residents and police that Hogan's Alley is only representative of the district—that demolition of its slums will be of little value unless action is applied to the entire district.

Look Over Alley

Sanitary and structural conditions among the tenements in Hogan's Alley were investigated this afternoon by George A. Rogers, the city's chief sanitary inspector, G. B. Gibb, deputy inspector for the district, and Jack Held, a member of the city building department inspection staff.

Crimes against civic social services committee—the probe was assisted by a report from an Assize Court jury that the alley is "a breeding place for crime."

to Mr. Marchi. Times have changed in the past few years.

The alley's most celebrated case was the murder of Pearl Traynor, a 28-year-old woman who was strangled to death during a fracas in 1921 on the night of November 23, 1921. Before she died in the General Hospital, the woman named her slayer as Alvin De Bortou. He hanged in Ontario jail on July 14 for the crime.

SLAYER NEVER FOUND.

Another woman well known to Hogan's Alley residents in 1928

SPEEDY CAMPAIGN FOR CENTRE SEAT

A whirlwind campaign for the provincial seat in Vancouver Centre, headed by the death of Fred Cross, will crowd the by-election meeting over ten days before polling on May 1.

The battle will begin in earnest tonight when rallies will be held by each of the three major parties.

Ald. H. L. Carey, Liberal candidate, will speak at a meeting in Moose Hall, Attorney General Gordon S. Watson, K.C., will support him.

Ald. H. D. Wilson, Conservative nominee, will open his campaign at Granville-Sassanoo Hall, First avenue and Spadina drive. H. L. Mallard, K.C., M.L.A., provincial Conservative leader, and Capt. MacGregor Macintosh, M.L.A., provincial organizer, will be other speakers.

Carey will rally behind Mrs. J. Stuart Johnson, the party's nominee at the opening meeting in Hotel Vancouver, Mrs. Dorothy Stevens, M.L.A., Harold Wain, M.L.A., and Arnold Webber will be other speakers. W. W. Jeffries will preside.

Old Paper Mentions Pattullo at School

Mention of Premier T. D. Pattullo as being one of the students promoted to a higher grade in school was one of the interesting items open in a July 3, 1885, copy of the *Woodstock, Ont. Times*, by members of the County Association, gathered in Hotel Castle. "Boswell" might be other names found in the ancient newspaper in the same connection were of association members present at the meeting.

A counterclaim of Hattenbury, whose counsel was A. B. McPhillips, for \$300 damages for alleged loss of a charter party, was dismissed. W. C. Thompson was counsel for the plaintiffs.

Hattenbury is a son of the late Francis Dawson Hattenbury, well-known British Columbia architect, who designed the Court House and Parliament Buildings at Victoria, and was murdered several years ago in England.

and unsavoury dwellers of the lowest denominator. When speaking of the inhabitants, Macfie compares the people of Hogan's Alley to "cords of sisal" and suggests "[t]hey keep themselves packed in tight down there," words that emphasise the otherness of Hogan's Alley citizens from "the average Vancouverite" and the ghettoization that occurred through most of the Alley's history. In contrast, the law enforcement of Stepler's article appears more sympathetic to the social realities that create a higher concentration of crime in a particular area. Stepler quotes Chief Constable Col. W. W. Foster, who says, "[t]here are many people in the alley who are just poor – not criminals. Others, of course, we are called to deal with." Foster appears to recognize the difference between the criminal and the typical human element of Hogan's Alley. Furthermore, Stepler's article explains that other areas of Vancouver's East End are similar to Hogan's Alley "because of poverty, the evils of drink and dope, and other factors which create such slums."

Figure 15: "Hogan's Alley Fate at Stake" Jack Stepler, Vancouver Daily Province, 21 April 1938

Although Stepler's article may appear more sympathetic to the contemporary inhabitants of Hogan's Alley in his time, in "Whither Hogan's Alley?" Compton gives voice to the black inhabitants of Hogan's Alley, a voice not present in the original article. The Hogan's Alley advocate Carl Marchi (depicted in the *Province* article as Caucasian) is replaced in Compton's re-imagining with a "[l]ong-time resident Hadrian McCabe, a Negro and retired foundry worker" (115). McCabe and Marchi share similar dialogue about Hogan's Alley when discussing the shape of the buildings as "clean and doing just fine" and "clean and comfortable" (115), respectively. Compton's character makes specific mention of the people of Hogan's Alley, as "church people...[and] good-time people" (115) whereas Stepler's article focuses on the physical

description of the buildings. Compton provides a black voice in his version of the Stepler article, a provision that locates Hogan's Alley within the black community's collective memory.⁹ Furthermore, by creating a dialectical relationship between McCabe and Macfie, Compton promotes a negative portrayal of white-law enforcement, which coincides with hip-hop aesthetics, but promotes a troubling distortion of historical facts.

Compton also connects visual poetry and hip-hop culture through the traditional African figure of Legba in *Performance Bond*. The poem "Vèvè" is a conversation between the personifications of "Digital" and "Analogue" recording technologies. At first, the reader notices the location of the conversation between Digital and Analogue "at the corner of Main and Union, beside the Georgia Viaduct" (116), the previous location of Hogan's Alley. Compton locates the poem in the present-day place of a previously historic black neighbourhood. While the location of the conversation is physically and temporally in the present, it is clear that Compton is shifting between locations and time as the conversation between Digital and Analogue takes place. Analogue invokes Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Voodoo, Afro-Caribbean language, and the Middle Passage in his/her first opportunity to speak: "I was reading a book called *The Arrivants* the other day. Towards the end the writer suggests that Voodoo is the beginning of an Afro-Caribbean language. You know, after the Middle Passage blotted the African languages out" (116). The location of Hogan's Alley and its relation to the current geography of Vancouver is thus globalized, alluding to hundreds of years of African history in five lines of dialogue.

The majority of "Vèvè" focuses on the West African trickster deity known as Legba and Esu Elegbara, among other names. Femi Euba explains in "Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama" that "Esu stands at the crossroads, the transitional point of sacrifice. He is the factor of change and therefore the most important element of the ritual, and he must be coaxed with the right kind of sacrifice" (168). Legba is also connected to language as the means of communication between humans and the supreme being ("African Religions"). Compton brings Legba's vèvè into the work by having "ANALOGUE [reach] *into* DIGITAL's *bag of trail mix and, taking out a handful, [write] on the sidewalk*" the proper symbol (Figure 16). As Analogue explains, this symbol has the power to "actually evoke [Legba]" and acts as a "portal between worlds" (118). Again, with the incorporation of the trail mix as the writing material and thus the offering to Legba, Compton combines ancient Voodoo

with contemporary “writing” material, forging a link between black ancestry and the present day.

Compton further complicates black history in the current space formally known as Hogan’s Alley by combining First Nations and African trickster mythologies.

Compton explains in “Culture at the Crossroads: Voodoo

Aesthetics and the Axis of Blackness in Literature of the Black Diaspora,” that “the use of Voodoo as a trope – is

part of the literary wing of the political strategies which similarly look to Voodoo as a means of defeating colonialism” (482). After the evocation of Legba using trail mix, the stage directional notes indicate that “[a] *coyote walks by*. [Digital and Analogue] *see it as a dog and so give it no remark*” (120). Of course, the coyote is the typical manifestation of various First Nations trickster myths and one of Legba’s symbols is the dog (“Legba”). The juxtaposition of First Nations and African mythologies again points to the space in which Compton’s poem takes place. Before the space that became Hogan’s Alley was occupied by African, American, and European emigrants, it was home to First Nations peoples that lived in the area. The mixing of First Nations and Voodoo characters by Compton also speaks to a kind of cultural hybridization what may be explained through what Homi Bhaba calls the “third space”:

for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (211)

By incorporating a variety of cultural signifiers (Voodoo, Coyote, and even trail mix) Compton attempts to claim this “third space” and break away from the same cultural dominance that historically destroyed Hogan’s Alley. In a Canadian context, Compton’s hybridization of different cultures into his poetry demonstrates, as Clarke insists, the African-Canadian’s “variegated composition” (“Contesting” 49) and emphasises that Canadian blackness is a “far more heteroglot, far more diverse, far more democratic kind of community” than African-American culture (“Crime” Clarke 57).

The power of Legba’s symbol does indeed summon this spirit into present day

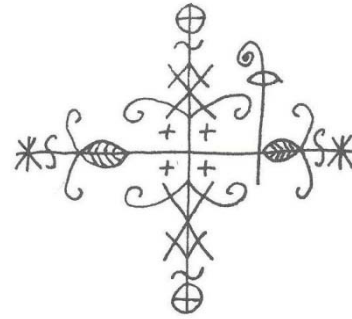


Figure 16: Legba’s vèvè (Performance Bond 118)

Vancouver with the entrance of Compton's third character, the City. The stage directions in the dramatic dialogue describe the City as a police officer who "*points his baton at the bag in ANALOGUE's hand*" and then forces the pair to relinquish the liquid in their brown bag before being driven off their resting place (122). It is important to note that, ironically, the City's order results in the pouring of libation to the ancestor, a feature of West African spiritual practices (*Sept. Gingell*). Euba explains "If...we see the erratic and seemingly contradictory characteristics of Esu as part of the art of the dissembler, then we can better grasp the complementary good and evil identity that Esu embodies" (171). Legba is not necessarily a positive figure in African/African American culture, especially after the Middle Passage and the demonization of the trickster figure by white, Christian slave owners. Nevertheless, according to Euba "[s]lavery, the 'racial burden'...was the fate imposed on the African by Esu through the exploitive aspirations of the white slavers" (169); therefore, the antagonistic role of the City supports Legba's historical identity as controlling the fate of his followers. Analogue and Digital become Legba's followers by obeying the law of the City. While the City may correspond to the trickster figure of Legba in the Voodoo tradition, or even Coyote of First Nations tradition, the City also stands for the cultural dominance imposed on Digital and Analogue, on the past and present of black Vancouver citizens and the power of African spiritual practices to subvert that dominance.

There are several aspects of Compton's "Vèvè" that link to hip-hop aesthetics. The most obvious connection is Legba's role as law enforcement and subsequent antagonism toward Digital and Analogue, which is similar to Compton's characterisation of Constable Mark Macfie in "Whither Hogan's Alley?" Further links between hip-hop and visual imagery are made with the writing of Legba's symbol. Writing the image on the street suggests a kind of Voodoo graffiti, marking the place of Hogan's Alley with this traditional African diasporic image. The insertion of a vèvè into the poem represents a type of visual poetics that is "more than language" ("Vèvè" 118). The image of Legba's vèvè is the source of power in the poem that creates action; this power is depicted by the City/Legba character, who controls its followers, Analogue and Digital by forcing them from their place in Hogan's Alley. Legba's vèvè indeed functions as a crossroads between hip-hop aesthetics and visual poetry, not to mention the connection between past and present, African and black Vancouver.

Performance Bond is a synthesis of visual poetry and hip-hop aesthetics that facilitates the creation of space for Vancouver's black community through the recreation of a historical

black place in the city. By utilizing forms of visual poetry and hip-hop, Compton hybridizes contemporary academic and popular culture. Furthermore, the spatial elements of visual images and hip-hop provide a significant advantage when constructing a social place because they each emphasize spatial aesthetics over temporal considerations, freeing Compton's work from the linear constraints of written language and oral performance. Although visual poetry is a relatively small part of *Performance Bond*, it is extremely significant because of its relation to hip-hop culture and its ability to claim physical space for the diaspora more effectively than written language on its own.

Notes

¹ Concrete Poetry: “a form of poetry in which the significance and the effect required depend to a larger degree than usual upon the physical shape or pattern of the printed material” (OED “concrete” 7.b). Abrams defines concrete poetry as “the use of a radically reduced language, typed or printed in such a way as to force the text on the reader’s attention as an object which is itself to be perceived as a visual whole” (34).

² Even the spelling of this cultural practice has not yet been standardized with some scholars and practitioners preferring to write “hip-hop” and others “hip hop.”

³ Commonly called “breakdancing.”

⁴ ABC Bookworld “is a public service project to help spread awareness of the literary activity in British Columbia, Canada’s province with the highest per capita book reading rate in the country” <<http://www.abcbookworld.com/about.php>>.

⁵ Although “veve” is spelled in other texts without accents, or with accents in either direction, “vèvè” and “vévé,” Compton appears to be adopting Kamau Brathwaite’s version of the word from *The Arrivants*. Brathwaite also has a poem titled “Vèvè” in that collection (224), which Compton is undoubtedly alluding in his poem of the same name.

⁶ In an email correspondence between Compton and me, he discusses his involvement in the “Lost-Found Landmarks” project. Although the concept for the project was entirely his, Mykol Knighton designed the signs with instructions from Compton to create a 1930s and 1940s retro aesthetic. Compton also chose the locations for the photographs and staged them together with Robert Sherrin. Both Knighton and Sherrin are also members of the Hogan’s Alley Memorial Project.

⁷ Emancipation Day marks the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, 1 August 1834 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* “British Colonization”).

⁸ For example: Willis Bond was a notable black Victoria settler with exceptional oratory skills (84). Mollineaux's associating Bond with "libation" is most likely the result of his being a "bar owner" and of his "suppl[ying] water for mining operators" (84) in the early days of the British Columbian gold rush. Similarly, Rebecca Gibbs, the wife of prominent citizen Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, was present at Barkerville for the "disastrous fire which destroyed the town in September 1868" (94). Kilian also cites a poem by Rebecca Gibbs about the famous fire (94). Mollineaux marks Gibbs's involvement in this historical event with a play on the phrase "tended fires," as the historical figure both *attended* and *tended* to the writing of the event.

⁹ The destruction of Hogan's Alley by the municipal government of Vancouver parallels the annihilation of another predominantly black Canadian settlement. Described by Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill in *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*, "Africville was a black community within the city of Halifax, inhabited by approximately four hundred people, comprising eighty families, many of whom were descended from settlers who moved there over a century ago" (28). The settlement was destroyed in the 1960s and its residents relocated to Halifax public housing.

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