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WHOSE BLUES?

AFRICAN CANADIAN THEATRE AND THE BLUES AESTHETIC

This essay explores some of the ways by which blues and a Canadian blues aesthetic are manifested in four African-Canadian plays. I'm particularly interested in the ways black Canadian playwrights appropriate, translate, and reconstruct African-American blues materials to create what George Elliott Clarke calls "an intra-racial post-coloniality." I argue that Clarke's *Whylah Falls: The Play*, George Boyd's *Gideon's Blues*, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, and Andrew Moodie's *The Lady Smith* theatrically conjure a diasporic AfriCanadian poly-consciousness that acknowledges its inextricable American connections at the same time as the plays use blues music and sensibility to chart and construct a distinctively Canadian experience. Signifying on African-American musical, theatrical, historical, and literary intertexts, African-Canadian theatre artists create, in ahdri zhina mandielà's words, "a homegrown africanadian aesthetics."

Cette contribution examine comment le blues et une esthétique canadienne du blues se manifestent dans quatre pièces afro-canadiennes. Wasserman s'intéresse tout particulièrement à la façon dont les dramaturges canadiens de race noire s'approprient, traduisent et reconstruisent le matériel tiré du blues afro-américain pour créer ce que George Elliott Clark a appelé « la post-colonialité intra-raciale ». Wasserman fait valoir que les pièces Whylah Falls: The Play de Clarke, Gideon's Blues de George Boyd, Harlem Duet de Djanet Sears et The Lady Smith d'Andrew Moodie évoquent, sur scène, une conscience afro-canadienne à plusieurs facettes qui reconnaît ses liens inextricables à l'Amérique tout en utilisant le blues et les sensibilités qui y sont liées pour tracer et construire une expérience qui est clairement canadienne. En se servant d'intertextes musicaux, théâtraux, historiques et littéraires afro-américains les artistes de théâtre afro-canadiens créent ce qu'ahdri zhina mandielà a qualifié « d'esthétique afro-canadienne d'ici ».



As a blues fan I'm continually fascinated by the complexity of this seemingly simple musical form, its power to tell a profound and moving story and at the same time engender laughter and the desire to dance. As a blues scholar I'm intrigued by the history of the music, its congruency with the history of black Americans, and the various ways that formal, thematic, and referential blues elements appear in the literature and drama of North Americans—African Americans mainly, but also African Canadians, Native Americans, and Native Canadians among others. As a critic and historian of Canadian theatre I find the corpus of African-Canadian (AfriCanadian) blues plays rich with the ironies and paradoxes of Canadian-American relations inherent in so much of Canada's geopolitical and theatrical history. If *African-Canadianité*, as George Elliott Clarke calls it, "derives a substantial portion of its identity from African-American culture," so too do "African Canadians construct their own *African-Americanism* to suit their own cultural and psychological needs" (*Odysseys* 36, 39). The appropriation, translation, and reconstruction of African-American dramatic texts and blues music into AfriCanadian blues plays vividly illustrate Clarke's notion of "an intra-racial post-coloniality" (*Odysseys* 80) and offer an alternative version of what Rinaldo Walcott terms the "diasporic aesthetics" (100) of black Canadian theatre.

Blues music emerged directly out of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American experience. A brilliant synthesis of field hollers with African rhythms and American country ballads, blues had its roots in post-Civil War Reconstruction and the sharecropping economy of the Jim Crow South, all of it seared in the crucible of poverty, racial indignity, and everyday threats of violence under which black Americans lived. The blues was first heard as a distinctive musical genre around 1900. Blues became commercialized in the 1920s with the popularity of radio, recordings, and classic women blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. With the Depression in the 1930s blues became identified with the self-expression of the lone country bluesman and his guitar: Robert Johnson screamin' and cryin', the hellhounds on his trail. In the 1940s, swept up in the Great Migration, Texans like T-Bone Walker headed west to California, Mississippians like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker headed north to Chicago and Detroit, their blues became electrified, and the new urban blues band—guitar and bass, drums, amplified harp and/or piano, with horns optional—soon morphed into rock 'n roll.

Along with the music, blues evolved as a discourse of feeling

and a philosophy: a way of experiencing the world, expressing that experience, and coping with it. Houston A. Baker, Jr. describes black American vernacular culture as “a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix [...] a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses” (3). Out of that matrix “the blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic,” Ralph Ellison writes: “This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences” (256).

The theatrical canon of African-American playwright August Wilson comprises a blues chronicle of twentieth-century black-American life. “Contained in the blues is an entire philosophical system,” Wilson has said, “the cultural response of black America to the world in which they found themselves. [...] Blues is the best literature that blacks have. [...] The music comes out of black life as created by black people” (qtd in Rosen 198). For Wilson blues is an artistic strategy—musical and theatrical—as well as a strategy for living, a creative expression of black America and black *people*. “African people” is the phrase he often uses (Savran 37), suggesting that the lived experience of blues and its value as a philosophical system encompass the entire African diaspora, transcending the particularities of American history, American citizenship, and specifically African-American social conditions.

Some African-American blues musicians themselves take a broadly humanistic, transnational, and trans-racial approach to the question of blues authenticity. B.B. King, for example, asserts that “the blues contains all the basic feelings of human beings: pain, happiness, fear, courage, confusion, desire ... everything” (164). It’s not surprising to find Canadian First Nations playwrights such as Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor cross-appropriating blues metaphors, music, and philosophy to help dramatize the lived experience of their people (see Wasserman). Blues can clearly speak beyond the borders of the land where they began, and they can speak with transformative power and effect.

An art form originally created by black Americans out of the crucible of slavery and its long racist aftermath has developed into a worldview and expressive philosophy available and applicable to other people who share the same racial make-up or culture, or a similar experiential history. Since the 1960s blues music has increasingly become world music. But at the same time the blues have remained an important component of self-identified black

American exceptionalism. Leroi Jones (before he became Amiri Baraka) dubbed black Americans “Blues People” in his 1963 book of that title. “[T]he term *blues*,” he insists, “relates directly to the Negro, and his personal involvement in America” (94). For Houston Baker, theorizing African-American literature in the 1980s, blues comprise the vernacular Ur-language of African Americans, “the ‘always already’ of Afro-American culture”: “They are the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (4). Musician and author Julio Finn essentializes blues as an exclusively African-American modality. “What distinguishes the blues *person*,” he argues, “is cultural-racial makeup, which can only be inherited by a descendant of an ex-American slave. [. . .] Anyone—French, Ethiopian, Mongolian—can play a ‘blues.’ But only a black American can *be* a bluesperson. [. . .] He alone *lives* the blues” (229-30, emphasis in original).

Such nationalist-racialist discourse challenges the blues authenticity of black Canadian artists, including dramatists, once or twice removed from “personal involvement in America,” its history and culture. George Elliott Clarke, a black Canadian who writes blues poetry and plays, complains of this “African-American tendency to annex all black-white racial discourse for its own hegemonic purposes” (*Odysseys* 9). In his anthology *Eyeing the North Star* Clarke claims the blues as one element of African-Canadian literary hybridity. He describes his own work as a “blend of Little Milton’s blues with Milton Acorn’s poetry” and praises other black Canadian writers in the book who “speak the raw blues of truth” (*Eyeing* xxiv). *Bluesprint*, the title of Wayde Compton’s anthology of black British Columbian literature, reinforces an African-Canadian claim to the discourses and experiences of the blues—what might be called an AfriCanadian blues aesthetic.¹

The relationship of black Canadian culture to black America is of course deeply complex, overlapping the always already ambivalent historical relationship of Canadian culture to American culture in general. African-American double consciousness is further fractured in the prism of African-Canadian cultural multiplicity, what Clarke calls its “poly-consciousness” (*Odysseys* 40). In her introduction to a collection of essays on African-Canadian theatre, Maureen Moynagh discusses how the *Showboat* controversy in Toronto, 1993-94, illustrated the significant differences African Canadians have sometimes had with American blacks regarding cultural representations of blackness in North America, and the stubborn resistance south of the border to the notion of any legitimate, and legitimately different, African-

Canadian position(s) (xiv).

The almost inevitable tendency of Canadian blues plays to cite African-American musical and theatrical intertexts reflects the historical origin of blues in the American experience as well as the cultural dominance of African-American literature and music within black North America. But Clarke's notion of "intra-racial post-coloniality" also posits a black Canadian margin that writes back to the centre. Clarke argues that African-Canadian cultural product regularly contests the "model blackness" of African America, with "the remarkable tendency of many of its creators to deliberately, deliriously, parrot/parody Black U.S. intertexts" (*Odysseys* 61). AfriCanadian blues plays make little effort to conceal or erase their African-American blues sources. As in Walcott's model, their aesthetic sometimes connects directly to the African and Caribbean diasporic elements within Canada's heterogeneous black communities. But primarily, these plays theatrically conjure a diasporic AfriCanadian poly-consciousness that acknowledges its inextricable American connections at the same time as they use blues to chart and construct a distinctively Canadian experience.

In an essay titled "Must All Blackness Be American?" Clarke reads black Nova Scotian playwright Walter M. Borden's *Tightrope Time* as an AfriCanadian revisioning of Lorraine Hansberry's classic 1959 African-American drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Clarke concludes that "Borden's predilection for ideas over ideals manifests his *Canadian* sensibility" (*Odyssey* 76, emphasis in original), as the play moves from Hansberry's specific social concerns to Borden's "abstract universalism" (77). I don't find this conclusion persuasive. Abstract universalism, or ideas generally, represent the Canadian sensibility no more accurately than social consciousness or idealism represents the American. In fact the blues sensibility, in both its American cultural origins and AfriCanadian theatrical forms, is distinctively anti-idealist and far more partial to experience than ideas.

Nevertheless, reading *Tightrope Time* over against its primary American theatrical source text makes good sense. *A Raisin in the Sun* has provided a powerful touchstone for black playwrights on both sides of the border. In reading Borden's play intertextually, Clarke is following Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who argues in *The Signifying Monkey* that "[r]epetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms," conceived as "double-voiced texts that talk to other texts" (xxiv-xxv). Gates refers to these various techniques of double-voicedness as *Signifyin(g)*. His textual examples come

solely from African-American literary works that draw from and speak back to other African-American texts. But when Gates says, “Black texts Signify on other black texts” (xxvii), he could be talking about the relationship of Canadian blues plays to their American antecedents. And when he traces “the black vernacular tradition” (4) from its origins in Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas by way of the Middle Passage, he makes clear that African-American Signifyin(g) is part of a larger black diasporic aesthetic. The Signifyin(g)/signifying impulse is as evident in African-Canadian literature and theatre as in African-American.

I want to argue that the blues aesthetic in African-Canadian plays relies upon their signifying on African-American musical, theatrical, historical, and literary intertexts. As a result, blues offer a productive option to black Canadian theatre artists who desire to “recognize and utilize a homegrown africanadian aesthetics” in their work (mandiela 70). Black Canadians who write blues plays AfriCanadianize, or otherwise hybridize, American blues to speak to the particularities of black Canadian experience, which always shares a border with and a consciousness of black America and partakes of the broader diasporic poly-consciousness that characterizes AfriCanadiana, in theatre as in other forms. I’ll examine the particular ways blues are employed in George Boyd’s *Gideon’s Blues* (first produced 1990), George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls: The Play* (1997), Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), and Andrew Moodie’s *The Lady Smith* (2000).

Except for *Harlem Duet* these plays are all set in Canada. But the blues experience cuts across borders. In accounting for the appeal of the great American blues queens of the 1920s, Daphne Duval Harrison writes,

the blues are a means of articulating experience and demonstrating a toughness of spirit by creating and re-creating that experience. Two qualities highly valued in the black community, articulateness and toughness, are thus brought together in this art form. (65)

The black community in that statement could as easily be Clarke’s 1930s Whylah Falls, Nova Scotia; Boyd’s 1980s Halifax; Sears’s expatriate black Canadians in Harlem; or Moodie’s contemporary Toronto. Articulate and tough in the face of painful experience, the characters in all these plays ask versions of the musical question famously played and sung by Louis Armstrong in his 1929 recording of the Fats Waller/Andy Razaf tune, and reiterated in the open-

ing chapter of Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "What did I do to be so black and blue?"

Another eloquent expression of blues philosophy comes from a second great mid-century African-American novelist, Richard Wright:

The most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, although replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. (xv)

Of these four AfriCanadian plays, *Gideon's Blues* corresponds least to Wright's notion of blues redemption. Boyd's characters don't just have the blues; as in Julio Finn's definition of the authentic blues-person, they live it. The play focuses its naturalistic lens on a black family struggling to survive in Halifax. Like Borden's *Tightrope Time*, *Gideon's Blues* signifies on the paradigmatic African-American family play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, centering on the struggle between the family matriarch and her adult son for his soul and the future of the family, but without the uplift of Hansberry's stirring, optimistic ending.

Lena Younger, the matriarch of *A Raisin in the Sun*, is known as Mama. The parallel character in *Gideon's Blues*, Momma-Lou Steele, embodies in her last name that toughness of spirit articulated by the blues. In both plays the mother holds the family purse-strings because her late husband left her some money. Three generations of Youngers, including Mama's adult son Walter Lee, his wife and child, live crammed together in a Chicago tenement apartment. Momma-Lou's adult son, Gideon, and his wife and children also live with her in what is apparently an inner-city Halifax house because they can't afford their own place. The women in both plays dream of living in what Gideon's wife Cherlene calls "a real house" in "them high-falutin' suburbs," with Momma-Lou sharing Mama Younger's vision of a "garden in the back" (*Gideon's* 17, 19). College-educated Gideon, who has to work as a janitor to support his young family, is just as ambitious as Walter Lee Younger, who works as a chauffeur. Walter Lee wants to open his own business, a liquor store; Gideon aspires to be a loans officer in a bank.

The similarities are significant, the differences telling. The Steeles have some definite advantages over the Youngers. They already live in a house of two stories, as the opening set description in the published script indicates (9). Maybe it doesn't seem like "a

real house” to Cherlene because it has no yard, or because it belongs to Momma-Lou and not to Cherlene and Gideon, or because it suffers from their poverty. The set description tells us that “[t]he furniture sags under oppression and depravity” (9), echoing the opening stage directions of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which describe the “weariness” of the furniture and carpeting in the Youngers’ living room (Hansberry 3). But at least the Steeles’s children don’t have to sleep on the couch or share a bathroom with other tenants down the hall like the Youngers do. In fact when Cherlene thinks about a new house, she imagines “my own dishwasher. My own washer and dryer” (*Gideon’s* 19). The Steeles’s upward and outward mobility seems already far beyond the point from which the Youngers must start. Rather than having to escape a 1950s Chicago ghetto only to become embroiled in the potentially violent racial politics of the segregated white Chicago suburbs, they aspire to move within kinder, gentler, integrated 1980s Nova Scotia. Owning your own liquor store is a ghetto version of the American dream. Working in a bank—well, what could be more white-collar, middle-class, genteel Canadian?

But Gideon won’t get the bank job. “How many niggers you see as loans managers in Nova Scotia?” (20), he asks bitterly. Halifax may not be Chicago, but as Momma-Lou observes later, “This is one nigger-hatin’ town! Poppy [her late husband] always use to say that, and he from Alabama!” (78). Even from the perspective of the American South the razing of the Halifax community of Africville in 1965 and the forcible removal of its black inhabitants—a story Boyd would tell in a subsequent play, *Consecrated Ground*—had been brutally racist. The people of Africville in that play are moved to “the projects” on Gottingen Street where they rent houses from the city (*Consecrated* 19, 45). Maybe that’s where the Steeles are living, the houses now badly run down, the streets crime-ridden. The Steeles’s comparative advantages over the Youngers, foregrounded by Boyd’s citations of Hansberry, paradoxically underline how few real differences exist across thirty years and a national border. Nova Scotia may not be Alabama, but underpinning *Gideon’s* blues is a Canadian racism as deeply rooted and insidious as the more familiar American brand experienced by the blues people of Chicago or the deep South.

When Gideon suffers the indignity of losing even his janitor’s job because he responds angrily to a racist remark while mopping a washroom floor, he turns to his brother-in-law Seve, a small-time drug-dealer and pimp. Seve works for a shady white man named Grebanier who sets up Gideon as a drug-runner. For a while

Gideon prospers but he clearly loses his soul. In the list of characters—in what might be taken as another classical American reference—Grebanier is described as “the godfather” (*Gideon’s* 9). But Momma-Lou calls him “the Shango” (76). The Yoruba god of thunder, Shango is associated with power and violence. To Momma-Lou, Grebanier the Shango is “almighty evil” (110), “a agitatin’ devil” (133). In *A Raisin in the Sun* Walter Lee’s sister Beneatha has an African friend, Joseph Asagai, who introduces himself as “a Yoruba” (Hansberry 51). One of the play’s most positive figures, Asagai represents postcolonial African strength and pride, vividly represented by his own dignified presence. His Africanizing influence on Beneatha also inspires the play’s most theatrically dynamic scene: Walter Lee’s drunken, semi-parodic, but intensely powerful African warrior dance atop the living room table, where “*He sees... that he is a leader of his people, a great chief... and that the hour to march has come*” (69)—an awareness and transformation that, in effect, occur by the end of the play. Boyd signifies on Hansberry’s notion of Yoruba power, a catalyst for progressive change in *Raisin*, to show how even it has been appropriated by white devils in contemporary Halifax and utilized as an instrument of violent (self-) destruction.²

Ironically unaware of Gideon’s involvement in the local drug trade, Chernelne is leading a crusade to drive crack dealers out of the neighbourhood, a crusade to which the city’s white power structure pays only lip-service because, as Momma-Lou recognizes, “the white man... don’t care that niggers is down here poisonin’ one another” (*Gideon’s* 77). It becomes clear that Gideon is not just destroying himself and his family but conspiring in the destruction of his community. By the end, too far gone to be redeemed, Gideon has to be eliminated. His killing takes place amid Halifax’s Mardi Gras celebrations, another expression of the play’s diasporic cultural consciousness, where a masked Momma-Lou confronts him. She admonishes Gideon just before she shoots him, referring indirectly to the marches of the American civil rights era, the historical context within which *A Raisin in the Sun* unfolds: “they may wanna hit ya with clubs... spray with hoses... sick (sic) rabid dogs on ya... but ya walk. **YA WALK WITH YER HEAD HELD HIGH!!** You don’t stoop so... so low...” (141). She echoes Mama Younger’s challenge to Walter when he reveals that he’s planning to sell their newly purchased suburban house back to the white man, planning to “get down on my black knees” before him (Hansberry 134), followed by his heroic change of heart and the family’s move as their “hour to march” has come. Again, by

appropriating American historical and theatrical intertexts, the AfriCanadian blues play underlines the brutal realities faced by a black Canadian family.

Gideon's awful story, told in flashback by the grieving mother who has had to kill him herself, epitomizes Ellison's description of the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain" (78). The stage directions even refer to Momma-Lou's bedroom, from which she narrates the play, as "*the blues*" (9, 11). She dances with Gideon and Chelene to B.B. King, "stomping the blues" in Albert Murray's paradoxical phrase, using blues music itself "to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being" (Murray 17). Gideon equips his car, a gift to him from Grebanier, with old blues tapes, causing Seve to ask Gideon sarcastically, "'Goin' down to the crossroads?'" (114), evoking perhaps the most famous of Southern American blues sites—the place where you trade your soul to the devil.

Drawing on a history of racist prejudice, manipulation, and neglect, *Gideon's Blues* dramatizes the reasons why a black Canadian man with middle-class aspirations would make such a trade. Citing, rewriting, and signifying on *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Gideon's Blues* offers Boyd's expression of AfriCanadian life as an ironic cross-border blues mirror of the African-American experience. For all its apparent privilege and distinction, life in 1980s black Canada proves at least as harsh and challenging, in its own ways, as life in the urban American ghetto of the 1950s.

Clarke's Whydah Falls is a different kind of place—and play—created out of the entanglement of African-American and AfriCanadian realities. A rural Nova Scotian blues community founded as a black Loyalist settlement in 1783, "Whydah Falls be a snowy, northern Mississippi," a character explains, "with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs, and wild roses" (13). Musically introduced by "*the melody of 'The Nova Scotia Song,' performed as a kind of Southern-fried blues*" (13), the play proceeds as a tragicomic funhouse mirror image of the steamy, blues-drenched 1930s South of Robert Johnson or Zora Neale Hurston, exploring the essential blues themes of love and death and racial injustice through the dreamlike prism of Clarke's ripe poetic dialogue within the black Maritime culture he calls Africadia.

Like *Gideon's Blues*, *Whydah Falls: The Play* retrospectively recounts the unhappy death of a young black man. The narrator here is Pablo, an African-American poet from New Orleans who meets the young Acadian poet X (Xavier) in Paris, then follows

him home to Whydah Falls where they get involved with the Clemence family. They court the three daughters, X hooking up with Shelley, then Selah, while Pablo and Amarantha become lovers. In a subplot resembling an African-American badman blues ballad like “Stagolee,” the girls’ brother Othello is killed by a strangely warped Iago named S. Scratch Seville who is driven by sexual jealousy and revenge but ultimately manipulated by the play’s real villain, Jack Thomson, a white man. This time the white villain is not the godfather of crack but, in a stroke of inspired Canadiana, the local Liberal candidate for Parliament. In case we think that a joke, Clarke has Pablo provide a black Southerner’s perspective on white (Canadian) politicians, urging his friends to understand that Thomson and the Tory candidate will “both sell out black folk as quick as others hang em in Mississippi” (52). This play also has its grieving matriarch, Cora Clemence, played in the original production by Jackie Richardson, a formidable blues singer herself, who also created the role of Momma-Lou Steele. But it ends very differently from *Gideon’s Blues*. As Maureen Moynagh notes, “*Whydah Falls* evokes a blues sensibility, but it sounds a few gospel notes too” (“George” 217). A series of gospel choruses at the Whydah Falls African Baptist Church precedes the final scenes which end on notes of bittersweet blues redemption—“I understand death and life now,” says Shelley, “How Beauty honeys bitter pain” (81)—and romantic blues comedy. As spring returns to Whydah Falls, Shelley and X walk “*hand-in-hand, into light*” (82), and Pablo and Amarantha live happily into old age, the Cajun and the Acadian “stewing a blues callaloo” (48).

One trope in which Clarke delights is the scene of pragmatic woman-to-woman advice on how to get, keep, and treat your man, the kind featured in classic African-American blues songs of the era like Ma Rainey’s “Trust No Man” and Bessie Smith’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Cora tells daughter Shelley,

Just sit back, relax, and be black. I’m gonna learn you bout the mens... Shelley, you gotta lie to get a good man. And after you gets him, you gotta be set to hurt him to hold him... Cos if you don’t or won’t or can’t, you’re gonna be stepped on, pushed round, walked out on, beat up on, cheated on, worked like a black fool, and cast out your own house. (37-38)

Angela Davis describes how a Bessie Smith song of this kind speaks to an “imagined women’s community [. . .] that refuses to place women in sexual and economic subordination to men,” and

she envisions “the enthusiastic responses that came from Smith’s female audiences” (Davis 59). I envision Clarke’s scene speaking to a contemporary Canadian theatre audience in much the same way; I imagine that audience, especially the black women in it, responding similarly. The same kind of audience response is set up in Sears’s *Harlem Duet* when one black woman advises another that if she wants to keep a man, she should margarine his backside (*Harlem* 28). These gendered blues moments speak in a black North American vernacular that transcends specific time and place.

Clarke constructs a poetic courtship between Selah and X very much in the manner of Langston Hughes’s groundbreaking 1920s blues poetry. Selah sings,

My bones are guitar strings
And blues the chords you strum.
My bones are slender flutes
And blues the bars you hum.
You wanna stay my man,
Serve me whisky when I come. (*Whylah* 42)

Sexual love and its cognates—jealousy, possessiveness, betrayal—have traditionally been the great blues theme. Davis postulates that this came about as blues music first developed in the post-slavery era:

For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black men and women were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered. Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. (4)

The blues emerged, in this reading, as an African-North American articulation of sexual freedom, its perils and complications.

Slavery may be a more distant memory for blacks in Canada than in the American South, but there are enough similarities in their lived experience for Clarke to describe *Whylah Falls* circa 1930 as a snowy, northern Mississippi and to suggest that Africadians, too, are blood-spattered blues people. At the same time Clarke insists on their distinctiveness. When Pablo first meets X, he immediately places him culturally and geographically: “you talk like a Nova Scotian: blunt and foul, all piss and saltwater”

(*Whylah* 15). Later in the play he refers to X as “this Mi’kmaq-Mandingo” (41). Specific local references abound, from the Sixhiboux (Sissiboo) River to Windsor Plains (Clarke’s own birthplace) and Joseph Howe. Nova Scotia’s “injustice system,” as Pablo calls it (82), is as effective as any Southern court would have been in ensuring that Othello’s murder goes unpunished. But when Shelley sarcastically refers to the presiding magistrate as “*Mr. Justice Pious Cutthroat*” (68), she uses recognizably Canadian nomenclature. Black Southern American histories of violence and injustice, like black American blues, provide resonant intertexts that underline the similarities and help mark the differences in the AfriCanadian blues experience.

Clarke adds a further dimension of diasporic aesthetics by filtering the play through the narrative consciousness of Pablo, an African American from culturally hybrid New Orleans who has lived in Cuba and Paris before coming to Canada, then travels to Sierra Leone before coming back. Pablo is a black citizen of the world. His cosmopolitan perspective is reflected in the play’s hybrid blues musical themes, which include a “1930s *fast blues, mixed in with a hint of Parisian accordion*” (14) and a combination of “*flamenco, blues, and Spanish guitar*” (18). The Othello references add yet other literary, historical, and diasporic elements to the mix, ones that Djanet Sears more fully utilizes.

Sears and Moodie both focus their plays on the blues themes of sexual jealousy, betrayal, and revenge. Moodie’s *The Lady Smith* traces a sexual triangle among sophisticated black urbanites in contemporary Toronto. When middle-aged Sylvia discovers that her husband, Jordan, is having an affair with Holly, a younger woman, she moves into the apartment Holly shares with Cindy. Sylvia at first has no clear agenda but is gradually driven to attempt murder. In Sears’s *Harlem Duet* American professor Othello leaves his expatriate Canadian grad student wife Billie for a white woman, and Billie plots his death by poisoned handkerchief. The setting is their apartment at the crossroads of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards in the great black matrix that is Harlem.

In both plays, sexual tensions, pain and anger, and the betrayal of a woman scorned elicit a blues response from the playwright. Sears calls *Harlem Duet* “a rhapsodic blues tragedy” (“nOTES” 14) and introduces each scene with a creolized musical prologue like Clarke’s in *Whylah Falls*, melding various styles of blues with the European sounds of a double bass and cello, and the African-American political voices of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Louis Farrakhan, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey and others.

Moodie makes Sylvia herself a blues singer who tells the audience what is needed to sing the blues:

You got to plant your feet
You got to dig down deep
You got to plunge yourself into that
Special well of pain. (Moodie 11)

And she describes her own revelatory discovery of Victoria Spivey and other classic African-American blues singers—“Sippie Wallace, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Mary Johnson, Margaret Johnson, Mamie Smith and more”—who “tore open their souls, cannibalized the pain in their lives” (50). We get this information at the opening of the second act in a voiceover during which Sylvia pursues a rat around the apartment she shares with the other two women at Bathurst and Bloor (certainly not as iconic as the Harlem intersection, but a Toronto landmark), eventually cornering it and smashing it to death with a shovel. This is a direct visual quotation of the opening scene of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in which Bigger Thomas chases, corners, and kills with a skillet a huge black rat in the one-room Chicago tenement apartment which is home to his family of four. Sylvia herself sings “Crazy Blues,” famous for being the first blues ever recorded by a black singer (Mamie Smith in 1920). Her man’s betrayal—shortly after Sylvia has been diagnosed with breast cancer, to add insult to injury—has made her crazy enough to think about murdering Holly (the rat!), just as Othello’s betrayal makes Billie crazy enough to think of murdering him. But unlike Bigger, neither woman becomes a killer. Both plays end with the kind of tentative irresolution more typical of blues song and blues literature than either the stark, dark conclusion of *Gideon’s Blues* or the relatively unqualified happy ending of *Whylah Falls*.

The Lady Smith ends with Sylvia quietly confronting Holly, who finally realizes that this is the wife her lover man is cheating on. The diasporic elements in the play help shape the audience’s feelings towards the central characters. Holly is a multimedia artist who, we’re made to feel, cannibalizes black and feminist cultural traditions to serve her own selfish ends, just as she hypocritically steals another black woman’s man. The ceremonial knife with which Sylvia is about to kill Holly just before she relents at the end is Holly’s reproduction of a Senegalese instrument used for female circumcision. Holly herself indicates that her artistic integrity is on par with her feminist solidarity, confessing that for \$50,000 she

sold most of her artwork to an American TV movie production for set decoration, to be burned up in a staged fire.

Jordan, the cheating husband, also has American connections which similarly help to brand him. He emigrated to “beautiful downtown Hamilton” as a child with his American expatriate parents: black radicals, he explains sarcastically, who “settled in this here part of the world as a protest of America’s oppressive, capitalistic involvement in the suppression of the people’s revolution in Vietnam” (40). Just as bourgeois Jordan has betrayed his parents’ political idealism (Cindy describes him as “one of these jerks who has amassed a certain amount of material wealth in the new economy” [35]), so he betrays his relationship with Sylvia, whom he met, he tells Holly in the same scene, on the “Trans Canada Railroad” (41). It’s hard not to hear in this reference an allusion to the Underground Railroad, which serves here, as well as in *Harlem Duet*, as an important element of black communal memory, a reminder of the solidarity and mutual sacrifice underlying black life in North America: the same principles which the bruised wives accuse their cheating husbands of undermining.

The primary tune on *The Lady Smith* soundtrack is Sylvia’s recording of “Crazy Blues.” In the song

an abandoned woman bemoans her (black) lover’s disappearance, bewails the fact that ‘he don’t treat me right,’ affirms the immutability of her love, contemplates and rejects suicide, and describes the physical manifestations (restlessness, loss of appetite) of the ‘crazy blues’ that possess her. (Gussow 183)

Along with its status as the first blues recording by a black singer, what makes “Crazy Blues” remarkable, blues scholar Adam Gussow argues, is a lyric in the final verse: “I’m gonna do like a Chinaman, go and get some hop / Get myself a gun and shoot myself a cop” (194). Gussow reads these lines as a violent black-on-white revenge fantasy, black songwriter Perry Bradford’s response to the terrible incidence of lynchings in the immediate post-Great War period by a so-called “crazy nigger,” defined this way by Gussow: “in the Jim Crow South [...] an African American willing to use violence against whites in defense of his person, family, and dignity, and in the face of deadly white reprisal that supposedly made such self-defense suicidal” (169).

Although this is an uncommon interpretation of the song, and a contemporary Canadian audience is unlikely to intuit its specific historical subtext, Gussow’s reading suggests the way the blues

accompaniment reinforces the high stakes of the final scene—and Moodie does include a note instructing that *the full version* should play over the scene (9). Even without that subtext, the song in which a tough, articulate female finds resilience by plunging into her own pain is the kind of woman's blues that often serves as "a purgative, or aesthetic therapy" (Harrison 101). Singing a blues in which she considers both suicide and murder helps Sylvia get through the situation without killing Holly, Jordan, a cop, or herself.

Sears's Billie, or rather the manifestation of her character called SHE, has a somewhat similar blues moment. Four scenes in *Harlem Duet* take place in a 1928 Harlem theatre dressing room where Billie is SHE visiting HE, Othello as a blackface minstrel performer who wants to be a Shakespearean actor. These scenes act as prologue, complement, and counterpoint to the contemporary action in Harlem and to sequences from the 1860s in which Billie and Othello are HER and HIM, slaves on a Southern plantation. In the second of the 1928 scenes, "*SHE holds a straight-edged razor in her bloodied palms. HE lies on the floor in front of her, motionless, the handkerchief in his hand*" (72). Barely suppressing hysteria, SHE delivers a largely unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness monologue which builds almost to a scream. But instead of screaming, SHE tells herself to sing: "please scream no sing sing (*SHE tries to sing.*) and if I get a notion to jump into the ocean, ain't nobody's business if I do do do do If I go to church on Sunday then shimmy down on Monday t'ain't nobody's business if I..." (72). These are lines from the well known blues "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do." The monologue and lyrics end abruptly there.

The scene then shifts to Billie's Harlem apartment in the present where Othello, packing his things to complete his split with Billie, delivers a monologue to her about how his "culture is Wordsworth, Shaw, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Dirty Harry*," and how he is "[s]piritually beyond this race shit bullshit now" (73). This continues the scene just before the apparent murder. After Othello has announced to Billie that he and his white girlfriend Mona have decided to marry, he ends that scene explaining how Billie's black feminism emasculates him and why he prefers sex and relationships with white women. The blues song occupies a strategic position between Othello's two key arguments about what Ric Knowles identifies as "the play's central concern: the intersection of race and gender" (383). It expresses Billie's response, a complex representation of her character and her own sexual and racial politics. SHE's

slitting HE's throat with a razor is of course another response, an expression of what Billie might be thinking during Othello's speeches (i.e., "I'd like to cut the bastard's throat"). We'll meet SHE and HE again later in the play, throwing further doubt on the reality of a murder scene already metatheatrically compromised by the fact that it takes place in a theatre dressing room, the apparent victim an actor in costume and make-up.

"Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do" is a blues articulation of female agency and autonomy identified with two extraordinary black women: Bessie Smith, who had the first hit with it in 1923, and Billie Holiday, whose 1949 recording became one of her signature tunes. In fact, "listeners familiar with Billie's well-publicized troubles considered it her anthem" (Lasker 30). Sears's Billie, whose name invites us to associate her with Lady Day, shares some of Holiday's self-destructive bent as well as her blues tenacity. Sears's Billie doesn't kill herself with heroin but does have a breakdown—she chooses, in her own way, to "jump into the ocean." She also refuses to back down in the face of Othello's attack on black women's assertiveness, singing the lyric from the Bessie Smith recording of the song (it contains the repeated "do do do do" absent from Holiday's version), which blues critic Robert Santelli says "sounds like an anthem for the women's movement" (35). She asserts identification and solidarity with a tradition of strong, independent black women blues singers, women who don't apologize for being black and strong—and blue.

Here, and in the musical prologues to every scene where Sears creates a hybrid sound by having a "*cello and bass call and respond to a [...] blues*" (21), blues is only one of a wide range of musical colours on her palette. Billie and Othello's own record collection leans towards jazz artists: Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach (49). In a flashback to seven years earlier, Billie romantically embraces the idea of a Harlem of "Black streets teeming with loud Black people listening to loud Jazz and reggae and Aretha" (106). This reflects Sears's own eclectic musical tastes which she fully illustrates in her earlier autobiographical play, *Afrika Solo*. There, she also reveals how important American pop culture generally, especially TV, had been to her growing up: *Star Trek*, *Twilight Zone*, *Batman*, even the racist, colonialist fantasies of *Tarzan* (*Afrika* 22-30). In that context Othello's declaration of his own cultural hybridity with reference to *Dirty Harry* and *Leave It to Beaver* seems to be underwritten with a certain amount of Sears's sympathy. Nor has Sears ever shied away from acknowledging and appreciating African-American culture, though she has become the public face of African-

Canadian theatre as an anthologist of African-Canadian plays and producer of AfriCanadian theatre festivals. The writers she cites as her key influences in the introduction to *Harlem Duet* are all African American: Ntozake Shange, Lorraine Hansberry (“my mother—in the theatre... I stand on her shoulders”), the Black Arts writers of the 1960s, Langston Hughes (“nOTES” 12-15). “I use [the terms] Black and African American interchangeably,” she declared in a 1998 interview (Sears and Smith 29).

Harlem Duet, then, is not so much the work of a black Canadian playwright signifying on her African-American sources as it is that of a black diasporic consciousness embracing those sources along with others to tell a story about race and gender that transcends historical particularities (through the *Othello* allusions, the historically varied voiceovers that introduce each scene, the 1860s and 1928 sub-plots), but at the same time is rooted in them. Peter Dickinson persuasively argues that Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is one of the play’s key intertexts, providing a critique of colonial psychology and racial pathology that reaches beyond contemporary Harlem to speak to and of the larger black diaspora. The geographically specific Harlem in which the play takes place is also “an international city. It is not ‘the United States’; rather it is where the African diaspora gathers” (Sanders 559).

Leslie Sanders points out that “Billie’s Canadianness [...] also brings the diaspora to Harlem” (559). A counterpoint to the mass of American references in the play, the theme or motif of Canada is first introduced in the initial scene between slaves Him and Her in 1860. They plan to escape to Canada, which represents not just the dream of freedom but something like the romantic ideal of family and prosperity sought by the Youngers and the Steeles: a place where they can have “a heap of children [...] and a big white house [...] on an emerald hill” (35). The notion of Canada as safe haven from American racial injustice is reiterated in the present day by Billie’s sister-in-law Amah—“I love that Nova Scotia was a haven for slaves way before the underground railroad” (45)—and by Billie’s father: “What’s that them old slaves used to say? ‘I can’t take it no more, I moving to Nova Scotia’” (83). He brings Canada into the play in a literal way, bearing its name.

If Canada the man stands for Canada the place, his reality initially serves to undercut some of that idealization. He has been an alcoholic and not a very good father. But “the drunk of Dartmouth” (45) has now been on the wagon for five years and wants to try to heal his estrangement from Billie. Although things fail to work out between the Canadian woman and her American

husband, the prospects for an AfriCanadian daughter-father reconciliation look better. At the end of the play, with Billie in the psychiatric ward slowly recovering from her mental breakdown after Othello has left for good, Billie asks Amah to send a message to her niece, Jenny: “Tell her that you saw me dancing [...] Tell her that you heard me singing” (116). As if on cue, Canada enters. The singing and dancing references echo an earlier speech by Canada to Billie, recalling their family’s Sunday dinners back before Billie’s mother died and things fell apart: “And after I’d pluck the guitar... And she’d start to sing... And you’d dance... You remember? You’d dance. You’d stomp on that floor like you were beating out some secret code to God or something...” (97). There again is Albert Murray’s metaphor of stomping the blues—with Canada the bluesman on guitar. In the play’s final moments Canada vows not to go back to Nova Scotia just yet but to stick it out with Billie. And as the lights come down on them they sing, together again, a duet of Aretha Franklin’s “Spanish Harlem,” another song about resilience, about a rose that grows up through the cracks of the concrete sidewalks in the urban ghetto. It’s not a blues but it is classic African-American music: originally recorded in 1961 by the sublime Ben E. King, covered by Aretha, the iconic queen of soul, who had a number one R&B hit with it in 1971, and written by master songwriters Jerry Leiber and Phil Spector—a couple of white guys.

AfriCanadian playwrights continue to write blues plays, finding in this profound, dark, and joyful American music, and in the deep cultural matrix of feeling, experience, and heritage it expresses, a powerful theatrical tool for exploring black Canadian life. Signifying on their American source texts, calling upon their shared racial and historical experiences with black Americans, and introducing additional diasporic elements reflective of African Canada’s heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, each of these playwrights Canadianizes her or his blues to create a rich diasporic theatrical stew—an AfriCanadiAmerican blues callaloo. ❁

NOTES

- 1 Within the United States itself recently, increasing immigration from Africa and the black Caribbean along with the rapid emergence of Barack Obama as a political superstar and first black President has challenged both the “tendency in American politics to treat ‘black’ and African American as interchangeable categories [. . . and] an African American cultural politics that arrogates to itself the official

- word on racial matters” (Chude-Sokei). Obama, son of a black African father and white American mother, and raised largely outside the continental United States, has become a lightning rod for questions about African-American racial authenticity and authority.
- 2 In making his devil Yoruba, Boyd may be getting one back on Hansberry by employing what Gates calls the “In your face” Signifyin(g) retort: “that by which you intended to confine (or define) me I shall return to you squarely in your face” (66). When the Yoruba Asagai first enters in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry gets a (cheap?) laugh out of a reference to a trip he has just made to Canada. “How was Canada?” Beneatha asks him. “Canadian,” he answers, oh so sophisticatedly (Hansberry 46).

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