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 **The Diaspora's Upper Left-Hand Margin: Octopus and Callaloo**

Wayde Compton

Callaloo

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Diaspora's Upper Left-Hand Margin  
Octopus and *Callaloo***

*Wayde Compton (bio)*

I first came across *Callaloo* in 1991 at Octopus Books on Commercial Drive in Vancouver. The small bookstore closed a short time later, one of the many independents across the country that died when the Chapters-Indigo juggernaut muscled its way to the top of Canadian book retail. Octopus Books was one of those increasingly rare businesses that reflected back the neighbourhood in which it was housed. The magazine rack at the front showed you that you were in left-wing reading, and gave a hint of the cultural palimpsest that is Commercial Drive. Formerly Little Italy, the East Vancouver neighbourhood was, by the 1990s, widely multicultural. It contained a large working-class lesbian community, a student rental redoubt, and an intellectually rowdy communist and anarchist presence. Before there was a World Wide Web, reading the political graffiti or walking into a place like Octopus Books and browsing that magazine rack was how one could get a sense of the greater cultural networks that flowed into and through the polis of Vancouver. This city has always been isolated, bounded on all sides by the Pacific, the Rockies, the U.S. border, and the vast north, each in their own way difficult to traverse. The sense of being out on the edge and away from any centre is real here, and is especially alienating if one is part of a racialized Diaspora. So the day that I picked up *Callaloo* from that magazine rack and realized I was holding in my hands the first black literary journal I had ever seen, it was like a small lifeline to that greater black world had been thrown towards me. As the graffiti outside on that street used to say, Commercial Drive was a "liberated zone."

I was then a nineteen-year-old undergrad at Simon Fraser University, burning through my breadth requirements and trying to figure out if it was possible to fit together black activism with a degree in literature. I'd entered university—the first Compton in my line to do so—with the intention of studying English, but was in despair at the department's paleo-canoncity. Making students start with Beowulf and Chaucer, glacially edging their way towards the current century course-by-course may be chronologically intuitive, but it has always seemed ass-backwards to me. I've always thought the departmental trajectory should start

contemporary and work back. For there I was, knee-deep in Dryden and Pope, but reading Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton on the weekends, and trying to put the square peg of one into the round hole of the other. I soon began considering a defection to History. English seemed, in that early introduction, to be perennially white.

Looking back now, I understand that I was pulling double duty during those years, as most blacks growing up in Vancouver must do. I was self-educating, teaching myself how to be black in the absence of basic ethnic networks. Vancouver's 18,000 blacks have no community centre, archive, or discernable neighbourhood, so growing up with African **[End Page 793]** ancestry in this city necessitates a kind of cultural autodidacticism. Family is one thing, but what happens when there are no models for fitting black culture and identity into public institutional spaces? One has to sift through the signs heuristically for what is useful and what is not. One has to find a way to make it *up* to make it at all.

*Callaloo* was one of those signposts, spotted at the right moment, that showed me that there was indeed a place for blackness in the world of letters. (There were others along the way, most significantly the academic inquiry of the poet and critic Roy Miki, who pioneered courses on writing and race at SFU in the early 1990s.) Knowing that such a journal existed out there, alongside others like it, was an explosion in my young consciousness, and sparked the inevitable question: "Can it happen here?"

Using American models in Canada is always a tricky business, given the pseudo-colonial relationship we have with the Yankee leviathan...

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## THE DIASPORA'S UPPER LEFT-HAND MARGIN *Octopus and Callaloo*

by Wayde Compton

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The octopus: Europe in the grip of organised crime, the wave is legitimate.  
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