

**BLAC  
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ATTERS**



AFUA COOPER  
WILFRIED RAUSSERT





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Wilfried Raussert

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— A.C.

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— W.R.

1. [https://uni-bielefeld.de/cias/entangled\\_americas](https://uni-bielefeld.de/cias/entangled_americas)  
2. <https://uni-bielefeld.de/cias/blackamericas>

This book is a dialogue between image and text. Wilfried Raussert is the photographer, Afua Cooper is the poet.

Resulting from numerous walks in cities of the Americas and Europe, the images capture the ubiquity of Black cultures and people. The African continent is powerfully present everywhere. While the images speak to the presence of Black people in contemporary societies, they often engage past historical and mythological epochs. The past and present come together. Photographs, paintings, and murals express Black beauty and Black power in public space and everyday life — and the political importance of that presence. Beyond that, the images want to inspire poetic and narrative responses. The poems are inspired by the images, responding to them directly and indirectly. They give voice to Black beauty, power, and resistance in words and sound. At the same time, they inhabit a world of their own beyond and outside the images.

The collaboration between Wilfried Raussert and Afua Cooper was joyful and fruitful. It began in 2017 when the photographer shared his photos with the poet. Her response to them was to first engage in a deep reflection: observation and meditation. What is the photographer

trying to say? What is the subject within the frame thinking? What myths, legends, histories, secrets, and tales are the images trying to express? What are they hiding?

“Father and Son,” while a contemporary photograph, calls on the poet’s historical memory to write “John Ware: Magician Cowboy” in honour of the legendary Albertan cowboy, John Ware. In the photo, a man strides confidently, holding his son in his arms. Both father and son are framed by shamanistic mementos (for example, the four directions) and by the symbol of cattle. As Ware was both a talented cowboy and a loving father, the poet asks, might this be a modern-day John Ware? The photo inspired the poem discussing Ware’s early life as a slave, his flight to the West after the Civil War, his life in Canada, and his career as a cowboy and horseman. But who were his parents? From where did they come? The poet’s imagination then took flight and travelled with Ware to ancient kingdoms in what are now Ghana and Nigeria.

The photo “Diversity, Toronto” is a collage of people of diverse “races” and genders. A Black man takes centre stage as he strides above the collage, in which there is no representation of Blackness. The image narrates a moment of Black empowerment and takes the poet into the

past, as she meditates on what “diversity” meant in Toronto two hundred years ago. She encounters enslaved Black woman Peggy Pompadour, her husband, and her three children. The poem “Fugitive” tells the story of Peggy, who was owned by Upper Canadian elites Elizabeth and Peter Russell. Peggy’s attempts to free herself and her children – Jupiter, Amy, and Milly – from bondage and reside as a Maroon on the outskirts of Toronto could be thought of as a practice of fugitivity, a condition that marks Black life in all locales, from slavery into present time. The diversity of twenty-first-century Toronto must be read against the bodies of its early inhabitants like Peggy Pompadour and her enslaved children.

The poem “Cimarron” also invokes the theme of marronage. A Black Mexican sells jewellery and other items on the streets of Granada, Spain, as he dodges Spanish immigration officials who track down illegal immigrants, migrants, gypsies, and other persons deemed undesirable. This cimarron invokes Yanga, the African Maroon who led an anti-slavery and anti-colonial war in seventeenth-century Mexico against Spanish slaveowners and colonizers. Fugitivity thus links the Black experience across time, space, and linguistic and colonial frontiers. The image chosen for this poem, “Black Americas,” points to the ubiquity of the Maroon experience in the Americas.

Similar themes of slavery, flight, resistance, and resilience are also articulated in “Jupiter Wise.” Jupiter, a slave from Prince Edward Island, ended up in court in 1786 for assault, and larceny. The poet imagines Jupiter not only as a runaway but also a jinn, the ultimate shapeshifter. To survive, Jupiter must become a jinn, must make himself invisible at times. Survival also depended on his wearing a mask – a white mask, to cover his Black face. Frantz Fanon, two hundred years later, would know Jupiter Wise as kinfolk. The Dali-esque image “Invitation to Dance,” of a figure wearing a white mask and playing a guitar, was ideal; the historical Jupiter Wise not only wore a mask for survival but also held a going away party with music, before he and his comrades fled from slavery. Both “Jupiter Wise” and “Fugitive” show that the enslavement of Africans was part and parcel of life in colonial Canada.

The book moves from historical resilience to contemporary joy. Walking through the streets of Bielefeld, a small German town in Westphalia, the photographer, the poet, and the poet’s daughter Lami found Nina Simone on a side street. What a treat! The result, a photo of Lami conversing with the goddess: “Lami and Nina Simone.” One woman, a world icon, and the other, coming into the bloom of her womanhood. The poet imagined she heard Nina’s voice wailing “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” during the conversation.



However, when it came time to put text to the photograph, it was not a Westphalian landscape that rose in the poet's mind, but the landscape and seascape of the island of Martinique. In "Lami and Nina," it is in Martinique that the dialectics of the mother-daughter, parent-child bond hit the poet with full force: they are bound together through blood and love forever but are independent of each other at the same time.

In the photo "Women, Metro Station, Lisboa," the photographer captures the aesthetics and pizzazz of the two women waiting for a train in a Lisbon subway station. While the photograph has a playful quality, it also has an unstated shadow side. Portugal was the first European country to initiate the Atlantic Slave Trade from Africa, and the last country to end colonial rule on the continent. Africans in Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique fought centuries-old colonial wars against Portugal for their independence. The poem "Queen of Cool" pays homage to the strength, beauty, and sovereignty of African women from antiquity to the present, throughout Africa and its diasporas. Similarly, "Street Musician, Lisboa" is framed by the image of celebrated athlete Mo Farah. The poem it inspired, "Congo Songs: By the Rivers of Babylon, Part Two," is a meditation on diaspora, exile, and loss — but also of triumph, hope, and survival.

In addition to the photographs inspiring the poems, poetry also begat poetry. Sometimes, verses of poems, songs, snatches of phrases, would burst from the poet's subconscious, unconnected to a particular image or photo from the photographer's collection. "A World Greener than Eden" surfaced as she reflected on manhood, work, food, children, slavery, flowers, travel, and love. Appreciating her father's and grandfathers' roles as horticulturalists and providers for their families gave birth to that particular poem. After reading it, the photographer provided "Urban Fields." Though the poet's father planted rural fields, writing the poem from her high-rise building in a very urban setting gave resonance to the photograph. Then, the poet wrote "Uncles," a tribute to all uncles, brothers, sons, dads who must travel far and wide as migrant labourers to work in agro-industries to enrich corporations, but also to reproduce the material lives of their own families. The photographer provided the image "Hoy Aqui — The Suitcase" for "Uncles." It was perfect; uncles must travel to work.

Furthering the theme of love, "Bad Bwoy Jimi" was inspired by the poet's abiding admiration for the guitar and music legend<sup>1</sup> Jimi Hendrix — his music his style, his sheer talent, his vision, his power, and his creative imagination. Knowledge of Jimi's childhood visits to his grandparents in Vancouver contributed vastly to the

creation of the poem. The narrator informs Jimi that “ah yuh a fimi” (you are mine) and calls upon legends, history, myths, and Jimi’s own grandparents to convince him of her love. The poet uses a form and structure that she hopes captures some aspects of the style of Jimi’s music — a kind of rhythm-and-blues rock, driven by up-tempo beats of a riddim guitar and trap drums. The image the photographer provided, “Jimi Hendrix — Composition in Green,” shows a transcendental-looking Jimi admired by a lovestruck woman dressed in a green coat.

In “Live with You in a House by the River,” the poet invokes nature, culture, art, and music to convey her passion for her spouse. Overcome, she uses an ancient love story, that of Belqis (the Queen of Sheba) and Suleyman (King Solomon) to give her beloved an idea of her love for him. The photographer provided “Woman on Bench,” in which the subject’s face expresses the longing, desire, and love described in the poem.

Both text and images eventually coalesce around such themes as marronage, parenthood, time travel, grief, fractured ancestry, spiritualities, diasporas, love, resistance, and resilience. In this book, poems and images fuse in their desire to celebrate Blackness as public expression of human relations, aesthetics, and politics.

## MAKING BLACKNESS VISIBLE: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ART

Historical examples of Black performance and art practice in public space inspire our project to document and celebrate Black visibility through urban photography and poetry — its beauty and its power. Art in public, commissioned or trespassing, intervenes in urban development as part of consumer culture and heritage politics. However, public art and artistic practice in public also continue to thrive as expressions of contemporary social and political movements like Black Lives Matter and as agents for turning communal and public spaces into fora for coexistence, environmentalist community, dialogue, participation, and resistance. Art practice continues to break with urban convention, social norms, and spatial configurations, and it does so even more effectively in the high visibility provided by open, accessible, public spaces.

Performance and art practice in public has had a long trajectory in Black cultures from Africa and the American hemisphere. As a frequent traveller between Jamaica and the United States, Marcus Garvey embraced ideas of pan-Africanism and integrated his knowledge of Jamaican and rural traditions from the American South. Arguably, Garvey was the intellectual

figure among Black radical thinkers who most enhanced the importance of visibility in public space for the advancement of Black people. Performance in public space was crucial to his politics and aesthetics of change. In parades, public theatre performances, and variety shows in Jamaica and Harlem, Garvey unfolded his performative skills of excess and exploited the subversive potential of multiple sites of cultural production.

To reach a high visibility and audibility in the streets was also central for the politics of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s that fostered identity and community-building in public space. Standing tall in leather jackets and berets, parading in the streets — at times with guns loosely over their shoulders — the Panthers used iconic visibility in public space to establish and secure Black urban structures, including food and medical supplies for the community. From the very beginning of the Panthers, soul musicians articulated and celebrated Black Power in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Black sound and iconic Black Power images in streets, parks, and other public sites created a strong Black presence in public sites in cities like Detroit, New York, and Oakland.

The visualization of Black public protest reached a climax with the presumably first Black mural in public space in Chicago in 1967. “Wall of Respect” was an outdoor

mural done for the community by a collective of designers, photographers, and artists like the Chicago muralist William Walker. Rather than creating an historical outline of Black cultural and political achievements, the “Wall of Respect” was grouped according to the different kinds of key figures of Black cultures. Rhythm-and-blues and jazz musicians like Aretha Franklin, Billie Holiday, and Miles Davis; political activists such as Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael; literary figures such as poet Gwendolyn Brooks; public celebrities as boxer Muhammad Ali; and religious leaders such as Elijah Muhammad ranged side by side on the mural. In their different social spheres and historical times, these figures had expressed their affirmation of and pride in Black cultures. So, all figures depicted on the wall spoke in their own ways to the activism of the Black Power Movement that had spread to Chicago by 1967.

*Black Matters*, then, is a contemporary dialogue between photographer and poet to make Blackness visible as well as audible.<sup>2</sup> The book pays homage to the cultural, social, and political work that cherishes Black culture, heritage, and resilience. It gratefully reaches out to all street artists that turn public space into a communal setting in which art can be shared freely and, thus, inspire new cultural creativity. Our poems and images are perhaps less spectacular, subtler than the projects of the revolutionaries and artists above.

But like these figures, we desire to extend an awareness of Black presence in contemporary urban space. We aim to do so through revised local histories and an acknowledgement of ongoing, everyday struggles for justice, equality, and peace.

*Afua Cooper*, Halifax  
*Wilfried Raussert*, Bielefeld

1. For example, see “Love in Lotus Pose,” in Afua Cooper, *Copper Woman and Other Poems* (2006)
2. The visibility of Blackness is a subject taken up by many scholars and artists, including Charles Mills. See his *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (1998)

*BLACK*  
*MATTERS*

Excerpt

# JOHN WARE: MAGICIAN COWBOY

They tell us  
you brought the longhorn cattle  
all the way from Montana to these parts  
you rode for a thousand miles

You fled South Carolina to Texas  
after slavery ended  
Though Blacks were now free  
they still had little liberty  
White men defeated in the war  
could not abide living with emancipated Blacks  
instituted racial terror  
bloodbaths and lynchings  
In Texas you became  
a cowboy  
working cattle  
breaking horses  
wrestling steer  
answering the call of your totems: horse and cattle

Some say you were born in a saddle  
your mama gave birth to you  
while escaping slavery on a horse  
but they caught her  
They say you got the spirit  
of the horse  
from her  
the story is told that before slavery  
she was a royal horsewoman from Oyo  
Others say it was your father's father  
a cattle herder from the African savanna  
from whom you received your cow wisdom  
They say he travelled for eons with his herd  
until he came to the forest kingdom of Osei Tutu  
it was there he took the name Owaré

You speak the language of horse and cattle  
you can tame any bronco  
you calm any wild bull  
John Ware  
cowboy magician  
part of the brotherhood of Black cowboys  
who have been erased from the history of the West  
From Texas you went to Montana  
and then  
Alberta  
beckoned







Father and Son

A white man named Stimson  
wanted you to take a thousand heads of longhorns  
to Canada  
a territory called the Northwest  
still owned by the Hudson's Bay

Canada was a monarchy  
not a republic like the one you lived in  
a thousand longhorn cattle from Montana  
to Alberta

You followed the North Star

John Ware  
John Waré  
John Owaré  
son of the house of Asante  
if not for the slave trade  
silken Kente would have draped your body  
the king would have sent you on diplomatic missions  
to Oyo, Gonja, Salaga, Hausa, and Songhai  
the symbol of your authority: a cow tail dyed in ochre

With your thousand longhorns  
you crossed prairies  
scrubland  
silent with luminous sadness in your eyes  
until you reached Brooks, Alberta  
in a new territory that like Oklahoma  
was brutally taken  
from the original inhabitants  
What is the difference between a monarchy and a republic?  
you asked yourself

You hated Calgary  
and went there only when you must  
In Calgary you had to step off the sidewalk  
whenever a white person approached  
you could not darken the entrance  
of any hotel or boardinghouse  
Calgary reinforced the shame of your skin  
a badge of dishonour  
the dishonour and shame you thought  
you had left behind in South Carolina and Texas  
Only in the wide-open prairies  
did you feel truly free

A man must marry  
She came from the east  
Whitby, Ontario  
she had a sensible name — Mildred  
she lived with her parents  
in Calgary  
you visited only twice  
before you proposed marriage  
she had a good carriage  
and a quiet and sure smile

She accepted the offer  
you wed  
she went with you to your ranch in Brooks  
and lived with you among the horses and cattle  
Your children  
grew up riding horses  
and having cows and ponies for pets  
later, your two sons would fight  
in the Great War

In the early mist of the mornings  
you still dream of your mother being whipped  
half-naked  
her screams waking you up  
You hold Mildred close  
then ease out of bed  
and walk to the children's room  
Janet is lying in her crib  
dreaming peacefully

Bucking broncos

you must go to Calgary

to participate in cowboy frolic

no one can ride a bronco like you

no wild horse has ever thrown you

In Calgary you showed them

how to tame the feral horses

play with them

put cattle to sleep simply with the vibration of your voice

Your heart work helped to create the

the bacchanal that has become the Calgary stampede

yet your name is written out

The grief of losing Mildred

she died from pneumonia and typhoid

you cry with your motherless children

who knew that loss could hurt so much?

A white man comes to your door

he is rich and famous

he has a horse for you to break

The children tell you not to go

they hang on to your coat

but you owe the white man a favour

and the money is good

You have to support your motherless children

Today is your fifty-fifth birthday  
Mildred would have baked you a cake

You go

For the first time in your adult life  
a horse throws you  
Before you fall  
you hold on to its reins  
and in cruel fate  
your hold has the power  
because you are so strong, John  
to pull the horse down on you

You look into its blood-filled eyes  
feel the breath from its snorting nostrils  
his weight is an everlasting mountain  
he crushes you

You close your eyes  
and your spirit flies  
over prairie lands  
rice fields and indigo vats  
to the forest kingdom  
of Osei Tutu  
Akwaba Owaré! \*  
They say your funeral was the biggest  
Calgary has ever seen  
John Ware  
John Owaré  
John Waré  
John Ware

In Calgary  
the newspapers called you the greatest cowboy  
who ever lived  
horse breaker  
steer wrestler  
shaman

\* Akwaba is from Akan languages. It means "welcome"

# FUGITIVE

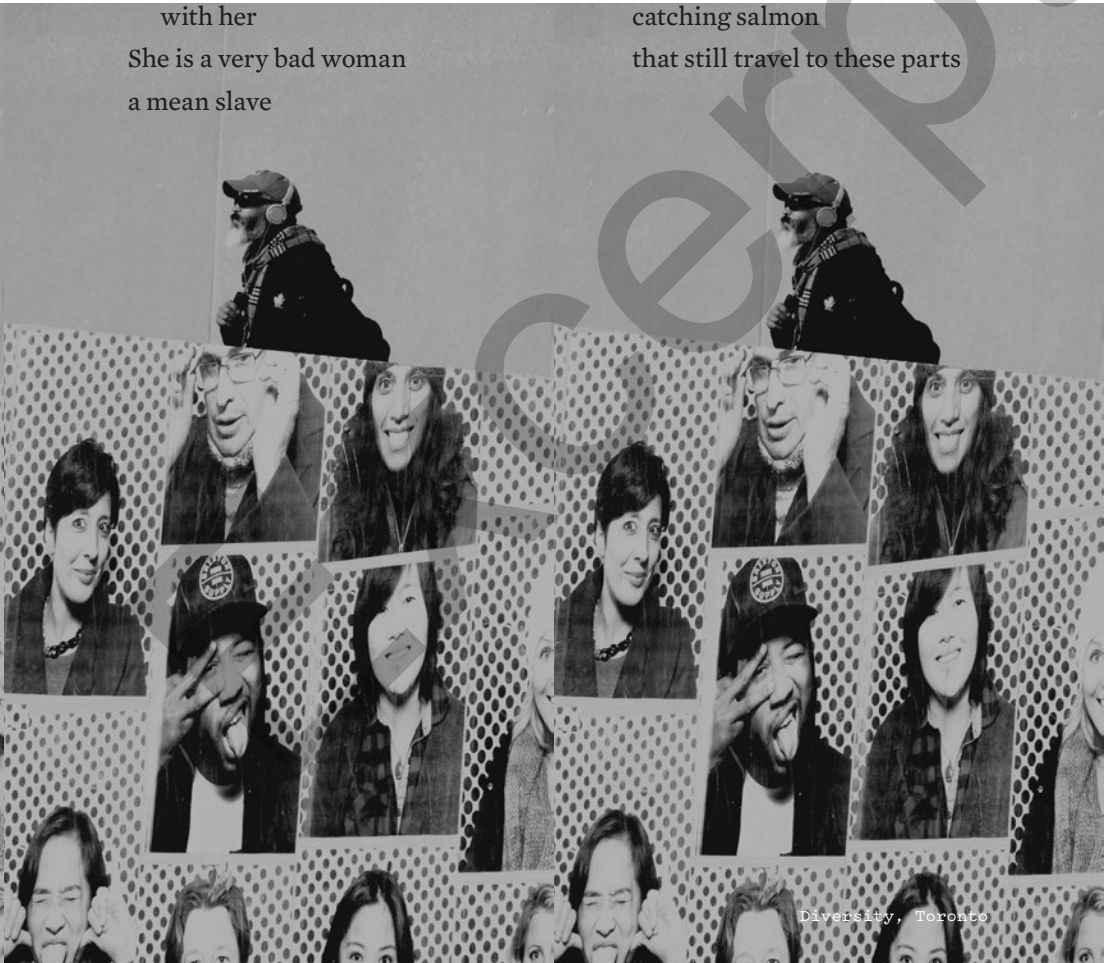
ELIZABETH RUSSELL SPEAKS OF HER  
SLAVE PEGGY POMPADOUR





Peggy is in the habit of running away  
 It would be bad enough  
 if she left by herself  
 but now she is taking her children  
     with her  
 She is a very bad woman  
 a mean slave

She goes to the outskirts of the city  
 and roams the bushes  
 eating berries  
 and wading in the Don River  
 catching salmon  
 that still travel to these parts



She has erected a hut of sorts  
 from the brambles of the elderberry tree  
 She lived there with her daughters  
 Amy and Milly for three weeks  
 until Peter sent the constables to  
 retrieve her

He returned the children to the house  
 but lodged Peggy in jail

Now he wants to sell her  
 but neither Joseph Brant  
 nor Matthew Elliot  
 wants to buy her  
 on account of her fugitive career  
 though they had promised Peter  
 they would

Because no one wants her  
 Peter has to keep her in jail  
 he resents paying the jailer's fee  
 If only this mean slave  
 would behave!

Her so-called husband Pompey  
 visits her each day  
 bringing her food, a blanket  
 and ginger tea  
 He tells me that even though it is summer  
 it is still cold in the jail

Once Pompey even snatched the children  
 from the house to visit her  
 Pompey is a free man  
 otherwise we would jail him too

Peggy's incorrigible son Jupiter  
 has followed in her fugitive steps  
 He has just run off  
 someone saw him in the vicinity of  
 the Don

around Pottery Road  
 lurking about Mr. Long's farm  
 Peter has sent the constables after him

Peter really wishes to be rid of Peggy  
I for one do not want her ever again in  
this house

I hate the very sight of her  
after she smashed the fine China  
I crossed the sea with from Ireland

Because the jailer's fee is mounting  
Peter is forced to put an ad in the paper \*

Matthew Elliot has disappointed us  
Joseph Brant the same  
perhaps someone else will take pity  
on Peter  
and take the wretch and her son off  
his hand

I have already gifted my goddaughter  
Elizabeth Dennison  
with Milly and Amy

---

**TO BE SOLD,**

**A BLACK WOMAN, named**  
PEGGY, aged about forty years; and a  
Black boy her son, named JUPITER, aged  
about fifteen years, both of them the property of the  
Subscriber.

The Woman is a tolerable Cook and washer woman  
and perfectly understands making Soap and Candles.

The Boy is tall and strong of his age, and has been  
employed in Country business, but brought up prin-  
cipally as a House Servant—They are each of them  
Servants for life. The Price for the Woman is one  
hundred and fifty Dollars—for the Boy two hundred  
Dollars, payable in three years with Interest from the  
day of Sale and to be properly secured by Bond &c.—  
But one fourth less will be taken in ready Money.

PETER RUSSELL.

York, Feb. 10th 1806.

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\* This historical ad is from the *Upper Canada Gazette*,  
Vol. 15, 45