

from *James Douglas: An Opera*

Wayde Compton

OVERTURE

A dancer, a soundscape, and a voice of history.

VOICE

Gold on the Fraser River lured them: first the British, then Americans, then those who were neither/nor. Eighteen fifty-eight in a fur-trading frontier. An Empire the sun never set on, so they said. The colonies of a barely-governed north and/or west.

The Hudson's Bay Company built forts and extracted jurisdiction. A corporation shaped like an army or an army shaped like a corporation. Versa vice.

But gold would throw open the door. American citizens would march north. To prospect. To overwhelm. To annex. Colonial lateral violence. Drove of Yankee miners. Manifesters of destiny.

(Pause)

James Douglas rose up through the trade. Completely loyal to the Crown. The bastard son of a Scottish planter and a "coloured" Guyanese. Later married Amelia Connolly, Cree and Irish. They built a swarthy family in a time of white invasion. He became a leader of white colonial rule who was uncertainly white.

(Pause)

What Douglas did to hold the British claim against the US was to send for 600 blacks from San Francisco. To live and work in the colony. To be a buffer. To be a levee. Blacks not wanted by America would become Brits not wanting America here. A bulwark of neither/nor. Douglas was or was not himself black. Did or did not bring them home. Could or could not set them free. Is or is not history.

ACT ONE SCENE 1

Fort Victoria, 1861. Christ Church.

*PRISCILLA STEWART stands at the front of the CHORUS
as they sing.*

STEWART

A North-South war was on its way,
any fool could see.
A North-South war was on its way,
any fool could see.
But just what side the West would take
was a blue-eyed mystery.
In Zion Church we prayed.
They're going to segregate

CHORUS

the sunset we'd run off into.

STEWART

I said they're going to segregate

CHORUS

the sunset we'd run off into.

STEWART

Jim Crow stalks the glittering bay
of a gold rush San Francisco.

CHORUS

In Zion Church we prayed.

STEWART

Douglas is the governor
Up north on British land.
Douglas is the governor

Up north on British land.
A whisper-coloured brother.
Another chance to start again.

On the dock of Fort Victoria,
On the rainy streets of Canaan,
On our way to equal scales
we prayed for streams of gold.

Let them plunder yellow rocks.

CHORUS

The only gold is home.

STEWART

Let them plunder yellow rocks.

CHORUS

The only gold is home.

STEWART

We got an alloy governor.
We are a breathing poem.
A Pharaoh, a Moses, a maybe.
To cross a coloured parting.
Another bloody Red Sea.
Another root through thirsting.

for

some colour other
than red, white, and blue,

and blue,

and blue,

and blue,

and blue,

and blue...