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"The Little State of Africadia Is a Community of Believers": Replacing the Regional and Remaking the Real in the Work of George Elliott Clarke

Alexander MacLeod

In keeping with the geographic vocabulary that seems almost unavoidable in any discussion of the relationship between literature and place, this paper opens by surveying the landscape of contemporary Atlantic-Canadian writing and mapping two distinct lines of critical inquiry. These two paths cover different territory, and in the beginning they move along separate routes before eventually coming together in the end. The first path follows the career trajectory of George Elliott Clarke from his early work up to the present day and attempts to evaluate the unique contribution that he has made to Canadian literature as an award-winning poet, dramatist, editor, and essayist. The second path re-examines some of the traditional challenges as well as new developments that have recently enlivened the debate surrounding contemporary regionalist literary theory and its relationship to current trends in the field of cultural geography. Where the two paths intersect, I return to Clarke's work and demonstrate how his efforts to establish an "Africadian" literary canon transgress the normal boundaries between real and imagined social space and, in the process, extend regionalist discourse into new areas of political and social action.[1]

The Departure of the Native

George Elliott Clarke's career thus far has been a tale of rapid ascent through the hierarchy of academic and artistic celebrity in Canada. In less than twenty years, Clarke has moved from the relatively peripheral standing of a young Maritime poet and graduate student to become one of the country's most influential literary figures. Marginalized at the beginning of his writing life by his race, his regional affiliations, his age, his political beliefs, and his aesthetic commitments, Clarke now occupies a position of central importance in Canada's largest literature

department in Canada's largest university in Canada's largest city. He has won the nation's top literary prize for poetry, the Governor General's Literary Award; he maintains a regular review column in Nova Scotia's largest-circulating newspaper, the *ChronicleHerald*; and his work and public commentary are routinely featured in coast-to-coast radio and television broadcasts. In 2005, Clarke's first novel, *George & Rue*, a chilling and controversial retelling of the events surrounding the 1949 murder of a Fredericton taxi driver and the subsequent executions of George and Rufus Hamilton, was published to widespread critical acclaim. When we consider all that Clarke has accomplished in such a relatively short time (as I write this, he is only forty-five years old), it is easy to understand why some see him not only as an essential poet and literary critic but also a more broadly defined cultural icon. Although he is perhaps at only the midpoint of his career, Clarke has already developed into one of those rare scholars who come along perhaps once in a generation: he is an academic who has at least partially escaped from the confines of the university's ivory-tower stereotype to become a genuine public intellectual.

It is important to understand, however, that Clarke's precipitous rise to the status of a national figurehead and/or regional spokesperson has not come without its costs. Although Clarke has always maintained close emotional and spiritual ties with his native Nova Scotia, for much of the past two decades, almost half of his life, he has lived outside the province. His academic training took him from Waterloo (BA) to Halifax (MA) to Kingston (PhD), and before he settled into his current position at the University of Toronto his professional life was punctuated by longer stops in Ottawa, Durham, North Carolina, and Montreal and countless other shorter journeys across the country and around the world. As anyone who has read his work will know, Clarke is a seventh-generation Canadian, and his family can trace its lineage directly back to the arrival of the black Loyalists and black refugees who migrated to the British colony of Nova Scotia in 1783 and 1815 respectively. His writing is unquestionably tied to the historical and contemporary experiences of this community, but this linkage between the poet and the place that Clarke represents to the wider world is not as one-dimensional or direct as many would assume. In a revealing interview with Maureen Moynagh, Clarke suggests that there has always been a "terrific tension" in his work because for much of his career he has lived away

from the community that defines both the centre and the limit of his poetry ("Mapping" 78). In a particularly candid moment, Clarke admits that his relationship with black Nova Scotia has not always been easy or positive: "I left here in 1979 to go off to the University of Waterloo, and in fact I left here quite deliberately because I was fed up with the place. I just had to get away. So I did, and immediately became tremendously homesick, and felt that I had made a drastic mistake in having left. And I started writing poems reflecting my Nova Scotianness, and my feelings about this place" (78).

Interestingly, in this statement, Clarke identifies his physical departure from Nova Scotia as the key event that triggered and then intensified his creative engagement with the province. In this formulation (one that we often see repeated with expatriate writers), the poet seems to gain the ability to imaginatively reinvent his or her home only after that place has physically been left behind. The vivid imaginary geography that we encounter in Clarke's writing almost demands a separation from its referent, the "real world" social space that exists "out there" beyond his pages. This gap that opens up between Clarke's real and imagined geographies is hotly contested territory that critics cannot take for granted. Although outside commentators may wish to treat Clarke's work as a direct and reliable ethnographic representation of black Nova Scotia, advanced literary scholars must remember that there is absolutely nothing simple or one-dimensional about Clarke's connection to this community. In his work, absence and belonging are intimately intertwined, and often Clarke is more interested in capturing the disorienting and dislocating experience of the exile or outsider than he is in accurately recording the rooted perspective that we normally associate with the insider's point of view. As the research of Michelle Banks ably demonstrates, rather than uncovering the "true" cultural geography of black Nova Scotia, Clarke's work is motivated more by "the desire for a home place" (58). Despite the deep roots of his family tree, his writing originates from a profound sense of cultural deracination, and it establishes what Banks calls a "thorough identification between the voice of the poems and the condition of homelessness" (67). In fact, when we look past Clarke's public persona, and engage carefully with only his work itself, we see that there may be no poet at work in Canadian literature today who is *less* comfortable with the blind embrace of community and *more* aware of the many demands and difficulties that lurk inside what,

on the surface, might seem like a simple relationship between the poet and his or her home. In Clarke's writing, both creative and critical, the "exceptional" talent of the artist is caught in the struggle to speak both to and for the "average" experience of the community.

Clarke explores this troubling dynamic in more detail in an interview with Anne Compton. Here he tells an emotionally charged story about being almost completely rejected by precisely the people whom he is trying to serve:

> I had this horrifying experience which I think every writer should go through at one time or another. In the spring of 1986, I was invited to take part in a fund-raising event put on by the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia. I was the only poet on the program. Every one else was a performer. I was there as the poet. I read in the way I had been taught to read in the university, . . . very plain, no emotion, just straightforward recitation. But this was in front of an audience of my peers, of my own community. So people started yelling at me: "Get off the stage." It was very direct: "You're boring. Go home." The people didn't want to hear some dry shit. ("Standing" 145)

Obviously, this kind of rejection was a traumatic experience for Clarke. It is very difficult to be told to "go home" when you believe that you are already there. In response to his audience's initial negative reaction, Clarke changed strategies at this reading and later decided to "perform" some of his then-new material from *Whylah Falls*. As the rambunctious catcalls for his dismissal died down, the tide eventually turned, and the people came back to their poet, cheering him on with calls to "Preach it" and to "Testify" (146). Clarke's story about the reading (which began so hopelessly) ultimately concludes happily. The *Whylah Falls* material succeeded where earlier poems failed. For Clarke, this experience at the Black Cultural Centre served as a kind of life lesson or perhaps an intense period of on-the-job training. After this initial rejection, he decided that he would "never write again anything [he] cannot read before [his] own community" (146). When Compton pushes him to further explore his status as a "wanderer" and "a permanent exile," Clarke admits, "I haven't had an address in Nova Scotia since 1987. How can I write about this place any more when my connection to it is so tenuous? I really feel this dilemma between being away and wanting to get back" (157).

The anxiety that Clarke feels about being torn between his literary presence within the province and his physical absence from Nova Scotia is understandable. From a national or international perspective, it may be easy to cast Clarke as the dominant and defining figure of contemporary black writing within the region, but at home and on the ground his status is more contentious. As is often the case, those individuals whom the outside world recognizes as prophets are rarely seen in such an exalted light by the people who know them best. Like any other diverse collection of individuals, black Nova Scotian society has its own internal divisions, and, although Clarke has done more than any other individual to promote and publish local writers, his work offers us only one way of writing and reading his culture, and not everyone in the community agrees with his portrayal. As an editor, reviewer, and anthologist, Clarke has established himself as a fairly aggressive and exacting evaluator of poetic quality and achievement. Charged with the responsibility to call it like he sees it, and to judge harshly if he believes that harsh judgements are required, he is sometimes placed at odds with the more nurturing support structure of the Nova Scotian writing community.

In his now infamous "unprejudiced" review of poetry collections by fellow Nova Scotians Maxine Tynes and David Woods, for example, Clarke serves up his compliments and criticisms in equal measure. Although he believes that Tynes and Woods are "irreplaceable contributors to the newly diversified canon of Canadian poetry," he also argues that their work lacks originality, is weakened by clichéd language, requires "ferocious editing," and should ultimately be considered "middling, but acceptable" (*Odysseys* 304). Obviously, these are not the remarks of a critic who suspends his true opinion when addressing the work of his friends. As we might expect, the other side of this family feud holds different views on what constitutes literary merit. Tynes especially has made a clear effort to carve out her own place in black Nova Scotian writing and to distance herself from Clarke's poetic and political agenda. As Danielle Fuller and Marjorie Stone have both demonstrated, Tynes's writing and reading of the black community are almost diametrically opposed to the models promoted by Clarke. According to Fuller, Tynes's staunchly feminist point of view, her more direct connection to the oral tradition of performance poetics, as well as her more accessible "emotive rhetoric" and "everyday imagery" provide a clear alternative

to the masculine, textually privileged, and more self-consciously "literary" aesthetic standards that Clarke often endorses (106-07). Stone, in her note on the Clarke versus Tynes debate, argues that, rather than ignoring or downplaying such differences of opinion within the black Nova Scotian literary community, scholars should actually pay more attention to these divisions to ensure that they do not portray "the current Black Nova Scotia cultural flowering as more homogenous than it in fact is" (243).

Denying such one-dimensional or artificially homogeneous readings of black Nova Scotian writing is essential if we are to fully appreciate Clarke's contribution to this literature. Clearly, Clarke is a writer who actively courts controversy and encourages dissent rather than politely shying away from them. From the beginning of his career, he has positioned his work against any and all vaguely formulated critical readings that might encourage black stereotyping or diminish the internal diversity of his community. The dominant recurring figure in his work has always been the intellectual exile, an individual who does not fit any standardized role within the society and cannot easily integrate himself or herself into pre-existing social structures. Even as his poetry has helped to reinscribe the collective experience of black Nova Scotia into the larger official historical narrative of the Canadian nation, Clarke, like so many of the characters we meet in his writing, has continually struggled with the burden of such a heavy responsibility. As far back as his first volume, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, published in 1983 when Clarke was only twenty-three years old, this focus on the exceptional outsider who longs to "escape" the embrace of the community was already present in masterpiece poems such as "Watercolour for Negro Expatriates in France" and "Crying the Beloved Country." In the latter poem, the artistic figure is seen struggling with the decision to leave or remain rooted:

> why can I not leave you
> like a refugee?
> . . . . . .
> why can I not depart from you
> like any proud, prodigal son,
> ignoring your eyes'
> black baptist churches?

what keeps me from easy going?
Mother, is it your death
i fear
or my life? (38)

In these last lines, the poet wrestles with the personal and public consequences that accompany any decision to stay or go. The final question examines an interdependent relationship in which the survival or destruction of the community cannot be separated from the survival or destruction of the artist. In later volumes of Clarke's work, the same issues of displacement are addressed again, and the same kinds of refrain are repeated.

The first poem in *Whylah Falls*, for example, is "Look Homeward Exile," and in the earliest stages of this poetic novel the reader is introduced to Xavier Zachary, another outcast/intellectual figure. We learn that X has been away from home for five years, pursuing his studies in Montreal, and that while his body "drifted sad and tired, in the east," his mind remained focused on the lush landscape of Whylah Falls and on the equally ravishing beauty of his true love, Shelley Clemence (24). In *Beatrice Chancy*, Beatrice similarly returns home to the Annapolis Valley after three years of convent education and finds that she cannot easily bridge the gap between the woman she has become and the slavery-scarred community she has left behind. After bursting onto the stage with an introductory speech filled with pastoral language and a liberal sprinkling of high-culture literary allusions, Beatrice is abruptly told by Lustra not to "be poetical" and reminded that there is no room for "Romanticism" in a world where "folk sweat day-long in fields" (32). The theme of dislocation continues to dominate much of the 1994 compilation, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile*. This book is subtitled *Fugitive Poems: 1978-1993*, and its closing section focuses on the experience of the black Loyalists who left Nova Scotia in 1792 and migrated to Sierra Leone in search of a better life. In his self-described "American" book, *Blue* (2001), Clarke's tight focus on Nova Scotia expands again (9). Short poems, such as "Haligonian Market Cry" and "No Second N.S.," are mixed into a now much broader catalogue that wrestles not only with local subjects but also with the wider experience of an African diaspora spread out across the country, the continent, and the world. By the time we reach *Execution Poems* in 2001 and *Québécité* in 2003, Clarke's creative work has temporarily left Nova Scotia behind and moved on to

settings farther west in New Brunswick and Quebec. The same progression away from the immediately local and into the wider world can be seen in the author's critical work. After *Fire on the Water* (1991), Clarke's next two book-length projects — the anthology *Eyeing the North Star* and the essay collection *Odysseys Home* — were published with subtitles that revealingly replaced his former provincial focus with a new national concern for "African-Canadian literature." With each step he takes, Clarke seems to expand his definition of the "home place" and to extend his geographical range over an ever-broadening cultural space.

Rethinking Regionalism

At this stage, I want to temporarily place Clarke's work to the side and turn back to our second line of inquiry. This path, I fear, may turn out to be far more challenging because it confronts the most basic theoretical assumptions on which any discussion of literary regionalism, Atlantic-Canadian or otherwise, must rest. I realize that the concerns I raise here introduce more problems than solutions, but these issues deserve close attention, first because Clarke's work touches on so many of the central ideas related to regionalist literary thought, and second because I think that scholars who have given so much energy to the study of Atlantic-Canadian literature often work at such a depth, and surrounded by so many like-minded colleagues, that it is often difficult to come back to the "surface" and articulate careful responses to what must be the first questions in this field. Although generations of editors, anthologists, and critics in Atlantic Canada have worked hard to establish, defend, and extend a regionally defined canon, this group of thinkers has never been able to articulate a clear critical statement that might once and for all establish the defining attributes of a regionalist aesthetic. Despite the best efforts of the leading regionalist scholars working in the field today — including Herb Wyile, David Jordan, Francesco Lorriggio, Michael Kowalewski, Alison Calder, and Lisa Chalykoff — the theoretical arguments on which regionalist discourse rests are only beginning to be excavated, and many of the essential questions remain unanswered.

For example, where should we place regionalist discourse in a scholarly landscape that is already crowded with so many different (and usually positive) models of postcolonial theory? Or, on the other hand, where should we draw the line between traditional regionalist boosterism and all the other (usually negative) critiques of cultural nationalism

that circulate in academia? Is regionalism, as Roberto Maria Dainotto forcefully argues, simply a devious way of reviving the old and discredited ideals of nationalism by "passing them off as 'new' regionalist ones" (488)? Is regionalism nothing more than nationalism in disguise, working on a smaller and more politically correct scale but still naïvely oversimplifying our complex contemporary realities and replacing them with what Dainotto calls pastoral portraits of "organic identity" (505)? What should we make of Frank Davey's aggressive charges against the "Maritime powerlessness" that he believes dominates realist regional fiction in this part of the country (67)? More to the point, do regionalism and realism have to be considered inseparable discourses? Does such an unbreakable union between these two aesthetics inflict what Davey calls a "discursive determinism" on Atlantic-Canadian writers (67)? Does regionalism, as its harshest critics suggest, conceal its real ideology, its politics, and its internal conflicts "beneath touristic images of landscape and inarticulately authentic individuals" (Davey, "Toward" 5)?

The problems continue to pile up. Is a writer's regionalist status decided by biography or by subject matter? And if biography is our leading criterion, how much of a biography does one need? As we have seen in Clarke's case, this has become an important question, specifically in the Atlantic-Canadian context, because so many of the works under consideration were not actually written in the region and because so many of the writers who are studied do not (or did not) actually live in Atlantic Canada during their most productive years. Does it matter, for example, that so many of Lucy Maude Montgomery's novels were written in small-town Ontario or that Hugh MacLennan spent most of his adult life in Montreal? Why do we argue so passionately about the fact that E. Annie Proulx has the wrong passport, and why should we mourn for Elizabeth Bishop, who spent only those few intense years of her childhood in the Great Village locale that shaped so much of her best work? Is a "real" presence in a particular geography required (or at least preferred) before scholars can seriously engage with an author's imaginary representations of that place? Clearly, the history of the regional canon seems to support such a claim. Like any other industry, Atlantic-Canadian literature prefers to keep its most talented employees at home. We find it troubling when writers have to go "down the road" to further their careers. When David Adams Richards finally moved from New Brunswick to Toronto in the late 1990s, for example,

Pottersfield Portfolio marked that sad occasion with the publication of a special tribute issue devoted to the author's life and work. Normally, such honours are reserved for writers who are recently deceased, but Richards, luckily, had only "passed away."

If it is not biography but subject matter and setting that ultimately decide a work's regionalist status, then which subjects should be allowed and which settings prohibited? As Lynn Coady's introductory essay in *Victory Meat*, "Books that Say Arse," demonstrates with hilarious effectiveness, it is nearly impossible to police such a border, dividing what should be kept in from what should be kept out. No matter how valiantly some may wish to maintain what Coady calls a "fetishized" nineteenth-century pastoral reading of Atlantic Canada, the contemporary world keeps intruding on that vision, barging in with its mass-culture American influences, its technology, and its references to contemporary politics (1).

What sort of relationship exists between the imaginary worlds that we are presented with in literature and the real geographical facts that we engage with in fully materialized concrete environments? Do contemporary scholars believe that nineteenth-century realist aesthetics should be applied to the writers whom we study today? Do we continue to see the external environment as a stable and reliable pre-existing referent that regionalist fiction unproblematically replicates? Is geography destiny? Do we think that the place *makes* the artist, or has our long, if not unproblematic, exposure to cultural studies, postmodernism, and the muddled world of "theory" mediated that former position somewhat, allowing us to think now more broadly about how, in even a partial reversal of that old thesis, we might be able to argue that artists actually create the places they inhabit rather than the other way around? Like any question of origins, this is ultimately a useless kind of chicken and egg problem. Which came first? The place or our representation of that place? At this stage of the debate, however, even that gesture, the capacity to see a kind of balance between an overmaterialized, environmentally determinist doctrine and its doppelgänger, an overly idealized, completely imaginary fictionalizing, is a step in the right direction. As Wyile accurately and succinctly puts it, scholars working on regionalism today must "walk a fine line . . . between environmental deterministic conceptions of regionalism on the one hand and a deterritorializing postmodern textuality on the other" (158).

Rather than viewing these challenges as the inescapable weaknesses of regionalist writing and criticism, recent work by Clarke and many others proves that the complexity of regionalist aesthetics — that fine-line balancing act that regionalism and its study require — may actually be the greatest strength of this literature. Rescued from the state of discursive dormancy in which it has lingered for more than a century, contemporary regionalist writers and critics are beginning to shed their old reputations as simple, one-dimensional recorders of geographic reality and ethnographic culture. The old portrait of regionalism as an essentially conservative, inherently realistic, inescapably mimetic aesthetic is slowly giving way to a new model as today's writers effectively reinvent the genre for a new time and an entirely new way of thinking about place. Led by the theoretical arguments initiated by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his earth-shattering text *The Production of Space*, and nurtured along by the excellent work of geographers such as Edward Soja, Derek Gregory, and David Harvey, literary scholars are only now beginning to understand that regionalist writers are active participants in the cultural construction of the worlds that they inhabit. Literary critics familiar with the teachings of current spatial theory are finally starting to examine the links that regionalist texts establish between what Soja calls "spatial ontology" (*Postmodern Geographies* 118) and "spatial epistemology" (*Thirdspace* 80). They are starting to see that "being placed" ontologically in any particular social environment is a never-ending intellectual process rather than a passive outcome, and that there is nothing fixed or predetermined about the strategies that writers use to locate their work within the constantly shifting cultural spaces of what Soja calls a simultaneously "real-and-imagined" geography (*Thirdspace* 11).

Building a Past for the Future: The Imaginary Architecture of Africadia

The intersection between "real-and-imagined" spatiality is also the crossroads where the two lines of inquiry that I have been tracing in this paper come together. As we have seen, Clarke's work straddles the line between traditional and contemporary interpretations of cultural geography. Read in a certain way, Clarke can easily be classified as a traditional regionalist. He is deeply committed to his role as an anthropological recorder and museum curator for black Nova Scotian history. The omnipresent photographs in his books, the archival material, the

recipes, the music, the newspaper clippings, the long lists of dedication and acknowledgement, the obvious indebtedness that he feels to writers who preceded him in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century waves of black Nova Scotian literature — people such as David George, John Marrant, and Boston King — all indicate that Clarke sees himself as a figure charged with a near-religious, but definitely political, responsibility to collect, protect, and nurture the cultural artifacts of his community. In his interview with Moynagh, Clarke states clearly that

> the need to commemorate has fuelled my writing since my youth. I try to struggle against the general absence and repression of the existence of Black Nova Scotians or Africadians in every major discourse in this province. . . . I feel I am constantly writing against our erasure and yet the erasure continues. . . . We have a history here, a history full of trials, triumphs, struggles, etc., and there is just no legitimate way that we can be excluded from the history of this place. And so this explains my commemorative efforts and my general interest in involving history and photographs in my creative work, because it is a means of contesting that constant erasure, which has led ultimately I think to racism, to the idea that "you folks do not count; you're not even a fit subject for history." ("Mapping" 73)

Obviously, commemoration and cultural recording are essential to Clarke's work, but I think that these elements play only a secondary role in what should be considered his primary project. Only when we take in the entire scope of his creative and critical contributions do we realize that, rather than being a writer who has been passively made by his home culture and is therefore predestined to defend that social space with his art, Clarke actively (and even aggressively) claims both the agency and the capacity first to reimagine his home and then to reconstruct it, physically, in the real world. The differences between these two types of literary ambition are difficult to overstate. Instead of being determined by his native land, Clarke is determined to change that place. His writing absolutely rejects the doctrine of a purely materialist environmental causality. It cannot be said that George Elliott Clarke, unlike traditional regionalist writers, *comes from* Africadia. In fact, in his peculiar case, the writer's relationship with geography is directly opposed to that model. Ultimately, it should be argued that Clarke is *going to* Africadia. The imagined geography of this place is his destination rather than his point of origin, and literature provides the means by

which he travels between these two points, slowly tearing down the old, real world and gradually building up its replacement. Clarke's writing is devoted to a region that did not exist in the real world before he gave it a name and initiated the slow process of its creation. The religious overtones of such a project are obvious, and Clarke has often drawn parallels between his own work and the New Jerusalem, city-on-a-hill thematic that runs through so much of America's early puritanical writing. "The little state of Africadia is a community of believers," he writes ("Maschil" 15). It is an imaginary place maintained by faith and by the desperate desire of a population that wishes to see the mythic materialized in the real world.

To support this somewhat outlandish claim, I suggest that the most important work that Clarke has done thus far in his career is his introduction to the first volume of *Fire on the Water*. I am not sure if it is the intense, youthful exuberance of the prose (Clarke had just turned thirty at the time of the book's release), the elevated evangelical rhetoric of the piece, or the overt political call to arms that Clarke launches at his peers in the closing sections of this short essay, but it should be clear to anyone familiar with his writing life that the intellectual concerns, the political issues, and the recurrent themes of exile, religious faith, and violence that come back so often in the rest of his oeuvre find their first full annunciation here. This essay marks the formal launch of his Africadian nation-building project. In the opening paragraphs, Clarke sees himself standing at the precipice, and he describes his position as one of both "luxury and anxiety" (9). He makes a special effort to emphasize that his work represents "not the last word, but the first," about the literary heritage of his community, and he characterizes himself as an "explorer — stumbling, straying, yet striving to clear and map a path for future seekers to follow" (9). At the close of his "Declaration" section, Clarke humbly suggests that "the entire catalogue of classical Africadian literature appears at once" in this volume of his own creation and that *Fire on the Water* should be read as "a monument to past and present writers and a beacon for those to come" (10). He concludes with a passionate plea to future generations of Africadians: *"Oh, you, who read these words in ages hence, may you add to this book further songs of the nation it honours. This work yearns, signals, calls, for you"* (10).

As many critics have noted, the "nation" that Clarke honours in *Fire on the Water* is an idea rather than a reality. In conversation with

Moynagh, he readily admits that, because the Africadia he envisions is not *yet* "a real physical place," it must be considered as "a mythical notion, an intellectual construct, a soulful nation" ("Mapping" 77). He goes on to explain:

> I've defined it as a place where the free self can live, a green space where the free self can live. It may not necessarily have to exist as a state with an anthem and a standing army, but it is important that we understand that we have this unique vantage point which does exist within ourselves, and which is manifested in different ways at different times, in different places with different groupings of people of African descent in this place that on paper we call Nova Scotia. But I don't think we have to accept these standard notions and that it's important to claim the place for ourselves, and to rename, reorder, rethink the whole thing. (77)

For scholars interested in regionalist theory and especially Atlantic-Canadian regionalist theory, these lines announce a dramatic changing of the guard. Clarke's call to "rename, reorder, [and] rethink" the imagined space of his nation is a direct assault on the doctrine of environmental determinism. In his always pastoral, green world of Africadia, the fixed facts of Nova Scotian geography become more flexible: Weymouth Falls can turn into Whylah Falls, and Digby County can change its name to Jarvis County. Beatrice Chancy can come from Italy and be relocated to the Annapolis Valley in 1801. Although he is aggressive with his changes, Clarke isn't naïve about the charges that may be levelled at such a project. He is well prepared to meet the criticisms of Dainotto and Davey. Rather than "concealing" its ideology, Clarke's fiery brand of regionalism flaunts its political commitments. Instead of promoting "touristic images" and "authentically inarticulate individuals," Clarke takes readers directly to the scenes left out of the tourist guides and revels in the playful complexity of language.

In another important essay that has never received the critical attention it merits — *Treason of the Black Intellectuals?* — Clarke returns to the potentially explosive topic of the relationships and the responsibilities that connect the "average" needs of any community with the "exceptional" abilities of its intellectual class. Although he admits that black thinkers "possess no immunity against the potentially toxic allure of nationalism" and that they must deny at every turn the "fallacious

myths, misty romanticisms, and blood-rite fascisms" of the discourse (2), Clarke argues consistently that a "persuasive cultural nationalist scholarship is an absolute necessity" for his community and that "it is the precise task of African-Canadian intellectuals to determine the imperatives of African-Canadian culture (or cultures) and to build economic, political and cultural institutions that will allow us a measure of autonomy, pride and independence in our dealing with all other interest groups in the society" (18). The sociospatial index of his thought is unmistakable here. Clarke believes that real and imagined geographies cannot be separated and that the intellectual work of the black artist or intellectual should eventually take on a physical form and help to build economic, political, and cultural institutions in the real world. For Clarke, this material manifestation of the Africadian cause is an ultimate goal: "Either African-Canadians are an assembly of miniature nations, or they are nowhere" (19).

Clarke's formulation of Africadian nationalism does not gloss over conflicts and divisions within the community. In a somewhat controversial claim in "The Death and Rebirth of Africadian Nationalism" (an essay that begins as a review of Shelagh Mackenzie's 1991 film, *Remember Africville*), Clarke places at least some of the blame for Africville's destruction squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of the black community at the time. Characterizing this group as an elite aristocracy that was interested more in preserving its own position of influence within the community than in defending the whole, Clarke argues that their "refusal to engage in more than token resistance to acts of discrimination, coupled with a failure to evolve a theology to counter the threat posed by modernity, left Africadia defenceless before the gospel of progress, which, by its very nature, could not accept the continued existence of Africville" (*Odysseys* 293). Clarke is absolutely convinced that

> Africville was lost because we Africadians refused to sufficiently value our right to exist. Our leaders of the 1960's allowed themselves to be seduced into thinking of Africville as a slum rather than as a potentially strong Africadian community-neighbourhood in a prime location on peninsular Halifax. Had they been strong enough to resist the temptations of progress, Africville might have become the spiritual capital of Africadia, the conscious annunciation of our existence. (294)

Clarke's anger here could not be more clear, but alongside his mourning for the loss of the real Africville his essay offers, again in overtly religious terms, the suggestion that the death of Africville — the "crucifixion," he calls it — may have been a necessary fall (295). In his version of events, the old Africville dies for the sins of "an apostate collective" so that the new Africville, "the spiritual capital of Africadia," as noted above, can be resurrected from the ashes (295). Only after the bulldozers and the social workers have demolished the "real" physical structures of the neighbourhood can the imagined and remembered Africville begin to do its work. For Clarke, clearly taking his lead here from successful minority nationalist movements in Quebec and New Brunswick, the rereading, rewriting, and reinterpreting of Africville's cultural-geographic significance within the community are the most important elements of the Africadian nationalist renaissance. Exactly as a rereading, rewriting, and reinterpreting of the events of 1759 by Quebec intellectuals triggered a transformation that saw French Canadians begin to view themselves as *les Québécois* in the 1960s, and exactly as the francophone community in New Brunswick used a rereading, rewriting, and reinterpreting of *Le Grand Dérangement* of 1755 to trigger an Acadian renaissance in the 1970s, Clarke's work demonstrates that a collective desire for the home place is infinitely more powerful than the passive defence of a real geographic site. Africville is more valuable to the Africadian cause as a lost place, a world that must be restored, a mistake that cannot be allowed to happen again.

If nothing else, Clarke is a scholar, perhaps even a rabid devotee, of nationalist theory and criticism. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of black nationalist movements in Canada and abroad, and he is intimately familiar and clearly comfortable with the teachings of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Julien Benda, Ernest Renan, Edward Said, and Charles Taylor, among many others. His long-standing support for the model of conservative nationalism endorsed by George Grant in *Lament for a Nation* and his equally passionate distaste for the ideology of modern liberalism are well known. Perhaps Clarke is even aware of the Anglo-Irish argument of Seamus Deane, which claims that "all nationalisms have a metaphysical dimension" that they are continually trying to "realize . . . in some specific and tangible form" (8).

"Realizing" the metaphysical dimensions of Africadia has always been the tangible goal of Clarke's work. With each poem, essay, novel,

opera, or screenplay that Clarke writes, he slowly wills an imaginary Africadia into existence. Obviously, this is not an easy process, and it is impossible to avoid the inter- and intracommunity conflicts that necessarily accompany such an endeavour. To put it simply, it takes a fair bit of chutzpah, or guts, or perhaps just blind arrogance — traits for which Clarke may be criticized by those who are jealous of his courage — at the age of thirty-one to name your own nationality and to claim that simply by virtue of your creative and scholarly work the collective identity of an entire population has been confirmed. My proof of this culture is enough to make the nation real, Clarke argues. He then outlines his case for the Africadian cause in clear and simple terms. If African Nova Scotian writers have produced a coherent canon, he suggests, then let scholars recognize that canon as "Africadian" literature. And if there are recurrent questions in this literature, then let those issues be recognized as the dominant themes of Africadian culture. And if this community possesses a recognizably distinct culture, and if that culture is strong, then let the people produce a state apparatus to sustain that culture. From there, the last step is obvious, and Clarke makes it perfectly clear that, "if Africadians constitute a state, let it be titled Africadia" ("Maschil" 9).

It might be easy to interpret Clarke's project as yet another purely hypothetical, entirely intellectual pursuit that has absolutely no relationship or contact with the real world. Life in academia is often cluttered with such well-meaning, theoretical endeavours that never cross over to produce concrete results in society at large. In this case, however, things are different, and scholars do not have to look far to see the startling transformations that Clarke's work has already helped to initiate in his community. In the aftermath of the 2003 provincial election in Nova Scotia, only 220 years after they first arrived in the colony, black Nova Scotians were granted their first official representation in the government of the province. In July of that year, Barry Barnet, a white MLA for Hammonds Plains-Upper Sackville, was named the first minister for "African Nova Scotian Affairs." In its official publications, the Government of Nova Scotia states that the "objects and purposes" of the Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs are as follows:

> to create and promote an integrated approach to matters relating to the African Nova Scotian community; to represent Nova Scotia in intergovernmental and other initiatives and negotiations on matters

> integral to the African Nova Scotian community; to provide the minister responsible with research analysis and policy advice on African Nova Scotian issues; to develop cooperatively communication strategies and public education in order to improve general understanding and appreciation of African Nova Scotian culture, heritage and community identity; and to advocate for the interests and concerns of the African Nova Scotian community.

The bureaucratic language used here may not stir the soul, and it is too early to judge the overall effectiveness of this initiative, but no matter how we interpret it this first official government recognition of the African Nova Scotian community is a momentous event. No other province in Canada offers its African community representation at such a high level. It is definitely not my intention to give Clarke exclusive credit for this political achievement. After all, he is only one of the many black Nova Scotians who have helped the community to reach this goal. However, Clarke has undeniably made a key contribution, and since the beginning of his career his commitment to the cause has been passionate and unwavering. We must remember that less than fifteen years ago "Africadia" was not even a word, let alone an official extension of the government of Nova Scotia with an office, a budget, and a minister all paid for by provincial taxes. In this world, where power often flows directly from political office, this kind of state-sanctioned legitimacy is a clear indicator of "real" cultural significance. Back in 1991, when Clarke was just beginning his journey, Africadia may have been "only" an imaginary site, but thanks in part to his tireless work the actual, material manifestation of this "community of believers" seems more and more like a real-world possibility.

Notes

[1] In the "Confession" section of the introduction to volume one of *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, Clarke offers the following etymological explanation for his invention of the terms "Africadian" and "Africadia": "I use the term 'Africadian,' a word I have minted from 'Africa' and 'Acadia' (the old name for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), to denote the Black populations of the Maritimes and especially of Nova Scotia. Other appellations — 'Afro-Nova Scotian,' 'Black Nova Scotian,' etc. — are unwieldy. Moreover, if Africadians constitute a state, let it be titled Africadia" (9).

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