

Standing Your Ground: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation

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SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY ANNE COMPTON

BORN IN WINDSOR, NOVA SCOTIA, in 1960, George Elliott Clarke is a seventh-generation African Canadian. Clarke has published three books of poetry — *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), *Whylah Falls* (1990), which received the 1991 Archibald Lampman Prize for poetry, and *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems 1978-1993* (1994). Radio and stage versions of *Whylah Falls* were performed in Canada in 1996 and 1997. *One Heart Broken into Song*, a made-for-television movie, which is set in the fictional rural black community of Whylah Falls, will appear on the CBC in 1999. Committed to research in-terests in nationalism, postcolonialism, and New World African literature, Clarke has edited *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing* (1991-92), *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (1997), and he co-edited *Border Lines: Contemporary Poems in English* (1995). A playwright as well as a poet, anthologist, and essayist, Clarke will publish his verse-drama *Beatrice Chancy* with Polestar in 1999. A brilliant “transplantation” of Shelley’s tragedy *The Cenci* to the Anna-polis Valley, *Beatrice Chancy*, the opera — libretto by Clarke, music by James Rolfe — premiered in Toronto in June 1998. In February 1998, the Nova Scotia Arts Council awarded Clarke the prestigious Portia White Prize for Artistic Achievement. Clarke holds a joint appointment in English and Canadian Studies at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, but Nova Scotia holds first place in Clarke’s work: “this is where the world as we know it begins, / all blue and beguiling” (*Lush Dreams* 39).

This interview was conducted by ferry, fax, and phone. For three hours on *The Princess of Acadia* — the ferry that plies the Bay of Fundy — Clarke and I talked about Maritime poetics, politics, and his poetry. The commotion of late-summer travellers spilled around us in the lounge, and from time to time, Clarke’s fans and friends interrupted the interview to greet him. At one point, we were called upon to help out on a crossword puzzle. Beside us on the lounge sofa, the infant daughter of George Elliott Clarke and Julie Morin slept. Appropriately — with Aurélia beside us

— our interview looked forward to Clarke's forthcoming work as much as it looked back at his poems, essays, and anthologies in print.

AC *Whylah Falls* seems to be the centre of your work. It has blossomed into a play and a forthcoming movie (*One Heart Broken into Song*). *Saltwater Spirituals* incubated it, and *Lush Dreams* extended it. The forthcoming *Beatrice Chancy* shares more than its setting — Nisan and Nova Scotia — with *Whylah Falls*. Is this an accurate account?

GEC It's a scary statement. I think, like most writers, I don't want to be known as the author of one work. On days when I feel dispirited about my progress as a writer, I go back to it. If I could do that, I say, couldn't I do something as good or better? What's also scary about it for me is that it showed a way forward for me that I may not, as yet, have actually taken. For some reason, I stumbled into a way of writing in *Whylah Falls* that I have not always replicated in my present work or in the work that immediately followed it. One of my present aims is to try to get back to the way of writing that I was pursuing when I was putting together *Whylah Falls*. The poems in that book flowed out of life. Even though it is a work of fiction, it is based very much on real people, real events.

AC *Whylah Falls* mythologizes a specific place (Weymouth Falls) and an event (the killing of Graham Cromwell), but it does even more than that. Under the pressure of events (the razing of Africville and Cromwell's death), it reconceptualizes a people and a 200-year-old history in mythic terms. There is a cyclonical energy in *Whylah Falls* that draws everything — all in its path — into the text. Is there some sense in which you, as author, felt incidental to this articulation, an amanuensis of a myth-book?

GEC Oh, absolutely, definitely. I took that role on. I guess it was really conscious because I was literally sitting in people's living rooms, writing down what they had to say — stories, jokes, sayings, proverbs — and trying to weave it into longer poems or keeping it as a short snippet in longer pieces of prose. I did see the work as an attempt to embody the oral literature, the oral folkways, of a people I was living with and working among, particularly in 1985-86, although there are some childhood stories and some family stories in the book as well. If I can sum this up, *Whylah Falls* was for me a kind of falling into consciousness, not merely a racial consciousness, which was always there, but a poetic consciousness, an understanding finally that while there was a great world of Anglo-American poetry out there, there was this Black Nova Scotian, "Africadian" poetry

that was rooted in the voice and in these shared jokes, stories, proverbs. If I really wanted to be a strong poet, I felt that's the material I had to work with. I think I went through a period, particularly when I went off to university, when I put all of that behind me and focused on how I could write the next *Paradise Lost* or follow the Cavaliers, and, of course, Milton, Shakespeare and all the greats.

AC If *Whylah Falls* is a myth book, it is also the book of canonical forms. Multigeneric, it comprehends prose, poetry, film, drama. It contains epic machinery (argument headings to each section, an epic hero, and epic catalogues). It is dramatic (playlets and film shots) and provides a *dramatis personae*. A lyric sequence delivers the narrative, and it contains a pastoral dialogue and a pastoral elegy. I'd like to understand the aesthetic and political ramifications of geography's collision with canon, and by geography, I mean cultural as well as physical geography. Were you self-consciously ranging across the forms, raiding canonical forms?

GEC I think I was. What happened was I spent two years writing these dreadful pieces of blank verse, just as exercises, and then something happened when I was about to leave Waterloo, where I had attended university, to come back home to Nova Scotia. One night, the week before I left, I stayed up all night, and I started remembering this community [Weymouth Falls] I had spent time in as a youth, and all of a sudden a poem, "How Exile Melts to One Hundred Roses," came out of it. And in a sense this was the first *Whylah Falls* poem. I wrote it in blank verse. It was an attempt to capture a miniature story of my visits to that community that I had suddenly begun to remember as I prepared to return to Nova Scotia. There was complete innocence in terms of writing. I had no idea that there was going to be a book or that I was going to develop this further.

AC So you didn't know what you were starting at that point?

GEC I was excited by the fact that I was taking this great Miltonic instrument and writing something that was, finally, out of my own experience, instead of trying to write poems for William Lyon MacKenzie King or something like that.

AC So this is where the wedding of canon and experience came together? That poem was the beginning of the growth of *Whylah Falls*?

GEC I realized after writing it, I could do more of this. It doesn't have to stop here.

AC Not only is *Whylah Falls* comprehensive in terms of canonical forms, but also it is a botany book of flowers and a lexicon of food and drink. What is this drive toward inclusiveness in your work? I see it, as well, in the forthcoming *Beatrice Chancy*.

GEC Well that's there because Black Nova Scotians have been left out of so much. And in a sense, we are very much still outside the canon and whatever else. This inclusiveness is also a response to all those travelogues about Nova Scotia, from Will R. Bird's *This is Nova Scotia* to Margaret Morley's *Down North and Up Along*, particularly those about the Annapolis Valley, my favourite part of the province. Most of them did not mention black people, or they mentioned them condescendingly. This jarred with my recollections and my knowledge of Black communities in the Annapolis Valley because they were, to my mind, not exotic but simply part of the valley, part of Nova Scotian life. Therefore, they had imbibed all of the culture that creates Nova Scotia — from English literature to various foods. Just in terms of being true to what I knew of these places and these people, it was natural to include catalogues of foods as well as to range across the canon. Another point to make about the canon is that it is our canon too. Even though it was imposed on us, it still belongs to us. I am told that I have to accept these writers as great writers, and that, in terms of English poetry, these are the models I have to use, but perhaps we can take these models and blacken them. We can make them speak Black English. We can adapt them. In everyday life, I see people adapting the English language all of the time to suit their own needs. We can adapt the forms.

AC Xavier Zachary (the character in *Whylah Falls* who is known as X) is, by times, a pastoral swain, a sonneteer, a cavalier. In his courtship of Shelley (and of Selah also), X churns out Petrarchan similes, but the vocabulary of praise in the conceits is transformed to ebony, indigo, apple blossoms, honey, pine and so forth. The conceit undergoes a “double transplantation” — cultural and geographic. Is this “double transplantation” a characteristic of Africadian writing?

GEC That's really intriguing, and I think that you're right, and this “double transplantation” is also a reflection of a double resistance. If we've been taught to think certain things about dear old England, or for that matter about the United States, *vis à vis* our own culture, which is understood to be inferior to England's and America's, then in order to come to terms with these “superior cultures,” we need to reconfigure them in our own terms. I think that is what I was trying to do in terms of *Whylah*

Falls, especially there. We've been given these devices, these forms, genres, techniques, tendencies in English Literature. What do they have to do with being a Black Nova Scotian? How can I use them to articulate who we are and create an English literature with a Black Nova Scotian accent? It's the only way to come to terms with it.

AC A postcolonial gesture: you take it, but you reconfigure it at the same time?

GEC It's a kind of robbery.

AC In the poem "April in Paris," you say, "I wander among the graves of poets / stalk inspiration with a loaded pen" (*Lush Dreams* 42). This is more than "anxiety of influence." Is the metaphor of the "loaded pen" the kind of thing that you are talking about at the moment?

GEC James Baldwin, the African-American novelist, said it best. He said that the Negro is a kind of bastard of the west. There is a lot in that. Because of slavery, and the machinery of slavery and colonialism, we were displaced, centuries ago, generations ago, into this different setting, this strange setting — into a transplanted European culture in North America. Since the majority culture insists on proclaiming this as the epitome of human achievement — in terms of literature, in terms of everything cultural — the question is, where is our voice? How do we fit in? What do we do with it? We are forced into a kind of negotiation with the master tropes, master genres, master language. In order to survive, in order to maintain some specificity for ourselves, we have no choice but to try to claim it for ourselves, to pretend that Shakespeare comes from Weymouth Falls or that Virginia Woolf comes from North End Halifax. I mean, why not?

AC You appropriate the forms and redo the tropes, but at an even more particular level, you take up and reissue lines. For example, a line of Michael Ondaatje's becomes "There's a trick with a verb that I'm learning / To do" ("Five Psalms of Paris" *Lush Dreams* 17). Is this parodic?

GEC Yes, it is.

AC And "Violets for Your Fur" (*Lush Dreams* 41) picks up A.J.M. Smith's line "a loaded violet /... in your fur" (*Collected Poems* 22)? Are you echoing it intentionally?

GEC No, I didn't know about that echo. I read Smith a long, long time ago. If I read that line, I completely forgot about it. In fact, what I was referring to with that title was a jazz standard of the '50s, John

Coltrane's, who is one of my jazz heroes.

AC That makes sense since Smith was a jazz enthusiast, particularly for Jelly Roll Morton. So you weren't doing with the Smith line what you were doing with the Ondaatje line because there is great self-consciousness in the Ondaatje reference? Is it parodic *homage* or a taking-over?

GEC It's a bit of both and also a response. One of the strange conditions of being Black Nova Scotian is that one is colonized in three different ways — by British culture, by American, and also by Canadian. We have to tussle with the Canadian, as well. From the standpoint of Toronto, my little community that numbers 30,000 people, which counts for about 10% of the Black Canadian total population, has little to contribute to the history and discussion of an African-Canadian presence. We literally do not count. So, part of my strategy as a writer, in responding to my status as the scribe of a marginal and colonized community, is to sack and plunder all those larger literatures — British, American, Canadian, French, African-American, Caribbean — and to domesticate their authors and their most famous or noted lines. In other words, my acts of homage are acts of damage.

AC You have described the Maritimes as the Canadian Orient and its poetry as East Coast pastoral ("Orienting and Disorienting" 52). Readers of Alden Nowlan and David Adams Richards might have difficulty recognizing the pastoral in their depictions of the Maritimes. What is it that you are trying to recover or to reclaim in your assertions of Maritime pastoralism and in your own practice of the pastoral, as in *Whydah Falls*?

GEC What I was really trying to do was oppose the survival thesis, Atwood's survival thesis and that of other commentators, particularly those in the '60s and '70s. Thematic critics of Canadian literature kept finding all this emphasis on survival, and on how harsh and bitter life is for Canadians. That may be true, but at the same time there is, at least in the Maritimes, specifically in parts of Nova Scotia — the Annapolis Valley — but also in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, the possibility for gardens, as opposed to wilderness, where one is, more or less, at peace and where one can find beauty. I find in the Annapolis Valley a very pastoral landscape. The vegetation is lush in the spring, summer, and fall. It's luxurious. You can luxuriate.

AC So you wanted to emphasize that this exists, or at least co-exists, along with the meagre and the difficult. The oft-told story of Maritime experience is the bleak, born-into-failure, state of entrapment. Are you

giving the backhand to the mentality of defeat?

GEC I don't know if it's that because I believe we should be defeatists. I am not entirely opposed to that. And in *Whylah Falls* there is defeat because the murderer of Othello Clemence is never brought to justice. But, at the same time, what I find most interesting is how people who do not have a lot of money can access a sense of beauty, or can create a beauty. And that is what I saw in the Black communities where I was working in the Annapolis Valley. Times are tough. People are on welfare, people are unemployed. There's racism. The police are unjust. The justice system is a joke. At the same time, while all of that is true, people insisted on creativity, on art, on cuisine, music, beauty for themselves. This wasn't a question of going to museums or buying records. It was a question of making things, making your own music, singing your own songs. This ability to find one's own beauty, and to define beauty for one's self, is also politic. It is an act of resistance against all people who declare your community a slum, or who define you personally as ugly or ignorant, or on the margin.

AC Which is what you say in a poem in *Lush Dreams*: "Hinterland is that country / you cannot even begin / to imagine" (77). Who is the "you" being addressed here?

GEC That came out of when I was living in Toronto in 1981-83. It was written in Toronto, looking back on here. Basically, I felt that the Toronto intellectual elite despised folks from Atlantic Canada. I felt that they tended to view us as model mongrels, as *Deliverance*-style dog-faces. "Hinterland" is a reaction to that brain-numbing prejudice.

AC Let's go back to what you were saying about making beauty. At the end of *Whylah Falls*, Shelley says, "We are responsible / for Beauty" (151). Yet, at the centre of that book, there is a crucible of pain. Is that the burden of words, then, to find beauty in pain?

GEC I think it is the means to find the strength to continue. Being able to see beauty, to create beauty, to know beauty, is an antidote, a means of balancing the pain, especially for the oppressed. We see that oppressed communities everywhere tend to be creative, a communal kind of creativity. I'm thinking of music especially. Music comes out of that and sometimes even art, such as wall murals, and these are created to express a communal consciousness. People may not even think of it as being "beautiful." It exists as a necessity, something they have to do to manifest their existence. It says we have a right to be here even if we are

oppressed; even if we are forced to suffer, we will continue to be here. We have an existence, and we have a means of defining our own existence for ourselves. Identity doesn't depend upon a ruling class or an over-group or a majority group. We have ideas and ideals. And I think, therefore, the artist, the poet, the writer, the musician has an opportunity — I don't want to say "a responsibility" — to articulate a communal consciousness. Depending on one's own philosophical orientation, one may find materials that strengthen one's own work in terms of the interest of the collective. A poet can reflect a community's art back to the community.

AC Isn't this what *Whylah Falls* does? It depicts the crucible of pain and gives back the beauty that can be claimed from that terrible experience.

GEC I'd like to think so. Another intention I had in writing that book was that I wanted to write something that I could read to my community. One of the problems I ran into with *Saltwater Spirituals*, even though many of the poems in that work talk about Black Nova Scotia, was that many of the poems are at an abstract, intellectual level. The difference between the two books is that the poems and stories in *Whylah Falls* were deliberately written to be read aloud and to be read in front of my own community. 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. Everyone else was a performer. I was there as the poet. I read in the way I had been taught to read in the university, which is very formal and very Atwood-like in terms of being 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.

AC That's interesting because *Saltwater Spirituals* seems to come directly out of your community. It begins, after all, with the dozen church poems, and it's the story of Richard Preston (Black Refugee, 1812; founder of the African United Baptist Association). So, therefore, the difference must have had to do with the way you present your material in the two books. *Saltwater Spirituals* has a different line from *Whylah Falls*, a very short, free verse line as compared to the blank verse line of *Whylah Falls*.

GEC That's very true, but there is also a difference in terms of substance and tone and direction. *Saltwater Spirituals*, even though it was

a reflection of, and a reaction to, my Nova Scotian history, was at the same time very much informed by what I had been studying in a way that hadn't yet been filtered out. The material hadn't yet been transmuted into my own voice. I was writing the poetry I thought I should be writing as opposed to stuff I had to write. And that was, I think, the difference. When I heard this audience reaction — there were two hundred people there that night — I was, of course, shocked, but luckily I had just written a piece, "Love Letter to an African Woman," which is in *Whylah Falls* (58-59), and I read that, and they loved it. The people got quiet and they started to say, "Preach it! Testify! That's it brother!" And the applause at the end was rich. It was intense. And I said to myself, I will never write again anything I cannot read before my own community.

AC So is poetry performance for you now?

GEC I think it always should be. For me, poetry is not only a printed form, a printed art. It is also an oral art, and it should always be. The two should never be separated. One should have a poem that reads silently as well as it does vocally.

AC Yet *Saltwater Spirituals* has a very oratorical quality, especially in the latter half where you are presenting Richard Preston's life story and where he is speaking.

GEC That's very true. I think there has always been a drive towards rhetoricity for me. I am interested in that, having grown up in the Baptist Church where I listened to someone orate or preach. I wanted to do a couple of pieces of that sort in *Whylah Falls*. And, of course, the Reverend Langford character was my way of doing that. I find that kind of speaking spellbinding. Last weekend, I attended a Black church service in Durham, North Carolina, and the way the minister performed reminded me so much of the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax. He didn't even use a text. He just performed. It was a twenty minute address that had people standing and shouting and laughing. At the same time, it was very spiritual. And I think that quality is there in some of my poetry where I am attempting oratory.

AC Were you, at one point, headed toward the ministry?

GEC Oh God. That's a telling statement. Yes and no. What I mean is that at different times in my life I've been pulled towards Christianity. I've read the Bible three times completely through and mean to do so again. At one point in my life, I considered myself to be "born again," but it didn't last very long. I still have a respect and interest in all that. From

time to time late at night, I'll tune into the Christian TV channel just to see what's going on. There's this one guy, a Black minister, evangelical — no notes — an extemporaneous, revival-fashion preacher, who said, "You've got tons of dirt on your Bible." I thought, "That's a great line." So I stole it and put it in *Beatrice Chancy*.

AC Alliteration seems to be the preferred rhythmic device — accenting stresses — in *Saltwater Spirituals*. Between *Saltwater Spirituals* and *Whylah Falls* do you make a shift from the psalmic alliterative line to Renaissance blank verse, and is that because of the epic inclination in *Whylah Falls*?

GEC Absolutely. Also, my analysis at the time was that blank verse line is the basic line in English poetry, and it's the line we are stuck with no matter where we are from and no matter who we are. I think in Canada, because of the fact that we fall between Britain and the U.S., where the poets have felt freer to move away from the standard line, a lot of poets are closer to blank verse. I've never felt comfortable with completely unfettered free verse even though I was writing it in *Saltwater Spirituals*. I always felt that there was something else that I needed. I found that with blank verse, although with deviation from it. In my work, the iambic line is really messed up, complicated, abruptly stopped at points by my heavy use of spondees, trochees especially, and, of course, pyrrhics. This is the way we speak.

AC Do you think an attachment to blank verse is particularly Maritime?

GEC Yes.

AC There is among Maritime poets a tendency toward disciplined forms as in the work of Milton Acorn, Fred Cogswell, John Thompson, Alan Wilson. Is this regard for form among Maritime poets an aspect of what you refer to as "anti-modernity modernism" ("The Birth and Rebirth" 72)?

GEC These are the forms that we have literally inherited because our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents loved and adored and used these forms, which are still around. The Nova Scotia Poetry Society publishes, every few years, a collection of poems by its members, and they are almost always sonnets, quatrains, and rhyming poems of one sort or another. This is the common perception of what poetry should be here in the Maritimes. I can't see that not affecting poets. So even though we may be well aware of free verse and all the other forms and techniques that may be available

to us, our poetic consciousnesses have been formed in this environment where people still expect you to be able to produce a sonnet.

AC You use the sonnet a great deal. There are at least eight in *Whylah Falls*, and *Beatrice Chancy* has a number of them. Do you see your work in the sonnet as existing in a continuum with the work of Milton Acorn and Archibald Lampman, who used the sonnet for social-political purposes?

GEC I am knowledgeable about their uses of the sonnet, particularly Acorn's, and to a certain extent, Lampman's as well; my only deviation from it is that my lines tend not to rhyme, but it was the same for Acorn.

AC Acorn was writing seventeen-line sonnets, nine-line sonnets, and yet, for him, they were still sonnets because they had the structure, the dialectical structure — as formerly in the octave and sestet — of the sonnet. He wanted to free the sonnet from the imprisonment of the fourteen-line form.

GEC I think this, also, is postcolonial. We have inherited this thing. Now, what can we do with it? How does it work here on this side of the Atlantic? This is one of the interesting things about East Coast poetry in general. On the one hand, our landscape is somewhat reminiscent of the British Isles. And the seasons are somewhat similar although our seasons are far more intense. That makes us feel on the East Coast that we can access British poetry. It's not completely alien to us, or even to our way of speaking. But at the same time, we are different; we are in America so there is a tendency toward a little more freedom, a little less formality, a little more abruptness, in speech. All of that gets translated into the poetry. Although there is still this tenuous connection with British poetry, it is specifically with British poetry no later than Dylan Thomas. I don't think anyone follows more recent British poets unless it's the work of Seamus Heaney or Derek Walcott, who also counts as a British poet, I think. But for the most part, when we think about British poetry, it ends for us with Dylan Thomas.

AC Yeats certainly enters your own work.

GEC Definitely, but, then, so does Pound, a poet I have a lot of trouble with, and for good reasons. Nevertheless, his drive for a powerful simplicity — a simplicity still encoded within form — is very attractive.

AC Is it the musicality of Yeats that is so consonant with the Maritime voice?

GEC There's a poem by Harry Thurston, in a collection called *Clouds Flying Before the Eye*, which is written in the voice of a next-door neighbour. Its rhythm, its muscularity, its at-homeness, and the plainness of the speech is very Yeatsian. It's what Yeats was doing in his later poems.

AC Is there a Maritime poetic? Or is that too cruel a question?

GEC It's cruel. I know I can't get out of it by just calling it pastoral. And I won't because it's more than that.

AC I appreciate your assertion of the pastoral in Maritime poetry, but this is a question about line and form and voice. Aside from content, how do we identify the Maritime poem?

GEC This is tricky. It's like asking how do you identify a Black poem or a poem by a woman?

AC A few moments ago, you were talking about poetry in terms of geography, and in one poem you talk about our "beach-broken speech" ("East Coasting," *Saltwater* 49). You seem to be saying that geography has gotten into poetry in the Maritimes.

GEC That's so even in terms of the way people speak. There is a very distinctive way of speaking in Newfoundland — but not just in Newfoundland — also in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and P.E.I. There's an accent difference — different from the kinds of English spoken in Ontario, and for that matter, different from Quebec, or anywhere else in the country — and there's a different word stock. It's an elemental diction, which is, at the same time, quite picturesque. Look at some of those South Shore phrase books...

AC ...which you raided for *Beatrice Chancy*.

GEC Oh, I certainly have, and also for *Whylah Falls*. They were like Bibles. I picked up Lewis Poteet's phrase books and that got me listening very closely to what people have to say. There's a line in *Beatrice Chancy* that I got from my uncle [Rex Mendes]. He was talking about crooked politicians, and he said about this one guy in Halifax: "He's so greedy, he'd even steal the leaves off the trees." I love that.

AC I like the line in *Beatrice Chancy* where Deal says, "Dice ain't got the sense God gave a dog in a fit."

GEC That came from Kishi. She's right over there (George's friend Kishi [Darlene Djomgoué, née Lawrence] happened to be on the same ferry crossing).

AC You're fairly obsessive about light. There's "J.M.W. Turner's Nova Scotia" (*Lush Dreams* 80), where light "raptures" what it touches; the as-yet unpublished "Paris Annapolis," where light, as the title indicates, collapses the geographically remote. And, of course, there is the poem that begins, "drunk with light / i think of maritime country" (*Saltwater Spirituals* 24). Is it light that nails us to Maritime space?

GEC That's a really interesting idea. I know that there is a particular kind of sky that one sees in Nova Scotia in April, which I really like. There's a certain quality of light that is very moody and changeable and full of various colours, kind of stormy. A turmoil of colour in the sky and in the light. And it is well known throughout the Maritimes that we can have a cloudy day, and a rainy day, and a sunny day, often within a few minutes of one another. I've always found that variety very enticing.

AC In the *Quarry* essay, "Discovering Whylah Falls," you describe how a group of ten poems separated itself from a projected collection called "The Book of Liberty." This rogue group eventually became *Whylah Falls*. Did the rest of "The Book of Liberty" become *Lush Dreams*, the 1994 book?

GEC Yes.

AC You say that the persistent concerns of Africadian Literature from its inception in 1785 (with the work of John Marrant, an African-American Methodist missionary) to the present are liberty, justice and faith. Is it accurate to say that *Saltwater Spirituals* is the book of faith, *Whylah Falls* the book of justice, and *Lush Dreams* the book of liberty?

GEC That's a nice way of putting it. I would never have thought of that myself. There's another formulation I've come up with. I'm struck by the revolutionary slogans that are usually tripartite: "land, bread, justice," the Soviet Revolution, and, of course, "liberty, fraternity, equality," the French Revoulution. Africadia also seemed to have a tripartite slogan, or a statement of what it is we are questing for. I thought "liberty, justice, faith" summed it up pretty well. But then in *Whylah Falls*, it's "beauty, liberty, and justice." So I would prefer to think of *Whylah Falls* as the book of beauty if one is going to trilogy my work.

AC So, then, where is *Beatrice Chancy* going to fit in?

GEC Realism is the word that comes to mind.

AC I wouldn't think of *Beatrice Chancy* as a realistic work.

GEC Not realism in that sense. Perhaps pessimism is a better word.

AC I began by saying that I found *Beatrice Chancy* to be a lot like *Whylah Falls*, but it's also very different from *Whylah Falls*. There's metaphysical grief in *Beatrice Chancy* in spite of its intense physicality. In *Whylah Falls*, faith is abiding — at the end, faith is still in place — but in *Beatrice Chancy*, they're beyond faith. Is that so?

GEC I think so. This is going to sound really grandiose, but I was reading a lot of Dante, so I look at *Whylah Falls* as the “Paradiso” and *Beatrice Chancy* as the “Inferno.” It wasn't really intentional; it was just the direction *Beatrice Chancy* was going in. I knew I wanted to write a tragedy and not one where there was going to be any easy sort of resolution at the end. She does take action; it's good action, positive action. At the same time, it results in her own destruction. But sometimes that is necessary if you're going to strike that blow for liberty, independence and freedom. Sometimes you suffer and lose. She's in a situation where she doesn't have any other choice but to act.

AC She goes through an amazing transformation from the girl we meet in the beginning, who is carrying apple blossoms and a Bible, and wearing a crucifix. She is so very innocent and abounding in faith in the beginning, and, then, she becomes the instigator of revenge. She takes the dagger from Lead's hand and pulls him toward the act. Beatrice epitomizes the libretto's metaphysical (and political) concerns when she describes the Bible as “wasps' paper that wants burning” and denounces prayer as futile. It's coming out in 1999, isn't it, on the 400th anniversary of the events?

GEC From Polestar, and I've got a November first deadline. I plan to finish it in Italy, where the original events transpired.

AC *Beatrice Chancy* is far bleaker than what has preceded it, but nothing as compared to those poems (ms. of the book that is to follow *Beatrice*) that I've gotten from you recently.

GEC Oh, yes, those nasty things.

AC The Vesuvian poems. They are volcanic: venomous and vituperative. But they are also misogynist.

GEC You think so? That's dangerous. Problematic.

AC In one poem, there is “slut” and “whore” and “bitch,” and in

another, “Seraphic virgins...gush bilge and crap” (“Res lascivas seu obscenas”). Are you surprised I found them misogynist?

GEC I know I’m going to be critiqued on that basis for some of them. What I was trying to do, and this may not be much of something to try to accomplish, and maybe it’s just dangerous and stupid, and, as you say, misogynistic, but these are poems that I’m planning to publish as part of a manuscript that I’m calling “Out.” What I’m interested in doing in these poems is exploring the modes of unacceptable thought and just letting the poems be there as ugly, awful, nasty and as difficult as they are. There’s something in it to offend everybody; so I’ll never be able to publish another book in my life!

AC But there is also tremendous word energy in those poems. They are like the work of the young John Donne, misogynist and bluntly unromantic, spoken with force, hurled. You seem to be reacting against your own earlier romantic work.

GEC That work [the forthcoming “Out”] is divided in terms of the seven deadly sins, and so some of those poems, which will most likely be seen as misogynist, will appear in the section called “Lust”; some will appear in “Wrath”; some in “Greed,” and so forth. “Depression” is another category, a modern sin, as is “Fear.”

AC A different kind of canon, this time!

GEC I have Blake in mind — *The Proverbs of Hell*, and *The Songs of Experience*, as opposed to *Innocence*. Sade is also an influence.

AC In the “Out” poems, are you giving voice to Francis Chancy (the villain in *Beatrice Chancy*)?

GEC Maybe. Yes, definitely, because there are sentiments like these given to him in *Beatrice Chancy*. This is a weasel answer, but “Out” is all of the above. Some of “Out” is stuff left over from *Beatrice*. Some of it is there just because I thought the lines were strong even if they are nasty and awful. All of this is stuff you shouldn’t think, and certainly shouldn’t say, but my desire here is to say it anyway and see what happens. Not that I expect anything positive to happen, or even that I’ll get the book published. I’ve just sent the manuscript out to a potential publisher. Not everything in it is going to be offensive though. “Paris Annapolis” is in it, and other pieces of that sort, and some reflective pieces. What I really have in mind for “Out” is that these poems will enter the world and cause ripples, but I am not writing just for the purpose of provoking people or to cause a

disturbance. For my own mental health, I want to get the stuff out there. Then I can just put it away and say, “O.K. there’s my nasty, *Inferno*, Part Two, Book,” and then I can move on to other things.

AC The question is, how far can anyone go with bold language? That issue arises in *Beatrice Chancy* as well. There are some extraordinarily bold lines in *Beatrice*. There is, for example, what Lead says when he comes into Lustra’s room after killing Francis Chancy — “Encunted, the dagger fucked his left eye.” The line begins with an invented word, a neologism, doesn’t it?

GEC No, it’s not. It’s a translation from Sade. I can’t claim it as an original. How can I put it? This new material is violent, and violation. It’s stuff I haven’t really explored before. I think *Whylah Falls* is a very “nice” work because it has that tapestry, the music, the flowers, and the food, and it has a good moral and all of that.

AC It is, ultimately, reassuring. Beauty does seem to win out in *Whylah Falls*, in spite of its tragic events, and in spite of the judicial inequity that stands behind it. There is something deeply affirmative about *Whylah Falls*, and there is not in *Beatrice Chancy*.

GEC I see these later poems [“Out”] as acts of war.

AC Who’s the enemy?

GEC It’s not very well defined, but there are some people whose names are in that long poem [“Contre la nouvelle trahison des grimauds”], a long bitter satire, 150 lines, using a six-line stanza, about various writers and critics. If the order I have in mind [for “Out”] works, it will be the first poem in the section called “Wrath.” I feel that there are a lot of issues that we never really talk about in Canadian poetry. I was thinking specifically of the folks in Toronto and how there is a certain kind of official political line that one has to tow, and an official poetic that one has to respect. And I just wondered, so what happens if we don’t follow that? You probably really get throttled. Let’s kick down the door a little bit and see what happens. I don’t expect it to be very well received.

AC First, you’ll have to get it published, but I don’t think you’ll have any trouble doing that because of its Vesuvian word energy and because it’s at the edge of the continent in the boldness of its language.

GEC It’s certainly not *Whylah Falls*; it’s not comforting and reassuring. I see it as something I just have to do. But I am also very interested now in the collision of words. In this manuscript, I am interested in colliding

words together and seeing what happens. I am struck by all the potential inner rhymes and the playful hidden rhymes you can make with English words. I'm interested in the sound combinations that can happen.

AC It happens with vulgar words as well as with beautiful words. I think that's one of the things this manuscript illustrates: language breeds maggots as well as beauty.

GEC You could say that I'm on a quest for boisterous language. But you know in that poem you were just talking about ["Res lascivas seu obscenas"], I was really paying homage to the "Seraphic virgins" who celebrate Cohen and Layton and Glassco. I was writing it in the spirit of Layton, who I read as a kind of Sadean voice, a poet and thinker full of piss and vinegar, and fire, sheer nastiness. There's no one doing that right now in English poetry in Canada. "Out" is a work in homage to Layton.

AC Is "Out" the abrogation of the anonymity of X (chief character in *Whylah Falls*)?

GEC Yes, I suppose that "Out" is a kind of reversal of X's anonymity, especially if you consider X to be a persona for myself. I guess that I felt safer projecting my own attitudes through X and letting him take the heat, so to speak, even though he is close to me. "Out" is, of course, a naked statement of my horrid personal failings, my own addictions to lust, wrath, greed, envy, pride, depression, fear, and *accidie*. Still, I think a semi-persona is still at play in "Out." For instance, there's the speaker in my sonnet "Nabokov" expressing lust for a thirteen-year-old girl. I know I could never act on such an impulse, but it was important to explore its reality. Then again, I'd like to think that I'm not the only one who feels from time to time immoral, sinful and politically unrighteous impulses and thoughts. Another example of what I'm getting at here is my poem "The Abortion," which describes the process in monstrous terms. It reveals, perhaps, my ambivalence for the procedure, even though I logically, conscientiously, correctly, affirm a woman's right to decide the fate of a pregnancy. Similarly, in that long howl of satirical hatred, "Contre la nouvelle trahison des grimauds," I denounce hypocrite and sycophant writers because I, too, have been too much a hypocrite and sycophant. The presiding spirit in "Out" is that of Irving Layton, that is, his penchant for speaking raw war.

AC You have moved some distance then from the earlier position where desire is the generative force in your poetry. Is that so?

GEC Maybe it's a different kind of desire. I think it is still there as a kind of yearning, but there is more voice now for anger, which I have never expressed much before. It's been there on the margins, but most of the poems said, "this is terrible, what has happened, but we're resigned to it."

AC Speaking of Blake, you describe *Whylah Falls* as a "dictionary of innocence and experience" ("Discovering Whylah Falls" 51). Does *Lush Dreams* extend that dictionary since its second section, "Gehenna" — poems about assassinations and crises — depicts the murder of innocence by experience on a world-wide scale in the twentieth century?

GEC For me, *Lush Dreams* is a kind of accident. A lot of the poems had been around for a long time. Some of the poems in the "Gehenna" section were written in the early '80s, and, as you have pointed out, I was planning at one point to publish this one book called "The Book of Liberty." I was going to include all the poems on assassinations and political events, but then *Whylah Falls* came along and knocked that project out of the water. Then when interest in my work picked up, because of *Whylah Falls*, there were some people who were interested in getting hold of *Saltwater Spirituals* and wanted to see it reprinted. But Lesley Choyce [publisher, Pottersfield Press] wanted to do another book and to select for it some of the poems from *Saltwater Spirituals*. I knew this would be a place where I could get rid of, so to speak, these poems which had been sitting around for so long, poems that had been published, but had not appeared in book form. I decided to set up the collection in terms of states of mind. The "Gehenna" section was the most coherent. I always knew I was going to have poems dealing with the assassinations in the '60s because I had grown up with them. They were part of my universe. I almost feel like turning against *Lush Dreams*. I don't see it as being the kind of book that I would have done if I hadn't been asked to do it. I don't feel as close to these poems.

AC "Gehenna" isn't the strongest part of that book, but there are some wonderful poems in it such as "Watercolour for Negro Expatriates in France." It works really well at the beginning of that section. The speaker asks the expatriates: "What are calendars to you? / And, indeed, what are atlases?" (14). Are the expatriates of no atlas, no calendar, rebuked by the twentieth-century calendar of political saints and martyrs that follows in "Gehenna"?

GEC I think there is an even more immediate rebuking that is going on. In fact, I didn't understand it at the time that I wrote the poem, but

I now know that I was reacting as a Black Canadian to Black American experience. I was doing a kind of Canadian critique of Americans, except they happened to be Black Americans and I am a Black Canadian. What I was doing in that poem, at the age of eighteen, was responding to African-American experience, which has been the defining experience for Black Nova Scotians even though it is not our experience. People complain about this sometimes: “Black Nova Scotians celebrate Martin Luther King Day and do all this other stuff that is oriented around the United States. What does that have to do with them really? Why aren’t they celebrating Nova Scotian notables? Why does it always have to be some African-American hero?” I think I was reacting to that by picking on this little group of expatriate artists for fleeing a country where they couldn’t pursue their art. It was tongue-in-cheek, partially ironic. But, at the same time, I wrote that poem in Windsor Plains! For crying out loud! Nobody left Windsor Plains and went to France. It was another postcolonial thing, except the people I was reacting against were African-Americans. While really appreciating what they had created, what they had done, I was also seeing in their flight a kind of evasion of responsibility. It was, of course, really easy for me to make that statement from my standpoint.

AC Not only there, but in other places, you reprimand “Ulyssean” roaming — the urge to be a traveller or a wanderer, a permanent migrant. In your work, there is a tension between home and “Ulyssean” roaming. Is that a tension that you yourself feel now that you are living in the States?

GEC I think that I’ve been feeling it for a while, ever since I left Nova Scotia for the first time when I was nineteen. I was back home in 1985-87, which is an instructive period for me because that’s when I started to write *Whylah Falls* — without really knowing it. That’s when those poems began to generate, but then I finished it in Ottawa. Basically, I’ve been away ever since. I haven’t had an address in Nova Scotia since 1987. How can I write about this place anymore when my connection to it is so tenuous? I really feel this dilemma between being away and wanting to get back. In fact, one of the projects I had in mind for this particular visit was to look for a cottage so I can come back here in the summers and write and be around people and steal their lines. And have more material to work with.

AC That sounds like nostalgia for home, but there are also conflicting feelings about home, aren’t there?

GEC Definitely. It’s possible to write pastoral poetry about Nova Scotia, but there is also prejudice, narrow-mindedness, a degree of provincialism, which is actually the same everywhere, so this is not an anti-Nova

Scotia or anti-Maritimes statement. Although we are always being accused of being provincials and doing provincial things, the whole country Canada is provincial from an American point of view. What is this game I see some critics from Toronto playing — if it comes from the Maritimes, it's automatically provincial?

AC Maritimers live degrees of marginality. We are the Maritime margin relative to Toronto, but we are the Canadian margin in regards to the States. You yourself talk about your culture being marginal within the Maritimes....

GEC Absolutely. So why should the world pay any attention? Why should anyone who reads English in Australia care about anything we have to say in Nova Scotia? On the other hand, we have no choice but to try to articulate some degree of our reality and of our consciousness as Maritimers, our way of looking at the world, whether that is one way or several ways. But that has to go into the writing if the work is going to have any kind of resonance. This is why I so admire Yeats and Walcott, whose work I've just reread again. I see in both of these poets a real insistence upon the geography, upon place, and a willingness, an insistence on speaking to the whole world from their location. Writing about the Caribbean, Walcott says, "Yeh, it's true. We don't have any history. Everything is all broken down. Nothing ever works. We're poor. But here we have stories, here we have our own history."

AC In terms of your own work, that's what invites readers into *Whylah Falls* and keeps them there. *Whylah Falls* creates an entire world, a cosmos of relationships, and of humans in relation to nature. The degree of rootedness is what is attractive in *Whylah Falls*, and it is what is sacrificed, to a certain extent, in the "Gehenna" section of *Lush Dreams*.

GEC Writing *Whylah Falls* was a communal process. I was very much a part of people's conversations. I was sitting in people's kitchens and writing furiously as they were speaking and taking stories and events and reworking them into poems, or into a poetic line or statement of some kind. That's my strength as a poet. That's my material.

AC I want to pursue a slightly different angle on the subject of community and ask about the conservative revolution that you talk about in "The Birth and Rebirth of Africadian Literature." In "Letters to Young Poets," you say, "Every poem must be a living insurrection...striking revelation or revolution," but in "Birth and Rebirth," there is, as well, the burden of conservatism, the call to preserve the past. What about this

paradox of the conservative revolution?

GEC I'm attracted to Red Toryism. I'm attracted to the idea of revolution as a means of creating a more equitable society, but at the same time I'm also interested in the idea of tradition and the sanctity of tradition. Tradition is something that needs to be maintained and upheld, as long as it's not oppressive, because it's a way of defining one's existence, as a group, as a people. So there is this Janus-faced approach one has to have, or one should have, as a poet. On the one hand, you're looking forward to the future, but, also, you're not afraid to look back and say, "this is important," and carry it forward into the future. There is a tyranny of newness that can sometimes happen: "Sonnet. That's finished. We don't need to do that any more. That ended in 1916 in the trenches in France. Nobody does sonnets anymore. Forget about Wilfred Owen too."

AC This is the battle against liberalizing, homogenizing modernity that you talk about in "The Birth and Rebirth"?

GEC One should be able to say that this form, this technique, is still interesting, still useful, and we can still do things with it. I like the fact that some of the poems in *Whylah Falls* are in the form that John Milton takes to a particular limit in *Paradise Lost*. All these forms are there to be renewed. I appreciate the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and the more self-consciously *avant-garde* poets, but I also insist that there is a way to be *avant-garde* that looks at the past and recovers what is still useful. That, also, can be radical. Revolutionary writing is not simply writing that is disembodied or very abstract or particularly vulgar as a means of claiming some kind of newness. And what about the audience? Can people read it? I still think we have a job to tell a story. Everybody can play games. We can all do that. We can write word games, and other people who write word games will enjoy them. But what if you desire to be read by your next-door neighbour, the person down the street, your relatives? Shouldn't the writing be accessible to them?

AC The narrative line is important to you?

GEC My horror is to be a writer who is not read by his own community. I like to think that I am giving back too. I am saying to the world this received line, or this image, deserves to be enshrined in print and given to everyone because, at this moment, it is poetic. It is poetry, and it should be given the permanency of print. I like reading folklore and phrase books. I just finished reading the *Encyclopaedia of Black Folklore*. Writing *Beatrice Chancy* I read all sorts of slave narratives to find the odd

suggestion of a line.

AC Does your being at Duke make a difference in your poetry?

GEC Yes. For one thing, the “Out” poems and their generally aggressive tones, images and rhetorics reflect an American *chutzpah*. I know that this is a cliché — the idea that the U.S. is a less polite — no, more impolite — culture than the Canadian version. But, after four years in the United States, I can report that the cliché feels true. So my “Out” poems attempt a U.S. talk-show-like candour — and even effrontery.

AC What is the crossover between your creative work and your critical work?

GEC In both contexts, I’m trying to establish an Africadian or African-Canadian vision, or perspective, on Canadian history and politics — and/or a personal vision attempting to rescue or assert certain aesthetic/political viewpoints combatting the hegemony of the standard aesthetic/po-litical viewpoints. And I even want to inject orality into my critical work.

AC You’ve written frequently about George Grant. (“Oh God,” G. E.C. groans). He is quoted in “Discovering Whylah Falls,” referred to in “The Birth and Rebirth of Africadian Literature,” and you wrote a long review article on *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity*. So, you and George Grant? Is it fair to say that you are in sympathy with his thinking?

GEC For a long time, I think, I wrote rather uncritically about George Grant, up until I read that Céline essay [Grant’s essay, included in *Subversion*]. I read more or less without the kind of criticism that I now know I must bring to his work. What I originally liked about Grant was that he was able to provide a model for viewing social issues that allowed for a progressive agenda while at the same time bringing forth a kind of classical morality. I still do like that. I still think that *Lament for a Nation* is a very powerful piece. At the same time, I now know I have to part company with him at certain points. In the Céline article, for example, particularly in the version that was published in the *Queen’s Quarterly*, he veers into anti-Semitism. It seems to be very clear that that’s what it is. I’m surprised that *Queen’s Quarterly* published the article. The end of that essay (“Céline: Art and Politics” *QQ* 1983) is vicious, not simply ill-advised. Basically, it is a ridiculous piece of writing that calls into question everything that he puts forward in *Lament*, which is a kind of humanitarian

conservatism, if I can call it that. It allows for a critique of capitalism, a critique of the United States particularly, which is always heartening for a Canadian. The problem with conservatism, like any “ism,” is that it can be taken too far. And I think Grant does that. I will say in his partial defence that Céline has been recovered by a whole lot of people of very progressive political stripes. I think Grant is a richly significant and important philosopher and thinker, particularly in terms of the English Canadian, if not in terms of the entire Canadian, context, and he had a progressive impact on people like Dennis Lee. Grant single-handedly created English Canadian nationalism in the 1960s. There is something to be said for that. He took principled stands on Vietnam and on corporate control. A lot of his pronouncements in terms of the drive of the whole world towards a bland homogenizing globalism seem to be taking shape. In fact, in 1965, he predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union. He doesn’t say it in so many words, but he basically predicts that and the triumph of global capitalism, and he says how dangerous this will be for people and how destructive it will be — from his point of view — for a moral, principled way of life. He was a prophet of what has taken shape. Grant foresaw the rise of the global capitalist state. And if that’s what we’re going to have, it’s back to Marx! Even though Communism as a means of organizing a society, as a government, has been a complete fiasco, the theory is still showing life because its critique of capitalism remains valid. We need to have some global means of controlling capitalism.

AC If a strong Canadian nationalist position, such as Grant advocates in his conservatism, is one of the things that would be a bulwark against globalization, doesn’t that very nationalism, at the same time, make it difficult for the Maritimes to have, and to express, its uniqueness? You can’t have it both ways.

GEC I think you can have it both ways. There’s a difference between nationalism and patriotism, love of one’s own place. I think you have to manifest that love of place. There is no way you can simply be a bland poet. I was looking at an anthology of love poems, and John Clare was there. It gladdened me that he was there. Clare’s work is very local. I love the fact that he is willing to celebrate the woman who lives across the field. The language reflects that; it’s an everyday, workaday language of the rural people of England in his time (1793-1864). His language is homely, even frumpy, bumpy and lumpy. It is so much out of where he is. I think a Maritime poetic idiom should reflect place in that way. And it’s not opposing anybody else; it’s simply being true to your own roots. That’s a struggle because there are a lot of people out there who will tell

you that your roots don't mean anything. If I can't speak in the rhythms and nuances, use the diction and vocabulary, of the people I grew up with, then what am I saying — they are not worth anything, that the way they speak is a nullity in the world? It can't be for me. I come from that. If they're a nullity, I'm a nullity. If I don't want to be a nullity, I have to do as much as I can to give voice to their voices, their experiences. There's a certain beauty in that. For instance, I've just written a poem, which I'm never going to publish, called "Queries for Kipling." I take his story "Gunga Din," and try to imagine how that would play out in the North End of Halifax. This is how I have to address Kipling. Not in terms of the British Empire, or what Kipling did in India, but rather, what did the British Empire mean for me as a Black kid growing up in Nova Scotia, a Black kid who sang "God Save the Queen" and meant it; who had a Union Jack in his classroom and loved it; read *The Jungle Book* stories and loved them. So, how do I react to that? I can't talk about that by writing about the Caribbean or writing about Africa. My relationship to history and literature has to come through where I come from. That's what I respond to in other people's writing. Another British writer I like is Hardy because he has such a strong sense of place.

AC Northrop Frye, whom I gather you are not very fond of, said that identity is regional and local and rooted in the imagination. It's how the imagination engages with where it is that makes for potent speech. From your localness, you engage in an argument with someone like Kipling. From your own ground. Perhaps that's what "standing your ground" really means?

GEC This is the ground upon which I received these figures, this culture, these impositions. I didn't receive them anywhere else. They came to me here. I have to respond to them from the same context. In a poem I've just published, "Antiphony," I am responding as a Black Nova Scotian to various literary figures and talking about the fact that they meant nothing to men and women who were probably illiterate, who worked as labourers and gypsum miners, or who worked in "service" as domestics. What did Shakespeare mean to them? Nothing. Why should he have meant anything to them? What kind of relationship, then, should I have to that literature, a literature of colonization? How do I work through that? By realizing that, while our language derives from this enclosed language, it is, at the same time, a *de facto* reaction against it. I see myself as being in a combative dialogue with English poetry, with American poetry, especially with African-American poetry, and with Canadian poetry.

AC If you have all of these dialogical relationships with the canon, with the “centre,” are you, also, as a Black poet, in a feisty dialogue with Maritime literature?

GEC I don’t feel that I am, or certainly not as much. I see myself as being in alliance with Acorn and Alden Nowlan and other poets from here. I don’t see myself as having any kind of tussle with them.

AC But if we move to the next geographic sphere, then the dialogue is combative?

GEC Definitely. For instance, as much as I may admire Atwood’s poetry, I think it comes out of a very different growing up experience — the bush in northern Ontario. That’s valid for her, but to say that *that* is the voice for Canadian poetry sticks in my craw. It’s an important voice, a distinctive voice, a rich voice, but it’s not my voice, or the voice of my experience. But of course it is not her job to give voice to my experience.

AC I guess what happens is that one kind of voice fills so much of the literary space in Canada that the “beach-broken speech” has to nudge its way in. It has great difficulty in asserting its musicality or its particular words. Is it finding space in the literary landscape of Canada that is a difficulty for the Maritimer? With other Maritimers you share, do you, a particularly aggressive stance relative to the “centre”?

GEC I think so. Acorn certainly had that. I think it is another reason why I am attracted to Layton. He certainly saw himself as an outsider. Even though Layton was, and is, central to contemporary Canadian poetry, there is a sense in which he saw himself — I am sure of it — as an outsider, culturally. I like the fact that he is prepared to be very sexual and angry at the same time, without apology. When I reviewed his book *Fornalutx* [1992], I said that it reminded me of Sade. That was the first time anyone had ever noticed the Sadean influence in his work. I like Layton’s combativeness, and I see it in many Maritime poets.

AC It is interesting that in talking about Maritime poets, you have not named one woman poet!

GEC I knew you were going to mention that. When I think of Maritime women poets who mean something to me, I think of Kay Smith who hasn’t published a lot, but whose work I admire very much, and of Elizabeth Bishop, although she’s a long distance Maritime poet. When I was a younger poet, Bishop was a poet I was reading.

AC But not your contemporaries? Is it because women’s poetry

comes from yet another “community”? You talked about how your dialogue with other Maritime poets is cooperative, rather than combative. Is there, then, another community in the Maritimes, the community of women poets, and would that be true in any geographic area?

GEC I think such a community exists, and I think I have a cooperative relationship with it — with Maxine Tynes, Sylvia Hamilton, Janet Pope. But at the time I came to poetic voice, so to speak, the poets I was reading are the ones I have mentioned. Nowlan was born where I was born — Windsor, Nova Scotia. There’s an immediate connection. Then, again, I think the strongest women’s voices for me are those of my aunt [Joan Mendes, née Johnson] and my mother [Geraldine Elizabeth Clarke, née Johnson] and Kishi, and many, many other women I have known in my community. And the various women that I visited in the communities in the 1980s.

AC But what about those women’s voices that have not been mediated through a male voice?

GEC This brings up the whole question of mediation. I am not sure I’ve been all that much of a mediator. I’ve done some shaping, some nipping and tucking, here and there, but often I’ll simply write it down as I hear it. Not as appropriation, but as homage. Some of the stories in *Whylah Falls* came from things that my mother told me or my aunt told me, or things I overheard. For instance, the movie, *One Heart Broken into Song*, grows in part from a conversation I had with a woman who hauled me into her house and sat me down and said, “I’m going to tell you the story of my life.” This was the summer of 1986; I was doing a survey for the Black United Front. And there was this tremendous story, a story about a poisoning. I elaborated upon it, but the gist of it was in what she had to tell me. What I am doing is not so much giving Black women voice, but creating community.

AC I don’t know how long we’ve been talking, but that’s the Nova Scotia coast up ahead. What you have just said goes back, I think, to the question I asked you earlier: “Did you feel like an ‘amanuensis’ of a myth book when you were making *Whylah Falls*?” Since we’ve circled back, as well as crossed the bay, this is a good place to stop.

WORKS BY GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

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