

Re-Visioning Fredericton: Reading George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems*

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Re-Visioning Fredericton: Reading George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems*

JENNIFER ANDREWS

O snow-washed city of cold, white Christians,
So white you will not cut a black man's hair.

— Fred Cogswell, "Ode to Fredericton"

IF NORTHROP FRYE'S "WHERE IS HERE?" remains a critical touchstone for literary scholars in the twenty-first century,¹ then the city of Fredericton, New Brunswick, as a birthplace of English Canadian poetry, offers a particularly fascinating subject for discussion (see, e.g., Bailey; Brown; and Smith). It first gained prominence in the late nineteenth century as the hometown of the so-called Confederation poets, a group that included Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, and Francis Sherman; their interest in Maritime topography and eagerness to create romantically charged visions of Canada's birth were often extrapolated from the scenic vistas and refined living offered in the relatively tiny city of Fredericton and its surrounding areas.² And in 1947, the federal government declared the city to be "The Poets' Corner of Canada," in honour of the contributions of Roberts, Carman, and Sherman to a national tradition of poetry.³ Yet over time, representations of Fredericton in Canadian poetry have changed; over the past five decades, poets such as Alden Nowlan, Fred Cogswell, and George Elliott Clarke have begun to explore the issue of racism in the provincial capital. In Clarke's 2001 award-winning poetry collection, *Execution Poems*, Fredericton is the setting for the downfall of George and Rufus Hamilton, two African Canadian relatives of Clarke who murdered a taxi driver with a hammer and were subsequently executed by hanging; in these powerfully evocative poems, Clarke explores the impact of the city's Loyalist history and privileged population on the brothers. Conversely, he examines the brothers' brutal murder of a taxi driver, a crime that remains discursively imprinted on the local community; the

area of Fredericton where the murder took place, Barker's Point, is still nicknamed Hammertown.

Born and raised in Windsor Plains, Nova Scotia, Clarke sees himself as intimately connected to the Maritimes, and as an African Canadian writer and scholar he feels a "responsibility, too, to contest the erasure and silencing of black culture and history in Canada" (*Odysseys* 6).⁴ Given the representation of Fredericton in Clarke's *Execution Poems*, how might one reread the city's status in the annals of Canadian literary history? How does Clarke's depiction of Fredericton through the voices of George and Rufus shape his efforts to consciously construct an "imagined community" or nation for African Canadians, an "Africadia" in his rural Nova Scotia birthplace? In this article, by attending to the dominant whiteness of the city — so aptly depicted in the last lines of Cogswell's "Ode to Fredericton" — in conjunction with Clarke's poems, the literary locale of Fredericton becomes a critical site for examining not only questions of Canadian literary identities and the historical absence of black voices, but also the changing psychological and cultural landscape of this provincial capital. *Execution Poems* gives voice to otherwise disenfranchised African Canadians in the Maritimes and thus counters the predominantly Loyalist tone of Maritime literature in the twentieth century and beyond.

(Re)Presenting Fredericton

In a millennial special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, called *Where Is Here Now?*, a plethora of Canadian critics took the opportunity to revisit Frye's famous query, including Diana Brydon, who persuasively argues that "our actions are constrained but not predetermined by location" (14). Given Fredericton as a locale with a long and illustrious literary pedigree, how might Clarke reconfigure the "Where is here?" of this white Loyalist town to enable the voices of Rue and George to be heard? Brydon helpfully poses two alternative questions that are particularly applicable to Clarke's *Execution Poems*: "What are we doing here?" and "What is here doing to us?" (14). These self-conscious formulations move beyond location by focusing on the positioning of both place and individual within a specific community context. The interactive dimensions of self-identification and differentiation are not only central to understanding the individual and tragic stories of Rue and George in *Execution Poems* but also clarify Clarke's larger aims as an

African Canadian and Maritime-born poet writing about racism both in Fredericton specifically and in the region as a whole.

The arrival of the Loyalists in the Maritimes at the end of the American Revolution forever changed the area; with the combined population of the provinces totalling fewer than twenty thousand, the influx of over thirty thousand Loyalists had a dramatic impact (see Reid 64). New Brunswick was the most affected; the province went from 4,000 to 18,500 residents as a result of the American War of Independence, giving the Loyalists a strong majority (see Reid 70). While blacks were a significant part of this fleeing population, once settled in the Maritimes they quickly discovered that “their supposedly equal rights and privileges would not be tolerated by fellow migrants” (Reid 74).⁵ Fredericton was shaped by this vision, with the white Loyalist elite establishing the capital intent on making it a model colony. As Janice Kulyk Keefer explains, the Loyalists aimed “to create a ‘well-appointed, graded society of landed gentry whose eminence [would be] based on the ownership of land, supported by a disciplined yeomanry” (124). In choosing a site for the capital, they displaced long-established Maliseet and Acadian residents (see Reid 78-80), and as in the other Maritime provinces blacks in Fredericton were typically either slaves or relegated to menial labour and forced to reside on the outskirts of the city, in areas such as Barker’s Point.⁵ Moreover, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Fredericton Loyalists and their descendants placed a special emphasis on the education of the white upper and middle classes, in a bid to make the city, as Desmond Pacey puts it, “the most gentlemanly on earth” (177). Not surprisingly, then, A.J.M. Smith observes that the poetry of Roberts and Carman, among others, reflected a society that was “calm, settled, and certain; conservative and . . . rather narrow; a beautiful flowering of many traditions — the Loyalist, the Anglican, and the classical” (71).

The most famous of the Fredericton Confederation poets, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, pays tribute to the provincial capital in his 1881 poem “To Fredericton in May-Time.” Roberts employs the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form, written from the viewpoint of an adoring male lover (see Abrams 197), to describe the natural beauty of an early summer morning in Fredericton. The octave focuses on how the local elm trees create their own majestic vision, one that mirrors the elegance of one of the most visible buildings on the skyline, Christ Church

Cathedral, with its 198-foot-high spire and location on prime river-front real estate: “thy close elms assume / Round earth and spire the semblance of green billows.” (l. 6) In the sestet that follows, Roberts shifts focus to the image of the city as a female temptress who tantalizes the speaker with her soft spring air but ultimately leaves him unsatisfied. Notably, this image of Fredericton as siren is echoed and refigured in the manuscript of a 1942 public lecture, delivered at the provincial capital, in which Roberts explicitly personifies the natural beauty and insularity of the city: “But because she has sat long aloof, Narcissus-like admiring her own image in her splendid threshold water, and too loftily indifferent to proclaim her merits to the world, travel has gone blindly past her gates” (“City” 2). His selection of the Narcissus myth is especially significant because in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the young man is cursed — as punishment for mocking Echo — to forever be enamoured of his reflection, an image without substance that eventually kills him (see Ovid 149-61). Such blindness is literally echoed in Roberts’s later characterization of Fredericton, a portrait that may be read as reflecting the poet’s ambivalence about his hometown and the dangers of a city that does not look beyond its own riverbanks.

Subsequent writers — including Nowlan, Cogswell, and Clarke — have written poems about Fredericton that depict the city in far less glowing terms; they also highlight, by implication, what Roberts hints at but does not probe in his representation of the capital, namely a place whose history has been written to suit the desires of its most powerful occupants. Nowlan, who spent much of his life in New Brunswick, penned “Ancestral Memories Evoked by Attending the Opening of the Playhouse in Fredericton, New Brunswick” (1967), a poem that recalls the 1861 visit to Fredericton of Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Victoria’s seventh child, an event that was much celebrated at the time by the city’s Loyalist descendants. In the poem, Nowlan explores the racial and class hierarchies that exist within the city of Fredericton that relegated “the lower orders, / . . . the Frenchies / and . . . the sly and treacherous Indians,” to the riverbanks while privileged whites dine at nearby Government House.

Cogswell is even more overt and specific in his critique of the city’s prejudices in “Ode to Fredericton,” first published in his 1959 collection, aptly titled *Descent from Eden*. The poem was inspired by several

incidents that took place in Fredericton in late November and early December of 1947, when Cogswell was a student at the University of New Brunswick. Three black students, two of whom were Second World War veterans, attempted to get haircuts at local barbershops and were turned away because of their skin colour; in protest, over five hundred UNB students signed a petition boycotting downtown barbers and pledged to open a shop of their own, open to anyone, to be located on campus.⁷

For Cogswell, a young white New Brunswicker with Acadian and Loyalist roots, the injustice of these events clearly resonated for years to come. In “Ode to Fredericton,” he takes aim at Fredericton’s local elite, whose Christian charity and goodness, as the poem reveals, is tinged with hypocrisy. He employs winter weather to convey the prejudicial “whiteness” of those who control the city, as epitomized by the epigraph of this article. The exclusionary politics of the capital city are masked by the apparent purity and virtuousness of the snow, the cathedral so gloriously depicted by Roberts, and those who occupy the large houses of wealthy — primarily Loyalist — descendants that populate the downtown core:

White are your housetops, white too your vaunted elms
That make your stately streets long aisles of prayer,
And white your thirteen spires that point to your God
Who reigns afar in pure and whiter air,
And white the dome of your democracy —
The snow has pitied you and made you fair. (23)

Cogswell turns the elm-lined streets of downtown Fredericton into mock church aisles that lead to the cathedral spires and, by implication, God. But the “democracy” of the community appears to extend only as far as those whose complexions match the snow that blankets downtown. And as the poetic “I” suggests, the weather conditions reflect the natural world’s feelings of pity for the capital city and its prejudices; the luminescence of snow — its whiteness — does not necessarily breed justice for all citizens. In the final lines of the ode, Cogswell specifically recalls the 1947 barbershop incidents, overtly linking the coldness of snow and its ability to conceal the racial biases of good Christians whose attempts to preserve their community include the clearly un-Christian act of refusing to “cut a black man’s hair.” Cogswell suggests that a Fredericton barbershop — much like the separate drinking

fountains and designated seats at the back of the bus that dominated the American South throughout the 1960s (and beyond) — can also be read as a site of explicit racism. And by labelling the poem an ode, he reverses expectations — his poem may seem, at least initially, to praise Fredericton, with its elevated language and rich expressiveness, but the message delivered is highly critical, pointing to the long-standing marginalization of African Canadians in this provincial capital.

Fredericton's Blackness

George Elliott Clarke's acclaimed collection *Execution Poems*, published by Gaspereau, a small press in Nova Scotia, renders in poetic terms the stories of two mixed-race men hanged for murder in Fredericton, displacing the fixed physical location of the city with the public and private positioning of Rufus and George Hamilton, whose race, poverty, and poor planning doom them to certain death. The collection has a striking cover design that visually conveys the exclusion that Cogswell describes in "Ode to Fredericton." *Execution Poems* has a thick, textured black cover with the title and author's name embossed on it, as if to obscure it from vision, implicitly reversing the "whiteness" of the cold, Christian Frederictonians. And the poems themselves sustain this tension, with titles in blood-like red ink and the texts of the poems in black ink on creamy white paper.

The story that Clarke tells in the voices of Geo and Rue, shortened versions of their given names, is of African Canadian brothers whose anger, frustration, hunger, and feelings of "otherness" lead them to commit several crimes, including the heinous murder of a white cab driver. The gruesome details of the event, the punishments that follow, and the locale of Fredericton within this narrative are meticulously woven together in a series of first-hand poetic accounts of the murder itself and of life both before and after the crimes, including Clarke's own summary of their lives from the perspective of a living relative in "George and Rue: Pure, Virtuous Killers." In that poem, Clarke describes them as "rough dreamers, raw believers," whose "clear Negro and semi-Micmac" roots did not help their cause: "They were dangled from the gallows in the third hour of July 27, 1949 A.D. / They were my cousins, dead a decade before I was born. / My bastard phantoms, my dastard fictions" (12). Himself visibly African Canadian and born in the same rural community as his cousins, Clarke wrestles with the

fate of these men and their self-negation, explaining in the first poem of the collection, “*Le nègre* negated, meagre, *c’est moi* / . . . My black face must preface murder for you” (11).

Fredericton does figure prominently in *Execution Poems* as the location where Geo and Rue commit their deeds, but it is certainly not the only cause of their violent behaviour. Clarke’s poems outline a family and community legacy of abuse and neglect in Windsor Plains, with their father beating their mother because she is mulatto. Moreover, as children, Geo and Rue witness neighbours being horrifically murdered and lament their inability to describe what they have seen; as Rue puts it in “Child Hood II,” “A poor-quality poet crafting hoodlum testimony, / my watery storytelling’s cut with the dark rum of curses. / / This is how history darkens against its medium” (17). Through the voices of his cousins’ memories, Clarke articulates how race — this heritage of darkness and accompanying self-hatred that can be traced back to the days of slavery in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick — has shaped the lives and actions of these men.

While such a representation of rural Nova Scotia is not entirely new to Clarke — violence, poverty, and racism are endemic to the area — Rue and George’s stories of Windsor Plains lack the Edenic plenitude of natural vegetation, human hope, and passionate love that characterizes Clarke’s previous depictions of the more positively inflected imagined community of Africadia in *Whylah Falls* and *Beatrice Chancy* (see, e.g., Banks 66, 68-69). One notable exception is two poems in the middle of *Execution Poems*, titled “Duet” and “Rue’s Blues,” in which Rufus recalls a youthful love affair in Windsor Plains with an exotic and beautiful black woman who picks apples from the local orchards; in “Duet,” the woman, aptly named India, speaks for herself, lamenting Rue’s physical absence in terms of the natural world:

I miss the cool ceramic smoothness of your shoulder.
I miss the scent of apple blossoms in the field
and the scent of apple blossoms in our hair —
especially me confusing the two. (29)

But the overwhelming bliss of this intense attraction within an idyllic setting is undercut in the poem that follows, an expression of “blues” that suggests there has been a literal and figurative fall, much like Eve’s tasting of the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden, an act that has altered the future forever. Rue turns to “black liquor” and a life of

crime, knowing that “all the Latin in a church / Can’t union ex-lovers again” (30). If, as Clarke has suggested, his representation of Africadia is intended to rewrite the map of Nova Scotia and more broadly the Maritime provinces, including New Brunswick,⁸ to create “a green space where the free [black] self can live,” then the lives of Rufus and George provide an explicit contrast to such idealism (“Mapping” 77). Positive memories of the abundance and nourishment that such a landscape might provide are displaced by the brutality and violence of childhood and the brothers’ sense of being thrown out of whatever Eden may have existed; instead, Rufus and George move to Halifax and eventually to Fredericton, a city where they are outcasts because of their skin colour and, in time, because of their crimes.

Fredericton takes on a life of its own in these poems by virtue of its impact on the Hamilton brothers and Clarke himself. Such interaction is exemplified by “Public Enemy,” a text that consists of nine couplets narrated with great élan by Rue, who begins with the lines “Fredericton — fucking — New Brunswick. / A decade of Depression, then the Hitler War” (32). Plagued by the poverty around them, the two brothers, as Rue explains,

drift into Fredtown like so much black sky —
squinting at the frigid, ivory, strait-laced streets

speckled by dung of Orange politicians’ grins.
(Spy ingots of shit orangening the snow). (32)

Rue’s vivid description turns the Orange Party, whose slogan was “Keep Canada British and Protestant,” into the equivalent of dog excrement, dotting the pure white snow not with darkness but with the evidence of political domination. The anger of the brothers, their desire to shake up “their white little paradise here” (32), becomes especially evident when Rue juxtaposes the city’s often unacknowledged roots with its publicly celebrated heroes:

Fredtown was put up by Cadians, Coloureds,
and hammers. Law and lumber get made here.
Bliss Carman got made here. Why should I put up with
this hard-drinking, hard-whoring, hardscrabble town? . . .
I want to give them all headaches and nausea:
I’ll play fortissimo Ellington, blacken icy whiteness. (32)

Here the physical building of the capital city by otherwise silenced populations is countered with the creation of poets such as Carman, word-makers who are little more than constructed entities, at least to Rue and George. In response, Rue turns to the musical rhythms of Duke Ellington, the famous African American pianist who in 1933 composed a tongue-in-cheek piece aptly titled “Rude Interlude” (see Holmes for more information). Similarly, Clarke, with his own “Ru(d)e Interlude,” challenges the quiet iciness of Fredericton with the brash innovation of Ellington’s music and Rue’s own rage, both designed to shatter the city’s veneer. The poem concludes with Rue’s punning promise that he’ll “draw blood the way Picasso draws nudes — voluptuously” (32), an image that, given the grotesque distortion of Picasso’s portraits, anticipates the horror of the murder to come but frames it with a cultural sophistication intended to speak to Fredericton high society.

The aftermath of the taxi driver’s murder is shaped by the conservative city’s shock and the brothers’ differing attempts to escape death. George claims innocence and insists that Rue committed the murder, fingering his brother in an effort to save himself. In “Ballad of a Hanged Man,” George claims that the hunger of his child has motivated robbery but not murder:

I had the intention to ruck some money.
 In my own heart, I had that, to rape money. . . .
 Have you ever gone in your life, going
 two days without eating, and whenever
 you get money, you’re gonna eat and eat
 regardless of all the bastards in Fredericton. (13)

Notably, George also differentiates himself from his sartorially resplendent brother, who apparently purchased, among other items, new clothes with the driver’s stolen money the morning after the murder. George aligns Rue with the zoot-suit riots of the era, distinguished by the exaggerated shoulder pads and sharply tapered legs of dark suits worn by young African Americans and Mexican Americans in an expression of anger over their marginalization during the Second World War (see Daniels, et al.; and White and White). George, however, is a family man who cannot afford to make such a fashion statement; he appears at the trial in work overalls: “I know Fredericton reporters can prove / zoot-suit vines style not my viciousness” (13).

In contrast, Rue, newly released from the Dorchester Penitentiary in southeastern New Brunswick, having served time for a previous assault in Fredericton, is a self-styled ladies' man who responds to his brother's snitching with a combination of bravado and recognition that his destiny "was always murder and to be murdered" (21).⁹ Rue has been accused of wielding the hammer that killed the taxi driver as well as plotting the dumping of the body and the car. His arrogance and anger at the racism that has shaped his life sustain him to the end:

Here's how I justify my error:
The blow that slew silver came from two centuries back.
It took that much time and agony to turn a white man's whip
into a black man's hammer. (35)

Rue remains unrepentant and well aware that the hanging of himself and his brother is inevitable because "blood must expunge, sponge up blood" (37), especially when blacks kill innocent whites.

In *Execution Poems*, Clarke's narrator repeatedly suggests that the brothers are roundly condemned to death by the local community for being almost but not quite the Maritimers they are supposed to be. They are destined to die partly because of the location of their crimes. More importantly, their race, their class status, and their geographic positioning at the edge of Fredericton ensure that they will be treated as "other" when put on the stand at the downtown courthouse. However, Clarke complicates this in explicitly linguistic terms by having the two brothers use different forms of "blackened English" to plead their case and tell their story. In "Malignant English," for instance, the Crown praises Rue for speaking "our English well," to which he replies, "But your alabaster, marble English isn't mine," and explains, "My duty is to make narrative more telling, / Yours is to make malice more malicious" (38). The cancerous elements of the conventional English language are pointedly mocked by Rue, whose poetic turns of phrase and highly imagistic vocabulary exceed the plodding conformity of the legalese that he must respond to in court. His language mirrors his dress, as a man whose meticulously styled zoot-suit ensembles and elegantly violent discourse separate him from his working-class roots, yet also suggests that he has no wish to become part of the white mainstream. In contrast, George's inelegant discourse is the subject of a monologue in a poem titled "Trial I," in which George vividly characterizes his speech in relation to location:

My English is like fractured china — broken.
 I really speak *Coloured*, but with a Three Mile Plains accent.
 See, I can't speak Lucasville and my New Road's kinda weak.
 Ma English be a desert that don't bloom less watered by rum. (36)

Rue may choose to mock the static statue of marbled English that he associates with the courtroom and the discourse of white privilege more generally, but George actually describes the roots of his language use, making distinctions between geographic locations within rural Nova Scotia and taking pride in both the general inflection of blackness in his speech and the particularity of his accent, one grounded in place. As Clarke himself has argued in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, “Since standard English was thrust upon African diasporic peoples against their wills, it is marvelous justice that, in every exilic African culture, from New Brunswick to New Orleans, . . . that tongue now meets a different standard” (276). Both brothers suggest that their resistance to and fragmentation of a standard English are important acts of self-definition and resistance against a city and a legal system that do not want to hear voices — each distinctive in its own right — that deviate from the dominant white Loyalist heritage of Fredericton, of New Brunswick, and of the Maritimes more generally.

The inevitability of the hanging becomes, for Rue and Geo, an opportunity to reflect on their sacrificial status in the place where they will be hanged, not like the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon,” one of the seven wonders of the world, but, in the words of the men, “like Christ hanged” (41). As “*disjecta membra*” of Loyalist New Brunswick, Rue and George in the poem “Famous Last” narrate their own demise in the city of stately elms in decidedly ironic terms:

Geo: The laws preach Christ but teach crucifixion.
 Folks glance through us like we're albino ghosts.

Rue: Hanging's a lot like drowning:
 The condemned pedal in air,
 while constriction inundates the throat. . . .

Rue: We will fall into our sentence: silence. (41)

Fredericton, by implication, is not only the physical site of their death sentences but also the place of their final doing-in, yet another fall from

grace. Virtually invisible to the local population except when considered a threat, the Hamilton brothers must negotiate their status in the capital city by virtue of their marginalization. Clarke's choice of title, "Famous Last," and the absence of the expected final, "Words," suggest that even in death the brothers resist deliverance through Christian grace. Rather than relegating them to silence or illiteracy once condemned, Clarke grants them the power of speech to the bitter end. The brothers may not escape the death penalty, but their eloquence, as he renders it, serves as a lasting rebuke of the capital city.

In a final satiric stab at Fredericton and those who inhabit the city, Clarke concludes his volume with three items: first, a letter addressed to the Governor General of Canada in 1949, Viscount Alexander of Tunis, a British war general, written by a citizen of Fredericton whose English pales in comparison with that of Rue and George; second, a newspaper item on the hanging from a paper aptly named the *Casket*,¹⁰ prefaced by several fabricated entries outlining the paper's criminal and literary reporting inaccuracies; and third, two photos, placed side by side, of a black man being hanged (though notably the photo is of a man who died in 1932 and is taken from the National Defence Collection of the National Archives of Canada). The anonymous letter writer denounces both brothers, insisting in an impoverished English dialect that they are obviously guilty: "wee the peepul of Fredericton feel they must hang fore the bluddy homaside they did" (43). In the corrections on the following page, both from the imaginary local paper, the *Casket*, the royal "we" of the paper's staff are forced to acknowledge their inaccurate recounting of a 1948 murder (44). Clarke's poetic "I" employs a series of fairly overt puns here to make his point; the killer, aptly named Spears Flowers, explains that he actually committed the crime in 1947, strangling Nicey Pew not because he was intoxicated but because, as he puts it, "she had begun to write poetry, though he prefers true crime" (44). Likewise, the paper admits to having wrongly attributed the novel *Cane* to W.B. Yeats and not its actual author, African American Jean Toomer. Located adjacent to these pointedly subversive alterations of the literary and historical record is the account of the brothers' hanging, an event that brought out a huge number of spectators even though the execution was done within a constructed shed; the event is still etched in the memories of some older Fredericton residents.

Clarke's collection is a sprawling and politically invested representation of Fredericton and its surrounding areas, one that must inevitably narrow, ending with the executions in the old jailhouse courtyard — located two blocks from the cathedral — where the two young black men are confined to a shed for their hangings. To commit their crime, Geo and Rue take a long journey. The two men move on separate occasions from Nova Scotia to Barker's Point, an area of Fredericton's north side, and settle in. And the crime itself takes place in Barker's Point, but over the next twenty-four hours Rue and Geo travel between multiple places with the driver's body in the trunk in an effort to dump the evidence. Geo, following his brother's instructions, takes Rue on the highway east to Minto, a small town outside Fredericton, where he plays cards all night in an effort to secure a solid alibi. Geo then proceeds to drive roughly a hundred kilometres down to the port city of Saint John, where he spends the night at a brothel and returns to Fredericton the next morning. Rue has suggested that Geo should abandon the car in Saint John, which has a larger black population, and take a bus home. But Geo ignores this advice. His fateful road trip, during which he returns the car to the area of the crime, is represented in Clarke's text by the "Silver coiled — . . . void noose — in the trunk" (12), an image that also appears on the title page of the collection, coupled with a hammer. That noose, though initially unfilled, becomes symbolic of the increasingly tight geographic circle that draws the two brothers in from the suburbs of the capital, taking them to Minto, Saint John, the south side of the river in Fredericton (where they finally abandon the car), and Barker's Point before returning them to the downtown core, turning relegation to the periphery into visibility at the centre with the double hanging of the two men.

Roberts characterizes Fredericton as beautifully narcissistic, too consumed by its own reflection to pay much attention to what passes by the river's edge; Nowlan and Cogswell explore the lengthy history of racism in the provincial capital, whether aimed at Natives or African Canadians. Yet Rue and Geo, themselves of mixed blood, change that, intruding with violence and hatred on the rarefied atmosphere of the city in an effort to make their mark. In doing so, they blacken the centre of the city both literally and figuratively, revealing the Fredericton community's fascination with their lives and especially their public deaths. Clarke deconstructs this objectification by giving voice to the two men

as they live through the crime and its aftermath; he also playfully notes at the end of the text under the “Author’s Disclaimer” that those who have helped to produce the book “bear no responsibility for its harms. Only the author deserves hanging” (46). With this, Clarke stresses the need to examine what has led to the resolute condemnation of his two cousins. Furthermore, Clarke’s interest in “rewriting the map of Nova Scotia” and of the presence of blacks in the Maritimes takes a considerably different turn in this text by focusing on a city that is outside of — and outcast from — the geographic and imaginary space of Africadia (“Mapping” 75); the collection implicitly delineates the boundaries of Africadia and the potential loss for those, like George and Rufus, who, once in Fredericton, can no longer remember the beauty of their birthplace and are reduced to describing it in predominantly ugly and violent terms.

Clarke, as a poet and scholar who has spent considerable energy pioneering the field of African Canadian literature, has much at stake in *Execution Poems*. As *Odysseys Home* attests, there is a rich and lengthy history of Africadian literature in particular that has been sorely neglected in the study and teaching of Maritime cultures, an area that has been dominated primarily by white Loyalist traditions.¹¹ To provide better access to these works, Clarke has already published two volumes of *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, which survey the writings of blacks in that Maritime province from 1785 onward. *Execution Poems* adds yet another dimension to his fictional depictions of Africadia and reflects his broader desire to make the complex and diverse voices of Maritime blacks available. In his collection, Clarke reclaims an otherwise unknown branch of his family and offers a personalized account of the ghosts whose positioning in relation to Fredericton society has shaped his own understanding of the city and the region. And the language that Clarke uses to tell their story, and his own, is not surprisingly a blackened or broken English, a deliberate choice that accords with his assertion in *Odysseys Home* that such speech is a means of maintaining a distinctive racial consciousness and sense of black solidarity (*Odysseys Home* 86). Writing in this tongue within the setting of 1940s Fredericton takes Cogswell’s ironically charged ode a step further by giving voice to Africadians living in the city and paying tribute to their varied linguistic expertise.

Clarke's poems assert a presence in Fredericton and New Brunswick that is black and proudly so — exposing the legacy of racism that has shaped the birthplace of Canadian poetry and conversely ensuring the inclusion of what Clarke calls “Africadian” stories and voices while introducing another set of paradoxes. In November 2003, Clarke was named the inaugural E.J. Pratt Professor in Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto, a position co-funded by Victoria College, where Frye spent his career. The choice of Clarke was justified by the English department chair with the explanation that, “Like Pratt, much of Professor Clarke's identity is shaped by his Maritime roots. And like Pratt, Professor Clarke is one of the country's most respected poets. So the choice was natural” (“Award-Winning Poet”). “Nature,” it appears, has come full circle. Africadia may be a site of Edenic abundance, “an ideal place” with an imaginary geography that powerfully counters the historical erasure of the presence of blacks throughout the Maritimes (Clarke, “Mapping” 77); Fredericton, in contrast, becomes a space for those who have been cast out, a site of dastardly deeds that reveal the narrow geographic and imaginative potential of the city and the impact of that narcissism.

With *Execution Poems*, Clarke asks his readers to again examine Fredericton as an undeniably significant — but extremely vexed — site of poetic inspiration. Rather than seeing the city of spires as a bucolic, pastoral setting, Clarke's collection demonstrates that New Brunswick is also a place of racial conflict and execution with a heritage that tinges the capital city's whiteness and reframes its place in Maritime and Canadian literary history. As the voices of Rufus and George so powerfully suggest, there needs to be a wider reconsideration of the history — and legacy — of racism in the Maritimes and New Brunswick in particular; George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems* demands that we begin to undertake such a process by looking, at least in the case of Fredericton, not to the cathedral and the river but to the jail and those it has housed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ See *Essays on Canadian Writing* 71 (Flynn) for an extensive discussion of this question. See also Blodgett 122, 211; and Kertzner 42, 120.

² Barry Davies notes that the population of Fredericton would have been approximately six thousand people in the late eighteenth century (117).

³ A plaque erected on the University of New Brunswick campus by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognizes the lives and careers of Carman, Roberts, and Sherman under the heading "POETS' CORNER / LE BERCEAU DES POÈTES," with the following inscription: "Born in or near Fredericton, these three poets were educated in this University and are buried in the cemetery of Forest Hill. Their gifts of verse enriched Canadian literature and gained for their common birthplace the designation 'The Poets' Corner of Canada.'" It can be viewed online at the following URL: <<http://www.brokenjaw.com/GovCanada-PoetsCorner.htm>> .

⁴ See, for example, Clarke's interview with Anne Compton in which he describes himself as "the scribe of a marginalized and colonized community" (Clarke, "Standing" 143). Similarly, in an interview with Maureen Moynagh, Clarke contends that "the need to commemorate has fuelled my writing since my youth. . . . There's a whole side of Maritime/Canadian life that has been repressed, and it's the duty of all of us who are creating right now to address that fact" (Clarke, "Mapping" 73).

⁵ See also Walker 97-99, who details the relegation of black Loyalists to the bottom of land claim lists and outlines their lack of rights in the Maritimes at the end of the eighteenth century; blacks were not allowed to vote, serve on a jury, ask for a jury trial, or hold a public office throughout the region. The result was an exodus of black Loyalists to Sierra Leone in 1792; the British government promised those who went grants of land and full political rights as members of that newly formed colony. As Walker notes, Confederation didn't improve the status of blacks in the Maritimes, nor did the end of the First World War and the coming of the Depression: "the elite among the [black] men became railway waiters and porters. . . . Waiting jobs and other personal contact positions passed increasingly to whites" (100), leaving African Canadians throughout the region heavily dependent on their local communities for survival.

⁶ See Reid 72-75; also see William Spray's extremely useful *The Blacks in New Brunswick*.

⁷ See the UNB student newspaper, the *Brunswickian* 5 Dec. 1947: 1-3, for detailed commentary on these events and student reactions to the racism of local businesses. Coverage of the incidents continued in the *Brunswickian* 13 Jan. 1948: 1-2.

⁸ See also Compton's interview with Clarke, where he states that "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" ("Standing" 143).

⁹ See Clarke, *George & Rue*, 217 for photographs of the two men; George is indeed in work clothes, while Rue wears a shirt and tie, a stylish topcoat, and an elegantly patterned scarf.

¹⁰ The *Casket* is, in fact, the name of the weekly Antigonish newspaper, and Clarke with his close ties to the province would presumably know this.

¹¹ See *Odysseys Home* 118-23. See also Gwendolyn Davies; Mannette; and Walker.

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