

Fighting Words: Recent Works by George Elliott Clarke

Maureen Moynagh

Volume 42, numéro 2, summer/autumn 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad42_2re01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Moynagh, M. (2013). Fighting Words:: Recent Works by George Elliott Clarke. *Acadiensis*, 42(2), 138–146.

REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUE

Fighting Words: Recent Works by George Elliott Clarke

My words collide with walls of fists,
Collapse, my teeth clacking like typewriters¹

My poetry must come from anger
Or nothing from it comes²

IN HIS 2005 NOVEL *George and Rue* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2005), George Elliott Clarke compares the detectives who investigate the crime committed by the Hamilton brothers to “village poets, scrutinizing every aspect of their fellow and sister citizens’ lives, recording details, eavesdropping, jotting down info” (159). This sly caricature of his own creative method as a kind of nosy detective work is particularly apt in the case of this novel and the preceding, Governor General’s Award-winning collection of poetry, *Execution Poems*, for both of these works are based on the “true crime” committed by Clarke’s distant cousins George and Rufus Hamilton. The brothers robbed and then murdered a Fredericton taxi driver with a hammer and were hanged for their crime on 27 July 1949. Clarke’s literary renderings of this history involve more than the archival sleuthing that characterizes his scholarship and much of his creative work; the poems and the novel also exhibit Clarke’s abiding interest in the lives, the cultural forms, and the language of the historic black communities of the Maritimes. As “village poet,” Clarke has confessed to “sitting in people’s living rooms, writing down what they had to say,” and using this “Africadian poetry . . . rooted in the voice and in these shared jokes, stories, proverbs” to forge his own “blackened English.”³ Once forged, this language becomes a powerful weapon – Clarke’s own hammer – in the struggle he is waging against the “erasure” of black Canadians from regional and national imaginaries.⁴ It is especially in this way that Clarke’s works are filled with fighting words.

In *Execution Poems*, Clarke elaborates on language and violence, on the violence in language, and on the use of language to commemorate and combat violence – the violence of slavery, the violence of poverty, the violence of racism. Admittedly, it

1 George Elliott Clarke, *Execution Poems: The Black Acadian Tragedy of George and Rue* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau, 2001), 19.

2 George Elliott Clarke, “Embracing *Beatrice Chancy*, or In Defence of Poetry,” *The New Quarterly: New Directions in Canadian Writing* 20, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2000-2001): 21.

3 Anne Compton, “Standing your Ground: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23, no. 2 (1998): 140. As Clarke explains, “Africadia,” a neologism that combines Africa with Acadia and incorporates the Mi’kmaq suffix *cadie*, is his coinage for the black communities in the Maritimes.

4 See George Elliott Clarke, “Embarkation,” the introductory essay to Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 6.

may seem odd to speak of commemorating violence and odd to characterize Clarke's project in these literary works as, in part, a commemorative act. Certainly, some members of Clarke's family no doubt would have preferred that he leave these particular skeletons firmly locked in the closet. Yet it is not so much the violence done *by* the Hamilton brothers – although he does not shirk from representing that as well in graphic, if fictional or poetic terms – as the violence done *to* them and others like them that is the object of commemoration here. Thus, in "Famous Last" the brothers are "the *disjecta membra* of Loyalist New Brunswick" (41) – the scattered remains of those who usually figure in narratives of the nation as proud founders. As Jennifer Andrews points out in her essay on *Execution Poems*, the impact of the Loyalist migration on Fredericton was transformative, displacing Maliseet and Acadians to found "the most gentlemanly [city] on earth."⁵ This Loyalist emphasis on what Daniel Coleman has called "white civility" effectively displaces the Black Loyalists, many brought in bondage, who also built New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.⁶ The violent dismemberment captured in Clarke's phrase serves as a painful reminder of that repressed history.

Both *Execution Poems* and *George and Rue* invite readers to approach the works as revenge tragedies, ones with a distinctively North American lineage that mix Shakespeare with Nat Turner. In "Reading *Titus Andronicus* in Three Mile Plains," the speaker, Rue, adopts the guise of Aaron the Moor; he announces "*Sit fas aut nefas*, I am become /Aaron" (25), incarnating Aaron's vengeful ways to address the injustices he has faced.⁷ Like the Shakespearean character that, Clarke suggests, is "driven in part by his lust for revenge against a civilization that considers him barbarous," Rue adopts the persona of "the frustrated and embittered black (minority) intellectual who uses his mastery of the codes of the opposing civilization to wreak endless havoc within it."⁸ Rue, in other words, is not only an Africadian Aaron but a stand-in for Clarke himself, who "listens" to Aaron demand "Is black so base a hue?" and repurposes Shakespeare to represent the violent outcome of racist violence. Thus Rue identifies not only with Aaron but with "drastic Aaron's heir, Nat Turner," an identification that aligns Rue's vengeful actions with slave revolt: "Here's how I justify my error," Rue announces in "The Killing": "The blow that

5 Jennifer Andrews, "Re-visioning Fredericton: Reading George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems*," in *Africadian Atlantic: Essays on George Elliott Clarke*, ed. Joseph Pivato (Toronto: Guernica, 2012), 26, and Desmond Pacey, quoted in Andrews, 26.

6 Daniel Coleman, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). For more on the history of the Loyalists generally, and the Black Loyalists specifically, see the recent essay by Jane Errington, "Loyalists and Loyalism in the American Revolution and Beyond," *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2012): 164-73, and Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists: Southern Settlers and Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2013). The seminal scholarly study of the Black Loyalists remains James St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for the Promised Land, 1783-1870* (Halifax: Dalhousie University Press, 1976).

7 The Latin translates as "Be it right or wrong."

8 Clarke, quoted in Susan Knutson, "The Mask of Aaron: 'Tall Screams reared out of Three Mile Plains': Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and George Elliott Clarke's Black Acadian Tragedy, *Execution Poems*," in Pivato, *Africadian Atlantic*, 58.

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). Again, through Rue's voice, Clarke inserts himself into the lineage traced from Aaron to Nat Turner (by way of J.M.W. Turner, whose famous painting of the slave massacre aboard *The Zong* Clarke also alludes to here), declaring "My pages blaze, my lines pall, crying fratricidal damnation" (25). In fact, Clarke announces his identification with his subjects in the opening poem of the collection: "*Le nègre, negated, meagre, c'est moi*" (11, italics in original). Exhibiting Clarke's trademark rhetorical verve, this line resists the very "negation" it expresses through its signifying on royal declamation.

Both *Execution Poems* and *George and Rue* pay homage to another literary work, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923). It is alluded to explicitly in each; the police find it among Rue's personal effects in *George and Rue* (170), and it is the subject of a "Literary Error" (44) in the edition of an invented Fredericton newspaper, *The Casket*, that Clarke appends to *Execution Poems*.⁹ These references to *Cane* not only identify Clarke as Toomer's heir, they invite comparison between this canonical African-American work, with its distinctive mix of prose vignettes, poems, and dramatic dialogue, and the formally distinctive works Clarke himself has created. *George and Rue*, while clearly a novel, is written in a highly poetic language marked by some of Clarke's preferred rhetorical figures, especially asyndeton (a series of clauses, presented without conjunctions) and paronomasia (the use of a single word in multiple senses, or of different words that sound alike). Despite its status as fiction, moreover, it includes archival photographs, as do several of Clarke's other creative works. *Execution Poems* effects its own mix of the archival and the literary; in addition to a poetic version of the letter George Hamilton wrote to then-Governor General Viscount Alexander and the invented newspaper entries (a report on the execution, retractions of "criminal" and "literary" errors), Clarke appends two photographs of lynched black men with the ironic caption: "The double hanging was executed according to the law" (45). If *Cane* offers something of a precedent for Clarke's formal experiments, it also is a work that depicts a range of black experiences, urban and rural alike, including experiences that, on Langston Hughes's account, discomfited contemporary African-American readers because they were not "respectable."¹⁰ The Hamilton brothers similarly lacked "respectability," but Clarke renders their lives and their sordid crime in terms at once affecting and richly imagined, without sentimentality, and with a view to depicting the larger context for their actions.

Part of his purpose may well be to extend and indigenize a black diasporic literature of crime and punishment. In "Raising Raced and Erased Executions in African-Canadian Literature," one of the essays included in *Directions Home*:

9 The title of the newspaper is another kind of "literary error" on Clarke's part: he has taken the name of an actual Maritime newspaper, one whose home is Antigonish rather than Fredericton, and exploited the meaning that automatically comes to mind when most folks "from away" see or hear the word "casket." The Antigonish newspaper masthead features an image of a jewel casket in an effort to persuade its readers of a different meaning.

10 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 55-9.

Approaches to African-Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), Clarke notes the relative absence, in comparison with its African-American counterpart, of an African-Canadian corpus of prison memoirs, slave revolts, and “outlaw” fiction. Yet, Clarke argues, African-Canadians do “have a history of conflict with white Canadian law enforcement and the judiciary that should mandate the creation of a *race*-conscious creative literature of crime and punishment” (78, emphasis in original). He acknowledges that African-Canadian writers do depict insurrectionary figures, but more often “an African-American or African or Caribbean ‘renegade’ than an indigenous one” (80). A key exception is the Quebec slave Marie-Josèphe Angélique, who has been the subject of several African-Canadian creative works. Key here for Clarke is that Angélique’s “crime” of arson was committed in Canada, or on terrain that became Canada, and her unjust execution likewise. So while Dionne Brand has written movingly about the execution of Jacqueline Creft during the coup that preceded the American-led invasion of Grenada in 1983 in *No Language is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990) and the heroine of Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2002) confesses to an act of revenge on the plantation manager who “kept” her and who was also her father, to offer but two examples, these works fail to address crimes committed in Canada. Clarke is not opposed to a diasporic vision on the part of African-Canadian writers, but he is invested in promoting literary works that are Canada-centred as part of his larger project of contesting the “white-washing” of Canadian history and the still-too-ready consignment of blackness to extra-national spaces. Clarke, significantly, dedicates this essay, which was originally published in 2002 – a year after *Execution Poems* – to his cousins George and Rufus Hamilton.

Clarke’s literary engagement with the historical record is about (re)construction and contestation. That is, he builds imaginatively on the traces of a longstanding black presence in the historical archive and he redresses, through his poetry, fiction, drama and libretti, the ways blackness has been occluded in national narratives and scholarly historiography alike. As Alexander MacLeod puts it, with respect to Clarke’s poetic construction of Africadia, “The imagined geography of this place is his destination rather than his point of origin and literature provides the means by which he travels between these two points, slowly tearing down the old, real world and gradually building up its replacement.”¹¹ I would add that the literary reinvention Clarke is engaged in extends beyond the Maritimes to encompass the nation as a whole, as the recent libretti *Québécoisité* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau, 2002) and *Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau, 2006) attest. The need to contest a painful past, signaled so powerfully in the opening lines of *Blue* (Vancouver: Polestar 2001) – “History fell upon us like the lash—/ Lacerating” – accounts for the intentional violence of some of Clarke’s work.¹² In an unpublished interview with Katherine Larson, Clarke “maintains that his poetry is meant to be

11 Alexander MacLeod, “‘The Little State of Africadia is a Community of Believers’: Replacing the Regional and Remaking the Real in the Work of George Elliott Clarke,” in Pivato, *Africadian Atlantic*, 244.

12 George Elliott Clarke, *Blue* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001), 19.

violent, to jolt readers into memory, awareness, and action.”¹³ While Clarke is speaking here of the verse drama *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), this observation could apply equally well to *Execution Poems* and *George and Rue*. The interest in using anger to move readers to act, encapsulated in the second epigraph above, confirms the larger political thrust of Clarke’s engag   poetics.

Scholars writing about Clarke’s creative work have been particularly interested in his poetic engagement with the history of black communities in Canada. This is true of several of the essays in Joseph Pivato’s recent collection, *Africadian Atlantic: Essays on George Elliott Clarke* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2012). Wayde Compton’s essay, for instance, about Clarke’s first collection of poems, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (Porters Lake, NS: Pottersfield, 1983), argues that Clarke’s poetics is characterized by a “distinctive engagement of history (time) and geography (space),” and he reads the poems as a “spiritual map[ping]” of Africadia (12). Similarly, Jennifer Andrews attends to the ways that *Execution Poems* challenges both dominant cultural narratives and canonical literary representations of the Maritimes in general and Fredericton in particular. The sort of critical regionalism that Andrews implicitly identifies at work in *Execution Poems* is addressed explicitly in Alexander MacLeod’s essay “‘The Little State of Africadia is a Community of Believers’: Replacing the Regional and Remaking the Real in the Work of George Elliott Clarke.” For MacLeod, Clarke’s project to found an “Africadian” literature serves to “extend regionalist discourse into new areas of political and social action” in large part because Clarke’s work “transgress[es] the normal boundaries between real and imagined social spaces” (228). This re-imagining of the social takes on a more explicitly national cast in the exploration of multiculturalism in Clarke’s opera about Trudeau, as Lydia Wilkinson makes clear in her essay “Creating a Canadian Odyssey.” Wilkinson, too, is interested in Clarke’s re-invention of the historical Trudeau; she focuses on Clarke’s “political strategy” of using his opera “to turn Trudeau into a symbol of multiculturalism that can exist outside of and even in contradiction to the established historical record” (220).

Still other scholars focus on what I call, in my essay on *Beatrice Chancy* reprinted in this collection, Clarke’s “citational practice” – his practice of reiterating and reinventing extant literary works and other cultural forms irrespective of medium, including orature (97-9). Thus H. Nigel Thomas examines “Some Aspects of Blues Use in George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*,” and both Diana Brydon and Susan Knutson analyze Clarke’s deployment of Shakespearean intertexts in their essays on *Whylah Falls* and *Execution Poems* respectively. Brydon argues that in answering back to Shakespeare Clarke is partly “writing his own place into the great tradition, but on his own terms” (174), and she proposes that we read *Whylah Falls*, with its (re)iteration of *Othello*, as “celebrating the survival of a beleaguered community in a context of racial hatred and violence” (175). Knutson, for her part, contends that in *Execution Poems* “the Shakespearean intertext . . . engender[s] both the rhetorical language and dynamic address of Clarke’s poems, which, like Titus [Andronicus]’s arrows, are fired into the heavens as an appeal for justice” (62). One

13 Cited in Katherine Larson, “Resistance from the Margins in George Elliott Clarke’s *Beatrice Chancy*,” in Pivato, *Africadian Atlantic*, 292.

of the most engaging essays in the collection is Katherine Larson's "Resistance from the Margins in George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*." Larson's approach to the "feast of intertexts" in the verse drama is to focus on "the strategic function" of the paratext – those elements on the periphery of the work (the dedication, epigraphs, photographs, prefaces, notes and the like) that serve as a point of entry for the reader. Given how idiosyncratic the paratextual elements of Clarke's works are, Larson's study of their operation in *Beatrice Chancy* offers a tremendously useful model for thinking about any number of Clarke's works.

Also of particular interest is Katherine McLeod's essay "'Oui, let's scat': Listening to Multi-Vocality in George Elliott Clarke's Jazz Opera *Québécoisité*." The originality of her work lies in her recourse to sound as a "medium through which to theorize the cultural crossings of [transcultural] improvisations" (188). Pivato has also included essays, apparently commissioned for this volume, by Italian scholar of English and Canadian literature Giulio Marra, who writes about *Black*, the second of Clarke's "colouring" books (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2006), and by Maristela Campos, a Brazilian scholar who compares Clarke's work with that of Brazilian poet Solano Trindade. Such contributions attest to the international interest in Clarke's work, but one wonders why, in view of her several essays on Clarke, and on African-Canadian literature more broadly, the Spanish scholar Pilar Cuder-Domínguez is not included in the volume. Pivato is clearly a fan of Clarke, and his introduction is self-confessedly personal, but while he explains his interest in editing this collection of essays, the introduction tells us little about Clarke or about the essays Pivato has selected. His own essay, oddly placed last instead of first where it might have served as a better introduction than the personal anecdotes and bare-bones descriptions of the essays in the volume, offers little more than an extended annotation of Clarke's work. The real value of Joseph Pivato's collection of essays lies in his having brought together in a single volume a fairly broad selection of Clarke scholarship, and his having selected essays that address most of the major works.

A decade separates Clarke's scholarly essay collections but, as the titles themselves suggest, the two volumes are closely linked. If the project in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* was, as I wrote at the time, to "sketch a metaphorical geography, to map blackness in the nation," beginning at the Canada-US border and then moving from East to West across the country, the new volume, *Directions Home*, has a more diffuse organization.¹⁴ The multiple "directions" followed and "approaches" taken in the recent collection mark Clarke's greater emphasis on the heterogeneity of African-Canadian writing, but there is much here that is consistent with the project undertaken in the first volume. First and foremost, there is the insistence on the political import of establishing a body of African-Canadian writing that pre-dates the more recent body of writing Canada owes to immigrants from the Caribbean and, more recently still, Africa. The essays about Canadian slave narratives, about the distinctive African-Canadian genre of church history, and about turn-of-the-century political essays and poetry exemplify this

14 Maureen Moynagh, review of *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* by George Elliott Clarke, *Globe and Mail*, 28 February 2003.

mission, which has to do with contesting the occlusion of historic black communities in dominant narratives of nation – not to mention countering the strategic forgetting of the practice of slavery in early Canada. The patient archival work that marks such essays as “The Birth and Rebirth of Africadian Literature” in *Odysseys Home* is evident as well in the new collection, particularly in the essays about the slave narrative, church histories, and the work of A.B. Walker and Anna Minerva Henderson. While *Odysseys Home* offered a “Primer of African-Canadian literature” and a “Selected Bibliography” in a section overtly labeled “Surveys,” that impulse to chart and survey the longstanding presence in Canada of African-Canadian writers also marks these and other essays in *Directions Home*.

Clarke opens *Directions Home* in a combative mood. The introductory essay is titled “Divagation,” at once a spatial digression or straying off course and a message that departs from the main subject. Indeed, this introductory essay is as much about responding to critics of the earlier volume and about re-stating the nature of Clarke’s scholarly project as it is about introducing the new collection. Addressing charges of nativism or cultural nationalism, Clarke insists that the essays in his first volume of scholarship on African-Canadian literature are less about privileging “the historical African-Canadian tradition” or arguing for a kind of geographical determinism than they are an assertion that to “read African-Canadian (or Black Canadian) literature adequately” one must “accept the historical (or ‘indigenous’) African-Canadian population as a constitutive element” (4). He reiterates that his project is about challenging the “ignorant” view that “the historical African-Canadian peoples were a clutch of illiterate victims” (4), and the mission of dispelling that falsehood is directed not only against the national tendency to erase blackness from the nation but also against those writers and scholars who are inclined to align African-Canadian literature with the arrival of Caribbean writers. For Clarke, moreover, it is not merely a question of who counts in terms of canon-formation, although that is clearly important to him; the project of African-Canadian literary study is also a question of hermeneutic framing. Clarke insists that the nation serve as the horizon for reading African-Canadian literature, over and above a diasporic framework, and this stance, too, has elicited sometimes divisive debate to which Clarke responds vigorously: “To omit this *essential* context is as much an intellectual fault as believing in racial superiority” (6, emphasis in original). While he acknowledges the importance of diasporic connections among African-descended peoples, Clarke nonetheless maintains that the influence of the national culture is decisive. Quoting Fanon’s “On National Culture” in support of his position, Clarke thumbs his nose at his critics: “Thus, I laugh off the ‘nativist’ smear” (6).

If Clarke does not engage much in theoretical debates about nation or diaspora, he is nonetheless careful to note the complexities attendant on such concepts – particularly in the hands of literary critics. In his essay “Repatriating Arthur Nortje,” for instance, he insists “All ‘national’ canons are more cosmopolitan and diverse than their framers allow” (145, emphasis in original). The relative permeability of national boundaries is particularly evident, he contends, in the case of African writers owing to “their often short-term residencies in a host of nations,” which “allows them the elastic luxury of multiple ‘belongings’ and ‘claimings’” (145). His case for “repatriating” the South African poet-in-exile Nortje rests not only on Nortje’s brief three-year sojourn in Canada, but on such elected affinities as Nortje’s mixed-race

heritage and Canada's status as "a mongrel state, the 'bastard' creation of Great Britain and France" (145). If this seems a tenuous enough connection, it undoubtedly goes some way towards staking a claim for the flexibility and heterogeneity of any African-Canadian literary canon. Essays like "Frederick Ward: Writing as Jazz" also "worry the nation," to borrow Jon Kerzer's phrase, by arguing that Ward's poetry is not accorded the recognition it deserves in part because Ward is caught between two national literatures, each with its exclusionary visions.¹⁵ As Clarke puts it, Ward is "an African-American expat in Canada and a Canadian relocatee *ex* African-America" (192). In "Does (Afro-)Caribbean-Canadian Literature Exist? In the Caribbean?" Clarke addresses still another way in which the boundaries of nation seem permeable in one direction and impermeable in another. With respect to the powerful transnational imaginary exhibited by many African-Canadian writers with ties to the Caribbean, Clarke has identified an abiding irony: the relative invisibility of these writers in the Caribbean. To be sure, the evidence that Caribbean-Canadian writers are little-known and little-read in the Caribbean serves Clarke's insistence that these writers should explore the "congruencies" between Canada and the West Indies; but here, too, the implicit vision is hemispheric.

A notable new theme in *Directions Home* is orality and performance. Frederick Ward is not only subject to being between nations; his work is overlooked, on Clarke's account, because "his offerings fall into the blank, silent limbo dividing orality and literature" (192). In an effort to redress the unjust critical neglect, Clarke explores ways of thinking about a jazz poetics, specifically addressing the ways that jazz can be manifested in words and on the page. A jazz poetics partly involves an emphasis on voice, and partly it involves adapting such jazz elements as syncopation, call and response, repetition, and revision of other music or, as the case may be, poetry.¹⁶ The problem of voice is also the central thread in Clarke's essay "Bring da Noise" about spoken word artists d'bi. young and Oni Joseph. The problem of voice is, for the black writer, also a problem of audience. The risk is either that a demotic, music-oriented verse is dismissed as mere "performance," or that a more "grammatical" verse is derided for its "whiteness" (177). Acknowledging that these debates have beset black writers for quite some time, Clarke insists that "no poetic form is primordially *black* or *white* in its signification"; but he also recognizes that "any black writer's aspiration to apolitical self-expression" is invariably fraught (179, emphasis in original, and 177). Ultimately, Clarke makes a case for assessing the work of poets who opt to foreground orality according to the terms of orature rather than "by the print conventions of Eurocentric poetry" (181).

Odysseys Home was about defining the field of African-Canadian literature and about the larger political project of insisting on the historical presence as well as the diversity of blacks in Canada as evidenced by that literature. *Directions Home*, I have been suggesting, is both an extension and a reaffirmation of that project. Clarke's work as a literary critic articulates the same claim to national belonging and to diasporic

15 Jon Kerzer, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

16 In identifying these techniques, Clarke cites Siva Vaidyanathan's entry on jazz in the *Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 395-6.

linkages that marks his creative work. Clarke's vehement "hammering" on this point is a testament not only to his passion but, more soberingly, to the persistence of the notion that blackness is not at home in Canada. It is no wonder that Clarke favours the catalogue, the survey, the list in his scholarship in ways analogous to his love for asyndeton in his creative work: this strategy is about the patient but also passionate piling up of evidence to counter hegemonic narratives of nation and region. And it is in this way, as well as in his newspaper reviews, his radio and television interviews, and in the conscientiously engaged quality of his poetry that, as Alexander MacLeod has suggested, Clarke may rightly be regarded as a public intellectual (229).

"I write my poetry for people who do not usually read poetry," Clarke declares.¹⁷ This seems an odd statement coming from a writer whose work is replete with allusion – Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Shelley, Eliot, Pound, Harper, Jacobs, Toomer, Hayden, to name but a few – dotted with words and phrases in Latin, French, and Italian and steeped in poetic forms ranging from the sonnet and the pastoral to free verse. Yet it is true enough that one does not find in Clarke "those skinny, / Malnourished poems that professors love," to cite one of the characters in his novel in verse, *Whylah Falls*.¹⁸ One finds instead "the boisterous, the gaudy, the glamorous, the luxurious, the lavish, the rococo, Pre-Raphaelitism, the extravagant, and the exotic" – another of Clarke's beloved lists.¹⁹ This excess addresses and redresses the violence in which the lives of black Canadians have so often been steeped. In *George and Rue* that deprivation, too, piles up: "And forget about having anything to themselves at their school: no books, no pen, no ink, no pencil, no paper smelling like mackerel. No tubby bottle of LePage's glue, no piles of Hilroy scribblers, no heaps of Eberhard-Faber pencils, no red-leather-bound old books – yellowed bits of history – and no bottles of squid-black, Parker ink" (30). It is not enough to say no pencil, no ink, no paper, no book – each item must be repeated and its specific qualities anatomized: *Eberhard-Faber pencils, squid-black ink, Hilroy scribblers, red-leather-bound books*. The texture, feel and even smell of deprivation, as well as its unremitting extensiveness, must be conveyed, impressed upon the reader. This much is true, as well, of historic violence and its domestication. In "Original Pain" in *Execution Poems*, readers confront "Hot pepper of mothers bullwhipped till blood / lava'd down their backs and leapt off their heels / was one-hundred-proof, fire taste of slavery / Pops spooned us raw charring first-hand" (15). "Childhood II" offers a lengthy list of the kinds of violence Rue witnessed in the absence of books by "all those secretly Negro authors" like Pushkin, Colette, and Dumas (17). Armed, then, with ink, paper, and many books, not to mention "the salty, peppery, vinegary, and sugary tongue of [his] African-Nova Scotian (Africadian) peers" (*Directions Home* 176), Clarke marshals his anger and fights back.

MAUREEN MOYNAGH

17 "Embracing *Beatrice Chancy*," 20.

18 George Elliott Clarke, *Whylah Falls* (Vancouver: Polestar, 1990), 84.

19 "Embracing *Beatrice Chancy*," 20.