SHAUNTAY GRANT

THE UNIVERSITY AS EPIC, THE EPIC AS GOSPEL, THE GOSPEL AS LORE: AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

ONE OF CANADA'S MOST CELEBRATED POETS, George Elliott Clarke was born in 1960 in Windsor, Nova Scotia, near the Black Loyalist community of Three Mile Plains. He grew up in the north end of Halifax and began writing poems at the age of 15. He published his first book, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), when he was an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo, and from the beginning his interests gravitated towards the history of "Africadians"—a term he coined to describe the descendants of the Black Loyalists who came to the Maritimes in the 18th century. His first book, for example, featured a series of poems written in the persona of a Black Loyalist, and he has revisited this subject matter frequently throughout his long and prolific career.

After earning his B.A. in 1984, Clarke returned to Nova Scotia and worked in various rural communities before earning his M.A. from Dalhousie University in 1989. He has said that the experience of working in rural communities was an "incredible introduction to the beauty of African Nova Scotian . . . speech, and the stories, and the folklore, and the songs," which he incorporated into his second book, *Whylah Falls* (1990). Expanding on the technique employed in his first book, *Whylah Falls* combines dramatic monologues and songs in order to create a portrait of an entire community (loosely based on the predominantly African Nova Scotian village of Weymouth Falls). Clarke described the work as a "blues spiritual about love and the pain of love," and it was later adapted for radio, released as an audiobook with an original jazz score, and produced as a stage play.

After earning his Ph.D. from Queen's University in 1993, Clarke taught

at Duke University, where he published two more books: *Provençal Songs* (1993) and *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* (1994). He returned to Canada in 1998, when he was appointed the Visiting Seagrams Chair in Canadian Studies at McGill University, and in 1999 he became Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto. During this time he continued to publish poetry with *Gold Indigoes* (1999), *Execution Poems* (2001), *Blue* (2001), *Illuminated Verses* (2005), *Black* (2006), *I & I* (2009), *Red* (2011), *Illicit Sonnets* (2013), *Traverse* (2014), *Extra Illicit Sonnets* (2015), and *Gold* (2016). In 2016 he also released the first volume of a three-volume epic poem titled *Canticles*, which critiques the history of slavery and European imperialism. Like his earlier work, *Canticles* weaves together a multitude of voices by constructing imaginary dialogues between various historical figures, including Christopher Columbus, Phillis Wheatley, Abraham Lincoln, Queen Victoria, Karl Marx, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman. Fiona Sampson describes it as "an astonishing excavation of myth, history, and identity," which is "unlike anything else being written today," and Paul Watkins similarly claims that it is "Clarke's most textured work to date," as it "revises and reworks history with the powers of a firebrand poet in full control of his craft."

In addition to his poetic work, Clarke also wrote the play and opera *Beatrice Chancy*, which premiered in Toronto in 1998, and the screenplay for the film *One Heart Broken into Song* (1999), for which he received an Outstanding Writer in Film and Television Award. He is also an important scholar and advocate for the study of African-Canadian literature. In 1991, for example, he edited a two-volume anthology of Black Nova Scotian writing, *Fire on the Water*, which featured a wide range of work from 1785 to the present. This was followed in 1997 by the anthology *Eyeing the North Star*, which featured historical and contemporary work by African Canadians originating from throughout the African diaspora, including Jamaica, Kenya, and South Africa. Clarke also helped to promote African-Canadian literature in his critical studies *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002) and *Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature* (2011), which identified the key characteristics of Africadian writing and argued for its continued relevance, as there is no such thing as a homogeneous African-Canadian identity: "Either African Canadians are an assembly of miniature nations or we are nowhere." His scholarly endeavours brought him teaching gigs at the University of British Columbia

(2002) and Harvard University (2013-2014). His revised version of William Shakespeare's 16th-century comedy, *The Merchant of Venice (Retried)* (2017), also addressed Shakespeare's interest in colonialism, slavery, and the interactions between Europeans and Moors. Like his *Canticles* project, therefore, his critical work similarly examines the legacy of imperialism and the Eurocentricity of our dominant historical narratives.

Clarke's many honours include the Portia White Prize for Artistic Achievement (1998), a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Fellowship (1998), the Governor General's Literary Award (2001), the National Magazine Gold Medal for Poetry (2001), the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award (2004), the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Fellowship Prize (2005), the Dartmouth Book Award for Fiction (2006), an appointment to the Order of Nova Scotia (2006), an appointment to the Order of Canada (2008), the Eric Hoffer Book Award for Poetry (2009), the William P. Hubbard Award for Race Relations (2009), an appointment as Poet Laureate of Toronto (2012-2015), an appointment as Canada's 7th Parliamentary Poet Laureate (2016-2017), and eight honorary doctorates.

One of Clarke's honorary doctorates was awarded by Dalhousie University in 1999, and he also received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Dalhousie Alumni Association in 2017. That same year he was commissioned to write a poem commemorating Dalhousie's 200th anniversary, "The Story of Dalhousie; Or, The University as Insurgency," which he presented at the Grand Parade in Halifax (where City Hall now stands). This venue was purposefully chosen, as it was the university's original site. Although the traces of Dalhousie's early years are now absent from the manicured lawns, the sandstone building, and the navy carpet and bleach-white walls of Halifax Hall, his poem boldly resurrected 200 years of Dalhousie's history with a colourful biography that drew smiles, yips, snaps, and a hearty standing ovation from a zealous and approving crowd. Playing with cadence and tone, stretching vowels and accenting choice phrases with gestures, his "preacherly" performance gave ample nods to his Baptist upbringing and his Africadian roots.

The following interview was conducted at City Hall shortly after Clarke's reading on February 5, 2018.

Shauntay Grant: How do you feel after that performance?

George Elliott Clarke: I'm glad that it went so well and that the poem was so well-received.

Grant: How do you approach writing a poem of that size and scope?

Clarke: Well, the poem was an imaginative summation of historian P. B. Waite's two-volume series *The Lives of Dalhousie University* (1994-1998), which provided a detailed account of Dalhousie's development from a small college to a large university. So I covered Dalhousie's history only as far as Waite brought me, which is to the mid-1980s. That's partly because I didn't have time to go into great detail. If you put Waite's two volumes together you get 600 pages, so I made my way through 600 pages of prose trying to find, for myself, the Poundian "luminous details" to make the history come to life.

Grant: In finding those "luminous details," how did "insurgency" become a central theme in the poem?

Clarke: I was struck by the university's tendency—perhaps accidental, definitely ironic—to attract students, professors, and donors whose education or pedagogy or vision stimulated social activism (consider Rocky Jones), allowed for the early admission of women (see Lucy Maud Montgomery), and added the grand accoutrements of much better-funded universities with historically prestigious names, like Harvard, Yale, Oxford, etc. What I mean here is that Dalhousie ended up adding the major, grand university-style faculties (and accompanying edifices) of Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Psychology, and Public Policy along with, later, the Maritime School of Social Work, the Transition Year Program, the Killam Library, and the Rebecca Cohn and Sir James Dunn theatres, etc. Together, these facilities and their students, graduates, and professors have demonstrably transformed Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Canada, but they have also had an impact on the world. Given the struggle for resources in an often depressed economy, Dalhousie—a publicly-funded institution—should not be as important as it is. That it is a transformative institution, anyway, is a testament to its ability to graduate folks who make a difference, to attract inspirational professors, and to schmooze effectively those folks who like to see their money go to advance particular programs or to allow them to slap their names on buildings.

Grant: Even without going into great detail, you covered a lot of ground. What draws you to this long form of poetry?

Clarke: I like the long form because it allows you to tell stories. In a lyric poem, you are basically talking about your own feelings or somebody else's feelings—an invented character's feelings or reactions to something—but a long poem is almost always narrative in some way, shape, or form. It might even be autobiographical, but it's still telling a story. And once you get into telling a story, you can get dramatic, you can have plot twists, you can bring in different characters, and you're writing more of a verse novel. It's a great way to digest a lot of history and then share that history with an audience.

Grant: With so much emphasis placed on conciseness and word limits, where does the epic fit in contemporary literature?

Clarke: Well, in the early 20th century modernist poets were responding to what they saw as nonsensical folderol—ridiculous poems that were simply patriotic propaganda or theological statements that didn't have any heft. Modernist poets thought that the best way to avoid this kind of poetry was to ask people to write short poems. They were also making the point that no one should be writing epics anymore because we've moved into the industrial age where everything happens in minutes—or, these days, seconds and milliseconds. Who has time for a really long form? So the haiku comes in as a means of forcing everybody to be much more compressed, clear, and concrete. And free verse generally tends to be a shorter way of writing—the standard free-verse poem is basically a page or less. There were a few modernist poems that were longer than a page, like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Another notable example is Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1917-1967), which is more than 900 pages long and contains some poems that occupy 20-30 pages or more. Pound ended up creating an epic, even though it's certainly not a traditional one. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) is another long poem that has a lot of force and power behind it, as it is very emotive, imaginative, and political. It's a chant, a howl, a scream, and you definitely have to read it aloud. Reading it silently defeats the whole purpose. You and I know this, but a lot of 21st century poets are still unaware that poetry is an oral art. I'm all for print poetry, but I also realize that there are people out there who do not read poetry silently and who are willing to come and listen to the human

voice orchestrating an arrangement of words that are held together by emotion and ideas—an arrangement that is meant to be transcendent, uplifting, inspiring, provoking, provocative . . . inciting to riot for crying out loud.

Grant: You're very much inside the poem when you perform. It's beautiful to watch.

Clarke: It's partly that I'm just afraid to look at the audience. I usually don't look at the audience when I'm reciting, no matter what, because I'm too afraid that I'm going to see people being bored, falling asleep, or looking like they want to get up and go. I don't want to see those potentially negative expressions, so I prefer to stay more or less hermetically sealed off as much as possible.

Grant: You also seem to approach poetry—and the performance of poetry—like a musician.

Clarke: Oh, yes. This brings us back to Pound again. He described poetry as "a composition of words set to music," and he claimed that "poetry withers and 'dries out' when it leaves music . . . too far behind." Word to the wise: If you don't want your poems to "dry out," then you have to get a bit of cadence, a bit of flow, a bit of music in there. And you should practice reciting your poetry so that you have a sense of how it's going to sound.

Grant: You have also worked with musicians on a number of projects, such as James Rolfe's opera *Beatrice Chancy* and D. D. Jackson's operas *Québécité* and *Trudeau*, for which you wrote the libretti. Do you find it easy to adapt your musical style of writing for the stage?

Clarke: I can't say that it's easy, but I've come to appreciate that reciting poetry should approach the condition of music. Since a tour of Italy in 2016, I've become emboldened to use more rhyme, use a lot of repetition for emphasis (in speaking, not in writing), and elongate vowels deliberately or cut some words short. In my experience, these oratorical elements help to make for poetry recitals that are unpredictable, startling, lively, engaging, and, well, jazzy. Since writing *Québécité* in 2003, I sound out every word, every phrase, and every sentence before I commit a work to publication. I do this

to make sure that what sounds good to my inner ear is actually pronounceable by my lips, lungs, teeth, and tongue. I even read my academic essays aloud to be sure that they read well orally and aurally.

Grant: How is your latest project, *Canticles*, related to the epic form?

Clarke: I envisioned *Canticles* as an epic poem in three parts. The first part was divided into two volumes, which were published in 2016 and 2017. I followed Pound in that some of the poems are 8, 10, or 15 pages long, but most of them are just a couple pages. I think I ultimately wrote about 200 poems altogether, and each book comes in at over 400 pages. And I wanted the poems to be read aloud because I've certainly had a lot of experience in reciting poetry. But it was writing *Canticles* that put me in the mode of being able to write "The Story of Dalhousie."

Grant: In another interview, you described this project as a response to Pound's notion that "an epic is a poem containing history." How did you incorporate history into *Canticles*?

Clarke: The first part focuses on imperialism, slavery, and the struggles against both from the time of Jesus Christ down to Mao Zedong's victory in China, so the point is to cover a millennia's worth of crises, coups, civil wars, rebellions, and revolutions. The second part is, dangerously, a rewriting of scripture from an Afrocentric perspective. One of the things that's always interested me—and if I'm wrong about this somebody can set me straight and it won't bother me at all—is that the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia has never written down a theology. In other words, the theology that the adherents to the African Baptist Church follow is an organic theology that is learned from parents, peers, ministers, deacons, and so on. But if the church was formed as a reaction to slavery, segregation, racism, and so on, then it's a response—often from illiterate people—to the Bible stories that they heard and processed intellectually, eschewing the codifying effects of print. Oral storytelling is thus a way of sharing a folk theology. This applies to songs, too, because spirituals and hymns are also part of that theology. So what I'm trying to do in the second part of *Canticles* is to rewrite texts that have been important for folks in the African diaspora by deliberately delineating the theology of those stories. I'm not a theologian,

so anyone can come along and say, "You're wrong"—or worse, "That's blasphemy"—but in my mind it's not.

Grant: Your great-grandfather, Reverend William A. White, was the first African Canadian to receive a Doctorate of Divinity from Acadia University, and the only black chaplain to serve in the British Army. What's your own relationship to the Afro-Baptist church?

Clarke: Like my great-grandfather, my maternal grandfather, and my father, I was raised in the Baptist church—African United Baptist Association—but I'm not baptized and I'm not a member of the church. In fact, I'm not a member of any church. I'm a lapsed Christian in every way, shape, and form, so I can't put myself forward as any paragon of virtue. But I remain someone whose conscience, intellect, and spirit have been deeply molded by church-going, Sunday school, and having read the King James Bible three times, cover to cover. I suspect that, if God spares me, I'll get a chance to go through it again.

Grant: Why were you interested in retelling Biblical scripture from an African Nova Scotian Baptist perspective?

Clarke: First of all, it's fun to work with Biblical texts. Maybe I shouldn't put it that way, but it is. It's kind of striking to look at them as poetry that can be rewritten as clearer poetry, while still staying true to the story as it unfolded. As a poet, I also love the possibilities of working with that language and that sensibility—telling the same stories but in the way an Africadian might. So it's a little bit less censored, a little bit more direct, and a little bit more imaginary as a way of delineating the theology more clearly and what folks may have gotten out of a story in hearing it. Rewriting scripture also forces me to look critically at the Bible again—as well as the glorious Quran, the Book of Mormon, and other theological texts—in terms of how scripture is manifested in faith traditions and how a poet might approach them. Maybe, at the end of it all, I will find myself freshly converted—and this time for good, although who knows to what!

Grant: It sounds like you're primarily interested in Bible stories that are connected to the experiences of Black Nova Scotians or people in the African

diaspora. How is that connection reflected in the story of Judith?

Clarke: Well, the Book of Judith is a feminist text because she chops off the head of Holofernes, who is trying to oppress the Hebrews on behalf of the Assyrian Empire and King Nebuchadnezzar. Holofernes is the war minister, and his mission is to starve the Hebrews into submission by basically occupying the sources of water—an early form of environmental warfare. But Judith—who is a widow—throws off her black gowns and says, "Look—I'm going to go down there to the Assyrian camp, take a couple of my serving girls with me, and entice Holofernes. I'm going to deliberately make him fall in love with me, and I'm going to chop off his head."

Grant: A great story! Why do you call your reworking an Afro-Baptist telling?

Clarke: This is generally true of the African diaspora coming through slavery: the stories that folks were given—or what they decided to focus on in the stories that they were given—were not so much about Christ's redemption. Instead, most of the spirituals were based on the Old Testament/Hebrew scripture, which promoted the idea that God was not waiting for you to die to intervene in glorious ways and redeem you. In his book *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), James H. Cone argued that African Americans often focused on Hebrew scripture because it presented a God who was active. If you were oppressed and cried out to God for deliverance, then God would deliver. It might take some time, and He might test your faith a little bit, but sooner or later there was going to be an intervention and it was going to be to your benefit. So you have to keep on climbing, keep on struggling, and keep on pushing to get ahead without giving up or losing your faith. I think those ideas are there in my rewriting of the Book of Judith.

Grant: At one point you also compare Nebuchadnezzar to a "slave ship captain who turfs his 'cargo' overboard as sport for sharks." This description seems to resonate with various forms of oppression associated with the transatlantic slave trade. Is that what you intended?

Clarke: Yes, I mean for my retelling to be anachronistic: I collapse together different historical narratives because the incidents related are essentially

the same. So the assassination of Julius Caesar is akin to the much later brutal murder of Muammar Gaddafi. One might argue that Gaddafi deserved his whacking more than Caesar did his, but I doubt that Caesar's killers would agree. Similarly, Mao's campaign to throw the "white devils" out of China is an echo of Toussaint L'Ouverture's struggle in Haiti 150 years before.

Grant: Are there any contemporary resonances in the poem?

Clarke: Oh, there are many! I also describe Nebuchadnezzar as seeking to "beautify his maps," which is a similar preoccupation of contemporary invaders, whether one considers George W. Bush in Iraq or Vladimir Putin in Crimea. I do believe that the history of the last 500 years has been, in essence, the attempt of the upper/north of the globe to suppress and exploit the labour and resources of the lower/south and that the mess of slavery, civil wars, cold wars, hot wars, riots, revolutions, rebellions, insurrections, coups, erections of dictatorships, etc. are all products of this basic moral and political (economic) fault.

Grant: I also noticed that the excerpt you provided mainly contains expository passages, which are quite powerful and vivid, but it seems that the first part of *Canticles* focused more on monologues and dialogues. Does this represent a shift in style or an attempt to mimic the language of scripture?

Clarke: Yes, I'm following the mood and manner of scripture. Well, I'll make the claim!