

Carrying “the wounds of history”

Joseph Pivato, ed. *Africadian Atlantic: Essays on George Elliott Clarke*. Toronto: Guernica, 2012. 340 pp.

Writing of the significance of blues use in George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*, H. Thomas Nigel suggests that in order to appreciate fully Clarke’s “protean” literary talents, one must have “a head stocked with creeds concerning language use, literary genres, poetic diction” and “mimesis” and “be familiar...with the blues, jazz, spirituals, and the black folk church,” among other things (69). If acquiring such knowledge seems like a Herculean feat, would-be Clarke connoisseurs will find that reading *Africadian Atlantic: Essays on George Elliott Clarke*, edited by Joseph Pivato, will make the task far less daunting. This collection of fourteen essays, plus a critical introduction, covers a fair selection of Clarke’s writing in different genres— including poetry, verse drama, and opera and jazz librettos— and features a number of formal, theoretical, and comparative approaches. Essays on Clarke’s postcolonial invocation of Shakespeare appear alongside essays comparing Clarke’s poetry to the diasporic, Brazilian poet, Solano Trindade, which illustrates the cosmopolitan nature of Clarke’s writing (see, for example, Brydon, Knutson, and Campos).

Pivato’s critical introduction begins with a personal narrative of his own experiences with Clarke and a discussion of their shared dedication to building communities among minority writers, an approach that seems fitting given Clarke’s commitment to being a public intellectual. Pivato then briefly traces Clarke’s importance, not just as a nationally and internationally recognized artist in his own right, but also as an anthologizer, editor, and reviewer of writing by other African-Canadian writers, work that has played a key role in “the fostering of Black literature in Canada” (2). It may well be true that “brevity is the soul of wit,” but for me, the brevity of the collection’s introduction was a source of some disappointment (Shakespeare 2.2.90). Given that this is the first book-length collection of academic essays on Clarke, and since the majority of these essays have previously been published elsewhere, the lack of a longer, more in-depth introduction situating these essays within the broader scholarly debates on Clarke’s writing tempers the usefulness of an otherwise excellent compilation.

Similarly, the organization of the collection is puzzling. Essays are not grouped thematically, chronologically, or by works discussed. Perhaps Pivato was hesitant to impose some kind of rigid order on a writer whose

work, as Wade Compton observes in his essay on the influence of black musical traditions in Clarke's *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, stubbornly resists confinement and questions Western ideas of progress (13). And yet, for all of Clarke's linguistic and generic play and postmodern experimentation, there is a substantial cohesiveness in his writing. *Dialogic* is a word that appears repeatedly throughout *Africadian Atlantic*, and a more deliberate juxtaposition of essays would have emphasized the important dialogue that Clarke's work inspires on issues such as African-Canadian identity; diaspora; Canadian national identity and history; multiculturalism; racism; regionalism; adaptation; and the fraught relationship between the English language, the literary canon, and a politics of resistance in Clarke's writing.

Scholars of Atlantic-Canadian literature will be pleased to find that *Africadian Atlantic* includes reprints of Jennifer Andrews' essay on Clarke's *Execution Poems* and Alexander MacLeod's essay, which traces Clarke's career path, analyzes his "unique contribution to Canadian literature" (226) and his sometimes complicated relationship with the Black Nova Scotian literary community (233-34), and then considers region and place in Clarke's writing. Andrews' compelling piece argues that *Execution Poems* forces us to reexamine the significance of the city of Fredericton, whose once pristine status as "the birthplace of English Canadian poetry" (22) is challenged by Clarke's portrayal of the city's simultaneous history as "a place of racial conflict and execution" (43).

Whereas Andrews argues that Clarke troubles our understanding of one region's role "in Maritime and Canadian literary history" (43), MacLeod contends that Clarke's work asks us to question the very nature of regionalism itself, particularly its environmentally deterministic bent, which dictates that a writer is shaped by their geographical origins. But Africadia, Clarke's literary regional creation, is a utopia that does not yet exist, and so MacLeod maintains that "[u]nlike traditional regionalist writers, it cannot be said that George Elliott Clarke comes *from* Africadia" (244), nor that he is being "passively made by his home culture" (244). On the contrary, says MacLeod, Clarke's writing and his political activism may actually be helping to create the Africadia he imagines (252). MacLeod's analysis is a valuable contribution to the always-lively debate on regionalism, though one might question the firm distinction he makes between Clarke and other "traditional regionalist writers" (244). After all, L.M. Montgomery's utopian novels about Avonlea changed the very real physical landscape that inspired them in profound and long-lasting ways, and so she (and arguably other regionalist writers) have also helped to shape *and*

have been shaped by their physical geographies, even if this shaping is less overtly political than Clarke's.

Many of the essays in this collection also discuss how Clarke's work challenges national narratives and myths of inclusion. In "This history's only good for anger: Gender and Cultural Memory in *Beatrice Chancy*," one of the pioneering essays on Clarke's writing, Maureen Moynagh applies Lauren Berlant's theoretical framework on sex and the nation to Clarke's opera and verse drama, *Beatrice Chancy*. Moynagh argues convincingly that *Beatrice Chancy* exposes the sexual and racial violence of slavery in Canada, which has been hidden from our national narrative in the name of "decorum," a concept she borrows from Toni Morrison's discussion of American slave narratives, but one that seems particularly apt to interrogate the foundational myths of a nation like Canada that prides itself on its politeness (95).

Moynagh suggests that our unwillingness to face some of the most appalling forms of sexual violation, such as incest, that took place under colonial regimes poses a challenge to our current notions of citizenship and exposes "the myth of a nation that represents Canada as a place of refuge, tolerance, and equality," a myth that "is dependent on the careful erasure of that earlier history [of slavery]" (103). Amanda Montague's more recent essay on *Beatrice Chancy* covers a lot of the same ground as Moynagh's, though she is particularly focused on theorizing Clarke's adaptation of Shelley's *The Cenci* to show that Beatrice goes "from abjection to agency through acts of physical and vocal insurrection" (147), and to argue that this movement challenges Canada's "discourse of suppression" of black histories and black bodies (139).

Whereas Moynagh and Montague focus on Clarke's potent (and poignant) use of anger to critique Canada's discourse of multiculturalism, Diana Brydon's essay on the narrative poem *Whylah Falls*, Lydia Wilkinson's essay on the opera libretto *Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path*, and Katherine McLeod's essay on the jazz opera *Québécois* reveal other facets to Clarke's writing on multiculturalism: hope and idealism. Brydon sees *Whylah Falls* "as an anti-modern and romantic text in the Canadian Red Tory tradition, celebrating the survival of a beleaguered community in a context of racial hatred and violence, which accuses the state of failing to guarantee its promise of 'peace, order and good government'" (175). While she acknowledges that Clarke's critique of the "discourse of [Canadian] civility" is scathing, she also suggests that this critique functions "less to discredit" civility "than to hold it to its promise" (173). Similarly, Wilkinson argues that Clarke's fictional Trudeau embodies the unrealized

but idealistic promise of multiculturalism, even if Clarke's Trudeau and his vision of multiculturalism never existed in reality (220).

In addition, a number of these essays show how Clarke calls directly on readers to assume responsibility for Canada's history of racial violence and for its current state of racial affairs. Katherine McLeod argues that Clarke's jazz opera asks listeners to engage in a kind of "critical *polyphony*," a model for multicultural relations. According to McLeod, critical polyphony demands listening "across languages, musical genres, and cultures," as well as listening "back upon itself" (209). Such a practice also involves recognizing (without resolving) what Ien Ang refers to as the "'uneasiness inherent in our global condition of togetherness-in-difference' (200)" (qtd. in McLeod). Katherine Larson, meanwhile, argues that Clarke's overabundant use of paratexts in the verse drama, *Beatrice Chancy*, and his "maximalist poetic style" (293) are "an injunction" to the reader "to remember history" (297).

It seems that much of Clarke's uneasiness as a writer stems from having to write about his people's history in English, a language that, as Guilo Marra observes, carries "the wounds of history" (159). And although this uneasiness is never resolved, it does not—as the essays in *Africadian Atlantic* illustrate—stop Clarke's writing from moving "towards the affirmation of ideal values such as love, beauty and justice" (Marra 159).

Works Cited

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