

Mapping Africadia's Imaginary Geography: An Interview with George Elliott Clarke

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AFRICADIAN, THE WORD George Elliott Clarke coined by fusing Africa with Acadia, is more than a convenient designation for Afro-Nova Scotians; it marks the conscious construction of an imagined community, and it is a project he engages in both through his poetry and through his critical work on the Africadian cultural renaissance. Born in 1960, in Windsor Plains, Nova Scotia, Clarke is rooted in a cultural geography charted by the generations descended from Black Loyalists and refugees. The particular terrain inhabited by Afro-Nova Scotians is visited time and again in a variety of ways in his poetry, from the poems named for churches in black communities throughout the province in his first book, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (Pottersfield Press, 1983), to the rebaptized Whylah Falls near the Sixhiboux River of Jarvis County in his novel in verse, *Whylah Falls* (Polestar Press, 1990), to the place names—Zarahemla, Gehenna, Axum-Saba, Africadia, Sierra Leonia—that “refer to states of mind, not actual geographies” in his most recent collection, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* (Pottersfield Press, 1994). In remapping the official geography of Nova Scotia, and in mapping places habitually ignored by the dominant culture, Clarke constructs a nation called Africadia in order to contest the ongoing erasure of the historical presence and cultural distinctiveness of Afro-Nova Scotians. His two-volume anthology, *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing* (Pottersfield Press, 1991 and 1992) extends this project by assembling a cultural history comprised of autobiography, sermons, petitions, covenants, historical writing, songs, orature, essays, poetry, drama and short stories.

The re-writing of colonial history and the re-mapping of colonial terrain are two well-known postcolonial strategies, and Clarke deploys them self-consciously. Intent upon representing, both as spokesperson and as artist, the Afro-Nova Scotian community, Clarke writes from and to a particular locality, bringing to bear on that writing a nationalist vision that insists on tolerance, change, and adaptation as much as on the preservation and promotion of cultural difference and group identity. Keenly aware of the role language and print culture play in the scripting of a national narrative, Clarke writes his imaginary geography in order to claim ontological ground denied the black community in the larger Canadian narrative. Yet the community Clarke imagines is one that draws on diverse narratives from several places, including Nova Scotia, Canada, Africa, and Afro-America, even as it foregrounds Africadia. This is not a contradiction; it is an integral part of the vision, one he elaborates in his current work, *Beatrice Chancy, A Passional*, which transplants to Africadia a twice-told-tale about the Cenci.

This interview took place in Halifax on November 26, 1995.¹

Who are you writing for?

I'm writing for anyone who reads English, although I do have certain audiences in mind. I am very interested in being read by my own fellow Black Nova Scotians, or to use my word, Africadians. I'm very interested in having some standing within my own community as a writer people know, and as a writer they may enjoy reading or hearing. I'm also interested in the larger community of people in Nova Scotia, and in the Maritimes in general, because part of my project is to make them more aware of our contributions and our historical presence in this part of Canada. Then there is the even larger audience of English Canadians, who often are unaware of our existence in this area. And then there is the United States, particularly African Americans, who many of us are descended from and who represent our major "ethnic connection," and so I feel that we have a bond, or a potential bond with them that ought to be further developed.

Your work is peopled with real as well as fictive Afro-Nova Scotians—Portia White, Richard Preston, Lydia Jackson, Graham Jarvis.² How do

you view the commemorative dimension of your work? Do you see yourself doing the work of a historian, in some sense, through your poetry?

Yes, definitely. The need to commemorate has fuelled my writing since my youth. I try to struggle against the general absence and repression of the existence of Black Nova Scotians or Africadians in every major discourse in this province: in terms of economics, tourism, and social interactions of all sorts. In fact there's a book that just came out—I just bought a used copy yesterday—called *In the Annapolis Valley* [Halifax: Nimbus, 1993], a collection of photographs published in 1993. Not one photograph, not one caption mentions anything at all about the presence of black people in the Annapolis Valley. I feel I am constantly writing against our erasure, and yet the erasure continues. If you read books that discuss the various ethnic groups that have contributed to Nova Scotia, the major ones that always are brought up are the Scots, the Acadians, and so on; my own group is often still overlooked. I remember deliberately writing away to receive the tourist brochures produced in 1993 and 1994 by Tourism Nova Scotia, and for two years I wrote letters, angry letters, to Tourism Nova Scotia protesting the fact that once again certain groups are mentioned and black people are not. Now, damn it, we have a history here, a history full of trials, triumphs, struggles, etc., and there is just no legitimate way that we can be excluded from the history of this place. And so this explains my commemorative efforts, and my general interest in involving history and photographs in my creative work, because it is a means of contesting that constant erasure, which has led ultimately I think to racism, to the idea that "you folks do not count; you're not even a fit subject for history." 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.

I'd like you to address a slightly different dimension of this idea of commemoration. In talking about the NFB film "Remember Africville,"³ you remarked that it uses memory to conjure both nostalgia and critical hindsight.⁴ Do you see yourself as engaged in a similar project? How do you understand the relationship between nostalgia and critical hindsight?

This is an important question. Nostalgia can be very dangerous, in that it *can* result in a kind of erasure as well, an erasure of the real conflicts, including intra-communal conflicts which did occur, particularly around questions of class, religion, gender, and so on, and so one has to be *nervous*, to be really critical about one's use of nostalgia. I often like to think of it in terms of the Italian meaning of the word which is to go back and recover memory. And so it can have strictly from that point of view a *degree* of critical consciousness, of critical hindsight. To deal with the notion of critical hindsight *is* necessary so that we *do not* forget the conflicts which exist and existed within a community. I don't think there's any way that we can escape the pressure of history, the shaping forces of history, although different people can have different perspectives on how that history has been shaped and how it has been used. *But* we have to have our own sense of "*Je me souviens*," to use the *québécois* nationalist slogan. We do have to remember the legacies of slavery, segregation, and the pressures that these imposed on our community. In one sense that process can be nostalgic. On the other hand, we need to have that sharply critical stance.

I would like to talk about a specific use of history in one of your works. In "Whylah Falls," you suggest that the only way to tell the truth is "to disguise it" as fiction. Would you elaborate on that?

Yes. In some ways, that work did come out of my own personal experiences and also out of the stories that people told me that seemed to have some basis in reality, some basis in lived, biographical detail, and I wanted to be true to that, to bear witness to that. But, at the same time, I realized that for one thing I couldn't use real names, and that in some instances, perhaps, I would have to bend or alter some story lines in order to arrive at the particular truth of fiction. So there was a bit of a compromise. There was truth in what I wrote in terms of narrative, in terms of characters and events, but I did find it essential as well to alter things, so that in the end it is more a work of fiction.

I'm interested in this notion of "truth" as you present it here. In the same work, in fact on the same page, you also write "I know that this traitor language can turn / One truth into another or even / Against itself. Yet it

is all we have.” And I’m reminded of the character Shelley’s mistrust of language and, by extension, of Xavier Zachary,⁵ the poet figure. Could you talk about the power and limitations of language and the responsibility that places on the poet?

Well, we know that reality is constructed to a large extent through language, or that our understandings of reality are dependent upon constructions rooted in language use. Being part of the population which has been at the receiving end of rather negative constructions, I think it is legitimate to have a distrust of how language gets used, in particular, how it gets used by those in power to disenfranchise others and to suggest that others deserve their disenfranchisement because they are poor, because they are ignorant, because they have a tendency towards crime, because their genes are defective, because they are of “naturally” lower intelligence, and so forth. All these various arguments which have been used, and are still used to support racism, are dependent upon certain constructions in language. For a long time these constructions were very potent and resulted in self-hatred within the black community itself, and were a denial of reality, as a matter of fact, because there were plenty of people who always went against these stereotypes and clichés and constructions. Particularly within the black community, I think one is writing against these received notions of blackness. And while at the same time one wants to create more realistic notions of blackness, one still has to be aware that one is working with a very defective device, or a device which can also be used against one. It’s a two-edged sword, and we have to try to use it to defend and preserve our community on the one hand, and on the other hand it can also be used against us.

Given the focus on Africadia as a place in your poetry, I wonder if you might comment on what for you is the meaning of place?

I think for me this goes back to my answer to the first question which is, in a sense, the construction of an Africadian tradition within Nova Scotia. What I’m trying to do in my own work, and what I try to encourage others to do as well, is to be really *conscious* about it. For instance, I’m interested in rewriting the map of Nova Scotia. I mean, why should I call Hants County

“Hants County?” I’ll call it “States County,” after a black family surname. Same thing with Digby County; that’s Jarvis County for me. In the same way that the Mi’kmaq people have gone back to the original Mi’kmaq names for many of the places in this province in order to lay claim to it, we need to reclaim the province because we have been disenfranchised; we’ve been ignored, we’ve been erased in a sense from the map. In the case of Africville, we literally were bulldozed away and then just last year they changed the place-name Negro Point; they erased it from the map of Halifax. I think the black community should have been up in arms over that. I mean, we may not call ourselves Negro any more, but the fact that bit of land was called Negro Point represented our history. The city may have had good liberal reasons for wanting to get rid of it, thinking, “Oh, maybe this is an insult”; but in fact there was no community consultation, and it was just erased from the map. Tolerance means nothing if it doesn’t mean the acceptance of difference and therefore the preservation and maintenance of difference. It’s not good enough to say we’ll accept you if you’re like us. No. That’s the liberal point of view. The conservative point of view, which is my point of view, is that “I accept you while you’re different, and I value your difference. I’m not going to say that you have to be like me for me to accept you.” *That* is intolerance of the grossest kind. And Africville was about that. Africville was about a liberal welfare state saying we cannot accept a black community; we have to destroy that community; we cannot accept its existence. It would have been far better to have said let us improve the housing; let us ensure that we finally provide proper city services, let us ensure that anyone who wants to live in Africville can—no matter who they are, no matter what their religious or racial background may be. I’m not in favour of segregation at all; I’m totally opposed to it. But I do think that it’s important that communities be able to exist so long as they do not keep other people from joining that community.

In terms of constructing this place of Africadia, what I’m attempting to do is to reassert difference and to look at Nova Scotia as an altered state. Of course, it wasn’t originally Nova Scotia, anyway. It’s a name that gets imposed, a Latin name,

meaning New Scotland, so why can't we give it our own name? Let's call it Africadia. Let's make it an African place, since Africans live here. And let's re-orient our understanding of the province and its traditions and its history from our own unique vantage point, our own particularity. But to go further, for me as well, Africadia, since it isn't in a sense a real physical place, it becomes, therefore, very much a mythical notion, an intellectual construct, a soulful notion. And I've defined it as a place where the *free* self can live, a green space where the free self can live. As Frederick Ward says in his fine poem on Africville, "Africville ain't a place, it's us."⁶ It's in us, and that's my view of Africadia. It may not necessarily have to exist as a state with an anthem and standing army [laughs], but it is important that we understand that we have this unique vantage point which does exist within ourselves, and which is manifested in different ways at different times in different places with different groupings of people of African descent in this place that on paper we call Nova Scotia. But I don't think we have to accept these standard notions, and that it is important to claim the place for ourselves, and rename, reorder, rethink the whole thing.

Is this what you have in mind when, in the collection "Lush Dreams/Blue Exile," you suggest that the place names heading each section "refer to states of mind" rather than actual geographies? Among the place names are Africadia and Sierra Leonia, and I was wondering whether you would comment on what the imaginary geography of Africadia in particular means to you.

I think it's kind of an ideal place. It's a place of communion, and communion can take place around a kitchen table, with a bottle of rum, or something like that. It need not even be tied again to anything political or religious, but a place where people feel free to express themselves, to be themselves. I can think of the Baptismal ceremonies, with people wearing their white robes going down to the water, wading into the water and so on. It can be people singing, playing music of one sort or another. It can be all of that. And I suppose it also reflects a realization of the highest aspirations of the Canadian state in terms of notions of equality and liberty, and so it would also encapsulate these notions. And

it's also a beleaguered state, a besieged state, a place that needs to be defended as well as explained, interpreted, in our own terms, and so it becomes an intellectual geography, a spiritual geography, for me.

I'm also interested in another instance of this concern with place that comes up in your work, and that is your frequent exploration of exile: the opening poem in "Whylah Falls," "Look Homeward Exile," or "To Syl Cheney-Coker": "I have my Nova Scotian madness, Syl/ I wander exiled, but prize it still."⁷ Is there a tension, for you, in being away and representing the black communities in Nova Scotia?

Yes, a terrific tension. I left here in 1979 to go off to the University of Waterloo, and in fact I left here quite deliberately because I was fed up with the place. I just had to get away. So I did, and immediately became tremendously homesick, and felt that I had made a drastic mistake in having left. And I started writing poems reflecting my Nova Scotianness, and my feelings about this place. I still feel that tension a great deal, although I've learned to live with it. But I think I would prefer to be here, all things being equal, as long as I knew I could leave in an instant as well. And right now it's not *too* bad, seeing as how I can come back more or less when I want, and next year I'm hoping I can actually establish a more permanent base here, from which to write and so forth. But the other thing about being away is that for the first time in my life it really forced me to read Maritime histories and black Nova Scotian histories, especially, and to get to know it in a way I hadn't really before. And I found myself reading all of these old touristy things like *This is Nova Scotia*, the Will Bird book, and travelogues, and I found them profoundly moving *for me*, particularly in terms of their ability to conjure up places in the Annapolis Valley—the places I feel closest to are in the Annapolis Valley. It really struck the poetry in me, and I found myself wanting to write to respond to the visions of Acadia articulated by mainly white commentators, and I wanted to inject my own black sensibility into these depictions of the place. So it has been very, very important to me, through my own experience of exile, small "e," to come to a new understanding of the position of my ancestors within this construct, and again to struggle against that

sense of erasure, because in so many of these other texts, travelogues on Nova Scotia and so on, black people are absent or are only present as figures of mirth, pathos or tragedy. So, I've found it necessary to try to write back against some of these ideas or depictions—or lack of depictions, actually, of Africadians in a lot of this work that I read because of my own feelings of alienation, estrangement, and physical distance, separation from this place.

I'd like to turn now to the work you've done representing the contemporary Afro-Nova Scotian, or as you've christened it, Africadian cultural renaissance, and I would like to begin by asking you to talk about the term itself.

The term seems to have arisen in 1983, which was an interesting year because a lot of things were coming about at that time. We had the play *Freedom* which was developed by students at Cole Harbour High, which was playing as part of the Nova Scotia Drama Festival, the scholastic drama festival, an annual event. Also my own first book of poetry came out that summer; David Woods produced a play that summer which was called "For Elsie Dorrington." *Four the Moment* was off the ground and running; they were beginning to perform across the country, and Walter Borden was developing his one-man show, *Tightrope Time*. Oh, and of course I can't neglect to mention Edith Clayton and her basket-weaving that was attracting attention. Maxine Tynes was also appearing on Arthur Black's show *Basic Black*⁸, and doing broadcasts out of CBC Halifax. There seemed to be, suddenly, this coalescence of people and forces that were interested in Africadian creative work of one sort or another coming out of our community at that time. It was Burnley "Rocky" Jones⁹ who first described this focus of interests as a renaissance . . . but four years later Rocky was against the idea of calling it a renaissance. He felt that there had been no break in the artistic and cultural development of the community. He's probably right about that. As he said, a lot of it took place within the church, and going back into the minutes I can see that, yes, people were putting on plays, people had been doing things. But I think what was different, beginning in the late 1970s and flowering into a more determined consciousness in the early 1980s, was that we did have a conscious group of people running around calling themselves

artists—I mean people who were really serious, and who could afford to be really serious about it, since by that point we had developed a means to create art and survive, and not have to dedicate ourselves entirely to just making a living. Also, I think that since so much of this work does recall or build upon the Black Loyalist inheritance or experience, we can call it a renaissance, because there has been, to go back to the word nostalgia, a need for retrieving the memories and cultural traditions suggested by that experience. And so much of the “art” has been about going back to, or going through the historical record, and dramatizing certain incidents in the life of the community. To go back to the idea of spiritual geography, I can see this being manifested in the sense of renaming this place for ourselves. Also the idea of commemoration—recognizing our own heroes and their contributions to our community as well as to the larger Nova Scotian society—has been encapsulated in the idea of renaissance.

It is political as well as cultural. We see a real uprising in political organization and aspiration and intervention within various social arenas in the province, and that in turn helped to fuel or support some of the artistic endeavours. I know myself, with my involvement with the Weymouth Falls Justice Committee,¹⁰ and the whole fight around the Graham Jarvis killing, that this manifests itself at least in part in the desire to write about it, and to enlist the aid of other artists as well in discussing the situation. You can see this in the songs of *Four the Moment*, not only those that I’ve written, but those by Delvina [Bernard]. This is also true of Faith Nolan with her album *Africville*, in 1986, and that [Africville] has of course been a major theme for so many of us—Maxine Tynes, and Sylvia Hamilton as well with her movies, and investigation of women’s history. There has been a strong connection between the need for political protest and intervention, and the desire to create artistic works of one sort or another. So, I do think that we can legitimately talk about a renaissance and that we also have to couch it in conscious political terms representing the need of a people to assert a presence. Maxine Tynes has a poem, “Black Song Nova Scotia,” which ends simply with “We are here. We are here. We are here.”¹¹ In the context of

our history in this place, that line is important, because we constantly have the feeling that “We aren’t here. We aren’t here. We aren’t here” in terms of the larger society.

Do you see any connections between the Africadian cultural renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement?

I would say more so with the Black Arts Movement. I suppose you can’t rule out some connections with the Harlem Renaissance, but I think first of all that the Black Arts Movement really influenced a lot of black Nova Scotian artists, and of course that Movement was quite tightly tied to the radicalization of Black American culture, and some of that spilled over into Nova Scotia. You had Rocky [Jones] bringing the Black Panthers here in 1968-69; the birth of the Black United Front, and what that meant in terms of a much more conscious radicalism; and then there was the destruction of Africville, which, if nothing else had happened, I’m sure would have been a spur anyway to a more critical understanding of black people and blackness itself within the Nova Scotian context. So you had all of these forces coming together, I think, in a sense, to encourage a much more conscious artistic intervention in various social issues and problems. And then you also had people who were basically working in both worlds, like Walter [Borden] who was involved in setting up Kwaacha House (which was a meeting place, a discussion group—in North End Halifax) with Rocky [Jones] in the mid-1960s or late 1960s, but who was also involved in trying to further his own career as an actor and flirting around Neptune Theatre. He also won a prize for his poetry in a provincial writing competition sponsored by the Writers’ Federation of Nova Scotia, and he was working for the Black United Front too. Many of the people involved in the arts movement now—Delvina Bernard, Sylvia Hamilton too—were all involved at one point or another with various social causes, and at the same time they were involved in making art. David Woods is another good example. And then I came back here and worked as a social worker in the Annapolis Valley in 1985-86, and it really did wonders for my writing. At the same time, I was involved with various fracasés down there; I had a chance to really listen to people and respond to their concerns

and try to capture some of their concerns in my work. So the Black Arts Movement was a natural kind of influence then, because people like Amiri Baraka in the American context, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, were all involved themselves politically as well as culturally, so it seemed to be the thing to do. It was very difficult for people to separate artistic praxis from political intervention, and I think that has remained true.

Do you see yourself and other Africadian writers functioning as a kind of vanguard for the black Nova Scotian community?

I don't know. At times I have; at times I've wanted to believe so, although there are elements of [W. E. B.] DuBois's talented tenth notion, of "We're the special ones, we get to lead everybody." There is a kind of bourgeois sensibility attached to that idea, but I don't know. It might even be better to think of it just in the sense of, well, some of us have to do some things. We just have to. I mean, that's just the way it is. Because not everyone is in a position to articulate certain problems, or to engage in certain struggles without incurring a tremendous cost. So those of us who can, do; many of us do. So, we may function as a vanguard, but I don't know if it's conscious, and I'm not sure in the end that we can actually . . . I suppose we do, because there is leadership provided. Certainly when someone like Rocky [Jones] sets up the Dal[housie University] program for Mi'kmaq and Blacks [Transition Year Program] that's a leadership role and it makes it possible for others to come behind. The same thing with the Black United Front. In fact, I think it would be interesting for someone to do a sociological study on who has worked for the Black United Front, because you would find that almost everybody who has done anything in the black community, of whatever sort, has put in at least four months working at BUF. We can disparage it as much as we like, but Rocky [Jones] worked there, Walter [Borden] worked there, Sylvia [Hamilton] worked there, I worked there, David Woods worked there. I mean, almost everyone who's doing anything was on the BUF payroll. So even though most of us often found it quite regressive and not up to speed in terms of dealing with political problems, even though many of us got fired, or left in a huff from that organization,

nevertheless, I think it did provide some training, and a place to air political disagreements with some of the leadership in the community and also it's a place to put certain ideas into action. "Vanguard" may be almost too grandiose a term, but certainly we have been involved in activities which have led to progressive development.

What about the dimension of your work as artists putting a Canadian and in fact specifically Nova Scotian spin on notions of blackness—I mean, to what extent is your poetry and the works of the other artists read in the black community? Does your work put you in the position of vanguard in that respect?

Perhaps in some ways, because if we're marginalized within Nova Scotia and its history, we're even further marginalized within Canadian history and Canadian understandings of blackness, which now are invested much more with an understanding of blackness as related to the Caribbean and, although to a much much lesser extent, to Africa, and also to Black America. But there is a lack of understanding that Canada also practised slavery, that black people have been part of this country for a long, long, long time, and have deep roots here. This position raises hackles with more recent arrivals, in some cases. I just attended a conference on black Canadian writing in Ottawa, in September, and there was a debate about this. I was on a panel with Adrienne Shadd who comes from the historic Ontario black community and we were both engaged in projects to go back, particularly to the nineteenth century and dig for whatever writers we can find, in order to construct this tradition of black Canadian writing, and at least two or three members of the audience who are first-generation West Indian Canadians objected to this, or at least didn't quite understand why the project was necessary. They said, you've got to confess that a lot of literature began with our arrival. That's absolutely right, but the problem with that is that it marginalizes—again—all those people who were struggling in obscurity, and who created whatever literature they did create against tremendous odds. This fact is important for us because we know that our history counts, and that it cannot be simply subsumed within the history that's being created by the more recent arrivals. There is a definite tension there.

Within the general construct of the African-Canadian community, there are all these further fissures, conflicts, or struggles within, over claims of identity and notions of blackness. My work is very much an effort as well not just to represent blackness in Nova Scotia and in Canada but also blackness within the black community, a particular Africadian blackness within the larger Canadian black community, and even the larger international black community because, as I was just saying, we are also erased within that context. Our blackness is not seen as being important. In fact, let me take as an example Paul Gilroy's book [*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*]. He hardly talks about Canada. It's not part of the Black Atlantic! And that's a problem, even though he does mention the fact that Delaney wrote *Blake* while he was living in Canada, which, I would argue, makes it the first black Canadian novel—the fourth black American novel, but the *first* black Canadian novel. Now if we can claim Louis Hémon as a *québécois* writer, a Canadian writer, when he only lived here while he wrote *Maria Chapdelaine*, then I can't see why we can't do the same thing with Martin Robinson Delaney. And I will, damn it! Why not? We have to claim all the writers and novelists we can from the nineteenth century.

I see our project as being part and parcel of what was necessary for mainstream Canadian culture in the 1960s: to do what Margaret Atwood described as search and rescue missions, to go back and reclaim people who'd been lost, and even those who could be claimed only tangentially as Canadian. In fact it might be helpful to read *Blake, or the Huts of America* from a Canadian perspective. You know, Delaney wrote it in Chatham, and so there are aspects of African-American culture which can probably only be understood from a Canadian perspective, which will be a difficult thing to sell to African Americans! But our project is reflective of, and in fact influenced by, that effort, which is very consciously still being carried out, on the part of mainstream Canadians to construct a Canadian literary tradition. Canadian women writers have done the same thing, saying, "Who were our foremothers?" And by doing that, you reconstruct, you refigure the entire Canadian canon. It has to look different once you start to include all the people who have been left out, and the

same thing will be true once we start to understand that Canadian literature also consists of African-Canadian writers who were writing a long time ago, and also the slave narratives out of the nineteenth century, which have never been accepted as part of Canadian literature. Why not? I think largely because of the mainstream Canadian need to distinguish ourselves positively from the United States. We've come up with this myth that there was no slavery here, or that if there was, that it wasn't as bad as the American slavery, as a means of saying, "See, we're better than them." While it's good that we remind ourselves of our difference, the myth is also dangerous in that it does cause us to repress elements of our history that ought to be confronted. In fact, the Canadian Civil Liberties Union recently published a poll which found that 83 per cent of Canadians were ignorant of the fact that slavery existed in this country. That's phenomenal. There's a reluctance on the part of the mainstream to embrace or understand the dimensions of black history within this country because we don't want to deal with racism, because that's meant to be an American problem, not a Canadian one.

You've argued that Africadian Renaissance literature "displays an anti-modern modernity." Would you explain what you mean by that?

The idea of religious belief is crucial here because if you do maintain some sense of religiosity or the religious, then that has to make you anti-modern, to a certain extent, because modernity has been predicated on notions—and here I'm accepting the standard notions of modernity—of so-called rationality and even liberalism. So if you oppose these notions, you are likely to oppose them on the basis of religious/spiritual belief, and this is going to make you anti-modern, or place you in a position of opposition to modernity. So it's possible to read Africadian history and literature as a manifestation of this opposition. Actually, this point leads into George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*—and I do take from him to a large extent—because Grant argues that you cannot have modernity without liberalism, or liberalism is the engine of modernity and that this erodes particularisms. This is why he argued that Canada was bound to disappear because it was a small "c" conservative nation living just beside the world's

most dynamic modernist/liberal state, and that our proximity would entail the erosion of Canadianness, which he conceived as an orientation towards notions of community, the state, the group, as opposed to the individual. And seeing the way things are going, in terms of the rampant Americanization of our economy and even of our political beliefs, there may be some truth in what he argues. And I think Grant has to be read as an anti-modern person, because he was interested in preserving or maintaining the efficacy of religious belief in our age, and religious belief which was not simply the more liberalized religion of the United States with its emphasis on the individual, but rather the more corporatist sense that he valued in Quebec, of reliance on a group-oriented religiosity to provide cultural cohesion, social cohesion. I'm more than conscious of the criticism that this kind of thinking can lead to fascism, which is corporatist, but at the same time to go the other way is to erase difference entirely. I hope that there can be a happy medium. But in order for us to get there we do have to oppose the modernist/liberal project to some extent, which would seek to deny difference. I see my community and what remains of its religiosity as being a forum counter to the liberal modernist project.

You brought up Paul Gilroy, and one of the things for me that runs through "The Black Atlantic," which is also connected to the definition of modernity that he articulates, is the history of colonialism. How would you talk about the anti-modern impulse in Africadian culture in relation to colonialism or postcolonialism?

First of all, to go back to Gilroy, the colonialism that he's most concerned with is that of African-Americans, or what he calls "Americocentrism" at one point in the work; in fact, when I eventually write something on this in the next few weeks, the title of my piece is going to be "Must all Blackness be American?" His work did touch this off for me, as did Walter Borden's play, which I argue draws upon this African-American writer, Lorraine Hansberry, in order to decentre her, to pry her loose from an African-American context and in a sense Canadianize her, or Africadianize her, I suppose, which is part and parcel of the postcolonial project. This is what we have to do, in order to

represent our own subjectivity. There's a little bit of Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence, too, embedded within this whole notion of needing to rewrite the imperial script, to go back to the imperial influences and domesticate them, to make them our own.

This is where I part company with Gilroy really decisively, because he has disparaging comments to make about cultural nationalists whom he sees as being the root of all evil, and to a certain extent that's right—taken to an extreme, any nationalism is dangerous. On the other hand, I argue, you can never get rid of it. I suggest that even in Gilroy's own work, this is a huge contradiction. He's very conscious of what he calls Americocentrism and the need to contest this as someone writing from Britain, and someone wanting to accent the fact that not all blackness is American. Some ideas of blackness come from Africa, from the Caribbean, and even from Britain, and the idea of trying to create one standard blackness is very dangerous because we're all heterogeneous, and one cannot be essentialist or reductive about it. But at the same time, the very notion of a Black Atlantic reintroduces nationalism, because what it creates then is a different understanding of Pan-Africanism. It becomes more of a—I think I can coin this term—Pan-Atlanticism. This is what he ends up creating because even he cannot eliminate the idea of blackness, and it obviously must have some cogency; it must have some agency because it continues to persist. He didn't focus *enough* on what I think is an underlying theme, which is that black Americans really dominate the discourse about blackness. Instead of really contesting that, what he in fact did was write about African-American writers: DuBois, [Richard] Wright, [James] Baldwin, Delaney, and [Toni] Morrison. And I think he's right to emphasize the interconnectedness of so much of the thought and song, but nevertheless this thought gets promoted and gets produced and gets disseminated by African Americans, and why is that? Or even if people come from elsewhere, it's Black America where they end up, really promoting their ideas or seeing them come to fruition there.

We are interested, I think like postcolonial writers elsewhere, in domesticating these so-called foreign or imperial influences.

In fact, I think that Africadia is an interesting entity because we draw *so much* from African-American culture, *so much, it's amazing!* Well, I suppose it's not all that amazing since it's a natural culture for us to draw upon, given that the experience of being a minority is similar, and African-American culture is so widely disseminated. Even as a kid, growing up, it was not uncommon for me to see *Ebony* or *Jet* or *Essence*. From time to time, the church would deliberately go looking for more black-focused publications and so forth, coming out of the African-American experience. Our ministers would often come from the United States. So there's also been a constant injection of African-American influence into Africadia. But one of the things I want to do now, and I've just started this in terms of looking at Walter Borden's work, is to look at how the influence has been domesticated, how it's been rewritten and reinscribed so that it does suggest a more Nova Scotian or Africadian perspective, which goes back to what I was saying about cultural nationalism never disappearing. It's always there. One never does accept willy nilly an influence. We still look to black America for a lot of our cultural symbols, but I think, ultimately, in our own cultural productions that we end up making something Canadian. I think we do embrace the influence disseminating from that particular culture but we also change it.

You've contended that it is impossible to divorce the Africadian Renaissance from nationalist thought. Why is that?

Well, again, this goes back to the question you raised about anti-modernism versus modernism, and again I'm going to go back to Grant. As Grant argues, any movement towards a nationalist vision has to be against modernity, it has to be anti-modern, so any art work which is going to talk about the experiences of Africadians as being a distinctive experience is engaging in a nationalist program. We are engaging in the construction of a particular vision, the construction of a particular identity which has to be to some extent "essentialist." Now essentialism carries such negative connotations these days because so many people are opposed to nationalism, and I think this is a misunderstanding, because for one thing, nationalism will always be with us. It

can never be totally obliterated and neither should it be, as far as I'm concerned, even though it must be kept in check. I think you need to have a certain amount of nationalism to exist as a distinctive group but at the same time, you have to have enough openness—liberalism, if you like—in order to get along with others. I think that what we should move towards is some universal understanding of human rights so that we do not have people being oppressed. At the same time, and it is going to require a fine balance, we also have to allow for the articulation and preservation of cultural difference, so long as it's non-violent, so long as it's not invested in coercions of others even within a group along the lines of gender and so forth. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we all have to follow the same things. . . .

My argument is that society consists of interconnecting but also contesting groups. If you accept this vision of reality, you understand that women will form groups to advance their rights; minorities will form groups, and do. Workers will form groups, and do, etc. Conservatism is about preserving notions of community and the social good, and the state as representing the people and so it appears to be unprogressive. But one can argue that a conservative vision does allow for progressiveness, and does allow for innovation, and in fact, I think that Africadian writers, when we look at it from a postcolonial point of view, can be seen as domesticating ideas of artistic development, and by domesticating, conserving them, nationalizing them. I think you've got to have cultural interchange and exchanges of ideas in order to grow, and in order to adapt as well, but the crucial point here is that this transformation take place on your own terms and not someone else's. That's when it becomes imperialistic. If we're going to value diversity, we have to value the preservation of diversity, which means that you adapt foreign influences on your own terms.

I want to ask you about the difficulties of producing as an artist in Canada, but particularly as a black artist in Canada, and I want to put that in the context once again of imperialism and multiculturalism. Peter Li has argued that Canada's multiculturalism policy has created a two-tiered, separate-but-not-equal funding system that continues to marginalize the work of ethnic minorities by creating a dichotomy between "Art,"

*which is white and predominantly Anglo-Saxon, and "folklore," which is what everyone else does.*¹² *I'd like to know what your thoughts are on this. I'd also like you to talk about the pressures created by the overwhelming economic influence of the US and the influence of US culture in Canada, and the kinds of difficulties that presents for a community of artists trying to get funding and being able to produce here, and particularly for black Canadian artists.*

First of all, to deal with the second one, and this goes back to something I was saying earlier about the need for English Canada, but also Quebec, to define themselves vis-à-vis the US, and what this then often creates is a tendency to repress minority contributions to the state and to the culture and to the society. So that to oppose, say Norman Mailer, we have Margaret Atwood in English Canada, or Anne Hébert in Quebec, and through this tendency artists who come from minority communities are then further marginalized, or just kept marginalized, because they're not seen as contributing to the over-arching need, particularly among the cultural communities, to create a Canadian identity, or to maintain or foster a Canadian identity. They are seen as being preternaturally "other." They are seen as perhaps needing to combat the "local" problems of racism or linguistic annihilation, or perhaps as still being implicated in conflicts arising from their "homelands" and therefore not really having anything to contribute to the over-arching Canada-versus-the-US mode that most of our cultural production takes place within. This has been true even in terms of the reception of my own work. There were a couple of reviews of *Whylah Falls* which basically suggested it wasn't Canadian. In fact, one writer said quite explicitly that the work didn't seem to be rooted in the Canada that "we" know, and that the writer (myself) seemed like a ghost among "us." It was a good review, but I wrote a letter to say, "I take umbrage with your use of these terms, suggesting that somehow I am not part of this 'we' and this 'us' that you mention"; and the reviewer was predictably "hurt" by this. . . . I remember sitting on a jury for the Ontario Arts Council in 1991. It was a blind competition, and we were looking at various manuscripts that had come in from artists looking for support and publishers looking for support for various projects, and one of the manuscripts, which I thought was

really excellent, dealt with Arab-Canadian history; it was a magical realist thing and it dealt with the history of that community in Toronto around the first World War, and I thought it was just a beautifully written piece, so full of life and energy, and better than a lot of the other stuff that we'd seen, but the reaction of one of the very well-known Canadian writers who was on that jury was, "It's not Canadian." You know, the guy who wrote it, as it turns out, is a third-generation Canadian of Arab descent. So, I think these are all concrete examples of the kinds of constructions that take place among mainstream Canadian cultural industries and workers vis-à-vis artists coming from minority groups.

As a writer of African descent who's also Canadian, I have this need to continue to reach out to my fellow and sister Canadians and educate them at the same time that I also need to speak to members of my own racial and regional community or communities. So this is the same battle that all of us have—Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke, and many others. Actually, I came across a review of Dany Laferrière last year, in *Nuit Blanche* by somebody, I forget his name. He was reviewing Laferrière's latest book, which is *Chroniques de la dérive douce*, and he didn't like the book, but his attack was interesting because it did reveal a racist point of view. He talked about Laferrière "spitting in our white sauce." I don't think there was a single letter to the editor to protest that guy's review. Not one! And it's a mass market publication in Quebec. I'm sure that Haitian writers suffer the same marginalizations and disenfranchisements that writers of minority background in English Canada also face. So you have constantly to negotiate this Canadianness thing.

And now I'm getting it doubly, because a review of *Whylah Falls* just appeared in the *African American Review*, and they're claiming me as an African-American writer! So, you know, it's one damnation or another. In any event, my Canadianness is constantly being erased. Constantly! The question "Where are you from?"—which gets asked of writers of African descent, especially—raises hackles. There have been essays written about that question. Adrienne Shadd has one in the collection *Talking about Difference*, edited by Carl James and herself, and she talks about

how this question is meant to ignore the possibility that people of colour are also Canadian, because there's just such a construction that whiteness is equal to Canadianness that we constantly have to negotiate and contest and quarrel with and change, and it doesn't even seem to matter how long you've been here. It still comes up and people from Nova Scotia and southern Ontario and New Brunswick are constantly being cast as American within the Canadian context, or if they're in Toronto they may be thought to be Caribbean. You know, they ask, "What island are you from?" And you say, "Cape Breton," or something like that. This tendency not to recognize the Canadianness comes in many different colours.

And in terms of multiculturalism, you're right, absolutely right. Particularly the way it was envisioned and carried out under the Trudeau government, it did tend to emphasize the folkloric, the *supposedly* folkloric, and it has come in for attack because of that. But at the same time, we have to realize that a lot of those multiculturalism grants went to producing work which we are now studying and thinking about, and recognizing as being very significant Canadian work, and that many of those grants that may have been intended in a paternalistic way—simply to say to Italians in Toronto, "Well, continue to produce your newspaper"—may also have provided spaces for people to write. In the African-Canadian community, we took those grants and we used them. There was a conference held at McGill in 1980 on the role of the black artist in Canada, and it was funded by Multiculturalism, Secretary of State. The bureaucrats at the end of the chain might have thought, "Oh, we'll give black people something to do"; but, hey, we used that conference. That conference made it possible for us to meet from all across the country, for the first time. I went up there, David Woods went up there, Sylvia Hamilton was there, and I know that was a profound experience for all of us, coming out of Nova Scotia, to go there and meet black artists and writers and filmmakers and sculptors from Vancouver, and Montreal itself, and Toronto, and we were all there together discussing a black aesthetic and how does that work in the Canadian context, and deciding that it didn't work very well, particularly given the linguistic divide. In fact, the

conference took place a week after the first Quebec referendum, and the Haitian artists basically walked out, and there was also a division between the Caribbean-born and native-born artists, and that took place on the last day of the conference. But still, it was a tremendous experience. I think multiculturalism has been taken and used by the ethnic cultural communities to benefit themselves, despite whatever paternalistic ideas the government had for promoting the programs. True, multiculturalism has created a second-tier kind of system in that works produced with a multiculturalism grant were not accorded the same kind of priority as works that came out with the Canada Council support. They were seen as perhaps coming from a ghettoized community, and there has been a problem along those lines, but at the same time, I don't think we could have avoided those problems anyway, even if everything had come out with Canada Council support as opposed to multiculturalism support, because there had been a reluctance to accept works by people from different ethnic backgrounds than either the prevailing Anglo or French backgrounds, and these works would have been marginalized or treated in a secondary way, anyway, no matter what.

What is your current project?

Well, as you know, I've got this *Beatrice Chancy* thing I'm working on. I hope it works out. I see it as being a postcolonial intervention once again in that I'm taking a story which began in late Renaissance Italy, and I'm transferring it to the Africadian context in the years 1801 and 1802. The original story has been done by everybody—Shelley, Artaud, Dumas, Corrado Ricci, Moravia—and they've all been writing about this family called the Cenci, and particularly the female heroine in the story, Beatrice Cenci. Of course, I've anglicized the surname, and there've been changes in terms of plot and other characters, too, but essentially the story line is the same; I've just transferred it to this place and a different time. And racially it's different too, since it's not an all-white story in my case, but one in which the mixed-race daughter of a white master is raped by him and then kills him, and is hanged by the government of Nova Scotia at the end. It's set during the time of slavery and so there's also a kind of

incipient slave revolt. I've been writing this work deliberately for the stage; and, actually, it started off as a libretto for an opera which is being written by James Rolfe, a Canadian composer from Ottawa/Toronto, now in residence at Princeton, where he's working on a PhD in music. We've been working together on this project for the last three years, and there will be the two versions: there'll be the libretto and there will be the verse play which I call a *Passional*.

NOTES

- 1 I wish gratefully to acknowledge the financial support of the Centre for Regional Studies at St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia.
- 2 Portia White was born in Truro, Nova Scotia in 1911. An internationally renowned contralto, she performed in Carnegie Hall and before Queen Elizabeth II, singing both classical opera and spirituals. Rev. Richard Preston escaped slavery in Virginia to become a leader in the Baptist ministry in Nova Scotia, where he founded the African United Baptist Association. Lydia Jackson, a Black Loyalist, was indentured to a Dr. Bulman who impregnated her and later beat her until she miscarried. Jackson has come to symbolize oppressed Afro-Nova Scotian womanhood; she was among those who left Nova Scotia in 1792 for Sierra Leone. Graham Jarvis was a young Digby County man who was shot and killed by a neighbour in 1985. Despite clear evidence of racism on the part of the judge, his killer was acquitted, and province-wide efforts to have the case reviewed met with no success.
- 3 *Remember Africville*. Dir. Shelagh MacKenzie. NFB, 1991. Africville was a small black community on the Bedford Basin in an area that, by the 1960s, had become an industrial sector of Halifax. In what has come to be regarded as an infamous liberal welfare-state experiment, community members were relocated to inner-city public housing between 1964 and 1970, and Africville was razed.
- 4 See Clarke's "The Death and Rebirth of Africadian Nationalism," in *New Maritimes* 11.5 (1993): 20-28.
- 5 Characters in the 1990 novel in verse *Whylah Falls*.
- 6 See page 19 of Ward's "Dialogue #3: Old Man (to the Squatter)," in *Fire on the Water: Vol. II*. Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press, 1992.
- 7 See *Lush Dreams/Blue Exile* (Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press, 1994): 91.
- 8 A weekly CBC Radio program.
- 9 Currently a lawyer in Halifax with Dalhousie Legal Aid, Jones is a long-time black community activist who established Dalhousie University's Transition Year Program for Black and Mi'kmaq students, and was instrumental in the founding of Kwaacha House, a meeting-place for inner-city youth, and the Black United Front, a government-funded advocacy agency for Afro-Nova Scotians.
- 10 Weymouth Falls is the Digby County town where Graham Jarvis was killed; the WFJC was created to lead the struggle for an appeal of the verdict that acquitted the man who shot him.
- 11 See *Woman Talking Woman* (Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press, 1990): 63.
- 12 See Li's article "A World Apart: The Multicultural World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada," in *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 31.4 (1994): 365-91.