

## ON BLACK CANADIAN WRITING: IN CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE.

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George Elliott Clarke is a well-known Canadian poet and scholar. Born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1960, he obtained an MA in English at Dalhousie University in 1989, and in 1993 he completed a Ph.D. at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. For several years he taught English and Canadian Studies at Duke University in the United States, and he has only recently returned to Canada to join the English Department at the University of Toronto as Assistant Professor. His work as a poet has increasingly attracted the attention of critics. He has published three collections of poems, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), *Whylah Falls* (1990) and *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* (1994). He has also written verse drama, the play *Whylah Falls* which would also later inspire a CBC film, and *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), an opera libretto. A seventh-generation Black Nova Scotian, he has done his best to make known the contribution of Black people to Canadian letters, most of all by collecting it in anthologies: *Fire on the Water* (2 vols., 1991 and 1992) compiles the work of Black Nova Scotian writers from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, while *Eyeing the North Star* (1997) offers a range of samples of current African-Canadian writing.

The interview took place in Dartmouth, when George Elliott Clarke came for the Nova Scotian premiere of *Beatrice Chancy*. As we talked, the phone kept ringing off its hook. Everyone —friends, relatives, journalists, scholars like myself— wanted to reach the famous author.

*There are several terms currently in use for the literature of people of African descent in North America: African-American, African-Canadian, and Africadian, which you yourself coined. Could you define each of them? Why did you feel the need to create a new term?*

First of all, I want to thank you for that question, which is a ridiculous question, not because you ask it, but because it shouldn't have to be asked. But the fact is it *has* to be asked because Black people in Canada, in North America in

general, are not in any easily definable category. "Who are we? What are we?" So the reason why you need to ask that question is because we ask ourselves as well, how do we explain who we are? Because we are no longer African, even though we have an African origin, and even, to a certain extent, a heritage (whatever survived through slavery), and different elements survived in different places: Caribbean Blacks have a particular orientation, or a heritage from Africa, but it is quite different from what Blacks were able to hold on to in the United States, and then again, from what they were able to hold on to here in Canada. Very different experiences particularise us.

So your question is a very serious one, and in fact it is one that has haunted discourse about Black cultures in the New World from the time of slavery. We have been called various terms: "Negro" —to use a term which I believe is Portuguese in origin, deriving from the slave trade—, "coloured", and other terms we still use to refer to Black people, like "mulatto", they come from the Portuguese involvement in the slave trade. So there's a conflicted history. And then at one point "coloured" was the preferred term, right here in Nova Scotia, and also in other parts of North America, especially the United States. In the 1960s, thanks to the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement, spearheaded by people like Malcolm X —and then of course Angela Davis and many other thinkers, and of course I shouldn't leave out W. E. B. DuBois—, "Black" became *de rigueur*, the preferred term, and we still use it quite a bit. At the same time, in the 1980s I believe there was a rise in concerns about loss of identification with Africa, in the sense that the term "Black" somehow was repressing the fact that we have an ancestral connection to this continent, and so in order to recognise this African heritage in a word, in a name, I think the "African", especially "African-American", began to be used in the 1980s. But it was also as a reaction to, or an acceptance of, an argument Malcolm X presented in the 1960s. In Malcolm X's speeches, he uses "the so-called Negro", he talks about Black people, and he also talks about Afro-Americans. And of course before his death he formed the organisation of Afro-American Unity, so as to make the point that we are "Americans" here, but we have this connection to Africa too. And so, it's funny that while Malcolm X was alive, his actual following among the Black communities was minuscule, something like 10% of the Black people in the U.S. would agree with Malcolm X, and like 85% of them would agree with Martin Luther King. And what's really interesting is that there's been a kind of reversal in those fortunes with the respective deaths of both leaders, and now Malcolm X's ideas about Black Consciousness and Black Pride have become much more influential than King's ideas, which have been boiled down unfairly to the issue of integration. King is still very much a hero to Black Americans, and his legacy is celebrated, but in terms of actual impact, how Black people saw and see themselves, Malcolm X seems to have become much more influential. So I think the use of the label "African-American" is a reflection of that deep and pervasive influence that Malcolm X's work generated.

And so there's a spill-over in Canada, in the sense that the same arguments that had been made about the term "African-American" began also to be made in Canada. Although culturally, we do have very different issues than the Black

American polity, our situation in Canada is very different from the American situation, but I would argue that the phrase "African-Canadian" is far more reflective of our reality than any other word one could invent. Because it's difficult for us to speak of ourselves collectively, for Black people in Canada come from very different constituencies. We have a situation in Canada where we are a multitude of ethnicities, not just one group of Black people. Black Americans tend to be far more coherent, uniform in outlook, in ideology, in religion, in practices and in culture. There are regional variations: the culture of Louisiana is not the same as the culture of California, which again is quite different from Harlem, in New York. But—and I know this now, I am going to make this argument because I've lived there for five years—to be an African-American is to subscribe to a whole set of ideas, issues, and a past, a history and a pantheon of heroes, and heroines, that gives you, no matter where you come from in the States, no matter what your particular Black experience might be, it gives you something you hold in common. Which is why it's quite possible for African-Americans to answer opinion polls and like 92% of them can say "we think O.J. Simpson was innocent", or that 75 or 80% of them are going to vote Democrat, because there is a consistency and a coherent world view at play in the culture, despite regional variations. The complete opposite is true in Canada: we do not have any kind of coherent idea or notion of Blackness in Canada. It just does not exist, because of the fact that, first of all, many Black people are first-generation immigrants, or second generation, and their first ties are to the homeland, wherever it was, and quite appropriately, so that one can say "I am Jamaican", or "I am Trinidadian", or "I am Bajan", "I am Saint-Vincentian", "I am Cuban", and those cultural influences are very strong, again quite appropriately so. So then for me, coming from Nova Scotia, from a particular background, to argue with somebody who's been living in Canada maybe 30 years, but still having a real living memory of having spent his or her first 20 or 30 years in another country, in another place, in a very different Black environment, he or she may not necessarily understand why I would have the point of view I have, on race or race issues, or on Black culture, because quite literally, his or her whole experience has been vastly different. He or she might agree with me on the issue of racism, in that racism is evil, we can all agree on that, but in terms of what is a Black culture, or "shall I even think of myself as Black", there is going to be a wide variety of difference.

That's why I think the phrase "African-Canadian" is good, because it connects us all back to Africa ultimately, while leaving it open that if some of us want to call ourselves "Jamaican-Canadian", we will, or "Trinidadian-Canadian", or simply "Black", that's fine. There's always been argument about nomenclature, because the real argument has to do with who we are, and because we cannot come up with a definition that fits, in complete reality, there'll always be variations, practically on a generational basis. Even the term "African-American" is not new. When Malcolm X was using it in the 60s, whether he knew it or not, the term had been used a hundred years before, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were Blacks in the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who were calling themselves "Afro-American". And not only that: the phrase "Afro-Saxon" came into use amongst elite-oriented Blacks who wanted to subscribe to what they saw as the world leader, basically Britain at that point. Even though now it

may be seen as regressive and backward, at the time their self-labelling was a challenge to the whole idea of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.

So, let me just say that the issue of naming is not a simple one, and it's one that again is crucial, and has always been at the crux of every formulation dealing with Black culture, because of the fact that it's a culture that is inextricably entwined with what has been inherited, or forced upon, Black people. At the same time that's true, I think that one has no choice but to engage in the discussion. I like to be, as much as possible, really cosmopolitan about it. And what I mean by that is, Black people only wanted to be, at first, described as Black. And then, the question arose, how would they like that? Capital B or small B? Probably capital. And I like that too. The only problem is, when the majority society talk about us as Black people, they write our name with a small "b". I don't like that, and I can't force every reporter in the world or every scholar in the world to write our name with a capital. But what such usage tells me is that I am not a real person, I am not as fully or as much a person as somebody who is Italian, or Spanish, or simply Canadian, all names which are written with initial capitals. I know it may seem like a minor thing, but it's always been a problem. When people were using the word "Negro", whites spelled it with a small "n". And it was only the Black publications that would use the capital "N". When we were being called "coloured", it was always with a small "c". And the only term that nobody can get away with using minuscule letters, is African. It's inappropriate to do otherwise in English. You have to use capital letters. And that's another reason why I like "African-Canadian", I get my full respect that way.

Now, "African-Canadian" is a word I came up with to refer to Blacks in the Maritimes. Because my feeling is that we constitute a peculiar culture. It's largely African-American in formation, and background and history, that's where most of our ancestors came from, the South, as escaping slaves, but not through the Underground Railroad, but rather through the two major migrations that occurred after the American Revolution and after the War of 1812. That means we've got two hundred years of residency in this part of Canada, two hundred years of not living in Mississippi, or Virginia, or Maryland, so we're not simply American or Black-American any more even though that culture remains extremely influential for us. But we have lived as Americanised Blacks in Canadian space, so that means we have had to come up with our own culture. Now, what does it consist of? I've spent most of my intellectual labour trying to figure that out. I don't know. But I do know that the Church is a huge part of that, and it's a very specific Church, the Baptist Church, and they are churches that the very earliest Blacks in Nova Scotia felt they needed to have, and wanted to have, and fought to have. And they built themselves two dozens churches across this province. That means that they have a particular religious orientation. And also that they have a community institution that they control, and not somebody else. That, to me, is important. Someone else might come along and say, "It's backward, they shouldn't be doing this. They should be making jazz music. Why weren't they doing that instead of singing spirituals?" Well, because they had a different experience. They didn't have an experience that generates jazz music, they got an experience that generates spirituals. Now, maybe

spirituals aren't as good as jazz music. I don't know, I like both. But the thing that I find interesting in looking at the people I describe as "Africadian", is that, for them, the invention, and holding on to, of gospel music, spirituals, church music in general, was crucial to their sense of identity. And that to me is interesting, because they didn't develop other forms of music *per se*. There are people who play other kinds of music, but they decided to go the Church road, why is that? Well, I think it is because they were an immigrant population that came *en masse*, like Puritans, or Pilgrims, who left one country *en masse* and came to another *en masse*. And one of the aspects of culture that they decided to focus on was the freedom of religion, and freedom to worship their own God in their own way. Maybe they shouldn't have; maybe they should have decided that they needed to build structures, that they needed to engage in agriculture, that they needed to evolve a new postal system, I don't know! But that's not what they decided to do. They decided to build themselves churches and sing church music. It's a major part of their culture.

To sum up, I really wanted a term that was going to ground Black people in a space. And I like the fact that the Acadians have done this. Of course, the Micmac people, the Indigenous people of this province, don't have to do this, because this is their land anyway. But then, all the other ethnic minorities of the province have done this, but we Africans were simply "Black Nova Scotians", that's how people would describe us. Now they are using "African Nova Scotian", that's the official term to describe us, and I think it's a fine term, it's wonderful. But none of those terms really make it clear that there is a group of us who have a connection to this land going back two hundred years, and then some of us have a connection even going back to slavery in this province, and so I think we need a term that captures that, and for me, it's "Africadian".

*You have touched on something that I find very striking in your academic work. It seems to me that you often stress the commonalities of Africadians with U.S. African-Americans, much more than their common features with more recent African immigrants in Canada. Is that because you feel that you share a history, and that therefore the issues are closer?*

That's a very good question, and at the same time a very dangerous one! There is a struggle going on right now over defining Black culture in Canada. And it's a struggle that Black Nova Scotians/Africadians have every possibility of losing. First of all, just in terms of pure numbers, we are insignificant, we don't matter. We are 10 % of the Canadian Black population. The vast majority of Black people in Canada live in Toronto and Montreal, and, after that, in Ontario and Quebec. So when it comes time for Black Canadians *en masse* to go to the government to request programmes, whatever they may be, we are not likely to be on the receiving end because the powers that be will always dispense first to those with numbers.

My reading of the situation is, we have to be insistent about our historical reality, our historical presence, because that has shaped our population in certain ways, and it's something that we need to have recognised. And so people start saying that the Black experience in Toronto of various ethnic groups is *the* Black

experience. And that covers us. Quite frankly, I don't think so. For instance, speaking as a writer, I don't think Austin Clarke in his fiction speaks for me, for Black Nova Scotians. I don't ask him to speak for me, it's all right that he doesn't. He has to speak for *his* reality, which is first generation immigrant from Barbados, writing about the struggles of other Bajans and other Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. That's important work, great work. What I don't want is for Austin Clarke to turn and say, "I am going to speak for Black people in Nova Scotia". That's not his job, that is my job, and the job of other people who come from this reality, or the job of people who come here and live here long enough, like David Woods, and can then start to talk about it.

*You think there is a problem of appropriation of the Black Nova Scotian experience, then.*

Yes, appropriation, that's the word. Not necessarily appropriation of our explicit experience, but appropriation of Black experiences so they become only one. I think that the tendency of some critics in the centre, in the metropolis, Toronto, is to think that Black experience in Canada is coming from somewhere else and then trying to formulate a new identity in Canada. Yet that's not all of it. For instance, M. Nourbese Philip, whose work I admire greatly, I think she is one of the few Caribbean-born writers who really does understand this. She at one point came to Nova Scotia and she said something which I do have problems with, but which I also recognise has a grain of truth. She said that the Black writers in Toronto are writing about an urban experience, whereas in Nova Scotia we are writing about a rural experience. That is too cut and dry, because we do have writers here who are writing about an urban experience too. Take the play *Consecrated Ground* (1999), by George Boyd. His play has a reference to the countryside, but it's basically urban. Philip's formulation is too cut and dry, but there is another part of it that is accurate, which is simply to say that, maybe the writers in Toronto are focusing on a very particular Toronto reality.

Of course this matter has to do with the whole issue of regionalism in Canadian literature. There are very few writers who can claim to speak for all Canadians and to all Canadians. In fact, that's a real problem, and it's also true for the minority writers. For instance, Italian Canadian writers split into two groups. There are those from the West Coast, Vancouver, whose experiences are not the same as those in Toronto or those in Montreal. Especially, Italian Canadians in Montreal, or Quebec in general, have a totally different experience from those in Toronto or those in Vancouver. That is not to say that they do not recognise themselves as Italian Canadian writers. They do. But they also recognise that they are not all the same. And this point holds true in the Black communities. Different parts of the country enjoy or endure different experiences.

However, I feel that a lot of scholars in Toronto still fail to understand that, and try to take one reality as the base example for everybody's experience. And that is not so. I have got a relationship to the state, to the government here in Nova Scotia, that they may not have to the government in Ontario. It's not going to be quite the

same, because they may own a house, but I come from people who own land in communities here, and who have been paying taxes on that land for generations. And we have an agricultural experience as farmers, small-scale farmers. And that gives me a different relationship to the state that someone who has just arrived, or who got here twenty or thirty years ago, and bought a house in downtown Toronto. Now, they do have a legitimate stake and a legitimate experience, but it is not *my* experience.

*My next question is probably going to sound ridiculous to you, after so much talk about different Black constituencies in Canada, because I wanted to know your opinion on African-Canadian writing in general, most especially from your experience with anthologies. You have contributed to anthologies of African-Canadian writing, like Ayanna Black's 1992 Voices, and you are yourself an anthologist. You edited Fire on the Water in 1992, and then in 1997, Eyeing the North Star. How would you assess the current situation of African-Canadian writing?*

First of all, I think it's tremendously exciting precisely because the issues we were just mentioning are being discussed right now, and I am part of that conversation, basically by saying, "Don't forget the folks in Nova Scotia!". One of the things that differentiates the writing of the historical Black populations from the new Black populations in Canada is the fact that we have a relationship with the land. If you read Dionne Brand, coming from Trinidad, she seems to be saying, "it's paradise here, I don't like the gender relations here, I don't like the fact that men lord it over women here in Trinidad. But, wow, there are the trees, there is the grass, there is the sea, and it's warm, and people are friendly, and all that. There is a history of slavery which I detest, and a history of American and European imperialist intervention which I hate, colonialism, blah blah blah. But hey, this is a place where I can relax, be at home with myself and be at peace, more like a home. I wish it were a socialist regime, but other than that, things are okay and I am going to write about them, about this natural paradise and, unfortunately, it is complete with these power relations which make it bad, but other than that, it's paradise. And when I come to Toronto I write about Toronto that it's cold, people are nasty and mean, it's racist, the police, blah blah blah". And I agree with that, I know what Brand is saying. But, then, I have another relationship, or people like me, writing out of the historical Black populations in British Columbia, Ontario, or even Quebec, we have a different reality. For me, I can go down to the Annapolis Valley and say, "This is beautiful, I love this, this is my land, this is my territory. And yes, I know there is the Queen, there is the Prime Minister, there is the RCMP, there is the police, and I don't have to like any of them. I don't. But yes, this land for me is space, is Black space, it's ideal space, my space, this is my paradise". I don't have the same kind of alienation that Dionne Brand may have. For me, I can be somewhere and hear bagpipes, and tears come to my eyes. Not because I am identifying with Scottish culture, or even Scottish Nova Scotian Gaelic culture, but because, when I was a kid growing up, I heard this music and it meant something emotional to me. And so when I am at a street corner somewhere else, anywhere, and I hear this music, it's going to bring me

right back home, and I am going to cry. For somebody coming from, say, Trinidad, who is not going to have had that experience, for them it may seem like stupid white people's culture. But it's part of my culture, of where I come from. And I feel the need to reflect that in my writing.

So this is a tremendously exciting moment for African-Canadian writing. We are realising that something called African-Canadian literature exists. And we are understanding that this is made up of the contributions of people from very different backgrounds, and of course from the different regions of the country, and for that matter, in the two different languages of the country. I think slowly and even painfully scholars and writers are beginning to understand this fact. Because before this, we thought of it simply as Black writing *in* Canada. There is an anthology with that subtitle, "Black Writers in Canada", instead of "from" Canada, or "of" Canada. These are people who come from all over the place, and they happen to be writing *in* Canada. So they are really writing of other spaces, of being Jamaican, or Bajan, or what have you.

And that's the shift that's taking place, especially as we begin to move now from first-generation to second-generation. The second-generation writers are extremely fascinating. Because they have no choice. Yes, they may know the parental homeland they have visited, and they may have close ties with it in certain intellectual ways, but at the same time they have to negotiate the fact that they grew up with Pierre Elliott Trudeau, they have to negotiate the fact that they grew up with Quebec struggling for greater autonomy, they are growing up with all that and along with the fact that the food they are eating is from Trinidad or Barbados, and the family photo albums and the visits from grandma and grandpa are also enforcing that particular cultural inheritance. But all that to one side, they still have to deal with the fact that they are using Canadian currency, Canadian stamps, paying Canadian bills, dealing with Canadian police and Canadian schools, and all the appeals to back home are not going to help change that. All the appeals to back home are simply a denial of reality. It doesn't matter that back home you had Black principals and Black teachers who knew your family and cared about you and knew your parents by their first name, and, if you got in trouble at school, your parents and grandparents at home would know and you would get a big licking. And now hold it, now you are in this big cold cosmopolitan city, Toronto, and whites don't know you and they may not even like you. And if you get in trouble in school they are not probably going to call your parents, they are probably going to call the police. And you are going to have to deal with the juvenile justice system, where it's going to be cold and alienating, with the Queen staring at you from the wall in some courtroom. It's an ugly situation, it's discomfoting. So you can still talk about how nice it was back in Trinidad, you didn't have to deal with that problem. Unfortunately though, I must say, "*Monsieur, Madame*, you are not living in Trinidad any more, you are living in Canada. And yes, it's a racist country, and yes, it's an awfully cold country, and yes, it's this and it's that. So, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to deal with it, face up to it, confront it, or are you going to, in a sense, go back home in nostalgia or literally run away from this cold hostile place?" The historical Black



community can explain matters. This place is racist, yes, we have known that for generations. We have had our experiences with the folks here, so they are not necessarily going to roll over and be nice to you. So what do you do? Do you continue to look at it from the standpoint of the immigrant/exile? The second-generation writers are coming to terms with being Black minority Canadian. Understandably so, since they have to live with this truth in every possible way.

As we move on in time, it's going to be harder and harder to access the back home. And less and less necessary too. Even in a first-generation writer like Cecil Foster, you see in some of his fiction, a shift towards trying to understand this process of acculturation. He writes about parents who return to the Caribbean, to the homeland with their children, and they realise that their children don't fit there. And they also realise that some things have changed, and that they are holding on to the nostalgia of what things were like twenty years earlier.

So, slowly but surely, by hook or by crook, I think that our writing is beginning to centre more and more on the creation of Black cultures here in Canada. I see an African-Canadian literature, but I think it is formed of a lot of subsidiary cultures, coming from Somalia, from Haiti, etc. It's a very eclectic group of texts and writers. And there are even different perspectives on Blackness. If you take a writer like Dany Laferrière, in his first book *Comment faire l'amour avec un negre sans se fatiguer* (1985), he makes the point very clearly. People say his novel is a satire on race relations, but what is wonderful is that because he's Haitian, because he comes from a Black majority country, he sees the whole debate about racism and black versus white as being completely stupid, and so he is able to poke fun at it and hold it up to ridicule it, and play with sexual and racial stereotypes left and right in that book. And he is able to do this in ways that writers who grew up here find it more difficult to do, because they grew up with the cause of fighting and struggling against racism, while Dany Laferrière grew up with dictatorship and oppression in Haiti, and though this oppression was based to a certain extent on colour, lighter-skin Blacks versus darker-skin Blacks, it's not the same as the kind of civil rights movement/integration/affirmative action and equity struggle on the mainland, in Canada and the United States. If you grow up in a Black majority country, you're not going to worry about racism *per se*, your struggle is going to be about class, or religion, or gender, or sexual orientation, not with race. And as a fact, the argument that Laferrière puts forward is that, in his perspective, the whole debate in the US and Canada has nothing to do with skin colour, but a lot more to do with class. And he is right. So he presents a hero who is able to use the discussion about race to advance himself classwise in the world. He says, "Oh, you North Americans want to talk about racism? Fine, I'll talk about it so long as you pay me". (Laughs) Because for him it's completely useless and foolish. But of course there are Black readers of Laferrière who don't get it. They think it's regressive. But I think his point of view is refreshing. (Laughs again)

*And how about the state of the scholarship on African-Canadian literature? You are fairly critical of fellow scholars and writers who forget the continued African presence in Canada since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, you correct several*

*popular misconceptions in the introduction to Eyeing the North Star, and you recently wrote a demolishing review of a book on African-Canadian writing which you considered "rich in factual errors and interpretative slippages". Do you think scholarship this poor is then the rule rather than the exception?*

Yes, that review was nasty. The reason why I reacted so fiercely and so savagely against that book is that that particular writer is putting forward a set of opinions without as far as I am concerned, any serious, scrupulous grounding, and simply saying to the world "I am a Black man living in Canada so you have to accept that what I say is true". And yet a whole bunch of white liberal critics jumped right onboard saying, "He must know what he is talking about: he is a Black man who lives in Canada". Excuse me: I just think such an attitude is a disservice to the culture, a disservice to the literature, and a disservice to any notion of scholarship. If we believe that there is an African-Canadian literature, again understanding it as made up of different cultures' contributions, then we have to pay it the dignity of scholarly inquiry, we have to treat it seriously. We can't just take a handful of texts and say, "They are written by Black people, therefore they are against racism". They might be, but that's not enough. I am tired of reading reviews simply saying Dionne Brand is against racism and homophobia, Marlene Nourbese Philip is against sexism and regionalism, and Claire Harris is just somebody who likes free verse. I am sick of that! How does such criticism advance us? What I am saying is, let's not reduce this writing to the question of who's further left.

*One of the features I find most striking in your work as a writer is that your books include photos, usually taken from the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, next to the poems. I believe this happens in all of them including your latest work, Beatrice Chancy. I am curious: was this your own decision, or the publishers'?*

I have always wanted to have photographs in my books, and every single book I have done has photographs, and every book that God gives me time to write will continue to have photographs. I think that they add to the text anyway, but I also want the faces and bodies and history of Black people in Canada to be represented visually in the text, because so much of that gets repressed. One of the things that I had a little discussion with the publisher of *Beatrice Chancy* about when we were going over the artwork for the book was, should we include these photographs of nude Black people? And they had serious concerns about that. It wasn't a racial question, it was more a question of how the photos would fit with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century setting, you know, because they are photographs as opposed to illustrations. I made the point, and they came around after a couple of weeks, that I wanted these bodies *there* because that is what slavery was about, it was about getting the body to do what you wanted it to do under coercion, under force. I also think the photographs are sensuous. I think the people can make the imaginative leap from 19<sup>th</sup>-century story to 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographs. It's a process of documentation, it helps make reality that much more present in terms of imagery. It says, "Yes, this book is about Black people".

*One can detect a Spanish presence that surfaces in some of your poems: "Guernica", and "Death and Life of García Lorca", as well as in Pablo and his flamenco guitar in Whylah Falls. The influence of Lorca can also be felt at times, particularly in the section "The Martyrdom of Othello Clements" in Whylah Falls, which reminds one of "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías". How do you explain this presence and/or influence?*

I think every writer in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century feels attuned to García Lorca. What I find most attractive in his work is his *Gypsy Ballads* [*Romancero Gitano*]. I have no Spanish at all, so I have read all his works in English, some of them in very good translations. I just love his whole attitude and perspective on the folk, on folklore and the peasantry, and the whole idea of listening to folk tales and then writing poetry, ornate and beautiful and sensual poetry out of those stories. That's what I was just trying to do in *Whylah Falls*. I loved the idea of the poet with his guitar, playing the lover, and being connected with Cuba. Because Nova Scotia is just a series of ports, sailors literally came here from all over the world, they came from Spain and Cuba and other Spanish possessions, England and France, from Africa, and the West Indies... and they intermingled all over the province. In fact, in the community I have based *Whylah Falls* on, Weymouth Falls, there is a local story that talks of sailors who came from Spain and other places and left their genes. That's just our reality and I wanted to reflect that. Even though our major populations are fairly homogeneous, there has been an awful lot of influx of various cultures to this place through the agency of the sea. For instance, I came across a newspaper article about a house in Weymouth which had been built by some sea captain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was just full of *objets d'art* and other objects from all over the world. Because he had sailed all over the world, and the house was full of *dissecta membra* he had picked up from all his voyages. And so to a certain extent I wanted to reflect that [in *Whylah Falls*], by injecting this slight Spanish touch, with Pablo. I have to confess it's not the deepest exploration of Spanish culture, it's pretty superficial, it's just the flamenco guitar and some touches of imagery, but I just loved what I saw as the passion in Márquez and Lorca. I also love flamenco dancing, which I saw in Carlos Saura's *Blood Wedding*. And for *Beatrice Chancy* too, I read Lorca's three tragedies, as some background preparation for writing that book. And I also think there is an African/Black influence in Spanish culture too, especially in Southern Spain because of the Moorish occupation. So I sense that, it's nothing scientific, but I sense that there is a connection there to Blackness and Black people. And I certainly sense that in Lorca. I feel a natural affinity. And the same thing with Márquez. Again, I have read all his work in translation, but I just love the whole idea of magic realism, I think it really works for minority writers, because so much of our culture is based on magical or fanciful things. And for instance, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is based in part on her reading of *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

*Another source of influence in your poetry seems to come from the English Romantics. You have even written a poem called "Mutability", which runs "Is the world now ending or beginning". Do you feel close to the preoccupations of the Romantics?*

I just like their spirit. I have never studied the Romantics! In all my years of study, I never took a course on the Romantics, but these are poets I do like very much: Blake, Shelley, Byron, not so much Wordsworth, and certainly not too much Coleridge. Especially Shelley and Blake, these two of the whole group I feel closest to. Shelley by accident, and Blake much more by deliberate reading. Shelley by the accident of his name. There is a character in *Whylah Falls* whose name is Shelley, a woman's name and a first name. And after I published a poem about her I went to Dalhousie University, and someone at a party asked me if my poem was about the poet Shelley. And I had never given the possibility any thought, but now I thought, this was an interesting connection, and I should check this guy out. And then, years later, I came across his play *The Cenci* (1819), and I liked this very much.

*The concepts of exile and home seem to me to be key concepts in your poetry. You used "exile" for the title of one of your collections, Lush Dreams, Blue Exile, and one of your poems ends "I have my Nova Scotia madness, Syl./ I wander, exiled, but prize it still". You have also written many poems dealing with Nova Scotian landscapes and places, and with the Atlantic. What or where is home?*

I do feel that Nova Scotia is home, but I am not able to live here. What I mean by that is, that it's not been possible for me to live here and make a living. Things might change and then I might be able to, but still I often wonder, if I did come back here, how long it would be before I would feel strange and insular, and cut off from the larger world. Of course that's unfair, because Nova Scotia and Halifax are quite connected to the larger world. Whatever happens in the world, we do hear about it and discuss it here. But when I was growing up here, for the first 19 years of my life, when I became aware of racism, I became aware that it was deeply ingrained in this place. There was a great deal of comfort and love within the Black community, but one has to make his way often (at least it used to be the case) in this place against a great deal of hostility. This province has been good to me in a lot of ways, so I don't want to sound unfair, but I often wonder if I would be able to come back here and live and feel good about living here.

*The idea of belonging to a community pervades all your work, and this strong feeling of being part of a common history is really very striking in everything you've written so far, particularly in Whylah Falls. Is this perhaps the reason why you seem to be working more and more across genres, moving away from loosely connected poems towards verse plays in Whylah Falls and more recently in Beatrice Chancy? Moving from the more lyrical to the more narrative forms?*

Yes,... I am still dedicated to the lyric. I am working on a collection of poems right now with the working title of, simply, *Blue*, and these are poems on lots of different subjects, though they are purely lyric. But what happened was that, at one point in my life, I realised that, as valuable as a lyric poem is, there was something about it that wasn't allowing me to reach my audience, what I like to think is my primary audience: Black Nova Scotians. So I wanted to engage a form that would allow for greater orality and greater performativity. . .

It is a fact having to do with the Black diaspora in the New World, from our ancestors right down to the present: performance is important to us. Orality and music are important to us. I don't want to be reductive, but it's not a cliché, it's not a stereotype. We like to watch performance and we like to hear music. And we like people to be engaging us. We want to be entertained. Frankly, I like seeing people attending a play, as happened right here in Halifax with *Whylah Falls*, and talking back to the actors, and singing along with the songs, and getting teary-eyed, and saying "Oh, it's just like me". I hope this happens with my opera too. I hope people say, "This is a story that is related to us, it is based on something real, on our experience". I think I can do that in lyric, but I also find narrative is a nice way too of allowing for greater expression, a greater element of performance. I think I wanted a closer connection to the audience, beyond people buying my book and reading the poems silently. I like the idea of people coming into the theatre and sitting down, and clapping, or yelling, or talking back to the performers. I love that idea. (Laughs)

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