

# The Crime of Poetry

## George Elliott Clarke in Conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin McNeilly

In the summer of 2002, George Elliott Clarke taught a graduate seminar as part of the University of British Columbia's Noted Scholar program. This interview consists of excerpts from a conversation, sponsored by *Canadian Literature*, in front of an audience at Green College, UBC, in late July 2002.

Kevin McNeilly (KM): George Elliott Clarke's poetry offers us an enticing tangle of contradictions and confrontations, things like a vicious delicacy or a brutal lyricism or—I've taken a phrase straight from his poetry—a "sweet hurt." Clarke provokes and challenges his readers' false comforts of culture, or of language, or of race, all the while immersing us in a kind of verbal balm. Wayde Compton's acclaimed first book of poems, *49th Parallel Psalm*, and his recent anthology *Bluesprint* have done great things to establish the presence and history of black British Columbian literature and orature. It's a pleasure to speak with you both today. I've asked Wayde to open the discussion.

Wayde Compton (WC): I haven't really prepared much, so I'll freestyle here a little bit. In 1994, I traveled to see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., launch *Colored People: A Memoir*. He read for a bit and in his discussion afterwards, somebody asked him: "Since you began studying African American literature, what has been the single, biggest change in the literature?" He answered that when he started looking at black writing in the United States, he was able to read every book that was published in America by a black author as each one appeared: "The biggest change is that sometime in the 1980s, I lost the ability to do that." So, my two questions for George are, first, do you do that? Do you read every book

published in Canada by a black writer? And second, what do you think has been the biggest change since you started?

George Elliott Clarke (GEC): Oh wow. No, I don't read every book published by a black writer, partly because my French isn't good enough, and in Canada that's a significant percentage of our literature. We're not talking about a whole lot of books anyway, especially if we're only talking about literary writing: but maybe ten or twenty literary books published by black writers in Canada a year. Probably something like that. Then there is this other group of books that is coming out in French; a significant body of material hasn't been translated. Stanley Péan, for instance, who is a major fantasy sci-fi writer in Quebec, a household name practically, but none of his work has been translated into English, so we don't know him. I really hope that will change, that we will have an expanding core of readers who will be able to read across the language division.

How has it expanded, how has it changed? When I did *Fire on the Water* twelve years ago, it was enough for me to say "Oh wow, there have been more than five or six books published by black Nova Scotians in the last 200 years. Good, that's kind of nice." [Laughter.]

When I first started doing my bibliography, *Africana Canadiana*, I thought, "This is going to be something that's going to be done very quickly." In fact, the first incarnation of that bibliography was only about twenty typed pages. I felt really good; I could carry it around very easily with me. But once I had a chance to do far more research, and really scour things, I'd go to the Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec and really look, and with a broad understanding of the term literature, it started just growing exponentially. When I first published that bibliography, I called it a comprehensive bibliography, i.e. everything that's ever been written by black authors, by black Canadian authors, is in this bibliography. I was wrong. That was silly.

WC Are you finding new stuff that wasn't included?

GEC Oh yeah, I've found stuff that's been left out, that I missed, that I wasn't aware of. And the final version that is coming out soon, I mean I'm already cringing because I know there are a couple of things that I've just learned about. But to sum up, I think black writing in Canada has become far more diverse, far more interesting.

KM You are both anthologists. Could you comment a little bit on your views about the cultural role of anthologists?

GEC Wayde? [Laughter.]

WC Well, I was wondering what inspired you to start the bibliography, because it's kind of the same question. For me, doing *Bluesprint* was just to get a sense of what is out there, to find the lay of the land. Because there's no foundation for what I'm doing in BC, I felt I needed to know what has come before. In terms of history, and also in terms of the writing. Is that a reason for doing a bibliography?

GEC What happened was, in fall 1994, I got a letter from Professor [Doug] Killam at the University of Guelph, and he asked me to do this article on connections between African Canadian writing and African writing. And I said, "Sure, it's a publication. I'm going to do this article." So I started looking for material to write about. And of course I used Lorris Elliott's very fine primary bibliography. Even though he did the research in 1978, the bibliography wasn't published until 1988. So really, it was out of date when it was published. So, in order for me to write the article I had to have a decent bibliography. Now happily, Lisette Boily had done a bibliography of writing by visible minority Canadians, which was in *West Coast Line* in the fall of 1994 [*West Coast Line* 28.1–2 (1994): 308–319], so I had Lisette's much more up-to-date bibliography to start with, and I just went to the library and started looking for stuff. And within 48 hours I had a bibliography that was way more extensive and deeper, and better, and larger.

I just got interested, and I asked myself, so what else has Austin Clarke done, for instance? What about books in translation? Who was the first black playwright in Canada? Who was the first black novelist? People were walking around saying, "Austin Clarke is the first black novelist." And yeah it's true, but only in terms of the first black novelist published in Canada. But if you looked at books published outside of Canada, then you talk about people like Amelia E. Johnson, who published a novel [*Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way*], her first novel in 1890, but in Philadelphia. So does she count? Yeah, because she was born in Montreal, and grew up in Toronto. But Canada didn't exist yet. I count her as an African Canadian foremother, and I think she should be read in that way. She may never be very important in terms of African American literature, but I would argue that for African Canadian literature she's absolutely important, and partly because of the fact that in none of her three novels does she use black characters. They're all white characters because the people who were publishing

her—an American Baptist society—figured nobody was going to read them. They did advertise her as a coloured woman writer, but they realized there wasn't going to be a market for black characters. So as long as their black woman writer wrote about white characters, everybody would be happy. But what's fascinating for me is what A.E. Johnson did to counteract that: she uses Black English. She gives her white characters black English. It's like, thank you! The illustrations are of white characters, and they have what is demonstrably black plantation English going on in the text.

I place someone like Suzette Mayr against her, and the whole context of racial identity and so on, and Johnson becomes a very interesting ancestral figure, whether Suzette ever read her or would ever be interested in reading her or not. I want to honour those who went and wrote and published when they had no expectation of being received or even read. I mean, Truman Green, for instance, *A Credit to Your Race*, a fantastic work, and who read it in 1973?

WC Very few people.

KM What kind of an audience do you envision for your work? Are you thinking about audience? I mean, who's reading this stuff?

GEC I am hoping that everybody is. [Laughter.] That's my hope. I'm interested in an audience of anybody who can read English. Because that's the only way my work is accessible, in that particular language. On the other hand, yes, I am trying to communicate specifically to black Nova Scotians, black Canadians, as well. I'm hoping that a black Canadian audience might find my work interesting, and a black Nova Scotian audience would find it interesting. But I also know that there is no way I can confine my writing to only those audiences, because there are very few publishers who, in the first place, will say "Okay, how many readers, how many identifiably only black readers can we guarantee your book?" Also, like many of us, I'm also . . . not didactic, but I am an educator. I am hoping that people pick up *Beatrice Chancy* and when they read that work, they'll say, "Oh yeah, there was slavery in Nova Scotia, and in Canada, and it wasn't necessarily a nice thing."

As someone just tried to argue recently in *The Globe and Mail*, in a letter to the editor: "Yeah well you know, our slavery wasn't as bad as American slavery." And I was like, "Oh really, tell that to the slaves." It was apparently a "kinder gentler slavery in Canada." [Laughter.] I'm trying to address those national myths that we tell ourselves, for the fundamental purpose of making ourselves seem better than Americans.

There are a lot of things we do better than the Americans, maybe, like delivering health care; on the other hand, we can learn from them about addressing, despite our great multicultural society, our problem around race and racism. At least Americans talk about it. They may not solve it, but at least they talk about it. We don't even do that. I'm also trying to signal to the rest of the world, whoever may come across these texts in some obscure venue somewhere, that we exist!

[Laughter.] We exist! We've been here for a long time and for what it's worth, here's our literature. Take a look at it.

KM I know in the introduction to *Eyeing the North Star*, the anthology you produced through McClelland and Stewart, you distinguish between African American and African Canadian literary practices or contexts. Could you elaborate on that?

GEC Well, of course it's a major question, and it ties into the whole Canada/US difference thing. But I think the greatest difference between African Canadians and African Americans is that African Canadians are not a monolithic group. And even though African Americans are composed of many different kinds of black people, who come from all over the world, there is really only, I would argue, one overriding African American identity, to which everyone is expected to subscribe, no matter where you come from.

In the same way that no matter where you come from in the world, to join the American republic is to accept certain ideas, values, principles, without dispute. To be an American is to accept certain fundamental values: you take an oath of allegiance to the revolution in effect—to what the American Revolution stood for—when you become an American citizen. In the same way, African America also has a kind of expectation of immigrants to its body, so to speak, to become African American and to accept the major culture, the heroes, the history, . . . simply to identify with all of that.

Whereas in African Canada, there is no such overriding determination of what it means to be a black Canadian. You are black Canadian as you wish, more or less, in our context. And that makes for a far more heteroglot, far more diverse, far more democratic kind of community, I feel, and far more diverse community than you have with African Americans. On the other hand, that's not always completely good. Because it also means it's much more difficult to organize. A handy way to see the difference is that African America has tonnes of national organizations. National organizations of teachers, of defense attorneys,

of prosecutors, of whatever it is you want, there's a national association of black, or African American what-have-you to represent that interest. We don't have any. There isn't a single national black organization in Canada. Now there are national ethnic organizations, organizations if you like of Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Barbadians. But the difference is that here, one's ethnicity, national origin, home, root, culture still continue to have some prominence, and some importance, so one may easily identify oneself as being Somalian or Ethiopian or Trinidadian, as opposed to being Canadian, or as opposed to being African Canadian.

Another handy illustration of this principle comes from the 1991 census, and the analysis that was done in 1997 by James L. Torczyner at McGill University [*Diversity, Mobility and Change: The Dynamics of Black Communities in Canada*]. With a team of black sociologists, he looked at the 1991 census data; from an African American point of view, it's astonishing, because according to their analysis, 43% of black Canadians did not self-identify as black. In the 1991 census! Now, in the US, that's impossible. You could never get a figure like that. But in Canada, what happened, according to their analysis, was that people who came from majority black nations, in the Caribbean and in Africa, chose to identify themselves as being either British or French. So people from Jamaica, Trinidad or Nigeria said, "We're British," and people from Haiti and Senegal said, "We're French." From an African American point of view, again, this would be almost insane: "Why are you saying that you're British and French? Come off it!" But from their point of view, it made perfect sense, because the context is British, or the context is French, from which these respondents were coming.

Althea Prince in her introductory essay to *Being Black*, her collection of essays that came out from Insomniac Press last year [2001], has a great opening essay. She talks about coming from Antigua, a majority black nation, where she's been schooled in British traditions (Wordsworth, daffodils, all that), and she flies to Toronto. She has come into another part of the British Commonwealth where she is now going to live with her sister, who's already been in Canada for a while, and she gets off the plane at Toronto International Airport, and everybody's staring at her. It's 1965, by the way; she is twenty years old. And she asks her sister, "Why is everybody staring at us?" And her sister says "Because you're black," and she had no idea. [Laughter.] No

clue what her sister is saying to her: “What do you mean I’m black? That doesn’t make any sense. This is stupid! I’m Antiguan! I’m a student! Why are you telling me I’m black?”

When one comes to North America from majority black culture, you don’t grow up thinking of yourself as being black, you think about yourself in other ways. And so when you come to the US, to Britain, to France, to Europe in general or North America, you’re suddenly in a minority, and a racialized minority at that, where you have a black identity thrust upon you. But then you have to decide, is that who you are, or not? Is that an identity that you really feel comfortable with? And not everybody does, nor should they. To suddenly have to think of yourself as being a minority, as being somewhat disempowered because of that status in this society and because of all the stereotypes that go along with that, is a tricky thing to ask people to do. For first generation immigrant writers, you see a working out of that exact dilemma: of either an adoption of something called black identity, or a rejection of it, as something very artificial and strange.

And I think you see this quite clearly in [Dany] Laferrière’s *How to Make Love to A Negro*, which is a wonderful refutation of that attempt to impose a stereotype, even though he’s using the stereotypes in that book. He can afford to make fun of those stereotypes because they are completely alien, artificial, antithetical to where he’s coming from, where he’s come from literally. And so he sees North Americans talking about black men and white women. For him this is actually a lot of fun. It’s so silly in terms of his context, his own native context, that he can afford to have all kinds of fun with things that people like Eldridge Cleaver had to take seriously.

Henry Martey Codjoe is from Ghana originally, he has this wonderful essay [“Black Nationalists Beware! You Could be Called a Racist for Being ‘Too Black and African’”] in the book edited by Adrienne Shadd and Carl James, called *Talking About Difference: Encounters in Culture, Language and Identity* [1994], where he talks about becoming black. He arrives from Ghana, a majority black country, and he comes to Canada and now everybody is telling him that he’s black. You’re black this, you’re black that, and he’s like “what is this?” So he has to go and purchase it. And it’s really funny because he talks about how he basically buys this commodified blackness: Malcolm X, Parliament Funkadelic, James Brown. Through purchasing these cultural com-

modities he starts to understand what the black experience is about. He has to be socialized into this whole new identity, by other black people in North America, in Canada. It's a funny essay, because by the end of it, he's completely radicalized: "I'm a radical Black Nationalist now!" Okay cool, but how do you get there? One of the phrases I use in my writing, I revised from Shakespeare: "Some are born black, some achieve blackness, and some have blackness thrust upon them." And I think that's really the Canadian way, so to speak.

Whereas in African America, it's simply imposed. I was given this lesson in very clear terms one bleak, rainy Friday night just outside Durham [North Carolina]. I was driving in my used 1990 Miata, towards the coast, and I was speeding, I admit it, I was speeding, and it was a lot of fun, and I got pulled over in the rain. Well, first of all, remembering that I'm a black male, no matter what, I keep both hands on my steering wheel. So I never move them off the steering wheel; they're always there, just in case there's any question of where my hands are, or what I might be doing. I don't want to get shot in the back of the head and all the rest of it. So the officer comes up; he takes a lot of time to approach the vehicle, and finally does. I admit: "Yes, you got me, yes I'm way over the speed limit." But anyway, he said, "Okay (I think he was mollified by the fact that I admitted my guilt), I'm going to mark you down as being only five miles over the speed limit so you'll only have a \$100 fine instead of a \$200 fine." Okay, I really appreciate that, officer: and I took the ticket and I was really happy. But when I finally looked at it the next morning, I realized there were two boxes on it, "B" and "W" and he'd checked off "B" for black, on a speeding ticket! [Laughter.] But it reminded me, viscerally, that this is a society where in every single fundamental way, I was being determined. I was saying I'm Canadian, but I'm a "B" to him. Okay, I accept that, I'm happy, I identify, it's not a problem, I even identify in traffic court. [Laughter.] So there's much less space for discussions of mixed race identity, hybridity, than there is here. I mean here, here there's a lot more space.

WC Witness the response to Tiger Woods trying to claim that he's mixed race. It didn't go over among African Americans.

GEC No, that's right. You get raced very clearly and specifically there. Afrocentrism in Canada has to be lived intellectually, spiritually, psychologically, but it can't be lived politically, not in the ways it can be in the



United States. In the United States you have blacks in numbers: in particular places, they can control the political network, the political system, including in some major cities. It's just not possible here, unless you are able to go off, settle, and form your own community someplace.

It's a mixed bag, I think in Canada you don't have as much reinforcement of a black identity which means you have a harder time to insist on one and communicate one and to live a black identity, it's much harder in Canada. That also means that you have a lot more freedom to be other things, whatever it is you may choose to be. A lot more space than you have in the US. On the other hand, if you want to organize against police brutality, against racism in the school system, about getting more blacks hired, and whatever, or wherever, you're going to have a harder time.

KM Both you and Wayde have produced anthologies with other kinds of conceptual frameworks that have to do with region: could either of you address the idea of region?

wc When I realized that *Bluesprint* was being published, one of the things that I thought was strange (because I knew about *Fire on the Water* and was using that as kind of a model)—and it seems odd, but it was nicely symmetrical—was that on both ends of the country, the first regional anthology had come out of Nova Scotia, and the second had come out of BC. But it seems strange because the designation “black British Columbian” seems a little arbitrary. The whole time I was struggling with it: is this the body of people that I should be looking at, or should it be Western Canadian, or Alberta and BC, or what? Because the term “black British Columbia” isn't something that people own. Which is just what George is saying, on a sort of micro-cosmic level. But in Nova Scotia there is that sense, because it is a longer history I guess, of something more deeply rooted. But the black population in BC is actually larger than the black population in Nova Scotia today, by thousands. But still, there isn't a centrally located black community. I wonder what you have seen in terms of regionalism in Canada. We have regional issues among the general population of Canada, the way Canada breaks down, as Western Canada, the Maritimes, Quebec, Central Canada. In terms of black people, or black literature, do the regions have significance to the writing, or the way that black people formulate themselves? In BC sort of, but it is hard to say.

GEC The answer to that is yes. I will, to my dying breath, say that black Canadian writing is as regional as Canadian writing in general. I do think there is a distinctive black BC school: now that you have put out *Bluesprint*, we all know there is one now. And whether it existed before or not, it does exist now. That is one of the functions of an anthology, to say “this is who we are.” Whether anybody agrees or not, the editor says, this is who we are. Even though you are being very cautious, and so on, and gentle, about imposing any kind of definition on people. The fact that the book is there, and the fact that you claim Sir James Douglas as a black writer, thank you, you are making some very real claims about territoriality, and what this body of literature consists of. What’s going to happen now, Mr. Compton, is that younger black writers coming up, ten years younger than yourself, who may not have even started writing yet, when they start writing, and they’re living in Vancouver or Surrey or Kamloops, and they go to the library, they will pick up *Bluesprint*, as they will whether you know it or not, and say, “Yeah, I’m a black BC writer, and when I am older and I pick up *Bluesprint*, we’re all going to be included.” And so when you set up those regional anthologies, you are setting up a tradition. All anthologies are basically saying a tradition exists. Whether you are talking about queer and lesbian writing, whether you are talking about women’s writing from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as soon as that scholar comes along and says, “Here is the anthology folks,” *boom*, you’ve got a tradition, you have a canon. And the other anthologists are going to come along and say, “Well I don’t really consider so and so to be a part of this; they are not really that kind of writer.” But it’s too late: you’ve already claimed it! It’s already happened.

I do think that the writers you’ve collected are in some ways different from writers, say, in central Canada. And I think one of the major differences is the fact that there’s more space in BC to talk about racial hybridity than there is say in Toronto, or than there is in Nova Scotia. I think that in these places, the mixed race black person, to use that phrase, is racialized to a certain extent, much more so than perhaps may be the case in BC, as black. I also think BC is different because you have someone like James Douglas, as the founding father of the literature. There isn’t another black community in Canada that can say the governor of the colony was a member of the establishment and got their literature started.

WC In a place like Vancouver, for younger black people, hip-hop has become their first exposure to what blackness is. It's this determining blackness that's coming from the US, which I am starting to think of as a kind of a sub-cultural imperialism. But yeah, black kids in Vancouver aren't thinking about Nova Scotia or Montreal necessarily, but they are thinking about the United States, they are thinking about hip-hop, and that's shaping how they see themselves. I'm starting to feel like I want to resist it, to a certain degree, because it's unsatisfying in a lot of ways.

GEC Resist no longer! (That's a Phantom of the Opera slogan.) Resist no longer! You're absolutely right, of course it's cultural imperialism: wherever Coca-Cola goes BET [Black Entertainment Television] follows. Although African Americans don't really have any conception of themselves as being part of the whole global cultural imperialist machinery of American culture. Even though, in fact, hip-hop helps smooth the way for Coca-Cola. So if you're trying to be black in Vancouver, and even though African American hip-hop may give you some clues and some ideas, you have to reconfigure that in your own ways in order to have it be useful for your life here. This is what I find fascinating about African American cultural imperialism on Canada, or Black Canadians, is that I argue that we take that influence and we adapt it. I feel that. I see that in the writing, and I see that in the music itself. Canadian hip-hop is not the same thing as American hip-hop.

KM Maybe we can talk for a minute about the nature of the writing practice, or the textures of these conversations or the reconfigurations you're talking about. I borrowed today's title (which we tacked onto the poster without your permission) from the author's disclaimer at the end of *Execution Poems*, where you talked about the crime of poetry. Although the book itself is about a crime, it's a very interesting move to hear poetry described as criminal. In what ways is the act of writing transgressive, perhaps, or criminal? How do you address that phrase, and why did you use it?

GEC Wayde?

WC Well, speaking at all seems to be breaking that, breaking a prohibition point in terms of black writing.

GEC I think when you are coming from a minority perspective there is always a grain of transgression: the fact that you're speaking up, the fact that you are talking about injustice as you perceive it, as you see it. The fact that you claim that the white government in British Columbia is black

is transgressive. It can be viewed as a kind of crime, of literature, of statement, of being, of saying. And also too, the fact that often we are trying to speak the unspeakable, we're trying to say what has not been said before, at least not in Canada in certain ways—trying to disturb the very idea of what is a Canadian identity. Can Canadian itself be centralized as white, or Anglo-Saxon, or Gaelic? Can it, really? Is it really possible to do that legitimately? And I think that a lot of the writing that we've been doing is an attempt to say no.

