

REVIEWS/RESENHAS

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Clarke, George Elliott. *Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

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African-Canadian writer and Professor at the University of Toronto, George Elliott Clarke is a poet, novelist, playwright, librettist, and critic. “A noir ‘peau rouge,’” as he defines himself in the introduction to the book *Red*, Clarke is *Africadian*¹ with roots in the Mi’kma’ki culture of Nova Scotia. Ten years after the publication of *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, this new critical collection continues to defend the argument that African-Canadian (or Black Canadian) literature cannot be read adequately without considering “the historical (or ‘indigenous’) African-Canadian

population and its cultural production as a constitutive element” (*Directions Home* 4). Resultant from Clarke’s long interest in black culture in Canada and extensive archival research in Nova Scotia, *Odysseys Home* includes the discussion of writings by blacks dating back to 1785. In doing so, Clarke contradicts the premise that African-Canadian literature began with the publication of Austin Clarke’s first novel in 1964. Reiterating his critical stand in the introduction to *Directions Home*, Clarke argues that African-Canadian literature encompasses “the new and the old, the come-from-away and the down-home, the urban and the rural, the pull of the regional and the equally irresistible seductions of African-American and Afro-Caribbean culture” (4).

The selection of fifteen essays responds to this inclusive character, discussing African-Canadian literature from diverse origins and in different modes of expression. Variety here also serves to demystify traditional concepts of what is or is not literature. Interested in African-Canadian literature for what it is and has been, Clarke observes that settler-descended African-

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Canadian cultures have written many community and church histories and concludes: "If we accept such writings as *literature*, we should understand how they both correspond with and differ from the *creative* writings of later, urban-settled immigrants" (9). Thus, *Directions Home* promotes this dialogic between early and late writings in church histories, slave narratives, drama, autobiography, poetry, and jazz poetics. Without canonical distinctions, Clarke discusses both recognized African-Canadian writers and others less known.

In the initial three essays, Clarke examines Canadian slave narratives from the eighteenth century on in a genealogy of discourses that, despite their marginal position, anticipate debates on slavery and colonialism. In "This is no hearsay: Reading the Canadian Slaves Narratives," Clarke explains that "North American slavery is so profoundly identified with the 'Great Republic' that the slave narratives is eyed, in Canada, as an exotic species of Americana" (19). Although recognizing correspondences between African-American slave narratives and colonial Anglo-Canadian writing, Clarke argues for distinctions and the latter's merit as foundational

discourse in Canadian literature. In the essay, "A. B. Walker and Anna Minerva Henderson: Two Afro-New Brunswick Responses to 'The Black Atlantic,'" Clarke examines the complexity of identity and belonging in regard to African diaspora and colonial Canada (32). Beginning with a sheer contrast between the two writers, Walker a black separatist, Henderson, an integrationist, Clarke then explores their trajectories and paradoxes in their political views. The production of this early period is yet analyzed in "Introducing a Distinct Genre of African-Canadian Literature: The Church Narrative," as representative of African-Canadian historiography.

The fourth essay, "Afro-Gynocentric Darwinism in the Drama of George Elroy Boyd," still on Africadian ground, focuses on two plays by Boyd acting out the drama of African-Canadian families related to issues of race, class and gender. Clarke notes that "while the plays bemoan the absence of strong, self-empowered, 'race'-identified, black males, they stress the presence of strong-willed, self-empowering, black females" (59). Black masculinity is also discussed in the essay that follows, "Seeing Through Race: Surveillance of Black Males in Jessome, Satirizing Black

Stereotypes in James.” Examining a reportage by European-Canadian journalist Phonse Jessome, Clarke contrasts Jessome’s repetition of old clichés of sexual exploitation of white females by black males with a satirical version by Afro-Montreal writer Darius James. The association of gender, race, and representation is also extended to the sixth essay, “Raising Raced and Erased Executions in African-Canadian Literature: Or, Unearthing Angélique.” A slave in eighteenth-century Montreal, Marie-Josèphe Angélique is murdered for having supposedly set fire to her mistress’s house and destroyed part of the town. Clarke initially speculates on the theme of crime and punishment, noting that in African-Canadian literature only a few texts focus on the black criminal or executed heroes. Then, as counterpoint to “the white space—the opaque silence—that shrouds Angélique in Eurocentric histories” (84), Clarke discusses three versions of the event by contemporary African-Canadian writers.

Clarke’s interest in the ways textual production and circulation is defined by ideologies is manifested in the two subsequent essays, the former comparing African-Canadian and Italian-Canadian anthologies, the latter analyzing

the resonance of European ideals on African-Canadian writers. In the anthologies comparison, Clarke initially observes their similar political agendas in the context of Multiculturalism to later examine their differences. While the prevailing desire in the African-Canadian anthology is to be part of a global Pan-Africanism (“almost oblivious to Canadian space”), in the Italian one it is to be included (not assimilated) in the Canadian culture and society. Questions of location (region and nation), and cultures in transit are other points of debate circulating in this segment of essays. In “Does Afro-Caribbean-Canadian Literature Exist? In the Caribbean?(),” Clarke speculates on the invisibility of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writings in the very homeland they evoke. As common ground between the two nations, he points out a history of colonization and decolonization that should be more explored by writers of the two cultures.

Still on Caribbean-Canadian literature, Clarke discusses H. Nigel Thomas’s and Althea Prince’s fiction regarding moral/amoral codes of behavior in postcolonial societies, and analyzes the trajectory of Dionne Brand’s work from early 1970s to 2001. The

latter, "Locating the Early Brand: Landing a Voice," examines a recurrent tension between "a wish to discard 'nationalism' as romantic, while simultaneously articulating a romantic pan-Africanism" (159). More inclined to "locating" Brand in a detailed contextual reading, the essay only briefly tackles on the issue of voice, outlining the positioning of early Dionne Brand and the world around her publications. From this period, Clarke discusses "Poem of a Place Once" (1975), establishing connections with Brand's later work in *No Language is Neutral* (1990), and *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001).

In two other essays, locating is also prevalent. In "Repatriating Arthur Nortje," a South-African poet with mixed-race background, the proposal is considering his work as African-Canadian literature. The merit of his inclusion is not only justified for having adopted Canada as his homeland (1967-70), but for the importance of his legacy. Inversely in "Maxime Tynes: A Sounding and a Hearing," the argument is positioning the African-Nova Scotian poet as "the *un-Maritimes* poet." Clarke explains that for Tynes, "the black people of Atlantic Canada possess an identity that looks south towards the United

States (and its 'South') and east towards Africa," thus being closer to these other geographies than their own (170). For Clarke, Tyne's "region," is not the Canadian East Coast and its conventional themes but mass media and mobility.

The performance poetry by Tyne, chez d'bi young, and Oni Joseph, and Frederick Ward's jazz-poetry discussed at the end of this collection reveal Clarke's interest in *orature*. In *Odysseys Home*, Clarke quotes anthropologist Lawrence W. Levine who recognizes the social dimension of this tradition in black culture. Levine observes that "through [a black storyteller's] entire performance the audience would comment, correct, laugh, respond, making the folktale as much of a communal experience as the spiritual or the sermon" (11). Clarke who cultivates oral tradition in his own art contests critics who undervalue this connection of performance and music with poetry in black culture. He believes that, against all odds, the orality of Negro poetry "*always* will out, bursting through all stifling blandishments and suffocating erasures, because those who choose to speak their verse seek both to face brethren and sistren blacks and to face down (white) racists" (*Directions* 189). By

evoking the origins of oral tradition, Clarke establishes a continuum extending it to contemporary forms of expression, jazz, dub, ghetto poetry. Here voice occupies a major role in its political implications of polyphony (dominant languages and variations of demotic). Also, the body becomes language, as in the photograph of d'bi.young's on the cover of her debut collection, "the poet's shaved head, somber face, and naked shoulders [bearing] white-paint, geometric designs" (181).

In his analysis of Frederick Ward, Clarke proposes to found "a poetics of jazz literature." Beginning with the difficulty of critics to "read" Ward, Clarke observes that "difficulty in poetry is akin to dissonance in jazz" (193). From then on, besides a dialogic with jazz history and criticism, Clarke actually gives a sample of an applied poetics of jazz poetry in his reading of Ward's lines. Clarke's discussion of Ward and other less-known artists is not only part of his politics of inclusion but also a response to critical readings that either "dissolve into cranky impressionism or bankrupt silence of skanky dismissal" (193).

Screening this publication per se dissociated from Clarke's positioning as critic would be

missing a good part of the film. In a brief comment on himself he writes:

Due to my dancing (i.e., cavorting) among principalities and jurisdictions, theories and concepts, I probably appear perilously unprincipled and quixotically unclear. But my philosophical flexibility and discursive dexterity are necessary to allow me to light upon a nation that is shadowy (Canada) and a notion that is nebulous (blackness). (*Directions* 7)

Here Clarke wittily exposes the unique character of his irreverent position, a contemporary version of *poète (et critique) maudit*. Ironically though he does not remain on the margin, but literally "dances" wherever he pleases. Of course dance, flexibility, or dexterity are not mere result of talent. *Directions Home* proves this in its solid research and original dialogic with a plurality of voices. Also, Clarke's ethical project to illuminate "a nation that is shadowy" or "a notion that is nebulous" is effectively aligned here with his politics of inclusion. This happens along the collection mainly through a genealogy that rescues African-Canadian literature since its roots to reach just-sprouted leaves.

Another important feature of *Directions Home* is interpreting “blackness” “as if through a prism, dazzlingly, as a rainbow union of multifarious cultures and ‘colours’” (10). In this way, Clarke situates his book among other Canadian publications which group diverse authors from different periods and cultural backgrounds under the rubrics of “African Canadian” or “Black Canadian”. By doing so, these publications both give visibility to black writers and promote a sense of community or collectivity. Quoting Bina Toledo Freiwald, Clarke recognizes the importance of discourses that carry “the power to effect that shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ that is a necessary condition for the articulation of a collectivity” (10).

On two occasions, Clarke has been to UFSC (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina) as visiting professor. Students of the graduate program in English and I had the opportunity to discuss with him some of issues that compose this critical collection. Clarke’s performance was impressive both for his profound knowledge and art of *orature*. Reading Clarke in his many arts (criticism included) or having the opportunity to listen to him, one notes the coherence of his ethics and his ability to

combine his passionate trait with the meticulous craft of a *virtuoso*. Add to all this a refined sense of resistance tinged with lavish humor, and you have “loud George!” May your *Directions* circulate home and elsewhere and motivate other pilgrimages in African-Canadian literature.

1. The term, coined by Clarke, refers to the black communities of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, places originally occupied by African-American black slaves and settlers.

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