

## George Elliott Clarke's Songs of Love and Pain from Africadia

### An Introduction to "The Apochrypha of *Whylah Falls*"

Daniel Samson<sup>1</sup>

Shelley, we wrest diamonds from coal,  
Scrounge pearls from grubs and stones, lest penury  
Work filthy rags of our magnificence,  
Or planners bulldoze our flowers into dirt.<sup>2</sup>

To read George Elliott Clarke's poetry is to gain a window on Africadia — a gumboed creole positioning of one aspect of the African diaspora — African, American, Canadian, Nova Scotian. The term itself was coined by Clarke and introduced in his two-volume anthology of Black Nova Scotia writing: *Fire on the Water*.<sup>3</sup> Much more so than hyphenated terms such as African-American, Black Nova Scotian, or French/English Canadian — which emphasize the meeting of two presumed wholes — it is a term which conveys the historical hybridity of the post-colonial world. Africadia is more than "Africans" in "Acadia;" it is a position, a cultural and spatial location characterised by fusion, duality, and ambiguity. It not only speaks to the particularities of race in one specific location, but also situates them within the broader theme of exile which runs through the province's history. Be they freed Black Loyalists, dispossessed Scottish crofters, expelled Acadians, or the famine Irish who were exiled in Nova Scotia, or the hundreds of thousands who left the region for work in New England and central Canada, any one person's Nova Scotian-ness has always been uncertain.<sup>4</sup> Yet, two hundred years in Nova Scotia moulded a society informed as much by the limitations and possibilities of Nova Scotia as the residual elements of West Africa and America. Africadia is a northern variant of Jamaica and Missis-

- 1 This "introduction" steals unashamedly from Clarke's writing; thus it is composed of quite wonderful words and phrases and refashioned in my clumsy, very unpoetic manner. This footnote, then, is both a citation and something of an apology to George for carving up his words so.
- 2 From "How Exile Melts to One Hundred Roses" in *Whylah Falls* (Winlaw, B.C. 1991).
- 3 George Elliott Clarke, ed., *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotia Writing* 2 volumes (Lawrenceton Beach, N.S. 1991 and 1992).
- 4 It is impossible to do justice to this comment in a footnote, but see, for example, James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for the Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (Toronto 1992 [New York 1976]); Naomi E.S. Griffiths, *The Contexts of Acadian History, 1686-1784* (Montreal 1992). On the twentieth century see Gary Burrill's superb oral history of the "depth and pattern of exile in the Maritimes" in his *Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario, and Alberta* (Montreal 1992).

sippi; cut from the same broad cloth of slavery and diaspora, but dyed with the hues of the ocean, snow, and apple blossoms: not magnolias, but wild roses; not corn bread and honey, but brown bread and molasses; as much Hank Snow and George Jones as Leadbelly and Duke Ellington — Sissiboo Delta blues.

Like the Acadians who were expelled from the colony in 1755, African-Acadians survived their exile by forging separate communities and identities built on the social geography of Nova Scotia. Part of that separateness was imposed. In 1783, over 3,000 of the 35,000 Anglo-American Loyalists fleeing the new republic were African-Americans, the founders of the first free-Black community in Canada. Promised land and freedom for their services to the Empire, they found both in small doses. They entered a society where the slave trade was illegal, but human property remained enforceable; and where they were valued more for their effect on the labour market than for their potential as settlers. The “refugee negroes” who arrived after the American Revolution and the War of 1812 were granted lots which one colonial official admitted were “very small ... and miserably sterile.”<sup>5</sup> Excluded from the possibilities which existed within a growing colony, they were unable to forge the kind of propertied independence which the Acadians had once created. By the end of the eighteenth century, many of the Acadians had returned, and the two groups, along with the Mi’kmaq, now shared similar positions, if in varying degrees of unfreedom.

Another part of that separateness, though, was self-fashioned. However limited, Nova Scotia offered them legal emancipation and a spiritual vision of freedom and social justice; however much resisted by colonial officialdom and their European fellow settlers, their shared experiences — in slavery, in relocation, and most especially in the religious and political institutions which they created in Nova Scotia — gave them a positive sense of their distinctiveness and what James Walker describes as a “communal consciousness.” Indeed, Walker argues, while the Black Loyalists divided over whether to stay in Nova Scotia or remove to Sierra Leone in 1792, it was their ability to form “a community aware of its distinction and opposed to the interference of outside influences or people” which must be seen as the primary bases for the decisions of both those who left and those who remained.<sup>6</sup> It was this shared and purposeful sense of common identity which supported them in their new northern home. In 1837, Sir Colin Campbell simply could not understand why these “refugee negroes” refused his offer of resettlement in different areas around the province: “wretched as their condition is and must, I apprehend, continue to be .... they persist in their refusal to remove, except in a large body.”<sup>7</sup> It was this same sense of collective and community purpose which informed the decision of the provincial African Baptist Association to refuse incorporation into the larger white organization

5 Sir Colin Campbell to Lord Glenelg, 25 August 1837, 55-7, volume 115, RG1, Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

6 Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, xi.

7 Sir Colin Campbell to Lord Glenelg, 25 August 1837, 55-7, volume 115, RG1, Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

in 1854. One hundred years later, it was a weakened version of this community which was unable to prevent the bull-doing of Africville — a largely Africadian community on the social and spatial outskirts of Halifax — “in the name of liberalism, integration, and progress.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, for all that marked Black Nova Scotians as a separate entity, the Black refugees and Nova Scotia each put their marks on the other. What is most striking is neither the particular nor the transcendent; it was the admixture they formed. It is the sounds, tastes, and language of Africadia which forms the context of *Whylah Falls*. Witness, for example, Cora Clemence’s creole cuisine: “gumboing the salty recipes of Fundy Acadians, the starchy diets of South Shore Loyalists, and the fishy tastes of Coloured Refugees” or the (mis)spelling of Sissiboo as Sixhiboux, which might be Acadian French, or bastardised Mi’kmaq. Africadia reminds us that it is seldom possible to understand identity and “culture” as separate; nor their constitutions as *either* expressions of racism or assertions of identity; they are, in fact, never so easily separated. Clarke’s poetry brings us within both the particularity of Africadia, and its Nova Scotian-ness; a society set apart and yet within. It brings us, as Stuart Hall writes, toward an understanding of culture and cultural identity as “not an essence but a *positioning*.”<sup>9</sup> Such positionings are always plural, but not pluralistic. It is thus not surprising that when I, as a white Nova Scotian, read *Whylah Falls*, or his earlier work *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, I can “get” most of the shared references — the sea and the fiddles, apple blossoms and fish chowder, the release of summer in a place where the cold rains of January often linger into June, and the coal and gypsum dust that slowly choked black and white men alike — but have to be guided child-like through the jazzy syncopations, the gospel speech, and the powerful yearning combinations of ecstatic faith and sexuality.

The following poems are missing elements of *Whylah Falls*, Clarke’s 1990 novel-in-poetry about love and death in a fictional, rural, Africadian community in the 1930s. Though cut through with death, desperation, pain, poverty, racism, alcoholism, and an often brutal sexuality, it is equally, and unapologetically, celebratory; *Whylah Falls* is a world where the passions find full expression. Here we again meet Shelley Clemence, her siblings Othello, Pushkin, and Seleh, and S. Scratch Seville, the murderer of Othello. “The Apocrypha of *Whylah Falls*” also draws on Clarke’s “Weymouth Falls Suite,” the real-life tale of the murder of a Black Digby County man, and the incredible struggle for legal and social justice that followed.<sup>10</sup> In his introduction to *Fire on the Water*, Clarke writes: “All art is a cry for identity.” This art then, this cry, is what identity is all about: the announcement and the exploration of social and individual selves. Black Nova Scotians are neither one nor

8 George Elliott Clarke, “Introduction,” in Clarke, ed., *Fire on the Water* volume 1, 14-5.

9 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London 1990) 226 [original emphasis].

10 *New Maritimes*, VII, 3 (Jan.-Feb. 1989); and his “The Birmingham of Nova Scotia: The Weymouth Falls Justice Committee vs. the Attorney General of Nova Scotia,” in Ian McKay and Scott Milsom, eds., *Toward a New Maritimes* (Charlottetown, P.E.I. 1992), 17-24.

the other but both; they are Africadians, a people whose historical presence is part of what made Nova Scotia, and how the two made Africadia. These are stories which come from marginalized locations — sites of oppression and silencing — but also locations of possibilities and new representations, what bell hooks refers to as locations of “radical openness.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for the descendants of “African-American Loyalists seeking Liberty, Justice, and Beauty,” it proclaims the unity within the search for identity and the struggle for social justice. As Clarke “admits” before beginning his journey into Whylah Falls: “These poems are fact presented as fiction. There is no other way to tell the truth save to disguise it as a story.”

Some of the following poems have previously appeared in *New Maritimes*, *Germination*, *Kola*, *The Windhorse Review*, *The Digby Courier*, *Tickle Ace*, and *The Idler*.

11 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework*, 36, (1989), 15-23.

## **The Apocrypha of *Whylah Falls***

**George Elliott Clarke**

### ***Polemical Introduction***

Stolen from the plots of quixotic Pierrot and troubled Muddy Waters,  
these elegiac flowers of Whylah Falls, the Black Mississippi village banished to  
Jarvis County, Nova Scotia, in 1783, droop with the heaviness of history.  
Irrigated by liquor and tears and dessicated by blistering blues, they bloom in  
direct moonlight. Though intended originally for the garden of *Whylah Falls*,  
these loose flowers are freely planted here.

### ***The Plot***

I cry of rivers, stars, the moon, and pines,  
Saltwater sorrow that descants in lines,  
The *Long March* from Jarvis to Whylah Falls,  
A shotgunned man dissolving in petals,  
His trialed mother who witnesses in cries  
Over his corpse cankered white by lilies,  
His cinnamon-scented sister who weeps  
Into blurry Bibles—and no more sleeps,  
My love naming my love an epic lie  
(Because I claim stars barnacle the sky  
And cotton run stuffs riverbeds and wells),  
The history of love that could not be,  
Though every lyric sketches liberty.

***The Birth of Song***

This egalitarian longing, this blues bliss, was born from five years of violent aloneness, violent separation, when brown brick became black bark, and the road, the train tracks, the sky, threw up barricades against our lips, our tongues, our hands, so that, suppressed, I could only cry:

The night falls soft, suggestible; our pines  
Are ripe with eloquence, rumours of wings,  
While milk and honey burns in the field.

Yea, I sought Shelley—her strange, indelibly earthen tongue, her clapboard Christianity, her tarpaper hymns. I desired the Golden Time when women were well-shaped, luscious, not just skin and bones protrudin' all over the place, but *round*. . . . Yea, those long days and nights I drifted, I knew, I did know, in drizzly Paris and smoky Montréal, that

if she be with me,  
I could quit the lustrous moon and lie down again

*April in Whylah Falls*

So beautiful:  
    cold rain and crocuses  
        creamed by snow.

*The Haircut*

Light as grey as eggshells  
    strains through milky curtains.  
Shelley twirls beside the woodstove.

(Is this love? Is this love?)

Such Innocence! She is sweeping  
    up my fallen hair—those Micmac  
    curls that once hugged my ears.

(And my heart is all hers.)

Ah, the sweet kind beauty  
    of her tango with the broom!  
Shelley twirls beside the woodstove.

(Is this love? Is this love?)

***Hansard***

I enter the parliament of white rum, quote liquor as clear as watered-down *Hansard*, If I'm in love, Shelley. . . .

**Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ (Halifax):** Mr. Speaker, I deny the filthy allegations of the Hon. Member for South West Nova (Mr. Thompson). The brain is a blossom of mortality. It perches atop the spine like a flower atop a stem. Would he be sober?

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. \_\_\_\_\_:** I have never heard such an abject confession of drunkenness! The Hon. Member has said clearly that the motivation behind his legislation is thoughtlessly ideological; and because it is thoughtlessly ideological, we have a piece of thoughtless legislation before us now.

If the Hon. Member is so narrow not to know that a flower rooted in alcohol will bloom sick but gorgeous, then he knows nothing, but then, he has confessed that previously. The Hon. Member should disabuse himself of his Liberal hallucinations.

**Some Hon. Members:** Oh, oh!

There is no escape from this maze save through the speedy passage of *An Act to Provide Love*, if, Shelley, you'll grant me your Royal Assent, your Jarvis County accent, your rosewater scent, after your first, second, and third readings of my *billet doux*. God damn all opposition!

***Rhythm 'n' Blues***

Snow falls so hard  
on Whylah Falls,  
it blinds the stars.  
Is my heart false  
as mute guitar?  
My nerves convulse  
from rum like tar—  
a fire that mauls;  
my feelings scar.  
Whose heart is false  
as mute guitar?  
Ah, the snow falls  
on Whylah Falls . . . .

***Jarvis County Blues***

Shelley, never will you love me. Never!  
I'm not pretty. I don't have much money.  
I cried sixteen black blues for your rare name;  
Ashamed, you padlocked them in your bureau.  
Do all my soft words taste like sour honey?  
The Sixhiboux's shimmering flux and flow  
Tenders the moon, but you won't tender arms  
Or tender lips. *Man can't live by bread alone!*  
Shelley, I'm wasting away like April snow.  
Must I wander Jarvis County forever?

*Taking leave of Shelley  
by the River Sixhiboux  
in the month of Nisan*

The moon flames in the Sixhiboux.  
From the cliff above Whylah Falls,  
I gaze upon a sudden grave.

Shelley's cotton skirt rustles  
As she steps through the Nisan dew.  
Must Beauty become nothing?

Between drunkenness and sorrow,  
I'll drift all the eves of my life,  
While apple blossoms petal the snow.

*Songs of Solomon*

Yea, thou art black  
but comely  
like the Sixhiboux River,  
like Mount Eulah's pines.

I have compared thee,  
o my love,  
to soft, black night  
and raisins and sweet wine.

Behold, thou art perfect,  
my beloved, yea, excellent:  
thou hast raven's hair;  
also, our bed is pine.

***Can't move no stone***

Can't move no stone  
to let my saviour out.  
Can't move no stone  
to let my saviour out.  
Can't move your heart  
if i start to doubt . . . .  
Can't move no stone,  
if you won't help.

Can't find no love;  
gotta find my Lord first.  
Can't find no love;  
gotta find my Lord first.  
Can't get yo' love:  
i damn well must be cursed!  
Can't find no love;  
things can't get no worse.

Can't drink no wine  
without my saviour's bread;  
Can't drink no wine  
without my saviour's bread.  
Can't make no love  
without you in my bed.  
Can't drink no wine:  
may as well be dead.

*Apostrophe to May*

A fresh sapling, she leans  
over the river, her breasts  
swaying like new fruit.

*Spring*

Langford pitches a scarecrow on his roof  
To shoo fat gulls from his dry smelts and fruit.  
Li'l Toof, cola-coloured, scrounges a man—  
Makes him melt like popsicle in her hands.  
Home after six suns, Liana scats blues,  
Mumbles Nashville dirges while milkweed snows.  
Saul Clemence, his feet flipped up like a goat's,  
Reels with a bottle of chilled, Tory votes.  
Selah, magnificent in gold and black,  
Presses night to stop my train in its tracks.  
Gravity thirsts for dew; we lust for us,  
Tasting life in two bright tumblers of scotch  
By the Sixhiboux, where Langford smelts, brings  
Everything we ever wanted, everything.

*Daisies*

A storm of daisies dizzies me because  
so-and-so says so; yellow weeds or flowers  
blow into my face and hands after  
the big drunk; the wind pushes flowers  
and grass and dirt into my face  
and hands; I almost fall  
into uprightnes; instead, I face  
a wall of grass, my feet resting on air,  
my toes pressing into the gale of daisies,  
my hands clutching at slippery grass.

*The House Party*

Pushkin kneads tobacco into his pipe,  
Mutters, "Eely's a Tory; Jack is best,"  
Slams the table with an insistent fist,  
Elects a forty-ouncer of scotch instead.  
But Jack, thirsty for a fistfight, lurches  
From one expletive to another,  
His eyes gone pasty with forgetfulness,  
Until Missy smacks his round, milky face.  
Pablo and Am hoot—and hug in the corner.  
Cora, greyed sixty, still limber, cries out,  
"Youth—and a man!", dances with my cross-step,  
Her glass of oblivion twinkling.

***Cancer***

It shakes me, sobbing, out of my body,  
A lean coffin, a gutted church, whose chimes  
Peel the warm skin from my frigid bones.  
I hear the shock of bells in my cold bones,  
My skeleton breaks into bright chalk  
And dark music. My heart rots in its cage.  
I am a vast ocean of death emptying  
Into lush grass.

***She Discovers Her Voice***

Against the grey wallpaper of that house,  
The monotony of beige dawns and dusks,  
The cankered roses in the plastic vase,  
Her husband's dull, monosyllabic hate,  
She hoarded words borrowed from the Bible,  
Country tunes, and gross, indifferent children.

Between her servings of watery tea  
And his helpings of woman on woman—  
Whelping so many bastards he lost count—  
She counted in her secret verse, hidden  
In a drab scribbler in an old suitcase  
In the drab closet under the old clothes.

When, at last, his secret, hidden cancer  
Overthrew him, taking its possession,  
And she had folded him—beige suit—into  
A grey casket, she salvaged her lost poems  
And she began to sing. *Oh, how she sang!*

*Canción Acadiense*

The moon is an orange sigh,  
A blue wind of desire.  
Ah, sweet Amarantha,  
Life is not forever.

Your eyes are dark roses  
In a bouquet of silk.  
Look, three or four guys  
Strum guitars to your looks.

Death will come no matter  
How oft I call you “sweet.”  
But still I call you “sweet,”  
Sweet, sweet Amarantha.

—*Pablo Gabriel*

*Of Lavinia Jarvis*

Lavinia up and cut  
Toof so terrible  
fo’ messin’ with her man,  
Toof look like a roadmap.

Next time, Lavinia dumped  
boilin’ tea right on top  
of sleepin’ Eely,  
then peeled back his skin.  
He howled bloody murder  
’fo’ she axed his throat.

If she ever gets out—  
look out!  
She’ll bash in your eyes  
an’ not think twice!

*Down in the Flood*

The frankness of water when you plough  
into it, churning a sudden womb  
or grave. It clasps you so tightly,  
you can't breathe—as if choked  
by a deluge of flowers. Watch it  
screw and screw and screw.

The riverbed is charged  
with water—liquid lightning.  
It churls in its throat  
of stone, wanting to bust  
the wooden teeth of the dam,  
which wants to give,  
which wants so much to surrender,  
to see how far the water will go—  
all that rain-prisoned rage,  
all those tears.

***The End***

When O dies, his mouth vases drowned roses.  
His punctured, rippling chest reveals sunken  
Treasures—rubies of blood, gold bars of bone.  
His soul is water crying for the sea.

***The Funeral***

The highway blunts itself on stones;  
The wind beats bushes senseless;  
The river blunders over stones;  
A killer calmly loads a grave.

*The Blind Witness*

Jack slumps in the kitchen, cusses—mean words  
Broken by biblical injunctions  
And gestures leaden as an axe falling.  
He promotes an Eden where men open  
Their lives with bank accounts and die, taking  
Their logging company pensions with them.  
His greased moustache twists blackly into law:  
“Love murderers. Vengeance belongs to God.”  
Then, in fishing boots, he plods off to spend  
His salvation across the Sixhiboux,  
To sniff around Am, get drunk, on cheque day.

*The Whylah Moon*, November 22, 19\_\_

### ***Off the cuff: No Prejudice Hair In Jarvis County***

By Mo Verbiage  
Editor

The question has arisen, is there a ratio problem in the air.

I thin knot.

A Torontoe repeater was in town seasonally and rased severed questions. I do not no to whom he spooked butt his questions appeer to hav gutten only half antswered.

I wonder if anyone tolled the man that our ton and moneycipal council are folly elected. Not one I've spoken with can remember the lost time that a membrane of any erase other than the caucus race has run for marsupial council. You cannot eject people who do not exist.

If only a few coloureds live in town, it is likely dew to a shortage of hymns or appointments or because as one parson told me, "I prefer to love outside of town."

Should 'Token' apartments be mad, regardless of intelligents or caperbilities?

As Christmass drawls near, I hop that we can all show coppassion, understating, and respeck to the Humus race.

***The Moon***

The drowned man floats  
face up  
in a jet-black sea.

**The Suicide**

Blood fanned across the rotted wall of the barn. Hay and brain bone  
mishmashed on the dirt floor. All akimbo, Scratch is a broken scarecrow, all  
the stuffing spilled out.

A half-empty bottle of white rum rolls beside the gargoyle. The shotgun  
straddles his lap; a suicide note hangs innocently on the wide-open barn door.  
The mannequin slouches against a hay bale.

*But why's the shotgun laying across his lap? Why's the rum only  
half-drunk? Why's the suicide note upside-down? Why's the barn door open?*

***Suicide Note***

That Janus bastard, Jack Thompson, is the assassin. He lurks in the wordbooks: jackass, jackanapes, jacksnipe. Son of a whore. He gutted Othello. Fly reason outta several, arcane windows. O's roses of blood, his sere petals of skull, are old news. His crooked eyes busted. Death's fertile here. Even the Royal Bank sits on broken treaties and buffalo bones.

There's only death  
And shudders of the eyes.  
I stand before the mirror  
And become the mirror.

Bye.

—Scratch

***Taunt's Hill***

*For Chester Jarvis*

T. hooks his bass, slits it open: wet notes  
Spill out like guts, bloodying night with blues.  
He moans over almond-tinctured Leafy,  
Wonders when she'll, if she'll, . . . then breaks for rum,  
Hollers out for "mo' molasses lasses,"  
Then keens a black, saltwater elegy  
For O., whose stomach leaked over gravel  
After the weary bullet found its home,  
And the attorney-general, white liar,  
Crawled into the papers and laughed like that,  
Letting the assassin piss on O.'s bones.

I remember T. like a smile, that thin  
Poet of Alcoholics Anonymous,  
Who fretted over Ang in the N. S.,  
Back when my engine hurt, coughing up weeds,  
And Haney's grassfire went loco, turning  
His three-generation, wooden home to snakes.  
Queen Anne's lace fans over the foundations.

Last April, nigh spring, T. fell in his chair  
While snow heaved and heaved against his window;  
He remembered the dead among the corn.  
Rum blazed while temperatures went arctic  
Chopped wood faltered in his stove. A blizzard  
Hacked through his brain, clearing the bullet's path:  
He was climbing Taunt's Hill — at last.

***A Poem with the Single Title of "Mercy"***

You salt away my soft letters, all cured,  
Tender, to decay in forgetfulness.  
There, foxed by tears, the dark sheen of words  
Will fade slowly to blurs, my negro blush  
Of language corrode into white silence.  
Starved for air, my love poems'll coarsen, stiffen  
Into stark, crude, Anglo-Saxon stresses  
That'll hinder, screw, all pronunciation.

S., how will your beauty appreciate  
If left unsung?

I'll wrench poems from branches,  
Scribble your name in the waterfall's noise,  
And make all Nature our rose-embroidered  
Canticles, to give this dark-complected love  
A hearing. *Them that have ears, they will hear.*

*To X*

X:

Lilac smells of dusk make me smile. Isn't it funny how Nature keeps her ways no matter how mixed up our feelings?

In your letter, you thought I'd "run off from you." I didn't. I saw you come through the door and I was not even ready for you, dressed in my everyday brown corduroy and all.

And I'm never sure what to say. My pencil talks better than my mouth.

Why did you tramp in pitch blackness to Brighton after whispering, "I love you"? I didn't say it back: Love's no trifle. But you could have stayed.

I want to see you smile soon. Yes.

I'm waiting impatiently for your love  
To come through to me.

Love,

Shelley.