

Cultural Polyphony in George Elliott Clarke's Works

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Abstract

This paper is part of a longer study on George Elliott Clarke's work, researched on a grant generously offered by the J. F. Kennedy Institute Library in Berlin. After a presentation of the writer and an exploration of the various sources or models serving his intellectual and artistic development, as well as a discussion of his "ars poetica," the article focuses especially on his jazz-opera libretto *Québécoisité* (2003), which is not only an example of "cultural polyphony" in his work but also an excellent representation of Canadian multiculturalism and its problems inside the Francophone province. Insisting on a "québécoisité de couleur," Clarke proposes a more inclusive concept of Canadian identity. The conclusion of the article is that Clarke's work proves that the arts allow for a felicitous meeting and blend of cultures.

Keywords: African-Canadian Literature, cultural polyphony, G. E. Clarke's "ars poetica", G. E. Clarke's jazz operas, Canadian multiculturalism

The Portrait of the Artist

In the context of present-day Canadian literature George Elliott Clarke's case is perhaps one of the best examples to illustrate the contradictory status of such a literature. Canadian Literature is usually regarded in an English speaking context as a postcolonial literature, the literature written in French is included in Francophone literatures, while writers belonging to ethnic groups (some of whom continuing to write in their mother tongue) represent themselves both as Canadian and, at the same time, as trans-national voices.

G. E. Clarke (b. 1960) could be considered as one of the most visible artists of the still little visible but extremely diverse as history and origin African-Canadian literature. His work presents an enhanced interest for the foreign reader as an illustration of Canadian postmodernism but also as a unique embodiment of a particular case of cultural miscegenation. At its roots, his rich poetic voice contains the residues of the Nova Scotian Black Loyalists' memory and the Mi 'kmaq Indians' oral traditions. As a black neo-protestant, he is influenced by the poetic text of the Bible, the music and rhythms of church rituals. He is not only an expert in traditional African-American genres but his knowledge of music goes through the jazz age and embraces all the varieties of contemporary musical creations, even those belonging to youth and popular culture; and as a creator of librettos, he shows knowledge of opera as well. As a student of literature, besides the classics, he has incorporated the poetic experience of both American and European modernists, to which he added the knowledge of great poets from other cultural areas as well. As a scholar and professor, he has a wide knowledge of literary theory, while as a literary historian of African-Canadian literature, especially that from his "Africadia," he is a pioneer. He had edited important anthologies of black Nova Scotian writing and a bulky book "mapping African-Canadian literature". His growing up during the sixties made him aware of the political context of protests against the establishment, the Civil Rights movement from the United States, the contradictions between Pierre Elliott Trudeau's policy of multiculturalism and the extant but officially unacknowledged racism in Canada. His various articles and essays published in

Canadian journals and abroad make him a constant observer and critic of Canadian matters.

Clarke is one of the lucky chosen people endowed with a sponge-like perception of the world, with all his senses acutely reflecting external and internal stimuli. His responses to the past and his awareness of the present-day socio-political and cultural environment make him the perfect, though at times controversial, mirror. I would say, he is one of those over-gifted writers whose extraordinary command of the English language and knowledge of other languages and literatures make it difficult not only for an outsider but also for anyone to write about him. And if he or she would dare, the critical discourse has to be unavoidably interwoven and not just “sprinkled” with Clarke's self-referential texts. For who could write better than G.E. Clarke about him and his work? The rock-hard logic of his critical articles, the exquisite evocative music and rhythms of his lyrical sequences or dramatic textures with richly allusive subtexts set almost insurmountable obstacles for commentators and translators. To this one should add the variety of genres and styles he employs and the recently various auxiliary texts—like introductions, epigraphs, explanatory essays, notes etc. — he adds to the “package” of his works. With all the charm and beauty of his poetry and prose when read just intuitively, Clarke becomes a difficult and extremely demanding author to follow along the myriads of references, names and lists in his work. Nevertheless, even though the critical readers' or students' cultural background could hardly match, even partially that of the writer's and would never cover the spectrum of his knowledge of the arts, history and politics, this handicap would be a challenge to remember things forgotten, to explore unknown paths, meet authors one hasn't read before, and get closer to the world we live in. Though it does not exclude freeing oneself from the spell of his voice, and at times even disagree with his political sympathies or literary representations.

In what he entitles “Vrai: un essai,” preceding his opera libretto *Trudeau*, Clarke gives a condensed story of his evolution beginning with his “Africadian, crypto-socialist, poetry-impassioned youth” evoking his heroes who were “warrior-intellectuals—scarved, lone figures,” “chivalric characters” whom he, like many other young men, romanticised.

Quoting from a “vivid poem” by Conrad Kent Rivers, this is how he describes his state of mind: “I yearned to live like that—in gorgeous exile, to sport a scarf and a beret and wander night-steeped avenues. I admired solitary Romantics (*Trudeau* 19). Drawing his self-portrait as a young artist who tried to look like Che Guevara, he gives the names of his “models” or “idols,” whom he will call, even if not repudiating them, in the following sentence a “suspect septet” and “dastards,” with “atrocious failings”: “Thus, as a tyro poet, I chose, as my models, dashing, difficult artists and politicians: *avant-garde* reactionary Ezra Pound; dictator-philosopher Mao Zedong; free-speech poet Irving Layton; jazz trumpeter Miles Davis; pop bard Bob Dylan; orator Malcolm X; and the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau” (*Trudeau* 19).

Clarke's explanation for his choice of this “suspect septet” is the context: “I was born in 1960, and grew up with the recordings and the books of these men in my home. Thus, I have written poetry about them all (19), and my poetics is informed by their styles and texts. These artist-politicos and politico-artists radiated, it seemed to me, insouciant sassiness as well as tragic charisma” (*Trudeau* 20).

G.E. Clarke's “Ars Poetica”

Contributing with poetry to various literary journals, Clarke published his first collection of poems *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) while still a BA student at the University of Waterloo. The very title of the volume, decorated with archive photographs of Baptist churches from Atlantic Canada and pictures of members of the Africadian black community, suggests the oral and musical source of his poetic diction. One of the cycles bears the title “Soul Songs,” recalling the old

work songs of the black slaves. Nor are forgotten his Mi'kmaq ancestors looking like "sepia saints" amidst nature's revival. The poet's famous black opera singer aunt Portia White is also present. But there are poems already showing the passionate for literature student's excursions to the old continent's literary centre, Paris, adding new vistas to his poetic imagination.

His second volume *Whylah Falls* comes after the seven years during which, besides being an MA student at Dalhousie, Clarke had begun his political activism in support of the Canadian black community. *Whylah Falls* is "a village in Jarvis County, Nova Scotia," "[w]recked by country blues and warped by constant tears, it is a snowy, northern Mississippi, with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs and wild roses" (XXVII). The book is an amalgam of genres and styles, verse and prose, dramatic monologues, with sections entitled "Cantoes," evidently referring to Pound. Thus, we have already a considerable multiplication of the tones and undertones in Clarke's voice, with more and more evidence of a literary transmutation of the political context of multiculturalism.

In the crucial year 2000, at forty, G. E. Clarke, the professor of literature with a PhD from Queens and a stage of teaching Canadian and African-American literature at Duke University in the U.S., a subtle scholar of literary theory and artist with an already well-rounded and mature personality was able to look back at his work and make his own critical statements about it. He had already published four volumes of poetry: *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), *Whylah Falls* (1990), *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems* (1994), *Gold Indigoes* (2000), and he was on the threshold of receiving the Governor General's Award for his *Execution Poems* (2000). He had published a dramatized version of his second volume of poems under the title *Whylah Falls. The Play* (1999); had written *Beatrice Chancy: an Opera Libretto in Four Acts* (1998) for Canadian composer James Rolf, successfully produced in Toronto in 1998, and subsequently filmed for the CBC television. Clarke published the play version of the libretto in 1999, with a documented introduction about slavery in Nova Scotia. He had collected and edited African-Canadian poetry: *Fire on the Water. An Anthology of Nova Scotian Writing. Volume One* (1991), the second volume following in 1992, and *Eying the North Star. Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (1997). Besides, he wrote a screenplay *One Heart Broken into Song* (1999) for the CBC-TV and was preparing the screenplay for the opera *Beatrice Chancy*. In the meantime he was writing poems for another volume (*Blue*, 2001) and collecting material for his *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* to be published in 2002. A real explosion of energy!

In comparison with the short preface of the first edition of his second book of poetry, consisting of a phrase referring to the background of the poems and two quotations about beauty, his "Introduction" to the tenth anniversary edition of his verse epic *Whylah Falls* shows the mature and self-conscious artist. Clarke was writing not just a "preface" discontent with previous commentaries and feeling the need to guide the reader through this miscellany of poems "geld" into a book. He calls the readers' attention to this "verse collection inspired by assassinations, civil wars, insurrections, and the other blood-stained brick-à-brack of our century," which had become "a rogue collection of poems and prose" (X). The "Introduction" is a retrospective about his career as an original writer but also an artistic statement. The titles of the sections can offer a glimpse into his theoretical standpoint and illuminate the reader about his attitude via-à-vis the most visible / successful critical theories of the last decades of the 20th century as well.

The "Introduction" starts with "The Intentional Fallacy," borrowing Wimsatt and Beardsley's concept, and explains the origin of the book as "born in the blues, the philosophy of the cry" in a time when he was trying "to rediscover the Four Muses—Eros, Death, Intellect and Spirit." The reader is guided to "understand improvisation, how a standard reference can become something else" (XI). The book should be perceived as a symphony in which each poem is a passage, "sometimes harmonious,

sometimes cacophonous,” in which “the narrative emerges from the lyrical—sometimes in counterpoint, at other times in harmony, now merging, now diverging, but always enjoying the liberty of concord and discord”(XI). The connection with music is shown also in the attached list with “discography,” including a variety of genres and species, from blues to opera. The conscientious reader becomes aware that before or while reading *Whylah Falls*, in order to have a correct reading of the text and get the real feel of it, he or she should listen to the musical selections from Clarke's “discography.” Even if the writer does not explicitly demand his reader such an effort, the reader, in order to extend his or her receptive capacity, may feel the urge or impulse to become a “connoisseur” who not only listens to the music but is also able to read the score, and even able to compare different interpretations of a musical piece. A similar conclusion could be reached when reading G. E. Clarke's introduction. One should have read the critics he is alluding to or take the pain of reading them. Still, the information the writer provides could alleviate the reader's effort to understand the poet's “intentions” even without looking for other sources: “Whylah Falls was also an attempt to improvise a myth, to honour an era of boxcars stuffed with apples,” starts Clarke's comment. “I wanted to resurrect the lost time when poetry was lightning and rich rain, falling like steel guitar. There was a florilegium of 45 r.p.m. records—three minute erotic statements I had to treasure, had to treasure, in my poems (XI).” Clarke describes the miscellany of his manuscript in a flamboyant style whose baroque pathos no critic could match, using keywords or dictionary entries the reader has to decode: “The manuscript mirrored the history of three churches, steamed clams, fried fish, excessively beautiful women, inhumanely handsome men, dented teapots, linoleum, shotguns, eggs, typewriters, roses, tobacco, Coca-Cola, hydroelectric power, Fournier typeface, full moon, rivers, Mississippi and Montréal. It became a dictionary of innocence and experience” (XII).

The poet's imagination was not immune to the political context either, with the liberals trying to woo their voters. Nevertheless, the personal element behind the challenging social-historical context of the nineteen seventies prevails and becomes a means to explore the poet's affective memory in a lyrical sequence: “In truth, I was trying to remember, I was trying to remember, a shy woman's smile and an oval, maple table of unique thickness and sheen. The earth leapt into canyons and lakes while my typewriter tapped hot springs in Banff” (XII). He also acknowledges the contribution of two living poets, met at the poet's retreat from Banff centre, who had helped him to “retrieve” his hidden memories:

Suddenly I could see radical woman's gifts of coffee, beans and wieners, her country blues, her blue denim, her pink hair curlers, her white cotton robe, her goldfish, her mathematical intellect, her bluebell-brilliant earth, her tired tractors put out to pasture, her cornbread swelling like sunrise in the night of a pan, her bed swimming with mackerel, her moonshine tasting of sweat and rum and rosewater, her coconut oil pomade, her Bible of roses. I remember strong liqueur and strong winds. (*Whylah Falls* XII)

We have here an unusual muse with quite a lot of attributes making her unique, who is able to inspire the poet stimulating his senses and imagination so as to attain an almost cosmic effect: “An electric storm fell over Edmonton and into my brain. My world was strange: sudden with lyrics. Every line was haunted by iambic pentameter. Hence *Whylah Falls* is the Apocalypse—the way the world looks when the Beloved is absent” (XIII). In brackets, he quotes from *The Great Code* Northrop Frye's statement about the end of the world: “The Apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared” (XIII); although it would be really difficult to believe that G.E. Clarke's “ego” would retreat backstage from his work.

The section entitled “A Defence of Poesy” sends the reader back to Philip Sidney's essay from 1595, but also to Shelley's post-mortem published “A Defence of Poetry.” The reason must be Clarke's strong belief that the origin of the poem is in songs, whether erotic or morbid, reflecting the artist's inner self, because “[a] stubbornly anti-modern artifice, the poem never, never, accepted the twentieth century. It revolted against the Industrial Reaction” (XIII). Clarke considers that even if the lyric has suffered various mutations—symbolist, imagist, social realist, and projectivist—it was “the only poetic form to survive the piggery of the capital and the slaughter-house of war.” Nevertheless, having read Garcia Marquez and Tony Morrison, he has to acknowledge that “myth is the womb of narrative, even of poetic narrative” (*Whylah Falls* XIV).

Another introductory section bears the name of Harold Bloom's famous and controversially received book *The Anxiety of Influence*. Clarke's canon of two quatrains contains, besides the Bible, 30 names of authors four in a line. The enumeration starts quite naturally with Shakespeare, followed, less evidently why, by Herrick, but again, with the fully justified presence of Milton, the three of them belonging to Bloom's “Aristocratic Age.” But Clarke jumps over centuries and the fourth nominee is Wordsworth. A possible explanation of this association would be the compelling “beat” he feels, as one is tempted to recite his list the way pupils used to learn Latin prepositions in versified quatrains: “Shakespeare Herrick Milton Wordsworth / The King James Bible Hopkins Yeats / Pound Eliot Thomas Heaney / Rimbaud Baudelaire Rilke Blake” (*Whylah Falls* XIII).

The names are arranged so as to respect the rhythmical pattern of an octosyllabic quatrain. The use of this meter must be intentional with Clarke, echoing not only Herrick's “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” (“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”) or Milton's “Il Penseroso” with its invocation to Melancholy: “And hail thou Goddess sage and holy.” This meter may have been used also with reference to the Zinacatan “bombas,” usually quatrains in octosyllabic meter, recited by the ritual humorists of the Carnival fiesta known as “Blackmen,” close to the traditional Andalusian sixteenth century “coplas” (cf. Bricker 1973). Some years later, in his octosyllabic sonnet “Au lecteur”—one of the introductory “packages” to his opera libretto *Trudeau*, Clarke will ironically comment: “Rhyme's, too, *déjà vu*—medieval—/ Even in octosyllable / Doubled as couplet (so I hear)—/ Art as avanguard as Chaucer” (*Trudeau* 15).

If the first quatrain contains, besides King James's Bible, well-known European poets' names with the addition of two American expatriates who felt more at home in Europe and in the European tradition, the first line in the second stanza comes with a “bomba” quartet: “Basho Li Po Mao Ondaatje.” Mao Zedong, of all, in the close vicinity of the seventeenth century Japanese classic, Matsuo Basho, and the famous Tang Chinese poet Li Po (Li Bai) from the eighth century! The only relationship between them and the contemporary Canadian poet Michael Ondaatje, born in Sri Lanka, could be for the innocent reader the alliterative “o” in their names.

The second line comes with a “black quartet”: the most influential writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer (1894-1967), whose choice Clarke will explain in the next section. After Toomer comes the founder of the Negritude movement in Francophone literature, Aimé Césaire, well-known also for his harsh criticism of colonialism (“Discourse on Colonialism”); the third is Robert Hayden (1913-1980), the first African-American poet chosen as a consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and, after him, the 1992 Noble Prize laureate, Derek Walcott (b. 1930), born in the West Indies, whose *Star-Apple Kingdom* and *Omeros* must have been important models for Clarke.

With the bohemian Milton Acorn (1923-1986), born in Atlantic Canada, Clarke recommends to his readers “the people's poet.” His neighbour in the list is Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936), the Spanish poet murdered during the Civil War, who wrote sonnets of “dark love.” Then comes the representative of the “Beat Generation” of the fifties, Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), who had a vision of

Blake and thought of himself a seer in his art (Wager-Martin 2378), best known for his epic poem "Howl." Another Noble Prize winner (1982), the Colombian magic realist novelist, whose middle name is also Garcia: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, listed undoubtedly for his "One Hundred Years of Solitude."

The last quartet begins with Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones (b. 1934), who, in his poem "Numbers, Letters," had introduced himself as a "black nigger in the universe." Editor, together with his wife, of *Yugen*, a literary journal in which he published Kerouac, Ginsberg and others, his life had been radically changed by the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, which made him move to Harlem and join the racial upheavals of the sixties (Williams 2700).

Clarke's praise of the several times Nobel Prize nominee Bob Dylan (Robert Allen Zimmerman, b. 1941) has already been mentioned. Next to him, Robert Bly (1926)—strangely excluded from the massive second volume of the Heath anthology of American literature—founder of the mythopoetic men's movement and co-founder of the American Writers Against the Vietnam War (1966), and, later, author of *The Insanity of Empire: a Book of Poems Against the Iraq War*. Even if he had not won the Nobel Prize, he has the merit of being the first translator and promoter—besides other Nobel laureates—of the 2011 prize winner, the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer. So that a commentator remarks: "present-day multicultural literary awareness [in the US] is due in no small part to Bly's work" (Gustafson).

Last but not least, at the very end of the list comes Rita Dove, poet laureate and dramatist, born in 1952 in Akron, the second African-American consultant for the Library of Congress, whose latest volume is *Sonata Mulattica* (2009). Clarke's reason to include her will be mentioned in the following section of his Introduction, together with some other additional names. But even if Clarke mentions apparently just one female author's name in his list-poem, he actually includes two "doves" in the cage of a name; for there was also an Okanogan "Mourning Dove" (1888-1936), born in Idaho, and given, besides her English name Christal Quintasket (coming from an Irish grandfather), the Indian name Hum-ishu-ma, meaning "mourning dove." Through her Indian grandmother she got to know the oral traditions of the Okanogan people who live nowadays close to the Canadian border. Her *Cogewea* (1927) was the first novel published by an Indian woman, though the contribution of her collaborator, Lucullus McWorther, intending to please the public, had distorted the oral simplicity of her style, introducing American slang (Herzog 1930). As she had little formal education, she had to rely again on McWorther's help for the publishing of her *Coyote Stories* (1933), about her people's traditions and knowledge meant to be passed on for the education of the younger generations, and about Coyote, the mysterious trickster and "imitator" of Amerindian folklore (Herzog 1930).

The section entitled "The Death of the Epic" recalls the theoretical discussions around the crisis and death of the novel, starting with José Ortega y Gasset's *The Decline of the Novelist* (1925), and Walter Benjamin's review *The Crisis of the Novel* (1930), and the later discussions in the fifties, with Gore Vidal and Roland Barthes or Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel* (1969). Under this title Clarke writes about his fascination with the epic and laments its death. Nevertheless he admits that "a memory of its grandeur and power persists in our era in the extended lyric sequences—which might even be termed an elegy for the epic" (XVI). The poets mentioned are Dickinson, Whitman, Baudelaire, Eliot, Hughes, and Williams. And Clarke goes on with another confession: "On top of this, I fell in love with lyric sequences and other works that created whole worlds. Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* (see "Pomade") demonstrated that lyric can limn cosmoses of human relationships. Jean Toomer used the mixed media of poetry, prose, song and play to achieve the same effect in *Cane*" (*Whydah Falls* XVI).

The section *Tradition and the Individual Talent* reproduces the title of T.S. Eliot's essay (1921), included in *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, containing the famous phrase "No poet,

no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." Clarke's revision of the canon has already shown who are those whom he admires and he is ready to confess any influence being aware of the strength of his individual talent. Referring to his first volume of poems, he describes it as "an extended lyric sequence" with the assertion of the "encyclopedic tendency of the epic" (XVII). Inspired by the black slaves' work songs, the poet becomes an industrious "reaper", collector, and conveyor: "I discovered the poetry secreted in recipes, popular songs, Hansard, newspapers, and the names of flowers, musical forms, even the proper origins of liqueurs. But the epic was always a combination of travelogue, drama encyclopedia, song history, and narrative of the ways and means of particular people, It was a catalogue (a quality which defines the extended lyric sequence as well" (XVII). The process of creation becomes "an act of layering, of adding and subtracting certain timbres and tones, and tints to permit the better revelation of character, voice, and plot" (*Whylah Falls* XVII).

The following step in the process of creation was to deliver "wrongly jailed words from the prison of dictionaries" and revive "all those beautiful, abandoned, thematic forms that resembled broken organs, rusted trumpets, warped guitars, yet were still capable of the most unearthly music" and gives a again a long list of figures and tropes. Clarke's all inclusive appetite engulfs the study of "the discipline of gossip and yarns, noting that such tales form the matrix of myths" (XVIII). He is no stranger to the technique of collage: "Fragments of true stories were accumulated, shifted, altered, portions discarded, and the remainder transformed into new myths" (XVIII-XIX). Writing for the press, he is shocked by the violence the horror stories found in the media and ponders whether it is a social or anti-social act to relate them. His conclusion is that "[v]iolence flourishes in every form of narrative, including fairy tales" (*Whylah Falls* XX).

The eternal couple Eros and Thanatos become "the morbid" and "the erotic" poles of literature and the poet rightfully claims that "[d]esire transforms reality daily, allowing dreams and myths to intrude" (XX). In an age of visual culture, he cannot ignore the art of cinematography: "I explored films such as *Desiderio* with its desert, millennium of rain, and rhythm of desire frustration fulfillment frustration desire, to discover the laws of love" (XX). Movie pictures made him to savour "the Afro-American, Chinese, French, Japanese, and Spanish experience of eroticism" and "[t]hus, noted lilies, sunflowers, the transparency of silk, the translucency of cotton, the scent of sandalwood and roses, the taste of cherries and plums, Amaretto and Chartreuse" (XX). But as a searcher of beauty he is not immune to fashion either: "I also catalogued the strange peculiarities of shoes, shirts, dresses, pants, robes, socks, nylons, observing the comedic and tragic ways in which they fall in love, even love that costs them their lives as they are ruined by reckless passion" (*Whylah Falls* XX).

In the section entitled "General Principles of Harmony," Clarke writes about his experience of "the literary phenomenon of African-American song disrupting standard literary discourse like blaring horns" (XXII). He underlines that besides canonical writers in literature, while "attempting to trace the genealogy of love," his *Whylah Falls* had been influenced by "sung literature" or "orature." In this respect, the canonic figures quoted are the famous voices with haunting echoes of: James Brown, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, Billie Holliday, and Bessie Smith (XXII). He compares the subversive influence of the song to the "mandolin in Lennon and McCartney's 'And I love Her'" which "can reappear as a sudden, Spanish mood in a lyric ostensibly written in Canadian English." He traces the origin of his second volume of poems to the blues and sees it "as a response to the call of popular angst in radio and folklore," the call and response representing an "antiphonal impulse" (XXIII). He discovered his "oral heritage" in the Nova-Scotian vernacular and he attempted to restore "the verbal magic of African United Baptists Association sermons," and record "the jazz of life" i.e. "shouts, hollers, coos, cries, screams" (XXIII).

The last part of his Introduction, "Bush Garden," borrows the title of Northrop Frye's essay,

echo of a poem by Margaret Atwood. In it Clarke refers to the artist's other discoveries: "that Beauty refuses to be suppressed" (...), that female characters (who had been first silent) demanded to be free to critique the unruly romanticism of males, that elements of history (...) intrude, that magic realism demands the counterpoint of social realism, that lyric requires episodes of prose, that politics evaporates before aesthetics, that modernism, pursued to its limits, returns to epicity, that myth (XXIV) is the glue of art." The conclusion is that the poet "needed another language, a fusion of tongues" (XXV) in order to express these discoveries. The final version of the book is "the memory of what was omitted," writes Clarke paradoxically. "Many of the ancestral poems were cannibalized for useful phrases, lines, images which were then resurrected in new pieces. *Many poems are written but few are chosen*" (*Whylah Falls* XXV).

Finally, Clarke pays tribute to his friends who contributed to the making of the book. The completion of the work, i.e. "the cessation of creation," is equivalent with the poet's return from an "exile," while the accomplished work has become "a place where the death of poetry has not yet occurred."

One should not forget that, chronologically, this Introduction to the second edition of his *Whylah Falls* was written after he had already transposed the book of poems into dramatic form, in 1999, and had published also his opera libretto *Beatrice Chancy*, a rewriting of Shelley's drama *The Cenci* in the context of North American slavery and racism. Whether in mind with the law of copyright or simply as a scholar and professor of literature who has to be a model for his students, the play version of *Beatrice Chancy* contains a "Conviction" set at the end of the play with a motto from the famous Chilean poet Antonio Skármata: "Las Beatrices producen amores incommensurables" and a list with the different works of art that the original story of Beatrice Cenci has generated or inspired along the centuries: "This work moves in sympathy with many visions of the true but often altered story of Beatrice Cenci, beheaded at the age of twenty for the crime of parricide, on September 11, 1599, in Rome, Italy" (*Beatrice Chancy* 152). Clarke views his play as an "echo" which shadows several dramas, romances, chronicles, film/screenplays, parodies, photographs, and operas [the list of names is too long to quote] by creators who "have dallied" with Beatrice Cenci, and a similar long list referring to Dante's Beatrice and her representations in various arts, with the dissonant inclusion of the title of a documentary about Malcolm X, and the names of two restaurants in Canada. The following list with references to slavery and violence includes also Benito Mussolini's novel co-written with Santi Corvaja *The Cardinal Mistress* (153). The fourth list is the acknowledgment of the play's "readers."

Québécois: A Bridge Connecting Arts and Politics

It is a truism to say that the socio-political and cultural contexts play an important part in one's life. Nevertheless, the shaping and evolution of an artist's work depends not only on his or her inbred or God given artistic potentials and the context. As is shown in Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers. The Story of Success*, chance and opportunity may lead one on byroads, with unexpected turns. Such an opportunity was the invitation addressed to Clarke to write an opera libretto for Canadian composer James Rolf. Clarke must have been ready to accept the challenge to explore another genre of music collaborating with an equally gifted musician. This must have come also with the excitement to set on stage a theme connected with the officially denied slavery in Canada. For there is no doubt that the theme had belonged to Clarke and he must have been sure that on stage the effect of the theme and also of his verse would be intensified.

As in the traditional opera, and as if in accord with the generally accepted view, observed by T.S. Eliot when writing his first verse-drama (Eliot 139), Clarke chose a subject from another historical

period, so that the characters should be “licensed to talk in verse” and falling in a kind of trance even begin to sing (Eliot, 142). The epic seed comes from Shelley's verse drama about incest and parricide *The Cenci* (1819), and Clarke transplants it from a sixteenth century Italian background to the nineteenth century Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia. Clarke's Beatrice Chancy is born to a black slave mother and fathered by the plantation owner who will finally crash her illusion of being a free individual by raping her. Her response in revolt is to kill him. She is consequently arrested and executed.

Though the opera produced in 1998, by the Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company in Toronto, proved to be a great success and was subsequently filmed for the CVB-TV, Clarke felt the need to make of his libretto an anti-slavery manifesto and published it for the reading public in 1999. His introduction to the published play version of the libretto offers Clarke the opportunity to give a comprehensive view on African slavery in North America, though admitting that “slavery in Eastern Canada (including Ontario) was a minuscule economic activity in comparison with the far more lucrative enterprise in the Southern States of the fledgling Republic. In the northern, Royalist colonies, slavery was small-scaled, a matter of household 'servants' of a few coerced field hands (*Beatrice Chancy* 7). Still, Clarke is determined to underline: “Stubbornly though, slavery is slavery, and the black slaves in what is now felt every bit as oppressed as their cousins in the United States, the Caribbean or South America. Moreover, slavery remained legal in British North America until it was finally abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834 (*Beatrice Chancy* 7).” Clarke feels the need to add the connection to his own roots: “[it] is not a work of history, but of imagination. It is not a polemic, but neither is it passionless. For being a Nova Scotian of African-American origin (i. e. an Africadian) I will never know the furthest origins of my African heritage. I do know that it was disrupted by a ship and ruptured by chains” (*Beatrice Chancy* 8).

Following the success of his first opera libretto, Clarke has another opportunity to collaborate with a musician, writing at the request of the Guelph Jazz Festival his *Québécoisité. A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos*, with music composed by award winning pianist D.D. Jackson. This time, like Eliot when he wrote his second verse-drama *The Family Reunion*, Clarke embraces a theme from contemporary life, with characters chosen from real life and situations occurring not only in the separatist province. The plot is a vivid illustration of Canadian multiculturalism and the problems young lovers with different racial or ethnic backgrounds have to face in their attempt to fulfill their desire for personal happiness.

The published version of the libretto, as it had happened with Clarke's previous one, gives its author the liberty to supplement the verse-text not only with extensive poetic-prose passages in his stage directions, but also with other elements he feels necessary to enlighten the reader about his intentions and clarify also the political background of the events closely following the 1995 Referendum.

The “Prelude” has a motto in French: *La littérature mène à l'amour, / l'amour mène à la littérature*” (Leduc), and a warning to the reader: “[t]his “libretto” is for connoisseurs.” Consequently he mentions some of his musical sources of inspiration: “Its stanzas were sculpted of the aggravated *gravitas* of Miles Davis's trumpet, the salacious solace of James Brown's howls, the fearless *laissez-faire* of Oscar Peterson's piano, and oceanic *négritude* of Portia White's contralto” (II). In comparison with the gravity of his stand when he wrote *Beatrice Chancy*, Clarke adopts a lighter tone confession enumerating other sources: “it is also a callaloo confection—or gumbo concoction—of Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953), Marcel Camus's *Orfeu Negro* (1959), Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991), Clement Virgo's *Love come down* (2000), and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002),” to which he adds:

“traditions, plus my own tendencies, eccentricities, affinities—lugubrious, lubricious, lubricated—this production accepts that History is a slaughterhouse, Poetry an opera house: only Love allows us to distinguish Beauty from its extinguishing” (*Québécois* 11).

Though the title *Québécois* makes the reader expect a kind of serious “problem-play” about identity, the subtitle *A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos* alleviates one's fears that the story's end will be tragic. Thus one's expectations are for a playful comedy. The author's euphoric presentation of his “rainbow quartet of lovers” may even seem frivolous: “These personae are *Fashion File* models of rhetorical ambition—chameleon chiaroscuro, erotic chintz, coarse discourse, Romantic sado-canticles. Their sung speech is an avenue of sonnets leading to (and fleeing from) the Eden—Golgotha like—of sex” (11). In the same way the province that has caused a lot of trouble for the unity of the Canadian confederation becomes an inviting and stimulating environment:

Their story is set in Ville-de-Québec because its architecture is Gothic, its vices baroque. Too, Québec is a cinema of words, a cathedral of jazz, a catwalk of politics, a theatre of art, a fête of nostalgia, a gallery of passion, and a theme park of dreams. It offers us curried caribou, neon haiku, chanted blues...é Poco, pomo, it is a refuge from desiccated aesthetics. (*Québécois* 11)

The political stage becomes simply “a catwalk” on which one imagines smartly dressed, handsome politicians parading but not seeing who are those backstage manoeuvring them. Clarke's euphoric eulogy of the province is followed by an inebriating promise of enjoyments: “Thus *Québécois* is an Absinthe-Amarula-Brandy-Champagne-Chartreuse-Cognac-Grappa-Palm-Port-Pastis-Rum-Saki-Sangria-Scotch-Tequila-Vodka opera, one coloured spicily with notes of ebony, dark-cherry, India indigo-ink, and bronze-beige the shade of papyrus or bamboo”; although the writer's expectations from the reader are not easy to fulfill: “If possible, your eyes must savour lilies here-lilies laced in licorice; your ears must accept African strings, Asian brass, European percussion, Aboriginal vocals.” “Yes, the word *love* is bastardized in every language. But hear Provençal's Mistral: *Lou soleu me fait cantar.*” And – look!–light gilds the sky” (*Québécois* 11-12).

A more informative “Postlude” includes Ajas Heble's comments. The music critic defines the jazz opera as “a hybrid genre [that] compels us to imagine an alternative vision of human possibility” and admits that “[i]t's a grand objective”, because “the opera has almost always been about grand-scale gestures, about excesses, about staging the spectacular” (*Québécois* 97). And he continues: “[t]hrow jazz into the mix, and what you get, is what George Elliott Clarke's libretto for *Québécois* so eloquently, so resiliently, demonstrates [...] where hope and imagination rainbow over orthodoxy, where the capacity to dream reinvigorates our commitment to new understandings of identity, belonging, and collective responsibility” (97). Heble reads the libretto's title, *Québécois*, as “deliberately and playfully provocative, especially considering the mixed-race couples at the centre of the plot, and in light, too, of the fraught role that ethnicity and race have played in struggle for Québec nationalism” and shows that Clarke has succeeded in eschewing “the exclusivist, monolithic, and anti-ethnic sentiments that too often attach themselves to expressions of national and cultural identity” (*Québécois* 98). The critic considers that “Clarke's emphasis on '*le Québec de couleur*' represents a bold attempt to counter the demonization of the 'other' in attempts to fashion homogenous national communities”(98). He also praises Clarke's successfully avoiding to tell the story from one point of view as it would be tempting for people “to blame their problems on others, and to seek succor and certainty from nationalist myths” (98). In order to underline Clarke's “more inclusive understanding of issues such as belonging, identity, and citizenship,” Heble mentions one of Clarke's former theoretical approaches to the problem of the Canada-Québec schism in the introduction of his

1997 anthology of African Canadian writing, *Eying the North Star: Directions in African Canadian Literature* (*Québecité* 98-99). Heble also stresses the fact that Clarke's libretto is "a necessary challenge to mainstream assumptions about Québec as white," and, in this context, "its non-compliance with dominant knowledge producing elites in Canada seems to me to carry a salutary—indeed an urgent—political force" (99). The critic attributes this force to the "text's insistence on the power to dream," recalling Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech" (99).

Concerning the libretto's background, I would quote also an outsider's opinion, namely an article written by a Romanian academic, Professor Liviu Cotrău. Being published in 2003, the article is based on information concerning the same period Clarke's opera libretto was referring to, the mid-1990s, and especially the years following the 1995 referendum "an event which—according to Cotrău—fuelled a revolutionary mode on both sides of the issue" (39). But this revolutionary mode was different from that of the sixties, when the so-called "quiet revolution"—which in Clarke's play has become the name of a pub owned by Chinese refugee—had encouraged acts of political terrorism. It was the period after Pierre Elliott Trudeau's death, when the Canadians experienced the outcomes of the charismatic Prime Minister's policy of multiculturalism, in the context of a massive immigration, when, as Cotrău concludes from statistical data, Canada had become one of the most segregated countries in the world" (40). Cotrău thinks that even though the policy of multiculturalism brought many good consequences, "in light of the Trudeau strategy's original purpose of securing national unity, there can be no doubt that it has failed" (50).

Clarke's "jazz fantasia in three cantos" instead of "acts" is dedicated first to "two dreamers of beauty," one of whom is the author's own deceased mother, Geraldine Elizabeth Clarke (1939-2000), with Indian blood in her ancestry, the other is the composer's Chinese origin mother, Lillian Liu Jackson (1937-1995). The other two are Canada's "visionaries of Liberty," the then Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson and "The Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau."

The quartet of characters Clarke chooses to illustrate Canadian multiculturalism consists of Quebeckers who are neither French nor English. Two of them are Canadian born, while the other two come from refugee-migrant families. The two mixed-blood couples of lovers live their "midsummer night's dream" in the post-referendum atmosphere of the separatist province, when, as one of them mentions, the failure was blamed on the ethnics' vote against separation.

The characters' names were certainly chosen on purpose and function like labels to orient the reader. LAXMI BHARATI, Université Laval student architect, 21, is Hindu, of Indian descent, born and raised in Montréal. Her first name derives evidently from Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of light, wisdom, fertility, generosity and courage, usually symbolized by the lotus flower. She is still clinging to the Hindu conception of "everyday morality." Her second name, Bharati, though a common Indian name, is also the name of a musical extravaganza, mixing dances, music and folk traditions. (cf. [Http://www.bharatitheshow.com/introd.php](http://www.bharatitheshow.com/introd.php)). More obscurely it may also allude to the Bhakti movement inside Hinduism, moving away from the abstract concept of Brahma, closer to everyday realities. As the reader will find out in Canto II, Scene VI, her Brahmin parents, a doctor and a teacher, fled from Mumbai in order to "foster fortunes and a future" for their daughter (*Québecité* 68).

Laxmi's lover is OVIDE RIMBAUD, Haitian, of black-white ancestry, brought to Québec by his parents in 1989. He is an architect, 25. As it is mentioned by him in the play, his family fled from Haiti after the massacres following the Duvalier family's dictatorship. Clarke must have chosen this origin for his character possibly because of Haiti's special history in the Caribbean and its fight against slavery. The country gained its independence after the 1804 slave revolt, being the first independent nation in the Caribbean, the first black-led republic in the world. Ovid Rimbaud's name suggests the accolade between the exiled Latin poet famous for his *Ars Amandi* and the libertine French "infant

Shakespeare,” poet and adventurer. Clarke's Ovide retains all the erotic ardour of the two poets in his attempt to woo the apparently “ice queen” Laxmi.

The other female character is COLETTE CHAN, law student at the same university with Laxmi, also 21, but of Chinese origin, escaping the 1989 'Goddess of Democracy' pogrom from her country of birth. The young woman's name has a special resonance, evoking the 20th century French novelist Colette (1873-1954), close friend of Jean Cocteau and also of Josephine Baker. The name Chan may be associated with various composers and singers from Hong Kong, but also with the American movie star Jackie Chan, also from Hong Kong, who since his career starting in the 1960s has become a cultural icon, referenced to in pop songs, cartoons and video games.

Colette's lover is MALCOLM STATES, a Montréalais jazz saxophonist of Afro-American and Mi'kmaq Nova Scotian heritage (like Clarke himself), debuted in Halifax. An Africadian, he's 25. The first association that comes to one's mind is certainly with Malcolm X. His being a jazz saxophonist connects him to the American jazz age and the importance of this musical genre in the battle between black American music and European music. Malcolm's second name, States, relates to the Black Royalists' country of origin. But “States” has also in its subtext the Indians from Canada registered under the Indian Act as Status Indians.

Scene 1 is set “Devant Le Château Frontenac” at dusk. The stage directions in prose are in Clarke's characteristic flamboyant style and the setting bears a reference to the French film *Paraplui de Cherbourg*. Laxmi and Ovid strand “on terrasse Dufferin before the fantabulous, Gothic-styled Château Frontenac. Grey gargoyles jut from a low roof, but cream-fresh-coloured blossoms arc upwards to meet them—as if in love” (19). The Hindu girl, with a strict family education, is defending herself from Ovid Rimbaud's arduous and sensuous courtship.

The second scene is set in Colette's father's night club, ironically named “À la Révolution Tranquile.” The décor reflects the mixture of cultures characteristic for immigrants' homes. In a corner there is small shrine dedicated to Chinese ancestors and deities. But the posters on the walls, most from the early 1960s, represent artists and politicians from different countries. The author gives a long list of names leaving the choice among them to the stage director.

The first Canto marks the beginning of the two couple's love story while they explore the city. Since the architect is the designer of the club owned by Colette's father, the couples get acquainted there. While Laxmi, a virgin, defends herself with witty cues—reminding of Shakespeare's Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew*—against Ovide Rimbaud's attacks, Colette, “[b]eautiful, a fashionista” gives her self-portrait in verse: “I study human-rights law at Laval / I don't try to judge what's musical, (24)/ Though I courted piano as a gal./ But the law states, Mr. States,/ Nothing can be done about lost lice; / But no one's free who isn't free to love” (25). She calls her partner's attention to the linguistic context of the province, the mixture of languages and the specific socio-lect: “In *Franglais*—as in *joual*—my name's Colette.” Since none of the two languages is her mother tongue, she is critical of both: “If only English weren't such and anguish! / If only French were not so *gauche!*”(25). Malcolm, born in Nova Scotia, refers to the general context of Canadian bilingualism: “That's Canada's anomalous calamity: /Anglos muck up the Queen's English; / Francophones fuck up French” (25). As usual, Clarke introduces a reference in Colette's answer: “Your wit seems as politically virtuoso / As Laferrière's in *How to Make Love to a Negro*” (25). The complete title of Dany Laferrière's novel in French, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired / Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985), is given in Clarke's Explications, at the end of the play. Nevertheless, sometimes the cultural allusions become rather obscure for the foreign reader—e.g.: “M. *Oui*, I chastise 'Vegas' Céline *via* Marjo, / Sample MC Solaar with Gilles Vigneault” (25)—who has to consult at least the Internet in order to identify the owners of the quoted names.

Colette gives a short account of the political background which made her family take refuge in Canada:

Bullets blasted away ballads and ballots,/ and bodies were 'miscoounted everywhere: / only nobodies numbered as the dead,/ when China drove us out in '89 / when I was nine. / A Communist comrade warned us /worshipping freedom could be fatal, / so my Lincoln-minded parents, /two pros adoring forbidden Ellington, / fled with all their hidden Ellington: / our total worldly foods were Music. / they opened this nightclub-café, / dreaming of a Bebop fusion Cathay. (*Québécois* 27)

The Canadian born Malcolm States is discontent with racism in Canada: “Halifax is a Hell of Haligonians—/ And Stygian, nasty Nova Scotians. // To forget my regrets, I picked up piano, / but saxophone was lighter to brandish than piano”(27). He gives a sample of his blues in black vernacular: “I's gonna sing now, so silence that cellphone—/ Less ya wanna get bopped hard by my saxophone! /[...] Leave them damned things off! Best: leave em at home! / *Ici à Quebec City, voici 'Blues de Malcolm'*”(31). He utters a euphoric eulogy of Jazz:

Jazz is indelible rainbow *aquarelles*; / Jazz is nights fallen open like a dress—and just as sweet; / Jazz is saxes stroked like violins, pianos beat like drums; / Jazz is the *vice versa* if Vice and Virtue; / Jazz is multiculti-Aboriginal-Semitic-Afro-Asian-Caucasian; / jazz is fried pigtailed, mango, and *Tabasco* splashed curry; Jazz us Lana Ogilvie in a Jean-Michel Basquiat; / Jazz is Chinese motifs in blues with black motives; / Jazz is delux, diabolical, champagne-and-vodka martinis. / Jazz is the human right to pleasure and Bauhaus-curvaceous Joy. (*Québécois* 36)

In Canto II, Scene II begins with a “[r]écit d'Ovide” in which his praise of “cosmo mosaics—rainbows—of women” is followed by a passage to rap: “Love your wife, tooth and nail: / Moulder in the Marriage jail. / Love your whore, fang and claw: / Make Adultery a law (54)”. Malcolm who is listening to him perceives the mixture of styles and finds analogies in poetry: “Now, you echo consciously surely, early Pound / Reading late, great, Yeats where the dreaming Shelley drowned” (54).

Ovide, like Romeo, speaks of his former love, Mireille “cute, homespun, haut-couture—/ Glamourous, amorous, *une belle du jour*,” and Malcolm adds his image of such a love: “Or molten, sparkling, ivory gloss—/ *La dolce vita, la vie en rose?*” (56), with the dual reference to Fellini's film and the one about Edith Piaf's life. But when Ovid describes his new love, Laxmi, his comparisons come from his profession: “her carriage Georgian, her columns Greek. // The curvature of space? / who cares? //Her curves erase / All fears” (57).

If Ovid gives voice to his phantasies about beautiful women, Laxmi is more concerned with the fate of women and racial inequities. While they travel with the “funiculaire,” Laxmi speaks about her “Québécoise idol,” Marie-Josèphe Angélique, the “abused slave girl” accused to have set fire to Montreal and executed. She speaks about the importance of remembering history, quoting Québec's motto: “*Je me souviens*” (60), and recommends Ovid a list of authors he should read (62).

The two girls' conversation “au magasin de confection” (as in the title of a lesson for learning French) brings new information about their life. Besides being students, they are working girls. Colette works at a firm whose name is “Layton Cohen,” funnily joining the names of the two important poets from the province, Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen. Laxmi is the chief-deputy's assistant at Hydro-Québec, the electric power station whose building and extension had affected the aboriginal peoples' life by dislocating them from the territories they had owned. The girls' meeting is an opportunity for them to compare their contradictory visions about love. Colette's love for Malcolm is passionate. She

thinks that they are linked by their vision and they form “a single chain of Being.” She defines their “twinning *québécoité*” as “an indelibly doubled haecceity” (64). The rational Laxmi, governed by her moral rectitude and an aggressive feminism, opens Collette's eyes to reality and encourages Colette to stop seeing secretly Malcolm, take home her black lover and face her parents.

Scene VI, set in front of the Parliament building, is a good opportunity to introduce a discussion about politics. If Ovid's perception of Canada is a “tolerably 'tolerant' place,” it is Laxmi again who refers to the concrete aspects of the actual situation. She ironically questions the political slogan “La peau brune, mais le coeur québécois” and reminds of the so-called “pure laine” local ethnic nationalism. Telling Ovid about the loss of 1995 Referendum being blamed on the ethnic vote, her conclusion is: “I knew then that all Québécois must be white / Or could not be Québécois, at least not quite” (68). She is proud of her Indian origin and blames the nationalists for negating the presence of native and coloured people: “I'll never be Québécois *de souch, un peps*: I'm Indian indubitably nixing nympholepsy. // Why show solicitude for folk's *québécoitude* / when nativists negate, denigrate, *négritude*? // Why not trumpet Québec's aboriginal origin, / Its very name that is Abenaki-Algonquin?” (*Québécoité* 67).

At Ovid's attempt to temper her, she comes with another example of dealing with race in the province, this time mentioning a case in which the Supreme Court of Canada's decision had simply eluded the question, “whiting out blacks.” Finally Ovid admits that the Québec nationalist party had actually invited Haitian refugees to immigrate. The subtext—less evident for an outsider—being that this was not simply for humanitarian reasons. With Haiti the only other state in America with French as its official language, the party's hidden agenda was to increase the province's Francophone population.

Scene VII, set “À l'extérieur de la boîte de la nuit,” takes up the racial issue discussed this time by Malcolm and Colette whose parents could not accept a “nigger.” Malcolm is well aware of their attitude: “I know what they meant. / That's what they mean—/ 'a brutal physiognomy, / ignoble, ingenious, ignominy.' // Oh, I know what they mean! // Québécois claim they're 'white niggers of America'. / Peut-être, but I'm the Negro nègre of Québec! / Merde! Merde! Archetypal merde! / Franchement! Nous sommes absurdes! Absurde!” (69). For Malcolm loving Colette is “Heaven and lynching” (70). And this is the moment for him to remember his family's history, his father fleeing from Tennessee, settling in Nova Scotia and marrying an “Afro-Mi'kmaq madonna.” The question is whether the members of the Chinese community would also be “pure laine” Québécois, excluding others. Thinking of their future children, Colette and Malcolm wonder about their identity:

COLETTE: Would our children be black or gold? / would they be free to be sold?

MALCOLM: Do you think our kids be striped like zebras? / Or look like Napolitan ice cream? / Or amoebas? (*Québécoité* 69)

The beginning of the Canto III continues with the couple's criticism of an attack on the status quo. Malcolm's exclamation: “God, damna keep-quiet revolution!” is continued with his determination to “holler Love maximally max.” Colette, imagining herself at the bar of prosecution, comes with her arguments:

Africa's far from China, yes, / but their histories harmonize: / On its 'yellow niggers,' / Canada a head tax incised, / but bid my slaving ancestors / lay down its rail ties; their blood scoured the iron road / flashing Gold Mountain's skies. // But China's not Shrangri-la or Eden: / Mao declared jazz seditious contraband. / He branded its sound 'bourgeois decadent,' / Then quickly commanded that it be banned. // Yes, jazz is a blackmarket, black magic Music: // Its voodoo

fuses Malcolm X and Confucius. // Now I lust for for the look of leaves, leaves in fresh wind. /
Blow startlingly green against Malcolm's sable skin! (*Québécoité* 77)

In the following scenes the lovers are lost in fog, like in one of O'Neill's short plays, though Clarke's seascape—as the stage directions mention—is “purloined from Li Po” (80). Ovid, “dressed in Stendhal colours” climbs over the bridge rails and prepares to jump, intending to kill himself, like the Poet in O'Neill's play. This time, Clarke, like Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, makes the lovers' exchange partners. Laxmi meets Malcolm who tries to console her. She accepts “the phallic bottle” with absinth offered by him to alleviate her mood. But when Colette appears, Malcolm proposes her to start their own “révolution tranquille” by making love, as if taking over the message of the nineteen sixties. Laxmi and Ovid also find each other and decide to build together as “equal partners,” guided, as Laxmi says, by the Indian trinity of Truth, God and Beauty.

Clarke sets the libretto's “finale” under a banner proclaiming Mayday the workers' as well as spring's feast. His intention is “to recall May 68: Trudeaumania in Canada, Pre-Raphaelite Marxism in Czechoslovakia, and classy sexy revolt in France” (91). The lovers reunite their voices in affirming that their complex identities are not just “philosophies and religions / languages and 'races'; / but also skin and breath, /thought and blood” and this should be the basis of their relationships. They envisage their children as being “every colour eyes can know, and free.” Their conclusion is that for their generation “parents, gods / must have no say” as love is a “tyrannical democrat.” The play ends with the well-known slogan “Vive le Québec libre!” but with a different meaning, for it refers to a redefined, more inclusivem“Québécoité.” The performance should close with the lovers' exit on 'vespa scooters', like in Baz Luhrmann's “Romeo+Juliet,” and with the descent of the Québécois flag re-died in new colours: “beige, pink, gold and indigo, and its fleurs-de-lys are correspondingly, violet, orange, black, and crimson, and its cruciform segmentation is green” (*Québécoité* 92).

Even though G.E. Clarke's “jazz fantasia” ends well, the libretto's reader cannot stop thinking that this kind of fairy tale ending is not exactly what happens in everyday reality. The question is not only whether love would be enough for the young couples to fight family traditions and prejudices, but also whether the environment would guarantee their right to happiness.

Conclusion

As seen from G.E. Clarke's self-referential texts, as well as from his work echoing sources from various cultures, he owns a great conductor's gift to unify the sounds of different instruments in order to achieve a harmonious whole. His polyphonic work could serve as an excellent introduction not only to African-Canadian literature or to the literary gourmet. It would appeal to all those who would like to learn about the peaceful meeting of cultures in the field of arts.

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