

George Elliott Clarke's *Othello*

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"After Howlin' Will Shakespeare, Blind Jack Milton, and Missouri Tom Eliot, I'm just one more dreamer to hoist a guitar and strum Sixhiboux Delta Blues. Oh yes" (Clarke 1990: 53)

Although "Howlin' Will Shakespeare" leads Clarke's list of precursor-dreamers and bluesmen, he is far from alone. Some might think it perverse to single Shakespeare out from among the crowds of famous writers who jam Clarke's work.¹ Indeed, my first reaction on reading *Whydah Falls* was to imagine Clarke as a PhD student in English literature who had spent far too much time cramming for comprehensives and drunk far too much coffee in the process. That effect, the anxiety of influence that haunts modernism and postcolonialism in different but related ways, emerges as one note within the polyphonic structure of the whole, but it is often drowned out by the exuberance and inventiveness of Clarke's play with the different traditions that he has inherited. Published interpretations of *Whydah Falls* have paid little attention to the Shakespearean intertext as such, preferring to focus on elements of the poem's formal constitution or its thematic engagements with Nova Scotian place and history. Ultimately, I do not see the "anxiety of influence" strongly marking Clarke's aesthetic.² Far more powerful is Clarke's desire to write his people and his place into his-

torical memory, through creating a literature that proclaims itself as conscious mythology. The urgency of this task is palpable: "I feel I am constantly writing against our erasure, and yet the erasure continues" (Moynagh 73). Part of this task involves writing against "received notions of blackness" (Moynagh 75). Some of the most powerful of these are articulated in Shakespeare's *Othello*. But another part of that erasure is the forgetting of what Clarke sees as an important fact: "African-Canadian literature has always been international" ("Eyeing" 1997: xv).

In *Whydah Falls*, one might easily conclude that the citations of other writers drown out the sole note signalled by the naming of a single character "Othello." Most articles on the text barely discuss it. Yet I will argue that this naming and the story of Othello Clemence lie at the heart of this book and its later transformation into drama. In attending to the function of invoking *Othello* in George Elliott Clarke's *Whydah Falls*, I am acutely aware of Chris Bongie's doubled set of warnings: against "spasms of high seriousness" and against yielding to postcolonial anxieties about popularity and value, without investigating their fraught relations to the canon and to questions about the role of art in community. Clarke himself addresses these issues in interviews, suggesting that his work exists "in two different modes": the "print-oriented" and the "speech-oriented" but that he tries to mesh the two to reach a wider audience (Foster and Ruprai 20),

thereby satisfying Canadians' unfulfilled desire for "some kind of public speech that has true resonance" (Ibid.15).

How do Clarke's invocations of Shakespeare's *Othello* create such speech? What do they reveal about the local uses of Shakespeare in creating communal identities under contemporary conditions? Where does Canada fit within the international dialogue now developing between Shakespeare studies and postcolonial studies?³ For the critic working on Canadian dialogues with black Atlantic traditions, further questions emerge. How does one talk about belonging in a multicultural nation and within contexts of diaspora, which may homogenize more than differentiate different origins and trajectories of movement? George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Rinaldo Walcott, among others, have been influential in bringing such questions to a national audience, and another generation of scholars is now emerging with an expanded set of questions.⁴

At an earlier stage in postcolonial criticism, during the 1980s, critics were tempted by Salman Rushdie's notion of a postcolonial "writing back" against the monuments of empire. That model is now complicated by Babelian investigations of the ambivalences and complicities of such citations, investigations particularly appropriate to the fraught contexts of settler-invader societies, an insight that Clarke makes much of in all his work. The "ghosts of slavery" (Sharpe) further challenge the discourse of civility embraced by Canadian settler nationalism, but in Clarke's analysis, less to discredit it than to hold it to its promise. "Language is Clarke's site for negotiating these realignments. Although Clarke readily embraces the postcolonial model of "answering back," he incorporates it within a "polyphonic poetics" (Fiorentino) which mixes Shakespearean echoes with those of various black cultural traditions. About his

use of Elizabethan language in *Beatrice Chancy*, Clarke says: "I don't apologize for using Elizabethan language in a work about Canadian slavery . . . I see the flavour as absolutely appropriate. I felt compelled to go there. I am answering back to Shakespeare and to Dante and to Shelley" (Nurse 30). But what does it mean to answer back to Shakespeare in *Whydah Falls*?

For Clarke, it seems partly a matter of self-validation, partly homage and partly a way of writing his own place into the great tradition, but on his own terms. As Ted Davidson suggests, he writes himself into the lineage of "father-poets" (206) who form the canon, and he writes "against the threat of white cancellation" (267), the fate of every poet confronted by a blank page but one with special resonance for the black poet who sees white cancellation as manifesting a potent but sometimes silent racism. *Whydah Falls*' form of answering back, then, recovers Canada's active moments of white cancellation and the voices it silences, redefining home and exile, the erotics of desire and epithalamium, and weaving them into a narrative that teaches the apparently universal lesson of "How Beauty honeys bitter pain" (152). The death of Clarke's *Othello* forms the pivotal moment in his text, making erasure visible and delaying, possibly indefinitely, the realization of desire. Michael Bristol's chapter, "Race and the comedy of abjection in *Othello*," can be read in dialogue with Clarke's *Whydah Falls*, to illuminate the Canadian readings of Shakespeare's *Othello* that each author provides. Bristol situates *Othello* within a tradition of great stories that "express the collective bad conscience of our civilization" (175). *Whydah Falls* invokes that collective bad conscience but shifts the terms of address from Shakespeare's implied English audience to a multicultural and contemporary Canadian one. In the process, much of the painful challenge of the original story is softened,

yet echoes remain. Bristol reads *Othello*, less as a tragedy than “as a comedy of abjection that depends on a background of racial hatred and violence” (175–6). One might say the same of *Whydah Falls*. I read *Whydah Falls* as an anti-modern and romantic text in the Canadian Red Tory tradition, celebrating the survival of a beleaguered community in a context of racial hatred and violence, which accuses the state of failing to guarantee its promise of “peace, order and good government” to all its citizens.

In interpreting “*Othello* as a carnivalesque text in the Bakhtinian sense” (179), Bristol suggests that the play may be read “as the carnivalesque derangement of marriage as a social institution and of the contradictory role of heterosexual desire within that institution.” I find this focus on the institution of marriage a helpful complement to Dorothy Wells’s examination of Clarke’s revisions of Petrarchan and Elizabethan sonnets and of pastoral poetic conventions in *Whydah Falls*. Clarke describes the derangement of marriage, most notably through the tragic figure of Saul Clemence and his incestuous affair with his stepdaughter Missy, which contributes to Shelley’s distrust of men and the language of love, but as Maureen Moynagh argues, Clarke’s love story appears to have a happy ending, with X and Shelley together once more (2000: 217). Clarke celebrates heterosexual desire and particularly the beauty of black women as the object of black men’s desire through the twinned courtships of X and Shelley and Pablo and Amarantha, and through the brief affair that X enjoys with Selah before returning to Shelley. Yet there is also a thread of homosocial desire linking the poem’s three male poets, X, Pablo and Othello, forming a strong undercurrent to the poem’s explicit courtship story. One might argue that the violated body of the dead Othello forms the true heart of this tale.

Clarke’s story is set during an economic

depression. He pays close attention to the material realities of his characters’ lives. In speculating about how a contemporary audience might have received Shakespeare’s play, Bristol suggests that *Othello* may have functioned “as an adaptation of the social custom, common throughout early modern Europe, of charivari” (180). This same social custom, still practiced in rural communities in Canada today, is immortalized in such Canadian texts as Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* and Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood*, where it is explicitly employed to police interracial marriages. Through invoking charivari, and Moodie’s account of it, Bristol reads *Othello* as staging “a ceremony of broken nuptials” and “the unmasking of a transgressive marriage” (180). Clarke’s writing back to *Othello* may be clearest here.

Although charivari is not explicitly evoked in *Whydah Falls*, I think it haunts the text’s delicate negotiation of communal taboo, reinforced by its images echoing scenes of lynchings. But by redefining Othello’s character, the circumstances of his betrayal and especially of his death, and by placing his murder in the middle of the narrative rather than at the end, Clarke succeeds in enabling *Whydah Falls*, that “ebon Muse/Whose Word is Liberty” (72), to triumph over the “chronic violence of the envy-jealousy system,” and of its racist permutations, as invoked by Shakespeare’s play.

Like Djanet Sears in *Harlem Duet*, Clarke takes on Shakespeare’s Othello “to exorcise this ghost” but while her “rhapsodic blues tragedy” (14) tells the absent black woman’s story, Clarke’s text takes up the challenge of redefining and rearticulating the black man’s desire, through the living voices of X, Pablo (who is described as “Moorish” [93] and more easily fits the role of Shakespeare’s “extravagant and wheeling stranger” [l.i.135]) and Othello, and through the post-death testimony of Othello and those affected by his murder. Indeed, Clarke’s O is described

as “muscl’d Othello, Shakespeare of song” (83)—clearly a figure of desire. If Shakespeare’s *Othello* concerns “a black man isolated from other black people” (148), as Ania Loomba, among others, argues, then Clarke’s rewriting reinstates Othello among his people. Relations within the black community become more important to Clarke than relations between black and white, as Clarke takes the actual story of the unpunished murder of a black man and embeds it within the broader dynamics of the Whydah Falls community and its larger black Atlantic connections, explicitly placing this rural Nova Scotian community within circuits connecting black experience in Paris, Cuba and Birmingham, Alabama, throughout the twentieth century.

This global context is highlighted even more explicitly in the play, which begins in Paris, with the chorus and then Pablo remembering “how Othello got killed and how his killer got away” (223) and with X explicitly addressing the black man’s dilemma: “My father’s life insurance is freedom, / But my name’s still ‘Coloured,’ ‘black,’ ‘nigger,’ / So, wincing, I crawl, this barbed globe of pain” (226). Othello too speaks lines in the play that more clearly reference Shakespeare’s imagery:

Mary had a little sheep
She took it to bed with her to sleep.
The sheep turned out to be a ram,
And Mary had a little lamb (227).

A defiant reshaping of Iago’s notorious speech to Desdemona’s father in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe” (l.i. 88–89), the rewritten nursery rhyme “signifies,” in troping black tradition on this persistent stereotype, as does the bluesy “King Bee Blues” (but without explicitly invoking *Othello*) in the poem.⁵ The play reshapes the poem’s material for dramatic focus, so that, perhaps especially when read in light of the play, the poem’s

engagement with *Othello* becomes clear.

Bristol notes that “Something real is at stake for the audience of *Othello*, even though the actual performance of the play depends on recognition of its status as fiction” (199). Clarke too addresses the real through foregrounding the performative qualities of language. Bristol’s analysis helps make sense of the ways in which *Whydah Falls* weaves the story of the murder of Othello Clemence into the other plot strands, centred on heterosexual desire, that bind this community, threaten its survival and link it to the natural and human worlds. When seen in this light, all the variants of desire and the ways in which they shape community and isolate from it, become frames built around the murder of Clarke’s Othello and the failure of the authorities to punish the murderer. The racial identity of the murderer may be less important (although his whiteness is heavily stressed in both poem and script) than the failure of the justice system to punish the crime. (Clarke is reported to have changed the identity of the murderer from a white man to a black man, for financial reasons, in a Halifax stage production, declaring “My poetry is about what beautiful black people have done, not what awful white people have done to us” [Workman C9].) Nonetheless, Clarke’s “Preface” to the poem invokes a setting of oppression and struggle, describing *Whydah Falls* as “a snowy, northern Mississippi, with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs, and wild roses.” His “Admission” declares: “These poems are fact presented as fiction. There was no other way to tell the truth save to disguise it as story.” A memorial to Graham Cromwell, murdered in Weymouth Falls, follows, suggesting the centrality of the unpunished murder to the poem. Cromwell’s unavenged death, Clarke implies, can only be told through Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the exorcism of its legacy. The success of this exorcism may explain the poem’s near

victory in the 2003 CBC Radio Canada Reads competition. Clarke's story, like Shakespeare's, expresses "the collective bad conscience of our civilization," disguising truth as story, by resituating the murder of Graham Cromwell within an earlier time period (the 1930s) and reimagining it through the lens of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Clarke was profoundly affected by the failure of the justice system to convict Cromwell's killer. His article describing the case, "The Birmingham of Nova Scotia: The Weymouth Falls Justice Committee vs the Attorney General of Nova Scotia," declares: "Consider this a blues cry, a Black witness, for Justice" (17). The article begins and ends with lines of poetry from *Whydah Falls*, suggesting the intimate twinning of the two. Yet the real that is at stake in this poem depends on its recognition as performative fiction.

In *Whydah Falls*, the renaming of the murder victim as Othello, invokes broader western cultural traditions beyond the political events played out in the southern United States and echoed in Nova Scotia. (Although it is interesting to note that W.E.B. DuBois's maternal grandfather was also named Othello [Johnson 143].) Whereas certain commentators locate the tragedy of Shakespeare's Othello in his desire for whiteness until he actually begins to forget that he is black (Johnson 155), Clarke's poem is suffused with extravagantly articulated expressions of a desire for blackness. Othello Clemence is comfortable in his blackness, belligerent in his defence of his sister Amarantha's honour, and an artist who expresses himself through music. In Clarke's story, the threat of a black man having sex with a white woman becomes merely a vicious lie, but a lie powerful enough to prompt a murder, which Clarke explicitly terms a "martyrdom" (89). (Such imaginings, rumour suggests, infected the popular folk interpretation of Cromwell's murder as well.) The poem's

Iago, the Liberal politician Jack Thomson, maliciously tells S. Scratch Seville that Othello is having an affair with Seville's wife, Angel. In fact, Thomson himself is involved with Angel. He has also been threatened by Othello for approaching Othello's sister, Amarantha, and finds the lie a convenient way to combine revenge with camouflage. The complexities of Shakespeare's Iago are sacrificed here to pit artists against politicians as masters of the word. Thomson's words deal death. The poet's words live. As X claims, "My poems, thrown to the creek, gleam, wriggle, leap" (25). Suffering is transformed into beauty and survival is proclaimed: "Angered by whip and lash of joblessness, maddened by gun and jail of politics, these souls clap hands and sing, 'What did I do/To be so black and blue?'" (126). The echoes of slavery, Yeats's late romanticism,⁶ and blues vernacular combine to "blacken" the English of Clarke's inheritance while suggesting that art transcends politics and social inequities—a comforting conclusion to a troubling performance. My argument has attended to the trouble rather than its transcendence, while noting the tensions between the two.

Clarke's open letter to Derek Walcott states: "I thank you for pioneering a way of blackening English. . . . You cannibalize the Canon and invite your bretheren and sistren to the intoxicating, exhilarating feast" (17). I find this metaphor more appropriate to Clarke's work than to Walcott's, but as a metaphor describing Clarke's art, "cannibalizing the Canon," captures the aggression, the fraught politics, the edgy humour and the exuberant excess of his achievement, turning one of the more potent justifying metaphors for imperial racism back on itself and enabling appropriation, digestion, transformation and elimination to replace direct protest against the injustices of the world. *Whydah Falls*, unlike "those skinny, / Malnourished poems that professors love"

(79), according to Clarke's sceptical Shelley, has gorged its full on the bounty that language provides and spilled it out generously with the shock of the real.

NOTES

- 1 I am using the 1990 text of *Whydah Falls* for this discussion. References to the 1997 play will be indicated in my text. I am grateful to Jennifer Drouin and Susan Knutson for inviting me to participate in the ACCUTE panel on Shakespearean/Canadian Intertexts at the Winnipeg Congress in May 2004. A lengthier and revised version of the paper is being prepared for the book they are planning based on this session. Comments from participants at this session and from my colleagues, M.J. Kidnie and Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, and the warm openness to dialogue of George Elliott Clarke are also gratefully acknowledged. Jessica Schagerl provided prompt and helpful research assistance, as did Barbara Bruce when I first began this project. Students in my graduate course on "The Black Diaspora," especially Helene Strauss, Heather Snell and Lori Walter, also provided compelling insights.
- 2 Jon Paul Fiorentino identifies this concern as crucial to Clarke's aesthetic.
- 3 Irena Makaryk and I raised these questions in our co-edited collection, *Shakespeare in Canada*, but they are far from resolved.
- 4 Good introductions to this foundational work and that which is following it may be found in Clarke's *Odysseys Home* and in Walcott's *Black Like Who?* as well as in their various edited collections. For a fuller discussion of this aspect of my argument see my article "Black Canadas: Rethinking Canadian and Diasporic Cultural Studies" *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingeleses* 43 November 2001: 101–117.
- 5 See Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* for an explanation of this important tradition.
- 6 Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" claims that "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress" (104). Clarke harnesses the energy of Yeats's poetic resistance to mortality in the service of a historically and racially specific protest against racism, violently shifting the visual image from the "tattered coat upon a stick" to that of a black congregation swaying in the spirit. The final lines of this stanza, "Nor is

there singing school but studying/Monuments of its own magnificence," may be considered a further comment on the ways in which Clarke has made Shakespeare's *Othello*, together with Africadia's other international inheritances, his "singing school."

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