

An Interview with George Elliott Clarke and The Anticolonial Theatre of Resistance

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F.D: On dealing with your *Beatrice Chancy*, Gale’s *Angelique*, Boyd’s *Consecrated Ground* and Moodie’s *Riot* within the context of Bhabha’s ‘third space’, Albert Memmi’s ‘the colonizer’ and ‘the colonized’, Frantz Fanon’s psycho-analytic theory on oppression, Aime Cesaire’s concept of “thingification” and Lawrence Levine’s definition of popular black art and culture to convey the Afro-American experience in America and on attempting to explore the transhistorical contours of black Canadians as envisioned in the works in question, I realized the following:

The four plays, in varied ways, are but havens and socio-cultural alternative spaces for black Canadians who lived, worked, resisted, refused and died due to unprecedented practices of capture, torture and execution. You, Gale, Boyd and Moodie attempted to carve out through your literary imagination socio-cultural and political avenues of ‘belonging.’ You attempted to remove the pernicious effects of colonization via writing anticolonial theatre of resistance, of refusal, and of anger, am I right? (Though, I believe right or wrong is not the case here).

GEC: YES, we 4 are writing "anticolonial theatre of resistance, 'of refusal, and of anger." The point is, our communities have been denied voice and presence--except for the "theatre" of work camp, refugee camp, immigrant camp, city dump-placed-next-door, and, of course, the jailhouse, the whorehouse, and the gallows. According to the decolonizationist Albert Memmi," within the colonizer there is a 'colonized', and vice versa". So, if black Canadians have been suffering from the falsified and twisted image of their history, what would be, in your view, as writer, the proper method to rewrite their own history to be an integral part of the mainstream African Canadian history?

I disagree with Memmi's liberal vision and I like Fanon's combative vision. Yes, the colonizer and the colonized share foods, music, letters, air, etc. BUT they do not share POWER. That's where Memmi's romanticization fails and Fanon becomes Reason. I think Afro-Can writers view the "mainstream" of Afro- Can literature as

announcing a bitter and continuous protest against erasure. This means that we must put the actual violence of white, settler-state "Canadian" government and courts "on stage"--to show clearly all the blood and bile that was imposed, and then erased as our histories were erased: A kind of polite expungence...

F.D: Did, in your view, literary theorists' and writers' attempts to transcend the historical boundaries succeed via adopting anticolonial approach in figuring out the multifaceted image of blacks in Canada?

GEC: I think we're still working out this problematic. One issue for Afro-Can playwrights: We cannot presume an audience of "solidarity." We cannot presume an audience. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that there is no dominant definition of "blackness," no bonding-glue of "black nationalism" or "Pan-Africanism" to automatically and easily create solid audiences of allies.

F.D.: Does the Canadian formal and institutional discourse, in your academic view, succeed in bettering the image of Canada in as much as the traumatic experiences of black Canadians throughout three hundred years of suffering are concerned?

GEC: The Canadian State practices a propaganda alleging that Canada is superior to the United States; in this regard, "race relations" becomes a signifying trope. The standard discourse is that colonial Canada offered "blacks" freedom; what is omitted from this discourse is the history of slavery in Canada. That most Canadians remain ignorant about this history is not due to any fault on the part of Blk Cdn authors but has everything to do with the operation of racism in Statist Canada. What is OFTEN forgotten, and most readily by Canadians, is that Canada is a Monarchy. By definition, this means that some people (white, Anglo-Saxon, Anglican/Protestant, and wealthy) are "better" than others. This perception works to position Canada as a place of "better"--if not the "best"--white people, who are willing to treat black people fairly (even though this assertion is a historical lie) as opposed to the bad, vulgar, republican (KKK) whites of America, who cannot be as "good" as Canadian whites because their dumping of the white, Christian, British monarch (1776 and all that) implied their acceptance of the automatically polluting and Plebian system of mass rule (democracy). Partly then, white Canadian propaganda uses black

American history to support a de facto Platonist vision (see *The Republic*) in which Monarchy is superior to "Mobocracy"; thus blacks were treated better in elitist Canada than they were (or are) in the mob-driven U.S. Afro-Can writers have to do a lot of "heavy listing" to dispel this propaganda and make our own history visible.

F.D.: What are the other possibilities for erasing slavery as a brutal institution? What are the potential methods that would be followed to effectively mirror oppressive power relations as I see in your amazing adoption of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty in *Beatrice Chancy* and in your outstanding manipulation of your imagination to refuse assimilation? How would you as African Canadian writer preserve your own imagination to continue injecting the black Canadian canon with particularities for historical continuity?

GEC: I don't know if my own work can be compared/contrasted easily in regards to Artaud (NOT that you make any such comparison): BUT Artaud is extending an anti-clerical (anti-Catholic) tradition in French letters that reaches back to Sade, Rimbaud, Baudelaire. The "particularities" of African Canadian life/writing are, for me, evangelical Christian, but NOT as a matter of Conquistador proselytizing. Rather, there is a wholesale absorption of Hebrew scripture vs. bondage (Book of Exodus) and Greek scripture vs. evils, but also a syncretic appeal to half-remembered, African faiths via water baptism, adoption of whole new pantheons (Haitian Vaudou, etc.), and the creation of vernacular/folk saints (Cuba, Brazil, and even Nova Scotia). Afro-Can writers retain "historical continuity" by recalling the faith traditions of the early settlers or slaves in the so-called New World, even if irreverently or "blasphemously." Intellectual assimilation is a surrender.

F.D.: Are historical practices of 'dislocation' shared with the younger generation of black Canadians? Do you find remarkable differences in the Canada of 1801 and that of today in as much as the blacks' bitter experiences are concerned?

GEC: Canada: 1801: Blunt racism is possible: In Canada 2014, racism is amorphous, and so becomes a stealth enemy, almost a myth. At least slaves knew that they didn't want to be slaves. But what should a "free" black wish to be? The slaves of 1801 had "bitter" realism to endure; but New World Africans had the "promise"--in Haiti after the San Domingue revolution and in the U.S. during Reconstruction--of potentially constructing new,

free selves in "independent" or quasi-independent territory. Yet, the models chosen were, generically, European/Western imperialism with a Christian face. The African Americans who established Liberia set up a Bible-toting dictatorship, absolutely racist and imperialist against Native Africans who were, in fact, reduced to slave labour. (They modelled themselves on American slavery and British imperialism.) Haiti took on the trappings of Rome, but of Caligula, not Caesar, while recalling the slogans of the French Revolution and defying them oppressively. To shorten my long answer: Historians must take note of differences between "now" and "then"; but we must always be aware of latent, subtle continuities. The racism of 1801 could afford to be blatant and tactile, vicious and nasty; the racism of 2014 doesn't tend to be so. Yet, Canadian prisons are filling up with Native and Black Canadian inmates; schools fail us; we face structural unemployment and underemployment. We should be conscious that a struggle for REAL equality is still to be waged.

F.D.: Does your *Weltanschauung* as academic and as creative writer view *Beatrice Chancy* as a persistent attempt to fill the empty socio-cultural and political space of blacks in Canada, regardless of the absence of real black identity due to the constant twisting of black history via rewriting it by the white with the aim of erasing black identity?

GEC: The troubling phrase here is "real black identity." Thanks to the strenuous efforts of Dr. Gates, et al., we have been told to distrust pronouncements of "real black identity." And so I do. But I also keep in mind that every black parent has SOME notion of a "black identity" that he or she wishes to pass down to child or children, partly for recognition of genealogy--but also as a means of self-defence against white racist acts. Indeed, even Professor Gates was reminded of the real impact of real "racism" when local constabulary failed to treat him as a law-abiding homeowner of high socio-

economic status and instead chose to view him as a belligerent burglar, and perhaps some of his arresting officers were thinking of him as "black," even if he was viewing himself as "(African) American." But back to the nub of your question: Afro-Can writers have little choice but to throw black ink into white--and black--faces (so to speak) in order to inscribe our history; for, in that history are our "identities" (plural), representing all our contradictions and our connections.

F.D: *Beatrice Chancy* "defies any categorization" as Kevin Burns states ("Quill and Quire, 1999). Was your use of verse as a dramatic form

operative in conveying the dramatic effect and in stressing the role of 'language as power' or rather as a 'defence mechanism' to resist the oppressor's ceaseless attempts to erase the identity of the oppressed?

GEC: *Beatrice Chancy* is a verse play and a revenge tragedy. Some might even call it a "closet drama." It descends from Shakespeare, Shelley (*The Cenci*), and Sophocles; it makes its actors/players/characters speak verse--blank, free, octosyllabic, rhyming--and even prose, here and there, to represent the tensions among different registers and idioms of "English" in use in colonial Nova Scotia. Also, I was simultaneously writing *Beatrice Chancy* as an opera libretto, and so there was a lot of transference, back and forth, between the pungent lyricism of the libretto and the barbarisms of the play. I'm not sure where you should place it in a Fanonian schema. Am I aping Shelley or am I following Césaire? To adapt European models to tell an "African" story?

F.D.: To what extent do the correspondences between the 18th century and our own help in the decolonization process and in the liberation of the consciousness of the black Canadians from psychological disorder, despair and discomfort and in their recovery of mental disorder and spiritual tension for which Bhabha creates a 'third space'; a platform of cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, meaning the master-slave relationship?

GEC: Again, I distrust Bhabha's "Third Space": To me, it is a cinema, flickering images of hybridity and métissage, behind which there is still an army (invisibly) pointing guns and bankers (invisibly) thieving from the still-oppressed poor. Celebrations of multiculturalism, of "sharing," never seem to get to the stage of wealth-transfers and power-sharing, wherein something like real Equality can emerge. In other words, in the American context, Suburbia can adopt Hip Hop modes of speech, style, dance, and personal comportment, and still view most blacks as suspect or as "suspects," always in need of policing--or harassment--or even execution (if by "mistake"), and that's with an African-American U.S. President who has read his Fanon and his Malcolm X. So, the "Third Space" is, to me, an arena of delusion and of money-making based on spurious alliances. I prefer the Malcolm X analysis: Hard to have any real sharing between Master and Slave: Whatever the master gives, is actually based on his original theft of the slave's labour; if the slave takes ("steals") from the master, it is an act of liberation, of marronage, as much as is his or her self-theft, i.e., his or her "stealing away" of himself/herself, out of bondage and toward Freedom. If the ex-slave has to wear some of the

master's clothes and speak the master's tongue, he or she will still ring registers of resistance upon these "gifts" or "tokens," to demarcate his/her historical difference, a difference underlined by the vast differences in power and wealth. In brief, cultural exchange/interchange ("sharing") does not displace the original model of oppressive THEFT (and RAPE and MASSACRE), but is merely a partial, intellectual or cultural "repayment" of a portion of the genetic THEFT. MAYBE what (once-) oppressed communities need is not "celebration" of their "hybridity" but massive infusions of capital long-owed (reparations) to allow them to begin to achieve real economic and political equality with the "former" oppressor-class. Finally, why should anyone forget the history that made some folks "owners" (and rich) and made others "slaves" (and poor)? The "return" the "repressed" require is return of "land" to First Nations and return on "labour investment" to the descendants of enslaved Africans. Official apologies are nice; cheques are better.