

## **George Elliott Clarke, O.C., O.N.S.**

### **Biography**

A revered poet, George Elliott Clarke was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, near the Black Loyalist community of Three Mile Plains, in 1960. A graduate of the University of Waterloo (B.A., Hons., 1984), Dalhousie University (M.A., 1989), and Queen's University (Ph.D., 1993), he is now the inaugural E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto. An Assistant Professor of English and Canadian Studies at Duke University, North Carolina, 1994-1999, Clarke also served as the Seagrams Visiting Chair in Canadian Studies at McGill University, 1998-1999, and as a Noted Scholar at the University of British Columbia (2002) and as a Visiting Scholar at Mount Allison University (2005). He has also worked as a researcher (Ontario Provincial Parliament, 1982-83), editor (*Imprint*, University of Waterloo, 1984-85, and *The Rap*, Halifax, NS, 1985-87), social worker (Black United Front of Nova Scotia, 1985-86), parliamentary aide (House of Commons, 1987-91), and newspaper columnist (*The Daily News*, Halifax, NS, 1988-89, and *The Halifax Herald*, Halifax, NS, 1992-). He lives in Toronto, Ontario, but he also owns land in Nova Scotia. His many honours include the Portia White Prize for Artistic Achievement (1998), Governor-General's Award for Poetry (2001), the National Magazine Gold Medal for Poetry (2001), the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award (2004), the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Fellowship Prize (2005), the Dartmouth Book Award for Fiction (2006), the Eric Hoffer Book Award for Poetry (2009), appointment to the Order of Nova Scotia (2006), appointment to the Order of Canada at the rank of Officer (2008), and five honorary doctorates.



## Awards & Honours

- 1981—First Prize—Poetry—Writers’ Federation of Nova Scotia provincial competition;
- 1991—Archibald Lampman Award for Poetry—Ottawa Independent Writers—awarded to *Whylah Falls* as best book of poetry published by an Ottawa-based poet;
- 1993—Invitee—World Poetry Festival, Harbourfront Reading Series, Toronto;
- 1997—\$12,000 Canada Council Arts Grant “B”—awarded for manuscript of *Beatrice Chancy*;
- 1998—Portia White Prize—Nova Scotia Arts Council—\$25,000 award for artistic excellence;
- 1998—Bellagio Center Fellowship—Rockefeller Foundation of New York—a one-month residency at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy, awarded to allow the completion of the manuscript of *Beatrice Chancy*;
- 1999—Honorary Doctor of Laws degree—Dalhousie University;
- 1999—Alumni Achievement Award—University of Waterloo;
- 2000—Honorary Doctor of Letters degree—University of New Brunswick;
- 2000—Outstanding Screenwriter Award—Toronto Black Film & Video Network—awarded for *One Heart Broken Into Song* (CBC-TV, 1999);
- 2001—Governor-General’s Literary Award for Poetry—\$15,000 award for selection of *Execution Poems* as best book of poetry published in English in Canada;
- 2002—National Magazine Foundation Gold Award for Poetry—\$1,500 award for selection of six poems published in *Prairie Fire* as best poetry published in any English-Canadian magazine in 2001;
- 2003—Appointed by Her Excellency, The Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson, Governor-General of Canada, to the Board of Directors of the Canada Council for the Arts;
- 2003—Appointed E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto;
- 2004—Martin Luther King, Jr. Award—Black Theatre Workshop of Montreal—awarded for achievement;
- 2004—Estelle and Ludwig Jus Memorial Human Rights Award—University of Toronto Alumni Association;
- 2005—Distinguished Teacher Award—Student Administrative Council, University of Toronto;
- 2005—Honorary Doctor of Letters degree—University of Alberta;
- 2005—African Renaissance Award—Planet Africa Television;
- 2005—Faculty Award—University of Toronto Black Alumni Association;
- 2005—Trudeau Foundation Trudeau Fellowship Prize—\$225,000 award, over three years, to support artistic and scholarly work;
- 2006—Dartmouth Book Award for Fiction—Atlantic Book Awards—\$1,500 award for *George & Rue*;
- 2006—*Frontieras Poesis Premiul* [Prize]—*Poesis* [Magazine], Satu Mare, Romania—\$500 award and statuette in honour of poems in translation;
- 2006—Appointed by Her Honour, The Hon. Mayann Francis, Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, to the Order of Nova Scotia;
- 2006—Honorary Doctor of Letters degree—University of Waterloo;
- 2008—Honorary Fellow of the Haliburton Society—University of King’s College;
- 2008—Honorary Doctor of Letters degree—Saint Mary’s University;
- 2008—Appointed by Her Excellency, The Rt. Hon. Michaëlle Jean, Governor-General of Canada, to the Order of Canada at the rank of Officer;

2008—William P. Hubbard Award for Race Relations, City of Toronto;  
 2009—Eric Hoffer Book Award for Poetry, Hopewell Publications, awarded to *Blues and Bliss: The Poetry of George Elliott Clarke*, ed. Jon Paul Fiorentino.

## Collected Works

### Poetry

*Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*. Pottersfield Press, 1983.  
*Whylah Falls*. Raincoast—Polestar Books, 1990, 2000.  
*Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems*. Pottersfield Press, 1994.  
*Gold Indigoes*. Carolina Wren Press. 2000.  
*Execution Poems*. Gaspereau Press. 2000, 2001.  
*Blue*. Raincoast—Polestar Books, 2001, 2008.  
*Illuminated Verses*. Canadian Scholars Press—Kellom Books, 2005.  
*Black*. Raincoast—Polestar Books, 2006.  
*Blues and Bliss: The Poetry of George Elliott Clarke*, ed. Jon Paul Fiorentino. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008.  
*I & I*. Goose Lane Editions, 2009.

### Fiction

*George & Rue: A Novel*. HarperCollins Canada, 2004; Secker & Warburg, 2005, Carroll & Graf, 2006; Vintage, 2006.

### Prose

Ed. *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*. 2 vols. Pottersfield Press, 1991-1992.  
 Ed. *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature*. McClelland & Stewart, 1997.  
 Ed. *The Dalhousie Review*. Special Africadian Issue. [1999] 1997.  
*Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. University of Toronto Press, 2002.

### Drama

*Whylah Falls: The Play*. Playwrights Canada Press, 1999, 2000.  
*Beatrice Chancy*. Raincoast—Polestar Books, 1999, 2008.  
*Québécois: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos*. Gaspereau Press. 2003.  
*Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path*. Gaspereau Press. 2007.

## Libretti

“Beatrice Chancy: An Opera Libretto in Four Acts.” *Canadian Theatre Review*. 1998.  
 “Québécois: An Opera Libretto in Three Cantos.” *Canadian Theatre Review*. 2002.  
 “Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path.” *Canadian Theatre Review*. 2006.

## Translation

*Poeme Incendiare*. Trans. Flavia Cosma. Oradea, Romania: Editura Cogito, 2006.  
 [Poetry]  
*[Many Kinds of Love: Heavenly, Earthy, and Hellish]*. Trans. of *Whylah Falls*.] Trans.  
 Tong Renshan. Beijing: International Publishing, 2006. [Poetry]

## Screenplay

*One Heart Broken Into Song*. Feature Film. Prod: CBC-TV. 1999.  
*Beatrice Chancy: The Opera*. Feature Film. Prod: CBC-TV. 2001.

## Stage Productions

*Whylah Falls: The Play*. Dartmouth NS: Eastern Front Theatre, 1997, 2000; Ottawa ON:  
 National Arts Centre, 1998, 2000; Venice, Italy: Universite de Venezia, 2002.  
*Beatrice Chancy: The Play*. Toronto ON: Theatre Passe Muraille, 1997.  
*Beatrice Chancy: The Opera*. Toronto ON: Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company,  
 1998, 1999; Dartmouth NS: Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company, 1999;  
 Edmonton AB: Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company, 2001.  
*Québécois: A Jazz Opera*. Guelph ON: Guelph Jazz Festival, 2003; Vancouver, BC:  
 Vancouver Jazz Festival, 2003.  
*East Coasting, or Make It Beautiful*. Toronto, ON: CBC Radio, “Words & Music  
 Series,” Glenn Gould Theatre, 2004.  
*Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path*.  
 Wolfville, NS: Summer Institute of the Trudeau Foundation, 2006;  
 Toronto, ON: African Canadian Playwrights Festival, 2006;  
 Toronto, ON: Harbourfront Centre Corporation, 2007; Halifax, NS: Pier 21  
 Museum and Mulan Chinese Cultural Centre, 2007; Department of Political  
 Science, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, 2008.  
*Québécois: The Play*. Ottawa, ON: Pennyworth Productions, 2006.

## *Summary of Relevant Achievements: A Personal Statement*

To explain my interventions—or adventures—in English-language poetry and scholarship, I must first cite William Blake, the British Romantic poet, who wrote, “I must Create a System or be enslaved by another man’s.” This principle has guided me in my creative work, anchored in writing poetry, and in my scholarly work, which has focussed on writing by marginalized or disempowered communities. I hope I have been organic in my creative practice as well as in literary and political criticism, essentially trying to add a different perspective, opinion, or idea, or to redefine a historical or communal experience.

A list of awards, prizes, and honours is one indication of achievement, and such appears in my c.v. But here is what I hope I have achieved:

1) The creation of a community and polity: Africadia and Africadians. I invented these words (now present in the Oxford Guide to Canadian English) to provide African-Nova Scotians (and other African-Canadians) terms to describe our communities and ourselves that link slave-trade-era Africa to historical Acadia/Acadie and Canada. Because Canada has often denied the historical presence of its African-heritage people, including as slaves during the colonial era, I have believed it important to give ourselves a name that functions in a manner similar to Quebecois (for citizens of Quebec): one that grounds us, historically, in place, and may even empower us politically to seek inclusion at the highest levels of decision-making in the nation.

To achieve this end, I have written several creative works that have attempted to mythologize the historical experience of Africadians: *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), *Whylah Falls* (1990; Chinese translation, 2006), *Beatrice Chancy* (1998), *One Heart Broken Into Song* (1999), *Execution Poems* (2000), *George & Rue* (2005), and *I & I* (2009). *Saltwater Spirituals* reads Africadian history as a matter of building churches, but also celebrates the life of African Baptist Church founder, Rev. Richard Preston. *Whylah Falls* looks intensively at community life in the 1930s; it is a novel-in-poetry that tells of young lovers, sexual jealousy that ends in murder, and a racist justice system that pardons the murder. *Beatrice Chancy* is both an opera (composed by James Rolfe) and a verse-play. Its narrative fuses the historical Italian saga of the Cenci clan with slave narratives to tell a story of tragedy set in the apple orchards of slaveholding Nova Scotia in 1801. *One Heart Broken Into Song* utilizes my composite Africadian community, Whylah Falls. This feature film, directed by Clement Virgo, is again a tale of tragic love. *Execution Poems* is a narrative lyric suite inspired by a dark, family secret: in 1949, two cousins of mine were hanged for murdering a taxi driver in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The poems meditate on poverty, brutality, justice, and injustice, not to excuse the criminals, but to try to understand them. *George & Rue* is *Execution Poems*, but in novel form. Here I focus on the lives, crime, and deaths of George and Rufus Hamilton, and I try to describe the social reality of racism in rural Canada in the early twentieth century. *I & I* is a novel in poetry, and features drawings by Lateef Martin. Set in 1974 and 1975, it is a pop-song-influenced text about two young Africadian lovers who travel from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Corpus Christi, Texas, where their tragedy begins to unfold. It is, really, a young adult tale.

In other creative works—*Quebecite* (2003), *Illuminated Verses* (2005), *Trudeau: Long March, Shining Path* (2007), as well as my miscellaneous poetry collections (*Lush Dreams*, *Blue Exile* [1994], *Blue* [2001], and *Black* [2006]), I have sought to intervene in discourses from which Africadian voices are often absent, especially in terms of national politics and international literature. *Quebecite* is a verse-play and jazz opera (composed by D.D. Jackson) that tells, in rhyme, the story of four adults courting, separating, and then marrying. The play’s politics is explicit in the different ‘races’ and genders of the characters, but implicit in the setting, namely Quebec City, or Ville de Quebec, a locale associated usually with Caucasians. *Trudeau: Long March, Shining Path* is another verse-play and opera (composed by D.D. Jackson). Here the Chinese-African-Canadian composer and I narrate the biography of one of Canada’s greatest prime ministers—Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919-2000), who was, as a Caucasian,

Francophone, Ivy League graduate, celebrity, and a millionaire, as different from the composer and I as anyone could be. I chose to write this character precisely because no other person of colour or, in official Canadian parlance, “visible minority” person had done so. I wanted to remake a ‘mainstream’ Canadian icon in a multicultural guise. *Illuminated Verses* offers paeans to the beauty and strength of African-heritage women; a full-colour photograph by Ricardo Scipio accompanies each poem. Here I sought to correct the absence of such images from photography bookracks. In my general poetry collections, I address many universal concerns and subjects, from love to nature, from war to poverty, and from Yukio Mishima to African-American exiles in France.

2) The establishment of a new academic field—African-Canadian Literature. Though scholars previous to me had written of Black Canadian authors and texts, these writers and works were usually viewed as *really* being Caribbean *only*, or as African-American, and were usually critiqued without any reference to their Canadian locales or educations. I was the first scholar to argue for understanding black writing in Canada as belonging to both African diasporic literature *and* Canadian literature, and requiring critical approaches drawn from both spheres. My work here has taken the form of editing anthologies, namely, *Fire on the Water: Black Nova Scotian Writing*, 2 vols. (1991-1992); *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (1997); and a Special Africadian Issue of *The Dalhousie Review* (1999). I also wrote the first history of African-Canadian literature (“A Primer of African-Canadian Literature” [1996]) and an extensive bibliography (“Africana Canadiana” [1997]). I am pleased to note that several Canadian universities have recently hired professors who specialize in the field I have established, and African-Canadian Literature is now also a research interest for foreign scholars. (I have lectured extensively in Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Brazil.) In 2002, my collection of essays in the field, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, appeared. A new essay collection, accepted at the University of Toronto Press, should be published in 2010.

To conclude then, I have succeeded in creating a new polity (Africadia) and people (Africadians). I have also produced the new academic field of African-Canadian Literature.

George Elliott Clarke