

# Mapping New Ground

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George Elliott Clarke. *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xii + 492pp.

In this hefty volume, George Elliott Clarke provides a lively examination of the birth and development of African-Canadian literature. A highly accomplished poet, playwright, and librettist, Clarke won a Governor General's Award for poetry in 2002 for *Execution Poems*, the story of two of his African-Canadian relatives, Rufus and George Hamilton, who were executed in Fredericton, New Brunswick in 1947 for killing a white taxi driver. The emotions of these two men, whose lives were momentarily sensationalized and then forgotten, come alive on the page, making the poems equally chilling and compelling to read. It seems appropriate given Clarke's creative flexibility that with *Odysseys Home* he has produced a pioneering collection of bibliographic materials and critical analyses of African-Canadian literature. And though virtually everything in the book is reprinted from other sources (albeit with some minor alterations), it is the layering of Clarke's perspectives that makes it a compelling read. The volume is encyclopedic in its coverage, providing a single source for a diverse array of his articles, reviews, and research that asserts and solidifies the notion of African-Canadian literature as a dynamic field of study in its own right.

The book, which is divided into three main sections, begins with an introductory chapter called "Embarkation: Discovering African-Canadian Literature" that provides a prelude to twelve essays or "Sorties" which explore various aspects of African-Canadian writing. Clarke is a skilled rhetorician and from the opening pages of the text, he succeeds in translating the intellectual intensity and high energy of his oral delivery to the page. He is also acutely aware of how his childhood as an African-Canadian living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and subsequent experiences as a poet, student, and academic, living in Canada and the United States, have influenced his perspective. Hence, Clarke's self-reflexivity in the introduction is especially apt given that he is both a contributor to and an architect of the field about which he is writing.

His introduction in the first section offers a useful framework for the essays that follow, an eclectic collection of articles that consider a wide variety of topics ranging from discussions of what differentiates African-Canadians from African Americans and how one might describe the development [Page 102] of what Clarke calls "Africadian" (107) literature to close readings of individual texts by Austin Clarke, Claire Harris, Dionne Brand, and M. NourbeSe Philip. In the former, he persuasively argues for the distinctiveness of African-Canadians, "whatever their adherence to potent transnational Afrocentricisms" (28), asserting the importance of locality to identity; in doing so though, he is also careful to deconstruct romanticized renderings of Canada as a nation that offered freedom from slavery and racism. Likewise, when describing the "birth and rebirth" (107) of Africadian literature, Clarke provides an extremely nuanced account of the changing motivation for the production of such writings, focusing on the rejection of American slavery as the initial motivator followed by silence and finally revitalization, precipitated by the collapse of the community of Africville in Nova Scotia in the late 1960s. In these essays, Clarke draws on an impressively vast knowledge of history, politics, economics, literature and psychology to make his case. He is conscious of the need to contextualize African-Canadian literature, history, and culture and does so with great passion and excitement. Even when Clarke focuses more closely on literary works he remains attentive to their social impact as rendered for example in his insightful survey of racialized metaphors in contemporary Québécois texts. The final lengthy essay of this first section in particular, takes a different—and quite timely—turn, by exploring the critical reception of three African-Canadian women poets (Harris, Brand, and Philip) with an eye to shifting recent scholarship towards an aesthetic rather than a primarily political or sociological analysis of their works. Having heard this article first delivered as a conference paper—which was persuasive in its oral form—it is appropriate that such a strongly worded plea for a change to the scholarly treatment of ethnic minority women writers should come at the end of Clarke's own *mélange* of critical articles. That said, what can be trying about Clarke's critical strategies becomes explicit and even grating in this essay. Clarke's frustration with fellow scholars is rendered in increasingly hostile terms over the course of the article, and yet his call for a change in "the terms of the debate" (267) concludes with silence; it would be far more convincing, especially in published form (where length is not the concern that it is with conference papers), if Clarke were to offer his own readings of these poets and their texts, putting what he preaches into practice.

The second and third sections of *Odysseys Home* consist of

"Incursions: Selected Reviews," reprints of eleven reviews, again on diverse texts, and "Surveys," a brief but crucial primer on African-Canadian literature followed by a stunningly lengthy and detailed bibliography of literature [Page 103] by African-Canadian writers from 1785 to 2000. The reviews, for the most part, are a pleasure to read because they cover such dissimilar topics; close readings of individual poets, which are judiciously phrased to highlight the limitations and talents of these writers, are put side by side with reviews of texts from a variety of other genres such as the NFB film, "Remember Africville," *Blacks in Canada: a History*, an academic study of blacks in Canada, and even a report on black communities published by the McGill Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic and Social Planning, called *Diversity, Mobility and Change*. In each review, Clarke crafts a context—often personal—for reading the work that brings the material to life. For the most part, Clarke is kind to the works he chooses to review, but even when he is not, he manages to make a convincing case for his criticisms without marginalizing authors or their texts. He provides a wonderful model for reviewing, one that is both generous and persuasive in its ability to demonstrate the significance of a specific work to a much larger web of questions and debates.

The bibliographic work that constitutes the third and final section of *Odysseys Home* is arguably the most important section of the book because it demonstrates the existence of a rich history of African-Canadian writing and gives scholars access to these otherwise maligned or unknown texts through detailed bibliographic citations. The sheer bulk of such a project makes this an incredibly exciting piece of work. The bibliography addresses the lacunae that exist in the field of African-Canadian studies; as the introduction outlines, though other significant bibliographies have been produced in the area, Clarke uses his to demonstrate the existence of black writing in Canada prior to 1970, to record the production of texts that do not conform to conventional literary categories, and to provide much more elaborate entries so as to ensure that these works can be examined by other scholars if they wish. The result is a labour of love, a bibliography that includes works in English, French, and in translation, produced over the last two hundred and twenty-five years. The one potential hindrance in using such a bibliography is that Clarke provides a brief designation of genre with every entry, placing each work in a particular category ranging from poetry, prose, fiction, poetry and prints, essay, juvenile, history, short fiction, atlas and prose to biography. These labels, while potentially helpful to scholars looking for very specific texts, may be misleading in cases where the work straddles several genres; however, that is a minor quibble, given that Clarke's

categorizations also help to demonstrate the range and complexity of the contributions African-Canadian writers have made to a variety of genres. Clarke even includes separate bibliographies of relevant [Page 104] corporate authors, serials, anthologies, and special issues and supplements of various journals, giving over this research to his readers in an effort to inspire more work on these texts.

*Odysseys Home* is certainly not a traditional academic book. But neither is George Elliott Clarke a traditional academic. The diversity of his interests and talents underpin this collection of articles, reviews, and bibliographies, establishing a solid foundation for African-Canadian scholarship by providing a variety of different tools and models of approach. Though the sheer weight of *Odysseys Home* may be initially intimidating, Clarke provides a rich set of resources for understanding African-Canadian literature and culture. And by gathering these materials together in a single volume, Clarke and his editors at University of Toronto Press have ensured easy access to an array of publications that might otherwise remain unrecognized as part of a larger scholarly project. The energy and intellectual vigour of *Odysseys Home* sets a standard in this field of study that will be hard to match but should provide excellent motivation for new and established scholars to continue to explore what is an exciting and relatively untouched landscape.

**Jennifer Andrews**  
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