

Book Reviews

ILHA DO DESTERRO

REVIEWS/RESENHAS

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Clarke, George Elliott. *Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

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African-Canadian writer and Professor at the University of Toronto, George Elliott Clarke is a poet, novelist, playwright, librettist, and critic. “A noir ‘peau rouge,’” as he defines himself in the introduction to the book *Red*, Clarke is *Africadian*¹ with roots in the Mi’kma’ki culture of Nova Scotia. Ten years after the publication of *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, this new critical collection continues to defend the argument that African-Canadian (or Black Canadian) literature cannot be read adequately without considering “the historical (or ‘indigenous’) African-Canadian

population and its cultural production as a constitutive element” (*Directions Home* 4). Resultant from Clarke’s long interest in black culture in Canada and extensive archival research in Nova Scotia, *Odysseys Home* includes the discussion of writings by blacks dating back to 1785. In doing so, Clarke contradicts the premise that African-Canadian literature began with the publication of Austin Clarke’s first novel in 1964. Reiterating his critical stand in the introduction to *Directions Home*, Clarke argues that African-Canadian literature encompasses “the new and the old, the come-from-away and the down-home, the urban and the rural, the pull of the regional and the equally irresistible seductions of African-American and Afro-Caribbean culture” (4).

The selection of fifteen essays responds to this inclusive character, discussing African-Canadian literature from diverse origins and in different modes of expression. Variety here also serves to demystify traditional concepts of what is or is not literature. Interested in African-Canadian literature for what it is and has been, Clarke observes that settler-descended African-

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Canadian cultures have written many community and church histories and concludes: "If we accept such writings as *literature*, we should understand how they both correspond with and differ from the *creative* writings of later, urban-settled immigrants" (9). Thus, *Directions Home* promotes this dialogic between early and late writings in church histories, slave narratives, drama, autobiography, poetry, and jazz poetics. Without canonical distinctions, Clarke discusses both recognized African-Canadian writers and others less known.

In the initial three essays, Clarke examines Canadian slave narratives from the eighteenth century on in a genealogy of discourses that, despite their marginal position, anticipate debates on slavery and colonialism. In "This is no hearsay: Reading the Canadian Slaves Narratives," Clarke explains that "North American slavery is so profoundly identified with the 'Great Republic' that the slave narratives is eyed, in Canada, as an exotic species of Americana" (19). Although recognizing correspondences between African-American slave narratives and colonial Anglo-Canadian writing, Clarke argues for distinctions and the latter's merit as foundational

discourse in Canadian literature. In the essay, "A. B. Walker and Anna Minerva Henderson: Two Afro-New Brunswick Responses to 'The Black Atlantic,'" Clarke examines the complexity of identity and belonging in regard to African diaspora and colonial Canada (32). Beginning with a sheer contrast between the two writers, Walker a black separatist, Henderson, an integrationist, Clarke then explores their trajectories and paradoxes in their political views. The production of this early period is yet analyzed in "Introducing a Distinct Genre of African-Canadian Literature: The Church Narrative," as representative of African-Canadian historiography.

The fourth essay, "Afro-Gynocentric Darwinism in the Drama of George Elroy Boyd," still on Africadian ground, focuses on two plays by Boyd acting out the drama of African-Canadian families related to issues of race, class and gender. Clarke notes that "while the plays bemoan the absence of strong, self-empowered, 'race'-identified, black males, they stress the presence of strong-willed, self-empowering, black females" (59). Black masculinity is also discussed in the essay that follows, "Seeing Through Race: Surveillance of Black Males in Jessome, Satirizing Black

Stereotypes in James.” Examining a reportage by European-Canadian journalist Phonse Jessome, Clarke contrasts Jessome’s repetition of old clichés of sexual exploitation of white females by black males with a satirical version by Afro-Montreal writer Darius James. The association of gender, race, and representation is also extended to the sixth essay, “Raising Raced and Erased Executions in African-Canadian Literature: Or, Unearthing Angélique.” A slave in eighteenth-century Montreal, Marie-Josèphe Angélique is murdered for having supposedly set fire to her mistress’s house and destroyed part of the town. Clarke initially speculates on the theme of crime and punishment, noting that in African-Canadian literature only a few texts focus on the black criminal or executed heroes. Then, as counterpoint to “the white space—the opaque silence—that shrouds Angélique in Eurocentric histories” (84), Clarke discusses three versions of the event by contemporary African-Canadian writers.

Clarke’s interest in the ways textual production and circulation is defined by ideologies is manifested in the two subsequent essays, the former comparing African-Canadian and Italian-Canadian anthologies, the latter analyzing

the resonance of European ideals on African-Canadian writers. In the anthologies comparison, Clarke initially observes their similar political agendas in the context of Multiculturalism to later examine their differences. While the prevailing desire in the African-Canadian anthology is to be part of a global Pan-Africanism (“almost oblivious to Canadian space”), in the Italian one it is to be included (not assimilated) in the Canadian culture and society. Questions of location (region and nation), and cultures in transit are other points of debate circulating in this segment of essays. In “Does Afro-Caribbean-Canadian Literature Exist? In the Caribbean?()” Clarke speculates on the invisibility of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writings in the very homeland they evoke. As common ground between the two nations, he points out a history of colonization and decolonization that should be more explored by writers of the two cultures.

Still on Caribbean-Canadian literature, Clarke discusses H. Nigel Thomas’s and Althea Prince’s fiction regarding moral/amoral codes of behavior in postcolonial societies, and analyzes the trajectory of Dionne Brand’s work from early 1970s to 2001. The

latter, "Locating the Early Brand: Landing a Voice," examines a recurrent tension between "a wish to discard 'nationalism' as romantic, while simultaneously articulating a romantic pan-Africanism" (159). More inclined to "locating" Brand in a detailed contextual reading, the essay only briefly tackles on the issue of voice, outlining the positioning of early Dionne Brand and the world around her publications. From this period, Clarke discusses "Poem of a Place Once" (1975), establishing connections with Brand's later work in *No Language is Neutral* (1990), and *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001).

In two other essays, locating is also prevalent. In "Repatriating Arthur Nortje," a South-African poet with mixed-race background, the proposal is considering his work as African-Canadian literature. The merit of his inclusion is not only justified for having adopted Canada as his homeland (1967-70), but for the importance of his legacy. Inversely in "Maxime Tynes: A Sounding and a Hearing," the argument is positioning the African-Nova Scotian poet as "the *un-Maritimes* poet." Clarke explains that for Tynes, "the black people of Atlantic Canada possess an identity that looks south towards the United

States (and its 'South') and east towards Africa," thus being closer to these other geographies than their own (170). For Clarke, Tyne's "region," is not the Canadian East Coast and its conventional themes but mass media and mobility.

The performance poetry by Tyne, chez d'bi young, and Oni Joseph, and Frederick Ward's jazz-poetry discussed at the end of this collection reveal Clarke's interest in *orature*. In *Odysseys Home*, Clarke quotes anthropologist Lawrence W. Levine who recognizes the social dimension of this tradition in black culture. Levine observes that "through [a black storyteller's] entire performance the audience would comment, correct, laugh, respond, making the folktale as much of a communal experience as the spiritual or the sermon" (11). Clarke who cultivates oral tradition in his own art contests critics who undervalue this connection of performance and music with poetry in black culture. He believes that, against all odds, the orality of Negro poetry "always will out, bursting through all stifling blandishments and suffocating erasures, because those who choose to speak their verse seek both to face brethren and sistren blacks and to face down (white) racists" (*Directions* 189). By

evoking the origins of oral tradition, Clarke establishes a continuum extending it to contemporary forms of expression, jazz, dub, ghetto poetry. Here voice occupies a major role in its political implications of polyphony (dominant languages and variations of demotic). Also, the body becomes language, as in the photograph of d'bi.young's on the cover of her debut collection, "the poet's shaved head, somber face, and naked shoulders [bearing] white-paint, geometric designs" (181).

In his analysis of Frederick Ward, Clarke proposes to found "a poetics of jazz literature." Beginning with the difficulty of critics to "read" Ward, Clarke observes that "difficulty in poetry is akin to dissonance in jazz" (193). From then on, besides a dialogic with jazz history and criticism, Clarke actually gives a sample of an applied poetics of jazz poetry in his reading of Ward's lines. Clarke's discussion of Ward and other less-known artists is not only part of his politics of inclusion but also a response to critical readings that either "dissolve into cranky impressionism or bankrupt silence of skanky dismissal" (193).

Screening this publication per se dissociated from Clarke's positioning as critic would be

missing a good part of the film. In a brief comment on himself he writes:

Due to my dancing (i.e., cavorting) among principalities and jurisdictions, theories and concepts, I probably appear perilously unprincipled and quixotically unclear. But my philosophical flexibility and discursive dexterity are necessary to allow me to light upon a nation that is shadowy (Canada) and a notion that is nebulous (blackness). (*Directions* 7)

Here Clarke wittily exposes the unique character of his irreverent position, a contemporary version of *poète (et critique) maudit*. Ironically though he does not remain on the margin, but literally "dances" wherever he pleases. Of course dance, flexibility, or dexterity are not mere result of talent. *Directions Home* proves this in its solid research and original dialogic with a plurality of voices. Also, Clarke's ethical project to illuminate "a nation that is shadowy" or "a notion that is nebulous" is effectively aligned here with his politics of inclusion. This happens along the collection mainly through a genealogy that rescues African-Canadian literature since its roots to reach just-sprouted leaves.

Another important feature of *Directions Home* is interpreting “blackness” “as if through a prism, dazzlingly, as a rainbow union of multifarious cultures and ‘colours’” (10). In this way, Clarke situates his book among other Canadian publications which group diverse authors from different periods and cultural backgrounds under the rubrics of “African Canadian” or “Black Canadian”. By doing so, these publications both give visibility to black writers and promote a sense of community or collectivity. Quoting Bina Toledo Freiwald, Clarke recognizes the importance of discourses that carry “the power to effect that shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ that is a necessary condition for the articulation of a collectivity” (10).

On two occasions, Clarke has been to UFSC (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina) as visiting professor. Students of the graduate program in English and I had the opportunity to discuss with him some of issues that compose this critical collection. Clarke’s performance was impressive both for his profound knowledge and art of *orature*. Reading Clarke in his many arts (criticism included) or having the opportunity to listen to him, one notes the coherence of his ethics and his ability to

combine his passionate trait with the meticulous craft of a *virtuoso*. Add to all this a refined sense of resistance tinged with lavish humor, and you have “loud George!” May your *Directions* circulate home and elsewhere and motivate other pilgrimages in African-Canadian literature.

1. The term, coined by Clarke, refers to the black communities of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, places originally occupied by African-American black slaves and settlers.

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West-Pavlov, Russell. *Temporalities*. New York: Routledge, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-415-52073-7

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Temporalities is described on its back cover as a “concise critical introduction”, but Russell West-Pavlov’s book actually presents a lengthy discussion

on the concept of time and how it has expanded into multiple temporalities. This argument is presented from a variety of perspectives based on language, gender, economy, postmodernity and postcolonialism. The author demonstrates how *time* is not necessarily absolute and unique, as it is allegedly known, but that it can also be diverse, as temporalities. Time is, thus, a particularly complex subject, since it is at once physical and imaginative, instrumental and abstract, material and subjective. As a consequence, West-Pavlov explores the layers of temporality through perspectives that vary from a philosophical abstraction to more concrete and pragmatic observations, such as physics, sociology and politics.

For an understanding of the complex implications of the concept of time, West-Pavlov begins with a discussion of the various changes in the definition of said concept along our history. In spite of its real existence, time is also a term that has been culturally constructed. Time's history begins with man's observations of natural elements, such as water, sand and sun, which were used to measure time and were gradually substituted by mechanical clocks (14). For the author, such change relates to a

demand of modernization: "two important aspects of modern time consciousness (accuracy of calibration and the global reach of a single time scheme) [...] were from the outset intimately bound up with expanding imperial capitalism" (15). He illustrates such changes with the discovery of latitude and longitude and how it improved navigation and the exploration of new territories, specially India and the Americas. These technological improvements proposed a notion of a fixed and chronological temporality, which is the result of the merging of social life and the mechanical logic.

As a consequence, West-Pavlov explains that the mechanical logic allowed people to have a different relation to temporality. When time was detached from nature and space, it became an abstraction and a ubiquity. Newton's physics was particularly relevant to such suppositions, since it predicted that temporality was equal and absolute to every matter in any situation. The watch, for instance, allows people to have a precise and constant measurement of time anywhere. The consequence is that space does not matter anymore; we do not need to locate the sun to know what time it is. Time becomes disembodied and

separated from space. Such notion is optimized by the digital clock's abstraction, which pushes time into the virtual world.

West-Pavlov shows how Einstein's theory of relativity confronted Newton's absolute time by demonstrating that a fixed temporality does not function in macro or micro matters, such as planets or atoms. Einstein defends the temporal individuality of each body, and reinstates time and space as one category. This scientific approach demonstrates how different notions of time exist even in science, and that these different concepts also relate to a social perspective. In this sense, West-Pavlov affirms that "global time does not exist except in the phenomenon of its production. That production is pervaded by contradictions and irregularities, from local perversions of the system through to its own constitutive relativity" (27), meaning that Einstein's theory of relativity might contribute to the temporal particularities of each region. GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), for instance, established an imposed and global progression of time, which does not respect the specificity of different regions.

In the following chapters, the book's subject shifts to a more philosophical approach to time. West-Pavlov's analysis pinches through the complex field of philosophy, encumbering Greek philosophy's notions of change and stability (32), Renaissance's conflicts between eternity and time (33), and more recently phenomenological approaches of Edmund Husserl—time as bound to conscience (42)—and Martin Heidegger—time as the condition for conscience (44). West-Pavlov's answer to so many different configurations of time is the acceptance of time as "change and transformation" (48), in which the process of becoming is time in itself, not the environment or the measurement. In addition, he explains "[t]ime is not a container (in which things exist and events happen), nor is it even a fluid medium (like air or water). Rather, time is immanent to things" (50), meaning that time is present in the very existence of things, since it constitutes their process of constant flux and transformation.

Temporalities also examines history's concept as a construction, meaning that history has a story of its own. West-Pavlov observes that previous to the nineteenth-century

notions such as Common Era did not exist, which shows the moment when Western society started giving relevance to certain events and constructing historicism. Therefore, the nineteenth century grew history as part of an orderly organization, “suggesting that it is very much analogous to the absolute time minted by Newton a century earlier” (59). By its turn, according to philosophers like Edward Gibbon and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the twentieth century marked the contingencies in our own concepts of history, as they propose that we can only understand history from our own historical perspective. The consequence is that “there is not position of objective, neutral historical understanding; historical understanding itself is necessarily historically determined” (West-Pavlov 72). By the end of the twentieth century, new micro and disagreeing histories emerge with alternative discourses to women, homosexuals, indigenous, disabled people, to mention a few. In this context, Newton’s absolute time is debunked.

In accordance with these histories, West-Pavlov exposes how temporality also relates to language and discourse, and how

history is verbalized. The author’s idea is that stories in themselves are products of time, since their development exists in language, which is unfolded through time. Consequently, narrative is an access to time; as the author explains, “It is the dynamism of narratives, their content and structure, as well as their tendency to be told, which makes up one of the many intertwined strands of the multiple temporalities we call time” (84). Nonetheless, West-Pavlov acknowledges that narrative tends to disrupt the logical sequence of time with its arrangement of fabula and *syuzhet* (85). In other words, their combinations produce different temporalities in narrative through flashbacks, ellipsis, iteractivity, to mention a few. Therefore, narrative does not only map temporality, but also as West-Pavlov acknowledges, “narrative is one of the many forms of time itself” (99). Narratives can take and make time (West-Pavlov 90). Another way to consider language and time is Derrida’s “trance,” in which a word is capable to carry old meanings and acquire new ones at the same time. In this word in trace, the past is inherited in the present, along with pretensions of the future. Such intersection grants the present a multiplicity, allowed

by how past and future influence the present (West-Pavlov 93-4).

West-Pavlov presents a sound argument on how temporality also configures gender. The deconstructionist perspective states gender as a social construction, an issue of becoming. Historically, time is masculine with ideas of change, cause and effect, as Chronos, while space is feminine, related to the womb and more recently to the domestic field. West-Pavlov explains that, according to Kristeva, such binary opposition contributes to a prejudicial discourse, which is perpetuated in society through the logic of lack (109). Some perspectives based on psychology, for instance, foreground the figure of woman as a castrated man, which figuratively means women's disadvantages, as if women lack something. Opposing these prejudices, West-Pavlov observes French philosopher Lévinas, who proposed the feminine as the unknown, figuring a creative future allowed through maternity (113). Nonetheless, his statement still maintains a dualistic image of gender, which is broken by Judith Butler's performativity. The latter states that gender is a temporal practice, realized through repetition. On this condition, West-Pavlov comprehends that gender is

constantly changing and cannot be contained in static representations (116).

"Economics" is a particularly interesting chapter, since it reveals not only the relation between capital production and temporality, but also offers an insightful view on contemporary processes of production, consumption, credit, and market. Economy molded our sense of time, in the sense that capital production emerged the concept of time as a commodity. Hence, mottos like "time is money" originate from how work-time assimilates value to products; the more time spent in producing a commodity, the greater its value. Furthermore, West-Pavlov states that capitalism has pushed "the concepts of time that are hegemonic today" (120), understanding fixed temporality as a product of nineteenth-century imperialist relations. Capitalist interest propels a mechanical logic in its support for technological development, which, as I already mentioned, transforms our notion of temporality. For example, the faster technology allows us to access information (Internet, mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, application programs, Wi-Fi, weblogs, faster vehicles, to mention quite few technologies),

the faster we have to process information, and ultimately, the faster we have to be, which implies that not only our understanding of time changes, but also the way we presence and live time.

Similarly, credit is also a temporal aspect, constituting a future orientation through speculation. Capitalism depends on an expansion into the future, credit, to construct the present. Nonetheless, if the investment does not return, the system drowns into a crisis, such as crisis of over-accumulation. Despite this, West-Pavlov defends that time becomes more fluid in the postmodern capital context, because contemporary financial capitalism proposes an ephemeral relation between money and commodity (136), due to speculative demand, subcontracting, the stock exchange, among others. Furthermore, new global variants, such as local and specialized production, would allow alternative temporalities.

A revealing example of how ecology, economy and temporality relate is the carbon-epoch period proposed by Chakrabarty and Smil. West-Pavlov acknowledges that this period retrieves the connection between time and nature, which the Enlightenment period

separated. The logic is that fossil and coal fuel were and are essential to scientific modernization, but the consequences were not only technological progress, since these resources also devastated the environment. Thus, the notion of climate history restates the connection between humanity and nature's history, understanding the dependence and the consequences that one has over the other (79).

Lastly, West-Pavlov discusses temporality through Postmodernism and Postcolonialism, which reunite time and space through a variety of perspectives. Postmodern temporality seems to result from a paradox between the persistence of Newton's absolute time and the emergence of new temporalities. After more than a century of Einstein's relativity, Newton's vision is still predominant in the way we organize temporality, while relativity is ignored in practice. On the other hand, West-Pavlov observes that new modes of production and relationships between them propose new temporalities through flexible regimes, as mentioned above. This paradox conveys notions such as time in reverse, presentness, lack of time, reversible linear time, and paradoxical temporal structures. For instance, presentness relies

on how postmodernism presents a dystopic future, filled by our anxieties towards global climate, wars, and financial crises (4), while the past is resumed into a self-reflexive nostalgia (142). What remains is the present, which West-Pavlov exemplifies with Obama's slogan "The time is now" (142).

Also interesting is that West-Pavlov does not observe a real break between modernism and postmodernism, since he understands that technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, and Skype, "are not genuinely postmodern to the extent that they merely evince the intensification of trends present in modernity from the outset" (140). Postmodern is then "an accelerated, intensified form" (151) of modernist time. Such notion explains how the same fluid and subjective temporality from modernists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce is repeated in postmodern writers like Jonathan Safran Foer. Although I am not entirely convinced of his argument, West-Pavlov beautifully explains the complexity and paradoxes of the postmodern time, as when he discusses Frow in the following passage:

As the term "postmodernism" itself suggests, there could be

no postmodernism without the modernism it claims to supersede but simultaneously perpetuates by maintaining its label as a root term. This leads Frown (1997: 13-63) to conclude that postmodernism is largely a discursive effect, produced by the logic of modernism itself. Modernism imposes a repeatedly new moment of the new, a logic which is self-contradictory, since the new cannot remain eternally new. Modernism can only be new, paradoxically, if at some point it exhausts itself. Whence the necessity of something which comes *after* modernism. [...] Postmodernism thus constitutes a repetition of modernism which is also a suppression of the evidence of that repetition. What might these aporia mean in terms of the temporal logic of postmodernism? (West-Pavlov 149-150)

In relation to postcolonialism, West-Pavlov states that the postcolonial argument should deny a Eurocentric vision of absolute time, in favor of plural temporalities. Postcolonial temporalities draw on a revision of history. In this context, West-Pavlov emphasizes how the history of time was centered on Europe, eliminating or subjugating other

regions. He clarifies that “The logic of Europe’s temporal self-conception dictates that non-Europe must be a temporal abyss” (164). Such Eurocentric position emerges from the binarism pre-modern/modern, which contributes to a structure of absolute time. To abandon such position would require “to take up a notion of overlapping, non-segmented temporal planes which credit many actants with agency” (166). These overlapping temporalities contradict and also complement one another in the construction of multiple histories that allow the discourse and reaffirmation of different groups (166). The focus is mainly those groups that were historically subjugated and can now have their past restored.

West-Pavlov concludes by revising the Enlightenment binary division of human versus nature, which contributed to an absolute time. He understands that such distinction also separates time from space, and that their interaction would indicate the way “humans interact with their environment” (178). We have detached ourselves from nature and space through a progressive discourse of modernity. Capitalism has contributed

to such ideas of separation and progress. The solution originates from postcolonialism and/or postmodernism that allows the multiplicity of time and recovers the connection between time and space. Overall, *Temporalities* presents a sound and encompassing study on how time is present in a range subjects. In doing so, West-Pavlov not only rethinks time as a multiplicity, but also provides insightful reviews on contemporary discussions.

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