



Abstract: The inescapable presence of violence throughout George Elliott Clarke's oeuvre proposes that the silence imposed on the black community is only overcome through violence. The inevitability of violence is particularly evident in his collection *Execution Poems*. This collection recounts the "Tragedy of George and Rue," cousins of his mother who killed and robbed a white taxi driver and were then the last people hanged as state punishment in New Brunswick. Through protagonists' rationalizations for the crime and with their familial connection to him, Clarke collapses time and justice to place the black man outside of history and within violence. Silence then becomes a visceral experience for black

males. Clarke suggests that Western society enacts its silencing of the black male through violence, thus combating this enforced voicelessness becomes a matter of

"I's Natural Homicidal":

Violence and Silence in *Execution Poems*

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violent vengeance: the only expression impossible to ignore. In a reflection of a peculiar position of blackness in Canada, the inescapability of violence for the black man who wishes to express his subjective being is grounded in a Western history of violence as retribution, which culminates in the diasporic struggle for black equality as enacted by black Americans. Clarke uses intertextual references to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and the iconic slave rebellion leader Nat Turner to locate his characters in a greater mythology of the battle for self-actualization, for a voice. Clarke himself is implicated in this violence, despite his recuperative ability to write poetry. The violence which drives the aptly titled *Execution Poems* reflects his belief that black literature still functions as a transgression for the wider community. Clarke posits the escape from this silence as an inherent act of violence.



Execution Poems is based on a historical incident: a notorious event from the post-war East Coast. In an interview aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National, George Elliott Clarke recalls:

I got letters from people, people sending me their poems and songs and stuff like that about this case because, of course, it had a great deal of resonance in Fredericton and, to a certain extent, in St [sic] John. People still remember this crime now, 56 years later. It was the last double hanging in New Brunswick, certainly, and anyone who was around then and is still around now, they know this story. (Koval 23)

Clarke has a personal link to the hanging. The hanged men were his mother's cousins, George and Rufus Hamilton, who killed, and robbed, a white taxi driver in Fredericton in 1949. Clarke never met these relatives, "dead a decade before [he] was born" (*Execution* 12), but the event certainly resonates with him; he has published two works on the subject. The first, published in 2000, is the collection *Execution Poems*. These poems were originally meant to be included in the subsequent novel *George and Rue*, which, unsuccessful in its first few drafts, was not published until 2005 (Koval 13). Clarke's attention to the topic is significant given that he is tackling a taboo family tale. In another interview, he notes that, until his mother told him the tale in 1994, his family had not spoken about the brothers or their criminal act for decades (Kyser 868). Their silent shame leaves

what Clarke calls “a gaping wound in the family genealogy” (Kyser 867), one which perpetuates the violence that led the brothers to their crime. Clarke meets this violence head-on in *Execution Poems*. In an “author’s disclaimer,” he names abettors in “the crime of this poetry,” but adds, “[o]nly the author deserves hanging” (*Execution* 46). He makes himself complicit in their crime, but his textual performance of violence—the translation of the incident from history to poetry—changes the context and ends the cycle of inevitable violence in which the brothers were trapped. Linking physical violence and textual violence, Jordana Greenblatt has identified how Clarke’s poetry represents and performs violence through its subject and its destabilization of expectations respectively. This analysis recalls Judith Butler’s theorization of the power of words to injure. Butler ascribes this power to the connection between language and the body. Without the body, there is no speech act, and the body is both sustained and threatened through speech acts (Butler 5). Linguistic violence, however, is not the same as physical violence. Butler suggests that words have a flexibility beyond the body. They can be restaged to heal traumas that they have inflicted (Butler 13). The split between the poet and the persona is key here (and I emphasize it in my argument by attributing the language to the persona rather than to Clarke, as opposed to Greenblatt’s construction); while Clarke can restage physical violence as textual, his cousins’ act is restricted to the body and can only open wounds. In restaging his cousins’ physical act as written works, Clarke fulfills his mother’s desire that, as the

writer in the family, he bind the family wound (Kyser 872), but he also addresses a historical wound: the silencing of the black voice.

Using textual violence to restage physical violence is a strategy familiar to Black Arts, the cultural arm of Black Nationalism. In the Movement’s eponymous 1968 poem, Amiri Baraka writes: “...We want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns” (19-21). There is certainly a sense of justified revenge, but we should take these desires literarily, not literally. Baraka’s contemporary Stephen Henderson writes: “The question of violence is no longer *if* but *how*” (67). The how is through language. According to linguist Geneva Smitherman, the Black Nationalists took on the word “black” precisely because of its negative associations in Western culture. More than reclaiming the insult, appropriating the word speaks a silence. As Butler suggests, healing an injury requires repetition (141). Investing themselves with the power of violent language restages the institutional violence done to them, forcibly inscribing the injustice. This violence scars language: a scar that heals wounds, but remains a sign of history.

Avenging History

Execution Poems suggests that violence is an expression of self for the oppressed black male—a rejection of societal silencing. Communicating both existence and the pain of that existence, vengeful violence impresses the persecuted on the persecutors. It is a

form of justice. In the Koval interview, Clarke explains, “Everything that happens to these guys is a reflection of their need to commit this crime” (34). If the crime is needful, surely capital punishment is an unjust response. A sense of institutional injustice is further underscored by the two photographs that appear at the end of the collection with the caption “The double hanging was executed according to law” (*Execution* 45). The photographs are obviously of two lynchings, which are therefore outside of the law. The caption is ironically juxtaposed with the image to combine official and mob law; law becomes ambiguous. This conflation, at the end of the collection, makes the stark claim that white law constitutes crimes against black men. In “Echoes in a Stranger Land,” black Canadian poet and critic M. NourbeSe Philip agrees: “[T]he onslaught against Africans in this New World has not let up since the first African was brought here” (21). The machinations of such a conflicted society serve to punish the brothers for existing. The Hamiltons’ crime of murder is then retribution for the abuse they receive solely based on colour; it is their sole successful response to socially sanctioned assault. Rufus (Rue) says in “Identity I,” “I’m negative but positive with a knife” (*Execution* 19). He can only manifest himself in violence.¹

¹ It could be argued that Austin Clarke’s men often manifest their black identities through sex. Comparatively, when describing how black males impose themselves on the dominant white body, George Elliott Clarke continually makes allusions to knives and swords (sex and violence). For example, in “Identity I,” Rue’s face is “like a black splinter lancing snow” (*Execution* 19); later, white children are chopped up in “1933” (*Execution* 23); and Rue hurls “insolent daggers” at alabaster statues in “Malignant English” (*Execution* 38).

This style of violence, however, traps him as a bogeyman. I focus on Rufus as the brother most desperate to verbally communicate (he wishes to be a poet). He is the one most concerned with society’s historical silencing, and he must be the brother who swings the hammer. In manifesting himself, something is finally composed; after the blow, “A rhyme-less poetry scrawled his obituary” (*Execution* 34). Rufus’s violent action becomes a public work, but it is also his death sentence. Discussing the murder in “The Killing,” Rufus explains: “Here’s how I justify my error: / The blow that slew silver came from two centuries back. / It took this much time and agony to turn a white man’s whip / into a black man’s hammer” (35). George disagrees: “No, we needed money, / so you hit the So-and-So, / only much too hard” (35). The brothers’ separate defenses don’t actually contradict each other: Rufus’s lines explain the accidental force and George’s explain the context. This duality defines their voices throughout the collection. Rufus weighs cumulative offenses, while George is concerned with visceral immediacies; the former represents the past, the latter the present. Still, according to the postscript of an “Anonamus” letter from Fredericton in the penultimate piece, the past and the present are conflated: “[T]hey is no different neggars (sic) & they both look a like in this Cryme” (43). This addendum (perhaps signifying on² the extensive white-written appendices endorsing slave narratives) implies that the unification of their identities is almost too obvious to mention. In the end, though Rufus deals the fatal blow, the

² Henry Louis Gates identifies “signifying on” in the sense of commenting on as a form of black critical practice.

two brothers die as one. The duet of the poem, which ends with the dissolution of the two brothers into one, parallels the dissolving of past and present for the black male. The consistency of the distinction between, and simultaneous connection of, past and present explains the consistency of violence in Clarke’s works. M. Travis Lane writes, “Clarke possesses a sense of history as continuous and present in his own context” (47). In embodying this here, the black male experience is both defined by and outside of Western linear time: a double hanging. To free him from atemporality and generality, this fusion must be broken with all the force that fission entails. The incorporation into language does the powerful work of fission; Clarke’s restaging both separates the brothers and contextualizes their crime, rescuing them from violent silence.

Silence and Violence

Always-already silenced, Rufus’s body, in its incontestable presence, becomes the only sign of his existence. Murder, another act in a system of violent acts, exposes the lack of viable alternatives for expression. In “Identity I,” Rufus says, “My words collide with walls of fists / Collapse, my teeth clacking like typewriters” (*Execution* 19). His words are blocked and demolished by violence, his attempts at verbal communication denied. Trying to achieve recognition through language, he is immediately muted—a repression as visceral as a punch to the face. In silence, the body loses the flexibility of the Butlerian word. Physical violence is a rigid, restricted channel of

communication. There is only the whip and the hammer. Words reduced to physical objects emphasizes the physicality of blackness, a categorization of bodies, not minds. To transcend this restriction requires the ineffability of language, a progression that suggests the Hegelian dialectic.³ Between the master and slave is the whip and the hammer, but the violently initiated impression of the slave on the master inaugurates recognition. The dialectic is violently initiated, but the expression of consciousness soothes the trauma. As a linguistic act that changes the context, Butler’s restaging takes place in the Hegelian consciousness; this repetition creates a synthesis that binds the wound.

Ensnared in the Western onslaught against the descendants of African slaves, Rufus is barred from this solace (much as Hegel excised the African from history). In the poem “Reading *Titus Andronicus* in Three Mile Plain, N.S.,” Rue posits a simile between himself and two iconic, violent black men: “Like drastic Aaron’s heir, Nat Turner, I’s natural homicidal: / My pages blaze, my lines pall, crying fratricidal damnation” (*Execution* 25). Turner was a Virginian slave, who—inspired by heavenly visions—managed, with a makeshift militia, to kill fifty-five whites before being captured, hung, and skinned in 1831. “I’s natural homicidal” makes violence inherent in the silencing of oppression, and also implicates language in the escape from this naturalism. The non-standard usage describing the self suggests an

³ John Paul Fiorentino, discussing *Whydah Falls*, Derek Walcott’s influence on Clarke, and both writers’ use of the Western canon, writes, “Is this an effort to legitimize the text? To include the Hegelian master/slave binary within Africadian poetry?” (Fiorentino).

escape from a convention, but this is not sustained. The quick return to standard is a return to a convention that represses the black voice and therefore naturalizes black violence. Turner and Rue must each rely on force. Much like Turner, who learned to read and write at a young age (which was, of course, highly uncommon for a slave) and became a preacher who, in an apocryphal story, turned a white man away from evil, Rufus does attempt linguistic communication.

Ultimately, though, Turner’s prophesying turns away from language to violence. Normative words are not sufficient to carry his message, and similarly, Rufus’s poetry is stunted. Though his “pages blaze,” his “lines pall”: another opposition prefiguring the brothers’ murder and subsequent damnation (*Execution* 25). After eight synonyms for the cloth of high-ranking officials, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘pall’ in noun form as “[s]omething that covers or conceals... a dark cloud or covering of smoke, dust, etc.” (“Pall”). This is a tantalizing definition that suggests the black lines might conceal the whiteness of the page; however, the word “lines” lacks an apostrophe to indicate possessiveness. “Pall” must be functioning here as a verb, “to grow weak or faint” or “to enfeeble or weaken” (“Pall”). In opposition to the noun form, the pages are foremost in the verb form. The whiteness or brightness of the pages fades the lines, overpowering their potential for expression. Rufus’s repressed words are then the impetus for his violent act. Turner and Rue, alike in punishment, find that unsuccessful language is ultimately fatal.

This, too, is the dilemma of Aaron, the lone black character of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. He urges violence, saying, “[B]y force / If not by words” (2.1.118). He is also Rue’s mentor in a life of unavoidable violence, where murder is righteous revenge (Knutson 39).⁴ Clarke uses Shakespeare’s play throughout the collection as a literary precedent with ancient sources, situating Rufus’s act in what Susan Knutson calls “a transcultural context” (39).⁵ In *Titus*, the titular character returns from war having captured the Queen of the Goths. As part of his conquest, he sacrifices her eldest son for his twenty-one sons killed in battle, and she swears revenge. Societal conventions subscribe violence on the subjugated, and inspire vengeance in them. The outcomes are inevitable, destined by tradition. The Queen’s eldest is used according to Roman custom; her revenge is the natural response of familial honour. Further, Shakespeare’s version of the story disrupts notions of barbarity since Roman practice is implicated in the initiation of violence. It is the Romans, whose customs designate insider and outsider (as do English language standards), who sow the seeds of their own destruction within these rigid boundaries. Breaking the cycle of violence, Titus’s remaining son must go to the defeated Goths for their help in righting Roman society. The Moor, however, is fatally punished (buried in the ground, rather than swung above it)—though this outcome seems to

⁴ Knutson notes that Rue’s positive response “has a striking correlative in the reception of Aaron by Black audiences in post-apartheid South Africa” (39).

⁵ It is notable that *Titus Andronicus* is by far the goriest of Shakespeare’s plays. In the New Cambridge edition, the editor describes it as a “bizarre and sensational type of violence” (4), referring later to its “notorious horrors” (33), and the “gratuitousness” of the violence (34).

be more a result of the power of his words in inciting action than for his own acts. Knutson explains that Aaron signifies a link between empowerment and articulation (40). A lone black figure in a white world, Aaron is unapologetically proud of his colour. Rufus's admiration is evident:

...I opened Shakespeare
 And discovered a scarepriest, shaking in violent winds,
 Some hallowed, heartless man, his brain boiling blood,
 Aaron, seething, demanding, "Is black so base a hue?"
 And shouting, "Coal-black refutes and foils any other hue
 In that it scorns to bear another hue." O! Listen at that!
 (*Execution* 25)

Aaron is absolutely not negated. Knutson points out that he interprets literature for the Goths (40), and he has enough verbal confidence to deny other colours emphatically. Thus Rufus describes Aaron in religious terms, as "a scarepriest" and "hallowed" man. His words inspire Rue to epic language: "O! Listen at that!" (*Execution* 25). For Rufus though, admiration does not suffice; he must turn into Aaron to appropriate his voice and make himself visible: "I am become / Aaron" (25). Unfortunately, this is a temporary transformation. Rue says Aaron's lines are burning (in contrast to his lines), and he admits he is "flummoxed" by a verbal volatility impossible to him (*Execution* 25). Rufus calls others to hear this voice, but he is not heard. Again, his language is not sufficient. The problem of his actualization is hinted at in the line break between "I am become" and "Aaron." In

the first line Rufus briefly manifests himself, but the second line reveals the necessary and impossible compromise. Additionally, beyond his own tragic end, Aaron is a tricky role model. Shakespeare writes his determining lines, making them black words under white control (the "blaze" and "pall"). Aaron's speech is actually a type of ventriloquism; without the hidden control, the puppet is silent.

This reverses an earlier image of Rufus as a failed writer, bringing up more tricky black words. "Childhood II" begins with Rue's desire to dress himself in the book covers of "secretly Negro authors" (Pushkin, Colette, Dumas) (*Execution* 17). These are seemingly white words, with hidden black control. In this concealment, the societal fetter of blackness is removed. Instead, there is a voluntary abnegation of parts of the self: the dangerous game of passing. To be heard, Rufus learns, blackness must be suppressed. This unseen blackness is Rufus's other model of literary blackness, but just as he cannot handle Aaron, he cannot hide his racial identity. He can only be "[a] poor-quality poet crafting hoodlum testimony" (17). As he goes on to explain, Rufus's "watery storytelling's cut with the dark rum of curses" (17). The first line simply degrades his poetry as "poor-quality," but the second elaborates on this pejorative description. "[W]atery" could allude to maritime storytelling and, more particularly, the storytelling of trans-Atlantic slavery, but it also has the implication of dilution. Moreover, there is a double dilution due to the reversal of the metaphor in this line. Rather than rum cut with water, it is water cut with rum. Reflecting the previous description of the "secret" black

authors, their whiteness cut with darker blood, for Rue, his obvious racial identity is a key factor in the “poor quality” of his writing. Significantly, though “cut” is obviously the conventional figurative for liquid mixing, the reversal of the metaphor also continues the theme of violence in black and white interaction in a neat use of idiom. Making it explicit, the poem concludes: “Instead I witnessed all this,” and then catalogues several horrific scenes of violence, again simultaneously legal and illegal, ending with “Everywhere I saw a Crimea of crime” (17). Rufus can only enter public discourse with his hoodlum testimony, discourse confined by the law that perpetuates his oppression. He says: “My destiny was always murder and to be murdered” (21). Without a successful linguistic outlet, he is condemned to fatal physical violence like Turner and Aaron.

Violence and Silence

The problem is introduced in the first poem of the collection, “Negation,” which declares: “*Le nègre negated, meagre, c’est moi /... My black face must preface murder for you*” (*Execution* 11). These two lines, at the beginning and end of the poem, form the ends of what Rinaldo Walcott describes as the black Canadian continuum. Clarke is focused on these extremes, jumping from invisibility to hyper-visibility throughout the collection. Violence is naturally the condition of hyper-visibility. Setting the tone for the rest of the poems, “must” works in the final line as both a presumption and a certainty: “I assume my black face...” and “It is unavoidable that my

black face...." When blacks are visible, violence is inevitable; conversely, the only way blacks can render themselves visible is to enact violence. As Greenblatt notes, the poems are suffused with this violence (200). It confronts the reader in almost every line, evoking a sense of continuous assault, grounding Rufus's act within an inescapable matrix of violence. Though he is speaking, he lacks the transcendent, malleable power of the word. Rufus can only answer brutal diminishment with a brutal avowal of existence. The taking of another life puts his own in sharp contrast, but never reaches the linguistic synthesis of recognition.

The collection is replete with these confluences of oppositions that never reach synthesis. In "Reading *Titus*," Rufus quotes the Latin part of Demetrius's answer to Aaron's suggestion of the rape and mutilation of Titus's daughter, Lavinia. The whole quote reads "*Sit fas aut nefas*, till I find the stream / To cool this heat, a charm to calm these fits, / *Per stygia, per manes vehor*" (Shakespeare 2.1.133-35).⁶ In these lines, vengeance expands beyond good and evil, and even life and death. Unaware of his mother's revenge plot, Demetrius is referring to the urgency of his lust; however, dramatic irony leads the reader to refer these lines to Aaron, the instigator. Rufus may have done precisely this, since "I am become / Aaron" follows the Latin quote (*Execution* 25).⁷ Lacking the charm of transcendence, along with past and present, the quotation adds good and evil as

⁶ *Sit fas aut nefas* means approximately 'be it sin or virtue'; *per stygia, per manes vehor* is approximately 'I pass by the Styx, by the shades of the dead.'

⁷ Knutson suggests he is also dismissing the rightness or wrongness of his transformation.

indistinguishable in Rufus’s blackness.⁸ This union is also present in “Haligonian Market Cry,” where the sellers’ lines alternate between saintly and sinful in the language of African colonizers, including Rome (erasing historical distance and foreshadowing *Titus Andronicus*). In embodying these two contradictions, the black male experience becomes another contradiction: defined by and outside of morality, another double hanging.

If invisibility is linguistic silence and the only solution is force, the filter of *Titus Andronicus* causes another elision-schism. Rue is Aaron, the vengeful black man, but he is also Lavinia, muted through the amputation of her tongue. Conflating their position correlates with the black Canadian experience of existing within contradiction. Walcott writes, “To be black and at home in Canada is both to belong and not belong” (146), an experience that reflects some black writers’ sense of writing in English. Philip writes in her essay “Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry,” “The place we occupy as poets is one that is unique—one that forces us to operate in a language that was used to brutalize Africans so that they would come to believe in their own lack of humanity” (63). In his position of violent revenge, Rufus says in “Malignant English”: “But your alabaster, marble English isn’t mine: I hurl / insolent daggers at it like an assassin assaulting a statue” (*Execution* 38). The invisibility of silence makes Rufus’s language an other: a tumour in the poem’s title, clearly not his in the poem’s body. His tongue is a gory gnomon like Lavinia’s. The English

⁸ The incompleteness of the quote suggests that life and death remain all too present.

language becomes both the oppressor and the means of oppression. English is the exact opposite of Rufus. Like Aaron, he has "boiling blood," described in "Original Pain" as "[r]ed sizzled, blazing" (15). The hot blood separates them from stone cold English, magnifying their common human features. Language is then inadequate for expression of their pain. They are more, both in themselves and in relief to English, but this more is still physical. Rufus says in "Negation": "Mouth spitting lies, vomit-lyrics, musty / masticated scripture" (11), the alliterations falling on top of each other, emphasizing that every manifestation of communication is defective in some way for him. It is clear that this is due to convention. Describing his experience with formal education, Rue says: "School was violent improvement" (25). To bring in another Shakespeare reference suggested by his rum curses, Rufus is Caliban, the "monster" Prospero "educates" in *The Tempest*, who protests that his only "proft on't / Is, I know how to curse" (1.2.366-67) (a claim made ironic by the poetic lines Shakespeare gives him). Rufus rejects language as inadequate to his humanity, but this rejection damns him to a loss of that humanity. Clarke says of his cousins, "I think they accepted all the propaganda against them and against black people in general" (Koval 36). Rufus calls himself "Her Majesty's / Nasty, Nofaskoshan Negro" (*Execution* 11). Accepting a position of possession, he is unable to describe himself with anything other than pejorative language. The language he learns is that of bodily violence. Unlike the Black Arts poets, he is unable to restage this violence into text.

Reduced to a body without voice, Rue’s response is to impose himself as a physical presence, physically in the present. He proves his will in the way the oppressor proves his—through violence. Rue must physically assault the cold, inhuman, unadulterated white language in his attempt to bend it to his hot, human, black story. In “Malignant English,” he embodies language to attack it. In “Public Enemy,” he explodes with what is left to him: “I want to give em all headaches and nausea: / I’ll play *fortissimo* Ellington, blacken icy whiteness” (32). He invokes a black musical sound as violence, a force without words. He is left with only physical revenge. As we learn from *Titus*, however, vengeful protagonists are consumed by violence, and their ultimate end is the silence of death. Clarke subtitles the collection *The Acadian Tragedy of George and Rue*,” leaving the reader in no doubt about their destiny. In “Famous Last,” Rufus says, “We will fall into our sentence: silence” (41).

In “Trial II,” Rufus laments his inability to be a poet:

I would very much like to sing—
 in a new life, a new world,
 some April song—
 “A slight dusting of snow,
 the indigo dawn hovers—
 and we sweeten in our love,”
 yes, something like that,
 but blood must expunge, sponge up, blood. (*Execution* 37)

There is no “new” in his world: another time-less image. Excluded from a dominating reality, he cannot conceive of an escape from his somatic silent prison. Clarke, though, can rescue his cousins (and himself) from violent silence.

From Hamilton to Clarke

That truncated “April song” may sound familiar to Clarke’s readers. In what could be a description of it, Lane writes of Clarke’s poetic style, “[He] tends to use the short-lined loosely trochaic rhythms... [that] most Canadian poets use... the structural sense is declamatory—the heaping or layering of one statement on another” (49). In addition, the “indigo dawn” image is one Clarke uses in other poems to describe the distinctive Nova Scotia light; Lane describes it as Clarke’s evocation of the “dark Canadian dawn” (53). While Rufus is reduced to the physical, his younger relation has the expressive ability he yearns for. With his writing, Clarke can open the word on their experience, restaging the violence enacted against the black male in Canada.

In an interview with Anne Compton in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Clarke says, “If they’re a nullity, I’m a nullity. If I don’t want to be a nullity, I have to do as much as I can to give voice to their voices, their experiences” (161). Clarke certainly has a strong sense of himself not only as a speaker, but as a revealer of other voices of black Canada (particularly historical ones). Katherine McKittrick points

out that he has a compulsion to list black Canadian writers (105) (he is an excellent archivist in this case). He has claimed the Western canon for his race, explaining in an interview with Anne Compton that “even though it was imposed on us, it still belongs to us. ... Perhaps we can take these models and blacken them. We can make them speak Black English” (141). His language echoes Rufus’s in the use of “blacken”; however, the physicality is transcended here. For Clarke, rather than violence as language, language is violent. His is a literary violence, as he confesses in the Compton interview: “[M]y acts of homage are acts of damage” (143); “I see myself as being in a combative dialogue with English poetry” (162). He feels the need to impose his presence into the mainstream, but his violence escapes the physical cycle of death, of invisibility and silence. Clarke will not be hung for his violence, but he is impelled to figurative crimes by the same constraints that drove his cousins: the absence of his color in the dominant (white) culture. In the Compton interview, describing his inclusion in and manipulation of classic English texts, he says, “It’s a kind of robbery” (142). At a University of British Columbia talk, answering a question about the author disclaimer mentioned in the introduction, Clarke expands on this idea:

I think when you are coming from a minority perspective there is always a grain of transgression: the fact that you’re speaking up, the fact that you are talking about injustice as you perceive it, as you see it. ... And also too, the fact that often we are trying to speak the unspeakable, we’re trying to say what has not been

said before, at least not in Canada in certain ways—trying to disturb the very idea of what is a Canadian identity. (Compton and McNeilly 54)

Walcott describes Clarke’s “obsession” with inclusion into the national dialogue as “melancholia,” suggesting that the necessary violence of this project traps him in his own depressing cycle (something with which Greenblatt seems to agree). Clarke, however, sees his project as a synthesis. In the Compton interview, Clarke explains his mode of engagement: “I’m attracted to the idea of revolution as a means of creating a more equitable society, but at the same time I’m also interested in the idea of tradition and the sanctity of tradition” (158). This is precisely the (perhaps Canadian) difference between Clarke and Black Arts. Black Arts violence is used to force a complete and radical dislocation from whiteness and all its products. Henderson writes, “This rejection of white values and standards is one of the most powerful aspects of the black revolution” (75). Black Arts aimed to release the black male from the racist restrictions of English, but, using the Hegelian model, Clarke intends to forcibly create a space for the black male within English.

I would like to end by noting the beauty and love that exists in this world of violence. “If the morbid is one pole of literature, the erotic is the other,” Clarke explains (*Whylah xx*). *Execution Poems* is allowed a few glimpses of spring renovation. In “Duet,” Rufus sings to a lover called “India”: “Look! Your April perfume is still locked, rose madder, in my shirt” (29), as if he is shocked at the possibility of anything

positive lasting, even briefly. For Rufus though, beauty is normally a "brutal, serrated, heart-shredding light" (25). It only wounds; it cannot soothe. Greenblatt notes that Rufus represents writing as "a desired shelter," but one that is impossible for him and, she suggests, for Clarke also (82). Clarke, though, who can complete his "April song," can also claim that "Being able to see beauty, to create beauty, to know beauty is an antidote, a means of balancing the pain, especially for the oppressed" (Compton 144). In its move from body to text, *Execution Poems* can repeat the act of revenge, yet be free of the necessity of bloody retribution. Unlike Caliban, Clarke can see the beauty in his curses. They are the scars that heal the wounds. ☉

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