Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 11, Part 1
Telling Black Histories: Writing, Recuperation and Resistance

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

[music transition]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.
[music]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas…

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: How are the writing and telling of Black and Africadian histories also acts of recuperation and resistance? How decolonized are we... really? And what do we need to understand about power and White supremacy if we are truly to change the world for the better?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In this two-part episode of The Courage My Friends podcast, *Telling Black Histories: Writing, Recuperation and Resistance*, we are very pleased to welcome the 4th Poet Laureate of Toronto and the 7th Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, George Elliott Clarke.

In Part I of our conversation, Clarke takes us on a journey through Black and Africadian histories in Canada, his own life and work and discusses the importance of recuperating Black histories through writing and resistance.

Here now is George Elliott Clarke.

GEORGE:*Look Homeward Exile.*

I can still see that soil crimsoned by butchered Hog and imbrewed with rye, lye and homely Spirituals everybody must know / Still dream of folks who broke or cracked like shale: Pushkin, who twisted his hands in boxing/ Marocco, who ran girls like dogs and got stabbed / Lavinia, her teeth decayed to black stumps, Her lovemaking still in demand, spitting Black phlem - her pension after 20 towns /And Toof, suckled on anger that no Baptist Church could contain /Who let wrinkled Eely Seed her moist womb when she was just thirteen.

And the tyrant sun that reared from barbed-wire / Spewed flame that charred the idiot crops / To depression, and hurt my granddaddy / To bottle after bottle of sweet death / His dreams beaten to one, tremendous pulp /Until his heart seized, choked; his love gave out / But beauty survived, secreted in freight trains, snorting in their pins, in babes / Whose faces were coal-black mirrors, in strange Strummers who plucked Ghanaian banjos, hummed Blind blues - precise, ornate, rich needle-point / In sermons scorched with sulphur and brimstone / And in my love's dark, orient skin that smelled / Like orange peels and tasted like rum, good God! I remember my Creator in the old ways:

I sit in taverns and stare at my fists / I knead earth into bread, spell water into wine / Still nothing warms my wintry exile - neither Prayers nor fine love / neither votes nor hard drink / For nothing heals those saints felled in green beds, Whose loves are smashed by just one word or glance / Or pain - a screw jammed in thick, straining wood.

RESH: George, welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

GEORGE: Resh, it's a great, great honor and privilege and pleasure for me to uh, join you.

RESH: And I want to also thank you so much for such a powerful start to this conversation. So could you tell us a bit about that piece?

GEORGE: Yes. *Look Homeward Exile*. I wrote it in 1985 in a laundromat in Amsterdam. It was my first time to leave North America, Turtle Island, and go to another continent. Of course it was Europe. And while I was watching my clothes spin around in the dryer in this laundromat, I started thinking about where I'm from. Little known obscure place and the ancestral history connected to it; which is a community called Windsor Plains, which actually is several communities. Newport Station, Green Street, Three-Mile Plains, Five-Mile Plains.

I actually still own a little piece of property, three quarters of an acre in Three-Mile Plains. And it's where my mother's family is located, my matrilineal lineage, from that part of Nova Scotia.

And so I was thinking about that place and the history connected to it, which is a history of struggle and privation, despair, as well as love and faith and music-making as I was watching my clothes spin around. And I started thinking about my homeland and the people associated with it. So I was inspired to write this poem. And it's one of my personal favorites, and it's in my book, *Whylah Falls*.

And one more thing I should say about this poem, because it may not be audible. But the poem was actually written in blank verse; unrhymed iambic pentameter. To-dumb, to-dumb to-dumb, to-dumb to-dumb.

I'd spent three years prior to writing this poem, three years writing very bad blank verse. And this poem finally came about because I was now attempting to reconcile my own voice - Black English, Africadian English, African Nova Scotian vernacular English - with one of the major systems of meter in English poetry, which is, of course iambic pentameter the line of Shakespeare. And so this British English poetic meter is the underpinning of my attempt to tell a story about a Black Nova Scotian community.

RESH: And through your, obviously this poem and also through your novels, *George and Rue*, which is my favorite, T*he Motorcyclist,Where Beauty Survived,* history is very much channeled through your own family history.

GEORGE: Keeping in mind that almost all of Canada, if not all of North America and the Americas in general, consists of unceded Indigenous territory, I need to say that upfront; it is also still true that many African Americans and then some West Indians later on in the 20th century, got plunked down on the worst possible land in Nova Scotia - New Valley Coast or Mi'kmaq, to give the Indigenous name for that province - and struggled to survive. And in that struggle to survive also formed communities of neighbors who looked like them and sounded like them and had the same experience, which is basically escaping from slavery. Either in what is now the United States or even in what is now Canada. And for the first time having the power to hold their spouses, to hold their children without fear they were going to be stolen away and sold away. Or that they would have to run in order to have lives of their own and not have their lives curtailed by some master somewhere.

And for those very first Africadians in the 18th century, and forming communities in the 19th century, the land they were given deliberately was unviable for farming, unviable for agriculture, and they were also forbidden to fish, by the way.

So in two of the major economic factors for Nova Scotia in being able to earn an income and potentially enter into a middle-class existence - agriculture and the fisheries - Black migrants, immigrants, ex-slaves, refugees, were all prevented from being able to take part in these major fields of economic endeavor in colonial Nova Scotia and well into post-Confederation Nova Scotia.

Despite the poverty, the illiteracy, the oppression; those founding Africadians - let me put it that way - still had what they considered to be blessings. The blessings of having their children and their spouses and other relatives nearby. And being able to hold them through all their lives, being able to hold them, unless of course, children, once mature, decided to move away and go somewhere else, to have their own families or to find potentially better living and economic conditions for themselves. But then also to have a roof over their heads and to have their children and their spouses, being able to live with them under their own rooves, even if the homes were considered shacks or were considered huts or considered rudimentary on the part of mainstream Settler society in Nova Scotia.

For those founding Africadians, they had something close to Utopia. Because they had a degree of liberty. They had their families. They had households. They had pieces of property, that they thought of as being theirs. And despite the fact the properties could not sustain any real income-generating activity, they still had land to basically live upon and build communities upon and eventually to construct churches upon.

And so in defiance of the Slave Master, and in defiance of the racist, colonial, and even post-Confederation governments- plural! - of Nova Scotia. In complete defiance of the attempts of those governments to force the founding Africadians to leave Nova Scotia or else suffer deprivation, poverty, illiteracy, oppression of all sorts. In defiance of all that, they ended up creating something like 60 different communities all around mainland Nova Scotia. Then the West Indians, when they arrived in early 20th century, built communities in industrial Cape Breton, Whitney Pier, Glace Bay, and so on.

So, to make a long story short, Africadia is built, is constructed in complete defiance, of white supremacist, racist governmental decisions including environmental racism - placing dumps beside Black communities, placing polluting factories on the doorsteps of Black communities and so on. Those people, my ancestors, decided that they were going to construct communities. Church-based, church-anchored communities all around mainland Nova Scotia, in complete defiance of the racist oppressor and the oppressor's attempt to create a Nova Scotia as a White person's paradise. As a White person's dream. As a British enclave. As a Scottish, supposedly Scottish enterprise.

What most Canadians don't know, what most Nova Scotians don't know, is that Nova Scotia was not settled by Scot's, and it wasn't settled by Britons. It was settled by Yankees in the mid 18th century. The Yankees convinced the British to kick out the Acadians, Francophone Catholic Acadians in 1755, because they wanted to steal the Acadians' land.

When I say Yankees, I'm not just talking about New Englanders. I'm talking about people from the South. From South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and so on. Slaveholders! And so when the slaveholders move into Nova Scotia in 1760, they bring hundreds of African American slaves with them. Hundreds. And so all of a sudden, colonial Nova Scotia is a slave-holding colony and a colony that is governed by slave masters.

And this sets in practice the Nova Scotian mentality. They call it "Mississippi North". And it took me a long time to understand why. But the answer is easy. Because it was Southerners who settled it. It was slaveholders who settled it. And it brought with them the same attitudes they had from Dixie.

And those attitudes still persist in Nova Scotia. Those attitudes also occur in other parts of Canada. Because Loyalists are also coming from the South, as well as from other parts of the United States to be. And they all bring with them racist attitudes, anti-Indigenous attitudes, which form the basis of the early policy structures of Colonial and then Confederation, post-Confederation Canada itself. But it's particularly acute in Nova Scotia. That mainstream culture was set in stone, so to speak, by the early, almost pseudo-American settlers who arrived with slaves and the slave masters' mentality.

When Black people began arriving, not as slaves, but as Loyalists in 1783 and then as refugees during War of 1812, they actually have to figure out a way to survive in the face of organized governmental hostility to their presence. And a governmental desire to ensure that if Black people remained in Nova Scotia, they would remain vassals of the state. They would have to be a servile population, that would deliberately be kept from ever achieving anything like a middle-class status economically. And that they would instead have the status of being a perpetual Lumpen Proletariat.

You know what? I like using those Marxist terms. I like using them because they are kind of exact. And that's exactly what the white supremacist governments in Nova Scotia wanted. They wanted Black population to be a Lumpen Proletariat. Pure and simple. And they tried to maintain that condition well into the 20th century.

It was only in the 1960s when Black Nova Scotians, Africadians, began to emerge from a couple of centuries of just blunt. brutal oppression, economic deprivation, segregation, and pseudo-enslavement.

Most Black women, for instance, had to work as domestics for wealthy or just simply middle-class White families all around the province, but especially in the Capitol, Halifax.

Black men essentially were poorly paid unskilled labor. If they had skills, it would be impossible for them to actually get trade certificates; because most Black Nova Scotians would've had in terms of schooling, not much more than grade three. Some achieved grade six. This is true well into the 20th century. And so therefore did not have the diploma and certificates that would allow them to move up class-wise, let alone becoming university graduates.

A few did get through teachers college. And 1949 becomes really important because Black women were finally able to become nurses. Which meant that they began to have one foot on the class ladder in terms of being able to ascend potentially into the middle class.

RESH: You coined the term Africadian. Could you speak about what that means and what that means for you?

GEORGE: Why Africadia? Well, the reason is that I wanted to show respect to my ancestors for the fact that they decided to stay and be Nova Scotians, Black Nova Scotians, colored Nova Scotians colored Baptist, African Baptists, especially in terms of the mainland.

And they built cultures. They built communities that celebrated Blackness, celebrated being connected to Africa. That maintained certain ways of speech, particularly ways of worship, cuisine. A sensibility around music and song and dance. That maintained connections to Africa, but which were also very much influenced by the Celtic, Scottish, Gaelic, French, Acadian, Indigenous Mi'qmaq, and also Cherokee. Because Cherokee came to Nova Scotia as a result of the war of 1812 as allies of the British. Some of them came with Black companions, Black family members to Nova Scotia. And in fact, my great-grandmother was Cherokee.

So I call myself Afro-Métis as well as Africadian I also have some Mi'qmaq heritage. I probably do, but I can't prove that. But anybody who wants to tell me I can't talk about being Indigenous, I'm gotta tell 'em go jump into a deep well. Go jump in it and suffer the consequences of your stupidity.

But in any event, I want to show respect for those ancestors who decided to create a community, a culture, connected by their Baptist Church Christianity, connected by cuisine, connected by their ways of speech, connected by the fact that people from different communities around Nova Scotia would go and court each other and set up families in another community.

So even though on the face of the planet there were only something like under 30,000 Africadians; the fact of the matter is because we ended up holding onto these terrible plots of land and making communities, we ended up creating a Black North Atlantic culture that is unique.

A Black North Atlantic culture that is unique. And we didn't have any help!

African Americans weren't coming to our help; they had their own situations to contend with through the 19th century into the 20th century. So as much as we were descended mainly from African America, as much as we admired African American culture and took aspects of it for ourselves; we were very much on our own as a micro visible minority in a white supremacist, racist province that wanted to erase our existence. Wanted to pretend we didn't exist except for being, servile servants to them.

Nor were the West Indies gonna come to our aid. Nor was Bermuda going to come to our aid. Bermuda was the capital of the South Atlantic Royal Navy and Halifax, Nova Scotia was the capital of the North Atlantic British Navy. Those two British colonies had very close connections and still do.

As a matter of fact, if you're a student from Bermuda, and you want to come and study in a Nova Scotia University, you are allowed to do so. You are treated as a Nova Scotian student.

But to get to the point here: Bermuda wasn't gonna come to our aid. The Caribbean wasn't gonna come to our aid. South American Blacks were not gonna come to our aid. African Blacks were not gonna come to our aid. African Americans, right next door, were not gonna come to our ancestors' help.

So I believe that they were extremely courageous, extremely inventive to say: Despite the cold. Despite the nasty attitudes of the white supremacist culture towards us and encompassing us, surrounding us, oppressing us. Despite all that, we are going to put down roots in this bad soil, this rotten soil, deliberately marshy or rocky soil. And we are going to be Black People, Black Nova Scotians. And we are going to put up our churches. We're gonna have our communities. And we are going to do whatever we can to survive and raise our families on our land! - What they thought of as being their land - On our land! And where we can be ourselves. Where we can worship as we like. Where we can sing and dance and play our music as we like.

You know, the town of Shelburn in 1789 passed a law, quote," forbidding Negro dances and frolics". What I like about that is that it tells me that the very first Africadians, liked to party. They liked to dance. They liked to sing. They liked to play their instruments. And they didn't mind being loud about it. They were probably loud and worshiping the Lord. They were probably big time loud in their churches, singing and banging tambourines and plunking pianos and all the rest of it. And causing quite a ruckus and a disturbance for the hypocritical White Christians around them looking down their noses at them.

An Africadian culture was taking shape even as early in 1789, which is shortly after the arrival of the so-called Black Loyalists. Whose arrival causes basically the extinction of slavery in Nova Scotia. Because there's so many free black people arriving with the Black Loyalists, that it became impossible for slave-holders to hold their slaves. Because the Black Loyalists would help enslaved Black people escape from their masters and shelter them.

So by 1805, the slave-holders have lost most of their political power. In fact, there was a petition from slave-holders to the Nova Scotian legislature 1805 saying. "Please, please allow us to recapture, our runaway fugitive slaves". And their power was so weakened that the Nova Scotian government just ignored that petition. So even though slavery was not officially abolished until 1834 in British North America; it had basically come to a practical end for all intents and purposes by the early 19th century, because of the pressure the Black Loyalists put on slaveholding and similar pressure exercised by the arrival of the Black refugees, 2200 people, between 1812 and 1816.

So, why Africadia? Why Africadians? Because they built a distinctive Black North Atlantic culture, despite white oppression and despite not having any real assistance

from much larger, much more empowered, Black communities, especially in the US and in the Caribbean. And they had to do it all on their own. And they did.

They had the nerve to put together 24 churches, some of them with stained-glass windows, all on their own. Despite their illiteracy, despite their poverty. All around mainland Nova Scotia, they built a network of churches 24! And had the nerve to call that association, the *African* Baptist Association, which was proclaimed to existence in 1853. African Baptist!

One million African Americans put together the National Baptist Convention in 1895, 42 years after the African Baptist Association is proclaimed into existence in Nova Scotia. The much larger 1 million members of the National Baptist Convention, African-American Baptist, they don't call their church African Baptist; they call it National Baptist. They don't call it African. Everybody's trying to run away from Africa and being associated with Africa in the later 19th century in the United States.

Nobody wants to be called African. Everybody wants to be called *colored* or *negro*. To be associated with Africa was considered to be, associated with primitivism and heathenism and so on. But here are these folks in Nova Scotia, and they say, well, no, we're calling ourselves African Baptist.

So in respect of what they created and to recognize the distinctiveness of that culture, I came up with *Africadia* for Black Nova Scotia and it's geography, it's topography, and *Africadian* to name the people.

And just last year, 2022, the East Preston Academy decided to rename itself the "Africadian Empowerment Academy".

Oh my golly. It only took 30 years!

RESH: George, this passion, right? For telling this history certainly is the focus of your writings, both when you're writing your own stories, when you're reflecting on the writings of others who are telling Black history, Africadian history, talking about those identities. And yet, as you say, this is not a history that is well known. This is not something that has been charted in the canonical historical writings. In the opening to your epic poem, *Canticles,* in volume one, you include this quote by Walt Whitman, "The greatest poet drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet."

Now you are not only raising the dead, but you are recuperating the lost. Essentially writing colonized people who have, again, been largely left off the pages of the historical record or the White historical canon, you're writing them back into history. And this cannot be an easy feat. So, so how do you go about this? What drives your passion for this?

GEORGE: Oh, Resh. Thank you so much for another great question. I'll try to be more succinct this time. It's a matter of respect for those who came before me, who

came before us. I don't believe that their lives were inconsequential. I don't believe that their attempts to have struggled for liberty, equality and justice and beauty were inconsequential or unimportant, or of no consequence for history.

I believe that my own presence, my own existence, my own belonging to Nova Scotia, to Canada, to Black community, to Indigenous community comes out of my ancestors, my parents, grandparents and their attempts to fashion a life for themselves that was still capable of providing joy and a sense of achievement, a sense of identity.

And I believe that these were incredibly creative energies that deserve to be remembered and honored because they were exercised in the face of such blunt dismissal. Such peremptory oppression. And that despite that, folks persisted, even if that was merely the fact that they put up a little vegetable garden on measely plots of land. Or somebody puts up a pear tree or gets a strawberry patch or blueberry patch going. Or they have blackberries and raspberries or crab apple trees and, so on. And even if that was only for familial consumption or community consumption, it still provided an aspect of flavor to their meals, as well as a sense of delight of being able to raise these food stuffs on their very small plots. The fact that they could still dress up with whatever clothes they had and make their way to church and jump up and get happy on Sunday mornings. And bash those tambourines around. And screech out those spirituals. For crying all loud! Thunder out those spirituals!

I grew up in a mixed working-class, north end Halifax community. I had a lot of white friends as well as black friends and friends of immigrants. I had a multicultural, diverse kind of childhood. But nevertheless as I grew older, as I matured, as I went to high school and then onto university, I began to realize that this incredible culture had not really been chronicled in any honest way. In any way that was willing to give the people their due.

And I think the greatest example of academic dismissiveness towards Africadians, is the great work - I emphasize GREAT work of history by the Yale professor, Robin W. Winks, W I N K S, in his book, "The Blacks in Canada: A History" first published 1971.

That book has not been equal in terms of Winks's ability to marshal facts- F A C T S - about Black communities, Black people, achievements and failures all across the country. But at the same time that he's so adept at giving us facts, Winks also reminds us, almost every single page, that these Black Canadians, Negro Canadians, are a bunch of failures. They just are a bunch of failures. They can't put together any kind of like national church. They can't put together any kind of national newspaper, or journalism culture. They're failures at setting up schools. No historical black colleges and universities anywhere in Canada, unlike in the United States. They can't get along very well; they're always accusing each other of fraud, and they're always at each other's throats. Crabs in a bucket, that kind of thing.

It is relentlessly negative, relentlessly negative!

Winks is like: Yo, you Black Canadians! You got nothing going for you. You better all get yourselves off to the United States as fast as you can and join with African Americans. They've got a culture. They've got stuff going. They've got historical black colleges, universities. They have infrastructure for crying out loud. They've got national networks of churches, of various denominations. Not to mention Nation of Islam and everything.

What you guys got up there, North of the 49th Parallel? You got nothing. You're a sorry bunch of losers!

And about Black Nova Scotia, oh my God, he was even more dismissive and negative! He talked about the African Baptist Association being a collection of "begging ministers". And churches that were full of illiterates.

And yet at the same time that Winks outlined so powerfully, and almost convincingly, the destitution, oppression, self-hatred of Black Canadians, and especially the historical, founding Black Canadians and Africadians; his own facts, his own F A C T S contradict this negative portrait that he's intent on creating in his history, T*he Blacks in Canada: A History*.

To give one example. He talks about how the Black Nova Scotian loyalists, refugees, etc, are unsuccessful in farming and they're unsuccessful in fishing and they're freezing in the winter and they're starving in the summer. And it's because they have no sense of industry. No means to take care of themselves.

But you gotta stop and then ask yourself. But hold on here. These folks were all agricultural workers when they were slaves. They were all agricultural workers in the South. So why can't they still be agricultural workers in the North? What's the problem here? What's wrong with this picture? And then you read on and you say, oh, it's because they only got 10 acres or less of land. And Winks himself has to admit that you needed 100 acres, which is what the White settlers got.

In order to have a profitable agricultural enterprise, you needed 100 acres. And the vast majority of incoming Black migrants didn't get anywhere close to even 10 acres, let alone 100. And that was deliberate.

And Wink says, they also didn't succeed in fishing. Well, why is that Professor Winks? Why didn't they succeed in fishing? Then you read on that the colonial government refused to give them licenses to fish and also refused to give them docking privileges. Even if you scraped together some pennies and you bought yourself a boat, or you built yourself a boat, you didn't have any warf privileges. You couldn't dock your boat. So you couldn't go and fish and bring the fish back and tie up your boat at a dock. You weren't allowed to!

That book, which was published in 1971, helped to cement for many historians, this notion that Black Nova Scotians, Africadians in particular, were really a miserable bunch of people who had no culture, no ability to do anything.

And to underline this portrait that Winks is successful in perpetrating, in 1974, Francis Henry an anthropologist professor at York University goes to the Maritimes, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and publishes a book, F*orgotten Canadians: The Blacks in Nova Scotia,* but she also published an article in a journal of Anthropology and Folklore back in 1974. And the article is called *Black Music in the Maritimes*.

You read that title and you think, oh my God, I'm gonna find out about Black music in the Maritimes. Instead. Francis Henry argues there is no musical heritage amongst the Blacks in Nova Scotia or in New Brunswick.

There's none! Zero!

She basically relies on racist historians who argued that Black refugees when they arrived in Nova Scotia were so destitute, they were so poor, they didn't even have music. They weren't even singing, they weren't dancing, they weren't playing any instruments.

And so she quotes these racist historians to say, oh yeah, no wonder they don't have any music because they're just so poor and ignorant. Even the idea of clapping their hands and stomping their feet didn't seem to come to their minds.

And then she contradicts her own article because she appends to the article four or five songs that she recorded from I think it was just one Black Nova Scotian family who brought out their instruments and sang songs for her. And even though she has appended to her article those songs that she recorded, she still says,there's no Black music tradition in the Maritimes.

That is why Resh, that is why I am compelled to set the record straight. Because even we just wanna talk about Black music in the Maritimes, what about Porsche White, who was the first internationally celebrated Black singer from Canada, whose career basically spanned the 30s to the 60s, and is such a significant presence that she had a postage stamp issued in her honor in 2000. And many, many, many other honors, including a photograph by Karsh for crying out loud. The great photographer of the properly famous.

So she's up there with Hemingway, with Einstein, with Riopelle and so on, in that pantheon of Karsh portraits. She's celebrated in New York, in the Caribbean,. She's celebrated in South America. And that's just to name one person.

What about the fact that Duke Ellington's companion and the inspiration for his *Sophisticated Lady* was from Africville? There are photographs of him sitting in Africville.

What about George Carter, the great banjo player? The Bohee Brothers of St. John New Brunswick, who were the first Black act recorded by Thomas Edison on a brand new invention called the phonograph?

The fabulous Bohee Brothers of St. John New Brunswick took the banjo to Europe. They performed before Queen Victoria.

And then what about the guys who were playing on Don Messer's *Sing-Along Jubilee*, who were, playing, invisibly of course on radio, mandolin, guitar, fiddles and so on.

What about people like my late great Uncle Charlie Croxen, who used to perform at dances all up and down the Annapolis Valley playing his fiddle for crying out loud. That's how he made money. Oh my golly! And his now late wife, my late great-aunt who was a country western performer.

She had the satin shirts and blouses for crying out loud and the cowboy hat and the cowboy boots and she's doing Country n' Western all over the place. And their son, Sugar Plum Croxon a monster! He's a monster, a genius! All kinds of music.

What about Chris White, the founder of the Ottawa Folk Festival with his Nova Scotia roots? What about Shelly Hamilton, who's charting right now with a hit on the Country n' Western charts? And she's Black Indigenous Afro-Métis from Nova Scotia. So no, no, no, no, no. I'm going on too long.

But Resh, in whatever capacity you wanna talk about achievement, Africadians have done it!

Even when people said to me when I published my first book of poetry 40 years ago. 1983, people said, "Oh, he's the first Black poet coming from Nova Scotia. He's the first Black poet. " And I thought for a minute that I was. And then I remembered, No, hold on. There's Gloria Wesley, she published a Chapbook in 1974. Another gentleman published a Chapbook of Poetry in 1974. And then you go back in church history and there's Louisa Bailey, who was a poet in the early 20th century for the African Baptist Association.

That realization that there were people who were writing long before me, even if they were not very well known, made me go and put together my first anthology *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*.

I found documents from 1785 John Moran.

1841 colored people at Preston write a petition to Lieutenant Governor Faulklin saying, we want to have title for our land so we can expand our allotments, or at least feel confident that it's actually our land.

And by the way, I gotta mention, they finally got title to their land. They finally got it, but I'm not gonna tell you to guess when it was. I'll tell you what it was. It was 2021. So the people petitioned Nova Scotia government for title to their land in 1841. Nova Scotia government says, "oh, here's the title to your land". And it's 2021. 180 year gap.

One of the ways I was able to refute Francis Henry's thesis that there's no traditional Black music in Nova Scotia - when I was putting together the first volume of F*ire on the Water*. I found collections of hymns and spirituals published in 1895 and 1903 by two different ministers.

Reverend F.R. Langford put together *Old Jubilee Songs and Hymns*, which is mainly spirituals. 1895, self-published in Weymouth, Nova Scotia, where he was a pastor for the Weymouth Falls African Baptist Church.

And then 1903 Wellington Ney States! Oh my golly. Reverend Wellington Ney States. Woo! Puts together his collection, *Hymns Sung at the Service*s. Guess what? There's no music. These are just collections of lyrics. There's no music given.

And I hold these booklets in my hand and I see that either these ministers are insane. That they're publishing these booklets at their own expense and there's no music to go with the spirituals, no music to go with the hymns that they print and publish.

What that tells me is people knew the music. The people knew the music! There's no other reason for the ministers to pay out of their pockets for these booklets if it wasn't the case. And they're all traveling around visiting different congregations. Some of 'em have six or seven churches they gotta go to every Sunday or every weekend.

They're circulating these collections of hymns and spirituals they paid for themselves to get printed.

One has to presume that either they are insane and crazy and just nuts. Or they knew that the people already knew the music or would pick up the music themselves, and that all they needed to have were the words. That's all they needed to have was the words!

RESH: Well, you know, it's interesting, George, because when you're saying that, that the music was in the minds of the people, or maybe just in the words themselves, this very much reminds me of your style of writing.

When I'm reading your work, be it your poetry or novels, to pause in the middle is like stopping in the middle of a song. It interrupts the flow. It interrupts the rhythm, the momentum. So how would you describe your style? Do you have a style?

GEORGE: Yeah. First of all, thank you again for stopping me in the middle of yet another preroration. But I really am enjoying this conversation and thank you so much for asking me to talk about Africadia and Africadians.

But my style, it took me a long time to understand this. I gotta start at the beginning.

I'm 15 years old. I want to be popular in high school, but I can't dance. I can't play basketball. I can't play football. I can't sing and I don't know any instruments. So I

think, okay, I'm gonna be a songwriter. And then I'm reading books about being a songwriter and they say, you gotta be a poet if you're gonna be a songwriter. So then I start writing four poems every day.

I knew that the songs were songs because they rhymed. And I knew that the poems were poems cause they didn't rhyme; cause I only really knew about, or understood or appreciated free verse in those days as a 15 year old.

When I was starting to write, I'm modeling myself very, very much on singer-songwriters who were very popular in the 70s. So Elton John's lyricist, Bernie Taupin was a huge influence for me. And then later I got into Bob Dylan, and then Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. And then Black Blues singers and their lyrics. And I'm absorbing these songwriters. And I'm also beginning to read a lot of poetry to support my attempt to be a good songwriter by being a good poet.

I'm also maturing as a teen. I'm now 16, 17, 18.

As a boy, White folks look at me as being kind of cute; he's a little colored boy, little negro boy. You know, nice to see him around in our classes. And so I'm cute. I'm okay. I'm a cute guy. I might still be a shoplifter, so you don't want me in your stores, but I'm relatively cute and harmless, right, as a boy.

But once I become a teen, I become an economic and a sexual threat.

I might impregnate a middle- class White girl. That's a huge potential problem. Or I'm gonna compete with a middle-class White boy for some job that might allow me to rise up and make my own way into the middle-class.

So in both of these ways, I have to be suppressed. I have to be. There's no way I can be allowed to mature and take my place in the economic pecking order according to my own talents and merits. I'm not allowed to, I cannot do that.

My parents, I love them and I appreciate them to this day. But my father had the idealistic view that we should not really anchor ourselves in our race or think of ourselves primarily as being Black because it was important for our mental health that we simply see ourselves as being like everybody else. And that we rise or fall according to our own merits.

So he was not someone to harp much on racism. He believed in having pride in ourselves and pride in our family, pride in our community, but at the same time that we should not allow ourselves to feel instantly victimized by being Black. That could be quite harmful.

Our mom was a little bit more practical than that. She understood that, "Well you are growing up in a racist society's sons, so you are going to have to understand how you should navigate that". And her way of dealing with it was to tell us, in oppositon

to my father; "You know, you are Black and you should be really proud of that and really anchor yourselves in Blackness." As she was.

As I'm learning to become a poet, I'm finding that the only poetry that speaks to my reality as an oppressed, and overly surveilled, young teenage Black male, about to become a young adult Black male. The only school of poetry that told me what that was like was African American poetry.

I was reading British, I was reading Canadian, I was reading other poetry and translation. But the poetry that spoke to me, that was about me, that was about Halifax, that could talk about rats and roaches and nasty pots and broken glass and graffiti all over the place, and people who were abusing substances and so on, were the urban Black poets of the United States ghetto ghettos, plural.

When they talked about ghetto realities in the United States, that was Halifax, that was Gottingen Street, which I sometimes called Gotta Gun Street.

RESH: Who were some of those names?

GEORGE: Well, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes.

Gene Toomer! T O O M E R. *Cane*! *Cane* was my bible for crying out loud, because Toomer wrote a lot about rural Georgia. And rural Georgia sounded to me a lot like Windsor Plains, a lot like 3-Mile Plains, a lot like Weymouth Falls, a lot like North Preston, East Preston, Cherry Brook, Lake Loon, Upper Hammonds Plains, Hammonds Plains, Upper Big Trackedyy Tackedy and Sunnyville, Lincolnville, New Glasgow; all these Black communities. Jordan Town [?] Ville all around Nova Scotia.

So Gene Toomer was a huge influence.

Then you jump into the 1940s. Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black author to win a Pulitzer Prize.

Sterling A. Brown, Sterling A. Brown wrote one tremendous book called *Southern Road*, it's mainly free verse, some blues. He also wrote a collection of blues poems called *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which was published in 1927. Very, very good collection of poetry.

Then you get into the 1960s, now you've got the revolutionary Black poets. You got the revolutionary Black poets for crying out loud! You got Nicki Giovanni, you got Sonia Sanchez, you got a Amiri Baraka.

You've got, and my favorite really, Robert Hayden. Robert Hayden was - oh my golly - meat and drink for me. I loved his stuff.

And Henry Dumas, I can't leave out Henry Dumas, although I was told recently that the correct pronunciation is Dumas. Cuz of course it's the US so they don't really pronounce it in the French way. They pronounce it in a non-French way. So it's Dumas.

And I liked his work because he combines writing about ghetto life with writing about rural life. And as a Black Nova Scotian, I had both. One of the things that made me feel very rich growing up is the fact I had my home in Halifax. So access to all the urban stuff, you know, movie cinemas. If not movie stars, you got movie cinemas. But then the country, my grandparents' home in 3-Mile Plains, Newport Station, Green Street. So I had this country life and I had this city life. I had both, it was amazing!

This would be true for a lot of Black Nova Scotians. We talk about up home, down home in Nova Scotia amongst Africadians. You say, "I'm going up home". That means you're going up to your homestead in some rural part of Africadia. Or you're down home. That means you're up in Toronto, Upper Canada, and you're going down home, means you're going back to Nova Scotia, you're going back to Africadia.

So I'm being influenced by singer-songwriters, mainly white, Black American poetry tremendously. But I am not yet tapping into my own sound. I have not yet figured out that there's a particular poetic available to me, that is unique to me. And I don't find that out until I go off to university, 1979 University of Waterloo. And when I go to Waterloo,

Holy Smokes! Resh, they got me reading everything British!

Oh my God! I'm reading British this and British that. British. British. British, British. If it's not British, it's not English. It doesn't exist. It's not literature. The only literature that matters is British. And then when they talk about American literature, they've got you reading *Huckleberry Finn*

When they say, okay, well we gotta make some room for the Yanks; we're gonna give you *Huckleberry Finn.,*There. you can read that. That's your American literature.

I am cartooning this a little bit. But that was really my experience.

But to be even more honest, I loved John Milton. I loved *Paradise Lost* cause it had something to do with my Baptist background, I guess. I just loved it. Taught myself blank verse because that great epic poem is written in blank verse.

I read that book insiden out. I was copying John Milton. John Milton all the way!

I also made room for a little bit of ts eliot or t s idiot. I like to say, no t s idiot. I made a little bit of room for him. And a whole lot of space for John Milton in my universe.

So here I am. I'm a Black poet from Nova Scotia, and I am trying to write like John Milton between 1982 and 1985. What's wrong with this picture? What is crazy about this picture?

I graduated 1984, and I spent a year in Waterloo as the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper. Then go back to Nova Scotia. And the job I get is as a social worker in Black communities, in the Annapolis Valley.

And as soon as I get back there, I start hearing these voices.

I've got an Honours BA in English. I'm not much of a social worker. And I'm still trying to be a poet.

And all of a sudden I'm hearing these voices I would've heard as a boy, right? But I had never really listened to the quality, the diction, the vocabulary, the rhythms. These voices telling their stories, telling jokes, singing blues songs, country songs, spirituals and contemporary rap and rhythm and blues and so on.

And then I start trying to write in the mode of those voices. But I really only know blank verse.

So what begins to happen as demonstrated with that first poem, I recited in our conversation - is I began to write this Black English on blank verse. And it begins to sound like me. This is my metier. This is how I come to voice. This is how I get to be a poet.

I mesh one of the cornerstones of the British poetic tradition, blank verse, and I'm now beginning to mesh it with an Africadian voice, Africadian diction, Africadian vocabulary, Africadian history, Africadian stories.

And I'm shocked to realize that this is my voice. This is me. This is my stuff.

It's not me trying to copy Bob Dylan. It's not me trying to copy John Milton. It's not me trying to copy a Amiri Baraka or Robert Hayden or Henry Dumas. This is my voice all of a sudden.

Now scholars do talk about African Nova Scotia vernacular English. The English that develops in Nova Scotia is ours. It's ours. And it's unique in the world of the African diaspora. It's a unique form of Black English.

That's what I finally came to understand. As scholars understand it now, as linguists understand it now. That we have our own Black English.

It's certainly not the same as African-American English or Ebonics. It's not the same because it also has those influences from the Celtic, the Scottish, the English, the

French, and Indigenous influences all around us at the same time. And then our own local musical traditions.

So my style ultimately comes out of that. That fusion. Plus the application of what I've learned through three university degrees in English, as well as the ultimate practice of putting together books, poetry, the novels.

I'm so glad that you mentioned *George and Rue* because *George and Rue* was yet another kind of discovery. When I started to write *George and Rue*, I was afraid. I was actually afraid to write the story because it was about my two cousins, my mom's first cousins , who committed robbery and murder in New Brunswick and got hanged. A story I didn't know about until I was 45 in 1995.

And as soon as I heard it, I knew I wanted to write a novel about it. And I also wrote a collection of poetry about it, *Execution Poems*.

But in writing the novel, I was actually afraid to grapple with reality of their lives. And I was also still fighting a sense of shame that these two young men, only 22 and 23, took another human being's life in a truly cowardly and despicable way. So under the laws of 1949, it was very unlikely that they were simply gonna get life in prison. After all, they were both Black and Indigenous. No. They were gonna be hanged. There was no question about it. And they did July 27th, 1949 in a barn in back of the Fredericton City Jail.

So I wrote a first draft of *George and Rue* that was actually kind of funny, now looking back on it. Because I present Rue as being this kind intellectual figure. He was the one who probably committed the actual murder. But I have him reading Shakespeare and quoting Shakespeare and basically playing the part of the alienated black intellectual, which was probably me, I was probably talking about me.

So I submit this manuscript to Harper Collins, and they said, "Ahem, we think you gotta rewrite this book. You gotta come at it again."

And I was disheartened. I was perplexed. But then I did go back at it two years later, in 2002, I had steeped myself in the trial records of both George and Rufus. I also had access to George's prison diary and some of the writing that Rufus did as well, in appealing for clemency instead of a death penalty. And also had gone back and read through every single copy of the Fredericton Daily Gleaner from early January, 1949, up to August, a few days after the actual executions.

George and Rufus had a very country way of speaking. And it reminded me of the way I heard people speak in 3-Mile Plains, Newport Station, my mom's home community.

And the thing that really lit up for me that, that made me recognize this was reading through the trial transcripts for George Hamilton's trial. And the court reporter wrote this word spelled B E W S. What is B E W S? I was looking it up, I couldn't find it

anywhere. And then I finally was smart enough to actually sound it aloud. "Bews. Bews". B E W S, Bews.

And I understood that what George was saying was "beers". B E E R S. In his way of pronouncing it, which was, "we had a few bews", instead of, "we had a few beers". You know, "we had a few bews". And so the court reporter - White - hears B E W S. That's what she types.

But then I'm realizing, holy smokes, that's their pronunciation. That's their pronunciation. And George isn't George? It's Joyge. It's Joyge. Jogie or it's Jawgie.

"How you doing today? Wanna have a few bews?"

When I started to get that, then it all started to fall into place. And then I started to have fun, even though it's a tragic story. I began to have fun trying to think how these guys would say certain things, right? In a country way. They both only got the grade three. And that was not uncommon. As a matter of fact, there was a study of 3-Mile Plains, 5-Mile Plains, of the adults, that was done in 1965 by Acadia University, Wolfville Nova Scotia.

83% of the adults in Windsor Plains had grade three. That was 1965. These guys were born in 1925, 1926. So of course, they're only gonna get grade three. And they're both unskilled laborers, lumpen proletariat. So their reading level is comic books. And of course, watching movies and listening to radio serials. That's what they got going on for them.

And so finally, when I got to write the second draft I said, "this is a ballad". It's *The Ballad of George and Rue.*

I had to become comfortable with accepting that this is how we speak. This is our English and it's valid. I stopped worrying about whether I dropped my G's or not. And it's not an affectation, it's the way I speak. Because it's the way I heard people speak around me.

Luckily I'm a full professor with several honorary doctorates, along with an earned doctorate. So I guess it's okay for me to drop my Gs now.

RESH: And you were also Poet Laureate of Toronto and then Poet Laureate of the National Parliament of Canada. So I think it makes it extra okay, probably.

But you know, George, you can see that struggle within *George and Rue,* especially in the disclaimer it really sort of captures a lot of what we're talking about.

You say in the disclaimer "George and Rufus Hamilton always lived outside boundaries ,including knowledge, including history, including archives. They're 'encompassed' here only by unrestrained imagination." In terms of the language, you go on to say that, the English of this novel," the English ain't broken, it's blackened."

And, and, as somebody who doesn't come from the Africadian experience, but does come from the English Caribbean experience, I can't tell you how important it is to hear that. This language that we speak in all parts of the world, that is just sort of off the center, or is the marginal dialect of the proper English - in the Caribbean would say "proper English". To hear you describe it as not broken, which is the way we always describe it, but it's blackened.. Gives it such a legitimacy, such a pride. It's not broken.

GEORGE: Resh, I wanna thank you so much for that. Because I was also trying to write in a way that my own community would feel a way to enter in. And hear themselves, hear our stories, in our way of speaking. And not be turned off by an overly, I wanna say "propertied English" along with the notion of proper English. Because there's also a class aspect to this of course, in terms of the imperialist vs. the colonized and the upper class vs. the lower class.

In *The Tempest* Shakespeare gives those great lines to Caliban: " You taught me your language, and my prophet on it is I know how to curse."

RESH: And the conversation continues and continues beyond borders.

So please join us for Part II of this episode, as acclaimed poet and novelist, George Elliott Clarke reflects on past and current struggles against racism and imperialism, the real meaning of decolonization and shaping effective resistance.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of the Courage My Friends podcast.

Thanks for listen.

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