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[See table of contents](#)

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Whips, Hammers, and Ropes: The Burden of Race and Desire in Clarke's *George & Rue*

GUGU D. HLONGWANE

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE'S *GEORGE & RUE* is an imaginative and painstakingly detailed recreation of an actual murder of Nacre Burgundy, a white rural New Brunswick cab-driver. Executed in 1949 for this killing are the characters after whom Clarke's novel is titled — George and Rufus Hamilton — arguably two of Canadian fiction's most unforgettable black brothers. While Clarke does not waver in naming this vicious act a crime, he nonetheless situates it within the context of the ravages of the black Atlantic Canadian experience. The murder of Burgundy, in other words, exposes the racial prejudices of mid-1920s to 1940s Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, which led the Hamilton boys to their violent self-destruction. As Andrew Steeves suggests in the foreword to *Execution Poems*, Clarke's first treatment of this grim murder, the architects of this brutal crime are part villain and part victim. What Clarke achieves, then, in fictionalizing this crime of young men who are his cousins, is the "blurring [of] the line between the perpetrator and the victim — a line we'd prefer to be simple and clear" (7). Through an employment of postcolonial theories of violence and more specifically the black Atlantic Canadian experience, this paper will discuss the place of race and desire in the killing acts of George and Rue.

A masterful blend of fact and fiction, *George & Rue* is a carefully constructed novel that describes a cold-blooded murder by two black men who "couldn't see straight" (xi). After presenting these men at their worst, with blood on their hands, Clarke delves back into their past to paint a damning picture of twentieth-century Atlantic Canada. The question asked by Frantz Fanon in his diagnosis of colonial violence — "what makes the lid blow off?" (*Wretched* 71) — is answered with each turn of *George & Rue*'s pages. As the plot unfolds, it becomes

apparent that George and Rue bludgeon Silver to death in order to avoid white society's "bigger hammer" (xi). Motivated by a deep spiritual and physical hunger, they misguidedly lash out at what they consider to be a symbol of their suffering. Tired of living in what Fanon describes as "a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light" (39), the Hamilton boys develop violent desires for the comforts they are denied. Far from being an advocate of violence Clarke, like Fanon, is concerned with the eradication of the oppressive conditions which produce George and Rue.

The harsh environment in which the fictional George and Rue grow up has a bearing in reality. In *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, Clarke writes quite personally and passionately about the meaning of growing up black in Atlantic Canada: "Nothing in the province reflected me or mine save for the two dozen or so churches of the African United Baptist Association (AUBA)" (3). In this alienating environment, not even the historically black community of Africville, situated in Northern Halifax, is allowed to exist. Bulldozed in the 1960s, Africville meant the relegation of African Nova Scotians to the peripheries of a very white Halifax. For Clarke, this injustice is compounded by "the perpetual, white denial of Canada's own history of slavery, segregation, and anti-black discrimination" (*Odysseys* 35). So implicated is white Canada in the suffering of black people that Clarke opines that they "have been defined and shaped, to some extent, by Eurocentric Canadian racism" (17). Some of Clarke's Black Loyalist ancestors, who formed black Nova Scotia or what Clarke terms Africadia after the American Revolutionary war of 1783, quickly tired of a "nasty and hardscrabble colony" and subsequently made a home for themselves in Sierra Leone. Those blacks who remained in Nova Scotia were the worse off: "In Sierra Leone, the ex-Black Loyalists became 'Nova Scotians,' while their African-American sistren and brethren who remained in Nova Scotia became 'caste-down' 'Negroes' and 'Coloureds': the invisible, unsung niggers of the diaspora." Reduced to what Clarke calls "underemployed, poorly educated wards of the state" (126), black people were compelled to move entire communities to the United States (111) — a "state of subsistence [which] persisted deep into the twentieth century" (110).

In his lyrical account of a gruesome murder, Clarke importantly highlights the ripple-effects of Canada's institutionalized racism. Like

Fanon's colonized man who "will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people" (52), George and Rue, who are raised in a dilapidated shack, not only feel the wrath of white society but are also subjected to the violence of a father emasculated by his "superiors." A temporary meat cutter, Asa attempts to regain his authority by taking "violence home with him, bundled up with meat scraps" (11). Life in the Hamilton household is so toxic that Alisha, the eccentric "conjure woman" (6) and midwife who delivers Rufus, correctly predicts that "if you don't hang God in your heart, Asa, you — or these boys — is gonna hang" (13). Indeed, the violence of a man whose philosophy is "belt straps and bullwhips on the ass," combined with the violence of a "whites-only" (11) society that robs black people of their dignity, eventually stifles the entire family.

Said to be a people "who came with nothing to nowhere" (*George & Rue* 14), the Hamiltons descend from "black slaves freed by redcoats down in Maryland and Virginia" (14) during the War of 1812 between the United States of America and Great Britain. They are "transported, like convicts, to 'New Scarcity' [Nova Scotia]" (14) where they are poorly accommodated by "shifty Brits [who] had granted no one nough land to be an independent farmer." Instead, "folks had to take hard rocks for pillows — and be happy" (15). Economically distressed, these refugees die of flu, tuberculosis, polio, rheumatism and arthritis in a "free" country described as "a hillbilly Hell" (17).

In this climate of hunger and disease where self-respect can barely be afforded (14), an intense self-hatred is cultivated. Asa's wife, Cynthia, for example, who associates whiteness with "good things" (Fanon 39), relishes her light complexion and "'good' hair" (21). But she is of course not fair enough to access the many privileges of whiteness. What she *can* do is desire whiteness and those associated with it, however loosely. A case in point is a white man, a stranger who compliments her good looks at a train station and invites her to Montreal to "come by Rufus's Paradise . . . a Negro gent who'll fix you up for big things." Consequently, she not only names her son Rufus but also feels that he "was *spiritually* that white man's son" (20). Just like drugs and music later become Rue's desire, escape and consolation, Cynthia's escape is the "civilized" Montreal — a place she fails to reach — and more realistically, Halifax, a place she runs to for a brief period with the corrupt and womanizing Reverend Dixon. When Asa discovers her escape plans to

Montreal, he mercilessly beats her. Eventually whipped by life itself, Cynthia suffers a stroke and then later a heart attack while scrubbing toilets for a pimp named Gabby Robie. Shortly before her death Asa, who also has no love of self, dies tragically at the hands of Cynthia's lover, Reverend Dixon, who drowns him at the Halifax harbour. As they are left to fend for themselves, George and Rue's violence spirals out of control.

After the death of their parents, George and Rue are left with few employment opportunities at a time when most doors were closed to people of colour. Even the Royal Canadian Navy, where Rue would have been forced to peel potatoes while his peers "call[ed] him nigger while gobbling his hash browns and sausages" (64), is closed to him. At an early age, the brothers' desires lead them to covet other people's things. Described by their mother as "phantoms of a devil father" (23), these young men are doomed by society and their father to be "niggers, not engineers" (28). As far as Asa is concerned, "the boys had to be abused like beasts, just whipped and slapped and kicked and punched and beaten, so they'd knuckle under and be quiet niggers" (28). Out of school by grade three and briefly abandoned by their mother when she flees to Halifax with her lover, George and Rue become not quiet but angry. Long before Rue hammers Silver to death, he fires wantonly at fifteen sunflowers. In another incident when he feels old enough and bold enough, Rue returns his father's violence with a piece of wood. Telling his wife-beating father to "stay down there like the dog you are," Rufus laughs "a laugh that come from a gutter" (46) at Asa, now the weaker of the two. Clearly molded by the scarcity of their black experience, the Hamilton boys become comfortably reckless with their lives.

George, the older and sometimes meeker of the two boys, is the voice of reason for an impulsive Rue who starts trouble wherever he goes. Although Cynthia has high expectations for a boy named after an unknown Negro gentleman from Montreal, she mostly sees him as a disappointment. As far as Cynthia is concerned, Rue "was a bother — rufous in tint and rueful in mood" (20). Whereas Rue tries his strength on sunflowers, George, who "could swing a big axe like a little hammer" (43), tests his strength on the maples he logs for a living. In order not to succumb to his brother's level of depravity, George escapes Rue after torching the family shack and splitting a hundred dollar's worth of insurance money (70). Seemingly at each turn in their lives, these boys are given ample opportunity to sharpen their rage.

But George and Rue, who clearly do not allow themselves to be reduced to Fanon's "hemmed in" (52) colonized native, do their best to function in an otherwise compartmentalized world. Unwanted by the Canadian Active Army which can only employ him as a cook and janitor, George is branded a "childish negro" (77) by the army shrink after being accused of desertion. Refusing to be "hemmed in" by a crippling colonial vocabulary, he nonetheless imprisons himself by turning to a life of crime. But just as Rue finds love and refuge in a woman named Easter, who later drowns while crossing the overflowing Avon River Bridge, George also has some respite from a life of constant failure. After he falls in love with a woman named Blondola, they marry and make a home for themselves in Barker's Point, New Brunswick, a place where "the Ku Klux Klan clucked and conclaved occasionally" (86). For Blondola, who tires of their life of struggle, the pertinent question is, "why shouldn't we be happy? Who don't have molasses, matches, moose meat, and milk?" (88). This desire for food preoccupies almost all the characters in Clarke's novel. It is a lack closely tied to the general unhappiness of a people too familiar with scarcity.

This state of unhappiness persists when Rue, in response to an invitation from his brother, lands in New Brunswick, a place the latter considers "too suspiciously white to be trusted." So disturbed is Rue by the whiteness of this place that he "schemed to apply black paint to the statue of Bobby Burns on the Green — either that or smash it to bits" (91). This "world of statues" (51), which Fanon generally interprets suspiciously as the immortalization of "the general who carried out the conquest" (51-52), only serves to further ostracize the underdogs whose achievements are seldom preserved this grandly. Clarke's poem, "Public Enemy," sums up Rue's anarchist response when faced with predominantly white places like New Brunswick: "I want to muck up their little white paradise here. / I want to swat their faces til I'm comfortable in my gut" (*Execution* 32). Rue does exactly this to Silver, the taxi driver who has access to the "white paradise" denied him.

In fictionalizing the lives of George and Rue, however, Clarke is not interested in demonizing these men. Like Blondola, who desires the sweeter things in life, specifically the good food they are mostly without, Rue — inspired by his new love India — asks a question similar to Blondola's: "would one day they'd share sardines, sausages, bread and butter, crumpets and tarts, and wild blueberries, a breakfast

of well-peppered Newfie steak (bologna) and excellent onion soup or burnt-onion hash?" (92). In other words, as violent as Rue is, he desires a life of peace. As a descendant of slaves, for Rue the nagging question is "when'd they ever be free to relax and easily *be*?" (93)

Ironically, the only time that Rue's brother, George, can "easily be," is when he is jailed after Silver's murder. Going beyond simply desiring food as Blondola and Rue do, George actually satisfies his physical hunger with "pies, muffins, cakes; all the pop in the world; orange juice, apple juice; milk, tea, coffee, sausage, turkey, mackerel, chicken, tuna, hamburger, beef . . . even pineapple rings. He'd'd no idea that some people ate so handsomely" (164). George knows the painful truth: those who eat "so handsomely" are not people who look like him. Or as Fanon puts it in his discussion of the economic imbalances of colonialism, "the cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (40). Denied the land "which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 44), the Hamilton family is forced to eat rodents rather than the delicacies that George ravenously devours in jail.

Unlike George, who experiences temporary nourishment in prison, Rue, who is incarcerated for various crime sprees in New Brunswick and called "nigger like it was his number and his name" (96), is hardened by the racism he experiences in jail. Like Fanon's colonized natives who are "always on the alert" and whose "muscles are always tensed" (53), the results of the Hamilton boys' lack of nourishment show on other parts of their bodies. Described as "thin black men, with black, angular caps and second-hand denim shirts" (103), George and Rue hatch a plan to "hit a white man real hard to get some cold cash" (104). Although reluctant to hurt the man who had brought his first child, Otho, home from the hospital, George needs money for his wife and newly born daughter, Desia, both of whom are held hostage at the hospital until the delivery bill is paid. Accordingly, George provides the murder weapon — a hammer he steals from a man named O'Ree after the latter refuses to pay him for cutting timber.

The killing of Silver is described in the most brutal of terms. For the boys, the idea is to "make his [Silver's] skull a bloody egg, smashed open like a *piñata*, consciousness seeping out, sparkling" (127). Crammed into the trunk of his taxi, the still-alive Silver groans in agony as his foot is mangled. Given the task of dumping both the car and Silver in

Saint John, George rationalizes that “apparently, Desiah’s birth had mandated Silver’s death. There was a balance here” (139). Before finally abandoning the car on the outskirts of Fredericton and not in Saint John as planned, George commits adultery with Lovea, a prostitute, while his wife and daughter languish in hospital. Clearly operating with a disturbed conscience at this point, George wears Silver’s bloodied cap, which he later offers as a present to Lovea. Rue is equally unfeeling. Rather than experience guilt over the murder of Silver, he is overly concerned about retrieving his clothes from the dry cleaners (128). The spoils of the crime are clearly not worth the death of a human being — “George got \$88 and the watch and the ring; Rufus had \$87 but also grabbed the clutch of coins. He also unhooked Silver’s black glass crucifix and beads” (129). But Silver’s death, which George rationalizes as “balance,” does not quench the brothers’ desires. Having spent the taxi driver’s money, Rue still has to rely on their neighbour, Mrs. Roach, to feed him. All he has to show for all the blood that has been spilled are a few flashy clothes, which inspire him to pose “like a gangster” (149). At this point George and Rue become the criminals they are perceived to be.

The seemingly insatiable appetites of the Hamilton brothers have much to do with the depth of their hunger which, as I have already suggested, inspires even deeper desires. Concerned with theorizing “the link between hunger and race or racism,” in the United States, where “people of color are represented disproportionately among the hungry” (“What Color” 3), David L.L. Shields refers to hunger as the “silent emergency” (2). While Shields contends that the cure for hunger is known yet ignored, in “Race and Poverty in the Psychology of Prejudice” he makes another important point: “hunger is a threat. Hunger is a political threat because the existence of the hungry is a stinging indictment against the political status quo.” More relevantly for *George & Rue*, Shields asserts that because “the hungry, having little to lose, are likely to fight by whatever means necessary to disrupt the social order” (“Race” 49). George and Rue do exactly this in their attempt to “muck up” a society that works against them.

The disruption that results in *George & Rue* involves the whips and hammers that are such an integral part of young men who feel they have very little to live for. There are also the ropes that eventually hang them. Although George converts to Christianity during his imprisonment

and identifies his brother as Silver's sole murderer, he is still charged with capital murder (163). Crown Prosecutor Alphaeus Boyd, who has a "looming appointment as the deputy attorney general of the Province of New Brunswick" (176) and who is hardly interested in contextualizing the boys' violence, reduces the brothers to "one deadly criminal: Rufus-George, with suspect clothes, dirty looks, shifty grammar" (175). While Clarke maintains that the taxi driver's murder "made crooked, bloody sense in a society that had no use for young black men save as minstrels, serfs, or clowns" ("Turning" 13), the fictional Boyd, while acknowledging the oppression of "negroes," is of the mind that Rufus-George were "not trampled in the streets or brutalized in their houses" (176). Furthermore, before passing his sentence after the juror's report, Justice Jeremiah Chaud, whose misunderstanding (or more accurately his denial) of the realities of blackness matches Boyd's, addresses George and Rue with much condescension:

Indeed, I am glad that my people, the Canadian people, have that self-restraint which is characteristic, I think, of our people, and they refrained from doing violence to you, leaving you in the hands of the law in the regular administration of the law. That is a great object lesson to other people, south of the border, by whom you people are less humanely treated. You differ from most of us in blood, in race, but no man can say that you have not had a fair trial. (186-87)

But for Clarke, white Canadians, who participated in the slave trade until 1834 when it was officially abolished throughout the British empire, are not innocent at all in their treatment of people of colour. As Clarke asserts in his *Execution Poems*, in the voice of Rue, "the blow that slew Silver came from two centuries back. / It took that much time and agony to turn a white man's whip / into a black man's hammer" (35). Illustrating the causes and effects of the boys' deranged act, then, is a crucial goal of Clarke's novel.

The larger white society which plays a major role in the boys' feelings of worthlessness is put under the microscope. On the day of the execution of George and Rue on 27 July, 1949, "six local Klansmen milled about in white sheets and hoods with slits cut out for eyes." The excited and savagely surging crowd which turn the boys into convenient scapegoats is described as "anticipating an orgiastic lynching" (205). Unlike Kenneth Bevin and Girvin Patenaude, whose death sentence for killing

a Montreal taxi driver in 1949 is commuted to life in prison, George and Rue “had no such white luck” (214). What these “beaten-up black boys” (103) do have at the end of their young lives are persistent desires. In *Execution Poems*, George wishes he “could go to / Africa, to a Coloured country, or to Haiti, or even to Cuba.” Here, George imagines “do[ing] / away with sickness / and not get away with murder” (36). Rue, on the other hand, sees only a hostile courtroom, “a parliament of jackals” and “Hitler faces front[ing] dark robes” (37). This environment notwithstanding, Rue — who remains unapologetic about his murderous deeds but shares a moment of tenderness with his brother when they briefly embrace before the executions — wishes to sing “in a new life, a new world, / some April song” (*Execution* 37). But Rue realizes that it is desire itself that is the problem. In “Trial II” Rue maintains that “We’re damned because desire is not damned” (*Execution* 37).

Like their descendants who left “New Scarcity” for Sierra Leone, George and Rue both desire “a new world” full of April songs. They fulfill this desire, to an extent, through the women they passionately and tenderly love. Interestingly, they seem to possess very little of their father’s misogyny, even though Cynthia sees a Rufus who is “too much like his papa” (20). Their passion for women notwithstanding, the brothers have too many other competing desires that need attention. There is, for example, Rue’s craving for “blue shoes, a yellow suit, and a green shirt” (*Execution* 17) in order to keep up appearances of success. This gnawing desire, for clothes and food, is best articulated by George in “Ballad of a Hanged Man”: “Have you ever gone in your life, going / two days without eating, and whenever / you get money, you’re gonna eat and eat / regardless of all the bastards in Fredericton / was bust in the head, skull jimmied open?” (*Execution* 13). The boys’ hunger clearly dulls both the heart and the mind to the extent that George is left with no feelings at all for the “bastards” who have reduced him to a nigger.

It can be argued that George and Rue’s hunger evokes desires for the very white world that they mostly shun — a duality that has been explored by several postcolonial theorists. For example Terry Goldie, who explores native/white colonial relationships in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, theorizes desire in terms of “fear and temptation,” while Stuart Hall and Fanon link desire to envy. In the case of Fanon, the disempowered native is not only envious but lustful: “The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it

expresses his dreams of possession — all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible" (39).

Both George and Rue feel envious of Silver and the privileges to which he has access as a white man. George gulps "the acid of envy" when, before his death, Silver shows off his blond family, especially his blond wife who, George guesses, "was the tenderly looked-after kind of blonde who could expect to sport a new mink coat every Christmas" (123). Whether or not they lust after Silver's wife in the manner suggested by Fanon, as young men who find it difficult to fend for themselves and their families — India leaves Rue while he is incarcerated — George and Rue feel deeply emasculated, especially after acquiring Silver's possessions.

In terms of another acquisition, it might seem as if Rue desires the language of his oppressors. During his testimony, Boyd comments on Rue's "almost perfect English" (183) while George, whom Rue had never seen reading (183), keeps a journal in prison written in "erratic Grade Three spelling" (195). The boys' English can be said to "fall short" for a couple of reasons. There is, firstly, their incomplete formal education due to their dire poverty. But more importantly, there is a deliberate attempt by Clarke, the creator of the fictional George and Rue, to give the boys a "blackened English." An act of resistance as well as defiance of the status quo, this English is one through which George and Rue assert their essential difference, a point illustrated by Rue in the poem titled "Malignant English." He responds to the Crown's observations about his "good" English with "But, your alabaster, marble English isn't mine: I hurl / insolent daggers at it like an assassin assaulting a statue" (*Execution* 38).

Rue's investment, therefore, is in forging a language of his own, just as he tries to forge an identity separate from his father's. But Crown Prosecutor Boyd, who renders the boys invisible by merging them into a single identity of Rufus-George, sees not only a shifty identity but he also hears "a shifty grammar . . . a scintilla of Africa, of bush, in the boys' talk" (175). It is this very "scintilla of Africa, of bush" that Clarke wants to resuscitate. Echoing Rue's sentiments in the poem "Malignant English," Clarke writes: "While we Africadians will continue, in increasing numbers, to learn Standard English, that education must not be won at the expense of our own native, stunning, and bluesy tongue"

(*Odysseys* 101). These spaces of resistance are crucial in combating a relentless racism.

But for Clarke's fictional black characters, the retention of cultural difference is both burdensome to the brothers and menacing to others. George and Rue appear to white society "as black as sin. No one could whitewash their atrocity into a mere mistake" (173). Moreover, "the killers' colour was not immaterial: it made a black crime even blacker" (174). Although white society sees only black boys who are naturally geared towards a life of crime, George and Rue descend from people racially mixed with the Mi'kmaq and also with the very whites who torment them. These "cinematically beautiful" people, who "often mirrored gorgeous Gypsies, possess[ed] long black hair and copper skin, or even long blondish hair with cinnamon skin" (15). The label of black, then, can be said to be limiting given the other branches of identity that form them.

While perceived as black, in reality "the boys looked Cuban; they looked Mexican; they looked Gypsie; they looked Indian; they looked Injun" (31). This fluidity of identity, tied to what Clarke terms a "poly-consciousness" (*Odysseys* 40), does not bode well for the two brothers. In fact it renders them more suspicious. That is why Rue arrives at the conclusion that racial harmony is possible only in music, with "the gorgeous congress of Negro and Caucasian keys, so capable of beautiful intimacy here, but not in Three Mile Plains, not in Nova Scotia" (40). Despite the general suspicion of blackness there is, however, a celebration of various shades of blackness and brownness. Blondola, for instance, is "a lively-lookin, dark-skinned black girl in black" with "coal-coloured eyes" (71). Far from being blonde, she reveals the ironic meaning of her name shortly before her husband's execution: "Ma loved her blond Jesus, and she loved her dark Coca-Cola" (203). This seamless merging of otherwise disparate identities may have made sense to Blondola's mother, but in a world keen on labels, there is the necessity to explain a label of blonde that ill fits a dark-skinned girl.

Since the world that George and Rue inhabit has rigid labels of identity, names become an important tool of justice — a balancing act for a people deemed ugly by the larger society. Easter's name, for instance, evokes the beautiful ascension of Christ, a crossing of boundaries while Silver's name represents the flashy coins that the boys think will help

them achieve the balance they are denied. But it is the name India States which is a blatant act of desire and defiance for a people rendered homeless and invisible by white society. Seemingly not using her real name, which Rue “had yet to learn” (92), India “had a quarter of black blood, and looked pure gold” (93). Whatever her real name is, she embodies a real desire for the land stolen from Canada’s indigenous peoples. Her name also evokes the difficult struggles of Indians against the British Raj. India States, then, is both a call for justice as well as a reminder of historical wrongs.

Because of his close connections to the historical George and Rue, Clarke is concerned with keeping this acerbic story in the nation’s memory. In his interview with H. Nigel Thomas, he reveals that the siblings of Nacre Burgundy had requested that he not fictionalize their brother’s tragedy. But Clarke responds by pointing out that the tragedy of the Burgundys is his family’s tragedy as well. He adds, about George and Rue, that “their fate encapsulated in many ways the situation of the Black community in the Maritimes at the time: the particular predicament of Black men, without a whole lot of education, and no jobs open to them except being labourers, which was extremely seasonal, just no security at all. . . . So, anyway, what were they going to do? What on earth were they going to do?” (52). Rather than become the place of refuge from American slavery that it was supposed to be, “New Scarcity” becomes, instead, a trap for black people forced to find joy in a beer and meat in rats (*George & Rue* 17).

The historical Hamilton boys, as Clarke asserts, were not exceptional, however. In fact, “of three black men sentenced to death by Nova Scotia courts in the 1930s, two — or two-thirds — went to the gallows” (*Odysseys* 111). While Clarke highlights race as an important factor in the executions committed in Canada, Neil Boyd, author of *The Last Dance: Murder in Canada*, suggests that “Canadians convicted of murder are, for the most part, socially disadvantaged. They approach life with poorly developed social skills, lacking what we might call social intelligence. In some cases they are miserable, just as likely to kill themselves as they are to kill others” (8). As I have illustrated, class position undoubtedly influences the poor decisions that George and Rue make in the novel. But there is no discounting the salience of race. It can also be argued that Clarke’s fictional characters are vibrant men who would rather live than die. If they appear mostly miserable, it is because white

society has hammered them down — and the boys, in turn, hammer themselves. George, in his self-doubt and self-hatred, sees himself as a spoiler of an otherwise perfect universe (103).

Clarke's fictional account of the Hamilton boys becomes especially poignant when one considers the pathetic lives of the historical George and Rue, who were "abandoned by their parents when they were two and three years old, dumped in their grandparents' backyard in the winter of 1928" (Boyd 192). Unlike the fictional Cynthy, who is a somewhat caring mother save for her brief abandonment of her boys when she leaves for Halifax with the far from reverend Dixon, the historical mother of George and Rue, like her sons, was allegedly a career criminal who spent time in various prisons and also ran "a fast house" in Halifax. (193) Where Clarke does stay close to historical facts as provided by Boyd is with regard to the motivation for the killing of the taxi driver. In Boyd's historical account, George is eager to acquire the money necessary to pay the hospital bills for his second child. Moreover, it is Rue who sits "in the front beside the taxi driver" while George sits at the back. (193) Although George provides the murder weapon, the hammer, it is Rue who strikes the deadly blow — not with the hammer as is the case in Clarke's novel but with a broken beer bottle — while George attempts to buy home brew from Nat McIntyre.

The killing of Silver in Clarke's novel is not only motivated by great need, by real hunger and economic depravation, it is also racially motivated — a factor overlooked by Boyd in his discussion of murders in Canada. While Rue suggests simply "stun[ning] and rob[b]ing a man," George "saw a white man staggering, bloody and wallet-less through a downtown alley, maybe Mazzuca's Lane" (104). For both brothers, "the decision to go out and hit a white man real hard to get some cold cash did not require much dialogue" (104). Internalizing their father's beliefs of boys who are just niggers and not engineers, Rue reminds his brother George of how hopeless their lives are: "Joygee, we is just thieves, pure thieves. We steal firewood, chickens, clothed off clothesline, even fools' bad ideas" (104). Just as society counts them out, the Hamilton men do the same to themselves.

The burdens of race that so overwhelm and eventually kill George and Rue have not eased today. Clarke has written eloquently about the injustices he has faced in contemporary Canada. In his introduction to *Eyeing the North Star*, he reminisces about his painful encounter

with the word nigger when he was only four years old (xi). Elsewhere, he explains that “the history of Black people in Canada is one of erasure. And it continues to this day” (*Thomas* 39). In order to combat Canadians’ “massive ignorance: a constant chorus of ‘I didn’t know,’” Clarke believes strongly that “those who know must fill in the blanks, because, even if Canadians in general might think that this history is irrelevant, it isn’t. Even now it is shaping the racial and multicultural attitudes of this country” (39).

Many theorists of race in Canada would agree with Clarke. Rinaldo Walcott, for instance, not only acknowledges the silences of the nation but stresses the importance of “resist[ing] this erasure [of black communities] in their personal, collective and everyday histories” (*Rude* 7). Clarke achieves this by writing into history those left out of the nation’s sweeping narratives, even though Walcott, in his introduction to the second revised edition of *Black Like Who?*, contests Clarke’s rootedness in the nation, especially his nativist focus on rural black Nova Scotia. Far from embracing Walcott’s “deterritorialized strategy,” Clarke, according to Walcott, overlooks “newer and urban” black presences in Canada. (15) More interestingly, Walcott observes Clarke’s “impossible desire to belong to the nation. A nation that forms him, but a nation that cannot imagine him within its own formative narratives” (16). It can be argued that it is precisely because of Clarke’s cognizance of the limits of the nation that he creates characters like George who desire to leave Canada for more welcoming lands. This desire notwithstanding, Clarke’s focus is on drawing a map of African-Canadian literature that makes black Nova Scotians a relevant part of Canada’s early formation, whether the nation likes it or not.

The racial tensions of contemporary Halifax of the 1990s as chronicled by Charles Saunders in *Black and Bluenose: The Contemporary History of a Community* suggest that eastern Canadian provinces are still unwelcoming. Saunders documents numerous clashes between blacks and whites, which occurred almost everywhere in the Greater Halifax region, at high schools, pubs, and shopping centres. After alleged discrimination against blacks at Halifax pubs in August 1991, marchers chanted:

Halifax, Halifax have you heard?
This is not Johannesburg!
Halifax, Halifax have you heard?
This is not Johannesburg! (Saunders 115)

The Halifax that the fictional George and Rue encounter may differ somewhat or remarkably from contemporary Halifax, depending on one's perspective. But the Halifax likened in the above chant to South Africa's once racially segregated apartheid city of Johannesburg inspires uneasiness about the extent to which things have changed.

Although contemporary Halifax's racially alienating education system, which has prompted vice-principal Wade Smith to call for an all-black school given the high drop-out rates amongst black learners, is arguably cause for concern or relief, the school system that George and Rue face in Clarke's novel is perhaps much worse. Called "a sly little nigger boy" (30) by a visiting teacher, Rue decides to quit school in Grade Three after being strapped at school and whipped at home for slapping his racist teacher. George follows suit, also in grade three, after attempts by his peers to whiten his face with chalk dust (30). These racial struggles within the education system continue today. As Clarke points out in "About African Nova Scotia (Africadia)," "By 1965, an Acadia University study reported that 83 percent of the [African Nova Scotians] adults had no more than a grade three education" (15-16). Today, black students in Halifax still face a whitening of themselves and of their culture and history, a state of affairs that begs Rue's question: "when'd they ever be free to relax and easily *be*?" (93). The question posed above is partly answered by Clarke in the disclaimer to his novel. When he explains that the English he uses in *George & Rue* "ain't broken, but 'blackened'" (v), he is asserting the very difference that caused such havoc in the lives of his relatives — a difference that called for desperate measures in very desperate times.

Although George and Rue ruthlessly consider the killing of Silver a balancing act, they nonetheless accept responsibility for their callousness through the perception of themselves as "pure thieves" ready to steal "even fools' bad ideas." Because they have been scapegoated by a society which undoubtedly has a stake in the men they become, the executions of George and Rue expose the scales of justice that are never tipped in their favour. Silver, too, is the whipping boy of those who fail to realize that redemption lies not in the taking of lives but rather in the transformation of a bigoted society.

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