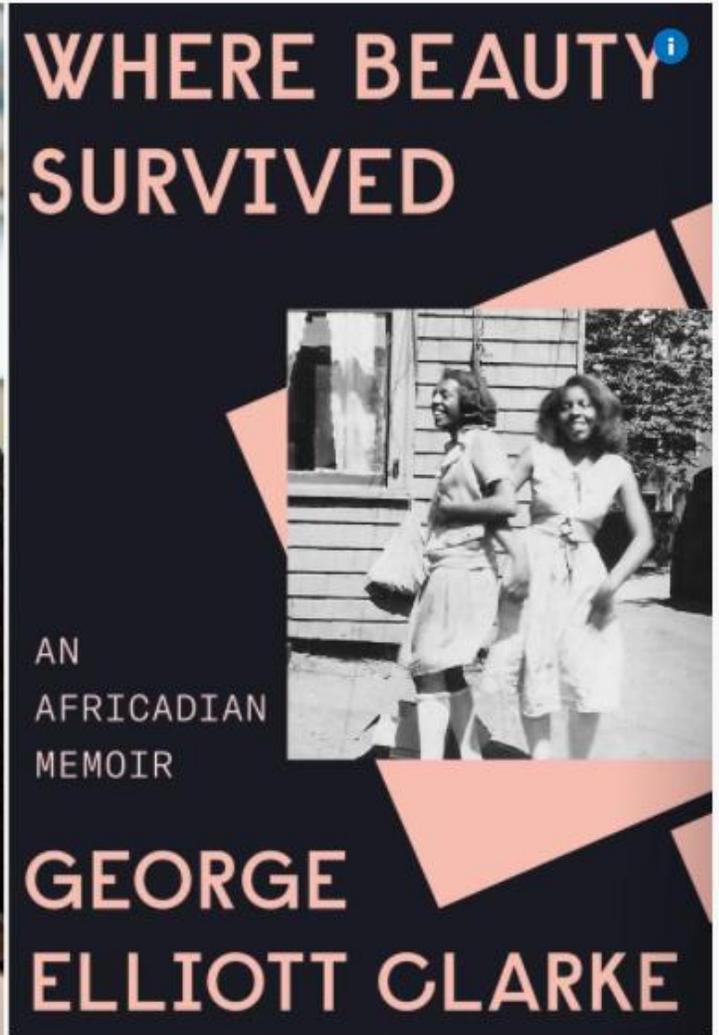


# ‘Haligonian hick’: Former poet laureate George Elliott Clarke recalls his first trip to Toronto



By **George Elliott Clarke** Excerpt from *Where Beauty Survived*  
Sat., Aug. 21, 2021 | 7 min. read



GC  
In *“Where Beauty Survived: An Africadian Memoir,”* the former poet laureate of Toronto and Parliament writes about his early life in what he calls *Africadia*, centred in Halifax.

My teenage self-rebrandings and cultural spelunkings moved me further and further away from the orbit of — I thought — my family, the “white-identified” Whites and Clarkes. My self-stylings were meant to repudiate the false consciousness — bourgeois, integrationist, highfalutin, pacifist (“turn-the-other-cheek”), and *noblesse oblige* attitudes — that I associated with the patrilineal genealogy.

That's not to say that my mom — or the Johnsons — were Afrocentrist or Black Nationalist. They weren't. But they were comfortable with our roots culture, our pungent vernacular, welcomed curry and rice, were palsy-walsy with whites but never acted as if they thought whites were better than black people, and were ecumenical in music, savouring folk, Country-n-Western, Rhythm-n- Blues, and soul, and both danced to and played these songs/records interchangeably.

A Three Mile Plains Africadian — like my mom — could have Patsy Cline follow Sam Cooke, or set Phoebe Snow on the turntable right after Hank Snow. (Still, she'd prefer the frank eroticism of R-n-B to the yodels and fiddles of C-n-W; yessum, she'd elect bedroom squeals over snake-handlers' squeaks.) I thought my father's lineage too stiff-upper-lip, too starched, to ever be able to shake and shimmy, to growl and cuss. I still admired my great aunt and internationally acclaimed contralto Portia White: she was the premiere *artiste* of Africadia. But Malcolm X was now more vital for my consciousness than my Great-Aunt's Command Performance for the #1 WASP in Canada, i.e., Her Majesty ...

Thus, my adolescence didn't only usher in the usual awkward discovery of sexuality, but also my essays to comprehend myself as a brown-skinned black (young) man in a white-majority society that feared and disdained us, short-changed and harassed us, marginalized and criminalized us. In that process of becoming "young, gifted and black," if the Johnsons were not central, the Whites/Clarkes were irrelevant — or so I judged.

(In time, I would see that their history of extraordinary accomplishment in spite of our oppression as black people had revolutionary significance. But as a teen, I tended to ignore familial history in preference to enlisting with urgency-inspired, activist circles.)

My own formation of a black identity had everything to do with adopting Africadian actor, playwright and poet Walt Borden's teachings and listening to Black Haligonian activist Rocky Jones's records and reading through his and his partner, Joan's, library, plus almost everything that the North Branch Library had on African-American struggle. I went from having once tried to be a pallid, "Catholic" saint (based on my reading) to trying to be as black and "bad" and smart and hip as Malcolm — the black saint, radical thinker, and political martyr (thanks to my reading).

I look back on my life now, and I know that those years, 1977-79, thanks to the teachings of Joan and Rocky and Walt, helped to determine my orientations as a young adult scholar and writer. Also vital was their pushing me to get outside of Halifax — to learn more about other black communities, but also to get outside of Nova Scotia, to transcend any innate provincialism. The first such memorable occasion was my first visit to Toronto as a very young man, aged 18, and still a high school student.

One April morning in 1978, I was sitting in my father's kitchen, spooning cereal and preparing for school, when the phone rang: it was Rocky. He had an extra ticket for a flight to Toronto. I was 18, an adult, according to Revenue Canada and to the law, but I still asked Bill's permission to leave — to skip school — and fly to Toronto with Rocky and his daughter, Tracey.

Well, about 30 minutes later, Rocky pulled up in his red Jeep, and then we were up, up and away — to Toronto the Good, Hogtown, the Big Smoke, the Big Crab Apple ... Not used to travel, I didn't pack proper clothes to address the April chill. Rocky didn't hesitate: just took off his own jacket and put it around my skinny shoulders. His mantle upon my back. The man was unfailingly generous — always. (The jacket was grey or beige with small black checks. I wore it proudly for years — slowly growing into it as my political consciousness too slowly expanded.)

Once we landed and eventually took a subway somewhere, I revealed myself to be a Haligonian hick by boarding the subway car and hollering, "Hey, everyone, I'm from Nova Scotia!" Was I ever properly silenced by the stony looks the other subway riders hurled my way! If they'd thought, "Here's another

half-ass, Haligonian half-breed, come to suck up our welfare and/or bum,” I couldn’t have blamed them.

(A couple years later, as I exited the humongous discount bazaar of Honest Ed’s, at Bathurst and Bloor, with a backpack stuffed with eternally creased polyester pants and tinfoil-fragile cutlery, an older black woman, spying my delight with my shoddy, shabby purchases, yelled, “You must be from Nova Scotia!” Yep!)

Rocky had flown us — Tracey and me — to Toronto to participate in a meeting of the Black Youth Community Action Project (BYCAP), which was stewarded by Dudley Laws.

Laws was a black elder who sported a Black Panther-style black beret right rakishly (and who organized the Black Action Defence Committee, in the early 1980s, to protest white cop aggression — often lethal — against unarmed black Torontonians). He had the smooth, suave, licorice complexion of R.J. (a Halifax student who had been my mother’s decade-younger lover, 1972-75), and also hailed from Jamaica.

But Laws was tutored in Malcolm X, not Penthouse; was devoted to Liberation, not partying. He spoke softly, but radiated grace — charisma as a cognate of charm under pressure. BYCAP — with the support of Laws and a bespectacled, tan-complected elder who seemed to speak through his teeth — namely, Ed Clarke, of the Black Resource Information Centre — was, that April weekend, holding a youth conference.

I think we landed on a Thursday. That night, there was a welcome supper — rice-and-peas, curried chicken, hot sauce. The next day convened the youth conference. After auditing a lot of fervent, Carib-accented rebel talk, I just proclaimed to the few dozen delegates, “The young man from Nova Scotia would like to speak.” And I spoke! Some chutzpah, some cojones! I don’t recall what I said, but my peroration met with generous applause.

I soon made my way to Third World Books, that shrine to Black literature. I didn’t have much money, but the priceless works went dirt-cheap. A few “Red” pamphlets and Black poetry booklets were a buck each. Everything I bought was treasure: Carolyn Rodgers (the stone-soul boss), Dudley Randall (who got me readin Pushkin), Angela Jackson (southern-fried eroticism), all titles from Third World Press (Chicago) or Paul Breman (London).

Now I had drums in my ears, poems in my head, folks trying to initiate a Black culture and consciousness revolution in Toronto, only a decade “late” after the U.S. movements. (Yet, they were right on time for Canada; I mean, what Canadians could possibly be ready for — in this *de facto* Red Tory state.)

One of our meetings that weekend occurred in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Hall, on College, about halfway between Spadina and Bathurst. I eyed the gold-tasselled, roped-off, crimson-velvet chair that had once cradled the tush of Marcus Moziah Garvey (whose middle name I’d pinched for my triple-barrelled nom-de-plume, “Nattt Moziah Shaka” and who had helmed the UNIA — the greatest global organization of black people that has ever existed. (Harlem was the HQ, but branches could be found in Europe, Canada, the Caribbean and Africa.)

When no one was about, I plunked my own bottom on His Excellency’s sanctified seat, but experienced neither epiphany nor blasphemy — just a sense of history.

That weekend also intro’d me to the Underground Railroad soulfood restaurant (home of barbecued ribs and sweet potato pie — which I wouldn’t fork again until living in North Carolina in the mid-1990s), and to Fran’s (where I was partial to rice pudding). The cookery in Toronto’s air, around Kensington Market and Spadina and Bathurst, was competitive with the seaside aromas of Halifax:

every breath was to trek Marco Polo's Silk Road; or to anchor in a Caribbean Isle, leeward or windward; or to shuttle through Europe, from Brit-theme pubs to Iron Curtain vodka.

Resonant were East Indian and West Indian mash-ups of curry and samosas and doubles; plus the Aeolian, Tyrrhenian and Mediterranean, Black and Aegean seas; plus the Tex-Mex/Cajun food/music corridor (Houston-New Orleans); plus the array of Argentinian beef and Brazilian hog; plus spicy dishes outta Szechuan or Vietnam (thanks to resettled, so-called Boat People). Anyway, Toronto's mutually consented-to *coitus* of cultures creates beautiful bastardizations or creolizations: a Greek *and* Chinese restaurant? An Italian *and* Jamaican restaurant? All's possible in this bastion of Apollonian multiculturalism: a feast for the belly — and a fiesta for the bedroom. (Multiculturalism mandates cosmopolitan canoodling. Amen!)

*Excerpted from "Where Beauty Survives: An Africadian Memoir" by George Elliott Clarke. Copyright ©2021 George Elliott Clarke. Published by Knopf Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited. Reproduced by arrangement with the Publisher. All rights reserved.*