"Your bass sounds like a typewriter":
A Reading and Interview with George Elliott Clarke

Interview conducted by Paul Watkins [PW] and Katherine McLeod [KM]
Transcribed and edited by Paul Watkins

PW: Well, thank you very much for coming out to check out—I mean, how couldn't you, right? George Elliott Clarke in Guelph, it's quite an honour. I need to begin by thanking the sponsors that actually make hosting an event in this type of capacity possible: the ICASP project—the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project; TCI—the TransCanada Institute, we're using their wonderful space right now; and SETS—the School of English and Theatre Studies, who is co-sponsoring the event. And, of course, George Elliott Clarke for agreeing to this event. My partner in the crime of this event, Katherine McLeod, and David Lee who will be playing some bass to accompany the poet, which I am getting quite excited about.

I'll say a little bit about Clarke, not too much—I'll let the poetry speak the larger part. As you can see, just from some of the books I have here from my own personal collection, he's quite a prolific poet… I mean his garden of poetry produces much foliage—it's continually growing.

Born in Windsor, Nova Scotia in 1960, Clarke is a graduate of the University of Waterloo, Dalhousie University and Queen's University, and he is now a teacher of Canadian and African Diasporic Literature at the University of Toronto. He is a renowned essayist, scholar, playwright, Canadian poet, and, above all else, a songwriter. His work largely explores and chronicles the experience and history of the black Canadian community of Nova Scotia, creating a cultural geography that Clarke refers to as "Africadia."

Thus, given the diversity of his publishing output, it is unsurprising to find that he models his creative voice and practice in relation to a variety of artist-intellectuals across borders—from jazz trumpeter Miles Davis to bassist Charles Mingus, to troubadour-bard Bob Dylan, reactionary modernist Ezra Pound, Black Power orator Malcolm X, and Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, among many, many others. His modeling of his creative voice in relation to a variety of artist-intellectuals across borders (always with personal anecdotes) allows for his poetry to be read as a matrix, a word I borrow from Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s analysis of the blues to describe a work that is structured as a "point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit." And I think the matrix metaphor befits Clarke's poetry quite well, particularly in my own readings of his trilogy of poetic colouring books: *Blue, Black,* and his latest, *Red*, which we will get to hear him read from today. Red being the colour that scatters the least among the colours of the visible spectrum, and can thus be seen from the greatest distance. Like infrared rays, *Red* operates beyond the visible end of the spectrum to take the poetic contours of "red" into "new" and exciting territory. What I would be tempted to call an *infrapoetics*.

But perhaps I am trying to explain too much by way of a preface, and should take a hint from the epigraph by Ezra Pound which opens *Red*, which states, "Beauty must never be explained." On a more fundamental level, Clarke has stated that he "became a songwriter—a lyricist—before [he] became, indelibly, a poet." And, so on that note, I graciously ask the poet to recite us some songs. So please join me in warmly welcoming George Elliott Clarke.

GEC: Thank you. Thank you. It's a great honour and privilege to be here. Thank you all for your interest; thank you for coming out today. I want to thank Paul Watkins for inviting me, and Katherine McLeod for being here as well, to field questions and helping organize. I want to thank Smaro, as usual, for providing all the space necessary for intellectual inquiry and endeavor and controversy, etcetera, etcetera. And I will get my essay edited for you very soon! [Laughs].

[Audience laughs]

Tomorrow! Tomorrow I'll start on it and get it done... finally, next week. So anyway, again, really good to be here and I'm really happy to read from this book. And I'm also going to be inviting David Lee, the bassist, to accompany me in a moment or two, after a few poems. And I really appreciate setting things up this way. I should just note very quickly my association with the Guelph Jazz Festival and of course Ajay Heble who's here this afternoon as well, and how productive that has been, and in fact I could mention that D.D Jackson and I who worked on two operas now together—*Québécité*, for the Guelph Jazz Festival, and *Trudeau*, which was another project altogether—we might be working on a third one. We might be… and I shouldn't say too much about it. We might be doing a third one, this time for folks in Capri, which explains the T-shirt... Anyway, all that to one side. Capri!

But I'm gonna get off on a tangent immediately by mentioning that when I was in Capri, I saw a portrait of Vladimir Lenin in a public park. It's true! It's absolutely true. There's a portrait of V.I. Lenin, but kind of like an Andy Warhol version, it's very Day-Glo, bright—it's a mosaic, actually, a mosaic portrait. Say, why Lenin, in Capri of all places? Well he was actually there in 1915 teaching a summer school in revolution. [Laughs]. In Capri! You know, bring it back! Bring it back!

Anyway, so yeah, all that to one side. Sorry to get off on a tangent. To the Poet! This is a translation, actually, from the Russian, and from the English. To make a long story short, "To the Poet" is a poem originally in Russian by Alexander Pushkin, and translated in the 1930s by Constance Garnet. And I didn't like Constance Garnet's translation, so I re-translated it, or re-wrote it, into my version. So I have no idea what the Russian is, actually. I have no idea. So this is my translation from the English of Constance Garnet's translation of Alexander Pushkin.

[GEC reads a couple poems from *Red*. 6:45-14:33]

Now it's time for the bass. Having established a space for the bass. This next poem, and I really want to thank Dave Lee for accompanying me on this; we've never done this before, so he's going to be improvising as much as I am, in a sense. And, so, I'll just say a little bit about the poem. It's the autobiography of Charles Mingus, or, "Charles Mingus: An Autobiography." And actually it's a little bit of a misnomer, because although I've read Mingus' autobiography a few times, I take great liberties with it, and I decide for instance, just to give an example, that Mingus is African Nova Scotian—black Nova Scotian, grew up in Halifax. So, "Charles Mingus: An Autobiography."

[GEC reads more poems with accompaniment by David Lee on bass. 15:45-30:15]

THE INTERVIEW

30:30

KM: Well, thank you to both George and to David, that was fantastic. It was a pleasure to see and hear the performance.

PW: So, I guess the first thing, because we just heard a lot of music, and there definitely was a lot of rhythm in the performance there, in the introduction to the 10th anniversary of *Whylah Falls* you assert that your poetry emulates jazz and blues improvisation. To quote you, you say, "you have to understand improvisation, how a standard reference can become something else. The text is context for what erupts like a solo— the phrase of iambic pentameter in a strophe of *vers libre*." So while your poetry at times

reads as incredibly well-structured vernacular in that it's very well crafted, like a good improviser you've demonstrated that once you've mastered a technique really well you can create new spaces of play upon the old standard. And we can think of the Charles Mingus example here, for example, how you kind of reinterpret Charles Mingus as an "Africadian." So I'm wondering how improvisation, and music more generally, functions in your work?

GEC: Ah. That's a great, difficult question. Well, I am a frustrated musician. And singer for that matter. And one of the most traumatic incidents of my adolescence was when I was 12. And I was sent by my parents to join the Baptist church choir, and I got sent home the same night, because the choir director said, "No, we can't use you... you go home." So that was... it was a memorable experience because I was convinced I couldn't sing. And I probably can't sing.

On the other hand, I feel that impulse towards song, and towards music, and I'm finding now in my life that when I come to read work, I find myself moving more towards that song style, speaking, singing kind of together at the same time. Which actually is—and you fall into all kinds of clichés and stereotypes—but some preachers, or testifiers, in the black church tradition, present their sermons in exactly that way. I'm not trying to be one of those guys, or women—I'm not—but I do realize that I grew up in that tradition, and there's a sense in which the sermon is supposed to be chanted, almost—almost chanted as much as it is spoken. And there's room for the audience, the congregation, for the antiphonal response, call and response, etcetera, etcetera. And so, I think there might be a bit of that influence there too. As I move in that direction, I don't know why, but I find myself moving more towards that song as a way of understanding how to put words together.

KM: Yeah, actually, building on both that question and your response, the first question that I was thinking of asking you was, thinking more, you know, mentioning different types of songs, but I was interested in how your work on opera and jazz opera, particularly such as *Québécité* that was, as you mentioned, performed here in Guelph in 2003—how your involvement with those particular forms have influenced the way that you write music in your poetry. But I also… I was very aware too… how thinking of voice and sort of the song, how in *Red* there's a poem called "Creole Lyric," and 'lyric' seems to be something that comes out in that collection and there's even a phrase in that poem that says: "When you are no more visible than your voice is now," and it's sort of this attention to how voice is being written on the page, as well as sung. So, I'm interested in how this voice or this singing has perhaps been influenced by the opera or the jazz opera, or maybe that it's taken a different direction in *Red*, but I'm interested in your thoughts on that.

GEC: Wow. Thank you, Dr. MacLeod, thank you, for that question, as well. Yeah, look; I've got to thank the Guelph Jazz Festival again for asking D. D. – commissioning D. D. Jackson and I to work on *Québécité*. And in 2003, you know it's this, for those of you who may not know… it was this opera. I shouldn't say 'was,' it's still around, not performed that much, but it's still around! But dealing with multiracial, multicultural relationships in Quebec City circa 2000. And the interesting thing for me, working with D. D. on that project is, that we first began to work on it, I sent him basically free verse material and he rejected it. And said I need rhyme! I need rhyme! Now, if you're coming from any kind of contemporary school of Canadian poetics rhyme is something you don't do. [Laughs]. It's like, no rhyme. We do not do rhyme here! Alright, this is modernism—in fact, it's post-modernism! We just don't touch it. We don't like it, we don't understand it, and we disavow it because we know it's stupid. Rhyme is ridiculous. Right? So it was really interesting that that project and D. D. in particular forced me to work with rhyme. And I found it very liberating actually. I found it very liberating because it was a lot of fun to try to make up unusual rhymes, or to find ways to work against the rhyming pattern. It was the first book I ever wrote, and I think it's—yeah, I'd like to say it's the first one I ever wrote—

where I read every line aloud many times before I committed it to publication. To be sure that I could read it easily, and that it would make sense and so on, and so forth. So that project put me more in touch with the traditional roots of poetry while at the same time putting together a project that was fairly avant-garde, you know a jazz opera. But a jazz opera with a traditional verse—almost traditional verse structure at the base. So that was a fascinating aspect, working on it with him, the idea that here's a jazz guy who's all about improvisation and he's saying, "I need rhyme!" [Laughs]. I need rhyme to compose, you know, give me rhyme! So, it was really interesting.

PW: I was thinking about, kind of, collaboration and influence, and dedication. Dedication is really important in your opus. The first book of yours I read was *Blue*, I think it was, you know, many years ago, and just looking at all the dedications, or "in the manner of," led me to discover, going to the archives and discovering all sorts of authors that I probably never would have discovered, and obviously that's very much a part of your process. I mean *Red* particularly is dedicated to your own polymath father who actually does all the artwork in this particular collection, and it's dedicated to your father, I think maybe solely? This collection?

GEC: I think so. [Laughs].

PW: Yeah, and there's other dedications to your father in other pieces. And so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the importance of dedication in your work?

GEC: Thank you again that's a great question. It's important for me to recognize forbearers, ancestors, artistic genealogical family and song, because none of us is here solo, or alone in a sense. We all come from a context. There is a genealogical context, cultural context, and there's also an artistic context. And one has many artistic relatives so to speak and you want to claim kinship at least with different folks. And, so that was a way for me to say, "ok, here is someone whose work has been important to me in some way, or whose work I've enjoyed in some way, let me dedicate a poem to him or her, or let me riff off his or her style as I perceive it." And… again as a kind of act of homage. But at the same time an act of tacit appropriation or attempted appropriation, etcetera, etcetera. And, then revisiting and rewriting in certain ways. And so, again on one hand its an act of homage, and on the other it's also a conversation I'm trying to have with those personages from the past or from the present: contemporaries, artists I've admired, and admire, and trying to stake out my relationship to them in my own work. Yeah, it's not quite a fetish. Not quite. I've been interested in showing that I'm aware that there's a big world out there, and that all of us are influenced by many different parts of that world. I'm going to tie this back into jazz and improvisation, and so on, by saying that I think that maybe one of the strongest appeals of jazz as an art form—for many of us—is that it is automatically at its roots: cosmopolitan, multicultural, polyphonic, and all of those notions of diversity and diverse engagements are important to me. I like the idea of a collage; I like the idea of the cubist juxtapositions of different things, and so on. I like being able to look out at the larger world and find aspects of it in terms of other arts, other artists, writers, as well as other persons and their particular philosophies or ways of doing things, or ways of speech especially. I've been trying to incorporate those notions of difference and diversity in my work.

KM: That's great. This leads into my next question for you. Paul mentioned the dedication, but also the epigraph. I feel like you've already been speaking about that a bit in terms of the larger conversation that you're having in your poetry. But, in a recent essay that George wrote, actually called, "Let Us Now Attain Polyphonous Epiphanies"— sorry to put polyphony into the mix—you mention how you think of the book as a whole. So the epigraphs are all part of… everything is sort of part of what makes up this book of poetry. Just to sort of throw this out there, to give a bit of background of the types of epigraphs

that you've used. The epigraphs that I'm interested in to ask you about are the ones about beauty. Just to go back, in *Blue,* the collection that was mentioned before, there's an epigraph from Keats, "what the imagination ceases as beauty must be truth." Then we have in *Trudeau* a quotation from Pound, "beauty is difficult." Then we also have an interesting one in Clarke's book *I&I*, that starts off the book, "This world is too beautiful to be true, and too beautiful not to be true." And that's from the group Pain Not Bread, a collection of poets with Roo Borson and Kim Maltman. Then here in your recent book you have two epigraphs, one by Frantz Fanon, "I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is," and also, Ezra Pound: "Beauty must never be explained." And I'm interested in how your return to beauty… do you see this as a progression over the course of the books, or do you see this as returning and rethinking the difficulty of beauty and how… where the place is for beauty amidst also say the violence that is sometimes in the poetry—the more difficult side of beauty. Is this a recurring or rethinking of that? How do you see this—beauty's invocation?

GEC: Dr. McLeod. It's become a fetish. [Laughs]. Well, to be really serious, to answer your very fine question again. I admit that I don't mind romanticism. I like romanticism. I was rereading Byron's *Don Juan* recently, as well as Browning, and I was struck by how contemporary they sound. Especially Byron, especially *Don Juan*. It just sounds like it was written yesterday. It's so fresh. And I love his put downs of various people, and critics, and other writers, and Conservatives and Tories. In fact, I'd like to take some of those lines and put them on a poster on Parliament Hill because they are still effective today. This is a long way of saying that the Romantic intervention for me was never superseded, or rather never cancelled by modernism and postmodernism. I still think that we are still trying to deal with elements of beauty, and the politics of beauty. What does it mean… the aesthetics of beauty and the aesthetics of art? What does it mean to make something beautiful or to make something new, etcetera, etcetera? Those are political questions and I've been struck by the various answers that various writers who I appreciate have tried to provide. What is beauty? What is truth? The age-old concerns. I think the Romantic intervention, which said, "we have to make art out of some understanding of beauty," and also a political art out of some understanding of beauty, remains germane, remains absolutely de rigueur for artists and writers today. The question has not been answered yet [laughs]… in any kind of final way. Maybe it can't be answered in any kind of final way or final satisfactory way. So that's really what I'm pursuing.

KM: And perhaps even the collision—I found in *I&I*—of beauty and the almost psychedelic world of the 70s; that was a sort of interesting sense of dissonance to watch happen. So that might be something to come back to in terms of the poems that were read today.

PW: I am thinking of the antithesis of beauty, the violence or the "hate" or the "evil" that sometimes might seep into your poetry. I have a quote here from Kevin McNeilly who talks about your poetry as, an "enticing tangle of contradictions and confrontations, things like a vicious delicacy or a brutal lyricism." And this was in the interview you did with him and Wayde Compton, "The Crime of Poetry." And, so I am wondering about some of the visceral and violent imagery that appears in some of your poetry: the Miles Davis autobiography in *Blue*, or some of the readings you did here—you even have a poem in *Blue* called "Calculated Offence." [Audience laughs]. So I'm wondering how "calculated offence" functions in your work? Even thinking further, how might that function pedagogically? If it does, or do you think about it in those kinds of terms?

GEC: Yeah, well these are really great questions. I think I will try to answer this by looking at a phase of literary history and cultural history that remains important for me along with Romanticism, and that is the Beat Movement—out of the 50s and into the 60s: an American movement, of course, with a lot of

repercussions and a lot of influence across the border, etcetera, etcetera. But, I still feel, or at least I felt at the time I was working on *Blue*, especially, that if there is such a thing as a Canadian poetics, an Anglo-Canadian poetics, that it was still a little bit sedate, a little bit. And that's despite the interventions of Michael Ondaatje and Irving Layton, etcetera, etcetera. And, I felt, maybe wrongly, at that point in my life in the 1990s, and maybe because of the fact I was in the United States—land of the free, home of the brave, blah, blah, blah, blah—that it was ok to strike out and attempt a more visceral, a more vivid, a louder, a more gruff, a more in your face kind of poetic. It was partially a reaction for myself; I mean, I was the one who imbibed too much that I couldn't say certain things, or that I couldn't write certain things, that I had to be really careful what I said, and what I wanted to say in my work. And being in the United States, and this is not to play into any cultural clichés or stereotypes, there was a sense, there was a sense in the republic that I could say things, that I was really free, in quotation marks "free," to say certain things, or explore certain ideas in the work with irony, and with educated commentary, almost footnotes, etcetera, etcetera— but that I wanted to be able to venture forward and explore different kinds of speech without worrying about whether anybody was going to be offended. Whether anyone was going to say, "oh that's nasty you shouldn't say that, or that's not acceptable," and so on. I really wanted to try to work against those kinds of ideas, which I had imbibed, which is not to say that the culture had imposed them on me, but rather I had accepted them. But the experience of writing *Blue*, in particular, was an effort to break away from what I had considered an imprisoning mode of discourse that was almost insisted on politesse—on being polite—in our poetry. And I really wanted—for myself—to break away from that, and be more open and also more "honest" (in quotation marks)… and to write a more aggressive poetic that would allow me to say whatever I wanted to say… hopefully, well. But, to claim that kind of freedom. And it might be odd to credit the United States of America [laughs] with that, given its history and its awful foreign policy in so many ways. But, there was a sense that I had in my years there that the American people that I found myself associating with were pretty down to earth, pretty good, and most of the ones I knew weren't carrying guns, so it was ok to disagree with them and so forth, and it wasn't too violent—to answer your question, I was trying, have been trying to claim a space for myself where I could just speak what I wanted to say, and let the "chips fall where they may" in quotation marks, without necessarily trying to be offensive to anyone… but I was aware of the fact that I had an audience here that might question or might be bothered by some of the things I chose to write. But… that was the whole point: particularly, *Blue*, *Black*, and maybe a little bit of *Red*. Saying: "Yeah, we can claim this space." And one last thing, to throw this out there too.

I have to talk about this as a black poet and someone who identifies as a black poet. I am also happy to be a poet who happens to be black. I don't have any problem with that phrase either. That's ok too. But, if I claim that positioning of being a black poet, I do want to be able to speak forthrightly out of the cultural traditions that are important to me that I feel are important, and the musical and popular motifs that I think are important without feeling repressed, or suppressed and oppressed, etcetera, etcetera… and to inject that voice into Canadian poetry. I still think that despite the successes of Dionne Brand and Wayde Compton, and many, many others, etcetera, etcetera, I still think that "we" have a struggle to establish our particular sensibility, and there is a particular sensibility that is around voice, and it's around performance, and it's around musicality, which the Canadian poetic academy has been very, very painfully slow to accept as legitimate forms of poetic creativity, and so the criticisms of our work often tends to fall into clichéd stereotyped camps. Of, basically "we're about performance, we're not about intellect, we're about putting on a show," as opposed to providing some kind of a really reasoned serious explanation or discourse: social, political, economic, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so, I'm a black poet who's conscious of the fact that our work is often split. And you can see it, I mean. Look at the mainstream anthologies, when we are included, the work that is included—mainstream meaning white, I'll name it—the work that is usually included is the work that is considered more academically acceptable. When you look at the black edited anthologies the work that is included is the performance-

orientated work. And it is still true today—that division is there—and it is a necessary division in some ways because black audiences, and I'm not trying to speak for everybody here, in my experience, black audiences have tended to want the speaker whoever it is: poet, preacher, actor, whatever, politician, to provide a performance as a way of engaging the audience and proving one's authenticity. It's like a litmus test of your authenticity to be able to speak to that audience, to win that audience over, to get a standing ovation for crying out loud. You want a standing ovation when you are speaking to, at least in my opinion, a black audience. You want the standing ovation. You need to get that standing ovation. If you don't get the standing ovation you failed. [Laughs]. At least for me that is something I keep in mind when I am speaking for a largely black audience, especially back home in Nova Scotia. On the other hand, at the same time, if that's true, I also want as a scholar, researcher, intellectual, I also want that part of my work to be validated and understood, and accepted too by everybody. It's been interesting in the course of my career as a writer to constantly run up against this division of what's acceptable and what's not from black poets. Or, how should we understand black poets? How do we read them? Or are we to be read at all, should we just be heard? Should we just issue CDs? If I had a dollar for everybody who ever said to me I'd like to hear you read; why are you selling books, you should be selling CDs! I would be rich. It's the old cliché, but I would be rich. But it's true. In some ways it's flattering, and I do feel flattered by that. People say: "I really liked your reading, I really would love to buy a CD from you." Well, sorry, I got a book. The book is just as good you can read it for yourself. [Audience laughs]. "But I want to hear your voice." And again, I love that in a sense. NourbeSe Phillip talks a lot about this in some of her essays. She had published an experimental book of poetry looking at grammar, and the subjugation of woman and black people, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. It's a brilliant book, but she felt that it wasn't accepted easily within the black community because it's a very avant-garde collection of poetry. It is very out there, and it is not an easy text to read or to perform. Although, it's a great text. She had an occasion at a university in the United States where they arranged for students to read the text as a kind of drama. And, for her, she's written about this, a light bulb went on: oh, that's it; I've got to write performance-orientated work. So then she started to write plays as a result of that. But then her latest book of poetry is again very experimental, and very tough to read, and absolutely brilliant, *Zong*. Absolutely incredible achievement. It's an epic poem, really. But, very difficult to read aloud. But it's meant to be read aloud, but it's also meant to be difficult to be read aloud, deliberately. She's also dealing with those contradictions about what we can say, and how we can be heard, and whether we can actually be heard in print, or whether it has be through microphones and through broadcast media. At the same time, there's nothing wrong with that; there's nothing wrong with broadcasting; there's nothing wrong with performing. I also feel a little bit bothered about the fact that sometimes we're made to feel guilty: "oh, you perform your work so well." Yeah, I do as a matter of fact! [Laughs]. I learnt to do that, yeah, I did cause I don't want to be too boring. And, I want to be enlightened and entertained, and educated by people I go to hear read their works as well. And so to make a long story short, and I'm giving a long answer to your great question, I think what I am trying to do in my poetry is do both. Have the texts that are *speakerly*, that are performance-orientated, that can be read aloud, and that can be sung. To have the teenagers in high school snap their fingers, or tap their feet, or clap their hands in rhythm with me as I'm reading. I like that, I think that's really important. But, at the same time I also want to have the poems that demand silence, concentration, and attentiveness, and so on. But at the same time why can't we have those poems that do both. That are good performed but that also demand some kind of attentiveness and scrutiny. So…

PW: Well, I think that you do both of those things really well, and those contradictions are what make people constantly return back to your work. It's interesting.

KM: And I think, you know, we heard perhaps one of those poems performed in terms of the Charles Mingus poem today, and we're interested in hearing some questions from you [the audience] and perhaps someone has a question related to that performance that we've seen here today. I think we'd like to open it up to audience questions at this point. Any questions from the audience for George?

QUESTION PERIOD

Audience Member: Thank you so much, this is so wonderful. Just such strong wonderful stuff to eat. I want to go back to the topic of rhyme. And I think it's funny that we live in an age, you know we always say the old thing, that what goes around comes around, and things work in cycles, and so here we are in a cycle in which we must find rhyme as the forbidden closet-type poetry element. And, that wonderful poem that you wrote about the estrus [when a cat is in heat, "Tomcat/Pussycat Blues"] wouldn't have happened if you hadn't allowed yourself, given yourself permission to rhyme. And the strength of that rhyme, and, you know, the structural quality of that rhyme, makes it a very strong poem. And there's nothing for god's sake to apologize for in having put that poem together, or having had it given to you in the middle of the night in rhyme for god's sake. Now, I would like to propose that all of us give ourselves permission that when rhyme as an element comes to us in our poetry as a valid vehicle with which to structure the work, we give ourselves that permission—go for it!—without apology, because as Sister Francis of the Blessed Sacrament said to me when I was twelve years old, "girls you have to know the rules in order to know how to break them." [Audience laughs]. Right? Everybody makes rules against rhyme, but I'm telling you when you made that opera you made rhyme against which the musician could work with his music as a foil, as a grounding, against which he could play with his improv. And if you hadn't done that for him, he wouldn't have been able to construct the music in the way that he did. So, that was a very, very important point that be made and I'm thanking you for accepting that and going with it. So there I am: rhyme is radical in our age. But it's no less valid as a poetic element. Thank you. I want you to go for it George every time it comes to you.

GEC: Thank you! Rhyme it is.

Audience Member: George, you made reference to your time at Duke. I remember you had a column—I don't remember how long you wrote it—that was published during that period in the *Chronicle Herald*. And I would read it and I often wondered what the community made of it. And how you projected yourself, I assume you lived in Durham or some place like that, and you projected it to Halifax. You know in lots of ways… whether you embraced Pound or whether you embraced the other sources—many of whom seem to have been African American creative figures or moderns—but you're projecting to, your being apathetic, but then your moving on, bringing it back to your own voice. Whether it's that, or whether it's the bible frankly. My real question had to do with, when you were writing, I'll call it journalism, how did that shape your voice? Did you choose a voice, and how did you project to that other audience?

GEC: That's a great question, thank you so much for it. And I'm still writing that column by the way. [Laughs]. Now I'm projecting from Toronto to Halifax. And I'm really thankful for it. I'm really thankful for that one little outlet into journalism. And I want to come back to being a scholar, and being a writer, and so on. As soon as you are a writer you are an intellectual, whether you want to be or not—you are. And, I'd also like to think of journalists as being potentially intellectual. Some of them are. Maybe many of them are. Right? But journalism is particularly useful because it is a way for an intellectual to develop a popular voice. To be able to potentially reach a wide number of readers. Now I'm dealing with reviewing books so it's not like it's going to be totally revolutionary or something like

that. And I can't say that I have thousands and thousands of readers. I have no idea how many people read my column or don't read it. I'm sure the newspaper is probably keeping track of these things, but so far they are keeping me on. So somebody is reading it. But, I'm taking a long time to answer your very good question. Yes, it has an impact on voice and again I'm trying to write in a way that is accessible while still trying to provide an assessment of the text of the book I'm reviewing for the reader. So the reader can decide whether he or she wants to purchase that book or find that book, or what have you. I really appreciate the fact that the *Chronicle Herald* gives me complete liberty. I can write about whatever I want, any book I want; I don't even have to write about books, I can write about anything. And it's my space. Every two weeks 700 hundred words in a newspaper with one million circulation [laughs] on the East Coast. So basically, it's as good as the *Globe and Mail*, but only on the East Coast. So it's a great privilege, and I add the occasional political comment. I think that most people who read my column know that I am not a fan of Stephen Harper, the Tories, or what have you. And they might actually find out a few other things by reading the column in terms of my political views, which I don't hide, and the newspaper allows me express… but again, the main point is that I do try to tailor the pieces to reach as great an audience as I can and to get people thinking differently about some things, maybe. For instance, we had the Titanic anniversary, of course, and the newspaper dedicated the entire Sunday April 15th edition to the Titanic. And so they said your column is supposed to run, but we're not going to run it unless you talk about the Titanic. And so I said, ok. I'll talk about the Titanic. I'll write about E.J. Pratt and Thomas Hardy's poems on the Titanic, and also an African American poet, Etheridge Knight, who also wrote a poem about the Titanic. So, how have the poet's read the Titanic disaster. Well, of course, Hardy and Pratt, more or less, although I think Pratt even more effectively than Hardy, talked about it in terms of the hubris of humanity and the comeuppance that technology got from Mother Nature, etc, etc. And Pratt actually goes into more of a class analysis than Hardy ever gets into in his much longer poem on the Titanic. And so that was presented in my column. But I also presented Etheridge Knight's very irreverent poem from the 1960s from the Black Power era on the Titanic, which is basically based on a toast—an African American toast from the 1920s—that he rewrote. And the African American toast of the 1920s was to celebrate a mythical stoker by the name of Shine on the Titanic. And when the ship was going down the banker offers—J.P. Morgan or whatever—offers Shine a million bucks to save his life and Shine says look, "money's grand but I'm jumping in and I'm swimming and good luck to you." And then J.P. Morgan's daughter comes up and she's like, but hey, "you can have me… if you save him you can have me too." And he says, "look you're fine and everything else but look you gotta swim like I'm doing and good luck to you." By the time the ship sinks Shine has managed to swim all the way from the South coast of Newfoundland to Harlem and he's sitting in the bar getting drunk [audience laughs] when he gets the news that the ship has sunk. But the newspaper cut that part of my review. They cut that part out. Because I think that they thought it was too irreverent. And I wasn't the one saying it; it was Etheridge Knight saying it. And I said ok, here's another view of it. I pointed out in my review that Hardy and Pratt are also irreverent about it. Especially Hardy, Hardy's like, "ok you got all these jewels down at the bottom of the ocean being visited by slimy worms." A point has been proven, at least for him, in terms of the contest between fate and humanity. And then Pratt as a minister who actually visited outports where people… where fisherman had drowned and officiated at those funerals or visited homes where fisherman or people had drowned with his dad who was also a minister. He knew something about death at sea and his Titanic is very much about that. He might be a little less irreverent than Hardy but he's also a little bit dismissive of the notion that human technology can match the force of "Mother Nature"— in quotation marks. But, so it was interesting to me that the paper cut the part that was racial. Cut it. I think I know who did it too. [Audience laughs]. One of the editors, but I think I know who it was.

Audience Member: That relationship you talked about where you're reading the poem and you're performing it. It seems to me that poetry is always challenging to teach, whereas a pop song kind of delivers itself. This has always been mysterious to me. Why is it that we respond to say a Motown song, but you put those words on a page and something else happens. What is the resistance in poetry to music at the same time that it is so musical?— there's something in the poem that separates it from the pop song even though they might seem to generate similar effects.

GEC: That's another difficult, great question. The simple answer is I don't know. But, to try to grapple with it, and I've been trying to grapple with it in many ways in my own work. I'd love to have a pop song that was a million-selling record. I'd love to have that. As I mentioned earlier I started writing poetry by trying to write songs. That was my first dream: to be a songwriter. But then I started reading—I'm slowing answering your question, I'm getting around to answering it—I'll start to answer it this way: when I was starting out as a poet and as a songwriter I was reading all these books about how to be a songwriter. All these books from the 1970s were saying you got to be Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen or Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, you gotta be a poet-songwriter. You gotta be a poet first then you can be a good songwriter. So I thought ok, and I went out and bought all the classic Dylan and listened to Joni Mitchell and Neil Young and all the rest of them, and I liked it—I loved it. I thought it was great and I thought that maybe those people had a point. This is the way poetry was supposed to be produced—in the context of song. But the problem is that the structure of song tends to be relatively simple, and it needs to be in order to allow for the music to be effectively present. And, whereas the poem, especially since modernism and postmodernism, has tended to be a bit tougher and spikier in its fabrication and really demarcating its territory as I'm a "poem," not a "song." And that's one reason why rhyme has been so discounted because as soon as you add rhyme you add the context of potential song. "Oh my god, that poem could be a song!" And then people get really afraid, really fearful. So, I'm not answering your question really well, except to say that, it has something to do with this contest between modernism and populism. Because remember in terms of Anglo-American modernism there was this whole anti-populist wing that said the poem has to be overtly intellectual. Overtly academic to be considered acceptable as a poem. And so then all kinds of more popular forms of poetry disappeared. And then the poets disappeared from those popular formats as well. Instead of the poet putting the poem in the community newspaper it has to be put in a book. Instead of the poet writing the poem for the wedding or somebody's birthday. And maybe its doggerel or maybe it's not, maybe it's a really good poem, but the tendency would be not to do that, because it would have overtones of doggerelism—if I can invent that word. And you don't want to write doggerel, you want to write an appropriate, proper kind of poem, so you have to stay away from popular formats. And so the pop song is, of course, by definition a popular format, so poets would tend to eschew it. And those poets who have pursued popular song seriously have tended to be marginalized. Gil Scott-Heron comes to mind as someone who was a poet—published poet—but who also did popular song, and who also did jazzy arrangements. And "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"—one of his most famous pieces… and yet, you're more likely to come across one of his CDs then you are one of his books of poetry. Even though he did both. There's a kind of segregation that developed in terms of poetry and the popular that has been difficult for poets to overcome. And the Beat Movement was really important for that in the States because it was an effort on the part of Ginsberg and Creeley and many others, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), to try to break down that division between the popular and the academic so to speak, and to move poetry back into the streets. And they succeeded for about ten years. And then things became reabsorbed in the academy. And I also think the other reason why it's difficult to maintain a song and poem connection, is because you also need to have a popular movement to go with it. And I think rap actually, in our time, has come the closest. Rap and calypso and reggae, all these forms of popular music have moved very close towards a "conscious poetics," while at the same time trying to reach a mass audience. For commercial reasons absolutely, but

then also for political reasons, for social reasons, for movement reasons… to try to build a base of support for the music, for cultural initiatives, etc, etc. I think Lauryn Hill's great album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, fabulous, fabulous… and using all the contours of popular song, doo-wop even from the 50s put forward very conscious popular song about what it means to be miseducated in school, what it means to learn about the realities of life, and the most important things in life in terms of family and children, etc, etc. All without preaching. And then they have the references that are there to Bob Marley, and African American popular song, and it's basically a college course in a CD in a popular song. And you can probably not take her lyrics and produce them as poetry. You probably can't. On the other hand, as a poet, that's the kind of place I would like to be. In that zone where she is, or that zone where Dylan is, or in that zone where Cohen is, and so on… where you can make poetic utterance… actually write poems too, but that which can also carry the force of popular recognition in terms of tune and voice.

And I got to talk about 98.7; I got to talk about the G Spot, 98.7. It's a radio station in Toronto; it's a new radio station that's dedicated to African Canadians from every background: Caribbean, African, African American, and African Canadian. It's the most important thing in my opinion; the most important thing in "race relations" (in quotation marks) to ever happen in the last few years in Toronto. It's the fact that we finally got a real black radio station that plays all kinds of black music, all kinds of black music. Although I don't know about jazz I gotta say. I don't think they play jazz. I haven't heard any yet. So I can't say they play jazz, but I don't listen all the time. But they do play most formats of popular music: so, reggae, calypso, socca, African musics, and of course the rhythm and blues and soul and disco classics, and so on. That radio station has created a black community in Toronto. There wasn't one before. There really wasn't. It was a mishmash of different communities. But that radio station everybody listens to. Everybody does. I was talking to a guy today [laughs] who was saying, "yeah, I got the G Spot on… I got it on!" It's called G 98.7 so it's called the G Spot. The reason why I mention that station is because yesterday I was listening to it and they played Dylan and they played a reggae version of "Knocking on Heaven's Door" and it was beautiful—beeeaauuuttifful. And the poetry was there and now its reggae coming at out of the radio. In the car for crying out loud! And I still love CBC, but I gotta say, CBC's got a lot of competition now from this radio station… and the poetry and from what they choose to play. There is a song about corruption in the islands—and I don't know if it's Jamaica or Trinidad or Barbados—but it's a calypso song dealing with the corruption of the islands. "Island in the Sun," how corrupt it is. It's a political song and there it is playing on basically their version of top-40 radio. Again, a long answer to your question, and not even a real answer, except to say that I think that for myself—not to be prescriptive—I feel that I have a responsibility to try to speak to a potential popular audience as well as an audience of poets or an audience of scholars, etc, etc. I would like to do that. One more thing about G 98.7: during Black History month they actually ran history spots that were about a minute long, which is a long time on radio, and they were covering the African Diaspora. So you'd get a spot about Nelson Mandela, you'd get a spot about Viola Desmond, a Canadian, you'd get a spot about W.E.B Du Bois, African American intellectual, you know—on the G Spot. [Laughs]. So, I really like the fact that they were blending the popular and the pedagogical, all at the same time, and I think in some of the musical selections there is also poetry involved. I grew up with popular song as we all did. When I was driving here today Al Green came on, and you gotta turn it up, it's Al Green. Turn it up, boom, right. [Audience laughs]. It's not necessarily poetry, but it's still moving and dynamic and inspirational, and it's still good.

[Audience member interjects and asks whether Clarke has heard President Barack Obama sing "Sweet Home Chicago" with the White House Blues All Stars]

Oh wow! Can I find it on YouTube? [Audience member: yep, it's on YouTube]. Excellent. [Laughs].

KM: Well I know there's probably more questions in the audience, but we are going to be having a small reception so I hope that you'll be able to ask George those questions then. Just as maybe a concluding question, I just wanted to point out that in one of your books, *I&I*, you refer to it as a pop-song opera, so we've got the mix of the popular and opera, and songs and poetry right there. And also this book concludes with a quotation from Charles Mingus which I thought was interesting because, well in *Red* Charles Mingus appears again, and today we got to hear the poem performed, and just as a way of concluding I'm wondering if you both [referring to David Lee, the bassist] had a couple thoughts on that experience of performing—of the collaborative moment? Maybe all that needs to be said is another performance.

David Lee [DL]: Well it's interesting on the question of rhyme, the lady [audience member] used the term like, putting rhyme for the improviser to play against, and that is a significant part of word-music performance. And I don't know George or his work, so I got here today and I am kind of playing with him, and sometimes when you get to know an artist the better you start to play against them a little bit and a certain tension forms. I mean you don't try to screw them up… well maybe sometimes you do. [Audience laughs]. But there is a tension of say, ah this will fit with this and then after you've done enough of that you think, "well I'm going to try something that will not fit with this and we'll see if a dynamic comes from that."

KM: Especially cause I know that myself as a listener could hear you listening to each other through that performance, and I think that that's something that speaks to the fact that you're both sort of hearing each for the first time almost in that conversation—that typewriter punctuating… you hear it and you respond in that way.

DL: Yes, performance is a heightened state. And certainly when I do that sort of stuff my mind is racing. You know, I'm thinking, "well this demands this… is this working, what am I going to do next?" It's kind of a speeded up state of being, and sometimes I would be thinking, "no, I'm playing too much with him, I've got to add some tension… how do I do it?" And it's all compressed in very short periods of time.

KM: How about you as a reader [to Clarke], or as a performer through words in this?

GEC: Well, I've been spoiled, because last week I was in Italy and I just did some performances there with two classical guitarists and we had worked together before, but years and years ago, so it was really the first time we were thrown together again, and trying to improvise these pieces. And I hope I can say that it all worked out, that it went well, and for me, the reason why I think it went well—and why I think it went well today and has been going well today—is because of that listening element. 'Cause I realized when I was working with the guitarist last week that I really had to listen and let them have their space. So it wasn't just me trying to hog the microphone and spit my words out, but that we could riff off each other. We could riff off each other. They would riff off me. So for instance, there's a poem here in *Black*, I think it's number "II.iv" for Andrea Thompson [actually it's "IV.ii"], and we performed it a couple times together, short poem, it's a sonnet… but then there got to be a point in that poem where I realized that there were words I could actually almost sing. And then as I would sort of elongate those words the musicians would feverishly go to work at the same time… they realized, "ok, we can have fun with this work, cause he's gonna have fun with this work, so we're just gonna attack it." So then it became even more of a performance. Like today when I was doing "First Light Blues" and you [David Lee] finished with this flourish, which I thought was very earthy and dirty David and very nicely done…

thank you so much. [Audience laughs]. Yes, you know what I'm talking about in that poem. It was really good to hear you basically taking control of the moment, the piece, and the words for yourself, in terms of how you chose to improvise around it. I'm still very much a novice at this, but I'm learning that one of the things I need to do when working with a musician around improvising is to listen. Listen and try to figure out if there's a beat or if there's a rhythm and to adjust my reading to that beat or to that rhythm as much as I can. That makes it more fun, more surprising, and so on. And there always is a beat, there's a rhythm and you just have to find it.

KM: Well thank you. I think we're pretty much out of time, but you had mentioned the "Sestina: April." Would you like to conclude with reading that poem?

GEC: Yes, and with gusto, and Dave, I'm going to ask you to deal with the bass again.

KM: They're reading a poem, "Sestina: April," and I'd like to point out that Clarke has brought copies of *Red* that the poem is in, which will be for sale after as well, and do stay for the reception.

CEC: They're only $20. [Audience laughs]. And I sign copies. So Sestina, it's the only sestina I've ever written, and I didn't write this one in the middle of the night. It was broad daylight… [audience laughs] on a train in England. And it was April. So here it is. Oh, and one more thing: for those who might not be familiar with the form of the sestina it's six words repeated at the end of the line; each stanza is six lines long, and there are six rhyming words in quotation marks that are repeated at the end of each line for each stanza. The same six words cycled throughout the poem until you get to the last three lines where all six words are used again but this time in three lines as opposed to six. So, that's the sestina form. "Sestina: April."

[GEC reads the poem with David Lee on bass].

[GEC gets a standing ovation from the audience].

GEC: Thank you, thank, I wasn't asking for a standing ovation, but thank you! For crying out loud!

PW: George Elliott Clarke!