

Supplement to *PhillyTalks* 18

Roy Miki

Roy Miki's text combines both a question he emailed in to the live audiocast during *PhillyTalks* 18, and excerpts from a talk he gave subsequent to the audiocast, "How do I get out here?: Question Mark in Place," in Bellingham, Washington State, at a panel titled "In and Out of Place" organized by Gary Geddes. His recent work includes editing *Meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001), the essays "Altered States: Global Currents, the Spectral Nation, and the Production of 'Asian Canadian'" (*Journal of Canadian Studies* 35:3 [Fall 2000]) and "Can Asian Adian? Reading the Scenes of 'Asian Canadian'" (*West Coast Line* special issue, "In-Equations: can asia pacific," No. 33 [Winter 2001]), and the poetry chapbooks, *Anticipation Alert* and *Kiyooka* (Calgary: housepress, 2000).

In the 90s, the escalation of global media systems, the saturation of the everyday with the fluctuations of finance markets, the re-tooling of the nation-state to accommodate the global economy, the disappearance of a "civil" political discourse, the undoing of the social contract, the traffic in labouring bodies, and the new rampant individualism – all these variables have exploded the question of subjectivities tied to "place." Working out of a self-defined yet open-ended "African American" positioning, poet C.S. (Cecil) Giscombe has recently published a text that blurs the boundaries of genres that include travel writing, autobiography, the journal, and fiction. Interestingly the book also blurs the boundaries between nations, the US-Canada border functioning as a site of the Fred Wah kind of hyphen that connects and divides simultaneously. Both borderblurs allow him to move, as the title of his book has it, *Into and Out of Dislocation*. What struck me in his conversation during *PhillyTalks* 18, with the other featured writer, poet Barry McKinnon, was the productive tension in Giscombe's thinking between a peripheral movement in the geocultural "seams" of both nations – "nation" as a racialized and ironically more mobile Sign – and the critical frameworks made possible by what we might call the translational acts he performs in the shaping of his narrative. I use the term "translational" from postcolonial terminology to suggest that a text such as Giscombe's *Into and Out of Dislocation* draws attention to the "local," not as a predetermined "place" into and out of which a subject is identified, but as a provisional and multi-inflected social space that is performed at the intersections of both determined and indeterminate variables. Here the "local" is a verb, and the act of negotiating relations with what is immediate can be approached as a movement "into dislocation" which is simultaneously a movement "out of" in the sense of issuing from this mobile positioning. The "locational" then becomes a constituting event that is both site-specific and conditioned by shifting alterities that include global forces. It is this event that perhaps calls for a new language of relational modes of co-existence. My sense of Cecil's mobility came from its contrast with Barry's more static notion of "place," a notion that is bound up in the territorialized spaces of the nation-state, although I'm sure he would disagree with me. His references to terror, to the wilderness "out there," i.e. re-presented before his perceptual frameworks, are constituted through the assumption that "place" is a mapped space that you go "in" and "out" of – which then posits, I think, that it's constituted on exclusionary/inclusionary borders which rescript the internal and external borders of the nation-state. Cecil's writing, though, seems to be able to move and manoeuvre – with of course the still haunted 49th for racialized blacks – in and out of the socio-geographical seams of the internalized (excluded others) that shadow the raced nation. So his outsidersness to the dominant signs (names) of the geo-nation allows him to see what the locals don't (because the seams are transparent to those who are "located"). I think Cecil's crossings expose so much about the border

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sites that are all too often covered over in the cultural politics of dominant representations of the US/Cdn divide. His shifts back and forth are so malleable that we marvel at the adeptness of his movements.

I have some questions for Cecil. Do you think, paradoxically, that it's the peripheral conditions of the traces of racialized signs and codes that make such crossings possible? And secondly, and I'm asking this playfully and yet perhaps half seriously, are you planning to become an African Canadian writer in the near future? If not, does the "nation" as a formation figure largely (or not) in your imagination? Where do you think so-called "racialized" writing is going these days, i.e., if you think it's going somewhere?

June 15, 2001

C. S. Giscombe

Response to Roy Miki

If the border in Roy's talking is the psychical one (that coincides in places with the "real" one) I do find traces of myself on both sides. And yes, my ambivalence at this crossing is inflected by race – I've tried to document this, as Roy notes, in the prose book, *Into...*, more than in the poetry book, *Giscombe Road*, which is also "about" Canada. (My appearance at the physical border has, historically, caused confusion among officials there: in the public languages of the border I give off contradictory signals.) But if my ambivalence has to do with my cognition of and acceptance of various "marginal" statuses, places I inhabit, places that are part of my description, it also involves other statuses, notably being middle class. My rather active acceptance of marginality is interestingly made easier by those. At the border I have a lot to declare.

Also, my having moved three times as an adult has necessitated a peculiar kind of nomad sensibility for me, one that's "helped" in my notion of borders as things to 2nd guess. Check out Pierre Joris's *Nomad Manifesto*; he quotes Maurice Blanchot – "Nomadism answers to a relation that possession cannot satisfy." Anyway that's part of the burden that the last 30 years has placed on me; Barry's 30 years in Prince George has put a different weight on his back – though he's a fan of Joris as well – and I'm using something he said as a point of departure for a presentation later this year on "Vernacular Geography." He said, "When you're here you're nothing."

I write this on the 5th of July, the day past the U.S. birthday and – in sidelong response to Roy's question – a few days after my own return from a cycling trip into Canada, from North Bay, from the first edge of northern Ontario. Some ado's being made this week and last week about Roy Wilkins's new book, *Jefferson's Pillow*, subtitled *The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism*. In the interviews Wilkins, a patriot (self-described as such) complicated by race, arrives at something akin to the Invisible Man's final understanding of his grandfather's perplexing deathbed advice in regard to white power: "agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open," the old man had said, and by the end of Ralph Ellison's novel the narrator had figured out that his grandfather had told him that "the principle was greater than

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the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name...”

My response to this, written quickly for and apparently rejected by the New York Times Op-Ed page, was to bring up my “discovery” of the present-day black population in Nova Scotia whose ancestors arrived (in part) in Nova Scotia as “Loyalists,” people who responded to the invitation issued by Lord Dunmore of Virginia to escape from slavery, take up arms for the British, and be free once Britain won the war which, of course, did not happen. This is not new for me – I include a discussion of it in the *Into...* book; and see, of course, George Elliott Clarke’s work on Nova Scotia. But that black and white Loyalists ended up there and that Birchtown, N.S. was, at the end of the 18th century, the largest free black settlement in North America is a matter of huge importance to black *U.S.* history and culture and it ain’t in U.S. history books (and it’s passed over in Roy Wilkins’s book which, to be fair, has other fish to fry). The point, in my unpublished editorial, was that my sense of myself as a hyphenated American on the 4th of July is complicated (interestingly, I think) by the presence in history of these black Americans who decided to throw in with the Tories and then lived out the consequences of their decision in Canada.

So “nation” is complicated and based to some extent on decision. Who or what are you going to say you are down at the border? What are you going to tell them and what are they going to see? I’m interested in nation as description or series of descriptions. Here I’m honored by Roy Miki’s reading of my work as a series of improvizations (and as a report of a series of improvizations). I claim blackness and American-ness as facts the same way that money’s a fact – I was socialized to be those complex things, call ’em global forces; but I’m pleased to be in Wayne Compton’s anthology of black British Columbia writing (though I’m not trying to pass).

5 July 2001
State College, Pennsylvania

George Elliott Clarke

Aug. 1, 2001

Bonjour, tout le monde!

Sorry I’ve been so late with a reply to Pt. 18 Supplement. BUT, ma wife’s computer – source of our e-mail / internet attachment – blew out from power surge, then there was da Big Code Red (reminiscent of dat Red Red Scare), and always LIFE happening happening outside internet internalization (ou quelque chose comme ça). Anyhow, tis pleasant to climb aboard the rocking locomotive of da conversation again.

Roy Miki is Right On! and right-on-time (again) with the analysis of how da corporatized global – old dreams of One Big Union (Wobbly) replaced by new visions of One Big Market (Mob-like) – has got to gut any stable notion of place. So dis location and dat location surrender to dislocation. Only ’ting Orwell got wrong in 1984 was maginin dat “1984” (da present future, da future present) was about three SOCIALIST empires fightin’ each other (dependin on alliances) and lyin, lyin, lyin

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to their peoples. Yes, we got “1984” all right, but it’s three or four CAPITALIST empires doin the war mongering and the lyin, lyin, lyin – expertly!

So, again, Roy be right to be writin bout how da Us-Can border be a blur, a dream/nightmare, a bind/bisection. See da newspaper headline (*Toronto Star*) today literally: “NAFTA boosts efforts to open borders.” Uh huh. So da Liberal Government du Canada want to reassure (lie to) somebody, sayin “We won’t let da border disappear.” Okey dokey. But da border don’t matter anyhow. Real question is, what be the quality of your space, your local(e), your “difference”? Any engagement of understanding (excavating) any place – near or far, here or there – is always two-fold: a movement into the World (translations from da Portuguese, maybe, or da Chinese Written Character as a Medium fer Poetry), but also a grounding in da shifting terrain of the local (da constant shaking uv politics, ululations in da lingua franca, da hocus-pocus histoire uv da locus), so you can write “Leaves of Grass” (the world made American beautifully) or “Paterson” or “Steveston” or “Land to Light On” or “Into and Out of Dislocation.”

So I ain’t sure Barry M’s afflicted by a “static notion of ‘place’.” T’ain’t possible (pronounced in French way ici), not if da writer comes to his/her voice AFTER absorption in reading (always transgressive and transportative). Even to THINK “I’s gonna write a Canajun poem” means so-and-so absorbed a degree of Herder (German), a smattering of nation-conscious poems (a bit of Dante, maybe some Mistral, maybe some Césaire, maybe some Baraka, maybe some Bible, maybe some WHITMAN), and schooled hisself/herself in MAYBE aboriginal (pre-Canajun) Kulcher, mebbe a slice of French, mebbe some OTHER ethnocultural or minority group consciousness. Can I get a witness? No body can say where “Here” is and what/who makes it up without reference to a “Not here.”

(Arguably, da border – any border – forces reflection about how and where YOU is. Is dat good? Oui, only so long YOU don’t trap Yaself into thinkin your “Here” is utterly superior to “their” “There.” See?)

Da “terror” Miki sees in McKinnon – and dat I see in Giscombe and McKinnon (an equality there) – is, I venture, about mortality, about that last space we get to venture into. No matter how ‘dislocated’ we get to be, there’s a positioned earth, water, air, and fire that’ll be our last home (outside the ‘breath’ that gets dislocated into electrical jotting or real (black preferably) ink on (white) paper). The ultimate terror is of silence/oblivion. We face it everytime we cross da border of da page or da screen.

Yes, Giscombe’s work crisscrosses da imaginary divide twixt Can-US – like all dem migrant fugitive slave an Black Loyalists and Black Refugees did not TOO long ago, givin’ allegiance to liberty, not land, but still puttin in roots and time SOMEWHERE (“Canada,” US, Sierra Leone, Trinidad, Liberia, Soviet Union, France, Nicaragua, England – all places colonized – whole or in spots—by “African Americans”).

Ainsi, Giscome est Afro-Canadien, oui, certainement, just as Wayde Compton be African American, Phillis Wheatley be African Canadian (see her poem “Rebus” talkin’ bout Quebec, Quebec), Malcolm X be African Canadian (parents met and married in Montréal), Elizabeth Bishop be Nova Scotian, and Richard Wright be Québécois (he lived awhile on Île d’Orléans, near Ville de

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Québec, and identified with “French peasants” there). All this is to agree: a writer is the constituency which claims his/her voice.

You speak out of dis location, get claimed by dat echoing location. Beautifully.

Moving on to Giscombe’s reply to Miki’s reply, I like his nomadology, his appreciation of fluidity twixt / along da border, so that McKinnon’s “Prince George” ain’t a place of fixity (but a confluence), and he see dat da Newyorktimes op-ed page ain’t ‘oped’ to ‘unpatriotic’ (?) talk bout split-off Afro-Ams who spat out da Declaration of Independence and split North (only to get spat on by dislocated Brits and ex-Yankees). Yessirree, da Reblution were real black and white in every way, and some dem Tories was Black (10%, really), who thought da British promise of 1 cow, 2 sheep, 10 acres of land – and liberty – was more trustworthy than a slaveholders’-sponsored bouleversement. (Even George Washington’s “faithful slave,” Henry, got on da boat for Birchtown – and, nine years later, for Freetown, Sierra Leone.)

Merci, C.S., for seein this – dis repressed narrative. Thank you, too, for seein “my work on Nova Scotia.”

I gotta say, I still don’t know WHAT Nova Scotia is. i prefer callin it “Africadia,” yes – this fusion of African-America and Acadia, the “lost colony” of South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland blackness, stranded up North, way, far away, so close to apples (slaves brought to the Annapolis Valley to work the apple orchards), so far from cotton. A miniscule population, now numbering 20,000 souls outta 1 million alterities, but land-owning, I said, land-owning, with whole communities – North Preston, and its Saint Thomas United Baptist Church (named for a Welshman who backed the African Baptist Association in them early days, not after some Catholic/Anglican “saint”) which got stained-glass windows featuring Black Jesus, black angels (Amen!), way out there in middle of nowhere known – and Weymouth Falls, where Rev. F. R. Langford tried to fly to heaven on sheepskin wings after the big schism in d’ Association – and Africville, bulldozed outta da world in 1960s, but still loved by US and unforgotten – and Lequille where the folks is all lemon-skinned and grey-eyed, all nicely mixed-up with aboriginal Mi’kmaw. Yep, I works on African-Nova Scotia outta love.

But, but, but, dat place, mon terroire, is flagrantly international immediately. Folks got dem Boston or Barbados roots (really); some of dem/we was Gaelic speakin’ up in Cape Breton, or puttin’ up a tiny Black Catholic and French-speaking church in just-as-tiny Southville. On Maynard St., in North-End, working-class Halifax, well, the next-door-neighbour’s gorgeous wife be Indian from Guyana (he be part-Mi’kmaw and Black “Indian” from down the Valley); Mr. Parker who worked CN trains, livin cross street from we, be West Indian. Corner store was owned by Greek family (son gimme hydrochloric acid to pour onto sugar to see it burn real black). Sour-faced British-Canajun dude up the street had real nice daughter. But my two bros and me also chased after French girls livin cross street from us and Black sweet Africadian gals livin next door too. To come to try to say anything about this twenty-churched, forty-community, ex-Af-Am enclave in “British North America,” means readin, say, Milton as Black English, Shakespeare as blackface minstrelsy, Baraka as a Newfie with different-timbred/coloured speech, Gwendolyn Brooks as a CBC reporter givin the truth about the ’hood, Toomer as an Acadian priest, Robert Hayden as Ralph Gustafson, the Bible as street gossip, Gotti’gen Street as 125th Street, Uniacke Square as Bedford-Stuyvesant,

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Montréal as Paris (especially Afro-Arab Château-Rouge), Toronto as London, Macintosh caramels as johnnycake, Governor-General's Rum as malt liquor, the RCMP as the KKK, Pierre Trudeau as Martin Luther King, bagpipes as saxophones, seaweed and fried clams as rice and black-eyed-peas, and and and....

I live in Toronto, after 5 years in Durham, North Carolina, but I remain Africadian, a synonym for 'universal.' I like the connection to the land where my Mama birthed me and where she is now at rest and where I hope, one day, to be at rest. In fact, with her passing, I have inherited land that has come all the way down from 1813. "Black" land in a "Black" province, "Black" because our presence makes it so. It makes me, proudly, a "rooted" cosmopolitan. And I am glad to be in an African-American anthology, *Soulfires* (Penguin, 1996), and in an English/French-Canadian anthology, *Passeport* (1998), and in *the Longman Anthology of World Literature* (forthcoming). But where I yearn to be now is in the membership rolls of the African (United) Baptist Association of Nova Scotia (est. 1854). That's the only "pass" – passage – I need to make.

"Rex States"

P.S. I delve into 'dialect' here because, first, it belongs to me – as native / nativist (but also international) Black domestic wit/speech. It is English some of us have made for ourselves under repressive circumstances. And strangely, it SURVIVES – sometimes luxuriously, as in Toomer, Brown, JW Johnson, Hughes, Brooks, Baraka (yep, him too), and Gayl Jones (kinda like "Sugar Jones" but with acid), and many many many more. (Did somebody say, "Frederick Ward"?) Another reason for its persistence is that it ACCENTS the idea of the 'same difference' or 'the changing same', which, in a sense, is what our discussion of 'border blur' (Ondaatje) has been about.... I.e. dialect (so-called) blurs the standard language, just as one might want to blur Canada-US 'difference'. Still, something called a 'border' remains, as profoundly indefinable as it is.... –"Rex States"

Barry McKinnon

Post Response

my job as a poet is to see and to unravel arbitrary and preconceived notions and definitions of reality, including what I might conjure as my own: the poet can't help but do that because of the very nature of the energy & process of the language that's chosen him or her. what has been mapped by manipulative and self-interested forces, from whatever source or reason, is firstly what the poet must at the most rudimental start of the thinking and writing process attempt to take apart. I must find myself asking unanswerable questions; there is no choice. the poem is a process that defies the static, the set, the static arbitrariness that herd most populations thru life and language. the poem is verb: there are no nouns in nature: nature has neither centre or periphery.

place becomes for me the perception of that moment when my eye sees an instant and then sees thru it / knows it; the poem moves at it, in it, becomes both it and not it. this written instant is of a / the world unmapped, immediate and excitingly incomprehensible, (now there and visible for "gradual awareness") and by that fact more real in its assertion than the lower-order uses of language that manipulate to create static, noise & stasis. in these manipulated claims of the "real world" by those obsessed with power, the dramatic premise is that once a thing ceases to move it is

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easier to kill (literally or metaphorically) – the poet included. if cecil and I share anything, I hope it is a clear sense of these margins, bounds and conditions and that we are neither black nor white (but a multiple of complex human activity which may include these designations*) – while in the heart and moment of the process of seeing and writing, terrified or not, in this necessary disappearance of the preconceived.

this is part of a poem I wrote in the 1970s that cecil referred to – having an importance to him – shortly after we met.

... it should be easier, so I go
back
 – some uttered language, rooted in the void,

as driving N.E. of Giscome – to McGregor – not making it – running low
on gas – the sun blinding – a sense of being

 nowhere, suspended & scary. the truck

moves along,
 between mountains, a train, slag heaps, (a copper
mine? thus
 the green ring that edges the lake?

such descriptions, without a meaning – or I am without
a meaning,

 not clearly, at 35
 driving ...
 (88)

here is part of cecil giscombe's poem "far":

It's that this far inland the appearance of a fox is more than metaphor. Or the appearance is a demonstration. Sudden appearance, big like an impulse; or the watcher gains a gradual awareness – in the field, taking shape and, finally familiar. The line of sight's fairly clear leaving imagination little to supply. It's a fact to remember, though, seeing the fox and where or, at night, hearing foxes (and where). The fox appearing, coming into view, as if to meet the speaker.

Push comes to shove. Mistah Fox arriving avec luggage, sans luggage. (5)

I see these lines as a conjunction in our thinking and writing – poets moving into / out of sudden appearance to trace the fact of a dislocated moving place.

* I'd like to question large and assumed categories and nominalisms even further as when poet george stanley writes to announce: "I am not a man ..." (68). similarly, here is leonard cohen saying: "... in an embrace you're neither man nor woman – you forget who you are. Once you have experienced yourself as neither man nor woman, when you are reborn into the predetermined form which you inhabit, you come back with the residue of experience or the residue of wisdom which enables you to recognize in the other extremely familiar traits." (crouch 21).

July 15, 2001

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