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Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of Africville¹

IN THE 1960S THE HALIFAX COMMUNITY of Africville was a symbol of the African-Canadian condition: marginalized, impoverished, dependent. Because it straddled the main trans-Canada railway line it attracted considerable attention. Nation-wide publicity labelled Africville a "blot" and a "disgrace," an anomaly in a land supposedly free of racial disadvantage. Then it became a positive symbol in the mind of white Canada for slum clearance and urban renewal and racial integration, as the population of about 400 were removed from their homes 'for their own good' and the physical community of Africville was bulldozed into the ground. Since 1970, when the last resident was forced out, Africville's symbolic role has shifted again. The community has continued to exist despite its physical destruction, and it is taken now as a symbol of the unconquerable black spirit in Nova Scotia. The relocation itself has been deemed an act *of* racism rather than *against* racism, something to be regretted and reversed.

Africville has been Canada's most highly publicized black community, but it was by no means unique. Every feature and every condition of life in Africville up to the time of its demolition was shared with other African-Canadian communities, with differences only in degree. Indeed, throughout its history the Africville story serves as allegory for the African-Canadian experience, especially in Nova Scotia, and its refusal to die has forced a reconsideration and ultimately a recognition of the powerful community orientation of black history in Canada.

¹ A shorter version of this article appeared in *The Literary Review of Canada* July 1993: 3-5.

Like every other black settlement in early Canada, Africville owed its origin to fugitive American slaves. In this case they were among the Black Refugees attracted to the British during the War of 1812 and carried to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on the promise of free land and equal rights. Neither promise was fully honoured. The lands assigned to the Black Refugees were given on "licenses of occupation" rather than grants, which meant that although they had full use of the land they lacked outright ownership and therefore could not sell it or use it for collateral. In any case the land distributed to them came in tiny plots of only eight to ten acres per family, neither large enough nor fertile enough for subsistence agriculture, and they were clustered in segregated tracts on the fringes of larger white towns, sufficiently close to commute as labourers but sufficiently remote to avoid social contact. And so Black Refugee settlements evolved, as had Black Loyalist settlements beginning a generation earlier, in physical circumstances that consigned them to isolation, poverty and economic dependence, but that at the same time encouraged the development of institutions and cultural styles suited to their own specific needs.

In 1842, following requests and petitions from black settlers and their white sympathizers, legal grants were given to those who were qualified. This permitted some to sell their land, if a buyer could be found, to finance a move to a more advantageous location. A few families in this way were enabled to relocate closer to Halifax, purchasing about thirteen acres along the shores of the Bedford Basin. Though no better for farming, the new location was more convenient for Halifax employment, it offered a readier market for produce and crafts, and it provided fishing opportunities in the Bedford Basin. In 1848 the earliest black deeds were registered, and in 1849 a Baptist church was established. The community took the name of Campbell Road, from its thoroughfare, and by 1851 it showed a population of 54. This represented almost exactly one per cent of the African Canadians living in Nova Scotia at that time.

Africville, as Campbell Road came to be known, literally grew in place; houses and outbuildings were added as families expanded or new ones moved in, with no concern for street plans or legal

niceties. Separated from the rest of the city by a strip of bushland, it retained a rural atmosphere though it was formally within the Halifax city limits. As Halifax modernized, its sewers and street lights and water system were not extended to Africville. The police did not patrol there, and although the fire brigade responded to emergencies, without road access or water hydrants the firefighters could not provide effective protection. Halifax did offer employment, though only of the type deemed appropriate for black people. Some of the early male residents had skilled trades, but over the generations most were relegated to unskilled labour. They worked on the docks and the coal barges, hauled night-soil, a favoured few became railway porters. Equally typically, Africville women became cooks and cleaners in Halifax homes and nearby institutions. Fishing and farming were a modest supplement to irregular employment and extremely low wages. In 1959 the Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs conducted a study which showed only about 35% of Africville residents with regular employment, and 50% earning less than \$1,000 per year.²

Physical isolation from the Halifax mainstream therefore carried certain disadvantages, but it did not preserve Africville from encroachments. Scarcely had the settlement been founded than the railway lines cut through it in the 1850s, requiring the first relocation for several families. Another relocation occurred when additional lines were constructed just before World War I. A prison was established adjacent to the community in 1853, night-soil disposal pits in 1858, an infectious diseases hospital in the 1870s. To this concentration of undesirables were added a fertilizer plant, two slaughterhouses, a coal-handling facility, a tar factory, a leather tannery. Some new employment opportunities were created, at the level of general labour, along with a great deal of noise, soot and pollution. The *coup de grâce* came in the 1950s when the Halifax city dump was located within a hundred metres of Africville homes. Frequent petitions to civic authorities were to no avail. A certain undesirable human element encroached as well. In the absence of police surveillance, bootleggers and their customers found a favourable haven, and their drunkenness and debauchery both dis-

² Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, *Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City* (Halifax: Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, 1962).

turbed the peace of the settlement and at the same time attracted a reputation which the community itself did not deserve. To outsiders, Africville smacked of impermanency and even immorality.

Community insiders had an entirely different perspective. Central to their community experience was the Seaview African United Baptist church. The church and the community were born together in the 1840s and they grew together for a century thereafter. At the request of the Campbell Road residents, the Reverend Richard Preston convened a congregation there and became its first pastor, as he was for several other Halifax-area churches, and when Preston created the African Baptist Association in 1854 there were Campbell Road delegates at the founding convention. As a spiritual institution the church sustained the human dignity of the parishioners, promoted a sharing of burdens and mutual honesty through the Sunday testimony, elevated souls with prayers and praise. The 'communion' of this community derived from the church. But the church was central in many other ways as well. Since they could never afford a full-time resident pastor, it was always people from within the community, people just like everyone else, who led the affairs of the congregation. Other community organizations were church-connected—the women's auxiliary, youth groups, missionary society—and community meetings were held in the church building. The first school was conducted in the church beginning in 1883. The elected elders and deacons were the *de facto* government of the settlement and the negotiators with the society outside. The name 'Seaview'—adopted in 1916, following construction of a new church necessitated by the railway expansion—evoked the peaceful view over the Bedford Basin, scene of public baptisms and of the universally attended Easter Sunrise Service.

The scene was not to last. Modern secularism had its impact on Africville just like everywhere else, undermining the elders' role as leaders and mediators. Church membership declined, particularly after World War II. In that same period Africville lost its second most important institution, the school. While the qualifications of its teachers and hence the quality of its education had often been poor, the Africville school promoted a sense of identity and paralleled the church as a provider of a black perspective upon the world and its meaning for life in Africville. In 1953, just one year before the American Supreme Court ordered school desegregation

in the United States, the Africville children were integrated into a neighbouring Halifax school. The community's pillars were being weakened, just when they would be needed the most.

Talk of expropriating Africville and relocating its people began as early as World War I. So often was the subject raised that residents took it as nothing but talk, as an excuse for the city's failure to provide services. However, the talk became serious in the late 1950s as Halifax began a major urban renewal program that resulted in the relocation of thousands of citizens. The 1957 Stephenson Report condemned the "deplorable" conditions in Africville and noted the industrial potential of its location, emphasizing the benefits both to Africville and to Halifax from its removal.³ But the people themselves called for development of their community right where it was, for running water and paved roads and decent housing and police protection. In 1961 they appealed to Sid Blum of the Canadian Labour Congress, a celebrated community campaigner. Blum asked Alan Borovoy to visit Halifax, to help Africville organize a defence.

Borovoy concluded, during his visit in August 1962, that relocation was inevitable. It was simply not acceptable in the 1960s for Canadian officials to restore and reinforce a black 'ghetto'; integration was socially desirable and politically necessary. He therefore concentrated his efforts upon making the best possible deal for those about to be uprooted. To that end Borovoy formed the Halifax Human Rights Advisory Committee, to arouse public support and to bring political pressure on Africville's behalf. It was this Committee, made up of black and white Haligonians all with experience in human rights causes, which suggested that the city engage Dr. Albert Rose to do a report on Africville conditions and to consider the appropriate solutions. Rose, too, became convinced that relocation was the only viable alternative. Believing that the people were willing to leave if the circumstances were favourable, Rose recommended that the removal should be spread over several years, that compensation be negotiated with each family, that the services of a lawyer and a social worker be provided free of charge, and that a post-relocation package be offered including

³ Gordon Stephenson, *A Redevelopment Study of Halifax, Nova Scotia* (Halifax: City of Halifax, 1957).

job training and employment assistance.⁴ The Rose Report was discussed at a meeting in Seaview Church in January 1964, and was approved in principle by 37 of the 41 people in attendance. Halifax city council then endorsed a program basically following the Rose recommendations. This involved two types of compensation: payment for expropriated land and buildings, and relocation assistance. The project social worker negotiated specific financial settlements with each of the relocatees and arranged for new housing in Halifax, for welfare and other allowances. The Halifax Human Rights Advisory Committee remained in existence as a watchdog, to ensure fair dealing and to advise the people of Africville. Despite these precautions the relocation experience was a bitter one. Only those who had legal title, 14 families, were eligible to negotiate a land settlement; the others were granted a blanket \$500 each in exchange for their squatters' right to their land. As soon as any family moved, their house was immediately demolished, to encourage remaining residents to settle their affairs quickly. The reluctant were expropriated. No serious employment program was developed for them. Adjustment assistance was minimal. Although their housing conditions were improved they had much higher expenses for rent or mortgages, and since underemployment prevailed this meant debt or welfare, and family stress. Group resources for mutual support were diminished, extended families were disrupted, the community was scattered. An overwhelming majority expressed their dissatisfaction in 1969, convinced that the entire operation had been designed to the advantage of the city, a device to remove them from valuable land. In an effort to confront their disappointments and prevent total discouragement, the Africville relocatees nurtured their old community ties and retained their identity, culminating in 1983 in the foundation of the Africville Genealogical Society dedicated to perpetuating "the spirit of Africville" for themselves and their descendants.

As the bearer of such a negative image—characterized by the city dump and bootleggers and racial segregation—Africville was not mourned by the broader society when the bulldozers did their work. Since it had been defined as a social problem, its re-

⁴ Albert Rose, "Report of a Visit to Halifax with Particular Respect to Africville" (Nov. 1963), in Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *Africville Relocation Report* (Halifax: Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, 1971) Appendix F.

moval must be a positive step and a benefit to the inhabitants. This was slum clearance in an era of urban renewal, the elimination of a black ghetto in an era of desegregation. The *Star Weekly* hailed “the slow welcome death of Africville,”⁵ and *Time* complimented Halifax for its “determined, if belated, effort . . . to right an historical injustice.”⁶ Africville deserved to go, as even most Halifax blacks were ready to concede. If a problem was recognized it was not in the removal itself but in the way it was done, the inadequate compensation, the absence of genuine consultation, the failure to provide post-relocation assistance. It is worth remembering that at that time African Americans were insisting upon integration and the Canadian government even proposed the elimination of native reserves in the 1969 White Paper on Indian policy. Arguments in favour of Africville’s continued existence were not considered seriously.

But that moment, too, would pass. Urban renewal and mass relocations would soon be discredited, to be replaced as a development model by the idea of building upon local community traditions to improve economic and social conditions. The African-American movement grew suspicious of integrationism and began to celebrate black pride and distinctiveness. Above all, black people throughout North America, engaged in a community-based struggle for their collective rights, became increasingly conscious of the communal nature of their history and culture and the foundations to their identity in black institutions. As black history was re-defined as a community story, Africville *as community* could be taken seriously. The sense of loss experienced by the relocatees was respected and shared by others, especially other blacks, as it was recognized that a viable community had been uprooted, a beloved church destroyed, an identity undermined. The arguments put forward by the people of Africville were given retroactive validity, including their interpretation of the city’s sinister motives. White society had awakened to the historic pervasiveness of racism in Nova Scotia; the pre-relocation condition of Africville could be recognized as a direct consequence of racial injustice, and the relocation not as a corrective but a continuation of the racist syndrome.

⁵ *Toronto Star Weekly* 1 Jan. 1966.

⁶ *Time* (Canada ed.) 6 April 1970.

These ideological developments and value shifts were experienced across the continent. Africville did not cause them to happen, but it did become the concrete Nova Scotian example to illustrate the general principle; it entered the discourse, locally, to engage and enhance a different perspective and a different paradigm that would redefine the meaning of black community, culture and identity. The genuine yearning for community lost is apparent in such evocations of the Africville memory as Shelagh Mackenzie's film *Remember Africville*, Joe Sealy's jazz album *Africville Suite*, and George Boyd's play *Consecrated Ground*.⁷ Africville came to stand, for the black people of Nova Scotia, as a warning not to accept any more government promises, not to submit to the direction of outsiders. Africville stood too as an inspiration: the black spirit and community identity had demonstrated its strength; that Africville could overcome its physical annihilation revealed a source of power that could generate positive change for all black people. Province-wide organizations were stimulated to utilize black distinctiveness and communal bonds in a renewed confrontation with the racism that had restricted black lives for generations.

2

As Africville's experience was being redefined in this way, the relocation process was being recorded and interpreted by two distinguished scholars, Don Clairmont and Dennis Magill, in one of the few classics to grace the field of African-Canadian studies. Their findings were published first in the *Africville Relocation Report* (1971), then in book form as *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (1974), which appeared in a new and slightly revised edition in 1987.⁸ They came to their study, in the summer of 1967, convinced that it was a model relocation, an example for other cities to follow. They grew disenchanted as they wit-

⁷ *Remember Africville*, dir. Shelagh Mackenzie, NFB, 1991; Joe Sealy, *Africville Suite*, Seajam Recordings, 1996; George Boyd, *Consecrated Ground*, Eastern Front Theatre, Halifax, 1999).

⁸ Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *Africville Relocation Report* (Halifax: Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, 1971); *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974); revised edition with a preface by Bridglal Pachai (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1987).

nessed the Africville people being ignored by social technocrats, and in fact they became engaged with relocatees in organizing to demand better compensation and re-establishment programs. They had entered their own story, and they had changed it. What they had discovered was that the “liberal welfare model” of planned social change was bureaucratic, dictatorial, undemocratic, and that it was not serving the best interests of the people of Africville.

The interpretation that emerged from the Clairmont and Magill study was that Africville was a “social problem” and its residents were “victims”: historically, they were victims of city neglect and encroachment, which produced the unsatisfactory “problem” conditions which in turn justified relocation; then they were victims of the way the relocation was organized, the unfair compensation and the failure to follow through on adjustment assistance. This thematic thrust does not change through the three published versions, but the package of information which carries the theme does undergo some subtle and very interesting shifts. In 1971 there was more discussion of theory and “relocation models,” as if the intended audience was sociologists and urban planners, there was more detail on land records and deeds of the early settlers, and a more elaborate description of the century of white encroachments emphasizing a longstanding interest in Africville land by the city of Halifax. In 1974 Africville as “social problem” receives more attention, including analysis of the impact of those past encroachments in terms of poverty, living conditions and social outlook. Although the text was almost identical, this direction was strengthened in the 1987 edition. A section entitled “Citizen Involvement During the Relocation Programme” in 1974, becomes “*Lack of Citizen Involvement During the Relocation Programme*” in 1987:⁹ the story is basically the same, but the reader’s attention is being directed more powerfully. And in 1987 a paragraph headed “Powerlessness” enshrines the perspective of victimization:

Africville residents, being black and poor, viewed the world with pessimism and resignation. Political bargaining with the “outside world” had been unsuccessful; the dominant attitude within the community was one of powerlessness and political ineffectiveness¹⁰

⁹ See 1974 ed. (175) and 1987 ed. (159).

¹⁰ 1987 ed. (160).

But while the 1987 edition indicates most clearly the deprivations committed upon the body and soul of Africville, there are some clues, really no more than glimmers, that *pre*-relocation Africville may not have been so bad, so incorrigible, so obvious a candidate for destruction. In 1987 the illustrations are sharper, and fewer in number, giving a far less depressing and decrepit impression of historic Africville. A reader would be affected differently. Consider also the subtle difference in impact of the opening sentence of the Introduction. In 1971 it was worded:

Africville was a Negro "enclave" within the city of Halifax

In 1974 it became:

Africville was a black enclave [no-quotation marks] within the city of Halifax

And in 1987:

Africville was a black community within the city of Halifax

The community perspective which infused black historical interpretation during the 1970s, and which had gripped the black people of Nova Scotia in the wake of Africville, was reflected in the way the scholarly interpretation was being presented.

The story has been told anew in a book compiled by the Africville Genealogical Society, *The Spirit of Africville*,¹¹ and the evolving social attitude toward the historic Africville community is given full voice. The first things you notice are the beautiful pictures. Gone are the drab and grainy photos of Clairmont and Magill; these are coffee-table quality, with flowers and bright blue skies, colourful houses and smiling black faces, declaring that this was a place worth saving. A preface by Irvine Carvery, president of the Africville Genealogical Society announces:

¹¹ Africville Genealogical Society, *The Spirit of Africville* (Halifax: Formac, 1992).

We, the people of Africville, hope that you will enjoy reading this book and gain a better understanding of what it is like to grow up in a black community in Nova Scotia. (xviii)

The first article is a whimsical and nostalgic stroll through Africville in 1959, setting the tone by emphasizing the positive human aspects of community life. Even the dump was an asset, a source of many valuable things from saleable scrap metal to usable food and clothing.

Some folks say the dump was put here to drive us out. If that's true, things kind of backfired, didn't they? (33)

There follow two articles by Don Clairmont, "An Historical Overview" and "Moving People: Relocation and Urban Renewal," which succinctly capture the scholarship of his earlier publications but with a distinctly different effect: the people of Africville were "wronged" by the century of trespass against them, but they did not become "victims." Clairmont does not disguise the hardships, but neither does he invoke pity. His perspective has shifted from the student of urban renewal to the student of black society. Africville is presented as a viable community; the injustice in the relocation was not in the way it was handled but in the very fact that it happened at all.

Equally effective in presenting this revised history of Africville is a report from a meeting in Halifax in November 1989, entitled "Lessons for the Future." Former residents speak their pride and their pain. Persons involved in the decision to relocate, both black and white, declare that they made a mistake. A black human rights activist and negotiator then on Africville's behalf says: "Would I have acted today as I did then? Of course the response is no."¹² A city councillor from the relocation era admits: "Looked at from today, I have to say that I think we also undervalued the importance of a sense of community."¹³ A now-retired provincial official draws the essential lesson:

¹² *Spirit of Africville* 97.

¹³ *Spirit of Africville* 100.

I think we have to learn that many such communities, and Africville is a prime example, have a cultural identity, a personality and an emotional place in the hearts and minds of their people which could provide the solid foundation for the future growth and development of that community.¹⁴

The demand from that meeting, and the current platform of the Africville Genealogical Society, is not simply for compensation but for restoration. The people of Africville want to go home again, to rebuild their community on the shores of the Bedford Basin. To dramatize their demands, one group has launched a physical 'vigil,' camping on the former location of the Seaview Church and claiming it for the community. The Genealogical Society itself filed suit against the city of Halifax in 1995, seeking legal title to the land first settled by their ancestors. Their declared intention is to develop the site both as a historical memorial and as a source of employment and revenue, to enable a reversal of the 1960s dislocation. Negotiations with the city were continuing in early 1999.¹⁵ The perspective of community members and the thematic orientation of academic observers have come together in *The Spirit of Africville*. As previously noted, Africville serves as allegory for the history of African Canadians; it can be added that it also reflects, in its multiple versions, the variety of interpretations both popular and scholarly which shape the way that history is told. The same event can encode quite different meanings depending on who are deemed to be the principals of the story and whether their goal is legitimated and their attributes respected. In its telling as in its living, Africville history is representative.

3

For the sake of this article I have identified five 'orientations' in African-Canadian historiography. They are 'orientations' rather than 'schools' because they are not deliberate or even conscious groupings of scholars; furthermore several orientations can coexist in the

¹⁴ *Spirit of Africville* 101.

¹⁵ Conversation with Irvine Carvery, Halifax, 4 Nov. 1997, confirmed in a telephone consultation, 7 Jan. 1999.

same piece of historical writing. Although my own preferences will be obvious, I do not pretend that there is *one* acceptable interpretation in this field or in any other. The orientation labels are descriptive rather than definitive, and they refer explicitly to one particular feature: what distinguishes one orientation from another is the role assigned to black people in the making of black history. As shall be seen, each has its advantages and its liabilities.

The first orientation I have labelled *Black Clients*. It is readily recognizable to anyone who has watched the C.R. Bronfman Foundation's "heritage moment" on the Underground Railroad, which plays occasionally during commercial breaks on Canadian television. This one-minute historical vignette shows a black woman in great distress, being comforted by a white matron who assures her that "he will arrive safely." The black woman runs outside and meets a farm wagon driven by a white man. Boards are removed, and out of a secret compartment leaps a black man. He and the black woman embrace, while a voice-over announces that "this is part of the Canadian heritage." In this *Black Clients* orientation the focus is on white people; black people enter the story as recipients of white justice and white philanthropy; they are cooperative, loyal and grateful. Almost anything with Underground Railroad in the title shares this *Clients* orientation, incorporating the image of fugitive slaves as 'passengers' being 'transported' to freedom by white agency. Literature of this type may acknowledge the existence of racism in Canadian history, but usually presents it as something that has been overcome by Anglo-Canadian justice or, if it does continue, it is only among certain 'rotten apples.' As a society, in other words, Canada is untainted, and the few rotten apples in our communal barrel can be plucked out. This understanding of the nature of racism was reflected in Canadian public policy until fairly recently.

The *Clients* orientation was more popular a few generations ago—the best examples are to be found in the writings of Fred Landon and W. R. Riddell—but it continues on television and in the popular mind, and it has more recently received credibility from Allen P. Stouffer's *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario 1833–1877*.¹⁶ Although Stouffer explains that

¹⁶ Allen P. Stouffer, *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario 1833–1877* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992).

his book is intended to be about white abolitionists, and therefore his exclusive focus on whites is justifiable, still the black actors who do cross his stage are fundamentally seen as recipients rather than participants; from the perspective of white abolitionists, blacks *are* clients. Stouffer is careful to describe white racism, even within antislavery ranks, but the congratulatory imagery of most earlier *Clients* historiography had already provoked a reaction, creating what I shall term the *Black Victims* orientation.

Black Victims began to appear during the development of a new sensitivity to human rights and race relations in Canada, reflecting a *mea culpa* attitude at the discovery that Canadian history shared comparable examples of racism with the United States. Often, in fact, it was *tua culpa*, as American scholars pointed the finger at the racist reality lurking behind the North Star mythology so beloved by Canadians. Jason H. Silverman's *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800–1865*¹⁷ is a good example of this orientation. African Canadians are redefined, from *Clients* to *Victims*, but the focus is still on white actors. Black history becomes the story of what was done *to* black people, rather than what was done *for* them, while the black characters remain *do-ees* instead of *do-ers*. Literature with a *Victims* orientation did make a solid contribution, revealing the deep roots of racism in Canadian history. It was no longer possible to hold seriously the 'rotten apple' view, and to this extent the *Victims* moved us forward, toward an understanding of systemic racism. But the liability was that African Canadians were not responsible for their own history, and a dangerous by-product often was that black culture was presented as 'pathology,' as the result of oppression. As has already been described, versions of *Africville* shared in this liability.

The next orientation I shall call *Black Achievers*. The focus is at last on African-Canadian actors. The racism is there, but certain individuals are able to 'make it' in the white world, and according to the criteria of the white world, by their own talents and diligence. Stephen L. Hubbard's *Against All Odds: The Story of William*

¹⁷ Jason H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800–1865* (Millwood, NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1985).

*Peyton Hubbard, Black Leader and Municipal Reformer*¹⁸ can serve as our example. The Hubbard of the title was a prominent Toronto city politician and a champion of public ownership of utilities, but he was never a "Black Leader" if that implies 'leader of black people.' The people Hubbard led were white. His achievement early in this century was remarkable, and his biographer properly treats him as an exception. This characterizes the *Achievers* orientation: African Canadians are central, their individual equality is recognized and their contributions are celebrated, but to be classed as a contribution they had to do something in and for white society. The liability was that these outstanding black people had to stop being black to win historical recognition. This is still a powerful orientation, especially among non-professionals. When I speak at Black History Month events I am most often asked about 'Black Achievers,' and the people posing the question are most often African Canadians themselves.

The early movement for civil and human rights fitted in with a *Victims* imagery, but as 'Black Power' and 'Black Pride' emerged the victim/pathology model was no longer acceptable. Black people were clearly not 'recipients' any longer, if they ever had been, and the focus moved to what they were doing and what they had done. This shift coincided with and participated in the social history movement, the researching and writing of history 'from the bottom up.' The rediscovery of black initiative and culture led to an appreciation of the communal nature of the black identity, and so it is appropriate to style this as the *Black Community* orientation. It produced a recognition of the things that made black people distinct from whites, of the contributions made to that process rather than to mainstream developments, and of the collective nature of the black struggle in North America. The most important by-product of the *Community* orientation was the rehabilitation of black culture, which became not only valid but central to the African experience in the New World. This in turn served to rehabilitate the African connection, the identification with the mother continent, as reflected in the current use of the terms 'African Canadian' and 'African American.' A liability of the *Black Community*

¹⁸ Stephen L. Hubbard, *Against All Odds: The Story of William Peyton Hubbard, Black Leader and Municipal Reformer* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1987).

orientation is that it may focus exclusively on what black people were doing, ignoring the context in which those developments took place, ignoring even the racism that set so many boundaries around individual and communal activity, and it may tend to idealize the past rather indiscriminately. *The Spirit of Africville* demonstrates both the vitality and the liability of the *Community* orientation.

The *Community* and *Victims* orientations are, or should be, incompatible. When my own *Black Loyalists* first came out in 1976¹⁹ with its *Community* theme, Robin Winks wrote that I had effectively “put an end to the ‘victims’ school of Canadian Black historiography.”²⁰ Not only was Professor Winks altogether too flattering, he was rather premature, for the *Black Victim* has been revived and multiplied since then. Sometimes this is a straight revival, but increasingly there is a twist upon it, and it is modified by a touch of *Achiever*. For this reason I shall give the 1990s version a distinctive name, and call it the *Black Survivors* orientation. ‘Survivor’ has a particular cultural meaning in the 1990s; it is not exactly a euphemism for ‘victim,’ for it has a nuance, and a therapeutic significance. In the *Black Survivors* orientation the focus is on black people but the perspective is back with the oppressor; African-Canadian history becomes the story of ‘persons living with discrimination.’ An extremely interesting example is Dionne Brand’s *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s*,²¹ or rather the editor’s introduction, for this is a collection of interviews conducted with African-Canadian women. Brand emphasizes exploitation and perseverance under suffering, but the interviews themselves emit a vibrant *Community* orientation. Work and racism are *not* allowed to define their identity as these women proceed beyond the editor’s agenda to describe lives contoured by church and school, black organizations and communal activities. The *Survivors* orientation can no doubt have a therapeutic effect, especially for those who lack a community background, and it may even win certain political advantages, in the

¹⁹ James W. St.G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (London: Longman, 1976).

²⁰ *The Dalhousie Review* 57 (1977–78): 150.

²¹ Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991).

short run, to make a claim based on sympathy. But the liability is that the African-Canadian story enters the contemporary discourse of power with black people as objects rather than subjects.

4

These five categories are not, of course, exclusive, and perhaps it is worth repeating that the books mentioned here and the literature in this field generally have innumerable strengths, and weaknesses, which characterize them at least as much as my 'orientations.' Still, as our attention returns to Africville and its current campaign for restoration, I want to emphasize the political significance of historical interpretation and within this context the centrality of the role played by black people in their own history. *History as it is understood* enters a political discourse, it becomes a participant in a power dialectic and it influences power relationships. George Orwell knew this when he gave Big Brother the slogan "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."²² Whatever Orwell's cynical intent, we can recognize that people do in fact act on what they believe to have happened in the past. This applies to African-Canadian history as it is understood by both black people and white people. The writing of history is a political act, deliberate or not.

In the past two decades approximately 80 articles, 50 books and 40 graduate theses have been written on African-Canadian history or at least with relevance to African-Canadian history. Besides regional studies, the most popular topics have been slavery and abolition, immigration, discrimination (particularly economic and legal), education, religion and culture, and life stories. Especially in the recent decade, black women have been receiving increasing attention. Thematically the literature ranges over all the orientations identified in this article, but if there is a trend it is toward the *Survivor*, the 'person living with racism,' the individual who perseveres 'in spite of it all.' Although *Community* is not neglected and blacks as historical actors are present, this is still not a

²² George Orwell, 1984, special ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 217.

prevailing focus in African-Canadian historical interpretation. This is unfortunate, in my view, because a focus on the black community is a key, is *the* key, to understanding African-Canadian history—the *meaning* of the racism, the migrations both in and out, the schools and churches, the newspapers, the antislavery movement, the individual achievements and the distinct role and position of women—because it all arises from or is profoundly influenced by the dynamics generated within black society and institutions. Oppressors may have dominated the process for much of the time, but they have never controlled it, not even in slavery and certainly not in Africville. To ignore the community dynamic would be to forego a powerful political impulse. It was through the community that black people related with external forces and structures, and as the community changed over time so did that relationship. The endeavour by the people of Africville to go home again is one illuminating example of how this process has always worked. The history lesson and the political strategy coincide.

Suggestions for Further Reading

SERIOUS READERS OF AFRICAN-CANADIAN HISTORY will want to consult Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1971), still the outstanding reference work in the field. The original text remains unchanged in the second edition (1997), but Professor Winks has added a new preface which addresses some of the criticism of the first edition. Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt: Book Society of Canada, 1981), is more suitable for introductory reading. James W. St.G. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada: A Study Guide for Teachers and Students* (Ottawa: Ministry of State for Multiculturalism, 1980), offers a narrative overview and a discussion of the most significant literature on African Canadians published before 1980. Only titles published since 1980 will be mentioned in the following discussion, and works cited in the footnotes of the preceding article are not repeated.

Regional overviews are provided (from East to West) by Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks*, 2 vols. (Halifax: Black Educators Association, 1987, 1991), Jim Hornby, *Black Islanders: Prince Edward Island's Historical Black Community* (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1991), and Howard and Tamara Palmer, "The Black Experience in Alberta," in *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985) 365–93. Local and thematic studies can be found in Judith Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20 (1992): 169–95 and "From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, c. 1870–1916," *Acadiensis* 24 (1995): 49–64, Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-19th Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis* 22 (1993): 61–83, Dorothy W. Williams, *Blacks in Montreal, 1628–1986: An Urban Geography* (Montreal: Editions Yvon Blais, 1989), Frances Henry, *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto: Learning to Live with Racism* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994), Keith S. Henry, *Black Politics in Toronto Since World War I* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), Howard Law, "'Self-Reliance is the True Road to Independence': Ideology and the Ex-Slaves in Buxton and Chatham," *Ontario History* 77 (1985): 107–21, Gwendolyn and John Robinson, *Seek the Truth: A Story of Chatham's Black Community* (Chatham: NP, 1989), Arlie C. Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton* (Chatham: Ideal Printing, 1983), J. Rick Ponting and Richard A. Wanner, "Blacks in Calgary: A Social and Attitudinal Profile," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 15 (1983): 57–76, Peggy Bristow et al., *'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994), Agnes Calliste, "Blacks on Canadian Railways," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 20 (1988): 36–52, Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion: No. 2 Construction 1916–1920*

(Halifax: Society for the Protection and Preservation of Black Culture in Nova Scotia, 1986), and James W. St.G. Walker, "'Race' and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 1–26.

Slavery and abolitionism in Canada are discussed in David G. Bell, "Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist New Brunswick," *UNB Law Journal* 31 (1982): 9–42, Barry Cahill, "Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia," *UNB Law Journal* 43 (1994): 73–134, and "Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia," *UNB Law Journal* 44 (1995): 179–209, Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713–1760," *Acadiensis* 25 (1995): 3–32, Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français* (LaSalle: Hurtubise, 1990), Michael Power and Nancy Butler, *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara* (Niagara-on-the-Lake: Niagara Historical Society, 1993) Part I, "Simcoe and Slavery" 9–39, and Peter C. Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 2, *Canada 1830–1865* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986). On the migration and settlement of the different waves of free blacks see James W. St.G. Walker, "On the Record: The Testimony of Canada's Black Pioneers, 1783–1865," in *Emerging Perspectives on the Black Diaspora*, ed. A.W. Bonnett and G.L. Watson (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1990) 79–119, John N. Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees of the War of 1812 in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1990), Michael Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 28 (1995): 465–85, Elizabeth Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901–1904," *Acadiensis* 24 (1995): 65–97, R. Bruce Shepard, *Deemed Un-suitable* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1997), dealing with the migration of African Americans to the Canadian prairies prior to World War I, Agnes Calliste, "Women of 'Exceptional Merit': Immigration of Caribbean Nurses to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 6 (1993): 85–102 and "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900–1932," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28 (1993–94): 131–48, and Vic Satzewich, "The Canadian State and the Racialization of Caribbean Migrant Farm Labour 1947–1966," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11 (1988): 282–304.

The discriminatory conditions faced by black people in Canada are studied in Agnes Calliste, "Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19 (1987): 1–20, Frances Henry, *Race Relations Research in Canada Today: A "State of the Art" Review* (Ottawa: Canadian Human Rights Commission, 1986), Frances Henry and Effie Ginzberg, *Who Gets the Work: A Test of Racial Discrimination in Employment* (Toronto: Urban Alliance on Race Relations, 1985), Peter S. Li, *Ethnic Inequality in a Class Society* (Toronto: Wall and Thompson, 1988), Marc S. Mentzer and John L. Fizel, "Affirmative Action and Ethnic Inequality in Canada: The Impact of the Employment

Equity Act of 1986," *Ethnic Groups* 9 (1992): 203–17, Leon Muszynski and Jeffrey Reitz, *Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Employment* (Toronto: Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1982), M. Nourbese Philip, *Frontiers* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1992), Carl Raskin, *De Facto Discrimination, Immigrant Workers and Ethnic Minorities: A Canadian Overview* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1993), Jeffrey Reitz, "Ethnic Concentrations in Labour Markets and their Implications for Ethnic Inequality," in Raymond Breton, et al., *Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experience in a Canadian City* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990) 135–95, Adrienne Shadd, "Dual Labour Markets in Core and Periphery Regions of Canada: The Position of Black Males in Ontario and Nova Scotia," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19 (1987): 91–109, Constance Backhouse, "Racial Segregation in Canadian Legal History: Viola Desmond's Challenge, Nova Scotia, 1946," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 17 (1994): 299–362, Austin Clarke, *Public Enemies: Police Violence and Black Youth* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), C.J. Mosher, *Discrimination and Denial: Systemic Racism in Ontario's Legal and Criminal Justice Systems, 1892–1961* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998), James W. St.G. Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1985) and 'Race', *Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies* (Toronto and Waterloo: Osgoode Society and Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1997).

On educational issues as they affect African Canadians consult Vincent D'Oyley, ed., *Innovations in Black Education in Canada* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1994), Bernice Moreau, "Adult Education Among Black Nova Scotians," *Journal of Education* 400 (1987): 29–35, Charles Saunders, *Share and Care: The Story of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1994), Afua Cooper, "The Search for Mary Bibb, Black Woman Teacher in 19th Century Canada West," *Ontario History* 83 (1991): 39–54, Jason Silverman and Donna Gillie, "The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: Education and the Fugitive Slave in Canada," *Ontario History* 74 (1982): 95–112, R. Bruce Shepard, "The Little White Schoolhouse: Racism in a Saskatchewan Rural School," *Saskatchewan History* 39 (1986): 81–93, Anthony H. Richmond, "Education and Qualifications of Caribbean Migrants in Metropolitan Toronto," *New Community* 19 (1993): 263–80. On religious issues see Elizabeth Beaton, "Religious Affiliation and Ethnic Identity of West Indians in Whitney Pier," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 20 (1988): 112–31, Peter J. Paris, *The Moral, Political and Religious Significance of the Black Churches in Nova Scotia* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia), Joyce Ruck et al., *Three Nova Scotian Black Churches* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1990), and Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer* (Jordan Station: Paideia Press, 1983). Mrs. Shreve's *Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth: A Century with the Amberstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association*, first published in 1940, appeared with a new preface in 1990. Other cultural matters are the concern of Neil V. Rosenberg,

"Ethnicity and Class: Black Country Music in the Maritimes," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (1988): 138–56, Charles Saunders, *Sweat and Soul: Saga of Black Boxers from the Halifax Forum to Caesar's Palace* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1990), Jason Silverman, "We Shall Be Heard! The Development of the Fugitive Slave Press in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 65 (1984): 54–69, William Doyle-Marshall, ed., *Cultural Crisis: A Look at Cultural Impacts in Canada, the Caribbean and England* (Toronto: Calypso House, 1980).

Life stories, in the form of biography, autobiography and collected memory, are becoming increasingly popular genres in African-Canadian writing, as they were in the nineteenth century. Some recent examples include Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, *Traditional Lifetime Stories: A Collection of Black Memories*, 2 vols. (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1987, 1990), Barry Cahill, "Stephen Blucke: The Perils of Being a 'White Negro' in Loyalist Nova Scotia," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 11 (1991): 129–34 and "The 'Colored Barrister': The Short Life and Tragic Death of James Robinson Johnston, 1876–1915," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 15 (1992): 336–79, Grant Gordon, *From Slavery to Freedom: The Life of David George, Pioneer Black Baptist Minister* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1992), Colin Thomson, *Born With a Call: A Biography of Dr. William Pearly Oliver, CM* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1986), Jason Silverman, "Mary Ann Shadd and the Struggle for Equality," in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 87–100, Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), Rosemary Sadlier, *Mary Ann Shadd: Publisher, Editor, Teacher, Lawyer, Suffragette* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1995), Patrick Brode, *The Odyssey of John Anderson* (Toronto: Osgoode Society, 1989), Donna Hill, ed., *A Black Man's Toronto: The Reminiscences of Harry Gairey* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), Gene Lees, *Oscar Peterson: The Will to Swing* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1988), Donald Moore, *Don Moore: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1985), by the founding president of the Negro Citizenship Association, Charlotte Bronte Perry, *One Man's Journey: The Biography of Alderman Dr. Roy Prince Edward Perry DDS* (Windsor: Sumner Press, 1982), Karen Shadd-Evelyn, *I'd Rather Live in Buxton* (Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1993), Carol Talbot, *Growing Up Black in Canada* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1984), about a childhood in Windsor, Ontario, Rosemary Brown, *Being Brown* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), Velma Carter et al., *The Window of Our Memories*, 2 vols. (St. Albert: Black Cultural Research Society of Alberta, 1981, 1990), a collection of Alberta reminiscences, and Cheryl Foggo, *Pourin' Down Rain* (Calgary: Detselig, 1990), another prairie memoir, Stanley G. Grizzle, *My Name's Not George* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1998), from the Toronto activist and former leader of the Sleeping Car Porters, and, while not exactly a memoir, Cecil Foster, *A Place Called Heaven* (Toronto:

HarperCollins, 1996) is a personal perspective on conditions and personalities mainly in the Toronto black community. There are many excellent biographies of African Canadians in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1966–). They can be searched according to name and date, and several volumes have an index category identifying black subjects. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1988), updated on CD-ROM in *The 1997 Canadian Encyclopedia Plus* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), also has succinct biographies of several outstanding black Canadians. *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming), contains entries on some African-Canadian personalities.

In this same era there has occurred a 'renaissance' in African-Canadian culture, with an outpouring of film, drama, poetry, painting and literature, often with historical themes. The prose can be sampled conveniently in George Elliott Clarke, ed., *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, 2 vols. (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1991, 1992), including its definitive introduction, and Clarke, ed., *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997), Ayanna Black, ed., *Voices: Canadian Writers of African Descent* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), and Black, ed., *Fierce Spirits: Canadian Writers of African Descent* (Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1994), Lorris Elliott, ed., *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1985). Recent novels include Cecil Foster, *No Man in the House* (Toronto: Random House, 1991), Lawrence Hill, *Some Great Thing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1992) and *Any Known Blood* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997). Many fine documentary films have been made on African-Canadian topics. *Black on Screen: Images of Black Canadians 1950s-1990s* is a descriptive catalogue with ordering information, produced by the National Film Board in 1992.

