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

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-

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. 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

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job training and employment assistance. 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-

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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,” and Time complimented Halifax for its “determined, if belated, effort ... to right an historical injustice.” 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.

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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.* 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.

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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. 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-

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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 ineffectiveness ....10

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9 See 1974 ed. (175) and 1987 ed. (159).
10 1987 ed. (160).
But while the 1987 edition indicates most clearly the depre­
dations 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 impres­
sion of historic Africville. A reader would be affected differently.
Consider also the subtle difference in impact of the opening sen­
tence of the Introduction. In 1971 it was worded:

Africville was a Negro "enclave" within the city of Hali­
fax ....

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 Hali­
fax ....

The community perspective which infused black historical inter­
pretation during the 1970s, and which had gripped the black peo­
ple 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
evolving social attitude toward the historic Africville community is
given full voice. The first things you notice are the beautiful pic­
tures. 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:

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:

11 Spirit of Africville 97.
12 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.

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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

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.* Although Stouffer explains that

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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 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

Peyton Hubbard, Black Leader and Municipal Reformer\textsuperscript{16} 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

\textsuperscript{16} 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 1976 with its Community theme, Robin Winks wrote that I had effectively “put an end to the ‘victims’ school of Canadian Black historiography.” 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,* 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.

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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.

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.” 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

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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


Four women walk along Campbell Road in Africville, in the wake of the Halifax Explosion of 6 December 1917. City of Toronto Archives SC 244-2451.