

Reviewing Blackness in Atlantic Canada and the African Atlantic Canadian Diaspora

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

Reviewing Blackness in Atlantic Canada and the African Atlantic Canadian Diaspora

IN 1976 JAMES WALKER PUBLISHED HIS SEMINAL WORK *The Black Loyalists*.¹ This publication put the history of expatriate African Americans not only on the scholarly map of North American historiography, but also secured a more important place in the public sphere for black historical memory in Atlantic Canada and beyond. Despite Walker's accomplishment, the field of African Atlantic Canadian history did not grow much until the mid-1980s when several academic and popular historians started to publish works on various topics. The majority of these works were intended for a popular audience while those dedicated to a more scholarly audience were less common. These works focused on various subjects ranging from the War of 1812 Black Refugees to the life of 20th-century African Nova Scotian leader W.P. Oliver.² Without question these works, both popular and academic, provided an essential foundation for later scholars to investigate other aspects of the local black experience. Despite these important advances in historical knowledge, however, historians still did not know much about the work black people did and how this changed from 1783 to 1960.

- 1 James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London: Longman and Dalhousie University Press, 1976). Two important works published before Walker's first book were Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) and W.A. Spray, *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1972).
- 2 It should be noted that some of the books written with a popular audience in mind also had much value for scholars. Those works intended for a popular audience include, but are not limited to, the following: Jim Hornby, *Black Islanders: Prince Edward Island's Historical Black Community* (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1991); 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); John N. Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees of the War of 1812 in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Dartmouth: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1990); Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks* (Halifax: Black Educators Association of Nova Scotia, 1987); Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks, Volume II: 1800-1989* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1990); and Colin Thomson, *Born with a Call: A Biography of Dr. William Pearly Oliver, CM* (Dartmouth: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1986). The following works are more academic in orientation: William Spray, "The Settlement of the Black Refugees in New Brunswick, 1815-1836," *Acadiensis* VI, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 64-79; Elizabeth Beaton, "Religious Affiliation and Ethnic Identity of West Indians in Whitney Pier," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 20 (1988): 112-31; David G. Bell, "Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist New Brunswick," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 31 (1982): 9-42; 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; Barry Cahill, "Stephen Blucke: The Perils of Being a 'White Negro' in Loyalist Nova Scotia," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 11 (1991): 129-34; 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; and George Elliot Clarke, *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, 2 vols. (Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press, 1991 and 1992).

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Moreover, researchers knew even less about cultural dynamics, residential patterns, family structure, patterns of migration, and interactions with other groups in the region.

During the early 1990s Judith Fingard and Barry Cahill published important articles about the local black population in Nova Scotia that discussed complex notions such as the role of respectability among African Nova Scotians in the late-19th century and the internal dynamics of community memory in regards to the first black lawyer in Nova Scotia.³ Since the publication of these two articles there has been a flood of quality scholarly work about black people in Atlantic Canada that runs the gamut from the possibility of the first person of African descent having been in the region in 1605 to David States's study about various black individuals and families in Hants county in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.⁴ In innovative and original work, John Johnston and Ken Donovan examined the history of black people in French-speaking regions of Nova Scotia.⁵ Their articles underlined the major gaps in historical knowledge about slavery and servitude in Nova Scotia. Barry Cahill also wrote important articles about the end of slavery from a judicial perspective, but his work also had several important nuggets for the discerning reader about the experience of black slaves.⁶ John Grant's concise work about the Jamaican Maroons placed their struggles within the wider context of Nova Scotian and Atlantic Canadian history.⁷ David Sutherland published a significant article about the contours of African Nova Scotian society in the 19th century while Suzanne Morton and Judith Fingard wrote essays that tackled gender and work patterns of black Nova Scotians in the 19th and early-20th centuries.⁸ And Elizabeth Beaton examined the experience of

3 Judith Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20 (1992): 169-95; Barry Cahill, "The 'Coloured Barrister': The Short Life and Tragic Death of James Robinson Johnston, 1876-1915," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 15 (1992): 336-79.

4 David States, "Presence and Perseverance: Blacks in Hants County, Nova Scotia 1871-1914," (master's thesis, Saint Mary's University, 2002).

5 John Johnston, "Research Note: Mathieu Da Costa along the Coasts of Nova Scotia: Some Possibilities," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 4 (2001): 152-64; Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713-1760," *Acadiensis* XXV, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 3-32; Kenneth Donovan, "A Nominal List of Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713-1760," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 16 (1996): 151-62; Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves in Ile Royale," *French Colonial History* 5 (2004): 25-42. Donovan will also be publishing a monograph about slavery in Ile Royale in the near future.

6 Barry Cahill, "Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia: *R v. Hecht Ex Parte Rachel, 1798*," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 44 (1995): 179-209; Barry Cahill, "Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 43 (1994): 73-134. See also his debate with James Walker: Barry Cahill, "The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada," *Acadiensis* XXIX, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 76-87 and James W. St. G. Walker, "Myth, History, and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited," *Acadiensis* XXIX, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 88-105 as well as Barry Cahill, "Colchester Men: The Pro-Slavery Presbyterian Witness of the Reverends Daniel Cock of Truro and David Smith of Londonderry," in Margaret Conrad and Barry Moody, eds., *Planter Links: Community and Culture in Colonial Nova Scotia* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2001), 133-44.

7 John Grant, *The Maroons in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Formac, 2002).

8 Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-19th Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis* XXII, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 61-83; David Sutherland, "Race Relations in Mid-Victorian Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 7 (1996): 35-54; Judith Fingard, "From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, c. 1870-1916," *Acadiensis* XXIV, no. 2

African Americans from Alabama in Cape Breton during the early-20th century.⁹

These scholarly works dealt with various topics that put pieces of the African Atlantic Canadian experience together. They did so by investigating basic aspects of black history such as what people did, where they lived, and how they encountered white racism. That being said, these works focused mostly on the black experience in Nova Scotia with little mention of African-descended people in other areas of the region. The emphasis within these works has also been mostly on topics before the First World War. In other words, historians have a fairly clear picture of the black experience from the mid-18th century to the late-19th century, but there is a gap between the early years of the 20th century and the Africville saga of the 1960s. Without question, then, in the last 15 or so years historians have started to piece together the disparate pieces of African Atlantic Canadian history although it is not clear why scholars have showed such a renewed interest in the local black experience.¹⁰

(Spring 1995): 49-64; Judith Fingard, "Rescue and Reward: Corporal George Liston's Heroism on the Halifax Waterfront," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 2 (1999): 145-54; Judith Fingard, "A Tale of Two Preachers: Henry Hartley, Francis Robinson and the Black Churches of the Maritimes," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 5 (2002): 23-43.

- 9 Elizabeth Beaton, "An African American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904," *Acadiensis* XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 65-97.
- 10 The historiography of blacks in the Atlantic Region includes, but is not limited to, the following studies: Philip G.A. Griffin-Allwood, "The Reverend James Thomas and 'Union of All God's People': Nova Scotian African Baptist Piety, Union and Division," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 14 (1994): 153-68; Constance Backhouse, "Racial Segregation in Canadian Legal History: Viola Desmond's Challenge, Nova Scotia, 1946," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 17 (1994): 299-362; George Elliot Clarke, "White Niggers, Black Slaves: Slavery, Race and Class in T.C. Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 14 (1994): 13-40; Charles Saunders, *Share and Care: The Story of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1994); David W. States, "William Hall, V.C. of Horton Bluff, Nova Scotia, Nineteenth Century Naval Hero," *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* 44 (1996): 71-81; Jay White, "Portia White's Spiritual Winter," *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* 44 (1996): 1-14; Bernice Moreau, "Black Nova Scotian Women's Experience of Educational Violence in the Early 1900s: A Case of Colour Contusion," *Dalhousie Review* 77 (1997): 179-206; James W. St. G. Walker, "Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of Africville," *Dalhousie Review* 77 (1997): 155-77; Constance Backhouse, "'I was unable to identify with Topsy': Carrie M. Best's Struggle Against Racial Segregation in Nova Scotia, 1942," *Atlantis* 22 (1998): 16-26; Isaac Saney, "The Black Nova Scotian Odyssey: A Chronology," *Race and Class* 40 (1998): 78-91; Joanna Brooks, "John Marrant's *Journal*: Providence and Prophecy in the Eighteenth-Century Black Atlantic," *North Star* 3 (1999): 1-21; Harvey Amani Whitfield, "'We can do as we like here': An Analysis of Self-Assertion and Agency Among Black Refugees in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1813-1821," *Acadiensis* XXXII, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 29-49; Harvey Amani Whitfield, "Black Refugee Communities in Early Nineteenth Century Nova Scotia," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 6 (2003): 92-109; Ruth Holmes Whitehead and Carmelita A.M. Robertson, eds., *The Life of Boston King: Black Loyalist, Minister and Master Carpenter* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum and Nimbus, 2003); Cedrick May, "John Marrant and the Narrative Construction of an Early Black Methodist Evangelical," *African American Review* 38 (2004): 553-70; Harvey Amani Whitfield, "African and New World African Immigration to Mainland Nova Scotia, 1749-1816," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 7 (2004): 102-11; Harvey Amani Whitfield, "The Development of Black Refugee Identity in Nova Scotia," *Left History* 10 (2005): 9-31; Justin Marcus Johnston, *James Robinson Johnston: The Life, Death and Legacy of Nova Scotia's First Black Lawyer* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2005); Daniel McNeil, "Afro (Americo) Centricity in Black (American) Nova Scotia," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35 (2005): 57-85; Daniel McNeil, "Finding a Home while Crossing Boundaries: Black Identities in Halifax and Liverpool," *International Journal of Canadian*

The resurgence of interest in African Atlantic Canadian history probably emanates from several sources. Perhaps the most important of these sources have been developments within African American historiography and the growing interest of scholars from outside of the region in the experiences of black people in Atlantic Canada. The emphasis among many American scholars on trying to better understand the historical importance of race relations no doubt encouraged scholars of Atlantic Canada to take a closer look at the black experience in the region. Also, as American historians searched for new and interesting topics related to black history, they started to look at African Americans who had left the United States and this resulted in some rather eminent scholars, such as Gary Nash and Graham Russell Hodges, writing about the black experience in Atlantic Canada.¹¹ More recently, scholars of international repute, Cassandra Pybus and Simon Schama, have written books with sections about black people in Atlantic Canada.¹²

The four books under review in this essay are part of a broad resurgence and flowering of African Canadian history. With the exception of one book about blacks in Montreal, these works tackle subjects in the 20th century, which is itself important because much of the historiography – with the exception of studies about Africville – has focused on earlier time periods. Frank Mackey's *Black Then: Blacks and Montreal, 1780s-1880s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004) offers short personal histories of African Canadians from the colonial era to the age of John A. Macdonald. Maureen Elgersman Lee, in her fascinating and exciting study *Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006), explores the history of a small black community in an overwhelmingly white state. Jennifer J. Nelson's *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) tackles a troubling part of Nova Scotian and Atlantic Canadian history. And Verna Thomas's *Invisible: A black woman's life in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2001) is a description of a black woman's life in 20th-century Nova Scotia.

Written in accessible language, Mackey's book can be used by the general public and academic historians alike. Mackey's short biographies of blacks in Montreal are gleaned from court records, newspapers, and other sources. The author has also included a collection of primary source documents at the end of his work, which give

Studies 31 (2005): 197-235; W. Bryan Rommel-Ruiz, "Colonizing the Black Atlantic: The African Colonization Movements in Postwar Rhode Island and Nova Scotia," *Slavery and Abolition* 27 (2006): 349-65; Harvey Amani Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (Burlington: University of Vermont 2006); David States, "Genealogy of the States Family of Kings, Cumberland, and Hants Counties, Nova Scotia," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 9 (2006): 147-61; and Harvey Amani Whitfield, "Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada," *History Compass* 5 (2007): 1980-97.

- 11 Gary B. Nash, "Thomas Peters: Millwright and Deliverer," in David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash, eds., *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1996).
- 12 Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (2005; reprint, New York: Harper Collins, 2006); Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Cassandra Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005): 243-64.

the reader a taste of the diverse experiences of blacks in the city. These individuals range from those who stayed in Montreal for a short time to those who spent major parts of their lives in the city. In describing the subjects of his work, Mackey states that “this is what these stories are – bits and pieces, some of which needed only a little scraping away of sand and seaweed, a little rubbing and polishing or fitting back together to bring out their shape and to highlight those flashes of colour that caught my eye when they were wet and gleaming. . . . All of them contain glimmers of the lives of black men, women, and children over a period of about one hundred years” (vix).

These “bits and pieces” that Mackey pulls together in this work range from the slave boy Henri McEvoy to the owner of a livery stable named Osborne Morton. Morton’s personal history fits very well into the paradigm of “from slavery to freedom” in the Atlantic world. His story is one of those former American slaves who migrated to Canada and enjoyed some fleeting success. But, unlike most fugitive slaves, he left Canada West and settled in Montreal. Although Morton’s former owner attempted to “entice” him to return to slavery, Morton ended up traveling to Scotland where he worked as a servant and got married. He returned to Montreal in the late 1850s and eventually opened the “Prince of Wales’ Livery Stable,” but the business eventually failed. He spent the rest of his life working with horses as a rider. Despite his troubles, Morton used the freedom Canada afforded him to become a business owner and valued member of the local community.

Mackey’s *Black Then* is an important addition to African Canadian historiography because it offers several starting points in the form of short biographies for historians to delve further into the history of African-descended peoples in Montreal. Despite the many positive attributes of this book, however, there are a few areas that might have been developed more. Due to the book’s structure – narrative biographies – there is not enough sustained historical analysis that might tell us about some of the major trends of the black experience in Quebec from the late-18th to the late-19th century. Moreover, although the author provides excellent documentation in the section on sources, historians may wish to know exactly where he obtained certain quotations throughout each of the biographies. It is not clear because the chapters sometimes do not have precise footnotes or endnotes. But these are small quibbles about an interesting book that should be read both by historians of African Canadians and, more generally, historians of Canada.

Maureen Elgersman Lee’s *Black Bangor* offers a glimpse into the lives of African Americans in the small industrial town of Bangor, Maine. American historians have examined almost every conceivable aspect of black history between 1880 and 1950 ranging from lynching and race riots to studies about the beginnings of urban ghettos. However, historical knowledge about the experience of small black communities outside of larger urban areas is minimal. According to Lee, her work serves to “uncover” Bangor’s black history and “fill a void in Maine’s historical narrative” (xiv). Perhaps more significantly, this book is “a study of African American community formation and identity in one of the nation’s whitest states” (xiv). The study is driven by a series of basic questions about African Americans in Bangor, including where they lived and worked. Lee also asks a broader question (xv): “What did it mean to be Black in Bangor during these seventy years [1880 to 1950]?” In four chapters, Lee attempts to answer these basic yet significant questions about a community that has not had the benefit of a serious and sustained historical investigation.

In her first chapter Lee discusses the origins of black people in Bangor. She offers

several fascinating insights. Although the black population never exceeded .83 per cent of the general populace of Bangor, it consisted of African-descended people from a variety of geographic locations. Indeed, black people came to Bangor from the Canadian Maritimes, the eastern seaboard of the United States, and the West Indies. Lee points out that the majority of African Canadians in Bangor came from New Brunswick. Lee's second chapter examines the work patterns of black people in the city. Some black people became respected business owners or found professional employment, while most worked in the service sector or in unskilled jobs. Black women faced tough choices between domestic and work life. For example, educator Callie Mills Peters had to take care of her children as opposed to pursuing her career as a teacher. Lee makes several interesting observations about the black community in Bangor in her third chapter. She points out, for instance, that although black people lived throughout the town, they were concentrated in an area called the Parker Street neighborhood. She also notes that local blacks "lived typical life cycles of birth, marriage, sometimes divorce, and death" and that during particularly the 20th century they had an "appetite" for "middle-class status symbols like pianos and automobiles" (55-6). In a more innovative section, Lee explores the food that black people in Bangor consumed, which was a combination of Maritime, Caribbean, Cape Verdean, and New England culinary traditions – something that underlines the fact that even within a very small black community there were several different strands of culture that slowly melded together to form a somewhat cohesive identity in Bangor. Lee's last chapter focuses on community institutions. Most interestingly, black people in Bangor did not create or maintain an African American church. This is somewhat surprising because black churches were common even in communities with small black populations. Lee notes that African Canadian immigrants (the majority from the Maritimes) tended to attend the town's Episcopal church, which opens up all sorts of questions about the importance of Loyalist identity and identification with Britain among African Atlantic Canadians.

Black Bangor is an extremely important contribution to American and Canadian historiography. American historians might look to this work as a model for pursuing African American history in small towns throughout the Northeast. Canadian historians will find it a useful starting point to understanding the experience of African Canadians who migrated to the United States. The book, however, is not flawless. It would have benefited, for instance, from a more in-depth examination of racism in Bangor. How did racism limit opportunities for blacks? Did racism in the town and Maine generally mirror national trends between 1880 and 1950? If this was not the case, then how did it differ? But these questions should not detract from what is a major addition to North American historiography.

In contrast, Jennifer Nelson's *Razing Africville* focuses explicitly on the nature and extent of white racism in Halifax through an innovative and new look at the Africville saga that uses the discourses of cultural studies, such as ideas about racialized spaces and communities, to undergird the analysis. This book explores how racism influenced the municipal government's attitude toward Africville and also how similarly negative racial attitudes informed the beliefs of city planners. In the end, racism was turned into rational arguments for the destruction of Africville and the removal of its residents. Nelson, as she states early in her first chapter, does not shy away from this focus on racism in Halifax: "I have written this book from a particular

point of view – that the razing of Africville is a story of white domination, a story of the making of a slum, and of the operation of technologies of oppression and regulation over time” (5). In this type of analysis, there is a focus on the actions of the “dominant” group in regards to the marginalized group; the agency of the marginal group, while certainly not denied in this book, is not the central subject. Those interested in the history of white Nova Scotian racism toward African Nova Scotians will find much of interest in Nelson’s work.

Razing Africville is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, Nelson lays out part of her general argument: racism, not the failure of well-intentioned policies, caused Africville’s destruction. In the second chapter there is a discussion of “space” and how different theorists have discussed it. In this wide-ranging discussion, she names every major theorist from Roediger to Foucault to Mendieta. In discussing the protean concept of space, Nelson notes that when “read against notions of progress and modern urban growth in its particular time frame, Africville is illuminated as a space that the city sought to control and demolish. Even in their eventual eviction and dispersal, Africville residents remained a threat to the social body. Racialized groups are seen not only to live within defiled spaces, but to embody those spaces” (33). In other words, Africville was a space in Nova Scotia that symbolized disorder and poverty – a space that needed to be erased from the public consciousness. The third chapter shows how local whites (police, social workers, academics, and journalists) portrayed the black community as “distinctly Other, as infantile, directionless, and unable to rationally participate in the planning of its future” (54). Moreover, whites “characterized black space as existing outside civilized society” and therefore Africville’s destruction was easily justified to the local population. Nelson uses various examples ranging from newspapers to government reports to show the ways in which racism was deployed to make the destruction of Africville palatable to the wider community. For example, she points out how the general impression of locals about Africville focused not only on violence, but also on its reputation for prostitution, bootlegged liquor, and endless examples of deviant behavior. Moreover, Nelson recounts how the *Halifax Mail Star* made it seem as if Africville residents relied on the local dump for subsistence. And the subsequent chapter shows how the discourses of race and space resulted in the physical annihilation of Africville; as Nelson states at one point: “The discursive focus on slum clearance masked the city’s crucial role in creating the impoverished conditions in question, and relied on racial narratives in preserving a conflation of the black community itself with moral and social degeneracy” (114). Her last chapter, “Reconciling Africville,” examines the place of that community in public memory. Taken together, the chapters of this book on Africville offer Atlantic Canadian historians a probing examination of white racism.

Nelson has made a significant contribution to Atlantic Canadian studies. Scholars will certainly read this book to understand racism in Nova Scotia during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, all of those concerned with the ways in which whiteness has been used historically would do well to look at this book. Some readers, though, might find a few small problems with *Razing Africville*. Nelson argues that individuals have not located racism as the central cause of Africville’s destruction. Perhaps she is correct. But Atlantic Canadian historians might be troubled to think that we have not admitted that racism was a central cause in Africville’s destruction. Indeed, James Walker’s 1997 “Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of

Africville” shows that the Africville relocation was based in racial discrimination: “The relocation itself has been deemed an act *of* racism rather than *against* racism, something to be regretted and reversed.”¹³ Moreover, even if other scholars concede that Nelson is correct in locating racism as the central moving force behind the Africville saga, then where do we go from there? Now that we have a very fine study of white racism, perhaps we can move to a serious treatment of the unity and divisions within the black community during the Africville experience. African Nova Scotians were not uniform in their views toward the Africville saga. I would also point out that the policy-makers behind the Africville tragedy represent a longstanding continuity of well-intentioned racism throughout Nova Scotia’s history that goes back as far as the War of 1812 Black Refugees, who were placed on ten-acre plots of land in an effort to allegedly make them self-sufficient farmers. We need to remember that racism and benevolence are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. Another problem with the book is that her section on the history of the local black population before Africville’s founding is based on older secondary sources; her argument about historical racism would, in fact, have been buttressed if she had cited more recent literature about the Black Loyalists and Black Refugees. Overall, though, this book makes an important contribution to understanding white racism in Nova Scotia and should not be overlooked by scholars of Atlantic Canada.

Verna Thomas’s autobiography of her life as a black woman living in 20th-century Nova Scotia, which covers her life from 1935 until 1999, is an important and intriguing read in part because it covers a seldom-examined time period – from after the First World War until Africville. She also discusses many historical events that occurred before her birth such as the Black Loyalists and the Black Refugees (and, in fact, includes at the back of the book a primary document on the latter). These two factors help give the book a very full-bodied portrait of black life in Nova Scotia, something that is greatly assisted by Thomas’s extraordinarily readable style of writing – especially her flair for telling excellent anecdotes. A light-skinned black woman, Thomas’s “awakening consciousness of race and racism came” when she moved to Preston, Nova Scotia, from the much smaller white community of Mount Denson in the Annapolis Valley (1). This might seem unimportant to the untrained eye, but her point about not fully understanding race and racism until moving to Preston is crucial for two reasons. First, it shows that racism and race relations were not uniform throughout Nova Scotia. Second, racism had its own special and bitter flavor in Halifax County that may be specific to the area around the region’s urban center. For example, Thomas notes that when she moved to Preston she found that “people breathed in racism from the day of their birth” (1). Moreover, Thomas points out that “when I came to Preston . . . I found a community of descendants of the province’s original settlers: a people isolated, locked into a subculture of poverty, holding onto their fear and mistrust in white people” (2).

The book is divided into two major chapters. The first chapter focuses on Thomas’s experience in Mount Denson up to her marriage to John Thomas in 1956. The second chapter is about her experience in Preston. This latter chapter includes some historical information for those unfamiliar with the history of the Black

13 Walker, “Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography,” 155.

Loyalists and Black Refugees. More significantly, it is full of personal examples of what life was like as a black person in Nova Scotia, including information about cultural institutions, political beliefs, and the role of the church in the black community. It also shows the importance of celebrations such as Christmas while discussing the types of work that men and women performed. Quite frankly, her life is an expression of the incredibly difficult circumstances that many black women found themselves in during the 20th century and still today. Her attempts to obtain education are astonishing. Thomas went to night school in 1962 to obtain her high school diploma. She was the only black woman in the class. Thomas had to study for school while raising three children and working part-time. After completing her high school degree, she obtained a diploma from the Nova Scotia Technical College. In short, Verna Thomas's life history, as George Elliot Clarke notes in the Foreword to the book, "is a visible enlightenment" (ix). Historians can never have enough books like the one written by Verna Thomas as this first-hand account of black life in the mid- to late-20th century Nova Scotia is simply invaluable.

Taken together, these books tell us a great deal about African Canadian history in this region, especially during the 20th century. Although *Black Bangor* is about a community in the United States, its evidence about black Maritimers provides another strand to the larger story of out-migration from Atlantic Canada. Verna Thomas and Jennifer J. Nelson have written books that are essential reading for scholars interested in the 20th-century black experience in Nova Scotia. In the case of Frank Mackey, historians can use the biographies in his book as points of comparison to black people in Atlantic Canada.

Despite the contributions to the historiography by these books, however, as well as the growth by leaps and bounds of this historiography in general over the last three decades (on topics such as migration, race relations, community development, and work patterns), there are still two main problems. First, regional historical studies are incredibly biased toward Nova Scotia generally and Halifax County specifically. This is somewhat understandable because the majority of the region's black population has resided in Nova Scotia. However, it is extraordinarily unlikely that the history of blacks in Nova Scotia mirrors the experience of African Canadians in Saint John, Fredericton, Charlottetown, or St. John's. Historians need more localized studies about areas outside of Halifax and Nova Scotia more generally because it is still problematic to make claims for the entire region when our knowledge of black people outside of Halifax County and Nova Scotia is so limited. Second, historians need to move beyond our relatively narrow historical focus on certain issues and events (and I admit that I am guilty on this count). Do we really need more studies about the Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, Black Refugees, or Africville? It is time for historians to till new ground by focusing on different parts of the region such as New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island and also different time periods where we do not know enough – such as the contours of race relations in the decades before the confrontations and successes of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

This expansion of work on blacks in Atlantic Canada could also make a significant contribution to the study of black history elsewhere, for as scholars delve into these other aspects of black history in this region they can then draw comparisons with black communities in the United States. As a result, migrations, diasporas, and transnational histories will be produced, which will help open up debates about North

American black identity. In this sense, our regional history will be transnational, but it will also question community and identity formation among blacks in Atlantic Canada and how this was similar and different from African American communities. Here, we have the rare opportunity to make a contribution to multiple historiographies including the United States, Canadian, British Empire, Atlantic World, and African Diaspora. African Atlantic Canadian history is strikingly unique because of its position in the midst of three competing and complementary worlds (Canadian, American, and British). The untangling of these worlds and their connections to the African Atlantic Canadian Diaspora is a significant task that will only be fruitful if examined with the greatest care and attention to the multiplicity of identities forged by blacks in our region.

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