

## **“Oral History as Identity: The African-Canadian Experience”**

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It has been almost 400 years since the first person of African origin stepped freely onto Canadian soil. In those centuries, the African Canadian population has seen slavery and freedom, poverty and racism, resistance and survival. It is on the last two that this paper will dwell - the resistance to the European culture of the white majority and the subsequent survival of important components of African-Canadian culture. Because of the lack of written documentation, resistance and survival must be traced through the oral testimony that has been preserved through memory and in many cases, electronically recorded for future generations. There is an old saying that “the winners write history.” However, living history composed of oral history and oral tradition has allowed for a rewriting of the past in the past quarter century and has also allowed the marginalized and peripheralized to maintain their cultural voices.

In this paper, I will trace the oral records of the oldest African-Canadian settlements in Canada. They are situated on the east coast of Canada in the province of Nova Scotia. I will provide a brief historical overview and then concentrate on the role that oral history has played in preserving their past and thus the past of all Canadians.

The history of peoples of African descent in Canada predates that of the United States by at least a dozen years.<sup>1</sup> When the French explorer Samuel de Champlain arrived in Acadia (Nova Scotia) in 1604, he was accompanied by Mathieu Decosta, a Portuguese-African. Decosta was said to have visited Acadia previously and was fluent in Micmac which was spoken by the First Nations people of the province. After two very cold

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1. Winks, Robin W. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971.

bitter winters in southwestern Nova Scotia, Champlain returned to France and in 1608, sailed up the St. Lawrence River and out of Nova Scotian history.

Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the major settlement groups in Nova Scotia were French-speaking peoples who became known as Acadians. Essentially, a self-sufficient rural people, the Acadians are considered the first founding European nation in Nova Scotia. There is little evidence of an African population among them, although, a census report of 1686, notes a person of African origin living on the southeastern coast of Nova Scotia at Cape Sable Island. He was listed as LaLiberte - a free man.

In the decades that followed, it wasn't until 1750, a year after Halifax was founded as the new commercial and military centre of English rule in the North Atlantic, that we again see reference to a free African population. Rations' records show that at last fifteen free Blacks received rations that year. This population was part of the over 2,000 settlers from old England and New England who had been attracted by the promise of new land and the promise of free victuals.<sup>2</sup>

With the expulsion of the French-speaking and Catholic Acadians in 1755 which is a whole study in itself of oral narratives becoming literature viz. the story of Evangeline, the areas of rich fertile tilled soil were soon granted to English and Protestant settlers from the New England colonies - "His Majesty's Yankees" as historian Thomas Randall called them.<sup>3</sup> Again, a number of free and slave Blacks arrived, the former to take up land grants and the latter to work on the grants that their masters had received. By 1770, with the large migration from the New England states, there were some 500 free and slave Blacks in Nova Scotia out of a population of some 10,000.<sup>4</sup> This 3 to 5% of the total population has remained fairly constant up to today.

Standard historiography on Nova Scotia divides the subsequent immigration of Blacks to Nova Scotia into four waves - all profoundly influenced by events occurring in the United States. It is important in any examination of oral history and its role in the preservation of an African-

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2. Pachai, Bridglal. *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land*, volume I (Halifax, Black Educators Association, 1987), p. 39.
  3. Raddall, Thomas. *His Majesty's Yankees*. (N.Y., Doubleday, 1942).
  4. Pachai, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

Canadian identity to appreciate the chronology and substance of these migrational movements.<sup>5</sup> They are presented here in summary form:

- 1776-1783 The American Revolutionary War gave rise to a massive migration of white and black Americans north to Canada. Nova Scotia received 40,000 migrants of which 10% were Blacks who had won their freedom by fighting against their American masters. In addition, up to 1,000 slaves were brought to Nova Scotia as well. Loyalists, Black and White, were settled throughout the province. Of these, some 1,195 departed for Sierra Leone, West Africa in 1792.
- 1812-1815 The War of 1812 also resulted in migrants to Nova Scotia. Between 1813 and 1816 (the war ended in 1814), about 2,000 African Americans were transported to Nova Scotia. The majority of them arriving in Halifax and its sister city Dartmouth. They, like their predecessors in 1783, had been promised freedom, protection and resettlement. They became known as the Black Refugees.
- 1840-1860 There is little evidence to show that the Underground Railroad had a terminus in Nova Scotia or in Maritime Canada. Of the fugitive slaves who followed the North Star, about 30,000 reached Upper Canada (Ontario) and settled in the southern part of the province. There has been some suggestion that some came by sea to Halifax in this time period but links to the Underground Railroad are tenuous.
- 1890-1910 Industrial migration from the Southern United States and a number of West Indian islands came to serve the labour needs of the coal mines and the steel mills of Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. Many married and settled permanently in the province.

I have not included in this overview the late 20<sup>th</sup> century migration of the African and West Indian population as the emphasis in this paper has been on the establishment and preservation of identity over a much longer period of time.

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5. *Ibid*, passim and Winks *op.cit.* passim.

## Oral History

With this historical context in place, let us now turn to the role of oral sources in terms of Nova Scotia's Black Heritage. The earliest sources are preserved through the religious heritage of the community. By the mid-1800s, despite the variety of Christian sects - Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian and some Roman Catholic, the Baptist church was the majority faith. Influenced by the layers of American immigration and long-standing family contacts across the border, the chorus of religious songs reflected much of the rich traditional church music that identified the Black community in Nova Scotia as distinctive within the province yet clearly linked it to the musical traditions of African-Americans in the United States.

In 1991, "Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotia Writing" was published. Skillfully edited by Africadian<sup>6</sup> George Elliott Clarke, he has brought together early and modern Africadian literature with a generous sampling of oral material in the form of stories, psalms, sayings and spirituals. Hymns from the 1880's included "Get on Board, Children," "Let My People Go," "Down by the Riverside," "Go Tell it on the Mountain," and numerous others.<sup>7</sup> To Clark, Africadian literature commences with song, story and sermon. This oral literature or "orature" arrived with the Loyalist Free Blacks and slaves in 1783 and was preserved as religious music and in many cases has metamorphosed into folk. In addition, spiritual songs like "Driver Blow this Horn" and "Dearest Mary" both composed by African-Nova Scotian William Riley in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are indigenous to the province.

As we get closer to the present, the dividing line between the sacred and secular becomes less clear. Music groups like the country band the "Rockin' Drifters" always kept one ear trained on the various rhythms of church music. The more contemporary a capella women's quartet "Four the Moment" have blended sacred and secular - personal and political into a distinctive African-Nova Scotian sound that speaks to young and old -

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6. Clarke, George Elliott. *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotia Writing, Volume I*. (Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia, Pottersfield Press, 1991), p. 9. A well published writer of poetry and prose, Dr. Clarke was raised in Halifax and now teaches at the University of Toronto. He has coined "Africadian" from Africa and Acadia (the old name for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

church goer and non-church goer alike about their past, present and their future.<sup>8</sup>

The oral heritage of the African Nova Scotia community has been preserved and expanded upon and provided song and story about a past that might well have been lost. However, despite this musical connection which bound a musical culture across national borders and generations, it must also be noted that other aspects of oral culture were not as well preserved.

In the 1920's, African American folklorist Arthur Huff Fauset travelled to Nova Scotia and sought out songs, stories and expressions from the Nova Scotia population. The majority of Fauset's informants (70%) were drawn from the African-Nova Scotian community and within that community a number were from the West Indies and the United States. His collection, later published as *Folklore From Nova Scotia* provides a wealth of information about the folklore of the province and some of his informants were later interviewed by Nova Scotia's own collector of songs and stories Helen Creighton, some twenty years later.

Fauset, one of America's first Black anthropologists,<sup>9</sup> grew up in Philadelphia and attended the University of Pennsylvania where he was a student and close friend of Frank G. Speck, Professor of Anthropology. In 1924, Fauset travelled to Nova Scotia to complete field work for his Masters thesis. The material he collected was later published by the American Folklore Memoirs in 1931. It was the first collection of Black folklore in Canada.<sup>10</sup>

After his field work, the most surprising aspect for Fauset and perhaps for us as well was the lack of “traditional” African American stories - no Brer Rabbit, Briar Patch or Nancy (Ananse) stories. As Fauset himself notes

“Questions about Tar Baby, Riding Horse, and other stories familiar to the Negro child of the United States elicited the same general response, “Never heard'em,” or once in a great while from some old person, “Yes, I remember that. They used to tell those stories when I was little, but I never paid no 'tention to them. I forgot 'em long time ago.” A schoolchild might

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8. Four the Moment, “We're Still Standing.” Album released in 1988.

9. Fauset, Arthur Huff. *Folklore from Nova Scotia* (N.Y., American Folklore Society, 1931), p. 128. Also see Fauset, Arthur Huff, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania 1971, first published 1944).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

tell you, "Oh, teacher read that story to us," at the same time manifesting no sign that he realized that such tales are the heritage of his own folk.

I believe that this investigation has been extensive enough to show that the native Nova Scotia Negro knows little or nothing about the original folk-tales which are common property among Negroes of the south. Animal stories, so prevalent in the lore of Africa are almost entirely lacking among these people.<sup>11</sup>

Why had these stories died out? Fauset stated that Nova Scotia Blacks "did possess the lore which is common to African peoples... (but) pressure of western culture has resulted in its extinction."<sup>12</sup> He speculated that this is due to the scattered nature of the population with small communities in the midst of much larger white populations and perhaps related to this that "they feel that it is below their level, or, shall I say, dignity."<sup>13</sup>

If the maintenance of a culture needed a critical mass, it would appear Black Nova Scotians didn't have one. In addition to the fact that communities were widely spaced, many were rural coastal communities where communication was difficult as it was by sea along several thousand miles of Nova Scotia's rugged coastline. The various layers of immigrants as reflected in Fauset's list of informants and the history summary outlined previously also played a part in the alteration of this oral history.

Helen Creighton was well aware of Fauset's collection and in 1943 interviewed and collected from the same William Riley, patriarch of Cherry Brook (near Halifax) who had a large repertoire of African Nova Scotian songs. However, Creighton's collection suffered from the fact that she was burdened by the common prejudices of the day.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, her collection of African Nova Scotian material was quite limited.

Four years after interviewing one of Fauset's informant's Riley, Creighton met a hotel owner a Mrs. Crosby, where Fauset had stayed for a time during his research in the province. Crosby remembered Fauset as a

11. *Ibid.*, p. VIII.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. IX.

14. Croft, Clary. *Helen Creighton: Canada's First Lady of Folklore* (Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1999), p. 86. Creighton's account of her meeting with Riley appears in her "Collecting Songs of Nova Scotia Blacks" in Kenneth Goldstein and Neil Rosenberg's *Folklore Studies in Honour of Harold Halpert* (St. John's Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), pp. 137-144.

man who planned never to marry as he “did not want his children to go through what he had regarding race.”<sup>15</sup> Crosby added that he was horrified to find how little progress had been made in Nova Scotia.<sup>16</sup> But progress was about to come.

The 1960's saw the African Nova Scotian community engaged in two predominant issues in North America namely civil rights and “urban renewal.” Both would give rise to a new type of oral testimony among African Nova Scotians - a testimony that centered on the political rather than the folkloric, as, for the first time, the community “made headlines” on issues that impacted on them. Both issues were as inextricably linked in the 1960's as was discrimination and racism.

Civil rights in Nova Scotia was not focused on the right to vote - a right that had been exercised for over 100 years. It was more the petty yet injurious discrimination of social civic gatherings and the much more serious lack of an African Nova Scotian presence in the economic marketplace.

The civil rights movement in Nova Scotia was foreshadowed by a conflict over a seat in a movie house. In 1947, Viola Desmond of New Glasgow (population 8,000) became fed up with being relegated to the balcony in the local cinema because she was black. She took the owner to court and won her case. Yet, despite her publicized struggle, throughout the 1950's, the many scattered black communities on the periphery of larger white communities continued to be excluded. Schools were still legally segregated until the early 1960's by which time the busing of mostly black students to white schools became the norm.

The event that energized the dispersed communities of the province was the decision by the City of Halifax to relocate a substantial black population within the City to make way for a new bridge across the harbour and the new feeder roads that would be required. Africville was settled in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as Campbell Road Settlement by Black Refugees from the War of 1812. In 1962, with 80 families and over 400 people, it was known by many in Halifax as “shack town.” Africville looked out on Halifax Harbour with the Canadian National Railroad tracks running through the centre and the City dump not far away. Much of the 1960's is marked by the many efforts of the City “fathers” to convince the African Nova Scotian

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15. *Ibid.*, footnote 17, p. 256.

16. *Ibid.*

community of Africville - by money, threats or physical force to move into a low cost housing development in the City. Africville, like so many other Black communities in North America subjected to urban development, lost the battle and the last occupant "Pa" Miller had his belongings hauled away in a city garbage truck in late 1969. This event publicized locally and nationally, provided a rallying cry for the many Black communities in Nova Scotia and since the completion of the relocation - many studies have been done by oral historians about the move, the resistance and the community as it was in the years before the bulldozers arrived.

Today the former Africville is a park and each year a reunion is held of those who were dispersed and their families. In addition, the next generation has continued to pressure City Hall for some recognition of the wrong that was done with financial reparations and by rebuilding the community church. They have not been successful in either. Nevertheless, the dislocation has not only provided a clear flash point for issues of racism and discrimination but it has also provided in an "undocumented" community a well spring of oral sources about community life in Africville.

Contemporaneously with the Africville struggle and no doubt influenced by it, the African Nova Scotian community by the late 1960's struggled to bring together all the scattered communities under one united organization. The influence of what was occurring in the rest of Canada and the decade long protests in the United States had had their influence. Energized by young leaders like Burnley "Rocky" Jones, tempered by the older (usually church) leadership of men like Rev. W.P. Oliver and perhaps pushed by two visits by the Black Panthers,<sup>17</sup> the Black United Front was formed in 1968 to represent the Nova Scotian Black community. Again, oral testimony has provided in subsequent years a rich account of what one writer calls the "Black Renaissance."<sup>18</sup>

The 1970's brought a continuation of these political struggles but simultaneously an intensified effort to reclaim Black History and Culture. James Walker's *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in*

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17. Kwame Toure (Stokely Carmichael) came to Halifax for an overnight in early October 1968 and I.D. Pawly and George Sams visited in late November 1968. In addition, Rosie Douglas, a Black Power advocate out of Montreal also came to Halifax at that time. See Smith, Jennifer B, "An International History of the Black Panther Party," Ph.D. for State University of New York (Buffalo), 1997, pp. 122-132.
  18. See Mannette, Joy, "Making Something Happen:" Nova Scotia's Black Renaissance, 1968-1986. Ph.D. for Carleton University, Ottawa, 1987.



*Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783-1810* published in 1976 traced the migration of over 1,100 African Nova Scotians to Sierra Leone in 1793. Walker collected extensive oral traditions in Sierra Leone from the descendants of the migration. Calvin Ruck began to interview Black veterans of World War I who served in the Construction Battalions that dug and maintained the trenches in Europe. What one Canadian military officer called a “White Man’s War” was not so white after all. Ruck’s findings would be published in “The Black Battalion: 1916 - 1920 Canada’s Best Kept Military Secret” in 1987,<sup>19</sup> and he continues his work on the military contribution of the Black community by interviewing the veterans of World War II and the Korean War.

There were also more far-reaching projects to collect and preserve - the most notable being the Black HERO project, a case study in assessing oral testimony.

In 1970, the Federal Department of the Secretary of State provided funding for the Black Historical and Educational Research Organization project which became known as the HERO collection. With project coordinator Burnley Jones, the aim was “to collect the oral history, folklore, myths, and superstitions of the Black community.”<sup>20</sup> Youth were trained and sent into communities throughout the province to interview all over 65. Approximately 270 Black elders were interviewed which represented 70% of the persons in this age group. Materials were collected on folklore, education, prominent people in the community, historical landmarks and examples of cooperation or hostility in the community. Jones’ s goal was to find a “Black unity” within the many communities of Nova Scotia and “to emulate the kind of Black humanistic philosophy practised by our ancestors.”<sup>21</sup>

One of the goals of the project was to publish the results. However, a number of problems - shortage of funds, changing personnel and most importantly no signed release forms meant that the tapes were put in storage until all interviewers would have passed away.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Ruck, Calvin, *The Black Battalion: 1916-1920, Canada’s Best Kept Military Secret*, Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1987.

20. Jones, Burnley “Rocky.” “The Hero Collection as Community History” in Dorothy E. Moore and James H. Morrison *Work, Ethnicity and Oral History*, Halifax International Education Centre, 1988, p. 127.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

The HERO collection represented a very early effort at systematic research about the Black community by the Black community. Coming as it did on the heels of the Africville relocation, it provided a concrete example of the importance of history from the bottom up for many within the community. Although the results of the research were not made public initially, the project provided a starting point and a learning point for others to follow.

The 1980's and 1990's have witnessed a flowering of Black Culture/Heritage in a variety of ways. The Black Cultural Centre was established in Cherry Brook within the Halifax Regional Municipality in 1984 and serves as a focus of activities in the community. It is also a major repository for documents, artifacts and tapes that researchers can consult including the HERO project and others. In the early 1980's, the Centre initiated an oral history project of Black biographies. The result was the publication of a two volume set called *Traditional Voices: A Collection of Black Memories* that was based on interviews among elders throughout the province. Fifty-one were interviewed for this project about ordinary men and women of the Nova Scotian Black experience.<sup>23</sup>

Based on the materials and many other projects not included here, Black history achieved a greater primacy in Nova Scotia schools in the early 1980's with a new emphasis in textbooks and other learning materials. Successful plays like "Freedom" based on the experience of slavery were produced in schools. "Freedom" was so successful that it was shown on CBC, the national broadcasting network. Other voices were raised in poetry (Maxine Tynes) and plays (David Woods) that publically articulated the African Nova Scotia experience. The musical contribution of *Four the Moment* has been mentioned earlier. Most recently, the CBC and the Black Cultural Centre produced a two CD set called "Oh Lord, We've Come a Mighty Long Way."<sup>24</sup> It combined the contemporary sound of some of the artists noted above with the archival voices of people like William Riley collected some sixty years ago.

Oral history is the personal as well as the political. Two recent projects in the Black community make this observation self-evident.

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23. Anon, *Traditional Voices: A Collection of Black Memories*, 2 volumes (Dartmouth, Black Cultural Centre, 1987, 1990).

24. *Lord, You Brought Me a Mighty Long Way*. Produced by Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Halifax, 1998.

In the early 1990's, the province of Nova Scotia undertook a study of various sites within the Halifax Regional Municipality that would serve as “waste sites” - fancy word for dump. One of the two identified was near a Black community in the Metro area. Protest meetings were held in the community and, aside from the obvious comparisons with Africville, there was also a claim made by someone in the community that this was a terminal station on the Underground Railroad and, therefore, a heritage site. There was no documentary evidence to prove this statement so a Black historian from Parks Canada was sent to carry out interviews with seniors in the community. In his report, he stated that he did not find any evidence to suggest that the Underground Railway was ever in Nova Scotia. However, his report was dismissed by the community as he was not from there. The “dump” was eventually located somewhere else.

Recently (fall 2000), I became involved in a community oral history project just outside of Halifax. The communities of “Sparksville” and “Upper Preston Plains” wanted to trace their history through archival research and oral testimony. With funding from Heritage Canada, the goal was to establish the ancestry of the community, and to identify living elders who had contributed to the community and collect their stories. They would then be commemorated by a series of plaques erected throughout the community. It was clear that the community was conscious of the real danger of disappearing as a Black entity in the face of suburban housing. Already 30% of the population was white and just off the main road, an expensive housing project identified as “Green Acres” was being erected. The sign “Sparksville” had been removed, replaced and removed again as the “resigning” and “re-designating” efforts of urban developers continued.

Although the research project is not quite completed, there have been some positive spinoffs from the oral testimony. A community celebration of barrel making and saw milling was held in February and those interviewed were introduced and gave a hands-on demonstration. A plaque has been raised to the first settlers of Upper Preston Plains utilizing information gleaned from both provincial archival and oral sources in the community. The monument for “Sparksville” will be raised soon and due to the previous vandalism set in stone and concrete.<sup>25</sup>

The struggle continues for small communities like these to maintain themselves and their identity in the face of at times overwhelming

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25. Personal Communication with Project Coordinator, 5 October 2001.

pressures. It is clear that oral history plays an essential part in this preservation. The tapes that have been collected in this project will be transcribed and copied with the originals going to the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia for permanent storage. Other repositories of oral material are in the Provincial Archives, the Beaton Institute of folklore materials in Cape Breton, and the university archives at Acadia, Dalhousie, Saint Francis Xavier, and Saint Mary's University. There is currently no central collection of African-Nova Scotian oral materials in the province but with the electronic communications available that may not be necessary.

I have tried in this paper to outline the importance of oral testimony in reliving and reenlivening the heritage of a population in Nova Scotia, Canada that was in danger of losing some of that heritage. The oral traditions and oral history narratives that were collected have provided a structure that was not reflected in the written documentation available as was the case for much Black history in North America. However, this problem was further exacerbated by the small population of African Nova Scotians spread throughout the province. These oral collections have not only supplemented the historical record but they have also provided a rich store of materials for poetry, prose, plays and song. Finally, the oral materials have also forged a political tool that has been utilized from time-to-time to protect beleaguered communities from further fragmentation.