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Africville: The Death of a Community for the Renewal of an Identity

George Elliott Clarke is one of Canada's most prolific Black Canadian writers. His work illuminates many lesser known chapters of Canada's Black history, such as slave narratives, and sheds light on the Black Canadian experience. He does this in a creatively poetic way, often intertextualizing various elements of this little-known history. In Clarke's poem, "Africadian Petition (1783)," he reimagines what life may have been like for early Black settlers of Nova Scotia's Africville and portrays their experience as a people routinely subjected to the lies of a government that promised prosperity. Through Clarke's unconventional poetics, he exposes readers to this little-known community, an often marginalized community whose ultimate and unjust removal allowed for a renewed collective identity that would hold relevance in reconciliation for the wider Black Canadian populace.

Clarke's recreation of Africville in "Africadian Petition (1783)" illustrates the foundation of this community's beginnings as a settlement for freed American slaves. From its inception, Africville was a safe haven, a Canaan (referring to the biblical promised land of the Israelites) of sorts, for American slaves who were granted freedom by Britain for their loyalty during the American Revolutionary War. The voices Clarke gives to these early settlers are an echo of their struggles in enslavement: "We be hauling Hardships long as pines- / All White whips which you Putting / to us here Since we be breathing / And Luvving. Goddam lashings harp / our

Crimsoning hirt” (*Blue* 22). This was the beginning of Africville, a community of expatriates who had fought for their freedom by pledging their allegiance to the British Empire, only to be resettled neither in the country they were fighting for, nor in the country they were fighting against, but in the “true North, strong and free.” As Clarke writes in *Odysseys Home*, Africville’s “forebears arrived in Nova Scotia *en masse* in 1783” after they had “join[ed] the Crown in its effort to stop the libertarian revolt which would foster the United States, and then to agitate for passage to British North America to avoid the possibility of being re-enslaved after the Yankee triumph” (293). For a people who quite literally fought for their freedom and their right to the land that they would eventually colonize, their descendants who remained in Africville would come to be treated with recurrent prejudice.

As Africville grew on the southern shore of the Bedford Basin, the Seaview African United Baptist Church (established in 1849) became the cultural centre of this small hamlet. It was here that all civic events were held: from baptisms, to weddings, to funerals. In 1883, Africville’s school officially opened. Residents had operated local fishing businesses in the Bedford Basin and would sell their catch in Halifax. While many residents ran farms, several had opened small stores by the end of the 19th century. Africville had become a tightknit, self-sustaining, vibrant village with its own post office, school, church, and stores. Although Africville was entirely independent, the City of Halifax proceeded collecting taxes from Africville residents, but they were not provided with basic services from the city such as paved roads, running water, and sewers (Tattie).

As the City of Halifax continued to disregard Africville and its residents as equals, Halifax began encroaching on the town with industrial endeavors. Beginning in 1854, a railway extension cut through the village and several homes were expropriated and destroyed in the

process. More land was taken and used for the railway in 1912 and again in the 1940s. In the latter half of the 19th century, Halifax continually placed undesirable industrial facilities in Africville including a fertilizer plant, slaughter houses, the Rockhead Prison, and the Infectious Diseases Hospital. In the 1950s, Halifax built an open-pit dump on the outskirts of Africville. By the 1960s, many whites in Halifax viewed Africville as a slum built around the dump by scavengers. Clarke describes this Africville as being “assailed by bureaucrats and politicians desiring either to rid Halifax of a so-called ‘segregated ghetto’ or to hijack precious waterfront property for industrial use”; “a village which was condemned, again and again, as a ‘slum’ before it was finally condemned to die” (*Odyssey’s Home* 288). A condemnation which would come soon enough.

Plans to turn Africville into industrial land came to fruition in 1964 when the first land was expropriated and houses began to be bulldozed lot by lot. Within five years all of Africville’s residents had been relocated and their homes demolished. The residents were promised fair compensation for their homes, but in reality were only given amounts that could hardly meet the minimum requirement for a down payment on a home in Halifax. Africvillers went from living productive, independent lives in their own homes and on their own land to being cordoned into public housing complexes owned by the city that were often scheduled for demolition themselves. As if there was not already enough stigma placed on the Africville residents for being forced out of their homes, many of them were moved to Halifax via the city’s garbage trucks (Tattrie).

This isolation and impoverishment of the residents of Africville, mirrored by countless other Black communities in Canada, contributed largely to a prevailing sense of otherness and exclusivity, which many would consider counter to Canada’s widely multiculturalistic society

today. As Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos puts it, the treatment of Africville and its residents “underlines Canadian hypocrisy regarding the management of race and difference” (Fraile-Marcos 115). Clarke poetically pens this feeling of otherness in his collection *Blue*: “You forgit us, so we be Nothing - / Like rain, Sobbing over water” (22), and “Denigrated, negative, a local / Caliban, unlikable and disliked” (21). Many Africvillers went from being proud, rural homeowners to being welfare dependent tenants in asphalt anguish, from having control over their own affairs to suffering the directives of social workers. Whatever sense of community they had in Africville was now lost. Irvine Carvery, an Africville resident who was relocated to Halifax, describes the experience as one that destroyed people’s identities: “It destroys peoples’ sense of being who they are, knowing who they are. You’re just like another number on the block... You don’t have no separate identity” (*Remember Africville*). Brian Thomas explains this lack of identity as a type of “social invisibility,” “a symbolic wrong that Black Canadians suffer, being equal parts cultural imperialism and neo-racism. Its effects are located in the status order and political economy” (603). Perhaps one of the most damaging incidents was the overnight demolition of the Seaview Baptist Church. In Africville, the church fostered a firm group identity. Clairmont and Magill state that Seaview United Baptist Church was “as old as the community itself and embodied much of Africville’s sense of historical continuity” (49). In this way, the death of Africville sparked a spiritual and cultural identity crisis for not just the residents of Africville, but for all Africadians, a neologism coined by Clarke to refer to African Canadians from the Maritime provinces.

Although the residents of Africville experienced racially prejudiced policies from the municipal government of Halifax, exemplified no more clearly than in their forced eviction, more recent events aimed towards reconciliation in this Maritime community hold a wider

significance for Africadians in reclaiming a collective identity. Although Africvillers had largely lost their sense of shared identity following their eviction, many former Africville residents began to join efforts in rescuing what was left of their Canaan. In 1969, residents formed the Africville Action Committee in order to seek redress and to keep their community alive. Consequently, the Africville Genealogy Society was formed in 1983 and former residents began holding picnics, church services, and weekend gatherings on the site of Africville. Much of the former land of Africville had been turned into private housing, ramps for the A. Murray MacKay Bridge, and the Fairview Container Terminal, but the central area remained undeveloped and was designated as Seaview Park. The park was officially declared a National Historic Site of Canada in 1996 with a citation calling it “a site of pilgrimage for people honouring the struggle against racism” (Tattrie). In 2010, the mayor of Halifax issued an official apology for the destruction of Africville and announced city plans to build a replica of the Seaview Baptist Church, which opened as a museum in 2012 just as the area was renamed Africville Park. In 2014, Canada Post issued a commemorative stamp depicting a photograph of seven young residents of Africville against a backdrop of the historic village. In this way, “commemorative events in relation to Halifax’s Africville” have facilitated a “surge of interest in African Nova Scotian History” and an “outpouring of attention to New Brunswick’s Black populations” (Harris 141).

Such events have occurred not only in the Maritimes, but across Canada. On the country’s opposite coast, significant strides have been made in recognizing the importance of the history of Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver. Just as Clarke’s writings have illuminated the plight of Africadians, poet Wayde Compton’s work has shed light on the blurred lines of so called “urban renewal” and “negro removal” in Western Canada. In so doing, Clarke “seeks to recuperate ...

the spirit of Africville, a largely Black community whose land was appropriated by the Halifax city council in the 1960s in the name of integration, slum clearance, and prime waterfront land” (McNeil 58). The histories of these communities follow the same pattern. A marginalized minority community was expected to give up their residence on prime land, and when they would not leave willingly they were driven out forcefully. Just as their communities were stolen away from them, so they were stripped of the only identities they ever knew. But in this process came a shared experience with a compelling sense of unification.

Much of the work Clarke has done has been of great significance to this restoration of a communal Africadian identity. As Fraile-Marcos writes, “Clarke’s own intertextuality appears as a dialogic exercise that makes African Canadian difference visible” (114). This visibility, which is assumed through Africadian difference, is in actuality a strong unifying force. Africville was once a community that had a strong individuality and possessed a collective identity of its own, but this identity was stripped away once the community had been taken from its residents. However, Africville today serves as a powerful symbol in the combat against racism and segregation in Nova Scotia and beyond, showing how efforts to right historic wrongs can help to restore communal identities.

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