

# Africville, an Imagined Community

Theorists of nationalism are divided on the question of nationalism's relationship to racism,<sup>1</sup> but that race can and often does articulate with national identity is clear. Some sense of the complexity of that relationship and of the constitutive contradictions of nationalism itself emerges when one considers that "national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation" (Bhabha 5). The ambivalence<sup>2</sup> of nationalism makes a strong case for the need to examine the particular, historical manifestations of nationalist discourse in order to make an evaluation of it. The recognition that literary and cultural studies methods are particularly suited to just such an examination has followed on the acknowledgment by historians and literary critics alike that the rise of nationalism coincides with the development of print technologies and realist narrative forms.<sup>3</sup> What this realization also means is that the study of literature itself has had, of late, to become more attuned to the ways literary *corpora* "[belong] to, [gain] coherence from, and in a sense [emanate] out of, the concepts of nation, nationality, and even of race" (Said 169).

In this paper, I undertake to analyze the cultural politics of race and nation in recent African-Nova Scotian writing and artistry. More specifically, I am interested in constructions of Africville and in the ways these acts of representation intervene both in the struggle over this site and in a state-sponsored nationalism that serves as the larger discursive frame through which identity and social difference are produced. My claim is that the construc-

tion of Africville as an imagined community represents a re-mapping of the competing discourses that have historically sought to control this site. In risking an act of affiliation, these artists may be said to engage in cultural contestation in order to resist disavowal, exclusion and displacement.

It may seem odd to be talking about nationalism at a time of increasing emphasis on *transnationalism* or globalization, and one could argue at this historical juncture that in donning nationalist clothing African-Nova Scotian literary resistance is opting for an outmoded fashion. But to the extent that relations of power and technologies of violence continue to be administered through the workings of the nation-state, it is to be expected that resistance continues to adopt a nationalist form, whether sub-national or anti-colonial. The litany of ills associated with nationalist discourse—its coercive, totalizing, and essentializing tendencies—have prompted a number of critics, both Europeanist and postcolonial, to call for an end to nation-states and nationalisms.<sup>4</sup> Yet such an approach risks providing an alibi for increasing globalization under the leadership of transnational corporations, which as Masao Miyoshi grimly observes, are “obviously not agents of progress for humanity” (746); in fact transnationalism extends the colonial project under a different guise. I do not mean blithely to disregard the essentializing and totalizing impulses in the invention of nationalisms, but I do think it worth pointing to Ernest Gellner’s observation that nationalism is in some sense the inevitable outcome of objective historical conditions, whatever the particularities of the “cultural shreds and patches” arbitrarily selected for the invention of its form (56).

The particularities of the *invention* of nationalism are primarily what I am interested in here. In explaining why he characterizes the nation as an imagined community, Benedict Anderson remarks, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Nationalism, then, is a simulacrum of community where not only geography but social difference effectively precludes that members should know one another or interact face to face. Crucial to Anderson’s formulation, and to my use of it, is his insistence that imagined communities are not to be measured against “true” communities; the imagined status of nations and sub-nations is a product of necessity, not falsehood. Thus, as Anderson puts it, “Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined”

(6). It is in large part the *style* of representations of Africville that I am after here, not only because the style of these representations constitutes the distinctiveness of Africadian nationalism, but because style can be seen as the link between the creative works and the conceptions of race and nation from which they emanate and to which they speak.

I am using *style* here to mean both what Anderson refers to (the particularities of a community's image of itself) and something more. Literary-critical discussions of style tend to be concerned at once with formal conventions and with what is distinctive about a particular writer's work—with a stylistic *signature*.<sup>5</sup> Given that formal conventions (genres, tropes, modes) emerge in determinate historical conditions and comprise a set of regulatory mechanisms within literary works, they may be taken as a marker of the historical and discursive conditions in which a text is produced. The stylistic signature of a given artist, similarly, is an index of her *situation* in determinate historical circumstances, of the ways she comes to inhabit the position of author, and to insert herself into the formal regime of the literary work. In focusing on the *style* of artistic representations of Africville, then, I aim to identify the markers of a nationalist discourse in these works, and to read the textual traces of their conditions of production, of their enunciation, and of their formal instantiation.<sup>6</sup> What I am attempting, in other words, is an analysis of these texts in relation to nationalist discourse and to contested constructions of blackness in Nova Scotia. I am not asking after the intent of these artists, nor am I making claims for the effect of the nationalist vision in their works on the political scene in the province. There is nonetheless a value in taking the measure of the challenge these texts pose to hegemonic discourses on identity and culture in Nova Scotia.

I am taking as the hegemonic discursive paradigm conditioning cultural production in the province the image of Nova Scotia as a community of traditional, rural folk that Ian McKay analyzes so brilliantly in *The Quest of the Folk*. According to McKay, the invention of the folk in cultural practices and state-sponsored tourism initiatives was undertaken in the context of a broad anti-modernism (31). Anti-modernist discourse, a fairly wide-spread phenomenon in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe and North America, took many forms.<sup>7</sup> One of the most pervasive articulations of anti-modernism privileged rural life as a place of moral, psychic, and social regeneration, a refuge from the ills of urban industrial-

ism and modernization.<sup>8</sup> Particularly significant, for my purposes, is the connection between anti-modernist and nationalist discourses. Both may be seen as responses to constitutive changes in social relations under modernity, where face-to-face relations are increasingly rare as a means of social and political organization.<sup>9</sup> The nationalist response is to imagine synchronous relations irrespective of spatial location; the anti-modernist response is to idealize the rural community as a repository of face-to-face interaction.

In Nova Scotia, according to McKay, this anti-modernism took the form of a conservative *non*-industrial (rather than anti-industrial) ethos that was anti-labour as well as anti-business, and centred on a romantic anti-urbanism. The embrace of the folk was constructed as a return to a whole, organic way of life (99), marked by traditional gender relations (251), whiteness, and an emphasis on fisherfolk, pre-industrial handicrafts, and the rural, non-industrial folklore collected by Helen Creighton. This construction of a non-industrial rural culture was nonetheless structured by modern capitalism which was busily engaged in commodifying rural lifeways, folklore, and crafts to feed a growing tourism industry. The “quest of the folk,” then, was a decidedly *commercial* anti-modernism (35, 149, 273), that in a climate of socio-economic crisis in Nova Scotia could answer “an urgent need to articulate a workable sense of Nova Scotian, and sometimes Maritime, identity” (264), since it meant that economic and political decline could be recast as “the pursuit of a simpler and more colourful traditional way of life” (265). That “simpler and more *colourful*” [emphasis added] way of life tended, not surprisingly, to be decidedly monochromatic in practice: the folk “could be members of any ethnic group,” McKay argues, “significantly excluding, for the most part, natives and blacks” (230). The quest of the folk was, quite clearly, also a quest for whiteness.

As McKay suggests, the state played a leading role in advancing and shaping this anti-modernism, supporting folklorists and promoting folklore through tourism, and creating a position for Mary Black as director of a newly formed Department of Industry and Publicity in order to facilitate the invention of handicrafts. Anti-modernism was hardly the invention of provincial bureaucrats, however. It was, in fact, a fairly entrenched and pervasive regional idiom in the Maritimes. One finds elements of it in much of the literature of the period as well as in more popular forms like the photography of Wallace MacAskill and the travel writing of Clare Dennis, Dorothy Duncan and Will R. Bird. The work of writers like Thomas Raddall, Hugh

MacLennan, Ernest Buckler, Charles Bruce, and Frank Parker Day, of Andrew Merkel and the Song Fishermen group, emphasizes in different ways the anti-urban, anti-industrial ethos described by McKay, offering as an alternative an often romantic vision of Nova Scotian rural life.<sup>10</sup> An anti-modernist idealization of rural life was and is thus a readily available cultural paradigm in the province, and it is a paradigm with a complex and contradictory relationship to modern capitalist interests and to racial discourse.

Not surprisingly, particularly in view of the specifics of Africville's history, traces of this cultural paradigm emerge in African-Nova Scotian representations of Africville, representations which, I have suggested, articulate an Africadian<sup>11</sup> nationalism. Creative treatments of Africville began in the early '70s with Frederick Ward's short novel in *Black English Riverlisp: Black Memories* and have encompassed a wide range of media: poetry (Ward, George Elliott Clarke, Maxine Tynes, David Woods), film (Sylvia Hamilton, Shelagh Mackenzie), drama (Walter Borden, George Boyd, Woods), music (Faith Nolan, Four the Moment, Joe Sealy), painting (Woods), museum exhibits (Henry Bishop, the Africville Genealogical Society), fiction (Charles Saunders) and essays (Clarke, Hamilton). The anti-modernism trope with its emphasis on the rural and the pre-industrial that McKay describes in *The Quest of the Folk* is to be found in these texts as well. African Nova-Scotian artists invent Africville, however, at once in the absence of any broadly-based state sponsorship and in an explicit refutation of state-sponsored constructions of Africville. The embrace of anti-modernism in African-Nova Scotian cultural practices is a reformulation of the state-sponsored discourse, a kind of critical *détournement*, that foregrounds the construction of social difference and its attendant economic and political violence at the core of nation-state (or, in this case, local state) nationalism.<sup>12</sup> The African-Nova Scotian embrace of anti-modernism challenges the exclusion of blacks from "the quest of the folk" by re-scripting Africville, product of urban industrialization, as a rural idyll. Africadian nationalism also exhibits a built-in critique of the dangers of nationalism by placing the processes of exclusion and the social contest of identity construction at the centre of these visions of Africville. If these texts imagine an alternative homogeneity, if they invent a different essentialism, it is nonetheless, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's formulation, a *strategic* essentialism.<sup>13</sup>

Africville has historically been a place on the margin. Situated on the geographic periphery of Halifax, it was "left behind" in the processes of

modernization that transformed urban space over the course of the twentieth century, rendered marginal by virtue of being a black community in a society dominated by white socio-economic interests. The gradual encroachment of commercial and municipal structures in and around Africville sought to order the terrain in a particular direction: CNR tracks, an incinerator, a land-fill site, and the city's refusal to provide sewerage and running water for the residents, defined Africville as industrial space. These markers of the city's imaginary geography competed with the houses, the church, the school, and the community map-making which resolutely proclaimed Africville a residential neighborhood. Without access to institutional power, however, residents had inadequate means of resisting the symbolic violence of the state. By the 1960s, Africville had been defined as a slum, a "deviance service centre" (Clairmont and Magill *passim*), a social problem in which the city was obliged to intervene paternally. Relocation, with its stated aim of improving the living conditions and economic prospects for Africvillers, was the guise under which the expropriation of land was ultimately carried out.

While the former residents lacked the institutional resources to win the struggle over Africville, the middle-class artists and intellectuals who began to produce in ever greater numbers in the late 1970s and the early 1980s were gaining access to cultural institutions that enabled them to take up the task of contesting hegemonic representations of African-Nova Scotians. A key strategy has been their re-mapping of Africville, which draws not only on the geography imagined by former residents, but enlarges it in an effort to encompass the diversity of African-Nova Scotian identity and experience in the province as a whole. The construction of Africville as a lost Eden, a pastoral community independent of the institutions of modernity with their attendant bureaucracies, where the church took the place of "mayor or city council or policeman," of "clubs, youth organizations, ladies' auxiliary" (Saunders, "Visit" 58), and where community members are so close "[i]t's really like a big family" (Saunders 56), transforms Africville into a metaphor for the kinds of social relations not possible under modernity. In claiming, as many of these texts also do, that Africville *is* African-Nova Scotian community, "the consciousness of a people" as Clarke puts it ("Death" 20), the literature about Africville performs the function of unifying diverse actors unknown to one another in a synchronous time and space, that Benedict Anderson identifies as the aim of an imagined community. These texts, in other words, are engaged in the act of narrating a nation.

The appeal of Africville as the founding myth of Africadian nationalism is not difficult to discern. In the narrative of the battle between the city, with its capitalist desire for land for industrial development, and the residents, who want to retain their pastoral community, we have the paradigmatic agon of modernity.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, in the Africadian scripting of this drama, the tragedians are raced: pitted against white industrial capitalists, a rural black populace struggles to survive. Race is not an incidental element; it is at the core of the struggle that gave rise to Africadian nationalism. For Africville provides more than a powerful affective narrative. As an experience of industrialization that not only threatened to but did in fact destroy a community, Africville is the social cataclysm that, in the context of a modern industrial society with an emergent black intellectual class, provides the objective historical conditions for nationalism. The Africadian nationalism that finds its *raison d'être* in the destruction of Africville is of course quite distinct from the nation-state nationalism Gellner has in mind; however, the political consciousness that emerges from the social cataclysm of Africville takes a nationalist form, and does so in the larger context of a state-sponsored discourse that emphasizes an anti-modern return to the rural folk. So as I have suggested, the rhetoric of Africadian nationalism can be seen as effecting a critical reformulation through the creation of a black counterpart to the state-sponsored quest of the folk. The specific interest of the narratives themselves resides in ways they map race in response to hegemonic cartographies and construct a unifying mythos for black political struggles in the province and in Canada.

A key topos in the contestatory mapping of Africville in contemporary African-Nova Scotian writing is the insistence on Africville's natural beauty, its status as a rural idyll. George Elliott Clarke's poem "Campbell Road Church," for instance, opens with the following image:

At Negro Point some forgot sleep  
 to spy the fire-and-brimstone sun  
 blaze all gold-glory  
 over a turquoise harbour  
 of half-sunken, rusted ships,  
 when it was easy to worship  
 Benin bronze dawns,  
 to call "hosanna" to archangel gulls . . . (1-8)

The tension between the "turquoise harbour" and the "half-sunken, rusted ships" already hints at the fallen state of this rural idyll, and the "fire-and-

brimstone sun” seems to promise wrath and torment even as it blazes “all gold glory.” The focus on natural beauty in these works is almost defiant; it does not fully occlude the signs of industrial encroachment, or the grim markers of poverty, but holds out a utopian vision of rural community precisely in order to counter the destructive effects of industrial racism.

In David Woods’ poem “The Spirit of Africville” we find an image of pastoral haven once again:

Across the path by Kildare’s Field,  
Amidst the poppies that lift gently into the air,  
And sunsets that are golden in the sky . . . (1-3)<sup>15</sup>

Here natural beauty is made synonymous with the *spirit* of Africville, a deliberately transcendent representation of what Africville has become in the wake of its destruction. Charles Saunders’ narrative, “A Visit to Africville, Summer 1959,” also draws the imaginary visitor’s attention to the community’s rural features: “Water, tracks and bushes—that’s all you can see right now. Kind of reminds you of the country, even though we’re still in Halifax” (54). These rural signposts explicitly connect Africville on the eve of its destruction with an earlier historical moment as Saunders also reminds his visitor about the loss of rural folkways: “Speakin’ of pigs, people out here used to raise ‘em” (55), and “That’s right. We got our own little forest here. Used to be a lot more woods and bush around, but most of it got cut down for lumber and firewood. Nothin’ but young trees and alder bushes and wildflowers now” (63).

When Africville was first settled in the 1850s, it was situated on the periphery of Halifax and was, in effect, a rural community. Families kept pigs, chickens, goats; fishing in the Bedford Basin supplied individual families and provided salable surpluses. By the 1950s, however, urban expansion had encircled the once remote and rural community; the City of Halifax owned property to the south, east and west which it was interested in selling to industrial developers for container ports, expressways and other harbour-front development. Residents no longer kept animals; to do so contravened a city ordinance. Fishing in the Bedford Basin had declined due to pollution. At the time of relocation, and for several decades leading up to relocation, Africville’s claim to rusticity rested more on its lack of modern amenities and social services like police and fire protection (over which it had struggled unsuccessfully with the City for decades) than on many remaining rural qualities. We can see, then, in the pervasive presentation of

Africville as a rural idyll by contemporary African-Nova Scotian writers a telescoping of the history of modernization in a way that highlights the familiar agon of modern urban industrialists dispossessing the rural dwellers of their land.

This opposition is particularly evident in Clarke's work. The opening image of sun-worshippers gathering on the edge of the Bedford Basin in "Campbell Road Church" is brought to a close with an abrupt, "but none do now." "Now" Africville is a ghost town littered with rubble and haunted by the proponents of urban development, a clear reminder of the struggle between residents and the local state:

. . . an ancient CN porter lusts  
for Africville—  
beautiful Canaan of stained glass and faith,  
now limbo of shattered glass and promises,  
rats rustling like a mayor's robe.  
He rages to recall  
the gutting death of his genealogy,  
to protest his home's slaughter  
by homicidal bulldozers  
and city planners molesting statistics. (10-19)

The loss of Africville is the loss of a promised land, its former residents persecuted people in search of a spiritual home. The anthropomorphic rendering of Africville's destruction graphically juxtaposes a flesh-and-blood community with the cold bureaucratic machinations of "city planners molesting statistics." That the ancient CN porter in these stanzas experiences first nostalgia and then rage suggests that the figuring of Africville as lost Eden and as promised land can be seen as an integral part of the protest of "his home's slaughter" by the agents of industry and urban planning. The utopian reconstruction of Africville, in other words, is directed more at the present and the future than at the past.

The temporal structuring of Clarke's lyric for the song "Africville," composed by Delvina Bernard, clearly illustrates the way that in many of the Africville texts *anti*-modernism takes the form of a utopian *ante*-modernism. The opening stanza constructs a historical Africville as rural seaside utopia:

At Negro Point, down by the blue Bedford Basin  
Where catfish jumped and ships went sailing  
We lived, we loved, we worked, and we ploughed  
And raised our children, Black and proud (1-4)

This is a landscape marked by an explicitly ante-modern social order as the plough can be read as a metonym for pre-capitalist industry. The couplet implicitly links blackness and pride to this earlier social mode. The next stanza, however, juxtaposes this ante-modern history with the modern landscape of poverty associated with Africville at the time it was razed:

We built our Africville, and made it home  
Church on Sundays, for a hundred years long  
No matter, rats, cops, the dump next door  
We could have stayed for a hundred years more!.] (5-8)

The positioning of the subject here is reminiscent of Benjamin's angel of history who is backing into the future while his horrified gaze remains fixed on the wreckage of modernity piling up at his feet (257). An ante-modern Africville can then be seen as a redemptive force leading to an as-yet-unseen future. In this way, the hundred years history of Africville is transformed into a kind of future anterior, what Gayatri Spivak has termed a "ghost dance."<sup>16</sup> A utopian Africville is invoked to haunt those responsible for its destruction, and to inspire African-Nova Scotians both to preserve community and to prevent "another Africville." Relocation is figured as the premature death of a community that "could have stayed for a hundred years more." Had it not been for commercial interests and competing constructions of Africville—"Well maybe they saw bad water in the well / But we could see sunrise, like no where else" (17-18)—the speaker claims, Africville would have weathered "rats, cops, the dump next door" and lived on. The history of Africville is rewritten over the course of the poem, and past conditional becomes future anterior as the speaker insists Africville will live on despite the "lies" that brought about its destruction:

Bulldozers can't break pride  
History ain't stopped by lies  
Africville will never die  
Africville has made us wise!.] (19-22)

Here we have a refusal of the "history" of the destruction of Africville and all it represents. The history of relocation is in effect contained, through the structure of the song, between the utopian construction of Africville's history in the opening stanza, where children were raised "Black and proud," and the closing stanza where, in the narrative present, the effects of relocation are denied—"Bulldozers can't break pride"—for the future of black communities in the province.

This future anterior structuring of the agon of modernity in representations of Africville means that the tale of Africville's destruction may also be framed as a pedagogical experience, as the discerning of truth from deception and the ensuing development of consciousness. This is certainly true of Clarke's song "Africville," where the determination to hold onto the truth in the face of deception leads to a newly found consciousness: "History aint stopped by lies / Africville will never die / Africville has made us wise" (20-22). Similarly, the destruction of Africville is figured as a call to action in David Woods' "Summons," where deception is a tool of modernity ("Truth stands a sceptre of stone / Amidst all the clever deceptions / our modern society posits"), and the process of modernization entails the destruction of innocence, which in turn leads to a newly found wisdom:

Listen—  
 Let us disrupt the lie,  
 When we see our child-beauty  
 parade her naked flesh,  
 Or when we see our kingdom of love  
 Brought to an ignoble death[.] (14-19)

The innocence suggested by "child-beauty" is undercut by the implicit commodification of a beauty compelled to prostitute itself, a depiction of a fallen state all the more poignant because it is *child*-beauty that has been corrupted. The wisdom that emerges from this destruction is less than pure—it is a "*mad*-wisdom"—but it is a consciousness that arms the collective subject against the forces of deception:

Let us gain mad-wisdom,  
 .....  
 Let us rebel against this lie  
 Lift up an intelligent sword  
 and assault the new world. (25, 30-32)

In these contestatory constructions of Africville, then, the City is the purveyor of "false consciousness," and the experience of Africville prompts the scales to fall away, and a revolutionary consciousness to develop.

This presentation of Africville's destruction as the founding moment of a racial, political, indeed national consciousness is echoed in Maxine Tynes' Africville poems, where the focus is less on what Africville was than on what it has become. In "Africville is My Name," Tynes emphasizes the extent to which Africville can be seen as constitutive of African-Nova Scotian identity, and that identity is clearly conceived in national terms:

. . . to shout the names of Africville like a map,  
like a litany, like a hymn and a battle-cry,  
like a flag and a constitution (10-12)

Africville's newly found status, moreover, is a denial of its erasure; if it has on the one hand been destroyed as a "real" community, it has on the other been reborn as the sign of community and thereby lifted out of historical time: "a banner of the Africville that was, that is / that always will be" (13-14). In lifting Africville out of history in this way, Tynes can reinvent its constituent features and make it synonymous with the people of the nation in her poem "Africville": "No house is Africville./No road, no tree, no well. / Africville is man / woman / child"(25-27) and with the experience of racial oppression in the African Diaspora in her poem "Africville Spirit":

To people of colour, oppression is oppression.  
.....  
and racism is the same everywhere.  
. . . Soweto is Chicago is Toronto  
is Detroit is Montreal is New York is Halifax and Dartmouth  
is Africville. (21-26)

In making the people of the nation and their experience of racism constitutive, Tynes extends the experience of Africville as imagined community over far-flung geographic areas and diverse individuals unified primarily by race.

The relationship between the destruction of Africville and what it subsequently has come to mean is also explored in one of Frederick Ward's poems, "Dialogue # 3 Old Man (to the Squatter)." Like Tynes, the speaker in Ward's poem insists on Africville's significance abstracted from the place itself: "Africville is us" (5); "*we are Africville!*" (7). The complexity of meaning-production around Africville is succinctly conveyed as the poem presents competing constructions of Africville that reflect racialized standpoints, historically distinct moments, and diversity of opinion within the community of former residents. An old man speaks to a squatter, urging the folly of trying to reclaim Africville by squatting on the former site. He impresses on his interlocutor and, by extension, on the reader, that the significance of Africville had less to do with the terrain itself than with racist attitudes toward its inhabitants. This point is effectively made through what initially seems a peculiar shift in the structure of address: "They don't intend to let us get *it* back. *You* / ain't a place. Africville is us" (4-5 emphasis added). In reminding the squatter that he isn't a place, the speaker seems to affirm that Africville can survive demolition since it lives on in the people

who used to inhabit it, but in the lines that follow the speaker suggests that with or without the place, Africville functions to identify in particular ways:

When we go to git  
 a job, what they ask us? Where we from . . . and if we say  
 we from Africville, *we are Africville!* And we don't git  
 no job. It ain't no place son. (5-8, emphasis and ellipses in original)

Africville “ain’t no place” insofar as it becomes synonymous with a particular notion of blackness that leads to racial discrimination. It is surely no accident that employment is the chosen example; the speaker interprets the destruction of Africville in a way that makes the link between economic interests and racism. The power of the city and white economic interests to destroy Africvilles, to control the economic lives of black people is bemoaned even as the limits of state power and systemic racism are affirmed in the counter-claim that nothing has been destroyed after all: “You think they destroyed something. They ain’t. They / took away the place” (10-11), and “cause we Africville. / NOT-NO-SHACK-ON-NO-KNOLL. That ain’t the purpose . . . fer / whilst your edifice is foregone destroyed, its splinters will cry out: *We still here!*” (14-17). Thus, Africville once again lives on in the ways it functions as a sign of community and of resistance.

Resistance to racial oppression is a central element in the constitution of Africvillian national consciousness; the re-mapping of Africville explicitly refutes hegemonic constructions of the community which are marked by the structural racism that has characterized the province’s relations with black communities throughout Nova Scotia. This contestatory community map-making, where topography is made a vehicle for affective ties to people and popular memory, is a pervasive feature of Joe Sealy’s *Africville Suite*, which opens with a reading of the David Woods poem “Mood Indigo” that announces the centrality of music in the lives of Africvillians: “Duke was in our landscape.”<sup>17</sup> Two compositions (“Brown Bomber” and “Duke’s in Town”) pay tribute to the internationally-known black personalities who had some connection to Africville, whether through romantic attachments, like Duke Ellington himself, or whether they came to know it through their own experiences of racism in Nova Scotia, like Joe Louis. Here again Africville is made part of the larger African diaspora, but several compositions draw attention to specific features of Africville’s terrain. “Train’s Comin’” reminds the listener of that dividing line down the community that represented both the encroachment of industrial interests on the small

community as well as employment for some of its residents. "The Caterpillar Tree" and "Kildare's Field" speak to the pastoral motif marking so many of these texts, as does the David Woods painting commissioned for the cover of the CD. Red flowers dominate the foreground of the painting and reach up across the canvas to meet the red sky at the top. In between, a train on the infamous track does not quite manage to overtake the centrality of the white church building in the middle of the frame. The folk idiom Woods has used in the painting complements the romantic vision of community, but as in so many of the Africville texts, romanticism surfaces in a productive tension with realist elements such as the train. This rich cross-hatching of myth, romance, and realistic historical detail calls our attention to the "socially symbolic act" (Jameson 20) in which these works are engaged: an imaginative resolution of abiding economic contradictions articulated in racial terms.

Charles Saunders' narrative tour of Africville provides not only a topography of the community, but a history as well of the ways residents have responded to the socio-economic conditions and the attendant symbolic violence imposed by the city; indeed the stops on the tour are largely dictated by the need to counter established stereotypes about Africville, and to critique the city's treatment of residents. The visitor is invited to admire the ocean view, sign of desirable residential property; to imagine sunrise church services on Easter, fishers hauling in lobster before the Basin became too polluted, Portia White teaching at the school in the 1930s; we are also shown the wells with their cautionary signs, "Water must be boiled before drinking," sign of the city's refusal to provide tax-paying Africvillers with standard services. Topography here becomes a means of visiting different moments of the historical past in order to present a counter-memory in the narrative present.

The transmutation of history into topography, of time into space, and the unifying of diverse social actors across far-flung geographical spaces under the banner of race combine to create the apparently homogeneous and synchronous time-space of the nation. Homi Bhabha's deconstruction of Anderson's presentation of the time-space of national narratives usefully underscores the manufactured quality of such homogeneity by emphasizing its narrative instability. Referring to Anderson's location of "the imagined community of the nation in the homogeneous time of realist narrative," Bhabha contends that the alterity of the sign "alienates the synchronicity of

the imagined community,” and consequently, “From the place of the ‘meanwhile,’ where cultural homogeneity and democratic anonymity articulate the national community, there emerges a more instantaneous and subaltern voice of the people, minority discourses that speak betwixt and between times and places” (158-59). Since Bhabha’s aim in revealing the narrative dissonance of imagined communities is to locate a “place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent” (149), the apparent homogeneity of Africadia in the texts about Africville bears consideration. It is worth repeating that Africadian nationalism is not the kind of state-sponsored nationalism that Bhabha is anxious to deconstruct; rather, Africadian nationalism operates within and in many respects against state-sponsored nationalisms both in Nova Scotia and in Canada. To the extent that the narratives of Africville construct an imagined community, however, they manifest the symbolic structure described by Anderson. More useful than deconstructing the unifying impulse, however, is a consideration of what it unifies in order to discern the strategies for political struggle in these texts, as well as the effort the writers make to create a space for “the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent” in the larger Canadian national narrative.

Two of the most central tropes in these texts, placed side by side, seem to present contradictory claims. In presenting Africville as a lost Eden, these texts claim Africville is a thing of the past. In presenting Africville as African-Nova Scotian community, these texts claim that Africville is eternal, that “Africville will never die.” A number of theorists of nationalism have called attention to its paradoxical temporal structuring, to what Tom Nairn has called the “Janus-face” of nationalism: one face gazes back into archaic mist constructed as the primordial essence of the nation; the other face gazes into the future. In the case of these representations of Africville, this double-orientation is scripted as a death and a rebirth, and is thereby a means not only of reclaiming the Africville that was, but of imagining its significance for future political action; in other words, it also marks a shift in the meaning of Africville. The Africville that serves as the founding myth of an Africadian nationalism emerges from and contributes to the new symbolic significance Africville acquired among African-Nova Scotians *after* relocation.

Africville becomes, in this context, an imaginary resolution of the contradictions constituted by the processes of modernization and the racing of

those processes in the state-sponsored discourses. The racing of competing representations of Africville in recent narratives, where the white socio-economic interests of the state are the purveyors of the “Africville as slum” vision which the black residents counterpoint with a rural idyll, elides the position of African-Nova Scotians who were not residents of Africville, and even masks the diversity of opinion within Africville itself. Douglas Clairmont and Dennis Magill, sociologists commissioned to report on the relocation process, contend that most African-Nova Scotians initially regarded the relocation of Africville “as both inevitable and acceptable” (219); that there was general acceptance in the province of the characterization of Africville as a slum; and that the liberal-welfare rhetoric that accompanied relocation met little resistance in the black community. Instead, black leaders voiced concern for just and equitable compensation of residents (a struggle that is on-going), for re-establishing what was valuable in the Africville community in improved surroundings, and for some kind of guarantee that relocation would represent real opportunities for the long-oppressed residents of Africville (Clairmont and Magill 219-20). It was not, however, until the failure of the relocation to achieve any of these aims that Africville came to mean something quite different for many African-Nova Scotians and representations of it began explicitly to challenge the state-sponsored consensus that Africville was a slum, unfit for human habitation.

That temporal shift in the meaning of Africville for African-Nova Scotians is memorably represented in Shelagh Mackenzie’s film *Remember Africville*. Gus Wedderburn, a lawyer and black community leader in Halifax, asserts a number of times, “I did not see the flowers,” when recalling his impressions of Africville. The flowers he refers to appear in a photograph of Africville on the cover of the catalogue for a commemorative exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Mount Saint Vincent University in 1989, a copy of which Wedderburn held up as he reiterated his failure to see Africville in such romantic terms when he visited it prior to its destruction. Among the most frequently circulated photographs of Africville<sup>18</sup> since its contestatory reconstruction are those that place the red gladioli in Dan Dixon’s yard in the foreground of a long shot of Africville houses leading up to the Bedford Basin in the background. It is this vista of Africville that David Woods refashions in his painting. Wedderburn’s insistence that the flowers were not part of his vision of Africville represents an important contestation of the post-relocation construction of Africville as rural idyll, and hints at another narrative about

the relocation. David Woods' radio play "Part of the Deal" focuses on the complicity of a young, educated black man employed by the city as "Assistant Relocation Officer for the Resettlement and Remuneration of the Negroes from the Unsavory Area," whose attitude toward "Coleville" and many of its inhabitants is one of shame: "It's always your own that drags you down." Yet even this text portrays most sympathetically the character who insists "home was never as bad as the newspapers made it look" and who enthuses, "You should see this place in the fall, man! Just about sunset the whole sky be filled up with colours—red, yellow and orange—just hangin' over the water. It be like lookin' up at heaven!" That more recent constructions of Africville make it possible to see the flowers is testimony to the power of the nationalist narratives to reformulate both hegemonic constructions of Africville and the discourse of the folk.

In effecting this shift within black community visions of Africville, the nationalist narratives reveal a will to suture class and other divisions among African-Nova Scotians in the province, and to recognize the ways those divisions are produced by the workings of industrial society where divisions of labour operate not only along class, but also race and gender lines. In making the enemy modern industrial capitalists and their state sponsors, and in making them white, these narratives strive to identify and resist the structural racism that produces and destroys Africvilles. An analogous and complementary impulse can be seen in the phenomenon of urban black intellectuals and artists creating a nationalism centred on a rural utopia. The political urgency of closing rural and urban divides in a province where significant numbers of African-Nova Scotians are not in the Halifax-Dartmouth metro area, but rather in rural and semi-rural communities scattered throughout the province is not difficult to grasp.

Not only, then, does the nationalist vision in constructions of Africville in these texts attend to the exclusion of African-Nova Scotians from the state-sponsored discourse of "the folk," it transforms a *non*-industrial vision into an *anti*-industrial vision in a way that attends to the racing of socio-economic divisions in the province. In centring this re-scripting of state-sponsored nationalist discourse on Africville, moreover, these artists are able to foreground the power relations and technologies of violence at play in the nationalist imaginings. The Africville texts intervene in nationalist discourse, not only by rewriting particular elements of the anti-modern vision of the quest of the folk, but more generally by disrupting the conven-

tional homogeneity of imagined communities through a foregrounding of the competition over the way a community is imagined. Africville's destruction is at once the condition of necessity that prompts the invention of an imagined community, and the trace of contested discursive terrain that comes to mark these texts. To be sure, in contesting hegemonic representations of Africville, these texts produce an alternative homogeneity that sutures class divides and urban-rural splits, but to the extent that this unity is scripted as a political strategy in response to disenfranchisement, exclusion and dispossession, it simultaneously refuses to become fixed as an identity. The visions of Africville in these texts can serve as a symbolic armature for subjective identification against hegemonic constructions of blackness in the province, and as a distinctive conceptual framework for an emergent literary and cultural corpus.

#### NOTES

- 1 Benedict Anderson, arguing against Tom Nairn's assertion that racism and nationalism are fundamentally connected, claims they are constitutively distinct and are deployed in different arenas (nationalism is deployed *internationally* and racism *intranationally*). Paul Gilroy in turn challenges Anderson's argument through his study of race and nation in Britain. See also Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein.
- 2 I have in mind Homi Bhabha's use of the term in his article "DissemiNation."
- 3 The principal study here is once again Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, but see also Homi Bhabha's collection of essays *Nation and Narration*, especially the piece by Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form" 44-70.
- 4 Among the scholars who have been very critical of nationalism are Eric Hobsbawm, Tom Nairn, Paul Gilroy, and Arjun Appadurai.
- 5 I am borrowing this concept of "signature" from Jacques Derrida and from Elizabeth Grosz's feminist elaboration in "Sexual Signatures."
- 6 An extended discussion of the conditions of publication and dissemination of contemporary African Nova-Scotian writing is beyond the scope of this paper. The textual traces of hegemonic and, especially, counter-hegemonic discourses on race, identity, community and modernity can nonetheless be discerned in these works in a way that situates the artists and their works in relation to their conditions of production. Hence my attention to the works' formal instantiation, that is, to the ways artistic form itself may be said to represent a concrete instance of the nationalist discourse in question.
- 7 Some sense of the range and diversity of anti-modernism may be gleaned from the study by T. J. Jackson Lears.
- 8 The seminal study of literary manifestations of this discourse remains Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. Much has been written on the subject in the field of

social geography. See for example, Michael Bunce, C. Bryant et. al., and J.R. Short.

- 9 See Anthony Giddens.
- 10 The scope of my study precludes any extended discussion of the work of these writers here. The anti-modern tenor of their work has, in any case, been taken up by other scholars. In addition to McKay, Erik Kristiansen has examined the emphasis on anti-modernism in the novels of Bruce and Buckler. See also Gwen Davies' studies of Frank Parker Day and of the Song Fishermen; Davies takes issue with McKay's notion "that much Maritime literature is merely a literature of nostalgia created by middle class writers who idealize a pastoral golden age as part of a 'culture of consolation'"(195), arguing that such a reading fails to take account of the "realism, irony, and economic cynicism permeating much of it"(196). Davies nonetheless confirms the pervasiveness of pastoral motifs and a nostalgic tone. See also Janice Kulyk Keefer and George Elliott Clarke, who has written about the anti-modernism of African Nova-Scotian literature in his introduction to *Fire on the Water*, and in "The Birth and Rebirth of Africadian Literature."
- 11 Africadian is a word coined by George Elliott Clarke as an alternative to African-Nova Scotian, Afro-Nova Scotian or black Nova Scotian, other possible appellations. A fusion of Africa and Acadia, this term is especially evocative of an imagined community. As Clarke himself puts it, "if Africadians constitute a *state*, let it be called *Africadia*"(*Fire on the Water* 9).
- 12 Houston Baker's work on the Harlem Renaissance is an important touchstone for my discussion of the anti-modernist tropes of African Nova-Scotian artistry in that Baker's characterization of African-American modernism as the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery" (15) may be seen to describe a similar *détournement* of a hegemonic discourse.
- 13 Spivak first elaborated the term in her introduction to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, but this frequently invoked argument has been taken up elsewhere by Spivak in essays and in dialogue with other critics. See "Feminism and Critical Theory," "In a Word. Interview," and "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution."
- 14 See Marshall Berman for a more ample discussion of the paradigms of modernity. I use the word *agon* advisedly because it means not only a conflict or contest, but more specifically the dramatic performance of a conflict.
- 15 This poem appears on Joe Sealy's *Africville Suite*. Not previously published. Quoted with permission of the author.
- 16 Spivak offers this definition: "[T]he ghost dance is an attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real or imagined" ("Ghostwriting" 70), and further, "Thus the 'end' of the ghost dance . . . is to make the past a future, as it were—the future anterior, not a future present, as is the case with the 'end' of most narratives of social justice" (70).
- 17 Not previously published. Quoted with permission of the author.
- 18 See the commemorative book *The Spirit of Africville* published by The Africville Genealogical Society, and the photos by Ted Grant that accompany Charles Saunders' "Back to Africville" in the feature on Africville in *This Country Canada*; the CD cover for Joe Sealy's *Africville Suite* reproduces some of the photographs from *Spirit of Africville*.

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