

“Too Valuable for Black Ownership”¹: Space and Discrimination in the Struggle for Africville

Catherine Stockall

¹The story of Africville remains a dark spot in Canadian history. Throughout the duration of settlement in Africville, the City of Halifax actively worked to make the community unlivable

by denying basic services and encroaching on the land around the community. It was a deliberate attempt by city officials to delegitimize the space of Africville and, thus, dismantle the community. This paper will discuss the contested relationship between space and discrimination in Africville.

Specifically, it will explore the initial settlement in Africville, the reaction from the municipal government of the City of Halifax, and Africville’s eventual destruction in the late 1960s, while emphasizing spatial politics and the racialization of that space. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that the legal regulation of the space in and around Africville was a deliberate attempt to marginalize and delegitimize its people in order to gain control over that space.

“WHEN THE CITY OF HALIFAX FELT THREATENED BY ‘THE NOTION OF A UNITED BLACK COMMUNITY’¹, THEY SOUGHT TO DESTROY THEM BY DELEGITIMIZING THEIR SPACE.”

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: DELEGITIMIZATION AND REGULATION OF SPACE

In her article “The Space of Africville: Creating, Regulating, and Remembering the Urban ‘Slum’”, Jennifer J. Nelson discusses how “the legal regulation of space governs what can and cannot happen within it”.² Space, whether it be physical, geographical, or social, is an integral part of any community³ and it defines the experiences that people have within it.⁴ As such, how a space is conceptualized outside of its community is also indicative of the way that the space will be treated.⁵ This is especially visible in the case of Africville

because it was outside forces that worked to dismantle the settlement. When the City of Halifax felt threatened by “the notion of a united black community”,⁶ they sought to destroy them by delegitimizing their space.

These ideas were also addressed by Michel Foucault, who believed “that space was fundamental in any exercise

of Power”.⁷ He explained that the physical segregation of marginalized groups, as was seen in Africville, was a common trait in the liberal state.⁸ Space was, in short, a means for the ruling class to control the lower classes.⁹ While Foucault primarily discussed this theory in relation to prisons and mental asylums,¹⁰ the theory can be applied to the case of Africville because it was a case of the segregation and control of a group

¹ Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 351.

² Jennifer J. Nelson, “The Space of Africville: Creating, Regulating, and Remembering the Urban ‘Slum,’” in *Race, Space, and Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2002), 212.

³ Sherene H. Razack, “When Place Becomes Race: in *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*, ed. Tania Das Gupta, et al. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 2007), 77.

⁴ Ibid, 77.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nelson, “The Space of Africville”, 212.

⁷ Razack, “When Place Becomes Race”, 77.

⁸ Ibid, 78.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

based on unequal power relations based in Euro-Canadian constructions of race.

To illustrate the relationship between space and discrimination in Africville, it is first necessary to situate it within a wider history of Black settlement in Nova Scotia. Since the first settlement in Nova Scotia, there have been a number of different waves of Black immigration.¹¹ In fact, Nova Scotia actually had the largest migration of Black people into Canada following both the revolutionary and 1812 wars.¹² Although slavery did exist to an extent in Nova Scotia, it was never legally instituted.¹³ Nonetheless, this was only because the harsh climate and rocky soil made slavery less economically viable than in the southern states.¹⁴ Furthermore, new immigrants, including free Loyalist Blacks, were promised land plots by the government.¹⁵ While wealthier and white migrants received large and fertile plots, the Black refugees were given smaller plots with rocky soil, making farming endeavours less prosperous.¹⁶ A similar situation arose when Black refugees protested the government's proposed settlement plan.¹⁷ Despite white communities being allowed to settle wherever they chose, the government had planned to disperse Black families against their will.¹⁸ Eventually in 1842, the government allowed Black refugees to settle in the Preston area.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the land was again of poor quality, further emphasizing the goals of the City of Halifax from the outset of the settlement.²⁰

There is an undeniable theme that emerges amongst these examples. Throughout the history of

settlement in Nova Scotia, land has been used to further marginalize and control racialized groups in the interest of consolidating valuable land for white settlers.²¹ It is, however, important to note is that it was never the rightful jurisdiction of the governing Europeans to distribute the land in Nova Scotia.²² Instead, it belonged to the Indigenous peoples who inhabited it long before settlers arrived.²³ The Black and Mi'kmaq populations of Nova Scotia share a common history of "tenuous land occupation, meager resources, and a consistent underlying threat of violence".²⁴ For Indigenous peoples, this has historically taken the form of policies like their confinement in the reservation system, which is a clear example of space as an extension of colonial power. Ultimately, the history of settlement in Nova Scotia is one that is based on the regulation and confinement of racialized spaces, resulting in the subjugation of marginalized groups.²⁵

There is no official account of settlement in Africville,²⁶ potentially pointing to the ways in which power relations are reproduced through knowledge production.²⁷ White settlers controlled this production of knowledge, which reified the racial constraints surrounding land distribution. There is no official account because the Euro-Canadian population failed to write or recruit those from within the community to write the history from an insider perspective. This control over the narrative of Africville is notably present throughout the history of the community, and was used by authorities to justify their treatment of Africville's population.

¹¹ Jennifer J. Nelson, *The Operation of Whiteness and Forgetting in Africville: A Geography of Racism*, (University of Toronto, 2001), 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis W. Magill, *Africville: the life and death of a Canadian black community* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 1999), 26.

¹⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 29.

¹⁸ Ibid, 29.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nelson, *The Operation of Whiteness and Forgetting in Africville*, 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Clairmont and Magill, *Africville*, 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

However, what is known is that around 1848, two black men, William Brown and William Arnold, purchased properties along the boundaries of what would become Africville—officially creating the community.²⁸ Soon after, other families began to migrate to the area.²⁹ What is most important to note is the reason that Black residents of Nova Scotia came to settle in Africville. While they were pulled to the Bedford Basin because of the promise of fishing and wage labour,³⁰ they were pushed from their previous settlements in Hammond Plains and Preston because of the poor land and economic opportunities.³¹ This arose as a direct result of their historic mistreatment by the British, particularly in terms of the regulation and limitations of their space.

Soon after its initial settlement, Africville was a thriving community.³² Nonetheless, the City of Halifax reacted poorly to the settlement, further establishing the historical typology of their behavior in Africville.³³ City officials responded to the settlement by placing the most undesirable and dangerous institutions and services in the area surrounding Africville. Very shortly after Africville was first settled, the city built Rockhead Prison on a nearby hill that overlooked the community.³⁴ About two decades later, city officials chose to put an infectious diseases hospital on the same hill.³⁵ The hospital was built on this site after objections from white and wealthier residents in Halifax who didn't want the hospital in their neighbourhood.³⁶ Moreover, there was the open city dump, railway lines, an oil plant facility, a bone mill, two slaughterhouses, a tar factory, and a foundry all in the direct vicinity of

Africville, creating an environment that was unliveable.³⁷ This was done in order to justify the removal of Africville's people, and use the land for industrial expansion.

Although residents paid taxes to the city, they were never provided with services like water and sewage lines, garbage collection, or police and fire protection³⁸—essential services that are necessary for the health and development of a community and services that the rest of Halifax received. Furthermore, the city routinely denied homeowners building permits to build new or improve existing houses.³⁹ As a result, it was nearly impossible to maintain a safe home.

As a direct result of this mistreatment from the city, the living conditions in Africville were horrific. Houses were falling apart, there was not access to clean water, and the community was surrounded by industry. However, this was a deliberate attempt by city officials who sought to delegitimize the space of Africville and further marginalize its residents.⁴⁰ As Nelson argues, the city of Halifax created a community that was considered by outsiders to be dirty, unsafe, and a slum.⁴¹ The city deprived Africville of basic services, which in turn created a community that was defined by outsiders as primitive and dangerous.⁴² Africville became exactly what the City of Halifax wanted Africville to be.

PUSHING BACK: SOLIDARITY AND COMMUNITY IN AFRICVILLE

Despite the effort of the city, the residents of Africville were able to create a very unique

²⁸ Ibid, 30.

²⁹ Ibid, 31.

³⁰ Ibid, 33.

³¹ Ibid, 34.

³² Ibid, 34.

³³ Nelson, *The Space of Africville*, 215.

³⁴ Ibid, 215.

³⁵ Ibid, 215.

³⁶ Ibid, 215.

³⁷ Ibid, 215.

³⁸ Henderson and Wakeham, *Reconciling Canada*, 351.

³⁹ Nelson, *The Space of Africville*, 215.

⁴⁰ Jennifer J. Nelson, *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 114.

⁴¹ Ibid, 114.

⁴² Ibid, 114.

community.⁴³ The experience of being Othered⁴⁴ by the rest of Halifax served to create a stronger and more tightly-knit community.⁴⁵ A common theme that arises in the interviews conducted with former residents is the strong sense of community in Africville that was unlike any other. This sense of togetherness and support is exemplified by Eddie Carvery, who grew up in Africville and explains that he:

remembers a time when I was out picking blueberries with Terry Dixon and I fell down on a bottle and cut my hand. Well, I didn't have to go all the way back home to have my cut mended. I went to the very first house that was there and I was taken care of. That was one of the things that was very important to me as a person living in Africville—the closeness and the oneness of the people. You weren't isolated at any time in Africville; you always felt at home, the doors were always open. That is one of the most important things that has stayed with me throughout my life.⁴⁶

Despite constant threat from the city to dismantle Africville's space, the people of Africville were able to create a space that was their own—a community that was supportive, and welcoming. It is also important to recognize the active resistance from Africville residents at every stage in the history of Africville. They were certainly not passive in the face of this discrimination, a testament to the strong community that they created. For example, despite demands from City officials to vacate their houses, residents remained

in order to resist the disciplinary power exerted by the municipal government. This understanding of resistance is central to Foucault's conception of power and space. When exerted power becomes too overt, it has the potential to result in galvanized resistance to authority, as was the case in Africville.

ASSIMILATION STRATEGY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF AFRICVILLE

The land on which Africville was situated was highly desirable for industrial development.⁴⁷ Specifically, the city planning board wanted to create an expanded expressway through the community.⁴⁸ By making the living conditions in Africville unsafe they could easily justify its destruction.⁴⁹ The forced relocation of Africville residents was framed by the city to be a humanitarian intervention that was necessary for the health and safety of Africville residents.⁵⁰ In her article "Africville and the Dynamics of State in Post-War Power", Tina Loo explains that the treatment of Africville residents was a "manifestation of the kind of deep-seated racism that was increasingly under attack in the North America of the late 1950s and the early to mid-1960s".⁵¹ City officials understood that they had to address the living conditions in Africville due to the outside pressures generated by the Civil Rights Movement. However, the forced relocation of the Africville community was not an instance of poorly executed good intentions. Instead, it was rooted in an ingrained sense of white supremacy.

Most of the removal of Africville citizens took place between 1964 and 1969.⁵² The first building

⁴³ Stephen Kimber, et al. *The Spirit of Africville*, ed. Africville Genealogy Society, (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1992), 80.

⁴⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁴⁵ Nelson, *The Space of Africville*, 212.

⁴⁶ Kimber, et al. *The Spirit of Africville*, 86.

⁴⁷ Henderson and Wakeham, *Reconciling Canada*, 351.

⁴⁸ Clairmont and Magill, *Africville*, 136.

⁴⁹ Nelson, *The Space of Africville*, 216.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 231.

⁵¹ Tina Loo, "Africville and the Dynamics of State in Post-War Power." *Acadiensis*, 27.

⁵² Ibid, 224.

to be destroyed was the Seaview African United Baptist Church, which served as the community's centre. The City's decision to specifically target the Church demonstrates the underlying intention of dismantling the social cohesion of the community. As residents moved away, their houses were demolished by bulldozers and their belongings moved by dump trucks, and they only received \$500 compensation for their houses.⁵³ Most residents moved elsewhere in the North End, mostly to public housing like Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park.⁵⁴ By relocating the residents to different areas of the city, the Halifax government hoped that they would assimilate with the rest of the city—mostly to create the appearance of desegregation.⁵⁵

Today, there are few indications that Africville ever existed. In 1985, the land on which Africville stood became the Seaview Memorial Park, and it was for a time an off-leash dog park.⁵⁶ There was an apology issued by the then mayor of Halifax, Peter Kelly, in 2010, as well as a \$3 million compensation deal. However, that money does very little to adequately compensate victims.⁵⁷ Furthermore, in 2011 the city built a replica of the church, but it serves only as an interpretation center, not the central community institution that it originally was.⁵⁸ As it only serves as a museum, the project does more to support Nova Scotia tourism than the Africville community.⁵⁹ The forced relocation of Africville residents was a calculated plan to destroy their strong sense of community and togetherness. As stated above, many of Africville's residents relocated to North End Halifax, a historically working class neighbourhood with a reputation of poverty and

crime.⁶⁰ More recently, the neighbourhood has undergone a process of gentrification that has led to the further dislocation and marginalization of the Africville diaspora.⁶¹

In conclusion, the mistreatment that the people of Africville endured at the hands of city officials cannot be removed from the idea of space. The City of Halifax first marginalized the peoples of Africville, and then actively worked to make the space in and around Africville unlivable so that they could easily justify its destruction. Halifax failed in their duty to provide the same safe space to the community of Africville that it had provided for the other neighbourhoods in Halifax. This was, however, a theme that has been seen throughout the history of Black settlement in Nova Scotia, where space and land have been used to decide to whom citizenship is extended. However, what is most important to note is that this is an issue has been seen in many historical and current racialized and otherwise communities in Canada, both in past and present day. The regulation of space is an issue that extends far beyond the borders of Africville, and marginalization and racialization of space continues to be an operationalized method utilized by European and North Americans to achieve a construction of space inextricably linked to colonial ideology.

⁵³ Ibid, 224.

⁵⁴ Paul A. Erickson, *Halifax's North End: An Anthropologist looks at the city*, (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1986), 72.

⁵⁵ Nelson, *The Space of Africville*,

⁵⁶ "Africville dog park upsets black community," CBC News, July 13 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/africville-dog-park-upsets-black-community-1.2705535>

⁵⁷ Ibid.,

⁵⁸ Ibid.,

⁵⁹ Michael Kimber, "Injunction filed to stop Africville Settlement," *The Coast*, last modified March 17, 2010.

<http://www.thecoast.ca/RealityBites/archives/2010/03/17/injunction-filed-to-stop-africville-settlement>

⁶⁰ Phlis McGregor, "Halifax: A city with two north ends- part 1," *CBC News*, last modified April 14, 2015.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-a-city-with-two-north-ends-part-1-1.3031005>

⁶¹ Ibid.,