

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Jennifer J. Nelson**, *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 192 pp. \$39.95 hardcover (978-0-8020-9252-6)

Africville has correctly been called Canada's most famous Black community. It was settled in the 1840s by descendants of the Black Refugees of the War of 1812–14 who purchased lands at the then outer perimeter of Halifax in the face of serious challenges to all but basic survival on the barren, scrubble land that had been granted them elsewhere. By the last decade of that century the name Africville had become widespread and it was deemed by Black leaders in Nova Scotia to be a fine community with much promise. Seventy years later, in the 1960s, the small community of roughly 400 persons was relocated by Halifax authorities with the reluctant approval of community leaders, local Black and White progressives, and social housing and human rights experts called in from Ontario. What happened and why? It has been the subject of scholarly books, works of fiction, award winning documentaries, hundreds of articles in local, national, and international newspapers, dozens of graduate student theses, poems, songs, a jazz suite, symposia, and an exhibition which traveled across Canada and is now housed permanently at the Black Cultural Centre in Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia. There is continuing negotiation over compensation for Africville people and proper recognition of the community (and acknowledgement of the failed responsibility on the part of Halifax officials and society in general) between the City of Halifax and the Africville Genealogical Society which speaks for the former residents and their descendants. A United Nations committee has also weighed in on the significance of Africville, the importance of its history, the racism and neglect that eventually made its people vulnerable to the urban renewal process and relocation, and the validity of the Genealogical Society's claims for compensation and recognition. Most of the public attention, certainly most of the positive characterization of Africville, has occurred in the thirty-six years since its buildings were bulldozed and its residents scattered, largely into neighbouring areas of the former seashore site. Africville no longer exists in a physical sense, though surviving members and their descendants and friends usually gather each summer at the former site, now the Seaview Memorial Park, to renew ties, remember, and enjoy themselves.

*Razing Africville* is another contribution to the extensive Africville discourse. It springs from Jennifer Nelson's doctoral dissertation. The book (and presumably the thesis) represents the author's interpretation, from a distance, of the Africville story. As she puts it, the work is based on a rereading of available materials, supplemented by more recent sociological literature on environmental racism and kindred themes. There was no fieldwork and little has been added in the way of fresh data. The book provides a detailed review of the literature behind the author's theoretical framework and an accurate reporting of existing materials pertinent to the Africville experience. Fully one-third of *Razing Africville* discusses heavyweight theorists such as Foucault and the views of those advancing the "environmental racism" critique, with an occasional reference to Africville. In the three remaining chapters, "Knowing Africville," "Razing Africville," and "Reconciling Africville," the author draws primarily upon my own work, both directly (the *Africville Relocation Report* plus several subsequent books and articles) and indirectly (via cited materials in these documents), while incorporating a few additional writings and newspaper accounts.

Africville is a complex and multifaceted subject, and the simple theory advanced here, the absence of fieldwork, and the dissertation style of the writing are real obstacles to a satisfying new account. The limits are manifested in the tunnel vision of having one persistent, virtually exclusive theme, racism, and the constant efforts to add depth largely by linking the life and death of Africville as a community to other "environmental racism" experiences throughout the world. The book's value depends on how insightful Nelson's theoretical perspective enables her to be in this re-examination of Africville materials, and how well she conveys these insights. The author repeatedly states that *Razing Africville* is directed toward the White community, not the Black community, although it is not clear why a penetrating analysis of the centrality of White racism would not be valuable to the Black community as well. Her thesis is that previous writings and "progressive" leaders in the Africville relocation process underplayed, if not completely missed, the centrality of White racism, which caused the relocation, and continues to be, in her view, a major feature of Nova Scotia society, rendering suspect any White claims to having learned lessons and wanting to adopt a more enlightened stance to the descendants of Africville or race relations generally. It would have been heuristic for that thesis had the author engaged in some fieldwork exploring the diverse vantage points on Africville with respect to racism as the master variable, and the evolution of perspectives on Africville in both the Black and wider community.

The theory advanced in the book does not rise beyond emphasizing White racism as the master variable. Scant attention is paid to other contexts such as the relocation emphasis of liberal-bureaucratic thinking in the 1950s and 1960s or the activism of that period, which focused on social integration. It was an era where Newfoundland outposts were closed, Inuit moved from camps to larger centres, and huge urban relocation projects were the order of the day; Africville, for example, accounted for less than 10% of the population relocated in Halifax. Activists and liberal-bureaucrats were often naïve and exhibited limited understanding of the importance of social class, power, and racism in constraining if not subverting progress. A complex model needs to be advanced in capturing how these factors are linked and especially how racism endures as a powerful legacy effect. Unfortunately the author is not up to this task. She reiterates the mantra, “racism,” and apparently sees herself as that rare person who appreciates racism’s significance, a judgment a tad sanctimonious which limits the value of the book in appreciating why the Africville relocation has been considered a failure and lacks generosity in understanding the Black and White activists’ mindsets and the limitations of their strategic policy intervention.

Despite its shortcomings, the book has value and could well find a readership in sociology courses and among some groups sharing the author’s critical perspective. The dissertation “mandatory” of the first fifty pages being “the theoretical exegesis” would probably work against the book reaching a larger pool of readers, though one should never underestimate the widespread interest in Africville and its significant symbolism for Black and White Canadians.

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