



**Article title:** Messages to Ancestors: Following the Notes from Africville to Emancipation to the Door of No Return

**Authors:** Cyrus Sundar Singh[1]

**Affiliations:** harriet tubman institute for research on africa and its diasporas[1]

**Orcid ids:** 0000-0002-3615-0532[1]

**Contact e-mail:** csundars@torontomu.ca

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**Preprint statement:** This article is a preprint and has not been peer-reviewed, under consideration and submitted to ScienceOpen Preprints for open peer review.

**DOI:** 10.14293/PR2199.001194.v1

**Preprint first posted online:** 21 October 2024

**Keywords:** Enslavement, Slavery, Emancipation, Africville, Diaspora, Senegal, Tubman, Goree, Door of no Return, ,

## **Messages to Ancestors: Following the Notes from Africville to Emancipation to the Door of No Return**

### **Overture**

On Canadian Thanksgiving in October 2023, I stood on the shores of Gorée Island, next to the Door of No Return<sup>i</sup>, off the west coast of Dakar, Senegal, along with a cohort of international scholars from Harriet Tubman Institute<sup>ii</sup> (HTI), Toronto, and Université Cheikh Anta Diop<sup>iii</sup> (UCAD), Dakar. Facing westward across the Atlantic Ocean and with the help of Fallou Bal, our Senegalese guide, I bent down and set fire to a collection of *Messages to Ancestors*, handwritten on paper by various Canadians of African Descent from Africville, Nova Scotia to Emancipation, Ontario, and many others in between. The smoke ascended into the African skies. Entrusted to carry their messages, I fulfilled my role as the messenger and documented the burning. My presence on African soil was the culmination of a decade of relationships that began with the Canadian communities of Africville and Emancipation at the start of my academic journey, which fortuitously also aligned with the Decade for People of African Descent<sup>iv</sup> (2015-2024). As such, the opportunity to carry their messages back to Africa was a blessing and an auspicious gift.

The visit to Gorée Island was scheduled as part of the international conference at UCAD, Dakar titled, *Africa and its Diasporas' Contributions to World Civilization*, where one day earlier, I had delivered my conference presentation titled *Dogs Gods and City Hall*. This was an alternate window into the story of the forced expulsion of the community of Africville, told through a multimedia co-creative model that engages the gathered “temporary community” (Etchells 2016: 21) through practice, theory and performance in the framing of the narrative. The participants are immersed in experiential learning that places them inside the context of history thereby complicit in co-creating, disseminating, and archiving the narrative. It is a participatory-performative-liveness that is based on the author’s work, including verbatim transcripts from interviews and various elements recorded on multiple visits to the community of Africville spanning five years.

### **First Movement**

*Dogs, Gods, and City Hall* traces the racialized legacy of the community of Africville: an impoverished Africanadian<sup>v</sup> or Afro-Canadian community that was systematically demolished during the 1960s; its homes razed, and its residents forcefully evicted in the name of progress. Four decades later, the City of Halifax officially apologized and accepted its culpability in the destruction of Africville and returned three acres of appropriated lands for a commemorative Africville Park. In addition, the city allocated funds to build a replica of the Seaview United Baptist Church, the heart and soul of the community, which was bulldozed in the middle of the night. The triumvirate of story, performance, and audience is used to create an interactive and immersive *live*-documentary experience incorporating oral storytelling, poetry, musical score, archival materials and television. This embodied spectatorship is invoked in the Sanskrit term *rasa*—a state of emotion that is experienced through the form of the delivery between performer and audience gathered within the space.

*Rasa*, an Indian theory of aesthetic rapture integral to the oral tradition of performance and “commonly attributed to the historical-mythical figure Bharata [...] acquired its written form

called *Natyasastra* between 200 BCE and 200 CE” (Mitra 2016, 90). In the *Natyasastra*, the attainment of *rasa* is elevated to such a level that it unequivocally stated: “Without *rasa* no dramatic device is of any importance” (Masson and Patwardhan 1970, 1). Many have tried to define and translate the Sanskrit term including Italian philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco, who penned the following in his paper titled *Rasa and Taste: a difficult synonymy* (2007):

I was interested by the concept of *rasa*, in so far as I found it translated as taste, relish, flavour (but also as sap or juice). The discovery was exciting because the concept of taste was absolutely absent in the Western Medieval theory of art. As an ability to judge of beauty, it appears in a non-technical sense in the Italian Renaissance (as *gusto*). [...] *rasa* as a subjective ability to perceive the poetic flavour (taste-for), and *rasa* as the objective poetic sense of the poem (taste-of). (Eco 2007, 4)

This *rasa* is also evocative of the feeling that is created by the dynamic and complicit relationship between the story, the audience, and the filmmaker/curator as part of the co-creative experience. For the duration of the performance, the audience becomes the community. My research into the Africville story began with my own twist of grafting a query onto the following familiar finger-action nursery rhyme: Here is the Church, here is the steeple. Open the doors and...*where are the people?*

In the early summer of 2014, on the final leg of a family vacation to Nova Scotia, we had a six-hour layover in Halifax awaiting a return flight home to Toronto. As we pondered how to fill the remaining vacation hours, I remembered bits and pieces about a place called Africville, located somewhere in Halifax that was triggered by the image of the Africville church I had recently seen on a commemorative Canada Postage stamp. There in that window of time, I had the opportunity to perhaps visit that church. The lore of Africville had been with me since my days as a touring reggae musician when I was introduced to a distant place called Africville by Faith Nolan, a singer-songwriter and community activist from Nova Scotia. Her first album titled *Africville* (1986),<sup>vi</sup> released on cassette tape, was recorded in Toronto with local musicians. Hence, our paths crossed and the seed of Africville was firmly planted within me. On that day back in July 2014, as tourists we went in search of the famed Africville church. Though most of the local people knew about Africville, no one was able to provide directions, and the site was not serviced by public transit. A few hours later, with the guidance of satellites, GPS, and old-school roadmaps, we eventually drove into the parking lot on the eastern end of Seaview Memorial Park overlooking the Bedford Basin.

Eager to see the church and bursting with curiosity and nervous energy, I entered the fenced-in park through the chain-link gate inside which a tall sign in mustard-yellow proclaimed, Africville: The Spirit Lives On, and walked onto a pastoral landscaped green space, dotted with trees by the Atlantic Ocean. I walked the entire length of the park and finally sighted the church on the other side of the fence. Feeling frustrated that there was no access through the fence, I walked all the way back towards the original chain-link gate, next to the tall sign in mustard-yellow that proclaimed, Africville: The Spirit Lives On, and that’s when I noticed the other sign, erected a few meters away, which proclaimed: Off Leash Park Area Rules. I left the park and walked along the road and finally arrived at the Church. Once inside, I realized this was a church museum where almost all the pews were replaced with display cases and installations that archived the community that once lived here—a memorial or memory of what once was—

whereby the Church is “now asked to work as a dramatized object within this museologized terrain that is momentarily sealed off from the contemporary reality” (Liss 1998, 70). Though Andrea Liss was referencing the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., USA in which a fifteen-ton freight car that “once transported people to the Treblinka death camp” (70), the analogy that “the museum is in the business of exhibiting fragments of raw history wrenched from the authentic sites of destruction” (69) can be ascribed to the actual replica of the Africville Church Museum—the building itself. In her book *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (1998), Liss makes the following case:

Despite the historical authenticity of the object itself, the artifact enacts its own absolute resignation to tell. There is no a priori guarantee that it can be enacted as evidence; rather, it attests to the trauma and the posttraumatic lacerations of the resurfacing of the events (71).

In seeking clarity about the rebuilding of the church as a museum along with the absence of the community, I turned to Sunday Miller, then Executive Director of the Africville Church Museum. I had so many questions for her, and they were pouring out faster than I could process the answers. Why? How? When? What? Moreover, the Seaview Memorial Park adjacent to the church, which was officially declared a National Historic Site in 2002<sup>vii</sup> by Sheila Copps, then Minister of Canadian Heritage, who formally unveiled the plaque in Africville in the presence of the community,<sup>viii</sup> was now officially designated an off-leash dog park.<sup>ix</sup> All my skills as a creative producer, musician, and documentarian were at a heightened state. I took pictures, asked questions, and even engaged with people who worked as interpreters at the museum.

In addition, I was curious about a man who rode a bicycle around the grounds of the church museum, whose look seemed most familiar to me. I learned that his name was Eddie Carvery, a former resident of Africville, who continued his one-man vigil as a visual and lasting protest on the grounds of his former home since 1970. In a recent e-edition of *Saltwire* journal, Eddie reaffirmed his 50-year journey on the grounds of his former home:

I’ve laid on the ground. I’ve been taunted. I’ve been shot at. I’ve seen the police do dirty tricks. I’ve seen the Ku Klux Klan. I’ve seen my own people turn against me. I’ve seen white people throw rocks at me. I’ve seen the winter, the summer, the spring and the fall,” he said. I’ve been through it all. But I’m still here, because I believe what happened was wrong and I believe the only way to fix it is through protesting (Ziafati, Noushin. *Saltwire*, September 18, 2020). x

Eddie’s long tenure of protest earned him the moniker The Hermit of Africville, which was also the title of a biography by author and journalist Jon Tattrie published in 2010. Tattrie reveals the genesis of Eddie’s legacy of protest on the land of his Africville home in 1970:

Later that summer, Eddie got hold of a beat-up tent and walked from Halifax to Africville. The houses were all gone, but still it felt like home. Foundations pockmarked the land like mortar shells in a war zone. City workers dragged the carcasses of Africville’s homes into the dump. They set it alight and burned the town they once invaded (Tattrie 2010, ch 34, p102).

On my request, Sunday Miller introduced me to Eddie. I used that brief opportunity and initiated

a tenuous relationship, took a few photographs, and promised him that I would return. My family's scheduled departure back to Toronto truncated any further impromptu research, and we exited Africville for our journey home.

Shocked by this phenomenological experience, I was curious as to how such a condition existed in a twenty-first century Canada on the cusp of proudly celebrating its 150 years of nationhood. A country that had sheltered, nurtured, and adopted millions of people from around the world who fled enslavement, political persecution, world wars, civil wars, and economic hardship. A Canada of hope into which I too had been granted entry as a brown-skinned fresh-of-the-boat ten-year old immigrant kid from India. Subsequently, my curiosity and search for answers grew into a decade of research that fed my creative and academic explorations across multiple Canadian provinces, connected Africadian<sup>xi</sup> Nova Scotian communities from Shelburne to Birchtown to Halifax, and Ontario communities from Toronto to Leith to Owen Sound. Additionally, this journey has led to collaborations with a Canadian Poet Laureate, a Canadian jazz legend, a Scotian singer, a Baptist Church in Halifax, a Methodist Church in Owen Sound, a Lutheran Church in Toronto, two site-specific *live*-documentary world premieres, numerous academic presentations, conferences, out of pocket expenses, and a joint PhD from two Canadian universities.

The unplanned visit to Africville, back in July 2014, began two days earlier and two hundred kilometers southwest in Shelburne, Nova Scotia. On arrival as tourists, my family left the car to explore the downtown area and look for a place to have lunch, while I parked the car in the public parking lot down by the historic Shelburne harbour. As I exited my vehicle, two older white tourist-looking couple outfitted in matching white pant suits approached me and asked for directions to the Black Museum. I was at once perplexed, shocked, and curious but engaged them in conversation. The couple were American tourists who had sailed their yacht from Boston, Massachusetts, USA and wanted to visit the fabled Black Museum in Shelburne. Their faces fell when I disclosed my ignorance and my status as a fellow tourist. In that moment the realization came to me that I was standing on ground-zero of *The Book of Negroes*,<sup>xii</sup> the novel by author Lawrence Hill that traced the journey of Black United Empire Loyalists<sup>xiii</sup> who were granted asylum by the British, post American Revolution in the late 1700s. Shelburne was the port of arrival for all 3000 Black Loyalists.

A few hours after lunch and a dozen queries for directions, we arrived at the Black Loyalist Museum in Birchtown, a few miles outside of Shelburne. This was the “Black Museum” still housed inside a small one-room schoolhouse that dated back to 1835.<sup>xiv</sup> It was an archive filled with history reflected in artifacts, articles, pictures, postcards, and postage stamps. That is where I also saw the painting by George James Rowe: *View of the Colony of Sierra Leone Previous to the Transports Being Discharged, March 16, 1792*. In his introduction to *The Book of Negroes* (2009) Hill described Rowe's painting:

It depicts the ships carrying 1,200 Black Loyalists, who, in the first “back to Africa” exodus in the history of the Americas, sailed from Halifax on January 15, 1792, taking about two months to cross the Atlantic Ocean before arriving in Sierra Leone. The scene might be considered idyllic—if one did not notice the large ship in the foreground, to the left, is a slave ship vessel and that a cargo of slaves is being brought to it.<sup>xv</sup>

Though completely unscripted, these experiences in Shelburne and Birchtown left me feeling as if I was being led, note by note, towards an important story that I was meant to hear. Therefore, by the time we arrived in Halifax for the final leg of our journey home, I was already primed for my visit to the legendary church in Africville. What I now realize is that my qualitative research began with that very first visit, and I had also unknowingly used Barney G. Glaser and Anslem Strauss' Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), which "avoids making assumptions and instead adopts a more neutral view of human action in a social context" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This methodology allows creative producers to make use of the unexpected and unscripted and be open to its contribution to the creative result, even when it initially may seem inconsequential.

### Second Movement

On my arrival back in Toronto, I called Jerry Lee Miller, an old acquaintance from my days as a working musician performing with the reggae/Caribbean music community. I thought he may be related to Sunday Miller or have Nova Scotian roots. At that time, he did not disclose any 'Scotian' roots but revealed to me for the first time about his roots all over Southern Ontario and that he was a direct descendent of Father Thomas Henry Miller,<sup>xvi</sup> a former enslaved person from the United States who found freedom in Owen Sound, Ontario—the northern terminus of the Underground Railroad. Father Miller is credited with starting the British Methodist Episcopal Church (BME) and as the "originator of the Owen Sound Emancipation Picnic [which is] the longest continuous festival in North America."<sup>xvii</sup>

Established in 1862, Emancipation Picnic commemorated the British Commonwealth Emancipation Act of August 1, 1834. Large groups of extended families, friends, and guests gathered once a year to reunite, share a meal, catch up on familial gossip, and cuddle new babies. Jerry Lee Miller shared his fond memories of attending the annual picnic throughout his childhood. This exciting information, hitherto unknown to me, flung me into a flurry of activity and a concerted round of quantitative research, including numerous phone calls with the Emancipation Picnic executive director and a descendent, Blaine Courtney. I received an invitation to attend the Emancipation events, permission to conduct on-camera interviews with event participants and record the weekend activities. I drew up a production schedule, borrowed recording gear, secured room and board with a friend who also helped me with the shoot, and arrived in Owen Sound on Emancipation Day, Friday, August 1, 2014.

Over the next two days, I fully immersed myself in the 152<sup>nd</sup> Emancipation Picnic. During the morning Cairn ceremony, I experienced a performative communal reading of *I am your Ancestor*, the poem penned by Courtney. Years later, I learned that this communal reading invoked a *mythoform*—a term coined by Molefi Asante (1987) which refers to "the all-encompassing deep generator of ideas and concepts embedded in the psyche of a people" (p. 96). "Mythoforms are unconscious acts that are made conscious via 'enactments' or 'utterances' that take place in discourse" (Morrison and Trimble 2017, 133). Post Cairn ceremony, I captured the commemorative group photograph of the gathered Emancipation families, friends, and guests. I was schooled in parts of Ontario history, which until that moment remained unknown to me. My 'aha' moment was the realization that Toronto's annual Caribana Festival,<sup>xviii</sup> which has attracted "more than one million tourists in Toronto" (*The Globe and Mail*, Aug 1, 2005), was also a celebration of Emancipation. Though I had participated in Caribana as a musician and spectator, I did not fully understand the implicit historical, geo-political, and socio-cultural significance of

the celebration until that weekend at the Emancipation Picnic. The Caribana Festival, “modeled after the Trinidad Carnival that, like its counterparts, the Carnival of Rio in Brazil and the Mardi Gras of New Orleans in Louisiana, has an international reputation for creative bacchanalia” (Trotman 2005, p191). However, no such bacchanalia was on display in Owen Sound.

Here, a few babies were being passed around from arms to arms, greeted by their aunts, uncles, and extended family. Here, pancake breakfasts, home-cooked picnic fare, and potato sack races were in play adjacent to the commemorative Cairn<sup>xix</sup> by the Sydenham River in Harrison Park. This is also where I had the opportunity to speak with Bonita Johnson DeMatteis, Cairn designer, author, artist, and a descendent of the Emancipation community who recounted her childhood memories about attending the picnic:

It was the thing to do. It was bigger than Christmas. It is where we always knew we could come and be recognized. People knew who we were. And you can always get a hug. You can always get some chicken, something. There were races. It was just tradition. It was where you met up in the summertime and it was about a reunion [...] So this was the only story we knew. So, when we found out about Emancipation, well what do you know? It’s on our family reunion day! I didn’t know that. And then I find out that, that is why our family gathered (Sundar Singh 2019, *Emancipation2Africville*, 02:15 - 03:40).

Although DeMatteis’ and other descendants’ familial roots are firmly planted for generations in the Owen Sound area, some local non-Black people still cast doubts about the presence of Black families and Black history in the area. In a 2017 interview published in the *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, DeMatteis quoted a local councillor who rushed over from a local meeting in 2002 and announced that someone at the meeting had “claimed that there were no Black families or Black ancestry or underground railroad or any of that kind of stuff, up here in the Owen Sound area.” (Vol-14/2017). This was the impetus for DeMatteis to take on the Carin project. To make visible the presence of the Black families who arrived at the northern terminus of the Underground Railroad and have settled there since the mid-1800s.

The Emancipation Picnic weekend opened with an event called Speaker’s Corner on the Friday evening. The special guest speaker on that Friday evening was former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, author and professor Dr. George Elliott Clarke, who coined the portmanteau Africadian. In the following article Clarke expands on the term:

I felt—as a writer and a scholar—that “Black Nova Scotian” or “African-Nova Scotian” or even “indigenous black” did not and do not answer to our specificity as a broken-off branch of African America, landed and abandoned in coastal British North America, I invented the term Africadian to describe us, our essence, and our being and I dubbed our communities (our land-base) Africadia (Clarke in *Cultivating Canada* 2011, 400).

At the festival, Clarke and I spoke at length about music, poetry, and my recent visit and introduction to Africville. Though I was unaware at our first meeting, the crossing of our paths significantly influenced my creative and producorial choices towards the *Africville in Black and White* premieres. One month later, on September 2, 2014, I began my studies in the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Documentary Media program at the former Ryerson University, renamed

Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU).

### Third Movement

The exposure to a diverse range of research methods and disciplines within the MFA cultivated and formalized my critical thinking which resulted in my very first essay titled *Chains of Freedom* (2014).<sup>xx</sup> Five months later, this essay became the foundation of what eventually became my very first academic conference presentation titled *Africville in Black and White: How a National Historical Site and a Memorial Park has reignited racial hatred in a Canadian city*. On May 21, 2015, I presented my paper as part of the *International Conference on Critical Topography*,<sup>xxi</sup> co-hosted by Trent University and TMU. I delivered a site-specific twenty-minute performance inside the main sanctuary of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church located adjacent to the TMU campus. The church became a container. A physical, metaphorical, and philosophical space in which the various parts of the Africville story in conjunction with the audience unfolded. The triumvirate of story, performance, and audience was used to create an interactive and immersive documentary experience and incorporated various traditional and contemporary elements such as: oral storytelling, poetry, music, and archival materials—all performed live.

The energy of the performance was shared between all three players: the narrator (the outsider), the singer (the insider), and the audience (the community), comprised of conference attendees as well as a few invited non-conference guests. To keep within the allotted presentation time for the conference, I employed a twenty-minute edited audio timeline containing sections of pre-recorded audio tracks, against which I presented/performed my essay and accompanied the singer/narrator Shelley Hamilton on guitar while she sang the selected hymns. As with verbatim theatre, all lines were pulled from transcriptions and the verbatim script was printed in a program that doubled as a liturgy that was followed and recited aloud by the audience (congregants). Moreover, post presentation, the printed script also became an artefact; an archive; souvenir; relic; keepsake. A decade later, in October 2023, that same script/liturgy was used for my presentation at the Africa and its Diasporas' Contributions to World Civilization International Conference in Dakar, Senegal.

As a creative producer, writer, and director, I am constantly exploring ways to expand how stories are conveyed and received, especially in a live setting, and site-specificity offered another outlet for the telling. Site becomes the container within which the *rasa* of the performance is shared between all who are present. Here, conference co-chair, Dr. Blake Fitzpatrick described the construct as it unfolded in the *Africville* story:

The conference addressed issues related to the politics of place and brought renowned researchers from Europe, United States and Canada to Ryerson. As one of the participating graduate students, Cyrus brought the conference delegates to the First Lutheran Church on Bond Street and delivered a lecture/performance on race relations in the Halifax neighbourhood of Africville. This was not the reading of an academic paper as one might expect. Instead, Cyrus delivered a spoken poem and live musical performance, with audio-visual interpretation in a place of worship and spirituality that spoke of a racial injustice in Canada.<sup>xxii</sup>



For the duration of the performance, the audience stood-in as the subjects of the story; the displaced Africville community. The only props in the sanctuary were the silhouette cut-outs of one dozen large dogs on coloured sheets of construction paper affixed to bamboo sticks and planted randomly amongst the pews to echo the condition of Africville, which was designated as an off-leash dog park at that time:

Located just north of the city of Halifax, Africville was home to 400 African-Canadians [...], who were evicted by the city in the 1960s. The entire site was bulldozed, along with the Seaview African United Baptist Church, which was called “the beating heart of Africville”, as it was the centre of the village. The land of Africville was eventually turned into ramps for the A. Murray MacKay Bridge, the Fairview Container Terminal, and private housing. The village’s centre turned into Seaview Park – a dog park (Van Cooten in *Pride* 2016).

I intentionally constructed the presentation as an aural experience and left out the images that would usually fill the proverbial screen. The audio recordings in conjunction with live performances within this specific site created a low-tech, low-budget production. The intimacy and interactivity between the audience and performer allowed for the Africville story to become more of a collective experience, conveying a sense of communal loss. Placing this story inside a place of worship (site) not only framed the narrative but also framed the loss of the Africville church as an approximated shared experience. The First Lutheran Church in Toronto is not the original Seaview United Baptist Church in Africville, but it is still a church—a stand in, an approximation. Much like the reconstructed images in a filmed docudrama in the absence of the real object where the substituted site becomes the sign. MacDougall expounds this idea further and framed the approximation of objects in this way:

Signs of absence often make ironic use of objects and testimony, positioning the audience uncomfortably by asking them to make judgments and comparisons, to search for and interject meanings. Here the sign for a lost object becomes not its surrogate but what has displaced it. These signs define memory by its true opposite, an embodied absence. An empty factory thus represents a fully operating one. A market square teems not with peasants and bullocks but with youths on motorbikes (MacDougall in *Transcultural Cinema* 1998, 236).

On that afternoon, a church in Toronto represented the rebuilt church in Africville. Moreover, *live*-documentary employs live music as an aural device to deepen a emotional connection. The selection of the music (songs/hymns/melodies) and the application of specific instruments deepens the testimony of the narrative. Thus, more profound for the audience. Once more, MacDougall frames the notes:

Among signs of resemblance, music is the analogue par excellence for emotion, and not surprisingly films of memory are choked with it. In these films music serves doubly for emotions imputed to the subject and meant to be aroused in the viewer. In addition, music is used by films of memory for its historical associations. Because musical styles “date” and are culturally specific they make ideal aural icons (234).

The unfolding narrative received within this container also heightens the experience for the audience. According to Fitzpatrick:

Inspirational, and profoundly moving, the combination of performance, message and setting combined to challenge all participants to imagine a more inclusive Canada. Many in attendance, including the *international* experts who participated told me that this was the highlight of the conference.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This small-scale presentation became a working template for scalable, complex, tech-heavy live productions with significant cast, crew, cooks, and cameras. The success of the performative conference presentation became a significant signpost on the road towards my academic-creative scholarship. The creative, technical, and produciorial leap from a twenty-minute conference presentation to a ninety-minute feature length *live*-documentary at an international documentary festival can be daunting. However, the methodology sustained the leap and has produced multiple *live*-documentary world premieres. Two years later, I produced the first of two feature-length 90-minute festival premieres of *Africville in Black and White*.

#### **Fourth Movement**

On May 3, 2017, inside the First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Shane Smith, Director of Programming for the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival (Hot Docs) stood at the pulpit and delivered a scripted performative introduction to the sold-out world premiere. In addition to Smith's introduction, the pulpit served as the platform for official announcements from which members of the audience, who volunteered to read, stood and delivered specific passages from the script, such as the National Historic Site declaration by the Minister of Canadian Heritage in 2002 (*Africville...2017*, p 20). The pulpit also served as the platform for the turntable on which DJ Mark (Dr. Mark Campbell) mixed analogue and digital HipHop music in real time. On my invitation, our live DJ sampled an archival recording of the song *No More Auction Block* and used it in a live-impromptu hip hop track to accompany an improvised dance sequence as per the following script:

Situated on the pulpit is DJ MARK who begins to spin a hip-hop track made up of an archival recording of William Riley singing, *No More Auction Block*. From the back of the church NATE ADAMS enters dancing 'freestyle' down the center aisle: The dance culminates near the altar (*Africville* production script 2017, p 12).

Back in August 1962, the pulpit was also the platform from which the final declaration of the impending evictions was delivered inside the Seaview United Baptist Church where the Africville residents voiced their unanimous decision to remain in the community. In this way the pulpit inside the First Lutheran Church invoked a sign of absence that makes "ironic use of objects and testimony, positioning the audience uncomfortably by asking them to make judgments and comparisons" (MacDougall 1998, 236), without explicitly making the connection.

My research into the history of Africville led me to the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington led by Martin Luther King Jr., where the song *Blowin' in the Wind* (1962) was performed by the folk group *Peter, Paul, and Mary*. Days before the premiere, as I reworked multiple drafts of the documentary production script, I recalled the opening stanza of the song and embraced its rhetorical or I shall posit, its intended call to action. I searched for an appropriate fit to use the song and/or its lyrics as part of the *live*-documentary script and came across more than a sonic connection between Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* (1962) and the Black Loyalists who fled to Nova Scotia post Abolition in 1883 (Lomax 1960, p 450). The connection

was an uncredited song of enslavement titled *No More Auction Block for me*, also known as *Many Thousand Gone* (Slave songs of the United States 1867, 48). Dylan also covered this song and performed it many times in the cafés of Greenwich Village in Manhattan, New York back in the early 1960s.<sup>xxiv</sup> The melody of *Blowin' in the Wind* closely resembles *No More Auction Block for me*, a song that was “sung by former slaves who fled to Nova Scotia after Britain abolished slavery in 1833” (Lomax, 1960, p 450) and many of “Dylan’s early songs were based on traditional songs” (Fagan, in *The Hub*, 2021). I dug farther and found an archival recording of *No More Auction Block*, sung acapella by William Riley in Cherry Brook, ten miles east of Africville, Nova Scotia and recorded by Canadian Folklorist Mary Helen Creighton in 1943 (Sherri Boden Colley, CBC News 2019).

In addition to the over-capacity audience at the main festival site inside the church in Toronto, this first iteration of *Africville...* was also connected live to the second remote site inside the rebuilt Africville Church museum in Nova Scotia that housed four subjects of the documentary along with a sizeable local audience of families and friends from the Africville community. Though both sites were connected in real time, there was a one-hour time difference across the varied time zones so that the premiere’s start time of 7pm in Toronto was 8pm local time in Halifax. Accessing available local wireless networks in each location, the two sites were connected remotely via Google Hangout, which was “an all-in-one online communication tool, available on multiple platforms.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Thirteen documentary subjects across two sites and pre-recorded interviews shared the Africville story. Four subjects, present in Toronto, included Nathaniel (Nate) Adams, descendent and dancer who performed HipHop to a live hip-hop re-mix by DJ Mark Campbell, and Joe Sealy, Africville descendent, Canadian jazz legend, Order of Canada recipient, and composer of his Juno award-winning album *Africville Suite* (1977). Five subjects, present in Africville, included Terry Dixon, former resident and poet, and his daughter Jaden Dixon. The father and daughter Dixon duet performed a spoken-word performance from Halifax and were accompanied live by musicians in Toronto. Four interviews were prerecorded and played back during the live documentary, including the Honourable Mayann Francis, Former Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. Multiple Juno and Grammy Award winning singer-songwriter Dan Hill was scheduled to perform with Joe Sealy but cancelled his appearance due to ill health. In collaboration with the thirteen subjects, the *live*-documentary was guided by narrators Shelley Hamilton and Justin Carter, two independent actors/performers and descendants. They sang, performed skits, and adlibbed off script. At times, they also led the audience and the subjects in a sing-along, evoking and perhaps invoking an experience or “an embodied absence” (MacDougall, 236) of what may have transpired inside the Seaview United Baptist Church in Africville before the church was bulldozed in 1967.

Hamilton and Carter’s songs were backed up by a live band seated in the choir section of the church in Toronto. The band, which consisted of three musicians, also performed the improvised live musical score for the feature length documentary. I invited veteran producer, arranger, and guitarist Lionel Williams to lead the band. It was only during the pre-production stage of the documentary that I learned that Williams produced Faith Nolan’s first album *Africville* (1986) and contributed the bass guitar tracks on the album. Moreover, Williams was ‘Scotian—a colloquial term used for people from Nova Scotia—and still had family and roots, in and around the region. From the opening strains of the improvised prelude by the live musicians

to the closing song jammed with the director, *Africville in Black and White* engaged its full-capacity audience. One post premiere review described the *live*-documentary:

The content of the documentary took full advantage of the church setting and included several gospel songs led by Hamilton’s powerful voice, as well as audience participation throughout by way of call and response, clapping, and singing. Sundar Singh succeeded in establishing an ambience that was both participatory and lighthearted, while maintaining a respectful deference to the community members who were sharing their stories. Taking into consideration the number of participants, musicians, and technicians involved, the actual execution of the live event was astonishingly problem-free, and any minor stumbles (e.g. camera feed issues) were quickly worked through. (Marc Serpa Francoeur, *POV Magazine*, May 29, 2017)

Beyond its initial ephemeral premiere, could this *live*-documentary methodology travel? The success of this iteration at Hot Docs fueled the idea of an Atlantic premiere. One year later, I produced the second iteration of *Africville in Black and White* inside St. Matthews United Church on Barrington Street in Halifax. From Shelburne and Birchtown in Canada to Dakar and Gorée Island in Senegal, the notes led me towards important stories that I am entrusted to carry and share through scholarship, verse, and music. It is within this context that I will invoke and reference the 1979 studio album, *Survival* by *Bob Marley and the Wailers*.

### **Fifth Movement**

As Marley’s saw it, “reggae music was like the news—the poor people’s newspaper” (Morrow, 1999 p6). *Survival* went beyond this to become a veritable documentary for Marley’s global audience. As a young Indian immigrant in Toronto, Canada captivated by reggae music, I too was inspired, mesmerized, and educated by the sights and sounds of *Survival* and embraced it with all my senses. From the assertive title to its thematic tracks, the album is like a documentary time machine—a container cradling the past, the present and the future. Using this container, Marley presented his stories in a way never before seen or heard in the reggae genre. It may be the first reggae concept album. Though author/critic Thomas Waugh stated that “[d]ocumentary film, in everyday parlance, implies the absence of elements of performance” (Waugh 2011, p75), he also observed that “basic ingredients of performance and direction are within the documentary tradition” (p75). *Survival*, as a documentary time machine, is defined by performance and art direction. On the album cover, Marley’s storytelling is intentional telling the story of black survival - of enslavement, and how its legacy continues in the present. The deliberate use of the iconic slave-ship diagram in black and white along with the colourful African flags set the tone. Neville Garrick, Marley’s art director and collaborator remembers that the “album was going to be called Black Survival, but in discussing it, we felt that it might alienate some people who weren’t Black. So, I tried to come up with a visual way of saying Black without using the word.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

The primary component of the cover, the Slave-Ship Chart, is a diagram from the “Stowage Of The British Slave Ship Brookes Under The REGULATED SLAVE TRADE Act of 1788, Fig 1, Longitudinal Section.”<sup>xxvii</sup> It shows how to pack as many enslaved humans onto a cargo ship as possible, in the same way you would pack commodities, such as sacks of coffee and sugar, in order to maximize space use and profit. In 1788, such a sardine-like packing image may have appeared logical to those who viewed the enslaved like sacks of sugar. In a twisted

sense of misplaced humanitarianism, under the Act, the chart's woodcut diagram outlined a method "which was designed to reduce the overcrowding that led to so many deaths on the transatlantic crossing, the Brookes was permitted to carry a maximum of 454 slaves."<sup>xxviii</sup> Ironically, this same slave-ship diagram, "an early example of graphic design that has the power of words,"<sup>xxix</sup> became the tool that galvanized the abolitionist movement. Almost two hundred years later, by using the diagram from the same slave-ship, much like archival footage in documentary films, *Survival* showed the audience that although the abolitionists were successful, the bondage still continues today with economic restraints and political strategies replacing the chains.

In 1979, such an image, especially on a black background, juxtaposed with the word "SURVIVAL" and colourful images of African flags, created a documentary in a form that was digestible and welcome food for a diverse audience, including non-black peoples. Twining the slave-ship diagram with the contemporary African flags instantly gave all those who looked at it a link between the past and the present. The cover was not only viewed as a memorial and a piece of black archive but a call to arms, and as a subversive political statement—all provocative elements of an engaging documentary. The images also inspired and educated black and non-black audience, many of whom were not used to its directness and depth of commentary on history and contemporary society through an album cover.

### **Da Capo**

The seeds and notes planted by the Marley's influential music, its redemptive messages, and the *Survival* documentary time machine grew into branches of creative musical explorations that eventually led me to Africville. My own lens went from a Canadian musician to a tourist's experience to a graduate student essay to my first academic conference presentation to two *live*-documentary world premieres to Senegal, and a PhD. On Canadian Thanksgiving in October 2023, following the notes, I stood on the shores of Gorée Island, next to the Door of No Return, off the west coast of Dakar, Senegal. Facing westward across the Atlantic Ocean, I bent down and set fire to a collection of *Messages to Ancestors*. The smoke from the messages ascended into the African skies...

### **Dénouement**

On April 6, 2024, I followed the notes to the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (UTSC), where in privileged collaboration with the Ontario Black History Society (OBHS) and HTI along with assistance from the Pedagogies of Inclusive Excellence at UTSC, I hosted *Messages to Ancestors: Multimedia Happenin' & Live Tour from Gorée Island, Senegal*. The event brought together a "temporary community" (Etchells 2016: 21) of special guest speakers, musicians, poets, and a number of fellow scholars from the Dakar Conference in a co-creative multimedia presentation centered on a virtual tour from the Door of No Return by Fallou Bal, live 'n' direct from Gorée Island, Senegal via WhatsApp. Included in this Happenin' was an impromptu archive of memorabilia that served as referents. These included broken seashells from the African coast placed on my vinyl copy *Survival* of which was placed on top of discarded envelopes with postage stamps and return addresses in which, various Canadians of African Descent from Africville, Nova Scotia to Emancipation, Ontario, and many others in between had sent me their handwritten *Messages to Ancestors*. I now recognize that, as we engaged in the referential experience of the unfolding narrative at the Happenin', we invoked a *mythoform* (Asante 1987), which could also be framed as the performance of the referent as in the

virtual tour live ‘n’ direct from Gorée Island as “an enactment of forward motion” (133) to the Door of No Return.

### Coda

Exactly one year to the date of my journey to Gorée Island, as I compose the closing notes of this reflection, I received a phone text with a link from Juanita Peters, the Executive Director of the Africville Museum. The link <sup>xxx</sup> led me to the following article from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO and Africville Heritage Trust are pleased to announce that Africville has been designated as Canada's first UNESCO Place of History and Memory linked to Enslavement and the Slave Trade. Africville is a historic site located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. On October 9<sup>th</sup> [2024] at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Gabriela Ramos, UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for the Social and Human Sciences, announced this designation together with other Places of History and Memory. 2024 marks the 30th anniversary of the UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples Programme (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2024, 9).

The journey continues.

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<sup>i</sup> Porter, Anna. "Goree Island: The Door of No Return." *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. 121, no. 1, spring 2014, pp. 38+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A363687775/GLS?u=rpu\_main&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=8e24a0ab. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

<sup>ii</sup> [The Harriet Tubman Institute | The Harriet Tubman Institute at York University](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Accueil | Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar \(ucad.sn\)](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [International Decade for People of African Descent \(2015-2024\) | UNESCO](#)

<sup>v</sup> a termed coined by George Elliott Clarke

<http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/needs-no-introduction/2017/01/evening-george-elliott-clarke>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.discogs.com/master/843786-Faith-Nolan-Africville>

<sup>vii</sup> In my early research, the date of the National Historic Site designation was 2002. This date was also referenced in multiple records including the CBC National News, which covered the official unveiling of the plaque onsite in Africville. However, The Canadian Encyclopedia references the date of designation as 1996 and the Parks Canada website references the year of designation as 1997. [https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page\\_nhs\\_eng.aspx?id=1763](https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=1763)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/society/racism/africville-expropriating-black-nova-scotians/africville-declared-a-national-historic-site.html>

<sup>ix</sup> The following guideline #1 of 7 from Parks Canada website: “*Dogs in Parks Canada’s protected places*”: “Guidelines when bringing your dog to a national park, a national urban park and a national historic site. 1. Keep your dog on leash (3 metres or less) at all times – it is the law.” <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/voyage-travel/regles-rules/chien-dog>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/five-decades-and-counting-eddie-carvery-continues-africville-protest-fight-for-justice-499016/>

<sup>xi</sup> *Africadian* is a termed coined by former Canadian Poet Laureate, Professor and Author George Elliott Clarke *Indigenous Black: An Irreconcilable Identity?* George Elliott Clarke: Aga Khan Museum, 2019. (18:00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3AA-5Ko2NE>.

<sup>xii</sup> The "Book of Negroes" is the single most important document relating to the immigration of African Americans to Nova Scotia following the War of Independence. It includes the names and descriptions of 3000 black refugees registered on board the vessels in which they sailed from New York to Nova Scotia between 23 April and 30 November 1783. <http://novascotia.ca/archives/virtual/africanns/BN.asp>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.ambaile.org.uk/detail/en/1099/1/EN1099-canadian-war-brides-2-of-14//Am%20Baile.htm>

- xiv After its life as a schoolhouse, the Old Schoolhouse served as the Birchtown Community Hall, then a storage building before ultimately being acquired for preservation by the Black Loyalist Heritage Society in 1997. The Old Schoolhouse acted as the original Black Loyalist Museum when the Heritage Site opened in 2000. Today the museum houses artifacts from the Birchtown community – including an original school desk, school records, and a Birchtown store ledger. <https://blackloyalist.com/birchtowns-historical-site-2/>
- xv Lawrence Hill. “The Book of Negroes,” Toronto: Harper Collins Canada (2009). p xi
- xvi <http://www.emancipation.ca/recognising-thomas-henry-miller>
- xvii *ibid*
- xviii [Caribana Toronto](#)
- xix <http://www.emancipation.ca/black-history-cairn-project>
- xx “Filling In The Blanks: Essays On Art, Media And Culture,” in *Media Writing* Fall 2014, executive editor: Michele Clarke. Ryerson University. p135
- xxi [http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/imablog/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CriticalTopography\\_Press-Release\\_May2015.pdf](http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/imablog/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CriticalTopography_Press-Release_May2015.pdf)
- xxii Blake Fitzpatrick, *Letter of Support* investiture for the Alan Shepard EDI Award February 2015.
- xxiii *Ibid*
- xxiv [No More Auction Block \(Live at the Gaslight Café, New York, NY - October 1962 - Official... - YouTube](#)
- xxv <https://techboomers.com/t/what-is-google-hangouts>
- xxvi <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/survival>
- xxvii LaBarre, Suzzane, Editor, Co.Design; *The Chart that Kindled the Abolitionist Movement*; <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1670325/infographic-the-slave-ship-chart-that-kindled-the-abolitionist-movement>
- xxviii Conway, Anne-Marie; *Charts Change Minds*; Blog Eye 82; <http://www.eyemagazine.com/blog/post/charts-change-minds>
- xxix *Ibid*
- xxx [Africville receives UNESCO designation as a Place of History and Memory linked to Enslavement and the Slave Trade \(ccunesco.ca\)](#)

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