WANDA THOMAS BERNARD AND CLAUDINE BONNER

Kinship and Community Care in African Nova Scotian Communities

In discussions with elders from three historic African Nova Scotian communities, we noticed repeated mention of family members (whether themselves, one or both of their parents, or some other relative), having been raised by someone other than their biological parents, pointing to a practice of informal adoption as a phenomenon of African Nova Scotian life. Through their stories this paper explores how particular geographic, racial, historical and sociopolitical contexts shaped the family lives of our participants. Through the lenses of critical race theory, Black feminism, and narrative analysis, we discuss strategies mothers used to ensure their children's survival, from leaving them with relatives and friends while they left to work nearby, or sometimes in another country; to placing them in homes until they were themselves able to mother them, or in some cases, giving their children up for "adoption" within the community. This paper comes out of a larger study, "The Promised Land Project: The Freedom Experience of Blacks in Nova Scotia," which was part of a Community-University Research Alliance funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Black mothers will pass the torch on to "their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard for future generations" (Bernard and Bernard, "Passing the Torch" 46). Within this tradition there is also knowledge of the importance of community care. This longstanding practice challenges the Euro-centric understandings of "family," since within it many of the relations inside a Black family group appear to be fluid and constructed by context, where older and younger siblings could become parent and child, or cousins could become brother and sister. Both kin and non-kin play important roles in terms of providing support and

sharing familial responsibilities (Gutman). Most commonly in these scenarios, grandmothers have been the ones to take on the role of caregiver when the mothers were deceased, had left the family to seek work elsewhere, or were otherwise unable to care for their children. This is in keeping with the work of historical and ethnographic researchers who have suggested that Black families indeed take-in related or non-related children, absorbing them into their own families (Gutman; Hill 1972, 1999). This is what Robert Hill (1972, 1999) has termed "informal adoption," meaning the rearing of dependent children by adults who are not their natural or legal adoptive parents.

The existence of vast extended families and the shared responsibility for members of the community is believed to have historical antecedents in an African family pattern that pre-dates slavery in the Americas. Several West African cultures regarded recognition and acceptance of kinship bonds as vital aspects of the socialization process (Gutman). When members of these cultures arrived in the Americas as slaves they found their values severely tested. Family proved to be a precarious notion among those in danger of being separated from familial groups through sale or other means. Consequently, Black families survived by expanding their parameters. It is believed that children were taught to refer to and address unrelated adults as "aunt" and "uncle" as part of their socialization, but perhaps also to create an extension of the family unit. Thus, if adults were sold away, the children would still have "family" who would care for them because of understood reciprocal kinship relations (Gutman; Jimenez). This extended family practice continued well beyond slavery. In fact, according to Steven Ruggles, in terms of household composition by race, between 1880 and 1960, 22.5 percent to 26.5 percent of Black families evidenced some kind of extended family structure (in comparison to 11.5-19.9 percent of white families).

In addition to this cultural heritage, economic, social and political inequalities faced by Blacks throughout their history in the Americas created the need for closer community ties and reliance on mutual aid and reciprocity. For example, the historic links between the forced entry of women of African descent into the labour market created interesting relationships between motherhood and wage labour. Families became accustomed to mother being part of the wage-earning of the family, if not the sole supporter (Jones), and as Christine Barrow, Makeda Silvera, and Karen Flynn and Cindy-Lou Henwood have pointed out, young children have long been left under the care of extended family to allow for mothers' entry into the workforce. Oftentimes this work was inside white households, providing intimate care for others' children and families while their own families were under the care of the extended family.

While there has been extensive research done on the African American family, little has been written about the African Canadian family, and even

less about the patterns of informal support that exist within this community. In this paper we present findings from data collected for a larger oral history project, "The Promised Land Project: The Freedom Experience of Blacks in Nova Scotia," which is part of a Community-University Research Alliance funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In this project we conducted life history interviews with 28 African Nova Scotian elders[1] from the historic Black communities of Sydney, Shelburne and the Prestons (19 women and nine men).[2] Our Community Historians ranged in age from 60 to 104 (with the majority being born between the two great wars), thus providing us with insight into African Nova Scotian life over several generations. In discussions with these African Nova Scotian elders, we noticed repeated mention of family members, (whether themselves, one or both of their parents, or some other relative), having been raised by someone other than their biological parents, pointing to a practice of informal adoption as a phenomenon of African Nova Scotian life. Through their stories this paper explores how the particular geographic, racial, historical and sociopolitical contexts shaped the family lives of our Historians. Through the lenses of critical race theory, Black feminism, and narrative analysis, we discuss the strategies mothers used to ensure their children's survival, from leaving them with relatives and friends while they left to work nearby, or sometimes in another country; to placing them in homes until they were themselves able to mother them, or in some cases, giving their children up for "adoption" within the community. Of course, there were reasons beyond the need for work that might have left them unable to provide care for their children. Extended families also came into being when mothers were too young (or even too old) to care for their child, or if they were too ill to meet their child's needs.

In order to come to a proper understanding of how these issues have shaped the lives of African Nova Scotians and created contexts in which communities have been forced to rely on their own strengths and support networks, we begin by providing an overview of African Nova Scotian historiography, especially in terms of how it has shaped a distinct set of realities within this community. Next we provide a look at the sociopolitical context within which each of the African Nova Scotian communities have evolved, focusing mainly on the supports available to the family. With a better understanding of the lives of people of African descent in Nova Scotia, we close with the stories themselves, as our Community Historians have shared them.

African Nova Scotian Historiography

An African presence in what is today Canada, predated the creation of the first British settlements in 1610. Accompanying Samuel du Champlain to

what is now Nova Scotia in 1604 was a Black interpreter, Mathieu da Costa who, whilst not being a resident in New France, was listed among the members of Champlain's crew. The first known slave in New France was a young boy brought to the colony in 1628 where he was baptized as Olivier Le Jeune (Winks; Pachai). The French colony of Ile Royale, which included the islands of Ile Royale (Cape Breton) and Ile St. Jean (Prince Edward Island) was home to a number of Blacks in the early 1700s, the majority of them enslaved to the more wealthy settlers (Donovan). As a result of the American Revolutionary War, thousands of Blacks arrived with the United Empire Loyalists, either as slaves, or as Black Loyalists. According to historian Amani Whitfield, "the mass influx of immigrants and the hierarchical nature of the colonial and imperial government meant that poor whites and the Black Loyalists were at the very bottom of the list of those who received land" (Whitfield, 2006, 19).

Therefore, few families or individuals received the land they had been promised, and those who did were mostly given much smaller land grants than their white counterparts, and usually on poor farmland, far from urban centres, meaning few could subsist on what they produced and any supplementary work was far away from the family home. They were forced to hire themselves out to white Nova Scotians in order to make ends meet. Similar stories exist for subsequent waves of Blacks migrating into the region over the next 150 years, stories of living at the margins and being tied to the land and its cycles of inclement weather and infertility, destroying their harvests. Surviving mainly on charity and settling into generations of poverty and hardship, the people of the Prestons and other Black communities in and around Halifax were seen by white Nova Scotians as a cheap labour force, to be met with open hostility (Samson; Whitfield; Walker).

The opening of the Dominion Iron and Steel Company in Sydney, Nova Scotia in the late 1890s created the need for skilled workers. The company sought the necessary expertise to fill the needs of industry. Among the skilled were African American steel workers recruited from industrial regions in the U.S. like Pittsburgh and Baltimore. By 1904 the majority of these skilled African American men they had recruited from the South had returned home after experiencing an inhospitable climate, both literally and figuratively. Their time in Cape Breton caused barely a ripple in Nova Scotian historiography (Beaton). To replace them, the Company began a process of recruiting Blacks from the West Indies into Sydney. Many came from the British colony of Barbados to work in the steel industry. As with previous migrants, their lives were wrought with experiences of racism and discrimination. However, by the 1920s there was a distinct West Indian-Canadian culture in the area of Whitney Pier, in Sydney (Pachai; Beaton; Winks).

This brief look at the migration of people of African descent into Nova Scotia highlights their rootedness in the face of over three hundred years of dehumanizing treatment, experiences of imperialism and colonialism, economic, social and political inequality, as well as systemic and other forms of racism. By coming together as a community, African Nova Scotians have managed to persevere, even though, according to Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard, "African Nova Scotians were not meant to survive. However, we have survived, using very creative strategies to overcome barriers caused by oppression and systemic discrimination" ("It Takes a Village").

The African-Canadian struggles for survival were similar to those of Blacks in the American South in the years after the Civil War. Shut out of the institutions geared at helping white Nova Scotians, African Nova Scotians were forced to establish their own strategies to enable their political and social advancement.[3] The communities turned inward and began to develop their own systems fostered by this isolation and strengthened by their shared experiences of adversity (Bonner; Whitfield). According to Bernard and Bernard ("It Takes a Village" 179), "looking specifically at the provision of social services, and child welfare services [in Nova Scotia in particular], the Black community had to establish its own formal and informal institutions." In 1921 the community opened the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children, which at the time, became the only orphanage in the province of Nova Scotia that would take a Black child (Johnson). With no state institutions prepared to address the needs of the Black community, African Nova Scotian reliance on informal adoptions addressed situations in which families are unable to care for their children. For African Nova Scotians the Black church and the extended family were central to their survival. (Pachai; Walker).

Church members were able to find the support, comfort and community they were perhaps otherwise denied. Again, this is similar to the African American experience, where according to Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (4-6), the church played a number of roles within the community including serving as "an agent of social control, forum of discussion and debate, promoter of education and economic cooperation, and arena for the development and assertion of leadership." Alongside the church were various mutual aid organizations across Canada, but for African Nova Scotians, it was primarily the church and its related organizations that connected, supported and guided the community well into the twentieth century.

Factors Shaping the African Nova Scotian Community

The early twentieth century in Nova Scotia was still marked by a deep rural-urban divide, with less than twenty percent of the Black population living for

example, within the Halifax-Dartmouth area, and the rest leading a distinctly rural life, continuing an essentially separate existence within the Province (Pachai; Morton, "Separate Spheres"). But despite these separate worlds, the realities of race, gender and class as dictated by the social structure of Canada often came together to oppress the Black family, whether urban or rural. Black men had great difficulties finding anything outside of menial jobs, which meant that Black women had no choice but to provide the additional income needed for their families to subsist. This meant taking on work outside the home in addition to the work they did raising children, tending subsistence gardens, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and sewing, among other things (Bonner and Thomas Bernard; Whitfield). To be able to earn the additional income for their families, many young women were forced to leave their communities to find work nearby in Halifax, while others sought work elsewhere (Morton, "Separate Spheres"). Similar to the findings of Jacqueline Jones in her look at the lives of African American women from slavery to the present, our Community Historians spoke of the difficulties inherent in trying to move from domestic work into the clerical and or retail sectors. Of our fourteen Preston Community Historians, twelve indicated that their mothers and sometimes grandmothers, and even they themselves, had worked in some kind of domestic service for at least a short time. Several also sold produce at the Halifax market. These women's stories demonstrate that jobs in domestic service remained the primary forms of employment open to African Nova Scotian women during this period (Solomon). It is interesting to note that women's occupations told little about issues of class within the African Nova Scotian communities themselves, and that the community status of these women varied (Morton, "Separate Spheres"). Some individuals held leadership roles in the church, were from well-positioned families, or were married to men who held high status positions. Yet, since this was the only work open to them, they all did domestic work at some point in their lives, even if it was just for a short time. Some women were able to wait until their children were old enough to take over the housework before they went out to work. Others worked as young women and stopped working once they had children.

Many of the experiences of our Sydney-area Community Historians differed somewhat from those of other African Nova Scotians. They belonged to the most recent group of Black settlers to the Province, and other than one family which migrated to the region to work for the Church, our Historians' families settled in Whitney Pier mainly for the purpose of working for the steel company. Being recruited for work did not guarantee a steady wage however, and our Historians noted that their fathers and the fathers of their friends and neighbours supplemented their incomes by whatever means they had available to them, including making use of the skilled trades they had brought

with them from the Caribbean. As Martha tells it, "in addition to working in the steel plant and then setting up his own business, my father taught music. He made a little extra money on the side teaching music." Iris shared the fact that her father had come from a family in Barbados where painting was their trade, something they were able to rely on in Sydney as well. "So when he came here that's what he started out doing 'til he got in the plant and then he got more work with the painters." For the majority, the wage they earned at the steel company was not enough to support a family, and they found themselves supplementing their employment by doing odd jobs in their down time.

The women in these Sydney families also had to work to supplement the family income. They did this by taking on cleaning jobs, taking in sewing, and by selling food, especially baked goods, to the men at the steel plant. Martha's mother was a seamstress, "She would sew for people around, to help add to the family income; she would sew clothes, make coats, dresses, pants, whatever. She was good with the needle and thread." The women also found creative ways of pooling their moneys to allow for whatever needs arose within the group, for example, some described participation in a communal banking system they referred to as "sousou," where, the women took turns in a process of rotating savings and credit, common in the Caribbean and West Africa (Verrest). All but one of the Sydney Community Historians had a connection to Barbados, and spoke of the existence of a West Indian community ethic of care.

For the Blacks living in the Shelburne area, the years under investigation were not much different from life in the nineteenth century—their lives continued in the same vein of poverty, marginalization and hardship. The general perspective held by the white community was that Blacks were simply a cheap labour force. As one Community Historian put it, in Shelburne "you had to know your place" as a Black person. Continued limited access to jobs meant that many of our informants and their families, like generations before and since, packed up and left Shelburne as soon as they were able, heading for some other part of the continent where they would be able to find work. For example, Joyce remembers that once school ended in Shelburne, there was only one recourse open to her,

> The first place I went to work was where they called it the Garment district in Montreal. That was picking widths off the coast of Maine in the Golden Factory. I stayed there until I finished my commercial course and then I went to work for National Typewriter Incorporated, an office machine company. I worked for them for thirteen years and from there I moved on to **** and *****, a frozen food company for five years and then another company and from there I moved back to Shelburne.

Wallace tells a similar story of the absence of jobs other than manual labour in Shelburne in the 1920s, so in 1927 he made his way to Boston where he was lucky to get a job "handling mail and baggage in South Station." He stayed there for 45 years, and on his return found that little had changed—"the same fellows worked down at the shipyards; they could work there all their life, they never got any farther."

By moving away to Boston for those years he had provided himself with a life that he would not have been able to have had he remained in the Shelburne area. On his return he found himself to be one of the few Black men in the region who owned a car, and he had enough capital to purchase a home. These were drastic changes in trying times.

Regardless of where they went, people of African descent met with the same racialized access to the workforce, which left only service jobs open to them in the first half of the twentieth century. The necessity of multiple jobs, and work that demanded long hours for low pay, undoubtedly took its toll, not just on the individual worker, but on his or her family as well; Andy remembers the hard work his father did:

> He was working an awful lot. I have to admire him for that because; between the steel plant and his carpentry work I don't know how the man slept. He would sleep for a couple of hours and then boom he would be gone off to the steel plant. He would come home, sleep for an hour and then gone off to a carpentry job.

This was the reality for those who chose to remain in Nova Scotia. Limited access to all but menial labour and long, onerous days working to make ends meet, all of which took parents away from families, and strained bonds between family members.

Finding Support within the Community

As has been previously mentioned, there were no State provisions for Black children in Nova Scotia before 1921. As well, there were no official provisions made for African Nova Scotian women who were pregnant and in need of care (especially unmarried women) until well into the twentieth century (Johnson). Regardless of race, prior to the 1940s, unmarried women were severely penalized for contravening the rules of sexual respectability. They received little social support, were often ostracized within their communities, and were usually left with the responsibilities of parenting (Morton, "Managing"). One Community Historian remembers the shame and anger she experienced upon becoming pregnant while still quite young:

*Then I had my first daughter, and I wasn't married, and my mother had to
go to the church and speak on my behalf, because they'd throw you out of the
church at that time. And so she had to go and tell my story (I'm in Toronto
at the time), she had to tell my story and they kicked me out of the church.*

White, unmarried, pregnant women in Nova Scotia in the early years of
the twentieth century, had limited options, but there were some services
available, and Halifax established its first children's aid society in 1920 (Mor-
ton, "Managing"). White women had the option of formal adoption, but no
such institutions existed for the children of African Nova Scotian women,
who therefore turned to their communities for support. As such, intersecting
issues of race, class, gender and location sometimes created circumstances in
which children were left with friends and family while parents sought work
elsewhere; as well as situations in which there were simply too many mouths
to feed. These children became the responsibility of their extended families
and of the community.

The most prevalent tale is that of grandmothers taking over mothering
roles. Grandmothers would often be seen as part of households. Grandpar-
ents, grandmothers in particular, appeared to play significant roles in the lives
of the majority of our Historians. The prominent role of women in creating
networks of support has a long tradition in the Black community where elders
and grandparents were very active in family and community life, for example,
preparing the meals, passing on skills and customs to the children, taking the
children to church and overseeing their spiritual growth. The importance of
elders continued to be upheld throughout slavery and beyond as they, espe-
cially grandmothers maintained the family structures, and the culture of the
community.

Migration as part of the Atlantic economy meant that individuals travelled
to make better lives for themselves and for relatives back home. The fami-
lies of many of those Community Historians in Whitney Pier were greatly
shaped by West Indian tradition and culture, as well as the economies of both
contexts. Our Historians told stories about how their families came to be in
Sydney, providing clues to their family dynamics at the same time. In order
to provide for their families, many came alone, leaving children behind to be
raised by others. For example, Will shared, "My mother was raised by her
grandmother because her own mother came over here to try to do better. I
assume when they did come over here, and they made some money, they sent
some back home to them." His mother had made her way to Sydney by way
of the United States, where she had worked as a domestic. Following the path
her mother had already taken, Whitfield's mother made her way to Sydney
and to his grandmother. Similarly, Mary spoke of her childhood saying, "We

came up the traditional way, my grandmother brought us up; mom were here, and Gran did a very fantastic job looking after us children, three of us, and I wouldn't change it for anything today."

For these West Indian immigrants, their pattern of migration bears similarities to the timing and sequencing of the migration of Black families to and from the rural American South, although there was no permanent return home on the part of the migrating adults—what we saw was adults reaching a certain level of stability being able to "send for" their children or other relatives in a system of multi/cross generational aid. Family back home assumed all responsibility for those left behind with the exception of the monies and care packages sent back by the migrants.

Similarly, the poor economies in other parts of the Maritimes often lead young parents away from their children in search of work. In the case of Wallace, his unmarried mother had left Shelburne and had gone to Boston in search of his father who had gone there possibly for work. Neither returned and we can assume she remained in Boston having found work there for herself as well. He was a small child when she left, and Wallace was 35 years old before he saw his mother again. In his parents' absence, Wallace was raised by his grandparents. For him, this process of informal adoptions was just the way things worked:

> *That is what it was, Guysborough County. And my grandfather who brought me up. You heard your people speak of the word "brought you up?" There was no papers, there was no adoption papers. So and so had three boys so Mr. so and so says "I'll take that boy." So he took that boy, on to the, Mr. Jones up there, and the boy was brought up as Jimmy Jones. And so that's what [happened] in this place of Nova Scotia. .*

Thus the role of grandparents in the African Nova Scotian context was an important one. All of our Historians remembered grandparents living with the family or nearby and described situations where they helped alleviate parents' childcare needs. Grandmother's was a place where children could go live for extended periods, as in the case of George, who lived with his grandmother for three years until she died. Often in these cases it is likely that the child had been sent out of a need on the parents' part, or because of a need for the child to assist in their grandparent's home.

Brothers and sisters could also be counted on to take over care of their sibling's children when needed. Lillian's uncle (her biological mother's brother) and his wife adopted and raised her as their own child. Even though they moved away with the child, they returned often to the family home in the Prestons, and Lillian was raised knowing both her "adoptive" and her biological mother. Gloria's mother similarly took in her young unwed niece's child and raised

her as her own child. As often happened in the case of unwed mothers, it was understood that the mother was too young to raise the child, so in this instance, the extended family stepped in at the request of the young woman's father.

When the need arose, the community at large stepped in and cared for children. As a young child, Iris lost her mother. Although she was later taken in by her god parents and then another family, she emphasized that the community rallied to care for her then four-year-old self immediately after her mother's death:

> And I could remember all the West Indian women, course I didn't appreci–
> ate it then, one would grab me and braid my hair, wash my hair, take my
> clothes and wash my clothes, and I'd go up to Mrs. Grant and my father,
> and when I come home I had a container of cookies, cause you know fathers
> weren't baking cookies, and that to a kid was a big thing, but anyone with
> a mother that was a normal thing. That was a big thing to me.

So we see that within this community, wherever there was a clear need, there were almost always people who could offer the required aid. The absence of formal social structures to address the needs of African Nova Scotians meant that people had to find creative ways of caring for their children. They did this by creating unofficial structures which worked within the fluidity of the African family, where the bonds of community allowed the parameters of family to be extended for the benefit of those in need, thus creating within the community an understanding of "taking care of our own." The creation of extended kinship networks served to enhance an ethic of care within the small, oftentimes geographically isolated and racially segregated communities. These stories resonate with those in the African American context and suggest a need to take a closer look at the ways in which African Canadian and African American family structures evolved over time, as well as the ways in which the different cultural and geographical contexts worked to shape strategies for survival in the various Black communities in North America.

[1]Referred to henceforth as our Community Historians. The interviews were conducted in 2011 by Claudine Bonner and a research assistant who is an insider and resident of Sydney Nova Scotia, using an interview guide created by the authors, and approved by the Dalhousie University Ethics Committee. All the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and reviewed by the authors. The names of all our community informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

[2]The Prestons as listed here refer to the communities of North Preston (or

New Road), East Preston and Cherry Brook/Lake Loon, parts of the former Preston Township.

[3]For more on African-American responses to segregation, see Bethel (95); Brown and Webb (225-232); Higginbotham; and Tillman.

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