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URBAN ENTANGLEMENTS IN THREE AFRICAN CANADIAN PLAYS: LORENA GALE'S *ANGÉLIQUE*, GEORGE BOYD'S *CONSECRATED GROUND*, AND ANDREW MOODIE'S *RIOT*¹

This paper examines the ways in which three African Canadian plays—Andrew Moodie's *Riot*, Lorena Gale's *Angélique*, and George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground*—rehearse moments of racism regarding the African Canadian diaspora. I explore the in/visibility and hyper-visibility of blackness in three plays that are set in a past which connects directly to contemporary politics: *Angélique* takes place in 1734 Montreal and the present, *Consecrated Ground* is set in Nova Scotia's Africville in 1965, and *Riot* looks back to Toronto in 1992. Yet rather than just documenting points on a visibility continuum, the plays also raise the prospect of establishing alternative—albeit metaphoric—definitions of 'belonging.' Using Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space," I argue that by exploring a compromised form of diaspora space as a means of locating African Canadian subjects, the plays provide an abstract alternative to 'belonging' in their urban narratives, in the wider community, and the larger nation. The performance of diaspora spaces, even if compromised, helps make visible African Canadian identities, as the plays renegotiate the nature of Canadian landscape, history, and identity at large.

À partir de trois pièces afro-canadiennes—Riot de Andrew Moodie, Angélique de Lorena Gale, et Consecrated Ground de George Boyd—Tomkins examine comment sont représentés les moments de racisme à l'endroit de la diaspora afro-canadienne. De plus, elle explore l'in/visibilité et l'hyper-visibilité de la négritude dans trois pièces qui ont lieu dans le passé à des époques qui sont directement reliées à des enjeux politiques contemporains : l'intrigue d'Angélique se déroule à Montréal en 1734 et au temps présent; Consecrated Ground se passe à Africville, en Nouvelle-Écosse, en 1965; et Riot fait un retour en arrière sur la ville de Toronto, en 1992. Plutôt que documenter des points sur un continuum de la visibilité, les pièces évoquent la possibilité d'établir d'autres définitions—si métaphoriques qu'elles soient—de l'« appartenance ». À partir du concept d'« espace diasporal » que propose Avtar Brah, Tomkins fait valoir qu'en explorant un espace diasporal marqué par le compromis pour situer des personnages afro-canadiens, les pièces fournissent une

autre forme d' « appartenance » aux récits urbains, à une communauté et à une nation. La représentation d'espaces diasporaux, même ceux qui sont marqués par le compromis, rend visible les identités afro-canadiennes alors que les pièces négocient la nature du paysage, de l'histoire et de l'identité canadienne dans son ensemble.



At the end of Andrew Moodie's play, *Riot*, the character Alex Arecalls his childhood pride in his Canadian identity, a memory that becomes a lament for his now-lost encapsulation of the nation. Alex explains that he would imagine being able to see right across the country from his own backyard in Ottawa: "I would flop on my stomach and grab fistfuls of grass and I would hug Canada. And you know what ... if you stay really really really still, after a while, it almost feels like Canada is hugging you back. And I miss that feeling. I really do" (95). The events that take place in *Riot* challenge Alex's patriotic relationship with Canada, while Lorena Gale's *Angélique* and George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* also question conventional assumptions that Canada guards the civil rights of all its citizens. The three plays rehearse moments of racism regarding the African Canadian diaspora. The existence of discrepancies between 'official' Canadian history and other accounts of past events does not surprise Rinaldo Walcott, who argues that "Canadian state institutions and official narratives [continue] to render blackness outside, while simultaneously attempting to contain blackness through discourses of Canadian benevolence. Thus blackness in Canada is situated on a continuum of invisible to hyper-visible" ("Tough" 39). This paper examines the in/visibility and hyper-visibility of blackness in three plays that are set in a past which connects directly to contemporary politics: *Angélique* takes place in 1734 Montreal and the present, *Consecrated Ground* is set in Nova Scotia's Africville in 1965, and *Riot* looks back to Toronto in 1992.

Yet rather than just documenting points on a visibility continuum, the plays also raise the prospect of establishing alternative—albeit metaphoric—definitions of 'belonging.' They try to redress some form of segregation of a black subject and/or community from the larger urban whole, and, by extrapolation, from the nation itself. In doing so, they stage a compromised form of what Avtar Brah calls "diaspora space."² For Brah, diaspora space is characterised by an "entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (16). She explains that "[d]iaspora space is

the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them', are contested" (208-9). The nature of this entangled spatiality between diasporic communities and the existing populations is such that "[t]he diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*" (Brah 209, emphasis in original). One might anticipate that Brah's argument would work very well in Canada, where some African Canadian communities have been 'entangled' in and with the larger Canadian nation for over two hundred years (even though some characters in *Riot* are first generation). The plays suggest, however, that a spatial 'entanglement' is much less easily achieved than one might expect: the productive entanglement that Brah describes is made all the more difficult because the visibility continuum tends to override entanglement in favour of almost segregationist invisibility and/or hyper-visibility. By exploring a compromised form of diaspora space as a means of locating African Canadian subjects, the plays provide an abstract alternative to 'belonging' in both the wider community and the nation.

Given the potential for a discussion of the entanglements of diaspora space to produce an enormous spatial framework, I have limited my investigation of intertwined spaces to the scope provided by the plays' settings: all three take place in urban locations. They actively explore perceptions of 'the city' as spatial. The plays not only reconstruct African Canadian subjectivity against an official history that regularly fails to acknowledge the contribution of African Canadians, they also perform an authoritarian urban place which appears to conspire against the characters to foster displacement rather than entanglement. Of course, representations of the city in literature and theatre are often multiple, fragmented, and conglomerated, so much so that Rob Shields maintains that "'The City' is a slippery notion. It slides back and forth between an abstract idea and concrete material" (qtd. in Balshaw and Kennedy 3). Mike Crang's description of the nature of any city is in much the same vein: "[t]he city is then, as Bachelard noted, the poetics of multiple *durées* coming together [. . .] not necessarily as unified wholes but as sometimes fragmentary and ragged patterns" (190).³ The city is a particularly appropriate spatial context for this investigation since it is in the urban context that the mapping of Walcott's visibility continuum appears most clearly. For African Canadian subjects, the instabilities or uncertainties of the city can be intensified. It is hardly surprising that 'the city' in these plays is represented in substantially authoritarian

terms. In staging the dislocation and placelessness that is imposed on many African communities, two of the three plays propose alternative means of both situating place/subjectivity and resisting containment. Whereas *Riot* concludes without performing an alternative to its urban context, *Consecrated Ground* and *Angélique* develop the basis for productive—if frequently abstracted—relationships with Canadian urban landscapes. The three plays perform a distanced relationship with both urban life and national identification, rather than replicating a literal or material city. Such a distanced relationship sets the foundations for identifying the entanglements of diaspora space that have tended to be obscured, overlooked, and/or rendered invisible in three Canadian cities.

Andrew Moodie's *Riot*, which premiered at the Factory Theatre, Toronto, in 1995, explores the most contemporary event of the three plays, articulating the difficulties a group of African Canadians experience living in a city that interprets them (when it acknowledges their existence at all) as dangerous trouble-makers. It is the most naturalistic of the three plays, set in a share-house in Toronto when the court case of Los Angeles police officers charged with beating Rodney King comes to its conclusion. While the play marks the boundaries between the authoritarian city and Crang's ragged patterns of urban potential (each at different points on Shields's slippery urban scale), it stops short of bridging the two locations in favour of isolating the effects of hyper-visibility on the characters. *Riot* establishes particularly clearly the way the visibility continuum works.

Riot raises the reality of racism in Toronto as it records the experiences of a group of young African Canadians: some are university students, and most are working. There are the usual tensions and disagreements found in any share-house: for instance, several of the characters hold substantially different political views from the others. On a more symbolic level, the share-house also serves to stage a vague microcosm of African Canadian identities. At the beginning of the play, the group learns of the Rodney King trial verdict. Shortly afterwards, several of the characters are implicated in the events of the Toronto riots, and the youngest member of the household, Kirk, fires a gun in the house in an expression of his own difficulty in finding a place for himself in any of the communities he traverses. The play ends with a sense of disillusionment about race relations, 'even' in Canada: the Toronto riots render African Canadians hyper-visible, in effect making invisible the existing entanglements that African Canadians have with the broader community.

'Racism' and 'Canada' are brought together in a way that conflicts with the nation's more familiar benevolent image: most people do not associate race riots with Canada, but a generalised African Canadian community becomes hyper-visible when a protest does get out of hand in Toronto.⁴ *Riot's* plot is based on events that took place three years before its premiere. The Los Angeles riots began on 29 April 1992, in response to the King trial verdict, and lasted until 2 May, when calm began to be restored. The Yonge Street riots in Toronto began on 4 May 1992, when approximately a thousand people gathered outside the American Consulate for a demonstration organized by the Black Action Defence Committee. It began as a peaceful march against the LAPD officers' acquittal, but was inflamed by the fact that the weekend prior, a twenty-two-year-old black man, Raymond Constantine Lawrence, was shot by Metro police Constable Robert Rice. The march continued to the intersection at Yonge and Bloor Streets, where protestors sat for forty-five minutes, listening to speeches. The main site of protest then moved to Nathan Phillips Square. Thirty people stormed the old city hall courthouse, smashing glass, followed by several hundred people who began to loot stores. Police were pelted with rocks and eggs. The violence continued until 11 pm, when the protestors dispersed. During that first day, an estimated thirty-two arrests were made. The next day, hundreds of young people clashed with police downtown, but 250 police on foot and horses controlled the situation and made twenty-two arrests. There were a few more incidents on the subsequent two nights, but police broke them up before any further violence ensued (see Duffy, Hall and DeMara; Maychak). To some extent, *Riot* assumes an audience's knowledge of these events: its riot is not documentary per se, rather it explores the implications of such events for the African Canadian community.

As Moodie's play opens, one of the housemates, Wendle, argues with a report on television about Quebec being a distinct nation. Wendle insists that such a move ought to offer him, "a black man from Nova Scotia," just as "distinct" a place as a Quebecois (Moodie 17). His response introduces the theme of race, particularly the fragmentation of a 'Canadian' community on ethnic, cultural, and/or racial grounds. Grace defends the cause of the Quebec community, declaring, "they are looking for the tools to protect their culture" (Moodie 17), a statement which resonates with the situation of African Canadian cultures in *Riot*. Shortly after, the household watches a news bulletin about the King trial verdict. The acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King

shocks the group. The video of King's beating—replayed on television—reminds them of the customary invisibility that blacks face. Henry responds to the footage, “do they not see a human being? Laying on the ground, bleeding! Being beaten to death?” (Moodie 33). While they are well used to the context of invisibility, they are shocked that even the hallmarks of visibility—made clear by the evidence of the beating captured on video tape—are still overlooked, and the officers are released from their charges. Even the patently visible is reclassified as invisible, resulting in a further embedding of the location of invisibility for African Americans, and, the play suggests, African Canadians.

In fact, several characters argue that the almost entrenched concealment of racism in Canada intensifies the invisibility that they feel in the nation. They discuss the experience of being black and living in urban Canada, where the police exercise an authority defined by racism. Henry reports that he has just been stopped by police for making an illegal turn, when his ‘real’ crime was simply being black (Moodie 26). Wendle, who has also been a victim of a trumped-up police charge (28), declares that “This country is racist from top to bottom” (28), as he reminds his housemates just how long African Canadians have lived in the country. Personal stories and examples in the historical record vie for attention throughout the play as the characters explore differing interpretations of what it is like to live in Canada. Wendle argues, “Canada is ten times more racist than the States but they hide it here” (29). Only when the riots occur does this statement become any more than one character's familiar tirade.

The riots turn the conventional invisibility of the overall African Canadian community into an almost instant, unwelcome hyper-visibility. The riots in Toronto stun the group because, as Alex exclaims, “This is Canada for crying out loud” (61). When Alex is caught up in the riots and suffers a bloody nose, he describes the event to the others: “It's like... it was sort of scary, but it was still kind of Canadian, you know... it's like, there was violence, but it was still kinda polite violence” (83). It is still Canada, but the authoritarian city threatens to eliminate any (resistant) means of inhabiting the city that does not conform to its rules. The riot redefines the entire African Canadian population: as blacks, they have suddenly transformed from invisible to hyper-visible. The spotlight that usually fails to pick them up in its beam is now fixed on the entire community, ready to accuse them of illegal (and, by extrapolation, unCanadian) activity. The members of the household recognise that in the context of the

riots, all African Canadians become hyper-visible, and this new reality alters their position, safety, and security in the urban landscape, whether or not they actually participated in any protests, legal or illegal.

The events in *Riot* expose various fallacies about race relations in Canada, in particular the constitution of a homogeneous African Canadian community. The diverse group of characters in Moodie's play comes from various countries, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds that belie any attempts to depict a united African Canadian community. In addition to witnessing to Toronto's response to the King verdict, *Riot's* main achievement is to microcosmically map numerous examples of what 'African Canadian' might look like. The characters who share the house agree on little, even before the protests, and they have different plans for their futures. The firing of a gun in their house towards the end of the play mirrors the riots, linking all characters (except the shooter, Kirk) in both a rejection of violence and a fear of further violence: they know that once the shot is reported to authorities, their house may be a flashpoint for police in an already tinder-dry environment. The riots prompt Henry to conclude that "we all have to stick together" (78). The plea for a form of unity is echoed by several other characters. But beyond that initial agreement, opinions vary as the play traces the range of responses to these events and as the characters attempt to locate themselves in what is suddenly a very different urban terrain. By the end of the third act, both Effie and Kirk have moved out: the solidarity of a broadly-based African Canadian community is even proven to be impossible in this house. Henry's initial argument about maintaining a strong community becomes demonstrably simplistic, but few characters have any better answers. Henry speculates further about what might help, explaining that rather than striving for community solidarity, the characters need to reconsider issues of basic equality:

I wish... we could just stop and make our own way and not have to struggle all the time to prove that we are equal. And when I see a black person has committed a crime in the newspaper, I don't feel that he is jeopardizing three hundred years of hard work. And if that one person commits a crime, it's because he's human, and sometimes, that's what human beings do. (Moodie 76-77)

His statement helps to identify a productively entangled space that looks beyond the visibility continuum, even though the characters

in this play are unable to actually occupy such a space.

The riots change the house irreparably. The epilogue sees Effie and Kirk moving elsewhere and the relationships between most of the characters altering in various ways, as a result of their experiences with the riots. *Riot*'s conclusion reinforces Rinaldo Walcott's observation that "To be black and 'at home' in Canada is to both belong and not belong" ("Tough" 45).⁵ While most of the characters are very familiar with this phenomenon, Alex appears to experience it for the first time. He contrasts his positive associations of Canada with the events of the riots: Alex is caught between his perception of an idealistic Canada and his disillusion with the Toronto of 1992 which now features on CNN reports (Moodie 96). His (not) belonging in Toronto or even in Canada presents a moment of profound sadness on which the play closes, the characters (and audience) left to work out how they might locate themselves in a city that appears to disown large portions of its community so easily. It also leaves open the possibility that the state of hyper-visibility will revert to one of invisibility, once the urgency associated with the riots has abated. The play was first performed three years after the riots, providing the opportunity for the audience to judge whether or not the urban entanglements of the 'present' are any better realised than they were in the 'past.'

Riot stages both a generalised African Canadian community and aspects of its sub-communities: it asks how African Canadians might maintain a literal—and productive—presence in the national and urban landscape when the very definition of "African Canadian" is so diverse. In raising such complicated and contested issues, *Riot* stages the difficulty of establishing a fragmented subjectivity in an uncertain urban landscape.

Whereas *Riot* chooses a naturalistic context for its examination of urban dislocation, the next two plays explore more abstract locations associated with the urban: they demonstrate how subjectivity might operate in an environment that regularly overlooks the existence of Brah's spatial entanglements in the context of African Canadian history. The play that deals most directly with urban dislocation is George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground*, which charts the determination of residents of Africville to maintain—literally and figuratively—their community at Halifax. Boyd's play documents the demolition of the literal community, but it also maps the foundation of a place for African Nova Scotians—even if it is symbolic instead of concrete.

Consecrated Ground, which premiered at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in Halifax in 1999, takes place in 1965 in Africville, a resi-

dential community which was established in 1848 (Walker 156), although the first residents lived there from about 1812.⁶ As James W. St. G. Walker notes,

Africville owed its origin to fugitive American slaves. In this case they were among the Black Refugees attracted to the British during the War of 1812 and carried to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on the promise of free land and equal rights. Neither promise was fully honoured. (156)

Its history alone suggests its entanglement in and with official Canadian history. Yet Africville's demolition, completed in 1970 (Walker 155), reinforced what Walcott calls "the desire to render black peoples [...] an absented presence in the Canadian nation" ("Tough" 38-9). Nevertheless, in *Consecrated Ground* and other creative reclamations of the community, Africville becomes intertwined with the nation's cultural and historical memory.⁷

Consecrated Ground recounts the city's resumption of Africville and the forced removal of its inhabitants to Uniacke Square, a Halifax housing development which typifies Walcott's comment about (not) belonging. Africville residents are to be moved from one form of invisibility in the fringe community to another in the housing projects of urban Halifax. The play's setting, over thirty years earlier than its premiere, means that the audience would have been well-armed with the knowledge that the community's relocation to Uniacke Square and comparable housing developments would come to be seen as disastrous.

The city sends the young, inexperienced, white Tom Clancy to negotiate the cash settlements with Africville residents. Clancy's job is made only slightly easier by the city's decision to leave the Africville church standing. In the meantime, Clarice and Willem—a couple living in Africville—are contending with the illness of their infant, Tully, who has become sick from the community's contaminated water supply. On Tully's death, the residents learn that not only will the church be demolished, but that the city has refused to consecrate new ground for Tully's burial.

The play's account of the relocation mismanagement pales in comparison to the actual living conditions in Africville, a community that was within the city limits of Halifax (Walker 157), but was not provided with sewer service, lighting, adequate drinking water, or decent roads. The police force avoided it, and the fire service was often hampered by the inadequate water supply—that is, if their trucks could even negotiate the poor road to reach a burning

house (Walker 157). Train lines were built through the community in its early years, then a prison was located next to it, followed by “night-soil disposal pits,” a hospital for infectious diseases, “a fertilizer plant, two slaughterhouses, a coal-handling facility, a tar factory, [and] a leather tannery” (Walker 157). Finally, Halifax’s town dump was moved right next to Africville houses. The play’s minister, Rev. Miner, wagers that whatever is constructed in Africville’s place will have decent, full facilities,⁸ and that the city has refused to install such basic facilities for an African Canadian population, who might as well be invisible. *Consecrated Ground* even recounts the well-documented case of one family and their possessions being moved in a garbage truck (Boyd 41).

Africville provided a nurturing community for Halifax’s African population, but it did not offer an easy life. In addition to the difficulties of living there, the men left early each day to walk long distances to find jobs on the docks, while most of the women were in service. One of the characters, Sarah, works in the community to raise the children whose mothers work in white people’s homes (Boyd 25). Nevertheless, land was proudly passed down through families in this community which Rev. Miner calls “a way of life” (33). The relocation of Africville, one of the many African Canadian communities in the country, continues to haunt Halifax: “To this day, the tragedy is a very sensitive and contentious issue; in fact, relocation and compensation claims are still actively pursued in the courts” (Boyd 7).

In Boyd’s play, Sarah’s discussion with Clancy makes the direct connection between Africville and the townships of apartheid South Africa. While Clancy sees the move to the city as a means of avoiding segregation, Sarah reads it for what it is: a measure of apartheid that most Canadians would not associate with their nation’s history. Sarah tells him:

I figures Africville be just another name for township—you heard of the townships in South Africa, ain’t ya? [...] Well Africville be just like that! They put all the coloureds in one place, close to the white city so they got a ready stock of labour, like maids, butlers, and gardeners and cleaners and the like. [...] ‘Cept in Canada, we just use different words for township. We calls it a ‘community’ or a ‘village’ or some-such. To me, it just be a township. Plain and simple. (24)

Clancy’s shock at Sarah’s astute analysis is likely reflected in audiences familiar only with the whitewashed version of Canada’s history. *Consecrated Ground* contrasts the ‘community’ of Africville

with the city's desire to contain 'blackness' by means of a bureaucratic, depersonalised urban renewal. While the residents' move to the housing projects in the city may suggest a form of entanglement with the greater Halifax community, the city seems determined to ensure that African Canadians remain invisible, wherever they are situated.

Consecrated Ground deliberately counteracts this attempt to render a large section of the Halifax population invisible. While the authoritarian city is only represented by the naïve Clancy and the dictates of City Hall, Africville's physical presence is set on stage by means of large "hanging cutouts" (8). These cutouts are essentially stylised house- and church-shaped flats, but they are lit so that they can be extinguished in turn as Africville is demolished. The multiple cutouts are placed at differing heights and perspectives to represent the size and depth of the Africville community: this staging decision underscores the city's assumption that Africville is merely a collection of houses that need demolition. Clancy is taken aback when Sarah announces to him, "people lives here [*sic*]" (26); this is something he failed to consider and a factor about which the city cares little. As the city tries to render the African Canadian people invisible, the play's set memorialises the strong community. The play begins as a lament for Africville but it transforms into a monument to the general diasporic community.

As the concrete community is demolished, an abstract version of community gathers strength in the concept of consecration that is at the centre of the play. Consecration brings to the literal place a sacredness that also has metaphoric qualities: the play extends the reach of Africville itself, even long after the last buildings are razed. Yet such consecration only takes place following the most desperate of deconsecrating acts. When Tully dies from drinking contaminated water, his parents are shocked to find that they are not allowed to bury their son in the church grounds because it is to be demolished, and, further, that the city won't consecrate any new ground in Africville. In effect, even the church is suddenly deconsecrated. Clarice says to her husband,

What is Africville if it ain't consecrated ground, Willem?
(*Beat.*) This land been in my family for years, hundreds a
years... My ancestors, they consecrated this ground. [. . .]
Surely no one, ain't nobody on this-here earth tellin' me
Africville ain't no consecrated ground!! [. . .] Africville is
consecrated ground. [. . .] [T]here ain't a single lick a land in
Africville that ain't consecrated. (52-3, emphasis in original)

Clarice's statement reinforces how the African Canadian community has been rendered invisible: the entanglements of diaspora space are not possible to see if the community is deemed to have been deconsecrated before it is bulldozed and forgotten in the building of urban development plans like the bridge across the harbour. Clarice's family has been Canadian for centuries, even if their presence has been muted in the nation's social history. The entire Canadian community is reduced by the calculated quarantining (and subsequent demolition) of Africville and its inhabitants.

Africville's church extends the symbolic reach of this community even further. Rev. Miner explains that the church is sacred beyond the worshippers and their ancestors: it is sacred to those who set out in slave ships but did not reach North America (Boyd 36). He explains,

We all know what the church means to coloured folk: it's our monument to those who died on the middle passage—every spirit that lies on the bottom of the Atlantic. [...] The church embodies what we do. [...] The church, as you all know, is a living monument. A testament to a race of black people; a proud, hard working and loving people. (36)

When the announcement is made that the church will also be demolished (because to leave it “would encourage an attachment to this place long after the people were gone” [Boyd 57]), Rev. Miner's conciliatory tone changes. He explodes, “Do they not know that this is the very cement that holds my people together?! Do they not know that this church is the very soul of ... of Africville itself?!” (57). The play concludes with Rev. Miner consecrating ground for Tully, but then the light in the church goes out (69): it is a small victory for Clarice and Willem who are still forced to move anyway. They are not even permitted to relocate to Uniacke Square after all, because it is for families and their baby's death denies them family status that they require to ‘belong’ in this supposedly integrated city.

The literal location of the community in *Consecrated Ground* is removed and destroyed, but the city's demolition of Africville fails to remove the traces of the community. Instead, Africville is reconstituted in a different form: for Walcott, “Boyd's play seeks to make Africville sacred in the Canadian popular imagination, to make art do something” (“Dramatic” 105). He explains further,

Recently, Africville has, in some ways, become consecrated ground. The federal government of Canada has now made

the site a national treasure. Furthermore, plans to rebuild the Seaview Baptist Church on the site might signal a particular national attempt to come to terms with the trauma that the destruction of the community is. The rebuilding of the church should not be given short shrift, because not only does the church represent a particular cultural centre of the community but its reconstruction can, more broadly, be read as signalling yet another one of those diasporic moments of reconnection and reparation. (105, emphasis in original)

Africville, declared a historic site in 2002 (“Africville”), thus takes new form as an abstract location in memories, memorials, and creative reconstructions.⁹ The success of such endeavours may even result in reconstruction of a tangible location, in the form of the Seaview Baptist Church. Even if a *concrete* reconstruction is impossible, the community is, according to Walker, “taken now as a symbol of the unconquerable black spirit in Nova Scotia” (155). Africville’s ‘visibility’ now takes the form of a monument—however abstract—that has the potential to communicate with the broader, national imaginary. *Consecrated Ground* establishes the historical, spiritual, and spatial connection that the site has with and to the more conventionally defined Canadian landscape. Africville represents one strand of a complex African Canadian subjectivity: a strong community rooted in historical and spiritual connection to the landscape, however fragmentary. Even the demolition of Africville in the 1960s did not completely destroy the “unconquerable black spirit” that it housed. *Consecrated Ground* reinforces that, for African Canadians, an abstract or metaphoric relationship with urban and national identification may provide the most promising means of inhabiting the city and deriving mutually beneficial urban entanglements therein.

If *Consecrated Ground* metaphorically consecrates and memorialises the African presence in an entangled Nova Scotian history, the eponymous character in Lorena Gale’s 1998 play, *Angélique*, marks another type of abstracted, intertwined relationship with location and community, this time in Montreal. Of the three plays, *Angélique* reaches furthest back into Canadian history to a moment conveniently forgotten by the official record: the torture and hanging of a black slave who was blamed for setting the fire that destroyed large parts of Montreal in 1734. Gale’s play, which premiered as part of the Pan Canadian play *Rites ’98* Festival in Calgary in 1998, charts the life of this slave, whose place in history was, if mentioned at all, reduced to the simple statement

that begins the play in voice-over: “And in seventeen thirty-four a Negro slave set fire to the City of Montreal and was hanged” (5). This line is repeated, with the first word in the sentence dropped until only the word “hanged” remains, echoing for effect. Few facts of Angélique’s life are known; even her name was likely chosen by her Montreal-based owner. The first African Canadian Governor-General, Michaëlle Jean, recently acknowledged that while no-one knows if Angélique actually set the fire, the details matter little now. Gale insists that Angélique’s “silence” in the historical record “speaks untold volumes of our diasporic history” (“Writing” 20), volumes which the play begins to stage. This play does not seek to be a memorial to one woman: rather, it seeks a place to belong. Angélique’s tough existence in Canada ends with an escape attempt at the time of the fire, followed by her recapture and her brutal execution. As a black slave, Angélique is unlikely to find a place in 1734 Montreal (except as a scapegoat), yet this resourceful woman manages to establish some (fragile) room for herself, a “diaspora space” of sorts.

Jean’s tribute to Angélique underscores the connections that Gale makes between history and the present: the play’s ‘history lesson’ combines with contemporary Montreal in the same pictorial and narrative frame. As the play progresses, the simple eighteenth-century costumes and props are augmented by contemporary ones, effectively collapsing the distance between 1734 and the present. Corsets and long skirts give way to contemporary business suits, while eighteenth century carpet-beating implements cross paths with electric vacuum cleaners. Angélique’s enslavement is thus cross-referenced with African Canadians in the present, as contemporary Montreal is situated in the same theatrical and narrative frame as the Montreal of 1734. The growth of Angélique’s owner’s ironworks stands in for the growth of the developing city, and the audience is encouraged to see in the expansion of the ironworks the transformation from the pioneering settlement to today’s bustling city. Montreal is not represented graphically in Gale’s play, but the complex, multicultural city (with inhabitants who identify as neither French nor English) is nevertheless sketched in both abstract and concrete terms.

Little has actually changed in almost three hundred years as the Montreal of today also fails to make adequate room for people of different classes, races, and genders attempting to inhabit the same space. In the frequent flickering from past to present and back again, Angélique and César remain domestics (and are always working). The author’s note stipulates that “[u]nless otherwise

stated, the slaves are working in every scene in which they appear, either in a modern or historical context” (3). Being enslaved also means being powerless to escape the sexual advances of her master, to whom Angélique bears several children. Her mistress knows who has fathered the children, but her mistress’s silence reinforces Angélique’s ‘invisibility’ in this community.¹⁰ Meanwhile, François and Thérèse continue to amass the wealth they have built on both the backs and souls of others. It is convenient to forget such a history, but vital that we remember:

[if] all we learn from her experience is that slavery was a demeaning and inhuman chapter in the history of mankind, then we walk away with the knowledge that we went through it—black and white, slave and master—together in Canada. Slavery is not black history; it is Canada’s history. (Gale, “Writing” 20)

Alan Filewod argues that the key to understanding the play’s profound rewriting of history is to assess the role of witnessing, a “deliberately unsettling” and performed tactic of testimony (288).¹¹ While I agree with Filewod’s compelling assessment of the power of witnessing, it is also productive to explore *Angélique*’s dislocation as a means to address the in/visibility of the ambivalent African Canadian subject.

Unlike most slaves who seek invisibility to avoid ill-treatment, Angélique seeks visibility as a means of intersecting with a community to find a place to belong. She is also on stage for most of the play, even if, as a slave, her actions of cleaning are frequently deemed to be invisible. Angélique does her best to entangle herself in her surroundings: she is determined to ‘settle’ in Montreal, even if she is enslaved. She wills that “These people will be different. These folk will be decent and good” (11), but she comes to acknowledge that “These people work me harder than they work their horses” (31).

Her plan fails and she attempts to escape. In departing this alien land, she and Claude, a white indentured labourer, flee Montreal for what they have heard to be the more prosperous and fair-minded New England: the irony of a slave escaping Canada to find freedom in the United States is made explicit. The escape is, however, thwarted when Claude abandons her, and she is captured to be tortured and hanged for arson. This was always to be her fate, and the audience is under no illusions about her demise from the beginning.

Neither a literal belonging in Montreal nor a literal escape

from enslavement is possible for Angélique who then opts for a metaphoric means of situating herself somewhere. She looks to two remote locations: the island of her birth (Madeira, off the coast of Portugal where she was also enslaved) and to a spirit world. For the first of these two ‘escapes,’ she turns to her memories of Madeira where she recalls hearing about events from an even more remote world, an unspecific ‘Africa.’ In Madeira, Angélique’s people would, she says, “tell the stories of our ancestors” (31), whose homeland is beyond even the reach of her memories. She abandons Montreal—at least in her mind—for a rural idyll, still a land of slavery, but a land to which she had more of a connection than she does with Montreal. The second ‘escape’ is to a spirit world. This is the world to which she sends her children, once she smothers them shortly after their birth so that they can ‘live’ (so to speak) more happily there than in this world: she says, “Fly home and greet the darkness. There are others there. Mama loves you and will join you soon” (26). Angélique takes refuge in all that remains: the abstract existence of her memories and a spirit world.

Such abstract attempts to belong are ultimately more productive for Angélique than negotiating a city and landscape that continually fail to acknowledge her, whether in 1734 or today. The association between historical Montreal and contemporary Montreal again becomes crucial: if Angélique has no place in 1734 Montreal, what place does she have in twenty-first-century Montreal? Filewod argues that “Angélique comes to believe that neither she nor her children will ever negotiate a place in this new country: there will always exist a blackness that borders the map of the cultural imagination” (282). Her children will (not) belong, a response that is echoed in Angélique’s final speech:

In the vista of tomorrow
stretching out before,
I can see this city...
swarming with ebony.
There’s me and me and me and me ...
My brothers and my sisters!

My brothers and my sisters...
Arrested for their difference.
Their misery
a silent scream,
rising to crescendo
and
falling on deaf ears.

There is nothing I can say to change what you perceive.
I will from twisted history,
be guilty in your eyes. (75)

The second stanza quoted here shifts to address contemporary urban realities that continue “falling on deaf ears.” *Angélique* untwists history and, in doing so, raises the possibility of a differently configured “vista of tomorrow.” The play leaves the audience to ascertain how the “vista of tomorrow” might unfold so that the historical experience is not repeated. The Montreal of 1734 made no room for Angélique, but the play offers Canadians of today an increased—if still limited—range of possible diaspora spaces.

Gale’s play suggests how Angélique might have burned Montreal (in addition to placing as strong or stronger opportunity and motive in the hands of several other characters) but forensic evidence is not the point of the play. The abstract places that Angélique occupies in order to establish her subjectivity are less sanctioned by a community than Africville’s abstracted location, but they nevertheless provide a basis for selfhood, even if it is fragmented.

All three plays examined here explore rarely-articulated versions of Canadian history as they examine the difficulty in locating African Canadian subjectivity productively in the light of literal urban dislocation. *Riot*, *Consecrated Ground*, and *Angélique* illustrate different ways of locating identity in place, even if that place is only quasi-concrete, its foundations paradoxically ‘grounded’ in abstractions. The performance of the in/visibility of African Canadians contrasts the plays’ absencing the dominant city from the stage. In its place are modified diaspora spaces, abstracted alternative to ‘belonging’ in both the wider community and the nation. They contest conventional boundaries of and for the city. The diaspora spaces that the plays map may be less stable than concrete buildings, but they are nevertheless characterised by alternative degrees of solidity. Further, they help articulate what Lavie and Swedenburg call the “historically grounded multiple subject positions” (5) that productively describe the characters and communities in these plays. The performance of diaspora spaces, even if compromised, helps make visible African Canadian identities, as the plays renegotiate the nature of Canadian landscape, history, and identity at large. Finally, they also “seriously problematise[...] the subject position of the ‘native’” (Brah 181). ❁

NOTES

- 1 Thanks to Sarah Holland-Batt for her help in researching this paper and her careful edits of a draft.
- 2 Note that Brah distinguishes “diaspora space” from “diaspora” itself (see 209). The use of the word ‘diaspora’ in this context may seem unusual: a broadly-defined African Canadian community may not appear initially to be diasporic, even though “[d]iaspora theories are derived principally from the historically specific experience of ‘the Black Atlantic’” (Lavie and Swedenburg 14). Certainly, theories of diaspora and the political and social contexts of the African Canadian community have changed markedly since the days of slavery, and the histories of African Canadians have many other socio-political trajectories as well. I recognise that while diaspora usually incorporates some sense of a desire for a ‘return’ to an original culture or context, that is not the case for many African Canadians. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘diaspora space’ is very helpful in interrogating the spatial achievements in the three plays.
- 3 This perception is echoed by most critics who write about the context of the urban. See for instance Blum, Donald, Edwards and Ivison, Lehan, and Pike.
- 4 Several characters can, however, point to numerous examples of Canadian racist violence in the past (Moodie 61).
- 5 This is an argument that Walcott makes in several contexts. See also his assertion that “the possibility of a Black Canadian subject is always a fractured subject and a fractured desire” (“Rhetorics” 19).
- 6 Walker writes that “[i]n 1848 the earliest black deeds were registered, and in 1849 a Baptist church was established. That community took the name of Campbell Road, from its thoroughfare, and by 1851 it showed a population of 54” (156). Boyd’s author’s note outlines that Africville was settled by black refugees from the war of 1812. They were given land grants here and elsewhere in Nova Scotia in particular by various heads of state and monarchs, including Queen Victoria (7).
- 7 In addition to Boyd’s play, Walker singles out two other creative texts that focus on Africville, including “Shelagh Mackenzie’s film *Remember Africville* [and] Joe Sealy’s jazz album *Africville Suite*” (162).
- 8 Gossip in the play suggests a park, but residents learn that, adding insult to injury, the ‘site’ would be turned into approach ramps for a new bridge (57).
- 9 Maureen Moynagh also outlines a project of “re-mapping of Africville, which draws not only on the geography imagined by former residents, but enlarges it in an effort to encompass the diversity of African Nova Scotian identity and experience in the province as a whole” (19).
- 10 Thérèse does, however, use François’s infidelity (in the rape of Angélique) as an excuse to beat her slave (Gale, *Angélique* 29-30).

- 11 'Testimony' in the form of 'testifying' is significant for Djanet Sears in African Canadian drama generally. See the introduction to *Testifyin': Contemporary African Canadian Drama*, i-iv.

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