

Exhibition Reviews

Many Rivers to Cross: The African-Canadian Experience. THE MULTICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY OF ONTARIO. Mounted at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa. 4 May 1992 - 3 January 1993. 16 p. catalogue.

Many Rivers to Cross: The African-Canadian Experience, mounted by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and curated by Sheldon Taylor, utilizes photographs, drawings, paintings, maps, sheet music-covers, and a videotape in order to attempt to convey the range and scope of the Black experience in Canada. Divided into four sections entitled, "Setting Out: Migration," "A Precious Cargo: Culture," "Charting a Course: The Struggle for Justice," and "Towards the Other Shore: Searching for a Role," the exhibit employs these nautical metaphors in order to guide the viewer from the origins of the African-Canadian community to the present, and to illustrate the diverse roles that African-Canadians play in contemporary Canada. One therefore undertakes a visual voyage through African-Canadian history. This arrangement communicates the subtle message that African-Canadians have always been part of Canadian life and now seek an enhanced presence.

The majority of illustrations (of which most are black-and-white photographs) depict notable African-Canadians. Although such a focus serves to highlight the significant achievements of individual African-Canadians, it fails to represent the details of everyday life.

The exhibit opens with illustrations of early Black immigrants, such as Mattieu da Costa (who came to Nova Scotia in 1605), and a Black Loyalist girl (whose parents would have arrived in Nova Scotia in 1783). Other key images in this section include portraits of the slave liberator Harriet Tubman, Alberta pioneer John Ware, and a reproduction of a front page from Henry Bibb's abolitionist newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive*.

These illustrations stimulate interest; however, they compose a mosaic rather than a panorama of Black immigration to Canada. For instance, a photograph of Seraphim "Joe" Fortes informs one that he taught hundreds of Vancouver children to swim at the turn of the century, but it fails to connect his presence in British Columbia with any pattern of Black settlement on the West Coast. This problem pervades the exhibit: illustrations seem to be included more often for their intrinsic interest than for their overall contribution to a theme.

In the "Culture" portion of the exhibit, Taylor proudly parades images of great African-Canadian artists such as the contralto Portia White, the novelist Austin Clarke, the nineteenth-century landscape painter Grafton Taylor Brown, and the late film-maker Jennifer Hodge de Silva. He also includes images of churches and ministers. The most engaging imagery, and perhaps



School children during the 1930s at Montreal Negro Community Centre. Courtesy of Dominick and Mairuth Sarsfield, Ottawa.

the most interesting part of the exhibit, nevertheless, is that devoted to songwriter Shelton Brooks. The mounting of several of Brooks's colourful sheet-music covers provides graphic evidence of his creativity. More artifacts of this type should have been employed.

The Culture section also emphasizes the strong Ontario orientation of this supposedly national exhibit. Though Taylor strives to deploy the term "African-Canadian" to articulate the continuity between the experience of the historical Black Canadian community (generally American in origin) and that of the newer community (generally Caribbean and African in origin), it turns into a synonym for the African-Ontarian experience, because most new African-Canadians have settled in that province.

Non sequiturs bedevil the "Struggle for Justice" section. For instance, one must guess the reason for the inclusion of a photograph of Ada Kelly, the first Black teacher in Windsor, Ontario. Segregation in Chatham, Ontario, in the 1950s is discussed, but not segregation elsewhere. The photograph of a social evening at the Montreal Negro community centre in 1952 belongs more to "Culture" than to "Justice." The razing of the historic Black Nova Scotian (I prefer the adjective "Africadian") community of Africville rates only one photograph. The reproduction of a tabloid newspaper story about African Liberation Day, 1972, gives no details of its import. This part of the exhibit should be reconstructed.

The final section, "Towards the Other Shore," presents a visual Who's Who of contemporary African-Canadians: executives, politicians, sports figures, and even a World War II pilot. However, the Ontariocentric claim that Dr. W.C. Perry ended discrimination in nursing ignores the successful struggle waged by Rev. Dr. William Pearly Oliver and Dr. Pearleen Oliver to end such discrimination in Nova Scotia. Taylor's impressionistic approach results in hazy history.

A videotape which accompanies the exhibit was not operative during this reviewer's visit (which occurred on a day when the museum is normally closed). Hence, some of the above criticism might be tempered or even cancelled given a detailed, contextualizing video. The catalogue, though well-written, also trades in impressions—mere snippets of information that again fail to indicate the regional and cultural complexities of the African-Canadian experience. Moreover, Taylor's assertion that the beautiful phrase "Towards the Other Shore" is taken from George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965), is only partially correct: Grant borrowed the phrase from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

To conclude, the exhibit is a passable introduction to the African-Canadian experience. However, its glossing-over of regional differences in order to promote what one must presume is an underlying cultural nationalism (thus the use of red, black, and green the colours of Pan-Africanism in the exhibit's publicity) results in an Ontariocentric bias. Furthermore, the emphasis on individual achievement ignores the historical context in which these successes occurred. The show would also have benefited from the display of more artifacts, thus grounding the African-Canadian experience in three-dimensional objects as well as in abstract history. Finally, and positively, it should be noted that the laser-printed captions are clear and bold—and bilingual.

George Elliott Clarke
Queen's University

Peterborough: The Canoe Capital of Canada. The Peterborough Canoe. Mounted at the Peterborough Centennial Museum, Peterborough. 18 July - 30 August 1992. 23 p. catalogue.

The canoe has played an important role in Canada's transformation from colony to nation. For the First Peoples, fur traders, explorers, and surveyors, the canoe was a necessary component in their quest to unlock the mysteries of the Canadian interior. The canoe has also been the inspiration for artists, craftsmen, poets, and writers, who used it to portray the mysticism and romanticism of the wilderness experience. This visual record of Canada's rich canoeing heritage was recently exhibited at the Peterborough Centennial Museum.

The curators of this exhibition, entitled *Peterborough: The Canoe Capital of Canada*, should be congratulated for this fine tribute not only to canoeing, but also to the role that Peterborough has played in its evolution. The exhibit area, although small, presented the visitor with a diverse presentation of the theme through the use of artifacts as well as visual and written documents. The mixing of canoes, with the visual and written storyboards, not only gave the exhibit a rustic atmosphere, but also allowed for the viewer to relate the written word to the physical shape, style, and construction of the canoes.