

When and Where I Enter: History, Film, and Memory

Sylvia D. Hamilton

Volume 41, Number 2, Summer/Autumn 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad41_2art01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hamilton, S. D. (2012). When and Where I Enter:: History, Film, and Memory. *Acadiensis*, 41(2), 3–16.

When and Where I Enter: History, Film, and Memory

SYLVIA D. HAMILTON

IN THIS ESSAY, BASED ON MY 2010 W.S. MACNUTT LECTURE at the University of New Brunswick, I reflect on a trinity of themes – history, film, and memory – as I encounter them and as they present themselves in my work. First, though, it is important that I acknowledge and offer respect to the First Nations' elders of New Brunswick. I also wish to mention two filmmakers whose work I admire – the late Errol Williams and Semra Yüksel. Errol Williams's film *Echoes in the Rink: The Willie O'Ree Story*, a heartfelt and lovely tribute to Willie O'Ree, is important for someone like me, who with my brother and cousins squared off playing hockey with makeshift, homemade hockey sticks on Lovett's Lake in Beechville, Halifax County, where I grew up. When we watched the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens on *Hockey Night in Canada*, we never saw anyone who looked like us. We did not know about New Brunswick's Willie O'Ree. Semra Yüksel's film, *The Honourable Muriel McQueen Fergusson*, taught me a lot about this remarkable woman – a daughter of Shediac, New Brunswick, and the first female speaker of the Canadian Senate – and her unreserved commitment to social justice and women's equality.¹

Within the tradition of the Akan people of West Africa, there is the concept of Sankofa – a return to the source: it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot.²

And, as African American historian John Henrik Clarke once said, "History is not everything, but it is a starting point. History is a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is a compass they use to find themselves on the map of human geography. It tells them where they are, but more importantly, what they must be."³

1 *Echoes in the Rink: The Willie O'Ree Story*, DVD, directed by Errol Williams (Fredericton: New Brunswick Filmmakers' Co-operative, 1997; Vancouver: Moving Images Distribution); *The Honourable Muriel McQueen Fergusson*, directed, produced, and distributed by Semra Yüksel (Fredericton: Arcolet International, 1996). This essay is adapted from the William Stewart MacNutt Memorial Lecture that the author delivered at the University of New Brunswick Saint John and Fredericton campuses on 23 and 24 November 2010. The first part of the title, "When and Where I Enter," is borrowed from Paula Gidding's 1984 book *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

2 Christel N. Temple discusses the Sankofa concept in "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States," *Journal of Black Studies*, online at <http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/early/2009/04/15/0021934709332464>.

3 John Henrik Clarke (1915-1998) was a prolific scholar, historian, and black intellectual who was born in Alabama. See <http://africana.library.cornell.edu/africana/clarke/index.html>.

Since our earliest days in Canada as African-descended people, we have striven to find a compass: to locate ourselves in this vast land, to plot our position on the physical and mental map of Canada. I am a direct descendant of one group of those early pioneers who settled in Nova Scotia – the Black Refugees of the War of 1812.

I am the grateful daughter of Marie Nita Waldron and Gerald Mac Hamilton, the granddaughter of Ida Grosse and Gilbert Hamilton and of Hattie Kellum and William Waldron, and the great granddaughter of Charlotte and Charles Grosse. William Waldron was a sailor and watchmaker who came to Halifax from the Barbados at the turn of the century and married Hattie Kellum. All are the reason I can stand before you today.

I have become a seeker, trying to plot some of the co-ordinates, not just for myself, but also for others. For me, as a filmmaker and a writer, history and memory combine to create a lens through which I view the present. These joint themes figure in much of my work that draws on oral story telling, archival and other found documents and objects, and on geography to tell stories about African Nova Scotians and African Canadians generally.

My work re-inserts and re-positions African-descended people in our landscapes by presenting stories and images of people being *witnesses* to their own lives. Their experiences and stories are the evidence of their realities. I think that a true understanding of our past and its meaning, one rooted in our bones, is vital to our future.

My back-story

In dramatic storytelling, writers develop a world for their characters – a “back-story” – in order to understand better their motivation, their actions, and why they do what they do – in short, their “context.” So I begin with some words about my back-story, my journey into our history and into the world of image making.

To borrow a phrase from Alberta writer Myrna Kostash, “Where you stand is the place that will inform your specificity. That’s how you will distinguish yourself from global culture. Your imagination requires and demands that you be from a particular place.”⁴

My context, my specificity, frames the work that I do. I recall my first exposure to archival documents related to African peoples in Nova Scotia. It was the mid-1970s. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia was housed in a small old stone building on the campus of Dalhousie University. Staff would disappear from behind the desk, into the stacks, and then emerge with long, grey, rectangular, lidded boxes as back then you routinely were given original documents.

I put on the clean white cotton gloves to examine maps, correspondence from governors and other officials dating from the 1700s, reports, education petitions, and *Clarkson’s Mission to America* – detailing the experiences of Black Loyalists and the preparation for the voyage to Sierra Leone⁵ – as well as documents about the War

4 “Andrea Kopyleck talks with Myrna Kostash,” in *Legacy, Alberta’s Culture Heritage Magazine* (Winter 2002), 49.

5 John Clarkson, *Clarkson’s Mission to America, 1791-1792*, ed. Charles Bruce Fergusson, Publication No. 11 (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1971).

of 1812 Black Refugees (my ancestors). There were also original minutes of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, established in 1854. It was not just handling the physical artifacts that caught my imagination; it was the embedded memory they represented.⁶

I moved back in time to imagine the people who had inhabited some of the locations I knew so well. I began to think about what their lives and experiences meant to my life and to the lives of my contemporaries. Yet none of what I saw had been in my school textbooks – at the elementary, secondary, or university levels. How does one deal with such absence, such exclusion? I sat in classes never learning about people who looked like my family, my friends, my relatives. You know *you exist*, your body is evidence, but nothing of you exists in this wider world. And what exists does not match your reality. People of African descent were barely present in any meaningful way. In the rare case where there was reference, we were framed as the “Coloured” or “Negro” *problem* – a problem to be solved, and not by us as self-directed human beings.

During research for my film *The Little Black School House*, people spoke of sitting in classrooms in grade 5 or 6 when “Africa” was introduced in the geography text. There was this “wild” child named Bunga, who lived in the forest jungle with no need of clothes. An earlier generation faced the small text entitled *The Little Black Sambo*. Though a generation apart, these caricatures were used against us, the names – racial slurs – new additions to the name-callers’ lexicon. Africa was always surrounded with negative associations. It was the *dark continent* that was home to the white hero Tarzan, who had to tame both the wild animals and the *black heathens*.

After that benchmark visit to the archives, I edited a special issue of a news magazine called *Grasp* (the communications organ of the Black United Front, a province-wide advocacy organization). The focus was the African United Baptist Association (AUBA). I used archival documents and interviewed church leaders and community elders. I asked myself what more could I do to bring these stories and this rich history into view?

Answering this question became the motivation for my work over the next 35 years, during which I made countless trips to the archives to gather material for my documentary films and to inform my research and writing.

Remembering the moving images of the '50s

As a child growing up in the late 1950s, I remember watching black and white movies at our all-black community school – a segregated school – in Beechville. Friday and Saturday nights were movie nights. They were mostly old westerns and, sometimes, other movies that were likely from The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) (though I don’t know for certain).

6 Copies of the minutes of the African United Baptist Association are in the holdings of the Maritime Baptist Archives, Acadia University Archives, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. While not a complete set, the archives does have copies of some of the earliest versions. Some copies may also be found at the Nova Scotia Archives (NSA). Of particular note is the use of the term “African” – a clear demonstration that people of African descent have claimed that heritage from their earliest arrival in Nova Scotia.



Dr. Lorne White, Sylvia D. Hamilton, and Dr. Donald Fairfax, production still from *Portia White: Think on Me*, 1999, Halifax, courtesy Maroon Films Inc.

Sometimes my uncle was behind the projector; other times, a man would arrive to show them. Everybody crowded in, young and old alike. Then came television. Our family could not afford one at first, so we would make the trek along the road in our village to my Aunt Gertie's house to watch *Ed Sullivan*, *Bonanza*, *Hockey Night in Canada*, *Don Messer and His Islanders*, and *Sing Along Jubilee*.

There was a black person on *Sing Along Jubilee*. He was just there, part of the group, singing along . . . amazing. We did not see black people on TV in those days. Years later I found out who it was: the late Dr. Lorne White, a schoolteacher and principal and brother to Portia White (and the youngest son of Rev. William Andrew and Izzie Dora White). Little did I know then that I eventually would interview Lorne White and other members of his family for a documentary film entitled *Portia White: Think On Me* that I would make about his famous sister.

But a Hollywood movie gave me my first image of a Black person writ large on the screen. The movie was *Muscle Beach Party*. If I try very hard I might remember what the movie was about. What it was about, though, was unimportant. What was important was that "Little Stevie Wonder" was in it. And what a "wonder" he was, up there singing, finger snapping, and playing his harmonica like there was no tomorrow. I don't know how many times I went to see that movie, just to see little Stevie. I lost count. Then came Sidney Poitier – *In The Heat of The Night* and *To Sir With Love* – as well as Cicely Tyson in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.⁷

It was so rare to see anyone who looked like me in movies and on television that when it happened it became an event, akin to a very good meal that would keep you going for quite a while: solid nourishment, comfort food.

⁷ *Muscle Beach Party*, directed by William Asher, 1964; *In The Heat of The Night*, director Norman Jewison, 1967; *To Sir With Love*, director James Clavell, 1967; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, director John Korty, 1974.

By the mid-1960s there was a regular line-up of black performers taking Ed Sullivan's stage: The Supremes, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, The Temptations, and Marvin Gaye. Music was ever present in my life – then and now – from the gospels and spirituals we sang at church to impromptu singsongs at a neighbour's house, to the country music played by my cousins, to the 45-rpm records played by my older brothers and sisters. I am conscious of how I have brought this thread into my films as a vital element of the storytelling. In *Black Mother Black Daughter*, there are two songs: "Lydia Jackson" tells the story of the Black Loyalist woman of that name, and the theme song is "Black Mother Black Daughter." I consider both as story songs that carry the themes of the film. *Portia White: Think on Me*, discussed in greater detail below, has music at its core.⁸

Spreading the news

In Halifax during the 1960s and 1970s we had several short-lived but significant black magazines and newspapers. And we'd wear out *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, whenever we would find them. The local publications were crucial vehicles of communications within and among Nova Scotia's black communities. Local periodicals such as *The Negro Citizen*, *The Clarion*, *The Jet Journal*, and *Ebony Express*, during the periods when they were published, enjoyed a wide readership.⁹ Through them, people spoke to each other without having to rely on the local media to cover their events or news from various locales. Along with the weekly bulletins, with "announcements," printed by African Baptist churches throughout the province, these materials served to connect and knit the communities. The American magazines linked us to that larger black world of which we were a part.

In later years, as I continued my research, I found out that the local publications had an important antecedent: *The Atlantic Advocate*, published in Halifax between 1915 and 1917 by a small group led by W.A. Decosta. The editors' intent was to publish a periodical that would be "devoted to the interests of coloured people in the Dominion generally, but more particularly to those in the Maritime Provinces." The inaugural issue announced its aims: "The Atlantic Advocate will record the history of its people not only of the present, but will gather from various sources the history of past generations and lay them before the young so that they may know something of their ancestors. It is a duty we must perform. We must know our past if we would succeed in the future."¹⁰

There were few topics this newspaper did not cover. There were articles of a historical nature, ones that covered politics, the military, social issues, and a selection of local news, poetry, songs, and fiction. The April 1915 issue published a detailed obituary for James Robinson Johnston (1876-1915), Nova Scotia's first black lawyer, who registered at Dalhousie when he was just 16 years old, along with an informative feature article on Rev. Richard Preston, the founder of the African

8 *Black Mother Black Daughter*, directed by Sylvia D. Hamilton and Claire Prieto, (Halifax: National Film Board of Canada, Atlantic Centre, 1989), and available online at NFB.ca.

9 Selected copies of these publications may be found at the NSA under "Blacks-Nova Scotia-Periodicals."

10 See *The Atlantic Advocate* 1, no. 1 (1915), NSA.

Baptist Association. Correspondents from black communities throughout Nova Scotia submitted news for publication. There were reports from Saint John, New Brunswick; Chatham and Windsor, Ontario; Montreal; and from cities in the United States. Themes of race uplift, unity, the importance of education, and equality of opportunity dominated the pages. An early issue included a call for volunteers to join Canada's armed forces for the First World War.¹¹

Thirty years later, many of these themes again gained momentum as evidenced in another black newspaper – *The Clarion* (1946) – which originated in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia (with Carrie M. Best as its founder and publisher). It began as a single broadsheet with the masthead banner, “For Inter-racial Understanding and Good Will.” A year later, enjoying wide distribution throughout the Maritimes and other parts of Canada, it had grown to eight pages. Best, not confining herself to print, created her own radio program called *The Quiet Corner*, which featured her poetry readings and a musical playlist of sacred, operatic, and classical (but not rock and roll) selections. Issues published in 1947 contained articles about the practice of Jim Crow in local restaurants and theatres, problems of education and employment, and the importance of observing Negro History Week. By my count, from 1917 to 1999, there have been at least 17 publications originating within the African Nova Scotian community. Their existence has much to say about the need and desire of African people to inform and educate themselves and to control the tools used in the process.¹²

When poring over these publications, I was especially interested in seeing the pictures. Perhaps it was a yearning, a longing. Upon reflection, I realize I have been trying to find ways to capture memories all my life as a way to forestall forgetting. I remember snapping pictures with a small Brownie camera, which took a roll of black and white film about as long as your finger. I would gently lift the small tab, and then carefully pull the film from one spool to the other. Next came a small Kodak instamatic colour camera: flip open the back, pop in the cartridge, add a flash cube, snap, snap. And I remember going to the booth at Woolworth's in Halifax with my sister and my cousins, and having photos taken by what seemed like only a light since no camera was ever visible. A narrow strip of three black and white wallet-sized pictures for 25 cents. In my short film, *Keep On Keepin' On*, I use a photo of me along with my sister Janet, who is wearing those fabulous “cat-eye” frame glasses. The last frame of the film is of me and my daughter Shani. I convinced her to squeeze into one of those photo booths I found in a mall near where we live in Grand Pré.

11 For a detailed discussion of the struggle of African Canadians to be allowed to fight in the war, see Calvin W. Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion: No. 2 Construction, 1916-1920* (Dartmouth, NS: Society for the Protection and Preservation of Black Culture in Nova Scotia, 1986).

12 It is commonly believed (and indeed readers may find the assertion in print) that Carrie Best's *The Clarion* was the first black newspaper in Nova Scotia. However, that pride of place belongs to *The Atlantic Advocate*. It remains however, a testament to her courage, strength, and sense of justice that Carrie Best, under very tough circumstances, created *The Clarion*. She picked up the mantle left by the founders of *The Atlantic Advocate*. A second point of interest is that beginning in 1956 another publication took the name *The Atlantic Advocate* (1956-1992). It was a monthly magazine published by the University Press of New Brunswick. See New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia, http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/nble/a/atlantic_advocate_the.html. For a discussion of the development of *The Clarion*, see Carrie M. Best, *That Lonesome Road: The Autobiography of Carrie M. Best* (New Glasgow, NS: Clarion Publishing Company, 1977), ch. V (esp. 49-86). Copies of some issues of *The Clarion* are in the NSA.

Touchstones

Nobel Prize-winning writer Toni Morrison was once asked why she wrote the kind of books she wrote. She replied: “Because they are the kind of books I want to read.” Novelist Alice Walker extended this thought: “In my own work I write not only what I want to read – understanding fully and indelibly, that if I don’t do it, no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction – I write all the things I should have been able to read.”¹³ These statements, and indeed these authors, have been touchstones for my work. I began making films about our experiences as African Canadians because these films were not being made at all, or rarely in a manner that satisfied me. Above all, I needed these images. I needed to see work that came from “inside” the experience. In the days when I watched Little Stevie Wonder, Cicely Tyson, and Sidney Poitier, I had no idea that black people actually made films. To see people who looked like me on the screen was a revelation; to think that they might also be behind the camera, making films, was beyond my experience.

Of course, if I (and my classmates, I might add) did not learn about the history, culture, and contributions of African Canadians, or other African-descended people, in schoolbooks, why would we have learned about their involvement in filmmaking? I was starved for images. I knew that if I was not seeing “me” or people who looked like me, then neither was anyone else (regardless of their background). They may not have been starving as I was, but who ever turned down a good meal? I had to teach myself this history so I would understand there was a tradition within which I would be working.

In the 1970s I bought *The Black Photographer’s Annual* – a journal that featured the brilliant, evocative, black-and-white photographs of black photographers such as James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks. They captured images of people who looked like me from all stations in life: from cities, the country, children, women, men, and family groups. These journals were inspiring and demonstrated the extraordinary power of the still image.

While I was absorbing these still images, and reading authors such as James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and June Jordan, I had no idea that there was an early generation of independent black filmmakers. They included Bill Foster, founder of the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago; Emmett J. Scott, who produced *Birth of a Race* – a counterpoint to D.W. Griffith’s racist *Birth of a Nation*; the prolific Oscar Micheaux; and women such as Harryette Miller Barton. She was a casting agent, production manager, screenwriter, and director, but because of her gender she could not be credited on the films she was involved in producing. Today I continue to seek out the work of photographers and filmmakers of African descent as they present their views of and to the world.¹⁴

I did not know about Canada’s premiere jazz performer, Eleanor Collins of Vancouver. A Canadian trailblazer, she began her radio career in 1938 on CBC radio

13 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 8.

14 See *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: American Film Institute, 1993), for a discussion of the evolution of black American film and filmmakers.

where she performed with a group called the Swing Low Quartette and later with the Ray Norris Jazz Quintet. She moved to television in 1955 and became the first African Canadian woman, and the first variety show performer, to have a weekly, national television program that bore her name: *The Eleanor Collins Show* (one year before CBC television began airing *The Juliette Show*). Eleanor Collins was honoured with the 2005 Sam Payne Lifetime Achievement Award, presented to her by Judith Maxie – her daughter and an accomplished actor in her own right. In 2006 a Vancouver reporter noted that Collins “had a voice that could melt the hardest heart.”¹⁵

Yet during the 1970s, when I helped develop *Black Horizon* – a current affairs television program for a newly established cable station in Halifax – I did not have Ms. Collins or her groundbreaking program as a reference point; no one had written that history.

Sites of memory and the primacy of the image

I was introduced to the concept of “sites of memory” by a text entitled *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. Editors Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally used French historian Pierre Nora’s concept of “lieux de mémoire” – sites of memory – as the theoretical framework within which to examine the conjoined themes of history and memory. For them, this idea pointed to a new set of potential historical sources such as paintings, buildings, dances, journals, novels, poems, orality – which, taken together, linked individual memories to create collective, communal memories. This concept offered a way for me to think about my work as bringing together the private (through oral storytelling and family histories) and the public (as found in archival documents). Moreover, the act of filming personal stories for public viewing transforms them from the private space to a very multi-layered, broad public space that is local, national, and international and can include television, festivals, schools, community centres, libraries, etc.¹⁶

Cinematographer Arthur Jaffa, who shot filmmaker Julie Dash’s brilliant film about African American women at the turn of the century – *Daughters of the Dust* – has spoken of the importance of placing black people in the forefront of the cinematic frame: “One of the most radical things that can happen in film is the foregrounding of black subjectivity. Because, essentially, black people always end up being backdrop, but very seldom are we in the subject position.”¹⁷

My film work centres, visualizes, African people in narratives as active subjects with agency, not as problems and historical footnotes. Within these films, the still photograph plays a foundational role because we rarely had home movies. The photos I use come from family collections and from many public ones: archives, historical societies, and newspaper files. Sometimes they have identifying information, many times not. Even family photo albums may be silent on specific names, family connections, dates, and locations. Taken in another time, in another place, and often by unknown hands, they offer a glimpse of a past. In re-purposing

15 Author, on-going private correspondence with Judith Maxie, Vancouver, BC (1991-2012).

16 See Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. Introduction (3-17).

17 bell hooks, *Reel to Real* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), 222.



Producer/director Sylvia D. Hamilton in conversation with group of community leaders, production still from *The Little Black School House*, on location at the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, Dartmouth, NS, 2006, courtesy Maroon Films Inc.

these images within my work, I strive to use them respectfully and in as historically accurate a manner as possible. In *Black Mother Black Daughter* and in *Against the Tides: The Jones Family*, there are scenes with individuals combing through family albums as they remember the events and the people shown. Two other films, in particular, required extensive use of the still image fully on screen in the construction of the narratives: *Portia White: Think On Me* and *The Little Black School House*.¹⁸

Since Portia White had died in 1968, and there was no biography or major work about her, I faced an enormous challenge. To guide my process, I created a research map and a detailed chronology. It felt like detective work. I canvassed for people – family, friends, former colleagues and students, concert-goers, and musicologists. I placed an advertisement in a national newspaper, seeking people who worked or studied with her.

18 *Against the Tides: The Jones Family*, Hymn To Freedom Series, directed by Sylvia D. Hamilton (Toronto: Almeta Speaks Productions, 1993); *Portia White: Think On Me*, written, directed, and produced by Sylvia D. Hamilton (Grand Pré, NS: Maroon Films, 2000); *The Little Black School House*, written, directed, and produced by Sylvia D. Hamilton (Grand Pré, NS: Maroon Films, 2007).



Portia White, c. 1941, production still from *Portia White: Think on Me*, 1999, Halifax, courtesy Maroon Films Inc.

The search for images (moving and still) as well as newspaper reviews, magazine articles, correspondence, concert programs, audio material, and memorabilia was continuous. And there was the weight of responsibility in making “the first” work about her; my research had to be thorough.

I cross-referenced what I learned in the interviews with what I found in public records such as newspapers or correspondence on deposit in various archives. There were small nuggets of archival footage, but not enough to carry the narrative. To my great relief, I found a goodly number of lovely still images that, along with the archival audio recording of her speaking and singing voice, became the spine of the film. I worked diligently to match the photos with the time period in her life during which I believed they were taken.

Portia spent considerable time in New Brunswick, especially in Moncton, where her friend Ruth Wilson lived. Between 1941 and 1948 she performed in about 12 concerts in different locations, including Saint John and Fredericton. She was very proud of her Maritime heritage and never hesitated to tell journalists about her home and her early training in Halifax. What continued to both surprise and delight me during the long birthing process for this film was how precise so many of the people I interviewed were in their memories of her: what she wore, what she sang, and how she performed on stage. Memories were 50 years and holding. What an imprint she left. After broadcasts of the film, I received many e-mail messages from people who had seen her on stage. They, too, wanted to share their memories. Elsewhere I have written more extensively about the making of this singular documentary.¹⁹

19 For a detailed discussion of the research, development, and production of *Portia White: Think On Me*, see Sylvia D. Hamilton, “Searching for Portia White,” in *Rain/Drizzle/Fog: Film and Television in Atlantic Canada*, ed. Darrell Varga (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009), 259-87.

The Little Black School House

My mother Marie Hamilton taught in segregated schools in Halifax County, and I attended one in Beechville for the first few years of my schooling. She, along with other retired teachers, organized The Association of Retired Teachers of Segregated Schools of Nova Scotia, and in September 1990 they organized a reunion. I filmed segments of the weekend events for a two-part documentary project I had in the works at the National Film Board (NFB). My mother possessed an amazing ability to get things done.

The teachers wanted to visit the sites of the former segregated schools in Halifax County, but the group had no funds to hire a bus. Mom assured her colleagues they would have a bus. Indeed they did: she called the local bus company, told the manager what they wanted to do and why, and by the end of her telephone call she had a bus and driver (at no charge). However, this documentary project was not to be as a major fire at the Halifax NFB office on Barrington Street destroyed everything that was in the building. Many filmmakers lost everything; I lost all of my research material with the exception of a small amount of footage of a peace and justice rally in Halifax that had been sent before the fire to Montreal for processing.

When the Birchtown Black Loyalist Heritage Society (BLHS) office was firebombed in 2006, I was knocked backwards. I had been working with them for many years and had just produced a promotional DVD for the organization, the original footage of which was in their office. The NFB fire had been electrical – an old building, old wiring. The firebombing was not. It was arson, and while a person was charged with the crime, the case did not proceed as the Crown did not believe a conviction was possible. Was this an act of racism? I believe it was.

This was not the first time the BLHS had been attacked. Over the years there were other incidents; on several occasions vandals painted racist slogans on their building. I think of these assaults as similar in kind to the very specific theft of index cards related to Blacks, First Nations, and women from the Nova Scotia Public Archives in the early 1990s. No one was ever apprehended or charged with the theft, and it took the archives about 15 months of work to rebuild the reference card holdings.²⁰

I come from a long line of people who do not give up, so I revised my plan for a two-part documentary, shifting the frame to the second part of the project: a focus on youth. The film became *Speak It! From the Heart of Nova Scotia*, a phoenix – literally – rising from the ashes. In the film, Shingai Njakeka, the young narrator, gives a speech to his class on the occasion of Canada at 125 years, and 125 years of black history in Nova Scotia. He tells his classmates we must never forget that Canada was a slave society and that we had segregation in education.²¹

After many years of research, preparation, and fund raising, in the fall of 2006, with the Reunion of the Retired Teachers of Segregated Schools much in mind, I

20 In June 2012, after many years of work and fund-raising, the Black Loyalist Heritage Society turned the sod for its Black Loyalist Heritage Centre. See <http://www.blackloyalist.com/>. The information regarding the theft at the archives came from private correspondence with Nova Scotia Provincial Archivist and Director Lois Yorke, May 2012.

21 *Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia*, directed by Sylvia D. Hamilton (Halifax: National Film Board of Canada, Atlantic Centre, 1993), available online at NFB.ca.



Kent Nason, director of photography, and Sylvia D. Hamilton, producer/director, production still from *The Little Black School House*, on location in Guysborough NS, 2006, courtesy Maroon Films Inc.

began shooting *The Little Black School House*. Phoenix number two. Had I been able to produce the original project, education would have occupied a section of the film. Instead, it became the focus of the entire film, completed a year later in 2007. Taking a page from my Mom's notebook, I got a bus – a school bus – for our tour. It involved elders and youth, and we traveled to the former school sites in Guysborough County: old memories for the elders, new ones for the youth.

The year 2008 marked the 175th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, including Upper and Lower Canada. I wondered at the time how might Canadians commemorate this historic moment. There was some irony in thinking about commemorating the abolition of a system many Canadians believe we did not have. When slavery is referenced in my films, it becomes the subject of much discussion in question and answer sessions after screenings. Recent publications, such as historian Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angélique* and Ken Donovan's articles about slavery in Louisbourg, now play a significant role in dispelling the myth that it did not happen here.²²

22 See Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2006). Burial sites include the Redhead Cemetery in Guysborough County, Nova Scotia; Priceville, in Grey County, Ontario; and a place marked by a large stone, called "Nigger Rock," in St.-Armand, Quebec. Filmmakers Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland directed a documentary entitled *Speakers for the Dead* (Toronto: National Film Board, 2000) about the Priceville site. For Ken Donovan's work, consult Kenneth



Producer/director Sylvia D. Hamilton with student participants, production still from *The Little Black School House*, on location at the Chedabucto Education Centre/Guysborough Academy, Guysborough, NS, 2006, courtesy Maroon Films Inc.

While such information did circulate in academic and research circles, for the most part it is still unknown by the general public. What are the legacies, tracings, scorings of slavery in Canada? I point to the unearthing of burial sites in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, where enslaved African people were buried, as physical evidence. A segregated system of education is a primary and visible trace. The burial grounds and the locations of the former schools are sites of memory.

In conceptualizing *The Little Black School House*, several storytelling elements emerged: first and foremost there was oral testimony or first-hand accounts, but there were also still and moving archival images (especially school class photos), the geography and physical landscape and locations, documents such as education petitions, and music (archival and original). The visual landscape of the film comprises the still image, rare archival footage of “inside” the black classroom, specific sites/locations, and on-camera interviews. The soundscape is a multi-vocal narrative – many voices remembering, telling individual stories, that together combine to present a collective experience. Above all, children and youth are at the centre of the film. They open it and close it.

When researching and preparing this film, I had at least two distinct reactions. Those who had attended segregated schools, or who had relatives who did, were

Donovan, “Slaves and their Owners in Île Royale, 1713-1760,” *Acadiensis* XXV, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 3-32, and Kenneth Donovan, “A Nominal List of Slaves and Their Owners in Île Royale, 1713-1760,” *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (June 1996): 151-62.

glad to know the story would finally be told. For many others, the response was incredulity: they did not know. The United States, or South Africa, yes, but *not* in Canada. People passed by one of the schools, converted to a community hall, and never knew what it was in its original form. This was – and is – the story that is “hidden in plain sight.” Lack of knowledge about the existence of segregation in education in Canada comes from the burial of memory. People and their stories, even life-changing events, disappear from public memory. But they do not disappear from the lives and memories of the people who experienced them.²³

In a lifetime, I moved from the brownie camera to the iPhone camera. The possibilities for creating visual records of our lives are limitless. Dr. Carrie Best and other publishers picked up the torch from *The Atlantic Advocate*. I have as well. I have gathered from “various sources the history of past generations” and, in my films, have laid it before the young so that they may know something of their ancestors. James Baldwin once rightly said: “If history were past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present. You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history.”²⁴

23 For an expanded discussion about *The Little Black School House*, see Sylvia D. Hamilton, “Stories from The Little Black School House,” in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, ed. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DeGange, Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series 2011 (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 91-112.

24 Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia & New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971), 188.