

## Chapter 1

Nostalgia can be very dangerous, in that it *can* result in a kind of erasure ... of the real conflicts which did occur, particularly around questions of class, religion, gender and so on, and so one has to be *nervous*, to be really critical about one's nostalgia. [emphasis original]<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: Culpable Omissions, Absented Presences

Despite five centuries of black settlement and cultural production in Canada's Atlantic provinces, only one black Nova Scotian folk artist, Harold Cromwell, is represented in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. In spite of this institutional recognition, however, no scholarly inquiry into Cromwell's practice has been published and no exhibition dedicated exclusively to his work has ever been mounted.<sup>2</sup>

Cromwell's remarkable position as the sole 'Africadian,' or black Nova Scotian, artist in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's permanent folk art collection, as well as the lack of critical attention paid to his work, seems to reflect what many cultural critics have identified as the liminal position of black cultural production in Canada. Writer and academic George Elliott Clarke, for example, has called the dearth of scholarly interest in Africadian literature and artwork a "culpable omission," arguing that too often texts produced by African-Canadians are either subject to uncritical celebration or entirely

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<sup>1</sup> George Elliott Clarke cited in Maureen Moynagh, "Mapping Africadia's Imaginary Geography: An Interview with George Elliott Clarke" in *ARIEL* 27(4), October 1996: 74.

<sup>2</sup> Cromwell's work has been part of several group shows at galleries in Nova Scotia and Manhattan. In 1998 his work was exhibited at the Anna Leonowens Gallery, at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, as part of the show *In This Place* curated by David Woods and Harold Pearse. Between October 2002 and February 2003 his work was shown at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's Yarmouth branch as part of an exhibition of the gallery's permanent folk art collection. In 2003 Cromwell's work was part of the contemporary drawing show *Ballpoint Inklings* at KS Art, a contemporary art gallery located in Manhattan. From February 2007 to April 2007 his work was part of the exhibition *The Soul Speaks... African-Canadian Art*, curated by David Woods. Finally, Cromwell's work has been on display at the Sissiboo Landing Cultural and Interpretive Center in Weymouth, Nova Scotia since June 2007.

ignored.<sup>3</sup> Either way, as Clarke continues, the academy is guilty of diminishing, or at times entirely neglecting, artistic production emanating from black Canada, particularly within Nova Scotia. Similarly, cultural critic Rinaldo Walcott has labeled African-Canadian creative practices an “absented presence,” suggesting that black cultural production, much like the practitioners who produce these works, are rarely imagined as representative of Canadian culture writ large, and therefore both the artists and their productions struggle to come into representation.<sup>4</sup> Clarke and Walcott, along with many other theorists, have worked to disclose the erasure of black cultural production in Canada, and have initiated creative and academic projects to redress, reclaim, revive and advance African-Canadian literature, theatre, music, poetry and fine arts. However, the exclusion of African-Canadian creative practices persists. For example, while some inquiry has been made into black Nova Scotian *folk crafts*, such as the study and exhibition of Edith Clayton’s basket weaving practice, critical attention has not yet focused on Africadian *folk art* practitioners.<sup>5</sup> In order to address such omissions, this thesis takes Harold Cromwell’s drawing practice as a site of inquiry and investigates the place of Africadian artistic production within Nova Scotian folk art.

Cromwell’s monochromatic and intricately rendered ballpoint-pen drawings of 1930s Nova Scotia initially appear to fall in line with the pastoral aesthetic that typifies

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<sup>3</sup> George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, “By Way of a Brief Introduction—Insubordination: A Demand for a Different Canada,” in *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism*, ed. Rinaldo Walcott (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Here I use “folk crafts” to refer to the production of utilitarian objects that are rooted in an ethnically-based decorative tradition, and occupy a meaningful place in the everyday lives of their creators. “Folk art,” on the other hand, refers to creative practices that express a practitioner’s aesthetic interests and concerns, while also, occasionally, referencing traditional materials and/or ornamentation. See Joleen Gordon, *Edith Clayton’s Market Basket: A Heritage of Splintwood Basketry in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum, 1977); Sylvia Hamilton, “A Glimpse of Edith Clayton” in *Fireweed* 18 (Spring 1984): 64-68.

the province's folk art tradition. His work takes up the rural fishing and farming themes emblematic of this genre, and he seems to depict the province through the lens of a nostalgic antimodernism, narrating it as a timeless and bucolic haven. However, as I will show throughout this thesis, Cromwell's seemingly pastoral representations of Nova Scotia have an anxious underpinning that complicates his depiction of the province. By examining how his practice makes use of personal and historical memory, how it plays with nostalgia and critical hindsight, and how it mobilizes a distinctive line—or what I have termed a “nervous line”—I will show that Cromwell's Nova Scotia is not as idyllic as it might first appear. Unlike many of the province's other folk art practitioners, who produce work that thematically and aesthetically reflects vernacular traditions and/or looks to represent regional and national values and identity, Cromwell uses the forms of folk art to allude to Nova Scotia's history of racism and discrimination and as a result, I will suggest, discloses the problematic nature of the province's self-representation as a racially homogenous space. In the play between nostalgic subject matter and nervous formal elements, Cromwell's drawings capture the complicated position of Africadians within Nova Scotia, while also reworking the aesthetic conceptions and political possibilities of Nova Scotian folk art.

Working from the unique aesthetic and formal qualities of Cromwell's oeuvre, I have identified three broadly connected issues that arise from his practice and that have guided my research questions. First, as the only Africadian artist whose work is part of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's permanent folk art collection, this thesis will investigate the cultural politics of his inclusion in this collection, as well as the gallery's collection policies, in order to better understand the particularities of Cromwell's practice and the

place of Africadian artists within Nova Scotia's folk art tradition. Next, despite Cromwell's inclusion in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's collection, there has been no sustained study of his oeuvre. This project will address this gap in scholarship by analyzing Cromwell's artistic practice and his personal history in relation to larger regional narratives of Africadian settlement, cultural production and political organization. Finally, the aesthetic dimensions of Cromwell's practice differ significantly from conventional Nova Scotian folk art. Where most Nova Scotian folk art practitioners produce paintings or sculptures that feature textured surfaces, brightly painted colours and naïve representational forms, Cromwell's work consists of intricately rendered, monochromatic ballpoint pen drawings. Cromwell's distinctive art practice thus has a unique place within the aesthetics of Nova Scotian folk art, in its implications for Africadian identity, aesthetic and politics.

In order to properly investigate these research questions this study borrows methodologically from the disciplines of anthropology and art history. Such an interdisciplinary approach is required because of the complex nature of Cromwell's artistic practice and the lack of published information available on the artist and his oeuvre. In order to overcome such a dearth of information, my initial research was focused on assembling the artist's personal history and collecting images from his large body of work. In order to acquire such information I made use of ethnographic methods, including participant observation at the Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival and interviews with Cromwell, his family, and his professional acquaintances. These activities not only allowed me to produce Cromwell's biography, but also provided me with direct access to many of his original drawings, as well as numerous digital reproductions of his work.

With Cromwell's biography and artwork in hand, my next research step involved the in-depth study of his drawings. For this stage of research I used art historical methods, including an investigation into the aesthetics of Nova Scotian folk art and a formal analysis of Cromwell's oeuvre, to better understand the unique qualities of Cromwell's "nervous line" and his place within Nova Scotia's folk art tradition. My final stage of research involved synthesizing the information gleaned from my study of Cromwell's personal history and art work, in order to think through many of the questions surrounding place, race, history, identity and belonging that emerge from his practice. This included examining the history of black settlement in Nova Scotia in order to trace the construction of race and ethnicity in the province and the emergence of a distinctive Africadian culture and identity. As well as investigating the history and development of Nova Scotian folk art as a discrete form of folk production, and the historical and cultural relationship between folk art and Nova Scotian identity. This project is not strictly anthropological, nor is it strictly situated within the discipline of art history. Rather, this thesis emerges from a methodology that makes use of ethnographic data and close readings of Cromwell's drawings to conduct an historically situated cultural analysis of Cromwell's art practice.

### **Finding Harold Cromwell**

I first came across Cromwell's drawings through research I was undertaking for a project that was to be a broad examination of Nova Scotian folk art and the cultural politics animating that field. During my initial research I had come across brief references to Cromwell's work in community newspapers and in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's list of holdings. Knowing very little about Cromwell, I decided to include him on my list

of artists to investigate while in Nova Scotia for a research trip in 2007. In August of that year Cromwell was to participate in the Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival, held annually in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. I planned to attend this festival in order to interview artists and collectors, and to examine the dynamics of the Nova Scotian folk art economy. This turned out to be the entirely wrong setting in which to conduct interviews. Many of the artists present concentrated exclusively on making sales, and likewise, many collectors were aggressively focused on finding a deal. Therefore, I had a very difficult time finding subjects to interview. None of the participants seemed interested in reflecting on the artwork they were making or buying, or reflecting on the economy that has emerged from the production of these art objects. The only person I managed to speak with on that day was Harold Cromwell.

The Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival is held annually inside the Lunenburg War Memorial Arena. The Festival provides each artist with a booth, consisting of a table and a wooden backdrop on which to hang artwork. Cromwell's booth was located near the entrance of the arena. On his table he had various small drawings on display, most of which were framed and lay flat on the table, with the exception of three or four of his larger pieces which were placed on tabletop display stands. Cromwell, dressed in a smart plaid shirt, khaki bucket hat and matching fisherman's vest, sat quietly behind this table stacked with his work and paid little attention to the swarm of people surrounding his booth. Unlike the majority of other folk artists exhibiting at this festival, Cromwell never attempted to draw potential buyers towards his booth and he never engaged anyone in conversation. If someone had a question about his work would answer as precisely as possible, avoiding unnecessary chitchat.

By the time I arrived at his booth, twenty minutes after the festival opened, Cromwell had already sold three small drawings, priced at three hundred dollars each. Cromwell's ability to make such quick sales did not surprise me once I saw his artwork; prior to this festival I had only seen reproductions of his drawings. Facsimiles of his images neither adequately portray the intense saturation of black ink in his drawings, nor the detailed richness of his work. Had I not already known that Cromwell's pieces were ballpoint pen drawings I would have believed that they were intaglio prints. Despite their vernacular subject matter—rustic landscapes, farmers, hunters, fishermen and quiet villages—Cromwell's monochromatic imagery stood out distinctively from the other folk art on display. Most of the artists at this festival showed paintings and carved wooden objects that were characterized by brightly painted colours, textured surfaces and simplified representational forms (see Figs. 3-8). Cromwell was the only artist at this fair who used drawing as a medium and who worked in a black and white palette. His pieces stood out as both refined and sophisticated—adjectives that are not usually associated with folk art, of any kind. Seeing the unique qualities of Cromwell's drawings, particularly set against the work of his colleagues, piqued my interest in his work and led me to alter my initial research plan by making his work the focus of my thesis.

During a lull in the crowds at his booth I approached Cromwell and asked if I could interview him for my project. He asked me to sit down in the empty chair next to him and repeat the question—he could not hear me over all the ambient noise of the festival. I sat beside him and asked again if I could interview him about his artwork. He seemed genuinely surprised by my request and sat in silence for a few moments, with an obvious feeling of shyness beginning to creep over him. He then collected himself and

told me that he was too tired for an interview, explaining that he drove in early from Weymouth Falls to get to Lunenburg for the opening of the festival—a 176 kilometer drive—and had to leave right after the festival ended to get back home. He did, however, take the time to show me a few articles written about him in local newspapers. I then asked if there might some other time he would be free to give an interview, but he simply responded by telling me once again how tired he was. During our brief discussion Cromwell seemed very reserved and guarded, and, not wanting to make him feel even more uncomfortable, I decided to leave his booth and let him attend to the crowd that was growing around his table. I left intending to interview him at a later date. However, this brief encounter at the Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival would prove to be the one and only time I spoke with Harold Cromwell. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, seven months after this short discussion, he passed away in his home.

During the months between this research trip and Cromwell's passing I had begun to collect as much information on him as possible, to be well placed to engage in interviews and, possibly, participant observation with Cromwell during the following summer. Throughout this process I discovered that the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia held four of Cromwell's drawings in their permanent folk art collection, and managed to procure digital images of these works (Figs. 9-12). I also learned that Cromwell was the only Africadian artist whose work was in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's folk art collection—reputedly the largest and most prominent collection of Nova Scotian folk art in the world. In addition, I found a series of twenty-four images Cromwell had produced for the Black Educators Association of Nova Scotia (Figs. 23-46). This educational organization had approached Cromwell to produce images to accompany an elementary-

level curriculum unit, written by Carolyn Smith, on the Black Pioneers of Nova Scotia.<sup>6</sup> These twenty-four images represent the only drawings Cromwell ever executed in colour. Furthermore, I contacted the manager of Sissiboo Landing, Weymouth Fall's cultural and interpretive center, Jeanne Nesbitt.<sup>7</sup> Nesbitt was able to direct me to local newspaper clippings on Cromwell as well as to provide me with photographs she took of the artist in his home studio (Figs 48-60). By December of 2007 I had acquired many additional images of Cromwell's work, as well as some biographical information on the artist. Unable to take a trip to Nova Scotia before the summer of 2008, I sent Nesbitt a series of questions and asked her to interview Cromwell on my behalf. She kindly obliged my request and was able to conduct what turned out to be an invaluable taped interview with Cromwell, just two months before his death.<sup>8</sup>

After Cromwell's passing, the possibility of conducting anthropological fieldwork with the artist was foreclosed. My inability to follow through with interviews and participant observation with the artist was a major blow to my plan of study, which I had initially organized around the anthropological data I had expected to collect. Despite this setback, however, I did not want to abandon this project. The few months I had spent investigating Cromwell's practice had turned up some important research questions that needed to be pursued. I continued to investigate Cromwell's oeuvre and attempted to

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<sup>6</sup> See Carolyn Smith, "The Black Pioneers of Nova Scotia", Black Educators' Association of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, <http://lrt2.ednet.ns.ca/PD/bea/slidegif/notes.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Sissiboo Landing's mandate is to promote Weymouth Falls tourism and to celebrate the five cultures that founded the village: Mi'kmaq First Nations, United Empire Loyalists, Black Loyalists, Acadians and New France settlers. As part of this mission, the Sissiboo Landing website features a special section on long-time resident Harold Cromwell and the Center has two of his drawings on display in their exhibition space. See Village of Weymouth, "Sissiboo Landing," <http://www.weymouthnovascotia.com/attractions.php?content=15>; and Village of Weymouth, "Harold Cromwell," <http://www.weymouthnovascotia.com/attractions.php?content=18>

<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Nesbitt, DVD Interview with Harold Cromwell, Weymouth, Nova Scotia, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

make contact with his friends and family, in order to get their perspective on his work. Fortunately, in August 2008, Natasha Cromwell, Harold's youngest daughter and the executor of his estate, contacted me about my research on her father. She was alerted to my project by Shannon Parker, the curator of collections at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, whom I had been in contact with while conducting earlier research, as well as by Jeanne Nesbitt. Natasha kindly agreed to help me with my project, and has since participated in various interviews and has sent me additional images of Cromwell's artwork held by HEC Folk Art Studio, a company she established from Harold Cromwell's estate, with a mandate to collect, archive and conserve his oeuvre (Figs. 13-22).<sup>9</sup> Together with Sissiboo Landing and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, HEC Folk Art Studio, is working towards mounting a travelling exhibition of Cromwell's artwork and maintaining the integrity of his drawings for future exhibitions and research. With the help of Natasha Cromwell and the aforementioned organizations I have been able to pursue my research into Harold Cromwell's important artistic practice.

### **Introducing Mr. Harold Cromwell**

Wearing tinted glasses, a stylish black newsboy cap and a neat jacket, Harold Cromwell sits down for a videotaped interview about his life and work with his friend Jeanne Nesbitt. As Cromwell waits for the interview to begin—an interview Nesbitt is conducting on my behalf—he casually rests his crossed hands on the handle of the cane he holds between his legs, seeming calm and at ease. Nesbitt begins the interview by attempting to introduce Cromwell and his practice, announcing excitedly from behind the camera that the man on screen is: “Harold Cromwell, sketch artist and...”—before she

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<sup>9</sup> HEC Folk Art Studio is named after Harold Ellsworth Cromwell.

can finish, Cromwell interrupts Nesbitt. Amused, and perhaps slightly embarrassed, he cuts short this enthusiastic introduction by interjecting: “don’t forget the mister.”<sup>10</sup> Both Nesbitt and Cromwell laugh at this self-deprecating rejoinder, and Nesbitt takes pains to correct herself, reintroducing the man on screen as “*Mr.* Harold Cromwell.”

During the brief, but revealing, episode described above, Harold Cromwell demonstrates that he is at once witty, modest, playful, and shy. While included in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Cromwell only reluctantly accepts both the mantle of “folk artist” as well as praise for his artwork, preferring instead to quip self-disparaging remarks or to share an anecdote about life in the province. Cromwell’s propensity for joking, combined with what his daughter Natasha has called his “profound storytelling,” effects a sagacious, almost grandfatherly aura—heightened by his grey hair and goatee.<sup>11</sup> Cromwell draws from a rich archive of experience to animate each of his tales and he consistently shows throughout this interview that he is a man who has lived a long, and sometimes hard, life. His sharp mind and good-natured, if slightly mischievous, manner makes him seem much younger than his ninety years.

Like the artist, Jeanne Nesbitt lives in Weymouth, Nova Scotia and has been acquainted with Cromwell for many years. She first met him at age five, at her elementary school, Weymouth Consolidated School. Nesbitt’s teacher had asked Cromwell, then the school’s janitor, to draw a picture on the side blackboard to decorate the classroom. Cromwell obliged and drew a wild animal set in a lush forest. This drawing made such an impression that her teacher allowed Cromwell’s work to stay on

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<sup>10</sup> This is the same taped interview conducted by Jeanne Nesbitt on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Natasha Cromwell, email interview, October 16<sup>th</sup> 2008.

the board until it was smudged beyond recognition and Nesbitt relates “being disappointed that such a nice picture could just be erased off and gone forever.”<sup>12</sup> Nesbitt became reacquainted with Cromwell over thirty years later in her capacity as manager of Sissiboo Landing, when the center decided to put Cromwell’s work on display. Eventually their professional relationship developed into a friendship, with Nesbitt describing the privilege of, “see[ing] a gentler and kinder man than a lot of people knew.”<sup>13</sup>

It was because of his friendship with Nesbitt that Cromwell was willing to participate in this interview, and share the major events of his life and his thoughts on his artistic practice. Cromwell begins by explaining that he was born in Southville, Nova Scotia on December 11<sup>th</sup>, in 1919 (Fig. 2). He grew up five kilometers away in near-by Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia, where he continued to make his home until his death in March 2008 (Fig. 2). A descendent of Joseph and Jane Cromwell, former American slaves and black Loyalists who arrived in the province in 1783, he was the third of ten children to parents Frank and Etta Cromwell.<sup>14</sup>

After spending a little bit of time in front of the camera, Cromwell becomes more comfortable and settles into a much more relaxed and idiosyncratic way of speaking. He begins to draw out certain syllables and letters, letting “o’s” linger in his mouth so the word “long” becomes extra-long and round, and letting “s’s” slowly slip out from between his teeth so that any word containing this letter becomes a breathy trace of what

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<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Nesbitt, personal correspondence, July 16<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Nesbitt, personal correspondence, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Blair Cromwell, relative of Harold Cromwell, personal correspondence, March 5<sup>th</sup> 2008.

it once was. This irregular manner of speech fills the silence in between words and allows Cromwell to collect his thoughts before seamlessly moving on to his next story.

Cromwell speaks clearly and openly, but there is a sense of playful hesitation about him. While poised, Cromwell is a little shy, and except for one marked occasion, he never engages the camera directly. Throughout the duration of this forty-minute interview, his eyes remain hidden behind his tinted glasses and they seem to skip across the room, purposefully avoiding the camera's lens. The one and only time Cromwell immediately addresses the camera occurs when he is asked a question about his wife. At this point, unsure if the camera is still rolling, he asks Nesbitt if the answer to this question is also being recorded. When he is told that the tape is still running, Cromwell looks directly at the camera and makes a humorously pained face, and then deftly avoids the question. Just as Nesbitt has suggested, there seems to be much more to Harold Cromwell than he allows others to know.<sup>15</sup>

Following this clever evasion of the question concerning his wife, Cromwell has no trouble opening up about his childhood. He grew up very poor. His father was, as he described him: "a hard working man, not a drinking man," however his family consisted of twelve people and both of his parents died when he and his siblings were quite young.<sup>16</sup> As a result Cromwell was forced, just like his older brothers before him, to leave school after the first grade and find work to help financially support his family. His older brothers found jobs fifteen kilometers away in New Tuskett, Nova Scotia, and had to live apart from the family. However, Harold Cromwell was able to find a work in Weymouth

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<sup>15</sup> When asked what is the one thing people should know about Harold Cromwell, Jeanne Nesbitt wrote: "There is so much more to him than what I knew." Nesbitt, personal correspondence, July 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008; Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

as a delivery boy at the Goodwin Hotel where he couriered messages, baggage and goods to the hotel's patrons (Figs. 2 and 63). Even though he was a only small child under ten years of age, Cromwell excelled at this job and was able to make his deliveries so quickly and efficiently that he earned the nickname "Lightning," a moniker that stuck with him for the rest of his life.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his success working as a delivery boy and contributing to the financial well being of his family, Cromwell regretted his lack of formal schooling. Throughout the duration of his life he lamented the fact that he, as he describes it, "didn't go to school at all which [he] should have."<sup>18</sup> Education was so important to Cromwell that even as a young boy he took pains to move beyond the limitation of his first grade education by teaching himself how to read and write, as well as learning some basic mathematics. Every evening after his shift at the Goodwin was complete, Cromwell would retire to his quarters, the hotel's sample room, to spend the night reading *Readers Digest* magazines. He began by tackling the shortest stories and then, over time, he moved on to longer tales, until he was able to read and write with facility.<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on his ability to learn such skills outside of school Cromwell joked: "by gosh, I came up pretty good!"<sup>20</sup>

In 1939, at age 20, Cromwell left the Goodwin Hotel to join the Canadian Armed Forces and fight in World War II (Fig. 62). He began his service with the West Nova Scotia Regiment. For the first few months of his service with the Regiment he was placed in the army reserves. There he spent time cleaning clothes and shining buttons, and was

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<sup>17</sup> Harold Ellsworth Cromwell Obituary, *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

also briefly employed as a cook. However, he was soon assigned the job of order runner, where he was charged with delivering important messages and documents between senior officers, and departed for Scotland with the 344 West Novas at the end of December 1939. Once arriving in Scotland the West Novas immediately continued on to Aldershot, England, where the Regiment underwent intensive training and witnessed the Battle of Britain. On June 15<sup>th</sup> 1943 the West Novas embarked on the first part of “Operation Husky,” which led them to Sicily. The goal of the Operation was to wrest Sicily away from the Axis powers and gain control of the Mediterranean for the Allies. The West Novas, along with British and American troops, helped take the island in just thirty-eight days. After the success of Operation Husky the West Novas pushed north into the rest of Italy to continue their campaign. In November 1943, after four years of service, the Cape Breton Highlanders arrived in Ortona, Italy to relieve the West Nova Scotia Regiment. However instead of leaving Italy, Cromwell joined with the Cape Breton Highlanders and remained in Europe. The Highlanders continued to move through Italy and eventually joined forces with the British 8th Army and the American 5th Army. Together these Canadian, British and American forces fought important battles including the breaching of the Gothic line and the Hitler Line, which opened the road to Rome for the Allied forces.

At some point in his service with the Highlanders, Cromwell sustained a serious injury to his chest, which was the result of being blown off the back of a truck by a bomb. Unable to continue in his post, he was sent for treatment to No. 2 CCS Victory General Hospital, a Canadian General Hospital located at the time in France. When describing this injury Cromwell was unable to provide any significant details as to what afflicted

him, most likely because the doctors at No. 2 CCS Victory General were unable to accurately diagnose or treat him. They did, however, recognize that Cromwell's injury required long-term care, which was something a field hospital could not provide. Consequently, he was discharged from military service and sent back to Canada with a full pension and disability benefits.

Cromwell, however, was not pleased with his discharge; he would have preferred to remain in Europe to be close to his four brothers, still on their tours of duty. Unable to make a legitimate case for remaining in France, Cromwell was sent back to Canada and was admitted to Camp Hill Veterans Hospital in Halifax for further treatment. There, for two months, doctors puzzled over how to diagnose and treat this mysterious injury, which they nicknamed "the shadow."<sup>21</sup> Doctors gave Cromwell multiple x-rays, confined him to a wheelchair and even treated him for tuberculosis, but according to Cromwell, they never determined exactly what he was suffering from.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, he was released from hospital and was well enough to work.

In the years following his military service, Cromwell married Esther Plympton on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1950, and with her had four children. To support his family Cromwell held a variety of jobs in Halifax, Weymouth and Sudbury, Ontario, including working as a cobbler, a commissionaire, a custodian, a cook and nickel miner.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Cromwell's daughter Natasha confirms that a diagnosis of her father's injury never occurred. She describes his injury as "some kind of bruising of the lung, or damage to the breast bone area... The end result was ... a bump in the breast bone ... the injury had the doctors perplexed...it was a complete mystery." Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> John DeMings, "Cromwell 'would have been Canadian art icon,'" *The Digby Courier*, March 31, 2008.

Throughout this interview Cromwell shares many details of his life and consistently takes the time to intersperse references to drawing throughout his tales. During his life Cromwell remembered drawing as something he always enjoyed and was always skilled at. While in school he was often selected to draw pictures to decorate the blackboard—he remembered, in particular, being asked to draw holly around the edges of the board for Christmas.<sup>24</sup> While working at the Goodwin Hotel his drawing skill was recognized and he was asked to act as the hotel’s official sign painter, painting room numbers on doors as well as painting “fire escape” and “exit” signs. However, Cromwell suggests that his drawing practice only truly developed while he was convalescing after sustaining his war injury. While in Camp Hill Cromwell noticed one of the other patients in his ward drawing to pass the time, and thought, as he later told Nesbitt, “I can do that and do it better.”<sup>25</sup> Cromwell promptly asked a nurse for paper and ballpoint pens and began to produce portraits of doctors, nurses and other patients, in addition to landscapes glimpsed through the hospital window. He has been drawing, using these same materials, ever since.

### **Cromwell’s Methods: The Nervous Line and “Telling It Like It Is”**

Reflecting on his art practice of sixty years, Cromwell described his drawings as being grounded in his personal experience of history; Cromwell wanted his art practice

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<sup>24</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Nesbitt, personal correspondence, 2008.

to, in his words, “tell it like it is, from memory.”<sup>26</sup> I understand the “it” that Cromwell endeavors to “tell from memory” as stories of “Africadian life” in and around Weymouth Falls as they interact with the history and culture of black Nova Scotia. Cromwell’s practice seamlessly and creatively intertwines acts of imagination with history and memory to produce drawings that investigate his unique cultural position and identity. As such, I would like to suggest that his art practice, like identity itself, is formed, using Stuart Hall’s words, “at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.”<sup>27</sup> Cromwell’s distinctive drawing practice describes his personal experience in Nova Scotia as it relates to “Africadian life.”

Here, I take up the term “Africadian life” to refer to the history and culture of black Nova Scotia. The term “Africadian” was coined by writer, scholar and Nova Scotia native, George Elliot Clarke, from a mixture of the words “Africa” and “Acadia,” the seventeenth century name for what is now Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Clarke uses this term to, in his words, “...denote the black populations of the Maritimes and especially of Nova Scotia.”<sup>28</sup> Through the creation of this neologism, Clarke is able to mark both the distinctiveness and the history of black Nova Scotian culture, and trace the multiple routes and roots of the Africadian experience. These include important historical and cultural references to Africa and colonial France and Britain, as well as references to contemporary Canada. The elegance and simplicity of Clarke’s term ‘Africadian’ evokes the centuries-long history of black settlement in the region and the richness and

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<sup>26</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves” in *ICA Document 6: Identity* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 44.

<sup>28</sup> See George Elliott Clarke, ed. *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing, Volume One* (Nova Scotia: Pottersfield, 1991), 9.

complexity of black Nova Scotian culture. I take up this term to describe Harold Cromwell's life and art, not only because Cromwell's personal history has deep roots in Africadian history—his ancestors arrived in Nova Scotia with the first black Loyalists in 1783—but also because the uniqueness of the Africadian experience is reflected in Cromwell's distinctive artwork, particularly in his use of storytelling and memory in crafting his drawings.

History and memory are, in fact, so integral to Cromwell's oeuvre that they became guiding principles of his practice. Cromwell would only draw images from memory; he would never draw anything directly from life. This is because Cromwell believed that working immediately in front of a subject was a kind of "copying" that is different from the imaginative production of artwork.<sup>29</sup> He asserts that copying is, as he phrases it, "cheating... it's not the real thing," while real art work is something one must, in his words, "draw from [one's] head."<sup>30</sup> Cromwell never carried a sketchpad and pen with him on his day-to-day travels. If he came across a scene or landscape he wanted to draw, he would take the time to remember what that particular place looked like many years ago and draw the image or story that it summoned in his mind. Cromwell had a photographic memory for detail.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cromwell's attitude towards the use of memory in creative practices aligns with Toni Morrison's assertion that "...the act of imagination is [always] bound up with memory." See Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 305.

<sup>30</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

His drawings, particularly those he executed after his retirement in the 1980s, were typically produced in the evenings while sitting in front of a blaring television.<sup>32</sup> Reclining in his favorite chair, accompanied by his faithful dog “Sport,” and a plate of crackers, cheese and sardines to keep his energy up, Cromwell would spend hours drawing out scenes that came into his head.<sup>33</sup> Always beginning a piece in the center of the page, he would progressively move out towards the edges of the image until each drawing was finished. The speed at which he completed work primarily depended on his mood. If Cromwell was interested in a particular artwork he could finish it in less than a day. He would often begin a drawing in the early evening and obsessively work through the night and early morning until it was complete, not noticing how many hours had passed.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, images he found less compelling could take several days or weeks to finish.<sup>35</sup>

The drawings that captivated Cromwell’s attention were mostly those he drew of the 1930s Weymouth Falls of his youth, a period of time he has termed “the good old days.” These images depict scenes of farmers ploughing fields with oxen, men hunting and fishing, farmers markets, sawmills, local schools, and even the first teenage drivers in Digby county (Figs. 9-21). Cromwell’s small-scale drawings are characterized by an interest in vernacular subjects that illustrated the experiences and struggles of Weymouth’s Africadian community “like it is,” or was—all from memory.

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<sup>32</sup> Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Nesbitt, DVD interview, 2008.

In this way, Cromwell described life in Weymouth Falls with critical hindsight. Despite his artistic methods, which relied on memory and the seemingly nostalgic celebration of times past, Cromwell's drawings are not simply a wistful attempt to ahistorically reconstruct "the good old days" as an idyllic space. Cromwell's practice of "telling it like it is" is a critical reflection. His distinctive use of line, which contrasts strikingly with his deployment of pastoral subject matter, calls into question such bucolic representations of Nova Scotia. Jean Fisher argues that inherent in the practice of drawing are questions of animation and of description: when one draws, one must find a way to animate thought, and to uncover what line best describes or conveys a particular event, feeling or fact.<sup>36</sup> The length, shape, direction, density and intensity of a line can convey much more than the specific form the artist wished to produce; a line can carry with it a host of personal and/or cultural sensations and associations. By mobilizing dark, dense and erratic nervous lines to describe Africadian life in Weymouth Falls, Cromwell maintains a connection to the past while making visible and perceptible histories and events that are not typically addressed within Nova Scotian folk art.<sup>37</sup>

Cromwell's ability to channel anxiety into the formal elements of his drawings is quite unusual for someone who has consistently been described as "laid back and easy-going."<sup>38</sup> The apprehension that characterizes Cromwell's lines does not seem to stem

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<sup>36</sup> Jean Fisher, "On Drawing," in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (London & New York: Tate Drawing Center, 2003), 217.

<sup>37</sup> Cromwell's practice can be understood as partially aligning with bell hooks' conception of the "strange and oppositional" aesthetic of blackness which acts, as she phrases it, "as testimony, bearing witness...[while] maintain[ing] connections with the past." See bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional" in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1990), 105.

<sup>38</sup> Nesbitt, personal correspondence, 2008.

from nervous habit or from a fidgety bearing; Cromwell was not naturally anxious. Both my brief meeting with him and his taped interview showed that while the artist could occasionally be shy, he was neither tense nor restless. This suggests that it is through the act of drawing that Cromwell's nervousness is made perceptible.

It is possible that the drawing process disclosed Cromwell's apprehension surrounding his sense of place and belonging due to this medium's intimate tie to bodily experience, through hand and gesture. Gesture has a direct, but complicated, relationship to the body. Giorgio Agamben argues that "...gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the practice of drawing makes visible bodily and cultural experiences that inform gesture; the gesture of the hand creates a mark on the page, and that mark expresses the extra-textual elements that inform a given drawing. Here, I take the "extra-textual" to refer to those traces within an artwork that are ostensibly outside of its content, yet inform the manner in which it was produced. In Cromwell's context this suggests that his erratic and pressure-filled markings are generated from unconscious gestures informed by particularly intense social, cultural and personal experiences.

One of the most important large-scale social and cultural events contributing to what I will call Cromwell's "nervous line" was the emergence of a politicized black identity in Nova Scotia during the 1970s. While Cromwell began his drawing practice sometime around 1946, while convalescing from his war injuries, his daughter Natasha

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<sup>39</sup> Giorgio Agamben. *Means Without End: Notes On Politics* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57-58.

remembers that he only began to regularly produce artwork in the early 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, it was also during the late-1960s and early-1970 that black life in Nova Scotia underwent considerable social and political change. Many black Nova Scotians became politically active and began agitating for change and equality in the province. Inspired by the events surrounding the destruction of Halifax's largest black community, Africville, between 1964-1969 and in response to the American civil rights movement, black Nova Scotians organized to combat centuries of economic and social marginalization. As a result of these political struggles a new and highly politicized Africadian identity began to emerge in the 1970s, supported by organizations such as the Black United Front.

Cromwell strongly resisted Black Power initiatives in Nova Scotia, dismissing organizations that engaged in racial politics as "rabble-rousers" who would upset the stability of black life in the province.<sup>41</sup> Groups such as the Black United Front, and the rapid change in definitions and articulations of black identity and belonging that they helped usher into the province, caused Cromwell a great degree of anxiety. He resisted participating in and being associated with public protests, and perhaps, like many of his generation, preferred instead a "slow and steady" approach to political action.<sup>42</sup> While Cromwell never made his political views explicit, I believe that he expressed his

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<sup>40</sup> When asked about how often her father would draw Natasha responded: "My earliest memory of him doing art on a regular basis was from about the age of 10. This would put us in the year 1970...[beginning in] the late 60's to the early 70's [drawing was] a constant thing. Once his family left home and he retired [in the 1980s], it became his life." Cromwell's studio space was constructed with a separate entrance from the home, allowing visitors to see his work without passing through the home and Cromwell to separate his practice from his family life. Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Natasha Cromwell, Email Interview, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> See Marcus Van Steen, "Nova Scotia: A Model for Race Relations" in *Saturday Night*, June 6, 1959, 20.

opinions, both conscious and unconscious, on issues such as race, place, identity and belonging through his drawing practice. When Cromwell marked a page using tight, dense, pressurized pen strokes that overlapped erratically, veered off across the paper and then came together to saturate sections of a pastoral image in dark ink, his “nervous line” expressed his anxious reactions to Nova Scotia’s changing social relations, and to the history that had led up to these changes (Figs. 9.1, 10.1, 11.1 and 12.1).

Avis Newman has described drawing as a practice that can externalize thought and experience with immediacy.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein I would like to suggest that Cromwell’s practice provided him with the opportunity to communicate and make perceptible memories and realities of Africadian life in Weymouth Falls, at a velocity that did not easily permit self-censoring. The speed and immediacy of his drawing allowed Cromwell to articulate anxieties and tensions that he would otherwise disavow, or believe to be too dangerous to express. By examining his unique combination of innervated line and pastoral subject matter, it becomes possible to read Cromwell’s oeuvre as communicating historical experiences and political and cultural positions that lie outside of traditional conceptions of Nova Scotian identities. His ability to present alternative versions of the provincial experience transformed Cromwell’s work from simple vernacular document, into a record of Africadian political practice within the realm of Nova Scotian folk art. While Cromwell did not directly conceive of his practice as political, or even critical, I intend to show that in the act of depicting the histories and geographies of the Africadian community, at both pastoral and nervous registers, Cromwell’s work can be constituted as a politically charged practice.

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<sup>43</sup> Avis Newman, “Conversation Avis Newman/ Catherine de Zegher” in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (London & New York: Tate Drawing Center, 2003), 236.

I understand Cromwell's drawings as political using Jacques Rancière's concept of the relationship between politics and aesthetics.<sup>44</sup> For Rancière politics is an aesthetic practice, and political power is exercised through what is made perceptible to the senses, or through what the theorist has termed "the distribution of the sensible." For example, according to Rancière, the ability to speak and be heard, to write and be read, or to draw and have one's work seen, carries more political significance than more abstract struggles for power, or concerns with distributive justice. As a result, Rancière suggests that political practices must scrutinize precisely that which is invited into, and expelled from, a particular cultural field, and challenge what is accepted as legitimate knowledge and practice. According to this model of politics, it is only by testing the boundaries of what is made visible, legible, audible, and so on, that it becomes possible to cause moments of rupture within the distribution of the sensible, and thus create opportunities for previously excluded knowledge to have a share in the stakes of a cultural field. I would like to suggest that by introducing histories and experiences that are not typically represented within the province's folk art tradition and by making aesthetic choices that stray from convention, Cromwell's drawings alter what is aesthetically possible within Nova Scotian folk art, and thus his work makes new identities and politics visible and legible within this folk art genre.

By examining Cromwell's personal history and introducing questions that arise from his unusual folk art practice, this chapter has established the three major lines of inquiry that this project will follow: first, how does Cromwell's work address Africadian

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<sup>44</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, "Translators Introduction: Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception" in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Jacques Rancière*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Continuum, 2004).

history and the black Nova Scotian cultural context? Next, how does Cromwell's oeuvre fit into the aesthetics of Nova Scotian folk art? And finally, what are the political dimensions of Cromwell's practice? To address these questions the following chapters of this thesis are focused on providing historical and social contexts in which to place Cromwell and his drawings. Chapter Two will provide the history of Africadian settlement in Nova Scotia and account for the emergence of a politicized Africadian identity in order to supply a context for understanding Cromwell's biography and the emergence of his nervous aesthetic. Chapter Three will examine Cromwell's political position as articulated through some of the drawings he produced for the Black Educators' Association of Nova Scotia's curriculum unit. Chapter Four will provide a close reading of one of the four drawings by Cromwell held by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in order to further elaborate the political dimensions of his work, by connecting his formal strategies to the historical context described in Chapter Two and his political context described in Chapter Three. Chapter Five will describe the emergence of Nova Scotian folk art as a discrete form of vernacular artistic production, and account for Cromwell's inclusion in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. This final chapter will also address why it is important to consider Cromwell as a Nova Scotian folk artist and offer avenues for further research into his work.

The object of this first sustained scholarly study of Cromwell's practice is to position Cromwell's personal history, detail the emergence of his distinctive aesthetic, outline his context within Nova Scotian folk art and assert the political implications of his practice, in order to situate him as an important and prolific folk artist within Canadian art scholarship.