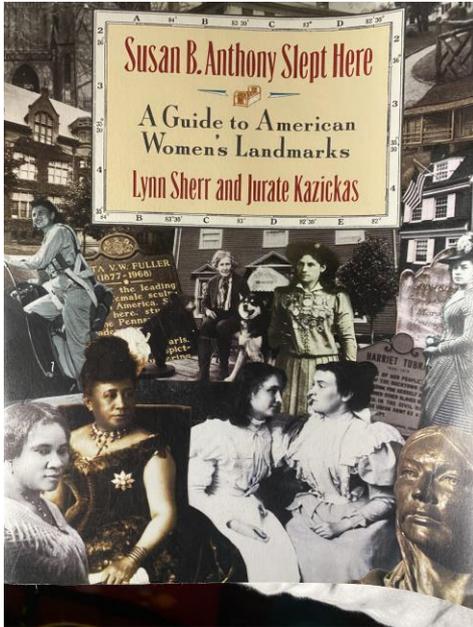


# Finding Betsey

## Tangled Roots and Routes



*It was 2023, the night before I started to pen stories about my childhood (1949-1958) in northeastern Ohio.*

*I pulled from my friend's bookshelf a compendium of U.S. landmarks celebrating women of historical importance.*

*I open the book to Ohio. I'm amazed to find Austinburg, my tiny farming community of 300.*

## My Muse Appears

*But what is the point of writing, if not to unearth things.*

- Annie Ernaux, *A Girl's Story*



*There was Betsey.*



*Betsey Mix Cowles was a leader in the pre-Civil War anti-slavery movement, the first Ohio Women's Rights Association, and the radical education movement.*

*Bing. Bing. Bing.  
Already three connections.*

*I had found my muse.*

*I began to write my childhood memoirs as "Letters to Betsey."*

*The more I unearthed details of her 66 years, the more resonances I found.*

*Common passions and purposes throughout our lifetimes, in different centuries.*

*Betsey, where have you been all my life?*

# Spiral Garden Stories

*The centre of my backyard  
in downtown Toronto  
is a spiral garden.*

*My ceremonial space.*

*It records my 32 years in this place,  
my spiralling through my 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s.*



*From my large kitchen window door,  
I'm comforted by the trees  
my friends gifted me  
as family members passed:*

*the crab apple tree for my father (2008);*

*for my mom, the Russian olive (2012);*

*and the serviceberry, my brother Van (2016).*

*Every four years, a new tree,  
their branches now reunited  
in the canopy above the stone spiral.*



*Spirals weave  
through my life  
and Betsey's life.*

*So, too, this recounting:  
winding around,  
back and forth,  
spiralling from the 1800s  
to the 1950s  
to the present  
and back again.*

*Our stories start  
as infants in Austinburg,  
that tiny corner of Ohio  
near the shores of Lake Erie.*

*We both move...around Ohio,  
to New York, and, in my case,  
eventually around the world.*

*At every stop along the way,  
trees are teaching me.*

*To breathe,  
to reach for the sky,  
to embed myself in the Earth.*

*Slow down. Stay grounded. Keep growing.*

## Land Acknowledgement

*“Ceremony is the embodiment of our relationship with older relatives.”*

- Denise Nadeau

*On my first visit back to my hometown, I am accompanied by Guna and Rappahannock theatre artist Monique Mojica, who also lived in Ohio as a youth.*

*We honour the [Erie Indians](#) of the Late Woodland Period (850-1340 AD). Ancestors buried in [Indian Mound Metro Park](#) in Conneaut, just inside the Ohio border.*

*Monique offers tobacco and smudges sweetgrass smoke to bless the land and trees.*

*I sink into the decaying leaves and rest my back against an ancient rock.*

*We each offer our intentions for this visit, asking permission to be here, hoping to uncover our histories in a “good way.”*



*As we near Austinburg, Monique points out that we are guided.*

*In the sky--four hawks and an eagle.*

*Arriving at Betsey’s home, we are greeted by a bird’s nest in the transom window of the front door.*



*Exploring the land around your house, Betsey, I wonder,*

*How did you relate to the birds? The plants? The trees in your world?*



And you respond:

*I saw the fields decked with flowers  
so bright and beautiful!*

*Each spear of grass, each blossom,  
each shrub and tree, hill, valley  
and plain, seemed to say:  
"I have something to do," and  
each seemed intent upon doing it, -  
upon fulfilling its destiny:*

*So said the little bird,  
the busy ant, and creeping insect.*



# TANGLED ROOTS

*How do I go underground with Betsey?*

*I turn to my co-authors, the trees,  
to visualize our common ground.  
Like roots, the themes that connect me  
with Betsey are intersecting.*

*I probe the roots or themes I share with her,  
our journeys unfolding in different centuries:  
colonization, church, food, anti-racism,  
women's rights, and education.*

*One shared root and one letter to Betsey at a time.*

*I'm spiralling 'round, revisiting an earlier collaboration  
with women activists and academics: [Tangled Routes:  
Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail.](#)*

*Even though we never shared physical time on Earth,  
our routes, Betsey, your journey and my journey, are entangled.*

*We have been nurtured by the same fertile soil, mycelia,  
and underground networks.*

