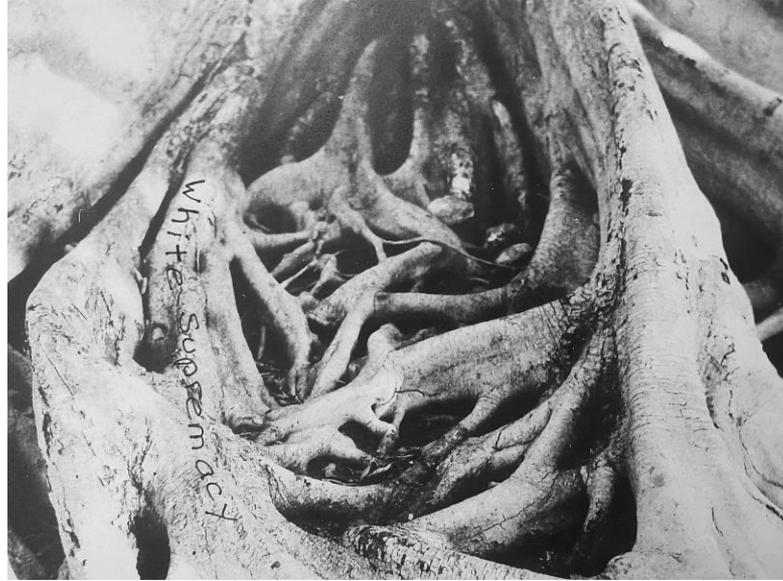


Racial Justice Allies

From Anti-Slavery in the 1800s to
Anti-Racism Movements in the 2000s



*Now the storm is not only gathering but the heavens are black
with frowning aspect & vengeance seems ready to burst upon our guilty nation...*

*If one particle of humanity remains in the soul;
it must sicken at the sight of this vast moral prison house...*

We look to the North; the East; & the West for relief - do we find it?..

They tell us the whole heart is sick; corruption has infested the whole.¹

- Betsey addressing an Anti-Slavery Society (1843)

I can no longer indulge in this memoir writing project without infusing my letters to you, Betsey, with rage at what is currently happening in the world, in particular, at the brutal hand of the current U.S. president.

When you charge that corruption has infested the nation, you could have been describing the catastrophe unfolding today.

Two centuries ago, tensions between the slave-owning south and the more liberal north threatened a civil war that would make a post-mortem of our government, its constitution, & its laws,² you wamed.

But racism is tenacious.

*Black and white tensions persist.
White supremacy underlies all current policies.*

If you were here, Betsey, you would be rising up, speaking, mobilizing.

*Challenging the underlying racism
Of the deportation of black and brown migrants,
Of cuts to social programs impacting poor racialized communities,
Of education and art programs that advocate diversity, equity, inclusion.
Of a genocidal war that starves Palestinians
And suppresses international student protestors.*

Here in Canada we protest the genocide in Gaza, sustained by weapons from my two nations, while millions take to U.S. streets to protest the rise of fascism on No Kings Day.

Historians like [Heather Cox Richardson](#) are making the connections, reminding us that history is not a straight line, but perhaps a spiral.

Racism returns in new forms in the present.





June, 2025

Dear Betsey -

I had a surprise visit yesterday from Winnie Ng, a friend since the 1970s, teaching English to immigrant workers in Toronto factories.

Winnie introduced me to Antonio, Joshua's father. Winnie gave me the results of my pregnancy test!

I last saw her on March 8, leading the labour contingent at the International Women's Day March, the largest in North America.

She told me about a recent study she had co-authored on race and income inequality, echoing your research on women's pay, Betsey. The new study built on her earlier PhD about racism in the labour movement.

Winnie has been a heroine of mine for decades, an organizer and an orator, like you, a powerful and positive force, unstoppable in her life-long fight against White supremacy.

In the face of firings of Black generals, deportations of Brown migrants, and abortion clinics closing, a new underground railroad is being constructed.

White male bullies are threatened by the strength of rising intersectional multiracial movements.

The struggle against racism, so central to your anti-slavery work, Betsey, has been the defining feature of social movements in my lifetime.

There were no black people in Austinburg as I was growing up, Betsey.

I was raised in a rural white environment.

As a child, I had little sense of the racism that was pervasive in America a century after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Perhaps aware of this, my parents took the opportunity to expose us kids to the reality of poverty and racism in an inner-city black neighbourhood in Cleveland, the big city closest to us.

One July in the mid-1950s, two black girls came to live with us for a week, part of the “domestic mission” of our liberal Congregational Church.

Beulah and Delilah were sisters, more or less the same age as my younger sister Kathy and me.

At all of 7 and 9, it was up to us to show the sisters a good time.

*We offered adventures in the pastures,
played house in the barns,
hung out on the local playground behind our house,
visited a nearby town for ice cream and dill pickles.*

But one incident left a really bitter taste.

In checking out my closet, Beulah found my shiny black patent leather shoes that were exclusively for Sunday use.

She tried them on. They fit her perfectly, (rather like Cinderella!), and my mother let her wear them.

Suddenly, there was another girl prancing around the house in MY Sunday shoes, the very shoes I was not allowed to wear on weekdays..!

I filed this incident away as an injustice, clearly unfair.

I was the victim.



While the Civil Rights movement was brewing in those pre-1960 years, I was not aware of the systemic injustices that Beulah and Delilah confronted every day in their Cleveland neighbourhood, substandard housing and crippling poverty, discrimination from merchants and teachers, taunts from other white kids like me.

Within a decade, my life would become totally shaped by the Civil Rights movement.

My dream was to study at Oberlin College, your alma mater, Betsey, but I didn't get a scholarship. So I ended up at Otterbein, another nearby church-related school, that offered me funding.

When applying in 1963, I was asked if I was willing to share a dorm room "with a person of another race." Carole (Cal) became my roommate for the next two years.

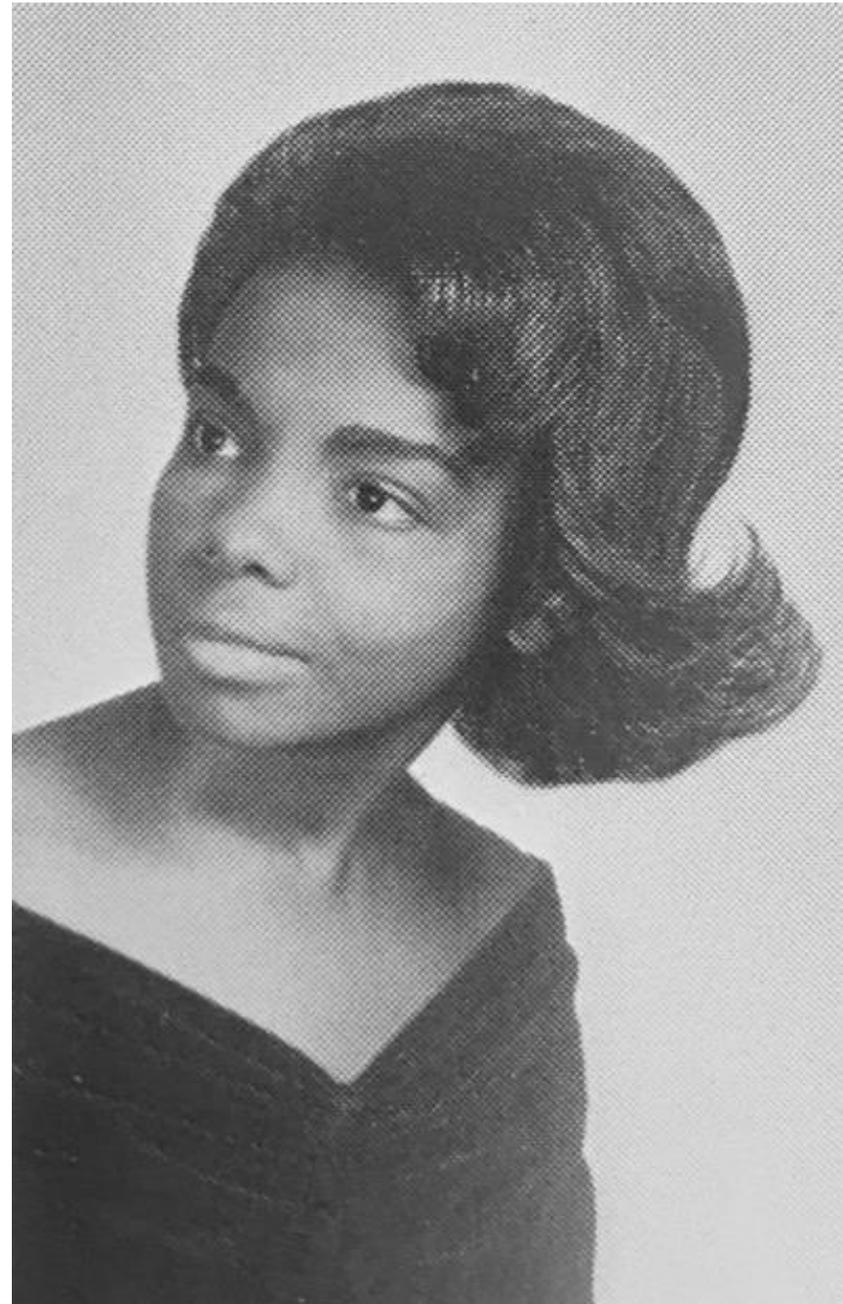
She was from a highly educated African American family in North Carolina, her mother a university professor.

Her parents hoped that by sending their daughter to the supposedly more liberal north, she would be treated better.

I witnessed how Cal, as one of very few black students on campus, experienced overt and covert racism that took a toll on her mental health; my mother drove Cal to regular therapy sessions, to deal with the trauma.

Even as she struggled with discrimination on campus, she and I also spent those two years responsible for waking and dressing a fellow student who was paralyzed by polio in both legs and one arm.

The college was ill-prepared to support either racialized students or students with disabilities.



The racial justice movement was in full force in the 1960s. I discovered that conditions similar to those impacting Beulah and Delilah were festering in nearby Columbus.

At Otterbein, I founded Students Concerned Over People Everywhere (SCOPE), a program for students to work on projects addressing poverty and racism in inner-city neighbourhoods of Ohio's capital city.

By the second year, 200 volunteers out of a student body of 1,400 participated in programs such as work camps, tutoring, nursing home visits, CRAM (craft, recreation, art and music), study halls, and community development work.

Looking back, I can see that the program bore a kind of missionary tone, appeasing white liberal guilt while not really challenging systemic racism.

At the very least, SCOPE gave students some real-life education about persisting deep inequalities.



I spent one summer during my student years living with a black family in that inner-city neighbourhood, in a project organized by a progressive Presbyterian pastor.

I was moved by the warmth of the family and their pride in the relatives who had served in the armed forces.

One morning, I came down to breakfast to learn that the man living next door had been murdered in the house while I slept.

This was my first exposure to the violence that so many lived with daily.

Such dangers must have been clear to you, Betsey.

*You harboured enslaved people who escaped
the oppression of the southern plantation.*

*After the treacherous crossing of the Ohio River,
they made their way north, shepherded by a network
of abolitionists, who could protect them temporarily
until they could move on to the next safe house
And the next, and eventually, by boat on Lake Erie, to Canada.*

*Your personal contact with freedom-seekers,
in particular, the women,
had a profound impact on you:*

*Women, telling the story of their wrongs,
and bearing the marks of the whip upon their backs,
were arguments which set soul and brain on fire;
and the strong sense of right and justice,
which had ever been her birthright,
fired up, regardless of expediency, all time-serving,
all political relations, and, bearing directly
to the heart of the question, cried out,
'Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'³*



I tune into my friend [Jane Sapp's rendition of "Harriet Tubman,"](#)
a spirited tribute to the iconic former slave
who "drove for the underground railroad."

*Tubman had trances and sleeping spells,
which she considered divine revelations
that helped her lead escaping slaves through dangerous situations.*

*She spent a lot of time outdoors,
used her intimate knowledge of the natural world--
the plants, the rivers, the constellations in the sky--
to find a way north.⁴*

"Moses" was her code name.

*And she used songs like ["Go Down Moses"](#)
as a signal that she was nearby and ready to lead people to freedom.*



*Like many youth of the 60s,
I grabbed a guitar,
strummed songs of freedom,
gospel spirituals referring to
the “long march to freedom.”*

*“Follow the Drinking Gourd”
with its coded instructions
for escaped slaves to follow
the Big Dipper or the North Star,
the route to Canada...*

*...a path I would one day follow
crossing the border, but easily,
thanks to my white privilege.*

That was 50 years ago.

*I met Jane Sapp in 1982 while working
at the Highlander Center in Tennessee,
where I photographed
the 50th anniversary concert
celebrating the powerful musical history
of the Civil Rights movement.*

*The song “We Shall Overcome”
came out of this centre, where
Blacks and Whites gathered
in the 1950s and 1960s,
before Pete Seeger spread the song
around the globe.*

*Jane has been a mentor for me
throughout my life,
teaching me to integrate cultural work
into organizing for racial justice.*





Rosa Parks



Highlander's Meeting Room



Septima Clark

So many strong women connected through Highlander, including Rosa Parks and Septima Clark. I photographed them as they sat in that iconic circle of rocking chairs, recounting their stories – Rosa's refusal to move to the back of the bus and Septima's literacy campaign for Black voters.

You would have been inspired, Betsey, by these women, a century after Emancipation.

Bernice Reagon co-founded the Freedom Singers in the 1960s and Sweet Honey in the Rock (below at a Highlander concert) in the 1970s (and came to Toronto in 2025, their 50th year!). Like Jane's music, theirs is deeply rooted in the gospel tradition of the Southern Black church.



An earlier song, Billie Holliday's haunting "[Strange Fruit](#)"
Bares the brutality that fed the freedom movement.

Were you aware of lynchings, Betsey?

Stories and songs now immortalized in museums
At the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, Mississippi, in 2015
I shiver when walking into a room full of banners with the names
of 500 men and women lynched in Mississippi from 1882 to 1970

My body again recoils at an exhibit in the Frederick Douglass museum in Baltimore in 2025
Mason jars contain soil collected from trees that hung Blacks for public viewing
Now acknowledging these dark acts of White supremacy

The trees and the soil as witnesses, my teachers.



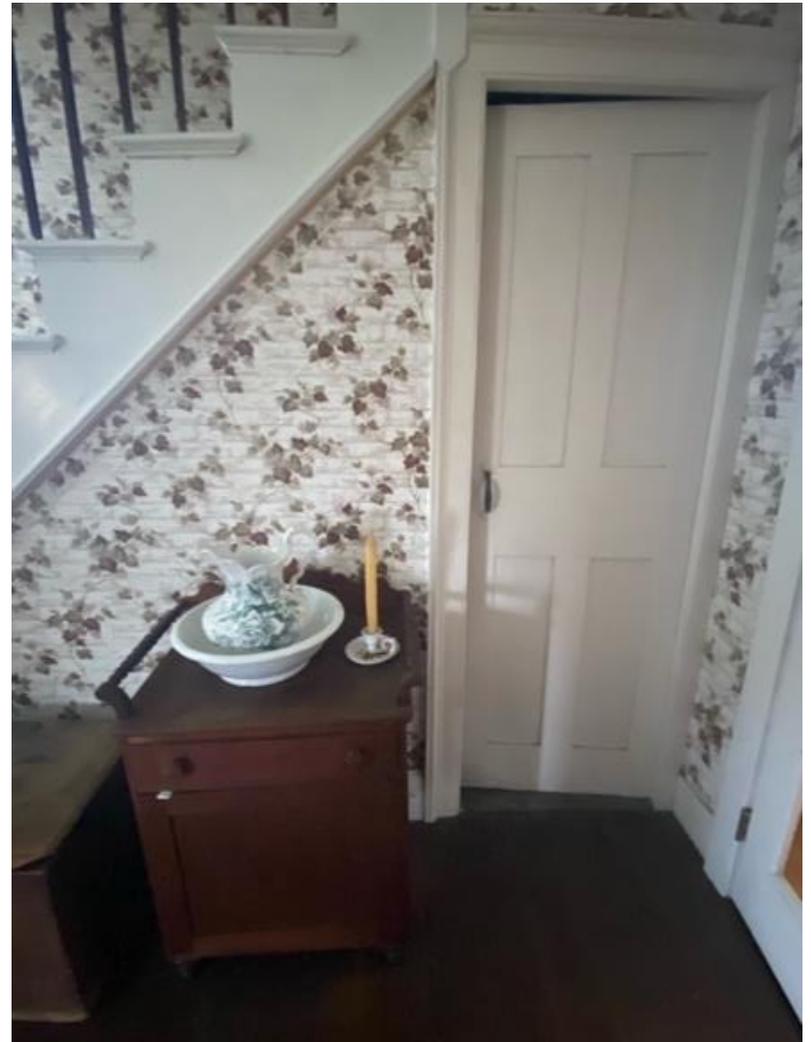
A poem by a Black woman takes
the voice of the tree that was
used for lynching. In the
Maryland Museum of African
American history.

What songs travelled the underground railroad in Ohio?

*I found one song that you and Cornelia brought to your anti-slavery work,
"The Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother to her Daughters,"
by John Greenleaf Whittier:*

*Gone, gone; sold and gone
To the rice-swamp dank and lone
From Virginia's hills and waters,
Woe is me, my stolen daughters!⁵*

*I wonder if you met women escaping slavery, Betsey,
Or was it mainly men who passed through Austinburg
On route to Lake Erie and Canada?*



*"There's a false wall within the closet behind that door,"
Margie, one of your descendants, tells me.*

*The candle by the door conjures up images of you, Betsey,
helping fugitives to hide from the packs of slave catchers,
hot on their trail to haul them back south.*



Margie peels back a floorboard to reveal another hiding place below the ground floor.

I imagine a trembling escapee lying flat in the small space, smelling fresh pine slats, tasting the dust, closing his eyes in the dark.

Slave catchers and their dogs pass overhead.



Trying. Not. To. Breathe

In your time, our northeastern Ohio county boasted a membership of 446 abolitionists. You organized the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society, which advocated that immediate emancipation of the slaves is the duty of the people of the United States.⁶

Your group denounced colonization and deemed slavery to be conquerable only by the moral power of the gospel.⁷

This was a religious mission: to promote the religious, moral and intellectual improvement of the colored people... and to produce and diffuse a correct state of Christian feeling towards this suffering class.⁸

While your family was united around the cause, there were splits within the church; some ministers had their licenses revoked.

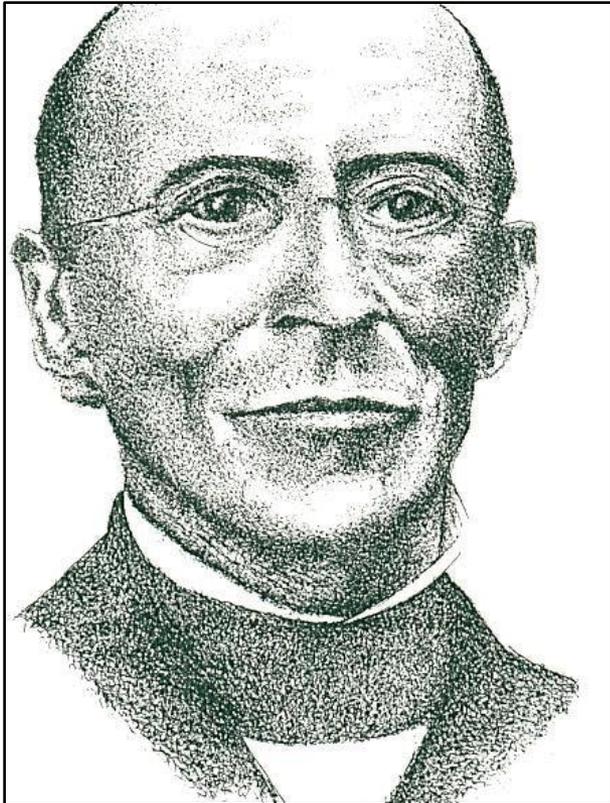
There were also strong disagreements among the abolitionists themselves.

While some believed that abolition had to be a gradual process, you aligned with those pushing for immediate emancipation. You followed the more radical national leaders like William Lloyd Garrison, who condemned both the government and the churches, and united under the motto "No Union with Slaveholders."

You were sympathetic with Garrison's "disunionism" that proposed the secession of the North from the South, to break the immoral Constitutional connection with slavery.

You organized Anti-Slavery Fairs, and brought luminaries like Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Stephen Foster and Abby Foster Kelly to Ohio from the east.

Your organizing and oratorical skills shone here, Betsey.



William Lloyd Garrison

The most controversial and effective tour was one you organized with the Foster and Kelly duo. You loved them, but some of your friends in Oberlin and Austinburg felt they were too radical.

One of your friends who found Abby “vulgar” suggested that you, Betsey, could be an even more effective orator: “you would make a glorious speaker...your fervent feelings, your language, your writing sarcasm – your sympathy for all that is noble... your magnificent person...I would go a hundred miles to hear you.”⁹

Abby Foster also thought you were destined to “go forward in this great work of redeeming mankind.”¹⁰ She invited you east for national and regional conventions.

You went to the first three-day national meeting of the Garrisonists in New York City in 1846. It was an honour for a woman from a small rural western community, and you were transfixed. You were also elected to the Business Committee, spending long hours with the movement’s famous leaders, developing resolutions.

How did you negotiate the tension between the rural Middle westerners and the New England urbanites, between the more radical Garrisonists agitating for immediate emancipation and many of your friends in Ohio who preferred a gradual approach?

They didn’t support the disunionist philosophy, which would have the North break away from the South and a pro-slavery Constitution.

What’s more, women in the more radical movement were denounced as “fanatic infidels.”¹¹ Conservative male abolitionists were threatened by women like you, who weren’t subservient, and who didn’t conform to conventional female behaviour.

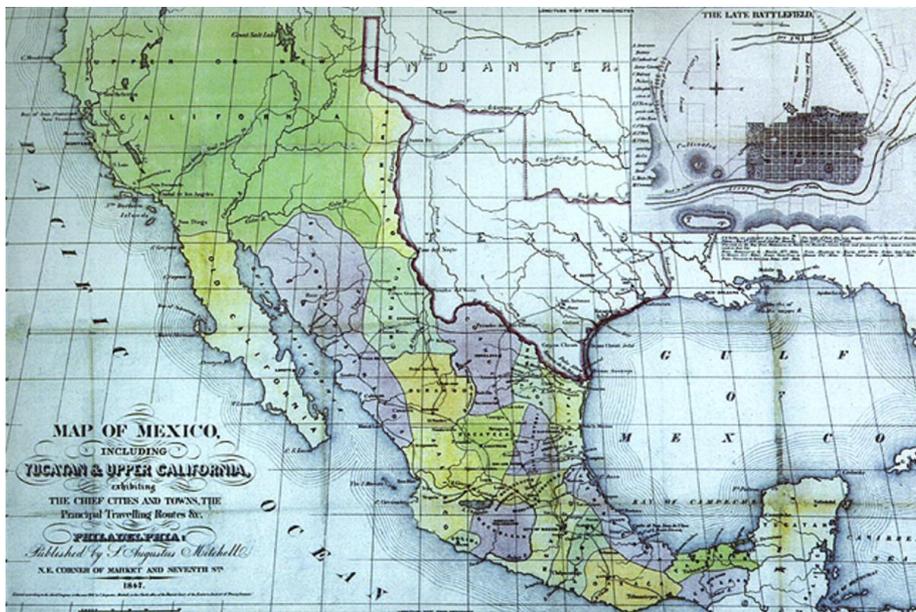
Perhaps, closer to home, they felt uncomfortable with your critique of the Church for not taking a stronger stand against slavery, and for rejecting the violence of war.

Meanwhile, the Garrisonists saw both sexism and racism as equal in discrimination.



While you identified with the hard line against slavery, you garnered respect for your pragmatic approach. You could advocate passionately while not offending people.

You were likely more courageous than me in making public pronouncements, Betsey; perhaps I am more of a reconciler. My dad was a reconciler, he had to work with deeply divided congregations, and was still able to keep the peace.



You joined the Garrisonists in critiquing the Liberal Party and the Mexican War as pro-slavery.

You organized to lobby the government to repeal the Ohio Black Laws.

You published an anti-Black law paper entitled “Plea for the Oppressed.”

You negotiated tension within the movement with a non-partisan approach, using your sharp wit and typical sarcasm,

inviting “all friends of the slave of every persuasion” to come . . .

Those whose superior wisdom looks upon us with contempt, come and see our folly – the contrast will enable you to appreciate even more highly your own superiority.”¹²

You fought the government of our home state of Ohio for “proposing to sell (your) own citizens.”

Eventually you turned, along with other anti-slavery women, to see the ballot box as the way to change the laws.

This meant mobilizing women’s rights groups to push for voting rights.

Your reputation spread beyond Ohio, both east and west.

Cornelia, while singing and teaching music in Buffalo, connected you with Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave who became one of the most influential abolitionists, helping 400 to escape to Canada through the Underground Railroad, and publishing a book with his life story.

He invited you to head an anti-slavery office in Rochester, New York.

But you chose to remain close to home, to make your contribution to the movement as an educator.

One of my favourite stories comes from your time in Portsmouth, where you taught in a Sabbath School:

“I have been out and collected a class for myself in Sabbath School; ten girls; & they are guilty of the crime; what think ye it is? why of possessing real black skins; & for this crime, have been excluded from Sabbath school.

Today one of them told me she liked much to come, but did not know she could for some of the white children were a going to leave, because they were there. I told her no: Sabbath schools were as much for black as for white; & if the white children left; we would have the house to ourselves.”¹³



Frederick Douglass

In fighting the Ohio Black Laws, you focused your anger on the White parents in the Massillon Union School who had enrolled eleven Black students.

While most of the children and teachers had not “imbibed the nation’s ‘natural prejudice’ against color,” some parents petitioned to have the Black students expelled.

Your satirical pen and oratorical prowess were directed at the lawyers who fomented fear in the community “as if there was danger of a ‘writ of injunction’ on the clouds and another on the sun... ..or a States’ warrant issued against the Almighty himself for presuming to create such a race.”¹⁴

My anti-racism advocacy was through popular education, Betsey, rather than eloquent speech.

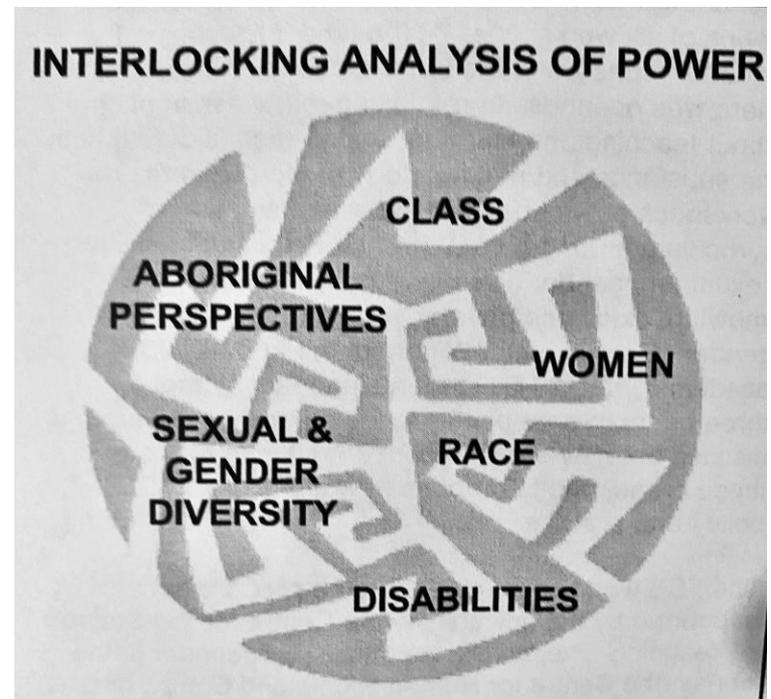
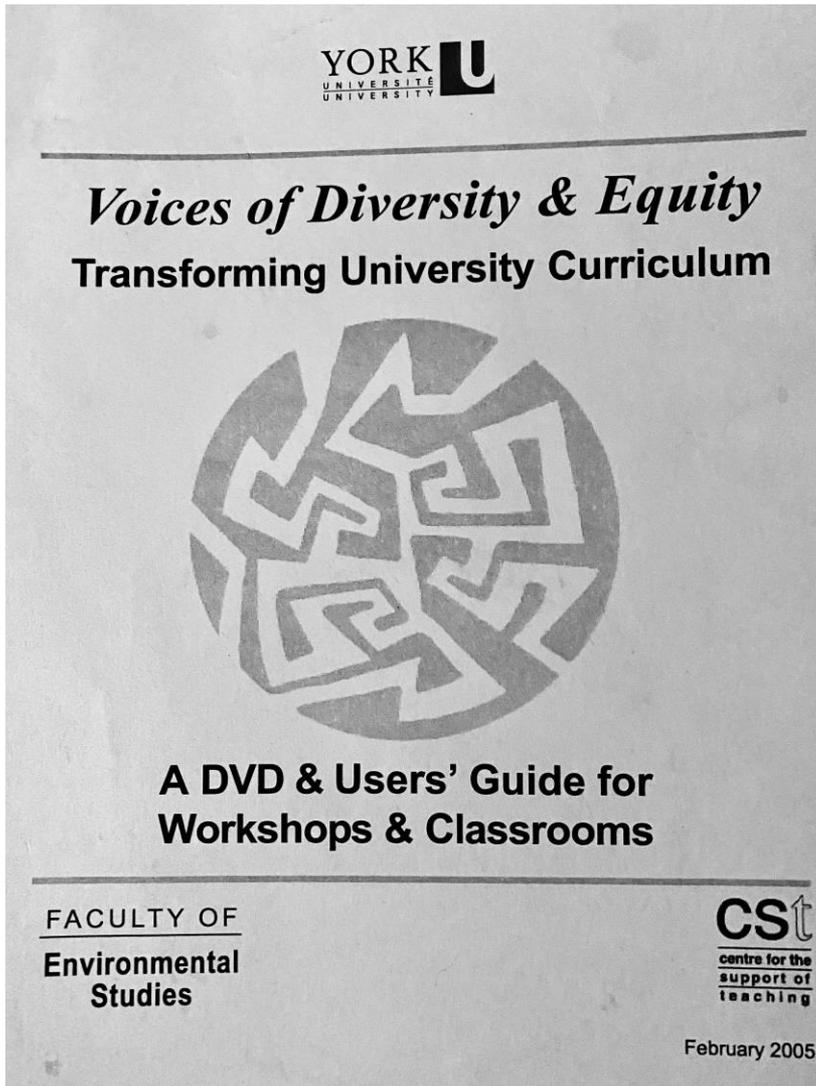
In 1991-1992, I coordinated workshops in the Moment Project, [“Recovering 500 Years of Resistance and Survival,”](#) using the two-row wampum as a frame for uncovering our histories as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, original inhabitants and colonizers.

The Two Row Wampum Treaty (first negotiated between the Haudenosaunee and my Dutch ancestors in 1613) represents the mutual agreement that canoes and ships (in other words, both peoples) would respect each other’s ways of life, and not intervene in each other’s path.



We continued gathering social justice activists across these differences the following year, focusing on the diverse experiences of racism, and exploring potential alliances between Indigenous nations and other racialized communities.

In teaching a graduate course, Popular Education for Social Change (York University), I integrated anti-racism into the key intersectional streams of education that challenge systemic inequities, including feminist pedagogy, labour education, queer pedagogy, Indigenous education, global education, etc.



In a campus-wide effort in 2003-05, we organized a series called "Voices of Diversity and Equity: Transforming University Curriculum."

Six workshops focused on different equity issues, as seen through an interlocking analysis of power.

The series culminated in a multi-media kit that used video clips of "sticky moments" drawn from recorded conflicts as catalysts for addressing racism and other inequities in interactions in our classes and beyond.

We then tried to get this kit adopted by key university bodies, but a year later, when a more reactionary director took over the Centre for the Support of Teaching, the kit was removed from the centre's website.

Today, at least in the U.S., the kit would surely be banned as too DEI...!

*Reviewing the struggles around race across the centuries,
I don't see a straight line, but more of a spiral.*

*The defining achievement during your lifetime, Betsey,
the Emancipation Proclamation, remains unfinished.*

*But if Abraham Lincoln was the symbolic head
of that achievement, in the popular imagination,
it's Martin Luther King and Malcolm X
who stand for the 1960s struggles and advances
in voting, education, employment, and Black power.*

*To their names I would add Black feminist teachers and writers
like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou in the U.S.,
and in Canada, diasporic writers Dionne Brand and Esi Edugyan.*

You would have loved them, Betsey!



*All of those so-called gains feel up for grabs now,
what with push back to the Obama election,
public outcry in response to George Floyd's murder;
and deepening polarization between the powerful intersectional
grass-roots movements for racial justice
and those threatened by that strength and diversity.*



Black Lives Matter Rally in Toronto June 2020

I wonder what it would be like for you to witness today's struggle against slavery and racism.

Not only is the struggle still unfinished, it's increasingly polarized, Betsey.

Today, slavery takes new forms, such as the indentured labour of migrant farm workers who produce our fruits and vegetables, who raise our poultry and beef on factory farms.

Over the past decade in Canada, we have been learning to reckon (finally) with the racism of 500 years of European colonization on stolen land--land of the original Indigenous stewards, who were deemed less than human.

We have been challenged to act upon the [94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

Even more recently (since 2023), the world has been witnessing the continued oppression and genocide of Palestinians, after a brutal attack on Israelis re-ignited the century-long Middle East conflict.

Living in one of the most multicultural cities in the world, I [witnessed the presence of people from all over the world](#) filling the streets to call for a Cease Fire in Gaza and offering solidarity.





If you were here today, Betsey, what would you be doing?

What would we hear, if you raised your voice?

Where would you put your energy and your deep commitment to peace and justice?

1. Betsey quoted in Linda Geary. *Balanced in the Wind*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1989, 50.
2. Ibid.
- 3..Ibid. Page?
4. Tiya Miles. *Wild Girls: How the Outdoors Shaped the Women Who Challenged a Nation*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2023, 29.
5. Quoted in Harriet Keeler. *The History of Ashtabula County*. 1878, 104.
6. Weibush, Op. Cit, 10.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Timothy Hudson, quoted in Geary, 56.
10. Quoted in Geary, 57.
11. Stacey M. Robertson. *Betsy Mix Cowles: Champion of Equality*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 77. ‘
12. Quoted in Geary, 59.
13. Betsey writing to her sister Martha. Quoted in Geary, 44.’
14. Quoted in Geary, 70.