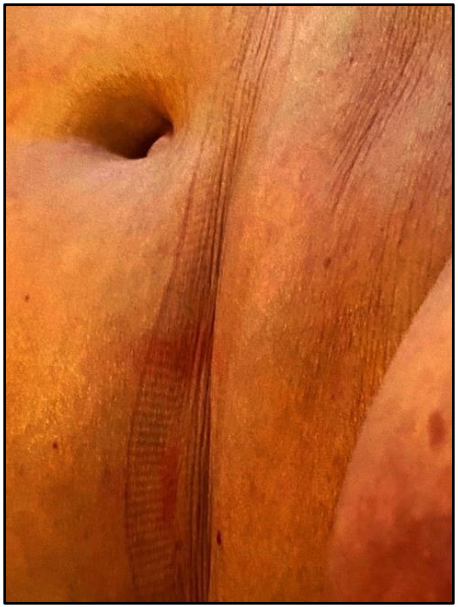
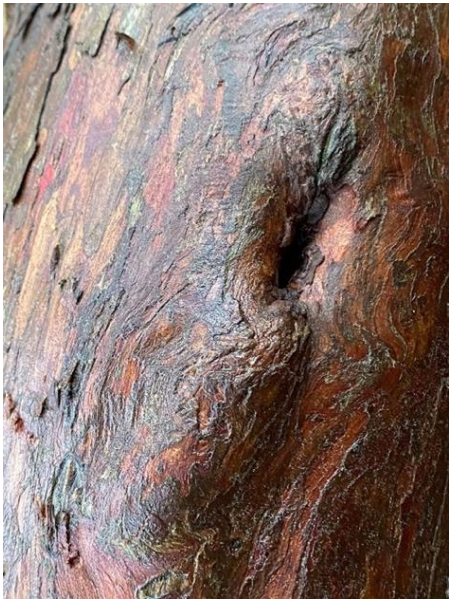
GOING UNDERGROUND WITH BETSEY

Deborah Barndt

The portfolio contains 10 pages selected from the chapters listed below, so will not flow as a text from one page to another, but will reveal the key themes, the narrative style, and the photo-based genre.

1. Prologue: A View from the Trees (8 pages)
2. Introduction: Finding Betsey: Tangled Roots and Routes (8 pages)
3. Ohio Country Calling: Children of Colonization (19 pages)
4. Rebel Spirits: Raised in the Colonial Church (25 pages)
5. Commodity or Medicine? Food and Farming in Transition (17 pages)
6. Racial Justice Allies: From Anti-Slavery in the 1800s to Anti-Racism in the 2000s (24 pages)
7. Teaching, A Moral Mission: Popular Education for Justice (21 pages)
8. Soul in Direct Action: Women Marching Across Centuries (21 pages)
9. Sharing Our Stories: Family Chroniclers (17 pages)





I was born a tree...that's *my* favourite "origin story,"
the umbilical cord connecting me to my mother
left a belly button echoed in the cedar I befriended
on Cortes Island in the summer of 2024.

From Chapter 1 - Prologue: A View from the Trees (pg. 3)

September, 2025

Dear Betsey –

I sip cedar tea from my mom's tea cup,
and look at your photo sitting on my kitchen table.

Here you are, have some tea with me.

You have been staring at me for weeks.

I feel the independent spirit you exhibited from childhood,
what was called an "uncommon tendency toward self-reliance." [2]

Uncommon because, while other women of your era
were focused on attracting a husband,
you wrote to your sister Cornelia that you

wished there was no such thing as marrying.[2]





Teaching was a career limited to single women,
because married women were expected to manage the household.
There was also a concern that pregnant woman
could "taint the classroom with female sexuality."[2]

Society's view of women shifted after the American Revolution;
up to the 1770s, they were depicted as passionate and lustful.
By the time you were growing up, respectable women were seen as
"completely devoid of sexual desire." [2]

Did you ever feel pressured, Betsey, as though it was the natural unfolding
of a woman's life, to be married?

You and two of your sisters remained unmarried, finding your worth
in legitimate occupations for a woman at the time,
you as a teacher, and Cornelia, a professional musician.

In the last century, you might have been called "old maids" or "spinsters"
Did you challenge dominant stereotypes for unmarried women?

Living in multicultural Toronto,
like working in Latin America, introduced me
to a great diversity of religious and spiritual practices.

I witnessed the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery
and how the cross accompanied the sword
in the colonization of the Americas,
in particular, the Peruvian Amazon.

Meeting with women in the Ladies Intellectual Society, you
"denounced colonization and deemed slavery to be conquerable only by the moral power of the gospel."

You opposed the Mexican war as a pro-slavery conflict.
You even wrote a satirical play mocking President Polk
and General Taylor as pawns of U.S. expansionism,
guilty of the massacre of Monterrey.

A strong critic of the government, you continued lobbying,
resolved not to be disheartened
by the "gag rule" passed in Congress.

I might prefer the word "imperialism" to describe expansionism,
but your critique two centuries ago presages
the anti-colonial perspective I've developed, working with social
movements throughout the Americas.

You challenged the Puritan Fathers of the church,
and were "denounced as heretical and skeptical
by the narrow-minded and bigoted."

I wonder if the evolution of our activism, Betsey—the need
to question inequities of all kinds—aligns more with
the theology of liberation I was introduced to while working
in the early years of the Nicaraguan revolution.



October, 2023

Dear Betsey –

I touch the dusty and tattered deer skins wrapped
around a trunk that protected your family's bedding
in a wagon train over 200 years ago.



Its wooden frame crafted
from pine trees
in Connecticut, today
preserving your clothes
in the attic of your house
in Ohio.

Cobwebs catch the light
Mirror the mystery
And the interconnectedness

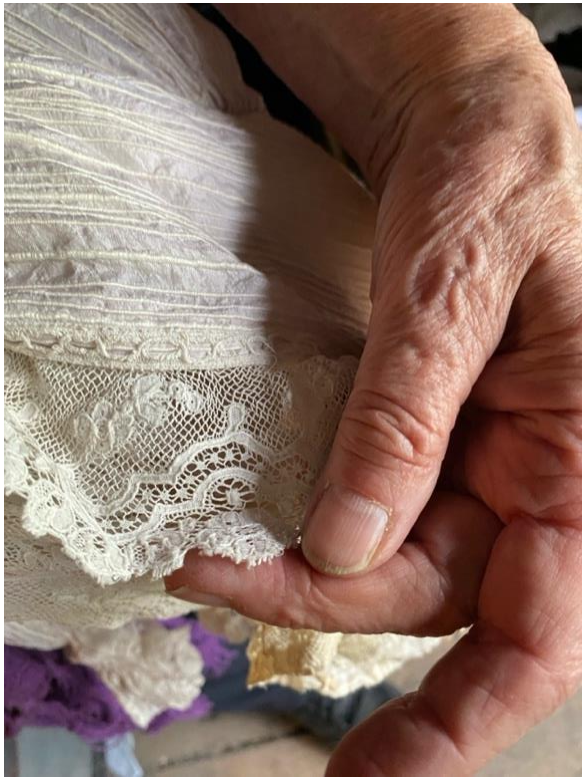
From Chapter 3: Ohio Country Calling: Children of Colonization (pg.3)

You clearly had a fancy for elegance in clothing, Betsey, whatever the fashion era.



I get goose bumps as I unwrap a delicate translucent blouse
protected by paper across the decades.
Through the light, I feel your shadow,
against the land that was our common ground.

.



Your body is here, Betsey,
tiny flakes of your skin
hidden within the creases.

Your fingers, my fingers.
Your clothes, my clothes.

We both loved beauty, texture,
and fine craftmanship.

I have never been a tee-shirt and blue jeans feminist.
Aesthetics is central to my self-presentation.
I cover myself with my favourite colours, organic fabrics,
hand-made textures, pleasing designs, and, most importantly,
I seek out unusual earrings, like seeds, spirals, and trees.

March, 2025

Dear Betsey –

The ground is thawing, the maple trees are breathing,
the sap flowing, with the sweet sweet water of the trees…

Did you tap those maple trees in front of your house, Betsey?

I can see you dipping your finger into the bucket,
slurping the sweet tree water with delight.

Sugar maple trees were not only a source of sustenance
They were medicine and a sacred gift
for Indigenous peoples for centuries
before you planted those trees in Ohio





What other sources of food did you find in the wilderness as your family settled?

What foods came with you from Connecticut?

Which ones came with the ships from Europe?

Was there a General Store in Austinburg in your time, Betsey?

A place to buy dry goods and sundries?

Austinburg was a ghost town by the time I visited it
two centuries after your arrival.

The corner grocery store, across from the church, a hollowed-out ruin.





Through my lifetime, I witnessed the development
of the post-war global food system in our hometown, Betsey.

Stories of a farming community that fed us fresh food
relegated to delicious memories.

The family farms are gone and local residents
either stock up at corporate supermarkets in a nearby city,

Or drive a mile to a multinational fast food restaurant
at the exit of. a transcontinental highway that transports fresh
tomatoes in refrigerated trucks from Mexico to my home in Canada.

This was the story I recounted in Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail.

A story of disconnection from the land, from our bodies as nature.



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

From Chapter 6: Racial Justice Allies (pg.13)

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!



From Chapter 6:
Racial Justice Allies (pg. 20)



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.