

The Journey From Tollgate to Parkway: An Interview with Adrienne Shadd

Naomi Norquay

I first met Adrienne Shadd¹ in print. She was one of the authors of one of the first books I ever read on Black history, *“We’re rooted here and they can’t pull us up”*: *Essays in African Canadian Women’s History*, an edited edition featuring Adrienne, Afua Cooper and others. I then came across Adrienne in a couple of books she edited with my good colleague, Professor Carl James. Upon learning about the launch of *The Underground Railroad: Next stop! Freedom!* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2002, I was excited to plan a trip to take my class there to see it. In 2012, it was a delightful surprise to learn that one of the researchers working on the Harriet Tubman Institute’s War of 1812 project (see review in this issue) was Adrienne. Finally, I would get to meet her in person! I got to know a top-notch historian, a meticulous researcher, and an exquisite wordsmith. I was thrilled when she accepted the invitation to be interviewed for the journal. We met up last November to do this interview.



Adrienne Shadd

Naomi Norquay: I’m interested in your most recent book, *From Tollgate to Parkway*,² but maybe we could start with your family and how you’re connected to Mary Ann Shadd. I know she is not the only Shadd, but she’s the one that people will recognize as an important historic figure.

AS: She’s the best known – and probably because she’s a trailblazing woman too. I descend from one of her younger brothers, named Garrison, who was named after William Lloyd Garrison.

NN: Oh, and who is that?

AS: He was an American abolitionist from Boston and publisher of the anti-slavery

¹ Shadd image: <http://tubman.info.yorku.ca/educational-resources/war-of-1812/about-the-project/meet-the-team/>

² *The Journey From Tollgate to Parkway: African Canadians in Hamilton*, by Adrienne Shadd, 2010, Natural Heritage Books / Dundurn Group

newspaper, *The Liberator*. A couple of Mary Ann's brothers were named after well-known abolitionists. My great-grandfather was one of those. Most of the Shadds that I know are either descended from Garrison, or from Mary Ann's sister, Elizabeth. So my great-grandfather was the nephew of Mary Ann Shadd. He would have known a lot about her, but unfortunately nothing came down to us. It's really bizarre, how at a certain generation they do not want to talk about their history, you know, all this wonderful stuff - they didn't talk about it.

NN: So why might that have been?

AS: I've thought about this over the years and I think that Black Canadians just wanted to blend in and not make any waves. I think they thought if they didn't talk about their history and their racial identity, they wouldn't be ostracized or they would experience less racism. And so, you know, to talk about slavery and to have to talk about all these things, they saw as bringing too much attention on their Blackness and they didn't want that.

NN: Okay.

AS: That's my interpretation, but who knows?

NN: So, as a kid did you know who you were related to?

AS: No.

NN: So when did you learn that your family name would have a ring of significance to anyone who knew anything about Black history?

AS: I was back down in Buxton one summer. I used to go every summer to visit my father who still lived there. I had nothing to do one afternoon and I sauntered into the museum and met the curator, whose name was Arlie Robbins, (she's now deceased). She was a wonderful woman and she wrote a very wonderful book called *Legacy to Buxton*, which has recently been reprinted by her family.³ Anyway, I walked into the museum and she sort of nonchalantly handed me this article and it was called "Mary Ann Shadd: Teacher, Lawyer, Suffragette, Abolitionist" – you know, something like that, and I'm thinking, whoa! So I started reading it and the article went into her parents and her grandparents even, and all this history and all of these accomplishments and lawyers and doctors and this and that that I had never heard about! I think I was maybe seventeen, or eighteen, or nineteen. It was an eye opener. I knew nothing about it. I really attribute that one moment to my interest in Black Canadian history.

NN: Did she know who you were?

AS: The curator? Oh, yes!

³ *Legacy to Buxton*, by A. C. Robbins, self-published, 1983.

NN: Was this a strategy on her part to get a teenager interested in Black history?

AS: Maybe she thought, "Let's see if we can get her interested in all of this." She was really fascinated by all this history. She did all this research and it was fantastic what she was able to find out. So anyway, yeah, she might have thought she might have a willing candidate for all of this history in me.

NN: So you were surprised? Did you go and talk to your dad and say hey ...!?

AS: I don't remember much about whom I talked to or anything. But I know that's where this seed first started.

NN: Okay, okay.

AS: I think, maybe, there's been other times, like I don't know if you know the book, *Look to the North Star* by Victor Ullman?⁴ That came out in the late sixties. That was another book that had a lot of stuff in it as well. There were maybe a couple of other things I read, but, Mary Ann Shadd! I had never heard of her until that moment.

NN: I see, so is that information what you then took to your family? Did you have Shadd grandparents growing up?

AS: Yes. I didn't remember my great grandfather, but I knew my great grandmother who died in 1967. So I knew her, but of course I was too young to ask any interesting or important questions of her. But I did know that generation. I know my father's mother's people as well.

NN: What was their name?

AS: Prince. So I'm related to Bryan Prince.

NN: I joke with my friend Madeleine Courtney, who's from Owen Sound, because whenever I mention anybody in the community, she says: "that's my cousin!"

AS: Right. Well, I could say that about a lot of people in Buxton.

NN: So you grew up in Toronto, but you visited Buxton, so what was the relationship with Buxton?

AS: I was born in Chatham, and grew up in Buxton, until I was ten, and then left and lived in Toronto.

⁴*Look to the North Star: A life of William King*, by Victor Ullman, Beacon Press, 1969.

NN: What got you writing? I mean you had an interest in history, but what got you writing?

AS: That's a good question. I don't know. My Uncle Bruce, my mother's brother, was studying at York. He was doing his BA or something. I remember we went up to the Yorkdale Mall. This was many years ago. We went into Eaton's. He was looking for a book by Vance Packard. It was *The Pyramid Climbers* or *The Status-Seekers*, one of his books about sociology or social commentary. And then something in the back of my head said "I'd like to do that." So somehow or other it's been something I have had an interest in for a long time. But, I remember I was in grade eleven and I wrote what I thought was this great short story. It was a true story, actually, about taking my grade ten piano exam at the Royal Conservatory. I wrote this story and it had a funny ending and all this. The teacher only gave me a like a B minus or something and I was so crushed that I figured, well, I guess I'm not meant to be a writer. Based on that one experience, which was stupid! But anyway, I don't know, but somehow or another I got interested, more interested in history and writing about that and decided I would come at it from that angle. I did a Master's degree in Sociology at McGill, and I did my thesis on comparing Black communities in Ontario and Nova Scotia, using a Neo-Marxist theory called internal colonialism. That catapulted me into Black Canadian history. And so ever since then I have been at it.

NN: And so at some point with Peggy Bristow's group that got together, you were invited, so how did that come about? I have to say that was a very important book when it came out. So how did you get attached to that book project?⁵

AS: Well, I was back in Toronto, after being in Montreal to study. I was back in Toronto and I was meeting different people. I became a member of the Black Development Committee to the United Way. It was an advisory group that helped United Way in the Black community. It was there that I met Carl James because he was on that committee and I met Ayanna Black and a number of others. I met Lloyd McKell there as well. Quite a number of people were in that group. Ayanna and Ann Wallace became interested in publishing something. It was Ann Wallace's initiative really, she was a publisher, and she wanted to create a magazine – and she did! It was called *Tiger Lily*. And I guess somehow they knew I was doing history of some kind and so they asked me if I would write a piece on Black women's history in Canada. So I wrote that piece, and Peggy Bristow saw the piece and she saw that there was a lot more stuff that you could delve into and she became interested in Black history in southwestern Ontario. Anyway, she decided that there should be a book on Black women because she worked in the Women's Resource Centre at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) and people were increasingly asking for writing on Black women's history in Canada and she had nothing much to offer beyond one or two articles. I was one of the people she asked, and she asked Dionne Brand and Afua Cooper and Sylvia Hamilton from Nova Scotia and several other people. So that

⁵"*We're rooted here and they can't pull us up*": *Essays in African Canadian Women's History* by Peggy Bristow, Dionne Brand, Linda Carty, Afua Cooper, Sylvia Hamilton, and Adrienne Shadd, 1994, University of Toronto Press.

was how I got involved.

NN: You also did two books with my colleague, Carl James.⁶ Very different kinds of books - about identity politics. You have these two different strands. You've got the historical stuff, and then - I'll call it more identity strand with Carl James. So how did that come about working on those two books?

AS: Well, as I said, I met Carl through the Black Development Committee to the United Way and we discovered we were both interested in publishing. At that time I really wanted to publish. So he had some ideas and I had some stuff I simply just wanted to get off my chest. That's how that came about.

NN: Right. Okay. In that first book you write the piece that kind of problematizes the notion of who gets to be Canadian.

AS: But before that I had written something for him called "Institutionalized Racism and Canadian History: notes of a Black Canadian" that he put in his book, *Seeing Ourselves*.⁷ Then we worked on a book together. We got Larry Hill and all kinds of interesting people to contribute to that.

NN: You did two books, right?

AS: Yeah, we did one that came out in '94 and then one that came out in 2001. The second one was a revised version basically. Some of the articles remained and some were new.

NN: Okay, but I guess the stuff off your chest comes from your experiences as a Black Canadian. In terms of that constant work you do when people ask you where you're from or who you are. Does it come from that place? Was it also connected to the silence in the family?

AS: I hadn't really thought about that. No, I don't think it's connected to that at all. No. But yes, it came from years of frustration at having to constantly explain to people why I was saying I was "Canadian" and the fact that it wasn't just accepted at face value. It seemed I always had to argue with people about it, and after explaining why I was a Canadian, not really being understood or even believed in some cases. It just didn't compute in people's minds. So in the article I wrote, I try to understand why that is, and to ask why "Blackness" and "Canadian-ness" seem so mutually exclusive and also how this has its roots in the historical construction of Canada as a location of "whiteness."

⁶*Talking about difference: Encounters in culture, language and identity*, edited by Carl James and Adrienne Shadd, 1992, Between the Lines Press; *Talking about identity: Encounters in race ethnicity and language*, edited by Carl James and Adrienne Shadd, 2001, Between the Lines Press.

⁷*Seeing ourselves: Exploring race, ethnicity and culture*, edited by Carl James, 1989, Sheridan College of Applied Arts and Technology.

NN: Regarding the silence in the family about the Shadd past, it wasn't a denial or a covering up, it was just "we're moving forward". The past doesn't actually matter to many people, right?

AS: Well, I think in a lot of Black Canadian cases, it's what I was saying earlier, people simply could not, or did not wish to talk about things. I guess it comes from painful experiences and, you know those kinds of things. But why they wouldn't pass down the great stuff I don't know. I have no idea at all.

NN: So here you are! Do you find that your name kind of garners more recognition? Is that something that's changed?

AS: Among Black people, yes, a lot more. But in general, I wouldn't say so. Unless someone is a historian and they know about the Shadd name. I've talked about this before, about being Black Canadian in a city in which Blacks are largely of Caribbean origin. It's not always the most enviable position to be in. Early on back in the '70s for example, there was no respect. You didn't get any respect [for being a Black Canadian with ancestral roots here in Canada].

NN: Why would that be?

AS: I guess they tend to see Black Canadians as maybe more "Oreo cookies". We weren't, you know, Black conscious enough in their view. We weren't revolutionary enough. This was the Black Power period. They didn't see us that way and sometimes we were not that way. We were maybe trying to blend in more rather than being outspoken and demanding our rights and all of that. But, not all of us were like that. Some of us were very conscious. Me, personally, I didn't feel that I got a lot of respect at that time. But now, when I mention who I am, I get more respect. That's fantastic as far as I'm concerned!

NN: You've certainly spoken out in your writing in a variety of ways. But now, I do want to talk about the Hamilton book which I really enjoyed. It really opened my eyes. So, *The Journey From Tollgate to Parkway...* is this the most substantive research and writing you've done?

AS: Probably, yeah, I would say so.

NN: How did you decide to take it on?

AS: It wasn't my decision actually. I agreed to do it. In 2007 - that's when we were commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by Britain. Jean Augustine got the provincial government to give a million dollars towards commemorating this bicentennial. A committee was formed and they decided to give a small portion of that money to groups or individuals who would commemorate the 200th anniversary in various ways. The Hamilton Black History Committee decided that they would see if they could get a chunk of that money and have someone write a series of profiles of Black activists, Black people who are, or were involved in the Hamilton community as social activists and people who have been fighting

for equality and social justice in Hamilton.

NN: Contemporary people?

AS: Contemporary, but also historical. And I had worked with an advisory group and the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre on another exhibit called *And Still I Rise*, which was on the 20th-century history of Black working communities in Ontario. So, Evelyn Myrie, who was on that committee and still is running the Hamilton Black History Committee, knew of me. She asked me if I would be interested in doing this series of profiles, and I said yes I would. But I talked her into doing a chronological history. So you will notice in the book that the last chapter is about more contemporary Black activists and community workers and so on, but the bulk of the book is on the 19th and early 20th-century history of Blacks in Hamilton. So that's how that came about.

NN: Okay. So, you wrote the profiles and then you took that material and other historic material and wrote the book. Or was it the other way around?

AS: I wrote the book and then wrote the profiles. I was interested in the history, the early history. So I ended up doing what I really wanted to do and then having the profiles at the end.

NN: It's evident to me that you did a huge amount of reading and a lot of digging in terms of archival stuff, and it looks like some oral history too – interviewing some contemporary people. Can you say a little bit about the process of doing that research and what you were looking for, what you found, and maybe some of the surprises?

AS: Well, I was looking for whatever I could find. So I went to the Hamilton Public Library. The main library has a room that is devoted to history. They have a very good collection actually. They've collected a tremendous amount of stuff. They have a lot of files on different people, and I just started there.

NN: So you had that as a kind of guide to know who was important?

AS: They had files on different people. So I started out there and then decided who I was really interested in looking at and then tried to research those people more. Of course you know I used a lot of the old "stand-bys" to get information like William Still's book⁸ and Benjamin Drew's book,⁹ any of these books that I was familiar with to draw out information on people that went to Hamilton and so on, and I just kept going. You know, when I think about it, there is a lot of stuff that I missed, or I found out later that I thought, "Darn! I wish I could've put that in!" But the book is already really thick.

⁸*The Underground Railroad*, by William Still, 1872 / 1968, Arno Press.

⁹*The Refugee: Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, Benjamin Drew, 1856 / 2008, Dundurn Press.

NN: What kind of things did you find later, more people or more stories about people in the book?

AS: More context, more interesting information. There was someone Guylaine Petrin found that she told me about. A woman named Actley. Her name was Phoebe Actley of West Flamborough Township in Hamilton-Wentworth. She shot at a man and didn't even hit the guy and she was sentenced to die. But she was given a reprieve, right. And a lot of white people came forward on her behalf. They signed a petition saying that it was too harsh a penalty and all that. The Lieutenant Governor commuted her sentence.

NN: And when was this?

AS: It was early. It was in 1825.

NN: That little anecdote does kind of strike a chord with me, because reading your book I kept finding these stories about how the community was rallying from early on. What we identify as a 1950s or 1960s civil rights movement was actually something that was present in the nineteenth century. Was that something that surprised you when doing your research?

AS: Yes. We found out a lot about this during the war of 1812 research too.¹⁰ There were so many petitions that were written to the government that we didn't know about because nobody had ever gone through all of the material that one could have gone through. And I think Guylaine Petrin was one of the people who has been going through those petitions prodigiously. She's found so much stuff! I mean, people were protesting and writing these petitions from early on. You know about the one that Richard Pierpoint wrote with his friends in the 1790s? So I guess this was a way to get anything done at that time: write a petition to the leaders of the government and get them to do something. I was just very interested to see how much of this was going on. We didn't really know that much about it before.

NN: One of the people that you mentioned is Edward Patterson. You had drawn a little information about an Edward Patterson who was in the Benjamin Drew book.¹¹ I'm wondering whether this might be the Edward Patterson on the Old Durham Road and I have been wanting to think about that. His age isn't quite right. The years are right for when he's in Upper Canada. And he's from Baltimore, Maryland.

AS: It could very well be the same person.

NN: Is this your experience, that in terms of the historic Black community in the nineteenth

¹⁰*'We stand on guard for thee': Teaching and learning the African Canadian experience in the War of 1812*, The Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of African Peoples, 2013, <http://tubman.info.yorku.ca/educational-resources/war-of-1812/>

¹¹"Edward Patterson," *The Refugee: Narratives of the fugitive slaves in Canada*, p. 126.

century, that there was a lot of communication and knowledge shared between communities? Was the Black community overall a fairly tight community – across its dispersal around the province?

AS: Well, I think maybe one of the reasons they knew each other was that there was a lot of movement around. People always seemed to be moving from place to place and didn't stay in one location a lot of the time. They would move somewhere else and try and find better opportunities I guess. But also, they may have come from the same area in the U.S.

NN: And then they could find each other once they got here. Did you have favourite people when you were doing your stories – people that stick out or personalities that stick out for you, that were especially interesting to you?

AS: Yeah, Captain William Allan. I wasn't able to find out much more about him because I didn't have time to go in depth to the degree I would have liked. And, as you know, he was granted 100 acres in the Oro settlement, but someone else settled on it in his absence, so he ended up in Hamilton. But he was somebody I wanted to find out more about because of the fact that he was a captain of a Black militia group that was out of Hamilton. And also, of course, there was the famous Paola Brown character!

NN: Is that how you say that "Pay-o-la"?

AS: Well actually at that time it was pronounced "Pee-o-lee". But I discovered there was a place called Paoli, Pennsylvania, and he was from Pennsylvania, so maybe that's where that came from. Of course I found out more information about him since the book came out. And also, there was a guy – Williamson Pease – who could pass for white and he's mentioned in Drew and I told his story based on what I read in Drew, but then I found out more about him by digging into the directories and the census and things like that. And finding out that the person with the name William Pease was the same person as in the Drew book named Williamson Pease.

NN: Who else?

AS: Wilma Morrison was somebody that I really found fascinating.

NN: You've known her a fair while?

AS: I've known her since I guess the 1990s. She was still working at the library beside the church, the Nathaniel Dett Chapel and the Norval Johnson Memorial Library. I went there to do research and she was there. She's a wonderful person! She knows so much of the early 20th century Hamilton history. If it hadn't been for her, the book would have been a lot less rich in that time period than it is because she gave me a lot of information and a lot of names. I was very interested in the things that they did as young people in the 1940s, you know, sitting in

restaurants to test whether they would serve Blacks and stuff like that.

NN: So, besides Wilma Morrison, did you interview anyone else?

AS: I interviewed a number of people for another project that I was doing in Hamilton, so I used those interviews. I interviewed Jackie Washington. That was a wonderful experience also. He's a lot of fun to talk to and he sang for me as well and played his guitar.

NN: That's pretty neat.

AS: I also interviewed Ray Lewis before he died. He was the Olympic bronze medallist in the 4x400 relay in 1932 who could only find work as a porter on the railroad.

NN: You've had lots of experience with the archival kinds of materials and you've had this interview experience – which is basically oral history. Do you prefer one over the other?

AS: Oh yeah, I love the archives. I'm not as comfortable dealing with live people, but I have to. I'm that type of person. But once I get over my fear of asking somebody for an interview and I get there, it's usually a delightful experience. I'm just a bit shy about asking people for their time and all of that. So, I prefer the dead people! What can I say?!

NN: It's been in my experience that there is a fair amount of sleuthing that one does when working in the archives. You really do have to pay attention and keep your eyes open and then look for those possibilities that are going to connect "A" to "B", that connect this name to this person over here. I hadn't put it on my list but since we are reviewing the website for the journal, can you say something about the work you did for the Harriet Tubman Institute's website on the War of 1812. What interested you, or surprised you about that work?

AS: Yeah, I found it, again, a really enjoyable experience working with you and all the other people on the team. Everybody there was doing what they really loved to do. So it's always good when you really like what you're doing.

NN: You wrote a substantive amount for that project. Can you say a little bit about the research you did on the Coloured Corps?

AS: I wish I could have done more, because I am now finding out more about it than I knew at the time. I guess I had thought before I started the project that the Coloured Corps were primarily from the Niagara area, but that wasn't really true. They were coming from various places, and they were originally from various places. Some of them had come from the U.S., and some were born in Canada. And, I was just interested to see the various places that people had come from and the different backgrounds. I just wish we had had more time to do more work.

NN: So what's next? What are you doing now? Have you got a project now?

AS: Well right now I am actually working with a publisher that is doing a series of books for school children on Black history, Black music, Black ancient civilizations, this, that and the other thing. They are going to be selling this across Canada. But specifically I guess the Department of Education in Nova Scotia is really interested in these books. So a number of us are working on various books for different grade levels. I have just finished one called *Freedom*. I just agreed to do a second one on ancient civilizations which is a little bit out of my comfort zone, but that's what I'm working on right now. I have a couple of books of my own in mind that I want to start working on as well, but I don't want to say any more about that right now.

NN: Will it be about Ontario African Canadian history?

AS: Yes, absolutely.

NN: Okay, that's the end of twenty questions. As I've come to know you through your writing, you have this really lovely breadth because there's the history piece, and the sociology piece. Do you see the sociology piece coming back? I mean there's a way in which it does inform *The Journey from Tollgate to Parkway*.

AS: Well, as you said, I don't necessarily see myself working on that type of thing again, but it informs everything I do because, I mean you can see it in the Hamilton book. One of my interests is in looking at the census decade by decade and seeing what occupations people had. That's very "sociology-oriented"! That's the kind of thing I'm really interested in: to see the socio-economic positions of people over time, and whether they improve not. So that kind of thing is always going to be in my work.

NN: When I was looking up your phone number I actually pulled out my most recent Toronto directory and you were the only Shadd!

AS: I've been the only Shadd, I think, for many years.

NN: Are there Shadds still out in Buxton?

AS: There's lots of Shadds in Buxton, Chatham, Windsor and so on and so forth. There are lots of Shadd descendants in Toronto, but they don't have the last name Shadd.

NN: So here you are! A twenty-first century Shadd to go down in history!