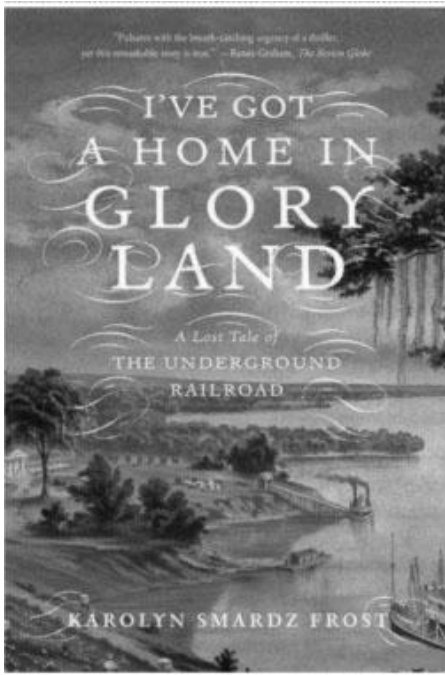


# **I**nterview with Karolyn Smardz Frost, **Author of *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad***

Interview by Naomi Norquay



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**Author Karolyn Smardz Frost**  
*Photograph by Timothy Hudson*

*It was the day before Independence Day, 1831. As his bride, Lucie, was about to be “sold down the river” to the slave markets of New Orleans, young Thornton Blackburn planned a daring—and successful—daylight escape from Louisville. But they were discovered by slave catchers in Michigan and slated to return to Kentucky in chains, until the black community rallied to their cause. The Blackburn Riots of 1833 was the first racial uprising in Detroit history.*

*The couple was spirited across the river to Canada, but their safety proved illusory. In*

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*Naomi Norquay*

*June 1833, Michigan's governor demanded their extradition. The Blackburn case was the first serious legal dispute between Canada and the United States regarding the Underground Railroad. The impassioned defense of the Blackburns by Canada's Lieutenant Governor set precedents for all future fugitive-slave cases.*

*The Blackburns settled in Toronto and founded the city's first taxi business. But they never forgot the millions who still suffered in slavery. Working with prominent abolitionists, Thornton and Lucie made their home a haven for runaways. The Blackburns died in the 1890s, and their fascinating tale was lost to history. Lost, that is, until a chance archaeological discovery in a downtown Toronto school yard brought the story of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn again to light.*

Q: In August 2008 I heard you speak about the Blackburns at the Friday evening event attached to the Emancipation Day Picnic, and then a couple of months later you spoke at the Quaker Historical Society Conference. What struck me both times was how electric you were, and how you conveyed a whole lot of excitement about this couple.

So I have some questions about Thornton and Lucie and about doing that kind of research. The book is done, you've won the Governor General's Award for it, and you're still very engaged with it, both the book itself and the people you researched.

Can you tell me what keeps you energized about this story?

A: I don't know why Thornton and Lucie Blackburn chose me to tell their story, but it has always felt like they did.

Throughout the entire experience of discovering the archaeological site and finding the documentation that proved that they were fugitive slaves from Kentucky, and through the documentation in Michigan that named the people who believed they were their owners in Kentucky, all of that was a process that led me further and further into the story and deeper into the idea of their lives. I guess what kept me going was the fact that we actually have no full birth-to-death account of a fugitive slave. This is the first one to be published since the Civil War that is based on all original research. So, I knew that it was going to be significant in terms of what it could do with respect to offering data. What kept me excited about it is that I kept finding more and more interesting things about what was going on in their lives, vis-à-vis the context of their times.

So often when we read about "The Underground Railroad" (which has got a lot of mythology attached to it, as we all know), or we read about any historical figure, we see them in a snap shot in a particular period in their lives. We lose track of the fact that they evolved just as we do over the course of their lives. Historical events impacted them, but so did trends and social change and all of the people they met. People are not static, and the Blackburns were not static.

So what I was attempting to do with the book and what kept me going all the way through discovering little tidbits of information, was trying to draw a chronology that fit into the history of race and slavery in North America. And not just from the time of Thornton's birth, but from the time of his mother's birth which was as far back as I could get it: 1776 in Virginia. How that woman got to Kentucky at the age of 16, giving birth to a child who was mixed [race], possibly [fathered] by the son of her owner; although I've never been able to prove that.

What her life must have been like in the context of real frontier era Kentucky, and then [with] Thornton being born during the war of 1812 at the place where the American troops mustered to attack Canada. The people who fought the battle of the Thames and killed Tecumseh in Canada were later mustered out at Maysville while Thornton was a baby. This just began a whole list of chronology in which Thornton and Lucie Blackburn and their contemporaries lived through some of the most tumultuous times of the nineteenth century.

Q: "Template" isn't quite the right word, but they do provide an interesting map of what might be possible with other such subjects.

A: Cultural historian Clifford Geertz called this "thick description". You toss a stone in the water and see where the ripples flow. We don't know if Thornton and Lucie were typical. We don't know if they're representative. We don't know if they're a case study. They were just two people who happened to be at specific places and specific times in their lives and had these huge forces act on them.

Q: One of the poignant parts of the book for me is the piece about extradition and the Blackburns' role as the first kind of test case. That's actually a very exciting part of Canadian History.

A: Actually, they changed history. This little couple, a children's nursemaid and her porter husband, changed history. Because it's a series of firsts: the Blackburn extradition case and Canada's refusal to return them to slavery in the United States (which is what would have happened), resulted in Canada's first refugee reception policy. That places African Canadian history, as much as any other story does, at the centre of the Canadian National narrative. It is not the history of the "other".

Q: You've been touring. Can you give me a sense of where you go?

A: Oh my goodness! I gave 118 talks last year!

Q: Who's interested in this story and in your account and in you? Who are your audiences?

A: Well first of all, the book is published in both the United States and Canada. So there is an American edition and a Canadian edition and both were promoted separately by their separate publishers. So the audiences are approaching it from different points of view of course. But I have done everything from women's shelters in the basement of churches to Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall, where Frederick Douglass used to speak. I had the tremendous honour of speaking at the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary service of Second Baptist Church, which is the oldest Black institution in Detroit and is still serving a congregation. The people who founded Second Baptist in 1836 are the same people who rescued Thornton in 1833. I also spoke at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati where they did a C-SPAN piece which is broadcast still regularly on U.S. national television. The American launch [of my book] was held at the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Canada Institute in Washington D. C. and the moderator was John Franklin, who is John Hope Franklin's son<sup>1</sup>.

Q: I would say that these are kind of expected audiences - organizations and people who have a vested interest in African American and African Canadian history. So you go to a women's shelter. How do they respond?

A: I talk about how Mrs. Blackburn had met her husband only three months before and wasn't allowed to get married because slaves were not able to marry. It was illegal. They were property so they could not enter into a marriage contract. She had just been sold on the auction block and was sold to a man who was going to send her south down the Mississippi River to the sex trade in New Orleans. This resonates just fine with almost anyone who has been oppressed: how she and her husband escaped in the boldest possible daylight escape. Their marriage was threatened again in Detroit, because when they were captured two years after their escape, if they had gone back to Kentucky in chains they would have been separated for life.

Q: Any other audiences like the women's shelter that you can think of?

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin (1915 - 2009) was an eminent African American historian. The author of many books and articles, he advised NAACP on the Brown vs. the Board of Education case that overturned legal school segregation. His influential book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, was originally published in 1947. He headed President Clinton's task force on race.

A: Any audience. The love story resonates with people, and also the idea of oppression. When I did the archaeological dig, there were three thousand school children who took part in that excavation. I talked about the Blackburns as a refugee couple escaping oppression. The children of Toronto schools had no trouble whatsoever understanding why people would leave their oppressive circumstances behind and try to make a better life for their children.

Q: What do your audiences seem to be most interested in?

A: It depends very much on what the audience's background may be. The questions tend to be different in the United States, and the further south one goes, the questions alter as well. One of the things that people in the deeper south always want to find out is: "Were the owners kind to the slaves?" Because every state in the south will tell you that slavery was kinder in their state than anywhere else. They say that in South Carolina, they say that in Georgia, they say that in Kentucky. So that is a perennial question. I do often get the question - usually asked gently and always with great care - late in the question period, about how I got interested in this sort of history, referring to the fact that I am a white writer of Black history. My response is first of all, I didn't find the site, it found me. The Blackburns' story was so fascinating that I fell in love with them. Secondly my great grandmother was a slave in Virginia, so my interest has always been in the field of African Canadian and African American heritage.

Q: When you go to speak, what do you hope people will come away with?

A: You know, I've spent my whole career getting people excited about history. That's what I do. I think history gives people a sense of place and identity. It can help us understand our own roles in the world and understand the forces that acted on other people that are more like us than they are different from us. So I try very, very, hard to strip away that sense of the "other" that sometimes is a factor in "multicultural" history, and talk about how this particular couple got past all the terrible things that happened in their lives and went on and were inspired to engage in anti-slavery activities in Canada. To receive people in their own homes, to billet fugitive slaves and help (slaves) go forward in their own lives. They spent the rest of their lives giving back in very tangible ways. I think that's an inspiration for all of us.

Q: One of the things that fascinated me about your book was your methodology. You did a phenomenal amount of historical detective work, partly because you were trying to find lives that had no diaries or letters or public accounts or contemporary historical accounts. Can you say something about what that process was like? And related to

that, I know you are a trained archaeologist, so did archaeology play a role in how you went about this research?

A: As I said in my introduction, nobody had ever done this before. I had no idea what I was doing, so I fell back on my own training, which was archaeological. I trained as a classical archaeologist, and classical archaeologists, Greek and Roman Archaeologists, are trained to analyze text in order to locate sites and find out about the people who occupied the site. So the methodology is identical in terms of what I did. I went to the places I knew the Blackburns had been. I walked the land. I looked at the terrain. I tried to put myself in a place where I could see the world as it was in their day. In rural Kentucky that's not that hard.

Q: In the sense that it hasn't changed that much?

A: Yes, in many places. The other piece of that is to look at the documentation relating to place, because slaves were property. You very often find the evidence for their existence and what happened to them in the documents that relate to property transfer; wills and marriage settlements. The classic plantation records with a list of slaves, there are very few of them, and an awful lot of enslaved people were not living on plantations, but in cities and on small farms. That's not as relevant a source in Kentucky as it might be in North Carolina or Mississippi where there were much larger plantation situations. So I was looking at very sparse records. But you know the interesting thing is there was a remarkable amount more data than anybody thought I was ever going to find.

Q: Did people think that because others have looked and not found things?

A: You really do have to spend a lot of time piecing the clues together. It's not going to be found from a cursory look. I mean I was looking for a slave who had no last name. The white people who wrote the records of slavery did not use last names for their slaves, even though the slaves themselves used last names. So I was looking for "Thornton, age 19, good with horses." Also, the owners of Thornton Blackburn (or the people who believed they owned him) in Kentucky, were named Smith and then Brown.

Q: That's like looking up a MacDonald in Scotland. So that's part of the reason it took you so long, because you were covering not only historical time but actual territory.

A: Yes, I went to 13 American states. Because, realize that it is the white slave-holding families whose records hold the record of slavery. Unless the enslaved people were literate - it is white people's records we are looking to. They took their family history with them when they moved. So there is the Westward Movement at play here. The Virginian family that brought Thornton's mother to Kentucky had descendants who moved to Missouri and on. The people who owned Thornton in his third ownership, which were the Browns, moved westward. In fact, some of the pictures in the book - the family portraits - were given to me by a direct descendant of Susan Talbot Brown, who lives today in Washington State. So I travelled a very great deal of distance to do this.

Q: I just have a couple more questions. One is: what advice would you give others wishing to reclaim hidden history?

A: It's there, don't give up! What I would advise them to do certainly is look at the court documents. Court documents are gold. For instance, if someone's mad at their husband and wants to divorce him, the amount of detail they are willing to reveal about their personal lives is phenomenal. Court documents are extremely useful. If there is any kind of a court case relating to an enslaved person, or any other hidden history, the court documents have more detail than anything else.

Q: Anything else that you think young aspiring historians should think about?

A: Give me a problem, because this is too broad for me.

Q: Okay! Let's think about the Old Durham Road where I have property. Our place was initially owned by Royal or Rozal (depending on how you read the various handwritten records) who was the son of Chauncey Simons. Where would you start?

A: One of the things I did with the Queens Bush Settlement<sup>2</sup> for instance, is I looked at newspaper accounts of people's recollections of where things used to be. Turn of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Queen's Bush Settlement was north of Fergus, Ontario.

century newspapers there were very revealing. Elderly men were interviewed and they would say: “Well, you know, when I was a child I used to go to school at the Mission School, and I had to cross this stream, and go up this hill”. I actually was able to locate the two Mission Schools, which I don’t think anybody’s ever done before. A descendant of the local settlers, Diana Braithwaite, and I went out one day and did this in the snow.

The other thing is that is your names are different. I was lucky with Thornton Blackburn, because there aren’t 16 of them. Chauncey Simons isn’t exactly a “John Smith” either. The name Chauncey is British, it’s very English. My guess would be that it’s stemming from Virginia origins. They may have been brought by way of Kentucky, but the name Chauncey is not a common name for enslaved people. You should be able to find Chauncey either as a surname or a first name, and while that wouldn’t necessarily give you a direct link, realize that enslaved people were sold, given away, given to married daughters and became the property of their husbands. Their last names did not follow directly the mythology that states they were named after their owners. Not true.

It might have been so in the first generation out of Africa, but after that it’s anybody’s game. Unless people had a very stable living situation, they travelled with their owners westward. Names had many incarnations as slave ownership changed from father to daughter to son-in-law, for instance. Slaves were raffled off in lotteries and dispersed through wills. But the name Chauncey strikes me as one that you should be able to reach.

Q: Rozal or Royal also?

A: Exactly, not common names. You should be able to do that. I would also try and find some descendants and talk. This is where you start with any kind of history. You talk to the old people and get as much of the story as you can. And if it’s not verbally available, it may be available in a taped oral history from the 1960s in a museum somewhere. And it may be available in the children of elderly people who remember their ancestors.

Q: So Karolyn, can you say anything about what’s next?

A: Oh yes! I have three books on the go! The first one (which is the main one) I am writing for HarperCollins and it is supposed to come out in January of 2011. It is called *Steal Away Home: Letters to a Fugitive Slave*. I have five letters out of a 20



year correspondence between a fugitive slave woman who lived in Toronto in the 1850s and her former owner's mistress in Kentucky. The former mistress was Fannie Thruston Ballard, who was the great-niece of William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and great grandmother of the Secretary of the Interior under Richard Nixon. The two women corresponded for many, many, years and towards the end of her life, Cecilia, the woman in Toronto, went back to Kentucky, because her husband's Civil War pension was not being paid. She didn't ask for money, what she wanted was political influence in Washington from her former owner's family.

She wound up living down the street from the woman with whom she had grown up (as a slave in the Thruston household) for the rest of her life. It's a two-women biography, one black and one white, starting in the 1830s and ending in the 1890s, and I don't think it's been done before. The letters are stunning. I only have five letters from Fannie to Cecilia, but they are so evocative that they send chills down my spine.

Q: What comes after that?

A: I am doing some work on the Detroit River right now with a group of people in Detroit and I also really want to write a book on the Confederate spies that operated out of the Queen's Hotel in downtown Toronto during the Civil War. Did you know that Robert E. Lee visited Toronto? John C. Breckinridge<sup>3</sup> lived here. The generals from the Civil War who couldn't get amnesty lived in Niagara-on-The-Lake for several years after the Civil War. Jefferson Davis<sup>4</sup> came to Toronto to visit them. There are a couple of books - and I think there's likely a lot more.

Q: Do you have an order for these? When can we expect the next one?

A: January 2011 for *Steal Away Home*. The Confederate book will be after that and I am calling it *White Rose in Snow*. The Detroit book will be sometime in between, because that's an edited volume with a group of people, so that's a fast write. And somewhere in there I have to write a children's book about the Blackburns.

Q: You do? That would be fantastic.

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<sup>3</sup> John Cabell Breckinridge (1821-1875) was the 14<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States. Although Kentucky was a Union state he sided with the South. He was a general in the Confederate Army and served as the Confederate Secretary of War.

<sup>4</sup> Jefferson Davis (1808-1889) was the President of the Confederate States from 1861-1865.

A: And we're hoping for film right now, so keep good thoughts.