

“This book is about freedom!”:

An Interview with Natasha Henry

Naomi Norquay

Since the spring of 2012 I have had the privilege of working with Natasha Henry at the Harriet Tubman Institute here at York University. I am managing a research project entitled "We stand on guard for thee: Teaching and learning the African Canadian experience in the War of 1812". Natasha is both a researcher and the curriculum developer for this project. It was in that capacity that she participated as a guest speaker in my Black History Field Trip for Teachers, held last May¹. As an educator with a huge interest in African-Canadian history, I was very curious about her two books: *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada*² and *Talking About Freedom: Celebrating Emancipation in Canada*³. We found some time on one of our busy days at the Harriet Tubman Institute to talk. (See Volume 8, 2011 for a review of the talk Natasha gave about her first book at the 148th Emancipation Festival Speakers' Forum; see this volume for a review of her second book.)



Natasha Henry

Naomi Norquay: What sparked your interest in African-Canadian history?

Natasha Henry: Well I've always been interested. It stemmed from my experience in high school, and wanting to learn more about the Black experience here in Canada. And from there, I went on to the Faculty of Education. As an educator, I wanted to make sure that my students were learning about the African story as well. And so through my readings, I started to develop usable materials for the classroom that I could share those with my students and other teachers. It just so happened that one day, when I was doing a presentation at Grey Roots Museum & Archives, sharing some of this information with educators, that Jane & Barry Penhale, from Natural Heritage Books, were there. They approached me and asked if I would be interested in writing a manuscript for a book on a topic that they felt had not yet been served.

¹ Also see *Bridging the Gap: Reflections on Priceville's Hidden History* by Rhonda George and Raeon George-Robinson for a review of the 2012 Black History Field Trip for teachers which begins on page 43 of this volume.

² Also see Cecilie Posthumus' review of the 148th Emancipation Celebration Festival on page 44 of Volume 8 of the *Northern Terminus Journal*. Natasha Henry gave the keynote address at that Festival Speaker's Forum for that year on the subject of her book *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada* (Natural Heritage, Dundurn: Toronto, 2010).

³ Sarina Ryan reviews Natasha Henry's *Talking About Freedom: Celebrating Emancipation Day in Canada* (Natural Heritage, Dundurn: Toronto, 2012) on page 54 of this volume.

They felt that I would be a good fit to write this book.

NN: So, what was your high school experience?

NH: Well I grew up in what they would now call a “priority neighborhood”, in the Lawrence Heights community in Toronto. I went to Bathurst Heights Secondary School which was quite diverse. As a student who loved history, I didn’t feel that the history that was taught was reflective of the student population. So I always did a lot of my own reading, and when I did my assignments I tried to incorporate some of that into my work. My fellow students and I organized a group for Black history, and we did that for a couple of years. And then after, when I came to York University, I did African Studies and Anthropology as a double major. I was always interested in learning more, and as an educator, I kept asking myself, how can we get students to learn about this information? Growing up with students who were somewhat disconnected from their learning, I felt as a teacher that maybe if they learned more about the experience of their ancestors, people who looked like them, who contributed to Canada, that somehow that would make a difference, and they would want to engage more in their learning.

NN: So, how did you go about researching this first book? It looks like it took quite a substantial amount of research!

NH: Well it was a tremendous feat. I started with some background reading. And believe it or not, even being born here, I had no idea that the Emancipation Day was celebrated here in Canada. My parents are of Caribbean descent and I was familiar with Emancipation Day celebrations in the Caribbean, but I hadn’t realized that Emancipation Day was a big thing here in Canada. So I did some background research, read some books, and I then tapped into the Archives of Ontario, where I started going through newspapers, lots of newspaper reels, and targeting some of the areas that were well-featured in terms of Emancipation Day, such as Windsor. Then I tapped into people who were familiar with the history, and asked them for some direction in terms of sources. I travelled to some museums to go through their collections of newspapers clippings, documents and articles. I also went to the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario, who are now located in a library of the University of Toronto. They did have some collections of clippings and photographs. So it took some time to go around, and to really put things together and to really get a sense of the depth of the celebration here.

NN: So of all that, what was the most interesting to you?

NH: What was most interesting to me was the extent to which Emancipation Day was celebrated. Before starting the research, I had an idea that it was celebrated in Ontario of course, because as you know, there was a large Black population. But then I learned that Emancipation Day was celebrated as far west as Victoria, B.C., and as far east as Nova Scotia. I just found it interesting that it was celebrated across the country. And in the earlier celebrations, the fact that people were travelling quite a distance without cars and making connections and plans without telephones or email, and winding up with hundreds of people who would congregate to mark this day.

NN: And of course, now that I'm thinking about it, there is a way that this across-the-country-celebration could be regarded as one of the few "national" (although non-statutory) celebrations.

NH: Yes!

NN: You must have met a lot of interesting people! Can you tell me about people you met while doing this?

NH: Well, I met an array of people. I met Lois Green of Owen Sound, and she was able to share with me her story, growing up in Owen Sound and participating as a young person, and later helping to organize and plan the event. She shared her reflections on what the Emancipation festival is today. I also met Nerene Virgin. I remember her from when I was younger, from a children's show called "Today's Special". She participated in a beauty pageant as a young girl. It was funny because when I came across an article about that pageant, I looked at the face, and thought "this face is so familiar!" I couldn't place it, but when I finally realized it was her, I decided that I had to speak with her. I've spoken with a few people, but haven't met them in person. In Nova Scotia, I spoke with Dr. Henry Bishop. He was very helpful and provided a lot of information about the celebration in Nova Scotia and who I could contact there.

NN: So, because of all the resources in your first book, I got a real sense of the various Black communities across the country who seemed really happy that you were doing this, and were generous with their knowledge and information. Is that your sense, that people saw your work as important?

NH: Yes it was well-received, and people, who could help, did what they could, and if they didn't have information, then they directed me to people who they felt did. So I did get a lot of support in that sense.

NN: Afua Cooper wrote the forward to the first book. How did she come to do that?

NH: Well Afua and I had worked together before, and I believe we were just wrapping up a project at that time, and I felt, based on that relationship, that she would be fitting to write the introduction. And as well, a few months before, she had written an article in a journal called *Directions*, for the Canada Race Relations Foundation. It was a special issue and in her piece, she did touch on the Emancipation Day celebrations. So it just seemed like a good fit at the time.

NN: In your first book, in your first chapter, you quote a poem, "True Essence of Freedom". I'm wondering if you can tell me about the poem and the poet.

NH: Well, and again, it's funny how things come together! The poem was written by my husband, Fitzroy Dixon. He wrote the poem long before we met, and he just happened to be compiling his poems together, typing them up on the computer, and he shared that one with me. And I thought "This is really perfect", because, of course, the theme of this book is freedom. And that's how I decided to pick that poem to open the book with.

NN: So you had the forward written by Afua Cooper, who is a very well-known and respected historian and scholar, and the opening verse of a lovely poem by your spouse. That's pretty cool! I guess I want to ask you about your next book, why did you write the second book?

NH: Well, the first book was really an overview of Emancipation Day, the extent to which it was celebrated, where it was celebrated, and once I got a grasp of that, because I am an educator, I wanted this information disseminated to younger people. The second book targets a younger audience, so they can learn about the history of Emancipation Day. But not only that! I wanted to help youth make a connection to what's going on in their world today.

NN: So that's why you have so many wonderful quotes from songs, from contemporary artists.

NH: Yes.

NN: How long did each book take to research and write?

NH: Well, as soon as I was approached to write the first book I started reading and researching, and that took just over a year of quite intense research and writing. The second book, took me about 10 months. Almost a year, and I did think it would be easier. But in reframing it for young people, there was still a bit of work to do. There was some new research included, so that's why the second book took about the same amount of time.

NN: I guess, when I read the first one, I was thinking about the way in which, over time, and we're talking 180 years coming up, there have been dips and surges in terms of the celebration of emancipation. Some places had celebrations and then did not, then had them again. What did you find that explained that kind of dip and then resurgence?

NH: In the earlier days, it seems to be a connection to the migration waves of people. Obviously the celebration was more frequent when communities were establishing themselves. When the children started to leave the communities, the celebrations started to wane. And if people were moving to larger centres, the larger centres tended to continue the celebrations somewhat. But also, too, while the cities may have populations reflective of the Black community, some of these more urban celebrations stopped for a bit. I assume that maybe when things were okay, when people felt that things were okay, or there was a bit more assimilation, it wasn't necessarily something that people continued. But then, later on, you would always find a group of people that feels that it is something of historical importance, so this tradition gets revived. We've even see that going on today. So it does happen in waves, yes.

NN: Owen Sound just celebrated its 150th Emancipation Celebration. Is it the oldest in terms of continuity?

NH: It's 150 years of continuous annual celebrations, yes.

NN: But some of them, such as Windsor, as you note in your book, marked the 175th

Anniversary of the Emancipation Day.

NH: But there was a break in celebrations for a few years. So they celebrated emancipation for a quite a time, but there were some breaks.

NN: So Owen Sound gets to wear that mantle of the longest running celebration!

NH: Yes!

NN: In terms of the larger centres, where else have there been substantive celebrations over time?

NH: We had in Montréal, the very first Emancipation Day, in 1834. It was the only location I could find for that first year. We had, of course, celebrations in Toronto, London, Hamilton, and going out west, in Victoria B.C. That one started in the late 1850s, as a result of the immigration of African-Americans from San Francisco.

NN: Are there any lasting features or traditions that have been maintained?

NH: Yes. For example, the connection to the church and the church services which are still held. That's one thing. What's also been consistent is the invitation to speakers, and people coming to Emancipation Day to share whatever at the time they feel important for people to learn about. So having speakers come in, is a great learning opportunity for the community as well. So that's something I found to be consistent, as well as some form of musical presentation.

NN: What about food?

NH: And food, of course! Yes!

NN: Can you tell me about some of the famous African-Americans who have attended?

NH: As I mentioned earlier, I found it fascinating that people would travel a far distance to come and celebrate emancipation, and Americans did come – both Black and white.

NN: Why did they do that?

NH: Well, in the earlier days, prior to the abolition of American Slavery, they used it as an opportunity to get support from their Canadian brothers and sisters in the fight to end American slavery. They also used it as an opportunity to put America on notice, to say "Here we are! Our neighbors to the north, they've abolished slavery, this is something you need to follow."

NN: But it would be freed Blacks and whites coming up before the end of American slavery?

NH: Yes.

NN: What about since then?

NH: Since then, again we have the idea of the fluid borders, and people coming across. So there's always been this cross-border relationship, whether its people coming to Canada, or going to Detroit to work from the Windsor area. You have some family members living on the Canadian side and some family members living on the U.S. side. So if you have that familial relationship where people would come across and families would use it as a time to reunite and get together. Maybe it was that one time of year where families would congregate. It also established that American-Canadian relationship as well. And so from early times we've always had a lot of speakers coming in. Frederick Douglass came to speak at the Dawn Settlement. Reverend Samuel Mays came from New York. He was a white abolitionist and he came. Moving on in time, Dr. Martin Luther King attended Windsor's in 1954. We also had Adam Clinton Power Junior, who was a congressman. He attended a couple of times. He was invited to speak. We had the former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt coming and Black activist, Mary McCoy Bethune. And those are just a few.

NN: So, of course Emancipation Day is a British tradition, because it was the British Empire that ended slavery, and of course America wasn't part of the British Empire. But are there emancipation celebrations in the states?

NH: Yes there are actual Emancipation Day - August 1st celebrations in the United States and they've been celebrated since shortly after the British passed the act, even though it wasn't a U.S. legislation.

NN: Are there some still?

NH: Yes, there are some that still continue to this day.

NN: Whereabouts?

NH: In northern New York State, they continue to celebrate Emancipation Day. And again, when you're looking at the migration waves, perhaps these are some descendants of people who settled in Canada, who later moved to the United States, showing their support for their British brothers and sisters and just continuing that relationship.

NN: I just have a few more questions. Obviously this history is important to you. Can you tell me how this long standing tradition is important to the Black community?

NH: Well it's important because it connects people in so many ways. And many people are not aware of it. For example, when Toronto's Caribana festival came about, it was proposed as an event for the Centennial celebrations in 1967. The people who put it together were mostly from the Caribbean and they infused some of the ways in which Emancipation Day was marked in the Caribbean. And so people who had immigrated from Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and Grenada, infused a lot of how they celebrated Emancipation Day in their home countries into Toronto's Caribana. A lot of people are not familiar with or don't know that there is that connection. And Caribana is held on the same weekend. So even there, there's been a revival by the Ontario Black Historical Society to hold something during that long weekend in Toronto, in

recognition of Emancipation Day. So it connects people, it connects people of African descent in the United States and in Canada. You're looking at the idea of people speaking out against injustice and not just about slavery but as time has passed, dealing with other social issues that have confronted the Black community.

NN: I can certainly imagine with Martin Luther King coming there would have been an aspect of the civil rights.

NH: Yes, and he came just before the Montgomery Bus Boycott got started. When we're looking at civil rights, it's not only American civil rights, but still during that era - the 1950s and '60s - there was very much a movement here in Canada to address some of the inequalities that faced the Black community.

NN: I think so much of what happens in Black History Month, with teachers that don't have the background, is that they often focus on Martin Luther King. It would be so wonderful if they wanted to do that, to actually focus on Martin Luther King's visit to Canada.

NH: Yes!

NN: How do you see this history as important to Canada in general, to our national narratives?

NH: Well, it's so important because it provides information that expands the Canadian narrative that so often tends to be portrayed as Eurocentric. We're looking at the history of people of African descent here in Canada, and the fact that they've been here for a very long time, almost 400 years. And so, what was their experience like and what was their contribution to the development of the nation? And I think that's very important so that people can get a better understanding of what our country is like. I think whenever possible, as historians and educators, we have a responsibility to really share as many of those stories as possible and be reflective of our people, our population.

NN: You're the fourth person I've interviewed, you're the second author. The question I asked the last author is: What advice would you have for researchers?

NH: Well, I would say try to have time for yourself sometimes!

NN: It's addictive!

NH: It's very addictive! You become so engrossed in trying to find out more of the story. It's so fulfilling, but I think it's important that you have that balance for yourself, for your family. And another aspect of that too, is to share that history, because sometimes some of these stories have been researched previously, but we may not know that because they haven't been shared or passed on. So I think in whatever way we can, we must pass on these stories so that maybe someone else can continue the research or someone can build on it or someone can just learn about these stories that we uncover.

NN: Alright I have one last question. What does your daughter Jamaya think about

Emancipation Day?

NH: Well she says she's had enough of Emancipation Day! But no, she's learned a lot and she's absorbed quite a lot from me doing research and writing on the computer. She's made her own little connections. She has started to write her own book on the computer as well and is doing a bit of research. Being a mother and seeing how important it is for young people of African descent to see themselves reflected in some of these stories and to learn about this history, I've shared them with her, and at six years old she can understand the difficulties that historic African-Canadians faced and some of the great things that they did. So for me, to actually see how her interest has grown, it makes me feel that all along that I'm correct: it will and can make a difference to young people. And so, if I can encourage a young person to want to read more, or want to write, or to explore someone else's story, then I think that it's a very good accomplishment for me.

NN: What does she think about having a book dedicated to her, as your "beautiful and brilliant daughter"?

NH: Well she's very happy, because of course, in doing the research, obviously I couldn't always spend time with her or do what she wanted when she wanted. So it was one of the reasons why I dedicated it to her. But you know, as a young person of African descent, born in Toronto, second generation, I want her to get a sense of that African contribution to Canada's history and also, help her to come to an understanding of what it means to be Black, and take away some useful strategies. How can I phrase it? I want her to take away a lot, as much as she possibly can! So it can strengthen her and make her become more confident, because in my experience in high school as an educator, I feel that sometimes students of African descent are not seeing themselves enough in the curriculum. They maybe don't get a strong sense of "I am Canadian" and that Blacks are Canadian. And so I want them all to get that - including my daughter.

NN: And that they have the same entitlement of citizenship?

NH: Exactly!

NN: They are two really, really wonderful books, and I know for everyone who's doing this important historic work that they are wonderful contributions. You've captured a truly amazing story. Thank you so much.

NH: Thank you.