

“WOW! I guess I can draw!” An Interview with Bonita Johnston-deMatteis

Naomi Norquay¹

Naomi Norquay: What is your connection to Grey County and Owen Sound?

Bonita Johnson-deMatteis: I guess that would have to be through my grandmother, Susan Earls Johnson. Earls is her maiden name. She married my grandfather, Clifford Johnson – Reverend Clifford Johnson - and he was from the Dresden area. Because they were both ministers they travelled all over the place. He died and then she married Thomas Wilson, and through that marriage she was able to collect my family, my sisters and myself, and she and my grandfather Wilson raised us.

NN: So is she an Earls from the Earls family up in Grey County?

BJdM: Yes, she is. She was the oldest daughter.

NN: Okay. So she grew up in the Owen Sound area and Grey County?

BJdM: Yes, she was actually born in - I think her birth certificate says Shallow Lake, Sarawak Township, which is kind of cool because I live out there now.

NN: And your grandfather Johnson was from Dresden. Did she meet him there?

BJdM: I think she did. I think with all those church conferences, they travelled about.

NN: What church was it?

BJdM: The BME Church.

NN: Did she preach at the little church in Owen Sound?



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¹ Images by Petal Furness

BJdM: She did, but that would be years later. She was a deaconess, and I think, being from a Christian background, there were very few women ministers. Addie Aylestock and her were great friends. And there's a book in the Owen Sound Library that explained that Addie Aylestock was the first woman minister in Canada and Susan Earls Johnson Wilson was the second woman minister in Canada. When we found that out, we kinda went, "what?!"

NN: That's pretty amazing! And the Wilsons, are they connected to the Collingwood Wilsons?

BJdM: No. I thought so at one point when I lived at home with my grandparents, because we'd go over there often to visit Sylvia and they called him [my grandfather] Uncle Tom, but I don't think he was of that line. He was from Welland.

NN: Oh, okay. There may have been a connection somewhere. How long have you lived in Owen Sound? Most of your life?

BJdM: Well yes. I lived with my grandparents. So, I am my father's daughter and my father's mother is Susan. He was in the Second World War and when he came back he was a very charming fellow, but he was pretty much wrecked by the war and he drank a lot. He married a very young woman and she was white. The interracial stuff, I don't think, was a big deal in our family from way back. My grandmother's mother was from England and her father, Solomon Levi Earlls, was from the Negro Creek Road settlement.

NN: Okay.

BJdM: They were interracially married back in 1894-95 I guess. So I don't think, in our family especially, this was an issue. I think that's why we have this great wash of colour, a huge variation of skin tone in our family. My father and my mother had actually seven children between them. I'm the youngest and there was a child between myself and my brother that they lost. And then my parents didn't get along and we were in Children's Aid forever. And then finally she (my mother) disappeared. It's interesting. This year I'm going to turn sixty and I'm the youngest, so we are putting on a search and we're going to try to find our mother, and we're going to try to find out if she's dead or alive. She'd be in her eighties now. Anyway, it's always been a big mystery and we really didn't have any information about her. You know, we were raised by my father's people. So that's our only frame of reference. We really didn't have that connection. Our family split up and we were in and out of the Children's Aid and foster homes. My grandmother had just lost her husband Clifford in 1957 and then she married Thomas Wilson in 1962, I believe, because it was shortly after that I went to live with them in Niagara Falls. When we were grown up, we often thought that she married him so that she could have a home to raise three of her grandchildren. Her sister, Beatrice Tillman (nee Earlls) adopted my sister Valerie.

And then there's Doug and Bruce, they're the boys. So three of us girls got to live in Niagara Falls in the early sixties and then the two older girls grew up, moved away from home and I was still with my grandmother so when she decided in her seventies that she wanted to come back home to Owen Sound. Well, that meant that I had to leave Niagara Falls, my friends, my school and come up here to no man's land.

NN: Right.

BJdM: You see, Owen Sound was just a town we came to for the picnic. It was always filled with so many people we were related to... It was quite profound!

NN: Oh! So you attended that picnic as a kid?

BJdM: Oh, absolutely!

NN: Wow! That's so cool!

BJdM: So I thought, well I don't know if I can do a picnic all year long, but anyway, I ended up...like what choice did I have, right?... I think I was fourteen, just starting high school. And I've been here ever since.

NN: Oh, my! I remember Owen Sound in the late '60s. It certainly seemed smaller and felt more rural than it does now.

BJdM: It did. People had chickens in their back yard. My Uncle Moses, my grandmother's youngest brother – he lived on 8th Street here in Owen Sound, and he had chickens in his back yard and I thought, "that's a stretch!", coming from Niagara Falls where it was all touristy and shiny and polished. So I've been up here ever since and I often thought, "I'm getting out of here as soon as I can". As it turned out there were a lot of lovely people, a lot of relatives that I met and there was a real sense of community within my own family, within my own community and I didn't really feel the need to have to go off anywhere. I went off to school, and stuff like that, but that came much later. There was always an aunt or an uncle - just in name only - because actually they were cousins, second cousins and third cousins and they were all quite older than me. People like the Harrisons, Courtneys, Greens...did I say Harrisons?

NN: Yes, you did.

BJdM: There were a lot of older families. Their children had children – grandchildren - and they moved away. Those are the ones that come back for the picnic. They travel back and celebrate and I just kind of hung around.

NN: You just hung around and were embraced by the community – your community of family.

BJdM: Yes, and I could feel very homey, it felt like I belonged somewhere.

NN: That's wonderful to kind of learn about your connections with the community. I guess the first question about your contemporary existence is, I'm curious to know how you came to be an artist?

BJdM: Oh, I don't think I've ever been asked that before! My sister Linda is an amazing artist and I would watch her as child, just draw and create these images on paper that looked like real people, that looked like real things. I thought, well, maybe there's something here. It just seemed to be something that everybody should be able to do. So I would copy her. It was just like writing, it was just something that we had to do. She actually received a scholarship to attend Sheridan College, right out of high school in Niagara Falls. Our grandfather Wilson was pretty strict, pretty stern and he said, "Nope. An artist is not any way for a woman to make a living. You have to be a secretary or a nurse or a teacher". He wouldn't sign the papers for her to go. She was young and he wouldn't give her permission to go. That was always a seed of resentment, one of many. So when it came to me, I guess my first real experience would be of course with school and I wasn't really great at math. I wasn't always very well behaved but I always got kudos when it came to art class and gym.

I don't know if you remember magazines like *Chatelaine* and how on the side of some of the pages there would be an advertisement that said "draw Bambi" or "draw this girl" or something like that. You'd send in your drawings to - I think it was to American Watercolor Artists Association. So I'd send it in and get an extra penny or two for the stamp so that it could go stateside, and I mailed this little picture in and forgot all about it. Then one morning there was a knock that came to the door. There was many knocks that came to the door, they were usually the Fuller Brush man or the egg man or the milkman or the mailman even. But this particular morning it was a different man with a briefcase and he had a suitcoat on and I heard this voice I didn't recognize. I think I would be eleven, and I got scared as my grandmother said "Oh! Bonnie?" (My family calls me Bonnie but Bonita is my given name.) "Oh Bonnie, well, yes she's here," and she sounded really concerned, and I took off and I hid under the bed. I had no idea what this man wanted and my only trigger was that I was going to be sent back to the Children's Aid, so this was very traumatic for me. Eventually she wrangled me out from underneath the bed and said, "did you send a drawing in the mail?" and I said "yes." So the man sat down at the kitchen table and he said "are you sure you did this?" And I said, "yes I did." And he said, "well, I feel kind of embarrassed because we came here to offer you training at our school but clearly you're way too young to get across the border." So that was my big "WOW! I guess I can draw!" This guy came to our house and said that I could draw. So from there I just kind of went for it.

NN: Is drawing your favorite medium?

BJdM: Well, I do like sketching and cartooning and then I love painting, oil painting and mucking that about. I often thought I'd like sculpting but really just the painting and the illustrating works for me. That makes me feel good. If I can render something and it looks half decent, then I'm happy about that.

NN: Are you self-trained?

BJdM: I was up until my thirties and then I actually bit the bullet and went to Georgian College. We were the last graphic arts /graphic design class that went through the campus here in Owen Sound and then they moved it over to Barrie. I think I just did it, just so that I could say that I did it. It was quite an education, I truly enjoyed it. I loved the history. I loved the whole attitude of the artists, you know, they were just people out trying to make a living. I had no illusions of grandeur. I learned that there was a huge difference with the folk art, Black folk art, and what we would call, I guess, the classically-trained people, such as in France, that whole school, the whole Impressionist school. I've been down to some places in Ohio, the Toledo Art Gallery, and they gave lessons. I tried to impress on the students there about the Group of Seven and they said, "Nah, that [folk art] doesn't cut it" and they were really closed-minded about what is true art and what is folk art, so that was a big education for me, that artists were so closed-minded.

NN: That's interesting. I'm cutting a little bit to the chase because we want to make sure that we have time to talk a lot about the Cairn and your books too. So how did you get involved in the Cairn project?

BJdM: Peter Lemon, Councillor Lemon, came to my home and he knocked on the door and I answered the door and he said "ok, good, I'm glad you're here, I'm glad you exist." He said "I've just come from a meeting where" - he would never tell me who it was that said this - "there was someone in this particular meeting who claimed that there were no Black families or Black ancestry or underground railroad or any of that kind of stuff, up here in the Owen Sound area."

NN: Wait! When was this? What year? Like 2000s?

BJdM: Well, I'm thinking it was like 2002?

NN: Wow!

BJdM: Because that's when we started on the Cairn project. But there's a back story to the Cairn project to begin with. It was just like all these forces - the perfect storm - came together. So he was very upset with this woman because he's an Owen Sound boy from way back and he went to school with a lot of the old families, and he just knew people existed here, so he said "I don't know what I'm going to do but I'm going to do something." Because clearly this person did not have the educational piece to say or to recognize the different communities within the

Owen Sound community. So, let's backtrack. I don't know when the big stink happened - let me see - Negro Creek Road.

NN: 1995.

BJdM: Was it '95? All right. So I worked at the Women's Center at that time. Anyway I went into work for my midnight shift and my co-worker Jemima Danard handed me the *Toronto Star* and on the front page there was an article about the renaming of Negro Creek Road. She puts this in front of me and she says "so what do you think of that?" and I said, "I think it stinks", and she said, "Well you know what? I think you need to go home and make some phone calls." She took over my shift, and I came home and I looked up the Reeve.

NN: Of Holland Township?

BJdM: Yes. So I called him up and I said "is this your article?" And he said "yes it is." And I said "I think it stinks." And he said "oh well, a lot of people don't like that word Negro." I said "oh, well, who?" He said, "well I talked to some neighbors and we agreed to take the sign down because it's offensive." And I said "well you're talking about a whole race, a whole country, a whole legacy - you know - people that happen to identify - that this is their heritage. What do you mean this is offensive? To you?" And he said "well, we just did it and that's the way it's going to be and if you have anything to say about it then you can come to a meeting." So we all came to a meeting. Carolyn Wilson was loaded with letters from the ombudsman, letters from Lincoln Alexander.

NN: Good old Lincoln!

BJdM: Oh yeah, we went loaded. My Aunt Beatrice came, Beatrice Tillman. Oh, jeepers! Who all else was there? I don't know. Mr. Jackson was there, Verona Jackson was there. We met in this man's kitchen. And he said that they took the sign down because there was an older settlement. I said "no, no. There wasn't an older settlement." Moggie Creek was a Scottish settlement, but they weren't there as long as the freed people of Negro Creek Road, the freed families. So it was very pleasant, but very stern by us and he said "well, I think you people need to build some kind of a monument on the side of the road here that says Negro Creek Road and what you people all stand for." I said "well you know what? I think that's a really good idea." I said "we'll build it! What's it called?" He said "I think it's called a Cairn, you know you see them on the road, a pile of rocks". I said "I think we'll do that, and you're going to put the sign back".

NN: Good for you!

BJfM: And they did! I don't know what happened, but they did. I'm going to fast forward. Years later, with a job I had down in the Durham area I had a client who was pretty savvy. She was a lovely intelligent woman from Germany and she came in one day and she looked at me and said

“you’ve got mixed blood in you, don’t you?” I said “yes”, she said “okay, next time I come I bring you something” so I thought, okay, fine. So, sure enough, next time she came she brings me this paper from a township meeting, the minutes of the meeting, where the man that took the Negro Creek Road sign down, had Negro Creek - the actual creek - pass through his property and he wanted to take water and sell it - bottled water. But in order to sell bottled water you have to name the creek it came out of and he thought if he had Negro Creek written on his bottled water he wouldn’t be able to sell it. How do you like that one?

NN: That’s quite something.

BJdM: I sat on that one for a really long time. It’s been over 16 years I’ve worked in the Durham area. I actually kept the paper, but now I’d have to scrounge to see if I still have it. I don’t know why I felt I should keep it.

NN: I’d love to see it sometime.

BJdM: I really scrounged through a lot of stuff and pitched a bunch of stuff that has otherwise been publicized, but this piece I thought I had to hold near and dear to me. He asked permission to take water out of the creek, but one of the things he had to do was name the creek on his product and he didn’t want to use Negro Creek, so he wanted to change it to Moggie Creek, or Moggie Settlement Road or whatever it was. How do you like that little tidbit?

NN: It’s a head shaker, that’s for sure.

BJdM: Ok, so now we fast forward to Peter Lemon showing up saying that we need to make a monument or something. So he draws this little sketch and it looked like a pile of rocks. The original idea was to send letters over to Africa, to the different countries and ask them to send us rocks from all of the places along the coast that people were stolen from. So we start marking the slave trade road, along the coast and up to where they crossed the Atlantic, and ended up in islands. We grabbed some rocks from the islands, up through the South, the slave states, the freed states and on up into Canada. We wanted to mark the journey with rocks from places of origin. But we weren’t getting rocks, we weren’t even getting responses back. I mean, who’s going to send a rock FedEx from Africa? So even if it was just a little pebble, like the size of a baseball, that would’ve been great! We’d label it up, stick it in the wall, do a write up on it. But that wasn’t coming. It wasn’t coming and so we were getting quite frustrated. Nobody had come up with a design yet because we didn’t have materials to work with. You can’t conceptualize what it’s going to look like without the material. So our wonderful friend Terri Jackson, she sits there (you know Terri?) and she goes “I know where there’s some rocks” she says “there’s all kinds of rocks around here.”

NN: So, like Ledgerrock?

BJdM: No. The shipping factory down here on the shore, Black Clawson-Kennedy, they had just

been demolished with wrecking balls and everything, and she said “those rocks that were in Black Clawson and Kennedy’s foundation, they’re from the quarries around here.” And she looked at me and says “well Bonita, you should know this because your great-grandfather was one of the quarrymen who died.” My grandmother’s father, Solomon Earls, died, at the Oliver Quarries. And so he died and those were the kind of rocks, the limestone - that they were quarrying. So it’s not a stretch to think that the rocks that came out of the many quarries around here at Shallow Lake and Owen Sound were in that foundation.

NN: Right, that makes sense.

BJdM: Terri said “let’s use those rocks and let’s use the rocks that we have from the slave islands and the slave states. We can use the majority of the rocks which are limestone, which come from here.” And that’s why we don’t have a whole lot that are labeled in the walls of the Cairn.

NN: I thought that was on purpose! I thought that you were communicating the importance of the settled local community and then you were embracing these places of origin within the community. That’s how I interpreted the Cairn’s choice of rocks.

BJdM: That’s a good way to interpret it!

NN: Okay, good! We’ll go with that one then!

BJdM: Terri’s so unflappable. She just said, “well they’re there, that’s something”. And I said “Terri, you’re brilliant!” But nobody knew that they were actually in storage, we didn’t even know these materials were around! But Terri said “yeah, we can get them”. So we got them! I got an idea of how many of them I had to work with, but then we were getting really frustrated because - well, Deb Haswell told me - she says “If you’re on a committee and the committee’s job is to make a horse and you end up with something that looks like a camel, you have a good committee, you put something together.” It doesn’t have to look exactly like you wanted.

NN: Right.

BJdM: I went home along the shore line and I remember thinking, okay, what are the big things that if my grandmother was here right now, what would she want me to make sure I brought to the fore? One was home, the foundation of home and the other is church and the whole lack of legacy. In Ireland and England, in Greece and Italy, there are all these ruins that nobody’s taken down. They love them, right?

NN: Yes, right.

BJdM: Whereas over here, everything gets taken down. And I thought, I guess the only real

relic-y-looking thing that we have in rural Ontario are the barn foundations.

NN: Ah, of course!

BJdM: There's a barn foundation across the road from me where I live and it's all broken down, trees growing through it, and I thought, well, who's to say that I can't make a cornerstone foundation as of part of the Cairn? And all at once it looks like both a church and a home. It looks like someone has tried to break down the walls or it looks like someone is trying to build up the walls. It just was so - what's the word - malleable? It's like, wherever you are, that's where it is. Right? The church, the windows - so this was another element of the Cairn that just came together perfectly. The windows in the Cairn, are actual replicas of the windows in the church known as the Little Zion Church and it was on the Sydenham River and no one really could find it. Lawrence Hill's dad, Daniel Hill Sr., I think he was the ombudsman, also - but he wrote a book called *The Freedom Seekers* and there's a couple of little paragraphs concerning Owen Sound in this book and he speaks about the Emancipation Festival or picnic. Now this picnic was church-based out of the BME church. The Rebecca Lodge would fund it and they'd go down and pay for the pavilion. They'd pay a couple years ahead, and people would walk down all dressed in white and they'd sing. This was turn-of-the-century stuff. Harrison Park has witnessed a lot of years of this gathering coming together. So this church was on the Sydenham River, but nobody knew where it was. So there's a fellow here in Owen Sound whose name is Donald McKay, he's from one of the old, old families. His family is the shipping family, his family owned McKay's which was a dry goods store, downtown - a famous store that's now The Artists Co-op. Donald's a great historian, so I stopped him on the street and said "Don, have you ever heard of this church?" and he says "well, yes I have. My mother used to take me to that church, the coloured people's church, when I was a kid." I said "where was it?" He said "Well, it's right over there." And it was across the street from the Owen Sound Library in someone's back yard - and the 'someones' were Sandra and Andrew Goss. They're jewellers, and they had this, what looked like a little mini garage with these beautiful windows, these arched windows.

NN: I didn't know that it had gone into private hands and was being used as a garage!

BJdM: I think it got kind of shimmied up the river. It was just grandfathered I guess, into their property. So as it turns out this was the church. We had Reverend Seymour Boyce and I forget the other minister, but they came and asked permission if they could have a prayer of sanctification or consecration or something, a blessing on this building. The Gosses were so moved they said "absolutely!" There's a couple of pictures of it too - I'm sure Grey Roots has some pictures.

NN: Yes, there is one we've used as a journal cover, but doesn't show its context.

BJdM: Well, yes, in someone's backyard! And the guys who go fishing down the river at midnight in colder months, they were tearing it apart, they were taking wood off it! But the

Gosses said “let’s try and see if we can preserve this thing.” So they took the windows out and they stored them in the basement of the BME church. I happen to know that because I’m the one that said “we’ve got to keep these windows safe.” They’re just beautiful, eh?

NN: Yes, they are!

BJdM: So when it came down to the Cairn and we needed windows, I said “well let’s check them out” and they pulled them out and we had replicas fabricated. They were a little shorter than the originals because they had to fit into the Cairn’s structure. And then, the other part that came together about the Cairn was the controversy about the quilt patterns. Controversy or not, I didn’t care.

NN: So, how much of the quilt story is true? Some of it must be true because it wouldn’t exist otherwise, right?

BJdM: Yes, that’s how I look at it.

NN: I think it’s a wonderful, hopeful, imaginative piece. So was there controversy at the time of putting the Cairn together?

BJdM: Not at the time, but it grew. As the story was circulating - about slaves, about the quilts and different symbols, what they represented and such, I actually Googled the book, *Hidden in Plain View*, and that was my first introduction that - oh my goodness! - there’s a school of thought out here that says this is a lot of hooey. So I acquainted myself with the hooey, with the controversy of it so I could square off in an explanation or whatever. I just took the viewpoint that when everything is stolen from you, your name, your religion, your country, your family and even your written word, you can’t write, you can’t speak, you can’t read, you make up stories, oral stories and they’re passed on. Just because these stories are not documented in the Congress Library, in Washington or wherever, just because it’s not documented as fact doesn’t mean it’s not valid as a life form, as instruction and as legacy. If that’s all that’s been left to us as a people, then we’re going to take it. We’re going to tell our story. So I had to be clear that, yes, these symbols like the drunkard’s path or the northern star, the flying geese, the monkey’s wrench, these were not created by the people telling the story, they were borrowed. It’s been argued that these designs weren’t even created at the time of the Underground Railroad. That’s fine, that’s cool. But what do you do with the pictures of the quilt in the book called *Hidden in Plain View*, where little knots of yarn are, like a map, sewn onto the quilt, to show you how many days you have to go up this river and when you get here you make a leap over to there and just sit tight until somebody comes for you. The horror of it all and then to have someone say “Nah. That’s not true.”

NN: I understand. Thank you for that. So you have the stones from the United States and from countries in Africa, you have the rocks from the quarries, you have the idea of a

foundation from a barn, you have the windows and you have the quilt patterns. Was there more in terms of the symbolism?

BJdM: The fact that it was able to be all constructed by the river in Harrison Park. Harrison Park is a sanctuary within itself. The view looking through one of the windows is the north: you can actually see the North Star. And the backdrop - the sky and forest line will never be adulterated by commercial signage and high rise condos. If you look through the Cairn looking north, because the park itself is a heritage park, it can't be developed. So this view is...

NN: Protected.

BJdM: Yes, and then the river also runs north. And, as you know, if you've been to Harrison Park, Canada geese are running all over the place, which is one of the symbols. There was a story I read - I think it was in the Tony Morrison book, *Beloved*. One of the people in that story decides he's going to run away and somebody gives him a piece of information to just follow the apple blossoms: keep going until you find the apple blossoms. You'll find apple blossoms in Virginia, but keep following apple blossoms and you'll find your way to the north. So, at the Cairn site, there were a couple of apple trees planted. It was pretty obscure symbolism, but I felt it was potent at the time.

NN: I'm hearing all kinds of resonances with the little Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery monument because we sited it on the North Star and it has these little fiber optic plugs with symbols of settlement life and we put in a few quilt patterns. One of the things that I've been thinking about are all the descendant apple trees on the Old Durham Road. They grow all over the place and they're descendants of the original trees. Of course apples and apple trees were such an important part of settlement because cider was safer to drink than water, cider vinegar was used for disinfectant, etc., etc. So that's amazing! That's another resonance and that's really wonderful. So the Cairn project is - what - ten years old now?

BJdM: Yes, close to it.... it was built in 2004.

NN: Oh! It's been thirteen years! Does it still resonate the same way? Has it done what you hoped it would do?

BJdM: Absolutely it has. I have been anticipating today's conversation with you! On the day of the unveiling I had a book, just a big notebook - like a journal - and I left it open on the Cairn for people to write their comments and what they thought of it, kind of like a guest book. And I'm going through them, looking at them and realizing people were quite moved by the Cairn. There are comments like, "my heart thumped", "my heart skipped a beat when I understood the symbolism", "I feel transported". I have a distant cousin from Alabama and she was so moved by the placement of the quilt patterns, and the story they tell. The way that the quilt patterns are laid out on the floor of the Cairn is, it starts off with the monkey wrench, the lore around

that is get your tool bag together, because there's going to be something coming. You want to get on this wagon, and you want to be ready to go, so that's the first one. And then comes the wagon wheel and the drunkard's path and all the way up to the North Star, which takes us up to the wall of the Cairn. My cousin said "I am from where this stone is from, this was my journey, this was my people's journey all the way up here to Owen Sound."

I sit back and I listen to other people talk about it. One of the greatest compliments was the night before the Cairn was to be unveiled. I moseyed on down and sat on the wall, and up the hill from Harrison Park is Greenwood Cemetery. All my folks are up there and I had this lovely sensation that they were smiling, that somehow I got it right. A little girl and her mother came by and the little girl said to her mom, "Oh wow, Mom, what used to be here? A house?"

It was a time to reconcile my grandmother's teaching and my time to speak, because Grandma was very private and political in a non-aggressive way. Being raised, looking white, being a Black person, or in my day it was easy to be who I was because I could just use the term "I'm coloured" which meant you were coloured, right? Black skin wasn't just the intensity of the pigment, it was your whole being. So there was this attitude of quietness and minding your business and don't be bragging about who you are, you know, don't be ... So, when the sixties came and the Black Panthers, the vigilance, everything turned. Martin Luther King. And just that quiet strength that you knew you were going to get through if you just did it the right way. You were going to get through it. That changed for my folks, my grandparents. They lost themselves in that kind of revolution, the music and the athletes. They were not even being kind of happy about when things changed, and James Brown was preaching in song, saying "I'm Black and proud", and Nina Simone was singing a new anthem, "I'm young, gifted and Black". All these wonderful songs coming about, and yeah, my grandmother said "you've got to stop singing those songs, the neighbors are looking at you." So, the whole idea of being quiet about your heritage, don't get up in people's face about who you are, they don't really want to know and you might get yourself into trouble. Just act cool, get your schooling done, get a job, be successful.

All that came cycling back to me with Les MacKinnon. He interviewed my sister Linda for *Speakers for the Dead*. In that documentary he shows how in the registry, the birth registry, how the mother could be Negro, the father Irish and then in the next generation, the grandmother, or the mother is called Irish or whatever. So there's the washing out of the Negro words even on the birth registries, right? And even though those people - they weren't abandoning or denying or - in my grandmother's day it was called passing. They weren't trying to get through and pretend they were white. They'd go home, they never denied their family or anything like that but they were considered by their families, their dark families, to be their success stories because they could go out and get a job, they could find money to get the things they needed to raise their children, they wouldn't be cold, they wouldn't be hungry. It wasn't about abandoning who they were, it was about making it work for themselves. So I always felt kind of comforted by that because I guess it's kind of the lane I travel in. I can walk into rooms

and people, unless they know me, they don't know me. I've heard some pretty bizarre things and I've heard some pretty amazing things from people. Racism gets just totally up in the face of the other racist people saying "that's not right." It's amazing to kind of sit there, invisible.

NN: It's amazing how some white people feel they can talk on behalf of everybody else.

BJdM: It's very English, isn't it?

NN: Yeah, it's the colonizer, right?

BJdM: Yes. So sitting on the wall, down there, the evening before the unveiling, I just felt very sure that the Black History Cairn Committee had got it right. And then I got emotional about it, the emotion snuck up on me. The Cairn was profound and it spoke for itself because it wasn't too loud, it wasn't too in your face, it was very inviting, it was comforting, and so I just felt that we got it. This amazing committee nailed it. It was just one of those things that can come to you to do in your life that is truly a privilege and blessing. After it was unveiled, the man from the Trillium Foundation made his way through the crowd to me and he introduced himself to me again, and he shook my hand and he said "this is the best use of Trillium money I have seen in years." And at that point I burst into tears because I realized, we got it!

NN: Yes, you did.

BJdM: It made its mark. I still go down frequently and I see people having their wedding pictures taken there and people just sitting within its walls. There was another little girl who ran up on the wall - it's very kid-friendly - you can climb up on it and not really kill yourself... And she says, "Wow, mom was this where the Black people lived? Is there really an Underground Railroad here, underneath?" And I thought, I'm done. The Cairn has started dialogue and imaginations. This is great. However, there was another group of clowns, these twelve year old boys, riding their bikes up on the wall of the Cairn and I said, "are you guys out of your minds?" And I said "this is not like, you know, a skate board park"! "Oh sorry" they said as they got down. "Do you know what this is?" I asked them. "Yeah, I think it's a graveyard or something, isn't it?" So I explained to them what it was and they said, "Oh, we are sorry". I thought that was pretty cool. Some people have said to me "what are you going to do if it gets defaced?" and I've said "we'll find out who defaced it, and then we'll educate them. That's all!" And then they'll go back to their schools and they'll say, "don't deface monuments". It hasn't happened. It hasn't happened.

NN: And that gives us lots of hope for the monument at the Old Durham Road, to know that the Cairn's been respected. It's an important thing to know this.

BJdM: Yes. The monument at Old Durham Road, is that the graveyard?

NN: That is the graveyard.

BJdM: I actually submitted a design for that.

NN: I know you did, because I'm on the committee.

BJdM: The beauty of that was when they finally chose the winning design, I think, was it Shirley Hartley who told me. Was she involved in that too?

NN: Yes, and John Hartley.

BJdM: When I found out what the design looked like, well it was perfect! It just resonated through me and I just kind of went "ahhhhhh! That's the one!" It was so suited for that corner, that open, vulnerable corner.

NN: Yes, it really marks it and of course the challenge was because there are graves it had to be a small footprint. It couldn't be a big footprint and it had to fit in between where the radar probe said that there were graves. I'm glad you like it.

BJdM: It was so perfect. I actually felt like – ah! Good! Someone's at home in the universe! This one works!

NN: Well the two work! I actually think that the Cairn and the Monument are connected. They tell parts of an important story. I'm just thrilled that you did that Cairn because it's so powerful and to me it does resonate. It resonates a story that when I go there I feel it has been told by people who lived the story and know the story.

BJdM: Yeah. All the stuff I knew, all the stuff I know came down to me from my grandmother and her life experience up here in Owen Sound. The homes, the people's homes that she had to work in, her going into nursing, she just did all of that stuff, to be a respectable person here. Make your own way. Get your own stuff. Don't be boohooing because – you just get it, you know? No mercy! Just get out and do it. So, I was always happy for that. We didn't have a lot of money, but she let us draw and sew and sing, and - we weren't really allowed to dance - but I'm making up for that!

NN: Okay!

BJdM: It was a huge thing to be influenced by that part of the generation.

NN: That important part of your heritage.

BJdM: Yes.

NN: That's amazing. So Bonita it is 3:00. Let's save the conversation about your books for another time. Let's do a part two next year, how about that?

BJdM: Okay, that's fine. That's actually probably very timely, because I promised Maryanne [of Ginger Press] ... I'm finally going to get a chapter book out, taking me from the stories I told in those children's books through the transition of Dr. King getting shot, the Kennedys, and what it was like to be me at that time.

NN: That would be awesome!



Bonita Johnson-deMatteis at the Emancipation Festival Speakers Forum, August 1, 2008