

DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
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Fully Known: Cotton Production, Black History and the Canadian Experience

Agnes Talks: History is Rarely Black or White Speaker Series

2022

SPEAKERS

Jason Cyrus, Charmaine Nelson, Shannon Prince.

KEYWORDS

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TRANSCRIPT

Jason Cyrus: Today, we will be joined by two scholars, researchers, institutional folks who I've looked up to and whose work I've engaged with for some time. And first and foremost, my name is Jason Cyrus. I am the curator of the exhibition *History is Rarely Black or White* on view at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, that opened at the end of November the 27th and runs up until the 20th of March. The Agnes is currently closed in accordance with the provincial closures, but we hope to open as soon as we can. I believe 26th is the projected time, should everything go according to plan, knock wood. So if you can, please make your way up to Kingston and see the show. If not, we have a digital exhibition that is the companion to the physical one. And we will put a link to that in the chat shortly.

So today we're here to discuss the -- this is the second chat in the series, the first will be posted on our website shortly in the coming days. And the whole purpose of the series is to have conversations and continued discussions to delve into themes that underpin the show, which looks at the cotton industry in the 1800s, its connections to fashion history, and its foundations, especially in the 1800s to enslaved labour and resources extraction. We're looking at cotton, we're looking at fashion, we're looking at materiality, we're looking at the dressed body, but we are also looking at land. And we would be completely remiss and it's so important to acknowledge the fact that the Agnes is situated on the traditional home of the Anishinaabe and the Haudenosaunee territory. And for myself as someone who is an immigrant settler, I'm originally from Georgetown, Guyana, in South America, and now I am in London, England actually doing a PhD, speaking to you remotely. The concept of land and migration and movement is something that's very important to me and dear to my heart. And when we think -- when I think personally about reconciliation and social justice, it's important to me that the work that I do and the work that the Agnes is doing in its reimagined phase, places social justice at its very heart. We hope that the exhibition and the conversations that are happening around the show and other shows thereof, this being one of them, adds something to the fire that allows the fire of social justice to burn.

I'm joined today by the fantastic Charmaine Nelson and Shannon Prince. And what I will do, I'll just give an overview of their bios and allow them to say hello. And then I will give an overview of our talk structure then we will get right into our chat. All right, Charmaine Nelson to many of you I'm

sure needs no introduction. She is the Canadian Professor of Art History, and she's the CRC Tier in the Black Diasporic Art and Community Engagement. She has taught at McGill University before joining NSCAD to develop the Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery. She's a first tenured Black professor of artistry in Canada. Her research interests include the visual culture of slavery, race and representation, Black Canadian studies, and in African Canadian Art History, as well as critical theory and postcolonial studies. Charmaine is the author of many books. She's given over 260 lectures across Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Europe, and the Caribbean. And it is my complete honour to welcome her to conversation today. Welcome Charmaine.

Charmaine Nelson: Thank you, Jason.

Jason Cyrus: We are also joined by the fantastic Shannon Prince. Shannon is Curator of the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum. She's chiefly a storyteller and a participant in historical reenactments, which brings together the history of Buxton, the Underground Railroad, and life for many groups that were founded there. Shannon is a descendant of early fugitive families that came to Canada for freedom and opportunity, and as such, she brings this insight with deep respect and love for this chapter and its continued heritage. Welcome Shannon.

Shannon Prince: Thank you.

Jason Cyrus: So what we will do is I will give an overview of the exhibition for folks who are unfamiliar. I will share screen and show some key images to give an idea of what the core principles of the exhibition are. And then what I thought would be fun to have is Charmaine will introduce herself in her own words, so will Shannon. And then we will get into your meaty conversation on shared themes. And that should take us up to both I think about an hour. And after that, we'll leave some time for some question, answer period with everyone gathered here. So I really hope this can be as informal as this medium can be, but such is the "Zoomosphere", as we say. So I will share screen and take us into the show. All right, can everyone see my screen? Can I get a thumbs-up? That's awesome.

Okay. *History is Rarely Black or White* primarily, like I said, looks at the connections between the cotton and the cotton industry in the 1800s and its connections to resource extraction and enslaved labour and the wider cotton supply chain that allowed the industry to happen. What we're looking at is the first gallery, the first of you that you get entering the exhibition. And here we have a connection of the Agnes's -- subset of the Agnes's cotton garments from as early as 1790 to as late as 1902. And what we tried to do here was use the Agnes's collection of garments as a jumping off ground to speak about these topics. On the main platform here, you're seeing a mixture of garments that not just speak to social class, but also gender and also different ways of being in the world. We've got a wedding dress, the ruffled dress, that's to our right. The chintz dress, roller printed chintz dress. That is the Agnes's -- one of the most important garments that the Agnes has in our collection. Menswear vest, you can see around the platform as well as a christening gown and a little child's suit. Behind that, what we've done is projected onto vinyl a map that gives you a sense of the cotton supply chain and different places and spaces, ports and people that are important to the supply chain at the time. You're seeing on the left a map or a key that unlocks and decodes

different areas, and we've used the Agnes's collection of the European art, Canadian art and again, these gorgeous garments to be able to tell this story.

Now important here is a mixture of not just the cotton garments and painting and portraiture, but also contemporary art. And I was fortunate enough to meet Vancouver-based artist Karin Jones. And she created an installation for us for the Agnes called *Freed*. And this is a site exhibit work, and it's primarily composed of cotton balls and black hair that Karin collected from a salon in Vancouver. And she's created a veil, as you were, around this gorgeous dress from 1897. That is a cotton wedding dress. And Karin's wish is that the veil and dress work in tandem that for you to appreciate the beautiful embroidery and the lace and the construction of the garment, which is a key part of material culture and the way that as a fashion historian, I experience the medium of fashion history, we must also look at the resource of cotton and how it was grown and how it was picked and what that did to environment, but also the labour in terms of the bodies, the Black bodies, the enslaved folks whose lives were torn apart in this industry, so the two are very much in conversation. Another aspect of the show that's important to this conservation.

Here we were very fortunate at the Agnes to have Anne-Marie Guérin work alongside us, who is a conservator working in Ontario. And Anne Marie collaborated with the Queen's Facility for Isotope Research. And in a nutshell, isotope research is a means of extracting or reducing rather fibers or different elements to their core chemical elements, and then tracing the signature or the buildup of these elements over time. And looking at the ways that that signature, that combination of elements and their amounts can tell you where in the world the -- you can almost geolocate them where that substance would have been taken from or would've been grown. And we've done that process to all the cotton garments that are on display. So, in a sense, not just using oral history and historical research to be able to tell the story of the connections between cotton enslavement and labour and materiality, but also using science as a way of bolstering and enlarging the conversation. At the moment, we are still waiting on the results. Testing started in early spring and wrapped up in mid-fall. And Dr. Daniel Layton-Matthews, who is head of the facility of Isotope Research at Queens, is interpreting the data for us. And so please check back in with the website every so often, and we will let you know when our results are posted. All of this information, by the way, is on the online exhibition sites.

We're moving from the first room that's giving you this whole review of the supply chain of cotton and its connections to science and testing. We're going now into what I call the heart of the show, which looks at the humanity involved in all of this. Damian Jöel is a queer Jamaican American artist whose work expands across making and photography and installation. And here we're seeing his fashion story called *Songs of the Gullah*. Damian worked with the Gullah/Geechee Nation in along the coast of South Carolina to tell the story of their history. The Gullah/Geechee, are a nation that's amalgamation of different African nation settled along with south than coasts of the states from North Carolina, all the way down to Florida. And Damian worked with Queen Quet, consulted rather with Queen Quet of the Gullah/Geechee Nation to create a three-dimensional story that told their way of coming across the middle passage and being forcibly settled in the southern islands and in the southern coast, the way that different African nations came together, formed a common language and a way of speaking and cultural roots. And what Damian has done is created a film which again, a short film, which we can view on the online exhibition fantastically created by Danuta

Sierhuis who heads up the Agnes's digital department. And Damien has also created these three garments that are part of a larger narrative or larger story. And we've selected -- I've selected these three, because in a sense, they speak -- they're a triptych that speaks to the Agnes's past, present -- sorry, the Gullah/Geechee's past, present, and future. We've got -- in the middle, we've got indigo, we've got cotton, and we've got rice. Looking at the ways that the Gullah/Geechee have lived off the land in very sustainable way, how the history is tied into the picking and harvesting of cotton, and in the ways that their food cultures have, in a sense, become a major influence in what is known as Southern American cooking. You think of gumbo and all the dishes, stuff like that.

We move into the last room, which connects all the rooms in a way connect to our life today. But I think this last gallery really makes it clear. Here we're looking at the connection of migration from this wider supply chain, looking at who would've been involved in picking the cotton in the American South, so this is one example of folks as such. Then moving us along into the Underground Railroad into Canada and troubling this notion of Canada as a safe space and having conversations about what the identity, what life would've been like for folks here. And what I've done is paired tintypes and examples of clothing from the Agnes's collection with Gordon Shadrach's portraits of artists and fellow creatives that he knows to really speak about what life is like today in Canada. Today, we'll be chatting and looking at these tintypes here alone from the Ontario Archives, as well as the carte-de-visite on the left side that is on loan from Jennifer McKendry, a Kingston historian. And we've got, if you can see the exhibition physically, please do, the Queen's W. J. Ross Special Books Library has loaned us the first two editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This is the very first printing. They still include errors and edits -- errors rather before they were edited, and then name of characters that has since changed. These are the very first printed copies, and they're incredibly rare to find, as well as a facsimile of what's called the Voice of the Fugitive, which was Canada's first Black newspaper based out of Sandwich, Ontario, which is now part of the wider Windsor area. And then on the far right, you're seeing a Voice of the Fugitive -- sorry, one second, this one -- this -- what is this called? I will remember. But in the book, it's open to the story of Henry Brandt who is a formerly enslaved individual, and what the book, whose name escapes me, well I apologize. What's amazing about this book here is that while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an allegorical account from Harriet Beecher Stowe and while Voice of the Fugitive is in a sense, a newsletter that connects this allegorical account to real life, the voice of -- what is it? I will find out [brief laughter], I'm sorry. But what the book on the right does is it shows the actual accounts of enslaved people in their own words. And the book is open to Henry Brandt who settled in Sandwich, Ontario, funny enough, where Voice of the Fugitive was based. And here, if you go up to the case, you can actually read details of Henry's escape from the American south into Canada. And there are lines where he talks about this dissonance of what he expected Canada to be, and then what it ended up being. And again, we end with Gordon Shadrach's portraits of contemporary Black creatives, and the ways that these -- the way that I've paired certain portraits troubled this idea of Canada in our reality now.

So what I will do, while I frantically look for the name of that book, is I will kick it over to Charmaine. Charmaine, please introduce yourself, give us an overview of your work, and you'll take it from there.

Charmaine Nelson: Okay. So I hope everybody can see that. Jason, can you give me a thumbs up you can see it. Okay. And Jason, is it Benjamin Drew's *North Side View of Slavery* that you're thinking of? Yeah. Right? Okay. So [brief laughter] that's in my brain too.

So I first wanted to thank Jason so much for including me in this and congratulate him again on this tremendous work in bringing this history forward, and especially in the context of Canada, where of course, most of us probably gathered here, know that the history, the 200 year history of slavery is not understood, not studied, not in the curriculum. So we have a lot of work to do.

So what I'm going to share it with you here is a way that my work on Canadian slavery intersects with Jason's very powerfully, and that is the domain of studying slave dress. And of course I do more than that in my body of work over two decades now. But I'm going to narrow in on slave dress and what that was and what that looked like in Canada. So first, let me just introduce to you a specific archive that I'm using to do this research, and that is fugitive or runaway slave ads. And they were a type of printed newspaper ad or broadside, what we today call the poster. And you can find these almost anywhere across the Americas where Transatlantic Slavery was practised and where you had a printing press. And in Canada, where you'd go to recuperate them would be in 18th and 19th century newspapers, where they were typically housed in Canada, where? In provincial archives or in university libraries. So think like the Halifax Gazette, the early printings of the Montreal or Quebec Gazette et cetera. Now who was creating and printing these? Were the enslavers, the slave owners and/or their surrogates, so people like overseers, jailers and sheriffs? They're printing them to capture and re-enslave people who resisted slavery through flight, meaning they ran away. And these ads are really, I don't even know what to call them. They're horrendous. They were incentivizing public participation in the recapture of these people. How? Through legal threats against people who would aid the enslaved runaway and through promises of monetary rewards to the people who would aid the slave owner.

Okay, so in the plethora of data that you can mine from these ads and these are just some of the things that you typically find in the ads, I won't go into detail on them, let's zero on number seven, is that slave owners commonly detailed what the enslaved person was wearing. So you can see how then for scholars like myself who want to go back and study slave dress, this is a go-to archive that we typically find scholars using and resourcing. So what type of clothing did the enslaved wear? Well, to answer this question, you have to -- we have to know where are you talking about? Because we have to recall is occurring or occurred across 400 years from Argentina to Canada, including the Caribbean, and also enslaved people were forced back to Europe, okay? So the where has a lot to do with this? If we're talking semi-tropical or tropical regions, in a place like Jamaica, for instance, the Caribbean Island of Jamaica that was first in the hands of the Spanish and then in the hands of the British. Jamaican slave owners gave cloth rations of Osnaburg fabric. Two enslaved females on the plantation said here, make clothing for everyone. So you had a standardization going on of clothing in places like the Caribbean. Interestingly, the same type of fabric was in circulation in Canada. And you see that in ads like these that I've taken from the Nova Scotia newspapers. Now, things change a lot when you get to Canada. And the colder or temperate climates where you had dramatic seasonal changes with cold climate seasons, for instance, in Canada, that's winter.

So what you find here, in this example I'm giving you, an enslaved man named Tom Brooks, he's described as a mulatto, which is a colonial term meaning that he was mixed race, probably in the strictest sense, not probably, in the strictest sense it meant he had one white parent and one Black parent. The Black parent is most likely the enslaved Black female mother and a white father, free white father of course. Now, Tom is wearing what? Mixed brown coat, waist coat, green trousers, a white beaver hat with gold laces. These are typically upper- and middle-class clothing that you find a white person wearing at the same time in the same place. Why? Because white slave owners in Canada were giving their enslaved people their cast off or secondhand clothing.

So what we have to do in Canada then is not just to think about like a certain type of clothing that's being used or worn by an enslaved. It's actually the exact same clothing that you'd find white people, free whites wearing; only it's old and worn, typically because it's secondhand. Now I share this one with you here an enslaved female named Bell, also describes as a mulatto, escaping from George Hipps in Quebec, why? What is extraordinarily weird or strange about this ad is that she's fleeing with no shoes and stockings on. Now, even though it's August, this is completely abnormal for Canada. This was a country where -- a region where enslavers understood that they had to provide appropriate seasonal footwear for their enslaved people or you would kill them. People would like literally lose their limbs in the winter and the fall to frostbite, okay? So that she is fleeing even in August with no shoes and stockings is a sign of -- is assuredly a sign of some distress and the fact too that her escape in this context or in this occurrence was not planned, okay? So you can see the way too, by piecing together our knowledge of the clothing and what was normative in the space, we can start to read other things into the ads that were not intentionally then disclosed by the slave owner.

Okay, I'll go to the next one here. Okay. So what characterized enslaved clothing in Canada? Well, one thing again was that because we're dealing with secondhand or cast-off clothing, we find descriptions of them being typically old, worn, and discoloured. And you can see that here with Joe, who is an African-born enslaved man, who is held in bondage by William Brown, who was the printer of the Quebec Gazette. So you can see that Brown is describing Joe's fur cap as old, his coat is old, his jacket is old, almost everything Joe is wearing is old. Okay. And that's -- why bother to say that? Because that's part of how the person, the reader will identify Joe, by acknowledging and identifying that the coat he's wearing is not just green or the cap he's wearing is not just green, but it's old.

The other thing that stands out in Canada is that there's a creolization that occurs in enslaved dress across not just African and European dress, but Indigenous dress. And you can see here another enslaved -- another fugitive ad for Joe is specifying that he's wearing a pair of Indian moccasins, what today we call Indigenous moccasins. So it's Indigenous footwear that he's wearing. So whereas in some regions, the clothing of the enslaved is really a blend of African and European, in Canada and especially Quebec where enslaved Indigenous people are also living alongside enslaved people of African descent, you find the blending of those three cultures.

So is there evidence of African cultural retention? Absolutely, there is. And one of the big things we see is head wrapping. As you see here with Marie-Thérèse-Zémire, who was the initially anonymized enslaved sitter of Francois Malépart de Beaucourt. And we know now thanks to the research of a

curator at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts that Marie was most likely an enslaved field labour in Saint-Domingue, which later became Haiti. So we are able now begin to do some research on the specific nature of the head wrap, which he depicts her wearing. I also want to point out though, that Marie was absolutely an enslaved person in Canada. We know she was forcibly relocated to Canada by de Beaucourt and his wife, and that she would've spent a third of her life in Montreal. So here you can see the continuation of this head wrapping practice in Canada, along the right-hand side with this anonymous Black woman in this photographic scene from a market in the Halifax regional context. And I want to point out that we can trace this back to slave advertising as well, another fugitive slave ad. Interestingly, this time a man identified as Andrew, born in Maryland, but here we can see he's enslaved in Quebec., by whom? This vintner, someone who's purveying or selling wines, James Crofton, in Quebec and part of that description is what, at the bottom, N.B., he is remarkable for being clean dressed and wearing a handkerchief tied around his head. So that is head wrapping. Okay. And head wrapping, of course, when these scholars have traced back to West Africa as a West African dress practice that then we can argue survives the middle passage to be recreated in the Americas by enslaved people and their descendants. But very interesting here that we're seeing a man doing this practice, because head wrapping is typically associated with enslaved and free Black women.

Okay. So just here, I want to show you another example of this from Nova Scotia, an enslaved woman named Florimell. And here we have a really interesting and complex combination going on. She's described as commonly wears a handkerchief around her head, again, head wrapping, having facial scars and speaking broken English. And I want to suggest to you that the combination of those three point me towards thinking that this woman was born in Africa, although the anonymized slave owner does not say so, okay? Because we have the preservation of the African dress culture, the scars on her face might not be ailment or sickness, it could be scarification, which is an African cultural practice of bodily adornment. And that would make sense to the broken English, because the common language spoken, of course, in Nova Scotia at this time by whites, by Indigenous people, by Blacks is English. So we have to ask, why is Florimell's English broken, right? Why is she not fluent? So that is just some insight into how then you begin to piece together other aspects of the identities of the enslaved people, even if it's not directly disclosed.

And here, I wanted to suggest here that the enslaved girl, Thursday, was fleeing from John Rock in 1772 in Halifax. His description of her clothing entails or includes a red ribbon about her head. And I want to suggest that the red ribbon might be head wrapping and he might not have known how to describe that, because he did not understand what it was that she was doing when she was adorning her body. So we have to read these archival documents and evidence against the grain and acknowledge the different extent of the ignorance of the white viewer and the white writer when they're describing Black and African culture.

And just the last one here, Jason, before I hand it back to you, other evidence from the archive. I find this ad particularly fascinating. It is the ad from the context of Quebec, with the deepest, the richest description of dress of an enslaved person. We have two people fleeing here, a Negro or Black man described as a Negro lad named Nemo from Albany, supposedly 18 years of age, but he's fleeing alongside a Black woman named Cash. Again, very derogatively described as a Negro wench, right? So and wench of course was a term to mean a woman of loose morality. So you can see the

objectification of Black female sexuality is just prevalent across slavery in the naming of Black femaleness. So Cash is 26 supposedly, 5 foot 8", but she's escaping with what? She has a considerable quantity of linens and other valuable effects, not her own. And as she has also taken with her a large bundle of wearing apparel belonging to herself, consisting of a black satin cloak, caps, bonnets, ruffles, ribbons, six or seven petticoats, a pair of old stays, and many other articles of value which cannot be ascertained. It is likely she may change her dress. Hell yeah, she's going to change her dress, of course. And you'll see in a lot of these ads that the enslavers will admit that they do not know what the enslaved person is wearing, because they've escaped with other clothing, or in other clothing. In this case, he's saying that she's escaped with a bundle of clothing. What is really, really pertinent and important here too is that Hugh Richie, who was a tailor, surprise, surprise, admits that much of what Cash fled with was hers. This is extraordinary. Most slave owners are saying everything they took, they stole from me. But he's willing to concede that she actually owns some of the stuff. And we need to understand that part of the reason he probably purchased her was that he knew ahead of time that she already had these skills that he could put to work and exploit and steal her labour in his tailor shop. The other thing I just want to point out, the last thing here, Jason, is that of course the clothing that she's fleeing with, we typically associate with who? Upper-class and middle-class white women. But again, we need to understand in a context like Canada, the American North, what the enslaved person is wearing and what the white person is wearing are the exact same clothing. The difference is that typically enslaved person, because they're impoverished, because they have no leisure time, because they're being exploited in terms of the theft of their labour, that the clothing they're wearing is again, old, worn, and discolored. So I'll leave that there.

Jason Cyrus: Wow. Thanks Charmaine. I already have 10,000 questions, but that was absolutely fascinating in its connections in terms of dress and the enslaved body. But before we jump in, Shannon, would you mind introducing yourself and sharing of your own work, a bit of your history and your work at the Buxton National Museum?

Shannon Prince: Yes. Thanks. That was awesome Charmaine that was really fascinating and intriguing, great work. Yes. So like Jason said, I'm the curator here at the Buxton National History Site Museum. I have been here for quite some time, and we're very -- and I'm also a descendant. So I really feel honoured to be able to, you know, walk the land that, you know, my family and other ancestors have cleared and to be able to share some of those stories with them. So my work here is very focused on research tours, et cetera. So Jason [brief laughter], so this is the aerial view of the museum. So we at the museum, if you haven't been before, we're again, fortunate to have some really amazing artifacts and collection, and we're also very hands on pre-COVID. We have some of those original shackles that I think it's very important, especially for children, to understand the fact that children actually wore them, and the weight and the circumstances sometimes with which they were sharing them. So we do tours as well. Again, touching on everything that we can, explaining the quite extensive fact that there was slavery here in Canada, you know, more than 200 years ago. So it's really, really important for them to understand the whole context of where they are and how significant the role that we played in shaping that history also. So what is the next one [brief laughter]?

Ah the tintypes! So as part of our collection, these are some daguerreotype pictures that we have, and they're all unknown pictures that came from a family that lives -- did live. And I guess some of their families still live in the settlement. But they're really, this is only one set that we have, but they're just amazing pictures. And when Charmaine was talking about the dress, and when we look at some of the ones in these pictures, they're just, you know, the women look very stately, you know, with their hats. And I just admire those pictures and very proud and independent and, you know, courageous and proud. It's like, yes, you know, even though I came from being enslaved, but look at me now, basically. And I think it says something about the people that when they did arrive. And it's interesting, because Reverend King makes note when the people that arrived here in Buxton, they were characterized as very manly, if you will, and had an air of independence about them. And the fact that they were able to do everything on their own when they did arrive here in the settlement, basically they were very independent. They built their own homes, cleared their own land. And because the money that they had secured was from the industries that they had within the settlement, so and they didn't take outside charity, and they were very cognizant of the fact that they were going to be very self-sufficient. And I think that was one of the reasons why the settlement was just so successful, because they were determined to dispel those myths about Blacks being lazy and uneducated, and we can do this on our own. Did I have one more or two more? I don't know [brief laughter]. What did I send you? Is that all I sent you? Probably.

Oh, and the diary. And this is from Garrison Shad's diary 18 -- I want to say 1881 something. Sorry. But anyway, this is the inside cover of his diary. And so this has been actually transcribed, but it's almost like he -- some of the most common thing he makes note of on which page, you know, like Josiah Henson's funeral was in Dresden was on page -- it's on page 71, which is really kind of an interesting story of a journal that he did. So again, we have some of those original journals, diaries. And it tells so much about what was happening here when people arrived and what they were doing, you know, their neighbours. But they're very -- when you read them, and I compare them again to a lady's and a man's, because the man's are very structured. You know, when the sun rose, when it set, very, very blunt, you know. Went to take some hay off, went to so-and-so's funeral, came back, took mother shopping. And the women, they are almost gossipy, if you will. Like they go into great detail, again, about what so and so was wearing at church [brief laughter], or what so and so cooked at the church supper. They could care less about the weather. They were more concerned about what their neighbours were doing. So it's really interesting the different perspectives of people within the community. So it's fortunate that we have these documents that are here and, you know, to share with people, because it says so much about the people when they arrive and who they were. So we're very, very pleased. That's in a nutshell.

[Laughter]

Jason Cyrus: Amazing. Oh, you are such a good storyteller I have to say. Well, my -- you know, I had a whole series of questions. But I want to follow, I think, a sort of thought that came together as both yourself and Charmaine were chatting, which is the agency of the folks that we are discussing. And you know what, rather than look at my face, I will bring up -- -- one of the images from the exhibition, so we can at least look at some of the types. Can we see that clearly?

Shannon Prince: No

Charmaine Nelson: I can't see anything.

Jason Cyrus: Okay. Okay. So I'm just going to screen here. Well, I guess my first point of conversation, while I'm bringing this up, is this -- and this is one of the questions that I had quite often when the exhibition first opened, and even for myself when I was researching, is to look at these images of folks who are now settled in upper Canada, or, you know, what we know as to be Southern Ontario, we're looking at them in their dress, and Charmaine as you just mentioned, they're using this, the realm of the medium photography and the clothes they're wearing in a sense, at least from my perspective anyway, to reclaim their humanity and to make a conscious choice of saying, this is who I am and this is who I've always known myself to be. But one of the questions that comes up quite often is, is this the clothing of the photographer? Is this clothing in the studio? Is this their own clothing? How would they have access to the skills to make the clothing? Where would they have gotten the materials, and so on and so forth? But Charmaine, as you mentioned quite brilliantly, and especially in the case of Cash, I believe it is.

Charmaine Nelson: Yes.

Jason Cyrus: Who had access to and who -- would you think she likely would've made her own clothing or based on the skills that she would've garnered from being an enslaved woman?

Charmaine Nelson: Yes, absolutely. I think Cash was someone who would have been making her own clothing and making clothing for others that then Richie sold and took the profits from, right? So this is the thing too Jason, you're opening up a really important point. When you're looking at Canada and thinking of labour, men and women were forced to do so-called domestic and agricultural/outdoor labour. So this is different from the tropical and semi-tropical regions where most everybody was in the fields, be it the coffee field, or the sugar field, or the cotton field. So many then of those enslaved domestics in a place like Canada would've have had to do things like cook the food, make the butter, milk the cow, sew my garment, mend my garment, like of the enslaver, right? Wash the garment. So Cash may have been extraordinary in her skill level, most likely. And that's why Richie would've purchased her if she wasn't born into his household or trained her to do that, if she had been born into his household. But many enslaved people would've had similar skills, just at a lower level. I think that's what we have to understand, because of the nature of slavery too in Canada, compared to Jamaica where you have domestic enslaved people and field enslaved people, right?

Jason Cyrus: Right.

Charmaine Nelson: But then again, Jamaica, let's get even more complicated, who are all these women given the osnaburg fabric who have to then make the clothing? That's also the field enslaved people, right?

Jason Cyrus: Right.

Charmaine Nelson: So what does the clothing then become and look like? But to your point too, with the photography, we'd have to drill down on specific archives of individual photographers to see if they provided the ability of clothing rental to potential sitters, or if the people were expected to come in wearing what they would be photographed in. But you're right. Photography totally democratizes the access of self-representation to formerly enslaved and enslaved and free Black people who, before that, were dealing with stuff like Beaucourt's portrait of a Negro slave, as it was the first title it was circulated under, which is a coerced setting. Let's get that right.

Jason Cyrus: Right, right, right. Yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: She's not the patron. She wouldn't have chosen to sit for that. She wouldn't have chosen to sit for it with breasts exposed, et cetera, et cetera. She wouldn't have been paid, right?

Jason Cyrus: I'm thinking too of Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker, the wife of Abraham Lincoln how she was formerly enslaved Black woman who bought her own freedom through her dressmaking skills, and then went on to be Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker. Folks like Ann Lowe whose history, a Black couturier whose history goes back to enslavement, who made Jackie Kennedy's famous wedding dress. And there's a very long history of, funny enough, of enslavement and making and clothing and this way of using skillsets, not just to survive while under enslavement, but also just way of pulling your stuff out of it. Shannon, I just love the conversation, or at least the continuation between these tintypes we're looking at here from the Ontario Archives. And the ones that you showed quite beautifully. Do you know any information about -- so much is unknown about them, what about their dress styles or about --

Shannon Prince: Yes.

Jason Cyrus: Or do you see a common thread in terms of how they're dressed all the time?

Shannon Prince: Yeah, that's the unfortunate thing, you know. And probably, I think if we, you know, I don't know. I guess I haven't read all of the documents that we have here on photos. But you know, there possibly could be something in one of those journals that I haven't touched on that hasn't been transcribed yet. Or even when the owner of these donated them to the museum, she accidentally found them in her attic. So had no idea that they were there actually, so it's interesting. But when you talk about the sewing aspect again, when it comes into people that eventually did find freedom, I guess those traits continued in all the Black communities well in Buxton, and I imagine and the rest of them as well, you know. The sewing bees, the quilting bees, because they sewed everything. You couldn't see a stitch. So it's interesting how those skills -- they're very proud of the fact that they, you know, they sew everything and the quilting as well. I wish I had that skill.

Jason Cyrus: And to me, what's amazing. I'm just going to bring up your images here again, is that from, you know, from a fashion history perspective and the way that, you know, clothing fits --

Shannon Prince: Yes.

Jason Cyrus: -- the clothing that everyone is wearing here predates a modern notion of off the rack.

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: And the sizes whereby you could get something that's a four or a 12 or 16 or a two when it fits your body more or less, especially when it comes to tailored goods and corsetry, and with the ways that seams fit on the shoulders, and around the neck, and around the bust. It could have be very hard for the photographer to have a cache of clothing that I think would have fit these robust body types as perfectly I think, as what you're seeing here. Obviously, more research needs to be done to investigate and see how that is. But I think, like as you're both saying based on the skillsets that many of these folks would have had or been passed down, or at least been forced to learn in what way they came about them. Why would they not then have made their own clothing?

Charmaine Nelson: Right.

Jason Cyrus: And, you know, use this as an example to really, to assert themselves in, or at least to reclaim themselves as it were.

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah. And Jason, I think too, we should think about the fact that for -- I think for any impoverished community, but especially for Black formerly enslaved people or Black people coming out of slavery, going to the photo studio would've been an event, because even for so many Black, diasporic Blacks today, and for continental Africans, I mean, we don't have photos of our ancestors, right? My parents who were born in the '30s and the '40s don't have images of themselves as children, because they came from poor families, and they didn't have a camera, and they didn't have access to photo studio, and this in 1930s and '40s, they were born. So do you think I have pictures of my grandparents, like barely, like maybe one of three out of four of them? So this is a big deal for Black people to be able to take back the process and the act of self-representation through their own hands and to have themselves pictured in the way that they wanted to. So for them too, they would've understood and even they would've been wearing their so-called Sunday best.

Jason Cyrus: Right.

Charmaine Nelson: Right?

Shannon Prince: Yeah. And the detail, I just love the fine intricate detail. And like you were saying, they're not off the rack because no two, you don't see too many, they don't have the same dress. And how they accent every, you know, like you said, very form-fitting. You would think that you know, very proud of themselves. It's just amazing how, yeah, detailed they are and how, yeah, fanciful if you will. And the gentleman, the bottom left, you know, he looks, I don't know if that's a shirt or neck scarf, what do you think? You know, like around his neck, is that just part of the shirt, do you think? If I'm not --

Jason Cyrus: It looks it might be a shirt with a vest peeking out from under the coat.

Shannon Prince: With a vest in it, okay. Yeah. Ah, I see that.

Jason Cyrus: But there may be something at the shoulder, at the neck, I see. Now, part of the -- I think the challenge of looking at images and trying to do research, and I know we've chatted about this before, especially I and Charmaine is the lack of holdings of, for example, the material or culture associated with these images. We don't have, or at least if we do have, we don't have the provenance of the clothing in archives that are linked to folks like these. Like where is their dress? Where are their things in archives and --

Charmaine Nelson: Right.

Jason Cyrus: -- one of the -- I'm going to jump back and forth between presentations so that I can use images to illustrate some points. But part of the reason why I want to put the tintypes in conversation, not just with the cotton clothing from the Agnes, the white garments that we are using as for scientific methods and to illustrate the upper-class Canadian consumer. But I want you to put these garments in conversation with the tintypes because to ask this question of, what of the garments of these folks? And why is it that their own garments, the garments that we're seeing in these tintypes, in these cartes-de-visites, why were they not preserved for posterity in terms of institutional collecting practices? And Charmaine as you're saying, it comes back to, I think, even notions of access, right? Photography who has notion, who has access to be able to, you know, go to studio and take these photographs, but also in terms of access to institutions that would want to keep their garments? Or whether maybe these garments would have been handed down, you know, from family to family. African and especially Black Canadians are known -- it's historically very thrifty and would want to hand it down a lot of these garments because of course fabrics and things like that, would've been hard to come by. But --

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: -- I'm wondering how can we use archives --

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: -- especially like yours Shannon as a way of telling this wider story of, you know, finally seeing these people as more holding their identities, as opposed to, we've got A North-Side View of Slavery, the book that I could not remember, you know, and the story we've got, some tintypes, and then we've got, for example, reaching back to what Charmaine was referring to the future slave ads. And it seems that a lot of Black Canadian history is so disjointed and spread across. And --

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: -- how is that we can use archives like I'm asking to bring these stories together so we can, in a sense, start to see people as more whole figures?

Charmaine Nelson: So, can I just jump in and say --

Jason Cyrus: Please.

Charmaine Nelson: -- there's multiple problems that have led to this problem that you're pointing out, which is a deficit of our collections of Black Canada especially historical Black Canada in Canadian institutions. Okay. So what went on? Canadian museums really were birthed later than the USA, and really after slavery ended in Canada which is 1834. But when they come about in the late 1800s is the same moment when Canadian scholars are trying to suppress Canadian slavery. They're trying to either say that it was more benevolent. We were kind of gentler because we weren't plantation slavery or that it didn't happen at all. Okay. So those things are happening at the same time. Then at the same, if you look at Canadian academia, we have no infrastructure of what African Canadian studies in the way that the U.S. has proliferated African American studies departments that have become the keepers of that history really, right? And we also have no infrastructure of African Canadian museums. The U.S. has a plethora of Black American museums on the national level and on the regional levels that are also keepers of this history. So part of it is when we think about the legitimized infrastructures of museums and academia that started in the 19th century, none of those people were interested in preserving anything from our communities. So it's not surprised that they're not there. But here's the twist. Of course, some of the collections, for instance, in a McCord Museum in Montreal, McCord Museum of History, the clothing they have, some of that would have been worn by enslaved Black Canadians, because the story I just told you --

Jason Cyrus: Right.

Charmaine Nelson: -- the whites slavers were giving secondhand clothing and castoffs to the enslaved people. But it's gone into the collection as the clothing of James McGill for instance.

Jason Cyrus: Interesting.

Charmaine Nelson: Even though James McGill maybe gave it to one of the five people he enslaved at some point in his life. But that's not recorded in the provenance and that's not in the cataloguing history, because also another problem we have a race-blind cataloguing going on in Canada for generations.

Jason Cyrus: Interesting, interesting, interesting.

Shannon Prince: I just want to add something else, Charmaine. A couple of the things that we have here and have not done any further research on is several photo albums, family photo albums. And the one thing that I did do when I received the photo album was look at the photographer, and it was a Black photographer who had a Black studio in Ann Arbor, Michigan and that's as far as I went. So there were, and I guess I should probably further investigate that. But there were several Black photographers that were coming into this area, come to find out taking some of these photos, because again, these were family photos and they were all again family dressed very well, like they wore their Sunday best. So and then they were some taken in the studio themselves and then some family portraits. And unfortunately that, you know, that family has since passed, and this is the only thing that we still have of them, but we have those original ones. And that's as far as we have gone thus far. But would be glad to continue that research to see exactly where it does go. Because the

photos are just amazing when you look at them. And like you say, you can tell so much about these people, these families even though they have a stoic look, you know. Deep down inside, they are feeling elated and proud of the fact that this is mine, I own myself, and this is my family. And just, you know, very well dressed and want to share it with everyone. So yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: And Shannon –

Jason Cyrus: Sorry. I'm sorry, you can go first.

Charmaine Nelson: Sorry. I just wanted to say Shannon, thank you so much for that too, because what's pointing out for the rest of us too, is okay, how many repositories of images of Black Canadians are sitting in archives in the USA? Because the brilliant Black photographers in the USA knew there's a community up there in Canada that's not being served, right? And maybe not just in Southwestern Ontario, but who was going up to Quebec to do that, right?

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: Or who was going up to other spaces in the Maritimes to do that same work.

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: So that is brilliant. And then Jason, what's missing from the archives too, of course, are the African dress practices, like which museum in Canada would have a headwrap?

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: Right.

Charmaine Nelson: Right. Who would've bothered to keep that, right? That's going to be the Black family that kept that.

Shannon Prince: That's right.

Charmaine Nelson: And hopefully it didn't deteriorate, right? But it's not going to -- sadly it won't be in a Canadian museum. I bet you, we could find some in American museums, because again, they've had infrastructures of support and care for Black American history.

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: What I'm definitely hearing, I think that's a brilliant thread it's speaking up is this non-normative way of looking across these archives, you know. For example, if you're looking in an archive and you're looking for an example of a dress style that would've been worn by someone who would have been given the passed down clothing, you are then looking for, it be catalogued on, not their name but the name of the slave owner. If you know, looking for an example, photography that would, or of a photographer studio that would've been taking a lot of photos. For example, a

lot of the photos from the Ontario archives are coming from, and now long since the prompt address in Toronto of all places. And when I was googling the address and looking up to the Toronto archives, because of the way that the numbering system has changed, that, you know, the address on Yonge Street is no longer because of the way that, you know, the city has now zoned. But again, like where is the repository of that archive? Is it, as you're saying, Charmaine, is it here, or is it further down south? And I was struck quite strongly when I was looking at, I think the clothing of the Agnes's collection and trying to find a way to connect it to, you know, different identities and putting this larger, so in context of the larger supply chain. And this is something that's characteristic of many strong dress collections like the Agnes. Think of the Met and the V&A and, you know, the McCord and other places that by and large, it's the wealthy white privileged dress that gets, no, the old Couture, the highest of the high. A head wrap that's connected to African dress practice was something that would not even be thought to be seen as, you know, what's considered a masterwork of fashion in the way that the Met for example, its mandate is just to collect garments that are the highest form of its category. So then you try to think of, well, what characterizes the highest and the zenith of a specific form of making? I do want to get into the Q&A. But I think the most important question I think for us to discuss today is, why is this conversation important? Looking at old clothes and old photos and, you know, cotton and its connections to different people, why have this conversation now in light of everything that is going on in Canada, so in kind of social climate? I mean, I can give a very passionate answer. But I'm interested to hear from both your perspectives of your own work, why are these conversations so important?

Charmaine Nelson: Well, I'll just jump in and say, all right. So we have to understand in transatlantic slavery, that the enslavers controlled every element of the lives of the people they claim to own. So what you were eating, how much you could eat, when you're going to get up, when you're going to go to bed, what labour they're stealing from you, your mobility, your immobility, whether they're going to brutalize you physically with whipping, whether they're going to brand you, that they're going to force you to stop practising your cultural beliefs, your heritage, your spirituality. One of the teeny tiny areas where enslaved people could exert some kind of influence is what they wore. By doing things like what Andrew from Maryland did. Okay. You may give me your castoffs in terms of your shirt, the trousers, the shoes, but I'm going to wrap my head still. Right. But still, we have to understand when Andrew is wrapping his head is because Crofton let him wrap his head. That's what we have to get. So personally, I don't call the agency because if Crofton said, take that off your head, Andrew would have to do what? Take it off his head. Okay. But it's a realm in which to when enslaved Africans were able to exert some influence that typically what shows up often across the Americas including Canada, is their African cultural heritage, which they're hanging onto, and which they're -- you can tell there's love. There's passion. There's a desire for self-care and wellbeing there. So I think for me, what's so powerful is that we need to read and address slave dress as a zone of self-care and resistance. And that's what people don't get. They just say, oh, clothing is clothing. Dress is dress. Who cares what's on his head? This is resistance my friends in a world where enslavers were saying, stop your Africanness. This is resistance to go and say, I'm going to wrap my head like my great grandmother taught me to do, which is from my West African culture.

Shannon Prince: Yeah, totally agree. Yeah. So many people are getting back to their roots. And I want to say self-identifying, but just feeling more, this is who I really am. And their expressions are

coming through more with their dressing. And you see that more and more often, you know. It's not only with music and poetry; it's coming back with the dress. Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: And I think for me too, as you're both saying this, the sense of pre-looking at history and reclaiming it too is, we can't, you know, envision where we need to go as a nation and as a collective people if we don't understand the past.

Shannon Prince: That's right. Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: This sense of, I especially remember the last summer when the, you know, the resurgence of the protest and a lot of social justice conversations were happening. I naively was shocked by the number of people who were finally waking up to or awakening to, you know, a lot of it. And I think the important part for me of these conversations is allowing people to understand that everything that we're trying to discuss now about Black Lives Matter and about the importance of seeing everyone as an equal and understanding what things need to be set right so that we can all have an equitable future. We need to understand the precedents. And as someone who studies dress history like myself, as I was saying, I have to look at a point in -- a more recent point in dress history that connected things in a more insidious way, in a way that was more underhanded. Because even as Charmaine you were saying that just really stuck in my mind. This way of looking at archives in a different way, where you're not looking at the -- you have to look for the names of different people. You have to look for different things to be able to understand how to trace the thread through. Because you will not find, for example, you know, for example, Shannon as you were saying at the Buxton, you will not find dress worn by this person who escaped via this from that. Just because of the collecting histories that have happened over the years, what people have kept and what they've not kept, and what they've passed on, sadly, we don't have a very detailed record of some of these dress styles. But we have to be able to understand that everything that we are wrestling with now was birthed in the past.

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: And that in that way, Canada is not somewhere where the conversation does not need to happen because it's never been here. No, it's always been, and we need to be able to deal quite strongly with what has happened, and therefore then to be able to move forward. Because we can't plead ignorance anymore to the fact that, you know, not everyone goes through life in the same way here.

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: And I hope this exhibition can and the conversations we're having can in some way bring that to light. And you know, we can all see how we're all connected. And I think that's my biggest hope for the show that we can see that our stories are all entangled and that our lives are all enmeshed. And that by understanding that we can actually start to heal and move forward in real and meaningful ways.

Shannon Prince: Yeah. Sometimes I think to try and put like the current events, you know, within a historical context and history within a contemporary context because so much is happening. And like you say, history, it helps us to understand the person, again by asking those questions. And there's so much out there that people are just not grasping. And I've seen within the last year with all the various Black Lives Matter events happening that there has been that resurgent of, wow, I didn't know, you know, that almost in an ignorant way I didn't know that this existed here, I didn't know. But now their eyes are opening and now they are thirsting for it. But in my mind, it's like, it's taken you this long to really understand what people have been saying. And, you know, we're trying to educate and share and acknowledge. I just have one story about -- well, it's connected. We were invited to do an exhibit at the city hall in Toronto quite a few years ago. And it was for Black History Month. And because we have some really wonderful artifacts here, we said, yes, we will take our shackles. We will take our neck collar. We will take some of the diaries and journals. And as soon as I said that, they were like, oh no, you can't do that. It's too offensive. What will people think? You know, we can't do that. And I'm thinking, oh again, hell no, no, no, no, no. This is part of our narrative here. No, it's going to be here. And there was a lot of push with city hall and counsellors who were like, no, we can't have that, you know. And there were two counsellors that were very in favour. And one of the things that they did, it was on display in city hall, but they also made provisions for it to be taken to some of the other museums in the outer -- that couldn't come into the city hall to see it. So they've made provisions to go to smaller museums or smaller places, so they could see it as well. But it's that type of mentality, you know. Oh, yes, we need to celebrate Black History so that we can educate people, but please don't, you know, that's too offensive. And what will people think if they come and see things like this? And it's like, wow. Yeah, you know, not in my backyard sort of thing. It's like, wow, wow. But that's been quite a few years ago, but I don't know how receptive they would be now. But it just tells you how, you know, how we have progressed hopefully, and now we're at that block again where, wow I didn't know it was tears. So like you say that narrative has to be changed and we have a lot of work to do. Yeah so -- yeah.

Jason Cyrus: Absolutely. I've got a question here from Hilary and I'll try to paraphrase it. So Hilary, forgive me if I don't do this correctly. But one of the main core components of the question is, has there been any research conducted in business or corporate archives whether here in Canada or in the U.S. that looks at union records or corporate and business archives that are looking for photographs of Black workers that might -- oh, I think I lost -- You're here? Got you.

Shannon Prince: Oh, sorry [brief laughter].

Jason Cyrus: No, no, no problem. Hilary was just asking if any research has been done in businesses like corporate archives or businesses, for example, union records that might, you know, bring up a cache of images or of photographs of Black workers that would be able to help us link this dearth of photography of the Black body?

Charmaine Nelson: Off the top of my head not to my knowledge, but that's a great suggestion to look in those business and corporate archives. I don't believe that a lot of scholars have thought of that. They typically go to provincial and national archives. So the thing I'm thinking though is usually the newest research in anything, in any field or discipline are the MA and Ph.D., the MA theses, and the Ph.D. dissertations. So we have to deep dive into those to see if any of those students have

found those things. And also I'm thinking of the curator, Julie Crooks at the AGO who's a curator of photography. She might know some of this too. So she would be a source that you'd want to check with Hillary to see if she's ever heard of that because she's a specialist in photography. Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: And she has an amazing show on called Fragments of Epic Memory. I think it's still up or might be closing soon. It began at the beginning of September that looks at photographs from the Caribbean. I believe it is the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s that tangentially connects here as well. Just see any other questions that might come up. And did you two have any other questions that you wanted to while I -- oh, skim this -- ?

Shannon Prince: Not just in the next series. Ah, Valentine's Day.

Jason Cyrus: Renia has a question, and again Renia you have to forgive me if I'm mispronouncing the name. The first time I went to the Grant AME in Toronto, I happened to sit down next to the church archivist. Her mother held that position before her. The church was founded in 1833. And Renia is wondering if we've ever looked into those archives and if that might be a font of knowledge?

Charmaine Nelson: That is wonderful too. We're getting these great archival insights and leads. But here's the thing I have to throw out to people. We got to know, this is a sad part too. I've been talking throughout, right? I mentioned to Jason and Shannon. There's a deficit in infrastructure in Canada. One of the deficits too, is that there is no African Canadian or Black Canadian studies in Canada, right? DAL has I think a minor in a combination of Black Canadian studies and Black Diaspora studies. There's no one place in Canada where you can go and get a degree, like a major that says African Canadian studies. So what does that mean? Again, we don't have the scholars on the ground who are training students to do this work. And as you can see from our conversation, doing research on the slave populations is not the same as doing research on free people. Free people if you want to recuperate a biography, what's the first thing we'd all think to go and look for? The birth certificate. Enslaved people were not issued birth certificates because they were considered chattel under the law. They were considered movable personal property like the desk in front of me and the chair I'm sitting on. So you have to train people how to do this research on enslaved populations because you're looking for a completely different set of documents in the archive. So all that to say, thank you for these leads, but we need the students to be working with professors like myself, who are focused on Black Canadian studies, and the focus on Canadian slavery, to be able to get this done, right? Because you know how -- most of you probably know how hard it is. And Shannon and Jason certainly know to do this type of painstaking archival work. In some cases, it takes years to go through certain collections and to come up with what you are looking for. So you need people on the ground who are trained to do this work, to get it done appropriately, and to not miss things in the process. But thank you for those wonderful suggestions. Of course, church archives and corporate and, you know --

Jason Cyrus: And Charmaine, I think that's one of the amazing things not just in terms of the way that funding -- different things are being funded. Like for example, this research is being funded by the Isabel Bader Fellowship and Philanthropy, which we are hugely grateful for to be able to, you know, leverage those funds and you know, to tell these stories. But I know Charmaine at NSCAD you

founded The Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery. And can you just give us a small snippets of the work that's happening there that you're hoping to, you know, start some momentum to be able to go through with?

Charmaine Nelson: Thank you, Jason. And by the way, thank you so much, Jason. And by the way, Jason is one of our first cohort of fellows who had to be virtual due to the pandemic. So we have five brilliant fellows for the 2021-2022 cohort. And Jason was in the first group in the fall of 2021, so thank you, Jason. And he's giving -- actually, he's going to be in a Black History Month panel on February 15th at 12:00 PM. So I think Charlotte will share the link for the institute after this. But yes, I founded the institute in part because we have as Shannon and Jason ably pointed out a 200-year history of transatlantic slavery in the regions that became Canada under two empires, the French and the British that basically almost nobody knows even occurred. And can I say, I say this all the time when I lecture, it has nothing to do with a deficit in the archive. The documents I'm sharing with you are sitting on microfilm reels in the provincial or national archives. That's not the problem. The problem is there's no infrastructure of departments that would typically hire someone like myself who is an art historian who specializes in transatlantic slavery and Canadian and Jamaican slavery. I got in through McGill as a Canadian as teaching historical Canadian art, but they got more than they bargained for because I was also someone who teaches the Black diaspora. That is not though who they hired. That is just who they got when they hired me if you get me. So the institute, then I want to make it a space to nurture and support brilliant talent like Jason Cyrus and scholars working in across different fields in the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary field of transatlantic slavery studies and the artists, my friends, because if we think about how most of us has come to our knowledge of transatlantic slavery, initially at least it was through a film. And typically, there are Hollywood films about the American South. And recently, we've had a spate of rather good ones like Lincoln, and Django Unchained, and 12 Years a Slave. There's no such film on Canadian slavery. Until we change that, the general public in Canada will continue to not know anything about this 200-year history. So we must support the artists in also doing this work, whether they're playwrights, whether they're filmmakers, whether they're painters, sculptors, et cetera. So the institute is actively working to have these cohorts on a yearly rollover basis, which hopefully one day will also include postdoctoral fellows. So also if you have a big chequebook, I implore you to think of donating to us because we need the money to fund brilliant people like Jason, right? They're not going to want to come stay with us for that semester or year when they could go to Harvard or they could go to Brown, or they could go to Oxford and have a fellowship if we don't have the funds to attract them to Halifax.

Jason Cyrus: And Shannon, in terms of, what do you think at the Buxton National Historic Museum needs to be able to continue doing its work? Can you share from your perspective as a curator and as someone on the team?

Shannon Prince: Well, we have two staff and that's our biggest issue trying to do everything if you will. So, you know, to do some research. Like when people want information on their family and, you know, nine times out of 10, we will have that, you know, readily available. But they might want more than we have at our fingertips, or, you know. So people, and if you don't answer them like in two minutes, they're like, wow, they're ignoring me. But there's more than just looking up, you know, a family tree because we have file folders and other background information to provide as

well. So it does take a lot of work. And then plus the fact that you know, we are doing tours. We are doing, trying to create exhibits, We're filling out grants. So you know, one of our biggest challenges is having the capability to fulfil all of those things that we would love to do. Like between the two of us, we have a list, a daily checklist, have we done that. Yes. So it's very time consuming. So basically, to do some wonderful research, like I don't know when I'll get to the photo album, Charmaine. [brief laughter].

Charmaine Nelson: Oh, my gosh, we got to team up. And listen, the chequebook needs to be split between the two of us. Okay. So the big philanthropies out there, give half of the money to Shannon and half the money to me. Okay.

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: I am not embarrassed to say we need money. We need money to do the work.

Shannon Prince: Yeah, we do.

Charmaine Nelson: Yeah. And we can't spend all our time writing grants people, right?

Shannon Prince: I know.

Charmaine Nelson: Because this is a thing that happens to us. We get turned into grant writers, and then we can't go do the research or support others in doing it, right Shannon, so?

Shannon Prince: There's a lot of things in a variety of repositories that need to be uncovered. And like you say, Charmaine and Jason, it's there. It's just, it's very time consuming in trying to find the bodies, you know, to do it. And I find with, because we are shut down, we have really been more -- well, because we're doing more Zoom presentations and virtual tours with school groups and that sort of thing. And it's not just -- so you have to tailor each one to each. So it is very time-consuming for us but enjoying it. But one of the, you know, we don't have that capability right now to do that intense research that some people have requested, so. Yeah. I think we're all in the same boat, lack of resources, lack of finances. Yeah.

Jason Cyrus: Yeah. So too, I want to keep -- I'd love to be mindful of everyone's time including you two wonderful individuals. I think, to sum up, you know, look non-normatively at collections and archives for information. Think outside the box. Remember stories are connected. And the most basic thing I think you can do to allow this work to happen is to donate, is to, you know, put all your money where your heart is, just as they say. And though we can continue to keep telling these stories, or we can continue to keep empowering people to, you know, to do the work so we can see ourselves represented. I'd like to give you both the last word before I thank everyone and wrap up. Any last thoughts you'd like to share?

Charmaine Nelson: I'd just like to say that when I have -- I have all kinds of students from different backgrounds approaching me to do this work with me. A lot of the students who come to be supervised by me at the MA or Ph.D. level are actually people who are interested in doing work

through the art historical lens on slavery. And one thing I always try to teach my students is that transatlantic slavery is not just a Black history. By it being coded as a Black history is how it typically gets dismissed. But we have to think about the fact that it's an Indigenous history. It's an African history. It's a European history. It actually encompassed a lot of different groups. It included Asians at the end, who were brought into British colonies like Jamaica to be indentured servants when the enslaved people refuse to work for the people who formally enslaved them. So you know, people need to understand that this is about their families too, whether or not they're of Black African descent, and is about their family histories and stories. And I think the thing we need to think about is who has had the ability over centuries to forget that this was a part of their history, to ignore that this is a part of their history. And what I mean by that is typically at McGill when I teach a big class, like 90 or 100 students that I call the Visual Culture of Slavery, I'd ask them on the first weeks, you know, who of you know that this is a part of your ancestry? Who in the class that's not Black, right? Because the Black diasporic students know that you go back a certain amount of generations and you hit enslaved people. So I say, everybody, go home and talk to your elders. If you're lucky your grandparents who are living or great grandparents, ask them some questions. Ask if your family had direct connections to slavery. And some brave students came back, and one stuck in my mind for a long, long time. She came back and said, "Professor Nelson, I have to share this with the class. I asked the question of my elders in the family and they revealed to us, to me and my siblings, that one of our ancestors was the governor of Virginia." Okay. Okay.

Jason Cyrus: Wow.

Charmaine Nelson: Thank you, Jason. And so can I tell you this man was a planter, of course, and owned many enslaved people. And the family was just sitting on that until this woman asked a direct question. So again, this is in everybody's family history, especially too in white people's family history, whether or not they want to share it. And we need to, as Shannon said to us, become comfortable with the fact that slavery is a brutal history of systemic violence, physical, emotional, psychological, and it should not be sanitized, right? When the people in Toronto didn't want her to show the shackles and the colour, no.

Shannon Prince: Yeah.

Charmaine Nelson: If you want to know the truth about slavery, it's a brutal history. And we need to confront what it actually was. And for me doing that is how I honour my ancestors, right? This work for me is very personal, is about acknowledging the fact that having two Black parents from Jamaica, my ancestors were enslaved. And if they had not survived, I wouldn't be sitting here.

Jason Cyrus: Absolutely.

Shannon Prince: Yep. Now, I tell people that when they come to the museum, again, if my family had not survived, you know, the middle passage, et cetera, I would not be here to share those stories and the history that we have. And you're so right, Charmaine. You know this is a conversation that we all need to have because we're supposed to be such a diverse nation. And I think everyone should be having these conversations about their history. So if we want people to see that their stories are valuable and that they don't have to be this internationally renowned

figure, you know, to do great things. You know, they just need to really understand their history because it's everyone's history, you know. We just need to help change that narrative to see because we are such a diverse cultural entity. So thank you all. This has been great. [brief laughter].

Charmaine Nelson: Thank you too. Wonderful to meet you, Shannon. And thank you, Jason.

Jason Cyrus: My pleasure. I can think of no better way than to wrap this up. Thank you so much everyone for spending your Friday afternoon with us. Special thank you to Shannon and Charmaine for sharing of yourselves and your work. And we will see you the next Speaker Series on February 11th.