

Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being, Book*hug Press & Artspeak

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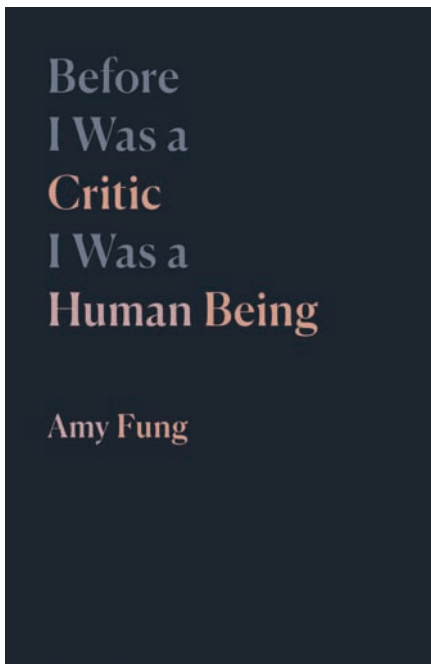
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Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being, book cover, 2019.

Photo : courtesy of Book*hug Press

Amy Fung

Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being

The Canadian motto of *A Mari usque ad Mare* comes from the Christian bible, which in its full form notes that “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth” (Psalm 72:8). Perhaps to no one’s surprise, Canada has been defined and continues to define itself in relationship to Christianity and (white) man’s ownership of the land. While today we recognize the ongoing negative legacy of colonialism, the national application of this recognition is hollow. We admit the presence of Indigenous people, but we claim them as Canada’s cultural property (the Indigenous peoples of Canada). We regularly ask people to acknowledge the traditional stewards of the land, without granting any agency to these same groups.

This duality is what Amy Fung scrutinizes in *Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being*, a memoir that reads like a cross-country road trip through the Canadian art world. Conceived as a long-form land acknowledgment, Fung’s short book covers more ground than anything I’ve encountered written by a non-Indigenous person (herself a settler and person of colour) in terms of recognizing the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the settler’s shared responsibilities for redress. Whereas most land acknowledgments are essentially empty gestures—in line with Canada’s current policies regarding Indigenous rights—Fung circumnavigates the form’s shortcomings in recognizing “the violence of whiteness that is both around me, and inside of me.”

Fung’s humanity didn’t end when she became a critic. Throughout this memoir she is still very much a living breathing human being. Nowhere is this more palpable than in 375, the chapter about Montreal (a city that celebrated its 375th anniversary the same year Canada celebrated its 150th). Here, Fung switches gears from talking critically about her personal missteps and those of the Canadian cultural sector and starts to reflect on a breakup. Given the substance of the book

and tone used elsewhere, this chapter feels raw and angry, and not about the specifics of racism in Quebec, which merit a larger discussion than given here.

Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being was made possible through the support of the Canada Council for the Arts; specifically, a New Chapter grant. The irony of funding meant to support projects that celebrate the country’s bicentenary going to Fung’s settler account of Canadian racism is not lost on this reader. And though it’s slow to arrive, and about as linear as Fung’s own map of Canada, change is coming. This book is an example of how things are shifting. Everyone should read it. Even though it is written by an art critic, it is not a book of art criticism, barely referencing artists, art institutions, or other art critics. Rather, she demonstrates how the Canadian art world upholds the same race and class dynamics that it regularly criticizes, and she demands we do better.

Amber Berson

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