

Blackity, Artexte, Montreal September 23, 2021 to June 23, 2022,
Curated by Joana Joachim

Jenny Burman

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salt. For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories
salt. Pour la préservation des récits historiques visuels des diasporas
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which the Black body is forefronted in a way that uplifts the community rather than painting it in a light of fragility and pain. As Teju Cole declares in his spirited preface, this dynamic photographic treasure trove is a nod to the Black lived experience and is wholly imbued with a sense of compassion, Black love, and joy.

The book beautifully finishes with a final interview with Dr. Kenneth Montague outlining his motivations, influences, and guiding principles not only in the creation of *As We Rise*, but his development of the Wedge Collection. This text, intentionally the last moment experienced, allows readers the opportunity to synthesize their own introspections about the book without being influenced by the curators' intentions. Montague's interview provides necessary context about the importance of taking up space as Black folks within the realm of the arts.

In a society where Blackness is frequently scrutinized and under question, this excerpt of the Wedge Collection refuses to accept any conventional narrative and instead presents varying depictions of Black identity, extending across eras and beyond both time and space. It combats harmful stereotypes and inaccurate narratives while simultaneously placing the Black body, both behind and in front of the camera lens, on a pedestal of reverence and pride. *As We Rise* speaks to the instrumental power of photography; as having the power to present the world from a familiar, loving perspective—from within a community, as a device to exorcise,

celebrate, and heal, and as a historic and vital tool for the acknowledgment of Black power.

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Blackity

Artexite, Montreal
September 23, 2021 to June 23, 2022
Curated by Joana Joachim

Jenny Burman

The first things you notice when you enter both the material and virtual exhibition spaces of *Blackity* are the vertical lines on the walls or screen, which are like lines on an old dot-matrix printer, the way they look grey but your brain knows they're made up of tiny black dots. There are skinny and fat lines, stretching from the bottom to the top, with lots of white space in between, and lots of printed or scanned materials

laid out against this line-blank-line space. The lines are a data visualization, marking the volume of materials this exhibition draws from, according to decade: 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s. *Blackity* “begins to trace a temporal cartography of Black Canadian art history,” writes curator, art historian and Concordia professor Joana Joachim.

The lines, like the exhibition overall, hold in place this wonderful assemblage of images, texts and artworks, against the ephemerality (the “blips in time”) of Black artists' visibility in Canadian art and criticism worlds, and towards the creation of another archive to stand with the scores of archives, mostly “little ‘a’ archives,” that exist on websites, in gallery and community centre basements, in magazines and books and libraries, in people's memories and stories.¹ Together these materials form a bold tradition of making, performing, talking and writing about Black diasporic and Black Canadian art over the last fifty years. The tradition is multifarious, multi- and intergenerational, collaborative, and engaged with Indigenous art and art by other



Blackity (exhibition view), Artexite, Montreal, 2021. Photo: Paul Litherland.

racialized people. It is installation and painting and poetry and dub and photography and criticism and performance, and it is sweaty, bloody, political work. It is beauty and rage and historical memory. “*i am not sleeping fruit despite denial,*” says Jan Wade’s *Soul Tone Poem*, on a 1993 pamphlet from a Vancouver grunt gallery show, tacked on the wall in the exhibition room. The tradition may be kaleidoscopic but it’s unbroken, because this art and world-making has been happening all the time, all over the place—as other forms of Black study happen, write Moten and Harney in *The Undercommons*²—both inside and outside of art world spaces: here we have posters for group shows in museums and in malls, postcards from exhibitions or distributed guerilla-style (as Melinda Mollineaux did with her Canboulay faux-tourist postcards, slipping them in with the BC Ferries timetables), flyers for Lillian Allen’s Dub Poets performances and for ten-year “artistic journeys” (Hollis Baptiste’s 2003 *Gun Play* work). Here we have the 1990s outpouring of anti-racist art and activism that Joachim describes in the curatorial statement, which curator and critic Andrea Fatona attributes partly to post-1988 Multiculturalism funding for the arts (interview cited above). Here we have university-based art galleries and collections hosting amazing shows and programs that I’d have never heard of if I hadn’t seen their catalogues in this exhibition (at, for example, Bishop’s, msvu, and York University), and generative interdisciplinary conferences

that brought diasporic artists together regularly (Celebrating African Identity or CELAFI stands out for its 1992 and 1997 gatherings and subsequent archive-building).³

Here we have a range of printed-matter objects that revels in different sizes, textures, fonts, designs (a nubbly catalogue cover like corrugated cardboard; a trio of tiny pastel-coloured books). Here we have old media: slides of Deanna Bowen’s installations and Stan Douglas’ projections, zines and fading photocopies, DIY catalogues (I was especially taken with the 1985 “Art and Community” catalogue, put out by A Space and the Community Arts Group in Toronto, featuring writing by Lillian Allen, John Greyson, the Regent Park Video Workshop, and others), and copies of *Fireweed* and *FUSE magazine* hanging precariously from wooden hooks. Here we have visible evidence of lifelong creative practices and relationship-building: a porous collective of Black women artists and curators have worked together in various formations over decades, across the country: Andrea Fatona, Busejé Bailey, Deanna Bowen, Camille Turner, Sylvia Hamilton, Jan Wade, Denyse Thomasos, to name but a few. In the gallery space at Artexte, you could see and trace these collaborations over the years.

There are touchstones and laden images that echo across the materials. Many artists and works are haunted by the embodied histories of transatlantic slavery, as Joachim touches on in her curatorial statement and as several texts in the exhibition elaborate. Some of the artists here work with old newspaper

announcements about fugitive enslaved people (e.g., Camille Turner and Camal Pirbhai’s *Wanted*, 2017), others with maps and ships, others with ancestral stories and practices. The curator herself is an art historian whose doctoral and postdoctoral research and writing delved deeply into the histories and archives of slavery in New France. Joachim’s scholarship, which has paid particular attention to the everyday lives and traces of enslaved women, is strongly critical of the absences in and institutional neglect of these archives, making her archive-building work in *Blackity* especially meaningful. Another thematic touchstone is home: losing and remaking it in diaspora (Fatona’s 1994 *Hogan’s Alley* documentary), longing for it in ways both tangible and ineffable (Michael Fernandes photographed in his garden), reinventing and forecasting its future permutations (Syrus Marcus Ware’s 2068: *Touch Change*).

What is remarkable is that, when an exhibition is curated this well, you can get a glimmer of fifty years of Black Canadian art from *one documentation centre collection*. Montreal-based Artexte, a library, documentation centre and exhibition space, houses an impressive material and digital collection (and a great e-catalogue). The centre engages in student and artist collaborations: *Blackity* germinated out of a collaboration between Artexte and Concordia’s Ethnocultural Art History Research group, EAHR. But *Blackity*’s digital exhibition extends the featured artists’ connections outside of Artexte’s walls and into multiple fora, which layers and thickens the “temporal cartography” in a way

that I've never experienced in an exhibition. This is where Joachim's curatorial skill impressed me the most: each material object in the show, appearing on the website as a scanned image, is paired with something else, which you join by following a link. The 1989 Artexte publication *For Fear of Others: Art Against Racism* brings you to Camille Turner's Afronautic Research Lab and a trove of resources curated by Turner and Black studies scholar Phillip Howard at McGill University in 2018. A Dub Poets poster brings you to a digitized 1983 videotape of a live Lillian Allen mixdown! The poster for a 2019 show at Galerie de l'UQAM in Montreal, *Over My Black Body*, brings you to a popular education website on Quebec's Caribbean (Hi)stories. Some links are to PDFs of scholarly articles or critical reviews about the artists and exhibitions. Many items are also accompanied by a short audio clip in which Joachim tells you something else about the artist or the work: sometimes it's biographical, sometimes it is unexpectedly quirky and touching. I swear—and I'm thinking like a professor who is always building imaginary syllabi—you could build a whole Canadian Art course out of this web exhibition.

Joachim's bilingualism, and Artexte's French and English-language collections, make this a particularly strong exhibition, showing and creating thematic and interpersonal connections between Black artists and curators (Manuel Mathieu, Dana Michel, Gaëtane Verna, Dominique Fontaine) working in Quebec and other provinces.

I was struck by all of it: the aesthetic and political power of the

work, the longevity of individual careers, and the steady and enduring formation of networks of affinity, collaboration, cross-inspiration, mentorship, and mutual care. As importantly, I was struck by the care with which the Artexte librarians have handled—and Joachim as curator has animated and contextualized—the materials, to keep holding a place for this tradition.

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1. Both “blips in time,” which Joachim uses as a title for her curatorial statement, and “little ‘a’ archive” are described by Andrea Fatona in a 2020 interview with Liz Ikiriko: “I think that the big ‘A’ archive exists to overshadow the little ‘a’ archive, which, for me, is the archive that I know and touch and feel, and most of us do through stories at your dining table, through photographs that you go through with your family.” See “Speaking Ourselves into Being,” *C Magazine* 144 (Winter 2020), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/144/speaking-ourselves-into-being>. <https://cmagazine.com/issues/144/speaking-ourselves-into-being>

2. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

3. See <http://www.celafiz5.com>

Julie Crooks, ed.

Fragments of Epic Memory

Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/
DelMonico Books D.A.P., 2021

274 pp. 100 colour, 50 b/w illus.

\$40.00 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781636810126

Lillian O'Brien Davis

In her introduction, exhibition curator Julie Crooks quotes Derek Walcott, from his series of essays *What the Twilight Says* (1998): “Only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us.” This exhibition catalogue, *Fragments*

of *Epic Memory*, keeps this quotation close to the heart, as the act of strenuous looking is a core theme addressed throughout the book. The catalogue contains commissioned essays along with excerpts of other previously published texts that are foundational to the exhibition. Each text or essay is a fragment that creates a whole, reframing perspectives on the Art Gallery of Ontario's recently acquired Montgomery Caribbean Photography Collection in a way that gives agency to its subjects and explodes the colonial lens. Acquired in 2019, the Montgomery Collection comprises almost 4,000 photographs, lithographs, and ephemera and spans the period of emancipation beginning in 1834 to the first half of the twentieth century, documenting regions in the Caribbean and the related diaspora. The exhibition is significant as it is the first organized by the AGO's new



Department of Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora and blends the Montgomery Collection with historical and contemporary artworks exploring how the Caribbean's histories are constantly being reimagined and rearticulated by artists across time.