

# salt. For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories

Pamela Edmonds and Joana Joachim

Salting is an age-old method of curing perishable food items, common long before modern refrigeration. During the early parts of the ongoing settler colonial period, ships from Canada would travel to the Caribbean laden with items like salted cod to trade for goods produced through the forced labour of enslaved Africans.<sup>1</sup> To this day, salt fish remains a staple food item in Black diasporic cuisine. The central role played by salted cod reflects the myriad ways that Canada is imbricated in Black diasporic lives within and beyond its borders.<sup>2</sup>

Acts of preservation such as salting involve forethought and provide safeguards for the future. Much in the same way, preserving histories through archival practices works to ensure that collective memory functions as a form of future-proofing. As Marcus Wood states in his study of visual culture of slavery, “What we remember is defined by what we choose to forget, and how we choose to remember is defined by how we choose to ignore.”<sup>3</sup> Archival research into Black diasporic histories confronts obstacles due to deep-seated institutional barriers and longstanding exclusions and erasures. Many factors come in to play within this issue, including the historical and continuing institutional oversight in the collecting and preserving of Black histories as well as the issue of opacity. Black archives—Black histories—are not recognized or legible in the same way as Western archives and histories in white supremacist contexts. Black archives are oppositional in many ways. They are an extension of the ontological nature of Blackness—rooted in fugitive and rhizomatic networks across time

and space which cannot always be contained or contended with within the limited frameworks of Western academia.<sup>4</sup> This is compounded by the fact that in the Canadian context, there exists no dedicated Black archive at the national level.<sup>5</sup> This lack effectively locates Black histories on this land as necessarily outside of the larger narrative of the place currently referred to as Canada.

In the discipline of Western art history, these exclusions have translated into a marked underrepresentation of Black diasporic culture in critical publications, major exhibitions and institutional collections. These gaps perpetuate the cycle of non-preservation and, by extension, the marginalization of African Canadian art histories.<sup>6</sup> The lack of critical writing and public acquisitions of the work of Black diasporic artists particularly in Canada, is a key contributor to the dearth of knowledge on the overall historical trajectories of Black diasporic aesthetics, as well as their formal and conceptual sensibilities. While there has been some recent critical examination of these issues in this country, for example in *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d'histoire* (“Black Canadian Creativity, Expressive Cultures, and Narratives of Space and Place,” December 2021), and specific issues of *C magazine* (Issue 144, “Déjà Vu” and Issue 145, “Criticism, Again”), *Canadian Art* (“Chroma,” Fall 2020) and in the book *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance* (2018), there continues to be a need for engagement with and care for the art produced by Black creators. The engagements with Black art in Canada that have occurred have historically emerged predominantly from Black

communities and led by Black women working within the field.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Black women were key players in most of the above publications.

Black diasporic art histories more broadly are documented inconsistently, leaving gaps in knowledge. In Europe, for example, much of the scholarship around Black histories disproportionately represents artists operating in the United Kingdom while, in the Americas, the hypervisibility of the United States leaves Black art in Canada, South America, and the Caribbean critically under-discussed.<sup>8</sup> These gaps take a variety of forms which go beyond mere underrepresentation in exhibition and collecting practices. They often result in superficial and incomplete analyses of Black artists' work, which "[...] engenders a critical misreading of some art as more of a form of social advocacy and de-emphasizes the aesthetic and/or conceptual tools at work," to borrow from Naomi Beckwith's thoughts around the errant form.<sup>9</sup> This lack of deep critical writing leads to a diminished understanding of these artistic practices within a larger art historical context across time and space. *salt. For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories* aims to locate these artistic practices in both Canadian and international art historical discourses, as part of the ongoing dual process of historical recuperation and future-proofing, that is, the simultaneous work of recording Black art histories and practices which have been omitted previously and the documentation of the current work of Black cultural producers.

This special issue of *RACAR* features a series of texts that critically engage with the stakes of preserving and archiving Black histories in Canada and throughout the diaspora by seriously examining the works of Black diasporic artists and situating them within the larger discourses of global art histories. These texts contend with the ongoing institutional failures to memorialize Black diasporic art practices by documenting and rigorously engaging with the practices of artists, including Sylvia D. Hamilton, Kamissa Ma Koita, Charlotte Henay, Mark Stoddart, Deanna Bowen, Elicser Elliott, María Magdalena Campos-Pons,

Thelma E. Cambridge, Kendra Frorup, Anina Major, Averia Wright, and Nicolas Premier. *salt*, then, is a collection of writings which record and elucidate Black artists and practices in their multiplicities. This issue aims not only to reflect further on the issues at stake, but also to carve out the space for this necessary work to take place.

Some of the key themes being discussed in the texts include archival methodologies and sensibilities which go against and beyond the ascribed Western meanings, strategies, and roles of "the archive." Hamilton, Henay, and Campbell each present a reformulation of what the archive can be and what it could do in the realm of visual art and Black cultural production. **Sylvia D. Hamilton**, in her illustrated essay, "Uncoupling the Archive," considers the central role that public and private archives have played in her artistic practice and methodology. Separating her archival findings from their restrictive physical form, she recasts them through documentary films, multi-media installations, public lectures, teaching, poetry, and essays. In this text, Hamilton draws on her artist's statements, journal notes, installation images and preparation maps from various iterations of her work to illustrate how she uncouples the archive in an effort to tell the truth about historic Black communities in Canada.

In "The House That Rosette Built," **Charlotte Henay** reflects on ways to read into gaps inherited and passed on in the archive. Challenging and refuting academic writing, this portfolio-piece foregrounds dreaming and visioning as legitimate spaces of knowing using imagination, empathy, and dreaming to conceive of futures of freedom. Henay presents the technique of what she calls "mash-up methodology," as she considers the impacts of experimentation and modified methodologies as themselves valid academic ventures. In many ways, this methodology echoes the works of Elizabeth Alexander, Saidiya Hartman, and Katherine McKittrick, among other Black scholars aiming to dismantle constrictive conceptions of archival research in order to widen the breadth of what constitutes so-called legitimate

research as well as cultural and knowledge production.<sup>10</sup> Henay's approach uncovers fundamental silences in representations of Black women's sensibilities, thereby contributing to a growing disruptive space that challenges the colonial gatekeeping of Black diasporic women's stories. Through the lens of her own archival research and using a multitude of voices, this work presents relationality in Black diasporic feminist work as part and parcel of imagining futures. In his article "More Life: Beyond the Archival & the Algorithmic," **Mark V. Campbell** examines Black methods of living beyond institutional archival relations. Campbell investigates what it might mean for curatorial projects, mentorship relationships, and the art practices of Black artists to incorporate archival approaches and sensibilities. What might this unlock in Black cultural production? Relating works by Deanna Bowen, Mark Stoddart, and Elicser Elliott to Black archival methods, the author sets out to uncover the potentials of a Black archival sensibility within the realm of cultural production in visual, aural, and written forms.

In their contributions to this special issue, David Hart and Simone Cambridge each cast a glance towards historic moments in Black diasporic artists' lives, examining the impacts that they have had on contemporary artistic practices. **David Hart** presents an analysis of María Magdalena Campos-Pons' work in his text "*Spoken Softly with Mama: Memory, Monuments, and Black Women's Spaces in Cuba.*" Working in the 1990s, artist Campos-Pons produced a series of three complex multimedia installations titled *The History of People Who Were Not Heroes*. These artworks function as conceptual monuments which, Hart contends, uncover the exclusion of poor, Black Cubans from public monuments and historical narratives. Hart elucidates the ways in which Campos-Pons' installations call into question accepted notions of domestic and public spaces; fixed national, racial, and gender identities as well as the systems which are used to recall the past and to trace paths of migration; and global artistic production as well as collecting practices. Hart foregrounds *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1997),

a work held in the collection of National Gallery of Canada which he touts as emblematic of these very issues. Campos-Pons's work presents an embodied experience spanning the Black Atlantic spatially, temporally and metaphysically. In her text, "It has just begun": Strawcraft in Bahamian Visual Culture," **Simone Cambridge** explores the visual culture and literature surrounding Bahamian straw work and its relationship to the archive and national narratives. Using the contemporary art practices of Kendra Frorup, Anina Major, and Averia Wright as an entry point, Cambridge presents Thelma E. Cambridge's thesis, "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," focusing on her discussion of Bahamian strawcraft, investigating her techniques, and considering how they translate to this day as well as how they shifted with the advent of white colonial presence in the Caribbean. With these texts, Hart and Cambridge tug at another key thread within the issue of preservation, that is, the fundamental need to locate Black histories across both time and space within global narratives and to bear witness to the ways in which Black peoples continue to be moved.

Along similar lines, Didier Morelli and Cécilia Bracmort, for their part, highlight how contemporary Black artists insert Black stories into the exclusionary narratives of both art historical pasts and futures. **Didier Morelli**, in his profile of Kamissa Ma Koïta, a Quebec City-born visual and performance artist, cultural worker, curator, and trans activist, discusses Ma Koïta's use of digital photomontage, live dialogic events, diachronic installations, and the embodied remixing of local and international art histories. Morelli considers the ways in which Ma Koïta celebrates queer Black life by decentering the white patriarchal monolith of the western canon with agency. Morelli discusses a range of mediums by considering three recent pieces by the artist. Drawing on performance theory and Black studies, including notions of disidentification (José Esteban Muñoz), on the historicity of race in constituting trans worlds (C. Riley Snorton), and on the memory of racial violence in stillness (Harvey Young), Morelli

presents a reflection on *Reenactment, Nous serons universel.le.s* (2018), *N\*gre d'Amérique: Affichage et rectifications* (2018), and *TransFormation* (2019). **Cécilia Bracmort**, in her contribution to the volume, takes the reader through the multifarious layers of French-Congolese artist Nicolas Premier's film *Africa is the Future* (2020–ongoing), which is broadcast exclusively during each new moon. Bracmort offers an overview of the work's pan-African odyssey of intertwined temporalities and considers the ways that Premier's work-ritual examines the repeated violence suffered by Black communities over centuries and the ingenuity, resilience, spirituality, and arts which have endured since. Bracmort's analysis further reflects on the evolution of the project and proposes different readings of this meaningful work.

Salting, like archiving, is a vital practice of preservation which this journal issue aims to enact through the selected texts. It is the ongoing act of remembering and future-proofing histories and practices such as the ones included within this special issue. With these texts, salt. *For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories* takes another crucial step in the expansion of discourses around Black diasporic artistic practices and cultural production. The special issue seeks to carve out space for an increasingly complex and layered understanding of these artists' work and for a more rigorous engagement with Black Canada within the larger context of Black Atlantic art. As we enter the third cultural season since the explosion of institutional responses to Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder, it is all the more crucial to be wary of the tendency toward "ethnic envy," as Amelia Jones puts it—that is, the institutional habit of "incorporat[ing] works by artists of colour in order to raise the status of the institution as culturally aware and politically on point" without sustained and substantial support of these same communities.<sup>11</sup> Jones uses the phrase "ethnic envy" as a way of describing a tendency that emerged in the 1990s wherein major art organizations would "include" BIPOC artists to appear politically aligned with them, while making no institutional changes

to support this claim. This same issue is also addressed by the conceptions of "blips" in time, per Andrea Fatona, or the "special effect" of Blackness in Canada, per Idil Abdillahi and Rinaldo Walcott, both of which name the particular ebb and flow of Black visibility in Canadian cultural spaces.<sup>12</sup> This trend is often par for the course when it comes to relationships between Black art makers/writers/workers and cultural institutions in this country.<sup>13</sup> *salt*, then, is also a reminder of the commitments made and the need to continue to stretch this significant work across time and space, beyond and beyond. ¶

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2. Andrea Fatona, Deanna Bowen, Peter James Hudson, Rinaldo Walcott, and Alison Kenzie, *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora: Deanna Bowen, Christopher Cozier, Michael Fernandes, Maud Sulter* (Chatham, ON: Thames Art Gallery, 2006), n.p.
3. Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 45.
4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Port Watson, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013); Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218; Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
5. Cheryl Thompson, "Black Canada and Why the Archival Logic of Memory Needs Reform," *Les Ateliers de l'éthique/The Ethics Forum* 14, no. 2 (2019): 77.
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13. Ikiriko, 2020; Joachim, 2021.