

Yaniya Lee

*Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art*

Montreal: figure ground books;

Toronto: Art Metropole, 2024.

204 pp.

\$25.00 (paper) ISBN

9781989010303

/Madeline Collins/

In the landscape of Canadian art writing, there is a marked scarcity of resources that centre, with appropriate care, Black Canadian women's contemporary art. This lack of resources also includes material that is particularly suited to young writers and that contains self-reflexive questions, firm critiques, and conversations with working artists. Writer and critic Yaniya Lee confronts this gap in *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art*, a compilation of essays, interviews, and artist features published by Lee between 2016 and 2022. Together, these texts form a multi-perspective review of the current conditions and creative practices of Black women artists in Canada. The book is organized into three general sections: contextual essays, a main body of interviews and reviews, and reflective concluding essays. Rather than providing a comprehensive chronology, the book opts for breadth over depth, functioning more as an introductory survey. While an exhaustive text on Black Canadian women's art is yet to come (and eagerly anticipated), the concise glimpse provided by *Selected Writing* makes it an excellent starting point for further research. More than a retrospective of Lee's writing, the collection functions as both a survival manual and critical manifesto, and offers tools, reflections, and models for how to write, think, and live as a Black cultural worker in Canada today.

This compact, canary-yellow book unsettles conventional approaches to Black art on two counts: first, by disrupting the America-as-centre, world-as-periphery framing often applied to Black diasporic art; and second, by foregrounding the frequently unacknowledged labour of Black women arts workers in the field. As the author and her interviewees often note, this field—and the programming it produces—tends to incorporate Black artists as DEI fodder and tokenized representatives rather than making concerted efforts to include Black art in the canon, or allow that inclusion to ensure meaningful representation in institutional leadership. “Black women are simply not hired,” Lee writes (40), pointing to a well-circulated 2015 study by *Canadian Art*, which noted non-white women make up a mere 3% of artists represented in Canadian galleries.<sup>1</sup> A 2017 study by the same publication further found that across 80 Canadian galleries, white people occupied a whopping 92% of all professional roles, a number that aligns with the demographics of Canadian corporations in general.<sup>2</sup> This is no secret, and Lee does not treat it as such; rather, the book seems partially aimed at familiarizing emerging arts workers with Black women artists and curators to lay the foundation for closing these representational gaps. Another aim is to simply deepen the presence of Black art writing. As Lee states in the foreword: “Black art is connected to our liberation and as long as we keep making it and showing it and talking about it and thinking about it and writing about it, we will continue to create conditions for an equitable future present” (9). Revising an entrenched canon is an endless operation and a duty inextricable from the discipline of writing.

Lee's collection follows two related publications: 2022's “For the Preservation of Black Diasporic Visual Histories,” a special issue of *RACAR* edited by Joana Joachim and Pamela Edmonds, and the collection *Making History: Visualizing Blackness in Canada* (2023), edited by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni. These publications feature essays that excavate and examine the intricate contours of Black Canadian presence in both art and history alike, spotlighting artists—particularly women—and exposing the cracks in Canadian institutions' claims to diversity. “As of yet, there is no official history of Black

Canadian contemporary art,” says Lee in the 2022 catalogue essay on Jan Wade (51), but three years later, these resources signal some movement. *Selected Writing* presents a new patchwork quilt of names and events alongside pleasures, cynicism, advice, and calls to action, especially as they concern art criticism. In doing so, Lee composes a dual historiography and archive: an inquiry into criticism’s role in constructing identity, and a record of the people and practices that constitute a Black Canadian art history—a history which, if not recorded contemporaneously, is at risk of never being written, or even being remembered.

The selected texts are generally quite short—the shortest, a catalogue introduction entitled “Light Grows the Tree,” spans just two paragraphs—and succinct in both detail and language. While this brevity occasionally leaves the reader wanting a more explicit dissection, Lee’s less-is-more approach effectively allows her to traverse, in just 204 pages, a vast, intergenerational spectrum of Black Canadian artists and curators, from the eminent to the emerging. Lee includes conversations with Tau Lewis, Anique Jordan, Carrie Mae Weems, and Jim Adams, among other notable names, then expands on this network through reviews and features on June Clark, Buseje Bailey, Divya Mehra, Walter Kaheró:ton Scott, and many more. The book thus introduces readers to a diverse range, if only a fraction, of Canada’s working artists of colour.

Lee contextualizes the existing institutional conditions for Black women in three essays which precede the main section. While the book may resonate most with readers who have prior exposure to contemporary art or cultural studies, the collection remains accessible to students, emerging writers, and curious readers drawn to the intersections of art, race, and criticism. In “How Canada Forgot its Black Artists,” Lee notes how Black artists are often absent from the popular imagination of what a Canadian artist might be, despite their increased visibility in museum and gallery shows. “Black Canadian artists exist, but we seem to have difficulty placing them,” she writes, describing a cultural amnesia that fails to retain Black histories (18). In “Group Theory,” Lee describes the radical activist labour undertaken by Black queer collectives through the 1980s and 1990s, a particularly exciting inclusion given

how often Black queerness goes unrepresented (33–34). “The Women Running the Show” (re)introduces us to the widening circle of distinguished Black women curators in the country, including Julie Crooks, Pamela Edmonds, Eunice Bélidor, and Andrea Fatona. Lee consistently acknowledges that work *is* being done, both institutionally and behind the scenes. In doing so, she reminds readers that we are no longer in a calcified state of erasure but that Black cultural workers have long been building momentum, the effects of which can be seen *right now*. Encouraging and present-minded, these essays set a tone of gratitude, and demystify the often-unseen labour required for Black women artists to remain visible in this field.

The main body of the text alternates between interviews, reviews, and essays seemingly randomly, jumping back and forth in time. The sequence can at times feel disorienting; it’s not always clear why certain chapters precede or follow others, but the patchwork-style editorial choices appear intentional, creating an affective relationship to the lives and desires of Black artists as opposed to offering linear storytelling. The interviews with curator Michelle Jacques and artists Kapwani Kiwanga, Carrie Mae Weems, and Natalie Wood are standouts due to the genuinely compelling and sometimes humorous dialogues about their respective processes and the structural realities of art-making and curating. Lee avoids overt commentary in the interviews and instead draws out the artists’ reflections on material, personal successes, and what it means to be a “Black artist” today. Each interview is imbued with a sense of kinship between critic and artist and models how to engage Black art without fetishizing trauma or hardship.

Lee gives and takes, in the sense of giving artists space to speak and distilling their insights into tangible advice for the reader. Some of the most effective chapters work as implicit blueprints for emerging racialized cultural workers. In her 2018 essay “Tactics and Strategies of Racialized Artists: Some Notes on How to Circumvent the Art World’s Terms of Inclusion,” Lee shares the practical strategies of Black sculptor Tau Lewis, Indigenous artist Walter Kaheró:ton Scott, and Indian conceptual artist Divya Mehra, who variously undermine the colonial logics and racialized pressures of the art world in order to maneuver deftly around

buyers, critics, and audiences. In the 2021 review “Unrequited Love,” Lee analyzes June Clark’s reconfigurations of the American flag to spotlight the artist’s creative process—how Clark slows down, takes breaks, and finds meaning in the act of making itself, in quiet resistance to the art world’s relentless pace (75–77).

The longest essay, “Anxious Territory: The Politics of Neutral Citizenship in Canadian Art Criticism,” offers an art critic’s perspective on the politics of recognition by examining the volatile terrain of national identity to which Canadians of colour are bound. Lee analyzes two reviews of racialized artists’ exhibitions by white critics who, despite supposed awareness of Canada’s uneven racial dynamics, ultimately reproduce microaggressive and careless misinterpretations that deny the artists’ claims to citizenship and the legitimacy of their inclusion in both nation and gallery. The case studies reveal how easily art criticism can reaffirm racist narratives.

After chapters like these, the reader is left with something concrete: racialized artists are advised on how they can bend the rules and learn to slow down, and art writers are encouraged to look inward and resist falling into colonial ideological traps. Such insights nudge the book from anthology to survival guide for navigating an art system still struggling with identity, inclusion, and hierarchy.

Self-reflexivity is *Selected Writing’s* greatest strength. Lee’s position as a Black woman gives her writing particular resonance, and she is open about the fulfilling—and often formidable—nature of her commitment. The final section is largely composed of essays in which Lee reflects on the evolution of how she writes and feels about art. In “A Somatic Seeing: Dionne Brand’s *Theory*,” Lee describes the change in her writing when she reinvented the way she looks: she stopped centring analysis and started focusing on love. “Does theory get you closer to, or farther away from, what you’re looking at?” she asks rhetorically (148). “I no longer want to look with just my mind, with theory—there has to be something else...I want to see with my whole entire body. And I think the key to doing that is to never let theory dampen love” (149). Lee’s self-examination validates the necessity of evolving one’s critical methods, of creating a practice

of thinking deeply imbricated with affect and desire, as a pathway to more honest, compelling writing.

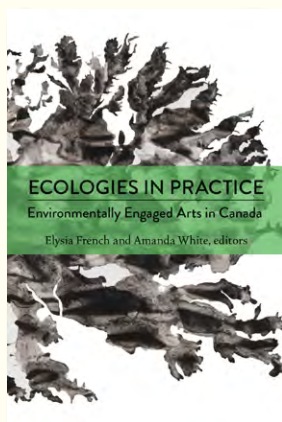
Later, in “Always Being Moved: Modernity’s Structures of Influence,” a playful speculative piece about meeting Charles Baudelaire on a dating app transitions into a serious meditation on the trace of his Black lover, Jeanne Duval, in his work. The chapter examines citation and relation in both art and writing, reminding us that “when we widen what we understand to be the scope of influence, a different kind of recognition becomes possible” (163). Other essays in this suite consider photographic ethics, the discriminatory failings of public programs like the Images Festival, and the emotional labour of navigating racial power dynamics. The final chapter, “Why I Write/Towards Relation,” articulates Lee’s personal ethic of writing, which seeks “to settle into self-knowledge: a synergy of my two modes of writing that speaks to the complicated, unresolvable present in clear, nourishing terms” (197). These essays, beneficial for writers both inside and outside the academy, create another kind of blueprint: simply, remember why you write, and why it matters.

Despite its simple title, Lee’s anthology is a love letter to Black women artists, to Black artists, to artists. There is a palpable romance in the way Lee frames both art criticism and artmaking as philosophies rather than professions, emotionally and practically. What are the intimacies between artists and writers? What alliance can Black arts workers make with the Canadian art world without compromising themselves in the process? How and where can joy and pleasure be preserved in the making of what might be, in fact, legacy-making work? *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art* is at once a historiographic intervention, a pedagogical resource, and a critical manifesto for reimagining the responsibilities of contemporary art writing in Canada. By archiving a rich tapestry of Black cultural producers working today, it creates a starting point for current and future writers, curators, art historians, and artists. At the same time, it urges us to remember—amid growing oppression and censorship—that loving is a necessary procedure in what arts workers do. Yaniya Lee loves art and artists, and the work of Black women is the engine which drives her forward (197). Never letting theory dampen love, indeed.

*Madeline Collins is an independent writer, curator, and the executive assistant at the Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora. She is a recent graduate from OCAD University, with an MA in Contemporary Art, Design, and New Media Histories.*

—*mcollins@ocadu.ca*

- 1 Alison Cooley, Amy Luo, and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, "Canada's Galleries Fall Short: The Not-So Great White North," *Canadian Art*, April 21, 2015, <https://canadianart.tempurl.host/features/canadas-galleries-fall-short-the-not-so-great-white-north/>.
- 2 Michael Maranda, "Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries," *Canadian Art*, April 5, 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity/>.



Elysia French and Amanda White, eds.  
*Ecologies in Practice: Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada*

Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2024  
302 pp., 22 illus., some colour  
\$44.99 (paper) ISBN 9781771126120

/ *Isabelle Gapp* /

As the climate crisis intensifies, the importance of place-based, microscale research becomes ever more urgent. As art critic, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard observed, "Local landscapes reflect global crises"<sup>1</sup>—a principle that guides *Ecologies in Practice*, edited by Elysia French and Amanda White. Yet this collection goes further than Lippard's idea to ask not just how the local reflects the global, but how place-based artistic practices might act as environmental interventions in their own right. In the Canadian context, where environmental realities are deeply entangled with ongoing settler-colonial histories and cultural politics, this approach proves particularly generative.

*Ecologies in Practice* brings together the voices of artists, scholars, curators, writers, and educators who explore how art can respond to, reflect on, and intervene in the layered environmental and cultural crises of our time. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, French and White frame the book as a "toolkit" (11), a set of "roadmaps" (1) for reimagining how artistic practice can be a form of environmental engagement. In doing so, the book contributes to the growing field of scholarship at the intersection of art, ecology, and research-creation, emphasizing praxis as a mode of ethical and situated inquiry. Its approach aligns with work by Natalie Loveless, who frames research-creation as a critical method in times of ecological crisis,<sup>2</sup> and T.J. Demos, who highlights the role of contemporary art in challenging dominant environmental narratives.<sup>3</sup> Within *Ecologies in Practice*, contributors collectively demonstrate ways of being-with, learning-through, and creating-in-response to varied, often inter-connected ecologies.

Structured around four themes—Interrupt, Witness, (Re)Place, and Reflect—*Ecologies in Practice* takes a holistic approach to what French and White term "environmentally engaged arts." Yet the strength of *Ecologies in Practice* lies less in its editorial structure than in the thematic resonances that emerge organically across its contributions. This review draws out these emergent themes: pedagogical practices and knowledge transmission; scale and relationality (individual/collective, local/global); and loss, renewal, and the ethics of witnessing. These themes will resonate with a broad audience, particularly those scholars interested in the environmental humanities and place-based creative research, who are looking to incorporate environmentally engaged arts into their own research, practices, and pedagogies.

In their interview-style chapter on "Dirty Nature," David Huebert and Tom Cull reflect on the persistent binaries that they are repeatedly faced with in their teaching. "Wild/civilization" and "nature/culture" (33) are identified as the two that most often rear their heads in the humanities and require consistent disruption when faced with environments that are instead polluted, corroded, or wasting away. Huebert and Cull explore how environmental change disrupts the classroom, using pedagogy, creative writing,