ARTICLE

Total Inversion: Black Studies in Canadian Art History

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La présence des personnes noires au Canada remonte au moins au début du XVII^e^ siècle. Malgré cela, le développement de l'histoire de l'art noir canadien demeure largement incompris de nos jours. Cet article déploie une réflexion sur l'apport des études noires à l'histoire de l'art canadien et sert de point de convergence qui présente une rare vue d'ensemble de ce développement à travers une pratique citationnelle ancrée dans les méthodologies des études noires. Plus encore, ce texte examine comment ces méthodologies, appliquées à l'histoire de l'art, peuvent révéler et relier des éléments qui semblent disparates au sein d'un réseau géotemporel d'artistes et de commissaires noir·es canadien·nes remontant à la fin du XIX^e^ siècle. Dans ces pages, l'autrice soutient que les études noires proposent des approches qui positionnent l'histoire de l'art noir canadien comme une « inversion totale », ou un négatif photographique, de l'histoire de l'art canadien. Ce texte cherche à brosser un portrait plus clair d'une histoire globale de l'art des personnes noires au pays, à travers le temps et l'espace, en attendant que de nouvelles interprétations émergent dans ce domaine d'études.

Black people in Canada have a longstanding presence on this land, dating back at least to the early 1600s.[1] Yet a collective understanding of the overarching trajectory of Black Canadian art history, specifically, remains largely elusive. Black feminists have underscored the importance of contending with the ongoing impacts of interlocking systems of oppression.[2] We have argued these same considerations must be applied to art history.[3] Taking cues from Black studies methodologies to develop a nonlinear, cross-temporal approach that pushes at the edges of art history, I examine the stakes of Black Canadian art practices in the ongoing struggle for collective liberation. The development of a distinctly Black Canadian art history must be enmeshed with a strategic reframing of how we engage with and understand Canadian art, history, and archives.

This article seeks to think through some of the research strategies and methods used to explore the conundrum of developing a historiography and discourse around Black art in lesser-known periods and locations in the Canadian context. I propose to examine some of the ways Canadian art history has engaged with Black Canadian art in the contemporary period and to consider how the combination of Black studies approaches with art historical research can begin to expand how we understand Black visual histories on this land. In other words, I am asking: how do we bring Black studies into art history? Black studies encompasses ways of being, knowing, and making that exceed the bounds of academic knowledge. Black studies in this context demands a "total inversion" of the materials and methods normally associated with this art history, producing something akin to a film negative of Canadian art history and allowing us to trace the shapes of Black art historical gaps and infer what might have filled them.[4] In order to form a more expansive Black Canadian art historical discourse, research approaches must begin from what is absent rather than what is present. What I am calling for is a paradigm shift of perspective in how we read Canadian art—a shift similar to the one demanded by photographic negatives, which enact an optic reversal of colour from dark to light, requiring a closer, more attentive gaze.[5] Tina Campt describes this shift while consulting a photographic archival fond in Birmingham, England:

> These negatives required me to engage in the kind of "reconstruction work" Stuart Hall so memorably invoked.... It is a strategy of reading that engages an image's perpetual inscription in multiple historical contexts; its implication in existing systems of classification such as genre, medium of delivery, and social function; and the impossibility of capturing earlier, original, or essential meanings or truths. It is an ethic and a practice that reads "beyond the frame" and examines both presence ("what is represented in a definite way") and absence ("what is unsaid, or unsayable, against which what is there 'represents'"). [...] The reconstruction work these images demand is a nuanced politics of reading that engages the submerged and encoded ways they articulate the historical experiences of racialization

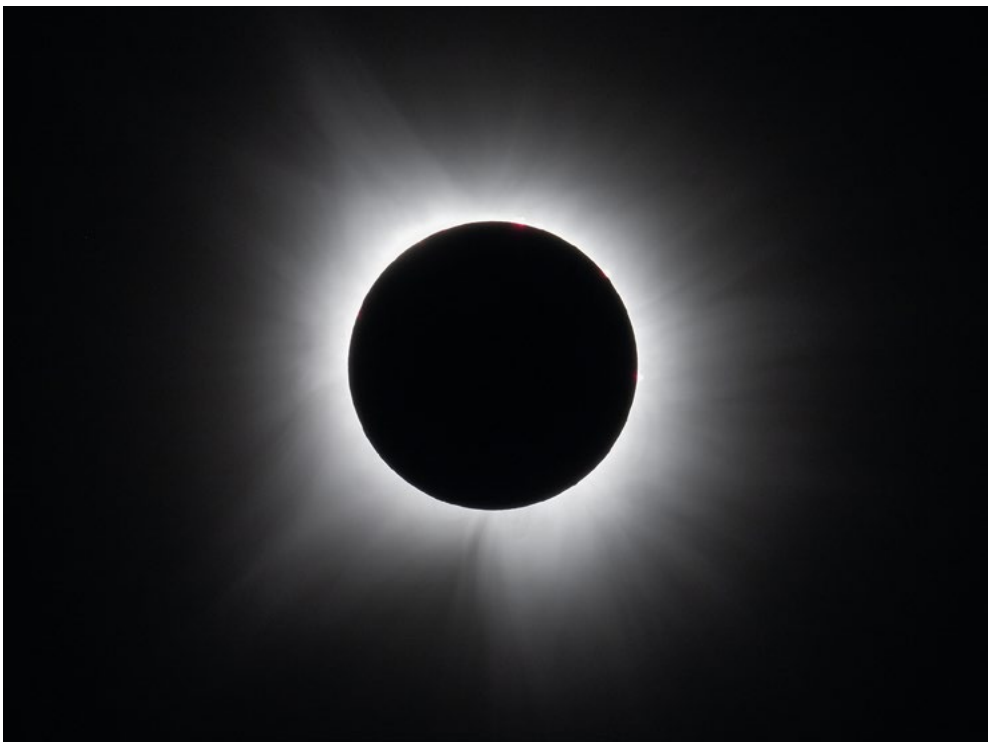


fig. 1 2017 Total Solar Eclipse (NHQ201708210105). Photo: NASA/Aubrey Gemignani, https://www.nasa.gov/nasa-brand-center/images-and-media/.

and cultural formation that shaped this community in the era of these images' production.[6]

With "total inversion" as a conceptual guide, I am proposing to turn Canadian art history inside out and study it from an entirely new vantage point. I am calling for a "nuanced politics of reading" and a form of "reconstruction work" to be enacted.[7] I argue that a "total inversion" subverts the persistent notion that Canada is a better, less violent site for Black life—compared to other settler-colonial contexts—by paving the way towards developing a rigorous discourse around Black Canadian art history prior to the contemporary period.

Using Black studies methods to attend to these issues reveals new aspects of Black Canadian art histories as the resulting image of this "total inversion," thus bringing into focus a clearer picture of heretofore unknown Black visual histories. Employing "rebellious methodologies" emerging from Black studies connects key people, events, and places to piece together an ever-shifting geotemporal network of the Canadian art milieu which defies colonial logics of domination.[8] Put differently, Black studies holds what we know about Black history up against canonical Canadian art history like an archival total eclipse, allowing us then to read the resulting stellar corona as Black Canadian art history (fig. 1).

The first section of this article will briefly contextualize Black Canadian art and history and discuss the circumstances which complicate its documentation. The following section will outline Black studies as an intellectual tradition and examine a few examples of art historical research and writing which incorporate "rebellious methodologies" from Black studies. I will examine how Black studies are integral to building a Black Canadian art discourse, discussing how a total inversion of Canadian art history as we know it may well unlock the liberatory potential of this discipline.

PEAKS, VALLEYS, AND SILENCES

Some of the few art-historical publications dedicated specifically to developing a Black Canadian art-historical discourse include Charmaine A. Nelson's *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance,* the edited volume *Making History: Visual Arts & Blackness in Canada* by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni, and the Toronto-based magazine *Tiger Lily* (fig. 2), co-founded by Ayanna Black and Zanana Akande in the 1980s, which focused broadly on women artists of colour.[9] Nelson's 2018 edited book in particular, the first of its kind to consolidate the field of African Canadian Art History, marks a major step forward in tracking Black Canadian visual histories from the period of slavery to now.[10] The book "argue[s] for an African Canadian art history that can simultaneously examine the artistic contributions of black Canadian artists within their unique historical contexts, critique the colonial representation of black subjects by white artists, and contest the customary racial homogeneity of Canadian Art History."[11] In Canada, Black studies offers crucial tools for grappling with the deliberate erasures of Black visual and material culture on this land. Black studies in Canadian art history reveals and connects seemingly disparate nodes within a geotemporal network of Black artists and curators dating back to the late nineteenth century.

The generally limited nature of art historical discourse focused on Black Canadian art is, in part, due to a lack of preservation of Black archival and material culture on this land. This can be attributed both to histories of forced displacement of established Black communities under the guise of urban renewal during the 1960s and to Canadian institutions' gross neglect of Black culture over many decades.[12] Examples of the physical destruction of Black communities and cultural hubs can be found right across Canada from Africville in Halifax to the St. Antoine's District (now Little Burgundy) in Montreal, passing through Priceville in Ontario right across to Hogan's Alley in Vancouver. I should note, too, that countless smaller communities were doubtless also dealt a similar fate with fewer witnesses to carry forward their memory. Each of these once-established Black communities were systematically torn apart and, with them, an unknown quantity of art, archives, and material culture.[13]

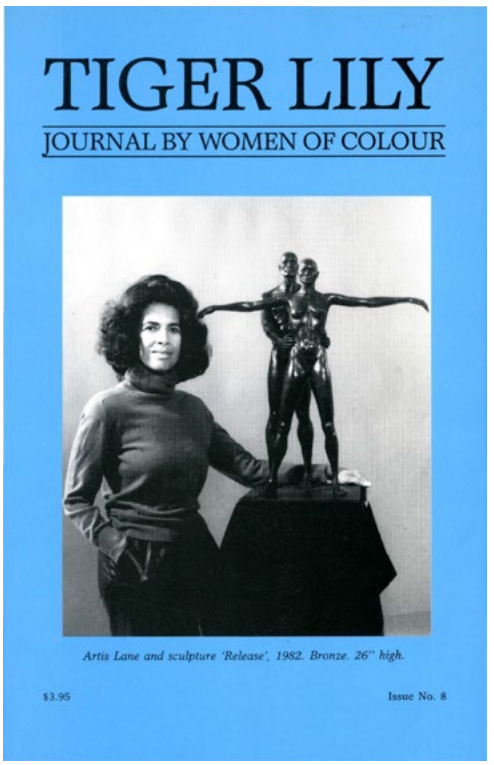


fig. 2 Cover of *Tiger Lily: Journal by Women of Colour*, no. 8 (1990), https://riseupfeminist archive.ca/periodical/tigerlilyjournal-00-08-1990.

These issues are further compounded by the ongoing inconsistency of institutional support for contemporary Black creative practices, characterized by overall neglect and periodic fluctuations of attention, with occasional peaks and long valleys.[14] The late 1980s and early 1990s in the Canadian art milieu were marked by an uptick in institutional engagement with communities of colour as identity politics, cultural diversity, and multiculturalism became driving forces behind a number of curatorial practices, locally and internationally.[15] This period also coincided with early iterations of what would become equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility (EDIA) policies at The Canada Council for

the Arts, as artists and activists of colour across the country called for increased financial support and representation from art institutions.[16]

The kinds of pressures placed on institutions during the 1980s and 1990s are evidenced by the multitude of publications and initiatives by artists, writers, and cultural workers such as Ayanna Black, Cameron Bailey, Dionne Brand, and M. NourbeSe Philip, advocating for greater cultural inclusion.[17] Their advocacy yielded a veritable boom of Black representation in art museums and galleries—for a time.[18] Despite the seemingly changing tide, what followed was a gradual decline in institutional investment in Black and otherwise culturally diverse artists.[19] This cycle would repeat itself briefly in the early 2000s and begin anew nearly two decades later, peaking in 2020 following the massive protests surrounding several police murders of unarmed Black individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] In recent years, Black people in the Canadian art milieu have once again experienced a steep increase in visibility and inclusion in museums and galleries.

While each of these peaks present great opportunities for Black Canadian artists and curators, the ensuing valleys leave many key actors exhausted, unsupported and disillusioned.[21] Moments like these unfortunately end as rapidly as they began with a return to the status quo of Black invisibility and lack of institutional support for this community. These periods of high demand leave Black art professionals depleted and without continued institutional engagement once a trend has ended. Antiracist and social-justice efforts within arts institutions, which generally emerge from the broader activist work driving these changes, tend to lose steam after a few years. As a result, Andrea Fatona argues, "[B]lack activists/artists have paid an astronomical price for vociferously highlighting the differentials in power that exist amongst racialized people and have seen their careers become null and void," leaving them needing urgently to return attention to their individual well-being and livelihood.[22] These trends are compounded by the shifting winds of government policies which, overly reliant on the will of individual actors within art institutions to make and maintain institutional changes, revert to their old ways after activist pressures ease.[23] Since 2024, such projects and initiatives have increasingly been openly attacked and dismantled, marking the beginning of the next valley.

Black Canadians have historically produced exhibitions featuring visual and material culture from our communities, which are rarely taken up critically or discussed in depth within the Canadian art historical milieu.[24] The landmark 1989 traveling exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* (fig. 3) is often touted as a pivotal moment in Black women's art history in Canada.[25] Organized by the Diasporic African Women's Art Collective (DAWA) and featuring many artists and activists of the period, it stands as a beacon that would herald in a new era of Black curatorial practices. Yet, critical texts discussing this foundational art historical event in Canadian art and its lasting impacts on the milieu are extremely limited. The most thoughtful assessments of this exhibition and its impact include the oft-cited article by Alice Ming Wai Jim and, more recently, Yaniya Lee's groundbreaking publication *Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in While*, which chronicles DAWA founding member Buseje Bailey's career, adding a brand new interview to the discourse around her practice.[26] This is vital because these documents preserve the legacies of Black women artists like Buseje Bailey, Khadejha McCall, Grace Channer, Winsom, Dzian Lacharité, Kim (Mosa) McNeilly, Foluke Olubayo, Chloe Onari, Barbara Prézeau-Stephenson, and Sulih Williams, all of whom were featured in the groundbreaking exhibition, which recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary through the exhibition *Ritual as Practice/Practice as Ritual*, curated by Fatona at Carleton University Art Gallery in 2024.

Critical writing about Black art histories and exhibitions in Canada, that is, writing which seriously engages with their form, content, and contexts, is crucial

fig. 3 Screenshot of *Blackity* online exhibition, Artexte, Montreal. Poster for *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* (1989), https://www.artexte.art/en/blackity/black-wimmin-when-and-where-we-enter.

not only for documenting these artists but also developing a discourse around their practices. Key Black Canadian exhibitions and art practices routinely go ignored by the art historical community, with few reviews, articles, or books being written about them. A galling example is the first major retrospective exhibition of Winsom's work at the Art Gallery of Ontario, curated by Fatona in 2018–19, about which only a single blog-post review exists.[27] Nevertheless, Fatona's own work over many years provides a key example of the importance of critical art writing. Her essay on the practice of Melinda Mollineaux (b. 1964) was, for some time, one of the very few records in existence about the incredible pinhole photographic series *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History* (1998/2021), which documents the historic site of Sungayka, the Lekwungen Cheko'nein ancestral Indigenous name of the place now known as Cadboro Bay, where Black community members in British Columbia once gathered to celebrate Emancipation Day.[28] Despite the consistent contributions of Black women like Fatona to the field, the historical lack of engagement with the work of Black women artists and curators on the part of art historians and critics leaves curatorial essays or artist's statements for exhibitions as the sole remaining textual records in many cases.[29] This has resulted in an unstable and incomplete record of Black Canadian art practices as well as a shallow art historical discourse.

BLACK STUDIES AND "REBELLIOUS METHODOLOGIES"

The further back in Canadian chronology we reach, the sparser material traces of Black art histories seem to become. With Black studies, tracing Black Canadian art histories from the abolition of slavery in 1834 to the current moment is neither impossible nor futile. Research methods for tracing these histories must necessarily spill beyond the edges of "traditional" art historical approaches. This is a consequence of the paucity of records within expected repositories and collections of cultural institutions and publications which have, by and large, neglected their duties towards Black histories in Canada until (very) recently.

Black Studies emerged largely from Black student activism in the 1960s, demanding culturally relevant education that decentered white Eurocentric approaches, namely through the Black Campus Movements and similar social movements which, in Montreal, led to manifestations like the Sir George Williams Affair.[30] Black studies are conceived of as an intellectual tradition that centres Black people, history, culture, and experiences as the core topics of critical inquiry.[31] Black studies is interdisciplinary, folding together history, philosophy,

sociology, feminism, queer studies and even science in myriad patterns and formulations.[32] Black studies methods, therefore, also cover a wide range of context-dependent and often cross-disciplinary approaches.[33] As Mariam Rashid writes, echoing Alexander G. Weheliye and Katherine McKittrick:

> Put differently, black studies question hegemonic systems of knowledge production and open up lines of inquiry that might appear errant and wayward while providing "detailed explanations of how techniques of domination, dispossession, expropriation, exploitation, and violence are predicated upon the hierarchies ordering of racial, gender, sexual, economic, religious, and national differences." Alternatively, black studies as method-making considers knowledge-making as a "collaborative intellectual praxis that makes our research what it is." It makes visible what is possible about us, our beings, and the urgency that we must work within to conceptualize our worlds, realities, freedoms, joys, and collective struggles.[34]

For several decades, Black Canadian art historians, curators, and critics have used Black studies methods to painstakingly retrieve and piece together traces of Black creative practices dating all the way back to the late nineteenth century. While key figures like Ayanna Black, M. NourbeSe Philip, Andrea Fatona, and Charmaine A. Nelson have done so through traditional academic research and publication, many others have gone a few steps beyond this in their approaches. These kaleidoscopic approaches in Black studies are what Katherine McKittrick refers to as method-making or "rebellious methodology."[35] This move away from usual art historical methodologies is what I am calling "total inversion." It implies a fundamental rethinking and reforming of research approaches to get closer to what we might deem a Black Canadian art history. In what follows, I propose to think through how these methods and principles show up in the work of art historians and curators in the Canadian context.

TOTAL INVERSION: BLACK STUDIES IN CANADIAN ART HISTORY

Black scholars, curators, and artists have historically employed a range of methods to eschew the pitfalls of traditional art history and to make a way out of no way for developing a more robust discourse around Black Canadian art. One such method I have discussed previously is "Black Feminist Art Historical praxis" which is geared towards fostering a deeper, more rigorous reading of Black artistic practices and histories.[36] "Total inversion," for its part, is an invitation to seek out new strategies specifically for tracing and reading those parts of Canadian art history which are markedly sparse of preserved material evidence like archives and artworks. Strategies like community canvassing, oral histories, and memory work, as well as digital data collation and critical archival inquiry as curatorial practice have been key to the early development of discourses around Black Canadian art history.[37]

Through the work of David Woods and Adrienne Johnson, who both use extensive archival research, community canvasing, memory work, and oral history, we now know a great deal more about Edith Hester MacDonald Brown (1886–1954), who is thought to be the first documented Black female painter in Canadian art history.[38] She grew up in a middle-class household in Africville in Halifax. One of her earliest surviving pieces dates back to 1898, produced at age twelve. It is believed she may have attended art school while briefly living in Montreal's Plateau district. Through Woods and Johnson's research some artwork by Edith's daughter, Ruth Brown Johnson, was also uncovered. She created a series of five linoleum-block prints depicting landscape views of Africville in 1949 after taking a printmaking course offered by the Nova Scotia Board of Education.

fig. 4 *Hidden Blackness: Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828–1901)*, curated by David Woods, installation view, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, January 25 to April 6, 2025. Photo: Roger J. Smith. Works from left to right: *Tree Landscape*, 1877, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Melvin and H. Alan Frank from the Frank Family Collection (1984.147); *Approaching Storm*, 1886, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of G. William Miller (1983.95.62); Untitled (man on horseback, woman on foot driving cattle), c.a 1880, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of H. Alan and Melvin Frank (1983.95.69); *The Hay Wagon*, n.d., oil on paper laid down on panel, Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery (2022.67). Courtesy of the Owens Art Gallery.

Woods's research similarly contextualized the oeuvre of Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828–1901) (fig. 4). Born in Saint Andrews, New Brunswick, Bannister was a self-taught, nineteenth-century African Canadian painter of the Barbizon school, known for pastoral landscapes and seascapes. In 1876, Bannister's painting *Under the Oaks* (now lost) won the bronze medal (for first place) at the Centennial Exposition Art Exhibition in Philadelphia, thus making him the first artist of African descent and the first Canadian to win a major art prize in North America.[39] Bannister was a prominent abolitionist and philanthropist (along with his wife Christiana Carteaux Bannister), and co-founder of the Providence Art Club, one of the oldest art societies in the United States.[40] Before becoming a full-time painter, Bannister worked as a cobbler, shipmate, barber, and, crucially, a daguerreotypist.[41] This implies he was also a photographer, perhaps even practicing before his departure to the United States, meaning his works, should they ever be located, could be read alongside the likes of renowned Canadian photographer William Notman, who was also active in the late 1800s.[42]

By building relationships over many years, and trusting the living knowledge of Black elders and community members, scholars like Woods and Johnson were able to recuperate undervalued Black art histories that identify landscape painting and photography as Black art practices, locating them squarely in the era of the founding of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts in 1880.[43] Total inversion in the processes of archival research, community canvasing, memory work, and oral history begins with the understanding that Black histories in Canada exist, by and large, within the gaps in common knowledge and within community—hence, total inversion requires scholarship that is embedded in the living collective knowledge of Black communities.

Archival inquiries as curatorial practice go hand in hand with tracing the photographic histories of Black subjects and makers in Canadian art. In a combination of critical archival inquiry and curatorial practice, Alyssa Fearon brought to light not only William "Billy" S.A. Beal's (1874–1968) legacy but also

raised important questions about how we think through and engage with Black visual materials in the archive. Her exhibition *Black Prairies* at the Dunlop Art Gallery (2025) presented over one hundred years of Black Canadian cultural production in the Prairies, spanning the 1920s to the present, featuring both contemporary artwork and original glass-plate negatives by early 1900s Black Manitoban photographer William "Billy" S.A. Beal, as well as archival material from the City of Edmonton's Frank B. Jamerson fonds.[44] Beal, son of a bookseller, was born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in 1874 and educated in Minneapolis. Not much is known about his life until he arrived in Manitoba in 1906. A trained sawmill engineer, Beal was also an avid photographer; fifty photographic glass plates of his making remain, bearing witness to the years he spent between 1915 and 1925 documenting the people, events, and activities of his community in the western Manitoba region.[45]

In addition to her work on *Black Prairies*, Fearon produced the short documentary *For Caesar* (2025), written and directed by Cheryl Foggo.[46] The film explores the beginnings of the Shiloh Baptist Church and Cemetery and its significance to the Shiloh People and their descendants, chronicling the period of the Great Migration and the arrival of Black families to Saskatchewan in and around 1910.[47] This was a period during which roughly 1,500 African Americans left Oklahoma and other parts of the Southern United States, fleeing targeted violence and Jim Crow segregation. Arriving in the Canadian Prairies, these families built homes, schools, and churches while also facing hostility and ongoing white supremacist violence. In Saskatchewan, the group of migrants known as the Shiloh People lived in a small rural community outside of Maidstone where they built the Shiloh Baptist Church and Cemetery. The documentary tells the tale of Caesar, one of the founding members of the Shiloh people, and his descendants' journey in restoring the church and obtaining its designation as a cultural heritage site. Total inversion in art history subverts the presumption that Black life and art, if located in Canada at all, predominantly exists in urban centres like Halifax, Toronto, and Montreal; rather it assumes the contrary, insisting on and seeking material traces of Blackness in all time-spaces.[48]

Documentary film and video, then, is another crucial avenue for recording and examining information about unknown or overlooked Black artists and makers. As evidenced by the numerous NFB documentaries chronicling Black life in Canada, this medium has been a pivotal site for the stubborn, rebellious, refusal to allow Black histories to be erased from the national narrative.[49] Beyond the ongoing production of films like *For Caesar*, carefully re-reading existing documentaries from a Black studies art historical standpoint also lends itself to developing a discourse around Black visual histories in Canada—as is the case with Catherine Tolbart (b. 1926), for example. Many of the images associated with the jazz scene in Montreal that have circulated widely come from the archives of the famed Rockhead's Paradise and Café St-Michel. Yet few people know that Tolbart was behind the camera in many cases. She was born and raised in Middleton, Nova Scotia.[50] In her early 20s, she moved to Montreal, where she worked in home care and as a photographer, taking photos of patrons at their tables at the aforementioned night spots.[51]

The National Film Board of Canada's documentary *The Road Taken* (1996), which covers the history of Black sleeping-car porters who worked on Canada's railways from the early 1900s through the 1960s, is one rare source linking Catherine to these images, in a short two-minute clip where she is interviewed about her time in Montreal.[52] Her photographic work from that time is otherwise largely unattributed. I owe my deepest gratitude to my graduate students Safia Siad, Mélinda Pierre Paul Cardinal, and Roxanne Cornellier, for this particular finding. In preparation for a new undergraduate course, I worked with this team of graduate research assistants on a project entitled *Caustic Networks: A Geotemporal Mapping of Black Canadian Art (1900–1950)*, with the intention

of rummaging through the Special Collections at Concordia University to trace the histories of Black Canadian art during the modern period. It is through this project that Safia made the connection between Catherine Tolbart in the documentary and the images from the jazz scene, which we had been examining. Total inversion through Black studies' rebellious methodology made possible a reconsideration of these archival images and this documentary from an art historical standpoint. This is an example of "methodology as an act of disobedience and rebellion [which shows] how black studies scholars have used and can use method to engender radical scholarly praxis."[53]

This kind of digging is precisely the work that the Black Art Histories Montreal research group is undertaking. The group is a collective composed mostly of Black community members from Montreal, including elders, researchers, students, curators, artists, writers, educators, and independent scholars. This intergenerational working group bridges gaps between academic institutions and community circles, sharing "a common interest and passion for the recuperation, preservation, recognition, and dissemination of the art and cultural legacies of Black visual artists who were and are active in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal".[54] Through their work, they have uncovered the practices of artists such as Cyril Adams and Joan Rolle, among many other Black makers in Montreal prior to the 1980s. Their research shows that Adams was trained and exhibited his painting in Montreal between the 1940s and 1960s.[55] It also narrates the life and career of Joan Rolle, one of the only Black woman modernist painters known to have been active in Montreal during the period of the 1950s.[56] In 2024, the group compiled the first edition of an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to Black artists in Montreal between 1950 and 1995.[57] In their collaborative work, they continue to uncover a veritable mountain of as-yet untreated and unexamined archival and visual materials pertaining to Black art practices in Montreal before to the internet boom of the 1990s.[58]

A major aspect of the work undertaken by this research group and scholars like Kessie Theliar-Charles, who is a member, involves extensive community-based archival work as well as oral histories. Through her research in the holdings of the *Centre international de documentation et d'information haitienne, caribéenne et afro-canadienne* (CIDIHCA), and through interviews with community members, Theliar-Charles uncovered records of multiple artist-run centres and galleries founded and operated by Haitians in Montreal during the 1970 and '80s.[59] Among them was journalist, art critic, and visual artist Mérès Wèche, who founded the gallery Diaspo-Art in Montreal in 1979 which would remain open until 1986 and featured a number of Haitian artists in the city including François Cauvin, Roland Bastien, Danielle Legrain-Sadan, Joseph Tony Moise alias Ti Tonton, Lyonel Laurenceau, Sam Abitbol, Suraj Sadan and Léonel Jules. Her research further uncovers the histories of Galerie Picasso and the Café Thélème, another two Haitian artist-run centres in Montreal during this period.[60] A total inversion of Canadian art history demands a willingness to leave no archival stone unturned and to look again and again, ever more closely, at our assumptions about who was active in an art milieux during earlier periods in any given setting.

Through the aggregation and collation of archival data, it becomes possible to make crucial connections across time and space in Black Canadian art history and thus begin to map a broader historical context around specific artists, galleries, and exhibitions. A number of projects endeavouring to do this have emerged in recent years. Some examples of online data-collation platforms include the work that Fatona is doing through the Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora, a dynamic online platform housing curatorial projects that expand the visibility and accessibility of works by contemporary Black Canadian artists, craftspeople, curators, and critics who have been historically erased from the discourses of Canadian visual culture.[61] Another groundbreaking project of

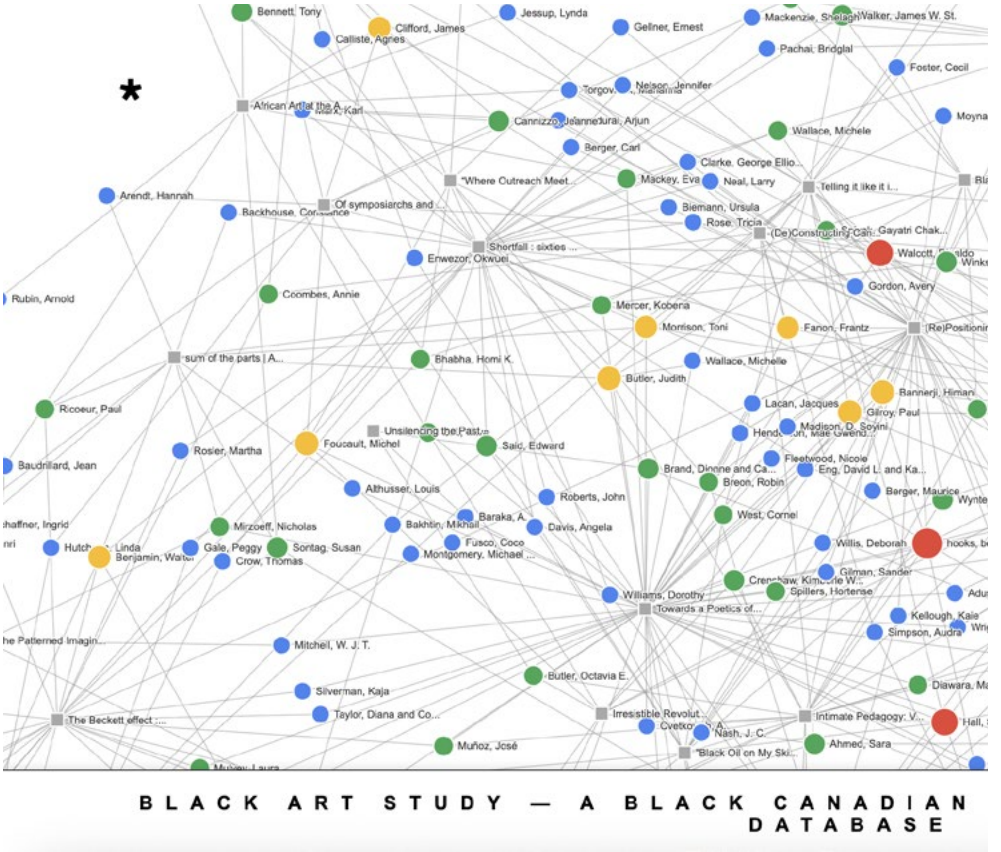
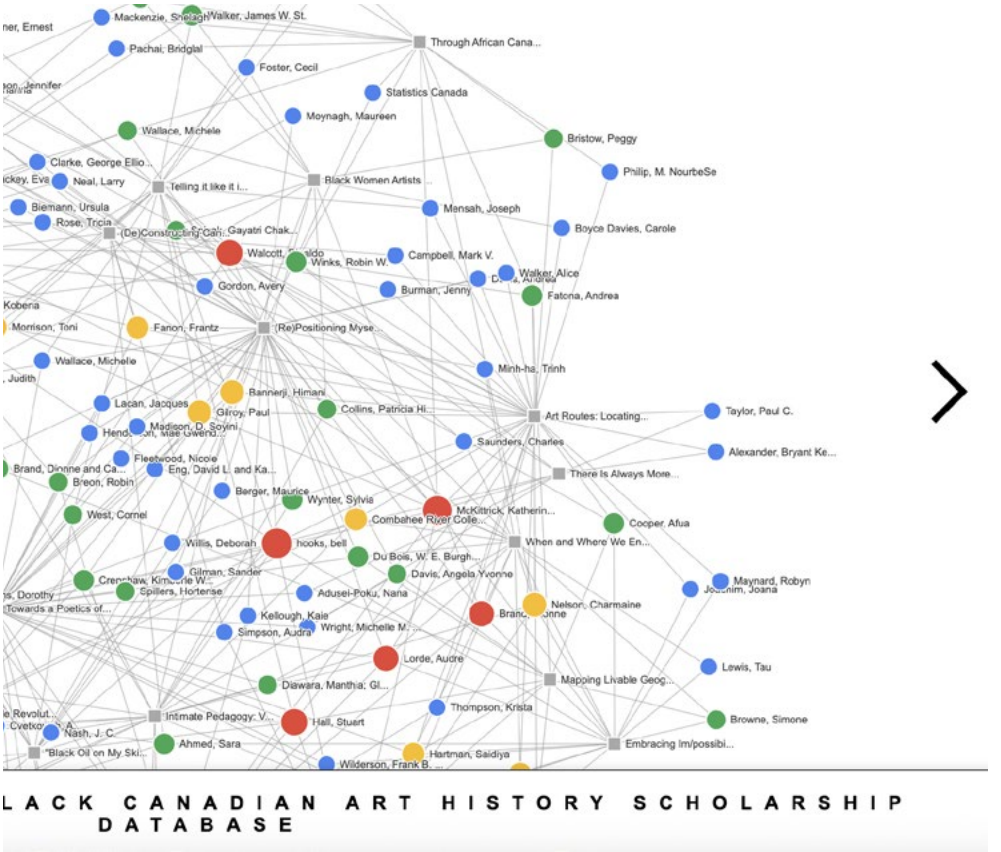


fig. 5 Screenshot of Yaniya Lee, Black Art Study: A Black Canadian Art History Scholarship Database, accessed November 4, 2025, http://blackartstudy.ca/.

digital data collation is *Searching for a Black Pacific: An Alternative Archive*, an online resource created by Phoebe Joan Colby. This project traces the Black Pacific through pamphlet and magazine publications that promoted Black people, places, art, and events in Vancouver.[62]

Yaniya Lee's Black Art Study: A Black Canadian Art History Scholarship Database (fig. 5), is a decentralized, citation-driven database of Black Canadian art scholarship, which composes one segment of a four-part portfolio titled "Black Art Study: Methods and Methodologies for a Black Studies Approach to Canadian Art History."[63] The online component identifies and connects research projects and academic papers about Black art history in the Canadian context, simultaneously mapping this knowledge and offering data visualization of this intellectual landscape. Lee's discussion of the project encapsulates much of the rebellious methods outlined above. She notes, "The citational and relational way of organizing and presenting the scholarship on this database was formed in answer to the following question: How do we build a database that honours black Canadian art history scholarship without reifying a classificatory system that is irreconcilable with black liberation?"[64] With this reflection, Lee gestures toward a larger issue, that is, how might we bring together Black Canadian art historical threads to form a broader discourse while resisting the colonial logics which have deemed it illegible or invalid for so long? In posing these questions and responding to them in a methodologically rebellious manner, these scholars bring Black studies into art history and, in doing so, they are enacting a total inversion.

Through their use of total inversion, these projects underscore how crucial reparative art historical research and writing is in bringing much-needed attention to the practices of often-overlooked artists like Denyse Thomasos



(1964–2012). This recuperative form of art historical writing and researching also helps further flesh out the trajectory of Black Canadian art into the contemporary moment leading to major retrospective exhibitions like *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*. Curated by Julie Crooks at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2023, this exhibition gathered over seventy paintings and works on paper, many rarely seen, to show how Thomasos "challenged the limits of abstraction, infusing personal and political content onto her canvases through the innovative use of formalist techniques."[65] Before the 2020s, very few critical texts and documentation existed on her practice.[66] Thomasos' oeuvre risked being lost to time without immediate scholarly and curatorial intervention. It is through the diligent retroactive research of Black cultural workers, scholars, and their allies that losses like this can be avoided or at least mitigated.

Through a combination of rebellious Black studies methods, that is, through total inversion, the contributions of Black artists in Canada can be tethered to one another, collapsing time and space to form a loose, shifting network of Black makers. Black studies methods allow new meaning to be wrought from seemingly unrelated archival sources as researchers look anew at these materials with the express intent of tracking down Black artists and their works. For example, returning to the archival images of the jazz scene in Montreal during the early twentieth century, while a cursory glance might merely reveal another visual record of the musical history of the city, looking at this material with a Black art historical gaze leads us to wonder who the photographer might have been or to notice the murals in the background and to ask, who painted those? Bringing Black studies into the fold of Canadian art histories also underscores the urgent need for preserving Black historic sites like the Shiloh community church—a singular marker of early Black architecture in Canada—and the crafts emerging

fig. 6 Kiera Boult, *Hamilton's My Lady*, 2024, installation view, Centre[3], Hamilton. Photo: Amy Su. Courtesy of the artist.

from the Maritimes, including objects held within the Taylor Leek Collection at King's Landing, as integral parts of Canadian material culture and heritage.[67] Through total inversion, these images and objects become archival proxies for anonymized Black makers all across Canada.[68]

Canadian art history must take seriously the fact that Black studies is not only a modality through which to read art by Black makers, it is central to the very productions of these artworks. That is, Black studies is enmeshed in how many Black artists make their work to begin with and is thus a key to understanding them. Using these methods to flesh out a distinctly Black Canadian art historical discourse therefore reflects the very practices of artists such as Sylvia D. Hamilton (b. 1950), Camille Turner (b. 1960), Deanna Bowen (b. 1969), Eddy Firmin (b. 1971), Michèle Pearson Clarke (b. 1973), Syrus Marcus Ware (b. 1977), Kiera Boult (b. 1980s, fig. 6), and Michaëlle Sergile (b. 1995), to name too few. Black studies and histories are fundamental pillars for many Black artists in Canada.[69] Employing Black studies to aid in the "total inversion" of Canadian art history shapes the very approach art historical research takes and supports rigorous and textured discussions of Black visual and material culture here.

CONCLUSION

Black studies in Canadian art history demands that we push beyond merely commenting on cultural diversity or representation to instead engage meaningfully with the core of Black art practices, peeling back their formal and conceptual layers to contextualize their processes and history.[70] A "total inversion" also subverts the persistent notion that Canada is a better, less violent site for Black life compared to other settler-colonial contexts. It isn't. Black studies in art history are one of the myriad paths toward disabusing many people of this notion. With the lens of "total inversion" as a guiding principle for infusing Black studies into Canadian art history, it might be possible to push even further in recording and engaging in a rigorous discourse around Black Canadian art. This approach also enables us to see what emerges if we apply these methods to white Canadian art history and archives themselves, much in the way that contemporary Black Canadian artist Deanna Bowen does with her practice.[71] Bowen's works perform a literal and metaphorical "total inversion" of what is acknowledged about these figures in the Canadian context.[72] Her practice brings together archival documents and images of white histories, drawing clear, evidence-based connections between prominent figures in Canadian art and the country's long legacy of white nationalism. By unflinchingly presenting these archival documents, she is asking the viewer to reconsider what they think they know about Canada and its visual histories.

Using "total inversion" to examine the work of Beaver Hall Group members like Prudence Heward and her numerous paintings of Black women and girls in the 1930s and '40s also opens a completely new line of inquiry.[73] As Charmaine A. Nelson and Julia Skelly have argued, a critical analysis of Heward's works

reveals them as records of how white artists perceived Black people at the time.[74] I am proposing that, with total inversion, it is possible to go beyond naming the power dynamics at play between artist and sitters on the levels of race, gender, and class. Using Black studies methods in an analysis of such paintings demands a reading which positions Black life, and thus the sitters, at the centre of the narration and contextualization of the pieces. A total inversion of works such as Heward's *Girl in the Window* (1941) offers a glimpse into the life of Black people who might have had an interest in becoming artists in Montreal at the time but could only access these spaces by working as models or domestic workers for white artists.[75]

Indeed, we know this time period to have been an effervescent moment of Black creative practice not only through music and performing arts but also through craft and art education.[76] Black women in particular were active in practising and teaching crafts like embroidery and sewing to local youths. I would argue that in some cases this was the most accessible and realistic venue for their creative expression, given the pervasive racist and sexist temperament of the period. Might it be that, in looking more closely at an anonymized portrait like *Girl in the Window* (1941), one could uncover the story of an aspiring Black woman artist, not unlike Joan Rolle, whose ambitions were curtailed by her social condition in midcentury Montreal? Are we looking at the likeness of a woman whose love for art and desire to be involved in it by whatever means necessary led her to model or work for Heward? Total inversion asks us to simultaneously seek out the fragments of Black art history that have been left unattended for too long and, further, to consider what happens to canonical Canadian art if we read it with Black Canadians and our histories in mind. Through total inversion, these become visual proxies of Black life and the histories and social conditions which prevented Black makers from being properly recorded in Canadian art history.

There is a dire need for deep, engaged research and writing on Black artists across larger swaths of time and space in Canadian art history. Regrettably, the last decade in Canada has corroborated Fatona's assessment that the art milieu's support for Black art history is rife with inconsistent engagement, swinging dizzyingly from extreme solicitation to near-total disregard at best, and retaliation at worst.[77] What does it say about Canadian art historians that Black community members, elders and youth alike, wishing to learn about and recuperate their visual histories on this land must routinely take matters into their own hands? This type of historical research in the Canadian context is extremely difficult, time-consuming, and often thankless; yet the fact remains that it needs to be taken on by professionals in the field. The longer Canadian art historians take to piece together Black art histories on this land, the worse the problem will get, as time passes and our connections to them fray. Art historians invested in the liberatory potential of their work need a better set of tools to accomplish this gargantuan task. Black studies methods can enact a "total inversion" of Canadian art history and reject the violence which continues to mar the discipline, allowing new meanings to emerge.

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