

**Selected Writing  
on Black  
Canadian Art**

**Yaniya Lee**

**figure ground &  
Art Metropole  
2024**

I as if history was  
not destiny

The texts in this collection were mostly published between 2017 and 2021 (with a couple stragglers from before and after) while I lived in a sunny, one-bedroom apartment in the west end of Toronto, a few minutes' walk from Lake Ontario. I was working all the time, fuelled by passion and excitement and naivety. I was a part of the editorial team at a national art magazine and moonlighting as a student (finishing my MA), freelance art writer, workshop organizer, collective member, and art criticism teacher.

Published in catalogues and magazines, as exhibition texts and online, by galleries and museums and artist-run centres, these essays, reviews, and artist interviews range from a few paragraphs to several pages long. Each piece was originally developed for a specific platform, edited to suit what its commissioner had in mind. Some received little to no editing or support. Others were revised intensely, and shaped by the input of friends, family, and colleagues. For this volume, we've kept some of the language as originally published. Of note are the variations on the spelling of black/Black, which reflect editorial debates within publishing at the time. I am proud of this writing, although some of it I find too earnest. I wish the seriousness had been tempered with play, and the didacticism softened with humour.

You'll find here the testimonies and achievements of African diasporic artists and curators from across the country and beyond. As these texts reflect the politics and urgencies of a specific place and time, so art writing and criticism, generally, is structured by the ethics and cultural values we hold dear in a given historical moment. Such societal meters are crucial for anyone in the arts, but also,

in the future, for whoever will tell the stories of what we cared for and believed in, of how we lived and grew.

Black Canadian contemporary art, in particular, unsettles the hierarchies and gentle exclusions of capital "A" art history and the semantic structures of its canon. This is why we need more art writing: to change what art history looks like, to subvert and undo and remake the canon. To witness and make that witnessing known, so Buseje Bailey, Sandra Brewster, June Clarke, and Tau Lewis become household names alongside Michael Snow, Jeff Wall, or Edward Burtynsky.

These texts are part of many, many endeavours from before, during, and after the narrow frame of their publication. I was only able to write them because of precedents set by the dedication of Black women, and the labour of artists and activists, curators and organizers, poets and theorists, writers and editors who study, critically engage with, and honour our histories. Publications like *At the Crossroads* (1992-97) and *Our Lives* (1986-89), and events and institutions like CAN:BAIA (Canadian Artists Network: Black Artists In Action) and CELAFI (Celebrating African Identity), Nia Centre for the Arts, and BAND Gallery and Cultural Centre are examples of how organizations have justly centred the beauty, insight, and transformative potential of Black creative practice.

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.

Yaniya Lee

# A Somatic Seeing

## Dionne Brand's *Theory*

2018  
Essay

“To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves,” wrote Lorraine O’Grady. She wanted to find a different way of looking, a way of looking that would allow us, for example, to see the Black maid in Manet’s painting *Olympia*.

For the past several years, I’ve been thinking a lot about Black Canadian art in all its complicatedness. As something that has not been named, and that needs to be seen. When I write, and when I think, I’m learning how to look. Actually, I often feel like I’m repairing the very ways in which I perceive. This summer, as I read through Dionne Brand’s novel *Theory*, I’ve considered new approaches to this repairing.

The novel travelled with me everywhere; I read it on the beaches of Lake Ontario, by rivers in France, on planes across Britain. The intimacy of Brand’s narrative, told entirely in the first person, made me feel as though I was seeing through the protagonist’s eyes. Teoria—who for me was a ‘she,’ though it was never stated outright—tells the story of the women she has loved. Throughout this telling, the acts and gestures of looking are enmeshed with the acts and gestures of loving.

Teoria describes the succession of relationships she was in as she wrote her dissertation. Her apprehension of each lover is filtered through the lens of her intellect. Her looking is determined by the Western ways of knowing she is immersed in as an academic, and her determination to resist them. That resistance and simultaneous loyalty to the academy makes me believe she must be Black. The double bind that comes from immersion in those ways of knowing is not unfamiliar to us.

Du Bois’ double consciousness, or Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. The Black Panther’s Ten-Point Program. We know this story. Black intellectuals have steadfastly striven to counter our erasure from modernity, our oppression and our dehumanization.

Teoria devours her lovers with her intellect, her theory. And I get this. I too became accustomed to perceiving first with my mind, after most of my senses had been shaped by a wretchedly rational critical lens. This is the way I had learned to look when I started writing about art. I sifted everything I saw through that lens. When I went into galleries and museums, my perception of what was good and what was right and what was beautiful neatly mirrored Eurocentric aesthetic hierarchies.

Then, about eight years ago, I was studying in Bremen, a small town in northern Germany that was lush and green and white and geriatric. That summer, the Beyeler Foundation in Switzerland mounted what was then the most extensive retrospective of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work, and I was determined to see it. I booked a plane down to Zurich and convinced my friend Rico to borrow his mom’s car and drive me the two hours to Riehen, near Basel, where the show was being presented.

I remember the experience of seeing that exhibition: I felt it in my whole body. It was this high-pitched tension in all of my limbs. Each canvas, each work, made a physical impression. And, by the end of it, I was supercharged. I talked non-stop the entire drive back to Zurich.

Whatever happened to me there, when I saw Basquiat’s work in Switzerland nearly a decade ago, came back to me while I was reading *Theory* this summer.

For years now I have been looking at art, discerning form and narrative, and, more often than not, it has been ethics and my analytical mind that determine my first impressions. Black studies theory has helped me complicate and unbind those European aesthetic hierarchies I had internalized, to start paying attention to ethical considerations of aesthetics, where ethics signify a sense of justice and humanity. These new considerations condition not only what I take in, but also how I perceive the things I do pay attention to. It's a soft limit, and I've become so immersed in that imperative to correct and vindicate that I am hardened to how art makes me feel. Obviously there is something at stake in how we look. What I hadn't wondered was: Does theory get you closer to, or farther away, from the thing you are looking at?

I said before that I thought looking and loving were entwined, and it's looking through Teoria, at the women she's loved, that brings me to that conclusion. There's a struggle in her ability to see them, but she does see them—with her body, it's just that her mind quickly recuperates that seeing. Her loving is complicated, halted, hindered by her analysis—her deep investment in a certain rectitude. Yet still, despite her, there is an erotics at play that informs her relentlessly intellectual approach.

I grew up with two Black moms in a mostly white, mostly straight culture. My ability to see their beauty and strength came only from loving, not theory or popular culture or any analytical lens I was given in schools. It seems to me *Theory* operates as a kind of blueprint for this kind of looking: it is about women loving women, which is a radical kind of love in a world structured by patriarchal white

supremacy. As I read through Teoria's intellectual struggle, I recognize how loving myself, and people who look like me, can be a hard thing to do, or rather, it is not something we are taught to do (we will never have the bluest eye). For me to look and apprehend and perceive from a position of loving or desiring blackness and black women is radical.

I no longer want to just look with my mind, with theory—there has to be something else. As I read the novel I thought about different ways of looking. There's something about love there. I want to let love reshape my ethics and the aesthetics that has shaped how I see. I want to get to a somatic way of seeing. I want to see with my whole entire body. And I think the key to doing that is to never let theory dampen love.

III

Why I Write

/towards relation

2017  
Essay

I write to figure things out, to understand the world around me and to make sense of my own feelings.

I write in two modes. The first is not so much an act of creation, but of release: a balm for difficult emotion. There are scraps of paper and half-filled notebooks all over my apartment. They are nothing and they are everything—the externalization of frustration and inner turmoil; a method of survival. When I wake up restless and anxious at 5 AM, scrawling into a notebook calms me. It allows me to place myself and others in some semblance of order, an arrangement that feels manageable. This writing is not a vehicle for ideas. Rather, it is a way of putting down and putting out what irks me. If I can write to the end of the trouble, I can fall back asleep.

The other kind of writing is an act of composition that has its own particular procedures and strategies. I'll try to understand a problem outside of myself, and build a response to that which is structural: brutally overt and sensed, but unseen. What can I say about a six-year-old girl handcuffed by police officers for misbehaving in her grade-school classroom? How can I describe the recurrence of an absence? In this writing, my intention is to expose the scaffolding of difference that governs our proximity to death and joyous living. I read everything, note all gossip and pursue evasive research. Then I write it all out and whittle away—adjust the angle, change the tone. It takes a pile of messy drafts, overwritten and revised, before this writing feels right enough for me to let it go. Before it stands alone.

Several women seem to manage the ideal combination of these two modes. Their forms are a source of

solace and nourishment. I revel in Adrian Piper's humour, Jamaica Kincaid's acuity, Dionne Brand's grammar, Hannah Black's intimacy. Their work gives me strength. It does something more than itemize their experience through critical considerations. They connect diasporic movement, art, love and Black life to the dull ache of living bounded within a system of white supremacy. Wearily, I go back to their writing again and again, finding repose in the precious spaces of lucidity they conjure.

According to Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter, everywhere different forms of inequality, like the notion of a biological hierarchy, are produced and passed on through the stories we tell. Our narratives and aesthetics shape us as human beings.

If being human is praxis, then writing for me is a movement towards self-determination and new ways of being. I hold fast to these artists. Their work has none of that very specific brand of white noise: the dull hum of white supremacy not knowing itself. I see in it a transformative, liberating power. As I develop a practice of thinking and writing, it is my hope to settle into self-knowledge: a synergy of my two modes of writing that speaks to the complicated, unresolvable present in clear, nourishing forms. This would mean understanding myself as always in relation, as a part of a vast, shifting constellation of beings and things.