

Black Art Study:  
Methods and Methodologies for a Black Studies Approach to Canadian Art History

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Abstract:

*Black Art Study: Methods and Methodologies for a Black Studies Approach to Canadian Art History* is a portfolio-based doctoral project that intervenes in the field of Canadian art history through the lens of black studies. It proposes a new framework for engaging with black contemporary art in Canada by employing “a black sense of aesthetics,” a concept that is built on and extends Katherine McKittrick’s “a black sense of place.” A black sense of aesthetics is rooted in diasporic experience and collaborative praxis; this research understands black aesthetics and black creative practice as a liberatory, relational, and anti-colonial modes of knowing. Drawing from interdisciplinary methodologies and a black sense of aesthetics, the project critiques and refuses canonical classifications and instead offers experimental modes of documentation, pedagogy, critique, and archival engagement.

The dissertation comprises four interconnected components: *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art* (the yellow book), a collection of art criticism centering black Canadian artists; *Greyzone Pedagogies*, a pedagogical archive of syllabi and workshops that enact Black feminist teaching strategies; *Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in a While, A Black Art History Project* (the blue book), a research and archival publication project focused on the career of artist Buseje Bailey, which reimagines the work of art history through storytelling; and *Black Art Study*, a decentralized, citation-driven database of black Canadian art scholarship. Together, these components build toward a methodology for black Canadian art history that is relational, non-linear, and deeply attentive to the specificity of local black diasporic art practices.

This portfolio resists tidy conclusions, instead proposing a living, growing archive of black life, knowledge, and creativity that challenges the disciplinary logics of art history. It advances a commitment to embodied, collaborative, and interdisciplinary research practices that foreground black women’s creative labor and intellectual genealogies. By embracing experimental methodologies and grounding itself in a black sense of aesthetics, this research contributes to the building of a sustainable, anti-racist, and anti-colonial art historical practice in Canada.

Keywords:

Black Canadian Art History; Black Studies; Black Creative Practice; Art Criticism; Black Feminist Pedagogies; Anti-Colonial Art History; Interdisciplinary Research; a Black Sense of Aesthetics

## Introduction: A Black Sense of Aesthetics as Method-Making

### Guide Quotes

“The task, as I have repeatedly noted throughout these stories, is not to track and quantify marginalized peoples and seek reparation through centering their objectification, but, rather, to posit that many divergent and different and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that can tell us something new about our academic concerns and our anticolonial futures.

—Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*

“An irony is inherent in this narrative. On the one hand, Black Canadians are outsiders, as this prevailing multicultural narrative obliterates the history and long presence of Blacks in Canada, differentiates between "Western" and "non-Western" cultures, and allows for Anglo and French cultures to maintain their hegemonic positions vis-à-vis "Other" Canadians. On the other hand, Black people exist within the nation, and indeed they are often figured as an immediate internal threat in media depictions. This logic positions Black people both as absence and as excess within narratives of nation.”

—Andrea Fatona “In the Presence of Absence: Invisibility, Black Canadian History, and Melinda Mollineaux’s Pinhole Photography”

“Black women artists (and all people of color) throughout the world are long overdue for inclusion in art history and in the systematic operations of the global art world... With a self-activated and sustained discourse characterized by the knowledge and conviction of self-determination evident in the fragmented voices of Black women artists, art historians and others, a major shift in the focus on Black women artists can be implemented. Most importantly, that shift could transform defensive discussions to more insightful interpretative exchanges that would lead to the construction of a critical art history. In addition, more effective strategies for dismantling the exclusionary devices of the dominant art establishment could conceivably be constructed. Such objectives, in their entirety, could be identified as a Black feminist art project that would be both academic and political in character.”

—Freida. W. Tesfagiorgis “In Search of a Discourse and Critique(s) that Center the Art of Black Women Artists”

## **Black Canadian Art History: Edith Hester McDonald-Brown**

Have you ever heard of Edith Hester McDonald (1886–1954), or Edith Hester McDonald-Brown as she was known after marriage?<sup>1</sup> In her 2015 MA thesis Adrienne Johnson argues that McDonald-Brown was the first black woman painter in Canada. The thesis chapter is quite remarkable, considering the sparsity of research materials available to Johnson; she interviewed McDonald-Brown's granddaughter, sought out the archival records of her death certificate and the marriage certificate of her parents, found a small selection of remaining photographs, and, of course, examined the remaining paintings.<sup>2</sup> From these sources we learn that McDonald-Brown was born in Africville, Nova Scotia, and was a fourth generation black Nova Scotian. McDonald-Brown started painting as a teenager. Of the paintings attributed to her, all are signed Edith McDonald, her maiden name. It is suspected she studied art in Montreal before returning to Halifax, where she married and lived until her death in the 1950s. Most of her work is thought to have been destroyed during the razing of Africville. To date, this chapter of Johnson's thesis and a book chapter she published based on the thesis are the only scholarly writings to examine the work or life of Edith Hester McDonald-Brown.<sup>3</sup> Johnson's thesis chapter

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<sup>1</sup> There is some discrepancy in Edith Hester McDonald-Brown's name and dates of birth and death. On the internet I found conflicting information: some sites claim the painter was born in 1880, others in 1886, and that she died in 1954 or 1956. Also, some indicate the spelling of her last name as MacDonald and others as McDonald. The different dates and spellings may simply attest to a lack of rigour and fact-checking, because on her death certificate in the Nova Scotia Archives, her married name (Edith Hester Brown) and date of birth and death (1886-1954) are clearly written.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Africville-born painter was first brought to public attention by c-ocurators by David Woods and Harold Pearse in the 1998 group exhibition "In This Place: Black Art in Nova Scotia" at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design's Anna Leonowens Gallery. In 2025, Woods curated another exhibition, this time featuring just McDonald's work, called "From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown (1886-1954)" and shown at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery.

<sup>2</sup> In 2015, when Johnson published her thesis, there were 5 known existing paintings by McDonald-Brown. In 2025, there are thirteen known works attributed to her, many of which were exhibited in Wood's "From Africville."

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Johnson, "Through African Canadian Eyes: Landscape Painting by Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century African Canadians," (MA thesis, McGill University, 2015).

is just under 2500 words. It contains critical writing about the artwork and, since the publication of the book chapter in 2019, adapted from her thesis research, none still none exist. Several online encyclopedias and arts and culture articles talk about McDonald-Brown, but not in any rigorous or analytical way; instead, these pieces contain the same scant information. Eight new works have been attributed to McDonald-Brown since the publication of Johnson's thesis ten years ago. Nonetheless, even as more of the artist's work becomes available for study, there has not been any increase in critical attention to it, or any renewed academic efforts to situate her artistic practice within an art historical legacy. The melding of research, knowledge, erasure, and McDonald-Brown's creative and aesthetic history—which are mapped onto the contested (razed, remembered) black geography of Africville and her gendered and racialized experiences—provides a meaningful contextualization of the complexities of black art worlds in Canada.

Curator, scholar and art historian Andrea Fatona has commented on the relationship between the lack of critical writing about black art and the dearth of attention paid to of black art in Canadian art history: “If there’s no writing as there would be for other kinds of exhibitions, and if there’s no conversation from folks in the field who come from these communities, I think we’re always going to end up with a void in the historical record of what happened, and the impact of what happened then gets lost.”<sup>4</sup> A sustained consideration of the artistic practice of, and visual art by, people of African descent in Canada does not exist yet within the discipline of Canadian art history. While the past decade has seen a marked intensification of the writing and presentation of black art here, this attention does not go back very far. Curators Joanna Joachim

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and Adrienne Johnson, ““Authoring belonging: early African Canadian fine artists George H. McCarthy (1860-1906) and Edith H. McDonald (c. 1880-1954),”” in *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance*, ed. Charmaine Nelson (Captus Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Fatona and Liz Ikiriko, “Speaking Ourselves Into Being,” *C Magazine*, 2020.

and Pamela Edmonds point out “the ongoing institutional failures to memorialize Black diasporic art practices.” They describe how 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.”<sup>5</sup> Art historian Charmaine Nelson points out that while black Canadian contemporary artists have been written about, there is very little on black artists going back to the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

The absence of more research on historical black Canadian artists is simply due to the fact that, unlike the American context where the thriving field of African American Art History is supported by scholars and professors who have devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to uncovering and researching the lives and artwork of artists from the nineteenth century and earlier, no significant amount of comparable research has yet been undertaken on historical black Canadian artists.<sup>6</sup>

Curator David Woods concurs, speaking of Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, he notes: “people tended to ignore that there were artists creating masterpieces equal to the work of anyone else at that time.”<sup>7</sup>

A century after McDonald-Brown painted her canvases barriers continued to exist for black women artists. In 1987, Buseje Bailey described her position in the art world:

My experience is that I am being denied a decent existence because I am Black and of African descent I am therefore economically oppressed and I not encouraged to express myself artistically. The oppression is twofold, the bureaucracy and the community proper. ... To have access to grants, shows, employment and other opportunities you have to understand bureaucratise and you have to have contacts and frankly you have to be white because Black art is not considered to be part of the national art.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pamela Edmonds and Joana Joachim, “Introduction: Salt. For the Preservation of Black Diasporic Visual Histories,” *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 47, no. 2 (2022): 4-8. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094904ar>

<sup>6</sup> Charmaine Nelson, et al., editors, *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance* (Captus Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Cronin, Ray. *Halifax Art & Artists: An illustrated history*. (Art Canada Institute = Institut de l'art canadien, 2024), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Bailey, “Bea on Art,” *Our Lives* 2, no. 1.

Bailey's comments reflect the reality of many of her generation of black artists, including black queer people organizing and making art in the 1980s and 1990s. At the time, "[w]hen Black women artists organized to make their material practices visible, they established their historical presence in the nation and its history of art, in defiance of cultural policies that had until then strategically prioritized European cultures and cultural production."<sup>9</sup> As the art historian Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis explains, "The patriarchy of men of European descent that regulates the art world operates a hierarchical system that asserts Euro-male superiority and domination over everyone else and the value of Euro-male production over that of others."<sup>10</sup>

Together, McDonald-Brown, an artist from the turn of the century, and Bailey, an artist practicing a century later, come to be a part of a black Canadian art history. There is a link between how McDonald-Brown's history is overlooked and the difficulty black women artists had, and still have, making and showing work. I begin this introduction by centering women—although this portfolio also attends, more generally, to art by black diasporic people—because their position, as most marginalized in relation to their peers who are white or male, is a useful barometer. To borrow from the Combahee River Collective, if black women artists have equity, then the system is equitable.<sup>11</sup> My goal with this research project is to experiment with methodologies; I want to introduce different critical reading and looking practices and think about how we might, collectively, shape and enact a black Canadian art history that is equitable, anti-racist and anti-colonial. I research and share a set of different methods and methodologies

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<sup>9</sup> Yaniya Lee, "Group Theory" *Canadian Art Magazine*, 2019, [canadianart.ca/features/group-theory/](http://canadianart.ca/features/group-theory/).

<sup>10</sup> Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s That Center the Art of Black Women Artists," in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Jacqueline Bobo (Blackwell, 2001), 260.

<sup>11</sup> *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1986).

that might and can be developed to make such an art history robust, sustainable, and unbound by the imperative to reproduce normative, colonial, and exclusionary art worlds.

## **Art History x Black Studies**

In its self-fashioning, Canada has used arts and culture, along with the craft of art history, to attempt control the narrative of the nation. Art historian Donald Preziosi affirms art history “was clearly central to, and a paradigmatic instance of, the social and political formation of the modern nation-state and its various legitimizing paradigms of ethnic uniqueness and autochthony, or evolutionary progress or decline in ethics, aesthetics, hegemony, or technology.”<sup>12</sup> Art history, as a discipline, is linked to a set of values and a particular canon. Canada’s colonial policies can be traced side by side with the development of its national art history, most visible in the public support for art that promoted a Eurocentric national identity and an idealized version of the nation.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, there has been little space for African diasporic people in the official story Canada.<sup>14</sup> Some characterize this absence as strategic: “As both the by-product of British and French settler colonies, the foundations of Canadian national identity was based upon strategic displacement and exploitation of indigenous and African populations.”<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, black art unsettles the patterns that exclude communities on the margins. Andrea Fatona writes about how black artists and their artworks undermine the nation and nationalism: “[black] artworks have served to disrupt dominant notions about who produces

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Preziosi, "Art History: Making the Visible Legible," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Fatona, "Where Outreach Meets Outrage: Racial Equity Policy Formation at the Canada Council for the Arts (1989–1999)" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Charmaine A. Nelson, introduction to *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance*, ed. Charmaine A. Nelson (Concord, ON: Captus Press, 2019), 3.



visual culture in Canada, and under what conditions, by calling attention to the invisibility of Black persons as subjects within Canadian cultural discourses.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, noticing and analyzing the artwork of African descended people in relation to the framework (artistic and otherwise) of the nation state upsets and displaces a clear national narrative by introducing the longstanding and diverse presence of Black people in Canada, spread across geographies and eras, from Africville to Little Burgundy to Hogan’s Alley.

The ordering of the art world is tied a range of power hierarchies that are animated by race, class, age, gender, location, and more; these hierarchies are concretized and normalized, they are told and retold by art historians through their narratives of what art history is and should be. Tesfagiorgis aptly describes the discipline of art history as a discipline that “systematically focuses on the fine art and lives of men of European descent. .... Its conventional purpose is to provide knowledge about developments of “major works” “masterpieces” by “major figures” “geniuses” and ultimately to influence appreciation of them.”<sup>17</sup> As such, the art history canon and the narratives that compose it are intimately entwined with the exclusionary structures (patriarchy, white supremacy, classism, and so on) that feed into its disciplinary practice and methodologies. Put otherwise, the canon, the history, the practioners, the art critics, the students, and teachers, all uphold disciplinary (and thus colonial) norms that are rooted in practices of marginalization. In this way, traditional art history reproduces the values of a privileged European aesthetic.

The solidity of these disciplines and their traditional approaches to art history demand alternatives that do not replicate these practices of exclusion—some already forged (as noted by

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<sup>16</sup> Fatona, Andrea M. “In the Presence of Absence: Invisibility, Black Canadian History, and Melinda Mollineaux’s Pinhole Photography.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (March 30, 2006), 228.

<sup>17</sup> Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique(s) That Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” 259.

Fatona) and others to be dreamt and realized. Black studies scholar Faye Gleiser, working in the United States, points out the colonial workings of traditional art history: “From Black studies, I’ve learned that the call is not to become an expert on these subjects but to literally find ways to survive and collectively dismantle these structures. This approach has been critical to helping me understand that art history doesn’t merely tell stories about artists and art. It’s really through its own structural insistence on chronology, comparison, and classification that it reproduces anti-Black and colonial power structures.”<sup>18</sup> The urgencies she outlines strongly suggest a black studies approach to art history can and could lead to some kind of change. If art history is a discipline linked to the recognition of beauty that reinforces a canonic set of beliefs and values, than the interdisciplinarity of a black studies approach would mean honouring and fostering research and findings that offer new or different kinds of knowledge that move across, subvert, and are generated outside a Eurocentric canon.<sup>19</sup> Black studies scholar Katherine McKittrick shares similar thinking: “Black studies engenders, shares, and demands diasporic literacy; black studies theorizes black liberation not through categories (identity) but from the perspective of struggle (struggle is entangled with identities-places-embodiments-infrastructures-narratives-feeling).”<sup>20</sup> Canadian art history, informed by a black studies approach, would not mean seeking recognition by and inclusion into a Eurocentric and/or patriarchal model, but instead would approach black art practices relationally, without a disciplining intent. Put otherwise, the melding of black studies and Canadian art history (will open up a set of complex entanglements that expose the limits of nationalism and the important ways black artists in Canada have worked and

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<sup>18</sup> Sampada Aranke, Huey Copeland and Faye R. Gleisser, “Let’s Ride: Art History after Black Studies,” *Artforum* (October 2023), <https://www.artforum.com/features/huey-copeland-art-history-after-black-studies-sampada-aranke-faye-raquel-gleisser-512513/>.

<sup>19</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press, 2021), 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

reworked what belonging means by producing works that persistently undermine the nation, the implementation of borders, and disciplinary (canonical) thinking. At the same time, a black studies approach reveals how anti-blackness has structured what objects/images/artists we study, how we study these objects/images/artists, and how entire intellectual field is undergirded by Eurocentricity. If “[d]iscipline is the act of relentless categorization,” than an interdisciplinary black studies approach is experimental and open to different kinds of analysis.<sup>21</sup> This leads to, in my view, a rigorous study of art and art practices that are provisional and shifting rather than solution-based conclusions while also nodding to black aesthetic and scholarly and activist work that understands that the work of liberation as ongoing.<sup>22</sup>

I am a black studies scholar and this research project, through the four portfolio components you will examine, takes a black studies approach to making a black Canadian art history. Although this project touches art history, art criticism, black Canadian studies, pedagogy, discourse analysis and library science, the way my research moves across these disciplines can be attributed to black studies. Art history, like other discourses and disciplines, is a system of knowledge that reproduces itself and profits from this replication; a black studies approach to Canadian art history would intervene in these concretizing processes. A black studies approach to Canadian art history recognizes black aesthetics as liberatory and unfinished.<sup>23</sup> A black studies approach Canadian art history would draw attention to the ways black art and black creative practice are entangled with theory and theoretical in themselves.<sup>24</sup> A

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<sup>21</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Fatona, writing about scholars like Katherine McKittrick, Paul Gilroy and Houston Baker, points out the power of black artist in relation to nation, because “Black diasporic sensibilities and aesthetics cannot simply place the Black subject back into a narrative of nation without transforming that very narrative or questioning the legitimacy of its foundation.” Fatona, “In the Presence of Absence,” 229.

<sup>24</sup> In *Dear Science*, McKittrick asks that we read creative texts as theoretical texts.

black studies approach to art history would shift art criticism, noticing how the method and methodologies that shape how we read, look, write about, black art dismantles knowledge hierarchies. This is not a project that names, builds or reifies the canon of black Canadian art history. Instead, this research program is a proposal, that is, a set of methodological approaches and well as a series of provisional and alterable propositions that seek to expose and rethink the complexities of black creative practices in Canada.

### **Method/Methodology**

Interdisciplinarity is a principal feature of black studies scholarship, and it guides how I conceived of the experiments in black Canadian art history that make up the components of my portfolio. My methods and methodology are developed from three experimental texts: *Golden Gulag* (2007) by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *The Hawthorn Archive* (2017) by Avery Gordon, and *Dear Science* (2021) by Katherine McKittrick. Each one of these books presents new forms and ideas by challenging the bounds of each author's academic discipline and/or home (Gilmore is trained in Geography, Gordon is trained in Sociology, and McKittrick is trained in Women's Studies) and their attendant conventions.<sup>25</sup> As well, these authors differently call into question "studies" more broadly; instead of inventing or adding to particular knowledge fields in order to master an area of study and refine expertise, their projects seek to work through how the production of knowledge generates liberatory practices, ideally, through an openness to relational thinking and horizontally organized epistemologies.

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<sup>25</sup> These are not the only texts that do this, just the most relevant ones for this project. Other examples are *Woman, Native, Other* by Trihn T Min Ha, *Dark Matters* by Simone Browne, *Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy, *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, and *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon.

The construction of *The Hawthorn Archive*, a research site that is an archive of subjugated knowledges, upends traditional disciplinary approaches to the study of utopia and their predetermined outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Gordon critiques the field of utopia studies by inventing a whole new form.<sup>27</sup> With the utopian margins as a subject, her book uses both real and imaginary components to create a new research site. Her careful collection of correspondence and case studies present an alternative version to the de facto disciplinary understanding of what a utopia is. Instead of theorizing utopia as a “homogenous perfect future no place,” Gordon suggests that utopia can be a standpoint for living in the here and now. She finds this standpoint by recognizing “the subjugated knowledge of slaves, prisoners, runaways, war deserters and other troublemakers” as evidence for another conception of utopia.<sup>28</sup> For her, their knowledge is theory. She wants to find a perspective, a language and way of recognizing a revolutionary truth. This book, in the form of an archive, allows for the speculative breadth of such a search: by creating a real/imaginary archive in this book, Gordon creates the kind of space that utopias are understood to be. In this way, her methodology and methods offer a more expansive understanding of utopia as not only a location, but a way of living. The construction of *The Hawthorn Archive* upends traditional disciplinary approaches to the study of utopia and their predetermined outcomes. The method and methodology of this project is a good example for black Canadian art history. The Hawthorn Archive’s experiments with form—changing whose

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<sup>26</sup> Avery Gordon, *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> In Gordon’s own words: “the form of the book essentially is trying to fuse critical theory and creative writing in a historical context so that fact, fiction, theory and image can speak to each other in an environment that, again, not quite academic, not quite artistic, but something in between or more combined.” Bhandar, Brenna, and Rafeef Ziadah, “Revolutionary Feminisms: Avery F. Gordon.” *Verso* (blog), *Verso Books*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/4842-revolutionary-feminisms-avery-f-gordon>.

<sup>28</sup> Avery Gordon, “Haunted Futures: The Utopian Margins,” lecture, ICI Berlin, 8 November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.25620/e211108>.

perspective is recognized as truthful and valuable, and shifting how new knowledge can be arrived at—offer means of disciplinary intervention. These experiments show that researchers can be playful and that building new forms and structures is a just and possible way to undertake research and arrive at new conclusions. My project, like Gordon's, uses new forms to work through research questions.

In *Golden Gulag* Ruth Wilson Gilmore takes a multiscalar and interdisciplinary approach to analyzing the factors that led to the dramatic proliferation of prisons in California over the 20<sup>th</sup> century?<sup>29</sup> She sources evidence from the social, geographic, economic, political, environmental and historical realms, and combines what she finds with anecdotal evidence from personal relationships and interviews.<sup>30</sup> As a Marxist geographer, her material approach is primarily spatial. Gilmore uses that perspective as the ground for an analysis of the other areas, and formulates a comprehensive understanding of the complex, interrelated factors that led to the rapid expansion of the prison industrial complex (a term coined by Gilmore) in the 1980s and 1990s. In her multiscalar approach, no single aspect is ever looked at alone: each detail and piece of evidence is brought into context with other aspects of the research to draw a full picture. *Golden Gulag* shows that considering factors beyond the disciplinary boundary is a helpful way to shape a comprehensive overview of a researcher's subject. This method is helpful to my experiments forming a black Canadian art history. I am attentive to the multiple black diasporas in Canada, and to the diversity of black creative cultures. I incorporate insights and methods outside of the discipline of art history, and alongside a variety of documents and evidence, to help me build a robust, multiscalar black Canadian art history.

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<sup>29</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Much of the book's footnotes are elaborations of interviews Gilmore did during her research.

McKittrick's *Dear Science* is an experiment in breaking academic form. Her subject and research site are black cultures and the black intellectual and radical tradition (in both theory and creative practice). The book suggests that methods and methodology are the beating heart of black studies, and our approach to research is the thing that can and must be changed in order to escape the racist closed epistemological loop of the humanities, and to challenge the conventions that scholars are usually expected to replicate. McKittrick reinvents the classic scholarly essay format by playing with images and layout and paper and textual form. To critique a discipline, this book demonstrates, you must challenge its form.

McKittrick argues that our approach to research can shift knowledge production. By wilfully crossing and entwining different modes of knowledge (scholarly, creative, the social sciences, the natural sciences, the humanities) we can honour longstanding black studies practices that are invested in collaboration, multi-modal thinking, and the kind of relationalities Edouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, and Paul Gilroy attend to in their work. She describes this as “Method-making” which “is the enactment of black life [that] bursts through disciplined abjection.”<sup>31</sup> McKittrick suggests the goal for scholars is not to seek solutions and answers, but rather move toward experimentation that is not beholden to the aim of a single, tidy conclusion. For her, the work of liberation (that perennial concern of anti-colonial and black radical scholars) is always incomplete; and is neither fixed nor knowable.

This text is an important example of how to deconstruct disciplinary conventions. McKittrick gives the researcher permission to experiment without the imperative of coming up with a hard and fast conclusion. The repetitions and references and experimentation in this book affirm that multiple approaches and different methodologies can be used in attempts to challenge

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<sup>31</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 46.

and expand disciplinary thinking, and will prove useful to the formation of a black Canadian art history.

The liberatory possibilities of black studies and black creative practice provide the context for my research. Black Canadian art history requires differential, overlapping, analytical sites and encourages reading practices that shift us away from static disciplinary thinking and toward more capacious and risky understandings of black knowledge, art, aesthetics, and artists. My methodology is experimental, based on concepts and approaches developed by anti-colonial thinkers who demonstrably challenge disciplinary norms. Their methods support the idea that the story is important, that how we tell the story matters, and that narratives count towards what we understand as truth. In the formation of a black Canadian art history, my goal is not simply to add a black art chapter to Canadian art history textbooks. I consider the multiple and simultaneous local black histories across the country, and as I analyse how they are connected to creative cultures of the black diaspora more broadly (across histories and geographies), I undermine national art historical discourses that place black art either into a single narrative, or outside the nation.

### **A Local Black Diaspora**

Geographer Doreen Massey's elaboration of the concept of 'local' informs how I describe African diasporic art practices in Canada. Rather than black Canadian art, I prefer to think of the black art in Canada locally connected to a global African diaspora. Massey writes about the local as sustained expressions of interdependent and unique spatial processes. No place can be understood in isolation. In this way, to study something local, like an aesthetic for instance, is to understand that it is connected to an elsewhere or stretches beyond its locality. I



take up Massey's theoretical elaboration of 'local' because it helps me position black art practices within Canada, geographically, without assuming those practices are enclosed within and bounded to the nation-state. In my consideration of black Canadian art history, I think beyond the confines of the national and emphasize how the local is always connected to other sites and locations and simultaneous articulations of 'elsewhere.' Black art in Canada, conceptualized as local black art connected to a global African diaspora, illuminates aesthetically spatial processes that are, simultaneously, expansive and particular. My use of the term local thus allows me to circumvent the crude and exclusionary expressions of nationalism (and, as well, related disciplinary strictures). Unlike the possessive adjective 'Canadian,' which establishes an identity linked to nation, the term local does not recapitulate a narrative that either absorbs or casts out historical and contemporary black diaspora presences.

The development of a discourse on black art and black art history in the West has been greatly centered on the United States context. Writing from Canada, and with an investment in local black art practices, it is essential for me to urge a stretching of the perception of what blackness is and where it belongs. In time, I hope to form a robust and expansive understanding of black diaspora aesthetics that recognizes the connection of longstanding African cultural forms to those of the African diaspora after the middle passage. I use black to refer to all Afro-diasporic people and also build on Fatona, who situates blackness in Canada within multiple diasporas and a lasting presence beyond recent arrivals. A focus on the former, recent arrivals, is often used to dismiss and displace black Canada in that it erases or downplays slavery in Canada and the nation's implication in perpetuating slavery globally, thus obscuring both transnational histories and ongoing diasporic connections. In this way, it is important to centre how "Black Canadian sensibilities and aesthetics are formed through a process of transculturation and are

about webs of connections to other places - the United States, England, the Caribbean, Africa. Diasporic subjectivity is grounded in the specificity of this place called Canada, yet gestures to locations and histories in the metropole and at the periphery.”<sup>32</sup>

While I am attentive to the ways in which black people were and continue to be exploited and harmed (regarded as subhuman, taken for granted, extracted from, excluded) and to how anti-blackness structures the very social and economic fiber of our societies, I rest and return, always, to a recognition of blackness as outlined by McKittrick in her essay “Worn Out”:

...black is in the break, it is fantastic, it is an absented presence, it is a ghost, a mirror, it is water, air; black is flying and underground; it is time-traveling, supernatural, inter-planetary, otherworldly; it is in between the lines and it is postcolonial; black is bulletproof and magical and in every dark corner; black is social death, afro-pessimist, afro-optimist, afrocentric, afropunk, afrofuturist, soulful, neosoul, blues; it is negritude, postslave, always enslaved; black is like who/black is like me; black is everywhere and everything; it is make-believe and magic.<sup>33</sup>

This is the perspective from which I work, and what I mean when I use black to designate art and artists. The black artists who make up a local black art history have a shared black sensibility through their social and/or economic and/or geographic experiences. The methods and methodologies reviewed above show the complex entanglements involved in the application of an interdisciplinary analysis. The reason these methods are necessary to the formation of a black Canadian art history is because blackness—the “black” in black identity or black art—is also an experience of complex entanglements: there is no simple way to understand blackness, and diaspora aesthetics, which we experience in the art made by black people, both encompass and are reflective of the multiplicity of black history and black experience. Shaping an art history that

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<sup>32</sup> Fatona, “In the Presence of Absence,” 229.

<sup>33</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. “Commentary: Worn Out.” *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1 (2017): 97.

honors local black diaspora art needs to start from anti-colonial, interdisciplinary methodologies, and a black sense of aesthetics.

### **A Black Sense of Place → A Black Sense of Aesthetics**

In order to apply black studies to Canadian art history and develop a black Canadian art history, I apply the concept and analytical framework ‘a black sense of aesthetics’ to my experimental research processes. A ‘black sense of aesthetics’ is born from McKittrick’s concept of a ‘black sense of place.’<sup>34</sup> Referencing Sylvia Wynter’s “demonic grounds” and expanding on Doreen Massey’s “sense of place” McKittrick works through the locations through which black people know from. That is, a black sense of place is a way for her to draw attention to how black people know, make, and remake place; given the persistence of white supremacy, she describes it as “a location of difficult encounter and relationality. In *Dear Science*, McKittrick revised her initial writing about a black sense of place as a geographic concept to also encompass diaspora considerations.<sup>35</sup>

A black sense of place is not a standpoint or a situated knowledge; it is a location of difficult encounter and relationality. A black sense of place is not individualized knowledge—it is collaborative praxis. It assumes that our collective assertions of life are always in tandem with other ways of being (including those ways of being we cannot bear). A black sense of place always calls into question, struggles against, critiques, undoes, prevailing racist scripts. A black sense of place is a diasporic-plantocratic-black

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<sup>34</sup> Katherine McKittrick first introduced the concept in her essay “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 947–63.

<sup>35</sup> McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place” (2011) and *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021).

geography that reframes what we know by reorienting and honoring where we know from.<sup>36</sup>

A black sense of place is not a static geography, but rather a way of being and a way of knowing—a sensorial and anti-colonial geography that informs how one envisions and spatializes liberation). A black sense of place is a site of struggle, and a perspective that allows you avoid reproducing colonial logics. A black sense of place is a vantage point from which to enact alternative possibilities of interrelation. A black sense of place allows you to develop new methodologies, and to do and look and relate otherwise. A black sense of aesthetics reconsiders McKittrick’s concept within the discipline of art history. Black creative practice is closely tied to knowledge production, diaspora, anti-racism, liberation and anti-colonialism and in adapting this concept, I understand black creative practice as liberatory.<sup>37</sup> As a local black Canadian art history takes form, it is imperative to anticipate the ways in which black aesthetic practices require a different approach than those of the art historical methods that discipline or erase black creative output.

A black sense of aesthetics is an analytical frame and a practice of freedom. Like a black sense of place, “A black sense of aesthetics is demonic grounds, it is “where we know from.”<sup>38</sup> A black sense of place is “a praxis that does not assume or desire resolved outcomes.”<sup>39</sup> Applied to art history, a black sense of aesthetics is an academic methodology that affirms black life and

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<sup>36</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Black culture is critical culture, Hortense Spillers says. According to her, what black creative cultures have in common is a spirit of resistance. From this stance, black art is political insofar as it faces up to, pushes against and has friction with dominant culture. See Hortense J. Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 7-28. See also: Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*.

<sup>38</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 117.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

relational thinking.<sup>40</sup> As a concept, a black sense of aesthetics dodges traditional art history disciplinary methods. It is an interdisciplinary, anti-colonial approach that honours black livingness. In its application, it refuses a disciplinary call to evidence and classify and categorize and reproduce the real and rhetorical anti-black violence of humanism's intellectual legacy. To critically engage these practices and memorialize them, from a black sense of aesthetics, is thus to challenge colonial knowledge systems and their epistemologies. Therefore, to take my concept as a starting point is to accept as a premise that black aesthetics are liberatory aesthetics. In applying a black sense of aesthetics to art history I believe, like McKittrick that "radical (rogue) interdisciplinarity (method-making) and patient relational thinking offer ways to rethink our present system of knowledge."<sup>41</sup>

## **Introduction to Portfolio Components**

As I worked on this dissertation portfolio, I centered these key questions: How can we make an art history that does not reproduce the colonial structure embedded in canonical art history? What unique research methods and presentation strategies have been developed by local black artists and art workers? How have local black aesthetic practices been remembered through publishing, exhibitions or other pedagogic, scholarly or organizational projects? These questions led me to think about the several parts that are needed to build a robust black Canadian art history. Firstly, adequate documentation of local black art practices, including images, writing and analysis. Second, an analytical, art historical methodology that does justice to black art practices (as well as related and marginalized creative works and processes). A black sense of

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

aesthetics, as a concept, is a helpful approach to reshape the method for making an art history that is both expansive and particular, local and transnational, anti-disciplinary, and aesthetically diasporic.

Black Canadian art history requires a different way of teaching, a different kind approach to art writing and criticism, a different way of doing archival research and a different way of organizing information and recognizing knowledge. This is not a simple process, and it takes experimentation and the pulling together of multi-layered knowledges and sources, which is why this dissertation has taken the form of a portfolio; I work across narratives, methods, textures, and forms. As well, the portfolio format has allowed me to think about, and share, various ways of making black Canadian art history. The projects I offer are not perfect, rather they are open-ended and include essays, syllabi, templates, library datum, all of which can be studied, distributed, and reshaped.

There are four components to this portfolio:

1. Yellow Book — *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art* (2024, figure ground/Art Metropole)
2. Greyzone Pedagogies — *Doing the Work: Selected Course Syllabi*
3. Blue Book — *Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in a While, A Black Art History Project* (2024, Arttexte)
4. Black Art Study — a Black Canadian Art History Scholarship Database

These components were distributed you, the reader/assessor, as a PDF and a hardcopy package.

You will receive a copy of each book, as well as two QR codes that lead you to

[greyzonepedagogies.com](http://greyzonepedagogies.com) (the syllabi website) and [blackartstudy.ca](http://blackartstudy.ca) (the database website).

Below, I give a brief introduction to each component.

Yellow Book — *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art (2024, figure ground/Art Metropole)*

One of the fascinating aspects of art historical inquiry is translating what you see with your eyes, and experience with your senses or your body, into written text. This process of formal visual description leads to analysis and is a key source of evidence for making arguments about works of art and material culture.<sup>42</sup>

— *CanadARThistories*, open source Canadian art history textbook

Black Canadian art history needs art criticism that documents the layers that comprise local black art practices. As seen in Johnson’s work on McDonald-Brown, which began this introduction, interviews, artworks, legal documents and art writing are some of the materials she used to make black art history; this kind of analysis, which attends to various sources and resources, is a good model for black art history. In Johnson’s 2015 thesis there is no reference to other critical analyses of McDonald-Brown’s painting. In her 2019 chapter on McDonald-Brown, Johnson includes her own reading of the painter’s subject matter. Her critical analysis is brief but suggests many possibilities for further research into McDonald-Brown’s work, and life.<sup>43</sup> Johnson notes that:

[a]lthough research continues in tracing McDonald’s life and painting, the towering and jagged peaks of mountains in the background of *Untitled* feature a topography associated with western Canada and regions of Scotland, thus presenting intriguing possibilities for feminist postcolonial art historical scholarship regarding travel and mobility in the Canadian context; an area still largely ignored in representing black Canadian woman as producers and participants in Canadian art from the twentieth century and earlier.<sup>44</sup>

The rich potential of these unexplored research questions reflects the underdeveloped critical attention to artists like McDonald-Brown in Canadian art history. More analyses of McDonald-

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<sup>42</sup> Johanna Amos, Alena Buis, Elizabeth Anne Cavaliere, Jen Kennedy, Sarah E.K Smith and Devon Smither, “Introduction” to *CanadARThistories 1.7* (Open Art Histories, 2022), 34.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, “Authoring belonging: early African Canadian fine artists George H. McCarthy (1860-1906) and Edith H. McDonald (c. 1880-1954),” 304.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

Brown's paintings in the historical and geographical context in which she made them, and then across eras and geographies, would enrich how we are able to lend significance to her aesthetic work. The re-historicization of black Canada in the past several decades adds another angle to the analytical framework that could be used for her work. Thus, readings based on place, race, history, migration, technique and subject matter might be overlapping or contradictory, but they will reveal the complexity generated by a consideration of a black art practice from this kind of multi-focal framework, which I would call a black sense of aesthetics.

Writing about black art from a black sense of aesthetics does not reproduce colonial aesthetic hierarchies in its analysis. It uses interdisciplinary methods to incorporate previously undervalued evidence (stories) to frame and analyze black creative practice. Approached with a black sense of aesthetics, the multiple intersections of McDonald-Brown's experience would be taken into account. The considerations would look at the contexts of her practice: who were the people around her in Montreal and Halifax when she was painting? What were the major events happening in Canada, and the world, at the time in which she relocated from Halifax to Montreal, and back? How were the fine art community and public art institutions structured in Halifax and Montreal when she was making art? What visiting scholars, local artists, historical references or popular texts that might have influenced for McDonald-Brown work? These kinds of questions and research prompts can lead us to a black Canadian art history that considers the multiplicity of contexts and influences and realities of local black art practices. For this kind of black art history to develop, we need to establish a practice of black art criticism that shows how this kind of analysis can be done with contemporary art.

The yellow book, *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art*, is a manuscript of writing about black artists and black art practices in Canada founded on a black sense of aesthetics. It



focuses narrowly on contemporary art being made and presented by black artists and art workers in the present. The book was published in 2024 by figure ground and Art Metropole and contains twenty-three texts previously published in catalogues and magazines, as exhibition texts and online, by galleries and museums and artist-run centres. These researched, analytical essays, reviews, and artist interviews range from a few paragraphs to several pages long. The presentation of this collection of writing about local black art practices demonstrates how to write, publish and contribute to the “matter” needed by art historians. By having a greater variety of source documents to work from, that are not invested in the reproduction of European aesthetic values, art historian’s research will be more responsive to the specificities and complex entanglements of local black art in Canada. With more black art writing and art criticism, we build a discourse that benefits the contemporary black art community, and provides the materials for art historians to use in their analysis. As such, the texts in the yellow book, written from a black sense of aesthetics, represent one component of a rich, black Canadian art history.

#### Greyzone Pedagogies — Doing the Work: Selected Syllabi

Wynter is offering a way to read radically.... to read differently (from a third perspective, from the perspective of struggle, from demonic ground) and observe how our present system of knowledge, a biocentric system of knowledge upheld by capitalist financing, is a self-referential system that profits from recursive normalization; and, second, to read and notice the conditions through which self-replicating knowledge systems are breached and liberation is made possible.<sup>45</sup>

—Katherine McKittrick

As noted earlier in this introduction, art history is a discipline that is tied to knowledge hierarchies—epistemological and scholarly structures that privilege Eurocentric views and are

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<sup>45</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 43.

passed down and concretized over time. One way these ideas are passed down is through teaching, learning, mentoring, and education. This portion of my portfolio presents how a set of syllabi and lesson plans can breach dominant knowledge systems. During the pandemic, for example, reading lists, resources and other shared collaborative and collective knowledge, like hashtags and recorded talks, circulated online in abundance, pointing to informal knowledge sharing that was/is reminiscent of shared black and black feminist organizing during and after the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> This kind of informal knowledge sharing challenges those academic institutions that seemingly hold exclusive domain over how we teach and learn. During the pandemic, the velocity of the sharing was accentuated because of our isolation and the new technologies at our disposal. As noted, this type of knowledge sharing is not new. In marginalized communities, informal knowledge sharing—what some now call mutual aid—has been a matter of survival. One significant text in this diffraction is the black feminist book, *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Womens Studies*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, et al, and published in 1982. In this book is a section called “BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAYS,” which mirrors the aforementioned reading lists that were circulated online during the pandemic. These printed bibliographies and the collection of black feminist data within the book are templates for how informal sharing is a necessary part of how we read and think through liberation, aesthetics, blackness, and diaspora. Also in this book is a section called “DOING THE WORK: SELECTED COURSE SYLLABI,” which I used as a model to organize this component of portfolio.

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview see: Carmen Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

[greyzonepedagogies.com](http://greyzonepedagogies.com) is a website that shares a selection of the workshops and courses I organized and taught while I was working towards the completion of this degree. I call the website greyzone after the concept used by critic Thomas Waugh in his analysis of the work of queer, anticolonial filmmaker John Greyson, in 2013 chapter “Notes on Greyzone,” featured in the 2013 book *The perils of pedagogy: the works of John Greyson*. In it, Waugh talks about pedagogical strategies for teaching queer cinema and emphasizes, in critical reading and teaching, embracing ambiguity, critical engagement and intersectionality when teaching and ethical responsibility. All these things, I felt, fit into a black sense of aesthetics as applied to pedagogy.<sup>47</sup> Many of the workshops used different online applications and platforms. In some instances, this was because of the constraints of the pandemic, but also there were an increasing number of new ways to digitally gather, present and sharing information. While people were isolated physically, arts organizations and educational institutions quickly created or adopted online social spaces to continue their education, presentation and outreach activities uninterrupted by the shared global catastrophe. For better or worse, we carried on. In my own teaching and workshop organizing, I worked with commissioning organizations, and my co-facilitators, to develop teaching strategies adapted to sites like Are.na, Zoom, and Milanote. We used these platforms to foster environments where we could talk and learn and share.

Though all the courses and workshops I taught from 2020-2025 are aligned with my research interests—contemporary art, critical discourse analysis, abolition, art criticism, art writing and art history—I choose on [greyzonepedagogies.com](http://greyzonepedagogies.com) only to highlight a few of my

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Waugh, “Notes on Greyzone.” In *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, ed. by Thomas Waugh et al. (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013): 19–42. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hnc5.7>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2025.

favourites, in which a black sense of aesthetics is visible in the syllabi and pedagogy.<sup>48</sup> On the website, the syllabi for these courses and workshops are presented with their pre-recorded videos, readings, prompts, themes and images. Applied to pedagogy, a black sense of aesthetics requires methods to be reshaped. Pedagogy from a black sense of aesthetics enacts Wynter's decipherment and McKittrick's black livingness. It is a relational process by which teachers learn from participants, and participants learn from each other, and together we develop the ability to recognize truth outside the boundaries of a traditional canon. These workshops and courses show how the concept of a black sense of aesthetics can move through different pedagogical strategies. Their syllabi offer new methods that can be applied to how (black) Canadian art history is taught. They demonstrate ways to challenge classroom dynamics and offer new ways of recognizing and making knowledge. They value what Avery Gordon calls "subjugated knowledge" and use black creative practice as theoretical texts to create space for relational (not hierarchical) knowledge production.

Art Criticism after Black Studies  
Queen's University undergraduate seminar, 2023

Ideas From Moving Water  
The Wattis Institute Lorraine O'Grady research season, 2022

Song. Prayer. Scream. A Praxis of Looking  
Cassandra Press & the Women's Center for Creative Work, 2022

WhAt She SAid: Promiscuous References & Disobedient Care  
Contingencies of Care Residency at OCAD University, 2021

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<sup>48</sup> On the site, on the "About Greyzone Pedagogies" page, I mention other workshops, creative collaborations, edited collections and pedagogical tools I made during my time as a student.

Blue Book — *Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in a While, A Black Art History Project* (2024, Artexte)

data tunnels a bridge of ancestry<sup>49</sup>

—Cecily Nicholson

Any discussion of archival loss asks that we recognize the archives as tracking the incomplete project of freedom. This incompleteness opens up the work of imagination—iterations of black life that cannot be contained by official history.<sup>50</sup>

—Katherine McKittrick

*Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in a While, A Black Art History Project*, the blue book, is the next component of my portfolio. This component is the book itself, the research, and the presentation. The blue book collects archival texts by and about Buseje Bailey, a black, lesbian, Toronto-based artist who was prolific in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of the key processes of art history as a discipline is archival research. A black sense of aesthetics applied to archival research allows that research to be creative and unruly. Wayward is difficult to control or predict. I applied a wayward yet rigorous process to my search through the fonds at the Artexte Research Information Centre in Montreal, where I did my PhD practicum during the summer of 2021. Initially, I called my practicum residency Wayside Archive, after Cecily Nicholson's book of poetry, *Wayside Sang* (2017). Wayside is the edge of the road. I circled the edge of the fonds: I took pictures and made copies of items of interest; I meticulously

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<sup>49</sup> Cecily Nicholson, *Wayside Sang* (Talon Book, 2018), 40.

<sup>50</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 142.

recorded my processes, reflections and findings in handwritten notes on cue cards; I looked beyond what was presented as knowable and transparent.<sup>51</sup> I tried to connect gaps in the archives, to see what was not there, or what was there in the last place I looked. I immersed myself in the documents and narratives of black cultural production, studying the activities of black artists and art workers from coast to coast. In the end, I encountered Buseje Bailey through the various materials that—in both their presence and absence—contextualized her practice and influence.

Mojeanne Behzadi, who was overseeing my residency, proposed we make a publication of my research. I felt a desire to show my research findings: how Bailey's career was in the archive but also not entirely held or captive.<sup>52</sup> I worked with Mojeanne, Haus9 Design and Artex's Kasey Hawke to make the publication. Aesthetically and in form, I was inspired by *Festac '77: The 2nd World Festival of Black Arts and Culture*, the Chimurenga book, The Warburg Institute Archive, *The Hawthorn Archive*, Neta Bomani zines, and the analogue presentation of DIY zine culture. These archives and publications used creative methods to present history and theory. They undermined traditional categorization rules and offered undisciplined and excessive collections of primary materials. In our selection, bundling and representation of documents for the publication, we proceed with a special kind of care, checking in with each other and the artist, reviewing with her our progress as the book very slowly came together over the course of two years.

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<sup>51</sup> See Katherine McKittrick on transparent space: "The naturalization of 'difference' is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of transparent space, the idea that space 'just is,' and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true," Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xv.

<sup>52</sup> The documents I found pointed to a rich and full career, but there was still way less information and materials about her practice than there were for her black male contemporaries.

A black sense of aesthetics applied to black Canadian art history means the work cannot be a project of capture, it cannot be about mining the archive for evidence. Instead, black Canadian art history must tell stories that speak to the ongoing history of black creative practice, without confining them to known categories or predictable trajectories. The blue book demonstrates what black Canadian art history could look like. Through her own words and in conversations with others, alongside the input of peers and researchers, the materials collected in the blue book outline what it was/is like to live and work as a black woman, as a poor person, as a lesbian and as a mother. In the end, the resulting collection is a cross section of documents that together form a whole image of the artist and her work. The book's use of primary materials presents the multiple perspectives that reveal the contradictions and difficult entanglements that determined Bailey's career. It is an example of the kind of complexity offered by the application of a black sense of aesthetics.

Black Art Study — *a Black Canadian Art History Scholarship Database*

Citation could, then, perhaps be considered one fulcrum of black studies: in a world that despises blackness the bibliography—written or sung or whispered or remembered or dreamed or forgotten—ushers in, or initiates, or teaches, or affirms. This is the praxis of being black and human as struggle. This cites and sites a genre of humanness that emerged from but is not solely defined by plantocratic logics of dispossession: the works cited, what we tell each other about what we know and how to know, contain how to refuse practices of dehumanization.

—Katherine McKittrick

Diane E. Peters' 2003 book *Canadian Art and Architecture: An Annotated Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations* gathers the abstracts and basic information of over 1765 dissertations published between 1924 and 1999 into two sections—'architecture' and 'art,' further dividing

the letters into thirteen categories.<sup>53</sup> A set of books, *Art and Architecture in Canada: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature*, Vol. 1 and 2, published twelve years earlier in 1991, might be what Peters modelled her collection on.<sup>54</sup> They contain information for 9555 entries from “books, articles, exhibition catalogues, government publications, and theses ... from the early nineteenth century to 1981,” and organize their contents by geographic region, by medium (as in: painting, sculpture photography, etc), and material (as in ceramic, glass, wood, textiles etc.).<sup>55</sup> Together, these books exemplify the categories and classifications that prevail in the discipline of art history. The clear, tidy, predictable, repetitive organization tells us what we already know. These categories have existed for centuries, coterminous with the expansion of empire and its art historical canon.

How to depart from categorizations and classifications that discipline and reproduce canonical art history? I created a resource list of existing Master’s theses and PhD dissertations on the subject of black Canadian art, collected for presentation and searchable in a decentralized way. The black Canadian art history scholarship database, the fourth component of my portfolio, is hosted at [blackartstudy.com](http://blackartstudy.com).<sup>56</sup> To bring together the initial contents, I used searched different terms or combinations of terms to comb through the databases at different universities and

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<sup>53</sup> These categories are: Analytical Studies; Art Criticism/Journalism; Art Education; Art Market/Economic Studies; Book Illustration; Catalogs/Bibliographies/Inventories/Directories; Folk Art/Ethnological Studies; Historical/Biographical Studies; Iconographical Studies; Legal Studies; Literature/Music/Film and Art; Psychological Studies/Art Therapy; Sociological Studies/Cultural Geography.

<sup>54</sup> Loren R. Lerner and Mary F Williamson, *Art and Architecture in Canada: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature* (University of Toronto Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442671010>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The impetus for this project came when I was doing research for my Master’s degree and kept encountering insightful scholarship as I tried to gather information on my subject. My Master’s thesis, also done at Queen’s University in the Gender Studies department, was titled “When and Where We Enter: Situating the Absented Presence of Black Canadian Art.” I realized that these research projects, which I found across a variety of disciplines, would probably never be known, let alone seen and read, by the kinds of people who would benefit from them most—black artists, critics and curators, and art historians who want to know more about black creative practice in Canada.



Library and Archives Canada. Search terms were both the access point and the barrier to my results: “black Canadian art” proved to be an insufficient search term. I used African Canadian, black Canadian, diaspora artist, creative practice, fine art, art, and so on. Each term, and combination of terms, yielded different results. For every new search I read through hundreds of abstracts to assess their relevance. I retained anything that had to do with the creation and presentation of black art in Canada.

When I had 30 theses and dissertations, I met with a coder (Ben Rawn) and a web designer (Pitt Wenninger) to build the Black Art Study website. My task with this collection could not simply be to make them searchable: access to these entries could not reproduce the “relentless categorization” of empire.<sup>57</sup> How could this database honour the subject of these theses and dissertations without delving them into a classificatory system that did not foster and encourage black liberation? I looked at this task with a black sense of aesthetics and arrived at references. I returned to McKittrick’s *Dear Science*, in particular the story “Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor),” where she posits citation as integral to black studies: “The works cited untangle systems of oppression and talk about resisting racist violence. The works cited are many and various divergent and overlapping texts, images, songs, and ideas that may not normally be read together. The works cited, all of them, when understood as in conversation with each other, demonstrate an interconnected story that resists oppression.”<sup>58</sup> And so I used citation and relation to organize the contents of the database.

The website features two diagrams that organize the contents of the database in a relational way. All the black art history scholarship is connected by the theorists and scholars

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<sup>57</sup> “Discipline is the act of relentless categorization,” McKittrick writes in *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 28.

who are referenced in the research. There is no search function, instead, you can select the nodal point for the thesis, dissertation or author and are led to at a list of shared references, or a stub page with the abstract, acknowledgements, and a link to a pdf copy of the research. Gone are the tidy, art historical categories that reproduce empire and disciplinary thinking. (The most cited scholars—Katherine McKittrick, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Dionne Brand, Stuart Hall—all work towards liberation.) Organized in this way, the data visualizations on this website offer a visual reckoning with the interdisciplinary nature of black Canadian art history. The scholarship, so far, spans eleven disciplines and three decades.

As a prototype for how to gather existing scholarship on black Canadian art history, this database demonstrates how we can reshape the categories that frame art history and direct our research. It brings together a collection of research that is already doing the work of shaping the discourses of black Canadian art. Presented in this way, the dissertations and thesis can continue to emerge across disciplines in an unruly way, and help establish a new methodology for black Canadian art history.

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