

## **“Embodiment and Subjectivity”: Intersectional Black Feminist Curatorial Practices in Canada**

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What is Critical Curating?

Qu'est-ce que le commissariat engagé ?

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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# “Embodiment and Subjectivity”: Intersectional Black Feminist Curatorial Practices in Canada

Joana Joachim

Dans le contexte de l'héritage canadien de colonialisme et de profond racisme, les musées ont contribué à l'oppression des Noir.e.s, des communautés de couleur et des peuples autochtones en gardant le silence ou en supprimant certaines histoires sous prétexte d'«objectivité». Cet article examine les pratiques commissariales de deux femmes noires canadiennes, Gaëtane Verna, directrice et conservatrice en chef de la galerie d'art contemporain The Power Plant, et Andrea Fatona, commissaire indépendante, afin de situer le commissariat critique à l'intérieur de perspectives afro-féministes intersectionnelles. En conformité avec une base conceptuelle fondamentale de ce féminisme, je soutiens que ce qui rend l'acte commissarial «critique» est la reconnaissance non seulement de la position qu'une personne occupe dans la société, mais aussi de celles dont elle ne fait pas toujours l'expérience. En examinant les pratiques de ces deux femmes, je mets au jour une riche histoire de l'art et du commissariat des Noir.e.s au Canada.

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In the context of Canada's legacies of settler colonialism and deep-seated racism, museums have contributed to the oppression of Black people, communities of colour, and Indigenous peoples by remaining silent, or by omitting certain histories under the pretense of “objectivity.” Since the 1980s, artists, art historians, and curators, particularly those from racialized communities, have worked to counteract this enduring tendency. This article examines the curatorial practices of two important Black Canadian women curators—Gaëtane Verna, Director of The Power Plant, and independent curator Andrea Fatona; both are currently based in Toronto. I argue that intersectional Black feminist perspectives inform the ways in which they navigate issues of social inclusion through their curatorial selection, interpretation, and discussion of artworks by artists from diverse cultural communities. Verna and Fatona reject the notion of objectivity and universal knowledge traditionally associated with museums, and instead use their awareness of the power relations at play in their own lives, within the institutional frameworks in which they work, and within society in general to curate critically—that is, to engage with issues of social inclusion and diversity in exhibition making. In this article, I compare their curatorial practices, contrasting them with those that take place in large-scale museums. I also discuss some of the ways in which major Canadian art museums have interacted over the past three decades with Black Canadian communities, and the roles played by curators within these institutions. I argue that what makes the act of curating “critical” is a recognition of one's position within society, as well as an awareness of privileges that are not universal. This very reckoning is a central aspect of intersectional Black feminism. In thinking through the practices of Verna and Fatona, I delineate major milestones in Black Canadian art history that speak to a rich, emerging history of Black Canadian art and curatorial practice.

Within the broader Canadian art context, Verna (born in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, of Haitian heritage) is acknowledged as one of the most established Black female curators in the country, particularly in the key leadership role of executive director and chief curator of a flagship institution. She holds an MA from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, as well as an International Diploma in Heritage Administration and Conservation from the Institut National du Patrimoine in Paris, France. From 1998 to 2006, Verna was the curator for the Foreman Art Gallery at Bishop's University, while also teaching in the Department of Art History at both Bishop's

University and the Université du Québec à Montréal. From 2006 to 2012, Verna was Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Musée d'art de Joliette (MAJ) in Lanaudière, Quebec, before taking up the position of Director of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto. During her time at MAJ, Verna helped secure \$10 million in funding for the renovation and expansion of the mid-sized museum.<sup>1</sup> Active in the arts community in a local, national, and international capacity, Verna has served on numerous curatorial committees, awards juries, and arts councils. As a curator, she has worked with emerging, mid-career, and established Canadian and international artists and curated numerous international touring exhibitions, including *The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding/Decoding* (2015), which examined the physical manifestations and mind-set of the specific visual dynamics of the post-World War II era. | **fig. 2** | In January 2018, the Cultural Service of the Embassy of France in Canada presented her with the prestigious Chevalier insignia of the Ordre des arts et des lettres in recognition of her significant contribution to “the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance.”<sup>2</sup>

Fatona (born in Birmingham, England, of Nigerian and Jamaican heritage) holds a PhD from the University of Toronto and is currently Associate Professor in the Criticism and Curatorial program at OCAD University. Previous to joining the faculty at OCADU, she was the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Ottawa Art Gallery from 2008 to 2011. She was also Co-Director/Curator at the artist-run centre ArtSpace Gallery in Peterborough, Ontario, and Program-ming Director at Video In in Vancouver. Fatona's projects include *Land Marks* (2013–2015), a major touring exhibition co-curated with Katherine Dennis and presented at the Thames Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Windsor, and the Art Gallery of Peterborough, and the ongoing SSHRC-funded project, *The State of Blackness: From Production to Presentation* (since 2014), which resulted in a two-day, interdisciplinary conference held at OCAD University and the Harbour-front Centre for the Arts that brought together forty-two artists, curators, academics, students, as well as multiple publics, to engage in dialogue and problematize the histories, current situation, and future state of Black diasporic artistic practice and representation in Canada.<sup>3</sup> As an educator, curator, and scholar of critical race studies and critical museology, Fatona is one of a handful of Black Canadian women working towards institutional change in the visual arts, both in the academy and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

This article locates its discussion of Black narratives and issues in relation to intersectional Black feminism within broader anti-racist and anti-colonial interventions. It is not possible to fully understand the oppressions of Black people without also situating the analysis within the ongoing settler-colonial context of Canada. Moreover, an intersectional Black feminist understanding of the Canadian context also recognizes the history of anti-Blackness and slavery as intimately linked to settler colonialism, as well as the deep connections between Black and Indigenous histories.<sup>5</sup> Another key aspect of intersectional Black feminism is the recognition of anti-Blackness as a defining factor in the lives of people of African descent.<sup>6</sup> Toronto thus serves as an important site for gaining a better understanding of Canada's history of anti-Blackness. The 2016 census of the city indicates that Indigenous and Black people, as well as people of colour, constitute 52.4 % of the city's

1. Mathieu Ferland, “10 M\$ pour le Musée d'art de Joliette,” *Le Journal de Joliette*, 16 June 2011, [www.lejournaldejoliette.ca/actualites/culture/174143/10-m\\$-pour-le-musee-dart-de-joliette](http://www.lejournaldejoliette.ca/actualites/culture/174143/10-m$-pour-le-musee-dart-de-joliette) (accessed July 22, 2018).

2. “Gaëtane Verna, Director of The Power Plant, was presented with the insignia as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres,” *Consulate General of France in Toronto*, January 25, 2018, <https://toronto.consulfrance.org/spip.php?article4408> (accessed July 22, 2018).

3. *The State of Blackness Conference* (under construction), <https://thestateofblackness.format.com> (accessed July 21, 2018).

4. Andrea Fatona, “‘Where Outreach Meets Outrage’: Racial Equity at The Canada Council for the Arts (1989–1999),” PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (2011).

5. Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 8–16.

6. Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement,” (1977), in *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara. Ed. Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press Inc., 1983).

population. The Greater Toronto Area is home to Canada's largest population of Black people.

Within the framework of intersectional Black feminism, critical curating involves careful consideration of the overlapping and differing forms of social oppression and their relationship with institutional power. In their curatorial practice, Verna and Fatona recognize their positions as Black women in Canada and problematize the power relations of exhibition processes that place the authority to select, value, and present the work of others in their hands. I want to be clear, here, that the thought processes and social considerations of individual curators are the primary focus of this article. I am invested in understanding what it would mean for museum curators to embrace their subjectivities and personal experiences as factors that contribute vitally to the way they do their work. What would it mean for institution-based curators to approach their practice from an intersectional standpoint? How could curatorial practices be transformed by intersectional Black feminist approaches?

As early as the nineteenth century, Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell stressed that understanding interlocking systems of oppression was crucial to social change and liberation.<sup>7</sup> The term intersectionality, which was coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to an analytical framework that recognizes intersecting identities—such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class—as occupying particular social positions, and thus facing varying realities and challenges. It is an approach that understands social exclusions and silences as telling factors and analyzes their broader impacts. Crenshaw, Vivian May, and Beth Richie, among others, insist that intersectionality goes beyond identifying categories of people defined according to common denominators, and examines how the social structures they exist within connect and produce specific difficulties and obstacles in their lives.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, these Black feminists underline the need to understand and utilize intersectionality, not as a means of labeling individuals, but rather as a way of doing. Drawing from the work of these scholars, I argue that an intersectional Black feminist curatorial practice thus involves analyzing realities faced by various groups within artistic communities and responding to them through a sharing of decision-making power in a genuine collaboration that produces lasting change and fosters ongoing discussions. Through their approaches, curators have the opportunity to fill the representational gaps in museum exhibitions and collections in Canada, which often exclude Black narratives.

Fatona, for example, works from a personal standpoint. In her words, “[My curatorial work] comes from a very, very personal place. It comes from my own embodiment and subjectivity. I’m a Black lesbian woman or queer woman.” As a Black queer female curator, she acknowledges that these parts of her identity shape her lived experiences of the world.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, this “embodiment and subjectivity,” as Fatona calls it, frames her curatorial process and is often perceptible within the exhibitions she curates: “In any exhibition I do, I’m seriously thinking about representation on a number of levels, from a very intersectional vantage point.”<sup>10</sup> Within the context of intersectional Black feminist practices, the notion of objectivity is considered to be an untenable intellectual position. Thus, “embodiment and subjectivity”—embodied

7. *Ibid.*

8. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour,” *Stanford Law Review* (1991), 1241–1299; Vivian M. May, “Speaking into the Void”? Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash,” *Hypatia* 29, 1 (2015), 94–112; and Beth Richie; Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

9. Andrea Fatona, personal communication, 21 March 2015.

10. *Ibid.*

knowledge and individual everyday experience—are considered crucial places of knowing that allow for important insights and transformative justice work.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the exhibition *Land Marks*, co-curated with Katherine Dennis, Fatona's attention to intersectionality and varied modes of knowing was apparent both in the selection of artists and in her interpretation of the artworks. Discussing the work of the diverse group of artists featured in the exhibition, she foregrounds Indigenous knowledges, and locates them alongside her own perspectives as a Black feminist curator.<sup>12</sup> In her curatorial essay, Fatona comments on how artists Mary Anne Barkhouse (Nimkish Band, Kwakiutl First Nation), Wendy Coburn (white Canadian), Susan Gold (white Canadian), Brendan Fernandes (Ethiopian Canadian), and Jérôme Havre (Black French) took up the notion of relationship to land and unpacked its social and political implications. In choosing to discuss these artists' work from a variety of ideological standpoints, Fatona expands the possibilities for grappling with "histories and narratives that are bound in specific geographies and challenge us to 're-write' the script of the human and its relationships to ecologies that include other humans, non-humans, organic and non-organic entities."<sup>13</sup> Combining her Black feminist perspectives with other interpretations of social issues, Fatona contributes to a multilayered engagement with power dynamics and relationships to land, economy, and politics.

Interested in engaging in similar critical conversations, Verna also presents the work of socially and politically engaged artists. In early 2015, she worked collaboratively with Mark Sealy, Director of Autograph ABP, to curate the travelling exhibition *The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding/Decoding*. Presented at The Power Plant, the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design, and the Museu Coleção Berardo, the show featured the work of Terry Adkins (African American), John Akomfrah (Black British), Sven Augustijnen (white Belgian), Steve McQueen (Black British), Shelagh Keeley (white Canadian), and Zineb Sedira (Algerian-French). It considered the role of the "visual" in consolidating understandings of how history, culture, media, war, politics, and race are connected. Understanding how individual and global experiences overlap is a key aspect of intersectional Black feminist concerns. By engaging with the intersections of culture, power, politics, and history as discussed by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," the curators worked through the ways in which individual experiences are affected by, and impact upon, broader transnational issues.<sup>14</sup> When *The Unfinished Conversation* was featured at The Power Plant, additional programming included *Translations*, a multimedia collaborative performance featuring visual artist Kara Springer and poet and cultural critic Christian Campbell, two members of local Black communities.<sup>15</sup> By including programs that featured local artists, Verna and Sealy acknowledged Toronto's Black communities and brought them into the conversation. However, while the themes touched on by the exhibition are relevant to the Black communities of Toronto, Black Canadian artists were included here only as part of the accompanying programs. Weaving Black Canadian experiences into the broader conversation about translational issues and colonialism by including local Black artists might have yielded a more critical curatorial intervention in these discussions, while further anchoring them in the local context.

11. Richie, *Arrested Justice*, 129.

12. Andrea Fatona, "Essay," in *Land Marks: Mary Anne Barkhouse, Wendy Coburn, Brendan Fernandes, Susan Gold and Jérôme Harve*, eds. Andrea Fatona and Katherine Dennis, exh. cat. (Chatham, ON: Thames Art Gallery, 2013), 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

15. The programs also featured a one-day symposium, titled "Expanding the Conversation," which presented scholars and speakers of various backgrounds discussing topics including re-animating archives and unresolved histories and their relation to art and the image. "The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding/Decoding," *The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery*, [www.thepowerplant.org/Exhibitions/2015/Winter-Spring/The-Unfinished-Conversation--Encoding-Decoding.aspx](http://www.thepowerplant.org/Exhibitions/2015/Winter-Spring/The-Unfinished-Conversation--Encoding-Decoding.aspx) (accessed December 18, 2017).

Critical museologists Helen Coxall and Lois Silverman emphasize that socially engaged curatorial practices must be cognizant of the assumptions against which such exhibitions are judged, and that these assumptions should be mediated through meaningful exchanges among different communities. From an intersectional Black feminist perspective, this involves not only seeking to represent a broad spectrum of people and ideas, but also an awareness of how these representations fit into society as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Coxall and Silverman's comments are reflected in Verna's curatorial practice, which reaches out to the communities being represented and gives them the possibility to participate in, and engage with, these representations. Another aspect of Verna's curatorial work that points to intersectional concerns involves her interpretation of social inclusion. For her, a crucial part of inclusivity and representation involves "breaking the silos" that exist within institutions, communities, and society as a whole. This means facilitating intercommunity relationships and encouraging a sense of unity between groups by addressing existing power dynamics and unpacking privileges that are not shared by all.

Recognizing relations of power and privilege is a crucial aspect of curating in a way that broadens the horizons of the exhibition, and that centres voices that have historically been set aside. Curator Maura Reilly, among other scholars, notes that this type of work has been going on for decades, yet power dynamics within museums remain off kilter, leaving many curators of colour exhausted and shut out of museums that continue to stand firm in their role as gatekeepers.<sup>18</sup> Such control to access produces two major challenges for Black art practitioners in Canada: on the one hand, the work of Black Canadian artists are being left out of important collections, and, on the other, museums exclude curators who know this art, thus keeping the status quo in place. As the work of James Clifford and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (and many other scholars and historians) has shown, museums play a major role in developing national identity and collective history.<sup>19</sup> These institutions are also recognized as tools for education and the production of knowledge. Through this generalized acknowledgement of their role within society, museums are given authority in collective memory-making processes and thus influence perspectives on the very narratives they construct. In this context, the pretense of "objectivity" stands as a veiled means of enforcing Eurocentric standards for so-called high art—standards according to which non-European artistic contributions fall short of the criteria of excellence.<sup>20</sup> While scholars like Patricia Davidson have long argued that curating and exhibition practices are de facto subjective acts, museums remain generally associated with objectivity and universality.<sup>21</sup> This contradiction between the assertions made by Davidson and others, and the perceived objectivity of museums, makes it possible for museum curators to exercise a great deal of control and influence over visual culture or public opinion regarding accepted discourses and histories.<sup>22</sup> Curators in fact play a central role in this process through the selection, organization, and exhibition of objects and artworks. Their decisions in these situations can either uphold the status quo of over-represented whiteness in Canadian art history, or work toward dismantling it. Despite the barriers faced by Black Canadian art practitioners, their relentless work over the last thirty years is nevertheless yielding noticeable results.

16. Helen Coxall, "Speaking Other Voices," *Cultural Diversity: Developing Museum Audiences in Britain*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 99; Lois H. Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 32.

17. Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement"; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1241–1299.

18. Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 17; Michael Maranda, "Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries," *Canadian Art*, April 5, 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity>, (accessed June 27, 2018).

19. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 213; Hooper-Greenhill, *Eilean Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 188–190.

20. Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Dealing with Chiastic Perspectives: Global Art Histories in Canada," in *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada*, eds. Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton, and Kirsty Robertson (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 66, 71; Emily Falvey and Milena Placentile, "An Open Letter to Marc Mayer, Director, National Gallery of Canada," *Excellence at the National Gallery of Canada*, <http://excellenceatthenationalgallery.blogspot.com/2010/03/open-letter-to-marc-mayer-director.html> (accessed July 7, 2018).

21. Patricia Davidson, "Museums and the Re-Shaping of Memory," *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 204.

22. *Ibid.*

While large-scale museums in Canada rarely include Black people in their collections and exhibitions, as evidenced by a 2015 study published in *Canadian Art*, Black women have been working in smaller institutions as artists and curators to address this exclusion.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for decades, exhibitions by and for Black women in Canada have led conversations about race, representation, settler colonialism, sexuality, and class, among other subjects. As underscored by Yaniya Lee in her article “The Women Running the Show,” the late 1980s saw the advent of the very first Canadian exhibition to centre Black women and their work. *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* (1989) was also the first exhibition to be curated by Black Canadian women curators, namely Buseje Bailey and Grace Channer, members of Diasporic African Women’s Art Collective (DAWA), a non-profit network of Black Canadian women founded in 1984.<sup>24</sup> This travelling exhibition ushered in the 1990s, a decade that also saw the creation of CAN:BAIA (Canadian Black Artists in Action) (1992) and the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia (BANNS) (1992). In the late 1990s, curator Pamela Edmonds began her career co-curating *Skin: A Political Boundary* (1998) with Meril Rasmussen, who was a student at NSCAD at the time, and who is now an instruction designer focused on social networks for education and research. Edmonds has subsequently worked in several galleries across the country, including as the Exhibitions Coordinator at A Space Gallery, Toronto, and the Director/Curator at the Art Gallery of Peterborough.<sup>25</sup> The following decade was marked by such interventions as the exhibition *Through Our Eyes* (2000), curated by Edmonds and Sister Vision Press, as well as Charmaine A. Nelson’s appointment as the first Black art historian in a tenure-track position at a Canadian University in 2003. Nelson’s scholarly contributions continue to push the boundaries of Canadian art and history. In her work, she advocates for critical race and gender analyses in art history, as well as the importance of holding museums accountable for their role in creating collective memory.<sup>26</sup> Verna’s 2004 exhibition *Epistrophe: wall paintings*, which showcased the work of Denyse Thomasos at the Foreman Art Gallery, and Fatona’s 2007 exhibition and catalogue *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora*, are also notable contributions to Canadian art history.

To date, this decade has seen a highly visible, significant growth in Black female curatorial and artistic contributions in Canada’s larger urban centres and beyond. In Montreal, curator, critic, and researcher specializing in contemporary Haitian art, Eunice Bélidor, works as programming coordinator at article, a local artist-run-centre. She also writes about fashion design, performance, post-Black studies and feminism, and shares her knowledge via #curatorialtips on Instagram.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, curator and artist Jade Byard Peek curated the exhibition *We are the Griot* at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax, and independent, Montreal-based curator Dominique Fontaine presented *Images, Imageries, Imaginaires* at the International Photography Exhibition of the World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures (2010) in Dakar, Senegal. These and other activities denote a crucial shift in Canadian art communities with regard to Black narratives, as Black Canadian curators continue to work locally and internationally. This decade is also marked by the project *Expanded Context: Black Canadian Curators at the 56th International Art Exhibition, the Venice Biennale 2015*, which was funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council,

23. Alison Cooley, Amy Luo, and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, “Canada’s Galleries Fall Short: The Not-So Great White North,” *Canadian Art*, April 21, 2015, <http://canadianart.ca/features/2015/04/21/canadas-galleries-fall-short-the-not-so-great-whitenorth> (accessed April 24, 2015); Lee, “The Women Running the Show,” 98–100.

24. Alice Ming Wai Jim, “An Analysis and Documentation of the 1989 Exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*,” *RACAR* 23, 1/2 (1996): 71–83; Lee, “The Women Running the Show,” 98–100.

25. Pamela Edmonds, “I Curate Art,” *Pamela E. Curates*, <http://www.pe-curates.space/about> (accessed March 30, 2018).

26. Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 125.

27. Eunice Bélidor, “Eunice Bélidor,” *Eunice Bée Esq. art. Criticism. Fashion. very black.*, [www.eunicebee.net](http://www.eunicebee.net) (accessed July 17, 2018).

**Figure 1.** Deanna Bowen, *(truth) seer*, 2005, video (installation view). Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, ON.



**Figure 2.** John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, installation view, *The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding/Decoding*, January 24–May 18, 2015, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto. Collection of the Tate; jointly purchased by the Tate and the British Council, 2013. Courtesy of the artist, Smoking Dogs Films, and Carroll Fletcher, London. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.





and which Fatona led within the purview of The State of Blackness;<sup>28</sup> along with Fatona and Verna, the project included the participation of curators Julie Crooks, Sally Frater, Pamela Edmonds, Dominique Fontaine, artist Camille Turner, and professor Rinaldo Walcott. Working in collaboration with Indigenous and POC artists and curators for the past decades, Black Canadian curators, artists, and scholars have produced space for generative conversations about Black diasporic experiences in the settler-colonial context of Canada.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the landscape of Canadian art museums indicates that the issue is not simply the exclusion of Black Canadian art practitioners, but also includes the utter disregard to which they are subjected, as well as the grave mishandling of, or refusal to engage with Black histories. For example, over the last fifty years, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal's (MAC) acquisition process has yielded an overwhelmingly white-dominated collection of over 8,000 artworks. My 2015 survey of the 1,053 Quebecois and Canadian artists collected by the MAC revealed that a mere forty-three of them are people of colour, and of these only three are Black artists, none of them Black women.<sup>30</sup> As artist Stanley Février's research indicates, as of 2017 the numbers remain the same.<sup>31</sup> Prompted by these findings, in December of 2017, the MAC updated its acquisition policy to explicitly note a need to diversify their collection in terms of both culture and gender, stating in section 2.1.3. "Collection Development Axes" that "the MAC Collection must consolidate the representation of Aboriginal and Inuit artists as well as artists from the cultural diversity of Montreal, Quebec and Canada. The development of the collection must be sensitive to gender parity." The policy had not been changed since 1999.<sup>32</sup> As both Février's project and the proportion of donations and acquisitions at the MAC suggest, a possible underlying issue may be classism, depending on which economic bracket art donors tend to belong. What would it mean for the acquisition committee to actively seek to fill the gaps in the collection by regularly evaluating its scope and being mindful of its limitations? The change in the MAC's policy, as well as its collaboration with Artexte in March 2018 to host an Art+Feminism Wikipedia edit-a-thon, underscore a willingness by some staff members—in this case, MAC curator Marc Lancôt and Julie Bélisle, Head of Digital Content Development—to listen and enact change. An intersectional Black feminist approach in these cases allows for a critical analysis of the lacunas in the collection and seeks to rectify these imbalances.

To situate the practices of Verna and Fatona in the context of Toronto, I conducted a similar study on the representation of Black art practitioners at The Power Plant. The Power Plant is a public art gallery that features local and international contemporary art; it was established in 1987, when the Art Gallery at Harbourfront moved to its current location.<sup>33</sup> In surveying the last twenty years of The Power Plant's quarterly programming pamphlets, I found it has presented the work of forty-five Black artists, curators, and practitioners. Of those, thirty-eight were featured between 2014 and 2018. Since Verna began her tenure at The Power Plant four years ago, over five times as many local and international Black contributors have been showcased as were featured since 1996. These findings not only reflect the staggering lack of representation of Black people within Canadian art institutions, but also highlight how

28. Lee, "The Women Running the Show", 98–100; Andrea Fatona, "Expanded Context: Black Canadian Curators at the 56th International Art Exhibition, the Venice Biennale 2015," *Research at OCAD University*, <https://www2.ocadu.ca/research/afatona/project/expanded-context-black-canadian-curators-at-the-56th-venice-biennale> (accessed July 17, 2018).

29. *Ibid.*

30. Joana Joachim, "Speaking Into the Void: Black Artists, Subjects and Curators in Canadian Museums," MA Thesis, Université de Montréal, 2015, 45.

31. Stanley Février, *Analyse de la collection du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal à partir du critère de la diversité ethnoculturelle transposée dans une installation*, MA Thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2017; and *An Invisible Minority*, Artexte, Montreal, January 24–27, 2018.

32. *La politique de gestion des collections du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*, Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 5th edition, adopted December 19, 2017, <https://macm.org/app/uploads/2017/12/MAC-Politique-de-gestion-des-collections-FINALE.pdf> (accessed December 28, 2017), 9; and *La politique de gestion des collections du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*, 4th edition, adopted October 27, 1999, 14–15. Translations by the author.

33. "About Us: Vision and Mission," *The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery*, [www.thepowerplant.org/AboutUs/Mandate---Vision.aspx](http://www.thepowerplant.org/AboutUs/Mandate---Vision.aspx) (accessed December 28, 2017).

intersectional curatorial practice and an attentive effort to diversify programming can result in a dramatic representational shift and correct imbalances.<sup>34</sup>

Similar studies have not yet been completed for the Ottawa Art Gallery or Art Space, where Fatona previously worked. Yet, despite having worked within such institutions in the past, this imbalance is one factor that drives Fatona to actively seek out cultural and exhibition locations in regional spaces. “The cosmopolitan centres of Canada,” as she calls them, are not available or open to the kind of work she is interested in showing. Systemic racism within large-scale museums also affects her work as a curator. “It is a deep type of racism that hasn’t been unpacked,” she says.<sup>35</sup> Fatona further notes that these institutions have made few efforts to truly engage with communities in meaningful ways. She understands that museums are selective about the communities with which they choose to interact and engage. Only certain kinds of people are actively sought, she notes, “and that kind of person is usually a respectable, middle-class, white person.” In a report published following *The State of Blackness* conference (February 21–22, 2014), Fatona noted an alarming lack of social equity and representation for women, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and visible minorities.<sup>36</sup> The report notes a tendency for museums and art galleries to represent Black Americans rather than Black Canadians, further ostracizing local Black communities. In intersectional Black feminist curatorial practices, a concern for representation at various intersections ensures that a diverse range of people are included at all levels of the institution’s activities, no matter the size of the team. This way, different voices and perspectives rightfully have a seat at the table.<sup>37</sup>

Adopting this type of intersectional concern for representation and collaboration within the governing bodies of the institution, such as the board of directors and trustees, as well as the policies structuring museum functions like acquisitions and collections development, could also yield positive change. The recent appointment of Julie Crooks as Assistant Curator of Photography and Wanda Nanibush as Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario are examples of an important shift that is slowly taking place. While these changes deserve acknowledgment and celebration, it should be noted that, in keeping with Fatona’s comments on institutional racism, it has taken decades for museums to begin reflecting the work that curators, artists, and scholars of colour have long done at the level of artist-run centres and galleries. Exhibitions such as *Here We Are Here* at the ROM and *Every.Now.Then* at the AGO, however temporary they may be, are nevertheless vital steps in the right direction.<sup>38</sup> By centring the voices of artists and curators of colour in the Canadian context, these exhibitions do the important work of presenting artists who are not usually featured in museum spaces and bring forth necessary discussions about diversity, inclusion, and institutional change.

Intersectional Black feminist curatorial practices can initiate powerful conversations and produce historical exhibitions. These practices can be amplified and used to recuperate relationships between museums and ethnocultural communities. Over the last four years, the Royal Ontario Museum has actively sought to repair its relationship with Black communities in Toronto. Nearly three decades after the controversial exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* (1989), the museum set out to mend community ties

34. Cooley, Luo, and Morgan-Feir, “Canada’s Galleries Fall Short”; Lee, “The Women Running the Show”, 98–100.

35. Fatona, personal communication.

36. Andrea Fatona, Ellyn Walker, and Heidi McKenzie, *Proceedings from The State of Blackness Conference* (2014) <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzFH62jo8ufNMWYteFRRDBwOWc/view> (accessed July 17, 2018).

37. Gaëtana Verna, personal communication, March 16, 2015.

38. “Four new curators appointed at the Art Gallery of Ontario,” *The Art Gallery of Ontario*, June 28, 2017, [www.ago.net/four-new-curators-appointed-at-the-art-gallery-of-ontario](http://www.ago.net/four-new-curators-appointed-at-the-art-gallery-of-ontario) (accessed July 5, 2017); Lee, “The Women Running the Show.”

through the collaborative work of Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Sylvia Forni, the ROM's Curator of African Arts and Cultures. In the fall of 2014, the museum introduced its "Of Africa" initiative, a multidisciplinary project aimed at creating spaces for African diasporic themes, histories, and artists within the ROM's programming over several years.<sup>39</sup> This project culminated in the exhibition *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, presented from January 27 to April 22, 2018 at the ROM, and from May 12 to September 16, 2018 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>40</sup> The curatorial team's intersectional approach is apparent in their collaborative work, in the variety of programs, artists, and themes they address, and in their sustained engagement with social issues faced by Black communities.

Working as an employee of a publicly funded institution with a board of directors and a specific mandate, Verna's curatorial practice is framed by a series of institutional boundaries that Fatona does not encounter as much as an independent curator. Whereas Verna's position as the Director of The Power Plant requires her programming to be more expansive in its representation, Fatona's independent status allows her to regularly place Black narratives, art, and artists at the centre of her practice, and to "bring the ways of thinking about Blackness and the construction of Blackness in conversation with each other."<sup>41</sup> Operating within a flagship public gallery, Verna also has the possibility to boost the visibility of local and international artists, perhaps bringing them to the attention of other curators and of larger institutions, potentially influencing acquisition and exhibition decisions within the Canadian art scene. By thinking through the "range of articulations and representations of Blackness," Fatona's goal as a curator is to not reproduce oversimplified views that essentialize Black people. Her curatorial decisions thus work towards repairing the imbalance of representation faced by Black Canadian artists, who have been historically excluded from museum exhibitions and collections in Canada. Fatona notes:

I believe it's really important to actually talk about non-normative approaches to identity and to present the works of artists who are taking up alternatives in terms of their definitions of Blackness, of sexuality. ... As I do my research, I think about bringing all these ways of thinking about Blackness and the construction of Blackness into conversation with each other.<sup>42</sup>

39. *Of Africa ROM100 Speaks Symposium*, October 24–25, 2014, Royal Ontario Museum; "ROM's Of Africa Project Explores Historical and Contemporary African Themes," Royal Ontario Museum, October 7, 2014, [www.rom.on.ca/en/about-us/newsroom/press-releases/roms-of-africa-project-explores-historical-and-contemporary-african](http://www.rom.on.ca/en/about-us/newsroom/press-releases/roms-of-africa-project-explores-historical-and-contemporary-african) (accessed January 19, 2015).

40. *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, Royal Ontario Museum, [www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/exhibitions/here-we-are-here-black-canadian-contemporary-art](http://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/exhibitions/here-we-are-here-black-canadian-contemporary-art) (accessed December 28, 2017).

41. Fatona, personal communication.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

Fatona's curatorial practice shows a concern for representing the many intersecting components of Black people's lives, and for discussing how these complicate our understanding of issues such as race, sexuality, class, and nationhood. Though Fatona locates Blackness as a central component of her work, she is also invested in facilitating conversations that include other marginalized voices. For her, social inclusion implies ensuring that a broad range of people has access to participation and representation within her work and within institutions. For her, the impact of inclusive curatorial practices "would express the range of humanity within the context of those social spaces."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, she underlines that the representation of diverse groups within public spaces is linked to fostering a sense of belonging and recognition within society.

Within the framework of intersectional Black feminism, working and thinking with Indigenous peoples is crucial for fruitful, anti-racist and

decolonial discussions to take place.<sup>44</sup> In 1996, while employed at Artspace in Peterborough, Ontario, Fatona programmed the exhibition *Native Love*, a group exhibition organized by Nation to Nation and curated by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito that presented works by contemporary First Nations visual artists and writers who explored the theme of love from First Nations perspectives.<sup>45</sup> Taking an intersectional Black feminist approach, Fatona was acutely aware of the lack of discussion about settler colonialism in Peterborough and actively sought to build relationships with the First Nations communities in the area. In a 2002 interview with Monika Kin Gagnon, Fatona notes her impression that representing First Nations artists and writers made the gallery more accessible to their communities in more ways than one.<sup>46</sup> By choosing to represent First Nations narratives and artworks in a collaborative way, while also seeking to make genuine connections with their communities by communicating with them and inviting them into the exhibition space, Fatona built relationships and opened a space to be shared.

One of the ways in which I believe intersectional Black feminism to be useful in the context of curating is by opening discussions between communities about topics that are difficult to unpack, yet necessary for our collective well-being. Black feminism is particularly useful in these conversations, because, as bell hooks famously stated, it is focused on continuously “bringing the margins to the centre” and consistently reflecting on what more can be done for the liberation of those most vulnerable to systems of oppression.<sup>47</sup> As such, an exhibition like *With the Voices of the Other*, curated by Verna in 2012, when she was head of the Musée d’art de Joliette, becomes a critical intervention. The exhibition showcased the work of Vasco Araújo, which uses mythology and opera plots as frameworks through which to discuss cultural stereotypes and social marginalization, and to point the viewer’s attention to historical misconceptions and erasures, thus encouraging critical reflections about society.<sup>48</sup>

In this exhibition, Verna’s concern for showcasing a variety of perspectives is evident in her decision to present the work of a white, gay Portuguese artist, whose life experiences and social position offer a unique perspective on the histories of slavery and colonialism in his country. Because it is often wrongly assumed that these histories are only relevant to racialized peoples, the curatorial decision to present a white artist whose work addresses such themes to a predominantly white community critically pushes back against this misconception.<sup>49</sup> What is interesting about this choice is that it takes the onus to engage in these difficult discussions off people of colour and invites every individual to think about how they benefit from, or are affected by, these collective histories. In an interview for the exhibition catalogue, Araújo asserts: “I think that, having inherited this history from my ancestors, I have some responsibility to express it. Not to apologize for it, but to express it and inform people: this is us—us White Europeans.”<sup>50</sup> Through this assertion, he takes responsibility for his white privilege and reflects critically on how this privilege, as a product of the history of white supremacy, has affected Black communities in Portugal. Araújo also uses gay marriage as another example of social inequality and calls for greater accountability and open conversations about so-called taboo topics as a means of coping with difficult

44. Maynard, *Policing Black Lives*, 8–16.

45. Richard Fung and Monika Kin Gagnon, eds., *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics* (Montréal: Éditions Artex, 2006), 37; Lindsay Nixon, “Nation to Nation,” *Canadian Art*, July 10, 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/features/nation-to-nation> (accessed August 25, 2018).

46. *Ibid.*

47. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1st ed., 1984; New York, London: Routledge, 2015).

48. Gaëtan Verna, *Vasco Araújo: With the Voices of the Other* (Joliette, QC: Musée d’art de Joliette, 2012), 7.

49. The 2016 census of Joliette shows that the visible minority population is 2.76% of the primarily Francophone area. “Census Profile, 2016 Census: Joliette [population Centre], Quebec and Quebec [Province],” *Statistics Canada*, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-re-censement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=POP-C&Code1=0396&Geo2=PR&Code2=24&Data=Count&SearchText=Joliette&SearchType=Begin&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=0396&TABID=1> (accessed July 26, 2018).

50. Eloisa Aquino, “The Garden of Colliding Meanings: A Conversation with Vasco Araújo,” in *Vasco Araújo: With the Voices of the Other* (Joliette, QC: Musée d’art de Joliette, 2012), 22.

pasts and building sustainable futures. Through her curatorial intervention, Verna invites necessary discussions about colonialism and exclusion within communities that may rarely consider such issues. As such, she brings various groups of people into discussions about racism, colonialism, and their ongoing impacts on society.

Unpacking difficult topics and engaging in meaningful conversations about race and culture have been important aspects of intersectional Black feminist art practices for many years in Canada. Indeed, Fatona's practice echoes the work CELAFI accomplished almost a decade ago. Along with public events, one of the components of her project *The State of Blackness*, which took place at OCAD University and Harbourfront Centre on February 21 and 22, 2014, was a series of closed work sessions meant to foster discussions and mentorship among artists, educators, curators, scholars, and cultural workers, and to create space for "discussions about the current state of blackness and the challenges and strategies employed to increase visibility."<sup>51</sup> The scope and impact of this event is reminiscent of the unprecedented 1992 project CELAFI: *Celebrating African Identity*—a series of conferences and exhibitions focused on Black Canadian cultural production initiated by CAN:BAIA.<sup>52</sup> Much like the activity of CELAFI, *The State of Blackness* gathered Canadian art practitioners invested in uplifting Black voices and fostered powerful conversations about Black Canadian art and life. In the historic contribution of *The State of Blackness*, Fatona underlined that, many years after the groundbreaking work of CAN:BAIA and similar collectives, Canada finally has a growing body of Black curators, artists, and art historians who are teaching in universities and mentoring the next generation of practitioners.

Centering community in her practice, Fatona uses education and community outreach to invite various perspectives and people into the spaces, projects, and exhibitions she organizes in an effort to foster a sense of hospitality and openness. In her words, she works "from a perspective of the greatest number, the most diverse range of presentations and participation by individuals from those communities within the context of a gallery."<sup>53</sup> Intersectional Black feminism plays a central role in Fatona's curatorial practice insofar as she continually interrogates herself and reflects on what may be missing from the exhibition or space at hand. Her exhibitions are manifestations of her constant wrestling with notions of social inclusion within the Canadian nation. In her exhibition *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* (2006), these considerations were intertwined with a concern for broadening conversations about Black diasporic experiences. Featuring work by Deanna Bowen (Canada), Christopher Cozier (Trinidad and Tobago), Michael Fernandes (Canada), and Maud Sulter (Scotland), the exhibition foregrounded questions,

not only of diasporic movement, but also of the role of African people in, and their relationship to, modernity and its incessant march of progress, of the history of Christianity and the church as a social institution in the black world, of trauma and self-making, of community and racial formation, and of the relationship of systems of representation to colonial and postcolonial histories.<sup>54</sup>

By taking an intersectional approach to research and conversations with artists and collaborators, critical curating practices ensure that an exhibition considers representational multiplicity. In this process, Fatona positions

51. Fatona, Walker, and McKenzie, *Proceedings for The State of Blackness Conference*.

52. Nkiru Nzegwu and Austin Clark, *CELA FI: Celebrating African Identity* (Toronto: Canadian Artists Network: Black Artists in Action, 1992); Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Articulating Spaces of Representation: Contemporary Black Women Artists in Canada," in *Racism Eh? A Critical Inter-Disciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada*, eds. Camille Nelson and Charmaine Nelson (Toronto: Captus Press, 2004), 352–365; and "An Analysis and Documentation of..." 71–83.

53. Fatona, personal communication.

54. Andrea Fatona, Peter James Hudson, and Rinaldo Walcott, eds., *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* (Lennoxville, QC: Forman Art Gallery of Bishop's University, 2006).

herself as a translator, collaborating closely with the artists she aims to exhibit. Building cooperative relationships is a means through which curators can gain greater understanding of artworks and their producers' intentions. Fatona's work engages with current scholarship on transnational issues; for example, during a five-week residency program at Florida International University's Biscayne Bay campus in 2004, she joined scholars from Africa, the Americas, and Europe to discuss important Black transnational issues. Such conversations are crucial for bringing Canada into discussions on transnational Black studies. Part of the partnerships Fatona develops in her curatorial practice also involve elucidating her own interpretations of the work to the artists. In collaborating on the exhibition *Reading the Image*, Fatona and leading artist Deanna Bowen discussed Bowen's work | fig. 1 | and "the complex ways in which the movement and migration of the black body, beginning with the slave trade, are articulated in visual artworks produced by black artists in the Anglophone world."<sup>55</sup> They affirmed their desire to bring these discussions into the Canadian context. In this context, Fatona's knowledge of Black transnational and Canadian scholarship, as well as her lived experiences, join Bowen's life and work to open up necessary discussions and points of entry into understanding the history and impact of Canadian slavery. Mindful of her own experiences and their influence on her curatorial work, Fatona works hard to make the artists involved in her exhibitions feel comfortable with her positioning of their work within the exhibition corpus. With this approach, Fatona develops a synergetic relationship with the artists she curates.

Beyond developing cooperative relationships with artists, critical curating also involves considering the communities represented and the general public.<sup>56</sup> Within the framework of intersectional Black feminism, contending with the issue of subjectivity also involves recognizing that the curator's understanding of the exhibition's discourse will not reflect that of every viewer. As Fatona notes, the curator must recall their role as a translator working between the artwork and the onlooker. As such, Fatona and Verna create spaces in which multiple meanings and understandings may intersect on a variety of levels, thus giving viewers numerous points of access to the conversation. Verna comments: "I promise people that they will be welcomed into the gallery, but I don't promise them that they will love everything that they'll see."<sup>57</sup> Both curators understand that not everyone shares their subjectivities, and they thus consider a plurality of possibilities in their work, without disregarding the integrity and intended meanings of the artist. Despite curatorial efforts to engage with a theme or discourse through an artist's work, viewers' readings will always be affected by their lived experiences, subjectivities, and perceptions. For example, one of the ways Fatona works to make all of these meanings connect is by engaging with viewers much in the way she does with artists. She invites communities who are traditionally absent from museums and galleries into these spaces through the presentation of artists and artworks that reflect them. Fatona also welcomes discussions regarding what members of these communities would like to see cultural institutions become.

Just as museums reflect social consensus, their collections and exhibitions often affirm and consolidate an approved version of history. The process of institutionalizing memory implies decisions regarding what (or whom) is to

55. *Ibid.*

56. M. G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 51.

57. Verna, personal communication.

be remembered and what (or whom) is to be forgotten.<sup>58</sup> In this article, I have sought to think through the ways that intersectional Black feminist approaches to curatorial practices in Canada play a crucial part in filling the historical voids left behind by decades of deliberate exclusion of Black artists from museums. A meaningful shift in curatorial practices within museums and galleries has begun to take place, as more diverse permanent staff have entered these spaces over the past several years. Part of the work that remains to be done involves acknowledging and unpacking the racism embedded at the very core of these institutions. Inaction that results in the maintenance of an “objective” stance merely compounds racial erasure and exclusion in institutional structures. By working within an intersectional framework, museum and gallery workers can do their part in the fight for social inclusion and diverse cultural representation within their institutions, while also highlighting the vibrant history of Black Canadian art and curatorial practice. ¶

58. Davidson, “Museums and the Re-shaping of Memory,” 204.