

## **SPEAKERS**

Dr. Joana Joachim, Kelly Lloyd

[00:00:00] **KL:** You're listening to *This Thing We Call Art*, a podcast about, "Being alive as an embracing, living, right? In all the small ways, whether that's, you know, taking the time to enjoy your coffee in the morning or making sure you get your water or your exercise, or go out for a walk and get some sunlight on your face. Um, and being intentional about that and mindful about that to me is also ways of, of resisting." I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 with Dr. Joana Joachim.

Dr. Joana Joachim is an Assistant professor of Black Studies in Art Education, Art History and Social Justice at Concordia University. Her research and teaching interests include Black feminist art histories, Black diasporic art histories, critical museologies, Black Canadian studies, and Canadian slavery studies. Her SSHRC-funded doctoral work, examined the visual culture of Black women's hair and dress in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, investigating practices of self-preservation and self-care through the lens of creolization as well as historical and contemporary art practices. She earned her PhD in the department of Art History and Communication Studies and at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill University working under the supervision of Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson. Dr. Joachim obtained her Master's degree in Museology from Université de Montréal and her BFA from University of Ottawa. In 2020 she was appointed as a McGill Provostial Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Institutional Histories, Slavery and Colonialism.

Dr. Joachim's scholarship has appeared in books, journals and

magazines including Spaces and Places of Canadian Popular Culture, Manuel Mathieu: World Discovered Under Other Skies, RACAR, Mixed Heritage: (Self) Portraits and Identity Negotiation (Americana: e-Journal of American Studies in Hungary) and C Magazine.

A friend of mine, Dr. Didier Morelli, told me about Dr. Joachim's scholarship around hair and also *Blackity*, the exhibition she curated at Artexxe. She agreed to an interview, and I met her at her office. The audio quality for this season is varied, so remember that the transcripts for all these conversations are available on the project's website [thisthingwecallart.com](http://thisthingwecallart.com).

Our conversation was an hour and a half long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in right at the beginning...

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[00:03:21] **KL:** Okay, that's incredible that, well, you set that up. So, you just had a job as soon as you finished your...

[00:03:27] **JJ:** My postdoc, yeah.

[00:03:30] **KL:** Yeah. Um, can I ask you being mid PhD? I'm just like, how did, how did that happen? How did you do that?

[00:03:36] **JJ:** Largely on accident. And then... okay, so how do I even begin this? So, I worked full time throughout my PhD. (KL: okay) So I was working at Artexxe, which we're going to visit after this. And, as I was finishing up, or getting close to finishing up my doctorate, I realized that I was no longer... sustainable. I mean, it was never sustainable, not a good idea, don't do it. But, um, I realized I needed to compartmentalize more than I already was, and so, um, my boss at the time, Sarah Watson sat me down and was like, "Girl, you need to take a break and come back when you're ready." And I was like, "Okay, fine." So, I took a, a leave from my position at Artexxe to focus

on writing my dissertation and finishing it up. And as I was on leave, I saw, uh, job posting for a postdoc at McGill, which really felt quite tailor made for me.

And so, I was like, I'm just gonna apply just to- for the experience of applying. I'll be able to get feedback after my rejection. [LAUGHS] That's not what happened, I got the postdoc and, which meant that I, in order to take on the postdoc, I had to not only leave my job permanently at Artex, but also finish my writing a year quicker than expected.

At the same time, the pandemic hit, two weeks after I started my leave of absence. And so, it kind of felt like this storm of things was happening all at once. So, I kind of rolled out of my position at Artex into a pandemic, finished my PhD, and then started my postdoc. And in the midst of all of that, Mr. Floyd got murdered, and all of a sudden in the Canadian context, everyone wanted a Black something somewhere.

And so, as a result of that, um, this position at Concordia... I see it as a direct correlation, I don't know if that's how it happened, that's how it felt. Um, the, the position at Concordia opened up within six months of me starting my postdoc, something like that. And being that at the time, there were only... less than a handful of Black art historians in the city. Myself, my advisor, and a few other students, grad students that I knew. I felt like I had a pretty good chance of getting the position. And, um, so that's how it happened. So that's why I say it feels like it was largely on accident because so much of it, feels like once in a lifetime, you know? Up until the start of the pandemic, I had no idea if I would even be able to work in Canada, let alone in this city.

Um, because the reality is, up until myself, there have been no positions specifically for Black art history in the country, and only one other Black art historian who successfully got hired by a Canadian university. And that's, that was my advisor. So, I had one example in a 20-year slice of time. So, it feels all very serendipitous, accidental and... just, I, I, I can't think of a work to describe how surreal it feels.

But yeah, so this concoction of events probably will never repeat itself, but hopefully other possibilities open up for, for folks who are at the PhD level who are getting ready to kind of think about, perhaps, a full career in academia. So yeah... I feel really lucky.

[00:07:42] **KL:** Could you tell me a bit about your, um, your PhD research, but then also just your, your research in, in general?

[00:07:49] **JJ:** Sure. Yeah, okay. So, my PhD research at the time was about the visual culture of hair and dress among free and enslaved Black women in the French empire. Now I say at the time because that's what I started with. And as I did my research and the writing and the thinking, I realized that what I was particularly interested in about this topic was strategies of resistance through self-preservation and self-care, right? So, I started to think, "Okay, what does it mean to resist in a context where you don't necessarily have bodily autonomy? And then what does that resistance look like?" And so, I started thinking a lot about, Steeve Buckridge and his work around, accommodation and resistance and creolization, the context of creolization. And I kind of wanted to take his reflections and drill down further. And so, I started sort of framing different instances of self-care, hair care, or dress, styling that I came across in the archive within those two categories, you know? Not to kind of put things into boxes, but just to think about the decision process and sort of what it would have meant to, to take certain actions.

Um, and so, you know, in a context like... in Canada, wearing a pair of shoes is not an act of self-care. It's an act of self-preservation because if you don't wear shoes in the Canadian context, as an enslaved person, you will get frostbite and lose your feet, right? And whereas in the Southern context, for example, in Louisiana, enslaved people didn't get shoes, that was a mark of enslavement. And so, to wear shoes then is an act of resistance in the sense of self care. You do not need the shoes, but you're choosing to put them on as an act of resistance to show your humanity. Right? And so those things

were really interesting to me. Um, and it was a way for me to sort of stand with, stand by think alongside the individuals I met in the archive.

There's a story I, I really, that really kind of reached in behind my rib, rib cage um, when I read it for the first time in the, in the archive. So, in Louisiana, there was a girl named Babette. She was 11 years old at the time. And I found a series of court records about her. And as I read through them, I realized that she had been essentially leased out from one slave owner to another slave owner, for whatever reason, I don't, I don't, uh, recall. Um, and while she was on lease, it sounds so crass to say it like that, but that's sort of the context that she lived through - um, she robbed the person who was leasing her. Stole a bunch of money out of his, like, treasure, treasure, chest, or whatever, and then she goes shopping in, like, the downtown area and like chit chatting with people.

That's how they got the, the witness accounts, cause she was just talking with people on her way to her shopping spree. And she buys herself ribbons, a dress, shoes, candy, like, all kinds of, like, non-essentials. And I was like, "Girl, what are you doing?" And, and sort of that question for me was a really important one because it allowed me to kind of contextualize Babette as someone who had already lived so much of her life, because as we know, enslaved people don't live very long lives. They on average die in their twenties, thirties, right? (KL: woah) In certain contexts. (KL: yeah)

And so, Babette was middle-aged. And so, the fact that a middle-aged enslaved girl was buying herself shoes of all things, in the context of Louisiana tells me something about what she knows about who she is and what she deserves, right? The fact that she bou- bought herself, I think it was, it was like pralines or pecans. Right? That tells me something about her. And so those moments in the archive were what I really wanted to center my research around. Those people, those moments, those relationships. And so, it started out as being the visual culture of hair and dress, but it ended up

being really about how people resisted through self-preservation and self-care.

[00:12:46] **KL:** Thinking about, what self-care *means* exactly (JJ: mm-hmm) um, in terms of like, "Yeah, we're reclaiming your humanity" versus it being like "hashtag self-care, right. Like, give yourself a... whatever", you know?

[00:12:59] **JJ:** If we're thinking of the context of slavery, there's a piece of it that's also about dignity. And, you know, I was particularly interested in thinking through being alive as being itself an act of resistance. And so, by extension, acts of self-preservation, something like having something to eat, having soap to, to clean your body, knowing what medicinal herbs to use to clean a wound or to, uh, protect yourselves from, from pests, right? All of that to me, um, folds into ways in which folks chose to resist and assert their aliveness.

And I think that, you know, as I'm speaking with you, it also applies to the contemporary moment, right? Being alive as an embracing, living, right? In all the small ways, whether that's, you know, taking the time to enjoy your coffee in the morning or making sure you get your water or your exercise, or go out for a walk and get some sunlight on your face. And being intentional about that and mindful about that, to me is also ways of, of resisting.

There's two authors who I (uh, there's a lot of authors that I think about when I think of this) but I think of Audre Lorde, I think of bell hooks. I think of Adrienne Maree Brown, and I think of the founder of The Nap Ministry, Trisha Hersey. So, these are folks who I think alongside when I'm thinking about self-care beyond it being the hip thing to do now, right? I, when I think about fundamentally what it means to make the decision to care for myself as a Black woman living in 2022 on Turtle Island. These are the people I'm thinking of.

[00:15:34] **KL:** Yeah. Um, how does that fit within the, like, hustle culture of academia, I guess specifically, and the fact that you- why did you work full time through your PhD?

[00:15:44] **JJ:** Okay. Two questions. So how does it fit into hustle culture of academia? It don't. That's the end of the sentence.

It does not, but, um, if academia wants to keep me, it will adjust. And I also, you know, for me, it's, I'm very intentional about that, those things. I put it in my syllabus, right? That these are the boundaries that I'm setting, right? I also verbalize it to my students constantly. I encourage them to set those boundaries for themselves as well, right? So, it doesn't fit into academia, but this is where I am. And so that's how it's gonna work. And then I forgot question two.

[00:16:34] **KL:** The question I, yeah, you might have noticed I asked fractured and clustered questions. Um but, uh, the second question was, why did you choose to work full time, uh, during your, (**JJ:** yes yes) your PhD?

[00:16:45] **JJ:** Oh, what happened was... when I started working at Artexte, I was the communications assistant and I really enjoyed it. And then serendipitously again, which is... you know (I'm like, I'm a leaf in the wind with this life, which, oh my God, who am I?) Um, the position for programming and exhibitions opened up and I knew I could do it and I wanted to do it.

So, I asked to be considered for the position, honestly. And then I suffered through. [LAUGHS] Um, so I wanted to do... I wanted to have the experience, right? ... And I also knew that in order to make my academic profile competitive, having experience in the real world was a huge asset, right?

And so, I, I had already come into grad school, having had experience working at the National Gallery of Canada, and I knew that adding a more, more senior position, like a curatorial one at Artexte would make my profile even more competitive and interesting. And the reason why I was thinking that way is because I

was acutely aware of the lack of positions for people like me. And so, I was like, I need to put all of the asterisks and bells and whistles onto my CV as I can, as many of them as I can in order to make myself, uh, marketable, which is, like, an awful way to think of it.

But that's kind of how I had to think of it. Um, but then, you know, as I was doing this research and looking at self-care and self-preservation, and, and feeling my health, uh, and my body telling me that I was doing the most, um, and having, you know, people around me who are caring and wonderful people like my, my former boss at Artexte who, you know, followed me and supported me and were flexible with me, but then also were, uh, loving enough to tell me when it was time to stop, right?

So, there's a lot of people in my life who I'm fortunate enough to have, be those people for me. You know, my colleagues at Artexte were definitely part of those people, my partner is definitely one of those people. Um, and so I did it because I had the support system, and I did it because of those strategic reasons. Again, don't recommend it. Right? I don't recommend it. It was *exceedingly* difficult.

There was a lot of thought that went into it. Um, and it was extremely difficult and I'm proud of myself for having achieved it. But I also recognized that I put myself through something that was not necessary or, or particularly caring towards myself, which is a big part of the reason why I'm in the process of trying to pivot with grace... (KL: away from that kind of like, um) exactly that kind of, like, fast paced hustle culture, bells and whistles, "Let's do all the things to make myself marketable." And I mean, obviously now I'm speaking from a position of relative financial security and safety within the academic standpoint, because I have a position and I, I can sort of make those decisions for myself. Um, and so I'm grateful for that. And... so I'm trying to carve out a space of softness and safety for myself within a place that is neither of those things. So, we'll see how- ask me again in 10 years. [LAUGHS]



[00:20:51] **KL:** I, um, I'm just interested in this language of like, uh, what do you do when it's for yourself? What do you do when it's to be marketable?

Uh, like how are, when do those things combine? When can you not differentiate between those two things? (JJ: mm-hmm)

[00:21:06] **JJ:** Yeah. I mean, that's a huge question. Um, for me... I can't be bothered. Um, quite honestly, I can't be bothered to try and make people like me, um, which is a dangerous game to play in a context where that is necessary to keep your job. At the same time though, I am very clear about that, right? I'm very clear about, there are moments where I need to play nice. And then there are moments where I take precedence. So, thinking about marketability... for me, it's not so much about making myself palatable or acceptable or whatever. It's more about letting people know who I am when I walk in the door. That for me is extremely important. And... thankfully, this is why I'm so grateful for this position in particular, because it's in my job title. It's in my job title that I am a Black Study Scholar, and that that's very important because that means that they already know that I will be the one, I will be one of the ones, um, naming anti-Blackness, naming anti-Indigenous issues, and thankfully I'm not the only person, uh, thinking about indigeneity and decolonialism and anti-Blackness in this department. Um, but it's in my job title. And so that, to me, also serves as a shield. And so, it also means that I don't need to do much to make myself marketable because everything I do in some way relates to Black Studies. And then for the rest, again, can't be bothered. I can't be bothered.

What I wear, how I speak, how I present myself to the world, how I do my research, how I interact with students has a lot more to do with the kind of person I want to be in the world. And always striving to be a better version of myself and to make the circles of the world that I interact with that much brighter. That's how I move through the world, that's what's most important to me is, um, making sure that I'm feeling safe and happy and joyful and loved and sharing a little bit of that as much as possible with the people who I interact

with, right? So, in my classrooms or when I'm working on a project or, you know, curating a show, whatever, like, that's my way of making a mark on the world. Like, the rest doesn't really, matter to me as much as long as I'm doing that, right? Like, how do I center this idea of being a caring person and contributing to a more caring world and to making the world a more caring place in my small ways?

And then in the context of, you know, thinking of the folks I meet in the archive, or I encounter in the... it's an unanswerable question, and that's part of the reason why I wrote the whole thing to begin with, right? And I was like, "Why? But why? Why are you doing this? Why is it that? Uh, free women of color in New Orleans were wearing rings on their toes? Why? Why, why toe rings, right? What, what was that about? And it was because they were being petty, and I love it. They were being petty cause they were allowed to wear shoes, but they kept getting, sort of, sneered at and laughed at by the white people in this city. And so, they were like, "Oh, you don't like that I'm wearing shoes? I'm gonna wear toe rings *as well*. Now what?" Right? So, this whole thing for me, or I read it as pettiness. I don't know if it was actually pettiness, but I don't know that I can answer the question of shine or marketability in the context of enslavement, but I do think that it is an interesting perspective to take, especially if we're thinking of, um, the context of *Plaçage* in New Orleans, right?

The practice of concubinage in free people of color communities, right? So, free women of color necessarily had to be marketable or shiny in some way, in order to entice, you know, a white suitor to take care of them and whatever, uh, children they may have, right? So, there is kind of this game that continues to have to be played in order to carve out a space of softness and safety for ourselves throughout time. That's been a constant thing. I guess for me, I don't believe that that always is necessarily, only about the outside world. Does that make sense?

[00:26:37] KL: Yeah. A hundred percent. Yeah, thank you for that. Also, yeah. Just, like, such a beautiful, um, thing to think about. Um, so do you have

any, like, specific hair examples of just like what people's hair was like? Umm...

[00:26:49] JJ: You know, it's really interesting. Um, in the Canadian context, it's been really difficult to find anything specific to sort of the Northern Turtle Island piece. But if I'm thinking of the U.S. context like Southern Turtle Island in Louisiana, there's a shift over time.

So initially during- while transatlantic trade was still legal, in quotation marks, because, you know, there's the on paper, legal legality and the off-paper context. But when people from the African continent were still being plucked and then dropped into the Western context (North America, the Caribbean, et cetera) there was still this knowledge of how to take care of African hair and this knowledge of specific cultural hairstyles that people wanted to maintain. Um, and so you see a lot more of that, right? The certain ways to shave the hair, certain ways to, to braid the hair, certain ways to grease the scalp, all those things, right? But then as fewer enslaved, Africans are being plucked away from the African continent, and more Creole enslaved people are being born - Creole as in born in the colonies, not, um, the contemporary definition of the term - there's a slow shift because the oral history and the cultural memory is no longer being translated or shared between African-born and Creole-born enslaved folk.

So, there's that. And then there's also the piece of creolization per Buckridge, [LAUGHS] where there starts to be this mixing between Europeans, Indigenous folk, and Black folk living in this sort of context where they're in close contact. And so, we see a shift in the way in which people are presenting themselves. First of all, because the cultural memory is no longer there, but then also because they're trying to stay, uh, fashionable frankly, or to blend in as much as possible. And so, you know, there are instances where Black folk were wearing powdered wigs for a while, right, because that's what was in fashion and, and you're trying as much as possible in that context to fit.

So, it's very interesting to see how things shifted. Um, and the other thing too, if we think of women, specifically women and girls, there is a moment in time where it becomes illegal for Black women's hair to be seen in public as a way of forcing them to mark themselves as lesser than white women, right? So that's where the *Tignon Law* comes in. And so the Tignon Law is this law that decreed that Black women and free women of color had to wear a head wrap and cover their hair as a mark of, of being lesser than, and, and I think also, um, as a way of, especially for lighter-skinned free women of color (and when I say free women of color, I mean Black women, but the term at that time, they were addressed as, uh, free women of color). Um, there was this, this anxiety around being able to tell if someone was Black or not. So, by forcing them to wear the tignon, they were forcing them to identify themselves as Black.

But again, with the pettiness, um, a lot of these women ended up adding embellishment and, and bringing back sort of these elaborate ways of wrapping the head and adding feathers and jewels and all these, like, extravagant, uh, additions to this thing that was essentially an anti-Black law. And so, it's very interesting to see how things shift and change. And it's particularly interesting to see how different or similar things are across the three sites that I studied. Um, yeah.

[00:30:51] **KL:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's, it's like, oh my God, it's so interesting. Hair is so interesting! [LAUGHTER] Are you teaching about hair?

[00:30:57] **JJ:** I haven't yet. I haven't yet. Um, I may someday, as I'm, cause I'm, I'm working on, on my manuscript and so I'm, I may bring that into my teaching. For now, I'm still, sort of, working on the fundamental building blocks of creating a Black Studies lane in this department, right? Because there are no courses outside of my own in this department that talk about Black Studies specifically. Um, and so thus far, the students in this department have had one course. And

that was the one I taught in January. So, I'm teaching my second one this semester, which is about Black women in art in Canada. So very wide topic that I have to try and like distil into 12 or 13 weeks.

Um, but that, that's sort of where I'm at in terms of the pedagogy, is putting down these foundational blocks for my students to then be able to funnel into more specific topics that I'll teach down the line. But for now, I need to make sure people know what creolization means and what, what is the Black Atlantic? Where is it? You know, those things. And so, I'm, I'm sort of doing this high-level fundamental stuff at the moment with my teaching and hopefully I'll be able to sort of take those big courses and whittle them down into more specific lanes down the line.

We'll see what happens, but I, I would like to bring that into my teaching at some point, but for now I'm really just kind of, I I'm seeing, I'm seeing the next few years as like the 101 years, you know? Um, of making sure that the students have similar language that I do and are familiar with some of the key concepts that would then allow us to have conversations like the one we're having now.

[00:32:58] KL: Um, so, um, speaking of language, I'm gonna ask just, like, a really base question. Um, and then maybe I'll explain it just to, like, save face or something. [LAUGHTER]

I read your, um, article "Embodiment and Subjectivity: Intersectional Black Feminist Curatorial Practices in Canada" and you specifically spoke about Gaëtane Verna and Andrea Fatona. (JJ: mm-hmm) And you were specific about saying that Gaëtane Verna was, um, born in Kinshasa, uh, of Haitian heritage and Andrea Fatona was born in Birmingham, England of Nigerian and Jamaican heritage. And so, I'm, I'm interested in identity construction in Canada, (JJ: uh-huh) specifically Black identity construction in Canada.

I'm a Black American, (JJ: mm-hmm) I'm in the UK context. (JJ: yeah) I've, I've encountered Blackness in South Africa. Like I'm, I'm quite interested in, like, who counts?

[00:33:52] JJ: That's such a great question. And I'm really excited about it because I have a thing that I have been doing in, in one of the classes that I teach, where we play a, so, um, an episode of The Nod, which is a podcast, an American podcast about Black culture and things. And they had one episode where they did a live show in Toronto and they, um, interviewed Victoria Mochama and another Black Canadian.

And the question came up of like, "Who all is Black Canada?" Right? Um, because they were problematizing Drake's use of Black diasporic musical styles largely and sort of asking, "Is it appropriation? Is it good or is it bad? Like, what is it?" Um, one of the things that really struck me, and the reason why I play this podcast episode in my class is because Victoria Mochama describes Black Canadian-ness as being something that's a little bit of a "pastiche" to use her term? Um, or eclectic if you will.

So, for me, and for many other Black people in Canada, growing up here means that you are, if you are in a, in a mixed community, you're growing up with a lot of other Black people from a lot of different backgrounds. And Black history in Canada is itself eclectic, right? So, you have, um, Black folks who were enslaved here, and then you have Black loyalists who came from the U.S. context to Canada.

You have Black folks who *fled* from, um, the U.S. to Canada through the Underground Railway. You have also those who were taken from the U.S. to Canada. And then you also have Black migration from the U.S. through the Trail of Tears, yes, um, going up to Western Canada and then, after slavery, this is all like during the, the 19th century, right. And then, um, in the 20th century you have the 1960s wave of immigration from recently decolonized African countries and other Black countries in the world. And then in the eighties you have another wave of, of migration. So, and then, you know, which continues to this day. And so, and then in the 1920s, also, you have another, wave. It's not as much of a wave, but there was a lot of back and forth during the prohibition era between the

U.S. and Canada, uh, because in Montreal *en tout cas* there, people were still drinking here, and so, people came here to drink, um, you know, during the jazz era and all this. So, there's like this hodgepodge [LAUGHS] of backgrounds.

And I, so for me, that's what makes up Black Canada is this sort of pastiche, eclecticism. Um, and to me, okay, to try and like, visualize what I see - you know, in the summer when it rains and you see an oil slick in the street, but it's kind of shimmery and you see a little bit of a rainbow in it, right? You see what I'm talking about? That to me is Black Canada, right? This ever shifting, continuously moving, group of people who share this one trait. And so, when I think, or discuss Black Canadianness, I mean, people who are Black who have roots in Canada, right, and that doesn't mean that they were necessarily born here, but to me, that means that they have settled here at some point. Right. And have some kind of an ongoing relationship with this place. And, and situate themselves within it.

[00:37:53] KL: I think it's just like a, also a, I like thinking about, you said something in, I think one of the catalogue essays that was about, it was just like, very clear where it was like: "Art history traces the line of like a nationalist history."<sup>1</sup> (JJ: mm-hmm)

So, like, I think it's really allowing to think about identity construction as a, as this broader thing (JJ: mm-hmm) as opposed to like, were you born here or not? (JJ: yeah) Are you a part of the national narrative of belonging or not? You know?

[00:38:17] JJ: Yeah. Well, because I don't think that it's... I don't think that it's an open and shut case, right? And I am very resistant to that idea especially because migration is such a big piece of Black Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Actual quote: "In art history, a field that has traditionally been understood to mirror national narratives, this has resulted in the perpetuation of Canadian art history as an almost exclusively white discipline, replete with narratives that construct the Canadian artist as necessarily white." From Joana Joachim, and Tamara Harkness, Tarek Lakhrissi with contributions from Gabrielle Montpetit, Cindy Colombo and Samantha Wexler, "[Dis]Identifications: Challenging Dominant Narratives of Black People in Canada", *EAHR @ ARTEXTE: Uncovering Asian Canadian and Black Canadian Artistic Production*, Artexte, (2015), 1.

history, right? Forced migration, necessary migration, voluntary migration, all of it is in some way, at some point part of our history, right. As North American peoples, as Caribbean peoples. So, I'm realizing that I'm quite resistant to this idea that only a certain subset of people can, um, access this so-called identity, right? I'm more interested in thinking about us (us being, you know, Black us) through space and time and place.

[00:39:16] **KL:** Cool. Awesome. Um, how, can you tell me a bit about *Blackity*?

[00:39:22] **JJ:** Yeah! Sure. So generally, *Blackity* was, um, a project that I was sitting with and thinking about for some time. Uh, in 2015, while I was still doing my MA, I did a student group residency at Artexxe, and we were tasked with finding Black Canadian art in the collection and compiling a bibliography.

Um, and so we did that, and the bibliography still exists. And I distinctly recall when I finished the bibliography with my team, that, you know, we have really only scratched the surface. And so, I knew in the back of my mind that I would eventually come back to it. I didn't know how, I didn't know when, but I knew that I would come back to it.

And then lo and behold, I got hired to work there, um, that same year. And then when I got promoted to the position of Exhibition Coordinator, I knew that that would be one of the things I wanted to curate. So, I started kind of just tinkering around and thinking about it and being like, I just wanna update the bibliography and sort of expand it and see what will happen.

So that was the, the intention. The intention was simply to expand on something that I had contributed to as a student. Um, and so the show is kind of, or was, cause it's closed now, um, a presentation, meditation on, alongside, how Black Canadian art history is witnessed by the Artexxe collection. So Artexxe is a contemporary art library, which means that the collection holds only documentation about contemporary art, um, globally, mostly



Canadian, mostly Quebecois because of, it's a physical collection, and so, you know, it reflects it's community, um, more strongly than other parts of the world because books are heavy and can't be mailed necessarily as easily. And so, I kind of just went through the collection as far back as I could go. So that took me to about the seventies cause it's contemporary art, right. So that only goes back to about the 1960s. And so, I found stuff all the way back to the 1970s and I just started sort of putting it together. Um, and wanting to think through what Black Canadian art looks like, who are the people who are making what or curating what, when and with whom? Um, and just kind of, displaying it and really kind of thinking about what does that look like?

Um, and putting the question out there of how come it's so hard to pin down Black Canadian art history? Um, obviously white supremacy is the answer to that question, but, um, there are other factors as well. And so just kind of posing the question and, and, and, and sitting with it. And, again, basking in resisting, in that resistance to be pinned down and, and sort of accepting the flux.

And so that's, that, that's, that was the show of just kind of like, seeing what the collection had to offer and then reflecting on what it is that the collection could not offer and all the reasons why it did not offer those things.

Right, so the archival process is one that begins with the creation of the document in a lot of cases, right? And so, if there was a show that included a Black artist in the 1970s, but no one thought to create a document to record the fact that that show included a Black artist, then that can't be archived, right? If no one thought to save a copy of that document, then that can't be archived, right? If no one thought to actually put the document in the archive, then that's the end of the story. And so, kind of just... thinking about all the different stages that need to, that need to be passed in order for a catalogue, a poster, a postcard, a document of any kind, a book, to *perdure*, last, until this time.

Right? And then also I wanted to use *Blackity* as... uh, to present *Blackity* as a research tool, for folks who are interested in Black Canadian art to have a, uh, one place to land, one of many places, because as it turns out, there are lots of, of places for them to land. And so, the online component of the exhibition, which is still online now, served that purpose to me, right? Not only presenting a portion of what was in the physical exhibition online, but also connecting it to a larger network. So, specifically, uh, *The State of Blackness*, a database by Andrea Fatona, which is another place where there's like this *agglomération*, collection, of Black Canadian art. Things like conferences and videos and books and references and all this stuff, right. So, linking those two things and then also linking to the *Vtape* list, cause *Vtape* has this fantastic list of videos in their collection by Black Canadians. So, linking to that. So just kind of using *Blackity* for me, uh, I, I, I was trying to use it as an entry point into this already existing network because the work is there, it's just not visible. So that, that's what the show is about.

[00:44:59] **KL:** Um, yeah. And, and I, and I loved kind of reading, um, well, well thinking through kind of, um, right like this, um, in, in the catalogue, you write, like, "The presence of, uh, mind of curators, historians, librarians, and archivists to see the work of Black arts practitioners, practitioners as valuable and worthy of historical preservation as a crucial piece of this process."<sup>2</sup> Like, how can artists access critical writing and archival documentation? (JJ: mm-hmm) Um, to make sure that they are a part of a larger discourse and a larger history especially, like, Black artists. (JJ: yeah) Um, so that, that can be available to (JJ: yeah) them and future generations.

[00:45:37] **JJ:** The that's the, the everlasting question. Um, it's very difficult as you've named, right. It's a lot to put on artists for them to also then be responsible for that visibility and that sort of recording. Um, I think

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Joana Joachim, "'BLIPS IN TIME' A CONSTELLATION OF BLACK CANADIAN ARTISTIC TRADITION FROM 1970 ON", *Blackity Catalogue*, Artexte, (2021), 9.

that there's two pieces to this. The first piece is what do artists themselves have to do? And, as an art historian, as a curator, as a museologist, as an educator, I think it's exceedingly important for artists to learn to articulate their work and make clear how they want their work to be taken up through their artist statement, through their project statements, et cetera. And so that's one piece of it, making sure that you have a landing place, right, that is substantial. Because, while having an Instagram account or a TikTok or whatever is one way of being visible, it is not, in my estimation, a way of being legible. So that's one thing. Making yourself legible in a certain way for art critics and reviewers and whatever, to then take it and run with it.

The other piece for artists is to name that, right? Um, when they are being approached for exhibitions or they're applying for an exhibition ask, "Is there gonna be a catalogue? Can I have a copy of it?" da, da, da, all those things. And to build a personal archive. And now I go into my like, "Well, we have to promote Artexte" speech, but, um, having an artist file at, at a place like Artexte where you, and, and keeping it up to date where, you know, you put in your CV or a list of the exhibitions that you've been part of and, uh, you know, your, your artist statement and any kind of document visual documentation of your work, like, you can just print off photos of your work, right? Having that is a way of building a legacy and having, you know, a place for people to then go and learn about your work and write about your work. Because if there's no information about your work, then people can't write about it. So that's one piece, that's the piece that artists I believe can control to a certain degree.

The next piece is a larger, more systemic problem that no one person can solve, right? Um, and that's why I'm constantly advocating for more critical writing. Um, because that's when folks like myself and curators and people who work for art magazines or people who work for cultural media or whatever to do the actual work, right?

And not, and, and by do the actual work, I don't mean contact whomever who's busy and exhausted and ask them for yet another

interview so that they do the work of telling you about their work, but to actually sit down and study the work and write about it. Um, and, and that's, you know, a small portion of, of why I became an educator because there just aren't enough of us, right? To date, there are two art historians who have art history positions in Canada, me and my advisor. Right? And then there are curators across the country who are doing fantastic work, but again, like, I could count them on two hands, right? There's not that many, not enough of us, not nearly enough of us to be able to write this whole history.

And so, the onus then is on non-Black art workers, art writers, reviewers, critics, art, historians, curators, whatever to do the work of actually writing about this stuff. And that's part of the reason why I became a professor is because I want to contribute to training people to think about Black work in that way, not just be like, "Okay, here's the Black artist making Black stuff" check mark. And then, and then interview them, and end it there. But to actually begin to have a discourse around that work and take it up, in a rigorous manner. So, there is a part of that that artists can control. And that's to making sure that you're clear about which conversations you wanna be part of and what your work is about and being explicit and direct and open about that and making your work legible in that way.

And I don't mean, like, spoon feeding people. "Well, you know, my work is about da da da", but making sure that if your work is opaque for a reason that you make it clear that your work is opaque for a reason, not just saying nothing. So, but that's, that's my perspective on, on the, um, issue. I do think that there are things that are more systemic and outside of an individual's power, but, and that's, you know, why I'm constantly sort of on my little soapbox, [LAUGHS] arguing and, and, and yelling at people to write more things, or, you know, do more conferences or whatever. But it's because all of that can't rely on the artists and their artists file at Artex, right? *That* needs to be taken up in a larger context.

[00:51:38] **KL:** I ask, um, everybody this last question, um, did we talk about what you thought we would talk about? Or do you have any questions for me? (JJ: oh) Or is there anything that you'd just like to say on this, you know, on this (JJ: mmm) occasion?

[00:52:03] **JJ:** Um, I think we did talk about what I thought we would talk about in the sense that I thought we would talk about cool Black things, and that's what we did, and I'm happy about that. Um, and, and if I wanna say anything, I would say support Black trans artists and, um... drink water and sleep. [LAUGHS] Take care of yourself. You know, I think that those two things, you know, if you're able to end your week and say, you know, I took care of myself and I supported a Black trans artist. I think that that's pretty awesome.

[00:52:48] **KL:** Thank you.

[00:52:49] **JJ:** You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

[00:52:51] **KL:** Yeah. Thanks, thanks so much for this conversation. I really appreciate it.

[00:52:54] **JJ:** Yeah, me too. It was wonderful.

[00:52:59] **KL:** Cool. Um, you know, I love it when, um, you're like, can life be that easy? I can just do these four things and not just like have a panic attack every day? [LAUGHS]

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[00:53:15] **KL:** Epilogue. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2022, Dr. Joana Joachim wrote to me, "I wanted to name that while there are few Black folks in art history departments \*specifically\* several people are teaching Black art in other departments like curatorial studies at Ontario College of

Art & Design University as well as in studio arts, feminist and women's studies programs across the country. The struggle to carve out a lasting path for Black art in Canada continues. Case in point my PhD supervisor Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson, who was recently named Fellow in the Royal Society of Canada, has since moved to a new position as a Provost Professor of Art History and the founding Director of the Slavery North Initiative at UMass Amherst and Gaëtane Verna has also left Canada to a position as Executive Director of the Wexner Center for the Arts, both in the U.S. I'd also like to mention that the National Gallery of Canada very recently laid off four senior staff members including Greg A. Hill, its curator of Indigenous art who opposed how the gallery was approaching the new decolonization agenda. So, while some headway is being made, several steps backwards are also being taken.”

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[00:54:33] **KL:** You can find more information about Dr. Joana Joachim’s work at her website, [joanajoachim.com](http://joanajoachim.com). And the landmark exhibition, *Practice as Ritual / Ritual as Practice* is at A Space Main Gallery until 23 February 2023. Curated by Andrea Fatona, this anniversary exhibition features many of the same artists in *Black Wimmin When and Where We Entre*, the first ever art show by and for Black Canadian women which took place in 1989.

You can find the link to this exhibition, as well as other things Dr. Joachim and I mentioned in the episode notes on the project’s website, [thisthingwecallart.com](http://thisthingwecallart.com).

This podcast was funded by The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities. If you would like to help make the next season of this podcast a reality, please consider rating and reviewing this podcast on Apple Podcasts, becoming a Patreon member, or donating through the Paypal link on the project’s website.

The logo was designed by eva duerden, the episode artwork was created by Giulia Ratti, and the theme song was made by

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Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week for my conversation with Jesse Malmed.