

Making History: Visual Arts and Blackness in Canada, edited by
Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni

Shanice Wolters

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BOOK REVIEW: *Making History: Visual Arts and Blackness in Canada*, edited by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni. The Royal Ontario Museum / On Point Press, 2023.

Book Review Author:
Shanice Wolters
Toronto Metropolitan University

Making History: Visual Arts and Blackness in Canada (2023), confronts and provides an understanding of the myriad of ways people of African descent have been erased and misrepresented in Canadian institutions. Such representational impasses have, as editors Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni assert, culminated in a state of cultural emergency, in which museums must now restructure and rethink their organization, rewrite their collections' stories, and redress the erasures of the past. *Making History* is a collection of 22 compelling essays that collectively provide a crucial exploration of the ways that Black history and art have, and continue to be, situated within the Canadian cultural landscape. This text thus aims to address the "dynamism and complicity of African and diasporic experiences seen through the lens of museological intervention and artistic practices" (p.15).

As explained by Crooks and Fontaine in their essay, "Of Africa: A Reflection on 'Speaking Back'," *Making History* acts as the conclusion and the continuation of the *Of Africa* initiative. Co-curated by Crooks, Fontaine, and Forni at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) between 2014 and 2018, *Of Africa* provided an array of programs and activities that foregrounded Black artistic production. Crooks and Fontaine write that *Of Africa* was an "attempt to redress decades of tension between Toronto's Black community and the Museum" (p. 23), which is traced back and responds to the ROM's contested 1989 exhibition, *Into the Heart of Africa (IHA)*. As explained by Afua Cooper in her essay, "The *Into the Heart of Africa* Exhibition and the Coalition for the Truth about Africa: A Personal Journey," located in Part One of *Making History*, *IHA* displayed the spoils of war and colonial plunder throughout Africa, exhibiting "artifact after artifact [of] whites in postures of superiority over Africans, who were presented in poses of defeat and tutelage" (p. 41). Crooks et al. posit that the *Of Africa* project was a corrective form of curatorial activism that pushed the institution to reckon with and respond to not only the long aftermath of *IHA* and its damaging representations of Africa in Western museums, but the larger systemic issues of the museum.

In 2018, *Of Africa* culminated in the exhibition *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, which opened at the ROM before traveling to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. As an expansion of *Here We Are Here (HWAH)*, which “temporarily interrupted the practices, ideologies, and approaches towards transformative change at the ROM” (Crooks and Fontaine, p.28), *Making History* utilizes the varied perspectives of the artists, scholars, and advisors involved to effectively extend and deepen many of the timely conversations initiated by *Of Africa*. The objective of *Making History* is, therefore, to draw from a range of voices and perspectives that engage with and corroborate what has been characterized by the editors as a crucial moment in our social history. Crooks et al. excel particularly well at contextualizing this “crucial moment” by demonstrating how *Of Africa* and *HWAH* “interrupted the practices, ideologies, and approaches towards transformative change” (p. 28) by engaging in a collaborative and multivocal methodology that in turn acted as the impetus behind *Making History*. Collectively, these essays provide strong testimonials on the crucial moment of our social history in which museums, such as the ROM, are reimagining the stories they tell through their collections through initiatives such as *Of Africa* and *HWAH*. Although *Making History* is an extension of *Of Africa*’s projects and initiatives, one does not have to be familiar with *Of Africa*, nor is it necessary to have viewed the *Here We Are Here* exhibition to grasp the importance of these timely works.

The intent of Part One of this text is to examine the histories and contexts that incentivized the development of *Of Africa*. Section One is composed of five essays that critique the exclusion of Blackness and slavery in Canadian historical narratives and, more specifically, how “museums and cultural institutions have been complicit in perpetuating this silence” (Crooks et al., p. 16). The authors in this section successfully contextualize this topic for unfamiliar readers by providing ample evidence that reflects “on the process of undoing persistent structures and strictures that silently inform institutional and cultural practices” (Forni, p. 30). The success of this section lies in the writers’ adept ability to harness the power of personal perspectives to support their arguments and the overarching objective of this text.

In the essay, “The *Into the Heart of Africa* Exhibition and the Coalition for the Truth about Africa: A Personal Journey,” Afua Cooper provides a particularly effective personal reflection of her experience viewing *Into the Heart of Africa* at the ROM in 1989. Cooper describes how she met with others angered by the exhibition, and how together they formed the Coalition of Truth about Africa (CFTA), which protested the exhibition. Cooper poignantly recalls how the ROM utilized state power to discipline, enforce violence upon, and criminalize the protestors and, therefore, “shut down dissent and reinforce its commitment to white supremacy” (p. 44).

While the fervent dedication of the CFTA effectively led to four museums canceling the exhibit, Cooper writes that the “legacy of trauma is still with many of us” (p.44). In part two of Cooper’s essay, she discusses her participation in the *Of Africa* initiative as the CFTA liaison. Cooper offers vital insights into the troubling history of Black people being silenced and misrepresented by the ROM while also offering the reader an encouraging yet complex reflection of how material change is made.

The second section of *Making History: "Black Art/Black Canada"* focuses on contemporary artists whose exploration of Blackness is central to their work. With contributions from artists and writers such as Bushra Junaid, Chantal Gibson, and Andrea Fatona, the objective of Part Two is to "offer a glimpse into the multifaceted and varied landscape of contemporary Black Canadian art" (Crooks et al., p.16). This section focuses on the work of artists who participated in *Of Africa* and who were featured in *Here We Are Here*.

In "Hoodies and Regimentals: Black Attire and Access in the Canadian Art Museum," Joana Joachim provides a compelling rumination of when and how Black people are permitted to enter the museum space. Joachim argues that a common aspect felt by Black museum goers is the feeling of being "simultaneously exposed, or hypervisible, as well as utterly invisible" (150). To support her argument, Joachim draws upon an experience in which she was the only Black employee in a museum space who was not a security guard, a visitors services worker, or a custodian. Joachim connects these experiences with paintings by Gordon Shadrach, a Black Canadian painter, whose art is included in *Here We Are Here*. Joachim explores how Shadrach's paintings *Embark* (2018) and *Arrival* (2018), which feature Black men in historical garments, confront "contemporary issues around the lack of representation of Black people in the museum space" and "explores the specific history of hair and dress as a site through which white anti-Black racism continues to be enacted" (p.153). Joachim's essay convincingly examines how the museum has historically ostracized Black people, and yet, through the decision to place historically dressed Black sitters boldly within these institutions, Shadrach's contemporary portraits challenge the treatment of Black people in Canadian art institutions.

The three essays in the final section of *Making History* provide critical inquiries into "the perniciously persistent whiteness of Canadian identity and art historical discourse" (Crooks et al., p.16). This section illuminates how *Here We Are Here* fits within a lineage of exhibitions and art criticisms that challenge the hierarchies embedded so deeply within museums. In his essay, "Why Are There No Famous Black Canadian Artists? *Here We Are Here* and How Diversity and Inclusion Trump Aesthetic Critique," Rinaldo Walcott reinstates the central issue presented within *Making History*: "The exhibition of Black Canadian art is in crisis" (p.226). Walcott contends that it is not productive enough to place Black Canadian artists within museum spaces. Rather, there must also be serious conversations and debates around the aesthetics, histories, and politics of Black art in the Canadian context. The essays within *Making History* are strong and convincing examples of the serious conversations that must continue to be had to rectify the crisis examined so masterfully throughout this text.

Making History is an approachable, timely, and heartfelt text. The contributors take immense care in examining and challenging how Black people have been omitted from or misrepresented within Canadian cultural institutions while simultaneously showing the reader why change must be pursued.