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Letticia Cosbert Miller

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salt. For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories
salt. Pour la préservation des récits historiques visuels des diasporas noires

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Black communities for hundreds of years. These art works and cultural practices did not always fit into mainstream platforms. Black artists in Canada, including Wade and her contemporaries, have found varieties of ways to make and share work outside of, or parallel to, those spaces. Later generations of artists, like Bowen's, were influenced by their work, but unfortunately still not enough of the history of this Black Canadian art is known. Students in art school, or without access to the actual communities in which these artists work, do not learn the stories of these Black Canadian artist foremothers. The history is missing, and this has caused breaks in the legacy of Black Canadian art's visual language.

The texts in this catalogue are attentive to formal and material aspects of Wade's work in a way that is gratifying and, sadly, often unattended-to in studies of racialized artists, when shallow representation talk takes precedence over analytical discussion of forms and contexts. The awkwardness of the first essay is only a reminder of the difficulty some white art workers have engaging Black Canadian culture, as they tend to see race as something that has nothing to do with them, but is instead a trait or series of accidents that belongs solely with the subject.

Catalogues like this are important to the burgeoning Black Canadian art history. As a part of the historical record, they become primary source material for how we see and think about Black art in Canada. As Black curator Andrea Fatona explained in a recent interview, "If there's no writing as there would be for other kinds of exhibitions, and if there's no conversation from folks in the field who come from these communities, I think we're always going to end up with a void in the historical record of what happened, and the impact of what happened then gets lost." As of yet, there is no official history of Black Canadian contemporary art. This catalogue will be an important addition to that nascent field, which right now exists mostly in archives as critical reviews, academic studies, exhibition texts, and sometimes, on rare and lucky occasions, as exhibition monographs. I look forward to more such catalogues for other black Canadian women artists with prolific exhibition track records, such as Deanna Bowen, Tau Lewis, Sandra Brewster, Erika DeFreitas or Michele Pearson Clarke.

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Tina M. Campt
A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See
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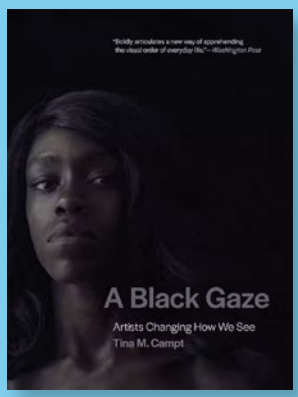
A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See is the much anticipated follow up to Tina M. Campt's groundbreaking book *Listening to Images* (2017), which introduced and explored the concept of photographic frequencies, that is, the haptic quality of images—"how they move, touch, and connect us to the *event* of the photo"—while championing a practice of listening to and looking beyond what we see in a photograph.[1] Campt, a Black feminist theorist of visual culture and Professor of Humanities and Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, amplifies many of the discourses presented in her 2017 monograph in this latest offering on making and viewing Black art.

In *A Black Gaze*, Campt trains her senses (sight, touch, hearing) on nine prominent contemporary artists whose practices straddle multiple media, including performance, video, film, photography, sculpture, and music: Deana Lawson, Khalil Joseph, Arthur Jafa, Dawoud Bey, Okwui Okpokwasili, Simone Leigh, Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich, Luke Willis Thompson, and Jenn Nkiru. As we encounter each artist in the book's



seven chapters, which are titled as "verses," we get a sense of Campt's continual "commitment to understanding visual culture through its entanglement with sound" (19). The

significance of sound to Campt's scholarship is well-trodden in *Listening to Images*, contextualized as a redirection of Ariella Azoulay's proposal to "watch" rather than "look at" images,[2] Campt chooses to "listen to" rather than "look at," in order to disrupt the equation of vision and knowledge. Drawing upon Paul Gilroy and Fred Moten, Campt demonstrates that sound, in particular, "is a sensory register critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations,"[3] and while this is not explicitly restated in *A Black Gaze*, its significance persists and is understood. Rather than fixing a definition to what she means by "a Black gaze," Campt allows for a fluid interpretation of the term, carefully exploring its meanings as informed by particular cultural moments, citing the proliferation of digital photographic and video documentation of Black life on social media platforms, and bringing in the cultural power brokers who are actively reshaping the circulation of Black culture, such as The Carters, Shonda Rhimes, Barry Jenkins, Rihanna, and others. Blackness, as it were, is everywhere, and yet too often its depiction allows for engagement at a safe distance, "through a lens of pity, sympathy, or concern" (7), something to be seen rather than to be felt. In response, through the book's introduction and its seven "verses," Campt asks what it would mean to "*see oneself through* the complex positionality that is Blackness—and work through its implications on and for oneself," rather than simply looking *at* Black people (7).

Throughout the text Campt draws upon Black cultural critics and film scholars who have challenged rigid understandings of the gaze, namely bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (and, to a lesser extent, hooks' 1992 essay "Eating the Other") and Manthia Diawara, whose "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1988) hooks famously critiques for its dismissal of gender disparity.[4] Acknowledging the formative role both scholars have played in her thinking, Campt signals a departure from their ideas towards an approach that refuses to affiliate a gaze with domination, to reduce subject to object, or to sacrifice agency for pleasure: "A Black gaze rejects traditional understandings of spectatorship by refusing to allow its subject to be consumed by its viewers" (38–39). Campt, then, also situates herself within a younger, contemporary milieu of scholars reconsidering the gaze, such as Simone Browne, whose *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* considers the constancy of being watched and how Black people have resisted, as well as Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, which juxtaposes the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of Blackness in American visual culture, among others.

Each of the seven verses combines tropes from memoir, art criticism, exhibition essay, and didactic text. Campt consistently begins with a personal anecdote, detailing how she has arrived at the artist's studio or exhibition, where they first encountered one another, and under what global or social conditions. This particular stylistic choice concretizes Campt's "transition to writing about art" (204), which she first gestured towards in Listening to Images, a notable departure from her previous ethnographic investigation of Afro-Germans through identification photography such as passport photos and studio portraits.[5] Verse One takes Campt to the Brooklyn studio of Deana Lawson, the Rochester-born photographer whose large-scale photographs highlight both the mundane and the exquisite in Black life across the globe. Most arresting in this chapter are Campt's accompanying interpretative texts or image descriptions, which illustrate the rigour with which she encounters art, and are in themselves demonstrations of a Black gaze at work. Campt cites a "humming" in Lawson's work, a refusal of her subjects to be reduced to objects, and a demand for confrontation with its viewers: "neither voyeuristic nor narcissistic, they stage encounters that require work" (39).

Verse Two sees Campt board a plane to Los Angeles to visit an exhibition of the work of Khalil Joseph, lauded filmmaker and brother of the late painter Noah Davis. Here Campt entwines Joseph's moving images with Christina Sharpe's theories involving *weather*—that is, "weathering the persistent weather of anti-blackness"(45)[6]—as well as the idea of *fabulation* as defined by Saidiya Hartman in her pivotal essay "Venus in Two Acts."[7] Campt also introduces her own theoretical concepts, which will reappear in subsequent chapters, such as "*Black countergravity*: the state of suspension between fungibility and fugitivity" and "*Black*

gravity: the force which propels Black flow" (73). Campt concludes that Joseph's moving images and the performances of their subjects refuse to capitulate to weather and gravity, creating a gaze that centres the Black subject, with "whiteness fully outside of the frame" (74).

Verse Three turns to Arthur Jafa, whose influence on the book is acknowledged at length in the introduction (or "prelude") and again in the dedication. Campt focuses on two lesser-known works by Jafa, the Mississippi born video artist and cinematographer: *Crystal & Nick Siegfried* (2017) and *Apex* (2013), before turning to his more well-known *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) which is held in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, MOCA Los Angeles, and many other institutions. Here Campt reintroduces her theory of frequency, augmenting it this time in describing it as a "*visual frequency of Black life*: irregular rates of vibration that register the differential value of the Black experience" (93). Here she adds a new term, "*hapticity*: the labor of feeling across difference and precarity; the work of feeling implicated or affected in ways that create restorative intimacy" (104).

Verse Four juxtaposes performance artist Okwui Okpokwasili and photographer Dawoud Bey to explore the relationship between *slowness and quiet* (the latter being "a sonic modality that infuses sound with impact and affect…a frequency perceptible through vibration rather than pitch") (135). Verse Five explores Campt's experience of *Loophole of Retreat*, a 2019 solo exhibition of Chicago born artist Simone Leigh presented by the Guggenheim Museum, before shifting to Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich's 2019 short film *Spit on the Broom*.

Provocatively, Verse Six attends to the work of Luke Willis Thompson, a New Zealand artist of Fijian and European heritage, who "has described himself as a Black artist, albeit not of the African Diaspora" (171). Campt takes Thompson's positionality seriously, ascribing to him "*adjacency*: the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability; the labor of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession" (171). In a remarkable flourish near the book's end, Campt clarifies that a Black gaze is not necessarily the viewpoint of a Black person, saying "it is not a gaze restricted to or defined by race or phenotype. It is a viewing practice and a structure of witnessing that reckons with the precarious state of Black life in the twenty-first century" (172). This important explication would perhaps have been useful at the text's beginning and could have been developed throughout the chapters. However, Campt foreshadows this flourish in explaining her use of the indefinite article in the book's title: "I am proposing that we think about *a* Black gaze (rather than *the* Black gaze) and understand it as both multiple and polyvalent" (21).

The final chapter, titled "Reprise," very briefly engages the work of Nigerian-British artist and director Jenn Nkiru. Though Campt notes that the Black artistic renaissance we find ourselves in is a global one, stretching to the UK, Caribbean, and the African continent (5), the vast majority of the artists discussed in *A Black Gaze* are American, with the aforementioned Thompson and Nkiru being the lonely exceptions. "Reprise" is a jubilant end to the book, filled with vivid stills of dancing, singing, and praise and worship taken from Nkiru's *Rebirth Is Necessary* (2017), situating Nkiru in a cultural milieu that extends beyond, but also fits firmly within, her contributions to critically acclaimed music videos for The Carters.

A Black Gaze offers readers an engaging exploration of what it means to make, view, and experience Black art in current (American) cultural and political moments. Campt's multi-sensory approach to contemporary art will inspire artists, writers, curators, and patrons of the arts alike, challenging all to engage blackness from unexpected, and sometimes discomforting, vantage points. In some ways, *A Black Gaze* is an illustration of Campt's theory of frequencies first proposed in her 2017 monograph: here, at one frequency level, Campt grapples with theoretical concerns—as evidenced by the multitude of innovative terminology peppered throughout the text's margins—while at another frequency she strives to engage in an approachable and accessible discussion of the artists and artworks that prioritizes the emotional and interpersonal relationships between artist, audience, and artwork. The result is a polyvalent representation of what it means to create art and

what it means to confront art's complexities. *A Black Gaze* is a welcome companion to *Listening to Images*, a timely reconsideration and application of what it means to listen *to* and *through* art.

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1. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
2. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008).
3. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6–8.
4. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
5. Tina M. Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Tina M. Campt *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and The African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
6. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
7. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives

PHI Foundation, Montreal
February 9 to May 22, 2022
Curated by Cheryl Sim

Raven Spiratos

PHI Foundation's *Revealing Narratives* exhibition comprised Stan Douglas's two photo series *Disco Angola* (2012) and *Penn Station's Half Century* (2021). In *Disco Angola*, Douglas assumes the role of a fictitious photojournalist from the 1970s who works in New York City, often attends the burgeoning disco scene, and frequently travels to Angola to report on the civil war. The series is set in 1974 and 1975, pivotal years for the world's political economy, marked by the oil crisis, the stock market crash, deteriorating US-Soviet ties, and civil wars. It also was the origin of

***Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives* (installation view), PHI Foundation, 2022. Stan Douglas, *Club Versailles*, 1974, 2012; *A Luta Continua*, 1974, 2012. Digital C-prints mounted on Dibond aluminum.** Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner © PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

disco, which became a major genre for queer, Black and Latinx people in New York City and around the world. In the second series, Douglas reconstructs New York's original Penn Station as it existed at nine moments. *Disco Angola* was presented in the PHI Foundation building at 451 rue Saint-Jean while the Penn Station series hung in the Foundation building at 465 rue Saint-Jean.

Stan Douglas was born in Vancouver in 1960, where he is currently based. He has a remarkable international reputation and was chosen to represent Canada at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. His work examines photography as a medium, challenging "authenticity" by examining the connection between remembered past and fact. Archival research is integral to Douglas' process of reproducing and reinventing historical settings in digital images.

Sprawled out across all four floors of PHI Foundation, the *Disco Angola* portion of the exhibition features a total of eight pieces (of varying dimensions above 5'× 9'), two pieces to a floor, as per the artist's vision. These large-scale panoramic photographs are paired, one work geographically tied to Angola and the other to New York. Writing for *Artforum* in 2012, Rachel Kushner explained: "*Disco Angola*, like its name, is a diptych: eight large-scale panoramic photographs, four related to disco, four to Angola, each carefully re-created either from a found source image or as an amalgamation of research and lore."[1] In Douglas' words: "The idea of *Disco Angola* is looking at how certain things which have positive possibility or a very momentary utopian possibility can often be ruined by the intrusion of some foreign forces."[2]

One such arrangement sees *A Luta Continua, 1974* and *Two Friends, 1975* compelled into dialogue with one another. In *A Luta Continua*, a figure with long wavy hair in a green jumpsuit stands outside, in front of a building painted with the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola party flag. On the lip of the building is written: "A LUTA CONTINUA VITORIA E CERTA" which translated from Portuguese into