

Julie Crooks, ed., *Fragments of Epic Memory*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/DelMonico Books D.A.P., 2021, 274 pp. 100 colour, 50 b/w illus., \$40.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781636810126

Lillian O'Brien Davis

Volume 47, numéro 2, 2022

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

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094916ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094916ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

O'Brien Davis, L. (2022). Compte rendu de [Julie Crooks, ed., *Fragments of Epic Memory*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/DelMonico Books D.A.P., 2021, 274 pp. 100 colour, 50 b/w illus., \$40.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781636810126]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 47(2), 121–124.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1094916ar>

that I've never experienced in an exhibition. This is where Joachim's curatorial skill impressed me the most: each material object in the show, appearing on the website as a scanned image, is paired with something else, which you join by following a link. The 1989 Artexte publication *For Fear of Others: Art Against Racism* brings you to Camille Turner's Afronautic Research Lab and a trove of resources curated by Turner and Black studies scholar Phillip Howard at McGill University in 2018. A Dub Poets poster brings you to a digitized 1983 videotape of a live Lillian Allen mixdown! The poster for a 2019 show at Galerie de l'UQAM in Montreal, *Over My Black Body*, brings you to a popular education website on Quebec's Caribbean (Hi)stories. Some links are to PDFs of scholarly articles or critical reviews about the artists and exhibitions. Many items are also accompanied by a short audio clip in which Joachim tells you something else about the artist or the work: sometimes it's biographical, sometimes it is unexpectedly quirky and touching. I swear—and I'm thinking like a professor who is always building imaginary syllabi—you could build a whole Canadian Art course out of this web exhibition.

Joachim's bilingualism, and Artexte's French and English-language collections, make this a particularly strong exhibition, showing and creating thematic and interpersonal connections between Black artists and curators (Manuel Mathieu, Dana Michel, Gaétane Verna, Dominique Fontaine) working in Quebec and other provinces.

I was struck by all of it: the aesthetic and political power of the

work, the longevity of individual careers, and the steady and enduring formation of networks of affinity, collaboration, cross-inspiration, mentorship, and mutual care. As importantly, I was struck by the care with which the Artexte librarians have handled—and Joachim as curator has animated and contextualized—the materials, to keep holding a place for this tradition.

Jenny Burman is an Associate Professor in Communication Studies at McGill University.
—jenny.burman@mcgill.ca

1. Both "blips in time," which Joachim uses as a title for her curatorial statement, and "little 'a' archive" are described by Andrea Fatona in a 2020 interview with Liz Ikiriko: "I think that the big 'A' archive exists to overshadow the little 'a' archive, which, for me, is the archive that I know and touch and feel, and most of us do through stories at your dining table, through photographs that you go through with your family." See "Speaking Ourselves into Being," *C Magazine* 144 (Winter 2020), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/144/speaking-ourselves-into-being>. <https://cmagazine.com/issues/144/speaking-ourselves-into-being>

2. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

3. See <http://www.celafiz5.com>

Julie Crooks, ed.

Fragments of Epic Memory

Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/
DelMonico Books D.A.P., 2021

274 pp. 100 colour, 50 b/w illus.

\$40.00 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781636810126

Lillian O'Brien Davis

In her introduction, exhibition curator Julie Crooks quotes Derek Walcott, from his series of essays *What the Twilight Says* (1998): "Only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us." This exhibition catalogue, *Fragments*

of *Epic Memory*, keeps this quotation close to the heart, as the act of strenuous looking is a core theme addressed throughout the book. The catalogue contains commissioned essays along with excerpts of other previously published texts that are foundational to the exhibition. Each text or essay is a fragment that creates a whole, reframing perspectives on the Art Gallery of Ontario's recently acquired Montgomery Caribbean Photography Collection in a way that gives agency to its subjects and explodes the colonial lens. Acquired in 2019, the Montgomery Collection comprises almost 4,000 photographs, lithographs, and ephemera and spans the period of emancipation beginning in 1834 to the first half of the twentieth century, documenting regions in the Caribbean and the related diaspora. The exhibition is significant as it is the first organized by the AGO's new



Department of Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora and blends the Montgomery Collection with historical and contemporary artworks exploring how the Caribbean's histories are constantly being reimagined and rearticulated by artists across time.

Within this constellation of artworks, Walcott's strenuous looking suggests that we must learn to look with eyes that see beyond the colonial frameworks that caused the images in the Montgomery collection to be produced in the first place. Julie Crooks describes her understanding of strenuous looking in her curatorial essay, which focuses on her observation of a young boy returning the cold, all-encompassing colonial gaze of the camera in the photograph *Boy with optical device at market* (ca. 1915). The act of strenuous looking appears repeatedly in many forms within the Montgomery collection and, as the catalogue contributors suggest, beyond in Caribbean art at large. Like the exhibition, the catalogue is a site of speculation with shifting rhythms between poetry, lectures, and formal essays—what contributing essayist Andil Gosine describes as the always potential dynamism of the material within the archive.

The book's affective recollection of personal memory is powerful. This is something felt keenly in the initial text in the book, Derek Walcott's eponymous "Fragments of Epic Memory," which includes vivid descriptions of the writer's own experiences returning to the Antilles—an experience many of the Caribbean diaspora can understand, a shift in perception, where one's eyes begin to see without the colonial lens placed over them.¹

Walcott's text establishes the tone of the book and his writing recurs throughout its entirety, in excerpts and quotations. The catalogue uses

fragmentation as foil to the false coherence of colonial time, drawing from language reflected in Walcott's writing describing the fragmentary nature of memory as a defining feature of the Caribbean archipelago. The texts in the catalogue seek to fill in loud silences in the colonial archives, writing about Caribbean and diasporic artists who have not been adequately recognized for their impact and accomplishments by the Western canon. In addition to the collected writing, the catalogue includes image plates from the Montgomery collection, reproductions of artworks in the exhibition, and installation views. The catalogue brings these artists and images together, an effective gesture of speculation that suggests how much we are missing when we rely on colonial visions.

At times, this act of speculation is done through the lens of the family, a theme that courses throughout the book. Family depictions found within the Montgomery collection portray how the word "family" itself assumes a subtle horror, with Black subjects standing amongst the white "family" to whom they have been unwilling bound (173). In contrast, depictions of Black families posing in front of their own homes suggest a different sense of the word, referring to bonds of love and mutual support (175). Writing in the catalogue reflects this theme as well, exploring patriarchal and matriarchal lineages established by blood as well as by influence.

Barbara Paca's essay on Frank Walter's artistic practice and life explores the ingenuity and creativity of a Caribbean artist, a "Black

Caliban," splintered between many worlds. Walter's artwork stitches together fragments of history, memory and diasporic experience. Paca outlines Walter's imagined patriarchal duty to his country, capturing memories of the past in plantation depictions as well as conceptions of the future in his later work. Paca's reference to Caliban feels apt, as Walter transforms from servant who worked the land to a visionary, expanding the scope and scale of the definition of a Caribbean artist. As Paca describes, Walter rejects the European perspective of Lévi-Strauss's *tristes tropiques*, instead seeing his home and the Caribbean in general as an unknown thread of epic history.

Other unknown threads include the short reflection by Mary Wells, the daughter of watercolourist Dorothy Henrique Wells, that recalls the efforts her mother made as an artist and educator. An artist who extended her studio into the world, bringing her paintbrush and watercolours anywhere she wished to work. Despite her proficiency as an artist and educator, there is a dearth of information about Wells in the art-historical canon. Emily Cluett's preface to Mary Wells' piece suggests that, despite this, the legacy of the elder Wells persists through the rigor of her work as a painter, her decades as an educator, and through her own children. A small but important note at the end of the preface recognizes Dr. Andrea Fatona's impact in bringing Dorothy Henrique Wells's work to the common consciousness.

Both of these artists, though they orbited the Caribbean, are described through these essays as

being intrinsically tied to the land through their work. A common theme in these collected writings being the act of returning to the Caribbean, an important step in rearticulating how the Caribbean is seen from the outside. Each piece of writing addresses this through what artist Christian Campbell describes as the diasporic theory of reassemblage—like a broken piece of ceramic stuck together again—something whole but fundamentally changed. Campbell pulls together quotations from Walcott's *What the Twilight Says* along with other poetic fragments drawn from various sources, using his own theory of reassemblage to outline a survivalist ethic of imaginative possibility. Overall, this act of reassemblage is done effectively throughout the book, though the blank pages that appear sporadically throughout feel like their own kind of unintentional gaps where an image might otherwise be perfectly at home.

In the catalogue, time is non-linear, something evident in the placement of the epilogue in what is ostensibly the middle of the book. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "EPILOGUE" explores colonial time and memory, as what were meant to be permanent monuments to imperial power in Haiti shift or lose their meaning through subsequent generations and changes in power: monuments dumped into the sea, where they will likely face judgment by those they had previously condemned. Marsha Pearce, in an essay on history as narrative, later describes postcoloniality as a "long-moment," a perpetual afterness with no clear beginning or end.

Pearce draws examples from the exhibition, such as Nadia Huggins's work *Transformations No. 7* (2016), which proposes new ways of seeing, positioning the viewer underwater. In Huggins's work, Pearce underscores how the body finds agency, free from historical constructs of race, gender, and class. Pearce's analysis works to deepen our understanding of how the works in the exhibition complement and expand on Crooks' work on the Montgomery Collection, suggesting that the works in this exhibition recall—or rather revoke—fixity. If as Pearce suggests, history is a narrativization of the past then the exhibition as a whole offers an alternative narrative that is routed through rather than rooted in history.

The writing in the catalogue reframes art made by people of the Caribbean as well as historical images of the place to suggest that the people depicted, rather than being nothing more than a detail of the landscape, embody what Pearce describes as the "defiant dignity" of people—like artist Frank Walter—who live close to the land. Pearce refers to Walcott's writing to suggest that the "rictus smile"—applied in order to do business with tourists out of the shame of necessity—of the Caribbean belies near constant resistance. The continuum of resistance and rebellion is reflected in the evolution of artists like Peter Dean Rickards, a maverick Jamaican photographer who embraced the digital early in his career, exploring aspects of Jamaican culture not often put on display. Annie Paul reflects on the "cancelling" of artist Peter Dean Rickards in England in the first part

of the 2010s when many galleries that showed interest in presenting Rickards' work were warned against it by rights groups that were able to influence programming decisions in what Paul describes as "performative wokeness at its worst." Without going into detail about the nature of the "cancelling," Paul suggests that Rickards' work documenting the Jamaican dancehall scene in the 2000s and his political satire through his magazine, *FIRST*, is not easily interpreted by a society so resolutely committed to policing class and colonial boundaries.

An account of an earlier rebel appears by way of an excerpt from a chapter in C. L. R. James' *Black Jacobins* (1838), "The San Domingo Masses Begin," which describes the revolution of enslaved people against the colonizers of La Cap, Haiti. The text traces Toussaint's arrival and the mythology of his hero-hood. James' description of the actions of the revolution in La Cap feels timeless when considered against recent events from the summer of 2020, distinguishing the cruelties involved in perpetuating injustice from the angry rebuke of the impoverished and oppressed—they cannot be equated.

Overall, the catalogue captures the inordinate influence Caribbean artists and culture have had on the wider world. Dominique Fontaine reflects on Caribbean art in its current form within the diaspora, linking this exhibition with other such shows that have been presented in Canada over the last ten years. Fontaine suggests that perhaps the Caribbean is not the periphery but, in fact, within our own urban

archipelagos, we are all connected back to the Caribbean as a cultural and artistic centre.

Fragments of Epic Memory frames the Montgomery collection as a speculative site of emancipation, using its collection of photographs to reframe dominant historical narratives about the Caribbean. Walcott's strenuous looking cues the reader to see these photographs with new eyes, asking: what is it that cannot be consumed? The catalogue contributes to the growing crescendo of voices that affirm that the colonial photographer has not and will never capture these subjects in their entirety. Through the collection of essays, texts and images documenting the Montgomery Collection and other artworks, the catalogue is distinguished beyond its association with the exhibition as a record of Caribbean artists, thinkers and writers reflecting on the impact of the Caribbean on the western artistic canon. One of the final texts in the catalogue, O'Neill Lawrence's interview with exhibition artist Leasho Johnson captures the essence of the catalogue's collected writings, successfully proposing an interrogation of a particularly rigid way of thinking by re-interpreting, re-looking, cutting up, collaging, to ask the question: "is this who we were—who we really were?"

Lillian O'Brien Davis is Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography.
— lillian@gallery44.org

1. Walcott's text was originally delivered as the 1992 Nobel lecture. See Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory — The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1993).

Jan Wade et al.

Jan Wade: Soul Power, exh. cat.

Vancouver: Information Office and the Vancouver Art Gallery, 2022

176 pp. 150+ colour illus.

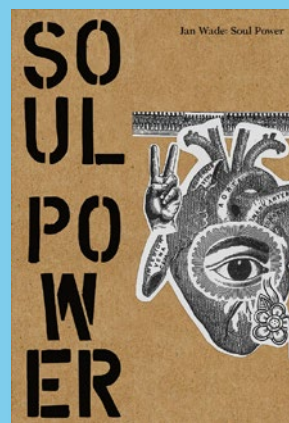
\$35.00 (paper)

ISBN 9781988860138

Yaniya Lee

Much was made in the press about the fact that Jan Wade's recent solo exhibition, *Soul Power*, presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery from July 2021 to March 2022, was the first major show for a Black Canadian woman artist in the gallery's ninety-year history. As a student of Black Canadian art, I know that these practices existed here for a long time, even if, until very recently, they were overlooked by major Canadian art institutions. More than the VAG's ability to fulfil current socially responsible representation targets under pressure, I was excited for the publication of a new monograph on an important Black Canadian woman artist, of which there are too few—monographs, not artists, I mean.

Jan Wade: Soul Power, a 176-page tome with over 150 full-colour images, was co-published by the Vancouver Art Gallery and Information Office to accompany the most comprehensive survey of Wade's artwork to date. The catalogue lays the groundwork for a fuller understanding of her practice through the introduction of discourses around the work, and in this way achieves its purpose of presenting Wade's career as an artist. In what follows I will give an overview of the contents of



the book and some of the main ideas it therein.

Three major texts are included in the catalogue: "Breathe: A Conversation," an interview with Wade by the artist Deanna Bowen; "Life Lessons," a biographical essay by curator Daina Augaitis; and "Signifying, Text and Movement in the Art of Jan Wade," an analytical essay by writer Wayne Compton, all preceded by a brief foreword by VAG director Anthony Kiendl and followed by a list of Works, a Curriculum Vitae, and Acknowledgements. Interspersed between the texts and images are two-page spreads of testimonials by the artist, in which she describes her upbringing, her work, and her values.

Wade was born to an interracial couple in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1952, and raised in the local Black community. After art school in Toronto, she moved to Vancouver in the early 1980s, and there she found a local scene that nurtured a practice that soon had her showing her work in solo and group shows across the country and abroad. Wade's many mediums include painting, collage,