Black Gold: A Black Feminist Art History of 1920s Montréal

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Abstract: The 1920s have been touted as the golden era of jazz and Black history in Montréal. Similarly, the decade is well known for the Harlem Renaissance, a key moment in African American art history. Yet this period in Black Canadian art histories remains largely unknown. As a first step toward shedding some light on this period in Black Canadian art history, I propose to use what I term a Black feminist art-historical (BFaH) praxis to discuss some visual art practices undoubtedly active alongside well-known jazz musicians and cultural producers in 1920s Montréal. This paper presents an overview of critical race art history and feminist art history, as well as Black feminist approaches to visual representation, to outline what might be considered four tenets of BFaH praxis. Applying these tenets, I propose that a new art history may emerge from well-known art objects and practices as well as lesser-known ones. I posit that through a deliberately BFaH approach, new meanings emerge and the voices of Black women, even when obstructed by mainstream white narratives, may begin to stand out and shed light upon a variety of histories. This praxis aims to underline the subtext lurking at the edges of these images and to make intangible presences visible in the archive and in art history. I propose BFaH as a strategy for more nuanced discussion of the work of Black Canadian artists and histories that have by and large been left out of official records.

Keywords: Black feminist art history, 1920s Montréal, Black Canadian art, Phyllis Wheatley Art Club, Coloured Women’s Club, Negro Community Centre, Harlem Renaissance, jazz

Résumé : Les années 1920 sont généralement présentées comme étant l’âge d’or du jazz et de l’histoire des Noirs à Montréal. De même, cette décennie est reconnue pour être la Renaissance de Harlem, un moment clé de l’histoire de l’art afro-américain. Pourtant, cette période de l’histoire de l’art afro-canadien demeure largement méconnue. Comme première étape visant à jeter un peu de lumière sur ce pan de l’histoire de l’art afro-canadien, je propose de recourir à ce que j’appelle une praxis de l’histoire de l’art féministe noir (BFaH) pour examiner quelques pratiques d’arts visuels qui furent inconstamment actives aux côtés de musiciens de jazz et de producteurs culturels reconnus dans le Montréal des années 1920. Le présent article offre un aperçu de l’histoire de l’art dans une perspective critique de la race (critical race art history), de l’histoire de l’art féministe noir, ainsi que des approches de féministes noires en matière de représentation visuelle, dans le but d’esquisser ce qui pourrait être considéré comme les quatre principes de la praxis BFaH. En appliquant ces principes, je propose l’émergence d’une nouvelle histoire de l’art à partir des pratiques et des œuvres d’art reconnues ainsi que celles qui le sont moins. Je postule qu’à travers une approche BFaH délibérée, de nouveaux sens émergent, de même que les voix des femmes noires, même lorsqu’elles sont entravées par les récits dominants blancs, puissent commencer à se démarquer et à jeter de la lumière sur des
histoire diverses. Cette praxis vise à souligner la présence dissimulée du sous-texte situé à la périphérie de ces images ainsi qu’à rendre visibles ces présences intangibles aussi bien dans les archives que dans l’histoire de l’art. Je propose la BFAH comme stratégie de discussions plus nuancées de l’œuvre d’artistes canadiens noirs et de leur histoire qui ont été en grande partie exclues des archives officielles.

**Mots clés :** Histoire de l’art féministe noir, Montréal des années 1920, l’art afro-canadien, Phyllis Wheatley Art Club, Coloured Women’s Club, Negro Community Centre, Renaissance de Harlem, jazz

For some time now, I have been pondering a question — a frustrating, bothersome question: What would a Black feminist art history look like? When I first began reflecting on this issue, I came across numerous feminist and critical race art historical texts as well as several Black feminist texts — none of which relieved my intellectual itch. There seemed to exist no simple answer to this question. While feminist art historians have long discussed the patriarchal nature of art history as a discipline, critical race art historians have underlined its inherent racism. And for their part, Black feminist texts discussed the importance of critical analyses of Black women’s representation, but almost exclusively in relation to popular visual culture.¹ My stance is that the representation of Black women in art should itself be central to some of these arguments. Somehow, despite the clear desire among scholars in these areas to discuss the visual representation of women and Black subjects, that is rarely the case. This article is my attempt to develop techniques for incorporating Black feminisms and art historical analyses.

The 1920s have been touted as the golden era of jazz and Black history in Montréal.² Similarly, the decade is well known for the Harlem Renaissance.

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¹ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990/2002), 67; bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015); Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies; No. 144 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York/London: Routledge, 2010).

² Sage Reynolds, “Toot Sweet: When Jazz Ruled Montréal,” *Canada’s History*, 15 June 2018, <canadashistory.ca/explore/arts-culture-society/toot-sweet-when-jazz-ruled-Montréal>, accessed May 2020; Dorothy Williams, “Little Burgundy and Montréal’s Black English-Speaking Community,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Historica Canada, 17 January 2020, <thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/little-burgundy-and-montréal-s-black-english-speaking-community>, accessed May 2020.
a key moment in African American art history. Yet this period in Black Canadian art history remains largely unknown. Through my curiosity about what the Montréal “equivalent” of the Harlem Renaissance might have been, I propose a reflection on how what I term a “Black feminist art-historical (bфаh) praxis” might reveal it. In order to think through the strategies that might constitute a Black feminist art history, I will look at the advantages and possible hurdles of three related frameworks: critical race art history, feminist art history, and Black feminisms. I also briefly review the groundwork laid out by art historians and curators who came before me whose texts are examples of Black feminist approaches. Pulling from the areas listed above, I will identify and define guiding principles for bфаh: four tenets that I hope will yield greater reflection and more refined tools over time. I then use the 1920s as a case study of how these tenets might be used to unearth more opaque slices of history by applying them to Black Montréal as an example. I explore how bфаh could serve as an entry point for discussing the visual artists and art workers who undoubtedly lived and worked alongside key jazz musicians and cultural figures such as Myron “Mynie” Sutton, Lou Hooper, and Rufus Rockhead.

I. BLACK FEMINIST ART HISTORIANS?

While the overwhelming majority of art-historical studies have generally overlooked Black women, there are scholars such as Judith Wilson, Lisa Collins, and Charmaine A. Nelson who have begun the process of discussing the representation of Black women in art history. Over the years, Nelson, Collins, and Wilson have critically engaged with the representation of Black women in visual art. These scholars’ groundbreaking work is at the root of my current inquiries. They recognize the crucial importance of engaging simultaneously with both gender issues and race issues in order to fully encompass the meaning and impact the representations of

3 Bruce Kellner, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995).

4 Judith Wilson, “Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden’s Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 112–22; Lisa Collins, “Economies of Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 99–125; Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*. 
Black women in art. These women’s deliberate choices to focus specifically on Black women in the visual arts serve to counteract the erasure of these representations in art history. In doing so Nelson, Collins, and Wilson use their work to centre the narratives of Black women in order to rehumanize them and bring back what Avery Gordon terms their “complex personhood” – that is, to treat such subjects with dignity and respect. In seeking to complicate our understanding and reading of representations of Black women in art history, these scholars are working to bring these women’s stories to life. Within the framework of a bfaH, these ways of thinking make it possible to discuss distinctly Black feminist concerns in analyses of representations that were never meant for Black women. As noted by Nelson, it is crucial first to understand the colonial context within which representations of Black women were produced in order to make an adequate assessment of them. By mapping out techniques for bfaH, I hope to move this discipline toward what Patricia Hill Collins first called for in Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (1990/2002) to develop a means for the empowerment of Black women through self-defined modes of knowledge production.

II. BLACK FEMINIST ART-HISTORICAL PRAXIS FOUR WAYS

Emerging from the context of Canada’s booming Black women’s art scene, I contend that the following techniques are possible tenets of bfaH in the hope to carve out space within art history as a discipline for discussing Black women’s art production and representations. Despite increasing attention to race within art history, many scholars opt to place all Black subjects under the same umbrella. Historically, feminist scholars enacted a similar erasing gesture through their consideration of the category “woman” from a colour-blind and cisgender-centric standpoint. Thus, neither feminist scholarship nor critical race scholarship adequately addressed the issues faced by Black women. Locating Black feminism in art history opens up the space

5 Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5.
6 Charmaine A. Nelson, The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xviii.
7 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 221.
8 Yaniya Lee, “The Women Running the Show,” Canadian Art, 2 October 2017, 98–100.
9 Nelson, The Color of Stone, xxii.
10 The narrow categorization of gender as binary also contributes to the erasure of trans, genderfluid, and non-binary folks within such discussions. For more on gender as a spectrum see Trans Student Educational Resources,
not only for a critical re-reading of art histories but also to consider the multiple facets of Black women’s identities and experiences actively seeking to better their social standings in the ongoing struggle for equality.\(^{11}\)

As Black feminist movements in the United States gained traction in the 1970s, feminist art historians increasingly began to engage with race in their analyses. Among their works, critical art historical texts speaking specifically to Black women’s experiences remain a minority.\(^{12}\) Black feminisms have found their way into mainstream feminist inquiries nonetheless. These discussions, however, have become coopted and distilled to suit the purposes of “diversity” and “inclusivity,” resulting in Black women’s narratives being left behind once again.\(^{13}\) Michele Wallace, a Black female art historian, calls for specificity precisely because it simply is not possible

\(^{11}\) For more on Black feminisms see also Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (July 1991): 1241–1299; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1997); Richie, *Arrested Justice*, 125–55; Vivian May, “‘Speaking into the Void’? Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash,” *Hypatia* 29.1 (2015): 94–112; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Joy James, “Radicalizing Black Feminism,” in *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader*, by Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 47–65.

\(^{12}\) Collins, “Economies of Flesh,” 99–125; Connor Garel, “Why Have There Been No Great Black Canadian Women Artists?” *Canadian Art*, 10 January 2019; Monika Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000); Lee, “The Women Running the Show”; Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, xi–xxxvi; Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*; Kymberly Pinder, ed., *Race-Ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002); Wilson, “Getting Down to Get Over,” 112–22.

\(^{13}\) James, “Radicalizing Black Feminism”; May, “‘Speaking into the Void?’”
to discuss Black women’s position in art and art history in the same way as that of other women. Her statement reads as follows:

The key problematic among feminist theorists of colour in our debates around identity and “otherness” has been this notion of “and blacks too.” The insight of the most recent generations of feminists of colour has been that blacks (or black women or women of colour or black men) cannot be tacked onto formulations about gender without engaging in a form of conceptual violence. In no theoretically useful way whatsoever are blacks like women.14

In this statement, Wallace clearly rejects the recurring comparison that early white feminists made between the plights of women and the plights of Black people. She is calling for a direct and thoughtful engagement with the specific site at which Black women find themselves within society. It is crucial to examine the positions of women in general; however, these cannot and must not be lumped together. Feminist art historical approaches that try to engage with race without recognizing that racism and anti-Blackness are in fact two distinct issues or that misogynoir — anti-Black racism compounded with misogyny — is a violence that only certain women face leaves Black women dangerously vulnerable to erasure once again.15

Rather than entertaining the notion of objectivity, which is considered by Black feminists to be an untenable intellectual position, these approaches consider embodied knowledge and everyday experience as crucial places of knowing that allow important insight in transformative justice work.16 By operating from a standpoint of personal experience and knowledge, it is possible for Black feminists to pose questions that have yet to be brought forth and therefore to critique aspects of institutional practices and oppression that have hitherto remained undisputed. Black feminist approaches understand the compounded effect of both racism and sexism on Black women’s lives and that they are “linked to uniquely disparaging images of Black women’s sexuality, and [are] emboldened by the ways that state power controls opportunity on the basis of race as well as gender.”17

14 Michele Wallace, “‘Why Are There No Great Black Artists?’ The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture,” in Black Popular Culture, Discussion in Contemporary Culture/Dia Center for the Arts, 1047-6806, no. 8, ed. Gina Dent, compiled by Michele Wallace (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 342.

15 Collins, “Economies of Flesh,” 99–125; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”; Morton, Disfigured Images, xi–xvii; Hartman, Scenes of Subjection; Collins, Black Feminist Thought; James, “Radicalizing Black Feminism”; May, “‘Speaking into the Void?’”; Richie, Arrested Justice.

16 Richie, Arrested Justice, 129.

17 Ibid., 128.
One of the foundational components of Black feminism is intersectionality, a term coined in 1991 by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In developing this term for work Black feminists had been doing for years, Crenshaw provided a crucial tool for articulating the specific experiences they had been describing. In discussing intersectionality, Vivian May argues,

Rather than conceptualize group identity via a common denominator framework that subsumes within-group differences, creates rigid distinctions between groups, and leads to distorted analyses of discrimination, intersectionality explores the politics of the unimaginable, the invisible, and the silence. Intersectionality understands exclusions and gaps as meaningful and examines the theoretical and political impact of such absences.

What Black feminists such as Crenshaw, Wallace, and May are arguing for is the need for us to understand and utilize intersectionality not as a means of labelling but rather as a way of doing. This means that feminist scholars must refrain from using intersectionality as a means of discussing various identities, as this undermines the true aim of this approach, which is to reconfigure the very foundations of our society to place Black women at its centre. If we turn away from using intersectionality as a means of labelling “diversity,” our attention then moves from who people are to what systemic oppressions they face. This paradigm shift, which Black feminists have been working toward for decades (if not centuries), is one that must also occur in art history as a discipline.

The tenets of Black feminist theory underlined by Beth Richie provide useful insight into how a BFH approach might begin to take shape. Richie highlights interlocking oppressions, standpoint epistemology, everyday knowledge, dialectical images, and social justice praxis as key points in Black feminist work. By orienting these tenets toward issues of

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18 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1241–99.
19 Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement,” in Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), <circuitous.org/screaps/combahee.html>, accessed 9 September 2020.
20 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”; May, “Speaking into the Void,” 167.
21 May, “Speaking into the Void”; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”; Dent et al., “Discussion.”
22 Though the term “Black feminism” had not yet been coined, the lives and the work of women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and Ida B. Wells show the clear aims of placing Black women’s bodies and experiences at the centre of activist and changemaking work.
23 Richie, Arrested Justice, 127–31.
visual representation and art, a new practice of art history may emerge. A Black feminist art historical praxis could centre around the following techniques: (1) reclaiming the narrative through storytelling, (2) centring Black women, (3) focusing on the sociopolitical impacts of art and visual culture, and (4) employing alternative modes of knowing. These techniques make it possible to bypass traditional art-historical approaches to directly address issues impacting Black women.

Borrowing Wallace’s words, it is not enough for critical race and feminist art historians to remain in the realm of “and Blacks too” — or “Black women too”— as this does little to solve problems of misrepresentation and invisibilization.24 As Beth Richie aptly notes, “A Black feminist analysis not only provides a much better explanation of the multiple dynamics of race, sexuality, gender, and class; it also accounts for the various forms of violence women experience and the multiple contexts within which it simultaneously occurs.”25 A fundamental aspect of Black feminist endeavours is not only to regain control over these narratives but also to work actively to dismantle the systems that made this power imbalance possible to begin with.

Richie underlines that in order for this work to be truly effective, it must be aimed at producing tangible changes in the current condition of Black women’s lives and those of their communities.26 Moreover, she holds that “scholarly work should be in service to activism and that the beneficiaries of research findings, policy recommendations, or theoretical insights should be those most affected.”27 Richie further contends that Black feminist scholars’ work aims to challenge hierarchies, transform academic institutions, work toward a new form of organizational leadership, and revive grassroots activist efforts for social change.28 This is what needs to occur within the discipline of art history as well. Indeed, feminist art historians have called for such changes. As outlined by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard in the introduction to *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*,29 the goal of feminist art history is not so much the rediscovery of forgotten women artists. Rather, it is the more radical alteration of the discipline’s methodology and theory by “experiencing in a new way the images and objects of the old art historical litany.” The representation and work of Black women in art requires a specific and intentional approach aimed

24 Wallace, “Why Are There No Great Black Artists?”
25 Richie, *Arrested Justice*, 127.
26 Ibid., 131.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Feminism and Art History,” in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), xiv.
at not only discussing the ways in which they are represented but also at underlining and challenging the ways in which these images continue to impact their day-to-day lives. Pollock argues that

To discover the history of women and art means accounting for the way art history is written. To expose its underlying assumptions, its prejudices and its silences, is to reveal that the negative way women artists are recorded or dismissed is functional in the perpetuation of the myth of masculine creative superiority and social dominance. A central task for feminist art historians is, therefore, to critique art history itself, not just as a way of writing about the art of the past, but as an institutionalized ideological practice which contributes to the reproduction of the social system by its offered images and interpretations of the world.30

This very same notion can and should be applied to Black women in art history. Operating in this way takes the onus off Black feminist art historians to fit within the institution’s framework, making room for the transformative work that needs to take place. The responsibility then falls upon art history as a discipline to reckon with its shortcomings. Echoing Nochlin’s early feminist critiques of art history, it should be noted that the issue is not to highlight or legitimize the work of Black female artists, nor is it merely to critique the ways in which Black women are represented. Rather, what needs to occur is a dismantling and reconfiguration of the very foundations of art history.31 BF AH allows us to do this. Applying its tenets to an analysis of the art milieu in 1920s Montréal contributes to closing the gap in Black art historical knowledge of this period.

III. “THE GOLDEN PERIOD OF MONTRÉAL’S BLACK HISTORY”

In the early twentieth century, Montréal’s Black community was composed of a mixture of Black diasporic peoples, including Black Canadian descendants of enslaved people as well as individuals hailing from the United States and the Caribbean.32 Dorothy Williams notes that the period

30 Griselda Pollock, “Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for Feminist Art Historians,” Woman’s Art Journal 4.1 (1983): 40.
31 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Art News 69.9 (1971): 22–39; Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Feminist Art History and the Academy: Where Are We Now?” in “Teaching about Women and the Visual Arts,” special issue, Women’s Studies Quarterly 15.1/22 (1987): 10–16; Broude and Garrard, “Feminism and Art History”; Pollock, “Women, Art and Ideology,” 40.
32 Dorothy W. Williams, The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montréal (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 43.
between 1897 and 1930 marks the beginning in earnest of what we might describe as a Black community in Montréal. With further study into the history of free Black people during the period of slavery in Canada, other pockets of Black community may emerge. Further, Cheryl Thompson has underlined how the numerous portraits of Black individuals in the William Notman Photographic Archive at the McCord Museum serve to underline early aesthetic trends among Black people in Montréal in the late nineteen century. The early twentieth century is also a moment during which several Black community institutions were created and would become pillars in the development of the city’s Black community. Williams notes that these organizations had one guiding principle: to help Black Montréalers survive the discrimination and isolation that they faced in city. She further underlines the 1920s were “the golden period of Montréal’s Black history, bringing the city millions in taxes on alcohol alone.” The 1920s are an interesting period to look at to consider the potential of BF AH.

Starting in reverse order of the tenets with alternative ways of knowing, let us consider the Black American art milieu of the 1920s, specifically the Harlem Renaissance, as a possible point of comparison. In an effort to move beyond issues of mis/under/overrepresentation to focus primarily on the political fallout thereof, the last principle of BF AH uses alternative modes of knowing to tell stories that are ineffable by academic standards. As illustrated by the work of Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes, among others, using alternative modes of knowing involves turning away from accepted academic approaches to knowledge production and analysis in order to make legible that which may otherwise not be apparent.

33 Williams, The Road to Now, 38.
34 Frank Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montréal, 1760–1840 (Montréal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2010), 339–340, ads 94 and 94b; 79; Robin W. Winks, The Blacks in Canada: A History (Montréal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1971/1997), 9; Marcel Trudel, Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français, Cahiers Du Québec; Histoire, Cq-100 (LaSalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH, 1990); Marcel Trudel and George Tombs, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Centuries of Bondage (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2013).
35 Cheryl Thompson, “Black Canada and Why the Archival Logic of Memory Needs Reform,” Les ateliers de l’éthique/The Ethics Forum 14.2 (2019): 87–92.
36 Ibid.
37 Williams, “Little Burgundy.”
38 Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12.2 (2008): 1–14; Saidiya V. Hartman, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2019); Marisa J. Fuentes, Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive, 1st ed. Early American Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
way of accomplishing this is through the use of speculative language that embraces the ambiguity of the unknowable, or rather, the yet-to-be-confirmed, to sit in liminal spaces of knowledge.

Thus, my analyses consider lived experience and intuition, as well as haunting and affect, as valid sites of knowledge production. In articulating her epistemology of haunting, Gordon notes that “Toni Morrison’s argument that ‘invisible things are not necessarily not-there’ encourages the complementary gesture of investigating how that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence.” Gordon’s epistemology of haunting, then, locates its analysis primarily within archival gaps, tracing their contours to reveal the presence of marginalized and erased people. She notes that “haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes obliquely” (emphasis mine). In other words, haunting is an invisible presence, which cannot be overlooked, similarly to black holes or dark matter in the universe.

Along these lines, Christina Sharpe argues, “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror is erased.” Her formulation of “the wake,” much like Gordon’s epistemology of haunting, provides a necessary theoretical framework through which to consider the intangible ways in which the legacies of transatlantic slavery make themselves known in Black people’s quotidian. And so, as a Black feminist art historian, I operate with the instinctive knowledge that in those empty spaces, in those silences, live the histories of the Black women who came before me. My work begins with the understanding that the unknown historical silences are in and of themselves sources of information that must be considered with the same rigour as tangible archival documents. In the case of the 1920s, then, I consider the context of the Harlem Renaissance as a clue pointing to the visual art scene in Montréal, which is “not necessarily not-there.”

39 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.
40 Ibid., xvi.
41 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.
42 Ibid.
43 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.
Given that, as noted by Williams, among others, many African Americans made their way to Montréal for work and leisure, it might be worth examining the cultural contexts from which they came for some clues as to how Black people during this time were engaging with art. In his discussion of the 1920s, Richard J. Powell describes the period as one of interdisciplinarity and cross-pollination, identifying this decade as marked by “an international groundswell of Black creativity.” The author notes that Harlem, New York was at the time a key cultural site attracting writers, performers, musicians, and visual artists. More than that, he argues that the Harlem Renaissance specifically reached far beyond the boundaries of Harlem and had a global impact: “Like jazz musicians, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance era travelled and interacted, and their art was cosmopolitan, inspired by European modernism as well as the cultural groundswell of black America.” Artworks from this movement were characterized by an expressive use of bold colours in representational depictions of Black people enjoying cultural activities, dancing, or playing instruments. Key concerns of artists during this time were to break down racist anti-Black stereotypes that remained prevalent in society and to embrace continental African folk art.

Sean Mills for his part notes, “As the one major North American city to largely escape prohibition, by the 1920s, Montréal had acquired a reputation for free-flowing alcohol, prostitution, and entertainment, and it

44 Williams, “Little Burgundy”; Williams, The Road to Now, 33–44; Sean Mills, “Democracy in Music: Louis Metcalf’s International Band and Montréal Jazz History,” Canadian Historical Review 100.3 (2019): 351–72; Dorothy W. Williams, Blacks in Montréal, 1628–1986: An Urban Demography (Montreal: D.W. Williams, 2008); Wilfred Emmerson Israel, “The Montréal Negro Community” (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1928).

45 Richard J. Powell, David A. Bailey, Gallery Hayward, Arts Institute of International Visual, and University of California Press, Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance (London: Hayward Gallery: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997).

46 Ibid. On the international reach of the Harlem renaissance see also Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Michelle Ann Stephens, Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and George Hutchinson, “Harlem Renaissance,” in Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 March 2021, <britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>, accessed July 26, 2021.

47 Powell et al., Rhapsodies in Black; Nate Sullivan, “Art and Culture of the Harlem Renaissance: Artists, Poets, Authors and Music,” <study.com/academy/lesson/art-and-culture-of-the-harlem-renaissance-artists-poets-authors-music.html>, accessed July 26, 2021.
would become a major tourist destination for visitors from the United States and elsewhere in Canada. The city was also coming alive with the sounds and syncopated rhythms of the new music.” 48 This is so much the case that “In Montréal, the corner of de la Montagne and Saint-Antoine Streets came to be known as the city’s ‘Harlem district.’” 49 The St. Antoine district at the time was predominantly Black and commonly frequented by African Americans, including hundreds from Harlem specifically. 50 With this in mind, it becomes easier to imagine internationally frequented cultural hubs such as the ones in Black Montréal neighbourhoods as potential meeting places for local visual artists, as was the case for musicians, writers, and dancers.

The next bFAH tenet examines the sociopolitical context and impacts of art in the 1920s in Montréal. As Richie notes, “[o]ne of the most important contributions of Black Feminist theory is the notion of how intersectionality is relational, structural, political, and ideological.” 51 For bFAH, this involves a conscious recognition of the interconnectedness between visual art, social issues, and the misrepresentations that justify the mistreatment of Black women within a larger context as another key principle. bFAH is geared toward consistently anchoring the past into the present to unpack the ways in which the meanings attached to Black women’s bodies through these images enact themselves in everyday events. This involves both examining the ways in which certain representational practices in art have concrete effects on Black women specifically and discussing longstanding issues from a contemporary standpoint. This includes considering how contemporary artists take up longstanding issues in their practice to complicate our understanding thereof.

From investigating the sociopolitical and art-historical context of Montréal during the 1920s, it becomes apparent that the city was earning a strong reputation in the fine arts milieu at the same time as its jazz reputation was being cemented. Indeed, the École des beaux-arts of Montréal was founded during this decade as it sought to further structure educations for the flourishing artistic practices of the time. 52 The aftermath of WWI also impacted the art scene in the city as enthusiasm for modern art grew and the religious social order of Québec began to shift. 53 Tracey Colett further

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48 Mills, “Democracy in Music,” 354.
49 Ibid., 356.
50 Williams, The Road to Now, 43–44; Israel, “The Montréal Negro Community,” 57.
51 Richie, Arrested Justice, 129.
52 Ray Ellenwood, Egregore: A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1992), 3.
53 Ellenwood, Egregore, 9; Mills, “Democracy in Music,” 359.
pinpoints Montréal as a crucial site for the development of modernism in Canada at large.\textsuperscript{54} This moment after the war prompted a “search for an identifiable Canadian art.”\textsuperscript{55}

The 1920s in Montréal also yielded the Beaver Hall Group, a collective of roughly 20 visual artists comparable to Toronto’s Group of Seven for its modernist approach. The Montréal Group distinguished themselves aesthetically in their emphasis on urban landscapes and inclusion of human figures and socially in their inclusion of women.\textsuperscript{56} This group’s remarkable history presents another example of how (white) feminist art histories can at times be limited in their scope without proper racial considerations. Indeed, the issue of Black women’s erasure can be raised in feminist art historical scholarship, as it has historically treated race as mutually exclusive from gender. In 1971, Linda Nochlin’s article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” marked the start of white feminist critical engagement with art history as a discipline, not only to deconstruct its patriarchal foundations but also to take control over the narratives of women.\textsuperscript{57} Her contribution opened the space for several ongoing and crucial conversations around gender and visual art. This article also set the tone for feminist art historians to compare the plight of white women to that of Black people, much in the same way it had been done throughout the Civil Rights movement. By making comments such as “The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics or the arts” (emphasis mine), Nochlin positioned women and Black people as separate categories that do not exist together.\textsuperscript{58} In positing an analysis of race and gender issues in this way, feminist art historians overlook the particular position of Black women in art history. The issue that makes feminist art historical

\textsuperscript{54} Tracey Collett. “Montréal: Its Role in the Beginnings of Modernism in Canada,” in \textit{Culture + State: Nationalisms}, ed. Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux and James Gifford (Edmonton, AB: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003), 77–83.
\textsuperscript{55} Evelyn Walters, \textit{The Women of Beaver Hall: Canadian Modernist Painters} (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005), 16.
\textsuperscript{56} Julia Skelly, “Significance and Critical Issues,” Art Canada Institute, <aci-iac.ca/art-books/prudence-heward/significance-and-critical-issues/>, accessed 26 July 2021; Walters, \textit{The Women of Beaver Hall}, 11–20.
\textsuperscript{57} Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 22–39; Broude and Garrard, “Feminist Art History and the Academy,” 10–16; Broude and Garrard, “Feminism and Art History”; Pollock, “Women, Art and Ideology,” 39–47; Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, \textit{New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action} (New York: Icon Editions, 1994); Wallace, “Why Are There No Great Black Artists?,” 333–46.
\textsuperscript{58} Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 22–39.
approaches inadequate for my purposes is the tendency to position feminist issues in comparison to Black civil rights issues and to consider them to be mutually exclusive. When this occurs in concert with critical race art historical inquiries which discuss race irrespective of gender, the result is that neither feminist scholarship nor critical race scholarship is able to fully address the issues faced by Black women who deal with both sexism and anti-Blackness. Only Black women face the twofold violence of misogynoir.\(^{59}\) It therefore is crucial that art-historical approaches looking to discuss issues of race and gender underline this point.

Further, this BEAH tenet underscores how the social fabric and very layout of the city played a role in its art history. The Beaver Hall Group took its name from its studio at 305 Beaver Hall Hill, and all of the women in the group are said to have attended the Montréal Art Association (later the Montréal Museum of Fine Art), another key institution in the education of artists at the time.\(^{60}\) The artists in this group produced work focused on individual expression and city life, divesting themselves of the limits of academic training and of sexist stereotypes.\(^{61}\) Critics of the Beaver Hall Group’s work at the time drew comparisons between the Beaver Hall Group’s use of colour and rhythm and “the feeling when a certain kind of jazz, transported, furiously flings out the most resounding, noisy piercing notes.”\(^{62}\) Indeed, Mills notes that immediately after World War I “[writers] painters and dancers shook the foundation of cultural establishments with their avant-garde art and political interventions. Jazz formed a part of this broader cultural renaissance.”\(^{63}\) It is important to consider how de facto segregation might also have affected the social settings of jazz and painting in Montréal. Both Bernice “Bunny” Jordan Whims and Tina Baines Brereton, jazz performers from Montréal, recall that Black artists were barred from performing “uptown” near Sainte-Catherine Street West and Stanley.\(^{64}\) Mills notes that racism in the city was such that Black musicians were by and large barred from

\(^{59}\) Combahee River Collective, “Statement”; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1241–1299; Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley, “Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework,” Gender and Society 33.1 (2019): 19–40; hooks, Ain’t I a Woman?

\(^{60}\) Walters, The Women of Beaver Hall, 14.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 17; Skelly, “Significance and Critical Issues.”

\(^{62}\) Paul Gessell, “All That Jazz: Beaver Hall Group Paintings from 1920s Show This Fall at Calgary’s Glenbow Museum. Galleries West,” 5 September 2016, <gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/all-that-jazz-beaver-hall-group-paintings-from-1920s-show-th/>, accessed 26 July 2021.

\(^{63}\) Mills, “Democracy in Music,” 359.

\(^{64}\) Show Girls, dir. Meilan Lam, in National Film Board Screening Room (Montréal: National Film Board of Canada, 1998), <nfb.ca/film/show-girls>, accessed 6 August 2020.
playing in venues on Sainte-Catherine Street west of Saint-Laurent, thus
impeding their ability to earn income from the more lucrative areas.65 This
is the very same area in the city where prominent art collectives such as the
Beaver Hall Group and art schools were located. It is likely, then, that Black
visual artists, like their musician counterparts, were barred from institu-
tions where they may have wanted to educate themselves or showcase their
talents. Given the increasingly rigid lines of segregation being drawn across
the city, these artists would have doubtless had to turn elsewhere. The ex-
periences of women such as Bernice “Bunny” Jordan Whims, Olga Spencer
Foderingham, and Tina Baines Brereton are helpful cases to consider in re-
gard to how artists might have navigated the social context at the time.

IV. THE WOMEN WHO STARTED THE SHOW

While archival and material evidence of Black visual art practices in Montréal
during the 1920s is gravely lacking, new avenues of thinking and research
arise with bfah. For decades, scholars have been discussing race and rep-
resentation in art history, critically engaging with the ways art has played a
role in reinforcing racial hierarchies and racist ideologies.66 Indeed, Camara
Dia Holloway notes, “[Critical Race Art History] acknowledges the role
that race has played in culture ever since a biologically grounded concept
of human difference coalesced during the early modern period.”67 These
scholars understand and are intent on illustrating how race, art, and visual
culture impact society at large and vice versa. They also understand that, as
Michael Harris astutely notes, “the one who looks holds power over the one
who is looked at.”68 Given that racial classification operates first at the level
of vision, images have the power of reinforcing or dismantling ideas about
people and cultures.69 This is what critical race art historians, as Holloway

65 Mills, “Democracy in Music,” 358; Williams, Blacks in Montréal, 27–42.
66 Peter H. Wood and Karen C.C. Dalton, Winslow Homer’s Images of Blacks: The
Civil War and Reconstruction Years (Austin, TX: Menil Collection, 1988); Dent et al., “Discussion”; Kymberly Pinder, ed., Race-Ing Art History; Nelson,
Representing the Black Female Subject; Nelson, The Color of Stone, xi–xxxvi;
Freeman H.M. Murray, Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A
Study in Interpretation (Washington, DC: Author, 1916); Albert Boime, The
Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century (Washington,
DC/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Camara D. Holloway,
“Critical Race Art History,” Art Journal (2016): 89–92; Michael D. Harris,
Colored Pictures; Gagnon, Other Conundrums.
67 Holloway, “Critical Race Art History,” 89.
68 Harris, Colored Pictures, 52.
69 Joana Joachim, “Making Visible Black Bodies: An Interview with Dr. Charmaine
A. Nelson,” Art/iculation (2017): 10.
names them, aim to point out and dismantle. Art historians who critically reflect on race reject the notion that the visual arts are neutral and unaffected by social and political issues or ideologies.70 These scholars deconstruct racist imagery and call into question the ways in which Black people have been represented in visual culture for centuries. Critical race art history allows us not only to critique and deconstruct the racist ideologies as they present themselves in visual art but also to centre whiteness to discuss issues of ongoing oppression and discrimination. The issue with critical race art history as presented by Holloway and as approached by many scholars thus far is the generalized disregard for gender as an important factor in these analyses. As noted by Nelson, the field of race and representation has long conflated Black men and women, thus erasing necessary gender analyses.71

Despite naming feminist insights as an influence on critical race art history, Holloway does not name the intersection between race and gender as also crucial.72 Without such discussions, art historians run the risk of upholding the falsehood of academic objectivity, which they claim to reject in choosing to discuss race. Overlooking gender in an art-historical approaches perpetuates the erasure of Black women. Through this oversight, critical race art historians are, whether they realize it or not, reproducing the very practices that, like the historicizing of Black liberation movements, for example, centred on heterosexual cisgender Black men’s experiences and voices to the exclusion of almost every other Black voice. Race and gender as presented in art and visual culture have historically had the function in society of regulating behaviour and spaces by reflecting who can and should do what, in which spaces. As such, they must be critically engaged in order to fully understand the particular regulatory forces that continue to impact the lives of Black women.

By decentering whiteness and including gender analyses, bfaH principles open up the possibility of considering exactly how visual artists in Montréal might have learned their craft and presented it during the 1920s. Using these principles, my investigation of the period highlighted a new question. If indeed the fact that the city operated under de facto segregation meant that Black artists were not welcome in “white” art galleries and exhibition centres, where would they have gone? If such was the case, Black visual artists at the time may have instead presented their work in community settings such as in church, in community centres, or in cultural venues such as jazz nightclubs. With these possibilities in mind, I have been able to find a few archival threads to tug on. Taking some cues from Yaniya Lee,

70 Harris, Colored Pictures; Boime, The Art of Exclusion; Holloway, “Critical Race Art Theory,” 89.
71 Nelson, Representing the Black Female Subject, 2.
72 Holloway, “Critical Race Art History,” 89.
and employing the next tenet of BFHAH, I propose to look to the women from Montréal’s Black community to investigate the visual art scene at the time.73

In seeking to bear witness to invisibilized narratives, BFHAH is not concerned with retelling white histories or rehashing white experiences. Rather, it actively casts them aside to create room for the histories that have been forced into the shadows.74 That is, this praxis centres on Black women by mindfully telling stories such as this one. Taking some cues from the likes of Nelson, Glymph, and D.G. White, the second core principle of BFHAH then involves maintaining specificity by forming its principal analyses and arguments around the lived experiences of Black women first and foremost.75 Much like Black feminists who have come before me, I stand by the fact that Black women face unique and multiple forms of oppression. This specificity also involves making clear the inherent difference between Black women and women of colour. In the words of Trudy (@thetrudz),

“Black woman” and “woman of colour” are not synonyms to be used interchangeably. “Women of colour” is a political identity of theoretical solidarity of non-White women because of the impact of White supremacy, racism and White privilege on non-White women. However, it is not also a racial classification in the way that “Black woman” is.76

Through this distinction, Trudy demarcates the nuance between racism and anti-Blackness, reinforcing the need for strategic focus on the specific socio-political and cultural position held by Black women in the world. This means that unless the issues being analyzed are related to dismantling harmful stereotypes, discussing anti-Black misogynistic violence, or underlining histories of resilience and resistance, they simply are not within the scope of a BFHAH analysis.

While Black men in Montréal were, for the most part, employed by the railroads, Black women in the city took the cultural lead.77 In the context

73 Lee, “The Women Running the Show.”
74 Nelson, The Color of Stone, xxiii.
75 Ibid.; Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage; Deborah G. White, Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1999).
76 Trudy, “Explanation of Misogynoir,” Gradient Lair, 28 April 2019, <gradient-lair.com/post/84107309247/de-ne-misogynoir-anti-black-misogyny-moya-bailey-coined>, accessed August 2020.
77 Williams, The Road to Now, 33–36; Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 417; June Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community in Educating Blacks in Montréal, from 1910 to 1940, with Special Reference to Reverend Dr. Charles Humphrey Este” (Dissertation, McGill University Libraries, 1982); Steven High, “Little Burgundy: The Intertwoven Histories of Race, Residence, and Work in Twentieth-Century Montréal,” Urban History Review 46.1 (Fall 2017): 28.
of 1920s Montréal, then, might it be that the people who were running the children’s programs at the various key organizations serving Montréal’s Black community, such as the Coloured Women’s Club (cwc), Negro Community Centre (ncc), and Phyllis Wheatley Art Club (pwac), were artists themselves? Were they people for whom visual art was important enough to want to instill in children? Organizations such as the cwc and the pwac appear to have been instrumental in fostering art practises of all kinds within the Black community in the city. The cwc, founded in 1902 by a group of women whose spouses were sleeping car porters, is an organization that provided crucial services to the community, including moral leadership, psychological and emotional support, and help during numerous health crises.\(^{78}\) The cwc, like the ncc, also offered consistent arts and craft programming to the Black community.\(^{79}\) Founded in 1922, the pwac for its part became a hallmark of high achievement and a site for the development of talents and skills for large productions.\(^{80}\) Of the major community organizations founded at the time, the pwac seems to have been the only one founded with the express purpose to “focus attention of Blacks on their history and artistic endeavours” as well as to respond to other fundamental community needs.\(^{81}\) The pwac would later become the Negro Theatre Guild, of which I have found no record to date.\(^{82}\) This is where Canadian archival opacity becomes a major hindrance.

While Robin Winks identifies Lillian Rutherford as the founder of possibly the earliest art organization in Black Montréal history, no known records exist to reveal further details about her life, aspirations, and history.\(^{83}\) Similarly, Maude Jones is identified repeatedly as a well-known and -loved arts patron in the Black community, yet the archive runs dry beyond a few basic details.\(^{84}\) Maude Jones was an African American migrant established in Montréal. She was a Christian Scientist and “relatively wealthy.”\(^{85}\) Jones

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\(^{78}\) Williams, *The Road to Now*, 50–52; High, “Little Burgundy,” 28; Williams, “Little Burgundy.”

\(^{79}\) High, “Little Burgundy,” 28; Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community,” 33, 103, 139–141; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 417.

\(^{80}\) Williams, *The Road to Now*, 77.

\(^{81}\) Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community,” 41; Hostesses of Union United Church, *Memory Book: Union United Church 75th Anniversary 1907 – 1982*. (Montréal: Union United Church, 1983), 364; Williams, *The Road to Now*, 77.

\(^{82}\) Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 417.

\(^{83}\) The PWAC, later the Negro Theatre Club, predates the Black Theatre Workshop, Canada’s longest-running Black theatre company, by nearly 50 years. “About BTW” Black Theatre Workshop, <blacktheatreworkshop.ca/about/>, accessed October 2020; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 417.

\(^{84}\) Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community,” 33, 139.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.; Williams, *The Road to Now*, 77.
was an advocate for social justice and an ardent support of Montréal’s Black youth.86 Jones’s passion for the arts and for supporting Black youth may well have been a key factor in Martha Griffith’s path. As noted by June Bertley, “She [Martha] developed her love and appreciation of poetry and recitation, and acquired her deportment under Maude Jones.”87 Indeed Griffiths would later pass one these very skills, offering classes both as a volunteer and as an employee at the NCC.88 Her relationship with Jones and her experiences in these community organizations seem to have been key factors in her life, as she recalled them multiple times in an interview with Bertley.89

It is undeniable that Montréal Black cultural life was impactful and indeed on a par with the Harlem Renaissance. As noted by Williams,

By the 1920s jazz reigned supreme in Montréal’s nightlife. This city was the ideal North American location for a developing black identity focussed on jazz. Jam sessions went on into the early hours of the morning — Montréal was the jazz capital north of the border. In the midst of Prohibition many musicians from across North America have their start in Montréal, and some stayed to live and work in the city. As a result of Prohibition Montréal was the place to be.90

These strong echoes of the Renaissance in the Montréal jazz scene may also have been reflected in the visual arts. As such, it might be that the visual/aesthetic influences of Black Montréal artists included the Beaver Hall Group as well as the Harlem Renaissance. Black women’s involvement in community centres was also a central component of the cultural life of Black Montréal. In collapsing the hierarchy between “high art” and craft, as would later become common in (white) feminist contexts, women such as Lillian Rutherford, Maude Jones, Martha Griffith, Bella Johnson, Ann Packwood, Mattie Wellons, and Irene Morris might also be seen as artists working in textiles and mixed media in a modernist context.91

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86 Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community”; Williams, The Road to Now.
87 Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community,” 141.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 139–41.
90 Williams, The Road to Now, 44.
91 The women listed here were members of the sewing and craft group hosted in the early period of the NCC. A photograph of their group is included in Appendix 12 of June Bertley’s thesis, “The Role of the Black Community,” 139–41 and 193. Williams, The Road to Now, 77; High, “Little Burgundy,” 28; Charmaine Nelson, ed., Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance (Concord, ON: Captus Press, 2018), 1–43. For more on the history of feminism and craft as high art see Elissa Auther, String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Julia Bryan-Wilson, Fray (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
Further, theatre and dance were extremely popular art forms in Montréal’s Black community.\textsuperscript{92} Taken up through the lens of bfaH, then, what might it mean to begin to think about women such as Tina Baines Brereton, Olga Spencer Foderingham, and Bernice “Bunny” Jordan Whims as early Black Montréal performance artists?\textsuperscript{93} Here, the final bfaH tenet could help shed light on this query.

In reclaiming the narrative, bfaH aims to take control over how images representing and created by Black women are seen and discussed. This means restoring the agency of the Black women who are represented and telling their individual stories. For the purposes of this study, the terms \textit{narrative} and \textit{storytelling} are used interchangeably. Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of colour is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. In fact, critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of colour by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives.\textsuperscript{94} Pulling from the work of Daniel G. Solózano and Tara J. Yosso as well as JoAnne Banks-Wallace, my understanding of storytelling involves piecing together the lived experiences and personal histories of those whose presence is only marginally accounted for by the archive. Solózano and Yosso refer to this as counter-story, that is, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege.”\textsuperscript{95} Within the context of bfaH, those counter-stories reside not only in the subtext of images but also in the social contexts in which these images belong.

As Banks-Wallace asserts, stories include both narrative, an account of a sequence of events, and dialogue, the way the story is told to impact its meaning. Storytelling through bfaH can not only string together the lives of Black women visible in the archive but also change the meaning of the images analyzed by changing how they are discussed and perceived.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{92} Lam, \textit{Show Girls}.
\textsuperscript{93} Each of these women was a performer in jazz clubs across Montréal and was featured in Meilan Lam’s documentary \textit{Show Girls}.
\textsuperscript{94} Daniel G. Solózano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” \textit{Qualitative Inquiry} 8.1 (2002): 26.
\textsuperscript{95} Solózano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 32.
\textsuperscript{96} JoAnne Banks-Wallace, “Talk That Talk: Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition,” \textit{Qualitative Health Research} 12.3 (2002): 417.
More than that, as argued by Nelson, this also opens up the possibility of thinking through alternative viewers of the works in question. For example, what would someone like Marie Thérèse Zémire, the sitter in *Portrait of a Haitian Woman* (formerly *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, 1786), have thought of her own portrait as an enslaved Black woman living in New France/Québec?97 Thus, BFH falls in line with the long-standing Black feminist tradition of reclaiming narratives.98 BFH mobilizes storytelling to simultaneously make Black women visible in the archive and make legible visual representations of them. As posited by Banks-Wallace, storytelling also makes it possible to establish a relationship between the teller and the listeners, thus reminding both parties of the similarities they share.99

Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, among other Black feminists, have noted the importance of representation in circumscription of Black women’s social positions. Stereotypes of Black women such as the mammy, Jezebel, and the welfare queen have been key tools in the economic, social, and political subjugation of Black women.100 One of the crucial ways in which power is taken away from the oppressed is through the control of images.101 By taking control of images and the narratives attached to them, Black feminism aims to restore Black women’s access to self-definition and empowerment both within and outside of the spaces we have created for ourselves.102 In this way, Black feminism allows Black women to move from being subjugated to being empowered individuals with agency in mainstream society.

As bell hooks states: “Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory.”103 Despite an ongoing recognition and critique of the power of images over

97 Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*, 4–5, 21–25, 70–75. *Portrait of a Haitian Woman* (1786) is the earliest known representation of an enslaved Black person in Canada. The sitter, Marie Thérèse Zémire, was enslaved by the artist and his wife who lived in Montréal in the 1790s. The portrait is part of the permanent collection of the McCord Museum and is on extended loan to the Montréal Museum of Fine Art, where it may be viewed in the “Founding Identities (1700s-1870s)” section of the Quebec and Canadian Art galleries.

98 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Richie, *Arrested Justice*.

99 Banks-Wallace, “Talk That Talk,” 411.

100 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 67.

101 Ibid.; Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 14; hooks, *Black Looks*; Richie, *Arrested Justice*; Morton, *Disfigured Images*, xi–xvii; Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*.

102 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 67.

103 hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.
the lives of Black women, Black feminist texts that discuss these representations seldom mention art history, limiting their analyses to popular visual culture. This trend intriguingly mirrors (white) feminist scholarship, according to Griselda Pollock’s comments. She states, “Indeed, from the inception of the women’s movement, one of the major targets of political activity has been the representation of women in advertising, cinema, photography, and the fine arts. Art history has a particular, if overlooked, role in all this.” Indeed, art history remains by and large off the radar of Black feminist critiques and thus continues to operate faced with few challenges. This is a problem because, as mentioned above, few feminist art historians or critical race art historians are paying much mind to the specific position occupied by Black women within the discipline. Black women are therefore left out of critical discussions on both counts. Although in recent years some art-historical work, such as that of Harris, Pinder, and Kin Gagnon, is actively seeking to bring race and gender issues to the discipline’s table, these efforts are being made in broad strokes that do not always account for the particularity of overlapping oppressions faced by Black women. Issues pertaining specifically to the treatment of Black women in art get lost in the mix.

Through the use of storytelling, Meilan Lam’s documentary, *Show Girls* (1998), along with oral histories recording the period, points to a fluid boundary between cultural production and so-called “high art.” Case in point, in an interview with John Gilmore, former band manager and frequent attendee of shows in Montréal jazz clubs, May Oliver repeatedly described women’s performances as art. Within the context of segregated Montréal, someone like Olga Spencer Foderingham, a Black woman performer, for instance, states that “the only place [they] had in those days to really have a nice complete show was in a nightclub.” Just as Vanessa

104 Pollock, “Women, Art and Ideology,” 39.
105 Harris, *Colored Pictures*; Pinder, *Race-ing Art History*; Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums*.
106 *Show Girls* bears witness to Montréal’s Black jazz scene from the 1920s to the 1960s. It includes images of archival material as well as oral history interviews with members of the community including Tina Baines Brereton, Olga Spencer Foderingham, and Bernice “Bunny” Jordan Whims.
107 Tina Baines Brereton also refers to the movements of the performers as art in *Show Girls*, minute 31:00. May Oliver, Interview with John Gilmore, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0049, 17 February 1982, audio CD, Concordia University Library Special Collections; Vanessa Blais-Tremblay, “Jazz, Gender, Historiography: A Case Study of the ‘Golden Age’ of Jazz in Montréal (1925–1955)” (McGill University Libraries, 2018), 123.
108 Lam, *Show Girls*, minute 1:15.
Blais-Tremblay notes that “[Josephine] Baker’s dance could be reclaimed as modern art because it can be aligned with what Houston Baker identified in Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance as the two guiding tropes of black modernist art and literature: the mastery of form, and the deformation of mastery,” so too might we think of Black dancers’ performances in Montréal as modern art.¹⁰⁹ I do not draw these connections to be glib; instead, I want to open a discussion about where Black visual artists might have turned to express themselves and show their work at a moment in time where virulent racism, poverty, and segregation would have truncated their opportunities to do so.

Whoever the visual artists were in Montréal during the 1920s, they existed within a rich artistic community, but, because of the sociopolitical challenges they faced, their mark on the scene has been obscured and continues to be by lack of documentation. The fact is that a large majority of the Black population in Montréal at the time were living in severe poverty and doing everything they could simply to survive.¹¹⁰ Their options were limited not only by this orchestrated financial circumstance but also by real structural and institutional stumbling blocks such as segregation and racism, doubtless preventing their access to the “mainstream” art scene. Their art would have likely remained within the confines of the Black community which in Canada has routinely been targeted by urban renewal projects and gentrification, often with little regard for cultural preservation.¹¹¹ The likelihood of Black visual artists’ work being documented or even safely conserved long enough for it to be studied or exhibited a century later is extremely low. Yet these artists surely existed, and hopefully some of their work is tucked away somewhere unknown for now.

V. THE ARCHIVAL CONUNDRUM

While the 1920s are regarded as a key cultural moment in Montréal when it comes to music and performing arts, particularly for Black people, the Black art history of the period remains obscure.¹¹² Using this period as a

¹⁰⁹ Blais-Tremblay, “Jazz, Gender, Historiography,” 123.
¹¹⁰ Williams, Blacks in Montréal, 36; Israel, The Montréal Negro Community, 57.
¹¹¹ High, “Little Burgundy,” 27–44; Ted Rutland, Displacing Blackness: Planning, Power, and Race in Twentieth-Century Halifax (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); “Hogan’s Alley,” Places That Matter, <placesthatmatter.ca/location/hogans-alley/>, accessed 2 August 2020.
¹¹² Reynolds, “Toot Sweet”; Williams, “Little Burgundy”; John Gilmore, Who’s Who of Jazz in Montréal: Ragtime to 1970, Dossier Québec Series (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1989); Oscar Peterson, A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson, ed. Richard Palmer (London: Continuum, 2002); Justine Lebeau,
A case study to underline the necessity of a specialized art historical approach reveals the glaring archival chasms relating to Black histories in Canada. As underlined by Thompson, “Historically, Black communities have not had control over their histories, the places and spaces of their communities, and the manner in which narratives of belonging and dis-belonging to the nation are catalogued within the archive.” The same holds true for visual art and material culture. Operating under de facto segregation at the time, Montréal’s “white” art institutions hold virtually no record of Black artistic practices from this period. This gap has remained intact to this day. Thompson’s observations about archival gaps in the Black Canadian context are also reflective of the major underrepresentation of Black art history in Canadian institutions. The process of looking into this historical period in the Montréal archives, including public institutions, university libraries, archival collections, community centres, and private collections, reveals an alarming lack of knowledge regarding the period’s visual artists despite the well recorded history of music and theatre. Using the tenets of bfaH praxis is a way to contend with these hurdles and reflect on the larger issues at stake.

It is impossible to see black holes. They emit no light. However, it is possible to see the effects they have on their environment. Put another way, one can indirectly see black holes because of their surroundings — their context. This is called the event horizon. bfaH can serve as a set of tools

Brian Foss, Nathalie Bondil, Hélène Sicotte, Esther Trépanier, and Kristina Huneault, 1920s Modernism in Montréal: The Beaver Hall Group, ed. Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss (Montréal, Quebec: Montréal Museum of Fine Arts, 2015).

Cheryl Thompson, “Black Canada,” 80.

Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 337–345; Williams, The Road to Now, 38–73; Lam, Show Girls.

Michael Maranda. “Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada’s Galleries” Canadian Art. April 5, 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity/>, accessed 27 June 2018; Connor Garel, “Why Have There Been No Great Black Canadian Women Artists?” Canadian Art, 10 January 2019, <canadianart.ca/essays/why-have-there-been-no-great-black-canadian-women-artists/>, accessed 10 August 2020; Joana Joachim, “‘Embodiment and Subjectivity’: Intersectional Black Feminist Curatorial Practices in Canada,” RACAR: Revue D’art Canadienne/Cnadian Art Review 43.2 (2018): 34–47; Yaniya Lee, “How Canada Forgot Its Black Artists,” The FADER, 31 August 2016, <thefader.com/2016/08/31/black-artists-in-canada>, accessed 13 August 2020.

Portions of this article were written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Various closures and lockdowns have limited on-site archival research. My hope is to pursue this further in coming years.
to decipher the “event horizon” of moments in history for which archival evidence is lacking. While specific Black visual artists in 1920s Montréal remain shrouded in mystery, the context of jazz, performance, poetry, community organizing, the white art scene, and segregation in the city at the time constitute enough of an “event horizon” to decipher this historical black hole’s shape. By applying BFH, a new art history emerges from well-known periods, images, and objects as well as lesser-known ones. Through a deliberately BFH approach, new meanings arise and the voices of Black women, even when obstructed by mainstream white narratives, begin to surface and shed light upon their specific visual histories and those of their communities. Finally, I would like to stress that what matters in this praxis is to underline the subtext lurking at the edges of these histories and to make intangible presences visible. With this praxis, it is possible to investigate how and why entire periods of Black Canadian art history seem to have vanished from historical records.

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