

**Or Gallery  
236 Pender St East,  
Vancouver, BC  
V6A1T7, Canada**

**Bodies, Border, Fields Symposium  
Panel: The Black Aesthetic Revisited  
November 22–  
November 24, 2019**

Group conversation with Krys Verrall, M. NourbeSe Philip, Yaniya Lee and Denise Ryner

Background to the Bodies Borders Fields symposium and the 1967 artscanada panel. Verrall discusses her research into cultural production amongst African-Canadian activists in Halifax during the late 1960s and the 1967 artscanada panel that happened simultaneously in Toronto and New York.

Philip recounts the transnational networks, causes and development of political activism amongst the 1960s, 70s and 80s black diaspora in the UK, the Caribbean and Canada and how this climate lead to demands for Canadian cultural institutions to be accountable to black communities.

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Transcribed text for the video:

0:38

Emily Fitzpatrick (EF): The name “Toronto” originates from a Haudenosaunee word, which means a place where trees stand in water. As always Toronto remains a meeting place and home to many indigenous people. So it’s important that we continue to name the names of those who have cared for the land before us and who have occupied the land before us as a sign of respect. But it’s also important to remember that these land acknowledgments should not be regarded as statements of closure there instead small gestures for change to bring awareness to the settler colonial systems of oppression that continue to shape the spaces in which we create work.

1:09

EF: Land acknowledgments, though, are also about celebration and knowledge sharing. We're here today this weekend to celebrate contemporary context is and representation of black and blackness within all art forms. We're here today as a community to engage in a dialogue with all the amazing contributors at Bodies, Borders and Fields through performance and food and writing and panels and many other amazing talks. So with all of those good things, one acknowledgment can't really happen without the other. All these good things happen along on this land. And so we have to acknowledge it.

1:52

EF: So this project is in has been in the works for quite some time. And I'm so happy that it is finally being actualized. I just want to thank Denise Ryner for the conception, bodies gorgeous field and Yaniya Lee for coming on as a contributor for the to help in the creative framework etc, etc. You've done so much. It's been a pleasure working with you, you're brilliant. I'd like to thank Karina Iskandarsjah, who has helped so much in all the coordination and travel support and all the care that she's contributed to all that work. A lot of the participants wouldn't be here if it wasn't for all of her time and consideration. Sorry, I have a few thank yous!

2:38

EF: I'd like to thank the Toronto Media Arts Center for hosting us here and coming on as a partner. This amazing building is home to four wonderful organizations that we work with often Dames Making Games, Gamma Space, Charles Street Video, and CFMDC and thank you so much for welcoming us year and being so hospitable. Sameer Farooq did the amazing design work on the pamphlets and actually all the designs you see that has pink, blue and green on it. He's brilliant, and it's been a treat working with him. Nish Dish is providing all the food for this weekend. There are now labels on the food right now for those who need them. So expect more tasty treats throughout the weekend. And thank you also to all of our amazing volunteers who's going to be helping us out this weekend. They're going to be guiding you everywhere since this is a multi venue symposium. And yes, all their hard work. It's very important to continue build-

ing relationships with all these volunteers who are so valuable to us. And finally, thank you to the Canada Arts Council for supporting the funding for this symposium and I will pass it to Yaniya.

4:01

Denise Ryner (DR): I really I really would like to echo the thank yous and to thank once again, Emily and Karina and the staff at Trinity Square Video for helping this event to be actualized. they've put in so much work and really took it on. And I feel lucky for anyone that gets to work with Trinity Square, and their amazing staff. And I also wanted to recognize it's Emily's Birthday. Happy Birthday! I know I know it. The worst thing to do to someone but yeah.

DR: And thank you to all the volunteers and as well all the contributors. I know that November is never an easy month for anyone and we all have deadlines. And so thanks so much for taking some time out to to come to Toronto or to come to TMAC, and share some of your words and work with us. Thanks.

5:07

DR: Okay, I'll kick off the conversation. Unless there's anything more. No. Okay.

DR: So I was working in 2017, sorry, I'm Denise, as Emily mentioned, one of the organizers of this, and I was working in 2017 in Berlin doing some research with a curator/mentor and happened upon an essay by Fred Morton that brought up a conversation between Cecil Taylor and Ed Reinhardt. Scrolling through images... so this image and the other one with the four men sitting there are from this panel that happened in 1967 in simultaneously in New York and Toronto. August of 1967. It then was published in arts Canada magazine in October of that year. And there was an exchange between two panelists Ed Reinhardt and Cecil Taylor that was written about by Fred Moten in a 2008 essay published in Criticism magazine, and he had read about that in an anthology on Ed Reinhardt's writings and, and interviews.

6:35

DR: And then I followed that through and found a text written by Krys Verrall

who's sitting beside Yaniya. And she wrote a really brilliant essay on this panel, largely focusing on some of the conversation that Fred had brought to the fore but also bringing it into a Canadian context. And then I was really excited that this panel has happened and that there was some attention to what was happening with black politics and culture in 1967. Very little but some in Canada, but then also, why it was so limited to having a panel of seven men with one musician poet who's based in New York. And we'll maybe talk about this later.

7:29

DR: That sort of just led to this larger idea of doing a symposium and thinking about these erasers in Canadian art specifically, but also, the word of the weekend is "proximity," and this panel was in the US and Canada so also just larger relationships. And that's how we got here.

8:00

Yaniya Lee (YL): I'll talk about how we started talking in the summer. So you had already started this. We are not seeing the full extent of starting to talk to people, organizing, and then the funding fell through. And then you did it again and it took three grants! So I feel like the fact that you persevered and that this is finally happening is really special. That's been a lot of work. Even if it hasn't been full time, you've been working.

YL: We were talking. You had this long list of guests or people whose work or ideas you thought might be perfect to include in this weekend and we just started knocking on doors, sending emails, knocking on doors, I learned a lot from your perseverance. Just keep on asking and then figuring out how to schedule everybody to come together and then trying to conceptualize what it might be like for us to come here and be together and it seemed important that this be a little bit different.

8:58

YL: I mean, we're working within this space. You know, we tried to dress it up. But we also wanted there to be some fluidity and some space and some time in between for us to be together because I feel like these are topics and things that

are always at the forefront of our minds, especially working in the arts and if you're racialized sort of dealing with it on the daily. And so it's not just panels or roundtables. We also wanted to have workshops and smaller spaces where, again, this work could be done in different forms, not just people talking at the front of the room, but an engagement.

YL: And with that, we thought of the plenary section sections, which would be tomorrow afternoon and Sunday afternoon, where it would be great for this to be a conversation for everybody who comes to be involved in different ways and for your responses to be a part of the conversation that we have because there's no closed conclusion necessarily. The idea is to have this space to think it through together and hopefully that works and it'll live on in the website.

10:04

YL: And the idea of having you both here who have done a lot of research and thinking is to, in a way frame or begin this conversation that we hope flows throughout the weekend. So some of the things that we can talk about, I know Denise and I will be moderating the panels on and off or trading off and introducing and we'll try and bring these ideas back to the artists and thinkers who are here.

10:43

DR: So I just met NourbeSe today. I've heard about an NourbeSe through various people and obviously about her work and I mentioned that I came to this topic through Krys's work, and realized, I think when we only met for the first time, a couple days ago, but I've been aware of some of your research, you know, through a symposium that I went to at AGYU and CIA center for incidental activism in 2011.

11:23

DR: I remember that research that you you talked about because it was very unique. I think about what I was coming across in terms of Contemporary Art topics and themes and in Canada. And so, Yaniya and I we're really excited to have NourbeSe and Krys here as witnesses to Canadian art history, Canadian cultural history and activism and erasures of certain histories and those things

that move to the forefront and background, and how they've both both approached it through their writing, and other formats of other practices. And so with that, I'll just introduce Krys and then Yaniya will introduce NourbeSe.

12:28

DR: I didn't have a printer, so I just had to write everything down just before this. Krys Verrall is an art and cultural critic and educator in the department of humanities children's studies program at York University. Her scholarship explores the intersection of the complex politics of race, age and citizenship with avant garde aesthetic practices. She's also a practicing artist in relational work and pedagogy so that there's this quite a few bleed throughs of your focus And topics.

13:05

YL: NourbeSe Philip, I'm also reading a bit of your bio. You're a poet and essayist, novelist, a playwright, and an independent scholar who lives in Toronto, you've practiced law, and then you moved into writing, but it's still there. You've published four books of poetry, you published *Zong!*, which has had such a reverberating effect. And I came across your work, I feel like you were in the ether. I grew up with artists-activists parents, and you were working alongside one another. And then we met again a few years ago when you're trying to find a place to perform *Zong!*. We've spoken and I've read your work, and I just I think your thinking is very important. I'm happy you're here.

13:59

DR: Just to give us a basis again of how this symposium came to be, I'd love to hear from Chris the initial research question that led to the work that revealed this panel and publicized it beyond the 1967 issue and your wider research into these relationships in Canadian contemporary art. So we could start there with your with your research question.

14:37

Krys Verrall (KV): I want to thank you, and you and you. I feel very privileged to be invited to be part of this conversation. And I see being here at the beginning is

just like a beginning point and I have a lot of faith and optimism about where you guys are going to take it over the next three days. And I'm very honored that that essay is generative in some way. So how I came upon that issue of Canadian art from 1967 is that I was looking for any kind of connection between conceptual art and the civil rights movement in Canada. And this is the early 2000s that I was looking for this and everybody that I was posing this question to is saying, well, there isn't any. And then I came across this issue and it was the first kind of "Oh!" there is like, this is a possibility the tip of the iceberg or at least a question. And so then I worked very closely with that issue and it was a while ago now. So seeing some of these images, I live so closely with them. And Anne Brodsky with her little skirt, just barely covers her behind. Anyway, it was a starting point for me, that issue, and to think it through.

16:49

KV: The premise was, as Denise described, this took place in 1967. It was a Canadian National celebration of the best Canadian technology. So Bell Canada was providing this international telephone connection between the studio in New York and the studio in Toronto. And group of artists (four in New York, and three in Toronto) had this simultaneous conversation that was being enabled by the Bell Telephone Company.

17:35

KV: The subject was "Black". And all of the participants were asked to have a dialogue. Just to have a conversation the way that we're having a conversation now on the color black. And it became very contested because the one black participant was the only person who wanted to talk about black as racial and all of the other participants who were all they were all men and all the other ones were white, including Ed Reinhardt, were really offended and resisted.

18:23

KV: Taking black into this terrain of being considered, culture being considered part of the social world or sociological and really struggled with him to have black be part of other discourses. So the competing discourse was Ed Reinhardt's black is aesthetic, it's a color, it's paint, it cannot be anything beyond its formal aesthetic

properties. Then the other strong narrative was about black as universal, as space, because the space program. The space race was going on and the Russians had launched the first astronaut into space. And so one of the participants really wanted to hold on to this idea of the universe as black and full of potential as outer space. And other I know Michael snow talked about blindness.

19:42

Anyway, there were these competing notions of black but there was only one voice that was arguing for black culture and particularity to black culture. Being racial. So that was really interesting to go through that whole transcript. The issue was published with the full transcript, which I believe the participants had a chance to fill out afterwards. But also it's very liberally filled with the images that they wanted to bring to the discussion. So there are... I'm just going from memory now... ancient sculptures, pictures of astronauts and outer space, Ed Reinhardt paintings and so forth. So it's a very rich issue.

20:58

YL: How did your article come about?

DR: how did you come to the starting point of those relationships that everyone was telling you wasn't there?

21:20

KV: I guess for me it was a stepping stone. I spent a lot of time with it. First thing is, is there a connection between conceptual art and the black civil rights movement in the 1960s in Canada? And the next question was, where to go next? I ended up going to Halifax and looking at at NASCAD... I also grew up very closely connected with the black civil rights movement in Halifax. I knew Rocky Jones I knew Joan Jones as a child. And it wasn't until I was an adult and an art student that I even knew about conceptual art or the conceptual art movement or NASCAD's formative role in it. And so then the real question for me became (and sort of my work after the Canadian art black issue) about why was there's this complete disjuncture between these two very important movements in my lived experience and so that became the starting point for using Halifax as a case study



for that disconnect.

23:10

KV Okay. I feel like I've talked enough. Pass this to somebody else.

YL: NourbeSe, we talked earlier. Do you want to give some context?

M NourbeSe Philip (MNP): Would you like to read what Cecil Taylor says about Krys Verral's article and the Arts Canada black issue?

KV: Okay, so this is a blockquote. "Taylor ruptures the Art-as-Artist life debate by forcibly putting black is racial on the table, he argues..." and this is the blockquote, "...I think Richard Wright wrote a book in the 1930s called Black Power. Unfortunately, newspapers must sell and I think they give a meaning of the moment to something which has long been in existence. The black artists have been in existence black. The black way of life is an integral part of the American experience. The dance for instance, the Slop Lindy Hop Applejack. What to see are the language the spirit of the black in the language, hip, Daddy crazy and what's happening, dig. These are all manifestations of black energy of black power, if you will."

MNP: Thank you all. Thank you Yaniya for inviting me. Thank you Denise for all this work and it was a real pleasure to read Krys's article.

25:07

MNP: It is well worth reading because it's a very patient and detailed analysis of parallels between what's happening in '67, NASCAD and the black activist movement in Halifax. So that got me thinking about 1967. I came here in '68. '67 is when the Conservative government brings in the point system, which allows more black people to come to Canada. I came in '68 as a student and so I began thinking from there as to what was happening in this part of the world. So in '67 we have the point system, but in '68 in England, we have Enoch Powell. I don't If any of you are old enough to remember him, Irish politician who talked about rivers of blood, very racist, anti immigrant. And I think that generated another immigration wave of Caribbean people who had gone to England, but then left

England and came here. So I think it's really interesting... and this is why I think Krys's piece is so important because it really takes this moment in Halifax. But it's having reverberations around the country. The immigrants who are coming here, coming primarily from the Caribbean, and they're coming from a colonial context, with all the struggles back there, and certainly when I came, what I was coming with was this understanding of the artist, the writer, as somebody who is inserted in society and who has to make interventions...

27:04

MNP: so... Lamming, Samuel Selvon, CLR James, Sylvia Winter, Claudia Jones in the US.

MNP: So, '68, I go to school and practice law for seven years in the city. But what's important about that generation is that they're coming from all the different islands of the Caribbean. And they're coming with a certain kind of energy. I think that comes from coming from a dominant black society. So those those are the people that demand we have a human rights, association, society

MNP: ... Sherona Hall, Charles Roach... if we can put up that particular slide because I think it's just important to have a very quick visual of what's going on there, demanding control of the police. And there's a direct line between those people and the SIU that we have today.

28:27

MNP: So that's my son, and that's Charlie Roach over there. We took a bus to Ottawa, and this was protesting, as the sign says, the racist Immigration Department. Bob Andrews was the was the Minister of manpower, and immigration. We had a chant: "Andrews you liar, we set your pants on fire!"

MNP: But this is about 44 years ago, and not much has changed. If we go forward... the green paper that the sign refers to was a policy paper some of you may remember that was looking at immigration policies here. And one of the reports talked about people whose physiognomies were different from the Canadian... what did Harper say? "Old Stock"?

29:35

MNP: What's also happening is the anti apartheid movement. Around this time, we have the black women's collective shout out to Grace Channer, which included Dionne Brand, Faith Nolan. We used to meet at their house. What's her name who's gone to Belize? Whose art was just bought by the AGO? Winsom. So what I'm trying to sort of suggest here is, and I was saying as we were talking back there that there's a similarity that the all these things that are happening around the world, but there's something that's bubbling under the surface here. I remember we held an event out of the Trojan horse (anybody remember the Trojan horse?) for the anti apartheid movement. Jeff Healey actually performed before he was discovered! Diana Braithwaite performed!

30:42

MNP: And we raised a couple of hundred dollars and gave it to the ANC. We wanted to give it to the Black Power movement there but there was nobody here to represent that. So this is all a sense of what's happening and the artists were working around that time. Dionne Brand, myself, Clay Harris out in Calgary. I think Fred Ward in Nova Scotia and Williams Wallace who had this press in Toronto, whose mandate was to publish people, writers from the Caribbean. My first two books were published with them. So this is why I think that Krys's moment is so important for me that it gave me an entry point into thinking about some of these issues.

31:36

MNP: I don't know if you have questions because I know it's not supposed to be a presentation. Do you have any, anything you want to say to that or respond?

KV: So what I'm thinking about what you're saying is that the 1967 kind of pre-moment, right? And then things start to change. Right and it starts to change because of the people, like you, and the people who are coming and things are starting to change and open up and but the 60s is kind of a closed up period still. So that's what I was thinking with the points you were talking about.

32:40

MNP: I think what's interesting is that your entry point which is this cross border discussion is interesting because what I'm talking about in terms of Toronto, the west of Halifax is that, yes, the US is important, but because of this colonial heritage that we are resisting and coming with. If we sort of jump forward a bit in England we have Linton Kwesi Johnson.

33:23

MNP: I think that the black world, there's a kinetic connection between us and that even though the official recording erases us, but underneath here these connections happening. So Linton Kwesi Johnson is inspiring Benjamin Zephaniah, the dub poet who is here, Lillian Allen, who's going to be performing and so on. And what is fascinating is that at a time when the Times Literary Supplement is writing reviews on Linton Kwesi Johnson and talking about him returning English to its source. The dub poets are being told in Canada that they're not poets.

MNP: So I think that's really important to understand. I think there are a number of reasons for that. One of which is that Canada is very insecure about its culture, in addition to the colonial racism that is there. So what I'm saying is that there's a complication, it's not just the cross in terms of the cross border situation, but it's also across the Atlantic Caribbean Sea connection that is going on. People that come out: Brathwaite, Sylvia winter and so on. These people are having an effect on that generation, because that changes as immigrants now begin to come in from the continent and as refugees and so on.

34:55

MNP: I want to jump forward to what I was saying to both Denise and Yaniya is that the ROM happens in 1989: into the heart of Africa. That's a watershed moment, I think, for a number of reasons. Until then, the black society, the issues that they concern themselves with were policing, over policing, housing, education. So we had things like the demand when they brought in the processes for immigrant children to learn languages. The black community got involved and asked for Black Heritage classes for the children, because the language requirement didn't apply to us coming from the Caribbean.

35:44

MNP: The ROM was the first time culture became an issue and representation. And then what I thought was interesting back then was that the community was so poised after that.

MNP: Okay, so there was this infamous exhibit called “Into the heart of Africa” and people like, Cooper, some names I forget, became very upset about how it was being portrayed. The curator and the institution said that the community didn’t get irony that the exhibit was intended to be ironic and that we just didn’t get it. So demonstrations began. Injunctions were pleaded, asked for, people were arrested. University students were arrested. A very quick anecdote. Many years after the ROM I went out to a hairdresser out in Scarborough, and she had been a student who actually had lost a year because of the demonstrations. She never went back to school. And I wonder how many are stories like that. It became quite explosive. The community won in that the exhibit didn’t travel. It was supposed to travel but it remained open and I think ever since then ROM has been trying to make up for Into the Heart of Africa. You mentioned to exhibit, “Position...?”

37:26

KV: “Position as Desired”. And that was in 2011. That’s right.

MNP: What there on in 2016?

KV: No, those ones would be Trafficking Conceptualism, which was another major exhibit.

YL: in 2016 was specifically ROM’s official apology and reparations.

KV: So was Position as Desire the beginning? That was before then. Okay.

YL: Just thinking about what is avant garde or what gets to be avant garde. So it seems like your article is arguing for a porousness and a back and forth, or maybe not a back and forth, but that these cultures were influencing each other in a way that isn’t acknowledged, and you push to sort of rethink and rewrite that organization. So I think you can both speak to the ways in which these structures that’s

very disciplinary in art history in the way that we think of the avant garde. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that.

38:57

KV: So I just would like to clarify that these are actually two articles. There's one article that I wrote on the black Canadian art issue. But then the other article that you're referring to is published in Charmaine, Nelson's book, Canadian art. And my book chapter is on the 60's. That's the one that really contrasts the activities of two organizations. So one is NASCAD and the first years of conceptualism at NASCAD and then this other organization called the Nova Scotia project, which came and went in a few years.

39:48

KV: The questions around the avant garde and what forms the avant garde is really something that I'm trying to figure out. And there was something that you said that reminded me, which is you're talking about the activists. So the activists were doing this, you know, and all of these things that you were doing and the artists were working around them. And then the other thing that you said, (I'm going to back up) the other thing that you said is that we were focused on before the before the ROM show, we were focused on these social issues, right, the policing the housing and then after the wrong turns to culture. So this is an earlier moment that I'm looking at and the Nova Scotia project was an activist organization. It was there to work on housing, to work on racism to galvanize the community and the youth and so forth. But at the same time, they were doing it by doing all of these cultural things. So what I wanted was to try and shift.

KV: What if we shift the focus from the work on housing and employment and other kinds of inequity and discrimination and put the focus on the cultural activities that are really swelling around these activities. And what if we give those cultural activities, the same kind of weight? As we're giving to the conceptual abstract activities that are coming out of NASCAD. What if we just say they're equal? And then where does that take us? And so I don't have an answer to what constitutes an avant garde as a definitive statement, but I think it's important to ask questions about whose culture? What is the culture? What kind of work is the culture trying to do and accomplish? And whose work is being taken up and

acknowledged not just at the moment but historically.

42:32

DR: To re-emphasize that. In the two articles that you wrote the one on the arts Canada panel, this conversation between Ed Reindhart and Cecil Taylor that hits this wall. “Hey man, you don’t get it, it’s we’re talking about conceptual art.” You know, you’re talking about black power and black experience and then again with NASCAD this idea that there wasn’t any sort of political or interesting art production until a certain era at NASCAD with the hiring of Gary Neil Kennedy and the staff that he brought along, or the faculty that he brought along. And then again, the situation with the ROM: “Hey, you don’t get it, it’s museology.” It time and time again keeps being this wall that’s hit culturally, you know, not just in Canada I’m sure but with with black communities and black cultural production and black activism, and just sort of tries to end these debates and end these conversations and how both of you hit this your own research.

MNP: One of the things I wanted to add to what Krys was saying when she talked about activism, I think quite often the artists were also activists. The art was a form of activism. I’ve certainly said that about myself, that my activism despite seeing me there in demonstrations, my activism is in the work itself.

44:12

MNP: What I think is also interesting is that the cultures that these newcomers are coming from, the Caribbean culture, is really vibrant. People are living, speaking, eating their culture everyday. So, I think what happens when you come to a new country, and particularly a racist colonial country, that for a while, you have to shelve some of those expressions. There are no places to express them and focus on survival. I think that the ROM and Showboat represents a moment when the community feels, it’s got certain things, not locked down, it never is locked down, but it’s almost a moment of excess.

MNP: Now we can pay attention to representation which is so central to how we are in the world. And so we demonstrated for over a year outside North York, as that center was being built and then Showboat happened. But to come to the point about the avant garde, I want to just read a quotation here from Harryette Mul-

len, wonderful African American poet. In 1996, she says this (and this is what I know best. I know this more than I know about the art issue in terms of poetics and poetry) She says: “the assumption remains, however unexamined that “avant garde poetry” is not black. And that black poetry however singular its voice is not formally innovative.” And then she goes on, “I hope that my work continues to challenge that deadly distinction between blackness and humanity, or universality that is still imposed on human beings.” And certainly, that’s something that I found with my own work. For instance, when I did, she tries her tongue. Because I think this is the mistake that the dominant culture makes that somehow formal innovation resides with them. So bear with me with this argument. One of the things I’m saying is this.

46:41

MNP: In music, it’s undisputed that black folk are the innovators. Anyone want to challenge that? [laughter from audience] Okay!

MNP: All right. So while I’m not a neurologist, I know that the brain is not compartmentalized in that way. So that if there’s a proclivity to innovate, it’s a proclivity to innovate, and we’ll see it in different areas. I think we come at it from a different perspective when it comes to avant garde poetics. So when I did, “She Tries Her Tongue”, people would say to me, oh, this is a postmodern work. Can you just put that this is a postmodern work. And my response would be, yes, you can see it that way. But if you don’t understand the Caribbean, and the Caribbean was postmodern before postmodernism, in terms of discourse, in terms of bricolage in terms of code switching, then you miss a big chunk of what the work is about.

48:06

MNP: “She Tries Her Tongue” is published in 1988. And these letters here, they go to September 2017. A colleague, Susan, who is from Calgary, who has been involved in avant garde poetics, asked me to submit a piece. And when I returned to Canada, as I’m going through her blog, find that there’s a book that’s published, called radical poetics in Canada 1957 to 2003. And when I go into more detail, there is no mention of “She Tries Her Tongue”. And the correspondence, If you didn’t have a chance to read it, is very typical Canadian fashion. I said on a somewhat related note had a look at your blog, which I found interesting and was



surprised no mention of “She Tries” or the work of Vision 21 which was a group that we had formed regarding pen and under representation of writers of color.

49:30

MNP: And the reason why I want to talk about this is because what I want to say is that it doesn't have to do with personal malice. It's almost an inevitability, a logic to the system that erases a black poetic, yes? So she replies and she's a friend of mine, and she asked for permission to publish it. She responds, “I take on board your criticism of these notable absences from the book. You're absolutely right. It's so embarrassing, much less personally disappointed And politically unacceptable to me to see that I've contributed to a continuing ratification of a white hegemony in the radical poetics world. There's no excuse. Thank you for taking the time to tell me what you saw when you looked at the book.” And then another email, she says to me, “Do I have your permission to write about our conversation?” Thinking back, I'm wondering how this happened. In my mind, “She Tries” was a profoundly important book that I wrote about several times. So I don't know why we didn't talk about it in writing in our time.

MNP: But, you know, I'm just using that as an example to show that there's a logic to the system. I have no belief that she intended this or anything like that. It just happens.

51:00

YL: in this later article, the one that's in the Charmaine Nelson edited book, you talk about the same interviews with men. When you're with men who were a part of that movement in Halifax in the 60s and asking them what is conceptual art? Was it related to these movements that were going on? And they'd say, “No, no, no, no, no.” And then later on, you tell me if I'm wrong, but later on in the same conversation and be like, Well, yeah, there was those other things going on. And it did have an impact. But I guess they have a cognitive dissonance as well. Inability to relate those two.

51:41

KV: I feel what you said is a really profound and enormous point. And we were

talking about this before, I think this is the time. I didn't want to be the white person who does Black Studies. The point is, thanks to this conversation, like preparing for it and worrying about it. I've been doing a lot of thinking and reading and talking. And one of the ideas that came up in two conversations and reading. The idea of being yoked. That the history of colonialism and imperialism and that we are yoked.

KV: When I'm listening I hear that for black people that the lived reality of being black and the possibility/impossibility of art. What you just read, never goes away. You may not think about it for a moment but it never goes away. It's like a fact and other facts of being yoked for being white, is that I have to remind myself. For me the education of doing this work is that everything is possible. And I have to remind myself of the impossible.

54:37

DR: Coming to this realization that we talked about the other day about how you have found other ways of maybe addressing this or shifted your work into a more focused on pedagogy and relational practice, I'm wondering if there's any hope or interest in creating different realities, different possibilities through that work or I'd like to know more about that work as well.

KV: What I got out of this work other than what I just sort of talked about, is that I am very interested in minority practices, bows, cultural expressions. And NourbeSe talked about in her book, "Blank" the importance of culture and the violence of taking away culture and denying culture. So, I'm very interested in the minority cultural practice and so I've kind of developed my taking that into thinking about other minority cultural moments.

56:17

KV: And currently I have a kind of relational art practice. I work collaboratively. I try and be a facilitator. And I get a lot of joy out of those moments. I am doing work with people with mental illness who live in boarding homes and have almost non-existent resources to be creative, but yet are creative and try trying to find and support and nurture their practices. So that's one of the projects that I'm currently working on.

57:09

MNP: I just have a couple more comments I want to make, to go back to this idea of form, that I think quite often critics make the mistake of just looking at the surface. For me form is substance, and the form is an integral part of what is happening as we rewrite (and that's wright as in writing) and writing this catastrophe.

MNP: We should be careful not to mistake the form for the substance. And that I think for many black poets, the form is deeply rooted to the issues that they're trying to struggle with. So the fragment in "Zong" is what I call for me, I've been working on the poetics of the fragment, because that's what we have. We have fragments, how do we work with the fragments? So I just wanted to make that comment and a second comment: I want to complicate what I said about the eraser, that sometimes we black communities, police ourselves, so that for instance, you will find black poets who say I heard Walcott in an interview he did here in Toronto by Christian Campbell actually say "we didn't have any time for the avant garde, the avant garde is not us." And I remember sitting there thinking, but we are the avant garde. We are the fucking avant garde! But there's that sense in which you know, we also get blinded by that and believe that somehow this is something that's hived off. And we all know those of us from the community that there's a certain kind of poetry that people think should be written the poetry about the struggle, some of which was linked to a particular time but I just think we have to be careful to to see how we can also police ourselves and censor ourselves. And I think that's my final point.

59:49

DR: I just wanted to bring back again a quote from Clyde Taylor that was in Krys's essay on Black Modernity in the end this statement that we refuse to enter into Modernity or into your subject Modernity as an individual on probation, and that that kind of has to sort of be a guiding fixture in not worrying about who sets the limits on the avant garde. If you wanted to add to that.

1:00:47

Audience Member (Raymond): I really appreciate this thing you're saying about

like the criticism of saying we don't have time for the avant garde, but I can see in it, maybe something that is about the necessity of the superseding it. Like, you were talking about not necessarily having a statement about the avant garde, where it's like, what is it? In a lot of instances, it feels like it's the western sort of imagination or desire for like a holistic or organic totality, or it's like the art emerges from life. And the avant garde is a means to approach that. So part of it is like thinking about coming from a position where you don't necessarily have to articulate your relation to other people, that the artwork doesn't come from a decade, sort of, like social sort of situation where it's like, you actually there are things that are mutually intelligible amongst you and your community, per se, that I wonder if you could talk about the possibility of thinking about this a ratio talking about if maybe the potential for it is about superseding, that sort of like Western category of the avant garde, if that's a possibility in terms of like the criticism you had of Walcott's sort of statement?

1:02:20

MNP: Well, you know, I think for me, one of the problems is language. Because the other words that are used, certainly in the writing, in poetry, is avant garde experimental, innovative. And I've resisted all of them in the sense that what I do is not an experiment. There's nothing experimental—in the way I understand an experiment—which is testing something to see if it works. The avant garde is rooted in a military context. It's the sort of troops that go up ahead, the shock troops. So I have to think about that. But I think your point is linked to what I was saying earlier on, about the community, taking on the ROM at a moment when there's excess of maybe energy and an understanding of the society, this hostile society that they're living in, and that we can now afford to confront. Many of the people who opposed it was students. So that's probably the earliest one of the earliest generations of the people who came as immigrants who maybe you came and didn't have university degrees and so on. So they were able to, to take it on. But I agree with you that we have to challenge these Western modes of thinking and the categories that they set up.

Audience Member (Raymond): [inaudible]

1:04:10

MNP: Well, yes, until that something else begins to crush you. And then we have to become the avant garde.

KV: My feeling is, it doesn't matter whether you call it an avant garde or not, I mean, I use that term because it had a kind of usefulness to it, but I was really thinking about how something gets valued. And all of the resources and the attention gets given to that thing. Meanwhile, there's all these other things that are being completely ignored. So I use that word in that way, but I don't have an attachment to it.

DR: Looking through your recollection of the Nova Scotia project and NASCAD. I don't think the note the artists working with in Nova Scotia project cared if they were the avant garde, they had work to do, but what gets retold is this. Erased racialized memory. That we remember NASCAD, we have traffic or whatever conferences about NASCAD and then we don't have that archival or academic knowledge about the NSP project.

MNP: Which is like the book which will have radical poetics in Canada without reference to "She Tries Her Tongue".

1:05:33

Audience Member (Kandis): Firstly, thank you for so many different things and you said tonight. I guess I have a question a little bit about the difference between the US and Canadian context. But I think it has to like start maybe with a little bit about Germany and the Holocaust and the degenerate art show and primitivism. So like in my recent I feel like this is the space of accountability in the space of confusion that we're in now, in terms of the avant garde is that the Nazis launched two exhibitions and 35. One was the degenerate art show and one was a show on the proper German artists, the Nazi sponsored, but they sold works from both shows internationally. So, this kind of avant garde is like rooted in a primitivism. That once it emigrates from Germany or is saved from the Holocaust is embedded with like a lot of the sort of like tendencies to a race, like the scope, big regime of the colonial era. And a fascist era to continue through the artists that we think of as the avant garde from Picasso to Kandinsky, Albers all these sort of pitted pivotal pedagogical figures as well who are teaching that the pre-colonial is decorative, but the point the line the plane, our intellectual spaces that belong to everyone

but they'd have to be authored by them. Like I'm thinking about. Albers going to Mexico and telling Diego Rivera that he understands the pre Columbian sculptor better than he does, because he understands the architect tonics of color. And then like writing a letter to Kandinsky saying, Mexico must be the home of abstract art because it's existed here for 1000 years already. And this kind of circular strange like, especially modernist thinking that leads us to an avant garde that's markedly like in the market position very, very highly. . . sorry, is there feedback thing?

1:07:45

Audience Member (Kandis): But to to an oven guard that's positioned very highly in the market and very highly discursively and highly pedagogically, but that has never intended to make space for the pre-colonial. So this sort of inevitable circuit i think is interrupted pretty drastically by a blues tradition in America. And I'm just wondering what you what you think about that in poetry and also the Spirals (arts alliance). . . And what kind of intervention they might be to that sort of, because there are those to say, like, black aesthetic movements for me really do represent like an avant garde that's like topsy turvy and like really aware of how it's positioned by the gaze and how it's also positioned legally, economically, socially. Yeah, I don't know.

MNP: I agree with you in terms of the blues tradition. I don't know if you know what, by Lyndon Barrett called blackness and value. I think it's a wonderful work. You know the work? Wonderful intellectual who died a couple of years ago, unfortunately. But he talks about the singing voice. And assigning voice and assigns of the value to that singing voice. And really, I think you'll find it very useful in terms of what you're talking about the blues tradition. At Aretha Franklin's Memorial, do you remember the Clark sisters? So they they're singing and there's a moment when one of them does something with her voice. And I remember thinking, that's the sound that the West has been trying to suppress ever since we have come here.

1:09:41

Try and find it on YouTube, and listen. I think it's the third sister when she does something is the voice that everyone tries to imitate from Adele to.. You know what I'm talking about. Yeah. In terms of the Spiral, I'm really excited by that

because the Spiral is also linked to issue, who is the Orisha of gateways and the crossroads and so on. The snail is supposed to be the symbol. And I see that as a much more generative image for us and really wish that we explore some of those resources as, not even as a counter to the Western hegemonic stuff. Just for ourselves, to take ourselves back to that place where we're a little less fragmented.

1:10:49

Audience Member: I wrote a poem about Martin Luther King and I was wondering what would be okay for me to do it?

YL: No. Did you have a question? No.

Audience Member: Thank you all so much. Good to see some of you too. I'm wondering if you could talk about if there was any interaction between Black Nova Scotians and some of the Caribbean immigrants that were coming in the 60s. Specifically in terms of contemporary art, but even other social struggles, if that was something that was talked about, with Caribbean immigrants coming in the 60s with a whole other culture, as opposed to people in Nova Scotia, who'd been here for a long time.

KV: So I think the moment that NourbeSe reminded us of that change in the immigration policy... and there's quite a bit of change in the centers in other parts of Canada... Montreal and Toronto, I don't know so much about Vancouver so I can't say. The other thing that I know from my research in the 60s is that there was a lot of movement. Black people had cars and they knew how to drive them and they were moving around just as much as other folks. So even though there is this long standing many generations and so there's a kind of qualitative difference to the black communities and their relationship to the larger dominant culture in Nova Scotia than there is in some of the other parts of Canada.

1:13:03

people like Rocky Jones was moving and across the country. People from Montreal and from Toronto were also going to Halifax once things were happening there. So there was a lot of movement and there was a lot of movement back and forth across the border. And there's the Human Rights conference that happened

towards the end of the 1960s in Halifax, and a number of activists came from Montreal and Toronto down to be part of that and were very vocal contributors. And I know when I talked to other people about that event, they point to those people and say you're from the Caribbean. They raised a lot of trouble, that trouble but they, their voices were heard.

MNP: I seem to recall that there was tension. Do you remember that Krys, between the two communities? Partly because Caribbean people came with a certain understanding, as I said, coming from a dominant black culture. It's an incredible, psychic and psychological boom. And I have three children born here. And I always say that one mistake I made was raising them in this country. If I had to do it over again, I would. Absolutely. I would raise them in the Caribbean. Because it's astonishing, the kind of security it gives you.

1:14:58

MNP: But I certainly have the sense that the older black population would get resentful and for instance, they will ask, "well where do you come from?" That's on the most superficial level. But I think they also resented that Caribbean people had a higher profile, as you say, we're more proactive and maybe outspoken and so on. And George Eliot Clark, I remember took issue with me, he took issue not in any profound way but certainly took issue in a literary sense because I felt that when I came here, there was no black tradition. And I think Canada differs from the US, which has a long Black writing tradition which goes back to Phillis Wheatley. And England differs because they have this long Commonwealth tradition.

1:16:04

MNP: We don't have that same depth. And he took issue with that because he felt that the Nova Scotian sermons constituted and literary form. And I think he's right to some degree, but I disagree with him because in terms of what I talk about the literary tradition are talking about the stuff people are reading, you know, generally do you know, and I feel that that wasn't here. So you almost have to create the condition even as you were, as you were writing and I think people like Dionne Brand... Fred Ward...

MNP: There's also the man heads the Black Cultural Center. I think he came



from the Caribbean. So I think over the years, there's been Afua Cooper as the chair in Black studies there now and she's from Jamaica. So I think there's really much more for us, maybe a softening of the hostility or I don't know if it was ever. It was very Canadian. It's a manifestation

1:17:30

YL: We have time for one more question.

Audience Member: Thank you so much. I heard that you said something about the form and poetry and got me thinking about what is the form of poetry and what constitutes as poetry and current process it crosses over to something that's not poetry anymore, so what constitutes as poetry?

MNP: Are you looking for a definition of poetry?

MNP: I'm trying to remember this poet he said something to the effect. And now I'll say something up. But he couldn't define poetry, but like a cat recognizes the rat, when it sees it. He recognized poetry when he read, but to be more serious. What is it? Point in the audience... Don't you recognize it when you when you read it? Is that what you mean? I want to take your question seriously, what is it? You're asking me? I'm not sure I quite get what you're asking.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

1:19:33

MNP: He talked about silence, poetry needs to use resources, if traditionally, this meter that there's rhyme. It's assonance and all those things, but in terms of with more contemporary poetry, those things don't manifest themselves in the same way, but I still think that they're working right? So for instance, in terms of radical poetry. So conceptual poetry. People talk about restraints, like, those are people who like, you limit yourself to something. Like I limited myself to just the words in a certain case. Well, that's no different than the limitation of poets but themselves under, whether it's rhyme or meter.

MNP: My personal definition of poetry is language under pressure. And you can

take that can go to anything. And so you put it under, you use all kinds of ways to put it under pressure. Traditionally, people use, as I say, meter and rhyme and assonance and those kinds of things. But you can put it under pressure in more contemporary ways. And then there's an explosion and its explosion achieved. There you go.

[Applause]

1:21:11

DR: Thank you. That's a good place to end our discussion. And also I would like to thank Keyon for the performance earlier today.

[Applause]

DR: If you could pose a question to the symposium to all the roundtable speakers to all the events happening over the weekend, what would that be? And we'll try to carry that through and see when we get to on Sunday.

MNP: Perhaps something like, what strategies would you use to put yourself in a position, or to make you more impervious to dominant culture, or the demands of dominant culture?

KV: I think about the second. Because in my own work has been about trying to find different methodologies to come at the problems in a slow way. Whether it's methodology if you're doing research or strategies if you're trying to be creative. I think that's the thing that will shift.

YL: Thank you both for being here. Thank you all for sitting with us tonight.

[Applause]

YL: We're still gonna hang out so we can have drinks and food in the back. And join us tomorrow and Sunday for talks, performances and workshops. You can check it out on our website.