

FEATURE REVIEW

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“If You Can’t Read It, You’re Not Meant To.”

Jillian Christmas. *The Gospel of Breaking*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2020.

Chantal Gibson. *How She Read*. Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2019.

Valerie Mason-John. *I Am Still Your Negro: An Homage to James Baldwin*.
Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2020.

Black women writers in Canada have always created opportunities for our work to surface from obscurity, but 2020 has been monumental, coinciding with this summer’s Black Lives Matter uprisings, because the rest of the country became interested, too. Though the visibility of Black Canadian writing should be celebrated, we must also be careful of what non-Black audiences expect of our work. This visibility accompanies a rising public desire to reckon with long-ignored histories. But it would be wrong, even unjust, to assume that we write of our particular experiences in a nation that has hidden us so that nation can ingest, assimilate, *understand* them. As poet M. NourbeSe Philip cautioned in her essay “Race-Baiting and the Writers’ Union of Canada,” “Black culture is approached as if it is a Creative Commons to which everyone ought to have access. And it is a zero-sum game because the widespread consumption of Black culture has not resulted in any greater respect for the original creators.”

Three recent poetry collections by Jillian Christmas, Chantal Gibson, and Valerie Mason-John, all Black women writers, handle this tenuousness effortlessly. Across their stylistic diversions, they swerve from pandering to the white Eye/I, the hegemonic lens prioritizing white settler perception even in our own narratives. Christmas’s, Gibson’s, and Mason-

John's collections forefront our own gaze, as Black, woman, queer, and demonstrate how our poetry reaches for each other across the dearth of unwritten histories, across space and time.

Spoken word artist Jillian Christmas's debut *The Gospel of Breaking* illumines sanctity and histories of interconnectedness in the Black queer ordinary. Missing a lover's touch invokes the migrations of monarch butterflies in "Butterfly in a Boneyard." In "(sugar plum)," the first in a prose poetry series about visiting Tobago, a grandmother's recollections summons visions of medicine women thriving without patriarchal authority. Who and what in this world is deprived of the reverence it deserves? Christmas writes praise songs for parts of Black queer life still forced into unlit corners.

Misogynoir, scholar Moya Bailey's coinage for the joined phenomenon of anti-Blackness and sexism that Black women face, lurks after Christmas's speakers; but there is the small grace that they're forever ungraspable by a white Eye/I. The speaker in "and still you cannot touch it" seethes at airport security agents x-raying the speaker's afro. She questions what "threat" they expect: "some secret / weapon, or a wisdom you know you can reach for but never touch / a knife, a key, a mirror? / are you hoping to find yourself in there?" In "Do Not Feed," Christmas writes of the humiliation of every movement and feeling, including Black mourning, being made spectacle for the white Eye/I:

this world...

wants me running
out of the house in my nightgown
ashy knees making love to the concrete
howling and wailing
may as well be admitting
the animal they already think I am.

Poetry provides potential refuge, even if brief or incomplete. Christmas's dance between remembering what's past and imagining what's possible is integral to Black queer survival.

An acclaimed performer in the North American slam circuit, Christmas translates her intimacy in voice to the page by threading storytelling, and the storytellers she's cherished, through the book. In "Will you write it?" a survivor learns from legend Maya Angelou that her "sweet mouth is not a casket / let it be a seed." Another speaker confesses "the first time a woman kissed me, / I heard the music," as blues visionaries and queer elders Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey black-bottom to her soundtrack of new desire in "Just How Some Folks Learn the Blues." These poems refuse their darkest parts to be splayed, revelling in quiet glories: "I keep learning to love better / and faster than a screaming bullet" Christmas declares.

Chantal Gibson's Griffin-nominated *How She Read* eludes the white Eye/I by unravelling English letter-by-letter, until the jaws of its tyrannical grammar loosen. As the poet writes in "c words," "How do you c_nfr_nt the past / with a c_l_n_z_d tongue?", explicating a record riddled, literally, with holes: "Truth is. / I c_n't." Gibson uses the exercises and word-games of grade-school spellers, before expanding into dictionaries, museums, and pop culture, to eviscerate this nation's semiotics of (anti-)Blackness. However, her historical voices have no interest in assimilating, disappearing, into "CanCon": Viola Desmond mails the government a cease-and-desist against postage stamps bearing her likeness; Harriet Tubman sneers at a factually flawed Heritage Minute. Gibson illustrates how Black women have left complex textual, visual, and gestural traces of ourselves behind, an archival code, to find each other.

That code is exemplified in an invented shorthand that recurs throughout the collection. Melding neat brushstrokes and chicken-scratch, the shorthand appears as exclamatory fragments and as entire movements, like the piece "Afterword: Aubade (Sonnet Crown)." A section of "The Tiny People: How to Use Your Book" transforms the word "Hegemony" into "Hegemony gets me down. / He gets me down. / He gets me down" until it's struck-through, inverted, distilled. This isn't the disintegration of English, but the crystallization of violence that language often obscures. On her shorthand, Gibson bluntly states: "If you can't read it, you're not meant to." A Rita Dove epigraph to the poem "passive voice" pairs well: "If you can't be free, be a mystery."

Like in Christmas's collection, Black women across generations bond in *How She Read*. Gibson revitalizes ekphrasis to distort the white Eye/I's dominance in poetry and art

history, like in the standout “Centrefolds: Delia and Marie-Thérèse on Opening Night.” It’s a dialogue between Delia, the subject of a nineteenth-century daguerreotype supporting scientific racism, and the unknown sitter in the painting “Portrait of a Haitian Woman” (1786), one of the first representations of an enslaved Black person in a Canadian context. Forced into an exhibition for white gallery-goers, the women form a private solidarity as “EVIDENCE...a fine Black woman in a / white Canadian landscape; a slave / where slaves ain’t supposed to exist.” They plot small subversions to how they’re framed, rendering outsiders’, and this nation’s, readings of them unintelligible.

I Am Still Your Negro embodies the force of essayist James Baldwin, to whom the collection serves an homage, but shimmers from author Valerie Mason-John’s own searing insights. The multidisciplinary Mason-John draws from her practice in addictions recovery and mindfulness, her poetic vision scrutinizing cyclical circumstances of Black extermination and defiance since slavery’s advent. Time skews from linearity; geographies, from England’s Thatcher-era foster homes to the coasts of Sierra Leone, overlap, as age-old atrocities against Black people have yet to properly become history. Borrowing from Baldwin, she conveys oppression and resistance’s duality in saying “*I am still your negro* and *I am not your negro* is my truth.”

Each section is book-ended by monologues from Yaata, the feminized Supreme Being of Sierra Leone’s Kono tribe, on gendered and sexual violence, addiction, disordered eating, and capitalism as intersecting influences deteriorating Black life. A Baldwin quote inspires each of Yaata’s remarks on the “Hungry Ghosts” and the shades of their ongoing occupation. Her words guide the reader through brutality’s many legacies, especially the commodification of our bodies throughout time. In “The Ghost of Thomas Peters,” the titular narrator recalls being “Sold for a bottle of rum / And a pouch of tobacco / And shipped we to de Americas” before his body is exploited as a Loyalist army soldier, his sole chance at freedom. A speaker inundated by modern materialism laments in “Manifestation” how “We are a Barbie narcotic / A walking neurotic / A pill-popping robotic / A media schizophrenic... / Our body a man-made creation.”

Like Gibson, Mason-John reads into racial signifiers of innocence and danger, such as in the persona poem “Yellowknife.” She speaks as Willimae Moore, an African-American charged in Canada’s first sexual assault case against a lesbian for making advances

toward a straight white woman: “The public needs to be protected. / Yellow Knives were out to get me. / Gross indecency was my crime. / Nobody asked me any questions.” This collection’s power doesn’t arise from reiterating to a white Eye/I what we are confronted by, as we have too many times before, but by rattling terror and apathy out of our people; awakening us to the haunting of our pasts, and the futures we can reimagine. “Black is an omnipotent being,” she writes in “Self-Portrait I,” a celebration of dark skin, “The rejoicing of life.”

These three collections recognize that those concealed knowledges that have made us so obscure to others in Canada is also the source of immense creativity. Poetics remain a powerful terrain of negotiation, deciding what is and isn’t said or shown and to whom, diverting from the demands of an industry fuelled by a white Eye/I. Even in a moment of visibility, Black writers and all our readers must remember that opacities, from creoles to codes, have maintained Black survival by asserting what we keep for ourselves.