

The Chorus is Speaking

Experiencing Identities of
Blackness in Canada

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The Chorus is Speaking exhibition essay:
The Victoria context

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Karin Jones, *The Bond*, 2024. Image courtesy of Art Mûr.



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The Chorus is Speaking exhibition essay: The Victoria context

The Chorus is Speaking is a group exhibition of eight artists of incredible inventiveness and insight: Ojo Agi, Christina Battle, Charles Campbell, Chantal Gibson, Dana Inkster, Karin Jones, Jan Wade, and Syrus Marcus Ware. It speaks to facets of the Black experience on Turtle Island and is the expression of a curatorial partnership between Jenelle Pasiechnik, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Campbell River Art Gallery, and Michelle Jacques, Chief Curator of the Remai Modern. The curators are grateful to be able to work with this incredible group of creatives, thinkers, and changemakers to create a space where the Black community of Victoria can come to feel supported and inspired.¹ Originating at the Campbell River Art Gallery, this touring exhibition has been thoughtfully brought to the context of Victoria, BC. Echoing Charles Campbell's sentiments, we hope the diverse artworks communicate in ways that Black folks viscerally connect to, and that they will create opportunities for those community members to feel joy in being recognized and celebrated.² This exhibition is intended to initiate thoughtful and open dialogues on Lək'wəŋən Territory.

Author Saidiya Hartman's book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, has been a guiding inspiration behind the name *The Chorus is Speaking*. Her reflections on the origins of the word "chorus" exemplify how the exhibition expresses collective and individual power, voice, and perspective:

*"The Greek etymology of the word chorus refers to dance within an enclosure. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise."*³

¹ Jenelle Pasiechnik wishes to acknowledge her privilege as a settler curator, and to express her gratitude to Michelle Jacques and the exhibiting artists for collaborating on this amazing project.

² Ojo Agi, Charles Campbell, Chantal Gibson, Karin Jones. 2022. Interview by Michelle Jacques and Jenelle Pasiechnik. Online via Zoom. May 12, 2022.

³ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 347-348.

The brilliant insights of Hartman communicate the synergy and power of the group, while creating space for “all modalities.” The chorus is a source of wisdom and insight, and a mover for change. This group of artists functions in a similar way. They bring a wealth of experience as educators, artists, advocates, activists, and scholars thinking through their own lives and creative processes; offering us the opportunity to learn from and witness that wealth of knowledge.⁴ This is not a headless group; each member is recognizable, distinctly heard, and valued.

The Chorus is Speaking in the context of Victoria comes up against the historical and enduring ruptures, dislocations, and power dynamics of the intertwined subjects of Britain’s colonies: “Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience.”⁵ Although this exhibition is a contemporary cultural conversation, it is important to recognize the histories that came before and the way in which those histories weigh more heavily upon communities of colour than settler populations. The City of Victoria, named for the British Monarch in ultimate control of European contact with Ləkʷəŋən territory, is fraught with a complicated history that has enveloped and entangled Indigenous and Black communities in the web of colonization. The ongoing effects of this oppressive embroilment continue to the present day.

The victorian era⁶ brought agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Douglas Treaties, and the dislocation of the Ləkʷəŋən People, who have been hunting and gathering here for thousands of years, from their lands. James Douglas, a complicated historical figure, rose to the top of the HBC,⁷ was the representative

4 Since conceiving of this exhibition a few years ago most of the artists in the group have hit major milestones, received recognition through awards and appointments, published books, and been in major exhibitions (*Jan Wade: Soul Power*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Hamilton, and Viva Award; Charles Campbell, *Vancouver Special*, Vancouver Art Gallery, *Fragments of Epic Memory*, Art Gallery of Ontario, *An Ocean to Liverty*, Nanaimo Art Gallery and Viva Award; Karin Jones, Sobey Longlist 2022, *History Is Rarely Black or White*, Agnes Etherington Art Gallery, Queen’s University, *Ornament and Instrument*, Burnaby Art Gallery; Chantal Gibson, Pat Lowther Memorial Award, 3M National Teaching Fellowship, *With/Holding*, Caitlin Press; Syrus Marcus Ware, *Until We Are Free*, University of Winnipeg Press; Christina Battle, *Under Metallic Skies*, Museum London). Due gratitude and appreciation are in order for the work that this group of artists does. These people are some of the rockstars of Canadian contemporary art, literature, and activism.

5 Brand, Dionne, *A map to the door of no return: notes to belonging* (Toronto, Ont.: Vintage Canada, 2023) 25.

6 The author has chosen to de-capitalize western, queen victoria, and the victorian era.

7 James Douglas was born in Demerara, British Guiana, which is now Guyana, in 1803. His father was a Scottish Merchant with commercial interests in sugar plantations, his mother was a free woman of Barbadian-Creole ancestry. BC Black History Awareness Society, “Earliest Pioneers (1858-1899) Sir James Douglas,” accessed August 8, 2024, <https://bcblackhistory.ca/sir-james-douglas/>.

who negotiated the 14 Douglas Treaties with some of the Indigenous people of Southern Vancouver Island including the Ləkʷəŋən: regarding the land and colonization of the land, explicit instructions were sent to Douglas from Archibald Barclay in London, who was at the time the company's secretary.⁸ It read:

*"With respect to the rights of the natives, you will have to confer with the chiefs of the tribes on that subject, and in your negotiations with them you are to consider the natives as the rightful possessors of such lands only as they are occupied by cultivation, or had houses built on, at the time the island came under the undivided sovereignty of Great Britain in 1846. All other land is to be regarded as waste, applicable for the purposes of colonization. The right of fishing and hunting will be continued to the natives, and when their lands are registered, and they conform to the same conditions with which other settlers are required to comply, they will enjoy the same rights and privileges."*⁹

The empiric manner of understanding development and land use was completely contrary to Indigenous Ways of Being. This resulted in the destruction of the tidal mud flats, the best clam beds on the coast; the loss of burial grounds and access to sacred places; the partitioning of lands and the dislocation of Indigenous peoples; the destruction of ways of life.¹⁰ The colonial impetus lacks a desire to understand. It aims to control and subjugate those who are seen as lesser peoples and has left scars on races, cultures, and communities the world over. In addition to these negotiations that have a continued impact today, James Douglas invited 800 members of the Black community in San Francisco to emigrate to Victoria to escape the discriminatory laws and racial tensions of California.¹¹ The Black settlers flourished. Many individuals from this group became prominent community members, such as teachers, artists, and business owners that left a decisive mark on Victoria and the surrounding areas.¹²

⁸ The Douglas Treaties were negotiated with Teechamitsa, Kosampson, Whyomilth, Swengwhung, Chilcowitch, Che-ko-nein, Ka-ky-aakan, Chewhaytsum, T'Sou-ke, Saanich (South), Saanich (North), Saalequun, Queackar, and Quakiolth.

⁹ "Douglas Treaty." Tsawout First Nation. Accessed August 12, 2024. <https://tsawout.ca/governance/douglas-treaty/>.

¹⁰ Songhees Nation, "Ləkʷəŋən Traditional Territory: The Signs of Ləkʷəŋən," Accessed August 12, 2024, <https://www.songheesnation.ca/community/l-k-ng-n-traditional-territory>.

¹¹ BC Black Awareness Society, "British Columbia's Black Pioneers: Their Industry and Character Influenced the Vision of Canada," Community Stories, https://www.communitystories.ca/v2/bc-black-pioneers_les-pionniers-noirs-de-la-cb/. Accessed August 8, 2024. This act of encouraging immigration served to cement Victoria as a hub of business and administration thus thwarting American territorial claims.

¹² Among the group of people that emigrated from San Francisco to Victoria in 1958 are a few notable educators Emma Stark, who became the first Black teacher on Vancouver Island, Maria Gibbs, Oberlin College graduate and teacher, and John Craven Jones, the first Black teacher in the province and first teacher on Salt Spring Island. Among the artists in The Chorus is Speaking are distinguished teachers. Chantal Gibson has been awarded for their inspiring methods, dedication to confronting colonialism and adapting curriculum to honour the contributions of IBPoC authors, scholars, and artists. She teaches writing and design communication in the School of Interactive Arts & Technology at Simon Fraser University. Syrus Marcus Ware is a core team member of Black Lives Matter—Toronto, award-winning activist, and Assistant Professor in the School of the Arts (Theatre and Film Studies) at McMaster University. Karin Jones is an Instructor, Jewellery Art and Design Program, Vancouver Community College (Department Head 2015-2021).

The ongoing history of Black communities in the area of Victoria has not been recorded or preserved in the depth that settler histories have. This erasure or omission leaves gaps where Black communities are concerned and doesn't honour their presence or contributions accurately. The artists of *The Chorus is Speaking* do the work to fill in these gaps by acknowledging pillars of Black communities, pushing back against erasure, and being pillars themselves. These are the complex entanglements of the past that inform the present. This is what Christina Sharpe refers to as being in the wake:

*"We think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness) and we join the wake with work in order that...we might continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our own lived and un/imaginable lives."*¹³

This is what Saidiya Hartman identifies as both the "time of slavery" and the "afterlife of slavery," in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."¹⁴ The eight artists in this exhibition are living and working in the wake, doing the labour to create a daily reality that imagines new ways of being in the world. This is done in the form of teaching, activism, and community-building, as well as in the creation of art that reflects the state of this wake work and the many temporal, emotional, and physical states that it conjures and reflects. At one point in the future, it will be longer that Afro-descendent communities have been free than they were enslaved. For Ayana V. Jackson that future reality creates excitement around looking and imagining forward: "I count on a future when there will be a time when we will be out of this longer than we have been in." The many caregivers and creatives within Black communities do the work of daily world-making and future imagining that build both the here and now and the future. That work exists in a counterbalance with history looming as an ever-present and immovable referent.

¹³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. 17-18.

¹⁴ Saidiya Hartman, "A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade." 1. The Path of Strangers. N20 winter (2007) Accessed on October 7, 2024. <https://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/winter-2007/nonfiction/journey-along-atlantic-slave-route-saidiya-hartman>.

For this iteration of the exhibition the curators asked the artists to consider how they would shift the artworks presented to shape the content in relation to the context of Victoria and the surrounding area.

Karin Jones’s selection of artwork features a new sculptural installation that has yet to be exhibited on Vancouver Island. *The Bond*, directly references queen victoria’s wedding dress and the aesthetics of white beauty and colonial power that are her legacy. The white wedding dress, which continues to be used today, is consistent with “an increasing obsession with an idealized feminine virtue epitomized by what feminist historians of the Victorian era call the “Cult of Pure Womanhood.”¹⁵ Jones’s victorian style white wedding dress is made of cornrows using Kanekalon braiding hair, which references western beauty ideals, impossible standards, and their colonial origins. Fashion is a product and instrument of economic power. It marks the economic status of the wearer in society so one’s class can be easily identified. Jones notes that the most important aspect of this signification is exclusion. Jones takes the time to thoughtfully remind people that there is a complex history contained within the name of the city, and ubiquitous fashion trends. It is a reminder to educate oneself on the codes clothing and names hold and communicate on peoples’ behalves, creating complicity with uneasy histories.



Images (left to right): Karin Jones, *The Bond*, *Golden Section 5*, and *Golden Section 6*, 2021-2023. Image by Anahita Ranjbar; Karin Jones, *The Bond* (detail). Image by Teresa Sammut.

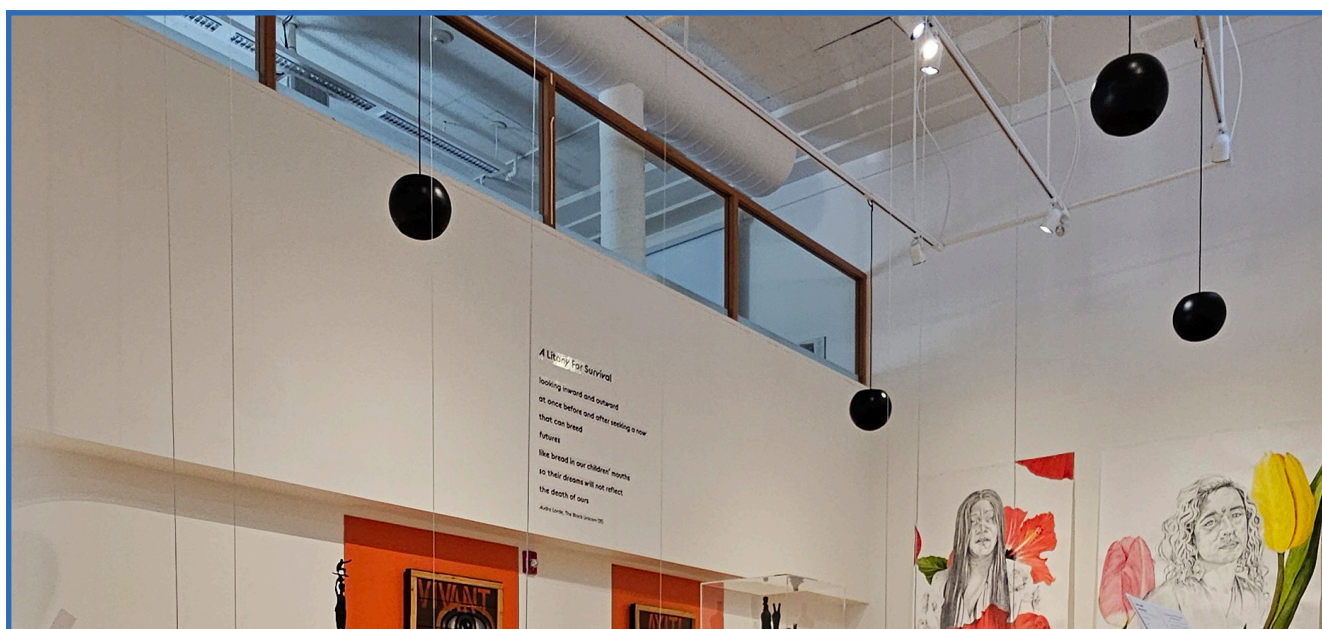
¹⁵ Richard Thompson Ford, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021, 142.

Charles Campbell brings together the sculptural installation *Breath Cycle I* and *Black Breath Archive*, an installation of breath recordings from Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, Surrey, and Lower Mainland residents for this iteration of *The Chorus is Speaking*. Also, shown in combination at the Nanaimo and Surrey Art Galleries during Campbell's solo exhibition *An Ocean to Livify*, it is a pleasure to see these two works paired together again. *Breath Cycle I* visually demonstrates the relationship between the human breath cycle and lichen. The pattern of the structure, the mobius, refers to both fractal geometry and the structure of lichen itself. Fractal geometry is a knowledge system that originated in Africa. Campbell calls attention to both the naturally occurring root of this complex mathematical concept and the origin of its discovery. Lichen are one of the key producers of oxygen and photosynthetic processes in our atmosphere. They are also symbiont organisms that provide a structure within which other organisms can coexist. Connecting the cycle of human breath to these key producers and their wondrous structure connects Black bodies to the lands and waters, ecological processes, and African origins and knowledge systems.



Images (top to bottom): Charles Campbell, *Breath Cycle I*, 2022. Image by Ivy Allen;
Charles Campbell, *Breath Cycle I* (detail). Image by Anahita Ranjbar.

Black Breath Archive is a powerful rhythmic gesture of community and multigenerational communality that serves to regulate, unite, and celebrate the sound and life force of Black breath without the need for spoken language. Sonnet L'Abbé beautifully describes how Charles Campbell's sound archive and non-vocal experience of collective Black breath "honours exactly that space where Black people are vibrant, present, and influential" whether it is spoken or not.¹⁶ The use of "conventional narrative and argument to insist on Black humanity, is inadequate to honouring the depth and breadth of intergenerational, diasporic Black aliveness."¹⁷ The addition of the archive adds a level of complexity and aliveness to Campbell's installation. This archive is informed by local and regional residents and their ancestors; it is not subject to the forms of erasure that have historically occurred in settler-run repositories of history. *Black Breath Archive* serves to reiterate the ongoing presence of Black communities on Lək̓ʷəŋən Territory, the beauty and power of Black breath, and the steadfast rhythm of Black life that contains all experiences from joy to sorrow.



Images (top to bottom): Charles Campbell, *Breath Cycle I* and *Black Breath Archive*, 2022. Image by Ivy Allen; *Black Breath Archive*, (detail). Image by Anahita Ranjbar.

¹⁶ Sonnet L'Abbé, "Not-Insisting: Charles Campbell's Chorus of Aliveness," *Charles Campbell: An Ocean to Livify*, Nanaimo Art Gallery and Surrey Art Gallery, 2023, 8.

¹⁷ Sonnet L'Abbé, "Not-Insisting: Charles Campbell's Chorus of Aliveness," 5.

Syrus Marcus Ware's new large-scale portraits in graphite and paint remind us that Victoria is part of a national conversation, connecting the Black communities of Victoria with Toronto. Ware's portraits highlight the incredible lives and contributions of Ravyn Wngz, Afro-Indigenous activist and artist, and Vivek Shraya, South Asian artist, performer, and assistant professor. Ware works to uplift and uphold pillars of activist, trans communities of colour that are often at the forefront of grassroots level change, and equally as often unrecognized for their contributions to the fight for queer and trans, bodily, disability, and racial rights. This is another significant example of an artist working to push back against erasure by creating monumental depictions of respected members of the trans and IBPoC artistic and activist communities.



Image (left to right): Syrus Marcus Ware, *Flowers While We're Living: Portrait of Ravyn Wngz* and *Flowers While We're Living: Portrait of Vivek Shraya, 2024*. Image by Ivy Allen.

Chantal Gibson covers and silences iconic Canadian children's stories and textbooks filled with racist histories—permanently redacting books by coating them in liquid rubber—on one hand, and writes to create openings for Black history and presence on the other. The oozing black substance found seeping slowly in the video and coating the books is a metaphor for text that permeates white ignorance and aggression with the untold stories and unheard Black voices.

Gibson teaches writing and design communication in the School of Interactive Arts & Technology at Simon Fraser University and writes poetry. She does the necessary work to create openings for voices of colour in curriculum, on bookshelves, and in the hearts and minds of her students and readers. Visitors to the exhibition will find poetic and literary excerpts in dialogue with the artwork. Included amongst Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Esi Edugyan is an excerpt from the poem “c words” from *How She Read*. The authorial voice in the poem asks:

*“How do you c_nfr_nt the past
with a c_l_n_z_d tongue?*

Truth is.

I c_n’t.”



Image: Chantal Gibson, *__Dominion* (detail), 2022.
Image by Teresa Sammut.



Image: Chantal Gibson, "c words" and "split infinitive" (poetry installations); *A Substance of Character* (video), and mixed-media altered texts, 2019-2022. Image by Ivy Allen.

Gibson's linguistic strategies exemplify Sonnet L'Abbé's argument that conventional language and argumentation are inadequate tools to convey Black aliveness, Black resistance, Black humanity. The poem is meant to be read with the eyes. Without seeing it, the reader is lost to the labour required of them, the power of redaction, and the need to dismantle the alphabet in order to write what can't be said.



Image: Chantal Gibson, *A Character of Substance* (detail), 2022.
Image by Teresa Sammut.

The Chorus is Speaking has been a multi-year project of collaboration and consultation that has resulted in an original exhibition at the Campbell River Art Gallery, and now a new iteration at the University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries, in Victoria, BC. The exhibition content and artistic choices came out of conversations with the artists that added a lot of value and ensured that the content resonated with the artists and the issues they saw as relevant at the time. The artworks are diverse and offer an array of perspectives, mediums, and points of entry. The connections amongst the artists and the thematics within their artworks abound. It is the hope of the curators that the viewers have the pleasure of discovering these many connections and the rich knowledge and expertise the artists offer as they make sense of the world and its many complexities through acts of creation. The exhibition touches upon difficult histories, ecology, technology, African knowledge systems, religion, class issues, colonization, racism, beauty standards, boundaries, activism, and joy. By no means a definitive conversation, it is a varied cross-section of Black life across Canada at this present time.

When the exhibition concept was first developed with the artists, the necessary presence of Black joy became apparent. The curators took that very seriously and worked together with the artists to present an exhibition with diverse emotions, ideas, and perspectives that show the great variety and beauty that exists within Black communities:

“Joy is an ember for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity. And that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity [...] My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common, we love.”¹⁸

Much like Saidiya Hartman’s description of the chorus that has been a guiding inspiration for the exhibition, Ross Gay writes of joy as a subversive catalyst that unites through the experience of shared emotion. It is with care and intention that this exhibition and all the associated programming has come to be, and we welcome you to come see, and to feel seen.

— Jenelle M. Pasiechnik

¹⁸ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022), 9.

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