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## Criticism is Not Static

### A black feminist perspective



Jessica Lynne is a founding editor of ARTS.BLACK, an online journal of art criticism from Black perspectives. Photo by Willa Koerner

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First, there is the matter of revision. What does it mean for the critic to share drafts publicly? The following is indeed that: it is a statement to which I will return—a draft that sharpens as I do. Because critics are those who think in public, we should be invested in the transparency of revisions.

So, I begin again with [Barbara Smith's](#) essay, [Toward a Black Feminist Criticism](#) first published in the autumn 1977 issue of the lengthily titled [Conditions: a magazine of women's writing with an emphasis on writing by lesbians](#). Smith's writing has become a central point of reference as I've worked to get to the root of my impulses as a critic (which is a process of daily refinement).

## For whom do I write? Why do I write?

In her writing Smith was working towards an impossibility, she says, that aimed to render visible through criticism the literature of black lesbian writers. How does one move against silence? In which ways has the apparatus of literary criticism failed to serve the literature of black women, especially black lesbians? Smith proposes a methodology that takes seriously the entanglement of race, class and the politics of sexuality.

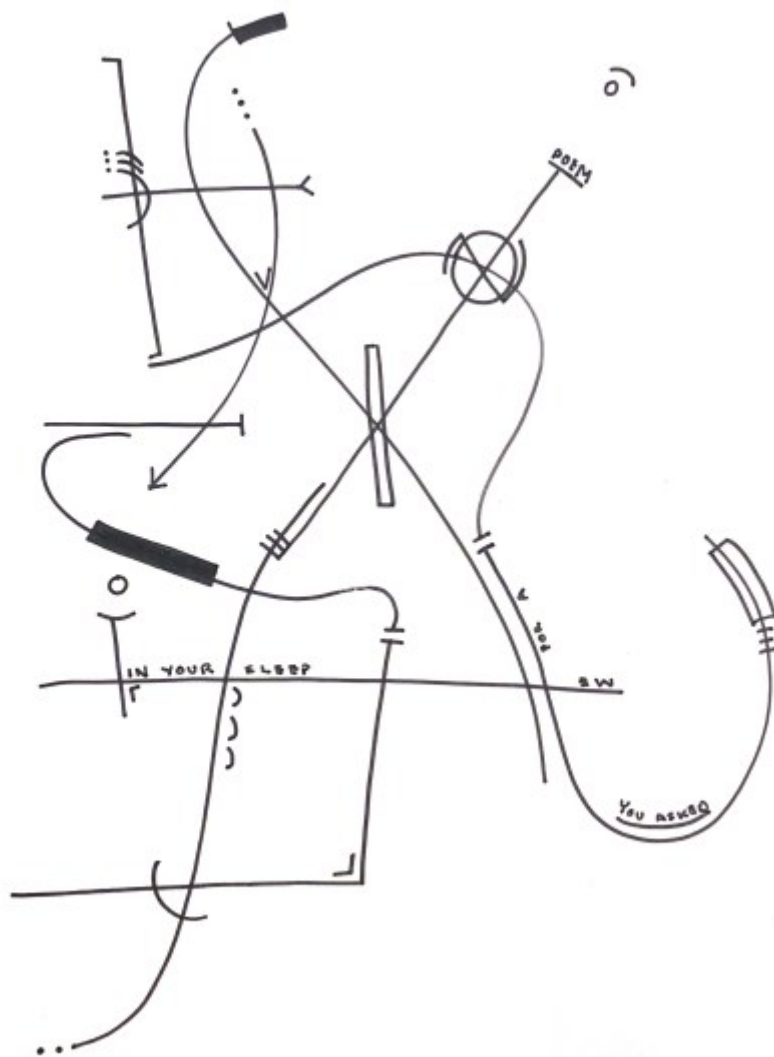
"Long before I tried to write this," Smith notes, "I felt I was attempting to do something unprecedented, something dangerous..."

As a black woman writer who has inherited the unfurling intellectual scaffolding of a body of black feminist theory that includes the likes of Smith, the sense of danger is still present for me. Before we get to the *how*, we need to ask the question: *do* you attend to the work of black women? As Smith noted, the feminist calls made by white women in the 1970s failed to include their black peers.

### I felt I was attempting to do something unprecedented, something dangerous

I have not always known that I wanted to be a critic, but I have long shaped my worldview around—been shaped, myself—by the simple fact that I am a black woman who loves other black women. I want this to show up in my writing. As [June Jordan](#) writes in her essay *Where is the Love?*: "I am talking about love, a steady-state deep caring and respect for every other human being, a love that can only derive from a secure and positive self-love." (Jordan, another seminal black writer who teaches me how to get free.)

I write to place care around the practices of black women artists. Their work. Their archives. Their fullness. Criticism is a way of showing up. It is a way of placing intellectual frameworks around the gestures and processes of artists. It is a way of preventing gaps and exclusions. It feels urgent now for me to engage in a critical practice that moves against silences, undertaking assessments of visual, performance and literary culture in ways that center and prioritize the complexities of black womanhood.



Najja Moon, *This is What I Wrote* (2019). Image courtesy of the artist

I have marveled at how easily a position such as mine has been dismissed by more establishment voices as if they have not been writing in and for their own interest for all of time. There is for me, a power, in asserting that criticism can excavate, illuminate, be in dialogue with canons of cultural production beyond whiteness or maleness or heteronormativity. For so long, objectivity has been a standard of measure that has resulted in exclusion.

I am thinking of the black women artists I know who are eager for a critical apparatus that takes them seriously and knows how see beyond the surface. A criticism that—like a river, as Jordan offers—carries forth the record of their grace. Writing that does not simply placate. Writing that dares. Writing that seeks accountability. Where does such writing live, and how is it sustained in a moment of extreme economic precarity for those who call themselves as critics?

Certainly, I have come to understand the role of my own publication, [ARTS.BLACK](#), as a necessary container for this ethos. Now in its fifth year of operations, my co-editor [Taylor Aldridge](#) and I have dedicated ourselves to publishing black critics online because we envision a contemporary cultural ecology that takes seriously lineages of black textual production.

Still, I reckon with the ongoing financial precariousness of my position. I cobble together a livelihood comprised of grant stipends and low-paying assignments in the absence of full-time work—and even that is a great fortune in this economic climate. This too must be said aloud. Yet, this is a choice I have made, for now, because I believe that a black feminist criticism offers the possibility for the type of critical relationship that dares me to slow down and make space for intimacy.

And this is a choice that has allowed me to find a necessary community to imagine myself as my most *full* self.

"I only hope that this essay is one way of breaking our silence and our isolation," Smith goes on to write in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, "of helping us to know each other". I am a black woman critic maturing alongside black women artists. They are my peers and colleagues and sounding boards. Our exchanges, formal and informal, constitute a necessary, generative meeting point in which we might challenge, provoke and support one another. We are women coming from the peripheries and we are seeing each other, and we are holding on to one another and we are holding one another accountable.

### **Criticism is not static. There is much left to learn**

I guess what I am trying to say is that maybe criticism should make space for the rigor that can arise when we orient ourselves horizontally. That is, when we reject an assumption of the critic's position as primacy. What does criticism look like when we reject the myth that it can only manifest itself in certain ways?

I want to propose that intimacy in criticism serves both a political and aesthetic purpose as it moves us closer to planes of formal experimentation (as in, how does your criticism show up on the page) while allowing for a sustained close reading of a body of work as it unfolds over time. In other words, it is an investment. There is always room for this in my imagining about the future of the tasks of criticism.

Criticism is not static. There is much left to learn. This can never be an ending; only an ongoing revision.