

Book Reviews

Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters

By APH KO AND SYL KO. Lantern Books, 2017. \$20.00 USD

REVIEWED BY AMANDA (MANDY) BUNTEN-WALBERG

Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters is a collection of radical decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, and vegan essays that “tackle the deep entanglements of oppression, and simultaneously offer ways of moving closer toward liberation” (Aph Ko). As the title suggests, this collection is written by two sisters, Aph and Syl Ko. Aph Ko is a theorist, indie digital media producer, and founder of Black Vegans Rock. Syl Ko is a philosophy scholar “exploring Wittgensteinian ‘forms of life’ defenses of animal use, taking into account the racialization of the animal.” Their collection is urgently necessary in a context where the “symbolic [and] cultural elimination of black Life” (Syl Ko) and the literal elimination of Black lives are ongoing; where other animals are systematically held captive, exploited for human use, and slaughtered in the trillions; and where mainstream veganism upholds Eurocentric, white-supremacist frameworks and ignores the insights and contributions of vegans of colour.

In writing this book review, I am mindful of my privilege as a white, settler, human. I want to emphasize that Aph and Syl Ko’s work does not need my approval. I hope to give readers a sense

of the nuance, depth, and vital importance of Aph and Syl Ko’s work using, as much as possible, their own words. However, I primarily hope to encourage others to read *Aphro-ism* for themselves, so that they may directly engage with Aph and Syl Ko’s vital work in all of its complexity and fullness.

In their collection, the Ko sisters artfully subvert problematic dominant discourses on feminism, race, and veganism. They actively “de-center white-centric campaigns that normally [come] to people’s minds when *anyone* talk[s] about blackness and animality” (Aph Ko; Ko’s italics) and they handle these complex topics with a refreshing degree of nuance and depth that are absent from mainstream discourses. For example, in “#AllVegansRock: The All Lives Matter Hashtag of Veganism,” Aph Ko critically reflects on the post-racial rhetoric that arose in response to an article that she wrote, which listed and celebrated 100 Black vegans. Throughout this collection, Aph and Syl Ko challenge post-racial claims that it is racist, divisive, or a distraction from helping animals “when activists of color try to organize around their own experiences” or to “carve out spaces of empowerment” (Aph Ko) for themselves. In a context where mainstream

veganism allows for “cosmetic diversity” (Syl Ko) while rejecting the actual perspectives of people of colour, Aph and Syl Ko engage with Black veganism. As Aph and Syl Ko elaborate on in “Why Black Veganism Is More than Just Being Black and Vegan” and in “Black Veganism Revisited,” Black veganism is specifically informed by Black perspectives as opposed to being merely mainstream, Eurocentric veganism practiced by folks who happen to be Black. They develop an analysis of how addressing racism and addressing the situation of animals are fundamentally linked, and they grapple with the human-animal divide that is at the root of inferiorizing both humans and animals. Though this text is valuable for everyone to engage with, the Ko sisters are not interested in spending their energies educating and fighting white people when they can instead put their energies into their “collective black selves” and into “examining just how expansive the territory of white supremacy is” (Aph Ko), while also critically engaging with animality. They also make clear that they are not just interested in challenging the systems of power and domination that are currently in place, but rather their project is also deeply invested in envisioning new theoretical frameworks from which new futures can be built. In “Creating New Conceptual Architecture: On Afrofuturism, Animality, and Unlearning/Rewriting Ourselves,” Aph Ko explores how Black veganism is an Afrofuturistic praxis in which “[p]eople who have been oppressed and minoritized are actively challenging white supremacy by rearticulating their relationship

to literal nonhuman animals [and by] developing a new relationship to ‘the animal’ as a social category” (Aph Ko). Thus, the Ko sisters’ collection undertakes the revolutionary task of offering new and meaningful frameworks for understanding entangled oppressions and for realizing liberatory futures.

Aphro-ism is not only subversive in terms of content, but it is also stylistically subversive as it does away with popular conventions in writing and publishing. More than just a collection of theoretical and political essays, Aph and Syl Ko intend *Aphro-ism* to “read like an intellectual journal between two sisters” (Aph Ko). Indeed, their deeply supportive sibling relationship infuses this collection with a tone of solidarity, support, and care. Although Aph and Syl Ko’s essays were undoubtedly carefully

written and selected for this collection, they are not airbrushed into a state of unblemished flawlessness. Instead, Aph and Syl Ko honour and showcase their growth and change in thought over time, and they celebrate contradiction among their essays. The essays vary in topic, length, and style. As Aph Ko points out, “[s]ome articles are more academic whereas others are filled with plain, unapologetic rage.” The result is a deliberately personal, dynamic, conversational, and accessible collection. Aph and Syl Ko’s stylistic choices, in combination with their visionary content, make *Aphro-ism* a fundamentally important text to engage with. *Aphro-ism* offers important insights for all readers, regardless of one’s positionality or familiarity with decolonial, feminist, or vegan theory.

MANDY BUNTEN-WALBERG is a Ph.D. student in Queen’s University’s School of Environmental Studies, where she is developing her dissertation research, entitled *Chiropteran Ethics and the Queer, Contagious Intimacies of COVID-19*. She is a graduate of York University’s Master of Environmental Studies program, where she explored how humans might learn from other animals as teachers, leaders, and visionaries of their own liberation. She is hopelessly devoted to her cat companion, Murphy, and she seeks to support all human and more-than-human persons through veganism, theory, and activism that pursues total liberation (though she admittedly has a long way to go and a lot to learn).

Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present

By ROBYN MAYNARD. Fernwood, 2016. \$25.00 CAD

REVIEWED BY RACHEL LOBO

Organizer and academic Robyn Maynard begins the first chapter of her award-winning, national bestseller *Policing Black Lives* with a quote by African American activist, William Wells Brown: “[t]he more I see of Canada, the more I am convinced of a deep-rooted hatred of the Negro here.” This was Brown’s observation after visiting southwestern Ontario in 1861—a time in Canadian history mythologized as showcasing the nation’s so-called benevolence and tolerance. Brown’s visit occurred between the passing of the *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850 and the beginning of the American Civil War (1861–1865)—a period when the largest number of freedom runners entered Canada to find reprieve from subjugation, bondage, and brutal racial violence. However, as Brown’s quote illustrates, freedom runners—like Black migrants and Canadian-born Black people—could escape neither the reality of devaluation, nor the state-sanctioned and popular hos-

tility that was enacted on all Black lives in Canada. For Maynard, “the image of Canada as a safe haven from racial intolerance was then, as it remains today, complex, multilayered, ambivalent and equivocal.” Building on decades of Black liberation activism and scholarship, *Policing Black Lives* offers an important corrective, combating the “social amnesia” behind Canada’s veneer of multiculturalism and tolerance. Maynard’s work firmly situates state-sanctioned violence and the concerted neglect of Black people within Canada’s history.

In Maynard’s words, the main focus of *Policing Black Lives* is to make anti-Blackness “legible” for activists, policymakers, students, and concerned community members. Specifically, she believes that there is a paucity of literature that addresses “in one place” how state policies and institutional practices shape the experiences and material conditions of Black life in Canada. By placing the “enormous, unparalleled power”

of the state at the centre of analysis, Maynard’s study illustrates how domination is structured at the systemic level of social institutions, rather than a matter of individual pathology. Understanding the rationale and cultural mechanisms of endemic anti-Black racism is, therefore, central to any understanding of Canadian history.

Maynard traces the genealogy of anti-Blackness in Canada, beginning her study with the global and historical roots of the devaluation of Black lives that started in 1444, with the transatlantic slave trade, and sketching out the historical contours of anti-Black racism as it developed in Canada. This analysis unpacks the practices of slavery in seventeenth-century New France and eighteenth-century Nova Scotia; nation-wide segregation that ran parallel to practices in Jim Crow America; unequal access to the economy, education, and housing; and heightened exposure to police surveillance. Here, Maynard reminds readers that Canada’s colonization was premised upon an explicitly white supremacist racial hierarchy that required careful engineering, through both a violent settlement project and racial slavery. The conditions of Indigenous and Black life today can be traced to this initial project; its logic has been embedded in state practices and institu-