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Book review

LETTERS TO THE FUTURE: BLACK WOMEN/RADICAL WRITING EDITED BY ERICA HUNT AND DAWN LUNDY MARTIN
KORE PRESS, 2018

What is tomorrow? What does it mean? What does it hold? Or look like? In Letters to the Future: Black Women/Radical Writing, that is the question the artists in this collection are asking and answering. This anthology challenges readers with this question to truly immerse us into the boundless possibilities in an effort to form answers. Letters to the Future is a collection edited by Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy Martin in which women poets and artists explore gender, race, sexuality, political ideologies, and what it means to be a Black woman in our current world. While reflecting back on the past, the writers of this collection examine the reality of what the present holds and demand a better future. The editors bring together a collection of strong, Black, imaginative, and boundary-breaking women from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom to discuss essential and problematic issues.

Hunt, a poet, essayist, and author has appeared in The Los Angeles Review of Books, Poetics Journal, among others and has received awards from the Foundation for Contemporary Art, the Fund for Poetry, and the Djerassi Foundation. Dawn Lundy Martin is a poet, an essayist, and conceptual video artist whose most recent poetry publications include Life in a Box is a Pretty Life and Good Stock Strange Blood. Together, these two women artists provide a place where others can come together in an immersive and innovative collection well worth the attention of a broad swathe of readers.

This collection offers a variety of poems in all shapes and sizes, but the underlying conversation, as Hunt references, is that of the “questions of tomorrow.” It is the question of identity, sexuality, of language and community, political ideologies, and everything in-between. Martin describes this work as an “anti-doctrine, as future imaginings, as languages with their own rules, as new makings, undisciplined and rebellious.” This collection is the future.

In this anti-doctrine, poems range from prose to free verse to micro-essays, from conceptualized images to deconstructed ideologies of what society may think of as poetry, or art. Letters to the Future provides a space where art and poetry are mixed and reformed. With this collection, the contributors span a wide range of age and backgrounds, and the stylistic approaches to poetry and art give us something we haven’t seen already because it re-writes what we think we know about poetry as well as re-writing the world.

Poems by Robin Coste Lewis use titles or descriptions from art in which a Black female figure is present or featured. Lewis uses these descriptions and titles to bring the history and the past into the present to re-see the objectified reality of Black women. In her poem “Catalog 1: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome,” she writes:
Statuette of a Woman Reduced
to the Shape of a Flat Paddle

Statuette of a Black Girl
Right Half of Body and Head Missing

Head of a Young Black Women Fragment
from Statuette of a Black Dancing Girl

By taking the words from a description of statues, Lewis is able to provide a specific picture of how Black women were and still are perceived: as bodies, as fragments, as reduced to shapes. These descriptions are from Western art objects that objectified the black female body, but they remain, viewed not only in the past but also now.

In this collection, artists incorporate language, blank space, structure and form, and visual designs and images to provide an original and unique collection. Hunt and Martin do an especially good job putting together a collection that celebrates the artist and artist statements. Adrian Piper takes an experimental, powerful stance in “Imagine: (Trayvon Martin).” Piper’s art here is simple, with three words “See color insert.” The insert is a post card with a picture of Martin’s faded face and a bright red bullseye overlay and the words “Imagine what it was like to be me.” This image and these few words give the reader all the questions and answers at once. Being able to detach this postcard from the book gives the reader a new, hands-on experience, with the book, and the ability to detach becomes a comment on the reader as much as inherent in the artwork in the reader’s hand.

Kara Walker’s piece, “Search for Ideas Supporting the Black Man as a Work of Modern Art,” uses a handwritten painting on postcards to discuss the female Black body and the West’s way of looking at and disregarding the female body and, with it, humanity. In Yona Harvey’s “The Subject of Surrender,” blank spaces encourage the reader to fill in the blanks throughout the poem. Each reader renders the poem differently.

This collection takes on many different forms, but the commonality among the artists is that they are Black women writing for a difference, for a future. Hunt and Martin have put together a groundbreaking collection that stresses the importance of tomorrow and what it means for today. This collection pushes in all of the directions we need to go.