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Kind(s) of Blue: The poetics and politics of blueness in Dionne Brand's *The Blue Clerk* and Lorna Simpson's *Ghost Note* and *Time*

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Abstract

This paper explores the *chromapolitics* of the colour blue as it becomes manifest in Dionne Brand's long prose poem *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (2018) and Lorna Simpson's unsettling and terribly beautiful portraits *Ghost Note* (2021) and *Time* (2021). Brand's poem is articulated as a dialogical sequence between an author and a blue Clerk in a blue coat, who acts as a metonymical figure for the blueness of ink, the sky, the sea, indigo, the night, the blues, and the connection of blue with melancholy. The two characters discuss writing (especially of poetry), the violence of colonial discourses, the histories of dispossession and race thinking, but also the unsaid and unwritten stories of Black communities' resistance and survival. Simpson's large-scale ink screenprints juxtapose blue, black, violet and grey to frame and impress the photographic portraits of women whose fragmented bodies and *blueblack* flesh persist and survive as counterarchives despite the violence and expropriation of modernity, from the Middle Passage to slavery and the long durée of racisms in the North American context. *The Blue Clerk*, *Ghost Note*, and *Time* confront the lacunae and absences of the colonial archive and deconstruct the monolithic grammars of reading and looking at the colour blue, which obscure the polyvocality of its hues, shades, textures and relations to adjacent colours—and mainly the colour black. Both the poetic and visual texts perform and incarnate an otherwise, paraontological gaze on blueness, blackness, and the spectres that they conjure in our precarious now-time.

Keywords: blue, black, chromapolitics, counterarchive, paraontology

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Primordial black is blue. How blue can you get? Black.[1]

The unanticipated shock: so much believed to be white is actually—strikingly—blue. Endless blueness. White is blue.[2]

Introduction: Kind(s) of Blue

How do we know that a colour is blue? Because we have learnt English.[3] Colour is contingent on language; it is not an entirely natural phaenomenon, common to all people and cultures. Colour perception is performed by the eyes and the brain that process the visual stimuli,[4] but calling something blue depends on one's linguistic resources and their *chromapolitical* understanding of the world. A compound of the Greek word for colour (*chroma*) and politics, the concept of *chromapolitics*, as developed by Professors Tina Campt and Macarena Gómez-Barris,[5] speaks to the social, linguistic, and cultural norms that frame, filter, name, see, gaze at, and define colour in a specific ontological, racial, political, and aesthetic way. Blue is a highly complicated colour; it can be as light as ice-white or as dark as primordial, night-sky black, as my two epigraphs suggest. Blue is the "sometime-ish"[6] colour of the sea

[1] Glenn Ligon, ed., *Blue Black: June 9-October 7, 2017* (St. Louis, Missouri: Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017), 63.

[2] Robin Coste Lewis, "Using Black to Paint Light: Walking Through a Matisse Exhibit Thinking about the Arctic and Matthew Henson," *Gulf Coast* 29, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2017), 138.

[3] I am paraphrasing here Ludwig Wittgenstein's question on the inevitable interconnection of colour with language: "Wittgenstein asked: 'How do I know this colour is red?' To which he replied: '. . . because I have learned English." See David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion, 2000), 91.

[4] See Susanne Marschall and Annette Werner, "Basics of Colour Research," *Colour Turn*, 28 August 2018, I–2, I–6, I–9 and I–10, https://doi.org/10.25538/TCT.V0I1.673 .

[5] I am indebted to Professors Campt and Gómez-Barris for this concept that they are developing in their course "The Chromapolitics of Visuality" which I attended at Princeton University.

[6] Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

and the sky and it appears almost impossible to outline and pin it down to a limited number of tones, since it can also bleed into other colours, like violet or green. Blue describes people whose skin is actually dark brown; it is the colour that one can experience aurally through the type of music called the blues; it is the colour of dark mood, mood *indigo*, and melancholy, but also surprise, when it comes out of the blue, or bawdiness, as in blue comedy.[7]

Blue's complex linguistic history reveals that this colour has not always signified the hues we identify as blue in English in the 21st century. According to Michel Pastoureau, in Ancient Greek and Roman cultures: "[i]t is difficult to determine which…words designate blue because both languages lack basic, recurring terms for it, whereas white, red, and black are clearly named. In Greek…the words most commonly used for blue are *glaukos* and *kyaneos*."[8] *Kyaneos* was dark: "deep blue, violet, brown, and black. In fact, it evokes more the 'feeling' of the color than its actual hue."[9] A dark colour signified a dark mood even back then, as is evident from the definition of the ancient Greek Hippocratic *melancholy*, a dark (blue black)[10] bile circulating in one's body and causing them to be depressed and catatonic. *Glaukos* designated "gray, blue, and sometimes even yellow or brown."[11] The perception of colour was also different: "Rather than denoting a particular color, it [*glaukos*] expresses the idea of a colour's feebleness or weak concentration. For this reason, it is used to describe the color of water, eyes, leaves, or honey."[12] So, the sea could be either *glaukos* or *kyaneos* depending on the context, the light, and the time of day. The Romans followed this trend of incertitude concerning blue, as is reflected in the chromatic terms that have passed down to English. They incorporated in their language two originally "foreign words

[7] See William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*, (New York City: New York Review Books, 2014).

[8] Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 23.

[9] Pastoureau, 25.

[10] The first half of the compound word, (*melas-anos*) is linked etymologically to the modern Greek word for ink (*melani*) and for the bruise (*melania*).

[11] Pastoureau, *Blue*, 25.

[12] Pastoureau, 25.

for blue, the Germanic *blavus* and the Arabic *azureus.*"[13] *Blavus* is an earlier type of the word *blue*, designating the multiple colours of a bruise;[14] blue is connected from very early on with the visible traces of violence remaining on the abused flesh.

Blue's reception by older societies was also determined by the scarcity or abundance of the ores, like *lapis lazuli*, and plants, like woad and indigo, which provided the fabric dyes and pigments that coloured the clothes and each era's artistic representations. The antagonism of woad, a European pastel for dyeing blue fabrics, with the exotic, imported indigo (initially coming from India, hence its name, *indicum*) led to a series of strict laws to forbid the importation of the foreign, demonised plant. As Derek Jarman suggests: "The arrival of indigo in Europe caused consternation. Woad was under threat in 1577 in Germany. A decree prohibited the newly invented pernicious and deceitful, eating and corrosive dye called the 'Devil's Dye.' In France dyers were required to take oaths not to use indigo. For two centuries indigo was hedged with legislation."[15] By the 18th century, however, when indigo's higher quality and potential for saturation had become indisputable, an entire colonial business was established for its production and transportation. Indigo was extremely affordable, even though it came to Europe from across the Atlantic, especially from the Caribbean, since there was virtually no cost in its collection and processing, performed almost entirely by enslaved people, whose

[13] Pastoureau, 26.

[14] See Glenn Ligon's artwork *A Small Band* (2015), part of the exhibition *Blue Black* he curated in Ligon, *Blue Black*, 6-7. He created three large-scale word sculptures using aluminium and neon lights covered in blue paint. The words he chose were BLUES, BLOOD, BRUISE, which resonate with the brief (and geographically limited to Europe and North America) historical overview of the colour blue I am offering in this introduction.

[15] See Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 105. Jarman also explores blue in his homonymous 1993 film *Blue*, consisting of a monochromatic blue screen and an audio-based narration of the complications of his fight with AIDS, during which he became partially blind. The blue screen symbolises Jarman's failing sight, as well as the mourning and melancholy for his friends and lovers, lost because of the AIDS epidemic.

hands were dyed blue and whose lives ended shortly because of the poisonous aftereffects of indigo fermentation.[16]

This short and—necessarily—incomplete historical overview of the linguistic expressions of blueness and the colour's material manifestations betray its slippery nature as a signifier, its fugitivity and elusiveness, the difficulty to pin it down and define it, and its, at times, arbitrary uses. Following this enigmatic tradition of the different kinds of blue, ranging from almost white to almost black, I choose to explore blue's varied chromatic manifestations which invite playfulness and announce the possibility of another gaze that counters the (neo)colonial *chromapolitical* understandings of aesthetics and race. This essay examines the poetics and politics of reading, looking at, and listening to the colour blue in an interdisciplinary apposition of contemporary prose poetry and visual arts, in order to speculate on the ways in which blueness can speak to otherwise, radical modalities of being human and being-with, deconstructing the *phallogocentrism*[17] of ontology and creolising the monolithic racial representations of blackness as the opposite of whiteness. Tina Campt's work on the *Black gaze* as the assemblage of "radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness—ways of seeing that historically depict blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness,"[18] will provide a theoretical background to my chromatic and ontopolitical research of blueness in poetry and art.

The first text under study is the long prose poem *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (2018), by the Caribbean-Canadian poet, writer, and filmmaker Dionne Brand. The poem presents a series of versos, that is, of the left-hand pages of a book,—containing what

[16] For a history of the plant's cultivation in India and the American continent and its subsequent exploitation by the colonial regimes, see Suryatapa Jha, "Plant of the Month: Indigo," JSTOR Daily, (June 2023), https://daily.jstor.org/plant-of-the-month-indigo/?utm_term=Plant%20of%20the%20Month%3A%20Indigo&utm_campaign=jstordaily_06222023&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On+Software&utm_medium=email. Indigo is blood-blue, as Jha article notes: "'not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood,'" n. pag..

[17] Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), xxv.

[18] Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 17.

the author had withheld throughout the years—the reverse of the logocentric, proper, neat, and ordered right-hand pages. Brand's text follows the dialogical sequences of the two protagonists, namely the author and the elusive Blue Clerk, on writing in general, and the potential of poetic texts, in particular, to speak to decolonial ways of being in a world interconnected through past, present and yet-to-come disasters, on translation, colonialism, racism and their pervasive and enduring afterlives. *The Blue Clerk* dramatizes Brand's continuous experimentation with poetic form and its potential to "perform the job of saying that/ which needs to be said or thought, to apprehend the/ slippery quality of being human"[19] more effectively than a novel. But what is the human that emerges through Brand's spectral poetics? Certainly not the *overrepresented*[20] Man2[21] whose ontological and political violence against the ones excluded from the categorisation of the human Sylvia Wynter has outlined, but an otherwise being, a being blue, for which blueness does not designate depression and despair, or lamentation—like Louis Armstrong's repetitive questioning *what did I do to be so black and blue?*[22]—but a deconstructive and paraontological grammar of refusal and resistance that dares to define and gaze at the human outside and around the frames of the western metaphysics of presence and Being. Marquis Bey employs Nahum D. Chandler's paraontology to speak to blackness, being and gender politics: "I am understanding the paraontological project as a stringent, radical attempt to explore other modes of living. These modes of living might cause the death of a subject, but that is only the death of a subject that needs to measure up to ontological grammars. Paraontological life, subjectivity emerging through paraontology, can look quite different, and it is that kind of life we strive toward.

19 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 177.

20 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 288, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

21 See Wynter, 269. For Wynter, Man1 was the "theocentric conception of the human, Christian," (269) and Man2 "the new humanist and ratiocentric conception of the human" the "homo politicus, or the political subject of the state."

22 See Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2024, *"Black and Blue Lyrics,"* Accessed May 25, 2024, https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/785439/Louis+Armstrong/Black+and+Blue.

We get closer to it with the attenuation of each vector of ontological entrapment we manage to grittily, painstakingly abandon."[23] For Fred Moten, the subject does not exist in a white void, or a black, blank space of nothingness; there is a material, paraontological space, somewhere around the subject, where so-far unread, fugitive and *undercommunal*[24] beings have existed and continue to exist, thrive and create together. Moten suggests that "[t]he black light, the fugitive formation…is detected only by way of another mathematics, a future metaphysics…"[25] Moten's paraontological articulation of the human is illustrated through colour and its fluidity: it exists in the melting of the *blueblackblur*; at the points of leakage of the colours' supposed edges, which dramatize fugitivity and alternative modalities of being and where blue, as Jarman suggests, "is darkness made visible."[26]

It is this rethinking of *blueblackblur* and its potential to signify otherwise ways of being and gazing at the contours of the human that I also read in Lorna Simpson's two paintings/collages under study, namely *Time* (2021) and *Ghost Note* (2021), from her ongoing series *Ice 2019-Present*, which resonate with issues of memory, time and the histories and stories of violence against black flesh. The two works are part of the African American artist's turn to painting and collage after her participation in the 2015 Venice Biennale. Simpson has been well-known for her previous work on black-and-white photographs and her poetic yet cryptic captions, as well as her video artworks, speaking to the history of racism and sexism in the USA as well as the discriminations still faced by Black people. For her *Ice* series, Simpson carefully selects her source materials from vintage *Jet* and

[23] See Marquis Bey, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender*, (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 11–12.

[24] As Harney and Moten argue, the undercommons is the potentiality of a maroon, fugitive type of community existing next to and outside the commons of the University, the state, or any type of sovereign, "enlightenment-type charade" (39). An otherwise way of being-with counts with "the possibility of a thought of an outside, a nonplace called the undercommons–the nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside, from which the enlightenment-type charade has stolen everything for its game. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, T*he Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 39.

[25] Glenn Ligon, *Blue Black*, 65.

[26] Jarman, *Chroma*, 114.

Ebony magazines, two publications focusing on the everyday life of African Americans after the second world war, as well as photographs of arctic landscapes, and creates darkening and imposing large-scale blue, black and grey works using screenprints and ink on gessoed fiberglass. Fragmentation and abstraction have always been part of Simpson's aesthetics but her latest paintings omit text (there are only long, thin slivers of printed texts on the paintings, which are however impossible to decipher) and display various cutouts of female heads, becoming speculative portraits *critically fabulating*[27] the stories of the unnamed, fragmented figures, saturated in blue-hued ink. Rebecca Rose Cuomo describes Simpson's *Ice* series as "[n]ebulous, murky, hallucinatory and oneiric,"[28] and suggests that "Simpson offers us a geography of displacements and a topology of the racialized and gendered body."[29]

From the first time I saw Simpson's *blueblack*[30] portraits, they conjured Brand's poetic description of her Blue Clerk, an ethereal and spectral female figure drenched in ink, carrying the debt of the violent colonial archive and grappling with the weight of a history of catastrophes that has rendered her almost invisible. The combination of the poetic and visual texts under study embodies and performs what Mina Karavanta calls a *counterwriting* of the colonial archive, that is, a decolonial testimonial praxis and a methodology that reconfigures the monolithic and monochromatic (white) human, through "a rewriting of the history of the slave as a human being who produced and generated her/his own aesthetics, ideas, language and community practices—which, when reconstellated in the present, can project alternative ways of imagining, thinking and representing the human being and her/his community."[31] My case studies *counterwrite* an understanding

[27] See Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

[28] Rebecca Rose Cuomo, "In Lorna Simpson's Latest Work, Racism Is Like the Weather," *Frieze*, no. 205 (September 2019), 180.

[29] Cuomo, 180.

[30] See Fred Moten in Glenn Ligon, ed., *Blue Black, June 9-October 7, 2017* (St. Louis, Missouri: Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017), 66.

[31] Mina Karavanta, "The Injunctions of the Spectre of Slavery: Affective Memory and the Counterwriting of Community," *Feminist Review*, no. 104 (2013): 44, http://

of being human that clashes with the Eurocentric idea of the white, *overrepresented*[32] Man and conjure a paraontological reading and gazing at being *blueblack* human and being-with the more-than-human, that I pursue here through the materiality, liquidity, and the various metaphorical and synaesthetic *chromapolitical* experiencings of the colour blue.

Blue Clerk Blues

What does the blueness of Dionne Brand's 2018 poetic collection *The Blue Clerk* signify? Which kind of blue is the Clerk's blue?[33] Brand creates a figure, the Clerk, who is stationed at a dock, in the middle of nowhere, collecting and taking care of the left-hand pages of the author, the blank pages containing the withheld and the unsaid. Why is the Clerk blue? I imagine her as a Black woman drenched in blue ink, exactly like Simpson's blue monochromes that saturate the brown skin of her *Jet* and *Ebony* models. Blue could describe the Clerk's very dark skin, as in the 2016 movie *Moonlight*, where Juan, impersonated by Mahershala Ali, remembers being told as a kid that: "'In moonlight'…'black boys look blue. You blue."[34] The absence of a verb here makes the identification of the boy with the colour even more pronounced; even though his skin is dark brown, he is Black, and also blue, according to light and the racial politics of the colonial gaze and language that classifies, names and colours. As Lewis incants in her "Using Black to Paint Light: Walking Through a Matisse Exhibit Thinking about the Arctic and Matthew Henson," a poem starting off from the photographic saturation of black skin to question colonial race and colour thinking:

www.jstor.org/stable/24571949.

[32] Wynter, 288.

[33] For an inventory of blue hues, their naming, and categorising, see Gass, *On Being Blue*, 59–60.

[34] See Barry Jenkins, "Moonlight," Daily Script, Accessed May 20, 2024: 21, https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/MOONLIGHT.pdf.

> I am blue.
> I am a frozen blue ocean.
> I am a wave struck cold in midair.
> The wave is nude beneath her blue dress.
> Her skin is blue.[35]

The abrupt switch of pronouns in this very short excerpt emphasises the shift of perspectives and the politics of gazing at the human and the other-than-human, also arising in *The Blue Clerk*. The I that feels herself as blue, as ice and water, (a figure like the Blue Clerk) is swiftly replaced by an eye that looks at the self from outside, (like the author) commenting on the blueness of the figure's dress and her skin. *She blue*, the second voice seems to suggest. This section explores the Clerk's blueness parallelly with Simpson's sculpture *Timeline* and her painting/ collage *Time*—which features a spectral and uncanny *blueblack* figure—to conjure the literary and visual works' archival politics and the wayward ways of employing ink to *counterwrite*[36] and safeguard the multisensorial histories and stories of the oppressed. Simpson's artworks and Brand's long poem dramatise what Rolando Vázquez theorises as *decolonial aesthesis*, which embraces the relational artistic praxes delinked from aesthetics, "allowing the coming forth of those voices that have been silenced and reduced through the process of modernity."[37] *Decolonial aesthesis* is concerned with "recovering time, recovering the time that has been hollowed out;"[38] with collecting the elliptical archive of the past and fabulating dynamic and vibrant art that implicates the entire body and its visceral responses, while defying the rational and sterilised ocularcentrism of Western high art.

Verso 1 of *The Blue Clerk* announces: "She is the blue clerk. She is dressed in a blue ink/ coat, her right hand is dry, her left hand is

35 Lewis, *Using Black*, 138.

36 Karavanta, "Injunctions."

37 Rolando Vázquez Melken, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthesis and the End of the Contemporary*, (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 149.

38 Vázquez 149.

dripping."[39] The Clerk is wearing a blue coat, or "blue robes"[40] in the colour of ink, that iridescent blue/violet hue that adds a metallic shine in Simpson's paintings. A blue fabric is not innocent; as mentioned in the introduction, blue dyes made of the indigo plant carry a long history of exploitation and abuse for the enslaved people who collected and handled it. What if the Clerk is or has been one of the blue-handed indigo workers who processed the plant and created a paste that would be subsequently exported to Europe? Her dripping blue hand could also signify that she is a writer or a painter, using the plants, ores and animals in her surroundings to make her own ink for her creations: "I have an ink from cuttlefish; I have one from a burnt/ pebble, one from several crushed juniper berries. This came/ off in my hand."[41] Accidentally or not, the "ink-drenched,"[42] Clerk bears on her flesh the traces of *blavus* writing, either the indigo chemicals that have saturated her pores or the violet-blue ink that has haphazardly blotched her skin. The Clerk also has "six thousand seven hundred and/ thirty-one pens, five blotters, a slate board and slate pencil/ around her neck."[43] She carries a writing surface on her body, making sure she will always self-sufficiently collect and archive her art and writings; her slate is not a clean one, a *tabula rasa*, drenched as it is in her series of inks. The Clerk's pages are also rife with "green unclassified aphids,"[44] tiny insects "living-with"[45] and leaving their transparent traces on these papers. How can the unwritten and the non-human traces of the spectral Clerk and the insect aphids be archived?

The Blue Clerk invites a thinking of the otherwise, decolonial ways of *arche-writing*[46] and the paraontological ways of being human

[39] Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 4.

[40] Brand, 132.

[41] Brand, 55.

[42] Brand, 5.

[43] Brand, 185.

[44] Brand, 5.

[45] Brand, 5.

[46] Jacques Derrida calls arche-writing a "movement of différance, irreducible arche-synthesis, opening in one and the same possibility, temporalization as well as relationship with the other and language" and employs it interchangeably with the trace to deconstruct the supposed domination of written over oral speech and

and being-with the other than human, in order to collect and inscribe a counterarchive of the past that is at best elliptical or entirely missing from the dominant narratives of colonialism, as well as our now-time, threatened by a series of climatic and climactic disasters to-come. As the "*archon*"[47] responsible for the management of the unarchived and potentially unarchivable materials of the versos, the Clerk has the "*arkhe*,"[48] the sovereignty to hide and destroy or reveal and shelter the papers on the dock/ "*arkheion*."[49] Building on the Derridean understanding of the archive and its precarity, I read the Clerk as suffering from a *mal d'archive,* a French idiomatic expression translated as *archive fever*. Being *en mal d'archives* signifies "in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute *en mal de,* to be *en mal d'archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun *mal* might name. It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away."[50] The Clerk suffers from her interminable preoccupation with the archive and is motivated by her drive to find, safeguard and, if needed, *critically fabulate*[51] the parts of the archive that were never written or have gone missing. According to Hadley Howes, "[t]he clerk is the counter-archivist who formulates the unfathomable grief of the archive."[52] She embodies the traumatic history of the Middle Passage and the period of slavery; she is devastated by the impossibility of collecting the archive of this historical period in full, since the majority of the people transported from Africa to the Americas were not recorded in any manifest through their names, but

annul their Manichean opposition. *Arche-writing* contains both written and oral language and speaks to forms of writing that have so far been misrepresented by anthropologists, linguists and ethnologists as non-writing. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 56,57,60.

47 See Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

48 Derrida and Prenowitz, 1.

49 Derrida and Prenowitz, 2.

50 Derrida and Prenowitz, 91.

51 Hartman, *Venus*, 11.

52 See Hadley Howes, Review of *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos*, by Dionne Brand, Archivaria 90 (2020): 185, muse.jhu.edu/article/775288.

as "'negroe man' [*sic*] 'negroe woman', or, more frequently 'ditto man,' 'ditto woman.'"[53] Alexis Pauline Gumbs poetically suggests that *The Blue Clerk* is a text about with-holding the transgenerational trauma of the slave ship. She asks: "What kind of holding can we learn from the clerk *stowing cargo* when we know the brutal forms and legacies of cargo in the hold?"[54] The Clerk is mourning the afterlives of slavery that survive in the 21st century, all this abusing and mishandling of the dark flesh. In an unnumbered verso, *The Blue Clerk* explodes:

> What makes the police kill Black children, everywhere?
>
> Rifle through their clothing, write down their names, slap
>
> their faces, rough up their bodies, eat away their young
>
> days, breath in their breaths; wipe their hands on their little
>
> chests and along their legs, and clasp their wrists so tightly
>
> they atrophy. What a strange and ghoulish intimacy.[55]

The Clerk is haunted by this "ghoulish intimacy" that eats away the young black lives. She becomes, thus, a metanarrative symbol of the writer and the artist, who struggle to inscribe, through ink, the histories, stories, and testimonies of the commons that have existed and continue to exist in a paraontological spacetime, and also of the archivist, who aims to keep the precarious documents safe. The Clerk *counterwrites*[56] memory, opposing the supposedly neat and ordered *logos* of western humanism and the *overrepresentation of Man*[57]

[53] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Zong!,* Wesleyan Poetry (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 194.

[54] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "letting go," *Small Axe*, February 2022, n.pag., https://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/letting-go .

[55] Brand, *The Blue Clerk,* 152.

[56] Karavanta, "Injunctions."

[57] Wynter, 288.

through affect as well as through the "innovative ways and counter-hegemonic formations of the oppressed, manifested in their Creole discourses, hybrid communities and carnivalising strategies;"[58] in their *blueblack* undercommons. The Clerk writes and safeguards her otherwise archive, counter to what colonial historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have recorded, her wayward histories and stories of *survivance*, a term that Vizenor describes as "an active sense of presence,"[59] a cultural survival of marginalised communities, and a continuation of storytelling and artmaking, sometimes against all odds.

An elliptical archive full of silences—which is not mute but speaks in another language that has so far remained mostly unheard—is stacked all around the Clerk, in innumerable reams. In her *Darkening* exhibition, Simpson materialises one such ream, as if she had the Clerk's dock in mind: the artist stacks the *Ebony* magazines she collects and employs in her collages/portraits, some still in their plastic wrapping, and erects her *Timeline*,[60] part of her series *Stacks 2017-Present*; a monumental sculpture more than three metres high, holding the precious yet precarious archive together. As Cuomo comments: "Collapsing historical distance, *Timeline* is continuous; past merges with present as it looms over our heads."[61] *Timeline* is a timely yet timeless counterarchive on black life; this collective, unruly stack visualises an alternative way of measuring the passing of time and cultural changes, through a series of self-representations by Black people, in post-war USA. The paper column resists and refuses readability and access to the viewer; the volumes are also unmovable and "fixed by an invisible steel beam running through their centre"[62] and they occlude their chronology, their covers, and backs, or any other identificatory information. *Timeline* resonates with the materiality and perishability of the paper archive, and its complicated relation

[58] Karavanta, *Injunctions*, 44.

[59] See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2010), vi.

[60] Golden et al., *Lorna Simpson*, 189. The reproduction of the sculpture is also available on https://lsimpsonstudio.com/sculptures/stacks-2017-present.

[61] Cuomo, 181.

[62] Cuomo, 180-181.

to time and survival, since it can turn into dust under extreme heat, or become mouldy because of humidity, as it happens on the Clerk's dock: In the dry season, the Blue Clerk's "bales turn to sand"[63] and in the wet season, they become soaked in sea or rain water: "some years the pages absorb all the water in the air,/ tumid like four-hundred-year-old wet wood."[64]

Time and its hauntology also preoccupies Simpson in the first painting/collage I look into: her 2021 *Time*[65] comments on spectral time and placelessness by featuring a cutout portrait from a magazine with the disembodied head and neck of a cobalt-black woman in an azure background, floating in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the painting, upside down. The figure has a perfectly coiffed chignon that looks like some sea creature, a hermit crab shell maybe, out of which the upturned face emerges. Simpson employs one of her recurring techniques in this painting, namely the uncanny fragmentation of the human body, maimed and mutilated to denote the ghoulish violence black flesh has suffered throughout modernity. Kellie Jones argues that "Simpson's incomplete and patched-together bodies do not stand in for an elusive whole existing somewhere outside the picture frame."[66] The ruin is all there is to narrate the disaster. Simpson's *Time* resonates with the figure of the Blue Clerk, an ethereal woman, who, according to Brand "is a creature of the air of the wharf; she's pure poetry, in a sense,"[67] soaked in iridescent blue ink and immersed in a spectral timescape, surrounded by the blueness of the sea and the greyness of the sky—or vice versa; which is up and down in this painting? (I have the impulse to turn it around and see what it can reveal). The Blue Clerk has a peculiar connection to time since Brand visualises her as a creature beyond time that "is an attempt to observe time and

63 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 5.

64 Brand, 5.

65 Golden et al., *Lorna Simpson*, 206–7. A reproduction of the painting is also available in the artist's site, at https://lsimpsonstudio.com/paintings/ice-2019present.

66 Golden et al., *Lorna Simpson*, 37.

67 Dionne Brand "Q&A: Canisia Lubrin speaks to Dionne Brand about her two new books, *The Blue Clerk and Theory*," interview by Canisia Lubrin, Quill and Quire, 13 September 2018, https://quillandquire.com/omni/qa-canisia-lubrin-speaks-to-dionne-brand-about-her-two-new-books-the-blue-clerk-and-theory/, n. pag.

not place. Therefore, the materials that the clerk excavates/collects are not hinged to place. The clerk lives in nowness. The clerk lives in the continuum of the present."[68] The Blue Clerk's time is non-linear; it is the disarticulated and non-teleological, out-of-joint time of the spectre.[69] Simpson's uncanny blue girl can represent another figure of the archival spectre; woken from her sleep in the *Timeline* stack of magazines, she came to the forefront of *Time*, however dark the times still are, or, rather because of the darkening times. Simpson avows that darkness and blueness in her large-scale ink paintings reflect her melancholic emotions during the works' creation: "darkness is about the nighttime as is present in many of the works, but I also feel that living in America right now is like living in a darkening, a very dark period. So there was this way of thinking about color and thinking about night, but also about atmosphere and inhospitable conditions, and how to survive those conditions."[70] Darkness is threatening but in the hands of the artist, it also spells out the possibility of an otherwise theorisation of being, being-with, and being visible as well as a (chroma)political praxis of survival and fugitivity. The artist also admits to listening to the blues during her creative process, as if the music's melancholy and its association with the colour blue affected the hues and tones she employed in her artworks. When asked by Shirley Ngozi Nwangwa: "What music do you play when you're making art?"[71] Simpson responded: "I have a playlist on Spotify. For the past two months, I've just played my 'favorites,' anything that comes up that I like. It's kind of amazing. Jason Moran—his 'I'll Play the Blues for You'—lots of blues."[72] Lots of blues, indeed.

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68 Brand, Lubrin, n.pag.

69 See Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Repr, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2011), 20.

70 Lorna Simpson, "Lorna Simpson in conversation with Thelma Golden," interview by Thelma Golden, *Hauser and Wirth* (14 May 2019), n.pag., https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/24565-lorna-simpson-conversation-thelma-golden/.

71 See Lorna Simpson, "The Many Layers of Lorna Simpson," interview by Shirley Ngozi Nwangwa, *The New York Times Style Magazine*, 30 September 2021, n. pag. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/t-magazine/lorna-simpson-art.html.

72 Simpson and Ngozi Nwangwa, n.pag.

The upper part of *Time* is a variegated assemblage of cerulean, cobalt and indigo blues, darkening at certain points to dark violet or navy blue, going all the way to black. The lower half of the painting is grey, like an overcast sky, ranging from white to black, depending on the concentration of the liquid, dripping ink, and the light. The grey brushstrokes are interrupted by a larger and (at least) two smaller black lines, like cuts on the surface. The longer, slightly undulating black line that seems to puncture the fiberglass and create an uncanny opening (has the figure emerged through this cut?) is divided by a series of transversal lines, almost straight, like they were drawn using a ruler and a pen and not a brush. I imagine these black lines as a warped timeline, which ends right under the cutout of the *blueblack* woman's face and represents a time out of joint that fails to describe and account for the paraontological beingness of beings like the blue figure of the painting or the eerie Blue Clerk. A series of screenprinted textual fragments also interrupts the otherwise smooth grey landscape; they are slivers of magazine text placed horizontally on the surface of the painting, which become illegible and indecipherable because of their orientation, their narrowness—not even enough for a small word to appear in full—and, finally, because they are painted over and covered, to a larger or lesser degree, by grey paint. These elliptical and fragmented pieces of text are not, however, static; they are dripping ink, as is the hand of the Clerk. This leakage transforms the fragments into otherworldly plants with their roots spreading and thriving in the greyness. These unreadable textual ruins exceed their edges and contaminate the surface of the painting with their rhizomatic, dynamic dissemination. Simpson's artistic gesture rewrites and explodes the written *logos* and its limitedness and creates its own meaning in the paraontological space beyond and around the fragment, the ruin and the wreckage. Brand's prose poem and Simpson's paintings recognise the restrictions and abuses of the official (neo)colonial narratives and embrace the ruin and the speculative as a site of an otherwise grammar for representing the oppressed and dispossessed human beings. According to Erica Johnson, the method of "wreckognition" consists thus in acknowledging that the inherited colonial material and resources are "a wreck of history replete with repressed voices

and unrecorded experiences"[73] that the readers and viewers have to carefully examine and peel off from the palimpsest of the visual or literary archives, in order to actually listen to the supposedly silent subalterns, who can and do speak.[74]

Looking at this portrait, I experience a mingling of senses. The mood of the figure is not what one would expect from a fashion magazine, usually representing smiling women, looking directly towards the camera. It depicts the *blueblack* woman with her eyes closed, and her mouth slightly open. She looks as if she is concentrating in order to pray or is taking a breath before saying or singing something. Simpson, throughout her long photographic career, has her models turn their back or avert their eyes from the viewers' hungry gaze that aims at a full translation and transparency of the represented. To the demand for clarity and readability, Simpson responds with opacity and illegibility. As bell hooks argues, Simpson's *Waterbearer* "creates by her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining…Hers is a portrait of serenity, of being, of making peace with oppositional history"[75] and I think that is an apt description of the quiet, blue-clerk figure in *Time*. This portrait is humming and vibrating with the "quiet but resonant frequencies of images that have been historically dismissed and disregarded."[76] This upside-down, *blueblack* figure, refusing to stay silent but teeming with the frequencies of fugitivity asks for, what I call after Campt and Moten, a *blueblack* gaze that synaesthetically experiences the visual, aural and haptic *decolonial aesthesis*[77] of the visual artwork,

[73] See Erica L. Johnson in Odile Ferly and Tegan Zimmermann, eds., *Chronotropics: Caribbean Women Writing Spacetime* (Cham: palgrave macmillan, 2023), 49.

[74] See Rosalind C. Morris and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Spivak asks whether subalterns (and subaltern women more specifically) can be listened to attentively, and translated in a way and a language that does not perpetrate further injustice upon them.

[75] See bell hooks, "Lorna Simpson: Waterbearer," *Artforum* 32, no.1 (September 1993): 137, https://www.artforum.com/features/lorna-simpsons-waterbearer-204264/.

[76] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 11.

[77] Vázquez, *Vistas*, 149.

while it remembers and *counterwrites*[78] the layered histories, politics and affects inscribed in the palimpsestic work. The *blueblack* gaze "wreckognises"[79] the suffering and abuse against black flesh, but also the potentiality of resistance and fugitivity always already manifested through the violet-blue ink that can write to reveal or obfuscate in "the liquid abyss where subjectivities ooze like blood, water and lava, refusing to coagulate."[80] The ink signifies, Simpson notes, through its "liquidity…but also its iridescence, the way that it pools, the way that I can make areas opaque."[81] While I look at the reversed portrait, I cannot help but hear the woman's quiet, melodious, blues murmuring: "*Now you have been blue, yes but you ain't been blue,/ Till you've had that mood indigo*."[82] And there is a mumbling also, a low whispering, an obstructed susurration (the speaker's teeth are clenched; the pen makes it difficult for her to articulate):

> Blue acts, blue ethic, violet surplus, the clerk says, the
>
> clerk says with her pen between her teeth, better violet,
>
> violet sleep.[83]

Viole(n)t Ghost Blues

The above poetic fragment, read in apposition with *Time*'s *blueblack* portrait, performs a cross-pollination and melting of the two figures, namely the enigmatic, upside-down, anonymous head, and the spectral Blue Clerk. The excerpt displays a recurring technique in the versos, that is, the lengthy asyndeton lists of the colours blue, violet and lemon,

78 Karavanta, "Injunctions."

79 Johnson, *Chronotopics*, 49.

80 See Ashley James et al., eds., *Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility* (New York, NY: Guggenheim, 2023), 089.

81 See Siddhartha Mitter, "Lorna Simpson Embraces the Blues," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2019, n.pag., https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/arts/design/lorna-simpson-paintings-hauser-wirth.html.

82 See Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2024. "*Mood Indigo Lyrics*." Accessed May 20, 2024. https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/2658282/Duke+Ellington/Mood+Indigo.

83 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 181.

followed by relevant or entirely unexpected nouns. Brand comments on the significance and relationality of her lexical combinations: "Well, I was trying an exercise where I could change the texture of both those word qualities. So while the lemon is an adjective, the lemon is also changed by what follows it. And whatever follows it is changed by the addition of the lemon. It was an experiment in finding an opposite and apposite meaning."[84] I will only focus on selected blue and violet lists, but it is important to acknowledge that violet and lemon are far more complicated qualifiers, since they are also nouns themselves, denoting a flower and a type of fruit, respectively, and inviting smell, taste and touch into the synaesthesia of the text. The lists have an almost hypnotising effect; read as a continuous litany, the words do not register unless the reader stops to carefully look at each individual word and its lexical interpretation. Katherine McKittrick argues that "[t]he colors written into *The Blue Clerk* are part of the poetic conversation, but they cannot be contained by the narrative. Indeed, each color asks that the reader focus on and use their own sense of hue to thus imaginatively exit the text. Each color asks that the reader imagine the world with and outside the textual dialogue Brand has written."[85] The colours' incantatory repetition and their multisensorial registers cannot be contained in the text; they drip and create roots that exceed the textual archive, like Simpson's textual fragments.

"How can you describe violet? It melts;"[86] *The Blue Clerk* wonders. Violet is the color of a flower and the bruise, the mixture of blue and red; violescent bleeds into *kyaneos*, blue, black, and indigo tones. As the long prose poem unfolds, it is sometimes difficult to recognise a clear-cut distinction between the Clerk and her conversant, the author; the I/eye of the narrator is not unified; two at least ways of being and seeing the world coexist, clash and collapse, melting into

[84] Dionne Brand, "Pressure on Verbal Matter: Dionne Brand and the Making of Language," interview by Robert Enright, *Border Crossings*, no. 155, November 2020, n. pag..

[85] Katherine McKittrick, "Pastel Blue: A Promising Inaccuracy," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (August 29, 2020), n. pag., https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/pastel-blue-a-promising-inaccuracy/.

[86] Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 51.

each other. I think of the Blue Clerk as mingling with the red author[87] and it is at these moments of a violent encounter and confusion that violet emerges. I keep misreading violet as violent in the lists and the whole chromatic experience becomes radically bleaker and darker. Violence is omnipresent in *The Blue Clerk* and it saturates the text with its pervasiveness and deathly undertones; it seeps into the supposedly innocent lists to remind that "no language is neutral"[88] and that chromatic epithets have the capacity to colour their predicates with deathly shades. The list technique hauntingly mimics the fungibility of certain lives—like the enslaved of the Middle Passage, or the BIPOC still abused and killed by the police—who can be reduced to objects, abducted, expropriated, and overkilled with impunity. In the verbless enumeration of the violet lists' lexical items, the readers encounter overt or covert violence and allusions to the suffering, fragmented body: "Violet the clerk has collected: violet hand…violet finger…violet arms…violet digits…violet limb…violet thumbs…violet palms."[89] There are numerous references to hands, which bring me back to indigo processing as well as the abuse and violent mutilation of the Black and Brown bodies in multiple events, catastrophes and genocides all around the world. It is especially the word *arms* that resonates with ambivalence and violence; arms are a part of the body, but they also rhyme with the violence of armed battle; the arms can embrace and caress or shoot and kill. In the recurring violet lists, there are also graphic word combinations like "hung violet,"[90] which echoes with the *strange fruit*,[91] the lynched, twisted Black bodies overkilled and

[87] Why is the author red? I see her as red because of her connection to communism, the blood of the disasters she obsessively narrates, or her anger. Let us not forget that the author is also *read*.

[88] I am echoing here Brand's earlier collection of poetry with the same title. See Dionne Brand, *No Language Is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990).

[89] Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 107–8.

[90] Brand, 107.

[91] Another blues reference to Abel Meeropol's song *Strange Fruit* recorded by the iconic Billie Holiday in 1939. See Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2024. "*Strange Fruit Lyrics*." Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.lyrics.com/lyric-lf/1563757/Billie+Holiday/Strange+Fruit.

hanging from trees in the American South, and "violet chained"[92] which evokes the chains binding enslaved humans in the holds of the ships or the American plantations.

The blue lists are also violent, as Versos 13 and 18.4.1, punctured with unsettling afterimages, demonstrate: "Blue tremors…blue suppuration…blue havoc…blue virus"[93] and "blue crimes…blue discriminations…blue lagan."[94] Lagan signifies goods from a ship found at the bottom of the sea;[95] it conjures the histories of the thousands of unnamed, fungible human beings treated as objects during the transatlantic Middle Passage, who were thrown overboard to drown or, who, having died in the holds of the slave ships, were unceremoniously disposed at sea, without burial, without a tomb to commemorate their name or a monument for their beloved to visit. These bodies, unlike other material objects, cannot be recovered from the bottom of the ocean, since they have been dissolved and transformed by the water, salt, sea animals and fish, as well as corals. The Blue Clerk could thus be imagined as a spectre incorporating the histories and sufferings of the victims of the disaster; a ghostly figure, arising out of the sea, like Toni Morrison's Beloved, a drenched revenant dripping water, appearing as "A FULLY DRESSED woman [that] walked out of the water."[96] Verso 35, with its cryptic description of the Clerk's whereabouts, depicts her as a sea-inhabiting creature, climbing out of the water to examine the dock and her fragile stacks: "The sea is oscillant, the waves heave like the back of the/ number 3; the clerk climbs out, looks back at the dock, the/ freight, the whole enterprise, the temblous archive."[97]

In Simpson's *Ghost Note*, a head also climbs out of the water: the bodiless black-and-grey head of a young girl, floating just above the sea-level, with a frowned look of consternation and sadness, a mood indigo. On the left-hand side of the floating head, there is an

92 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 107.

93 Brand, 72.

94 Brand, 106.

95 See *Cambridge Dictionary*, (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024), s.v. "lagan," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lagan.

96 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 60.

97 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 180.

imposing grey arctic iceberg, and framing the face, on each side, there is one column-like strip of text, crossing the greyness and diving into the blueness of the sea under the head's neck; the textual slivers seem to be sounding the depth of the *blueblack* obscure and opaque ocean. The black and grey figure's facial expression resonates with the uncanniness and uneasiness of the photographed subjects of anthropologists and ethnologists, made to pose before the lens for the purposes of supposedly proving pseudoscientific theories of black inferiority and primitiveness,[98] or the plethora of widely disseminated contemporary images of migrating human beings, at sea, in distress. Simpson juxtaposes seemingly unrelated "narratives and spaces,"[99] like the blurry blue-white arctic frozen landscapes and the blue-black figures whose combinations appear at first to arise out of the blue; however, her bricolage techniques compose a creolisation that "synthesizes the things that seem impossible into something visible,"[100] into a "speculative project, a montage project, one that creates new icons in excess of the limits of the frame"[101] and into a critique of climate change and the weather of antiblackness[102] that still envelops North America. Simpson's creolising synthesis, her speculative remapping of the world, as well as her interdisciplinary artistic hospitality surfaces in her inclusion of poetry as a companion to her works: for her exhibition *Darkening* in Hauser and Wirth in 2019, she printed the extract from Robin Coste Lewis' poem which serves as my second

98 See Carrie Mae Weems, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," *MoMA*, (1995-96), https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45579 for her reworking of the racist daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz and taken by Joseph T. Zealy, by saturating them in blue or red monochromes and overwriting decolonial and affectionate texts addressed to the figures represented.

99 See Beckwith in Thelma Golden et al., *Lorna Simpson*, Second edition, revised & expanded, Phaidon Contemporary Artists Series (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2022), 209.

100 Golden et al., 209.

101 Golden et al., 209.

102 The weather as a metaphor for the atmosphere of antiblackness in the North of America, and especially the USA is drawn from Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104. She argues: "In my text, the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (104).

epigraph, on the wall, in order to question the whiteness of white ice, which is seeped into and contaminated by blueness, and to speak to the necessity of what Edward Said calls a *contrapuntal* reading of the archive, that signifies being attentive to its "overlapping territories and intertwined histories,"[103] while carefully unravelling the layers of the textual or artistic palimpsest under study. Lewis and Simpson both remark the so-far unacknowledged and unarchived subjects of history, like Matthew Henson, the African American explorer that was crucial to the exploration of the Arctic, and the Inuit locals that guided and taught the American expedition techniques to survive in an inhospitable, endless, light cyan, *glaukos*, empty and frozen landscape.

Even though her eyes are darkened by shadow, the black and grey figure of *Ghost Note* seems to be looking to the left of painting, where something sinister has caught her attention. Where is the figure's shadowy gaze directed at? Is it the Clerk's dock and her reams? The girl is gazing at a black monochrome, an opaque box, almost fully immersed in the blue, impenetrable water. In the catalogue of the 2023-2024 Guggenheim exhibition *Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the End of Visibility*, Jordan Carter traces the history of the black monochrome in painting and its connection to portraiture, from its racist roots to its reclamation and creative employment by Black artists who assert their right to opacity and their otherwise ways of representing their resistance and creativity: "the black monochrome becomes a mise-en-scène—the artists [of the exhibition] are critically engaging it both as (art) history in motion and as a site for recasting and figuring subjectivities."[104] The black monochrome[105] acts as a site of potentiality and opacity, in the sense of refusing the western gaze and the metaphysics of the transparent, white Man of western modernity. The black square in Simpson's ink-overpainted screenprint—a motif that haunts various of her artworks—described by Key Jo Lee as

[103] See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994), 1.

[104] James et al., eds., *Going Dark*, 084.

[105] Kerry James Marshal's use of black, brick-like rectangular blocks of opaque paint in his *Invisible Man* (1986) obscure the figure's forehead and his genitals. The artist's ludic attitude in his portraits, where only the teeth and eyes of the figure are visible in a totally darkened, black background, reclaims the black monochrome as an artistic technique and as a refusal to become the prey of the hungry gaze of the spectators. See Carter, pp. 079-089 in James et al., *Going Dark*.

"jarringly symmetrical and well defined against the organic nature of the rest of the piece,"[106] can be read as an otherwise portrait, which relishes in the black monochrome and the opaque cover it provides, refuses to display and represent its subject and becomes a counterpart to the grey-black portrait. According to Carter, "[b]lackness within the monochrome becomes a refusal of stasis, a state of perpetual and productive in-betweenness. This is not a result of indecisiveness but a purposeful and plentiful state of promise in precarity."[107] The black box is also the keeper of evidence when a plane crashes—even though such boxes are actually bright orange, they are still called black. Simpson might be affirming in this way the impossibility to uncover the black box of the unnarratable disaster of the slave trade, the archives, testimonies, and lagan of the millions of people uprooted and lost. Who can testify for such disasters of the human, for which, the only true witnesses, as Jacques Derrida suggests,[108] are the ones that perished in the catastrophe?

A ghostly and silent detail in *Ghost Note*, a haunting footnote that might go unnoticed if one quickly glances at the painting, is a fragment, a sliver, a mutilated head in the sea, deep in the water where the Egyptian blue turns midnight blue, indigo and almost black. There is a vertical sliver of a face, an eye, half a nose, half of the lips. This figure, saturated in cerulean blue, is surely looking directly towards the lens and the beholder. Is she the ghost of the painting's title? A spectre returning to ask for justice or a woman surviving in *blueblack* paraontological spacetime? Naomi Beckwith argues that "Simpson is able to migrate the Black female subject from the earthly registers of regimes of violence and misrepresentation and give them an afterlife, becoming characters in speculative fantasy scenarios where they join with science textbook pages to become at times strange, or monstrous, gemological and extra-terrestrial"[109] ghost notes (both as writerly and musical forms) that refuse to be fully seen, read, and heard,

[106] James et al., *Going Dark*, 099.

[107] James et al., 089.

[108] See Jacques Derrida, Thomas Dutoit, and Outi Pasanen, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 90.

[109] Golden et al., *Lorna Simpson*, 193.

hiding behind black monochromes, blue saturations, and indigo/violet shades. The cutout with the spectral blue half-face looks like a knife from a distance, a dagger cutting into the ocean to assert her gaze and her haunting presence, or a stylus/pen that *counterwrites*[110] the *chromapolitical* histories and stories omitted from the colonial archives. Whenever I turn, she looks at me and punctures me. The figure performs but also demands "a Black gaze that refuses to look away, and instead embraces precarity as possibility—the radical possibility of living [as well as writing and painting] otherwise."[111]

Conclusion: *Something in Blue*[112]

How to visualise the Clerk's multi-hued blueness and hear her incantations? How to attentively listen to the musical notes the *Ghost Note* vibrates with or the quiet humming of *Time*? What if the viewers touched the screenprinted, ink-blue paintings and their smooth surface, immersed themselves into the navy blue, *kyaneos* or *glaukos* sea around the Clerk's dock or in Simpson's artistic fabulations, or smelled the violet and tasted the Clerk's lemon lists? *The Blue Clerk*, *Time* and *Ghost Note* invite and necessitate otherwise modalities of experiencing colour and performing a *blueblack gaze* which deconstructs and rewrites the stereotypical (neo)colonial *chromapolitics* that expropriate and banish certain subjectivities from the enclosure of the human. As Bey argues: "Being and becoming other than we must, or other than we are said to be able to by ontological mandates, is to find life and livability in mutability and rearrangement toward the illegible, which is to say the defiance of the ontological—in other words, the paraontological."[113] It is in this blurry *paraontology* that Moten calls "exsensed blue, its blur, a grammar of blur, blue grammar's swarmed, schwärmereitic syntactic mood"[114] that is "black as blue can be,"[115]

110 Karavanta, "Injunctions."

111 Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 101.

112 Another jazz reference to Thelonious Monk's homonymous album and song. You can hear it in: Thelonious Monk, "Something in Blue 1971, Full Album," YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i269TOngxpE .

113 Bey, *The Problem*, 17.

114 Ligon, *Blue Black*, 66.

115 Ligon, 66.

where blue bleeds into black and white, violet and green, that the poetics and politics of the human and of community can be rethought and rewritten, employing the grammars and modalities of artists and writers who dare to change the way we see, hear, touch, smell and feel the world synaesthetically, without the strict demarcations and limits at the edges of the senses. But there are still many kinds of blue, viole(n)t, black, grey and white (that is not innocent or blank) which remain opaque and illegible, irradiating with a terrible beauty that cannot yet be translated into the language of ontology and that call for a hauntological and paraontological appreciation of history. And there is always *something in blue* that is left behind, something that evades interpretation, because it refuses the grammars of ontology and western metaphysics; some residue that resists the white light and transparency of enlightenment; a synaesthetic *blueblackblur* whose radical promises and otherwise politics emerge through the convergence and encounter of brilliant artworks like Simpson's blue ink screenprints with poems like Brand's *The Blue Clerk*.

The literary and visual archives under study act as palimpsestic narratives overwriting and collaging seemingly incongruous events, disasters, genocides, geographies, timelines, and colour politics, in order to creolise the concept of the human and speak to an otherwise theorisation of being as being-with that has yet to be catalogued by the *phallogocentric*[116] grammars of western metaphysics. Simpson's artworks and Brand's poetic versos necessitate what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls a *poethical*[117] way of reading and gazing at the colour blue, and at human beings whose skin hue has been the basis of dispossession and racism. A *poethical* politics speaks to "a moment of radical praxis,"[118] a poetics and an ethics which aims at the decolonization and reconstruction of the world and which acknowledges the epistemological racisms that restrict blackness to inferiority, as well as the material conditions that have built the modern world with the blood and land of Black and Indigenous peoples performing the

[116] Derrida and Bass, Margins, xxv.

[117] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(Ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.44.2.0081.

[118] See da Silva, 85.

hard labour in the fields and the plantations—for instance, processing indigo. A decolonial *poethical* gaze recognises the otherwise communities formed against all odds, what Tiffany Lethabo King calls "black shoals,"[119] that is, porous spaces of encounter, interconnection and otherwise modalities of forming undercommons amongst BIPOC. My case studies become, thus, speculative experiments on narrating the histories and stories of the dispossessed through their saturation in the politics and the poetics of blueness, attentive towards the nothing that is something, the synaesthetic overload of misheard voices, misidentified ghost notes, mistranslated blues and misrepresented *blueblack* humans, which demand different modalities of looking and reading. As Eduardo Cadava beautifully argues on the necessity of a *poethical* and multisensorial exploration and excavation of the visual archives' so-far unheard voices and darkened opacities: "learning to see means learning to read what is not visible, what remains unknown and unperceived, what can emerge only by reading creatively and historically at the same time."[120] A historical reading of the three works in apposition performs, thus, an encounter and a counterarchiving of community as the *blueblackblur*, paraontological undercommons of hospitality towards human beings, insects, animals, ores, plants, paper documents, and spectral creatures, in order to visualise and imagine this "living otherwise"[121] that Campt gestures towards and what Karavanta calls "the polity of decolonised beings,"[122] in our precarious now-time.

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[119] See Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2019).

[120] Eduardo Cadava, *Paper Graveyards* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 347.

[121] Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 101.

[122] Karavanta, *Injunctions*, 46.

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