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Listening in Black and Blue:
Disorienting Whiteness in Sound and Color

by

Katie Emery Brown

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Rhetoric
and the Designated Emphasis
in
Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Mascuch, Chair
Professor Fumi Okiji
Professor Eric Falci

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Disorienting Whiteness in Sound and Color

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Abstract

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Professor Michael Mascuch, Chair

In *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten asks, “what if we start acting like whiteness is not the surround?”¹ This dissertation takes up this question, exploring practices and possibilities for decentering Modernity’s pervasive white subject. Through various modes of reading, writing, feeling, and relating, I describe a listening practice that could disorient and destabilize my own white subjecthood. When I say listening in this project, I am really thinking about a kind of embodied sensibility or attunement, a way of relating that is multisensory and not based purely on “hearing.” A listening that attempts to decenter white subjecthood requires a radical reframing where we move away from the conception of listening as silent attention, attending instead to forms of what Sadiya Hartman describes as “the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity” of “black noise.”² This is where an engagement with the color blue becomes integral to this listening practice. Blue is important here for its role in Black studies, its theological history, its proximity to darkness, and its potential for destabilizing the subject. While I attend to sonic and vocal evocations, resonances, and rhythms in the texts I read, I consider blue as a figure that pushes against the edges of language, sight, and sound. In the texts, blue is never purely visual, it is full of noise and frequency. Blue is constantly falling into darkness, into sound or music, into void, indeterminacy, and infinity. Attending to blue alongside sound allows me to meditate at sensory edges, looking to places where those edges dissolve into echoic atmospheres and darkness.

The texts I engage in this dissertation might all loosely be called “autotheory.” A perpetually inchoate genre that resists stable classification, autotheory might be best described as a kind of writing, thinking, theorizing, and feeling that engages, disrupts, and distorts the coherent self. By investigating forms of selfhood that are de-articulated and deformed, I am pointed toward a disoriented, multi-sensuous practice that destabilizes and challenges my own white subject position and embodiment. Because the listening practice I describe moves toward disorientation, it must be approached diagonally and indirectly. So, I lean heavily on association throughout the chapters, jumping around and leaving connections open-ended.

¹ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 227.

² Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

My first chapter takes up Fred Moten's essay "Blue Vespers" from his 2017 book, *Black and Blur*, in which he explores the artist Chris Ofili's series of blue paintings. Weaving Ofili's work into his own, Moten gives us a radical, persistent blue seriality that works through prayer and devotion rather than address. Moten's writing makes possible alternate formations of sociality, unraveling the seemingly discrete bounds of Modern white subjecthood and enacting a radically entangled "we." My second chapter takes up two of Maggie Nelson's experimental texts, 2009's *Bluets* and 2015's *The Argonauts*. Bringing Nelson into the conversation allows for a shift in my exploration of unraveled whiteness. Here, I attend to the ways in which Nelson undoes her own selfhood in forms of writing that linger in impossibility, unwritability, and plurality. My final chapter offers an initial attempt at this listening practice through extended readings of Claudia Rankine's 2015 book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Rather than assume that Rankine's engagement with the second person "you" is an invocation that allows for white understanding, I explore instead what kind of listening can or must occur when there is no mutual, stable, intimate ground on which to communicate.

Each chapter is its own encounter, in which I get caught up in an indeterminate milieu of fascination, resonance, and sensation, and where my selfhood gets bent alongside the various selves made by the texts. Each of these texts offers what I see as a spiritual experiment in writing the self, whether through experiences of art, color, collectivity, love, pain, history, or violence. I read through a sort of skewed phenomenology, where I am led by embodied, sensuous experience but not quite from a coherent first-person perspective. While I attempt to linger in a disorienting blue fog throughout this dissertation, this practice must also repeatedly reflect upon itself. The self-reflexivity required for a listening that decenters whiteness must never cohere or congeal, for it would merely reinscribe whiteness as the methodological focus. There is thus an inherent tension to this practice, for it must be self-reflexive and self-critical, while simultaneously shifting focus away from my white self. It is a listening that can never be finished, that will always have to begin again.

For River,
my uncontainable everything

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And River, everything matters more because of you.

“The ears don’t have eyelids.”

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*

Introduction

Concerto in Black and Blue

There's too much light and soon there will be too much sound. Black stains lack with boom in blur; white is strewn with reflection ...

— Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*

In the fall of 2002, David Hammons turned off all the lights in New York's cavernous Ace Gallery. Upon entering the exhibition—entitled *Concerto in Black and Blue*—visitors were each given a small LED flashlight that emitted a point of blue light. These small blue points were the only source of light inside the otherwise-empty galleries. As visitors explored the space, they became the work, playing a collective role in its ephemeral creation and dissipation. In *Concerto in Black and Blue*, we see a Black, American artist displace and rupture the (literal and figurative) whiteness of the art gallery. Instead of finding artworks displayed against a white gallery wall, blue mixed instead with darkness, blackness, shadow, and emptiness.¹ While the blue lights of the flashlights might have shone on the (ostensibly) white walls of the galleries, their whiteness was never revealed—it became blue.

I imagine the experience of Hammons' show as profoundly disorienting, since I could not rely easily on my vision to orient my body in space. Where vision would normally lead, my other senses would have to take over—sound, touch, even smell would all likely be heightened and foregrounded. I could also not have relied on my vision to make sense of those around me or, more precisely, to assume that vision could help me make sense of them. Yet, even if I couldn't "know" those around me, with our bodies and blue lights we would all be directly impacting each other's experience of the work. Steve Cannon describes his visit to the exhibition this way:

If you walk through each and every room of this exhibition, as I did, you might allow yourself to surrender to an experience where time and space are suspended. If you are in the gallery alone, your engagement can be with contours of light, shadow, and surface. As you wander through each room, exploring the corners, the ceilings, the darkened skylight, the concrete floors, you might find yourself in a state of what the Zen practitioners call mindfulness. If you are not alone in the gallery, then the effect is multiplied.²

¹ Cf. Zora Neale Hurston's oft-cited quotation, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," from her 1928 essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me." This quote is also featured in Glenn Ligon's 1992 work "Untitled: Four Etchings," which is printed in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a text I explore in Chapter Three. Hammons' 1992 work, "In the Hood," is also reproduced on *Citizen's* cover. Moten makes reference to "In the Hood" in his essay on Hammons: "Neither the ending nor the beginning is happy. Born in burial; a detached and empty hood; an empty, hanging noose and lonely mourner; a chalk outline with a piece of chalk in hand." Moten, *Black and Blur*, 229.

² Cannon, "David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue."

In Cannon's telling, sharing the space with others heightens the show's effect. A form of community emerges here that does not come from seeing or knowing one another but, instead, from suspending the expectation to know. A heightened effect also comes from surrendering to an altered form of time and space. As Bob Nickas describes it, *Concerto in Black and Blue* is "exhibition as composition, to be performed, experienced, with nothing left at the end but a memory."³ The exhibition is temporally destabilizing both in its slowing down and its ephemerality; it demands and foregrounds a presentness to which one cannot return. Space, too, is transformed in blue/black darkness. Nickas writes that "an empty gallery in the dark turns darkness into a kind of permeable solid."⁴ Peter Schjeldahl echoes this sense of the materiality of darkness: "The nothingness of 'Concerto' is beautifully measured, as if a mountain of darkness had been carved to fit snugly into the gallery's echoey rooms."⁵ As Claire Tancons puts it, "as the lights kept going on and off, they created an ever morphing sculpture of light."⁶ In these recounted experiences, darkness and light take on shifting material form.

Speaking about his show, Hammons said, "there are so many kinds of nothingness."⁷ Fred Moten explores this idea in his reading of Steve Cannon's reading of *Concerto in Black and Blue*. In a brief essay in *Black and Blur*, Moten juxtaposes Cannon (and Hammons) with references to modernist poet Wallace Stevens, riffing on lines from some of Stevens' poems, most prominently "The Snowman."⁸ Here is the final stanza of "The Snowman":

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.⁹

In contrast to what he calls "some blank surround," Moten finds a different kind of nothingness emerge in Hammons' work, which relates instead to the transient blur of black and blue. Moten writes: "But here, now, the vacuity that is all but not there, the emptiness that so brutally and so generally makes its absence felt, is not our concern. We are after the absolute presence of blur. Blueblackblur is our concern."¹⁰ "Blueblackblur" might be a kind of nothingness insofar as it is "anaconceptual" and cannot be captured. At the same time, even in its blurriness, it offers an "absolute presence" that contrasts with emptiness.

"Blueblackblur" is not the same kind of white nothingness that we find in Stevens' poem. Rather, blueblackblur emerges for Moten as a different form of relation, one marked by "in" rather than "and." Without "and," false or arbitrary boundaries begin to blur:

³ Nickas, "David Hammons Turned Off the Lights In an Empty Gallery. What Happened Next Was a Masterpiece."

⁴ Nickas.

⁵ Schjeldahl, "The Walker."

⁶ Tancons, "Review of 'David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue,'" 94.

⁷ Schjeldahl, "The Walker."

⁸ To give a sense of how Moten plays with Stevens, here is the opening of the essay: "Steve Cannon is a light, primordially black. Wallace Stevens is a wall, primordially white. Primordial black is blue. How blue can you get? Black. So your mind needs to go all wintry to see the nothing that is there through the nothing that is not. Understand this as a play of presences, not absences—or of presences held within a general absence that is, in fact, not there. It's winter but it's Sunday and the fire's already been lit. The nothing that is not there appears, but only from its own perspective, to surround the nothing that is." Moten, *Black and Blur*, 226.

⁹ Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 10.

¹⁰ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 226.

In can only proceed surreally in *and*'s insistent, overbearing absence. This false ubiquity of absence, manifest as the proliferation of borders, must be radically and improperly misunderstood. What if we start acting like whiteness is not the surround but an inventory of snowballs suitable for wholesale distribution? Immeasurably aggressive, isolate flecks are harvested, processed, and submitted to their own restricted economy. The bliz-aard in which black's entanglement with blue is held in obscurity marks an atmospheric condition in and from which Hammons is constantly escaping; one aspect of his technique is to facilitate blueblack's fade into one another with such recalcitrant blur that it's hard to see up in (t)here.¹¹

In this passage, Moten considers the destabilizing reversals that take place when Hammons renders the white from the gallery walls invisible. Moten considers what might happen when whiteness no longer surrounds, encloses, or suffocates, but becomes a commodity itself within the white-serving economy. (This is also a reference to Hammons' even more ephemeral 1983 performance, "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," in which he sold snowballs on the street in New York City.) At the same time, Hammons' work gestures toward the possibility for this not to be a reversal of white and black but something else entirely. There is an entire shift in value that occurs here, when we are no longer in the space of the white-walled gallery full of things to sell. As Cannon puts it, "it is a practice, which, by eschewing art as commodity, reminds us that art, at its best, is about beauty, and contemplation, which often means that it is about nothing at all."¹²

Here, when Cannon speaks of contemplation, he means something different from "thinking." As he says, "however you engage this show, there is, in essence, nothing to think about while you're inside the gallery [...] While we are inside the gallery space, there is 'nothing.' There are no objects, at any rate, to 'see.'"¹³ This nothing to 'see' is the blur in which Moten finds so much possibility. A different kind of sociality emerges in this shift away from art-as-commodity, when we are immersed and disoriented by blueblackblur and no longer in the "bliz-aard" that obscures black's entanglement with blue. Hammons choreographs an environment in which to ask: what shifts, in and between us, when there is nothing precisely to think or see?

Hammons' exhibition materializes an environment of "blueblackblur" where whiteness is not just disoriented but removed—as Moten puts it, "it's hard to see up in (t)here." The exhibition makes it possible to imagine an escape from the overwhelming and slippery whiteness of the "bliz-aard," which we might understand here as an unexamined and unchallenged whiteness that haunts and surrounds us. Returning to a succession of references to Stevens, Moten questions what Stevens calls "the evilly compounded, vital I" in "The Poems of Our Climate." Here is the excerpt in Stevens' poem:

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white.¹⁴

¹¹ Moten, 227. (emphasis mine).

¹² Cannon, "David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue."

¹³ Cannon.

¹⁴ Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 193.

In his essay on Hammons, Moten isolates and draws out Stevens' (unwitting) composition of what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls "the transparent 'I'"—modernity's self-determined white subject that stands in as a universal self.¹⁵ Da Silva defines the transparent "I" as "Man, the subject, the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought."¹⁶ In Stevens' poem, the "evilly compounded, vital I" is made "fresh in a world of white," a visual that speaks—in Moten's repurposing—to the vast and impenetrable transparency of the white "I," which continually reconfigures and sustains itself as "the sole self-determined thing."¹⁷ In response to Stevens' "I," Moten succinctly asks: "if winter doesn't end for us here how do we respond when 'the evilly compounded, vital I' is neither our birthright nor our inheritance [...]?"¹⁸

Listening in Black and Blue

What does it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all his being?

— Jean Luc Nancy, *Listening*

In its profoundly disorienting atmosphere, Hammons' *Concerto in Black and Blue* helps to illustrate some of the primary motivations of this project. As Moten asks, "what if we start acting like whiteness is not the surround?" In what follows, I take up this question, exploring practices and possibilities for disorienting and decentering my own white subjecthood through various modes of reading, listening, sensing, feeling, and relating. While the majority of my project focuses on literary texts, Hammons' show renders literal an atmosphere where whiteness recedes and where the "I" recedes. By plunging the viewer into blueblack darkness, Hammons places visitors in an altered and disorienting sensory plane. In a way, it is helpful for me to begin by describing something I didn't witness directly. Instead, I am leaning on others' impressions, memories, and experiences in search of a decentered positionality where my own reading serves to extend and amplify the show's ephemeral and lingering traces. Rather than provide a secondhand reading of others' disorientation, I am attempting, instead, to disorient myself but from a position that does not foreground my own experience.

In *Concerto*, Hammons calls attention to black and blue both as pigment and as race. In her review of the show, Claire Tancons discusses the titular colors as both the literal colors in the gallery and a reference to skin color: "In black talk, black people who are very dark skin are seen as so black as to be blue and are called as such. 'Blue blacks' are so black that they are lost

¹⁵ I have always loved Stevens' poetry; in fact, I wrote my MA thesis on Stevens' feminine subject. In some ways I am hesitant about using Stevens' verse as the paradigmatic white "I." In other ways I think that my love of Stevens' verse is precisely what makes this engagement more dynamic and generative. I do not think that Moten is rejecting Stevens by contrasting him with Hammons; Moten's ensembles and juxtapositions are never so facile. To play with Stevens' words and their whiteness is, to some extent I think, for Moten to embrace him and his musicality—not despite but because of all the problems that his work and life enable and make tangible.

¹⁶ Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xvi.

¹⁷ Silva, xii–xiii.

¹⁸ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 229.

in the confines of the bluest night, the ultimate blackness.”¹⁹ In its dark blue atmosphere, a kind of music can also be heard. In part, this music is literal: a certain rhythm is created by visitors’ footsteps, whispers, coughs, breath, laughter. This music is also evoked by the show’s title, as Cannon points to in his review:

The artist himself is suggesting two nearly mythic icons of African American culture here, the music recalled by the exhibition’s title, and the music suggested by the light and color Hammons helps us bring to the gallery space. However, there’s more at stake here than a simplistic reference to “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue,” the 1929 song by Andy Razaf, and to “Kind of Blue” (1959), the most famous work recorded by Miles Davis. Black and blue are highly charged colors in the cosmology of African American culture and historical experience. Night’s blackness holds a unique suggestion of terror in black American history. One is also reminded that the ancestors of many families escaped slavery under the cover of darkness, in the blue-black night. There is a sense, then, in which the entire history of Africans in North America can be told through reference to these two colors. In addition, there is the sense in which these two colors can be seen as metaphors for the impact the peoples of African ancestry who reside in North America have had on the world at large. The blues is, after all, the twentieth century’s paradigmatic art form.²⁰

In addition to these songs by Andy Razaf and Miles Davis, Claire Tancon references Duke Ellington’s “transblucency” in her review of the show. For Tancon, the show is like transblucency in that it is “neither vacuity, nor pure transcendence,” but it recognizes our “ontologically fleeting quality.”²¹ In some versions of Ellington’s song, the title is elongated as “Transblucency: A Blue Fog That You Can Almost See Through.” This blue fog speaks, I think, to a kind of atmosphere that makes possible an imagined music, one that is not directly heard but that makes itself felt. It is in the felt effect of transblucency’s blue fog that I attempt to remain throughout this dissertation, never fully seeing my way out, never quite sure in which direction I face. Perhaps, it is in the sustained disorientation of transblucency where we might disrupt the transparency of the white “I.” Never fully see-through, always amidst a foggy blue that elicits the layered and historical affects of the Black experience.

The Radical Informality of We

The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

With *Concerto in Black and Blue*—as well as Moten’s engagement with Hammons and Cannon—we find a shifted sociality of the senses that leads toward what Moten calls, “the radical

¹⁹ Tancons, “Review of ‘David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue,’” 95.

²⁰ Cannon, “David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue.”

²¹ Tancons, “Review of ‘David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue,’” 95.

informality of we, the nothing, the blackness that is before, and deep, in the break, not in between.”²² Throughout this dissertation, I search for ways of thinking and feeling this radically informal “we,” which gestures away from Western modernity’s transparent white subject and toward something less composed, discrete, or visible. While, for Moten, this “we” is never wholly identifiable, I also do not want to assume that Moten’s “we” is mine. Though he describes it as informal, I do wonder whether it is, in Christina Sharpe’s words, a completely “undifferentiated we.” Sharpe writes:

In the face of the murders of Black people, murders that endlessly repeat, how can one pressure, still, that there is an “us” and a “we” that are in something together? This register assumes that “we” are all in the world in the same way, that we experience suffering on the same plain, that we can be “repaired” in the same way, that the structures, the architectures of violence and of affect, reach us in the same ways [...] The architectures of violence fracture we; affect does not reach us in the same ways.²³

Sharpe appears here for me as a precursory consideration that works somewhat counter to Moten. Moten’s “we” has a generality and partiality that places me in relation to it in some strange way. At the same time, it feels almost embarrassing to presume that I could be of this we, that I have a right to write it. I am reckoning here with a “we” that is not mine, while also exploring whether the we that emerges from Moten’s writing might erode the stability of my own subject position, including me in my own undoing.

Ocularcentrism & Racializing Vision

Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed.

— Fred Moten, *In the Break*

I have long considered the work that moves toward this “we” to be a listening practice, insofar as a focus on listening can work to de-hierarchize the racially-overdetermining nature of vision. Here, I am indebted to the many critiques that have come before of what Martin Jay calls ocularcentrism. Ocularcentrism names “the philosophical and theological histories that posited sight as the highest of the sensory faculties, as the privileged means of coming to know God, or as the sense most closely linked to epistemological certainty as well as rationality.”²⁴ Speaking more to present day norms, Krista Ratcliffe highlights the cultural biases that influence “our culture’s privileging of sight, our preference for interpretive tropes that proceed via the eye.”²⁵ Throughout much of modern Western thought, vision has been (and continues to be) considered the privileged and dominant sense, the primary access to judgment and knowledge, and a vehicle of white supremacy.

²² Moten, *Black and Blur*, 244.

²³ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 33.

²⁴ Porcello et al., “The Reorganization of the Sensory World,” 53.

²⁵ Ratcliffe, “Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and A Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct,” 201.

Because we tend to believe that our vision gives us “the things themselves,” Alia Al-Saji argues that we see through our sedimented habits of visual perception in such a way that racializing vision remains unconscious and invisible. In racializing vision, we project “race as a property of the visible body” and remain unaware of the historical operations of power that construct it.²⁶ Moreover, in her descriptions of racializing affect, Al-Saji finds that “racialization proceeds not only through unconscious perceptual habits, but also through habituated and socialized affects that inextricably color and configure perception.”²⁷ Accordingly, racializing affect produces the idea that all is given in perception and, so, we expect to find confirmations of what we think we already know in a closed horizon.²⁸ Due to the structurally invisible and prelogical roles of habit and affect in naturalizing racializing vision, Al-Saji argues that we cannot simply intervene on a discursive or cognitive level.

My turn to listening functions as an attempt to disrupt such reliance and trust in our habits of seeing. However, this is not an attempt to replace ocularcentrism with a focus on hearing and sound, to simply reverse the hierarchy. Indeed, the ear and the eye inform one another—along with the whole sensorium—in their perception and formation of meaning. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “why, however, does each of these facets also touch the other, and by *touching*, put into play the whole system of the senses? and how, in turn, does it touch perceived meaning? How does it come to engender it or modulate it, determine it or disperse it? All these questions inevitably come to the forefront when it’s a question of listening.”²⁹

A Question of Listening

There is an incommensurability between the production of sound and the reception involved in listening. Listening has no limit, no articulation, but waits in the silence that fills the future lying all about the utterance.

— Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*

A definition of listening may at first seem obvious or intuitive. As the assumption goes, if you can hear, then you can listen. Yet, the closer we seem to get to a definition, the more that listening’s exact qualities recede from view. Peter Szendy asks, “What is listening [...] Is it even an activity?”³⁰ Speaking to the hazy distinction between listening and hearing, Tom Rice writes,

²⁶ Al-Saji, “A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing,” 137.

²⁷ Al-Saji, 140.

²⁸ For Al-Saji, racializing vision is both ‘more and less’ than vision itself. Racializing vision is *less* than vision in its affective closure, insofar as what is “closed down in racializing perception is the *receptivity* of vision,” thus limiting one’s openness to unanticipated difference. Further along these lines, rationalization of racializing vision comes from the belief that “I can see bodies as raced, only because I cannot see them otherwise.” Through further foreclosure, racializing vision becomes more than vision itself, for, it posits a complete racial schema through which negative othering “sustains itself by means of the very perceptions, representations, and affects it produces.” One’s reactions to a racialized body appear as though produced directly by this body—thus, this naturalized view of the body remains blind to its constructed, socially contingent schema. Al-Saji, 140, 139.

²⁹ Nancy, *Listening*, 3.

³⁰ Szendy, *Listen*, 1. Similarly, in Szendy’s “Prelude and Address,” he interrogates the possibility of transmitting his own listening—to “*make a listening listened to*” (5). He writes: “Simply to prepare you to hear these [favorite]

“it is not so much that listening is somehow separate from or opposed to hearing; indeed, the distinction between listening and hearing is often unclear, and the two are frequently equated or conflated.”³¹ In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy draws attention to a failure of listening in the history of Western philosophical thought. He asks: “hasn’t philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*? Isn’t the philosopher someone who always hears (and who hears everything), but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize?”³² In Nancy’s framing, listening is incommensurate with Western philosophizing, which is ruled by an impulse to know, delineate, and categorize.

Nancy’s question could easily extend out beyond philosophy, toward the myriad ways in which listening is overdetermined through preconceived formations of meaning. If knowing and listening are incompatible, as Nancy writes, then it follows that we would have developed, culturally and historically, ways to suppress, minimize, or “neutralize” listening. Nancy also contrasts listening with hearing, the second of which falls more in line with Western philosophy’s neutralized listening. As Nancy puts it, “perhaps we never *listen* to anything but the non-encoded, which is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never *bear* [entend] anything but the already coded, which we decode.”³³ In this distinction, *listening* only occurs when we suspend what it is we think we know, while *hearing* only happens within the realm of the already known.

Not only is listening often mistaken for understanding, but we also often presume that it occurs naturally or intuitively. In her work on rhetorical listening, Krista Ratcliffe notes that the dominant trend “has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening—to assume it is something that everyone does but no one need study.”³⁴ Insofar as it has been undervalued, naturalized, and confused with hearing or understanding, listening retains qualities of being at once emergent and overdetermined. Listening’s evasion of definition, alongside its tendency to be naturalized, make it most vulnerable to influence. As Nina Eidsheim writes: “because listening is never neutral, but rather always actively produces meaning, it is a political act. Through listening, we name and define.”³⁵ So, even if the term itself evades definition, the act of listening has the power to fix and to categorize, to devalue and to marginalize.

The “transparency” of the Enlightenment subject emerges with and through forms of such “neutralized” listening, where modes of listening that further reenforce the transparent ‘I’ have been affirmed and cultivated, while others have been devalued and atrophied in the West. According to Ana María Ochoa Gautier, “modern subjectivity demanded a specific type of listening constituted by silent attention, understood as a crucial dimension of an ideal, rational subject that is in control of the production of meaning [...] This required the cultivation of an enlightened notion of the senses, which involved the silencing of irrational or noisy forms of listening.”³⁶ Ochoa Gautier describes how the modern subject is reaffirmed through the

moments *as I hear them*, I begin to describe them to you—but barely—with words. And immediately I begin to lose them” (5). As soon as he tries to put his own listening into words, to describe it, that listening escapes him.

³¹ Rice, “Listening,” 99.

³² Nancy, *Listening*, 1.

³³ Nancy, 36.

³⁴ Ratcliffe, “Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and A Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct,” 196.

³⁵ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 24.

³⁶ Ochoa Gautier, “Silence,” 186.

privileging and cultivation of only a certain kind of listening, one that values reason and silent attention above all else. Such rational listening has worked to censor other forms of relation and sociality in the construction of the racial.

Imagining Sound and Color

Such an opening is only held in looking that is attentive to the sound—and movement, feel, taste, smell (as well as sight): the sensual ensemble—of what is looked at.

— Fred Moten, *In the Break*

When I say listening in this project, I am really thinking about a kind of embodied sensibility or attunement, a way of relating that is multisensory and not based purely on “hearing.” A listening that attempts to decenter white subjecthood requires a radical reframing where we move away from the conception of listening as silent attention, attending instead to forms of what Sadiya Hartman describes as “the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity” of “black noise,”³⁷ or what da Silva describes as “sensuality, joy, and noise.”³⁸ This is where an engagement with the color blue becomes integral to this listening practice. Blue is important here for its role in Black studies, its theological history, its proximity to darkness, and its potential for destabilizing the subject.³⁹ While I attend to sonic and vocal evocations, resonances, and rhythms in the texts I read, I consider blue as a figure that pushes against the edges of language, sight, and sound. In the texts, blue is never purely visual, it is full of noise and frequency. Blue is constantly falling into darkness, into sound or music, into void, indeterminacy, and infinity. Attending to blue alongside sound allows me to meditate at sensory edges, looking to places where those edges dissolve into echoic atmosphere and darkness.

Insofar as this project attends to (unheard) sounds and (unseen) colors in literary texts, it is a project that lingers in the imagination. Christopher Grobe articulates a critical problem when conceiving of sound in literature: “people talk about printed literature as having a *sound*... in truth, they are thinking of something weirder: the sound that literature *would* make if it could sound itself out somehow. They are thinking, in other words, of a *potential* for sound that lies

³⁷ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

³⁸ As da Silva writes, “the European message that sensuality, joy, and noise, instead of being merely special and exquisite, indicated the presence of a kind of human being that was, as the scientist of man Robert Knox stated in 1850, ‘a degradation of humanity and was rejected by nature.’” Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 223.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva comments on the relationship between seeing blue, temporality, and subjectivity: “Johannes Purkinje’s law states that in dim light, short wavelengths prevail over long ones; thus, before sunrise, blue is the first color to appear. Under these conditions, one perceives the color blue through the rods of the retina’s periphery (the serrated margin), while the central element containing the cones (the fovea) fixes the object’s image and identifies its form. A possible hypothesis, following André Broca’s paradox, would be that the perception of blue entails not identifying the object; that blue is, precisely, on this side of or beyond the fixed form; that it is the zone where phenomenal identity vanishes. It has also been shown that the fovea is indeed that part of the eye developed latest in human beings (sixteen months after birth). This most likely indicates that centered vision—the identification of objects, including one’s own image (the ‘self’ perceived at the mirror stage between the sixth and eighteenth month)—comes into play after color perceptions. The earliest appear to be those with short wavelengths, and therefore the color blue. Thus all colors, but blue in particular, would have a noncentered or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation.” Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 225.

buried in the silent page.”⁴⁰ In Grobe’s view of literary sound as silent potential, listening in literature is framed in relation to a conditional future which “tunes our ears to expectation itself.” Looking to literature in order to articulate a project on listening requires retuning the ear toward a future that may never realize itself, toward a future music, voice, or sound that we may never hear. Literature’s sonic capacities are shrouded always in silence.

Similarly, looking for color in text is, to an extent, about attending to absence. In some ways, I am thinking about, as W.J. Mitchell puts it, “the *idea* of imagery, and all its related notions of picturing, imagining, perceiving, likening, and imitating.” Mitchell hypothesizes that writing about vision makes possible a kind of listener who “might see patterns in these conversations that would be invisible to the sighted participant.”⁴¹ There is something generative, I think, about the ways in which ekphrastic imagery in text gestures toward points of tension or incompatibility within the text. By this I mean that there is something inarticulable in texts about image and color that functions in concert with literary sound. We cannot quite access it in the space of the text and so this opens up possibilities for the imagination. An ekphrastic text might especially require an engagement with other sensory modes beyond the visual. By describing a visual work with text, literature will always fall short of replicating the work itself and so it must do something else entirely. When a text engages a visual work, that engagement sets in motion other sensory modes and perhaps requires a sonic landscape. In this way, the ekphrastic text might demonstrate a particular way in which the visual and the auditory are intertwined.⁴²

Historian of color, Michel Pastoreau, describes color as a phenomenon that “resists analysis itself.”⁴³ Color resists analysis partially because it resists language—it is wordless. However, even if it resists logical or analytic language, our perception of color is still, according to Pastoreau, “first and foremost a social phenomenon.”⁴⁴ Although it is social, color also provides “a distilled demonstration of our inability to share an exact understanding of the world with one another.”⁴⁵ Perhaps this is why, as Wittgenstein once said, “colours spur us to philosophize.” For, while we can never really know another’s experience of color, there is something about it that is still shared. In the perpetual mystery of anyone else’s experience of color, there is a potential for considering forms of sociality that do not rely on knowing the other but that, instead, preserve the unknowable. By attending to sound and color in text, I am hoping to move toward such forms of sociality, where the discrete self might recede even as we preserve difference.

⁴⁰ Grobe, “Sound,” 179.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 1.

⁴² Sound in poetry is often described in relation to sight, or in visual terms. In *Language in Literature*, Roman Jakobson describes sound as a “figure”: “verse is primarily a recurrent ‘figure of sound.’” Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 81. Stephen Ratcliffe, in *Listening to Reading* writes that “the sound of a poem’s words and their visual shape on the page are interconnected: that the sound of words is, literally, an acoustic shape (the shape of words in air), their shape literally a visual sound (letters waiting to become sound).” Ratcliffe, *Listening to Reading*, 1.

⁴³ Pastoreau, *Blue*, 7.

⁴⁴ Pastoreau, 7.

⁴⁵ Parsons, “A Meditation on Color and the Body in Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*,” 379.

Crisis and Risk

Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis.

— Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

A specter of violence and bodily risk haunts listening's generative possibilities. In his descriptions and theorizations of listening, Jean-Luc Nancy uses words like "attack," "crisis," and "contagion." For Nancy, there is a quality to the experience of listening, as well as to the sonorous event itself, that mimics patterns of viral spread. Listening's contagion demonstrates its status as constitutively and complexly intersubjective, entailing a crisis of the coherent self. The idea of listening as a "crisis of self" might, in part, speak to the body's vulnerability in auditory experience. According to Nancy, this vulnerability is twofold. First, the human body is not "constructed to interrupt" sonorous experience. Rather, we are consistently open to it. We cannot close our ears in the same way that we can shut our eyes.⁴⁶ Second, we process sound in a way that traverses and unravels the boundaries of the body: "to listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated... To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other."⁴⁷ In these ways, when listening, we cannot maintain the boundaries of our bodies as separate or enclosed, and we cannot barricade ourselves from the "attack" of sound. Listening reveals our constitutive porosity.

Destabilizing white subjecthood necessitates a level of vulnerability and risk. Roland Barthes writes that, insofar as listening "involves a risk: it cannot be constructed under the shelter of a theoretical apparatus."⁴⁸ Here, Barthes correlates the risk of listening with a lack of theoretical shield. If the theoretical apparatus shelters us from risky listening, then this listening cannot really be theorized, or at least it cannot remain beholden to conventions of analysis. This further inscribes some of the impossibilities around such a listening practice. Rather than theorize it, for Barthes, such a listening "implies that one enters it, ultimately finding oneself there. Listening will exist only on condition of accepting the risk."⁴⁹ If listening cannot be "constructed under a theoretical apparatus," it must, instead, be *felt*. Yet, when we take the risk of listening in such a way, we open ourselves up to vulnerability and pain.

In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine relays an exchange with Judith Butler that speaks to our vulnerability to sound. In response to being asked what makes language hurtful, Butler replies: "We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this."⁵⁰ For Butler, to be addressable is a condition of suffering—to be able to hear the other opens us up to the possibility of being injured by them. But in *Citizen*, many of the recounted incidents of racism do not actually entail a kind of reciprocal address. Overhearing the racist remark involves a kind of incredulity: "What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word."⁵¹ Here, hearing and being addressed

⁴⁶ Here, Nancy references the quote: "the ears don't have eyelids." Nancy, *Listening*, 14.

⁴⁷ Nancy, 14.

⁴⁸ Barthes, "Listening," 256.

⁴⁹ Barthes, 256.

⁵⁰ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 49.

⁵¹ Rankine, 41.

do not quite match—“suddenly incoherence feels violent.”⁵² In the experience of overhearing that takes place in *Citizen’s* linguistic climate, the Black body is thrown into crisis.⁵³

Thinking about listening along the lines of racial hierarchy and inequality, George Yancy argues for sustained “moments of breakdown” that would be “precisely *unfavorable* to our discomfort.”⁵⁴ Yancy calls for “more social encounters that place white people in a state of crisis regarding their whiteness, social encounters where immediate retreat is not an option.” In a direct address to the second person, Yancy writes that “we need a place where *we* get to dwell near and where *you* get to be in crisis—a fundamental turning point, a site of uncertainty, off-centeredness, and within a space too close to hide.” Here, we see a kind of critical sociality that not only emerges *from* crisis but also calls *for* it—where a certain form of white crisis, or disorientation, might allow for new ways of orienting ourselves in the world. To make possible such moments of breakdown, Yancy calls for a form of “Parrhesia (or fearless speech)” in order to disrupt the familiar. As he explains, Parrhesia is incompatible with the kind of “white talk” that insulates white people from self-examination. Alongside his call for fearless speech, Yancy also calls for a “fearless listening,” which he describes as “an openness to have one’s assumptions regarding race and racism shattered [...] it involves, in the case of white people, having one’s white self-identity challenged and fissured, even as that process of fissuring will require a constant refissuring.”⁵⁵ For Yancy, this listening is “a profound site of risk and vulnerability” where the self is ruptured and decentered in sustained and extended moments of crisis.⁵⁶

In *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten describes a mode of “listening for an enarticulate murmur—the informal noise that attends enformation’s and deformation’s constant undoing of information.”⁵⁷ Moten writes toward a listening that lingers in noise and murmur long enough to begin to loosen reason’s hold. Saidiya Hartman does something similar in descriptions of her method of critical fabulation, writing that a sort of “narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian,

⁵² Rankine, 42.

⁵³ In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon describes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema, as that which holds only for the white person. Alternatively, the Black person’s self-image is imposed on him by the white gaze—he is overdetermined from the outside: “an object among other objects.” According to Axelle Karera, Fanon exposes the failure of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body schema by “exposing us to a contrasting rupture between body and world or, perhaps more precisely, between a corporeality and the involuntary dissolution of the coherent corporeal schema.” Karera, “The Racial Epidermal Schema,” 289. The Black body schema is radically limited and ruptured by the white objectifying gaze. Fanon describes the experience of a child saying to his mother “*Maman*, look, a Negro; I’m scared!” He writes: “I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple: I was taking up room... I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovering my blackness, my ethnic features.” Here, Fanon describes the radical disruption of selfhood and embodiment that comes from this encounter with the white gaze. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91, 92.

⁵⁴ Yancy, “White Gazes: What It Feels Like to Be an Essence,” 62.

⁵⁵ Yancy, 46.

⁵⁶ As Jill Stauffer puts it: “In listening, [one] should be ready to hear things that don’t accord with her expectations, things she doesn’t want to hear, even things that threaten to destroy her idea of how the world works. She will have to be disarmed.” Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, 109–10.

⁵⁷ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 205.

derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man.”⁵⁸ Alongside the inchoate and non-linguistic noise that Moten and Hartman tune us toward, the self-reflexivity required for a listening practice that decenters whiteness must never fully cohere or congeal, for it would both re-inscribe whiteness as the methodological focus while also re-ossifying da Silva’s transparent ‘I.’ There is thus an inherent tension to the practice of listening against whiteness, for it must be self-reflexive and self-critical, while simultaneously shifting focus away from the white self. Along such lines, I am searching for ways of listening for noise, murmur, nonsense, and opacity that might deform and erode the stability of my own subject position.

Genre in Blue

I am writing this all down in blue ink, so as to remember that all words, not just some, are written in water.

— Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Moten’s engagement with *Concerto in Black and Blue* leads him to play, engage, and ultimately turn away from Wallace Stevens. While not, I don’t think, a wholesale rejection of Stevens, this move away from traditional lyric verse helps to illustrate something interesting that happens when texts bend against generic boundaries. The texts I engage in this dissertation might all loosely be called “autotheory,” a perpetually inchoate genre that resists stable classification. We might describe autotheory as a kind of writing, thinking, theorizing, and feeling that engages, disrupts, and distorts the coherent self.⁵⁹ It might also be helpful to think about the texts I engage as lyric essays, a term Michelle Dicoski uses to describe Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*. This term is helpful because these texts each rupture the typical conventions of lyric poetry in various ways.

At the same time, it is difficult to identify the parameters that constitute lyric poetry because both “lyric” and “poetry” remain highly ambiguous and contested terms. For Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “a resistance to definition may be the best basis for definition of the lyric—and of poetry—we currently have.”⁶⁰ Even so, there are several often-referenced descriptions (if not definitions) of lyric poetry. As John Stuart Mill argued in 1833, “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*,” and, “poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.”⁶¹ Mill’s formulations were taken up a century later by Northrop Frye, who defined lyric as the “utterance that is overheard” wherein “the poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners.”⁶² According to Jackson and Prins, these definitions of lyric as confession, monologue, or utterance overheard, all “share a general sense that the lyric is the genre of personal

⁵⁸ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

⁵⁹ Robyn Wiegman describes autotheoretical writing as “a practice of creative and critical invention” with “no formal or aesthetic unity.” Wiegman sees autotheory as a “distinctly feminist practice” committed to “putting ‘flesh’ on the universalist pretensions of established theoretical traditions.” Wiegman also draws particular attention to the “intimate poetics” found in several important thinkers in US Black studies. This intimate poetics “links the personal to the impersonality of social forces and modern histories.” Wiegman, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory,” 9, 8.

⁶⁰ Jackson and Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 2.

⁶¹ Mill, *Essays on Poetry*, 12.

⁶² Frye, “Theory of Genres,” 32.

expression, a sense assumed whenever we talk about ‘the lyric I.’”⁶³ Mill and Frye exemplify long-held conceptions of the poetic speaker as an insular, solitary figure, speaking to himself rather than to his reader or listener. Pushing back against lyric genre can allow a text to push against a stable subject in ways where the personal leads into a refiguring of the social. By rupturing the lyric “I,” autotheoretical texts or lyric essays can find ways of relating to and in language that move away from the distinction between I and we. Part of this refiguring comes from formal structures that disorient and rupture the self, through fragmentation, elision, disordered seriality or temporality, associative rather than linear logic, collage, digression, meditation, creative citation, and non-traditional modes of address.

Reading and Writing the Fractured Self

But do not use the rotted names.

— Wallace Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”

In many ways, the lyric essay is also helpful for describing my own approach to writing. Because the listening practice I describe moves toward disorientation, it must be approached diagonally and indirectly. So, I lean heavily on association throughout the chapters, jumping around and leaving connections open-ended. Perhaps, one way to put it is, as Nelson quotes Joseph Cornell in *Bluets*, “Day/ and I gathered fragments of blue dense.”⁶⁴ Or as Rankine says at the beginning of *Citizen*, “the route is often associative.”⁶⁵ It is through such an associative and citational route—trudging and floating through these fragments of blue dense or the blue fog of “transblucency”—that I become thrown off course, both in writing and reading. I read so that the text might surprise or jar my thinking, considering this reading as a kind of disoriented listening for disrupting white logic and the white imagination. I attempt to read, not dispassionately, but with pleasure, pain, ardor, fascination, powerlessness, choicelessness, imagination, sensation, and devotion. While both sound and color present imaginative possibilities in their indeterminacy, they can easily be overdetermined by the overactive white imagination with its tendency to fix, contain, and categorize. I read in an attempt to hold the generative and dangerous aspects of the imagination simultaneously.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed looks to the possibility of disorientation in order to point toward new forms and directions of social gathering. For Ahmed, “moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.”⁶⁶ Ahmed’s queer phenomenology advocates for sustained disorientation that opens up new angles by not overcoming ‘disalignment.’⁶⁷ At the same time, Ahmed also looks to the word “black” as a reorientation device that “gathers us around” and “points toward the future and toward a world that we have yet to inhabit: a world that is not orientated around

⁶³ Jackson and Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 2.

⁶⁴ Nelson, *Bluets*, 68.

⁶⁵ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 5.

⁶⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

⁶⁷ Ahmed, 172.

whiteness.”⁶⁸ In his essay “From Speech to Writing,” Barthes describes a practice of writing in which the body returns by following an “indirect, measured, musical” path of a divided subject.⁶⁹ Barthes determines that it is up to the listener to learn how to follow writing’s divided subject, and so he calls for a multi-layered form of listening, one which would need to remain flexible, open, and improvisational in order to read and listen for a shifting subject.

What Follows

All address, no doubt, contains at least silently these words: “I pray that you will listen to me.” And just as one who prays directs his word—himself—outward, so it is with the listener as well. Maybe when we *listen*, when we are *attentive*, it is always to a prayer...

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*

Each of my chapters is its own encounter, in which I get caught up in an indeterminate milieu of fascination, resonance, and sensation. In these encounters, my selfhood gets bent alongside the various selves made by the texts. Each of these texts offers what I see as a spiritual experiment in writing the self, whether through experiences of art, color, collectivity, love, pain, history, or violence. I read through a sort of skewed phenomenology, where I am led by embodied, sensuous experience but not quite from a coherent first-person perspective.

My first chapter explores some of the theoretical points of departure for the project. Here, I read Fred Moten’s essay “Blue Vespers” from his 2017 text, *Black and Blur*, in which he explores the artist Chris Ofili’s series of blue paintings, sometimes referred to as “The Blue Rider” series. With Ofili’s work, Moten gives us a notion of a radical, persistent blue seriality that works through prayer and devotion rather than address. In the chapter, I consider blue seriality as a mode of speech, a grammatical mood, and a form of writing. I consider blue seriality as a synesthetic bodily gesture or posture, and as a devotional practice that works toward—and on—the future as well as the subject. Moten offers modes of writing that make possible alternate formations of sociality, destabilizing the boundaries of subjecthood in order to move away from the centrality of the white subject. Here, a reiterative exploration of sound and color on the page unravels the seemingly discrete bounds of modern white subjecthood, enacting instead a “we” that emerges through a “vulnerability that marks/instantiates entanglement.”⁷⁰ This chapter explores the possibilities of this “we” so that, as Zun Lee puts it in the afterword to Moten and Stefano Harney’s *All Incomplete*, “we may lose our individuated selves in favor of a blurred, irreducible sociality of the senses.”⁷¹

I begin the chapter by exploring the origins and motivations of Ofili’s seriality and how he brings temporality, light, sound, and devotion into conversation in his paintings. Next, I turn to Moten’s “we,” looking to the ways that Moten’s notion of blue seriality makes “I” impossible, working alongside his writing which functions as prayer rather than speech. Through the sonic ensemble that Moten writes of and with, different possibilities of sociality and value emerge.

⁶⁸ Ahmed, 156.

⁶⁹ Barthes, “From Speech to Writing,” 7.

⁷⁰ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 241.

⁷¹ Lee, Moten, and Harney, “Home Is Where We Displace Ourselves,” 172.

This first section ends with Moten's engagement with art critic T.J. Clark's exploration of portraiture and the face, which I envision as a maternal figure of multiplicity that precedes any self. The chapter's second section turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose descriptions of color are decidedly sonic, and whose exploration of synesthesia adds a phenomenological sense for the ways that the color blue functions as sound and music. In Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the blue of the sky in *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can also see a blurring of the subject through what he calls "a bodily attitude for becoming blue." This section closes with a brief consideration of the relationship between color, gesture, silence, and language in Merleau-Ponty's late writing. Lastly, I end with Wasily Kandinsky's descriptions of the relationship between blue and black in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Insofar as Kandinsky's group "Der Blaue Reiter" served as inspiration for Ofili's early blue paintings, his writing on blue adds further texture to the nexus that emerges when Ofili paints and when Moten writes. In many ways, Moten's writing and thinking guides this entire project and the various directions it takes.

My second chapter takes up two of Maggie Nelson's experimental texts, *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*. Bringing Nelson into the conversation allows for a shift in my exploration of unraveled whiteness, as I attend to the ways in which Nelson undoes her own selfhood. In 2009's *Bluets*, Nelson explores her love of the color blue in 240 numbered prose fragments that she calls "propositions," modeling the form after Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. While *Bluets* is often described as an ode to blue, the text is not heavily "visual." Rather, blue often recedes into meditations on love, loss, pain, loneliness, sex, divinity, darkness, and writing. In 2015's *The Argonauts*, Nelson explores her relationship with her partner, Harry, recounting his top surgery and experience taking testosterone alongside her own bodily transformations in pregnancy and childbirth. Nelson's exploration veers into examinations of gender, feminism, queer family-making, language, writing, and identity broadly construed. Like her writing on blue, *The Argonauts* explores slippery subjects in fragments, in an open and decentered form that works to avoid pinning anything down.

I read Nelson's texts in order to consider the unknowing and undoing that happens in the collision between her formal choices and subject matter. There is a certain impossibility and unwritability to these subjects that leads to a dissolution of the coherent self in her fragmented prose, creative citationality, and her use of address, which demonstrates what she describes as the strangeness of relationality. Hers is kind of writing that takes up ontologically indeterminate subjects while maintaining that indeterminacy. On writing, Nelson looks to Sedgwick and Barthes on the dual activity of pluralizing while refining and specifying, saying that "this is an activity that demands an attentiveness—a relentlessness, even—whose very rigor tips it into ardor."⁷² An attentiveness that both pluralizes and refines at once might function to maintain the indeterminacy of its subject. Gender and color demonstrate this mode of attention insofar as Nelson takes up a subject that refuses a center, so that the reader must relinquish the expectation of a particular shape, tone, or shade, and instead shift along with the text.

I begin the first section of this chapter by looking to *Bluets'* first proposition as a turn away from lyric confession and toward a fragmented and nonlinear seriality in which the subject is undone and emptied. I then look to blue's vast infiniteness as a blurring of boundaries in which the subject is rendered "choiceless." Blue's expansiveness also leads Nelson toward the divine. Expanding on my exploration of prayer, darkness, and blue with Moten, I look to the ways that blue dissolves in darkness, divinity, and oblivion. Darkness and oblivion lead into an

⁷² Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 62.

exploration of the unwritable book that haunts *Bluets*, as I consider the ways that muteness, colorlessness, and the unwritten lend the text a stance without a center. This section ends with an exploration of song, sound, and “the blues” as ways of identifying blue’s radiating movements of unknowing and undoing. In the second section, I look to a moment in *The Argonauts* when Nelson gestures toward an (internal) sound that communicates the complex subjectivity of pregnancy. She describes this as a “static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.”⁷³ Here, I ask how sound—or more specifically, noise—can make possible the relation of “not one, but also not two.” Considering the confluence of pregnancy, writing, and queerness, I explore a kind of relationality that ties to embodied destruction and multiplicity. In the chapter’s final section, I find a layered plurality in the layered temporalities of both texts, looking to conditional and subjunctive grammars as a writing to and alongside impossibility.

My final chapter offers an initial attempt at this listening practice through extended readings of Claudia Rankine’s 2015 book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Rather than assume that Rankine’s engagement with the second person “you” is an invocation that allows for white understanding, I explore instead what kind of listening can or must occur when there is no mutual, stable, intimate ground on which to communicate. *Citizen*’s “you” challenges me to engage the text so that I am decentered from the frame while also remaining self-critical, where I move from an “I,” to a “you,” to perhaps going unaddressed entirely. I aim to read *Citizen* in a way that diverges from, as Rankine herself puts it, “the American tendency to normalize situations by centralizing whiteness,” asking instead whether a different kind of sociality could emerge by reading away from whiteness.⁷⁴

I begin this chapter by putting forth a notion of *Citizen*’s “you” as that which creates an “apostrophic listener,” drawing from Jonathan Culler’s notion of lyric apostrophe. This listener is unstable and open, born from and made by the text, yet never fully cohered. I then move to an engagement with the nonlinear temporality of *Citizen*, a jumbling of time that makes slavery’s violent Middle Passage both concurrent and future of the contemporary racist exchanges portrayed in the text. This temporality is enmeshed with Rankine’s various descriptions of atmosphere, which is sometimes figured as “blue.” *Citizen*’s atmosphere blurs and converges the senses; at times the text’s atmosphere(s) are profoundly abstract or disorienting in ways that seem to drown and pull apart the Black body. This violent destabilizing leads into Rankine’s uncited engagement with white Confessional poet Robert Lowell in the middle of the book, where I linger further on how she deconstructs the confessional lyric “I” by conversing with and ventriloquizing Lowell. This moment points to the incommensurability between the safety of Lowell’s lyric and the anti-Black violence to which Rankine gestures. Finally, I turn to Rankine’s description of a “cave of sighs” which allows for considerations of the relationship between the text’s spatiotemporal atmosphere and the precarity of Black breath. Here, I consider the role of an imagined soundscape in the text as a possibility for thinking and relating otherwise. By looking to the sigh in *Citizen*, I attend to the pre-verbal, not-yet-articulated voices emitted within the text, asking how these non-linguistic evocations construct a racialized sonic atmosphere. I

⁷³ Here is the full quotation: “As if when I myself see pregnant women in the public sphere, there isn’t a kind of drumming in my mind that threatens to drown out all else: *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant*, perhaps because the soul (or souls) in utero is pumping out static, static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.” Nelson, 91.

⁷⁴ Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning.”

read so as to hear the sounds of the body and voice in and of the text, to ask what it could mean to hear a body's breath in text. Some questions hover over this chapter that I do not try to answer, exactly, but which spur my thinking and reading. When the sigh is written rather than voiced, what is heard and what is opened up? What kind of sonic climate does the sigh create? Finally, is there a relationality made possible by a poetics of breath and, if so, what are the roles of race, sound, self, and the imagination in this exchange?

The dissertation ends with a more “personal” coda, in which I consider my own experience of pregnancy and early parenthood as a disorientation through which a past self was destroyed. Beginning with reflections on literary form, methodology, and crisis, pregnancy inadvertently has become a way to explore my own decentering, as I contemplate what it means to listen from and in a body that is not one, but also not two. Here, I am in search of a writing as resonant relationality, which emerges through images of folding and unfolding, touch, and the sonic composition of the womb.

Impossibility

Lose your // composure in repose, at rest, in descent, in the general murmur, a general antagonism of noise...

— Fred Moten, *The Little Edges*

This project begins with the admission of its own impossibility. I aim toward a listening practice where whiteness is decentered from the frame—where I am decentered from the frame. While it is not my goal to erase myself from my own writing, I am attempting to describe a practice where I might begin to recede from, or at least not dominate, my own page. To a degree, I know that this is a project destined for failure. Yet, rather than simple defeat, this failure is also about the possibilities to be found in surrender. In the ephemeral spirit of Hammons' work, I view this dissertation as a first draft in a project that asks for, and requires, persistent feedback and revision. It is a practice that can never be achieved—in fact, to achieve it would be the ultimate failure. As such, this is a project invested in impossibility. This is not about accomplishment but about blurring the bounds of self and other, and destabilizing my sturdy sense of self and its place in relation to others. To admit to (or embrace) the probability of failure is, for me an invitation to experiment and to remain in a space of liminality, unknowing, perpetual beginning, and incoherence.

On that note, I think it is important to clarify that I am not relying on a scholarly approach in which I produce a particular “reading” of the texts. Somewhat akin to the texts I explore, my writing tends to be associative and aphoristic, as I attempt to create a space for figures and voices to enter and then to disappear. I'm seeking to create an effect, where the ensembles that I present work cumulatively and in concert with one another.

It could be that a listening that decenters whiteness begins in self-reflexive method and ends in chaotic noise, where the subject loses herself in dizzying and sensuous, blueblack blur. Yet it cannot stop there. Perhaps, more than disordered, dizzy, or disoriented, there must be a

derangement of white subjecthood—a reading which tips into madness and frenzy.⁷⁵ Perhaps the text must fall apart, perhaps the white voice must fall away. Nancy writes that “the sonorous [...] outweighs form.”⁷⁶ But maybe noise and color outweigh the sonorous; where we are led into a formal unraveling and drowned in multi-sensuous noise.

⁷⁵ In the chapter epigraphs In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, da Silva gestures toward madness as openings and diversions, quoting Frankenstein as a moment of breakthrough and a disfiguring of the subject. In “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,” she uses citations as titles for each section in order to signal the “general” and “hopelessly vague—questions and questionings demanded by the project.” It is this spirit of both madness and generality that I aim toward. Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,” 82.

⁷⁶ Nancy, *Listening*, 2.

Chapter One

Blue Seriality

Devotion and Entanglement in Fred Moten’s “Blue Vespers” and Chris Ofili’s Blue Paintings

Where’s the sky start? We are in it, this border. We blue.

— Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*

I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself,
my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

At first glance, Chris Ofili’s painting, “Blue Devils,” is indiscernible, the forms so dark that blue blurs with black, veering toward abstraction. A Black man surrounded by British police officers only hazily appears after extended time looking at the canvas. The painting’s title, “Blue Devils,” draws upon the character in Trinidadian folklore wherein, during carnival, people from the town of Paramin dress up as “devils” covered in blue paint, terrorizing onlookers with blood, snakes, and frogs.¹ Carnival tradition gives these “blue devils” permission to behave in a menacing and intrusive manner that would ordinarily be prohibited. In the painting, Ofili associates the blue devils with the British police—the ‘boys in blue’—bringing this notion of permissible menace into conversation with anti-Black police violence.

“Blue Devils” makes up part of Chris Ofili’s series of blue paintings, often referred to as the *Blue Rider* series.² In the New Museum’s 2014 mid-career retrospective of his work, nine of Ofili’s blue paintings were displayed together in a dark room. At first glance, the paintings appeared almost black, with little to no figuration. Hanging in near darkness, Ofili’s blue paintings challenged the viewer’s relationship with “visual” artwork. This challenge brought forth a slowed temporality for experiencing the work, where viewers needed to wait for their eyes to adjust in order to see the intricacy of the paintings’ forms or else miss them entirely. Indeed, the more time you spent with the paintings, the more you could see.

¹ A Black British artist born and raised in Manchester, England, Ofili now lives in Trinidad, a place whose climate, landscape, history, and mythology inform the trajectory of his work, enriching his depictions of slavery, blues music, police violence, religious iconography, and ritual.

² This title originates with Ofili’s 2005 show, *The Blue Rider*, at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin. “The Blue Rider” series takes its name from “Der Blaue Reiter,” the early twentieth-century artist group founded by Wasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. According to Christopher Zuschlag, Ofili’s interest in Der Blaue Reiter is due to its “synthesis of the arts, especially the strong reference to music, and the demand for the equal status of European and non-European art, of high art and folk art.” Ofili, *The Blue Rider*, 5.



Fig. 1, Ofili, Chris. *Blue Devils*, 2014.

In his essay “Blue Vespers” in *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten explores Ofili’s series of blue paintings displayed in the New Museum retrospective. For Moten, these paintings are “not series the way they want to make you think about it.”³ Rather, Moten sees Ofili’s seriality as a ritualistic act of return that calls us to prayer. Moten links Ofili’s use of the color blue with this prayer-like seriality.⁴ With the paintings’ blue pigment and their move toward darkness, the blurring haze of twilight makes it so that you can’t quite settle, you have to keep moving, nothing is fully grasped. For Moten, both seriality and blue lack any discernible spatio-temporality. This is part of what make them so generative for Moten’s considerations of blackness. There is no beginning, no ending, no arrival. Moten describes blue as that which has no place, it is something we are *in* already and that we *are* already—an “echoic atmosphere.”⁵ Similarly, the work of seriality’s devotional refrain is “to have arrived at nonarrival.”⁶ As Moten sees it, for Ofili to linger in and return to this (non)place of seriality, to refuse to arrive, “such refusal is devotion.”⁷

³ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 233.

⁴ “An insistent seriality, its (re)turn, all the concomitant blue blurring that goes with that. A seriality of the not-in-between, the unenclosed.” Moten, 233.

⁵ Moten, 239.

⁶ Moten, 233.

⁷ Moten, 239.

Drawing on Moten's notion of a radical, persistent blue seriality, I explore the possibility of a listening practice that works through prayer and devotion rather than address, destabilizing the boundaries of subjecthood in order to move away from the centrality of the white subject. I consider blue seriality as a mode of speech, a grammatical mood, and a form of writing. I consider blue seriality as a synesthetic bodily gesture or posture, and as a devotional practice that works toward—and on—the future as well as the subject. I read Moten's work as offering forms of writing that make alternate formations of subjectivity possible. Here, a reiterative exploration of sound and color on the page unravels the seemingly discrete bounds of modern white subjecthood—what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the transparent “I”—enacting instead a “we” that emerges through a “vulnerability that marks/instantiates entanglement.”⁸ This chapter explores the possibilities of this radically informal “we” so that, as Zun Lee puts it in the afterword to Moten and Stefano Harney's *All Incomplete*, “we may lose our individuated selves in favor of a blurred, irreducible sociality of the senses.”⁹

I begin this chapter by exploring the origins and motivations of Ofili's seriality and how he brings temporality, light, sound, and devotion into conversation. Next, I turn to Moten's “we,” looking to the ways that Moten's blue seriality makes “I” impossible, working alongside his writing which functions as a kind of prayer-like speech. Through the sonic ensemble that Moten writes of and with, different possibilities of sociality and value emerge. This section ends with Moten's engagement with art critic T.J. Clark's exploration of portraiture and the face, which I read as a maternal figure that precedes any discrete self. The chapter's second section turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose descriptions of color are decidedly sonic, and whose exploration of synesthesia adds a phenomenological sense for the ways that the color blue functions as sound and music. In Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the blue of the sky in *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can also see a blurring of the subject through what he calls “a bodily attitude for becoming blue.” This section closes with a brief consideration of the relationship between color, gesture, silence, and language in Merleau-Ponty's late writing. I end with Wasily Kandinsky's descriptions of the relationship between blue and black. Insofar as Kandinsky's group “Der Blaue Reiter” served as inspiration for Ofili's early blue paintings, Kandinsky's writing on blue adds further texture to the nexus that emerges when Ofili paints and when Moten writes.

I.

Paintings as Remnants of Process

We can trace Ofili's seriality back to his installation at the Tate entitled, “The Upper Room,” which was first displayed at London's Victoria Miro Gallery in 2002. A radical rendering of the sacred and the secular, The Upper Room reflects religious iconography, starting with its titular reference to the location of the last supper. The series is composed of thirteen paintings, each of a rhesus monkey, all of which are arranged to suggest Christ surrounded by his apostles. Beyond these more overt Christian references, there is a spiritual element to both Ofili's process as well as to the viewing experience. Part of this spirituality has to do with a deliberate slowing down, transforming the processes both of making and viewing.

⁸ Moten, 241.

⁹ Lee, Moten, and Harney, “Home Is Where We Displace Ourselves,” 172.

In a conversation with the painter Brice Marden, Ofili describes the experience of painting the Upper Room series as “one long meditation.” Much of it, he says:

had to do with going further and further into something. Before that, I was making work, then I’d exhibit it, and then it would disappear. I wanted to find a way to extend my relationship with my own work, to have the work around me, to have it actually enrich the process of making things. So I stopped the process at making and kept everything in the studio. And I just had a whole load of canvases that were the same size, and I allowed them to start to speak to one another.

Ofili tells Marden that the paintings evolved organically into a series based on their energy. For Ofili, the finished paintings serve primarily as remnants of this process: “The journey up to that point is the most interesting thing. The least interesting is, in some ways, the image at the end.”¹⁰ In Ofili’s description of how these works evolved into a series, we start to see an emphasis on a slow process that allows him to listen to his paintings speaking to one another. There is an auditory quality in this meditative slowing, as time and sound become “part of the palette.” Time shifts and re-materializes in the ways that Ofili takes it up in his series.



Fig. 2, Ofili, Chris. *The Upper Room* at the Tate, London. 1999-2002.

Beyond the painterly process, Ofili also slows the viewer’s experience of the paintings. Here is critic Calvin Tompkins describing the installation of *The Upper Room*:

Viewers waited in long lines to climb a steep flight of stairs, then groped their way down a narrow corridor before coming into a dramatically lit oblong space with six gorgeous

¹⁰ Marden and Ofili, “PAINTERS’ PAINTINGS: Brice Marden and Chris Ofili in Conversation.”

paintings on each side and a larger gold one at the end. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were clad in walnut veneer, which gave off an aromatic scent. Spotlights on each painting spilled pools of reflected color on the floor.¹¹

The paintings were exhibited at the Tate in a quiet, dark, chapel-like room designed by Ofili in collaboration with the architect David Adjaye. Ofili wanted the venue to feel like a space of worship and so the paintings were illuminated so they would refract colored light, like stained-glass windows.

Ofili extended this slowing further with the display of his blue paintings in the New Museum retrospective. Similar to the Upper Room's chapel-like space, nine of Ofili's blue paintings were brought together in a geometrical environment designed by the artist. Unlike the Upper Room, however, Ofili's blue paintings were displayed in what Dan Fox describes as "sepulchral gloom." According to Fox, "once your eyes adjusted to the dark, these deep indigo-coloured canvases glowed like stained glass in moonlight."¹² Again, the viewer is placed in a devotional space where divine light seems to seep through the paintings as if they were glass. In this case, the glowing occurs, in part, because Ofili layers deeper and deeper hues of blue over silver. As he says: "I had found that if you put silver underneath blue, the blue sits back, like night, or glows like moonlight."¹³ Even in darkness, there is an ominous yet divine reflection and dispersal of light. Yet, because there appears to be no direct light source reflecting onto the paintings, the source of the divine becomes less clear. This makes way for a form of devotion that moves into darkness and blind faith. Ofili's dark blues, indigo, purple, black, and silver challenge the viewer to sit with the reality that you cannot see everything at once, that forms might be painted over, partially hidden, or too dark to differentiate. An alternate sense of space emerges with this slowing in darkness, one that Moten emphasizes in his descriptions of the devotional aspects of Ofili's seriality.

Composed in dark hues of blue, Ofili's blue paintings evoke the blue light of twilight in Trinidad, while simultaneously taking up the relationship between anti-Blackness and modes of seeing. Here, Matthew Ryder describes Ofili's painting, *Blue Devils*:

Blue Devils, with its twisted, interlocked figures barely discernible beneath the deep, overlapping shades of blue, evokes a misconduct occurring in a state of near invisibility. It also captures something much harder to express – the peculiar way that such confrontations between black men and the police are simultaneously intensely crude and unusually subtle. They are crude because of the pervasive sense of menace and the blunt threat of violence – even as an observer, a confrontation between police officers and a man on the street can be more frightening than anything else we witness. At the same time, there is a subtle complexity, because it is always hard to be confident about what you are witnessing.¹⁴

The darkness of the paintings and the darkness of their surroundings alludes to the possibility of something foreboding, of your eyes tricking you, and of the complexity of witnessing. At the

¹¹ Tompkins, "Into the Unknown."

¹² Fox, "Chris Ofili: New Museum, New York, NY."

¹³ Tompkins, "Into the Unknown."

¹⁴ Ryder, "Chris Ofili's Blue Devils: Between Black Men and the Police."

same time, as Ofili has discussed, darkness allows for the imagination to take hold in a multitude of ways.¹⁵ Ofili's work points to both the possibilities and the risks of darkness, where vision gives way to alternate forms of sensory experience. To remix Ofili's own words on Gauguin, there's a kind of sound in these paintings that portrays the "nonvisible energies" of night.¹⁶ Or, to repurpose Jean-Luc Nancy, "music floats around [the] painting."¹⁷



Fig. 3, Ofili, Chris. Image of the blue paintings displayed at the New Museum retrospective: "Chris Ofili: Day and Night," New York, 2014.

A Sociality of the "We"

Moten describes the seriality of Ofili's blue paintings as common, bent, unfinished, condensed, explosive. Ofili's seriality has "irreducible indiscretions," "riotous generativity," "monkish, spherical dimensionality," "unended circularity," and "curved indiscretion." In these descriptions, seriality seems akin to an indiscrete yet material form or gesture, one that "bends toward itself" but also outward. In this perpetual bending, it cannot be located, temporally marked, or fixed in place. There is generative partiality to the fact that we are *in* seriality already and we are *in* blue already, and this leads Moten toward a sociality of the "we." In the (non)place and (non)time of blue seriality, Moten writes, "here's where we might begin to think the radical informality of we, the nothing, the blackness that is before, and deep, in the break, not in between."¹⁸ In its unpredictable movement, its lack of stable temporality, and its move toward

¹⁵ Ofili describes how his blue paintings work with the dominance of night in Trinidad: "a blue-y silvery light that allows you still to see forms but also tricks you as to what those forms actually represent. So my imagination was constantly sparked. At first I resisted it, but once I found a way that I felt comfortable with to translate this into painting, then I could let the work become darker and allow some of those forms to disappear." Ofili and Buck, "Interview with Chris Ofili: Something of the Forest and the Night."

¹⁶ Tompkins, "Into the Unknown."

¹⁷ Nancy, *Listening*, 10.

¹⁸ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 244.

the more-than-sensuous, Moten's blue seriality emerges in collaboration with Ofili's paintings. Blue seriality affords ways of thinking and feeling this radically informal "we," gesturing away from Western modernity's transparent white subject and toward something less composed, discrete, or visible.

In the following section, Moten shows how the prayer of blue seriality points toward a form of sociality that makes "I" impossible, partially through a move away from traditional forms of address:

All rituals are not the same. Why is prayer different than speech? Maybe it's because prayer, if it's real, implies neither addresser or addressee. Maybe prayer is (not) (in) between. Maybe prayer is that there's nothing between us. Maybe there's nothing between black and blue, no relation of existence between blue and gone, just that blur black leaves when it comes and goes before the subject. Blue comes and goes before the subject. Blur comes and goes before the subject. There's another kind of prayer, another modality of devotion, another devotional mood, given in the black indigeneity of ceremonial indigo. We are (in) the general prayer just like we are (in) the margins, the wilderness, the social. We are (in) the insistent previousness of the we. We precede. Blue abides. Where? Gone. This problematic of blue's place, that it has none, in a movement of infusion and surrounding. Where's the sky start? We are in it, this border. We blue.¹⁹

Subjecthood and address are destabilized in this blue seriality. The address gives way to prayer because we are immersed in a blue/black blurring that makes a clear distinction between subjects impossible. Another sociality is at work that we are in already, spurred by a torqued serial movement, a blurring move toward darkness, a "blue rinse for the language."²⁰ Ofili places the viewer in a kind of blue darkness where it is impossible to see the whole thing at once, in a seriality that moves us further and further away from *even the possibility* of a whole thing at once. As Moten puts it, "at twilight, in the evening, when sense is gone as sense's blur, the sociality generally valued as relatively nothing is given in the full richness of its resistance to valuation."²¹ This blue darkness makes way for a sociality that shifts our entire relationship to value, possession, and subjecthood. This is not a sociality the way they want to make you think about it.²² Seriality's refusal to arrive is evoked by the inability to fully see Ofili's paintings at once. They reveal themselves in partial stages that never quite cohere.

In darkness, visual blue opens itself up to the sonic capacities of "we." Ofili's work pushes Moten associatively toward a loose idea of the ensemble. He writes: "Ofili's work is so black it's blue. It's hard not to tarry with the ensemble that's forming (in) my mind: Ofili, Fanon, Ralph Ellison, Louis Armstrong constitutes a quartet within a larger plain."²³ This ensemble includes a painter, a philosopher, a novelist, and a jazz musician and, alongside the many eclectic references that occur throughout the essay, the quartet shows the multisensory, multidirectional Black radical traditions that Moten weaves together. Working with these legacies—particularly in the open citationality, improvisation, and constant revision that can be found in Black music—

¹⁹ Moten, 233.

²⁰ In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson quotes this line from John Ashbery. Nelson, *Bluets*, 74.

²¹ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 244.

²² Cf. "This is not a *seriality* the way they want to make you think about it." Emphasis mine. Moten, 233.

²³ Moten, 231.

Moten simultaneously pushes toward and away from them, imagining a form of sociality not yet there, one that can only be approached diagonally, through his persistent seriality. Moten’s “we” is a radical gesture both born of and diverging from the traditions in which his writing is steeped.

Blue, Brushed Grammar

Moten’s writing offers various points of entry for thinking outside of the logic of the insidious white “I” in its references, its contexts, its layering of blue and the blues, the rising and falling register of his sweeping wordplays and sonic affinities, where lists are made, and unexpected compound or invented words are added together in winding, associative, musically textured sentences that take the reader for a ride. Here’s an example:

... blue ain’t even thinking about sunrise. See what blue has done? Pigment calibrates a material’s reflectivity and capacity to absorb. Air scatters radiophonic spray. And then it turns out there are all these layers—colorant, binder—till nothing but middle’s registered, bottomless medium’s boom, vehicle in the tension it induces, riding, giving pigment a ride, taking reflection for a ride, but bound and in suspense, but somehow fugitive when suspension fails, hits bottom, so blue is already in green, on the way to what it’s in, that modality of herbaceous mood, depressive mangrove, metamorphic plant in early mourning, post-blue’s lumpen swerve.²⁴

Here we are in an antilogical, embodied, pigmented space where color and form smear and flicker, resisting conceptualization by moving toward touch and music. The blue about which Moten writes is *so* blue that it resists, it cannot be contained by blue and so it is “already in green.”²⁵ A form of associative language play gets opened up here that is rooted in, as Moten puts it, the way that “materiality, pigmentation, and (un)truth, mess with the supposed interplay of truth, whiteness, and transparency like a birthmark.”²⁶ Moten writes materiality, pigmentation, and (un)truth in a blue seriality that functions outside of the logics of truth, whiteness, and transparency. Blue doesn’t think, it moves, touches, sings, and evades us.

Working and reading on the edges of grammar and syntax,²⁷ Moten demonstrates the movement and flow of what he describes at one point as “blue, brushed grammar”—a mood and mode of writing that disorders the subject:

²⁴ Moten, 235.

²⁵ *Blue in Green* is also a reference to the song from Miles Davis’ seminal album *Kind of Blue*, which I reference in the introduction as well as in Chapter 3, when Rankine mentions “kind of blue” in *Citizen*.

²⁶ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 238.

²⁷ Speaking of C.L.R. James in an earlier essay in *Black and Blur*, Moten could also be describing his own work here:

I’m interested in those moments in James’s historiography when meaning is cut and augmented by the very independent syntaxes and outer noises—conveying new and revolutionary content, mysterious and black magical politico-economic spells and spellings—that James would record. Those moments help to structure a collusive interplay in the work that is not in between but outside of the broad-edged narrative/historical trajectory of a familiar dialectical lineage now cut and augmented by the serrated lyricism of what Robinson calls the “black radical tradition.”

Moten finds meaning cut and augmented by noise and syntax, where radical form can work outside of a narrative and historical trajectory. Moten, 6.

Prolepsis is conceptual motility, a thought provoked by senseless sense, enacted in senseless ritual's inveterate sensuality, disorder's tendency to blue, this blackness, which is not prophecy but description. How blue can you get? Prochronic blue. The bluer the berry, the sweeter the juice. *We been gone, was gone* when we got here, that inveterate forward flash of nachel blue, that senseless sense of what *been* there 'cause it *been* gone, subjection's prey in prayer, entangled, exsensed blue, brushed grammar, blue grammar's swarmed, schwärmeritic anasyntactic mood.²⁸

The subject—subjection, even—becomes prey to the prayer of blue grammar. The subject cannot hold in the midst of blue's disruption. There is also a disordered temporality in this grammar, a prolepsis that is anticipatory but that is also “not prophecy.” The “we” has “*been* gone, *was* gone” but, at the same time, blue also flashes forward, still to come. Blue grammar's ritual works through sensuality and senseless sense, moving chaotically, words entangling, swarming, blurring.

Here, Moten both describes and demonstrates ways of “writing (not) (in) between,” words that move and live in “inverse prose” and “a celebratory space” of devotion that is spurred by Ofili's work, akin to a collaboration where painting and words convene:

Blueblack matters no matter where or when. There is neither settlement nor event in blurred mattering. And if there's a writing (not) (in) between—suspension moving through inverse prose in celebration of a critical mass, in preservation of a celebratory space—then Ofili's work is such writing's exacerbation. I just want to devote myself to that, to be touched by that disturbance, to feel its quickening power. I can't handle it, can't grasp it, can't quite reach it but it's precisely that affect, that getting to in being gotten to, that I'm after. I mean to say that I am after that but also that “I” is always and only ever after that, as emanation, as emissary, as evangelist. Maybe to be within reach is the imprecise way we have for reaching out, in our speech, to what it is to have been reached.²⁹

Ofili touches Moten's writing in a way that precedes any “I.” It is an imprecise mode of reaching that comes before address—prayer rather than speech. There is also a strong sense of materiality in this section—this “blueblack” blurred mattering—that elucidates “writing (not) (in) between.” Ofili's work “exacerbates” Moten's writing so that paint blurs with text.³⁰ It is a kind of material middle ground, a dark, formless yet tangible something that emerges with Ofili's blues and through Moten's prose.

Moten's alternatives of grammar, tense, and form tune our ears to different sorts of sounds, when expectations of what the text might do become disrupted.³¹ We might think of Moten's tuning as akin to a sort of “middle voice” that is neither active, nor passive but, instead, self-reflexive in a way that does away with the discrete self. It is a mode of thought or critique

²⁸ Moten, 235.

²⁹ Moten, 230.

³⁰ Ofili's work shows this entanglement—seriality's curved indiscretion. Moten, 233.

³¹ Da Silva also highlights grammatical disfigurements that could call attention to our linguistic misconceptions: “Certain terms and phrases have been capitalized to place their accepted commonsense meanings under scrutiny.” Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,” 94.

that we are simultaneously *doing*, while simultaneously *being undone by* it—a “getting to in being gotten to.” According to Jane Bennett, middle voice “designates performances undertaken *within* a field of activities, rather than decisions of subjects who enter a field either to do something (the active voice) or to be acted upon (the passive voice).”³² In this way, middle voice elaborates a non-linear ongoingness, where we are always already immersed within language itself.³³ Returning to the passage above, Moten writes in modes of speech that put us within reach, while simultaneously offering imprecise ways for reaching out. By immersing us in this “blueblack” milieu, Moten’s middle voice reaches out beyond the self, toward Ofili while also incorporating the reader in an unending and enfolding serial process.

Seriality as Fertile Gesture

At times, in “Blue Vespers,” Moten describes seriality in ways akin to the strange, entangled relationality of pregnancy. It is spherical, circular, curved. It is common, generative, and “explosively multi-matrilinear.” In Moten’s writing, seriality seems almost to produce an embodied maternal figure, never fully formed. We can find these maternal evocations in the sections where he looks to T.J. Clark’s writing on Rembrandt and the face, finding vulnerability and allure in that which precedes both the portrait and the self:

But there is an original or anoriginary vulnerability, a vulnerability before vulnerability’s coalescence, entanglement’s anaecstatic before, that ought not be forgotten, that remains not to be drawn forth but as a recess to accompany fugitive, welcoming twilight. At stake is the infinitesimally small, immeasurably large difference between the arrest and embrace of elusion, an uncapturable allure that precedes itself, that precedes the self, that precedes the body, or bodily life. This irreducible and jurisgenerative precedent—blackness misunderstood if it is merely understood as void; nothingness misunderstood if it is understood as relative, wildness misunderstood if it is understood as wilderness—is *pied, precedent, precise indistinction, an imaginative, improvisatory, previsionary refusal to be envisaged*. What the face, in its irreducible instability, gives us, is that which is between us insofar as we are always and only in between. The blue-black birthmark that undergirds and undermines every act of portrayal...³⁴

In this passage, there is a vulnerability that seems to depend on a state of perpetual anticipation—the before-ness of entanglement. Additionally, fugitivity lives in the darkness of twilight, where the face refuses to be seen. Perhaps, we could read “entanglement’s anaecstatic before” and this “refusal to be envisaged,” as a kind of pregnant plurality that is always before the moment of separation. The umbilical cord not yet cut, bodies still tied, the placenta—an organ that never belongs to one body alone—still intact. Could the “blue-black birthmark that undergirds and undermines every act of portrayal” be a precursor to the separation of subjects so foundational to modern Western thought’s transparent “I”? When pregnant, we cannot see the face that lives in darkness inside us—the grainy ultrasound is a sonic image. The portrait is

³² Bennett, *Influx and Efflux*, 112.

³³ As Angus Fletcher puts it, in middle voice we are “always in the midst.” Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 169.

³⁴ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 241–42.

foreclosed in a way that requires another sort of faith and devotion, a non-visible sociality beyond yet within the self, “(not) (in) between.”

Moten quotes Clark, who writes that “a face . . . is a machine for exteriorizing—exchanging, universalizing—subjectivity”; in which a face is a machine for universalizing the ‘I.’”³⁵ If the face is that which gives us the “I,” what happens if the face is never envisaged? What if we remain in the before-ness of pure potential, in “a narrative of passage” on the level of the mystical material that never fully arrives?³⁶ Might this lack of portraiture help us to think Moten’s “we”—where we remain at the sonic level of the ultrasound’s blue/black twilight? As Moten writes,

“[...] the brutality of having been brought face to face, this misprision of ethical encountering in which the face is imposed as both emblem and instrument of serial blur’s (black + blue’s) strict regulation, in which what passes for difference is difference’s seizure, is not the same as the vulnerability that marks/instantiates entanglement. We do not undo one another; we are this constancy of undoing/redoing, this generality of antagonism and protagonism that blue seriality induces when portraiture gives way to mystical and material showing.”³⁷

Blue seriality lives in vulnerable entanglement, not in face-to-face brutality. It is an ongoing refusal to live within the bounds of the portrait, the face, the discrete self. Instead, Moten imagines how portraiture can give way to a “showing” of something that precedes the self. For Moten, the face imposes upon and regulates serial blur. The face is that which seizes difference, rather than the serial blur that allows difference to proliferate.

II.

Color as Murmur and Echo

Historian of color, Michel Pastoreau, describes color as a phenomenon that “resists analysis itself.”³⁸ Color resists analysis insofar as it resists language—it is wordless. However, our perception of color is still, according to Pastoreau, “first and foremost a social phenomenon.”³⁹ In this way, color holds the potential to open up new forms of sociality resistant to logical or analytic language. Although it is social, color also provides “a distilled demonstration of our inability to share an exact understanding of the world with one another.”⁴⁰ Perhaps this is why, according to Wittgenstein, “colours spur us to philosophize.” For, while we can never really know another’s experience of color, something is still shared. In part, this could be because the experience of looking at color can evoke certain sonic qualities that communicate on a multisensory level. For example, in his essay, “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty uses decidedly sonic descriptors in his descriptions of color in Cézanne’s painting. Merleau-Ponty writes that

³⁵ Moten, 241.

³⁶ Moten, 238.

³⁷ Moten, 240.

³⁸ Pastoreau, *Blue*, 7.

³⁹ Pastoreau, 7.

⁴⁰ Parsons, “A Meditation on Color and the Body in Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*,” 379.

quality, light, color, and depth “awaken an *echo* [éveillent un écho] in our body.”⁴¹ Later, he describes “how the *indecisive murmur* [le murmure indécis] of colors can present us with things, forests, storms—in short the world.”⁴² As an echo and an indecisive murmur, color works on a hazy sonic level below the linguistic.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, when Merleau-Ponty explores synesthesia, he puts forth an understanding of the senses as, at once, distinct yet indiscernible, looking again to the relationship between color and sound. He argues that “it makes sense to say that I see sounds or that I hear colors if vision or hearing are not the simple possession of an opaque *quale*, but rather the experience [l’épreuve] of a modality of existence, the synchronization of my body with it.”⁴³ In his view, synesthesia, rather than a pathological condition, is a unique mode or style of experiencing the intertwining of the senses. Merleau-Ponty describes a style of attention running “through and across” intentionality, evoking the qualities of how sound travels and interacts with the body, how sound can bounce and resonate off surfaces, and how it can form an atmosphere or haze that is not wholly locatable or fixable—akin, perhaps, to the “echoic atmosphere” that Moten finds in blue seriality. In another synesthetic moment, Merleau-Ponty writes, “When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my entire sensory being, and in particular with that sector of myself that is capable of seeing colors.”⁴⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, synesthesia is a style of attention where the body’s sensory experiences—especially of sound and color—blur.

Like the murmur and echo in Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of color, Moten’s exploration of blue works with the sonic registers of his texts, inseparable from them. Blue is as much sound and music as it is color. Blue veers away from the visual and toward darkness, unknowing, and undoing. Like the blue of the sky that becomes and blurs the subject, Moten writes of and with a blue seriality that is unlocatable; it is not of, or about, or to, or from the subject. It is *before* and yet it is ongoing—a non-chronological devotional practice returned to again and again.

“Where’s the sky start? We are in it, this border. We blue.”

Merleau-Ponty gives us a phenomenological grounding for reading the above line in Moten’s essay. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Myself as the one contemplating the blue of the sky is not an acosmic subject *standing before* it, I do not possess it in thought, I do not lay out in front of it an idea of blue that would give me its secret. Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it ‘thinks itself in me.’ I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.⁴⁵

In contemplating the blue of the sky, I cease to be a seeing subject witnessing something outside myself. Instead, the sky’s blue becomes me—“it ‘thinks itself in me’”—and I become acted upon by this blue. By plunging into the mystery of blue, I become part of the sky’s activity that it

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 164. Emphasis mine.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, 172. Emphasis mine.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 243.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 243.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 222.

does for itself, and I am saturated by its blue. It leaks into me and I leak into it. In this description of the sky, blue has an atmospheric quality that exceeds that which can be *looked at*, surrounding and penetrating the looker in a Motenian blur that recalls when “air scatters radiophonic spray.” At the same time, akin to Moten’s “blue, brushed grammar,” this experience is both active and passive at once. Color, air, sound, and body scatter and bleed together.

Submitting to the sky’s color in this way aligns with what Merleau-Ponty describes as a “bodily attitude that corresponds to blue.”⁴⁶ In his thinking, each color requires but also enacts its own bodily attitude, but it is an imprecise attitude, one that “is never sufficient to make me truly see blue.”⁴⁷ It is an attitude that allows me the means to “become blue” while, at the same time, being a “response to a poorly formulated question.”⁴⁸ So, there is an ambiguity that keeps open the never-quite-articulated question posed by color to the body. In the body’s relationship to color, Merleau-Ponty writes, I am “a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade.”⁴⁹ Or, as Moten writes in *All that Beauty*:

The open book.

The endless

folding

of the moment.⁵⁰

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the fold that is made and unmade in relation to the world and its colors. For Moten, it is writing (the open book) that allows for our endless serial folding. But also, Moten’s writing is music and music is played by and on the body. Text, body, and color are folding together here. In the complex temporality of Moten’s seriality, this folding is both “endless” and occurs in the flash of “the moment.”

When describing the interrelated communication of the senses, Merleau-Ponty returns to the paradigmatic blue of the sky:

If I wish to enclose myself in one of my senses and, for example, I project myself entirely into my eyes and abandon myself to the blue of the sky, soon I am no longer aware of gazing and, at just the moment I wanted to give myself over to vision entirely, the sky ceases to be a “visual perception” in order to become my current world. Sensory experience is unstable and wholly unknown to natural perception, which is accomplished with our entire body all at once and opens onto an inter-sensory world.⁵¹

The blue of the sky allows Merleau-Ponty to show the way that color forms an atmosphere that does not give itself to one discrete sense. Rather, it gives itself to our whole body simultaneously. Moreover, it is not only that each color elicits or evokes a bodily attitude, but also that, according to Merleau-Ponty, colors are each surrounded by an affective atmosphere and “are themselves different modalities of our coexistence with the world.”⁵² In his

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 222.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 222.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 222.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 223.

⁵⁰ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 48.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 234.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 285.

understanding, color surrounds us, acting on our bodies and causing our bodies to act, all working to demonstrate our overlapping existence in the world.⁵³ Music does something similar, for Merleau-Ponty, both to the sensing body and also to the atmosphere itself. He writes: “Music is not in visible space, music erodes visible space, surrounds it, and causes it to shift.”⁵⁴ In sound and sky, the body absorbs blue on an intersensory level that leans toward receptivity.

What I find so mesmerizing about this bodily attitude and atmosphere for “becoming blue” is that it allows for a synesthetic style of attention that is not an activity. At the same time, it is also not pure passivity, for there is a certain work at play that readies the body for becoming blue. It is a sensual ensemble, in Moten’s terms,⁵⁵ or a writing from the middle. There is a material relation between Blackness and blueness and a reorganization of the senses at work in this style of attention. As I see it, this style of attention is akin to what Moten calls prayer—a practice that makes possible a form of sociality where subjectivities overlap, blur, and become unmoored through sensory overlap. We give ourselves over to blue in a reiterative return that is akin to prayer—a practice that we never get right, that can never be finished insofar as, according to Merleau-Ponty, it “is never sufficient to make me truly see blue.”

Color as Material Gesture

In his late essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty explores the relationship between writing and painting, linking them through his notion of gesture. In his descriptions, gesture makes possible an enlivened relationship to language and communication. For Merleau-Ponty, gestures speak. They communicate a style, an affect, an immediacy of being. Merleau-Ponty describes gesture as bodily, visual, textual, spoken, and aesthetic. In the essay, he also puts forth an understanding of “creative language” in contrast to empirical language, as a fresh, embodied relationship with words and concepts. For him, creative language precedes empirical use (not unlike Moten’s notion of entanglement as precedent to the discrete self). Indeed, empirical engagements with language build upon embodied gestural language. Yet, we see all the time that language has the tendency to harden into fixed concepts, to become impoverished and ossified. As David Abram puts it, “perception always remains vulnerable to the decisive influence of language.”⁵⁶ Here, Abram refers to a language that has lost ties with its origins, even if it *was* born from perceptual experience and gestural expression. Such an impoverished language then turns back toward perception in an attempt to wholly explain and delineate it, rather than allowing for an open relation to language founded upon—and perpetually tied to—the body. It is this attempt to explain perception through logical language that leads toward a sectioning off of the senses, where the body becomes an abstract object of language rather than an integral part of its workings.

⁵³ In his preface to *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Colors, sounds, and things—like Van Gogh’s stars—are focal points and rays of being.” Merleau-Ponty, 330.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 234.

⁵⁵ Moten gestures toward an entangling of color, sight, and sound in *In the Break*, where he sees possibility in a form of looking “that is attentive to the sound—and movement, feel, taste, smell (as well as sight): the sensual ensemble—of what is looked at. The sound works and moves not just through but before another movement.” Moten’s sensual ensemble is a dizzying sonic movement that moves beyond individual senses and into noise. Moten, *In the Break*, 210.

⁵⁶ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 91.

In order to turn away from such fixed, logical language, Merleau-Ponty articulates an understanding of silence at the heart of creative language, wherein “sense appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words.”⁵⁷ Through silence, Merleau-Ponty makes possible a relation with language in which sense emerges in the gaps, in the eloquent gestures, in speech mixed with “threads of silence.”⁵⁸ He weaves these threads of gesture, silence, and speech together in embodied communication. For him, the gesture is invaluable insofar as it is implicated in all other forms of expression. Gesture opens up the possibility of accessing language differently—wherein language becomes “something like a being.”⁵⁹ In his view, language is not merely conceptual but material; it makes something present, it moves, and it requires our engaged, embodied reciprocity for us to access the sense that emerges in the silence between words. In its enmeshed reciprocity, there is a certain form of seriality to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the gesture of creative language. Here, silence makes possible a serial gesture of radical reciprocity.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of color is both silent—insofar as it exists outside of logical language—and wildly sonorous. Like his view of creative language, color is material, it has “a dimension which creates—from itself to itself—identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something.”⁶⁰ Moreover, color and gesture overlap in their expressive capacity: “The words, lines, and colors which express me come out of me as gestures.”⁶¹ Color’s vague dimensionality and gestural quality lead us toward the possibility for color to both demarcate the subject, but also lead to its dissolution.

In his writing on Ofili’s blues, Moten writes a “refrain” of the paintings, in the sense that he re-turns to them again and again in an immersive, visceral, sonic seriality that moves in many directions throughout the essay. Evoking aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of creative language, Moten’s writing is gestural, sonic, silent, and temporally destabilizing. With the eclectic ensemble on which he draws to discuss Ofili’s work, Moten’s re-turnings are akin to the devotional movement of turning to face god. Here, though, god is never thought to be located in any particular direction. Instead, prayer is to be found in the movement of persistent turning, where blue seriality becomes a wave to join and ride. Like a wave, Moten’s writing is already in motion when we join, and we might merge for a moment with the water and its blues. To read Moten on Ofili is to descend into darkness and to be transported. The writing’s rhythms enact a sensory realignment on another frequency, affording a different way to be “we.”

Blueblack’s Retreat

Ofili’s early blue paintings were first displayed in a 2005 show at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin called “The Blue Rider.” “The Blue Rider” series takes its name from “Der Blaue Reiter,” the early twentieth-century group founded by artists Wasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. The group sought spirituality by connecting visual art with music and believed in the spiritual and symbolic associations of color. In his 1914 text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky explores the relationship various colors have with form, music, painting, and spirituality. Although

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 243–44.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 248.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 244.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 370.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, 274.

Kandinsky describes black as the color of grief and death, his descriptions of black change when it is linked with blue. Through the power of association and boundary crossing, Kandinsky finds a spiritual relationship between blue and black that works alongside the physical one, where “blue can be so dark as to border on black.”⁶²

The power of profound meaning is found in blue, and first in its physical movements (1) of retreat from the spectator, (2) of turning in upon its own centre. The inclination of blue to depth is so strong that its inner appeal is stronger when its shade is deeper. Blue is the typical heavenly colour. The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest. When it sinks to almost black, it echoes grief that is hardly human. When it rises towards white, a movement little suited to it, its appeal to men grows weaker and more distant. In music a light blue is like a flute, a darker blue a cello; a still darker a thunderous double bass; and the darkest blue of all—an organ.⁶³

Kandinsky’s description of blue and its affinity toward black speaks to Ofili’s blue series. For Kandinsky, blue’s “heavenly” quality makes it well suited to the sacred and devotional that both Ofili and Moten emphasize. Related to this heavenliness, we might read the grief that arises when blue sinks toward black as tied to the grief related to untimely Black death, which Ofili takes up in “Blue Devils” as well as in his painting “No Woman No Cry.”⁶⁴ Moreover, to imagine the grief that echoes when blue crosses into black is, for Kandinsky, to hear the sound of the organ—an instrument which ranges above and below the vocal register, beyond and outside the subject—as color moves out of the visual realm and into the sounds of devotion and prayer.

Kandinsky’s writing on blue’s movements speaks to Moten and Ofili’s serial movements. Kandinsky describes blue’s “physical movements (1) of retreat from the spectator, (2) of turning in upon its own centre,” both of which might approximate the kinds of movement that Moten allocates to seriality: “monkish, spherical dimensionality,” “unended circularity,” and “curved indiscretion.” Moreover, blue, together with black, “echoes grief that is hardly human.” This move away from the human alongside a retreat from the spectator, return us to, and perhaps add texture to, Moten’s radically informal “we.”⁶⁵ In his essay “Blackness and Nothingness,” Moten explores and seeks to inhabit “the refusal of standpoint.” Referencing what Bryan Wagner calls “existence without standing,” Moten asks “what would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for standpoint?”⁶⁶ In this chapter, we have seen—in Moten’s writings and Ofili’s paintings—a temporality and a spirituality juxtaposed with the grief of untimely Black death, that moves toward the dissolution of the discrete subject.

⁶² Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 37.

⁶³ Kandinsky, 38.

⁶⁴ Per the Tate’s description, Ofili’s 1998 painting “No Woman No Cry” “is a tribute to the London teenager Stephen Lawrence who was murdered in a racially motivated attack in 1993. A public inquiry into the murder investigation concluded that the Metropolitan police force was institutionally racist. In each of the tears shed by the woman in the painting is a collaged image of Stephen Lawrence’s face, while the words ‘R.I.P. Stephen Lawrence’ are just discernible beneath the layers of paint. As well as this specific reference, the artist intended the painting to be read as a universal portrayal of melancholy and grief.”

⁶⁵ Kandinsky also references blue’s “active coolness” which may tangentially relate to Moten’s dissolution of the active/passive binary in his writing.

⁶⁶ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” 738.

We have seen Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological blurring of the subject with the blue of the sky, and Kandinsky's descriptions of blue that elicit movement, sound, affect, and grief. All these together point toward a mode of being and relating where we might begin to imagine Moten's question.

Chapter Two

“Not One, But Also Not Two”

Dissolving the Subject in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*

I cannot tell you what it looks like, exactly, but I can say that I have seen it.
— Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

In 2009’s *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson explores her love of the color blue in 240 numbered prose fragments that she calls “propositions,” modeling the form after Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. While *Bluets* is often described as an ode to blue, the text is not heavily “visual.” Rather, blue often recedes into meditations on love, loss, pain, loneliness, sex, divinity, darkness, and writing. In 2015’s *The Argonauts*, Nelson explores her relationship with her partner, Harry, recounting his top surgery and experience taking testosterone alongside her own bodily transformations in pregnancy and childbirth. Nelson’s exploration here veers into examinations of gender, feminism, queer family-making, language, writing, and identity broadly construed. Like her writing on blue, *The Argonauts* investigates slippery subjects in an open and decentered form that avoids pinning anything down in assertions.

Alongside their fragmented forms, both texts practice loose, untraditional citational styles. Nelson’s citational inventiveness might be best described by her idea of writing as a “sort of leaning against.” This “leaning against,” she specifies, is not about “any particular *kind* of relation or transmission. The leaning against I’m talking about takes place on a horizontal plane of action, not a vertical one. It brings one into the land of wild associations, rather than that of grim congenial lineage. It is a place, as Gertrude Stein would have it, in which ‘the difference is spreading.’”¹ This spreading gesture is not only relational or citational, but also occurs in the ways that both texts open out onto their subjects, offering tangential, diagonal, and proliferating ways to consider them. Through an intertextual writing in which she handles quotations “roughly,” Nelson writes to a multitude of different “you’s” in nonlinear fragments. Formally, there is a way in which, to quote bell hooks, the text works to “kill [the] self in writing.”² The self is killed insofar as it is no longer discrete, Nelson’s words bleed into and become entangled with the words of others in “wild association.”

I read these two texts in order to consider the unknowing and undoing that happens in the collision between her formal choices and subject matter. There is a certain impossibility and unwritability to these subjects insofar as they evade language, which leads to Nelson’s fragmented prose, creative citationality, and her use of address, which demonstrates what she describes as the strangeness of relationality. Hers is the kind of writing that takes up ontologically indeterminate subjects while maintaining that indeterminacy. On writing, Nelson looks to Sedgwick and Barthes on the dual activity of pluralizing while refining and specifying,

¹ Nelson, “A Sort of Leaning Against?: Writing With, From, and For Others.”

² hooks, *Talking Back*, 261.

writing that “this is an activity that demands an attentiveness—a relentlessness, even—whose very rigor tips it into ardor.”³ Perhaps an attentiveness that both pluralizes and refines at once might function to maintain the indeterminacy of its subject. Gender and color engage this mode of attention insofar as Nelson takes up a subject that refuses a center, so that the reader must relinquish the expectation of a particular shape, tone, or shade, and instead shift along with the text.

Although I am attempting to read Nelson’s texts for what they offer rather than what is elided, I do want to acknowledge the stark omission of writers of color from both texts. In *The Argonauts* in particular, which is a heavily citational text, an entire history of Black and Brown feminist self-writing—from the work of Audre Lorde to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*—is almost completely excluded from the text’s “many-gendered mothers.” So Mayer criticizes

[the erasure] of people of colour in *The Argonauts*, either as lived beings or through Nelson’s citational practice of queer kinship. The lack of acknowledgement that there is a Black queer and trans feminist (literary) genealogy for the kind of mothering and/or writing that Nelson undertakes is startling given her parenthetical acknowledgement of the queer feminist parent-writers who precede her, and whose work precedes hers.⁴

While I do not intend to ignore or endorse the moments in Nelson’s writing when, as Mayer puts it, “a kind of sentimental white liberal feminism seeps in,” I am primarily focused on how these texts point to possibilities for the destabilizing and disorienting of white subjecthood.⁵ Perhaps, there is something to be gained from attending to a text that reads so white, even as it works to formally deconstruct a stable subject. Indeed, there is no ethically superior kind of literary form, something I explore further in the Coda. Ben Lerner points out how both “the uncritical acceptance of voice and narrative conventions *as well* as their ‘wholesale’ disavowal by certain avant-garde writers can preserve racist and sexist ideologies.”⁶ Even though Nelson’s formal inventiveness makes room for possible re-imaginings and distortions of white subjecthood, it can also reinscribe what Cathy Park Hong calls “the avant-garde’s delusion of whiteness.”⁷

I begin the first section of this chapter by looking to *Bluets*’ first proposition as a turn away from lyric confession and toward a fragmented and nonlinear seriality in which the subject is undone and emptied. Before *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*, Nelson published several volumes of poetry, and so I consider how this formal shift to the prose fragment works with and on the lyric subject. I then look to blue’s vast infiniteness as a blurring of boundaries in which the subject is rendered “choiceless.” Blue’s expansiveness also leads Nelson toward the divine. Expanding on my exploration of prayer, darkness, and blue with Moten, I look to the ways that blue dissolves in darkness, divinity, and oblivion. Darkness and oblivion lead into an exploration of the unwritable book that haunts *Bluets*, as I consider the ways that muteness, colorlessness, and the unwritten lend the text a stance without center. This section ends with an exploration of

³ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 62.

⁴ Mayer, “MEDEA’S PERINEUM,” 190.

⁵ Mayer, 190.

⁶ Lerner, “Beyond ‘Lyric Shame’: Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson.”

⁷ Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.”

song, sound, and “the blues,” identifying blue’s radiating movements of unknowing and undoing. In the second section, I look to a moment in *The Argonauts* when Nelson gestures toward an (internal) sound that communicates the complex subjectivity of pregnancy. She describes this as a “static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.”⁸ Here, I ask how sound—or more specifically, noise—can make possible the relation of “not one, but also not two.” Considering the confluence of pregnancy, writing, and queerness, I explore a kind of relationality that ties to embodied destruction and multiplicity. In the chapter’s final section, I find a layered plurality in the layered temporalities of both texts, looking to conditional and subjunctive grammars as a writing to and alongside impossibility. The chapter ends with Nelson’s turn to rhyme in the last line of *The Argonauts*, in a meditation on lyric, rhythm, and unending serial form.

I.

An Impossible Lyric

Bluets begins with a conditional proposition that unravels the generic conventions of confessional lyric:

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then* (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow* personal.⁹

With this repeated “suppose,” Nelson begins her book with a proposition that asks the reader to imagine her narrator saying something to them.¹⁰ However, this something is suspended or perhaps even imaginary—we are “supposing” it were true. In this scene, she speaks intimately, “as though it were a confession,” invoking both the “I” and the confessional aspect of lyric genre but with a caveat—we enter the text in a suspended space wherein we are not sure whether we are meant to believe this confession.¹¹ We still have an “I” here, but the bounds of this subject do not hold in *Bluets*. We are in the realm of something that is “*somehow* personal,”

⁸ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 91.

⁹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 1.

¹⁰ Alexandra Parsons points out the way that this first proposition “places us in an imagined physical relation to Nelson: she invites us to picture sitting across a table from her at a cafe, bearing witness to the physical tension betrayed by the charming detail of her ‘shred[ing her] napkin’ as she shared her love-affair ‘as though it were a confession.’” Parsons, “A Meditation on Color and the Body in Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*,” 385.

¹¹ Examining *Bluets*’ opening proposition in terms of what Gillian White calls “lyric shame,” Ben Lerner observes how “a language of impersonal philosophical skepticism—the ‘suppose,’ the *Tractatus*-like numbering, the subjunctive—interacts with an emotional vocabulary and experiential detail. The italics also introduce the possibility of multiple voices, or at least two distinct temporalities of writing, undermining the assumption of univocality and spokenness conventionally associated with the lyric. As though it were a confession; ‘it became somehow personal’: two terms associated with lyric and its shame are both ‘spoken’ and qualified at the outset of the book—a book that will go on to be powerfully confessional and personal indeed.” Lerner, “Beyond ‘Lyric Shame’: Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson.”

but, in its conditional stance, this opening passage unwinds itself from any generic conventions that might offer the personal experience of an intact subject. We stare into an empty teacup alongside the narrator, the teacup's emptiness anticipating to the dissolution of the subject that occurs throughout the text.

Another turn away from lyric comes a few pages later with a reference to Wallace Stevens' poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar": "and please don't talk to me about 'things as they are' being changed upon any 'blue guitar.' What can be changed upon a blue guitar is not of interest here."¹² Contrary to this early rejection of the poem, Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" overlaps thematically with some of *Bluets*' movements: its turn to darkness, its rejection of definitions, the dissolution of fixity.¹³ If Stevens takes up similar themes and mysteries in "Blue Guitar," then what is it, for Nelson, that is "not of interest here"? In this reference to Stevens, Nelson would seem to part ways with lyric completely, a rejection that might align with this shift to the prose fragment from her earlier publications in verse. However, we could read this disinterest in Stevens as, instead, a rejection of the idea that blue changes anything—"what can be changed upon a blue guitar is not of interest here." Nelson is not looking at blue for its power to change. Likewise, tied up with her exploration of blue is a search for—or a belief in—a kind of writing that leaves everything unchanged. She writes: "For better or worse, I do not think that writing changes very much, if at all. For the most part, I think it leaves everything as it is."¹⁴ Indeed, while *Bluets* might be a text "about blue," it includes no visual reproductions and

¹² Nelson, *Bluets*, 5.

¹³ In the penultimate section of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens turns to darkness, moving away from light and its proximity to definitions and names:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

In the first two stanzas, Stevens rejects rotted names and definitions, calling for a different kind of description in order to "say of what you see in the dark." Space here is "mad" and "jocular," and it seems to be undone in darkness where nothing stands "between you and the shapes you take." Darkness destroys the crust of the shape, allowing a kind of immediacy or proximity where there is no clear distinction between shapes. Removing the fixed edges of a shape, removing names and definitions, we have contours without limits—a shimmering silhouette rather than a clear delineation. Even if "you are yourself," this is a shifting self that is surprised, or acted upon, by the blue guitar. Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 183.

¹⁴ Nelson, *Bluets*, 74.

very little distinctly visual description. Nelson is not trying to capture anything blue with her writing. As she says toward the end of the book:

193. I will admit, however, upon considering the matter further, that writing does do something to one's memory—that at times it can have the effect of an album of childhood photographs, in which each image replaces the memory it aims to preserve. Perhaps this is why I am avoiding writing about too many specific blue things—I don't want to displace my memories of them, nor embalm them, nor exalt them. In fact, I think I would like it best if my writing could empty me further of them, so that I might become a better vessel for new blue things.¹⁵

Rather than displace, exalt, or embalm her blue things, Nelson's writing is constantly moving in an attempt not to capture—and therefore change—its subject.

If writing changes anything here (although “change” might not exactly be right), it would be an emptying of the self. Insofar as Nelson admittedly has “little to no instinct for protection,”¹⁶ her writing—like her resistance to preserving her blue things—allows entropy to continue along. She writes so that, as Kyra Sutton describes, “rigid ontological distinctions between the *you*, *blue*, and even the *I* are revealed to be overwhelmed by the kenotic movement at the heart of the text.” In this kenotic movement, “the ‘self’ is consistently undone, in the process of dissolving, in the name of a groundless ‘belief.’” Sutton continues:

Though Nelson is often read in the vein of memoir or confessional, I would argue that the book's serial aphoristic structure enacts a different form entirely [...] This is no longer the autobiographical realm of a static subject—one of “religious” confessional or “secular” memoir—but that of a subject's dissolution.¹⁷

Reading *Bluets* as a postsecular text, Sutton points to the ways in which Nelson's serial form works to disperse autobiography's stable, linear subject. In Nelson's move away from lyric and toward *Bluets*' de-subjectivating seriality, the subject is formally undone, emptied.

A Move Toward Blue is a Move Toward the World

As the color of the sky and the ocean, blue can often mark something unboundaried or out of reach. Along these lines, Nelson quotes Goethe, who writes: “we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.”¹⁸ For Goethe, blue enacts a reaching gesture that opens us up toward desire. As Nelson then offers:

You might want to reach out and disturb the pile of pigment, for example, first staining your fingers with it, then staining the world. You might want to dilute it and swim in it,

¹⁵ Nelson, 77.

¹⁶ Nelson, 82.

¹⁷ Sutton, “Back to the Future: The Postsecular Literary Imaginary in Maggie Nelson and Ben Lerner,” 253.

¹⁸ Nelson, *Bluets*, 4.

you might want to rouge your nipples with it, you might want to paint a virgin's robe with it. But you still wouldn't be accessing the blue of it. Not exactly.¹⁹

Here, we are reaching toward blue, trying to be inside of it, to touch it, trying to stain ourselves and others with it, and yet we can never wholly access or possess it. If we take a bucket of water out of the ocean, it no longer appears blue. We can never reach the blue of the sky. The sky and the ocean are composed of blues we cannot grasp.

While Nelson references many blue objects throughout the text, the ocean plays a pivotal role in her love of blue:

The half-circle of blinding turquoise ocean is this love's primal scene. That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless. I returned there yesterday and stood again upon the mountain.²⁰

Here, to be in the midst of the ocean's blue is to become "choiceless," stripped of the freedom to choose often associated with conceptions of subjecthood. However, it is this de-subjectivating blue that makes the speaker's life remarkable even—or perhaps because—it undoes the notion of an acting subject within a passive landscape. This binary is obfuscated, confused, as the speaker stands both in the midst and on the edge of blue. Another form of experience is happening here.²¹

While the idea of choicelessness might seem to denote a lack of freedom, it also speaks to the concept of choiceless awareness in Vedic meditation. "Choicelessness, in the Vedic sense, refers to *knowing* deep down what the most relevant action and attitude might be at any given time. You don't have to think, wait, deliberate, wonder, or struggle about wondering what to do... as consciousness expands, you *know* what to do."²² In this sense, choicelessness becomes preferable and even delightful. Choice, insofar as it is rooted in "me-centered" thinking, becomes a site of suffering. By contrast, in choiceless awareness, attention expands beyond the "me" which would limit it. Returning to Nelson's scene in front of the ocean, we can see a shift in the lines from the "me" of "my life," to the more general "one": "To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless." Choicelessness seems to indicate a departure from the thinking that would demarcate "my life" as a separate thing. For a choiceless moment, we lose contact with the "I."

Divinity, Darkness, Oblivion

The sky's blue also leads Nelson toward engagements with the divine: "I watched the white winter light spangle the cloudy blue and I knew together they made God."²³ In this line, Nelson demonstrates a kind of faith in the causal relationship between color and god—to look at the sky and to *know* with certainty that light mixed with pigment is what makes god. At the same

¹⁹ Nelson, 4.

²⁰ Nelson, 3.

²¹ Cf. *Blue, Brushed Grammar* in Chapter 1.

²² DeChenne, "Choiceless Awareness Is the Dance."

²³ Nelson, *Blues*, 9.

time, in *Bluets*, pigment, light, and the divine lead toward a darkness that undoes such certainty. Nelson explores the ways that god has been figured, not just as light, but also as a “Divine Darkness” which is beyond light. She quotes Dionysius the Areopagite: “by not-seeing and unknowing we attain to true vision and knowledge.” Nelson then links this to “the idea of *agnosia*, or *unknowing*, which is what one ideally finds, or undergoes, or achieves, within this Divine Darkness. Again: this *agnosia* is not a form of ignorance, but rather a kind of *undoing*.”²⁴ In darkness, it is possible to undo and unknow—to empty, perhaps—in order to move toward a non-visual kind of knowledge.

As I explore in Chapter One, blue is so tied to darkness—it can veer so closely toward black and into the non-visual realm—and this is part of its beauty and its magic. To see it is to be on the edge of nothingness—in the empty space behind the sky.²⁵ Or, as Nelson puts it, “to seek these far off blue places is [...] to seek oblivion.”²⁶ At one moment we are seeing blue, and the next, we move toward a non-visual experience of blue where we are “alone in the darkness, in all its pulsing quiet.”²⁷ Like in choicelessness, the subject in *Bluets* dissolves in darkness, divinity, and oblivion. Indeed, *Bluets* could be read as an exploration of various forms of obliteration, a kind of phenomenology of the intangible and unknowable, in which life is found in darkness, formlessness, and emptiness.

Darkness and the Unwritten

Nelson’s exploration of blue keeps moving toward darkness. Perhaps this is because, as she says in *The Argonauts*: “(visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre.)”²⁸ She writes with a kind of letting go of the material or subject of her text, almost like grains of sand falling through her fingers or “a sleeve of ash falling off a lit cigarette.”²⁹ At times, Nelson describes her own book as unwritable, unwritten:

13. At a job interview at a university, three men sitting across from me at a table. On my cv it says that I am currently working on a book about the color blue. I have been saying this for years without writing a word.³⁰

Not writing the book seems at times to be an expression of her passion for blue. As she emphasizes early on: “I have enjoyed telling people that I am writing a book about blue without actually doing it.”³¹ Although we are, in fact, reading *a* book by Nelson on blue, an unwritten or unopened book exists alongside or within this one—a potential never to be realized. Perhaps this is because Nelson’s book on blue is so tied up in darkness that, even as we read the text, we are pulled further away from it. As she says: “We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It

²⁴ Nelson, 63.

²⁵ “The blue of the sky depends on the darkness of empty space behind it. As one optics journal puts it, “The color of any planetary atmosphere viewed against the black of space and illuminated by a sunlike star will also be blue.” In which case blue is something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire.” Nelson, 62.

²⁶ Nelson, 55.

²⁷ Nelson, 94.

²⁸ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 86.

²⁹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 5.

³⁰ Nelson, 5.

³¹ Nelson, 6.

is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.”³² This line reads like a description of Nelson’s writing, which can be a kind of dizzying, disorienting attempt to read that which is illegible, to see that which is unseeable, but also to let go of any attempt to do so. If blue becomes almost interchangeable with darkness, then the text becomes unreadable to a certain extent. In *Bluets*, writing becomes a way of letting go of both blue and the self so that both “subjects” can recede.

This receding of the writing subject appears early in the text, in two consecutive fragments:

10. The most I want to do is show you the end of my index finger. Its muteness.
11. That is to say: I don’t care if it’s colorless.

I read the index finger here as, not just the finger that points, but part of the hand that writes. Its muteness would speak to something unsayable or inarticulate in the writing hand but also to a haptic quality in the writing. Then, with the next line, there seems, even if only through proximity, to be a relationship between muteness and colorlessness. The index finger is colorless, invisible, writing somehow, but also not speaking. To consider color from the point of colorlessness, to write from the point of muteness—here we have a stance without a center, without sound, a finger pointing toward nothing.

Shimmering Mess

Sound and voice factor explicitly into Nelson’s blue, both in her references to songs and singers—Lucinda Williams, Billie Holiday, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen—and in how these musicians take up “feeling blue” in song. There also seems to be an implicit sonic component in her understanding of color:

[...] For the rest of our lives, barring blunted or blinded sight, we find ourselves face-to-face with all these phenomena at once, and we call the whole shimmering mess “color.” You might even say that it is the business of the eye to make colored forms out of what is essentially shimmering.³³

This “shimmering mess” is comparable to the vibratory, layered, resonant quality of sound. Here, sound becomes necessary for understanding color, particularly when we have moved into darkness, or when we cannot—or need not—distinguish between “all these phenomena at once.”

Sound also comes into Nelson’s many associations of blue with shadow and “dazzling darkness,” where an absence of light pushes blue beyond and outside of the visual register. In reference to Billie Holiday’s “Lady Sing the Blues” Nelson says, “Nonetheless, as Billie Holiday knew, it remains the case that to see blue in deeper and deeper saturation is eventually to move toward darkness.”³⁴ Here, the deepest blue involves the absence of light. It also involves a mixing of darkness and song that moves toward sadness and pain. At the same time, in its

³² Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 51.

³³ Nelson, *Bluets*, 20.

³⁴ Nelson, 52.

connection to sound and to Divine Darkness, blue works as a sort of anti-knowledge related to “unknowing” and “undoing.” Indeed, blue “has no mind.” Instead, like pain and like sound, “it radiates.”³⁵ Even if blue is about unknowing, Billie Holiday *knows* something about the deepest blue, a kind of knowledge that joins “feeling blue” with Blues music and Blackness. In darkness and undoing, in radiating and shimmering, blue elicits sound, song, and Blackness.³⁶

II.

Pregnant Writing Before the Self

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson gestures toward an (internal) sound that communicates the complex subjectivity of pregnancy. She describes this as a “static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.”³⁷ What is this static that makes such complex relationality heard but not articulated? How is it that sound—or more specifically, noise—can make possible the relation of “not one, but also not two”? Here, noise brings about what Nelson refers to later as the strange relationality of how “we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (*Argo*). I guess the cheery way of looking at this snowball would be to say, subjectivity is keenly relational, and it is strange. *We are for another, or by virtue of another.*”³⁸ In the (perhaps imaginary) static noise of “not one, but also not two,” the strangeness of subjectivity’s relationality makes itself heard. To imagine the noise of pregnancy is to enter into a space of inarticulacy and womb-like darkness—where such layered relationality cannot be understood or spoken and can only be experienced through a kind of disorienting static murmur.

This resonant relationality is furthered by Moten’s notion in *Black and Blur*, of “the (not) (in) between,” which is a move away from opposition and toward an indeterminate, expansive positionality. The strange relationality and pregnant static that Nelson describes here might flesh out another form of the social—where sound and body cannot be disentangled. As Moten asks in *In the Break*, “what’s the relation between phonic materiality and anoriginal maternity?”³⁹ Perhaps, Nelson’s pregnant writing could work alongside the wild, black, nothingness in Moten’s move away from the face, moving further toward the radical entanglement of we and

³⁵ Nelson, 65.

³⁶ Although there is the lingering presence of a kind of blue that can only go along with Blackness, Nelson doesn’t make much mention of race in *Bluets*. Nor, for that matter, does she in *The Argonauts*. Many have commented on Nelson’s exclusion of voices of color from her writing, particularly on motherhood. Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks: “What if mothering is about the *how* of it? In 1987, Hortense Spillers wrote “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: A New American Grammar Book,” reminding her peers that motherHOOD is a status granted by patriarchy to white middle-class women, those women whose legal rights to their children are never questioned, regardless of who does the labor (the *how*) of keeping them alive. MotherING is another matter, a possible action, the name for that nurturing work, that survival dance, *worked* by enslaved women who were forced to breastfeed the children of the status mothers while having no control over whether their birth or chosen children were sold away.” Gumbs, “M/Other Ourselves: A Black Queer Feminist Genealogy for Radical Mothering,” 22.

³⁷ Here is the full quotation: “As if when I myself see pregnant women in the public sphere, there isn’t a kind of drumming in my mind that threatens to drown out all else: *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant*, perhaps because the soul (or souls) in utero is pumping out static, static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.” Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 91.

³⁸ Nelson, 95.

³⁹ Moten, *In the Break*, 235.

the sonic sociality of blue. To read the undoing of the white subject in the absence of explicit discussions of Blackness is to read the text alongside a different canon, a different set of references. Bringing this tangling of white subjecthood into conversation with Moten's "(not) (in) between" might move us toward a form of pregnant, embodied writing with radical subjunctive potential, an ongoing seriality where we are not lingering in the snowball of whiteness.⁴⁰

In the background of all this lies a feminist tradition of self-writing that writes with the body and away from the coherent self. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous writes that "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse [...] women will go right up to the impossible."⁴¹ This "impregnable language" that comes from women's writing with and through the body is, in Cixous' words, both destructive and impossible. It brushes up alongside both Moten's and Nelson's seriality—where the linear self is upended. Moreover, it speaks to the idea, in *Bluets*, of an impossible writing, an impossible text.

With this confluence of pregnancy, writing, and queer selfhood, I am in search of a kind of relationality that ties to embodied destruction, multiplicity, and (im)possibility. However, I am not trying to idealize the actual state of pregnancy. Rather, I am working with an image of it—or, a lack of image, a sound—which Moten unearths so intriguingly by thinking away from portraiture and the face. I am trying to imagine a sociality where the other is a part of you, present but invisible.⁴² That kind of relationality requires an enormous amount of faith, a faith that I think pregnancy can evoke, and that Nelson and Moten evoke in the ways that they tie blue to darkness, sound, and the divine. There is something in blue's slipperiness, its sliding into black, us sliding into it, that can make our edges blur.

At times, Nelson approaches something like this faith in descriptions of her experience of pregnancy in *The Argonauts*:

Powerlessness, finitude, endurance. You are making the baby, but not *directly*. You are responsible for his welfare, but unable to control the core elements. You must allow him to unfurl, you must feed his unfurling, you must hold him. But he will unfurl as his cells are programmed to unfurl.⁴³

There is powerlessness amidst responsibility here. There is a kind of vertigo to that combination, a wavering between poles, a destabilizing and letting go of anything like control. This dynamic might approximate Nelson's description of her relationship with her baby: "I have my baby, and

⁴⁰ Cf. David Hammons' "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," which I reference in the Introduction.

⁴¹ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 886.

⁴² In Moten's praise blurb included in the pages before *The Argonauts* begins, he speaks to the relationship between the maternal, futurity, violence, and love: "Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* makes the socialization of the maternal function—the dispersed, dispersive essence of the futurity we present to one another until one is not another anymore—palpable as feeling and thought. There's the violence we commit in making a claim for that futurity, and the violence we endure when that claim is denied; there's the love story buried in every 'I love you,' and in every 'I love you' there's a contract for destruction and rebuilding [...]"

⁴³ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 91–92.

my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology.”⁴⁴ In this floating eros between mother and baby, there is love without exactly an object of desire.

Anne Carson describes the evasiveness of eros’ syntax in *Eros the Bittersweet*: “As syntax it impressed us as something of a subterfuge: properly a noun, eros acts everywhere like a verb. Its action is to reach, and the reach of desire involves every lover in an activity of the imagination.”⁴⁵ As both noun and verb enacted by desire and the imagination, eros describes a kind of writing that emerges in the strange relationality of pregnancy as well as in Nelson’s choice to write about slippery subjects like gender and color. How to take up ontologically indeterminate subjects in one’s writing, Nelson seems to ask, while maintaining that indeterminacy? On this kind of writing, Nelson looks to Sedgwick and Barthes, who each describe the dual activity of pluralizing while refining and specifying. Nelson says that “this is an activity that demands an attentiveness—a relentlessness, even—whose very rigor tips it into ardor.”⁴⁶ Here, a kind of passionate attentiveness is required in the movement to pluralize and refine at once—to maintain the expansiveness of one’s subject without losing the rigor of attentive care. This ardor, akin to Nelson’s buoyant eros without object, describes the approach to writing about subjects like pregnancy, gender, and color. Each of these refuse a center, and in many ways, they also refuse language. The movement of this writing is like the “radiating” and “shimmering” of blue in *Bluets*. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson offers a quote from Denise Riley that also speaks to this: “gendered selfconsciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature.”⁴⁷ With Nelson’s static and the (not) (in) between of Moten’s blue seriality, it becomes possible to imagine a writing that echoes and amplifies its subject, radiating, shimmering, and flickering in and out.

Writing to Another

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson describes a “writing that dramatizes the ways in which we are *for another* or *by virtue of another*, not in a single instance, but from the start and always.”⁴⁸ At the same time, she acknowledges “the discomfiting fact that relation can never be achieved in a simple fashion through writing.”⁴⁹ It is the friction between these two seemingly opposing poles that dramatizes the book. Indeed, *The Argonaut* begins with a disagreement—an argument between the narrator and her lover that takes place at the onset of their relationship. The argument concerns whether language has the power to express the inexpressible—Nelson’s favorite idea from Wittgenstein: “Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed”⁵⁰—or if, instead, it kills both that which cannot be expressed while irrevocably nailing in place all that it names. This argument shapes the investigations that follow—investigations of the body and its possible permutations and transformations, of gender, love, birth, death, sex, writing. This argument also shapes the form of the text. With her deployment of the fragment, Nelson is able to approach and reapproach such subjects without nailing them down. In fact, it is Nelson who “changed too. I looked anew

⁴⁴ Nelson, 44.

⁴⁵ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 63.

⁴⁶ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 15.

⁴⁷ Nelson, 15.

⁴⁸ Nelson, 60.

⁴⁹ Nelson, 76.

⁵⁰ Nelson, 3.

at unnameable things, or at least those things whose essence is flicker, flow.”⁵¹ *The Argonauts* is a text born from the potentiality of friction and disagreement, and from the idea that we can never quite write relationality even if all writing ever attempts to do is reach the other in some form or another.

Even in *Bluets*, where Nelson often meditates on the experience of loneliness,⁵² writing is an inherently plural exercise.⁵³

How often, in my private mind, have I choreographed ribbons of black and red in water, two serious ropes of heart and mind. The ink and the blood in the turquoise water: these are the colors inside the fucking.⁵⁴

Here, body, writing, desire, and color converge. The colors are both “inside”—“in my private mind”—but they are also part of something that happens between people. Writing and fucking—two throughlines in *Bluets*—are both activities insofar as, in Nelson’s descriptions of them, they “kill the time.” They are also *not* activities insofar as they both “leave everything as it is.”⁵⁵ In the above proposition, fucking and writing intertwine when submerged in blue water—in these images body and text mix together chromatically in an act of the imagination—an act which, like eros, is both noun and verb. There is also a devotional quality that surrounds these “activities”—it seems that god can be found here as a part of such “time-killing” endeavors. To kill time is, in some ways, to transcend it, to reach a kind of non-durational experience (that “leave[s] everything as it is”) and in which the subject is obliterated in devotional relationality.

It is particularly striking to consider relationality in the context of color insofar as it is notoriously difficult to know if our experiences of color are similar. In her reading of *Bluets* alongside Derek Jarman’s *Chroma*, Alexandra Parsons writes that “color provides a distilled demonstration of our inability to share an exact understanding of the world with one another.”⁵⁶ However, there is also a different sort of relation gestured toward here, that is not dependent on “understanding” the other. With Nelson and Jarman, Parsons finds that attending to color’s universality alongside its contradictions provides “a means of attempting to get closer to a fuller understanding of the world, [while] simultaneously accepting the futility of any such task.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Nelson continues to explore ways in which color can be shared, as well as ways in which people have attempted to share it:

⁵¹ Nelson, 4.

⁵² *Bluets* begins with a kind of loneliness that ties to, or grants access to, the divine: “I admit that I may have been lonely. I know that loneliness can produce bolts of hot pain, a pain which, if it stays hot enough for long enough, can begin to simulate, or to provoke—take your pick—an apprehension of the divine. (*This ought to arouse our suspicions.*)” Is belief in the divine not the ultimate antidote to loneliness? Nelson, *Bluets*, 2.

⁵³ On Leonard Cohen’s famous blue raincoat, Nelson writes:

I have always loved its final line—‘Sincerely, L. Cohen’—as it makes me feel less alone in composing almost everything I write as a letter. I would even go so far as to say that I do not know how to compose otherwise, which makes writing in a prism of solitude, as I am here, a somewhat novel and painful experiment.

Even if she describes *Bluets* as an exercise in writing with loneliness, her personal modes of second person address can often resemble a letter. Nelson, 41.

⁵⁴ Nelson, 76.

⁵⁵ Nelson, 75.

⁵⁶ Parsons, “A Meditation on Color and the Body in Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*,” 379.

⁵⁷ Parsons, 380.

There are no instruments for measuring color; there are no “color thermometers.” How could there be, as “color knowledge” always remains contingent upon an individual perceiver? This didn’t stop a certain Horace Bénédict de Saussure, however, from inventing, in 1789, a device he called the “cyanometer,” with which he hoped to measure the blue of the sky.⁵⁸

It is interesting to think of Saussure’s “cyanometer,” this attempt to measure blue, as actually an attempt to see blue collectively. Rather than a limit or a label, it seems possible that measuring here could become a way to share in the blue of the sky, a way not to experience this blue alone.⁵⁹

There is a dynamism to this idea of sharing something which can never really be shared, that ties to Nelson’s complexly relational writing. In Julia Kristeva’s explorations of color and language, she finds that color achieves “the laying down of One Meaning so that it might at once be pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings. Color is the shattering of unity. Thus, it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject, accepts.”⁶⁰ Here, color’s proliferating expansive movements push the subject beyond accepted norms and codes. Kristeva continues, however, to claim that the plurality of color does not just shatter the subject’s adherence to such codes, but leads also to a shattering of the subject itself: “The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm for language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences. These, however, are articulated within an area beyond meaning that holds meaning’s surplus. Color is not zero meaning; it is excess meaning.”⁶¹ Color signifies as excess, as difference, and as a shattering of the subject that cannot be relegated or explained; it is “beyond meaning.”

The (Un)Address

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson often appears to address her partner directly in the second person. By contrast, she does not address her baby directly (except in one brief fragment at the very end of the book). On the idea of writing to her (unborn) baby, she says:

I consider writing Iggy a letter before he was born, but while I talked to him a lot in utero, I stalled out when it came to writing anything down. Writing to him felt akin to giving him a name: an act of love, surely, but also one of irrevocable classification, interpellation [...] The baby wasn’t separate from me, so what use would it be to write to him as if he were off at sea?⁶²

⁵⁸ Nelson, *Bluets*, 39–40.

⁵⁹ Gesturing toward a potential shift in value, Nelson writes on sharing blue alongside blue’s abundance: “It does not really bother me that half the adults in the Western world also love blue, or that every dozen years or so someone feels compelled to write a book about it. I feel confident enough of the specificity and strength of my relation to share it. Besides, it must be admitted that if blue is anything on this earth, it is *abundant*.” Nelson, 61.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 221.

⁶¹ Kristeva, 221.

⁶² Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 140–41.

In this indirect address, Nelson writes *toward* but not *to* her baby.⁶³ We might describe this mode of non-address as a kind of perpetually pregnant writing.⁶⁴ We see flashes of it in Nelson’s descriptions of being in labor: “an experience that *demand*s surrender”⁶⁵ or, in her “question from the inside”: “*How does one submit to falling forever, to going to pieces.*”⁶⁶ In many way, this falling forever, this surrender to a self-in-pieces, gets at a writing where, in Nelson’s paraphrase of Heraclitus in *Bluets*, one approaches “the possibility—the inevitability, even—of a fresh self stepping into ever-fresh waters.”⁶⁷ This fresh self is a plural self, a fractured self, an amplification in which ink, blood, and blue mix in water, where self and other might cease to be the question.

III.

Layered Temporality, Layered Plurality

In *Bluets*, Nelson often lingers in memories. At other moments, she thinks in the present—in attempts to understand the perceptual experience of color, or in her second person commands and addresses. Alongside these temporal shifts, several consecutive fragments begin with incomplete sentences. For example:

41. On the eve of the millennium, driving through the Valley of the Moon.

[...]

42. Sitting in my office before teaching a class on prosody, trying not to think about you, about my having lost you.

[...]

43. Before a faculty meeting, talking again with the expert on guppy menopause.⁶⁸

Although seemingly unrelated, these incomplete sentences appear as a series, each containing a gerund or present participle that implies a layered temporality, with multiple things occurring at once. Each sentence begins in anticipation of something to come, with a before-ness that sits amidst that which is ongoing. These gerunds contrast with the temporality of the next fragment:

⁶³ Another way of imagining this kind of (un)address might be in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of “speaking nearby,” which Trinh describes as:

A speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition — these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language.

Here, Trinh references a decolonized mode of speaking that allows for an open dialogue to unfold in indirect speech. In this approach, the words of another are not explicated or subsumed, but rather allowed space to speak for themselves in words that are *felt* rather than explicated or decoded. Trinh and Chen, ““Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha,” 87.

⁶⁴ Nelson inadvertently speaks to this in her description of her writing process: “You need to engage, and then perform, textually, the alchemy of your body thinking through another’s body. The stakes have to be high; it has to matter.” Nelson, ““A Sort of Leaning Against”: Writing With, From, and For Others.”

⁶⁵ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 134.

⁶⁶ Nelson, 84.

⁶⁷ Nelson, *Bluets*, 80.

⁶⁸ Nelson, *Bluets*, 16-17.

44. This particular conversation with the expert on guppy menopause takes place on a day when, later that afternoon a therapist will say to me, *If he hadn't lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is.*

This fragment frames an event in the past as if it were still to come: the therapist “will say” this thing. The conditional framing of the therapist’s statement indicates a sort of temporality of alternate possibilities, or in which to imagine these possibilities.

These alternating and overlapping temporalities speak to Mallarmé’s notion of the perfect, unwritable book to which Nelson returns throughout *Bluets*: “For Mallarmé, the perfect book was one whose pages have never been cut, their mystery forever preserved, like a bird’s folded wing, or a fan never opened.”⁶⁹ Perhaps, this unwritten or unopened book might approximate the pregnant potential of Moten’s blue seriality—an inability to envisage the whole portrait.⁷⁰ The temporality of the gerund, the future, and the conditional work alongside Nelson’s imaginings of the (im)possibilities of a text:

“could one imagine a book similarly saturated, but with color?”⁷¹

“could one imagine a book that functioned similarly, albeit in reverse—a kind of optional black-and-white appendage to a larger body of blue (e.g., “the blue planet”)?”⁷²

By imagining a book throughout the book we are reading—as well as referring sporadically to her unwritten book on blue—Nelson makes room for alternate, even impossible texts within this one. For Nelson to write about the book that couldn’t be written is to admit to a kind of failure, but one that, by imagining an alternative, opens the door for something else to be possible.⁷³ Returning to *Bluets*’ opening proposition, it seems that the conditional and the subjunctive engage a writing that leans toward impossibility.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Nelson, 70.

⁷⁰ Another parallel might be Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, in which the section entitled, “Erato Love Poetry,” is fragmented so that blank spaces line up with text on opposing pages. With this form, the text is completed only when the book is closed, enacting an idea of the unreadable text as the perfect text. The self of this section inhabits an expansive non-linear time, and (ala Moten) cannot be captured: “Her portrait is not represented in a still photograph, nor in a painting. All along, you see her without actually seeing, actually having seen her yet. For the moment, you see only her traces.” Cha, *Dictee*, 100.

⁷¹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 57.

⁷² Nelson, 66.

⁷³ There is also a grammatical component to Jack Halberstam’s notion of queer failure which, he writes, “begs for a grammar of possibility (here expressed in gerunds and the passive voice, among other grammars of pronouncement).” Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

⁷⁴ Moten also works on the edges of grammar and syntax. Speaking of C.L.R. James, he writes: “I’m interested in those moments in James’s historiography when meaning is cut and augmented by the very independent syntaxes and outer noises—conveying new and revolutionary content, mysterious and black magical politico-economic spells and spellings—that James would record. Those moments help to structure a collusive interplay in the work that is not in between but outside of the broad-edged narrative/historical trajectory of a familiar dialectical lineage now cut and augmented by the serrated lyricism of what Robinson calls the ‘black radical tradition.’” Moten finds meaning cut and augmented by noise and syntax, where radical form can work outside of a narrative and historical trajectory. Moten, *Black and Blur*, 6.

An Ending Without End

The Argonauts ends with the following two fragments:

When all the mythologies have been set aside, we can see that, children or no children, *the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing.*

But is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song.⁷⁵

Even if *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* have moved away from poetic verse, the book's final line ends in rhyme.⁷⁶ To move from death, nothingness, and pointlessness into rhyme seems to recuperate something from lyric, as the text ends in a formal wavering where it appears, for a moment, to veer into poetic verse. Robyn Wiegman finds that this turn to rhyme "transpos[es] a confrontation with death into a celebratory emphasis on the present."⁷⁷ Whereas *Bluets*' first few pages point to the ways in which lyric's subject does not quite fit in the territory of the prose fragment, we now, at the end of *The Argonauts*, circle back to a rhyme that places us in a musical and insistent, perhaps nondurational (or at least unmeasurable) present.

This ending in a rhyme stuck in the present recalls Giorgio Agamben's *The End of the Poem*, in which he describes poetry as "defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment."⁷⁸ Here, Agamben also references Valéry's definition of the poem as "a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense."⁷⁹ These definitions work in conjunction, particularly when it comes to the relationship between enjambment and rhyme, where "it often happens that the rhyme ends, without the meaning of the sentence having been completed."⁸⁰ In rhyme and enjambment, the union of sound and sense is deferred. In surfacing the musical and sonic components of the text in these final lines—the reader is literally left in the rhyme of "ongoing song." Here, Nelson repeats "I don't know" and "who knows," seeming to indicate that sense is not to be expected right before leaving us in song. Insofar as the last line of a poem holds no possibility of enjambment, the end of the poem presents a sort of crisis of poetic form for Agamben.⁸¹ He asks, "if poetry is defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment, it follows that the last verse of a poem is not a verse. Does this mean that the last verse trespasses into prose?"⁸² With *The Argonaut's* final line, we have a sort of inverse of Agamben's conundrum,

⁷⁵ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 143.

⁷⁶ In Robyn Wiegman's reading of these final lines, she sees Nelson's italicized quote from Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani as a "rejection of the universalizing presumptions of theory" where Nelson "ruminates on what it means that living, much like thinking and loving – or narrative itself – inevitably comes to an end." Wiegman, "IN THE MARGINS WITH THE ARGONAUTS," 212.

⁷⁷ Wiegman, 212–13.

⁷⁸ Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 112.

⁷⁹ Agamben, 109.

⁸⁰ Agamben, 110.

⁸¹ In Ben Lerner's exploration of both Nelson's and Rankine's turn to the prose fragment, he also identifies a sense of crisis, finding that "the prose poem arises as a form during periods in which there is a crisis of confidence in verse strategies [with] the notion of the lyric being felt as a loss as it becomes prose." Lerner, "Beyond 'Lyric Shame': Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson."

⁸² Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 112.

where the last line trespasses into verse in a way that turns us back toward some sort of lyric subject, but it is one who has become impossible and is felt as a loss.⁸³

Looking to Nelson's question in *Bluets*—"Am I trying, with these 'propositions,' to build some kind of bower?"⁸⁴—Ben Lerner writes:

Nelson's "blue bower" evokes not only the actual bird, renowned for how the males construct and decorate "bowers" to attract mates, but also the traditional association of lyric with a metaphoric of birds and birdsong. It further evokes the Dante Gabriel Rossetti (a shamelessly lyric poet if there ever was one) painting of that name, as well as his poem with the received title "The Song of the Bower." To build a "blue bower" out of "propositions" is to cross a lyric and anti-lyric project in the space of prose, implicating and complicating both.⁸⁵

In the ways that lyric and anti-lyric converge, Lerner elaborates that Nelson enables "us to think of poetry as a reading practice as much as a writing practice, and to experience verse techniques as withheld or unavailable in *Bluets* instead of as merely forgone or forsworn."⁸⁶ To imagine a lyric reading practice brings us to a consideration of what these texts make possible for their reader. While *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* both employ a nonlinear, fragmented, serial prose form, there is still a sense of rhythm which retains something of poetry. We might consider each as a collage of fragments that has a rhythm.

Jean-Luc Nancy describes rhythm as "the vibration of time itself"; it "bends time to give it to time itself, and it is in this way that it folds and unfolds a 'self.'"⁸⁷ It is rhythm's bending of time that brings forth an unstable self, folded and unfolded. To become taken up by the texts' rhythm is to become unfolded in a non-linear temporality. Nancy looks also to the relationship between rhythm and timbre as outlining a "matrixlike constitution of resonance [...] when it is offered to listening."⁸⁸ Together, rhythm and timbre create a space of writing as what Nancy refers to as an "*archi-écriture*, a voice that resounds."⁸⁹ Turning to Wittgenstein's understanding of timbre (reminiscent of Nelson's devotion to Wittgenstein's idea of the inexpressible), Nancy writes that timbre is an image of:

experience that is not communicable. I would say that timbre is communication of the incommunicable: provided it is understood that the incommunicable is nothing other, in a perfectly logical way, than communication itself, that thing by which a subject makes an echo—of self, of other, it's all one—it's all one in the plural. Communication is not transmission, but a sharing that becomes subject: sharing as subject of all "subjects." An unfolding, a dance, a resonance. Sound in general is first of all communication in this

⁸³ According to Lerner, "perhaps there is a sense for Nelson (and Rankine) in which poetry isn't difficult—it's impossible. There is faith neither in poetry's power of imaginative redescription (the blue guitar) nor in its practical effects as a technology of intervening in history ('I do not think that writing changes very much')." Lerner, "Beyond 'Lyric Shame': Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson."

⁸⁴ Nelson, *Bluets*, 28.

⁸⁵ Lerner, "Beyond 'Lyric Shame': Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson."

⁸⁶ Lerner.

⁸⁷ Nancy, *Listening*, 17.

⁸⁸ Nancy, 36–37.

⁸⁹ Nancy, 36.

sense. At first it communicates nothing—except itself. At its weakest and least articulated degree, one would call it a noise [...] In a body that opens up and closes at the same time, that arranges itself and exposes itself with others, the noise of its sharing (with itself, with others) resounds: perhaps the cry in which the child is born, perhaps an even older resonance in the belly and from the belly of the mother.⁹⁰

Plurality, (in)communication, noise, and pregnancy converge in Nancy's idea of timbre—a sonic descriptor which cannot be measured and yet, still insists on a kind of sharing that goes beyond “sense.”

Perhaps, the alternate sense that we might find in this constellation of timbre, rhythm, and pregnant noise might be found in the rhyme of this “ongoing song.” To move away from lyric in the opening lines of *Bluets*, and then to return to rhyme in the last line of *The Argonauts*, evokes a layered temporality alongside the unwritten text(s) which haunt these. To end in a rhyme that seems to move away from sense gestures toward further possibilities of writing. While these possibilities may or may not ever be realized, they might, perhaps, be sung.

⁹⁰ Nancy, 41.

Chapter Three

“A Cave of Sighs”

Atmosphere, Breath, and Imagined Sound in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*

“All living is listening for a throat to open—”

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Citizen: An American Lyric defies the lyric genre of its subtitle. It does so not just in its prose-like form, but also because its second person “you” ruptures the lyric “I” typical of the genre. Perhaps the most troubling claim made about *Citizen*’s second person address—which has been heavily theorized since the book’s publication in 2014—is that it allows the white reader to “empathize” with the subject of anti-Black violence and microaggressions. Such readings emphasize and center the white readerly experience as the primary ethical work of the text, oversimplifying Rankine’s second person address as an invitation to a white audience to “understand” the experience of the racialized other. As Kyle Frisina writes, *Citizen* “has been widely engaged as an instructive, empathy-generating vehicle that ostensibly explains, per its *New York Times* review headline, ‘How It Feels to Be Black in America.’”¹ To instrumentalize *Citizen*’s “you” in this way makes it so that, in George Yancy’s words, “the issue of Black pain and suffering gets set aside and transformed into a process of focusing on white narcissism, which is a reinscription of whiteness as the center of discourse and concern.”²

While its subtitle may lead us to classify the text as a work of poetry, *Citizen* can also be considered an autotheoretical text insofar as it brings theory into conversation with personal experience, while working to interrogate the “coherent self” that is often assumed in accounts of the personal or autobiographical. Indeed, many of the “personal” experiences recounted in the book come from Rankine’s friends and colleagues and are not just hers alone, enacting an autotheory on the level of the communal or social. In eight formally distinct sections, the book takes up problems of anti-Blackness—from subtle, cumulative microaggressions to police violence and hate crimes. At the same time that Rankine’s “you” appears to thrust the reader into an affective, relational, dialogical space, the racist exchanges relayed in the text foreclose what Susan Stewart describes as lyric’s “social, mutual, intersubjective ground of intimacy.”³ Even if a form of address is taking place, a mutual ground of communication cannot occur from, or in, the narratives Rankine relays. In many ways, Rankine’s eschewal of traditional poetic address—in which the lyric “I” is foreclosed—demonstrates this rupture, this lack of intimate poetic ground on which to converse.⁴ Still, *Citizen*’s “you,” its invocation of dialogical address, has been readily taken up as a path toward white-centered empathy.

¹ Frisina, “From Performativity to Performance,” 141.

² Yancy, “White Gazes: What It Feels Like to Be an Essence,” 60.

³ Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 13.

⁴ Much has been said of the disconnect between Rankine’s subtitle and her choice to write primarily in prose. In reference to Rankine’s previous volume, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (which shares *Citizen*’s subtitle),

Rather than assume that these “you” moments are invocations that allow for white understanding, in this chapter I ask what kind of listening can or must occur when there is no mutual, stable, intimate ground on which to communicate. *Citizen’s* “you” challenges me to engage the text so that I am decentered from the frame while also remaining self-critical, where I move from an “I,” to a “you,” to perhaps going unaddressed entirely. I aim to read *Citizen* in a way that diverges from, as Rankine herself puts it, “the American tendency to normalize situations by centralizing whiteness,” asking instead whether a different kind of sociality could emerge by reading away from whiteness.⁵

I begin this chapter by suggesting that *Citizen’s* “you” creates an “apostrophic listener,” drawing from Jonathan Culler’s notion of lyric apostrophe. This listener is unstable and open, born from and made by the text, yet never fully cohered. I then move to an engagement with the nonlinear temporality of *Citizen*, a jumbling of time that makes slavery’s violent Middle Passage both concurrent and future of the contemporary racist exchanges portrayed in the text. This temporality is enmeshed with Rankine’s various descriptions of atmosphere, which is sometimes figured as “blue.” *Citizen’s* atmosphere blurs and converges the senses; at times the text’s atmosphere(s) are profoundly abstract or disorienting in ways that seem to drown and pull apart the Black body. This violent destabilizing leads into Rankine’s uncited engagement with white Confessional poet Robert Lowell in the middle of the book, where I linger further on how she deconstructs the confessional lyric “I” by conversing with and ventriloquizing Lowell, pointing to the incommensurability between the safety of Lowell’s lyric and the anti-Black violence to which Rankine gestures. Finally, I turn to Rankine’s description of a “cave of sighs” which allows for considerations of the relationship between the text’s spatiotemporal atmosphere and the precarity of Black breath. Here, I consider the role of an imagined soundscape in the text as a possibility for thinking and relating otherwise.

By looking to the sigh in *Citizen*, I investigate a listening method that attends to the pre-verbal, not-yet-articulated voices emitted within a poetic text, and how these non-linguistic evocations construct a racialized sonic atmosphere. I read so as to hear the sounds of the body and voice in and of the text, to ask what it could mean to hear a body’s breath in the text. Some questions hover over this chapter that I do not try to answer, exactly, but which spur my thinking and reading. When the sigh is written rather than voiced, what is heard and what is opened up? How does poetry or autotheory lend word to the “inarticulate” sigh or gesture? What kind of sonic climate does the sigh create? Finally, is there a relationality made possible by a poetics of breath and, if so, what are the roles of race, sound, self, and the imagination in this exchange?

Ben Lerner writes that “the traditional trappings of the lyric—verse itself, musicality, intense personal expression ... are less willfully rejected than made to feel unavailable.” Lerner, “Beyond ‘Lyric Shame’: Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson.” In Dan Chiasson’s review of *Citizen* in *The New Yorker*, he writes of the relationship between temporality and formal, poetic technologies: “you could argue that poetry is precisely about this return of the past, its many formal technologies—rhyme, meter, repeated verse and stanza forms—designed to make such recurrences possible and meaningful. In *Citizen*, the past has never receded in the first place. The needle is stuck, so the tune is lost.” Chiasson, “Color Codes: A Poet Examines Race in America.”

⁵ Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning.”

The Apostrophic Listener

We might think of listening to and in *Citizen* in relation to the figure of apostrophe that Jonathan Culler describes in his investigations of lyric genre. According to Culler, lyric apostrophe is typically understood as “a turning aside from supposedly real listeners to address someone or something that is not an ordinary, empirical listener, such as a nightingale, an urn, or one’s own poem.”⁶ While Rankine does not address anything quite like an urn in *Citizen*, the “you” is also neither ordinary nor empirical. Indeed, there is no stable addressee we could locate and then maintain throughout the text. As Kamran Javadizadeh puts it, “openness is the most salient characteristic of Rankine’s reconfigured lyric subject.”⁷ Culler describes apostrophe as:

... not just one trope among others but a troping on the circuit of communication or situation of address, a turning aside from whatever is taken to be the real or normal addressee... to some other entity which is not an ordinary present addressee. Apostrophes foreground the act of address, lift it out of ordinary empirical contexts, and thus at some level identify the poetic act as ritualistic, hortatory, a special sort of linguistic event.⁸

If the lyric apostrophe involves turning aside from standard modes of address, Rankine’s unstable second person could be understood as apostrophic insofar as she throws the (often taken for granted) form of poetic address into relief. By calling the trope of lyric address into question, Rankine challenges the stability and universality of the “I” and the “you.”

Akin to the liminality of her generic straddling of poetry and prose, Rankine’s “you” is indeterminate, unstable, and grammatically multiple. Sometimes it seems addressed to a specific other in a conversation, other times it seems to be the poet addressing herself or the one who experienced the interaction (we are never told which is which), and at others it could be read as a direct address to the reader. As Rankine has often mentioned, many of the stories in *Citizen* stem from her conversations with friends and colleagues about their own experiences of racism. In this sense, they are very particular “you’s”, and yet they are de-particularized into a lyric texture. The openness of *Citizen*’s “you,” keeps the reader on unstable ground, unclear of her role in a given story, unclear of her place as perpetrator, victim, or witness.

According to Christopher Grobe, *Citizen*’s mode of address “*involves us.*”⁹ We cannot read from a distance; we are implicated in the racist act. However, just because we are *involved*, does not mean that we *understand*, nor that we could easily center ourselves in the text. Instead, Lisa Uddin points out,

We are reminded of, or get acquainted with, how racism goes down as lived event marked by slippages, accidents, double-takes, and miasmas of feeling. We are invited to endure it, not analyze it, and certainly not master it. We are thrown into it, asked to bear

⁶ Culler, “Lyric, History, and Genre,” 68.

⁷ Javadizadeh, “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject,” 486.

⁸ Culler, “Lyric, History, and Genre,” 68–69.

⁹ Grobe, “Sound,” 189.

all of its disorientations and inconclusiveness. These are the states of unknowing that are required for any significant engagement with race.¹⁰

Ultimately, Rankine's "you" is not a transparent address in which the reader can insert herself. Rather, the shifting "you" points to impossibilities of intersubjective communication and understanding and instead proliferates what Uddin calls these "states of unknowing."¹¹ Engaging with race here requires unknowing and disorientation, not an attempt at understanding.

In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart explores the intersubjectivity of lyric poetry. She writes:

Every work of poesis anticipates and is completed by practices of reception... in lyric poetry, especially, the presentation of face-to-face communication is always triangulated. The poet speaks to another in such a way as to make the communication intelligible to more than one person. The communication is not simply intimate: it is constitutive of the social, mutual, intersubjective ground of intimacy itself.¹²

Here, Stewart describes a (seemingly unfringed) lyric dialogue, but she also points to the way that readerly reception enhances and constructs lyric's intimate ground. For Stewart, the triangulation of lyric occurs through the reader, who becomes a participant in the dialogue. By contrast, Rankine's engagement with an ambiguous second person address problematizes this triangulated communication that culminates with the reader. There is no "mutual, intersubjective ground of intimacy" on which we can rely. In Rankine's conversational disruptions of lyric genre, she offers alternatives for thinking the form of such exchanges, providing space for impoverished forms of communication to be attended to and recognized while maintaining the reader's instability. In Culler's notion of lyric apostrophe, he writes: "I have essentially treated it as an active form of naming, which performatively seeks to create what it names."¹³ If lyric apostrophe could be understood as an act of creating what it names or addresses, Rankine, in writing to and with a shifting "you," creates a different sort of listener, one who must listen without the stability of a clear subject position. In this way, the apostrophic listener points to or makes possible a form of sociality that departs from the "I" or "you."

Impossible Beginnings

Citizen's opening lines work immediately to problematize lyric's genre, subject, and address. The text begins:

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low,

¹⁰ Uddin, "The Matter of Black Life."

¹¹ We might also think of *Citizen's* shifting "you" in the way that Barthes describes "the shifter" in *Roland Barthes*: "the shifter thus appears as a complex means—furnished by language itself—of breaking communication: I speak (consider my mastery of the code) but I wrap myself in the mist of an enunciatory situation which is unknown to you; I insert into my discourse certain *leaks of interlocution*." Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 166.

¹² Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 13.

¹³ Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre," 68.

gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.¹⁴

Although, at first, it may seem that the “devices” you “are too tired even to turn on” would likely be a computer, phone, or television, the device here might also refer to the literary techniques we have come to expect from lyric poetry.¹⁵ The inaccessibility of literary device works alongside the absence of the lyric “I” from the start. However, even if devices cannot be turned on, at the end of this opening paragraph, Rankine does introduce a literary device: the metaphor. Here, the metaphor is named but not exactly employed and it is unclear who does this reconstructing as metaphor, for the “you” seems to passively “fall back into” it rather than write or speak it. Although we are told that these early memories are reconstructed *as metaphor*, the actual metaphor is not clear. This ambiguity is representative of the text’s formal tensions: there seems no active employment of poetic meter, rhythm, stanza, lineation, or rhyme, and yet there are ways in which literary devices are constructed or “fallen into,” despite their early rejection. In this beginning, form and device function as off-limits and inaccessible but also seem to provide a sort of inadvertent habit, coming together in spite of themselves. As such, *Citizen* is an American lyric that simultaneously refuses and engages conventional lyric devices—inhabiting this paradox.

There is also a simultaneous refusal and engagement of the white reader in *Citizen’s* beginning. Referring to this opening passage, Eric Falci writes that “white readers are implicitly invited to inhabit the ‘you,’” because at first it appears universal and racially unmarked. Then, on *Citizen’s* next page, when “you” becomes much more specific and specifically non-white, those same white readers are, according to Falci, “then turned back and must reckon with the implications of this double motion. This complexly orchestrated deictic mechanism discloses the whiteness of a white reader, who initially feels hailed by or included in the volume’s ubiquitous ‘you’ but is then dismissed by the terms and specifics of the scenario that unfolds.”¹⁶ To begin the text by feeling included in its address and then immediately thrown out of this inclusion sets the stage for an experience in which the white reader must constantly reorient and recalibrate, never again gaining stable footing.

There is also a temporal disorientation that begins in *Citizen’s* opening lines and persists throughout. The past is present from the very start, almost tangibly so, “stacked among your pillows.” You lie with the past, it surrounds you. Even before this first line, past, present, and future mingle and become confused. Depicted on the book’s cover is a sculpture by David Hammons entitled *In the Hood*, where the hood of a black athletic sweatshirt is hung with wire, empty, roughly shorn from the rest of the sweatshirt. To a contemporary reader the hood immediately calls to mind the murder of Trayvon Martin, to whom Rankine refers explicitly later in the book. Yet, Hammons’ piece was made in 1993, two decades before Martin’s murder, almost as if the sculpture anticipates or predicts it, in a way that jumbles temporal linearity.¹⁷

¹⁴ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 5.

¹⁵ In an interview with Rankine, Lauren Berlant comments on the metapoetics of *Citizen’s* first line, while also writing on Rankine’s engagement with devices such as tone throughout her text, claiming that the “you” in *Citizen* “needs such devices to defend, refuse, and reinvent the ordinary.” Rankine and Berlant, “Claudia Rankine,” 45.

¹⁶ Falci, *The Value of Poetry*, 76.

¹⁷ In Margo Natalie Crawford’s *Black Post-Blackness*, she writes of this disjuncture between Hammons’ piece and Trayvon Martin’s hood: “*In the Hood* was created nineteen years before the killing of Trayvon Martin and the emergence of Martin’s hoodie as an icon of young black men’s lack of protection against police brutality. As readers begin reading Rankine’s depictions of the everyday life of antiblack racism in the twenty-first century, and

Abram Foley identifies a relationship between time and the denial of Black life in Rankine, insofar as she attaches the white denial of Black life to a kind of forgetting. Foley points to Rankine's claim that "white liberals feel temporarily bad about black suffering," where "the 'temporarily' of which is engulfed by forgetting."¹⁸ Rankine's jumbling of time as well as her return to embodied memory work to counter the white forgetting of anti-Black violence. Foley continues by identifying that,

in Rankine, the spectacular and the timely wash over and submerge the mournful, the spectral, and the untimely. It is in opposing this fluid amnesia that Rankine remarks on her admiration for Black Lives Matter. The movement, she says, 'aligns with the dead, continues the mourning and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us' [...] Here, black lives matter in the refusal of forgetting.¹⁹

Rankine counters white forgetting by bringing in the names of those killed, many of whom are memorialized only briefly, as well as by calling attention to the "everyday" moments that are otherwise easily forgotten (or not even registered) by the white subject.

When nearing the end of her text, Rankine writes: "I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending."²⁰ This lack of ending is reinforced by the incorporation and magnification of Turner's 1840 oil painting, *The Slave Ship*, after the final lines of the book—a visual representation of history's eternal return, as if we have returned to the Middle Passage by the text's end. *In the Hood* and *The Slave Ship* frame the written text—a visual disordering that bars any attempt to read a linear temporality in *Citizen*. Admitting to a lack of ending is also a rephrasing of an earlier quotation from *Citizen's* section on Hurricane Katrina: "We never reached out to tell our story, because there's no ending to our story, he said."²¹ Rankine's linear disruptions show how, rather than end, the text will continue to stumble and stutter on.²²

Blue, Sonic Atmosphere

In section V, the text moves toward abstraction alongside a formal shift to freer lineation. At its midpoint, *Citizen* breaks with the prose-like paragraphs of the preceding sections. The section begins in prose, but then sentences start to fall off and into one another in almost Dickinsonian em dashes, leading into moments that resemble verse more than prose. The section is also full of atmospheric descriptions where the "you" becomes disoriented. These moments that veer into abstraction are shot through with an almost non-visual blue: "all day blue burrows the

her direct meditations on Trayvon Martin, the cover image can easily be misread as twenty-first-century, post-Trayvon Martin art, but Hammons's 1993 sculpture anticipated the power of the twenty-first-century reclamation of the hoodie as a way of raging against a white power structure. *In the Hood* anticipates *Citizen*; Hammons anticipates art that will enter into the presence of black absence—the real force that he produces when he hangs the hoodie on the wall and shapes it, with wire, into a sculptural form of presence as absence." Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 36–37.

¹⁸ Foley, "Claudia Rankine, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the Untimely Present," 228.

¹⁹ Foley, 229.

²⁰ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 159.

²¹ Rankine, 84.

²² Another important way that Rankine does this is by including a memorializing list of Black people murdered by the police, a list which continues to grow with each reprinting. I return to this list in more detail in the section "*Imagined Rhythm — Real Rhythm*."

atmosphere” and “You hold everything black. You give yourself back until nothing’s left but the dissolving blues of metaphor.”²³ Here again, metaphor—that literary device that seems to defy Rankine’s early turn away from the device—returns in a moment of abstraction and formal disintegration. Yet, the text’s metaphors are composed of “dissolving blues,” the only thing “left” but something that is constantly receding and cannot be held.

A blue light that recurs in this section appears also to indicate an absence of light, or perhaps just an absence. Blue seems to signify the text’s entry into abstraction, and a possible shift of sensory experience. In a description reminiscent of David Hammons’ *Concerto in Black and Blue*, Rankine writes:

In the darkened moment a body given blue light, a flashlight, enters with levity, with or without assumptions, doubts, with desire, the beating heart, disappointment, with desires—

Stand where you are.

You begin to move around in search of the steps it will take before you are thrown back into your own body, back into your own need to be found.

It is also possible that this absence of light points to an alternate form of sociality based on something other than visual recognition. As Moten writes in *Black and Blur*, “At twilight, in the evening, when sense is gone as sense’s blur, the sociality generally valued as relatively nothing is given in the full richness of its resistance to valuation.”²⁴ Alternate ways of relating emerge in this shift into blue darkness, where the dark allows you to enter “with levity, with or without assumptions, doubts, with desire, the beating heart.”

The dissolving blues amidst this move toward darkness work alongside some of the visual artwork reproduced in this section of the text. When asked about her inclusion of Carrie Mae Weems’ triptych, “Blue Black Boy,” Rankine responds, “I was really interested in echoing Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* throughout the text. I wanted it to rinse the world of *Citizen* in a certain way. [...] Sometimes the art pieces I gravitate toward speak to me in terms of narrative, at other times they speak to me in terms of mood.”²⁵ Music and image work together here, even as they recede into darkness. In the script for the situation video in Section VI entitled “February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” Davis’ *Kind of Blue* operates as elegy. In the section, Rankine speaks to, as she has said, “the weight the black male figure carries, given the fact that they are targeted by the police, and are constantly in danger of being misread in public spaces.”²⁶ Although elegiac, the section does not speak of its subjects as existing in the past—everything is in the present tense:

On the tip of a tongue one note following another is another path, another dawn where the pink sky is the bloodshot of struck, of sleepless, of sorry, of senseless, shush. Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of

²³ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 70.

²⁴ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 244.

²⁵ Rankine and Asokan, “I Am Invested in Keeping Present the Forgotten Bodies.”

²⁶ Rankine and Asokan.

Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through and when we open our mouth to speak, blossoms, o blossoms, no place coming out, brother, dear brother, that kind of blue. The sky is the silence of brothers all the days leading up to my call.

If I called I'd say good-bye before I broke the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don't hang up. My brother hangs up though he is there. I keep talking. The talk keeps him there. The sky is blue, kind of blue. The day is hot. Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Is it cool? Are you cool?

My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. It is raining down. It was raining. It stopped raining. It is raining down. He won't hang up. He's there, he's there but he's hung up though he is there. Good-bye, I say. I break the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up, don't hang up. Wait with me. Wait with me though the waiting might be the call of good-byes.²⁷

In this section, “kind of blue” repeats twice, igniting a musical undertone in text that sits directly opposite a reproduced archival photograph of a public lynching. In the photograph, the hanging Black bodies have been edited out, so that all we see is a group of white spectators casually gathered. Even if the visual Black bodies have been erased, they are stitched back into the text itself. The bodies of what Rankine calls “my brothers”—which span temporally across centuries—do not just hang from the tree, but become the tree and its roots, the rope, and the sky. This dissolution of the coherent Black body is a kind of silencing in which the throat is slit, in which blossoms come out of the mouth in place of words. All this is “kind of blue.” The blues play in our imaginings amidst this violent silencing. Insofar as blossoms and blue sky often indicate tranquility or beauty, this description almost masks the recurring violence to which Rankine gestures. In the absence of the lynched bodies alongside the beauty in Rankine’s prose, it becomes momentarily possible to envision the white crowd as benign or innocent. Yet, *Kind of Blue* hovers over these pages as a persistent refrain that undoes such grasping for innocence. *Kind of Blue* brings the middle passage, lynching, and Trayvon Martin into contemporaneity—“on the tip of a tongue one note following another is another path.”

Temporal Atmosphere

Citizen's atmosphere is entwined with its temporality. When the text begins, memory is spatial, “a tough place” that you lie in or among.²⁸ In the book’s first section, the atmosphere shifts from almost non-sensuous, through an associative route that leads to heightened sensuousness. In similar sensuousness, an early vignette depicts the subject in pouring rain, where “the trees, their bark, their leaves, even the dead ones, are more vibrant wet.”²⁹ With these dead leaves, vibrancy and death converge in water, perhaps in anticipation of later evocations of water and drowning,

²⁷ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 89–90.

²⁸ Rankine, 64.

²⁹ Rankine, 9.

all of which culminate in Turner's *The Slave Ship*. This evocation of death serves as a temporal marker amidst an otherwise unremarkable moment. In describing this raining moment, Rankine writes that "before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen."³⁰ Here, experience is about seeing untied to knowing, a kind of sight that does not first categorize or dismiss. This seeing also immediately transitions into hearing, or mishearing, in a refrain that repeats and mutates throughout the book: "What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?" In this passage, overhearing a racist phrase—a moment that is both incredulous and expected—is also a moment that "stinks." Smell, sound, and sight intermingle and lead into the tactile feeling of the rain: "You want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you."³¹ The feeling of rain on skin immerses the "you." The rain is something you want to feel, something "vibrant" perhaps, but at the same time it is also something that carries a reminder of death. Even though it seems "light," it still rains down, putting pressure on the "you"—vibrancy and injury both.

These early examples are among numerous passages where the atmosphere injures and penetrates the body, blurring its bounds. Indeed, to be "drowning" in sound works to emphasize the relationship between literal drowning in water and the feeling of being unable to speak or breath due to the force of another's words. The text juxtaposes the attack of language as that which figuratively surrounds and drowns the subject with literal descriptions and images of drowning. For example, in a subsection of section VI, Rankine stitches together quotes that make explicit reference to drowning collected from CNN during Hurricane Katrina. Repeated throughout this section is the phrase: "I don't know what the water wanted." In these scenes, the water has agency and determination, while also revealing the death and destruction already there. Moreover, the water causes a kind of non-verbal, incoherent sound to emerge:

Then each house was a mumbling structure, all that water, buildings peeling apart, the yellow foam, the contaminated drawl of mildew, mold.³²

Water turns each house into a structure that emits sound as it crumbles, as it is no longer able to enclose or protect. Instead, its failings—mildew, mold—reveal themselves in the water's mumbling, vocal destruction where vision is blocked or uninvited:

He gave me the flashlight, she said, I didn't want to turn it on. It was all black. I didn't want to shine a light on that.³³

In the preceding section, the storm of Turner's *Slave Ship* is evoked amidst the blues of sky and ocean:

Blue ceiling calling a body into the midst of azure, oceanic, as ocean blushes the blues it can't absorb, reflecting back a day

³⁰ Rankine, 9.

³¹ Rankine, 9.

³² Rankine, 84.

³³ Rankine, 84.

the day frays, night, not night, this fright passes through the eye crashing into you, is this you?

Yes, it's me, clear the way, then hold me clear of this that faces, the storm carrying me through dawn

not knowing whether to climb down or up into its eye—
day, hearing a breath shiver, whose are you?³⁴

In the first couplet, the sky is figured as a blue ceiling, claustrophobic rather than a vast expanse. Moreover, this blue ceiling pushes the body down into the ocean, where colors come to signify the violence of drowning in the storm (like the one we see vividly depicted in Turner's painting). When "ocean blushes the blues it can't absorb," blush seems the color of blood, the ocean bludgeoning the Black body, which is figured here as blues that don't match the ocean—it cannot absorb them. In the next lines, the "you" becomes disoriented, not distinguishing between day or night, up or down, hearing an unknown breath, all of which indicate an absence of light when caught in the eye of a storm or submerged in ocean. With the proximate repetitions of "night" rhymed with "fright," we get a brief glimpse at poetic device before it is again submerged, alongside the body, in the dark ocean.

Finally, by the end of the book, the body becomes water:

And still this life parts your lids, you see
you seeing your extending hand

as a falling wave—³⁵

In this final section of the text, the "you" becomes indistinguishable from atmosphere, buried, drowning, everywhere and nowhere, "in a landscape drawn from an ocean bed."³⁶ The "you" here is also capable of seeing itself as it becomes water: "you see you seeing." The body expands but also disintegrates as the outside invades, as the atmosphere becomes like water, capable of drowning: "A body in the world drowns in it—."³⁷ The injured body becomes indistinguishable from that which surrounds it—as "you" extend your hand out to the world, it becomes a falling wave ready to crash and disperse. It is "the kind of body that can't hold the content it is living."³⁸

Tangible Memory

While disorientation is made more explicit in the text's formal shift toward abstraction, it begins in early descriptions of the work of memory on the body. Returning to *Citizen's* opening paragraph, the second person "you" is submerged in a moonless night and in a dense,

³⁴ Rankine, 75.

³⁵ Rankine, 139.

³⁶ Rankine, 109.

³⁷ Rankine, 142.

³⁸ Rankine, 143.

encroaching ceiling of clouds where the only light is “dark light.” In the absence of both light and lyric device, it would seem at first that we are submerged in a non-sensory atmosphere, or at least one in which we can neither see nor hear. However, following what she describes as an “associative” route toward the description of early childhood memories, Rankine then shifts to a description of the physical effects of experiencing the racist moment. These early memories—such as the memory of a “close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper”—are reconstructed through overwhelming sensory experience:

Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words.³⁹

Recalling these moments induces an intense sonic experience alongside a physiological loss of speech: these moments “drown you in sound” and “strike you across the larynx.” The heart, tongue, lungs, and larynx are overwhelmed—rendering the subject speechless, mute, silenced. These memories are also marked by heightened sound—the “you” is surrounded and drowned in sound even as the voice is silenced, negated. The overwhelming sensuousness of this experience is enough to totally destabilize the subject, where “you” turns quickly into “I,” and where being incorrectly addressed leads to a speechlessness in which you forget who or how to address. There is almost a hallucinatory quality to this recounted experience, where time, space, sight and sound blur, rendering the subject sensorily overwhelmed and incapable of speech.

Atmosphere and Addressability

In accounts of overhearing a racist remark, *Citizen* gestures toward the injuries and threats that speech can impose. At times, language becomes a physical weapon that injures the body. As such, auditory, linguistic experience interweaves with and co-creates the porous, injurious atmosphere that Rankine evokes and describes. Words are part of the “outside” that blisters you. *Citizen’s* atmosphere is not just composed of air and water, but language too.

Another friend tells you you have to learn not to absorb the world. She says sometimes she can hear her own voice saying silently to whomever—you are saying this thing and I am not going to accept it.

You take in things you don’t want all the time.... Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn’t be an ambition.⁴⁰

In these lines, language is thick, viscous. Absorbing the world means absorbing what others say. Others’ words creep into the body even if the body resists them. By contrast, the internal voice telling “you” not to take these things in is “silent,” yet it can still be heard. While hearing one’s

³⁹ Rankine, 7.

⁴⁰ Rankine, 55.

own silent voice could refer simply to internal thoughts, it might also refer to hearing on another register—a kind of attunement to silence.

In the second half of the quote above, the silent voice pushes back against the encroaching atmosphere as the body contorts to try to protect itself. How can you have your foot on your own throat? Only when the body is maimed, injured, distorted. The body in *Citizen* is surrounded by an inflamed atmosphere. We can see this in Rankine’s recounting of a talk by Judith Butler. In response to being asked what makes language hurtful, Butler replies: “We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.”⁴¹ For Butler, to be addressable is a condition of suffering—to be able to hear the other opens us up to the possibility of being injured by them.

As we see over and over in the text, the possibility of being addressed opens us to pain. But in *Citizen*, many of the recounted incidents do not actually entail a kind of reciprocal address where the “you” is in the position to listen. Indeed, “what did you say?” repeats throughout section III like a refrain or an echo. It comes in response to comments that make the “you” seem, at once, invisible and hyper-visible. Overhearing the racist remark involves a kind of incredulity: “What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word.”⁴² Here, hearing and being addressed do not quite match and, in this mismatch, “suddenly incoherence feels violent.”⁴³ In the experience of overhearing that takes place in *Citizen*’s linguistic climate, the self is thrown into a crisis that does not end.

That time and that time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you, words
outmaneuvered years, had you in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes
dripping.⁴⁴

In the lines above, the throat is again constricted, in ways that would make it impossible for you to speak. The atmosphere in *Citizen* chokes you, sprays you with tear gas, injures you, penetrates you and it happens over and over and over. The “you” is stuck in history. To return to Susan Stewart’s notion of lyric, the lyric encounter is alien to this place. *Citizen*’s atmosphere is a place without the triangulated communication of speaker, addressee, and audience—it is a place of impossible address. An address allows us to feel like we coexist, that we are part of a community (that we are a citizen). Rather, the feelings expressed in the text are those that take you away from the communal: “Every day your mouth opens and receives the kiss the world offers, which seals you shut.”⁴⁵ By the end of the text, words act as pulse, strumming but not speech. The body loses the location of its mouth. “You cannot say” is repeated over and over as the body disintegrates.

Destabilizing the White “I”

Section V includes uncited references to Robert Lowell, the prominent white male confessional poet of the 20th century. In order to show *Citizen*’s disavowal of the white lyric subject, Kamran

⁴¹ Rankine, 49.

⁴² Rankine, 41.

⁴³ Rankine, 42.

⁴⁴ Rankine, 156.

⁴⁵ Rankine, 154.

Javadizadeh traces Rankine's rephrasing of a line from Lowell's poem "Man and Wife" from his 1959 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Life Studies*. In the middle of her text, Rankine writes, "if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads."⁴⁶ At first, this line may appear to reference the violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (violence made visual at the end of the book with *The Slave Ship*). However, in addition to this reference to the Middle Passage, Rankine's line also rephrases a line in "Man and Wife" where Lowell addresses his then-wife: "your old-fashioned tirade—/ loving, rapid, merciless—/ breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head."⁴⁷ Whereas "the Atlantic Ocean" in Lowell's poem is a simile (his wife's tirade is "like" the ocean), in Rankine's poem "the Atlantic Ocean" is literal, historical, and based in collective memory. Indeed, Rankine writes "our heads" rather than Lowell's "my head"—deforming the narcissism of the lyric "I."⁴⁸ Rankine's move away from the literary device of simile is also a move away from the broad, "universal" form of whiteness that could mention the Atlantic as purely figural or personal (as Lowell does), while glossing over its violent history.⁴⁹

Instead of positioning *Citizen's* "you" as merely a reaction against the confessional "I" of Lowell, Rankine revises American lyric by almost conversing *with* Lowell, seeming both to chastise and ventriloquize him, but where it is often unclear who is speaking. This response to Lowell begins: "Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—To know what you'll sound like is worth noting—."⁵⁰ There is something important happening in this imagined confrontation, to know what you'll sound like, to hear "the noise in your voice."⁵¹ After a disorienting page weaving through a darkened atmosphere with a blue flashlight (see *Blue, Sonic Atmosphere*), Rankine turns to the "I," interrogating the first person just before invoking Lowell's "ill-spirited, cooked, hell on Main Street, nobody's here, broken-down, first person."⁵² Here, Rankine works to disorient and reveal the instability of the "I," not grant it some sort of privileged access to knowledge. Rankine says explicitly: "the first person can't pull you together."⁵³ Instead, the "I" is revealed as unstable yet powerful, able to construct something seemingly concrete out of nothing. Yet, even if the "I" *is* able to construct itself, dismantling it can also occur in its interrogation: "Sometimes 'I' is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it."⁵⁴ *Citizen's* "you" neither replaces the "I" nor supports it, instead it works to unravel its seeming stability, as this section in

⁴⁶ Rankine, 73.

⁴⁷ Lowell, *Life Studies and For the Union Dead*, 92.

⁴⁸ As Javadizadeh puts it: "Whereas the vector of the displacement of 'the Atlantic Ocean' from the scene of Lowell's poem was figurative, in Rankine's poem that vector is historical." Javadizadeh, "The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject," 487.

⁴⁹ Rankine also breaks with Lowell's simile in how she writes of the relationship between body and ocean. See *Blue, Sonic Atmosphere*.

⁵⁰ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 69.

⁵¹ Rankine, 71.

⁵² Rankine, 72. Among the references here are Lowell's "Skunk Hour" as well as his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for *Life Studies* in 1960, in which he said: "Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners." Ramazani, Ellmann, and O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, xlix.

⁵³ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 71.

⁵⁴ Rankine, 71.

the middle of the book becomes a place where the text starts to fold in on itself, where the “I” is told: “join me down here in nowhere.”⁵⁵

A Cave of Sighs

A coupling of heightened sensuousness alongside an inability to speak returns in section IV of *Citizen*, in what Rankine describes as a “cave of sighs.”⁵⁶ The section begins:

To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about.⁵⁷

Rankine’s cave of sighs is a climate of memory, affect, and audible breath. A “cave” calls to mind constriction, claustrophobia, darkness, as well as the possibility of hearing an echo. Here, the sigh is indicative of a body that overflows with affect, that echoes history. The sigh functions as an exhale of the past that’s stored in the body.

You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard.⁵⁸

The sigh is breath and past made audible; it communicates but also retains ambiguity. Yet, to quote Nathaniel Mackey, “when breath becomes an object of attention, no longer unremarked on, no longer taken for granted, anxiety is also in the air.”⁵⁹ In *Citizen*, the sigh expresses anxiety, exhaustion, frustration, and bodily pain, while also acting to release accumulated feeling. As Rankine says, “the sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing... The sigh is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being.”⁶⁰ The sigh is the sound of the body containing too much—the body overflows in the sounded exhale.⁶¹ It both allows the body to breath, while also pointing to its injury, to its strained breath.

According to Brandon LaBelle, “sighing is the sound of the body as it vacates itself, as it experiences the sensation of a creeping loss, of something falling through oneself to resolutely exit out of the mouth. In this sense, the sigh is a sort of rehearsal of one’s dying moment: it shadows the body’s ultimate gasp, that final sound and respiration.”⁶² In LaBelle’s description, sighing is an indication of grief and loss, but insofar as it is a “rehearsal” of death, the sigh also works as anticipation in order to release that which has not yet occurred. LaBelle also describes the sigh as a “dramatic rest,” where a refusal to hold onto that which is exhaled also indicates a

⁵⁵ Rankine, 73.

⁵⁶ Rankine, 62.

⁵⁷ Rankine, 59.

⁵⁸ Rankine, 63.

⁵⁹ Mackey, “Breath and Precarity: The Inaugural Robert Creeley Lecture in Poetry and Poetics,” 5.

⁶⁰ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 60.

⁶¹ Brandon LaBelle also describes the relationship between the sigh and a lack of freedom by looking to Italy’s Bridge of Sighs: “The sighing bridge carries all those sensations of loss and emptiness experienced and embodied by the prisoner: as a body soon to expire from the movements of social life.” LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 84.

⁶² LaBelle, 85.

rhythm disrupted. For LaBelle, the sigh “literally exteriorizes, and in doing so, may give shape, in the form of a breath, to all that we can no longer have.”⁶³ Through the sigh, Rankine constructs a sonic climate where a past rhythm has been disrupted and made explicit. Once the affective breath is exteriorized and becomes an object of attention, it calls to mind the rhythm (of breath unattended and unlabored) that “we can no longer have.” In the temporality of the sigh, a sort of anticipatory, dissonant, aching structure seems to open alongside history.

In this layered temporality of the cave of sighs, Rankine returns to the scene of watching a tennis match on television, this time in silence, as a cure for a headache. In an earlier section of the text, Rankine reflects on the tennis player, Serena Williams, and the repeated bad calls and racist accusations launched against her throughout her career.⁶⁴ Now, she writes:

The sole action is to turn on tennis matches without the sound. Yes, and though watching tennis isn’t a cure for feeling, it is a clean displacement of effort, will, and disappointment.⁶⁵

And later:

Sitting here, there are no memories to remember, just the ball going back and forth. Shored up by this external net, the problem is not one of a lack of memories; the problem is simply a lack, a lack of before, during, and after.⁶⁶

In these passages, the “cave of sighs” registers as absence of feeling and here, time seems to stop, memories are inaccessible or disconnected. Again, there almost seems to be a hallucinatory quality to this space of remembered and imagined sound and vocalization but at the same time, watching tennis without the sound reinforces numbness. The space where: “The head’s ache evaporates into a state of numbness, a cave of sighs.”⁶⁷ In the “dramatic rest” of Rankine’s “cave of sighs,” absence of sound coupled with a displacement of attention barricades or protects from the affects of the past, stopping the full force of memory, prefiguring a kind of death that allows for respite.

Yet, amidst this stoppage of time, a different rhythm gets constructed on the screen when two players have a good rally, when the match continues without interruption. Access to this rhythm—“just the ball going back and forth”—pauses access to memory, causing “a lack of before, during, and after.”⁶⁸ Moreover, with the sound turned down, the viewer is perhaps solicited to *imagine* the sounds of the match: the pop of the ball bouncing back and forth, the breath, grunts, and yells of the players, the squeak of a shoe on the court, the narration of each play by the announcers. The inaudibility of the match seems to hover between the sensuous and the non-sensuous, engaging the reader’s sonic imagination but also disorienting our sense of

⁶³ LaBelle, 85.

⁶⁴ In *Citizen*, tennis serves as a figure for a kind of sociality that functions through strict rules and norms—both explicit and implicit. Looking to Rankine’s focus on Serena Williams, Javadizadeh writes that we see “the apparently ordinary sociality of the match punctured by another racist disruption.” Javadizadeh, “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject,” 486.

⁶⁵ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 62.

⁶⁶ Rankine, 64.

⁶⁷ Rankine, 62.

⁶⁸ Or is it that when there is no present sound, it is then that remembered sound comes rushing back in: “Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you.” Rankine, 63.

sonic reality. At once, the match is both turned to silent while producing an imagined sonic rhythm. The sigh gives way to the imagined soundscape of the match, the imagined breath of the players.

Yet, an imagined rhythm does not necessarily syncopate with that of the televised match. For, just as the reader may have begun to imagine an alternative soundscape, a consistent rhythm, the image on the screen disturbs this:

Feeling better? The ball isn't being returned. Someone is approaching the umpire.
Someone is upset now.⁶⁹

You fumble around for the remote to cancel mute.⁷⁰

Now, the visual on the television creates a dissonance with the imagined rhythmic sound of the ball's bounce. This imagined sound is rendered as an absence out of sync with the images on the screen. In the text, the match's volume is turned up only when the visual rhythm is disrupted, when it is clear that something has upset it. The mute match cannot continue to function outside of time once the player is upset. Feeling and memory reenter in concert.⁷¹ Briefly, imagining an alternative temporal rhythm allows for the possibility to imagine feeling better or even finding joy despite a headache. Indeed, the section ends with "feeling good" seeming tied to an absence of the sonic real:

Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on. In due time the ball is going back and forth over the net. Now the sound can be turned back down.⁷²

Imagined Rhythm — Real Rhythm

The imagined rhythm of section IV is thrown into relief alongside some of the very real rhythms of anti-Black violence that Rankine references in the second half of the book. In section VI, Rankine moves away from recounting everyday individual encounters, moving into meditations on the frequent murders of Black men. In a subsection titled "July 13, 2013"—the day George Zimmerman was acquitted for the murder of Trayvon Martin—"Trayvon Martin's name sounds from the car radio a dozen times each half hour."⁷³ Here, there is a numbered and timed regularity to the repetition of Martin's name, evoking an evenly-spaced deathly refrain that seems to suspend the acquittal as both plausible and implausible, regular and irregular, at once. At the end of section VI, Rankine composes another memorializing rhythm by listing the names of Black people murdered by the police, repeating "in memory of" as the text gets lighter and lighter until it fades off the page. In its fading, the list signifies an unending rhythm which echoes throughout the rest of the text. In the spaces left blank waiting for names, the text

⁶⁹ Rankine, 64.

⁷⁰ Rankine, 65.

⁷¹ Earlier, Rankine refers to the relationship between memory and feeling as "your fatal flaw—your memory, vessel of your feelings" Rankine, 7.

⁷² Rankine, 66.

⁷³ Rankine, 151.

anticipates violence to come. Indeed, in every reprint of *Citizen*, Rankine adds more names to this list. On the page opposite this list, Rankine includes a sort of haiku:

because white men can't
police their imagination
black people are dying⁷⁴

The imagination plays a very different role here from the imagined sound of the tennis match—it does not operate outside of or alongside reality but instead overdetermines it. Black death is caused by the overactive white imagination, lending disturbing rhythm to the “wrongfully ordinary” moments of police violence against Black bodies.⁷⁵ In these short lines, the white imagination cannot be policed and instead acts *as* police, its resting state instigates and enacts violence.

Troubled Anticipation

In *Black Post-Blackness*, Margo Natalie Crawford defines anticipation in contrast to waiting. She writes: “the productive force of anticipation is its difference from waiting. Anticipation is much more active than waiting.” Anticipation “gives one ‘a different sense of time’; it makes one’s present deeply tied to the future.”⁷⁶ The imagined sonic rhythm of the tennis match on mute relates, perhaps, to Crawford’s notion—where anticipation and sonic imagination converge in a “different sense of time.” Crawford’s chapter opens with an epigraph of Merriam-Webster’s sonic definition of anticipation: “the early sounding of one or more tones of a succeeding chord to form a temporary dissonance.”⁷⁷ The sighs and moans that open section IV evoke such a dissonance, where we hear soundings, not just of past and present pain and injury, but of pain that is to come. The mute tennis match might serve as such “temporary dissonance,” where we have heard a call or sigh of pain, but the cause has not yet occurred. We are suspended in anticipation of a pain to come. So, while the mute match may disrupt those sounds that carry memories and past feelings, the numbness already anticipates a future.

Rankine introduces problems of listening in her use of discordant rhythms and temporalities alongside an instability of lyric address. In *Citizen*’s disrupted yet insistent presence, Blackness might be illegible and unseeable within a certain logic, but it might be heard or imagined otherwise. Crawford writes that, “black anticipatory aesthetics is the art of not knowing what blackness will be; it is the art situated within the sustained dissonance of the earlier chords being heard, simultaneously, with the sounds that are just beginning to emerge.”⁷⁸ Breath and time repeat as rhythmic markings but are also transfigured and undone throughout the text. We cannot hold on to this shifting, not quite identifiable rhythm.

Listening to the chords of this temporal dissonance requires a mode of attention akin perhaps to what Fumi Okiji has called “unhinged listening”—a listening that would confound

⁷⁴ Rankine, 135.

⁷⁵ Writing on a passage from *Citizen* that recounts a botched first meeting with a therapist, Christopher Grobe writes that “white supremacy, in this poem, is itself a problem of the sensory imagination: a force that warps the world by shaping what (white) Americans ‘see’ and ‘hear.’” Grobe, “Sound,” 187.

⁷⁶ Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 31.

⁷⁷ Crawford, 18.

⁷⁸ Crawford, 36.

the senses, that would be led by sensory disorientation.⁷⁹ In such “unhinged listening,” we might become tuned or attuned to soundscapes or frequencies that do not depend upon addressability. Ultimately, breath, memory, and rhythm are inextricably tied in *Citizen*, as we can see in some of its final lines:

Though a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to
breathe you have to create a truce—

A truce with the patience of a stethoscope.⁸⁰

Here, Rankine evokes the stethoscope—a device that listens for internal sounds, that looks for normative rhythm—when nearing the end of her text. In *Citizen*'s disordering of time—uncanny temporality is rendered strange alongside the stethoscope's regulated rhythm of heartbeat and breath. As the text nears its last line, Rankine writes: “I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams.”⁸¹ In order to dream you *need* even breath, you *need* rhythm. Yet, who can breathe evenly when “the outside blistered the inside of you, words outmaneuvered years, had you in a chokehold”?⁸²

Throughout *Citizen*, the reader's attention is repeatedly called toward the instant of racist action or speech and, yet, that instant is juxtaposed with the long, unending rhythms of history and police violence—the violent event rendered ordinary in its repetition. The rhythmic regularity of racist memories inhabits the body, leading to (in Rankine's formulation) the feelings that create the self: “To your mind, feelings are what create a person, something unwilling, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. Those sensations form a someone.”⁸³ As the white self attempts, perhaps, to inhabit or predict the text's rhythms of anti-Blackness, this self becomes disrupted by rhythmic and formal interruptions. The text's address invites and repels the white reader, as she cannot reorient after the initial shock of not being included in the “you.” Such a shock sends the reader in multiple directions, in Rankine's words, “constructing or exploding whiteness out of you.”⁸⁴ As *Citizen* unfolds, a different kind of subject might be imagined in the anticipatory dissonance of disrupted breath, in the possibility of alternate temporal rhythms, in an atmosphere composed in blue darkness, impossible language, violent water, violent land.

This different kind of subject returns us to Culler's notion of apostrophe as a form of creating what it names. An apostrophic listener is a listener who might never be fully realized—unlikely, unfinished. Even though *lyric* apostrophe differs from the apostrophe as grammatical

⁷⁹ Fumi Okiji used this term in a talk at UC Berkeley on February 14, 2020, entitled “Cecil's Non-Sensuous Standard: Harnessing the Energies of Intoxication for Revolution.”

⁸⁰ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 156.

⁸¹ Rankine, 159.

⁸² Rankine, 156.

⁸³ Rankine, 61.

⁸⁴ These lines come from a section in memory of James Craig Anderson, who was killed in a hate crime in Mississippi in 2011. In the section, Rankine addresses Anderson's killer directly, calling him by name. The pickup truck that was used to kill Anderson becomes “human in this predictable way.” It is also a “pure product” and that which “is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object.” The pickup truck becomes animate, turning Anderson's body into a “black object” while also “constructing or exploding whiteness” out of Anderson's murderer. Rankine, 93, 94.

mark, I cannot help but think of the apostrophic listener in terms of possession. Rather than possessing the text, the apostrophic listener is, instead, possessed by it—in a state of open readiness to be moved in unpredictable directions. The apostrophic listener is not fully outlined, blurry, disoriented. Grasping for itself but also for those others who compose it.

An apostrophic listener cannot expect to be addressed. Rather, such a listening requires “remaining in the quotidian of disturbance,” as Rankine writes in *Just Us*.⁸⁵ Or, perhaps, it would approximate what Kathleen Stewart describes as “a noticing that gropes from a haptic space in the middle of things.”⁸⁶ Such descriptions of unstable comportment point toward a disoriented, multi-sensuous practice where we might become ready to be possessed by something, even if that “something” is unstable, illegible, silent, or yet to come. In Rankine’s words:

All living is listening for a throat to open—
The length of its silence shaping lives.⁸⁷

An unstable listener is born in anticipation of breath—shaped in attunement to silence and that which is not yet spoken.

⁸⁵ Rankine, *Just Us*, 334.

⁸⁶ Stewart, “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World,” 71.

⁸⁷ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 112.

Coda

Touching Through the Blue

The sky isn't up there: it's between us.

— Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”

A Form of Crisis

It is certainly not a new project to imagine forms of writing, reading, speaking, or listening that could liberate us from oppressive norms and hierarchies. The fact that no single form or mode of writing could possibly be named *the* definitive anti-authoritarian form is part of the point. It is not really, or not *only*, the form that matters—any form once designated as such would lose its liberatory potential, destined to become a stale site for reenforcing the status quo. My readings of Moten, Nelson, and Rankine are not attempts to valorize one form or another, to claim that “autotheory” and the “lyric essay” are ethically superior forms or genres—that is, even if they could be classified under the rubric of a cohesive genre. Rather, I have been attending to the forms of these texts in search of the ways they disperse or disintegrate or disorder my sense of self, to see if there is something to be discovered from this encounter.

It is also not *only* the disorientation or deforming of selfhood that matters here, either. James Baldwin wrote that “if it is difficult to be released from the stigma of blackness, it is clearly at least equally difficult to surmount the delusion of whiteness.”¹ Drawing on this idea from Baldwin, Cathy Park Hong argues that “the avant-garde’s ‘delusion of whiteness’ is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian.”² Renouncing subject in the name of the experimental and the new has served, historically, to preserve a sort of unexamined “post-identity” that implicitly valorizes and reaffirms whiteness.³ In my attempts to disorient and destabilize my own white self in reading and writing, I have noticed myself falling back into habits of reading, thinking, and writing that reenforce the norms from which I hope to unravel.

Rather than assume that I can once and for all go from a cohesive white subject into something less cohesive or less white, I instead want to gesture toward the ongoingness of the practice, the “ongoing song” of it. In the perpetually inchoate nature of this project and in the difficulty of overcoming the delusion(s) of whiteness, every draft remains a first draft, offered up for engagement, feedback, and revision. In this constant return to the beginning, I have been

¹ Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 106.

² Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.”

³ As Hong writes, “even in [the avant garde’s] best efforts at erasure [...] there is always a subject—and beyond that, the specter of the author’s visage—and that specter is never, no matter how vigorous the erasure, raceless.” Hong.

guided (even if not always explicitly) by some of the founding principles of the phenomenological method. As Merleau-Ponty writes in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*:

The philosopher is a perpetual beginner. This means that he accepts nothing as established from what men or scientists believe they know. This also means that philosophy itself must not take itself as established in the truths it has managed to utter, that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning, that it consists entirely in describing this beginning, and finally, that radical reflection is conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation.⁴

In addition to the experiment of perpetual beginning, I am drawn to Merleau-Ponty's idea of radical reflection, which describes a non-linear approach, through which we return again and again to the unreflected. Radical reflection is radical not only because it reflects on the unreflected, but also because it must reflect continuously upon itself. As a perpetually nascent methodology, phenomenology names a dynamic, relational, living movement.

In this beginner's spirit, I am led repeatedly to ask, how do we/I continue to account for whiteness? How do we/I continue to attempt to unravel from its pervasive logics? I use the "we/I" here because I am not asking these questions solely *for* me, but I am also not writing anything prescriptive. Gayle Salamon describes phenomenological unknowing as necessarily self-reflexive; it cannot be instructed or asked of others. In a phenomenological ethos of unknowing, my goal must be "to unseat my *own* belief through the suspension of what I already think I know."⁵ While it might seem strange to turn to methodological descriptions in the coda, I like the idea of ending with something that might traditionally go at the beginning of a project, in a gesture toward further work to be done.

In the introduction, I spoke of the crisis that listening presents to the coherent self. It is interesting to consider listening-as-crisis alongside the relations between crisis and phenomenology as well as between crisis and literary form. Duane Davis writes, "from its beginnings in Husserl's thought, phenomenology has consistently been defined in response to crisis."⁶ As a response to crisis, phenomenology remains tied to ethical and political questions rooted in intersubjective experience—even in Husserl, whose focus tends toward the transcendental "I."⁷ Donald Landes also describes the "crisis" behind Merleau-Ponty's development of radical reflection. He writes: "phenomenology will need a new theory of reflection, given the inexhaustible presence of the preexisting world beyond the constitutive activities of knowing that world that phenomenology was designed to enumerate. Reflection suddenly realizes it is constitutively haunted by that which resists reflection."⁸ Throughout this dissertation, I have in one way or another, been attending to this haunting of that which resists

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxviii.

⁵ Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisba King*, 159.

⁶ Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," 3.

⁷ As Lisa Guenther claims, even Husserl's transcendental ego is, "in its most basic formulation, a relation or orientation of the thinker to the thought." In this way, relationality is actually foundational to phenomenology's transcendental subject. Guenther refers to the "quasi-transcendental" aspect of critical phenomenology insofar as it is rooted in 1st person experience but cannot be only that, so requires a self-reflexive assessment where "transcendence" is precisely what is transcended. Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 11.

⁸ Landes, "The Flesh of the World," 142.

analysis—the delusions of whiteness that require a radical shift in approach in order to begin to tackle them.

Looking to the prose fragment in the work of Nelson and Rankine, Ben Lerner describes how “the prose poem arises as a form during periods in which there is a crisis of confidence in verse strategies [with] the notion of the lyric being felt as a loss as it becomes prose.”⁹ Here, I think it becomes possible to understand the potentials offered by literary form in moments of crisis.¹⁰ When the grounds upon which we believe we stand begin to shake, the old forms just won’t do. This is formal experimentation that writes in the face of and in response to crisis, rather than for the sake of the new.

On the one hand, moments of crisis can be profound turning points in which we might radically destabilize the subject. On the other, crisis can instigate a receding into the comfort of the familiar, causing us to become less willing to take on the challenges of the unknown. In *Afropessimism*, Frank Wilderson writes that “most people [...] are emotionally unable to wallow in a problem that has no solution. Black suffering is that problem. And a suffering without a solution is a hard thing to hold, especially if that suffering fuels the psychic health of the rest of the world.”¹¹ It is not difficult to see Wilderson’s remarks at work all around us today. While not explicitly demanding it, Wilderson’s text asks for a listening that might allow an unsolvable or unthinkable problem to be felt and held, rather than rejected, ignored, or “solved.” I imagine this looking something like Nancy’s description of listening. He writes: “to listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside.”¹² When the text responding to crisis meets the crisis enacted by listening upon the coherent body, new forms of encounter might become possible. As Jack Halberstam writes in the preface to *The Undercommons*: “change cannot come in the form that we think of as ‘revolutionary’ [...] Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine.”¹³

Folding and Unfolding

How to resist the urge to retreat and fold in on oneself in the face of crisis and, instead, to persist in working to unfold once more? This image of a folding and unfolding gesture recurs throughout the preceding chapters. In Chapter One, I looked to the image of folding in both Merleau-Ponty and Moten. In the body’s relationship to color, Merleau-Ponty writes, I am “a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade.”¹⁴ Or, as Moten writes in *All that Beauty*:

The open book.

The endless

⁹ Lerner, “Beyond ‘Lyric Shame’: Ben Lerner on Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson.”

¹⁰ Speaking to the censorship of writers by authoritarian regimes, Toni Morrison writes: “I have been told that there are two human responses to the perception of chaos: naming and violence... There is however a third response to chaos, which I have not heard about, which is stillness. Such stillness can be passivity and dumbfoundedness; it can be paralytic fear. But it can also be art.” Morrison, “Peril,” 3.

¹¹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 329.

¹² Nancy, *Listening*, 14.

¹³ Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” 10–11.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 223.

folding
of the moment.¹⁵

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the fold that is made and unmade in relation to the world and its colors. For Moten, in this instance, it is writing (the open book) that allows for our endless serial folding.

This folding of text and self returns in Chapter Two, in Mallarmé's notion of the perfect, unwritable book, which Nelson references in *Bluets*: "For Mallarmé, the perfect book was one whose pages have never been cut, their mystery forever preserved, like a bird's folded wing, or a fan never opened."¹⁶ The mystery of the unopened or unwritten text recurs in *Bluets* as a symbol of alternate realities or possibilities that haunt the text's stability and its temporality. This temporality leads into the image of folding and unfolding in Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of rhythm. Nancy describes rhythm as "the vibration of time itself"; it "bends time to give it to time itself, and it is in this way that it folds and unfolds a 'self.'"¹⁷ It is rhythm's bending of time that brings forth an unstable self, folded and unfolded. To become taken up by the text's rhythm (and its multiple, simultaneous possibilities) is to become a self that folds and unfolds.

Finally, in Chapter Three, we have Rankine's engagement with Lowell's first person in *Citizen*. In this section in the middle of the book, Rankine writes that, "the first person can't pull you together."¹⁸ Instead, the "I" and the "you" are forced into an encounter at the book's midpoint, where the text starts to fold in on itself. Here, the "I" and the "you" fold into one another as they are called to "join me down here in nowhere."¹⁹

Touching Through the Blue

This recurring of folding and unfolding speaks, I think, to a relationship between writing, plurality, and the body that I return to throughout the dissertation. It is this relationship that informs my approach to listening as a multi-sensuous, embodied-yet-textual practice. Nancy writes:

Touching upon the body, touching the body, *touching*—happens in writing all the time. Maybe it doesn't happen exactly *in* writing, if writing in fact has an "inside." But along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing *but* that happens. Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*.²⁰

These lines from *Corpus* help to (literally) flesh out what has been so generative for me in Nancy's writing on listening. As Nancy puts it in *Listening*, "Communication is not transmission, but a sharing that becomes subject: sharing as subject of all 'subjects.' An unfolding, a dance, a

¹⁵ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 48.

¹⁶ Nelson, *Bluets*, 70.

¹⁷ Nancy, *Listening*, 17.

¹⁸ Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 71.

¹⁹ Rankine, 73.

²⁰ Nancy, *Corpus*, 11.

resonance.”²¹ Writing is communication as touching, as sharing, where subjects are made in unfolding and in resonance.

Nelson also speaks to this notion of writing as sharing when describing her own creative process:

I believe that our words, ideas, and thoughts are in essence shared, that they surround us like an ocean, and that writing can be like dragging a cup through those communal waters and seeing what you net. But the sometimes difficult, sometimes ecstatic (and sometimes both) burden of trying to navigate between self and other cannot be easily dismissed, nor should it be. We literally come into being as a knot of self-reliance and dependence, and so we continue on, each and together, on the page and off it.²²

Here we have an image of navigating the plurality of writing as being surrounded by water. This image strikes me as a writing through the blues that connects us. It is a reading and writing through the fog of translucency, through a “blue rinse to the language.”²³ We touch each other through these blues. This blue writing is, I think, a kind of prayer, akin to how Nancy describes it. It is prayer insofar as it is “in Adorno’s terms, ‘freed from the magic of the result.’ Prayer does not ask in order that its request be granted, nor does it produce that result.”²⁴ For Nancy, prayer is not about asking for satisfaction. It is not about experimenting for the sake of it, it comes from devotion and from necessity. Prayer is “the very act of *transcending*. It is passing-to-the-outside, and passing-to-the-other.”²⁵

The Blues of the Womb

Something becomes possible in this kind of writing that is ever emergent, not yet born. In blue’s relationship with darkness and sound, I look again to Nancy and his notion of listening as a resonance born in the womb:

The womb[*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? But, more generally, more womblike, it is always in the belly that we—man or woman—end up listening, or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become.²⁶

The darkness of the womb is the site of listening as co-constitution, where a resonant echo is folded and unfolded. Here I am returned to the idea of form, but this time it is the form of the body as it holds another body.

²¹ Nancy, *Listening*, 41.

²² Nelson, “‘A Sort of Leaning Against’: Writing With, From, and For Others.”

²³ In *Blues*, Maggie Nelson quotes this line from John Ashbery. Nelson, *Blues*, 74.

²⁴ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 137.

²⁵ Nancy, 138.

²⁶ Nancy, *Listening*, 37.

During this project, I have witnessed another body come from my body, and in this utterly ordinary and extraordinary experience, I have felt brief glimpses of what it is to be “not one, but also not two.”²⁷ To write about the disorientation and dissolution of self amidst the early days of my son River’s life has been eerily apt — I have left my former self behind, but a “new self” seems never to have fully cohered, a “falling forever,” as in Nelson’s description of labor. After River was born, I found myself returning to many of the texts in this dissertation and finding something entirely new—they, and I, had changed. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson writes of “the pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one’s work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life.”²⁸ This movement of circularity and return in reading and writing feels to me like a re-dyeing when the blues have faded. Returning in such a changed state and finding the text to have also changed is a relation to text that, in Foucault’s words, “transforms the thing seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood.’”²⁹ Because this return, this blue seriality, is what constitutes a life.

In *Bluets*, Nelson writes in reference to Heraclitus: “I believe in the possibility—the inevitability, even—of a fresh self stepping into ever-fresh waters, as in the variant: ‘no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.’”³⁰ My son is named for that which cannot stay, constantly flowing and ungraspable.³¹ I cannot step into the same river twice, because I am not the same River but neither is he.

²⁷ In Luce Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” she uses a similar formulation, though not in the context of pregnancy: “We are luminous. Neither one nor two.” Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 207.

²⁸ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 112.

²⁹ Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 213.

³⁰ Nelson, *Bluets*, 80.

³¹ Or, in Irigaray’s words: “These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility. This life—.” Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 215.

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