

Claudette Johnson: Darker Than Blue

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Darker than red is the colour of our blood. All our blood, no matter which rhesus factor or blood group. Lacking fur or scales, our human body is covered by skin, our largest, breathing, living organ. In the world of cosmetics, the palette of our human skin tones encompasses ivory, porcelain, pale ivory, warm ivory, sand, rose beige, limestone, beige, sienna, honey, almond, chestnut, bronze, umber, golden, espresso and chocolate. Ranging from dark, medium, fair, to light, biologically these tones are generated by melanin, some of which I (the writer of this essay) am lacking. The reasons for and impact of this lack are part of a longer story. One that is connected to my darker skinned Anatolian father, a migrant from the so-called Middle of the West's perceived East who genetically has not shared much of his melanin with me. Looking at the statistics and lack of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic academics in Higher Education,¹ I have reason to believe that this, in turn, may have helped me to secure a lectureship in history of art at a very white dominated university in the UK. Speaking from this privileged position, while facing the ruins of racism and the legacy of empire, in what follows, I am going to share my reflections on Claudette Johnson's exhibition *Darker Than Blue*, currently showcased at the Barber Institute of Fine Art - the University of Birmingham's on-campus gallery.

The 'Barber', as we (staff) affectionately call it (and I shall hereafter refer to it), is hailed as one of the finest small European art collections in the UK, with its permanent collection including paintings by Paul Gauguin, Thomas Gainsborough, Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet and René Magritte. Considering the Barber as context and site of Johnson's exhibition, I am going to focus on specific constellations and moments in the show that open up a set of questions in relation to works in the Barber's permanent collection, such as Gauguin's *Bathers at Tahiti*, 1897, and *Ikegobo to the Iyoba (Hand Altar to the Queen Mother)*, late 18th/ early 19th century - a brass cast made by an unrecorded Edo artist from the Kingdom of Benin; this work is part of a group of objects that were violently looted by British forces from Benin in 1897, and are often collectively been described as 'Benin Bronzes'.

In a society that, I would argue, often pretends to be 'post-race' (as if race no longer matters), it is important to note that Claudette Johnson is the first Black woman to exhibit at the Barber. Unlike me, the subjects or sitters in Johnson's paintings are melanated. In her innovative mix of pastels with other mediums, such as watercolour, gouache, acrylics or oil, she utilises the full range of the aforementioned palette of skin tones to convey the deeper than black beauty of 'darker than blue' skin. Through her monumental larger-than-life paintings and drawings of Black subjects, Johnson asserts and claims space for 'those people who are darker than blue' within a history of art, which for a very long-time centred whiteness and Europe. As the first woman of colour exhibiting at the Barber, Johnson has made a significant contribution towards decolonising and reframing the hegemonic, patriarchal, elitist, white supremacist art historical narrative, that the Barber's current collection holdings of Fine Art reflect.

Visually stunning, her work is boldly confronting the all-too-familiar history of institutionalised neglect and the erasure of Black women (and mothers) from the history of art.

The exhibition's title *Darker Than Blue*, printed in white vinyl letters onto an ultramarine blue wall next to the entrance to the Lady Barber Gallery, provides political context and a lyrical framework to the work, in a tribute to the song *We the People Who are Darker Than Blue* (1970) by the great American funk and soul legend Curtis Mayfield.² Renowned for his 'Chicago soul style', Mayfield's socially conscious lyrics and innovative sound reflected a shift in mid-1960s R&B, speaking to the evolving political agency of music in the Black freedom movement.³ As an urgent call for change and resistance against racial apartheid and discrimination, *We the People Who are Darker Than Blue* carries a profound message, speaking to the pain and struggle of Black people worldwide. As Stephanie Shonekan writes, 'the song itself is a journey from Africa to the Americas, fusing the hypnotic djembe drum beats of a West African past with the funky improvisational jazzy horns and keyboards of African American R&B.'⁴ Mirroring Mayfield's innovative style, and his playful improvisation that combines elements of African percussion with dreamy keyboard cascades, Johnson's work mesmerizes the viewer through the exquisite use of colour, bold experiments in gaze, texture, line and rhythm. Tightly framed portraits of Black figures (modelled after herself, or those familiar to the artist,) in striking compositions set against plain and abstract backgrounds embody the tension between space and time, form and content, abstraction and figuration.

Entering the gallery space, we are drawn to the centrepiece and my favourite work in the exhibition - *Blues Dance*, 2023. A vertical study of a Black woman dancing, dressed in vibrant shades of blues, her movement captured in swirling lines of pastel, watercolour and gouache on paper. Gazing down and looking inwards the female figure appears to be one with her inner world, immersed in music. According to the exhibition label, *Blues Dance* is inspired by Johnson's memories of the 1980s Blue Beat reggae dance scene in Britain, when people of Caribbean descent would gather to hold dance parties in their homes. Overwhelmed by the larger-than-life scale of the image, we can sense and experience the vibrations of the off-beat Reggae rhythm and movement in the fluid brushwork carrying visible traces of Johnson's energy and physical engagement with her materials. The woman seems to be swaying her arms beyond the frame, resisting the boundaries of the large rectangular sheet of paper, her eyes gazing down - signalling her journey into an inner world, moving to the rhythms of Reggae and diasporic memory, transporting us to a different place - one where freedom reigns. This collective sense of liberation conveyed by the body in movement, which cannot be contained or classified, deeply resonates with Johnson's assertion that 'art makes life worth living [...] It's one of the last free places on earth you can go to. Where there is nothing to restrict or bind you. Where you can be free.'⁵



Fig.1

Claudette Johnson, *Blues Dance*, 2023

Pastel, watercolour and gouache on paper, 183 x 122 cm.

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust), purchased with support from the Garcia Family Foundation, 2024. © Claudette Johnson. Image © The Courtauld.

Photo: David Bebbler.

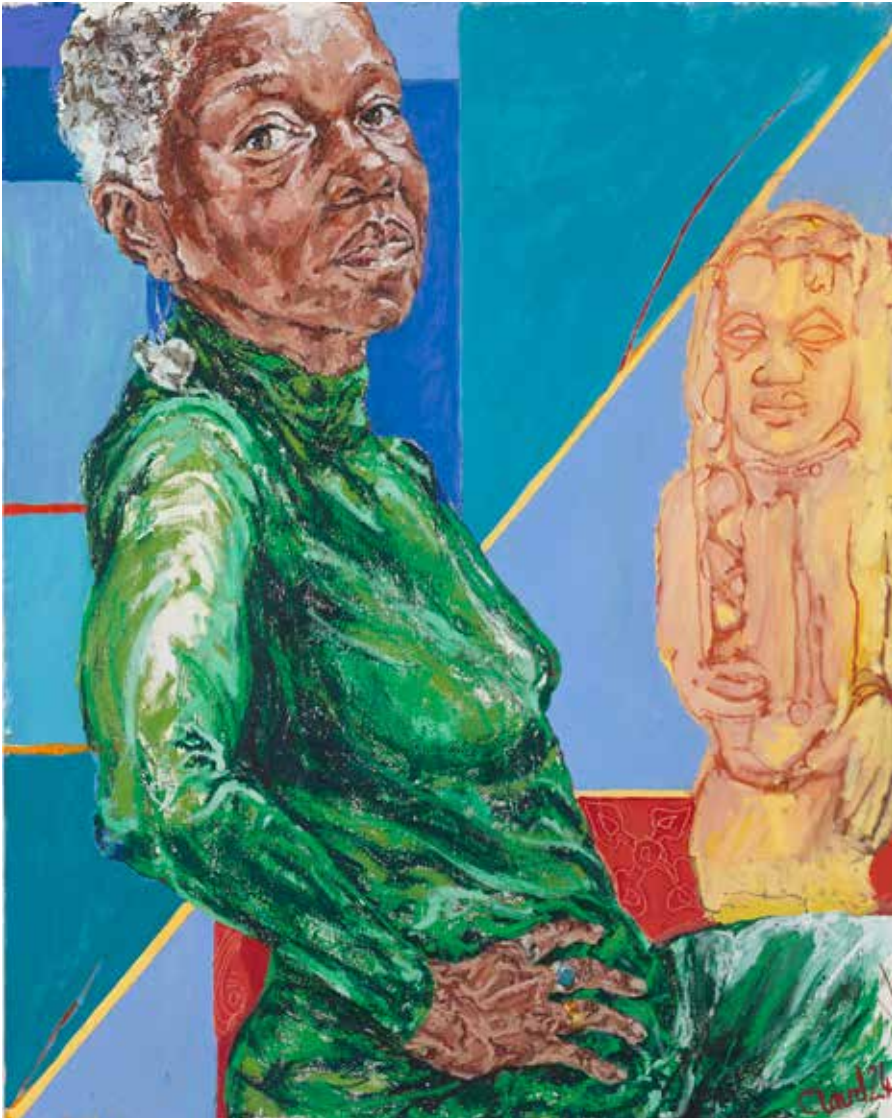


Fig. 2
Claudette Johnson, *Protection*, 2024
Oils, oil pastels, soft pastels in
gesso primed watercolour paper,
154 x 122 cm. © Claudette Johnson.
Courtesy the artist and Hollybush
Gardens, London.

The figure's closed eyes, her refusal to look at us, the reluctance to return our gaze are in sharp contrast to the arresting gaze of the female figure confronting the viewer in *Protection*, 2024. Painted in bold and vivid colours combining oil, oil pastels and soft pastels, Johnson's more recent, yet equally monumental, work is placed in close vicinity to *Blues Dance*, adjacent to the central wall. *Protection* depicts an assertive Black woman - modelled after Johnson. Her look is 'telling', accusatory almost - she does not let our gaze leave hers. With her hand firmly placed on her hip, in a striking dark green emerald dress, she is flanked by an object that Eurocentric art historical convention has generically classified as 'African art'. As we learn from the artwork's label text, the object is a visual reference to the Barber's controversial 'Benin Bronze' - an altarpiece which is made of brass (not bronze) and dedicated to the Queen Mother of the Edo people of Benin (in what would be modern-day Southern Nigeria). Studying the label, we learn that it was made by an unrecorded Edo sculptor prior to the British looting and brutal destruction of the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897. We are invited to scan a QR code for more extensive information on the provenance history of this item in light of current debates around repatriation and their impact on the Barber's collection.⁶



Fig. 3

Unrecorded Edo Sculptor, *Ikegobo to the lyoba (Hand Altar to the Queen Mother)*, Kingdom of Benin, Edo state (modern-day southern Nigeria), late 18th/early 19th century
© The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

Stripped from its original context and spiritual function, the Ikegobo (altarpiece) is showcased in a glass vitrine at the entrance to the Barber's permanent collection; directly opposite to the Lady Barber gallery hosting Johnson's exhibition. The Queen Mother (lyoba) is represented as the largest figure in the centre of the cylindrical hand altar, surrounded by three female and male attendants to either side - with Johnson's work referencing one of the two male attendants, who 'offers support and protection to the lyoba (queen mother).'¹⁷ The spatial constellation and vicinity of the altarpiece to *Protection* and *Blues Dance* creates a powerful moment for reflection, connecting interior and exterior worlds of Black diasporic subjectivity. Moving between the artworks, we are invited to meditate on the power of the gaze - with both of Johnson's works speaking of Black women's power and agency - activating past, present and future.

Confronting the legacy of empire and brutal histories of dispersion through the direct response and visual reference to the imperial and colonial context of the Barber's collection, *Protection* is a sophisticated intervention by Johnson who from the beginning of her career has been actively engaged in redressing and shaping the history of art through her art. Professor Dorothy Price, who has written extensively on the artist, has placed Johnson's



Fig. 4 Paul Gauguin, *Bathers at Tahiti*, 1897
Oil on sacking. 73.3 x 91.8 cm ©The Henry Barber Trust,
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

work in critical dialogue to works of French modernism.⁸ While the latter may certainly have inspired formal aspects such as the expressive use of colour in her work, it is the creative act of ‘colonial revenge’ and subversion of the white male-macho gaze and sexual objectification of women of colour in Primitivist paintings by Gauguin or Picasso, which seems to be the driving motor of the feminist and decolonial politics of Johnson’s practice.⁹ This fraught relationship to modernism is clearly articulated by Johnson in a comment printed on the label next to Gauguin’s *Bathers at Tahiti*, 1897, forming part of the Barber’s permanent collection:

‘The effect of the work that Gauguin did in Tahiti, the way that it presented an outsider view of Tahitian women, is the opposite of what I am doing, in that I am kind of working from the inside. I don’t have the same objectifying lens, I am working with a different kind of power, really.’¹⁰

Resisting the white (voyeuristic) gaze which dominates Eurocentric histories of art, and debunking what Susan Hiller has called the ‘myth of Primitivism’,¹¹ Johnson’s work is testimony that works of art can be subtle, intimate, beautiful and deeply political at the same time. *Protection* is the continuation of Johnson’s critical engagement with the diasporic agency of African art, already evident in earlier works such as *Standing Figure with African Masks*, 2018, which she exhibited at Modern Art Oxford in 2019.¹² Exploring the legacy

of her African heritage and the histories of forced dis-location that were inflicted on her ancestors in the Caribbean in relation to the Barber's displaced 'Benin Bronze', *Protection* transports the viewer across time and space, into the haunted world of objects that were plundered from Africa to be displayed as 'exotic curiosities' or so-called 'primitive art' in European museum collections, such as the British Museum, the Barber, and many others. The hand altar dedicated to the Queen Mother (Iyoba) once was alive and sacred to those who revered it, placing their hand on it to ask for protection of their wealth and talents. As Gloria Anzaldúa has argued about objects stripped of their cultural context in the museum, it has since become 'a conquered thing, a dead thing', having been 'transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performance ritual.'¹³ The fate of displaced statues in European museum collections (and whether or not to consider them as 'dead' or 'alive') has captured the imagination of many artists and filmmakers, with prominent examples including Chris Marker's (at the time highly controversial) anti-colonial film *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*), 1953, which in turn inspired Isaac Julien's video installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, showcased as part of his recent retrospective at the Tate Britain.¹⁴ Originally commissioned by the Barnes foundation to celebrate their centennial, the narrative of Julien's multi-screen video installation centres around an imaginary encounter between Philadelphia art collector Albert C. Barnes and Alain Locke, an African American philosopher, who is regarded as the 'Father of the Harlem Renaissance'. A poetic exploration of their relationship, the multi-layered installation brings to light hidden histories of the objects in the collection, tracing the history of African diaspora art and black modernism through a mix of archival and new material. Visual references to the brutal looting of the Benin bronzes by the 1897 British punitive expedition, raise questions about the restitution and repatriation of African art, which are equally pertinent to Johnson's painterly and two-dimensional invocation of the Barber's Beninese hand altar in *Protection*.

What might happen, I wonder, if we attempted 'listen' to Johnson's exhibition,¹⁵ as did her creative collaborator Trevor Mathison in the act of conceiving an experimental sonic response and sound scape accompanying her work? No doubt, we would all hear a different soundtrack. I close my eyes and let my mind wander. 'Listening' to Johnson's work, I seem to hear echoes relaying words that were once uttered by the artist Rasheed Araeen, who like Johnson, was grappling with Western modernism, its appropriation and exploitation of so-called 'primitive art', and the exclusion of Non-Western artists from the canon of modern art. Infuriated by the omission of Non-Western artists from the controversial '*Primitivism*' exhibition at the MOMA in 1984-85,¹⁶ he famously exclaimed: 'I'm no longer your bloody objects in the British Museum. I'm here right in front of you, in the flesh and blood of a modern artist. If you want to talk about me, let us talk. BUT NO MORE OF YOUR PRIMITIVIST RUBBISH!'¹⁷ Karachi-born British-based Araeen and Johnson, British of Caribbean descent, were both invited speakers at the First National Black Art Convention, held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in

1982 and are both affiliated to what has later come to be known as the British Black Arts Movement.¹⁸ What inspires me about the generation of artists affiliated to the British Black Arts Movement, including Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid, Ingrid Pollard, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith, to name a few key members, is their critical engagement with the histories of art. Whether this is through writing, academic or artistic practice, they are driven by the shared objective of introducing a corrective narrative to mainstream Western art history - something I aspire to in my own practice as an artist, researcher and educator.

The lyrics of Mayfield's song '(...) We people who are darker than blue/ We got no time for segregatin'/ Let's talk about brown and yellow too/ High yellow girl, can't you tell?/ You're just the surface of our dark deep well/ If your mind could really see/ You'd know your color the same as me (...) bring to mind the British Black Art Movement's appreciation of a political Black. This connotes an understanding of the necessity of strategic solidarity across marginalised and racialised postcolonial identities in what Rasheed Araeen considered 'a joint struggle of Asian, African and Caribbean people against racism'¹⁹ - a kind of international solidarity which today in spite of turbo capitalism's promotion of atomized individualism and new forms of tribalism - as I would argue - is still present in the global Palestinian solidarity movement. Foregrounding Black subjectivity, Johnson insists on resisting hegemonic concepts of race, which as she states 'represent a narrow colonial viewpoint that excludes the way people of colour view themselves.'²⁰ Across the Atlantic, skin tones form the base of hierarchies of colour which have deeply impacted the lives of Black people, with skin tones historically being used to classify enslaved plantation workers. Echoing Mayfield's lyrics, Johnson's work pushes against the black/white binary by embracing a spectrum of colours, to 'posit another way of looking at race and colour.'²¹ I would argue that this manifests in the aesthetics of her work, which are radically different to Kerry James Marshall or Lubaina Himid's monochromatic depiction of Black figures.

As Emma Ridgway has noted, 'skin tones are a central aspect of her work, made up with pastel contours or multiple painted colours.'²² Contemplating Johnson's masterful experimentation with colour and texture to convey the visual richness and complexity of skin tones, I recall [*The Coloureds' Codex, An Overseers' Guide to Comparative Complexion*](#) by Keith Piper, 2007, as a striking visualisation of the brutal history of racial classifications according to complexion. Mimicking the aesthetics of cosmetics displays, Piper's work references three major groups named 'Field Negroes', 'House Negroes' and 'Whites' classified into fifteen different skin tones in a wooden display box. The fifteen round creamy pigment pots placed in rows in the box look like testers for foundation make-up, the kind you would pull out of drawers in duty free shops, and range from 'white gentry', 'white Artisan', 'white Labourer', 'white - Indentured', to Hexadecaroon, Quintroon, Octoroon, Quadroon, (classic) Mulatto, to negro (modified), Standard Field, Seasoned Field, Guinea

(Part Seasoned), and Congo (unseasoned). Going back to the renowned Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's classification of humans into four 'varieties',²³ and the imperial thirst of capitalist extraction, the colour of our skin and complexion as justification for scientific racism and colonisation impacts Black (and White) people still to this day.

Considering my own positionality and skin tone, there is no doubt that my perceived whiteness has afforded me many privileges, one of them being employment in the predominantly white sector of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. On the flipside, the colour of my skin has at times led to strange encounters (some of which still speak of privilege). Take, for instance, my encounter with an elderly Black woman outside of Walmart in Richmond, a deprived suburb of San Francisco, and the way she called me a 'white hussy'. My lack of melanin made her 'misread' me as white (Caucasian) American woman and my brown British-South Indian (Asian) husband (whose childhood memories include his mother treating him with a bleaching agent hoping that his skin tone would become fair) as a Black or African-American man. Considering the United States' brutal history of slavery and segregation, the continued racial violence, oppression and incarceration of black people to this day, I felt that it was understandable that our differing complexion as a couple provoked this woman, perhaps triggering a deep trauma of racism and pain of betrayal - leading her to intervene and scold my husband: 'Boy, what are you doing with this 'white hussy'? You think, she's gonna get you a job at Walmart?'

Back on the island of Great Britain, in what used to be the epicentre of the British Empire, showcasing Johnson's work as first woman of colour in the newly refurbished Lady Barber gallery, is considered a milestone in the Barber's history - a step towards a much-needed and long overdue institutional change. As public appreciation of her success, Johnson's nomination for the 2024 Turner Prize is a significant and a career-changing moment for the artist. However, as the above anecdote and the recent resurgence of racist violence across Britain exemplify, we must be clear that the belated acknowledgement and celebration of Black artists does not signify the end of institutional and societal racism in Britain (or elsewhere). While we are collectively mourning Black lives, such as Sonia Massey's, and continue to face the legacy of colonialism and empire embodied in objects of African heritage dispersed and displaced in European and North American museum collections, we cannot afford to be complacent. To end with Mayfield's song's last lines: 'I know we've come a long, long way/But let us not be so satisfied for tomorrow can be an even brighter day.'²⁴

Endnotes

- ¹ See Jason Arday, 'The black professoriate: Assessing the landscape within British higher education', *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 5(13), 2022. Available from https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.13.4
- ² Curtis Mayfield, 'We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue', *Curtis* [Album]. Chicago: Curtom Records, 1970.
- ³ Tammy L. Kernodle, "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free": Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 2, 2008, pp. 295-317. Available from <http://dx.doi.org.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S1752196308080097>
- ⁴ Stephanie Shonekan: 'Epilogue: "We People Who Are Darker Than Blue": Black Studies and the Mizzou Movement', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86 (3), Special Issue—When Voices Rise: Race, Resistance, and Campus Uprisings in the Information Age, Summer 2017, pp. 399-404. Available from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.86.3.0399>
- ⁵ Introductory wall text in *Claudette Johnson: Darker than Blue*, solo exhibition, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2024.
- ⁶ For more information see https://digitalbenin.org/catalogue/3_BIRBI481
- ⁷ 'Claudette Johnson, Protection, 2024', label text in *Claudette Johnson: Darker than Blue*, solo exhibition, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2024.
- ⁸ Dorothy Price, 'Claudette Johnson: Presence', in Dorothy Price and Barnaby Wright (eds). *Claudette Johnson: Presence*, exhibition cat., (The Courtauld Institute) London, 2024, p. 26.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ¹⁰ Claudette Johnson, 2023, cited in 'Paul Gauguin, *Bathers at Tahiti*, 1897', label text in the permanent collection, Barber Institute of Fine Art, 2024.
- ¹¹ Susan Hiller (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism*, London and New York, 1991.
- ¹² Claudette Johnson: *I Came to Dance*, Modern Art Oxford, 1 June - 8 September, 2019.
- ¹³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, 1987, p.91
- ¹⁴ Isaac Julien, *What Freedom is to Me*, Tate Britain, 26 April - 20 August 2023.
- ¹⁵ Here I take inspiration from Tina M. Campt's book *Listening to Images*. See: Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017.
- ¹⁶ The land-mark exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by William Rubin, at the MOMA New York, 27 September 1984 - 15 January 1985, drew a lot of criticism. The exhibition showcased works by modern artists like Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, and Constantin Brancusi alongside de-contextualized objects from indigenous cultures of Africa, Oceania, and North America, while omitting modern artists from these regions. For an extensive critique see: Clifford, James, 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern', in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 189-214.
- ¹⁷ Rasheed Araeen, 'From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts', in Hiller 1991, as at n.11 above, pp. 132-150 (p. 143).
- ¹⁸ For a more detailed account see Price and Wright 2024, as at n.8 above, 2024, pp. 17-20

¹⁹ Rasheed Araeen, 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness in Contemporary Art in Britain', London, 1988, cited in Gilane Tawadros, 'Running with the Hare and Hunting with the Hounds' in David A. Bailey, and Allison Thompson (eds.), *Liberation begins in the Imagination. Writings on Caribbean-British Art*, London, 2021, pp. 117-20 (p. 118).

²⁰ Introductory wall text in *Claudette Johnson: Darker than Blue*, solo exhibition, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2024.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Emma Ridgway, 'Introduction', in Emma Ridgway (ed.): *Claudette Johnson: I Came to Dance*, exhibition cat., Modern Art Oxford, 2019, p. 9.

²³ In *Systema Naturae* (1735), Linneaus distinguished four distinct groups of humans, classifying them according to their skin tone as *Europaeus albesc[ens]*, *Americanus rubesc[ens]*, *Asiaticus fuscus*, and *Africanus nigr[iculus]*, which Staffan Müller-Wille has translated as "whitish," "reddish," "tawny," "blackish". For a more detailed discussion of "the invention of race" and Linneaus' taxonomy, see: Staffan Müller-Wille, 'Race and History: Comments from an Epistemological Point of View', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 39(4), 2014, pp. 597-606. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243913517759>

²⁴ Curtis Mayfield, 'We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue'. Curtis [Album]. Chicago: Curtom Records, 1970. My return to Mayfield's lyrics to end my essay has been inspired by Stephanie Shonekan's 'Epilogue: "We People Who Are Darker than Blue": Black Studies and the Mizzou Movement' referenced above n.4.