

# Claudette Johnson's Black British Aesthetic in *Darker Than Blue*

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An essay commissioned by the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, on the occasion of the exhibition *Claudette Johnson: Darker than Blue*, 22 June - 15 September 2024.

This essay considers Claudette Johnson's exhibition *Darker Than Blue* as one that has taken an intergenerational approach to imagining a Black British aesthetic through the gaze; I argue that this is an unwelcome act for some in white British society, but that it is a very necessary one for the Black British subject.<sup>1</sup> To explore this further, I discuss the aesthetic evolution of Black Britishness from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century utilising three works featured in Johnson's exhibition. This is framed by two songs performed by the Black British artists: Louisa Mark's *Caught You In A Lie*, 1975, and Laura Mvula's *That's Alright*, 2013. Their addition mirrors the role of Trevor Mathison's soundscape, *Filters*, 2024, which forms part of *Darker Than Blue* through four speakers positioned in each corner of the square room housing the exhibition.

## Introduction

In my recent PhD thesis, I was interested in the emergence of the Millennial Generation of Black British Feminists who had formed Creative Collectives between 2013 and 2020, and the political economic factors that connected them to that of their Black British feminist elders like Claudette Johnson, who had established themselves between 1980 and 1985.<sup>2</sup> In *Darker Than Blue* Johnson utilises the act of the gaze to convey the evolution of Black British aesthetical space from the 20<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from her dual Black feminist position of author and subject.

## Conceptualizing Claudette Johnson's Black British Aesthetics in the 20th Century

🎵 Music Playing: [Louisa Mark. \(1975\) Caught You In A Lie. Safari Records LTD<sup>3</sup>](#)

In *Blues Dance*, 2023 (fig. 1), Johnson revisited the embodied gaze of a Young Black Female from the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Young Black Woman in the frame is gazing downward, lost in her own joyful soundscape. A space that had offered us respite from the rising racist politics that was, I argue, a central feature of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Britain (1979-1990). *Blues Dance*, 2023, is 'imbued with her own [Claudette Johnson's] memories of being part of the Blue Beat reggae dance scene in the 1980s, when dances were often held in people's homes'.<sup>4</sup> This work is representative of a Black British aesthetic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting the internal/external politics facing Young Black Women who dared to push the notions of their subjectivity.

Louisa Mark's song, *Caught You In A Lie*, 1975, is referenced here as a metaphor for the social contract Britain had reneged upon with its post-war Commonwealth immigrants like my own parents, and Johnson's, who had migrated from Jamaica. Mark's own family had come from the Caribbean Island of Grenada. *Blues Dance*, 2023, is an example of embodied Black British spatialisation.<sup>5</sup> In this case, its cultural genealogy is derived from *Lovers' Rock*, the reggae sub-genre emerging in 1970s Britain that was carried by the voices of Young Black Female songstresses. Johnson's depiction conveys the uncertainty of a nation refusing to acknowledge our presence, but also the quietly mouthed defiant call - 'we don't care!'.

Lisa Palmer reminds us that the young Black woman depicted in Claudette Johnson's *Blues Dance* was performing a Black feminist politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the Black British aesthetic of *Lovers' Rock* which had experienced its own marginalisation as a music genre due to its 'feminisation of erotic love, the masculinisation of black public politics, and the false separation of erotic discourses about love from the radical politics of liberation found in roots reggae'.<sup>6</sup>

Here Johnson performs her role dual of both subject and author. This 1990 extract from a bell hooks (Gloria Watkins) discussion with Isaac Julien illustrates how Black British artists of her generation were attuned to this practice. Julien was reflecting on his film, *Young Soul Rebels*, 1990 (Channel Four, UK) as being 'both an act of historical retrieval and an unsentimental exploration of the identities we inhabit today'.<sup>7</sup>



**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 Bebbber.

## Conceptualizing Claudette Johnson's Black British Aesthetic in the 21st Century

🎵 Music Playing: [Laura Mvula \(2012\) \*That's Alright\*. RCA Records.](#)<sup>8</sup>

The works by Claudette Johnson that featured as part of *Darker Than Blue* were produced between 2018 and 2024 and so speak from the place of Black Britishness that has evolved in the period I describe as 'Austerity and Brexit Times'.<sup>9</sup> *Austerity and Brexit Times* places the socio-political-economic conjunctures interplaying between 2007 and 2020. This period was marked by the start of the global economic crisis and the end of New Labour (2007-10) that led to the arrival of David Cameron (2010-16) whose government, I argue, unleashed austerity as an ideological policy. Cameron slashed the state's funding of primary public services on an unprepared British public. Its impact upon Black community life in Britain was catastrophic, pausing briefly in 2020 for an interval of something worse, COVID-19. Brexit was the result of the 2016 European Union referendum vote that brought about the UK's departure from the EU, cementing the country's rapid fall into its present conjuncture of right-wing populist politics.<sup>10</sup>



It is here that I bring in two works by Johnson that convey the transition of the Black British subject's gaze as the embodiment of the aesthetical shift we can see in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first example, *Doing Lines 1 (Lockdown) Line Journeys*, 2020 (fig. 2), captures Johnson reflecting upon her own image, acknowledging its beauty, forced by the stopping of time brought about by the mandatory COVID-19 restrictions on social movement. Like in Laura Mvula's, *That's Alright*, 2013, where she sings in the opening line, 'I will never be what you want and that's alright', *Doing Lines 1 (Lockdown) Line Journeys* maps the route of Johnson through her own gaze which has arrived at the place where she wanted to be.

**Fig. 2**  
Claudette Johnson, *Doing Lines 1 (Lockdown) Journeys*, 2020 Oil pastel on paper, 102 x 77.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.  
Photo: Andy Keate



**Fig. 3**

Claudette Johnson, *Young Man in Blue*, 2024  
Pastels, gouache, pencil, watercolour with gesso ground on paper, 122 x 183 cm  
© Claudette Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

The intergenerational genealogy Johnson's works represent can be seen in *Young Man in Blue*, 2024, (fig. 3). It centres the figure of a young Black man whose gaze seemingly embodies both internalised and externalised expressions. The millennial Black British feminist cultural critic and writer, Janine Francoise explored this intergenerational journey in her performative essay, *The Minimal Self: The Year I Arrived*, 2023, where they stated, 'my matrilineal line will serve as a metaphor for Black Feminist knowledge production'.<sup>11</sup> The *Young Man in Blue* has been taught about the past by his elders (Johnson and Mathison) and can now house those ancestral knowledges (cultural genealogies) as seen through his gaze. He can look forward, having visualised the future. The *Young Man in Blue* sees beauty not only in his reflection but also in the life awaiting him. His gaze meets with that of the Young Black Woman depicted in *Blues Dance*, in Johnson's imagination. Together, they sing the songs of Marks and Mvula in chorus aloud at a volume audible only to themselves, taking their cue from Mathison's, *Filters*, which documents the quotidian processes of Johnson's creative practice that incorporate her being. The *Young Man in Blue* embodies Johnson's self-reflection, now assured that Black life has a future.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have considered the recent *Darker Than Blue* exhibition by Claudette Johnson held at The Barber Institute, University of Birmingham, UK. It sought to illustrate how Johnson visualised the embodied experiences inhabiting Black Britons between the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a shift in aesthetical thinking and being. Johnson undertook this through the act of the gaze as a device to posit this cultural transition. I selected three of Johnson's visual texts, *Blues Dance*, *Doing Lines 1 (Lockdown) Line Journeys* and *Young Man in Blue*, to show the cultural shift from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: a period embodying the lifetime of Johnson and myself. This allowed for a discussion on how we (Black Britons) have evolved our self-directed representation of the spaces, experiences, and feelings we have occupied and how they might be translated as part of the continuity of a Black British aesthetical development that is produced intergenerationally (cultural genealogies). In *Darker Than Blue*, Johnson's visualisation captured those quiet enabling spaces that flow within and beyond the land-locking boundaries of The British Isles. Mathison's accompanying soundscape, *Filters* is not an add-on. It is an essential component of Black British aesthetical spatialisation and place-making. Claudette Johnson's collaboration with Trevor Mathison in *Darker Than Blue* moves us forward (not back) to the '*Blues Dance*', acknowledging that we move. We are moving.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Claudette Johnson: Darker Than Blue* exhibition, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, UK, 22 June-15 September, 2024. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://barber.org.uk/claudette-johnson/>

<sup>2</sup> R. A. Gayle, *The Collective Utopia: Black British Feminists' Creative Escape from the Margins of Society*. University of Birmingham, PhD, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> L. Mark, *Caught You In A Lie*, 1975, Safari Records LTD. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://open.spotify.com/track/3DeOYHObVJTWD26BoP9FuS?si=362a7519a6364ec4&nd=1&dlsi=4dc155a2623e4b31> and 'Louisa Mark (1960-2009)', Hackney Museum, London, <https://museum-collection.hackney.gov.uk/names/AUTH5829>

<sup>4</sup> Anon., 'The Courtauld acquires major new work, Blues Dance, by Claudette Johnson', 1 December 2023. The Courtauld Website. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://courtauld.ac.uk/news-blogs/2023/the-courtauld-acquires-major-new-work-blues-dance-by-claudette-johnson/>

<sup>5</sup> Gayle, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> L. A. Palmer, 'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!' Erotic politics, lovers' rock and resistance in the UK', in *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 4:2, 2011, p. 191, DOI: 10.1080/17528631.2011.583454

<sup>7</sup> B. Hooks & I. Julien, 'States of Desire', in *Transition*, 53, 1991, p. 170, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935186> I came to this article via this reference: Hall, S. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice*, vol. 20, no. 1/2 (51-52), 1993, pp. 104-14. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735>

<sup>8</sup> L. Mvula, *That's Alright*, 2013, RCA Records. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://open.spotify.com/track/3bC8SIWgLijNz4lOyayczo>

<sup>9</sup> R. Gayle, 'Creative futures of Black (British) feminism in austerity and Brexit times', in *Trans Inst Br Geogr.* 2020; 45: 525-528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12381>.

<sup>10</sup> As I prepare to submit this article (August 2024), England is experiencing another 'Summer of Discontent' as small battalions of White Nationalists orchestrate racist attacks upon Black and Brown people who cross their paths, and also mosques and hotels said to be housing asylum seekers. Their crusade has arisen in the vacuum of misinformation circulating on social media platforms posted in the wake of a mass stabbing incident in Southport, NW England on 29 July 2024 in which three girls aged 6, 7 and 9 were killed. BBC News, Judith Moritz, Rebecca Wearn, Liz Roberts and Fiona Trott, 30 July 2024. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cmm2qdmqz5qo>.

<sup>11</sup> J. Francois, 'The Minimal Self: The Year I Arrived'. Black Blossoms website, 2 April 2023. Accessed online 5 August 2024: <https://www.black-blossoms.online/the-journal/the-minimal-self-the-year-i-arrived>.

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