The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos. Dionne Brand. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2019. 248 pp. 9780771001543

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Dionne Brand's *The Blue Clerk* is not only an epic *ars poetica* but also an *ars archivi* – an art of the archive that demonstrates the necessity of poetry for a critical archival practice. Brand has received multiple awards for her poetry, novels, and essays; was admitted to the Order of Canada in 2017; and is currently a professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, Ontario. Her work influences prominent scholars and artists, including Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Torkwase Dyson, and *The Blue Clerk* marks an important contribution to conversations across disciplines including Black feminist, decolonial, and archival studies. *The Blue Clerk* is presented as a collection of 59 versos. A verso, or the "back of a leaf," in publishing language, refers to the back side of the page in a bound book – the left-facing page when one is reading left to right (p. 4). For Brand, the versos represent everything that has not made it into print: "I have left this unsaid," opens the first stipule (printed on the recto or right-facing page); "I have withheld more than I have written" (p. 3). In this publication, the versos are printed on both recto and verso pages, indicating that what has been previously left out or withheld has now been judged worthy of the archive. The archive Brand manifests continues the project of a "queer, unconventional, and imaginative archive of the black Atlantic."[1] *The Blue Clerk* indicates that the entirety of Brand's oeuvre is in

1 As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes Brand's work after *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and*

conversation with this archival practice, which involves plumbing the depths of what is unsayable, unimaginable, and unwritten.

Turning the page, the reader begins "Verso 1," emerging onto "a wharf somewhere; at a port, somewhere," where the blue clerk restlessly labours (p. 4). The clerk and the author are two voices who negotiate throughout the book to determine what to offer the reader on the page and what secrets to keep protected in the stacks. The clerk is the archivist of all that is withheld. While the author chooses the "presentable things, the beautiful things" (p. 6), and records them on the right-hand page, the clerk presides over the erasures produced by the (public) archive of rectos – over the bales of documents, cities, blues, artists, thoughts, lemons, memories, lavenders, women, music, etc., etc. that make up the subaltern elements of the author's existence. The wharf buckles under the weight of an incessant influx of immeasurable material; compared to the precious collection of signatures bound into the book held in the reader's hand, it brings to mind historian Jennifer Morgan's insight that "archival absences weigh us down."[2] Morgan describes the relationship of the subaltern to the state archive as lying "outside of or marginal to the archival project of nation building."[3] When it comes to the state archive, archival evidence forms the foundational justification for exclusionary and racist violence. As Morgan writes, the archive is a fraught space for researchers, one that both produces silences and provides the possibility of producing counter-narratives. Interrogating the archive requires us to interrogate how we are products of the archive itself. In *The Blue Clerk*, Brand enacts a critical archival practice through an extended and multivalent dialogue between the clerk and the author – or the archivist and the scholar who engages the archive – risking the challenge of simultaneously interrogating both the archive and herself as its product.

"I am the clerk," Brand writes, and "I am the author" (p. 6). An intimate dialogue between the clerk and the author forms the internal structure of the book, teasing out an inconclusive, combative, and loving elaboration on "the heterogeneous qualities of a life, or of life" in general, that challenges "both corporate and State" efforts to homogenize human life (p. 110). Poetry is the form that allows this

Gay Studies 14, no 2–3 (2008): 193. See also Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001).

2 Jennifer L. Morgan, "Archives and Histories of Racial Capitalism: An Afterword," *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015): 154.

3 Ibid.

heterogeneity to flourish. The human has become describable, argues the author, due to the vast availability of information, of history, of thought. When archives are expected to satisfy narratively, they are made "unavailable for the generative possibilities that a poem has" (p.111). Brand addresses scholars like Morgan, who struggle with the question of how to recover lost narratives from archives that are built on the erasure of Black life. With a scholarly commitment to narrative, even in the service of recovering the uncountable lost narratives of the Black diaspora, the author is still obliged to offer understanding to the reader, whereas with poetry, "you don't owe them at all" (p. 111). If writing is "a negotiation between what is said, what is written, and what is withheld," then poetry is the method of writing that maximizes the "possibilities of its withholding, and the possibilities of its revealing" (pp. 111–12). With a protective eye, the clerk watches over all the unpublished details of Brand's characters' lives. Poetry has the capacity to express the secrets and silences of the archive without subjecting them to the violence of the archive's flattening processes; poetry is the linguistic manifestation of the indescribable human.

Brand's poetics of human being and its immeasurable complexity stand in contrast to the exclusionary definition of the human that cultural critic Robert Reid-Pharr argues is the basis of Western humanist discourse and, therefore, of archival scholarship.[4] In *Archives of Flesh*, he makes a plea for an invigoration of *critical* archival studies in the form of what he calls a "post-humanist archival practice."[5] He describes archival practices as the "methods by which we identify, evaluate, store, catalog, and transmit what we take to be the most precious examples of civilization and tradition."[6] Reid-Pharr demonstrates how the characteristics of Western archival practices overlap with those of war: both are "raced, classed and gendered practices" that "delimit the space available to females, people of color, and working-class persons while also actively and energetically exploiting their productive and reproductive potentialities."[7] The violence of the archive is expressed when meaning is produced to fit humanist narratives while the presence of real human life is obscured. Reid-Pharr's

4 Robert Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

5 Ibid., 10.

6 Ibid., 30.

7 Ibid., 31.

archives of flesh are archives of lived Black experience; they illustrate his claim that our ability to consider human beings is not limited by the structural conceits of humanism reflected in the Western humanist structure of the archive. His challenge is to look for "ways of naming human being, that are not bounded by the very forms of philosophy and sociology from which black and female subjectivity are always already excluded."[8] A post-humanist archival practice is capable of reading the "messiness" of individual lives – the "untoward and undisciplined" actions of the archive's subjects, their animality, their "disloyalty to the most sacred of humanism's many conceits" – as the real conditions of being human.[9] Brand demonstrates this critical archival practice in *The Blue Clerk* through messy engagements with personal memories, undisciplined forays across philosophical, political, and artistic discourse, and a poetic disloyalty to narrative resolution.

In "Verso 22," the author describes an encounter with an archive housed at the Museum of London Docklands on the West India Quay. When she reports the information she has found – about a man named John Brand who, in the 1790s, captained four voyages of a ship that carried people from the Gambia to be enslaved in Dominica – the clerk responds that "this is perfectly respectable for the right-hand page. Why burden me with this too?" "Yes," the author responds, "but it is so tedious, this type of material is worn out. . . . It repeats without resolution" (p. 132). The clerk admonishes the author to be more careful with her collecting practices: "Such an encounter only brings more grief than you can handle" (p. 133). The author lists more facts, about another John Brand who was a clergyman in Norwich; a Thomas Brand who was a member of Parliament; and a William Lyttleton, the owner of the ship captained by John Brand, who was also, somehow, a staunch supporter of abolishing the slave trade only 15 years after his ship's voyages. The author claims she needs a historian to cope with this "ephemera," but if, as philosopher Achille Mbembe claims, the historian and the archivist are both most useful to the state,[10] then who should the author call on to help her navigate the emotional depths of the archive (p. 134)? Contrary to Mbembe's formulation of the (state) archive as having the status of truth that

8 Ibid., 11.

9 Ibid., 102.

10 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19–26, 26.

"does away with doubt,"[11] Brand's encounter with the multiple truths represented in the archive produces a profound question with no resolution. At the end of the verso, the clerk offers another fact that has been conditionally relegated to the left-hand side of history – "if not for" the complicity of a different author with the slave trade – a provocation to remind us that "it is possible that everything is washed in it" (p. 134). The clerk is the counter-archivist who formulates the unfathomable grief of the archive.

"What made the dictatorship in Argentina steal people's children?" "What makes the police kill Black children, everywhere?" the author asks (pp. 149, 152). Jennifer Morgan might commiserate: "So many reams of paper, so much flotsam, and yet we still are faced with secrets and silences that testify to how crucial those archival erasures are to the construction of an exclusionary 'human'"[12] In "Verso 40.6," Brand offers an example of how archival practices, the interpretation of archival evidence in particular, maintain systemic erasures that contribute to a dominant (and dominating) definition of the human. The subject of this verso is the famous photograph by Louis Daguerre known as the first photograph ever to capture the image of a human being. The scene of the image is Boulevard du Temple in Paris in 1838, taken from a heightened perspective, perhaps the rooftop of a building. The image required an exposure time of 10 minutes, so all the animated activity on the boulevard that day has disappeared from the scene. However, in the bottom left-hand corner, a figure has remained still long enough to be recorded, one foot raised, apparently having his shoes shined. The common description of this image refers to this standing figure as "the first human being to be photographed" (p. 202). However, Brand sees "first the figure cleaning the shoes as the photograph's subject. Secondly, the event of the shoe-cleaning" (p. 202). This verso perspective of the image – of the lived relational necessities that support the appearance of histories – is the counter-reading Brand challenges us to bring to the archive.

The "instituting imaginary" of the archive[13] categorizes this photograph according to a logic whereby the only human in the photographic archive is the man who stands still long enough to be attended to; the rest of the animated world disappears as it revolves around him. This is how the archive produces

11 Ibid., 21.

12 Morgan, "Archives and Histories of Racial Capitalism," 157.

13 Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," 19.

a definition of humanity, a category from which the author and the clerk are excluded: "Which nation ever said of a woman she is human?" (p. 40). Brand's archive of versos, however, demonstrates an archival practice that refuses to be weighed down by the "toxic imagination" of this representation of the human, offering instead painting and music as brilliant arguments against Enlightenment reason: "Art is the only response" (p. 101).

Brand demonstrates the paucity of the exclusionary colonial archive and how its limited imagination fails to interrupt the real and relational archives of kinship, land, and weather, or in Robert Reid-Pharr's terms, archives of lived Black experience.[14] In a town by the sea, the author's grandfather lived and recorded the "clouds and their seasons and their violence" (p.11). In recalling her grandfather and his home in intimate detail, the author realizes that he was her library. This intimate description of the author's relationship to a counter-colonial archive reflects a critical archival practice that offers an imaginative orientation to scholars engaging with subjects who have been systematically dehumanized by and excluded from the colonial archive. "That sea was like a lucent page to the left of the office where my grandfather kept his logs and his notebooks with their accounts" (p. 9), just as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley has described Brand's Black, queer Atlantic "an ever-present, ever-reformulating record of the unimaginable."[15] The sea is withheld, the (Black, queer) Atlantic is the verso of Western humanist history, a "living, breathing, elliptical, complicated, undone thing," as Brand describes the endless material diligently watched over by the clerk.[16] Dionne Brand has drawn *The Blue Clerk* from the lucent left-hand page of the sea, an exemplary art of the archive, of a life, of life.

14 Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh*.

15 Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," 194.

16 Canisia Lubrin, "Q&A: Canisia Lubrin speaks to Dionne Brand about Her Two New Books, *The Blue Clerk* and *Theory*," *Quill & Quire*, September 13, 2018, accessed December 23, 2019, https://quillandquire.com/omni/qa-canisia-lubrin-speaks-to-dionne-brand-about-her-two-new-books-the-blue-clerk-and-theory/.