



Blues\Blank\Black: Performance Art as Gesture, Color, Repetition, Archive

Blues\Blank\Black: Performance como gesto, color, repetición, archivo

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Abstract: The visual essay discusses the performance *Blues\Blank\Black* (2016) by the artist Dell M. Hamilton, engaged in dialogue with two novels by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987). The performance grapples with individual and collective traumas and memories, with the failure to articulate the past and with the intergenerational impacts of experiences of violence against black women and girls. In three acts and by means of a superimposition, the artist evokes the folkloric and mythic figures of La Sucia and La Llorona of the popular oral traditions of Central America, and engages with the aesthetic effect of the color blue as a signifier for the orisha *Yemayá*. As part of an ongoing artistic research into the character of social violence, *Blues\Blank\Black* is a procedure of exaggeration, a hyperbole, as recognized in traumas, and it is a means to becoming aware of revived memories of past generations.

Keywords: Archive; *La Sucia/La Llorona*; Color; Violence against black women.

Resumen: El ensayo visual presenta la performance *Blues\Blank\Black* (2016) de la artista Dell M. Hamilton que dialoga con dos novelas de Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) y *Beloved* (1987). Esta performance lidia con traumas y memorias individuales y colectivos, con la incapacidad de articular el pasado y con los impactos intergeneracionales de experiencias violentas

de mujeres y niñas afrodescendientes. En tres actos y a través de una superposición, la artista evoca las figuras folclóricas y míticas de La Sucia y La Llorona, conocidas en las tradiciones orales populares de Centroamérica, y se integra el efecto estético del color azul como significante de la *orisha* Yemayá. Como parte de una investigación artística sobre el carácter de la violencia social, *Blues\Blank\Black* es un procedimiento de exageración, una hipérbole, reconocida en los traumas, y una manera de darse cuenta de las memorias revividas de las generaciones pasadas. **Palabras clave:** Archivo; *La Sucia/La Llorona*; Color; Violencia contra mujeres afrodescendientes.

In memoriam of Toni Morrison

All of our waste, which we dumped on her, and which she absorbed
 And all of our beauty which was hers first, which she gave to us.
 All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome when we cleaned
 ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness.
 (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*)

Visual Essay by Dell Marie Hamilton. Text: Liliana Gómez



Act I, Fig. 1: In Act 1, the artist enters the space wearing a long ill-fitting blue satin dress. To signal the shift from herself into Azul, her performance character, she kneels to grab a wig from a pile of props that include a child's toy microphone, a dirty hairbrush and a black feather boa. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act I, Fig. 2: Dressed as Azul, the artist holds up the curly-haired decapitated head of an African American porcelain baby doll. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act I, Fig. 3: Dressed as Azul, the artist holds up the name of Rekia Boyd. Boyd, a 22-year-old African American woman, was shot in the head in 2012 by a Chicago off-duty officer who was investigating a noise complaint. Photo by Melissa Blackall, and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act I, Fig. 4: The names of the deceased African American women and a bundle of props are placed in the corner of the gallery. The corner itself signifies being backed into a location from which there is no escape. Photo by Tiph Brownne. *Blues\Blank\Black* performed at Five Myles Gallery in 2016.



Act I, Fig. 5: Objects used in Act I include a pair of worn-out blue suede heels, the broken porcelain baby doll head, and a black feather boa. They are left on the floor of the gallery as the piece transitions from Act I to Act II. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act II, Fig. 6: Still dressed as Azul, a bluesy nightclub singer, the artist caresses her wig before changing into the wedding dress on the gallery floor for ACT II. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act II, Fig. 7: In ACT II, the artist shifts into the role of *La Sucia*, a folkloric female figure who is jilted at the altar because she isn't baptized. She then falls victim to madness, and vows to wear her wedding dress for eternity. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act II, Fig. 8: During ACT II, as *La Sucia*, the artist raises the wedding dress over her head to both expose and hide herself from the viewer. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



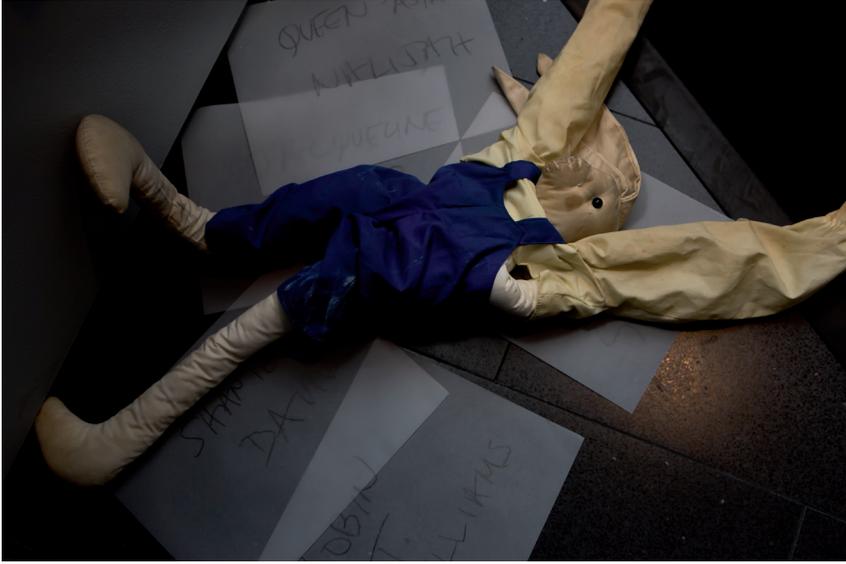
Act III, Fig. 9: Each deceased African American woman or girl's name is written in black charcoal on semi-transparent vellum paper. Channeling *La Llorona* and donning a cheap dirty blond wig, slathered in white body paint and a long black gown made of tulle and satin, the artist yells out the name of Tanisha Anderson who was shot in a police encounter in Cleveland in 2014. Photo by Tiph Browne, Blues\Blank\Black performed at Five Myles Gallery on May 21, 2016 in Brooklyn, New York.



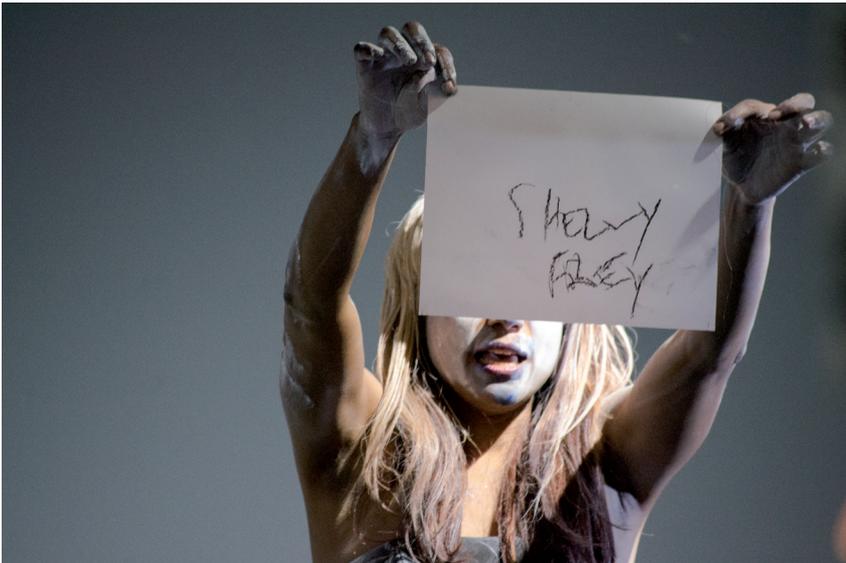
Act III, Fig. 10: The artist violently swings a plush Brer Rabbit toy. The toy rabbit is a nod toward the impact of Uncle Remus folktales upon the novelist Toni Morrison, specifically the story of *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*. Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* was published in 1981. Photo by Tiph Browne, Blues\Blank\Black performed at Five Myles Gallery on May 21, 2016 in Brooklyn, New York.



Act III, Fig. 11: The artist carries her props by wrapping the objects in blue fabric. Above her head, she swings blue tulle fabric that is adorned with dozens of latex finger cots. Photo by Tiph Browne, Blues\Blank\Black performed at Five Myles Gallery on May 21, 2016 in Brooklyn, New York.



Act III, Fig. 12: The plush Brer Rabbit doll is left on the gallery floor as part of the performance. Photo by Melissa Blackall and courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University.



Act III, Fig. 13: The artist holds up the name of Shelly Frey who was shot in the neck in 2012 in a Houston Walmart parking lot by an armed security guard who was also a Harris County deputy sheriff. Photo by Tiph Browne, *Blues\Blank\Black* performed at Five Myles Gallery on May 21, 2016 in Brooklyn, New York.

This visual essay documents *Blues\Blank\Black*, a performance artwork that Dell Marie Hamilton first performed for approximately 20-25 minutes at the Five Myles Gallery in Brooklyn, New York on May 21, 2016. In this initial version, the artist sought to channel the mythic figure of *La Llorona*, a scorned woman: after learning of her husband's infidelity, she murders him, her children, and then kills herself. In subsequent presentations Hamilton further developed her work's inspiration with story-telling and the popular oral traditions of Central America, presenting the performance in a narrative structure of three acts. The performance since has had varying run-times when performed at Harvard University's Ethelbert Cooper Gallery for African and African American Art (30 minutes) and at Boston University's 808 Gallery in 2017 (50 minutes) and more recently in 2018 at the Living Arts Gallery (40 minutes) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in remembrance of Juneteenth Independence Day and the abolition of slavery in the southern United States.

The artwork engages in a dialogue with key paragraphs from two of Toni Morrison's most well-known novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987). Its conceptual framework seeks to address the violence that lays waste to the lives and bodies of black women, a violence alluded to equally in the literary texts it interacts with. Across societies, in the context of the Transatlantic slave trade, the lives and bodies of Afro-descendant women have often been held as equivalents of trash, forming part of the semantics of the abject and waste. In response, Hamilton has explored her own trauma, in the way she reflects on her own migration experience bringing together autobiographical elements with psychic and material sedimentations of the plantation history of Central America that she has investigated elsewhere as the impact of the American political economy and violence on her Honduran family history. In her performance, she internalized passages from Morrison's novels and wove them together with the names and stories of black women who have died during encounters with American law enforcement officers in the recent history of the United States. Both through this self-fashioning, and the superimposition of the folkloric and mythic figures of *La Llorona* and *La Sucia*, a grotesque monstrous female figure of loose morals and filth is revealed. In this work, Hamilton shows the viewer how the subjectivity of these women, both real and fictional, becomes entangled in value systems that are steeped in disenfranchisement, racial violence, economic inequality, and misogyny.

Blues\Blank\Black presents itself also as an effort to grapple with the unspeakable nature of trauma and its intergenerational impact. Whether occurring during slavery or in the present, trauma in many of its guises (rape, incest, domestic violence, police brutality) has a reproductive quality that is retained and re-performed through individual and collective memories and social behavior. As such this reproduction of trauma operates within an echo chamber in which identity is crafted, interrogated, negated, adapted and archived. With the further development of the piece, Hamilton has created *Blues\Blank\Black* to borrow from the materiality of language and to use the expressive nature of gesture, movement and color as a basis for a new variation.

As a superimposed narrative, she delves into the present reality of losing women like Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Korryn Gaines, Atatiana Jefferson due to law enforcement's malice, indifference and incompetence. Conceiving this performance as a way of carrying forward memories between generations, and doing what Christina Sharpe elsewhere calls 'wake work' (2016) –waiting and remembering the already dead and the soon to be dead black bodies that are ensnared in the pervasive and unceasing afterlives of racism, misogyny, slavery and colonization–, Hamilton explores the themes and metaphors of the blues – an African American Southern musical genre that articulates, and makes perceptible the meaning of sorrow through song, engaging here as well with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where the color blue signifies the impact of a 'white gaze' leaving the reader to consider what blue eyes are permitted to see or not see.

Similarly, as with *The Bluest Eye*, the performance *Blues\Blank\Black* is preoccupied with the optics of spectacle and with how vision produces meaning by seeing, not seeing, or being seen. The performance is thus invested in the formal and metaphoric capacities of color by using the color blue as a signifier for the Yoruba orisha, *Yemayá*. As mother of the ocean, *Yemayá* is venerated within West African derived religious practices in the Caribbean and Latin America (Santería, Vodun, Palo Mayombe) for her strength, power and protection of all Afro-descendant people whose ancestors survived the Middle Passage. In contrast, however, the presentation of the color black evokes death, mourning, ugliness and the void, but also the social construction of 'blackness'. Along with the interaction of these colors, 'blank' is conceived of as a tabula rasa that absorbs all the tragedy that we encounter in life as well as the surface onto and through which Morrison's figure of Beloved, Sethe's dead baby, is fashioned. In her performance, as a multiple 'third' person and in the sequence of the three acts, Hamilton mirrors the figure of Beloved as a canvas onto which we as the audience can project our judgment and hierarchy, insecurity and guilt. Because the gestures, use of voice and props, as well as actions are exaggerated, the piece also pokes fun at the lengths to which women will go to maintain their beauty and be accepted. Beauty and its power can be endlessly reconfigured depending upon geopolitical contexts, individual subjectivity, economic access, and social status, Hamilton suggests. Within the work, there is also the suggestion that racial and ethnic identities are unsustainable contradictions that we use as masks to hide how fragmented we might feel inside.

In re-reading Morrison's work and thinking through how to address contemporary instances of violence against black and brown women and girls, Hamilton chooses to repeat and yell out individual names during the performance to draw attention to the fact that, unlike Eric Garner or Michael Brown, many of these women's names are unknown to the general public. Hamilton explains that she began to reconsider *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* in the context of the #SayHerName movement. Developed by black feminist scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, #SayHerName is a public awareness campaign to highlight the deaths of black women who have been killed by the police. However, there is a larger challenge with the #SayHerName initiative in that it has not gained traction in the same way that #BlackLivesMatter has become a clarion call.

Since in so many instances, members of the public cannot recall the names of these women, all we are left with are questions. Who is it exactly that we are supposed to remember? Why were their lives snuffed out? Who is punished for their deaths and what do we do with our grief? How is the value of one life rated against another? Or, does it have to do with the fact that violence against black women and girls has been so normalized as to be invisible? How are we complicit in the expectation that violence against women only happens within the confines of the domestic realm?

Engaging explicitly with the figure of Beloved and how it is present, Hamilton questions how oral traditions function in policing the behavior of women and girls. Accordingly, *Blues\Blank\Black* is also a haunting performance, as it delves into the present past. It raises the questions: What might happen if the ghost stories, which scared the artist as a child, are incorporated, namely, the folkloric figures of *La Sucia* and *La Llorona* of the Central American popular stories? The well-known story of *La Sucia* narrates that the figure *La Sucia* was left at the altar by her betrothed, because she was not baptized, which is to say that she was unclean and unfit for marriage. Again, these popular oral stories activate the semantic field of dirt and waste to judge women and their behavior, and underline a cultural legitimization of violence against women. As a result, the performed figure goes mad and refuses to take off her wedding dress. In the case of the figure of *La Llorona*, her punishment is to roam the material world as an apparition. Great harm is said to come to anyone who goes near her.

Having evolved against this background, the piece superimposes and plays with the various female figures of both Morrison's novels and the oral traditions of *La Sucia* and *La Llorona*, marking make-believe stages from girlhood to womanhood, playfulness to madness and rage. Accordingly, the more recent history of violence against women in the United States becomes interwoven as the performance evolves in time and interacts with the audience through recited parts of Morrison's novels and the non-narrated names of killed black women:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name.
 Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her.
 And even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?
 Although she has claim, she is not claimed.
 (Morrison, *Beloved*)

Through the performance of these multiple persons and figures, as they are adapted, enacted and superimposed by Hamilton in the sequence of the three acts, the semantic field of dirt and waste, that is related to the abject and the segregated, forms the basis of the shifting meaning of violence that remains enduring of a present past. It relates to what Rebecca Schneider observed:

When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive experts), but as both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance [...] we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object,

to bone versus flesh. [...] Still, we must be careful to avoid the habit of approaching performance remains as a metaphysics of presence that fetishizes a singular ›present‹ moment. As theories of trauma and repetition might instruct us, it is not presence that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but precisely (again) the missed encounter – the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten. (Schneider 2011, 101)

The artwork by Hamilton references on a metalevel the works of performative theorists such as Peggy Phelan (1993), Diana Taylor (2003) or Rebecca Schneider (2011), who problematize the marginalization of work with the body in Western cultures and, overall, their banishment from the historical narrativization of violence and violence against women in particular. Hamilton discloses in her work the archival quality of gestures and the body, as they become part of long lasting cultural ascriptions and projections of identity politics. Her research into the character of social violence thus gains a genealogical dimension, as she unfolds the cultural impact of violence and intergenerational trauma. By delving into the marginal and the marginalized in a culture, which is related to the semantic field of waste and the abject, her performance work stresses the fragility, partiality and even the fragmentariness of how we remember and perceive violence. Finally, she reveals through the performance of the body and its changing and projected identities the gesture as part of a body-archive and thus the documentary dimension of the body: The body becomes the medium that preserves those events that are withdrawn from the records of history, but that holds elements that are marginal, marginalized or abject in our culture (Sajewska 2016, 366).

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