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Glenn Ligon and the Matter of Fugitivity

My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view. Standing there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July. Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," 1852

In 1991, Glenn Ligon set out to draw a history of American freedom (fig. 3.1). He began by inscribing the year 1776 into the upper-left-hand corner of a red ground before proceeding to record what came next: 1777, then 1778, 1779, 1780. Occasionally, splotches of paint undermine the numbers' rectitude; gradually, the dragging of black oil stick and plastic stencil decreases their clarity; and every other line or so, a year is cut in half by the paper's right edge. Such incidents of smear and shadow hardly count, because one year after another, the story and the drawing unfold, the digits dutifully plodding across the surface until they meet its margin, wrap around it, and continue onward. When their journey concludes, it does so abruptly, even anticlimactically, leaving a jagged red strip beneath the year 1865. "Liberty and justice for all" have somehow arrived, their uncertainty intact.

In its movement from the Declaration of Independence to the abolition of slavery, *Untitled (1776–1865)* marks out the disparity between instances of American emancipation so as to materialize the distance between the realities of black op-

pression and the myths of white freedom. In drawing these moments together like so many links in a chain, Ligon's work not only points to the lapses of memory that have been required for the republic to imagine itself, it also suggests how the selective occlusion of the past continues to falsify our imagining of the present. Executed for the artist's show at New York's Jack Tilton Gallery, which opened—perhaps not coincidentally—on July 2, 1991, just days before the United States independence holiday, *Untitled (1776–1865)* can hardly do otherwise. Ligon's understated indictment thus seems to echo Frederick Douglass's scathing assessment of the nation's hypocrisy and thereby keeps alive, nearly one hundred and forty years later, his still-pressing question: "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?"

Both men, I would argue, implicitly answer "nothing," though the ways each goes about giving shape to nothingness—to the lack of voice, autonomy, and personhood that characterizes the position of the black subject—are, of course, purposefully different. Unlike the former slave, whose oration unfolds with dizzying rhetorical brilliance, Ligon dispenses with words and settles for the unassailable march of numbers themselves. Yet like Douglass, who cannot rejoice—"I," he declares, "must mourn" on the Fourth of July—Ligon has made a somber drawing, a listing that runs together, collapsing dates and darkly compressing time.¹ Here, it is not the clock but the artist's hand that keeps on ticking, patiently inscribing each numeral in its place within a grid while physically registering the occasional errors that arise in the course of such an exercise: an errant "18" crops up between 1824 and 1825, and the year 1855 is missing altogether, but the work's core proposal still holds.

As did Douglass, Ligon understands the political disavowal with which assertions of black freedom are met, and like so many modernists, he mourns for a loss that we still cannot get over, a difficulty brought into his then-present by the conceptual pendant to *Untitled (1776–1865)* (fig. 3.2).² Beginning where that drawing left off, *Untitled (1865–1991)* makes even less of a claim for the epochal status of its featured dates, merely holding out another cascade of digits that eventually halt at the year of its execution. The accounting of American history in these pieces cleaves along the date of abolition, materially enacting the disjuncture between eras of black oppression. Yet the works' almost identical modes of rote execution also intimate how the effects of the "peculiar institution" continue to induct us into the future even as we ostensibly move ever further from the primal scenes of the antebellum past. Taken together, these untitled drawings make manifest the grounds from which this chapter departs: namely, that slavery, its legacies, and the modes of resistance to them were of formative importance for Ligon's conception of history as well as his aesthetic means in the late 1980s and early '90s, a tendency most dramatically evinced by his large-scale installation *To Disembark* (1993).

Curiously, such engagements were rarely considered in the initial accounts of his art. Just a few weeks before his opening at Jack Tilton, the up-and-coming painter was the subject of a Sunday *New York Times* profile. In the accompanying photograph, Ligon emerges warily from behind one of his trademark antiporraits,



3.2
 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled*
 (1865–1991), 1991. Gouache,
 oil stick, and graphite on paper.
 76.2×56.5 cm. (Courtesy of
 the artist.)

bodily doubles, in which first-person assertions of identity—frequently appropriated from texts by canonical African American authors such as Ralph Ellison—are repeatedly stenciled in black paint onto a white ground until the words become illegible (fig. 3.3). In her write-up, critic Roberta Smith situated the artist’s practice not within traditions of black radical critique, but in relation to his seemingly antithetical personal experiences, beginning with his daily childhood commute from a South Bronx housing project to a West Side private school and ending with his shift from painterly abstraction to a multimedia practice pointedly engaged with social issues. Ligon’s peripatetic life had, according to Smith, enabled his art to “negotiate an unusually effective course between the visual and the linguistic, the visceral and the cerebral, and the personal and the political.”³

In the quotation that gives the profile its title, Ligon confirms his status as a nomad ever marooned between such antinomies: “Lack of location is my location. I’m always shifting opinions and changing my mind.”⁴ More than just a clue about his personal disposition, this statement sums up an attitude toward identity in terms quite befitting the moment. These were, after all, the salad days of identarian critique, epitomized by cultural critic Stuart Hall’s well-known declaration of “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.”⁵ Such interventions



3.3
 Nancy Siesel, *Portrait of Glenn Ligon*, from the *New York Times*, June 1991. (© Nancy Siesel.)

aimed to trouble the fixity so often presumed whenever race rears its impossible head, though, as we saw in Lorna Simpson's case, for all the talk of hybrid and performative selves, mainstream criticism by and large further trivialized the work of black artists even as it was brought forward to capitalize on the reigning taste for alterity.⁶ Fully aware of the limitations imposed on practitioners of color during what he would later call the age of "High Multiculturalism," at the time, Ligon acknowledged his investment in African American history, but was careful to hedge his bets toward the ambiguous.⁷ When Smith asked if he considered himself a political artist, he responded: "I don't have any problem with the term if it means you're doing art about real life and about what's most important to you. But sometimes it's used as a pejorative to criticize work that pushes a specific agenda. I hope my work is more open-ended, more about questioning positions than establishing a single position."⁸

This assertion has established something like an interpretive baseline for the whole of Ligon's practice, which has modeled a topical diversity and aesthetic promiscuity shaped by his social positioning as a gay man of African descent, even as his work interrogates the bases of social positioning as such. In the last fifteen

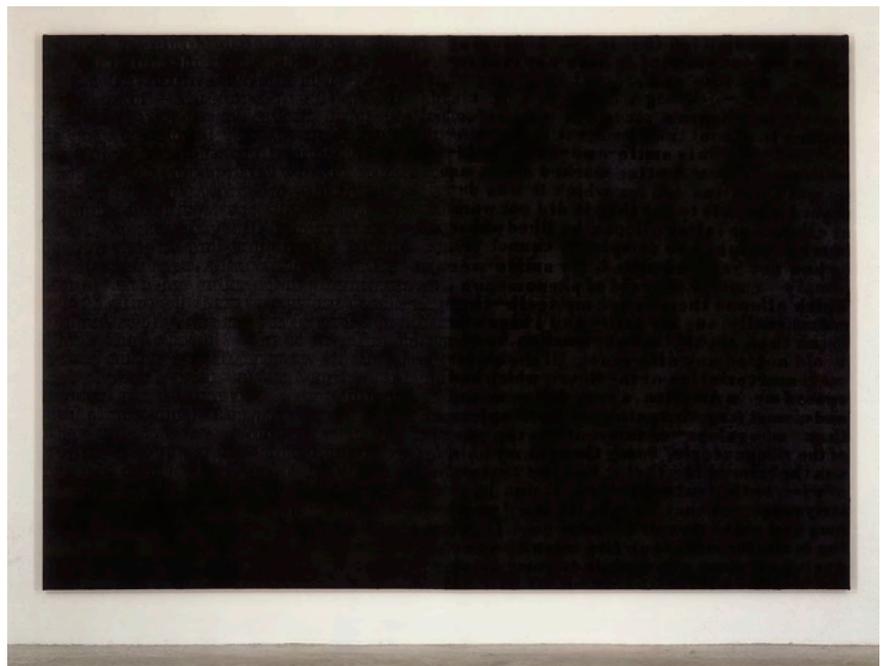
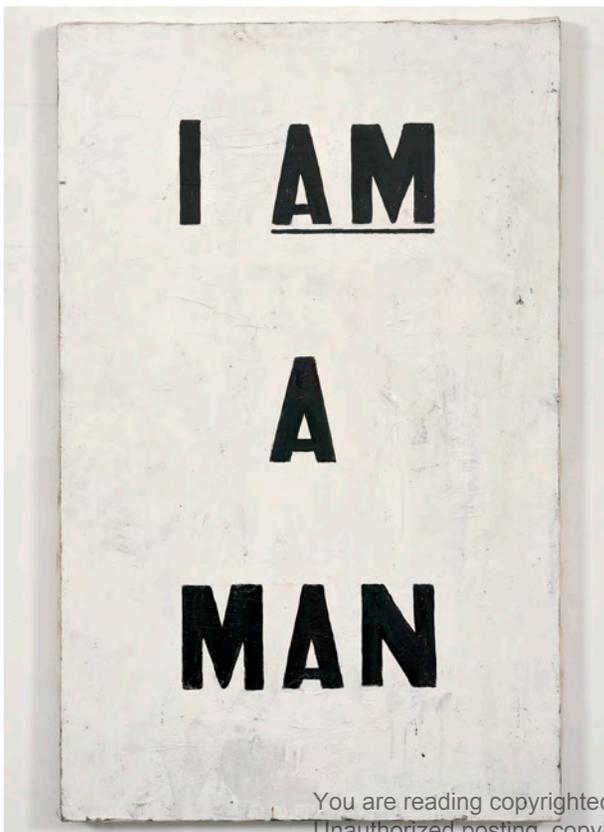
years, he has gone on to recruit household furniture items in fantasizing the image world of black queer youth (*Twin*, 1995); to videotape a session with his therapist in order to deconstruct his anxieties about the trajectory of his practice (*The Orange and Blue Feelings*, 2003); and to create neon sculptures featuring the words “negro sunshine”—a phrase culled from Gertrude Stein’s 1909 novella “Melantha”—in glowing foot-high letters (*Warm Broad Glow*, 2005).

However, it is the paintings on fabric, as distinct from the drawings on paper, that initially garnered Ligon a place as one of the foremost artists of his generation. Consider the earliest work included in his retrospective, *Unbecoming*, which opened at Philadelphia’s Institute of Contemporary Art in 1998 (1988; fig. 3.4). In this untitled painting, Ligon reiterated, destabilized, and subtly queered the declaration of manhood featured on the placards held out by protesting Memphis sanitation workers in 1968 as guards against scopic and bodily harm. The most recent painting in the exhibition cast the first five paragraphs of James Baldwin’s 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village”—an account of the writer’s self-imposed exile to Switzerland—as a dark monochromatic screen that visually figured the writer’s double negation as black and gay (1997; fig. 3.5). These two pieces functioned as bookends for Ligon’s work of the previous decade, underlining how his art has consistently looked back to earlier moments for its historical and formal articulations.

Along with any number of practitioners in the early 1990s who evoked the socially marked body through figural surrogates—his 1993 *Whitney Biennial* cohorts Janine Antoni and Byron Kim spring most immediately to mind—Ligon was influenced by conceptualism’s linguistic turn, minimalism’s phenomenological address, and feminist critiques of media imagery. His wide-ranging engagements with and reframing of these practices have since become exemplary of how contemporary artists might take up yet ultimately resist univocal assertions of identity.⁹ In his groundbreaking essay for the *Unbecoming* catalog, Richard Meyer argues that

3.4 (left)
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. Oil and enamel on canvas. 101.6 x 63.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.5 (right)
Glenn Ligon, *Stranger in the Village (Excerpt) #10*, 1997. Oil stick and coal dust on linen. 243.8 x 365.8 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)



Ligon mobilizes language and its disappearance to demonstrate that particular subjects always necessarily exist in excess of the limits imposed by categories of racial or sexual difference.¹⁰ Darby English has taken this line of thought to its logical conclusion in a series of rigorous meditations that explain how the artist dodges convenient dichotomies, sidestepping essentialist reductions of identity by rendering the Other an image always on the move.¹¹

In their sustained attention to Ligon's practice, these art historians' readings help us to comprehend the relation between the artist's open-ended approach to language and his investment in revisiting specific figures and episodes. For Meyer, Ligon's work models a "dialectical engagement" with the past, while English suggests that history subtends his "compositional method."¹² What I want to emphasize is that for this artist, history *matters*. If Wilson's work was haunted by the past and Simpson's structured by it, then Ligon's aesthetic means reflect an understanding of how formations aimed at illuminating the contingency of the self are part and parcel of the epistemes of violence that continue to produce marked subjects. As Ligon would write of African American artistic masters David Hammons and Sun Ra in his 2004 essay "Black Light," "not being from *here* is a movement toward placelessness, toward the utopic, *and* a deep critique of American society. Their genius was to employ a postmodern concern with the emptying out of the self as a critical strategy, one that might have particular resonance with a people historically positioned at the margin of what was considered human."¹³

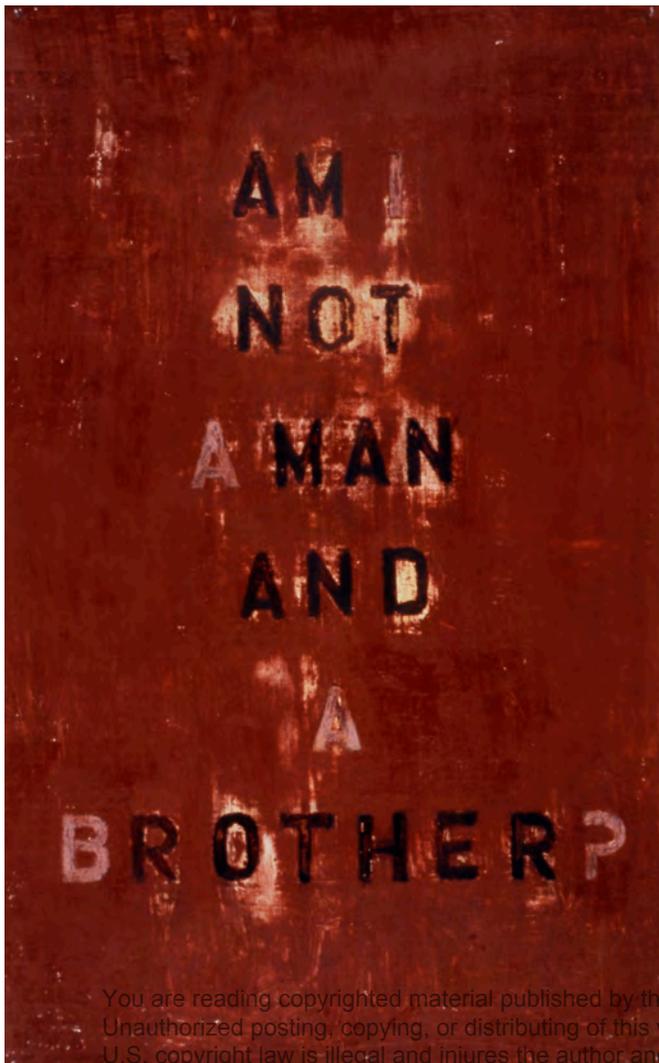
These comments are, I think, equally applicable to Ligon's own varied practice and contingent self-positioning, which root conceptions of the decentered subject in black peoples' storied tactics of survival and critique in the modern West. Indeed, over the course of his career, Ligon has consistently engaged the postures and visual technologies that produce black folks as runaways who define the limits of belonging and productively figure the aporias of representation. Whether he focuses on James Baldwin's eloquent prose or the protesting sanitation workers' blunt declaration, in bringing our attention to these men's words and demanding that we attempt to reread them, Ligon brings their fates to bear on the structuring of the self past and present, black and white, queer and otherwise. In so doing, he limns both their positions and his own, that sense of being continually unmoored, which historian Harold Cruse described as the lot of the Negro intelligentsia as a whole, that "rootless class of displaced persons who are refugees from the social poverty of the black world."¹⁴

These facts of social fugitivity have directed Ligon's practice and its reflection on the unmoored status of the black and the queer in the modern era. Just as important, his art reveals an attunement to and understanding of the ways in which marginalized subject positions are anticipated by the placelessness of the enslaved, who, as novelist Toni Morrison argues, were long ago forced to negotiate the "postmodern" problems attendant on the dissolution of the self, the symbolic, and the social.¹⁵ This contention is borne out both historically and theoretically. The captive not only provided the linchpin of an emergent capitalist economy,

but also served as the prime object for the emerging regimes of knowledge, power, and vision that have differentially produced the Western subject. The specular and panoptic modes of seeing that constituted the enslaved—on the one hand meant to display their abjection through an obscene violence, on the other to maintain their subjection through omnipresent surveillance—have been integral to the evolving production of the racialized body as a knowable site whose very being is not just revealed in the skin but rooted in the flesh.¹⁶ Not dissimilarly, the homosexual has been produced as an unimaginable figure who provides a boundary marker for the commons: his intangible desires may remain invisible, but his difference can eventually be hunted back to his body by the very same discourses of natural history and comparative anatomy on which scientific racism relied.¹⁷ Lost somewhere in these intersecting and historically interdependent binaries, the black queer subject is constructed by opposing modalities of imagined negativity and social visibility.

Ligon's figurative "lack of location" might be aligned, then, with the place from which a black radical queer critique emerges.¹⁸ Yet in fabulating selves through previous articulations of marked positionality, in considering the links between the shifting horizons of any individual subject and the structural coordinates of alterity, his work has been everywhere touched by the discourse of the slave, that avatar of ultimate historical and subjective difference. An untitled work from 1989 goes straight to the heart of the matter (fig. 3.6). In this instance, the maroon ground of the paper has been reworked almost to the point of excoriation, though

3.6
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled*,
1989. Oil on paper.
121.9 x 76.2 cm.
(Courtesy of the artist.)



3.7
Anonymous, *Am I
Not a Man and a
Brother?*, 1837.
Woodcut on woven
paper, 26.7 x 22.8
cm. (Image courtesy
of the Library of
Congress Rare
Book and Special
Collections Division,
Washington DC.)



3.8
Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*,
1993, installation view. Ten
lithographs, nine wood crates
with sound. Overall dimensions
variable. (Courtesy of the
artist.)

the stenciled text embedded within it can be made out readily enough: “Am I Not a Man and A Brother?” An inversion of the 1968 protesters’ declaration and a rhetorical ploy much like Douglass’s, this question was initially devised by the eighteenth-century British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade as a caption to accompany stock figures of half-dressed supplicating slaves. Subsequently, the pairing of image and text was translated, revised, and reproduced throughout those nineteenth-century slave-holding societies in which abolitionist discourse had gained a foothold (1837; fig. 3.7).¹⁹ The scabrous surface of Ligon’s drawing seems to memorialize the image’s storied transmission while also recasting its ventriloquizing text. Instead of an inert motif that would again empty the enslaved of particularity, the work holds out an inimitable linguistic terrain. Indeed, the drawing’s very facture seems to crumble even as it freshly articulates an appeal to those ties of kinship and community that the black subject has historically been denied in his placement at the limit of and as an embodied locus for modernity’s modes of violence and visualization.

It is the legacy of these modes, either inaugurated in slavery or passionately posed against it, that haunts Ligon’s practice and directly animates *To Disembark*,

first shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC (fig. 3.8). In this work, Ligon pointedly figured himself as a fugitive slave in prints and sculptures based on antebellum sources, and throughout his practice of this period, he emerges as a runaway subject. Making the case will require looking more closely at Ligon's early work, revisiting his haunts, recontextualizing his references—in short, repeating his returns. In the process, I want to foreground those forms of experience that often could not be registered by painting, focusing on works where Ligon's visual tactics directly engage the racial technologies and spatial sites that inform the lives of runaways in the present and that take their measure from the lingering traces of the peculiar institution. In so doing, I hope to make vivid the critical practice that emerges when one takes the vicissitudes of race and sex as seriously (and lightly) as does Ligon (himself). For in his work, blackness, slavery, and its aftermaths are not simply agencies of oppression or marks of foreclosure, but expansive openings through which we might begin to see the modern, the aesthetic, and ourselves differently. It is with this aim in mind that I now want to think further about where Ligon's "lack of location" placed him in New York circa 1993 and what that vantage afforded his imagining of the past.

Am I, I wonder, a thing among things, a body propelled along a track by sinews and bony levers, or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost? Whatever the case, I am plainly not myself in as clear a way as I might wish.

J. M. COETZEE, *In the Heart of the Country*, 1976

In 1993, Ligon executed *Picky* for the group show "Trespassing," an often-overlooked work that is nonetheless key to understanding the ambitions of his early oeuvre (fig. 3.9).²⁰ Comprising a negative Photostat map of Brooklyn and a positive photocopied text pinned to the wall, it conjoins an early reproductive technology—the Photostat was invented in 1907—with the one that effectively replaced it. As such, the work partakes of the black-and-white visual economy of Ligon's text canvases, yet for all of its high-keyed contrast, possesses little of the paintings' seductive appeal. If the *Strangers in the Village* nod to the work of modernist painter Ad Reinhardt, then *Picky* pays tribute to the conceptualism of Joseph Kosuth, particularly his *White and Black* (1966), which renders dictionary definitions of the work's titular terms as a negative Photostat diptych. Almost in compensation for this bare-bones aesthetic, in *Picky* we are given a rather different access to Ligon's "voice": instead of "a monologue moving through time" that hovers above the ground of social relations, the work offers a series of racially inflected scenarios played out in the then–newly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood of North



PICKY

North Williamsburg is a white ethnic working class neighborhood in Brooklyn into which young white artists have moved. There are a few Asian and Latino families. There are Arab grocery stores and bodegas. There are a few black people. Years ago, I was looking for an apartment and went to several brokers in the area. I was told repeatedly that apartments were scarce because they were rented by word-of-mouth. "It must be a tough business for you, if everything is rented by word-of-mouth," I said. One man, perhaps feeling sorry for my naivete, gave me some words of advice. "People out here are picky," he said. "You know... picky."

Standing Outside

Cliff's building has no buzzer. You have to call from across the street, then stand on the corner until he comes down to open the front door. His landlady, a middle-aged Polish woman with arched eyebrows and a beehive hairdo, runs a store at the street level of the building. She would often see me standing there, waiting for Cliff to open the door. No words were ever exchanged between us, only looks. Patricia Williams, in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, says that although we as a group are poor, powerless and a minority, in the minds of whites we are large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural. In our exchange of looks I see those images flicker across her face. And yet... while I do not discount what I sense she feels about me, knowing that my ability to read white people's faces has literally kept me alive, I still wonder how much of this is about how I have been made to see myself as "Other." I wonder about the times when I silenced myself, or was silenced, in order not to say what white people did not want to hear. I realize, in fact, she need not say anything to me, my sense of my "Otherness", my sense of my "place", already, internally, firmly in place.

A Nice Boy

Cliff's next door neighbor Lily is in her 80's and has lived in the building for fifty years. When Cliff moved in she decided she liked him and would bring him gifts of fruit, homemade cookies and little candies. She was a bit cooler towards me, but after I helped her carry her groceries upstairs a couple of times and took her garbage out she got friendlier. About nine months after Cliff moved in Lily stopped coming by to visit and would not linger in the hall to talk. Perhaps it was that she overheard an intimate conversation between us, or spied on a kiss, or saw me leaving Cliff's apartment in the morning once too often. She had figured out that the nice young man next door and his friend were queers, and that difference, piled on top of the difference in our races, created a hurdle too high for her to jump over.

This reminded me of something that happened in Ft. Greene, a primarily black working and middle class neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn where I live. The lone white tenant in my building (who, unlike the rest of us, was offered a lease renewal with no increase) introduced his black boyfriend to the white landlords. They promptly stopped speaking to him, assuming the antagonistic attitude towards him that they had with us. My neighbor Herbie, always blunt, laid it out for me. "That white boy didn't understand why they stopped speaking to him. I said, 'you know why? It's simple. It's not because you're gay. It's because you're being fucked by a nigger'."

Pioneers

I am reading an article on Williamsburg that was in a magazine last summer. I am looking for an acknowledgement of privilege, that the spaces that white people move through with ease may be experienced differently by people of color. I know, too, that I am privileged, that the renovated apartment I live in once housed a working class black family. Every Bohemia has its displacements, either of the people who lived in the neighborhood before the "pioneers" came, or, as in the case of Soho, of the "pioneers" themselves. While I object to the terminology, I know that there is an inequality in the word. I know that I am a "pioneer" because I moved into a black neighborhood, and that black people moving into white neighborhoods are not called "pioneers". We are called "blockbusters."

The New Bohemia

I have had a studio in Williamsburg for the past three years. Although certain experiences in the neighborhood have been alienating, I find spaces where differences result in unexpected pleasures. Last week I walked down Metropolitan Avenue to the grocery store on the corner. The woman behind the counter was in her early forties, with teased blond hair and a Texas drawl. She had run out of brewed coffee so she surreptitiously added a Sanka packet and hot water to the dregs of the morning's pot. She said, "that will be four sweethearts," and as I closed my eyes for a brief moment I heard my mother's voice. This week when I come in the Texas lady is gone. She had finally found a buyer for the store, a Korean family. We discuss the difference between Snapple and Lipton Iced Tea, and why there is so much trash on the Oprah Winfrey Show. After I have bought my toilet paper, New York Times and a Diet Coke, they stand at the door and wave goodbyes, urging me to come visit them again soon.

Glenn Ligon 1993

3.9

Glenn Ligon, *Picky*, 1993. Above, detail, photostat. 22.9 x 22.9 cm.

Below, detail, photocopy, 40.6 x 58.4 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)



3.10
 John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis, *Ghetto Boundary Projects*, 1969. Five archival ink-jet prints, text, and sticker. Each photograph and text, 20.3x30.4 cm; sticker, 5x7.6 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and LACMA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art Ralph M. Parsons Fund.)

Williamsburg.

Their protagonists subtly snubbed by “picky” real estate agents and bemused by the invisibility of white privilege, these narratives bring home the fact, as the passage titled “Pioneers” puts it, “that the spaces that white people move through with ease may be experienced differently by people of color.” Here are the closing lines of that same vignette:

Every Bohemia has its displacements, either of the people who lived in the neighborhood before the “pioneers” came, or, as in the case of Soho, of the “pioneers” themselves. While I object to the terminology, I know that there is an inequality in the word. I know that I am a “pioneer” because I moved into a black neighborhood, and that black people moving into white neighborhoods are not called “pioneers.” We are called “blockbusters.”

In its attunement to the tendentious relation between dark skins and property lines, between blackness and value, this narrative harkens back to John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis’s *Ghetto Boundary Project* of 1969 (fig. 3.10). In that work, two thousand stickers were affixed to “telephone poles, street signs, etc. along

[a] fifteen mile boundary” in order to demarcate the “thickly populated area” of southeast San Diego “inhabited by minority groups often as a result of social or economic restrictions.”

In drawing out the limits of the “ghetto” as supplied by the San Diego Planning Commission, the *Ghetto Boundary Project* orchestrated a street-level encounter with the lines of force meant to reify public space, cordon off the city, and stigmatize colored subjects. Like Ligon, its authors were interested in the disjuncture between the policing function of the grid as imposed from above and the lawlessness of spatial practice as experienced on the ground. Such radical incommensurability is underlined by *Picky*’s juxtaposition of white-on-black map and black-on-white text and theorized by Michel de Certeau in his essay “Walking in the City.” He argues that the bird’s-eye view of space, as employed by the urban planner, presents a fictional viewpoint intended to render the illegible masses of the city a “transparent text”—a vantage at odds with the messiness of life in the streets and the particularity of the subject’s wandering through them.²¹

Viewed in this light, Ligon’s anecdotes point to the structural affinity between the gaze that fixes the apprehension of the city and the hallucinatory stare that pins down the meaning of blackness: whether merely analogous or nearly identical, such ways of seeing share a dream of epistemic mastery that *Picky* quite cogently picks apart. To be a black pedestrian on that map and to suffer through the experiences described within it, is to *be* a boundary marker, to carry the fright of “the ghetto” in all its clichéd menace, to endure the process of “epidermalization,” which, as philosopher Frantz Fanon shows, constitutes the black subject as a *text transparent* to the anxieties thrown up on his skin.²² In *Picky* we are made to understand how racial difference functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy imposed from without and above yet nevertheless felt. Consider the passage titled “Standing Outside”:

Cliff’s building has no buzzer. You have to call from across the street, then stand on the corner until he comes down to open the front door. His landlady, a middle-aged Polish woman with arched eyebrows and a beehive hairdo, runs a store at the street level of the building. She would often see me standing there, waiting for Cliff to open the door. No words were ever exchanged between us, only looks. Patricia Williams, in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, says that although we as a group are poor, powerless, and a minority, in the minds of whites we are large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural. In our exchange of looks I see those images flicker across her face. And yet . . . while I do not discount what I sense she feels about me, knowing that my ability to read white people’s faces has literally kept me alive, I still wonder how much of this is about how I have been made to see myself as “other.” I wonder about the times when I silenced myself, or was silenced, in order not to say what white people did not want to hear. I realize, in fact, she need not say anything to me, my sense of my “Otherness,” my sense of my “place,” already, internally, firmly in place.

This text describes one particular black-white relation, a shadow play of projections that installs and undercuts a sense of “place” in the same paradoxical moment. For even as the narrator’s psychic position is hard-wired externally and internally, it is that very fixity that denudes him of singularity, ejecting him from the here and now into a space of phantasmatic projection.

Seen everywhere and wanted nowhere, it is as if the black subject cannot proceed to where he is going because his specter has always arrived before him, a predicament that Ligon mordantly summed up in a 2002 *New Yorker* article: “You try getting your post-black ass into a taxi in Harlem.”²³ Lack of location, indeed. Whether waiting for the cab that will never stop, or channeling the latest ode to indeterminacy, what Ligon’s statements point to and his art bears out, I want to argue, is a notion of fugitivity—as a transitory state of being, a way of wandering to survive, and a protocol of reading—that emerges as a critical response to the black subject’s positioning on the margins of the human in the modern West. To be colored, Glenn or otherwise, is “to be part of a community of souls who h[ave] experienced being permanently invisible nobodies; ‘black’ [is] a designation for those who h[ave] no place else to go.”²⁴

This is Patricia J. Williams’s claim in the 1991 book that Ligon cites in narrating his encounter with Cliff’s landlady. It is no accident that the essay from which he pulls her words is in large part given over to what happened in Howard Beach on December 20, 1986. Three black men, stranded in the working-class Queens neighborhood by their stalled car, were viciously attacked by a group of ten or so white teenagers. One of the men lost the use of his eye. Another, Michael Griffith, lost his life when he was hit by a car while trying to run away. By all accounts, the men did nothing wrong except to be black. Of the insights that emerge from Williams’s account of the episode, as well as the protracted public debate that followed Griffith’s death, the most telling is no doubt the most obvious: any black person can fall victim to an attack if in the wrong place at the wrong time.²⁵

Such possibilities are key to the spectacular discursive machinery organized around black masculinity in the public sphere that Ligon would address time and again in his work of the early 1990s. Take the *Victim Studies*, a series of ink-on-paper drawings after photographs depicting black men like Yusef Hawkins who were caught in neighborhoods where they were not welcome and paid the price with



3.11
Glenn Ligon, *Victim Study (Yusef Hawkins)*, 1990. Ink on paper.
7.6×5.1 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)



3.12
 Glenn Ligon, *Profiles*, 1990–1991, installation view. Eight paintings, oil stick on canvas. From left to right: *Son of a Role Model*, 95.6 x 56.5 cm; *A Loner, Shy and Sad*, 81.6 x 56.2 cm; *Little Brother with a Big Brother*, 66.4 x 56.2 cm; *Peaceful Demeanor and High Scores*, 46 x 56.2 cm; *Strict Discipline and Class Cutting*, 63.8 x 56.2 cm; *Learning Disability and a Temper*, 66.4 x 56.2 cm; *A Sharp Dresser with a Strut*, 76.5 x 56.5 cm; *Success with Girls*, 81.6 x 56.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

their lives (1990; fig. 3.11; 1990). Like Wilson's *The Last Murdered Black Youth* (1989), these works send up the long artistic tradition of the memento mori in order to mourn the deaths of particular individuals and to illuminate how race differently inflects every subject's sense of mortality. Other pieces from this period, such as the *Profiles*, turn their sights on the visual and linguistic presumptions governing the processes of abstraction that render African Americans moving targets (1990–1991; fig. 3.12).

This series consists of eight text paintings based on the *New York Times's* biographical sketches of the youths indicted and wrongly convicted in the notorious Central Park jogger case. In its multipart deconstruction of the visual logic of criminalization, this suite falls neatly within a lineage of Western history painting that extends from Édouard Manet's renditions of the execution of the Mexican emperor Maximilian (1867–1869) to Gerhard Richter's paintings of the German Baader-Meinhof group (1988). Yet Ligon, true to his own antiportrait impulse, eschews the depiction any individual to focus on how black subjects enter into representation. In certain canvases, for instance, he tweaked his stenciling technique so that a literal profile emerges from the text, recalling the physiognomic and photographic traditions that have been mobilized to empty out the particular black male subject so as to better fill in a spectral black male image.

Likewise, in *Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*—his first work to move pointedly away

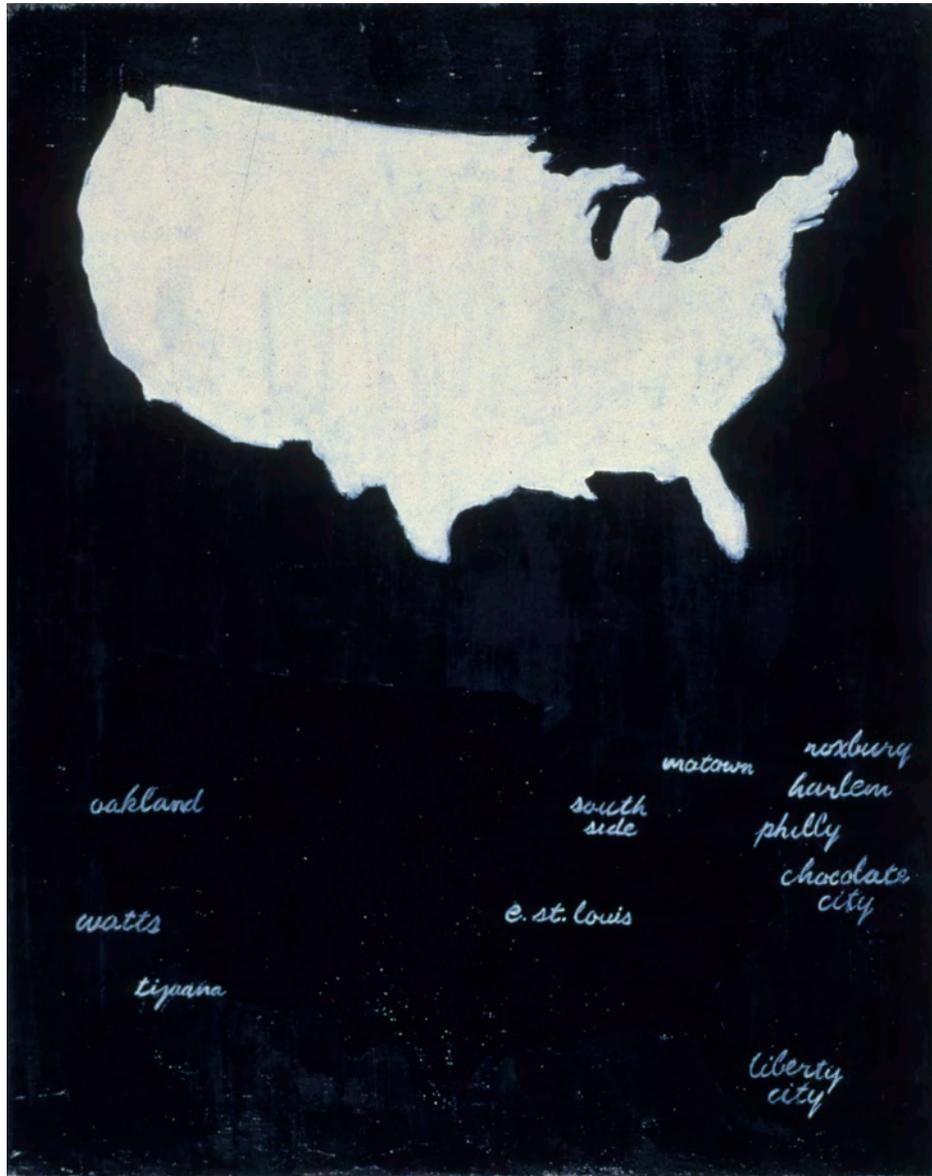


3.13

Glenn Ligon, *Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*, 1992, installation view. Four banners, silkscreen on canvas. 457.2x152.4 cm each. (Courtesy of the artist.)

from painting and toward a broader imagistic field—Ligon appropriated the male figure gracing the paperback cover of psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs's 1968 classic *Black Rage*, blowing up the silhouette hundreds of times and mounting it on large banners so as to comment on the inflationary media obsession with menacing black male figures (1992; fig. 3.13).²⁶ In taking up *Black Rage*—a fiery polemic that located the root cause of African Americans' potentially explosive anguish in the depredations of slavery—the artist draws out the fact that all of us have been complicit in the ongoing production of blackness as a site of horrified fascination. While this work spoke to a moment saturated with worries over endangered and endangering black masculinity, it also effectively disarticulated the spectacle's production of racial conflict as a battle for recognition between straight men.²⁷

In all of these instances, a degeneralization of the figure destabilizes gender and sexuality, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of all black subjects ever since the economies of the transatlantic trade undid distinctions between masculine and feminine in producing fragments of mere flesh.²⁸ The terrors of slavery—itsself predicated on the theft and inconsequentiality of black life—have not only rendered the black body the ultimate signifier of negativity in modern thought and metaphysics but have also determined the realities of placelessness as black folks in America have encountered them from slavery through Jim Crow to the present.²⁹ Excluded from a society predicated on the despotism of property relations and continually exposed to the fatal projections of a violence administered and sanctioned by the agencies of the state, the position of the black subject, is, in a sense, no position at all. Rather, blackness is the marker that makes place intelligible as such, consigning people of African descent to a location of utter vulner-



3.14
Glenn Ligon, *Two Maps*, 1990.
Oil and enamel on canvas.
76.2 x 50.8 cm. (Courtesy of
the artist.)

ability within civil society.³⁰

In another painting, *Two Maps*—which, like his text works, bears a strong affinity to the art of Jasper Johns—Ligon stacks white America on top of black, making clear precisely where colored folks do and do not belong (1990; fig. 3.14). Yet in its diagrammatic simplicity, this work also covers over intraracial conflict, producing a unified image when in fact the African American community is often riven by divisions of class, gender, and, perhaps most deeply, sexual orientation. Cultural theorist Robert Reid-Pharr argues that if the denigration of the black gives whiteness its coherence, then it is the striking of the homosexual that falsely promises to restore the bonds of blackness by refusing myths of African deviance developed



to justify transatlantic slavery and by upholding European bourgeois notions of the familial matrix. Consequently, the black queer subject is produced as incommensurable to the demands of politics proper and antithetical to an imagined black polis.³¹

Like his contemporaries who also sought to articulate the visual logic of black queer difference, such as Lyle Ashton Harris, Kobena Mercer, and Marlon Riggs, Ligon plumbed these exclusions and their material effects for the photographic structuring of a communal image. Indeed, the late 1980s and early '90s were a watershed moment for African diasporic gay cultural discourse, witnessing the publication of poet Essex Hemphill's anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991) and the debut of Isaac Julien's groundbreaking film *Looking for Langston* (1989).³² For his part, Ligon executed *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* a sprawling phototext created between 1991 and 1993 that interpolated photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's images of nude black men with cultural commentaries indicative of the range of opinions generated by the white gay artist's work as well as the disruptive force of interracial homoerotic desire (fig. 3.15). Unsurprisingly, one of Ligon's narratives in *Picky* spoke directly to this cultural flashpoint in a section entitled "A Nice Boy":

Cliff's next door neighbor Lily is in her 80s and has lived in the building for fifty years. When Cliff moved in she decided she liked him and would bring him gifts of fruit, homemade cookies and little candies. She was a bit cooler towards me, but after I helped her carry her groceries upstairs a couple of times and took

3.15
Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–1993, installation view, detail. Ninety-one book pages, seventy-eight text pages, metal frames. Overall dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist.)

her garbage out she got friendlier. About nine months after Cliff moved in Lily stopped coming by to visit and would linger in the hall to talk. Perhaps it was that she overheard an intimate conversation between us, or spied on a kiss, or saw me leaving Cliff's apartment in the morning once too often. She had figured out that the nice young man next door and his friend were queers, and that difference, piled on top of the difference in our races, created a hurdle too high for her to jump over.

This reminded me of something that happened in Ft. Greene, a primarily black working and middle class neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn where I live. The lone white tenant in my building (who, unlike the rest of us, was offered a lease renewal with no increase) introduced his black boyfriend to the white landlords. They promptly stopped speaking to him, assuming the antagonistic attitude towards him that they had with us. My neighbor Herbie, always blunt, laid it out for me. "That white boy didn't understand why they stopped speaking to him. I said, 'you know why? It's simple. It's not because you're gay. It's because you're being fucked by a nigger.'"

A perfect storm of racial, sexual, and class antagonism, these lines give voice to the complex crosscutting of prejudicial notions that produce the subject's exclusion, whether as faggot, nigger, or the lover of both. Yet as Lily's unwillingness and Herbie's plain talk suggest, despite the revulsion with which it might be met, homosexuality is a social construction that has been mobilized for the instauration of racial difference and aligned with heteronormative notions of white citizenship, which, as ever, depend on blackness to be their antithetical counter.³³

Positioned at the intersection of these modes of abjection and refusal, the black gay subject is a locus without a place, representing one site where the contingencies of identity and their visual articulation might be brought to the fore.³⁴ In Ligon's art, such possibilities for self-making, as well as the conditions that would foreclose them, are visualized through a range of operations: literalizing, queering, deforming, displacing, erasing, hyperbolizing—the list could easily go on. My point is that the artist's aesthetic means are determined not only by the media he aims to confront but also by his movement between black and queer modes of appearance, whose psychic effects and political legacies his pieces variously summon. Ligon's works, I want to say, model tactics—in de Certeau's sense of "calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus"³⁵—aimed at disrupting the logic of the image. By pressing the verbal against the visual, the painterly against the conceptual, the past against the present, the individual against the group, the black against the queer, his art gestures to an exterior in order to carve out a space for being grounded in the historical positioning of subjects cast as fugitives in life and in representation. It is with these dynamics in view and the early '90s works at hand that I now want to turn toward *To Disembark*.

You see, whites want black writers to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the black experience. But the vocabulary won't hold it, simply. No true account really of black life can be held, can be contained, in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based. But they won't let you do that. And when you go along, you find yourself very quickly painted into a corner; you've written yourself into a corner.

JAMES BALDWIN, "Last Testament," 1989

In *To Disembark*, many of the concerns addressed in Ligon's work of the early 1990s—the production of racial and sexual difference, the limits of American cultural politics, and the expansive capacities of placelessness—are historically moored and so conceptually clarified through a multiplicity of forms that compulsively refer to slavery.³⁶ To create the work, Ligon drew on both generic framing conventions and highly specific historical episodes that he encountered while perusing the collections of the New York Public Library and an archive at New York's South Street Seaport. The exhibition occupied two "rooms" created from a single gallery that was divided in half by a wall constructed specifically for the occasion.³⁷ In one area, entered via a short passage to the left of the exhibition signage, viewers confronted nine wooden shipping crates bearing international symbols for fragility (see fig. 3.8). The variously constructed containers were modeled after the conveyance in which Henry "Box" Brown shipped himself from captivity in Richmond to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849, where, upon arrival, he broke into a hymn based on the Bible's fortieth psalm (though his own subsequent ballad would be sung to the tune of the popular air "Uncle Ned").³⁸

Ligon's boxes—scattered evenly about the room and all of roughly the same dimensions (thirty by thirty-six by twenty-four inches)—pay appropriate homage to Brown's sonic celebration. Each is outfitted with a tape recorder that emits audible sounds, from a heartbeat to Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" to Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit." Hung at regular intervals on the walls were ten offset lithographs that faithfully reproduced the format of nineteenth-century runaway handbills. In the adjoining room, viewers encountered nine frontispieces to slave narratives that were never written, fictive texts loosely based in the artist's biography (fig. 3.16, above). Opposite and perpendicular to this wall were three drawings in oil stick, each eighty by thirty inches and each deploying a different sentence from Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me": "I remember the very day that I became colored," "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," and "I do not always feel colored" (fig. 3.16, below).³⁹

What this description makes clear is that Ligon posed in the roles of the missing slave and again underlined the contingent place of the African American subject through recourse to the antiportrait. Every part of *To Disembark* pointed up



3.16

Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993, installation view. From *Directions: Glenn Ligon: To Disembark*, 1993, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Etchings, wall drawing (*above*); wall drawings (*below*). Overall dimensions variable. (Photography by Lee Stalworth. Courtesy of the artist.)



the black male body's absence from the representational frame, holding out indexes of its presence that betrayed nothing of the figure's actual location. As such, the project deploys the discursive materials of slavery to illuminate the structural coordinates of black being both past and present. Ligon might thus be said to comprehend, on a formal and a political level, the famous dictum from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers."⁴⁰

For the philosopher as for the artist, the memory of the past that volatilizes out of a moment of crisis cannot simply be held up as an example to be avoided, but rather, must be held onto as revealing the exigencies that make our own moment possible in all of its ruinous tilt. In forging a link between the obstacles encountered by the fugitive slave and the dangers faced by the contemporary black subject, Ligon enacts a kind of repetition familiar to students of African American culture, so that history, text, and performance become circulating quantities always subject to reiteration and renewal.⁴¹ In the process, he asks a question most eloquently posed in his own words: "Who are the other 'masters' from which we flee?"⁴²

Historically, visibility itself—thanks to its frequent denigration of the black image and its despotic manifestation in the white look—has been construed as the mastering conceit from which African Americans have sought refuge. Everywhere haunted and pursued by the gaze, black cultural practitioners past and present have often turned to the word in posing alternative articulations of the self; Ligon was no exception.⁴³ In the late 1980s, the artist slowly came to realize that language could provide the basis for approaching what he called "a whole body of things"—a whole body of blackness that could not otherwise be registered.⁴⁴ Words mattered because they expansively referred and, just as important, they ably rerouted, bracketing the metonymic chain of associations—"tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency"—which, as Fanon teaches us, are set off by the sight of dark skin and doggedly pursue black subjects.⁴⁵

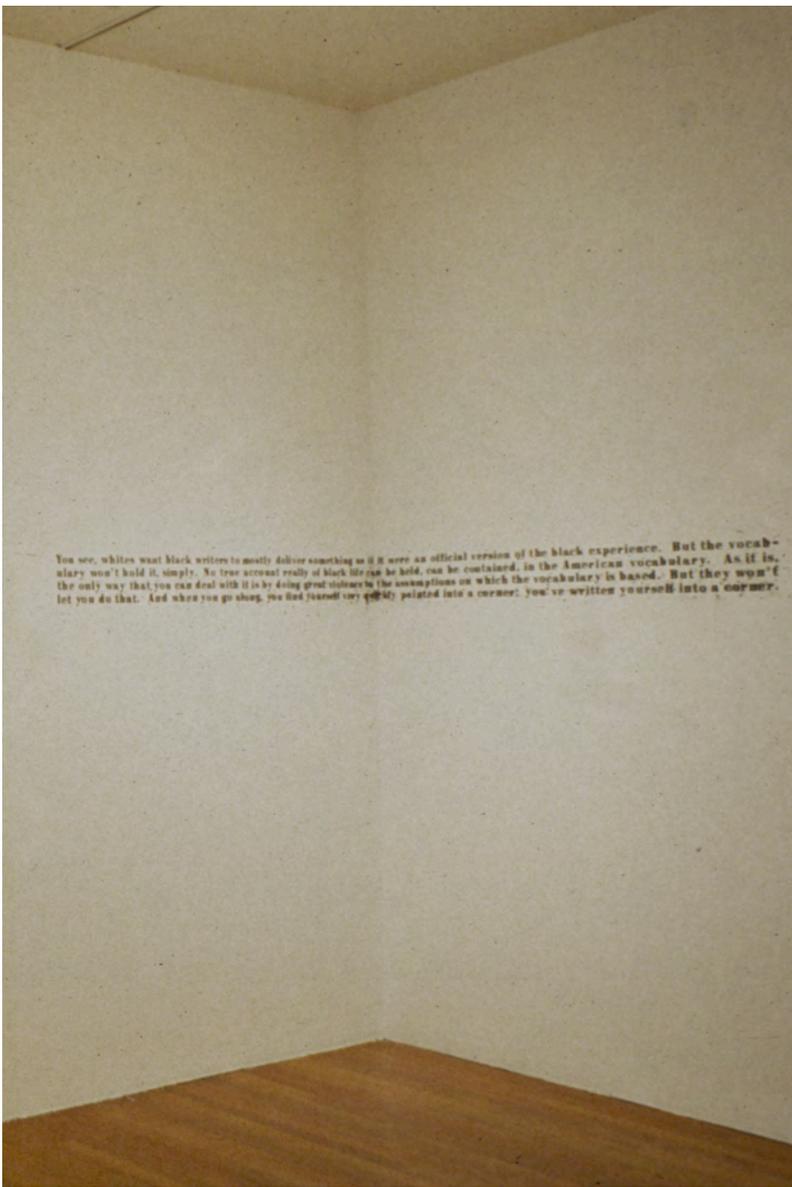
In updating Fanon's laundry list of racial phantasms circa 1993, we might add the visage of "Willie" Horton, the "high-tech lynching" of Clarence Thomas, and of course, George Holliday's harrowing amateur videotape of Rodney King being senselessly beaten.⁴⁶ Ligon, like other contemporary African American artists, such as Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, and Danny Tisdale, felt compelled to address the demonization of black male subjectivity emblemized by such images.⁴⁷ More than ever, the word was the faculty deemed most capable of doing so. Language could take race out of the imaginary and make it a function of a larger symbolic system, revealing and short-circuiting the scenarios of violence and terror that have long given blackness its objective weight within the collective psyche and

throughout the mainstream media.⁴⁸

At roughly the same time, black literary theory was rising in prominence within the academy, due to the efforts of scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr.; across the cultural landscape, there was growing acknowledgement of African American achievement in letters, from the approbation that greeted Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to the canonization of "lost" writers such as Hurston. These developments were surely not lost on Ligon, whose work manifests a voracious appetite for the printed word. Yet he also well knew that language has never constituted a site of unfettered black expression: as part of his 1992 exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the artist stenciled Baldwin's comments on the limits of the American vocabulary directly onto the wall (fig. 3.17). Any attempt to read this text required the viewer to go along with it, to walk into a corner and so bodily experience the situation that the writer figuratively described.⁴⁹ Through the deployment of Hurston's text, in *To Disembark*, Ligon similarly aligned the facticity of black discursive constraint with the physical support of the gallery itself, the literal ground of white institutionality and artistic discourse.

Like the identically inscribed canvases that preceded them, these wall drawings transmute affective mantra into projective blur, figure into ground, word into image, white into black (1990–1991; fig. 3.18). This visual effect is again the result of Ligon's deductive procedure as he drags his stencil along the surface, one line after the next: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. I feel most colored. . . ." Regardless of the material on which the sentence is inscribed, Ligon eventually leaves us in the dark, grasping at phrases that are a foregone conclusion. In these works, the artist relies on language in its corporeal and metaphorical dimensions to cast blackness less as fact of perception than as a frame of mind dependent on the presence of whiteness for its meaning. The one is literally illegible without the other. Or as Fanon stated about the making of men in modernity, "the Negro is not. Any more than the white man," both caught up in an antagonistic bind that disallows mutual recognition and therefore the attainment of the human on either side of the color line.⁵⁰

In performing this impossibility and its perpetual recurrence within representation, Ligon stages the murkiness of racial thinking and runs headlong into the dilemma thrown up by Fanon's negative ontology of race: black being cannot be accessed rationally, though its affective contours can be intimated in the gaps that structure hegemonic modes of speech. Indeed, while Ligon's text paintings can be read as both printed page and flattened image, when viewed obliquely, the letters float above and recede into their grounds, becoming three-dimensional halations that illuminate the deceptions of the gaze and gesture toward other arenas of perception.⁵¹ All of which makes a certain sense, particularly if we follow the lead of theorist Kara Keeling: she argues that it is the plenitude, contingency, and symbolic import of black feeling, which opens onto those fugitive states that the black image, in its liability for stereotypical reduction, would seem to preclude and that



3.17
 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (James Baldwin)*, 1992. Acrylic, oil, and pencil.
 312.4 x 25.4 cm. (Photograph by Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of
 Art/Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of the artist.)



3.18
 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown
 Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990–1991. Oil stick and
 gesso on panel. 203.2 x 76.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

black letters can only obliquely manifest.⁵² As the wall drawings intimate, every discourse can become a site of foreclosure, particularly given the dialectic of “I” and “we” that can at once bolster possibilities for black collective action and stifle the particularity of individual lived experiences.⁵³

This tension is exemplified by the life and work of Ligon’s source. A prolific novelist, journalist, and ethnographer who came to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was nearly expunged from historical memory and roundly excoriated by her contemporaries for what they perceived as all manner of political incorrectness.⁵⁴ As if to drive this point home, Ligon culls his lines from

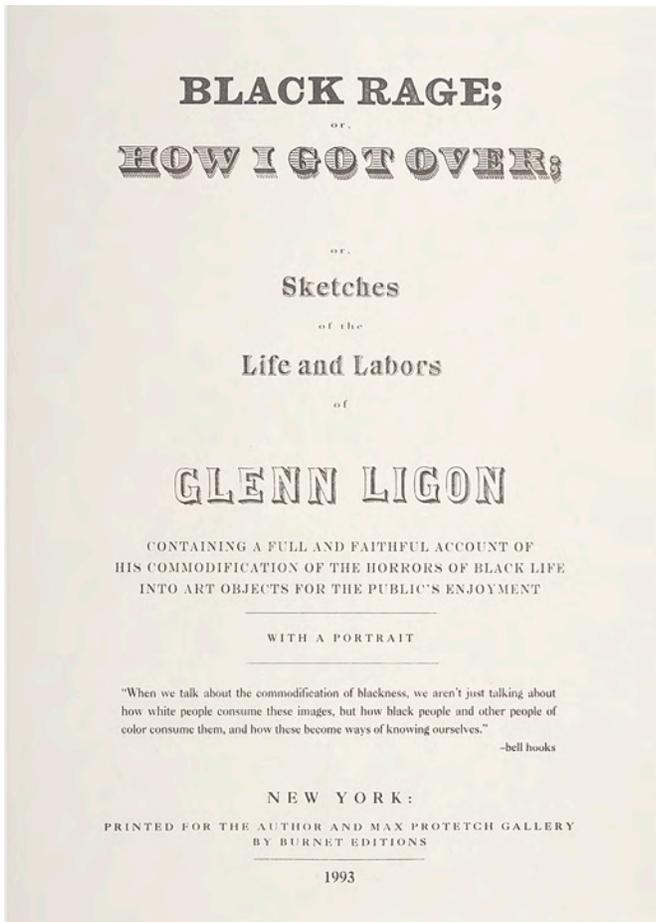
a text larded with stereotypes that seem to fly in the face of its insistence on the contextual character of racial identity; in fact, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" has often been cited as a prime example of Hurston's intransigence, even regression, by those who otherwise laud her writing as a model of black critical practice.⁵⁵ When cast as a darkening image, the author's words suggest how projective investments in racial filiation tend to cloud African American voices and, ultimately, to outstrip the command of language altogether.

The wall drawings thereby attest to Ligon's interest in the at once censoring and spectacularizing frameworks in which black being has been presented for public consumption, whether in the case of contemporary practitioners of color expected to speak compulsively of their identity, Negro writers straining at the bonds of decorum, or ex-slaves attempting to prove their humanity through demonstrations of literacy. On this score, it is worth quoting the artist at length:

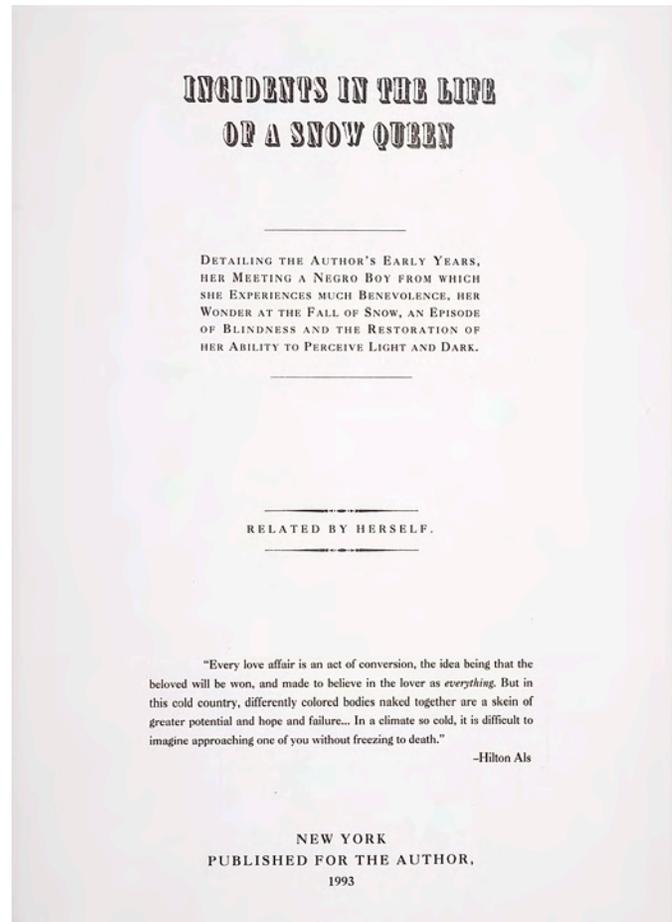
I recently became interested in slave narratives because their modes of address and the conditions under which they were written had certain parallels to my questions about audiences and cultural authority. . . . I was interested in contemporary traces of the conditions under which former captives wrote their narratives. For example: what are the conditions under which works by black artists enter the museum? Do we enter only when our "visible difference" is evident? Why do many shows with works by colored people (and rarely whites) have titles that include "race" and "identity?" Who is my work for and what do different audiences demand of it?⁵⁶

In asking such questions, Ligon does not posit an equal, direct, or analogical relation between himself and the slave. Rather, he looks for traces of those modes of subjection that have dispossessed the black subject and insistently conditioned his speaking, ever attentive to those threads that might be said to structure the possibilities of black expression and the figuration of the black "I."⁵⁷

It is this imperative that directs the titling of Ligon's *Narrative* frontispieces, which also revisit texts previously figured in his oeuvre. In *Black Rage, Or, How I Got Over*, the artist combines the title of Grier and Cobb's polemic with a 1951 gospel hymn made legendary by Mahalia Jackson in introducing a text that promises "a full and faithful account of his commodification of the horrors of black life into art objects for the public's enjoyment" (fig. 3.19). By roping book and song together, Ligon articulates the ways in which black aspiration is reproduced as spectacle, either anguished or transcendent. The third title of the narrative, "Sketches of the Life and Labors," refers back to accounts provided by nineteenth-century ministers of the gospel, thereby situating the artist as a proselytizer for an autocritical engagement with his work and the production of blackness more broadly.⁵⁸ Since slave narratives were often prefaced or concluded by the verifying testimony of white citizens, Ligon provides a quotation from cultural theorist bell hooks that is meant to revise this tradition and license his own discourse: "When we talk about



3.19
 Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Black Rage, Or, How I Got Over)*, 1993.
 One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé. 71.1x53.3 cm.
 (Courtesy of the artist.)



3.20
 Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Incidents in the Life of a Snow Queen)*, 1993.
 One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé. 71.1x53.3 cm.
 (Courtesy of the artist.)

the commodification of blackness, we aren't just talking about how white people consume these images, but how black people and other people of color consume them, and how these become ways of knowing ourselves." The plays on convention in each *Narrative* thus construct historical continuities while also bringing forth constitutive disjunctures.

The page entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Snow Queen*, for example, riffs on Harriet Jacobs's 1861 narrative, replacing the *Slave Girl* of her title with a present-day derogatory term for black gay men attracted exclusively to whites (fig. 3.20). Through this transcoding, Ligon recovers the queerness of Jacobs's text, from her attempted escape in blackface sailor drag to her description of a male slave's sexualized humiliation at the hands of his young master.⁵⁹ Although the tactic of cross-gender impersonation is not unheard of in accounts provided by former run-aways—just think back to how Ellen Craft disguised herself as a white gentleman to abet her and her husband's escape—references to homosexual practices on the

plantation are exceedingly rare within the archive of slavery.⁶⁰ Ligon hyperbolizes such incongruity within the print by narrating the fictive author's "fall" toward homosexuality in nineteenth-century language rich in metaphors of whiteness as light, blindness, and snow, and by calling on contemporary black gay writer Hilton Als's account of drawing close to white men "in a climate so cold."

These temporal gaps are singularly united in the title of another frontispiece, *The Narrative of the Life and Uncommon Sufferings of Glenn Ligon, A Colored Man, Who at a Tender Age Discovered His Affection for the Bodies of Other Men and Has Endured Scorn and Tribulations Ever Since*. This author's plea for sympathy and confession of guilt are recast by the print's brief eighteenth-century epigraph, taken from the journals of Samuel Sewall. A Massachusetts judge who fought for abolition and ultimately regretted his role in the Salem witch trials, he shows no tolerance for a slave charged with "forcible Buggery," who to his mind, is rightly "Condemn'd."⁶¹ Such testimony from a liberal-minded speaker underlines the ways in which culpability continues to be hunted back to those bodies and behaviors that define the limits of social being. Taken together, Ligon's prints make palpable the difficulty of imagining radical difference within the American framework and limn the circumstances that continue to erase gays and lesbians of color from a culture that demands quickly categorized and easily devoured apparitions of blackness.

In their emphasis on the multiplicity of Ligon's possible affective identifications, the autobiographical fragments trotted out in the *Narratives* resist such totalizing racial and sexual scrimms, just as the *Runaway* prints stage the artist's successful escape from the very modes of epistemic violence to which he was never entirely available in the first place. Both bodies of work purposefully draw from the extant well of figures and typefaces developed to frame the enslaved, assuring a formal affinity between the prints and their sources. In line with the frontispieces of nineteenth-century slave narratives, Ligon's etchings are executed with chine collé, in which a fine sheet of paper is affixed to a cheaper backing material.⁶² However, his *Narratives* leave the scale of the book behind, assuming dimensions more fit to a portrait.

Similarly, the *Runaway* lithographs—printed on creamy paper with rich dark brown inks—possess a sumptuous facture and idiosyncratic structure that is a far cry from the utilitarian look and feel of the standardized woodcut handbills that inspired them (fig. 3.21). Compare a Ligon print with those deployed in *Mining the Museum*, or better, with one produced in 1838 for William Burke of Bardstown, Kentucky, and later published in Marcus Wood's seminal *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (fig. 3.22).⁶³ Despite their shared icons and typefaces, the text of the artist's broadsheet is notably stripped of all references to a master in pursuit. It also increases the size of the words "RAN AWAY," opts for symmetry over economy, and separates verbal signs from visual ones, which float freely in luxurious expanses of unmarked paper. Not unlike Andy Warhol's monumental silkscreen suite *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964), which was



RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5'8", very short hair cut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155-165 lbs., medium complexion (not "light skinned," not "dark skinned," slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50's style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He's socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner.

AP IX / X

Glenn Ligon '93

3.21

Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (A Loner)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6x30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)



3.22
 Anonymous, Runaway advertisement, 1838. Woodcut on paper.
 (Courtesy of Marcus Wood.)

based on mug shots lifted from New York City Police Department files, Ligon's images selectively recall in order to aesthetically queer both their sources and the criminalizing apparatus of which they were part.⁶⁴

Fabricated with the assistance of master printmaker Gregory Burnet and the backing of the artist's gallery, *To Disembark's* printed matter is the result of techniques associated with nineteenth-century large-scale image manufacture, though they are intended for an art market that prizes limited runs and the artist's hand. Each print is inscribed with an edition number and Ligon's signature, which index his engagement with the market for black authenticity even as the *Runaways*, in their production and referents, signify his removal from such networks of circulation.⁶⁵

RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5'8", very short haircut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155–165 lbs., medium complexion (not "light-skinned," not "dark-skinned," slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50's style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval-shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He's socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner.

This text is one of ten descriptions written by unnamed friends of the artist. Without telling them why, Ligon instructed his accomplices to describe him, to render him in words as if he had gotten loose from language's grip. Accordingly, this writer has chosen first to concentrate on the formal qualities of the subject in question, restlessly compiling an array of data that seem appropriate to a police report, but are equally fitting as an update of a runaway advertisement.⁶⁶

In a certain sense, Ligon's directive recalls that animating another Baldessari project, *Police Drawing* (1971). To create this piece, the artist entered a classroom,

switched on a video camera, and left the assembled students—whom he had never met—to describe his likeness to a police sketch artist. Despite their structural affinities, Ligon's and Baldessari's works diverge not merely because of the races of their targets, which overdetermine the force and aim of the policing gaze, but also because of their witnesses' different levels of familiarity with their respective subjects.⁶⁷ Consider the tenor of the *Runaway* cited above. With its breathless clauses and elliptical closing assessment of the artist's interpersonal behavior, the paragraph wants to characterize Ligon as a subject, to sketch a portrait in shorthand that gives some clue as to what it might be like to bump into the artist on the street or at an opening: the two final sentences bear the marks of time spent, of having acquaintance with Ligon's idiosyncrasies, the tics that constitute his presentation of self. What the description achieves, however, is not so much a lasting image as a set of rapidly thrown off impressions that register most forcefully on the level of appearance. Ligon refuses to cohere into a tangible picture, becoming a fantasized absence, though the outlines of a figure do emerge possessed of considerably greater specificity than that allowed by the fugitive icon.

In each *Runaway*, the descriptive text is paired with a visual header, generic male or female figures that operate in contradistinction to the specificity aimed at in the prints' language. These images have no pretensions to serve as representations, but work more along the lines of symbolic placeholders that mark out the runaway slave's structural location. Without the aid of language, the image can only serve to alert the reader that something is amiss, that some species of black flesh has gotten loose from its moorings within the social hierarchy and must be put back in its place. This, of course, was the function that the runaway slave bulletin performed in its heyday as shown by Burke's advertisement:

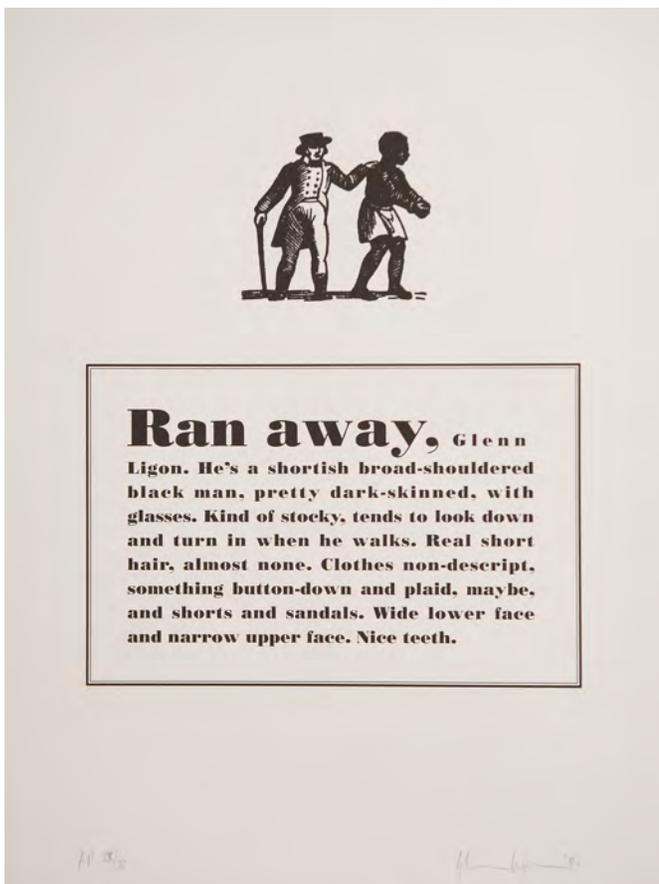
\$150 REWARD. RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of the 2^d instant, a negro man, who calls himself *Henry May*, about 22 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, ordinary color, rather chunky built, bushy head, and has it divided mostly on one side, and keeps it very nicely combed; has been raised in the house, and is a first rate dining-room servant, and was in a tavern in Louisville for 18 months. I expect he is now in Louisville, trying to make his escape to a free state, (in all probability to Cincinnati, Ohio.) Perhaps he may try to get employment on a steamboat. He is a good cook, and is handy in any capacity as a house servant. Had on when he left, a dark cassinett coatee, and dark striped cassinett pantaloons, new—he had other clothing. I will give \$50 reward if taken in Louisvill [sic]; 100 dollars if taken one hundred miles from Louisville in this State, and 150 dollars if taken out of this State, and delivered to me, or secured in any jail so that I can get him again.

While exhaustively detailed—down to the part in Henry's hair—this description lacks all the insouciant charm, psychological probity, and queer sensibility displayed in Ligon's prints, instead focusing on the vagaries of the hunt and the res-

titution of property. “\$150 REWARD” puts the cash on the table right up front, though this sum would have been a mere fraction of the exchange value of the slave, which might well have been in the vicinity of a thousand dollars, especially given the numerous talents of the fugitive in question.⁶⁸

In making this assertion, I rely here as elsewhere on the work of John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, two of the foremost historians of runaway populations. As they aver and as the sliding scale of Burke’s reward suggests, the most money was to be made in recapturing escapees who had somehow managed to make it North, and advertisements like this one served to heighten the intensity of the gaze that fell on black bodies. Every dark figure might be searched for tell-tale signs of fatigue, disorientation, or foreignness that might transform an unattended person back into a fungible asset.⁶⁹ For the large portion of runaways—like Henry, mostly males in their late teens and twenties—fleeing was a dangerous proposition with no guarantee of success, the possibility of recapture looming everywhere as owners attempted to reassert control over what they saw to be rightfully theirs.⁷⁰ But despite the prospect of whipping, further mutilation, and separation from their kinfolk, slaves did run away—especially those like Henry, whose proximity to the master classes and comparatively decent living conditions made them more rather than less prone to abscond. Secreting away the self, fully cognizant of one’s value, was the penultimate act of defiance amidst a range of resistive tactics that included sabotage, willful incompetence, outright rebellion, and most extreme, suicide. Captives seized on whatever means available to frustrate the repression of slavery, to refuse its way of life, and subsequently upset the myth of the docile slave so prevalent in pro- and antiabolitionist imagery.

In this respect, fugitives no doubt succeeded. Although the advertisement circulated in aid of Henry’s procurement does not dwell too long on his psychological makeup, many masters felt it necessary to qualify their descriptions with a battery of behavioral as well as physical characteristics. As Franklin and Schweninger remind us, slave owners developed a complex lexicon of terms intended to telegraph the color, proportions, and persona of the runaway. Adjectives like proud, artful, plausible, cunning, amiable, polite, wily, and deceitful reappeared with astonishing frequency in the descriptions given by masters, registering the individuality of the slave but also constituting a shifting portrait of the fugitive.⁷¹ For above all, slavery’s status quo was endangered by the fugitive’s ability to dissemble, to put on a false impression that allowed him to pass for what he was not, to make his disposition absent just as his body would subsequently become. The runaway slave signified the onus of property to be recovered and the threat of the peculiar institution gone awry, its order undone and its objects restored to themselves, even if only momentarily. Consequently, the fugitive is a figure who muddies and disturbs fantasies of the idyllic antebellum South, leaving the confines of the plantation in order to inhabit a placeless horizon. Just as the runaway sought to move beyond his status as property, to duck the system of surveillance and representation meant to curtail, restrict and ultimately cease his sojourn, his vivid absence remained a



3.23

Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (Nice teeth)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6 x 30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

blight in the memory of his owner and a bastion of hope for those still enslaved.

The whole of *To Disembark* seeks to explore this liminal condition, just as Ligon's larger practice consistently thematizes the trope of fugitivity in its limiting and liberatory capacities. As elsewhere in his work, repetition becomes a substitute for the ability to access a storehouse of black collective memory that in point of fact was never available and that exists now only as a set of traces whose refiguring allows us to recollect the disappearance of the runaway subject.⁷² "Glenn" and "Henry" are summoned through the force of word and image, which serve as surrogates for black bodies no longer available either as sight or as property, objects of speculation that have disappeared. Though they seem to occupy vastly divergent historical situations, there is a sense in which all of these figures are fleeing from the same master: the white overlord has been replaced by the specter of the symbolic order for which he claimed to stand.

Another print, which includes a scene of a white gentleman clasping the shoulder of a half-dressed slave, helps illustrate this contention (fig. 3.23). The text here is rather more laconic than in the first *Runaway* addressed, but because of that, even more striking in its foci.

RAN AWAY, Glenn Ligon. He's a shortish broad-shouldered black man, pretty dark-skinned, with glasses. Kind of stocky, tends to look down and turn in when

he walks. Real short hair, almost none. Clothes non-descript, something button-down and plaid, maybe, and shorts and sandals. Wide lower face and narrow upper face. Nice teeth.

This time around, the writer has made no attempt to characterize the artist's persona but has stayed true to the facts as they presented themselves, an emphasis on the data of visual perception summarized in that final clinching phrase: "nice teeth."

It is precisely this type of proscription imposed in representation and by institutional structures that Glenn and Henry are running away from. The stakes are different but the problematic remains, since it is in the disjunctions as much as in the continuities that the resonance of Ligon's work lies. Just as a missing person is not the same as a fugitive slave, "nice teeth," is not the same as saying "good teeth," the latter an index of health, a selling point for the slave master, the former a compliment of purely cosmetic nature paid to a friend. Both assessments speak to appearance, but the one serves to indicate value and the other to register its attainment, to cast the artist within a particular socioeconomic milieu, going along swimmingly with "something button-down and plaid maybe, shorts and sandals." As ever, language *places*, makes evident some kind of real or imagined societal location.

Which is not to say that Ligon's practice imagines language to be suspect by virtue of its ability to prescribe or interpellate the subject, since it is those very qualities in which his work takes such pleasure. Despite the fact that several different writers with rather different voices have taken stabs at describing the artist, their words do end up resting on a set of shared terms, as evidenced by the following *Runaway* text, headed by the emblem of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, that seems to combine and reorder the other two.

RAN AWAY, Glenn. Medium height, 58, male. Closely-cut hair, almost shaved. Mild looking, with oval shaped, black-rimmed glasses that are somewhat conservative. Thinly-striped black-and-white short-sleeved T-shirt, blue jeans. Silver watch and African-looking bracelet on arm. His face is somewhat wider on bottom near the jaw. Full-lipped. He's black. Very warm and sincere, mild-mannered and laughs often.

In this case, the artist's race appears very late in the passage, almost as an afterthought bracketed by "full-lipped" and "very warm and sincere, mild-mannered and laughs often." What becomes apparent here is the way that the black male body in any description, however benign, bears some relation to a history of stereotype and racial prejudice.⁷³

Ligon is well aware of these mechanisms, and every aspect of *To Disembark* works to point up the historical and ongoing conditions in which African Americans enter the cultural frame.⁷⁴ In fact, he has gone on to exhibit the various ele-

ments of the installation in a number of different exhibitionary and discursive configurations; the frontispieces, for instance, were published as a single cohesive group apart from the installation.⁷⁵ *To Disembark* is not, then, a site-specific project in the original sense of the term, which implied the physical inseparability of the work from the site in which it was executed, as in the case of, say, Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), whose moldering fragments can still be found on the campus of Kent State University. Instead, like that of his contemporary Renée Green, Ligon's installation represents a mode of site-sensitive practice, in which the peripatetic status of the work of art indexes that of the black body, thus referring us back to the racialized frameworks of institutional display regardless of locale.

Just as the artist turned to installation to turn the genre out, so his objects figure the self as a set of tactile surfaces and texts without a sure autobiographical referent: the *Runaways* declare his absence, the wall drawings are haunted by the hand that executed them, and the frontispieces, despite their offerings of accompanying portraits and their declarations to be written by the artist himself, are unstable and conflicting revisions of a life story that cannot be countenanced.⁷⁶ Ligon comes to us as a fugitive from history, a figure who models the various modes of narration deployed by him and others to contest the past. In so doing, he produces incident rather than authenticity, questioning the viewer's demand for forms of blackness that ostensibly give life to the subject but often only manage to reiterate his social death.⁷⁷

A number of persons soon collected round the box after it was taken in to the house, but as I did not know what was going on I kept myself quiet. I heard a man say "let us rap upon the box and see if he is alive": and immediately a rap ensued and a voice said, tremblingly, "Is all right within?" to which I replied—"all right." The joy of the friends was very great; when they heard that I was alive they soon managed to break open the box, and then came my resurrection from the grave of slavery.

HENRY "BOX" BROWN, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*,
Written by Himself, 1851

The most striking aspect of *To Disembark* is surely the set of crates that shape the viewer's movement through the space. With them, Ligon moved into three dimensions for the first time, a shift informed, I would contend, by the difficulty of bringing enslavement into view in purely imagistic or textual terms: in Brown's box, he recovered a form capable of marking the slave's conflicted status as both person and property, of spatially charting the black subject's lack of location, and of figuring the body without requiring its appearance, thereby avoiding the spectacular representation of suffering souls.⁷⁸

3.24

Samuel Worcester Rowse, *The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia*, 1850. Lithograph. 34 x 45.4 cm. (Virginia Historical Society [2005.149].)



For his part, Brown would make himself a rather different sort of spectacle following his escape from slavery: for a while, he was the toast of the abolitionist lecture circuit, where he would arrive at certain venues by box and burst forth with a Houdini-esque flourish in a reperformance of his miraculous “resurrection” (1850; fig. 3.24). However, he was not immediately free from the recriminations of his masters, and not merely because his flamboyant showmanship did not accord with prevailing notions of behavior appropriate for a grateful former slave.⁷⁹ The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act forced him to flee to England and there reconstitute his most useful public relations tool, a large multipanel panorama entitled *Mirror of Slavery*. Unlike his widely read and much circulated narrative, song, and image, Brown’s moving panorama—composed of scenes depicting the evils of slavery and once featured in town halls throughout the northeastern United States—is no longer extant. But in the surviving list of the work’s some forty tableaux, we find evidence of Brown’s awareness of the recursive turnings of subjection.⁸⁰ While the final image is said to have figured an immense jubilee in celebration of “Universal Emancipation,” two previous scenes depict “Nubians Escaping by Night,” followed somewhat later by “Nubian Slaves Retaken.”⁸¹

Escape, it seems, is never definitive and freedom never absolute. Yet in enduring a nearly thirty-hour imprisonment within its confines, Brown marked his curious transport as the focal point of a parodic tactic that made visible the pecuniary underpinnings of enslavement only to undo them: box as cell, slave, and talking commodity all at once. Perhaps the greatest irony that emerges from his adventure, then, is that this particular slave can only attain some semblance of

worth through an elaborate act of masquerade in which he literalizes his status as thing. In accomplishing this feat, a perverse rewriting of the Middle Passage, Brown pointed up the despotic relations between people that undergird capitalist production, while also describing the slave's aporetic position within them.⁸² So framed, his box not only signifies on slavery's metaphors of life, death, and rebirth, but also on its economics, the mechanics of monetary flow that governed the institution, that still exert a tenacious grasp on the subject and that have come to emblemize Western modernity's cult of cargo.⁸³

Brown's sojourn can thus be seen as a mode of black radical critique that disturbs and upends even the logic of Karl Marx's well-known disquisition, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." In this chapter of *Capital*, Marx ventriloquizes the modes of speech conferred on commodities by classical economists in order to lambaste the theory that objects have inherent value outside of exchange and to enact the impossible notion that things might give voice to their own desires.⁸⁴ Yet Brown's performance—like the testimony of so many ex-slaves—gives weight to the idea that the commodity does, indeed, speak. Theorist Fred Moten argues that "that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows."⁸⁵

This complex stew of capital, fetishism, and subjection is part and parcel of Ligon's turn to Brown's story as the structuring conceit of *To Disembark*. He does not, however, leave the slave a void stuck in a box. Rather, the artist's maneuver short-circuits the logic of capital itself and forces us to realize the duplicity of its constructions, the arbitrariness of its object choices. Henry Brown's box is, after all, just a box. Likewise, the commodity fetish is not so much the object itself, its material worth, or even its symbolic force, but its power to accrue meaning as value and to reproduce the network of exchange.⁸⁶ *To Disembark* points to these hyperbolic processes of systematization and makes the slave disappear from their routes of commerce even as it conflates a whole set of fetishistic models with a single gesture—the commodity, the absent body, and the Western sculptural object.

In particular, Ligon's boxes evoke both the museum installations of Marcel Broodthaers and the "specific objects" of Donald Judd.⁸⁷ More strikingly, they recast the gestalts of Robert Morris with a twist, recalling the minimalist practitioner's *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* of 1965, as well as his 1974 audio installation *Voice*, composed of an eight-channel stereo system and fourteen wooden boxes covered with felt.⁸⁸ The most salient referent, however, is Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961, fig. 3.25), which consists of a music player nestled within a wooden container that relays the sound of the work's construction in homage to Marcel Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* of 1916.⁸⁹ Ligon's production process, however, resounds more with Warhol's *Factory*, in which much of the activity of and creative responsibility for object manufacture was delegated to a cast of fellow practitioners. As in the case of his prints, the artist outsourced the fabrication of *To Disembark*'s crates, this time to studio mate Jim Donahue, who had seen Samuel



3.25
Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961. Walnut and recorded tapes (original) and compact disc (reformatted by artist). 124.4 x 24.7 x 25.4 cm. (Image courtesy of Seattle Art Museum 82.190, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright. © Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

Rowse's image of Brown's resurrection and knew that his friend was working on a project about slavery. Aside from this information, Ligon's instructions to his collaborator—an artist and set designer then employed part time, aptly enough, at the Williamsburg outfit Box Art—were these: Donahue was to build and stencil an internally varying set of plywood crates that maintained some fealty to their lost oak inspiration while also taking into account the metrics provided by his own body and those of other *Runaway* writers.⁹⁰

In the resulting constructions, which might be renamed *Boxes with the Sound of Self-Making*, Ligon's corporeality is again displaced so as to bring forth both the relational predication of the "I" and every subject's liability to be produced as an inert yet animate object. At the same time, the singing voices of the installation, much like those heard in Simpon's *Five Rooms*, alternatively found and locate black subjectivity within the realm of the sonic. In each crate, the noises of a thing imbued with an ability to sing itself are recoded as the voice of an absent narrator

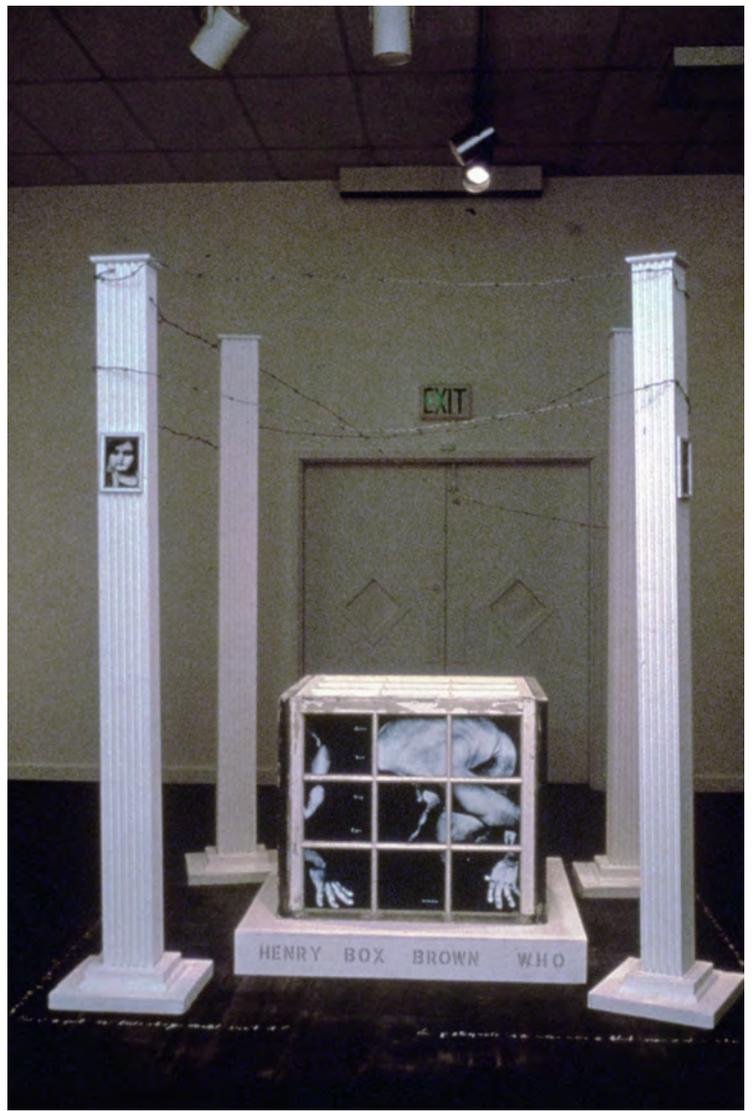
describing a journey; as an ensemble, the boxes take viewers on an aural trapeze through musical history to better suspend them on that perilous road where the benighted object becomes black subject.⁹¹ From the performances of the McIntosh County Shouters, which revive the slave tradition of the ring shout, to gangsta rapper KRS-One's "Sound of da Police," which equates New York police officers with plantation overseers, *To Disembark's* recordings give voice to the affective and existential noises of black emergency as they spool out within commodity culture and continually put pressure on the boundaries of the human.⁹²

Even more important, the crates articulate the historical anteriority of African American resistive tactics aimed at simultaneously undoing and exploiting the conflation of persons and things that has shaped the contours of blackness and the direction of Western three-dimensional aesthetics. For if, as art historian Rosalind Krauss argues, modernist sculpture is "essentially nomadic," effectively defined by "its negative condition—of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place," then Ligon's boxes and his means of producing them can be said to condense and literally replay these histories through the black body in a recursive loop.⁹³ Of course, that body as site and surface—the fetishized object of the racializing gaze—is purposefully absented, throwing us onto the skin of an object, which, in its plain yet multivalent materiality, undoes distinctions between modern, minimal, and site-specific modes of making through focusing on the structural rather than the visual dereliction of African diasporic subjects. In this sense, the crates function as a kind of corporeal armor, a bodily cladding that both secures the opacity of its contents and solicits the viewer's phantasmatic projections only to expose the arbitrariness of their moorings.⁹⁴

To be sure, Ligon is not alone in his purposive recasting of Brown's conveyance as material object, attesting to the resonance of Brown's journey as a metaphor for black experience in terms that are uncanny, wondrous, demonstrative, and accusatory.⁹⁵ The section on the Underground Railroad at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, for example, has since 1988 featured an eerily animated effigy of Brown that emerges from and disappears into a large crate marked "Adams Express" (fig. 3.26), endlessly performing the fugitive's departure and arrival to vivify the experience of enslavement for the edification of the museum's audiences, particularly its youngest patrons.⁹⁶ Most influential for Ligon, however, was artist Pat Ward Williams's *32 Hours in a Box. . . . And Still Counting* (1987; fig. 3.27).⁹⁷ In this work, a rectangle of text written on the floor describes contemporary scenes of racial discrimination and encloses four white pillars mounted with images—a violin, a doll's eye, a rose, and a skyscraper—which, in their turn, frame Williams's iteration of Brown's box. Her construction gives us two views of a black man doubled over in a container, revealing the contortions of his body beneath the latticework of its walls. Like panes of a window filled with photographs rather than glass, the sides of the structure function according to a logic of visual and historical transparency. Thus, the work's title underlines the perpetuity of collective black incarceration, while the text inscribed along its base—"HENRY



3.26 Henry "Box" Brown installation, National Great Blacks in Wax Museum. (Photograph by the author, 2008).



3.27 Pat Ward Williams, *32 Hours in a Box...And Still Counting*, 1987. Cyanotype prints in window frames, photocopies, wood pillars, and text. 243.8 x 243.8 x 243.8 cm. (Collection of Peter Norton.)

BOX BROWN WHO ESCAPED SLAVERY ENCLOSED IN A BOX 3 FEET WIDE AND 2 LONG"—demands a cyclical movement around the sculpture.⁹⁸

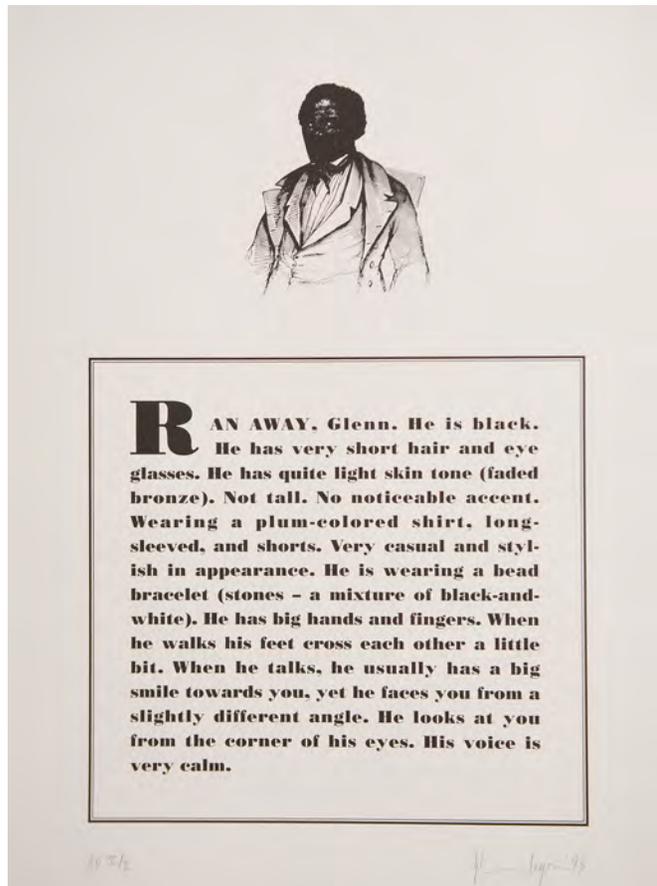
What enables *32 Hours in a Box's* feint of interpretive closure is a collapse of historical frames that constitutes slavery as a generative metaphor that asymptotically engages the present through recourse to an irrefutably tragic past. It is a canny maneuver, one that weaves Brown and his latter-day avatar into a seamless narrative in which fugitivity signifies only the promise of new forms of subjection. Because despite the promises of civilization held out by the photographs on the pillar, even if he were to escape his cell, the man depicted in the work would surely not receive the same warm reception that greeted Mr. "Box" Brown. Williams's figure can look forward neither to hearty applause from white liberal supporters

nor a book contract, but to the intractable reality of racialized aggression summed up so succinctly by the work's external ring of text and its loops of barbed wire. In this sense, *32 Hours in a Box* could not be timelier: its date of execution coincides with the apogee of an unprecedented uptick in the incarceration of African Americans that, since 1976, has seen the prison replace the ghetto as the prime site for the degradation of black life and the production of black masculinity as abject, dishonored, and inherently criminal.⁹⁹

Such concerns are, to a certain extent, evoked by Ligon's work as well. Clearly, both his and Williams's projects are invested in the former slave's narrative and pay heed to the dimensions of his incongruous carriage in order to reframe the conditions of the present. Visually, the similarities seem to end there. Ligon shows no desire to offer us a freshly minted photograph of the isolated black male body imprisoned. Nor does he construct an index of the real that eclipses the distance between now and then, making crystal clear the continuities between the two. Such divergences are ultimately symptomatic, I think, of Ligon's and Williams's differing understandings of how history ought to be conceived. For Williams, the past reads as a deferral of the present that must be vigilantly reimagined: representation becomes an aid to memory and history a refracting lens through which to judge the course of current events. Ligon, on the other hand, embarks on a path of re-presentation that interrogates the regimes of viewership that subtend the afterlife of slavery.¹⁰⁰ The boxes in *To Disembark* evoke a whole host of fugitive subjects who function as the opaque loci of a discursive field indicative of the visual forms that constructed the runaway and allowed him differing degrees of autonomy: the broadsheets' prescriptive account of personality, the narratives' confining conventions, and the painted word's inevitable fading from particular declaration to predictable if inscrutable blackness.

Seen from this retrospect, Brown's own manic proliferation of autoexpressive media takes on a renewed poignancy. In addition to his performances, panorama, images, and hymn, the fugitive reconfigured his 1849 narrative two years later in order to get right what his white amanuenses could not see fit to print.¹⁰¹ Not dissimilarly, the likeness of Brown that provided the frontispiece to his first narrative is itself a generic type, which served as the portrait for another ex-slave's narrative and which appears as the header for another of the *Runaways*, as if to intimate the black subject's constitutive exchangeability as object of slavery and subject of contemporary art (fig. 3.28).¹⁰² Then as now, African American cultural practitioners have played numerous modes of representation off of each other to secure some space for the articulation of an autonomous self within verbal and visual regimes intent on their singular scripting.¹⁰³

In addition to their critique of the ongoing production of black dereliction as commodity form, Ligon's various modes of figuration in *To Disembark* reflect those aspects of slavery that continue to resonate with understandings of the self on all sides of the color line. In particular, nineteenth-century legal discourse on the runaway provided a model for intellectual property law's commodification of im-



3.28
Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (Very Calm)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6x30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

age, word, and voice, opening onto the analogical similarities between the fugitive subject and the fungible aspects of subjectivity that map capitalist culture's ever increasing subjugation of personhood to possession.¹⁰⁴ Ligon's ensemble casts the processes of theft and reification that shaped the production of the fugitive in the present tense, absconding with the properties of others to create a liminal space for the expression of black sounds and queer desires in excess of the representations that would constrain them.¹⁰⁵

With that said, we are now ready to disembark. As we have seen, Ligon is a master of felicitously chosen words that are capable of sampling multiple histories, traditions, and theoretical suppositions that find themselves evoked, only to be detained, echoing the complexity of the artist's own position within a set of discourses that overlap and oppose one another. *To Disembark* emblemizes this tendency within his practice: in Ligon's lexicon, the titular phrase means not so much to reach the end of a journey as to endlessly retrace its course in search of openings always under threat of disappearance. This is what his installation effectively demands of us as we shuttle between wall and floor, past and present, the humorous and the horrifying. Moving through the work's numerous visual and aural registers means positioning oneself in relation to the history of slavery, unveiling the

recursive logic of stereotype, and engaging with the artist's multiple "selves." To disembark, then, is to assume responsibility for the production of meaning, to run away from the prison house of language, and to reconstitute ourselves in the traces we leave in our wake. The installation is a spatial text and our movement within it becomes a bodily reading as we recode Ligon's words, turning them over in our hands, poaching them to arrive at our own meaning.¹⁰⁶

As the viewer navigates the work, she is seduced by the materials on the wall and drawn close by the sounds emerging from the boxes, which recalibrate not only her bodily awareness of black visibility but also her sense of the circumstances that inducted her into the museum. Neither fully mooring us before the prints, nor entirely subjecting us to the sculptural demand, *To Disembark* relies on a contingent relation to the visual that is not dependent on a point of mastery but that understands the placelessness from which the gaze originates.¹⁰⁷ In its spatial breadth and affective complexity, the work demands a kind of aporetic looking, a reading askance, a fugitive walking meant to refigure the self even as it is contained in the box of blackness. It is from that location, the placeless place of the fugitive, where the present freshly comes into view, though the prospect that *To Disembark* offers is a damning one.

Can blackness ever appear other than through the scrim of its debilitating visual, institutional, discursive, and physical constraints? Are African American artists still unable to come to full voice within mainstream artistic discourse despite their increasingly splashy landings on the shores of culture? Have black queer subjects just gotten off the boat, able to articulate themselves openly but still denied a place within African American culture at large? Do these arrivals signal not so much advancement as the beginning of a new even more insidious stage in the exploitation of black difference and perversity? Who, in other words, is arriving from where and when and with what avenues for redress? All of these queries fall somewhere close to the mark, though to privilege one more than the others would likely be to hamstring the discursive force of Ligon's work, if not to miss the point of his multiple voices altogether.

To get closer to the tenor and texture of those voices, it is helpful to turn back to Gwendolyn Brooks's deceptively slim volume of poetry from which the exhibition takes its name. Published in 1981, her *To Disembark* looks to the recent past of black resistance movements in America and abroad in order to measure distance traveled, to take stock of the present political crisis, and to mourn the men and women lost in the arrival of a revolutionary black consciousness. This epoch-making moment in black culture often motivates the poet's descriptions, whether she is elegizing "Young Heroes," pointing out scenes of senseless black death, or condemning the petty slights and false self-importance of current black leaders.¹⁰⁸ Ligon took up this volume, I would contend, because it evokes material circumstances on the ground so vividly and because it describes how blackness gets figured, felt, and lived at a moment when one journey has ended and another has begun. In this sense, Brooks's text seems to set out the ambitions for the artist's

installation, which is also underwritten by the imperative to assess the current situation through the lens of history and to mourn its future.

In Ligon's practice, the subject darkened by the optics of race and sex arrives over and over again—from slavery, from segregation, from rebellion and persecution and catastrophe—though he never comes any closer to arriving at a destination that would either emancipate him or entirely foreclose his individual possibilities. It is this sense of a missed encounter with the present, of a mourning without end, that haunts Ligon's installation.¹⁰⁹ Arising like a flash in the moment of danger, slavery serves as the meditative node where the contours of blackness now come into focus. In reaching back to the past, Ligon reaches out for what cultural historian Saidiya Hartman calls the fugitive's dream, "a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood . . . of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive."¹¹⁰

In their contingency and multivalence, the artist's visual means suggest the difficulty of keeping that dream alive and the wily disposition needed to do so, an ability to adapt and abandon and abscond, ever attentive to the losses such fugitivity entails and the liberation it promises. In the aftermath of the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s, an agonistic engagement with the global order of things often seems impossible, especially given the economies that would constitute us and render the world as always already packaged, delimited, boxed—or, to use a term of the contemporary transnational shipping industry—containerized.¹¹¹ Under these conditions, there is little hope for escape, but there are perhaps no better tactics of evasion than those developed by fugitives who have long had to survive as material and phantasmatic grist for the machinery of capital and who have managed to do so by taking wing regardless of where they might land. For a clearer idea of what such a flight might entail, we must now look to the trajectory of Renée Green.

- Archive, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.
- 101** Lorna Simpson, "Proposal: The McLeod Cabins," document 57–028 (January 4, 1991), Places with a Past Archive, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.
- 102** Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States," in Price, *Maroon Societies*, 151–67.
- 103** James Meyer, "The Functional Site," *Documents* 7 (Fall 1996): 20–21.
- 104** On Simpson's refusal to explain her work's meaning purely in terms of her own identity, see Glenn Ligon, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," *Artforum*, September 2004, 245. For a progressive approach to *Five Rooms*, see Wright, "Back Talk," 22–23.
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CHAPTER 3

- 1** Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Extract from an oration, at Rochester, July 5, 1852, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969), 441 (original emphasis).
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CHAPTER 4

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