

Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects

*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.*¹

—Frederick Douglass, 1852

IN 1991, THE ARTIST GLENN LIGON set out to draw a history of American freedom (fig. 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 framing 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 onwards. 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 two moments of American emancipation so as to materialize the distance between the realities of black oppression and the myths of white freedom. In drawing them 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 but also suggests how the selective occlusion of the past continues to falsify our imagining of the present. Executed for the artist's first show at a

ABSTRACT In this essay, Huey Copeland examines contemporary artist Glenn Ligon's multiple engagements with the history of American slavery, particularly as evidenced by his 1993 installation *To Disembark*. As Copeland shows, in casting himself as a runaway slave, Ligon points up the relationships between the regimes of power, violence, and resistance that continue to produce black subjects as fugitives in life and in representation. *REPRESENTATIONS* 113. Winter 2011 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 73-110. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI:10.1525/rep.2011.113.1.73.



FIGURE 1. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (1776–1865)*, 1991. Oil stick and paint on paper, 76.2 × 55.9 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

commercial venue, which opened—perhaps not coincidentally—on July 2, 1991, at New York’s Jack Tilton Gallery, *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 to keep 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 that 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



FIGURE 2. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (1865–1991)*, 1991. Gouache, oil stick, and graphite on paper, 76.2 × 56.5 cm. Image courtesy The Sender Collection.

together, collapsing dates and darkly compressing time.² Here it is not the clock but the 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, the year 1855 is missing altogether, but the work’s core proposal still holds.

As did Douglass, Ligon seems to understand 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 straight into the present by the conceptual pendant to *1776–1865*.³ Beginning where that drawing left off, *Untitled (1865–1991)*—as its unassuming moniker implies—makes even less of a claim for the epochal status of its featured dates (fig. 2; 1991), merely holding out another cascade of digits that halt at the year of the work’s execution. The accounting of American history in these pieces cleaves at 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 begin to make manifest the grounds from which this essay departs: namely, that the attempt to figure 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 1990s, a tendency most dramatically evidenced by his large-scale installation *To Disembark* (1993).

Little of this inheritance, however, was brought to bear in 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 her write-up, critic Roberta Smith situated Ligon's work 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."⁴

In the quotation that gave the profile its title, the artist confirms his status as a nomad ever marooned between antinomies: "Lack of location is my location. I'm always shifting positions and changing my mind."⁵ More than just a clue about his personal disposition, Ligon's statement sums up an attitude toward identity quite befitting his moment. The late 1980s and early '90s were, after all, the salad days of identarian critique, perhaps epitomized by cultural theorist Stuart Hall's well-known declaration of "the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject."⁶ Such interventions aimed to trouble the fixity so often presumed whenever race rears its impossible head, though 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.⁷ Fully aware of the limitations imposed upon so many 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.⁸ 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 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."⁹



FIGURE 3. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. Oil and enamel on canvas, 101.6 × 63.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

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 "Melanctha"—in glowing foot-high letters (*Warm Broad Glow*, 2005).¹⁰

It is the paintings, however, that initially garnered Ligon a place among 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 (fig. 3). This untitled painting reiterates,

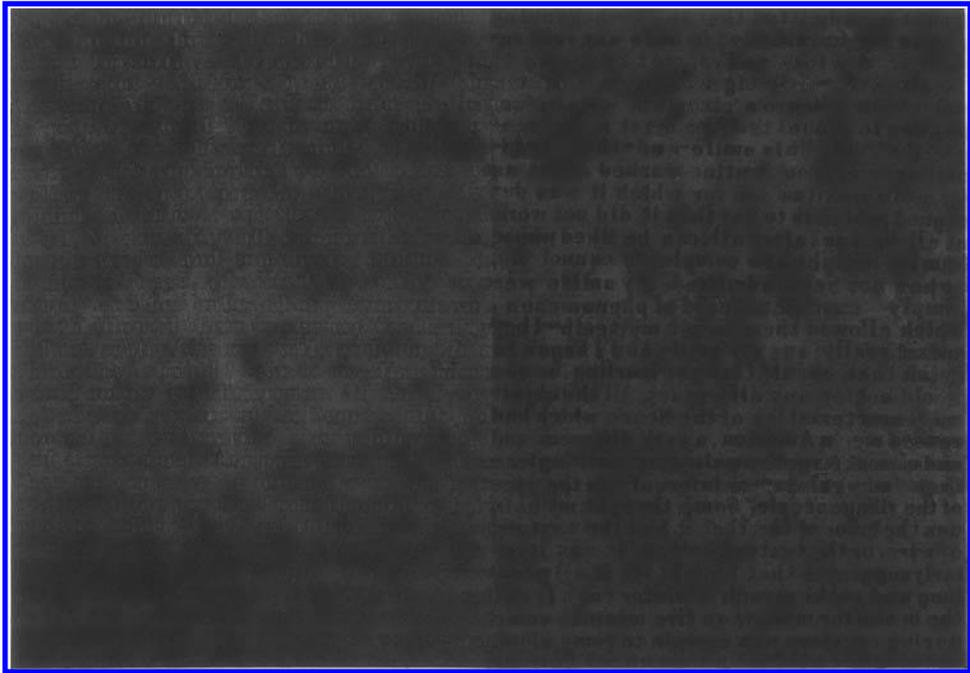


FIGURE 4. Glenn Ligon, *Stranger in the Village (Excerpt) #10*, 1997. Oil stick and coal dust on linen, 243.8 × 365.8 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

destabilizes, and subtly queers the declaration of manhood featured on placards held out by protesting Memphis sanitation workers in 1968 as guards against scopic and bodily harm. The most recent work in the exhibition cast the first lines 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 materialized the writer’s double negation as black and gay (fig. 4). These two pieces functioned almost 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.¹¹

Along with any number of practitioners in this moment who evoked the socially marked body through figural surrogates—Janine Antoni, Robert Gober, and Byron Kim spring quickly 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.¹² In his groundbreaking 1998 essay for the *Unbecoming* catalog, for

example, Richard Meyer argues that 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.¹³ Of late, 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” as an image always on the move.¹⁴

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 the painter’s “compositional method.”¹⁵ What I want to emphasize, however, is that in this artist’s oeuvre history *matters*: his aesthetic means reflect an understanding of how modern discursive 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 pioneering conceptual artist David Hammons and of equally innovative jazzman 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 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.”¹⁶

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 mined the archive, engaging the postures, fates, and visual technologies that produce African diasporic folk 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 worker’s 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 Harold Cruse described more than forty years ago 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.”¹⁷

These facts of social fugitivity have engendered the artist’s reflections on the homelessness of the black and the queer in the modern era. Just as important, his art reveals an attunement to and an understanding of the

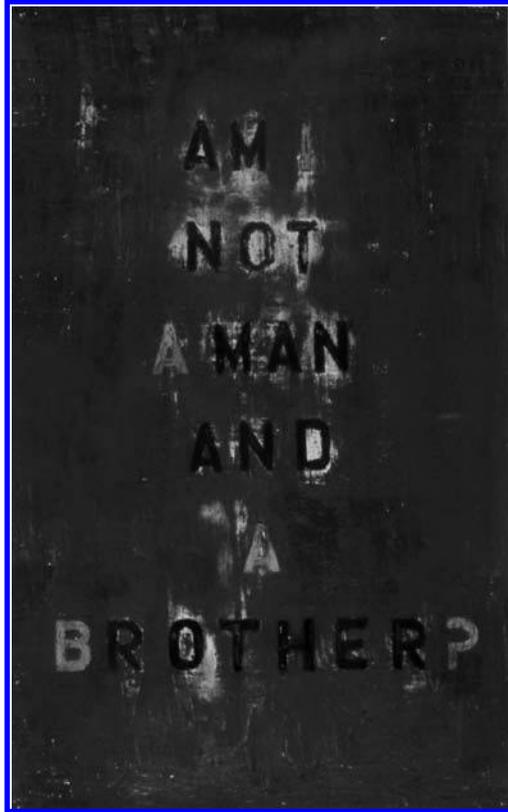


FIGURE 5. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled*, 1989. Oil on paper, 121.9 × 76.2 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

ways in which marginalized subject positions are anticipated by the placelessness of the enslaved, who long ago were forced to negotiate the “postmodern” problems attendant upon the dissolution of the self, the symbolic, and the social.¹⁸ For in addition to providing the lynchpin of an emergent capitalist economy, captives served as prime objects for the regimes of knowledge, power, vision, and resistance that still differentially produce Western subjects.¹⁹

Another untitled work, this one from 1989, goes straight to the matter of these historical processes (fig. 5). Here, the maroon ground of the paper has been reworked almost to the point of excoriation, though 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 eighteenth-century British abolitionists as a caption to accompany stock figures of half-dressed supplicating captives. Subsequently, the pairing of image and

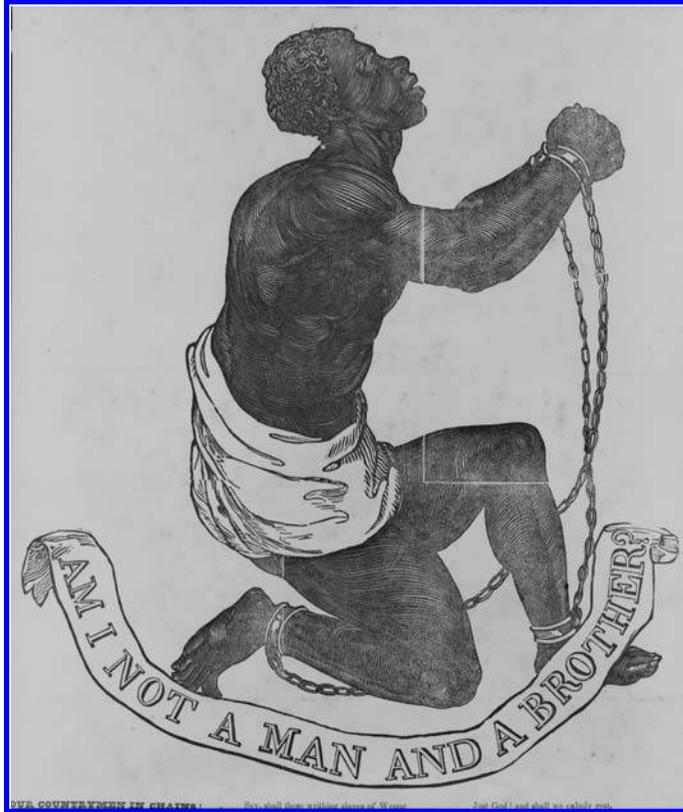


FIGURE 6. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* 1837. Woodcut on wove paper, 26.7 × 22.8 cm. Image courtesy Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington, DC.

text was translated, revised, and reproduced throughout those nineteenth-century slave-holding societies in which abolitionist discourse had gained a foothold (fig. 6).²⁰ 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 a linguistic terrain whose very facture seems to crumble even as it freshly articulates an appeal to those ties of kinship and community that black subjects have historically been denied in their placement at the limit of, and as embodied loci for, modernity's modes of violence and visualization.

It is the legacy of these modes, either inaugurated within the peculiar institution or passionately posed against it, that haunts us in the present and that directly animates *To Disembark*, first shown in 1993 at Washington DC's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. In this project, many of the

concerns addressed in the artist's early work—the production of racial and sexual difference, the limits of American cultural politics, and the expansive capacities of placelessness—are historically moored, visually condensed, and so conceptually clarified through a multiplicity of forms that compulsively refer to the histories of slavery. What I want to argue is that in *To Disembark*, the peculiar institution and its various 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 both despite and because of the obstacles thrown up by representation and its remains in the archive.²¹

*You see, whites want black artists 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.*²²

—James Baldwin, 1987

In creating *To Disembark*, Ligon drew upon both generic framing conventions and highly specific historical episodes that he came upon while perusing the collections of the New York Public Library. In one gallery viewers confronted wooden shipping crates bearing international symbols for fragility (fig. 7). The variously constructed containers were modeled after the 1849 conveyance in which Henry “Box” Brown shipped himself from captivity in Richmond to freedom in Philadelphia, where, upon arrival before his white benefactors, he broke into a hymn based on the Bible’s fortieth Psalm, though his subsequent ballad would be sung to the tune of the popular air “Uncle Ned.”²³ Ligon’s boxes—scattered evenly about the room and all of roughly the same dimensions (30 by 36 by 24 inches)—pay appropriate homage to Brown’s sonic celebration: each is outfitted with a tape recorder that emits barely audible sounds, from the songs of the McIntosh County Shouters to Billie Holiday’s rendition of “Strange Fruit” to rapper KRS-One’s “Sound of da Police.”²⁴ Hung at regular intervals on the walls were ten offset lithographs that faithfully reproduce the format of nineteenth-century runaway handbills. In another gallery (fig. 8), viewers encountered nine frontispieces to slave narratives that were never written, fictive texts loosely based in the artist’s biography.²⁵ Also on these walls were three drawings in oil stick, each 80 by 30 inches and each deploying a different sentence from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be



FIGURE 7. Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark* (installation view), 1993. Ten lithographs, nine wood crates with sound, overall dimensions variable. Image courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photography by Lee Stalworth.

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.”

As this description goes to show, every element of *To Disembark* pointed up the black body’s absence from the representational frame, proffering indexes of its presence that betrayed nothing of the figure’s actual location. Rather, in this project, the discursive materials of slavery were deployed 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’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image

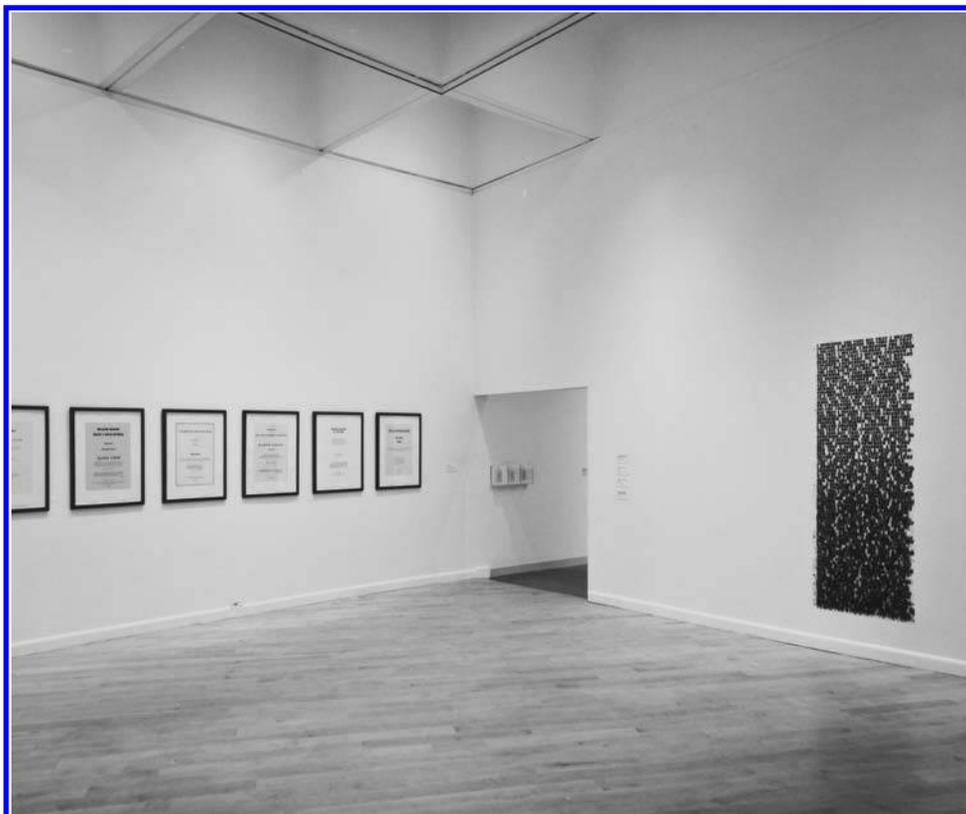


FIGURE 8. Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark* (installation view), 1993. Nine etchings, three wall drawings, overall dimensions variable. Image courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Photography by Lee Stalworth.

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.”²⁶

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 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’s work 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.²⁷ In the process, the artist asks a question most eloquently posed in his own words: “Who are the other ‘masters’ from which we flee?”²⁸

Historically, visibility itself has been construed as the mastering conceit from which black peoples have sought refuge. Indeed, 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.²⁹ Everywhere haunted by the gaze, African diasporic cultural practitioners have time and again turned to the word in posing alternative articulations of the self. Ligon was no exception.³⁰

In the late 1980s, the artist 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.³¹ Words mattered because they expansively referred and they ably rerouted, bracketing the metonymic chain of associations—“tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency”—which, as Frantz Fanon argued more than fifty years ago, are set off by the sight of dark skin and doggedly pursue black subjects whenever they appear.³² In updating the theorist’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 the harrowing amateur videotape of motorist Rodney King being senselessly beaten.³³ Ligon and 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; more than ever, the word was the faculty deemed most capable of doing so.³⁴ 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 for centuries given blackness its objective weight within the psyche and throughout the mainstream media.³⁵

At roughly the same time, black literary theory was rising in prominence within the academy, thanks to the efforts of scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.; across the broader cultural landscape, there was growing acknowledgment of African American achievement in letters, from the approbation that greeted Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) to the canonization of “lost” writers such as Zora Neale Hurston. Such developments were surely not lost on Ligon, whose work everywhere manifests a voracious appetite for the printed word. Yet he also well knew—as Baldwin’s comments on the limits of the American vocabulary spell out—that language has never constituted a site of unfettered black expression, a fact best brought to light in *To Disembark* by the deployment of Hurston’s text.³⁶

Like the identically inscribed canvases that preceded them (fig. 9), these wall drawings transmute affective mantra into projective blur, figure into

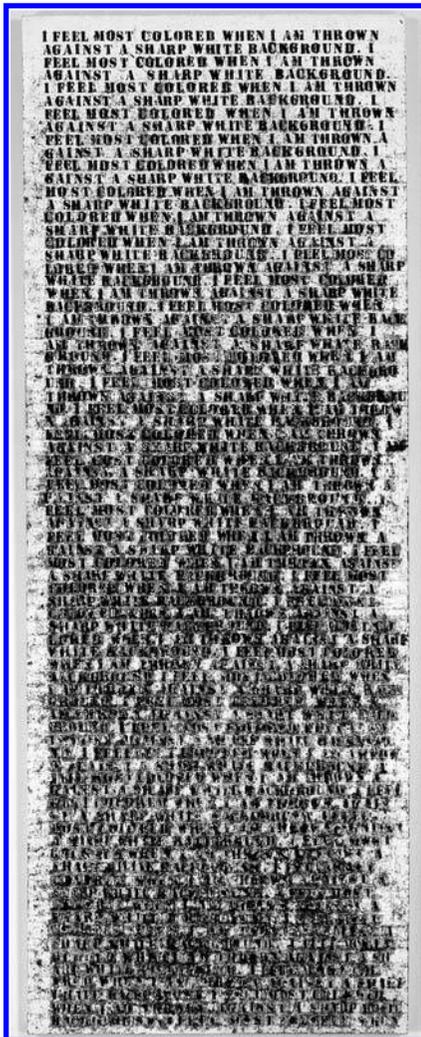


FIGURE 9. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990–91. Oil stick and gesso on panel, 203.2 × 76.2 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

ground, word into image, white into black. This visual effect is a result of the artist’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, we are eventually left in the dark, grasping at phrases that are a foregone conclusion. In these works, language in its corporeal and metaphorical dimensions casts blackness less as fact of perception than as a frame of mind dependent upon 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.³⁷

In performing this impossibility and its perpetual recurrence within representation, Ligon’s paintings stage the murkiness of racial thinking and run 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. It is the plenitude, contingency, and symbolic import of black *feeling*, in other words, that open onto those fugitive states that the black image, in its liability for stereotypical reduction, would seem to preclude and that black letters can only obliquely manifest.³⁸ As the wall drawings intimate, every discourse can become a site of racial constraint, particularly given the dialectic of “I” and “we” that can at once bolster possibilities for African American collective action and stifle the particularity of individual lived experiences.³⁹

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 critiqued by her contemporaries for what they perceived as all manner of political incorrectness.⁴⁰ As if to drive this point home, Ligon has culled his lines from a text larded with stereotypes that fly in the face of its apparent insistence on the contextual character of racial identity; in fact, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” has been cited as a prime example of Hurston’s intransigence, even regression, by those who laud her writing as a model of black critical practice.⁴¹ 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?⁴²

In asking such questions, Ligon does not posit an equal, direct, or analogical relation between himself and the slave. Instead, he looks for traces of those modes of subjection that have dispossessed black subjects and insistently conditioned their speaking, ever attentive to those threads that might be said to structure the possibilities of black expression and the figuration of the black "I."⁴³

It is this imperative that also directs the titling of *To Disembark's Narrative* frontispieces (fig. 10). Consider *Black Rage; Or, How I Got Over*, which combines psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs's fiery 1968 polemic with a gospel hymn made legendary by Mahalia Jackson. The titles introduce a text that promises "a full and faithful account of [Ligon's] commodification of the horrors of black life into art objects for the public's enjoyment." By roping book and song together, the text 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, situating the artist as a proselytizer for an autocritical engagement with his work and the production of blackness *tout court*.⁴⁴ Since slave narratives were often prefaced or concluded by the verifying testimony of white citizens, Ligon provides a quotation from African American cultural critic bell hooks that is meant to revise this tradition and license his own discourse: "When we talk about 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* (fig. 11), 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 exclusively attracted to whites. Through this transcoding, it is possible to recover the queerness of Jacobs's text, from her attempted escape in sailor drag to her description of a male slave's sexualized humiliation at the hands of his young master.⁴⁵ Although the tactic of cross-gender impersonation is not unheard of in accounts provided by former runaways, references to homosexual practices on the plantation are exceedingly rare within the archive of slavery.⁴⁶ Such incongruities within the print are hyperbolized through the narration of the fictive author's "fall" toward homosexuality in nineteenth-century language rife with metaphors of whiteness as light, blindness, and snow, and by the simultaneous citation of contemporary black gay writer Hilton Als's account of drawing close to white men "in a climate so cold."

Ligon's engagements on this score reflect both his own concerns and an emergent cultural tendency. As evidenced by the work of Als, Essex Hemphill,

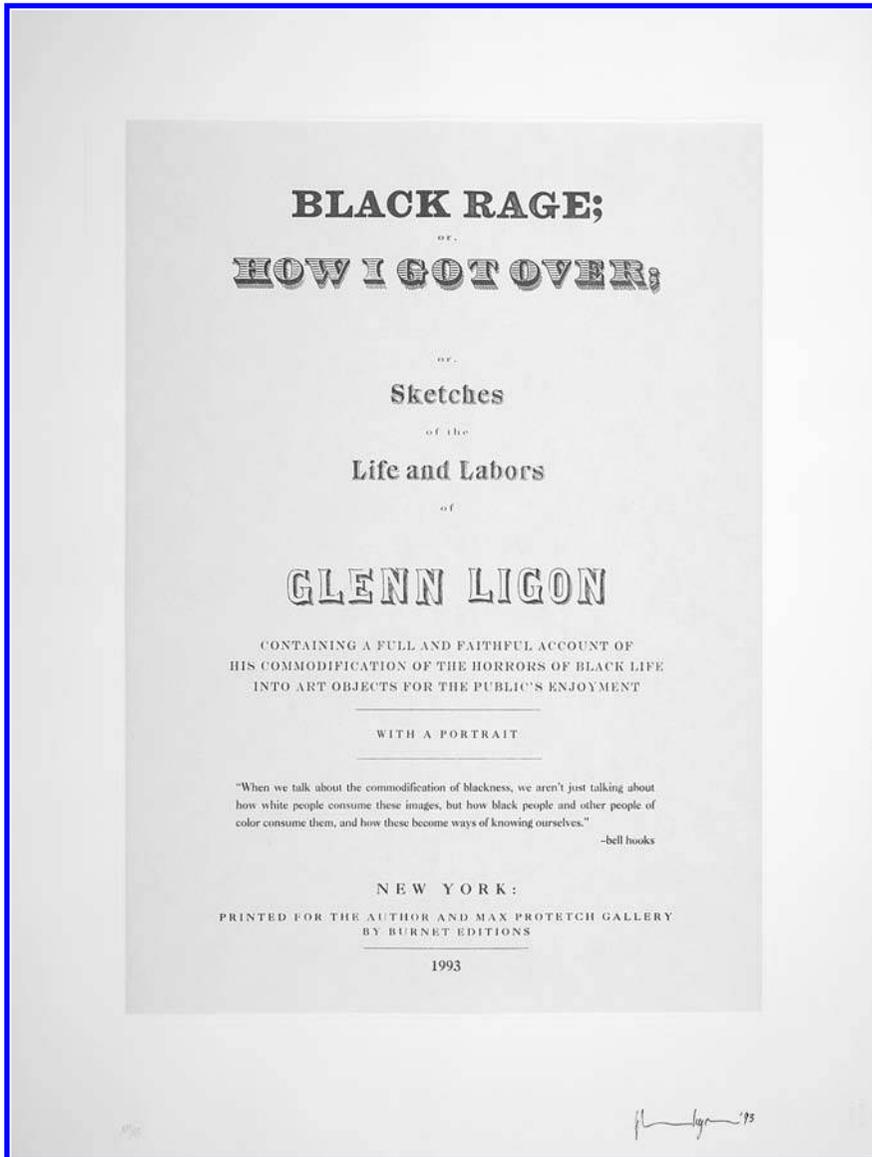


FIGURE 10. Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Black Rage; Or, How I Got Over)*, 1993. One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé, 71.1 × 53.3 cm. Image courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Isaac Julien, and many others, the late 1980s and early '90s were also a watershed moment for queer African diasporic practice.⁴⁷ Ligon's most well-known contribution to this discourse is his *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* (1991–93), a sprawling phototext that interpolates Robert Mapplethorpe's



FIGURE 11. Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Incidents in the Life of a Snow Queen)*, 1993. One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé, 71.1 × 53.3 cm. Image courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

images of nude black men with cultural commentaries indicative of the range of opinions generated by the white gay artist's work. Seen in this light, the *Incidents in the Life* print offers a complementary take on the disruptive force of interracial homoerotic desire, holding out mannered text as opposed to vivid imagery in order to reveal the historical circumstances that continue to visually erase gays and lesbians of color from cultures that demand normative apparitions of blackness that are quickly categorized and easily devoured.

In their emphasis on the multiplicity of any given subject's possible affective identifications, the autobiographical fragments trotted out in the *Narratives* resist such totalizing racial and sexual scrimps, 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 plunge into the well of figures and typefaces developed to frame the enslaved, assuring a formal affinity between the prints and their sources so that the latter might be better destabilized. Like the frontispieces of nineteenth-century slave narratives, Ligon's etchings are executed with chine collé, a process in which a fine sheet of paper is affixed to a cheaper backing material.⁴⁸ However, his *Narratives* leave the scale of the book behind, assuming dimensions more fit to a portrait, and the *Runaway* lithographs—printed on creamy paper with rich brown inks—possess a sumptuous facture that is a far cry from the utilitarian look and feel of the original handbills that inspired them. Produced 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. Accordingly, each print is inscribed with an edition number and Ligon's signature, which index his engagement with the market for black authenticity even as his *Runaways* (fig. 12), in their production and referent, signify his removal from such networks of circulation.⁴⁹

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.

This is one of the ten descriptions written by an unnamed friend of the artist. Ligon instructed his accomplices to describe him, to render him in words as if he had gotten loose from language's grip, slipping out onto the streets of New York City to disappear into the crowd.⁵⁰ The writer in question has chosen first to concentrate on the formal qualities of the subject at

hand, restlessly compiling an array of data that seem appropriate to a police report but are equally fitting as an update of a runaway advertisement. With its breathless clauses and elliptical closing assessment of the artist's interpersonal behavior, the paragraph seeks to characterize Ligon as a subject, to sketch a portrait in shorthand that gives some clue to what it might be like to bump into the artist on the street or at an art 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: 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 serving 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 the runaway slave bulletin performed in its heyday, a function exemplified by the following advertisement printed in the 1850s in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*:

Twenty Dollars Reward—Ran away from the subscriber, the boy Tom. Said boy is black, 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high, has a piece cut out of one ear, is about 26 years old. The above reward will be paid if he is lodged in any jail in the State; if caught in a free State, I will pay \$500 if he is brought to me in New Orleans.

—John Ermon, corner of Camp and Race streets.⁵¹

To put it mildly, 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 restitution of property. "Twenty Dollars 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 two thousand dollars.⁵² The real 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.

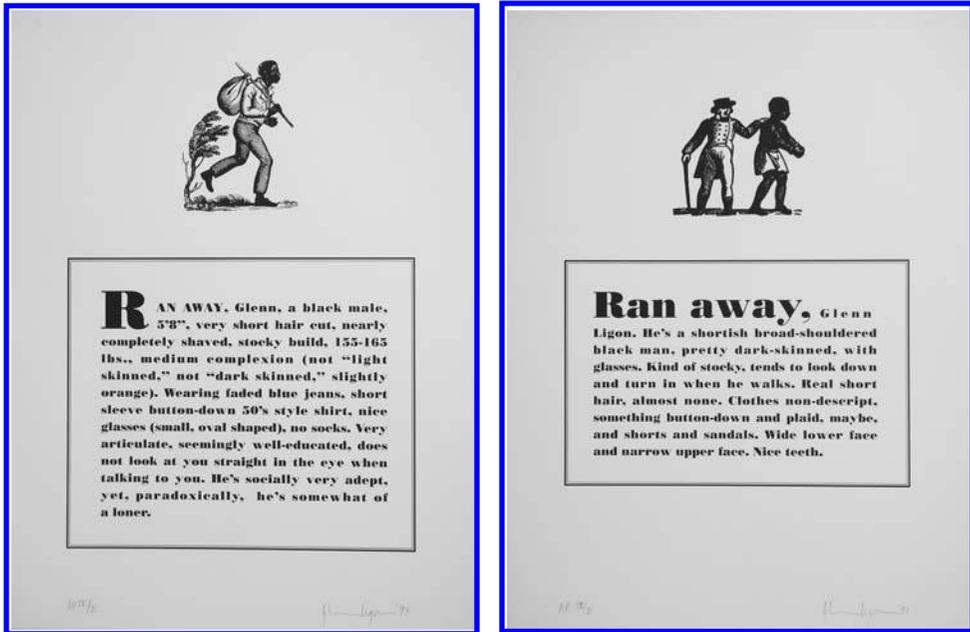
Every dark figure might be searched for telltale signs of fatigue, disorientation, or foreignness that might transform an unattended person back into a fungible asset. Most telling for the bounty hunter were the specific markers

pointing to acts of physical violence inscribed upon the slave's body. As his former master recounts, Tom's ear has been cut or mutilated, a standard punishment for slaves who had attempted to escape from bondage only to be tracked down, re-enslaved, and confronted with the violent retribution of their masters.⁵³ For the large portion of runaways—like Tom, 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.⁵⁴ But despite the prospect of whipping, further mutilation, and being separated from their kinfolk, slaves did run away: the penultimate act of defiance amidst a range of resistive tactics that included sabotage, willful incompetence, outright rebellion, and suicide. Captives seized upon whatever means were available to frustrate the repression of slavery, to refuse its way of life, and subsequently to upset the myth of the docile slave so prevalent in pro- and anti-abolitionist imagery.

In this respect fugitives no doubt succeeded. Although the advertisement run in the *Picayune* in aid of Tom's procurement does not dwell for any time on his psychological make-up, many masters felt it necessary to qualify their descriptions with a battery of behavioral as well as physical characteristics. Slave owners developed a complex lexicon of terms, both words on the page and inscriptions on the flesh, 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 subject.⁵⁵

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 the owner to recover his property and the threat that the peculiar institution had 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 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, mobilizing the trope of fugitivity in its limiting and liberatory capacities. Throughout the work, the repetition and deformation of that which persists within the archive becomes a substitute for the ability to access a storehouse of black



FIGURES 12, 13. Glenn Ligon, *Runaways*, 1993. Two from a suite of ten lithographs, 40.6 × 30.5 cm, edition of forty-five. Images courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

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 runaway subject.⁵⁶ “Glenn” and “Tom” 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 both men are fleeing from the same master: the white overlord has simply been replaced by the specter of the symbolic order for which he claimed to stand.

Another print (fig. 13), which includes a scene of a white gentleman clapping the shoulder of a half-dressed slave, helps illustrate this contention. The text here is rather more laconic than in the first *Runway* addressed, but for that reason 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 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, like Tom, is running away from. The stakes are different but the problematic remains, for it is in the disjunctions as much as in the continuities that the resonance of Ligon's work lies: "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, casting the artist within a particular socio-economic milieu that goes 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 believes language itself 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, which seems to combine and reorder the other two.

Ran away, Glenn. Medium height, 5'8", 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 the black male body in any description, however benign, bears some relation to a history of stereotype and racial prejudice.⁵⁷

Ligon is well aware of these mechanisms, and every aspect of *To Disembark* points up the historical and ongoing conditions in which African Americans enter the cultural frame.⁵⁸ In fact, he has gone on to exhibit the various elements of the installation in a number of different combinations. The work is not, then, a site-specific project in the original sense of the term, which implied the physical inseparability of an object 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. Rather, like the projects 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.⁵⁹ As such, *To Disembark*, like Ligon's art as a whole, models tactics—in Michel de Certeau's sense of "calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus"—aimed at disrupting the logic of its own conditions of appearance.⁶⁰

Just as the artist turned to installation to turn the genre out, 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 assertions to have been written by the artist himself, are unstable and conflicting revisions of a life story that cannot be countenanced. Ligon comes to us as a fugitive from history who models the various modes of narration deployed by himself and others to contest it, producing incident rather than authenticity and questioning the viewer's demand for forms of blackness that ostensibly give life to the subject but often only manage to reiterate the slave's social death.⁶¹

*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 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.*⁶²

—Henry "Box" Brown, 1851

The most striking aspect of *To Disembark* is surely the crates that shape the viewer's movement through the space. With them, Ligon moved fulsomely into three dimensions for the first time, a shift prompted, I think, by the difficulty of bringing enslavement into view in purely imagistic or textual terms: in Brown's box, the artist recovered a form capable of marking the slave's conflicted status as person and property, of spatially charting the black subject's lack of location, and of figuring the body without requiring its appearance, avoiding the spectacular representation of suffering colored souls.⁶³

For his part, Brown happily made himself a rather different sort of spectacle following his escape: for a while, he was the toast of the abolitionist lecture circuit, where he would arrive at each venue by box and burst forth with a Houdini-esque flourish in a reperformance of his miraculous "resurrection"



FIGURE 14. Samuel Worcester Rowse, *The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia*, 1850. Lithograph, 34 × 45.4 cm. Image courtesy Virginia Historical Society.

(fig. 14). 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.⁶⁴ The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act forced him to flee to England and there to reconstitute his most useful public relations tool, a large multipanel panorama entitled *Mirror of Slavery*. In contrast to his widely seen and much circulated narrative, song, and images, Brown's moving panorama—composed of scenes depicting the evils of the institution and once featured in town halls throughout the Northeast—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.⁶⁵ 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."⁶⁶

Escape, it seems, is never definitive and freedom never absolute. Yet in enduring a self-imposed nearly thirty-hour imprisonment within its confines, Brown marked his unlikely 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 a 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.⁶⁷ His box thus not only signifies on slavery's metaphors of life, death, and rebirth, but also on its economics, the mechanics of monetary flow that still exert a tenacious grasp on the subject.⁶⁸

I would argue that Brown's sojourn can be seen as a mode of black radical critique that disturbs and upends even the logic of Karl Marx's well-known disquisition in "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." In this chapter of *Capital* (1867), Marx ventriloquizes the modes of speech conferred upon commodities by classical economists in order to lambaste the theory that objects have inherent value outside of exchange and the impossible notion that things might give voice to their desires.⁶⁹ Yet Brown's performance—as does the testimony of so many ex-slaves—gives weight to the idea that the commodity does, indeed, speak: as Fred Moten has argued, "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."⁷⁰

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*. In so doing, he by no means reduces the slave to 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; similarly, 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.⁷¹ *To Disembark* points to these hyperbolic processes of systematization and disappears the literal slave body 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 minimalist object.⁷²

Ligon's boxes rewrite the gestalts of a Robert Morris with a twist, recalling the minimalist sculptor's *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* of 1965 as well as his 1974 audio installation *Voice*, which comprised an eight-channel stereo system and fourteen wooden boxes covered with felt.⁷³ The most salient referent, however, is Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* of 1961 (fig. 15), which consists of a tape recorder nestled within a wooden container that resounds with the noises of its construction and harks back to Marcel Duchamp's



FIGURE 15. Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961. Walnut and recorded tapes (original) and compact disc (reformatted by artist), 116.8 × 24.8 × 25.4 cm. Image courtesy Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright, ©2010 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

With Hidden Noise of 1916.⁷⁴ In each case, a thing is imbued with an ability to speak itself; in Ligon's works, which might be renamed *Boxes with the Sound of Self-Making*, such speech is recoded as that of a narrator describing his journey, taking viewers on an aural traipse through black musical history, only to suspend them on the perilous road where the benighted object becomes voiced subject. Just as important, the crates in *To Disembark* articulate the historical anteriority of resistive tactics employed by the enslaved that were aimed at simultaneously undoing and exploiting the conflation of persons and things that has shaped the contours of blackness and the direction of the aesthetic in the modern era.

To be sure, Ligon is not alone in his purposive recasting of Brown's conveyance as material object, a fact that attests to the resonance of the fugitive's journey as a metaphor for black experience that is at once uncanny,



FIGURE 16. The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Henry “Box” Brown installation, 2008. Photography by the author.

wondrous, demonstrative, and accusatory.⁷⁵ To wit, the section on the Underground Railroad at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, has since 1988 featured an eerily animated effigy of Brown who emerges from and disappears into a large crate marked “Adams Express” (fig. 16), endlessly performing Brown’s departure and arrival so as to vivify the experience of enslavement for the edification of the museum’s audiences, particularly its youngest patrons.⁷⁶

Most influential for Ligon, however, was the artist Pat Ward Williams’s *32 Hours in a Box . . . And Still Counting* of 1987 (fig. 17).⁷⁷ 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, 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

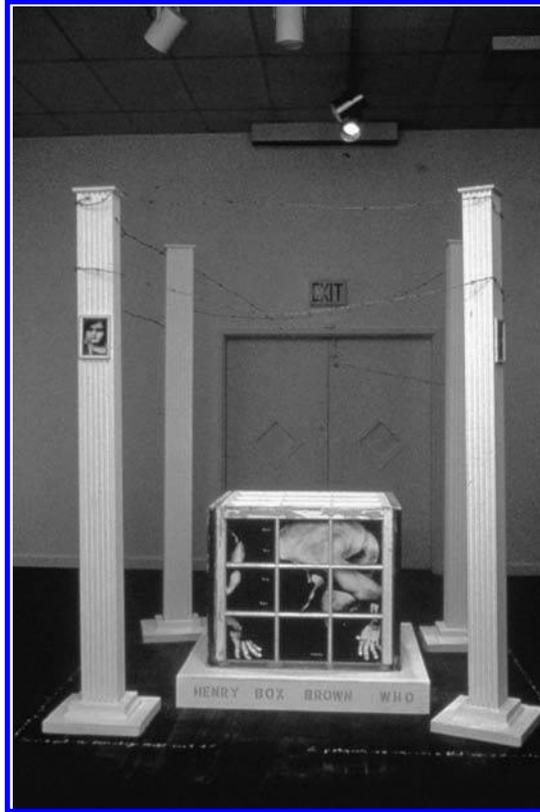


FIGURE 17. Pat Ward Williams, *32 Hours in a Box . . . And Still Counting*, 1987. Cyanotype prints in window frame, photocopies, text, and wood pillars, 243.8 × 243.8 × 243.8 cm. Image courtesy Collection of Peter Norton.

rather than glass, the sides of the structure function according to the conceit of transparency just as its title underlines the perpetuity of collective black incarceration and the text inscribed along its base—“HENRY BOX BROWN WHO ESCAPED SLAVERY ENCLOSED IN A BOX 3 FEET WIDE AND 2 LONG”—demands a cyclical movement around the sculpture.⁷⁸

What enables *32 Hours*’ 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 images of civilized achievement depicted in the photographs on the pillar, if he were to escape his cell, the man depicted in Williams’s work would surely not receive the same warm

reception that greeted Mr. “Box” Brown: neither hearty applause from white liberal supporters, nor a book contract, but the intractable reality of racialized aggression summed up so succinctly by the work’s external ring of text and its loops of barbed wire.

Williams’s and Ligon’s projects are equally invested in the former slave’s narrative and pay close attention to the dimensions of his incongruous carriage. Visually, the similarities seem to end there. Ligon shows no desire to offer us a freshly minted photograph of the 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 re-imagined: representation becomes an aid to memory and history a refracting lens through which to judge the course of current events, which continue to reveal the inextricable link between barbarism and civilization.⁷⁹ Ligon, on the other hand, embarks on a path of re-presentation that interrogates the regimes of viewership that subtend the afterlife of slavery.⁸⁰ The boxes in *To Disembark* 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 word’s inevitable fading from particular declaration to predictable if inscrutable blackness.

Viewed from this retrospect, Brown’s own manic proliferation of auto-expressive 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.⁸¹ 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* (fig. 18), as if to intimate the black subject’s constitutive exchangeability as object of slavery and subject of contemporary art.⁸² Then as now, African American cultural practitioners have played numerous modes of representation off each other to secure space for the articulation of an autonomous self within verbal and visual regimes intent on their singular scripting.⁸³

The various modes of figuration in *To Disembark* reflect these aspects of slavery that continue to resonate for understandings of the self. In particular, nineteenth-century legal discourse on the runaway provided a model for intellectual property law’s commodification of image, word, and voice, opening onto the analogical similarities between the fugitive subject and the fungible aspects of subjectivity, which map capitalist culture’s ever-increasing

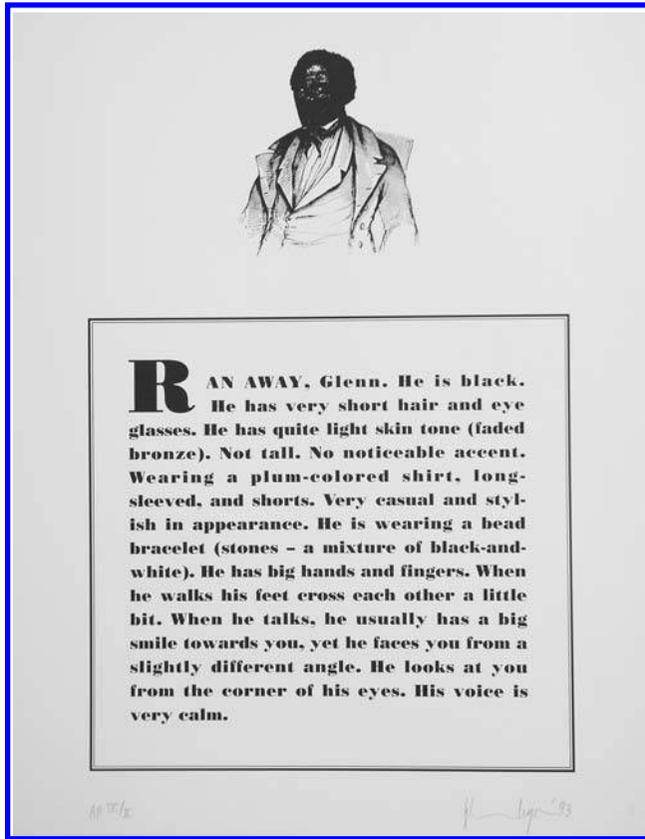


FIGURE 18. Glenn Ligon, *Runaways*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs, 40.6 × 30.5 cm, edition of forty-five. Image courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

subjugation of personhood to possession.⁸⁴ 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. By pressing the verbal against the visual, the past against the present, the individual against the group, the black against the queer, *To Disembark* gestures to an exterior in order to carve out a space for being otherwise that takes its measure from the historical positioning of subjects cast as fugitives in life and in representation.⁸⁵

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, as if to echo the complexity of the present and

our positions within it, which emerges as a set of discourses that overlap and oppose one another. *To Disembark*, in other words, emblemizes both our relation to the archive as well as a tendency within Ligon's practice. Taken from this angle, the installation's 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 the work effectively demands of us. Moving through it 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" 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 its utterances, turning them over in our hands, poaching them to arrive at our own meaning.⁸⁶ As viewers navigate the work, they become aware not only of their bodies in space but also of the circumstances that inducted them into the museum. Neither fully mooring us before the wall, nor entirely subjecting us to the sculptural demand, *To Disembark* relies upon a contingent relation to the visual that is not dependent on a point of mastery but that understands the placelessness from which the gaze itself originates.⁸⁷ The work proposes 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. And 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 perhaps a damning one.

Are African American artists today unable to come to voice within mainstream artistic discourse despite their increasingly splashy landings on the shores of culture? Have black queer subjects just gotten off the boat, at times able to articulate themselves openly but still effectively denied a place within African American culture at large? Do these arrivals, such as they may be, signal not so much advancement as the beginning of a new, even more insidious stage in the exploitation of black difference and perversity? Who, finally, 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 be to hamstring the discursive force of the work, if not to miss the point of its multiple voices altogether.

To get closer to the tenor and texture of those voices, it is helpful to turn 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.⁸⁸ Arguably, Ligon took up this volume 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 seems to have ended and another to have begun. In this sense, Brooks's text sets 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.

For in *To Disembark*, 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 emancipate him or entirely foreclose his individual possibilities. It is this sense of a missed encounter with the present that haunts the installation. 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 Saidiya Hartman has called 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."⁸⁹

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, always alert 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 feels impossible, especially given the economies that would constitute us and deliver the world as always already packaged, delimited, boxed. 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.

Notes

This article derives from my 2006 dissertation, completed at UC Berkeley under the inimitable direction of Anne M. Wagner, and is an excerpt from my book on the political and aesthetic significance of slavery for African American artists

in the early 1990s (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press). In preparing this essay for publication, I have benefited from the comments and criticism of numerous scholars, but in particular, my thinking has been deepened by the comments of T. J. Clark and Saidiya Hartman—both members of my dissertation committee—as well as by the thoroughgoing engagements of Stephen Best, Nicholas Sammond, Krista Thompson, and the anonymous readers at the University of Chicago Press.

1. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Extract from an oration at Rochester, 5 July 1852, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1969), 442.
2. *Ibid.*, 441; Douglass’s emphasis.
3. On mourning and modernist painting, see Yve-Alain Bois’s “Painting: The Task of Mourning,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 229–44.
4. Roberta Smith, “Lack of Location Is My Location,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1991, H427.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Black Film, British Cinema, ICA Document 7*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London, 1988), 28.
7. Charles Gaines, “The Theater of Refusal,” in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, ed. Catherine Lord (Irvine, 1993), 13–21. For more on this problem in relation to African American artistic practice of the late 1980s and early ’90s, see my “‘Bye, Bye Black Girl’: Lorna Simpson’s Figurative Retreat,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 62–77.
8. The artist as quoted in Huey Copeland, “Post/Black/Atlantic: A Conversation with Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon,” in *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*, ed. Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter (Liverpool, 2010), 79.
9. Smith, “Lack of Location,” 36.
10. All of the Ligon works cited but not pictured in these pages are illustrated in *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes* (Toronto, 2005).
11. These lines redact a key thread of my argument in “Untitled (Jackpot!),” in *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, 119–32.
12. Richard Meyer, “Light It Up, or How Glenn Ligon Got Over,” *Artforum*, May 2006, 241.
13. Richard Meyer, “Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language,” in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming* (Philadelphia, 1997), 34.
14. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, 2007), 204; and “Glenn Ligon: Committed to Difficulty,” in *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, 60.
15. See Meyer, “Light It Up,” 245; and English, “Committed to Difficulty,” 58.
16. Glenn Ligon, “Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness,” *Artforum*, September 2004, 249; Ligon’s emphasis.
17. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), 454.
18. On this score, see Toni Morrison’s remarks in Paul Gilroy’s “Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison,” in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London, 1993), 178; as well as William Beverly’s *On the Lam: Narratives of Flight in J. Edgar Hoover’s America* (Jackson, MS, 2003), which has shaped my sense of the ways slavery informs subsequent notions of fugitivity in an American context.
19. Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC, 1995), 42.

20. Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester, UK, 2000), 19–23.
21. The reading of *To Disembark* that follows rhymes with, yet ultimately departs from, the analysis of Kimberly Rae Connor, who emphasizes the work's belonging within African folk, slave narrative, black uplift, and sacred traditions. See her "Disembarking the Past: Glenn Ligon," in *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (Chicago, 2000), 157–93. For a more recent engagement with the installation, see Peter Erickson, "Black Like Me: Reconfiguring Blackface in the Art of Glenn Ligon and Fred Wilson," *Nka* 25 (Winter 2009): 30–47.
22. As quoted in Quincy Troupe, "Last Testament: An Interview with James Baldwin," in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson, MS, 1989), 285.
23. Marcus Wood, "'All Right!': *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown* as a Test Case for the Racial Prescription of Rhetoric and Semiotics," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 107, no. 1 (1997): 80–83.
24. The other sonic materials included in *To Disembark* were a heartbeat, the artist's reading of Brown's narrative, and performances of the following songs: "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" (Paul Robeson), "Traveling Light" (Billie Holiday), "Four Women" (Nina Simone), "Can You Party" (Royal House), "Redemption Song" (Bob Marley). Glenn Ligon, correspondence with the author, 27 September 2010.
25. Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark* (Washington, DC, 1993).
26. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 255.
27. See James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 213–30.
28. Ligon quoted in Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon*.
29. Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 35–42.
30. Key texts in this vein are Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in Ferguson, *Out There*, 39–50; Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Face and Voice of Blackness," in *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* (San Francisco, 1990), xxix–xliv; and, most saliently, Thelma Golden, *Glenn Ligon: Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap* (New York, 1992), which takes up and refigures Gates's and Wallace's terms in introducing Ligon's work. The four paragraphs that follow revisit and expand upon arguments first staged in my "Untitled (Jackpot!)," 124–25.
31. Ligon as quoted in the unsigned interview "Matrix" in the *Wadsworth Atheneum* newsletter, August 1992, 6.
32. Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967), 112.
33. For an overview of this terrain in artistic and cultural terms, see *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York, 1994).
34. I examine Simpson and Danny Tisdale's responses to the Rodney King beating and subsequent riot in "Outtakes," *Art Journal* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 28–29.
35. My thinking in these lines is inspired by Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997).

36. In fact, Ligon inscribed the Baldwin quotation that serves as the epigraph to this section directly into the corner of a gallery for his 1992 installation at the Wadsworth Atheneum. See Andrea Miller-Keller, *Glenn Ligon/Matrix 120* (Hartford, 1992), as well as my "Untitled (Jackpot!)," 126–27.
37. Frantz Fanon, "By Way of Conclusion," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.
38. My reading here draws upon Kara Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 91–117.
39. For related thoughts on Ligon's exploration of the fraught relation between individual and community, which I here extend, see Thelma Golden, "Every-night," in *Unbecoming*, 44.
40. Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (New York, 1979), 7–25.
41. See, for example, the commentary that introduces the essay in Walker, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, 151.
42. Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon*.
43. Henry Louis Gates Jr., productively charts this history in "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition," in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York, 1987), 3–58. For a crucial analysis of the formulaic tropes that enable the slave narrative as genre, see James Olney's "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford, 1985), 154–57.
44. I think, say, of the 1851 volume *Sketches of the Life and Labors of James Quinn, Who Was Nearly Half a Century a Minister of the Gospel in the Methodist Episcopal Church*.
45. These episodes are recounted in Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 110–13 and 192–93, respectively.
46. Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism': Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives," *African American Review* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 223–37.
47. Kobena Mercer charts these developments in "Dark and Lovely: Black Gay Image-Making," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York, 1994), 221–32.
48. Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon*.
49. Meyer, "Borrowed Voices," 15.
50. Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon*.
51. The advertisement is reproduced in John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, 1999), 283.
52. *Ibid.*, 285.
53. *Ibid.*, 217.
54. *Ibid.*, 210–13.
55. *Ibid.*, 224.
56. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure," 220.
57. Meyer, "Borrowed Voices," 17.
58. Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon*.
59. On the historical transformation of site-specific practices, see Miwon Kwon's crucial essay, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 85–110.

60. Michel de Certeau, "Making Do': Uses and Tactics," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), 37.
61. Here I refer specifically to Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1982), 1–14.
62. Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (New York, 2002), 62.
63. Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and look at this?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *Black Male*, 92.
64. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 106–7.
65. Daphne A. Brooks stunningly charts Brown's performances in "The Escape Artist: Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery," in her *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC, 2006), 66–130.
66. As quoted and described in Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond, VA, 2003), 94, the most fulsome account to date of Brown's life and work.
67. On this score, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Passing Beyond the Middle Passage: Henry 'Box' Brown's Translations of Slavery," *Massachusetts Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 23–44.
68. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): 9. For two opposing interpretations of how Brown's box should be understood—as tomb, womb, coffin, or merely a parcel—see Wood, "'All Right!'" 91, and Samira Kawash, "Freedom and Fugitivity: The Subject of Slave Narrative," in *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford, 1997), 68–72.
69. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1990), 1:176–77.
70. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, 2003), 11.
71. Jean Baudrillard, "Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (New York, 1981), 92.
72. For an excellent analysis of the cube and its vicissitudes, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
73. Kimberly Paice, "Catalogue," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (New York, 1994), 256.
74. *Ibid.*, 104.
75. Traces of Brown's narrative can be located in a range of African American cultural production, from James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) to Melvin Van Peebles's 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. For accountings of Brown's more recent reincarnations—including a film by Charles Burnett and a performance by historian Anthony Cohen—see Richard Newman, in his introduction to the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, xxix–xxxi; and Suzette Spencer, "Henry Brown, an International Fugitive: Slavery, Resistance, and Imperialism," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 115.
76. The "Box" Brown display was designed and curated by museum cofounder, Dr. Elmer P. Martin. Joanne Martin, e-mail to the author, 27 July 2010. For an extended meditation on the institution's tactics of display, see Marcus Wood,

- “Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums: The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum as a Test Case,” *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 2 (June 2008): 151–71.
77. Glenn Ligon, conversation with the author, 21 December 2006.
 78. Kellie Jones, “Pat Ward Williams: Photography and Social/Personal History,” in *Pat Ward Williams: Probable Cause* (Philadelphia, 1992), 7.
 79. In these lines, I refer, of course, to another of Benjamin’s well-known dicta: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another”; Benjamin, “Theses,” 256.
 80. Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago, 2004).
 81. On the differences between Brown’s first narrative, which was overdetermined by the editorial influence of abolitionist crusader Charles Stearns, and the second, more autonomously authored edition, published in 1851, see Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 59–65, 128–32.
 82. As Newman notes, this image also appeared on the cover of an 1854 book written by the runaway Anthony Burns. See “Illustrations,” in *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, xxxix.
 83. Michael A. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington, 2008), 2–13.
 84. Best, *Fugitive’s Properties*, 16.
 85. My reading of Ligon here resonates with Kawash’s interpretation of Brown. See her “Fugitivity and Freedom,” 71.
 86. My immediate reference here is to de Certeau’s “Reading as Poaching,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 165–76, though his “Walking in the City” in the same volume is again germane. In that essay, de Certeau suggests that the gridlines of New York provide a kind of text, a *langue* that only comes to mean through the movement of the pedestrian whose walking is a kind of speech act or *parole* (97–98); I would argue that this same logic applies to Ligon’s installation.
 87. Jacques Lacan, “The Line and Light,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, book 11, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1981), 91–104.
 88. Gwendolyn Brooks, *To Disembark* (Chicago, 1981).
 89. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), 234.