

# Glenn Ligon and Gertrude Stein: Beyond Words

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## Language and a New Identity

*"I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."*<sup>1</sup>

I begin with this quote from Zora Neale Hurston in order to provide an evocative point of entry into Glenn Ligon's 2005 *Untitled (negro sunshine)* (right), not only because of Ligon's re-appropriation of this phrase in other works, but also because of its deeply poignant characterization of language. The white background of which Hurston speaks could refer to both the modern exhibition space and the differentiating function of language that produces the concept of identity, and, by extension, identity-based bigotry. There is inescapable violence in both contexts; Hurston is *thrown*, identified, and forced to exist within confines that remind her constantly of her difference in a masculinist, racist society. These marginalizing factors label her as an outsider; they give her a name, and in doing so breathe her Otherness into being. The museum setting is likewise a site of continual disavowal, deliberate omissions, and the consecration of monolithic discourses within the arts. Difference begets language; it is the juxtaposition of syntactical pieces that allows the subject to both produce his identity as a speaking entity and his separateness from others.<sup>2</sup> In his seminal *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, Frantz Fanon recounts a story that makes clear the damnation begotten by words; when a young girl on the street names him a "Negro", he becomes aware of the structuring power of language in forming one's self-concept and its relationship to the external world.<sup>3</sup> Fanon realizes his blackness when he is given a racial moniker that marks him as different, as an object of fear. Whether in front of the sterilized background of the museum or the whitewashed canvas of American society, Ligon's buzzing, illuminated words recall a history that informs their aesthetic redeployment with the magnification and excision of words, the foundational elements of bigotry, separation, and subordination. *Untitled (negro sunshine)* performs the centrality of language in black American history in a decidedly modern medium that recalls the line between articulation and silence that intersectional minorities must straddle as a result of the marginalizing power of language.

Ligon literally plugs in Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, a 1909 novella that chronicles the experiences of three women, one of whom is a mixed-race woman named Melanctha.<sup>4</sup> Stein constantly employs variations of the phrase "warm, broad glow of Negro sunshine" in multiple contexts; in its most disturbing and visible variation, it refers to the racist stereotype of the "happy darkie" whose stupidity and laziness preclude him from critical thought or an awareness of his impoverished condition of enslavement.<sup>5</sup> This oft-used trope has a long tradition in imperialist and racist imagery; in fact, it was quite fashionable to send postcards bearing the image of grinning black children consuming watermelon that served to emphasize their seemingly grafted-on grin.<sup>6</sup> One especially pernicious trope

was that of Jim Crow, whose buffoonish antics entertained white audiences with songs such as "Old Mr. Coon".<sup>7</sup> In bringing the legacy of American imperialism and racism to the forefront as an illuminated object, Ligon renders Stein's egregious bigotry inescapable; it is as ubiquitous today, though perhaps in a subtler manner, as shop signs and billboards.

What has been entirely neglected, however, is the specific relationship of *Untitled (negro sunshine)* to Stein's narrative and prose, as well as the central importance of this translation in forming new configurations of race, sexuality, and gender. The literature on this piece falls short in its privileging of a simplistic focus on irony rather than a foundational linguistic reformulation that undoes language as an instrument of stratification. Given Ligon's career-long relationship with carefully-chosen prose, it is not only the historical moment to which *Untitled (negro sunshine)* refers, but rather the specificity of a text that contains multiple and complex meanings, even in one short phrase. At the core of *Three Lives* there is a refutation of a monolithic interpretation of bigoted epithets, despite the consistency of Stein's implicit and explicit racism. She deploys "the warm broad glow of Negro sunshine" in scenes of bigotry, love, and non-normative sexuality, all of which add up to an inscrutably multifaceted character in the protagonist, Melanctha. Ligon is not blinded by the daunting presence of racism. Instead, he takes it on full force, with all its contradictions, inconsistencies and ambivalence.

The space of which Ligon speaks has no name; it is the spectral site of the momentary meeting of countless discourses of power and self-formation, and to look for it is to come ever closer to an asymptotic approximation. It follows that the illustration and distillation of this vastly engrossing story in neon points to the slippages that are constantly produced in language, as well as the capacity of the art object to exploit these uncertainties, sexual, racial and otherwise, in a productive and critical manner. In order to understand this complicated relationship, I begin with the visual properties of *Untitled (negro sunshine)* followed by a close reading of Stein's short story. There has never been a sustained inquiry into the specific relationship between Ligon and Stein beyond a cursory acknowledgement of the act of derivation, and taking this next step is crucial to an expanded palette of interpretational possibilities. To interrogate language itself as a tool of structural oppression engenders the possibility of new forms of identity formation that unravel the heretofore-unquestioned connections among history, language, disenfranchisement, and intersectional lives.



**Glenn Ligon**  
**Untitled (negro sunshine), 2005**  
**Medium/Support: Neon**  
**Dimensions: 13 x 108 x 6.4 cm (5 1/8 x 42 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.)**  
**Harvard Art Museums, The Jorie Marshall Waterman '96 and Gwendolyn Dunaway Waterman '92 Fund, 2007.98**  
**Copyright: Glenn Ligon**  
**Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles**

Humanities

## History Meets Neon

The words “negro sunshine” are suspended on a wall in old type-writer script, and there is no attempt to hide the process that affixes them to the surface of the gallery wall. The artist spells these words using neon tubing, each letter connecting to the other, indeed born out of the other. The bright neon mimics natural light in color, but its extreme voltage gives it a distinctly artificial feel that ultimately belies the subject matter. It is at once like sunshine and beyond sunshine in its glowing presence. Large enough to be seen from the street, it is meant to bring passers-by into the gallery like an advertisement. As with all light installations, it can be both illuminated and extinguished. A building or business that might display such a sign could easily go under, or a wayward rock might permanently extinguish its glow. It is not unreasonable to taste the bitterness of gentrification and ghettoization in the irony of the “sunshine” that is available to African-Americans in a racist society, a glow that is nothing more than the flicker of cheap, commercial material.<sup>8</sup> Such concerns certainly connect to Ligon’s prolific career, especially his essay *Housing in New York: A Brief History*, in which he discusses his own experience of racial tensions and gentrification throughout a forty-year story of displacement.<sup>9</sup> *Untitled (negro sunshine)* is directly opposed to the deeply felt reminiscence for disappearing Americana connoted by neon. One artist recalls:

It was driving at night that I loved best. It was then that the darkness would come alive with brightly colored images of cowboys twirling lassoes atop rearing palominos, sinuous Indians shooting bows and arrows, or huge trucks in the sky with their wheels of light spinning. These were the neon signs attempting to lure motorists to stop at a particular motel or truck stop diner. It was always the neon signs that I remembered.<sup>10</sup>

Gone is this melancholic urge for childhood dreams and in its place is a cheapened shell informed by intolerance.

In keeping with Ligon’s truth to materiality, the power cords hang haphazardly from the lights, thereby connecting the floating words forcibly to the ground and the electrical source. There is nothing mediating the image and its source, no authorial mark with which to identify human presence. This translates into an undeniable focus on the material supports of *Untitled (negro sunshine)*; indeed a conscious incorporation thereof is central to the reception of the piece as it points to the weighty presence of language. Ligon’s project is not one of the quasi-spiritual urge toward aesthetic purity that can be seen in the neon works of artists from Lucio Fontana to Dan Flavin, but rather of insecurity in the re-appropriation of an unknowable past through concomitant legibility and illegibility, corporeality and mechanization. Ligon exploits this indeterminacy in order to unearth a tenuous connection between the viewer and the art object. *Untitled (negro sunshine)* at once enters into the viewer’s space and refuses sure identification, just as marginalized subjectivities necessarily exist within and outside of dominant discourses. The translucent facture of the tubing is reminiscent of the clear, unexamined narratives that seem to offer a fogless view of history.<sup>11</sup> *Untitled (negro sunshine)* puts neon center-stage, and its material fundamentals are inextricable from the words it projects into reality and the history with which it communicates. Ligon resuscitates *Three Lives* both visually and through semiotic

redemption and selection; the tight curls of *Untitled (negro sunshine)* visually reflect Stein’s repetitive, simple, encircling prose, even as the individual semantic pregnancy of each individual artwork makes their combination unstable. Stein is present in the form of neon, and this choice allows for productive inquiry into questions of truth and indeterminacy.

## Revisiting Stein

*Melanctha* tells the story of a tumultuous relationship between Melanctha Herbert and Dr. Jefferson Campbell that ends in the dissolution of their romantic journey, leading ultimately to Melanctha’s suicidal ideation and lonely death from tuberculosis. *Melanctha*’s eponymous central character is defined early on through her separate, rhetorically privileged position as an African-American with white lineage. Perhaps for this reason Stein never describes her as possessing the Negro sunshine that repeats almost obsessively in people, environments, and emotions. The theme of miscibility or immiscibility, of navigating multiple selves, runs throughout the short story as Melanctha attempts to reach happiness and sexual enlightenment by constant “wandering” in search of “understanding” in the arms of both men and women. These ephemeral relationships leave her consistently “complex with desire,” a desire that is necessarily bound up in the language Stein employs.<sup>12</sup> Even after her eventual sexual awakening with her good friend Jane, Melanctha remains restless as she finds Jeff, a lover with whom she could potentially settle down. Still, Jeff never trusts her, as he is constantly preoccupied with her “wandering” past, or, more specifically, her search for a sexual identity within the confines of racial stereotypes. No longer is this simply a story about race. Rather, it presents a complex mingling of race and sexuality that leads to an opaque and intersectional image that Ligon represents with equally fraught imagery eighty years later.

The oft-quoted beginning of *Melanctha* reads, “Rose laughed when she was happy but she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of Negro sunshine,” thereby framing the story in its first page with a recurring metaphor that is unthinkable disgusting to modern eyes, though some have claimed that Stein was very attuned to racial inequities.<sup>13</sup> Stein uses the phrase in several contexts and refers to multiple characters, though it is never applied to Melanctha. For instance, when describing Melanctha’s well-educated, gentlemanly lover Jeff Campbell, Stein states, “He sang when he was happy, and he laughed, and his was the free abandoned laughter that gives the warm broad glow of Negro sunshine.”<sup>14</sup> Stein therefore applies Negro sunshine to characters that are on both ends of a spectrum of acceptable blackness as defined by prejudicial norms, from the “sullen, stupid, childlike” Rose to Jeff Campbell, the “serious, earnest, good young joyous doctor.”<sup>15</sup> Melanctha, on the other hand, displays “meaningful silences” that render her inscrutable even as Jeff attempts in a fifty-page discussion to “[force] her into language,” or, more specifically, a discernable, delineated identity akin to Frantz Fanon’s realization of self after being *verbally identified* as a Negro.<sup>16</sup> She is never made to exteriorize her identity through Stein’s offensive terminology and instead exists in a state of visual and semantic inscrutability, even as her lover constantly verbalizes his every emotion, hoping desperately that Melanctha would do the same. Melanctha thereby comes to represent the opaque nature of language, even racist language that

seems to elicit only one meaning.

The theme of light and sunshine extends to include the ephemeral nature of love that is debated in Melanctha's and Jeff's lengthy discussions about their rocky relationship, always in front of the warm glow of the fireplace. Jeff Campbell describes his ideal of love as "more tender than sunshine, and a kindness that makes one feel like summer, and then a way to know, that makes everything all over...and it does certainly seem to be real for the little while it's lasting..."<sup>17</sup> Sunshine continues to preside over the evolution of their relationship, but it is always haunted by Melanctha's bisexuality and promiscuity. For a time, their love, sanctified once again by a cleansing light, is certain: "It was summer now, and they had warm sunshine to wander...All day they had lost themselves in warm wandering. Now they were lying there and resting, with a green, bright, light-flecked world around them."<sup>18</sup> Their relationship constantly reworks itself, mostly as Jeff questions Melanctha's past, but sunshine functions to illuminate those instances of connection, of community, of love. Conversely, in Ligon's work, the corporeal function of Negro sunshine is precarious, for neon extends into the space of the viewer even as it is the epitome of emptiness; its glow is cold, industrial, and anonymous.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that the nature of the warm, broad glow takes a tragic turn as Jeff leaves Melanctha and she once again roams the rail yards in search of corporeal satisfaction. The end of her relationship seems to be inevitable from the beginning as a result of Jeff's constant mistrust of Melanctha and all other African-Americans who fall into the latter category of his formulation of "two kinds of ways of loving, one way that is good to be in families and the other a kind of way, like animals are all the time just with each other, and how I don't ever like that last kind of way for any of the colored people."<sup>19</sup> It seems that Jeff's binary mirrors Stein's; those who exhibit the traits of Negro sunshine, namely Jeff and Rose, triumph in the end, whereas Melanctha, in her refusal of categorization and exteriorization, falls prey to her own transient identity, her failure to submit to identification. In this way, there is an urge to maintain a certain image of blackness through language that delineates those who exhibit sexual propriety and those who do not, as well as those whose stereotyped identities are worn like skin and those whose complicated natures preclude any application of Stein's Negro sunshine. As the story draws to a close, Stein describes the melancholic waning days of Melanctha's happiness before her ultimate self-destruction after the loss of her best friend, Rose, and her relationship with a gambling, violent man: "It was summer now and the colored people came out into the sunshine, full blown with the flowers...These were pleasant days then, in the hot southern Negro sunshine, with many simple jokes and always wide abandonment of laughter."<sup>20</sup> The story concludes with the evacuation of all warmth and sunshine as Melanctha finds herself without a single companion in the world, and she dies alone having never found a place in a world marked by categories – those with the glow and those without, those who have "understanding" and those who do not. The sunshine is gone, and in its place is a bitter, all-encompassing "blue," the absence of Stein's ceaselessly repeated imagery of warmth, light, and careless laughter.<sup>21</sup>

## Lightness and Legibility

In beginning to understand the connection at hand between

a text and a sculpture with many decades in between them, the transcending link is certainly language in its insecurity and relationship to identity formation. It is clear that *Untitled (negro sunshine)* is "concerned with figuring out how to do something that the text does, but to do something else at the same time...What does that translation...add that is different from the author's intent...without distorting everything about the original?"<sup>22</sup> At the core of *Untitled (negro sunshine)* are two examples of disjuncture in translation: history and semiotics. *Untitled (negro sunshine)* is itself "complex with desire" like the character of Melanctha. There is always the distance, the refusal of desire, imposed by history, a melancholic effect that reminds the artist and the viewer that the past cannot be fully reconstituted. As Joan Scott points out, "Retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions and repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, and the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined...Desire is ultimately unsatisfiable since it seeks to restore an imagined wholeness and coherence."<sup>23</sup>

With respect to language, another displacement occurs when Ligon removes a portion of a phrase and amplifies it. Rather than reproduce Stein's "warm broad glow of Negro sunshine," he chooses one segment, thereby creating a break in the linguistic chain and an unspoken desire once again for an imaginary wholeness. All the while there is a yearning to understand from whence these words come, their history, their context, and their power. What results is an oscillating process of identification; at once, viewer and subject identify with and desire the lineage that Ligon creates and are repulsed by its impossibility. This ambivalence is central to Stein's project as well. The indeterminacy of language is most apparent in her various applications, as well as refused applications, of Stein's organizational phrase of her African-American life – Negro sunshine. Some have it and some do not, and some simultaneously possess it and lose it. Indeed, inasmuch as this delineating term takes on such a variety of contingent meanings, "the narrator demonstrates how factors such as gender, sexuality, and social status destabilize interpretations of the meaning of race and make membership within a stable community essential for all but the most extreme or powerful characters," namely Melanctha and Jeff, whose disparate views of black identity coincide with Stein's multifarious and unpredictable applications of stereotype.<sup>24</sup>

Homi Bhabha's formulation of the stereotype is fruitful here:

In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of 'truth', not to subject its representations to a normalising judgment. Only then does it become possible to understand the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse - that 'otherness', which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity.<sup>25</sup>

It follows that the very deployment of stereotype, and, in this case, its visual re-articulation, exposes the cracks in colonial and racist discourses at the structural level. The interplay between and juxtaposition of visual and textual, especially in such disparate time periods, epitomizes the fragility of racial and sexual discourses as monolithic, unchanging formulations of difference. In historicizing identity-based discourses, it is essential to see each author and each work in dialog with those that precede them in order to fully grasp

the lived experiences and social conditions that produce modern inequities. *Untitled (negro sunshine)* provides a template to complete exactly that task. Ligon makes his impossible continuity undeniably visible in his medium; its clear materiality and transparent facture are themselves reminders of a construction of history that is at once artificial and visually, corporeally present. Within this context of deferred desire, “two words with multiple associations are allowed to reverberate ceaselessly. [Ligon gives] the words maximum room for detonation,” a fact that is inextricably tied to neon’s “lightness and legibility... No matter how clearly his words read, their meaning remains productively unfixed in a continually oscillating daisy chain of metaphor.”<sup>26</sup> In transforming Stein’s prose into sculpture, *Untitled (negro sunshine)* paradoxically concretizes the eliding and mutable nature of language that produces identities. In the same way that Melanctha cannot be characterized by her inscrutability to the demarcating function of linguistic expression, the visuality of Ligon’s piece takes the concept of language and puts it in material form even as that materiality falls apart. Neon, in its glowing, transparent, and ephemeral presence engenders the constantly shifting nature of language as it applies to the formation of race and sexuality embodied by Melanctha.<sup>27</sup>

At its core, therefore, *Untitled (negro sunshine)* accomplishes a productive transferral of meaning and uncertainty into the realm of the visual by exposing the contradictions, similarities, and slippages inherent within the monolith of linguistics. In Ligon’s words, “Text demands to be read, and perhaps the withdrawal of the text, the frustration of the ability to decipher it, reflects a certain pessimism on my part about the ability and the desire to communicate.”<sup>28</sup> What Ligon accomplishes is the establishment of a queer space, in the general sense of the term as described by the late Eve Sedgwick:

Recent work around ‘queer’ expands the term along dimensions that cannot be reduced to gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, and postcolonial nationality crisscross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses... [that] do a new kind of justice to intersecting intricacies of language, skin color, migration, state and culture.<sup>29</sup>

*Untitled (negro sunshine)* exists in the liminal space between historical memory and the impossibility of recollection, race and sexual identity, speech and silence, in an intersectional world. Ligon’s destabilization of these categories and commentary on the momentary intersections thereof undoes language and its accompanying structures. A mere ironic re-appropriation of racist imagery would not have the critical ramifications of Ligon’s project. In looking forward to new ways of discussing art and identity, scholars must look at objects like *Untitled (negro sunshine)* not as simplistic, singular works, but rather as entrances to countless interpretational modes that explode extant discourses.

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## Notes

- 1 Walker, Alice, ed. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...and then again when I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979. 154.
- 2 See Chapter 1 of De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Baskin, Wade, edited by Bally, Charles et al. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. Additionally, for an example of the poststructuralist critique of de Saussure, see Irigaray, Luce. *The Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Porter, Catherine. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- 3 Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008. 82.
- 4 Stein, Gertrude. *Gertrude Stein’s Three Lives*. Linda Wagner-Martin ed. Bedford Cultural Edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- 5 Rothkopf, Scott et al. *Glenn Ligon: America*. New York and New Haven: The Whitney Museum and Yale University Press, 2011. 44.
- 6 Bindman, David and Suzanne Blier. Lecture, “Image of the Black in Western Art.” Harvard University, 5 November 2012.
- 7 Honour, Hugh. “The Art of Observation.” In *Image of the Black in Western Art Volume IV, Part II*, edited by Bindman, David and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 69.
- 8 I owe this point to Dr. Adrienne L. Childs, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University.
- 9 Ligon, Glenn. “Housing in New York: A Brief History.” In *Mixed Use, Manhattan*, edited by Cooke, Lynne and Douglas Crimp, with Kristin Poor. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2010. 273.
- 10 Lakich, Lili. *Neon Lovers Glow in the Dark: A Retrospective*. Los Angeles and Layton, UT: Museum of Neon Art and Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1986. 6.
- 11 It is important to note at this point that Ligon made another version of this piece entitled *Warm Broad Glow*, thereby alluding to the earlier segment of Stein’s famous phrase. *Warm Broad Glow* has black paint applied to the neon foundation, which detracts from the facture of the piece while emphasizing a play of colors. Many of the analyses I draw upon refer to *Warm Broad Glow*, though each variation deserves a separate discussion.
- 12 Stein 89, 91
- 13 Stein 87; Wagner-Martin 263
- 14 Stein 105
- 15 *Ibid.* 87, 105
- 16 Wagner-Martin 14
- 17 Stein 123
- 18 *Ibid.* 133, 134
- 19 *Ibid.* 136
- 20 *Ibid.* 169
- 21 *Ibid.* 187
- 22 Rothkopf, Scott, ed. *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews - Glenn Ligon*. New York and New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art; Yale University, 2011. 154.
- 23 Scott, Joan. *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 125.
- 24 Blackmer, Corinne. “African Masks and the Art of Passing in Gertrude Stein’s ‘Melanctha.’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 2 (1993): 230-263. 247.
- 25 Bhabha, Homi. “The Other Question: Homi K. Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse.” *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18-36. 18.
- 26 Rothkopf “Yourself in the World” 154; Rothkopf “America” 45.
- 27 I owe this important point to Nozomi Naoi, Ph.D. Candidate in History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University.
- 28 Firstenberg, Lauri. “Neo-Archival and Textual Modes of Production: An Interview with Glenn Ligon.” *Art Journal* 60, no. 1 (2001): 42-47. 43.
- 29 Sedgwick, Eve. *The Weather in Proust*. Series Q, edited by Goldberg, Jonathan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 200.