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Black Like Me

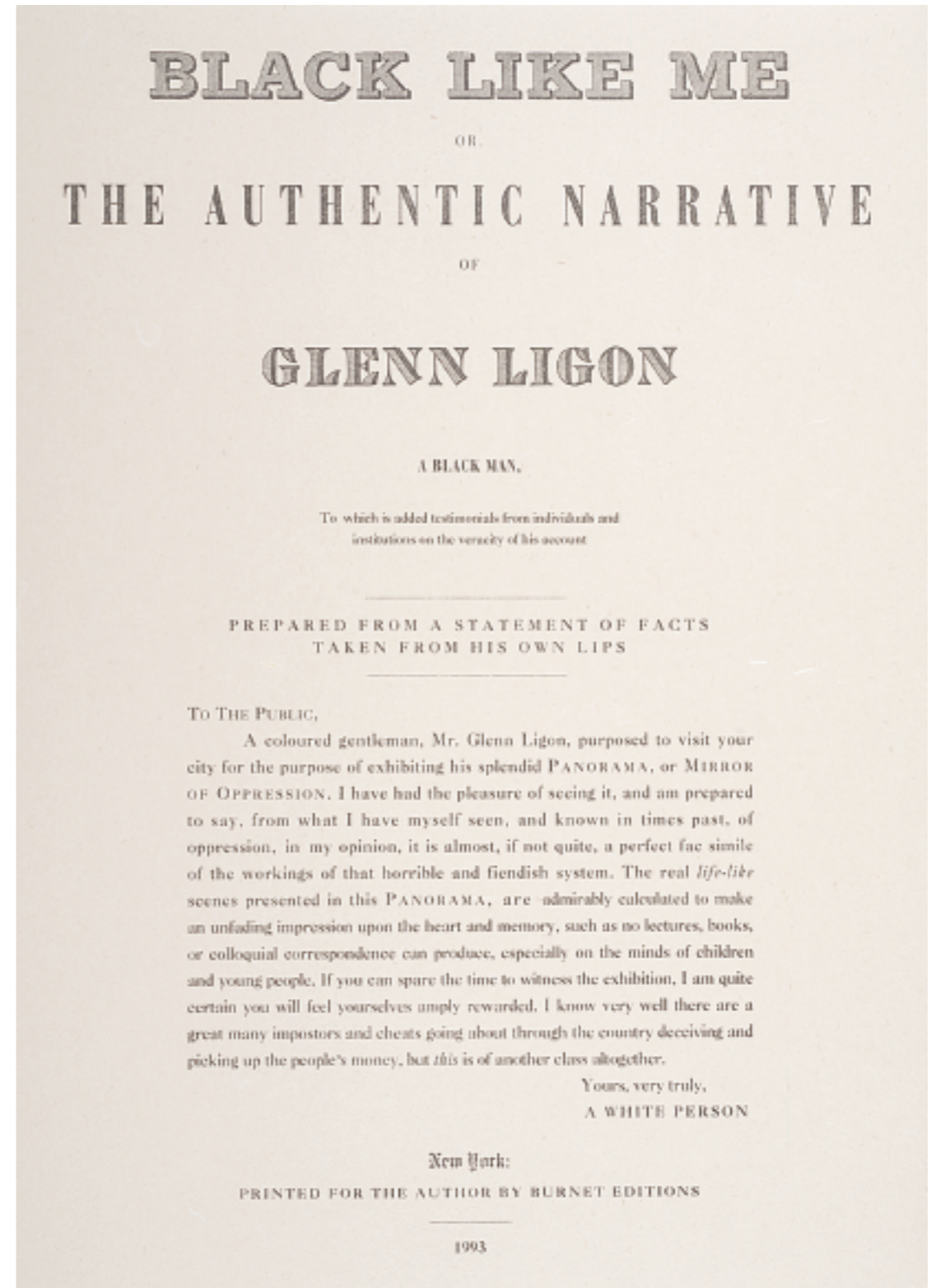
Reconfiguring Blackface
in the Art of
Glenn Ligon
and Fred Wilson

Peter Erickson

In works entitled “Black Like Me,” two contemporary African American artists, Glenn Ligon and Fred Wilson, explicitly address a standard text of the early civil rights movement, *Black Like Me*, by the white author John Howard Griffin. Ligon and Wilson’s responses come three and four decades, respectively, after the original moment. This time gap provides a measure of the ongoing difficulty of recognizing and confronting the unresolved issue of blackface in Griffin’s book.

Ligon and Wilson enact their critical perspectives through the medium of art: how the artists translate textual material into a visual field is a crucial aspect of how they create new vantage points. Their critiques are conducted by means of visualizing language. In this cross-media appropriation, the process of transposition loosens up the text, pries it out of its normal location on the page, and puts it on display. Alternatively, words are entirely supplanted by new nonverbal forms. These exposures give the language a different look so that it loses its obviousness and becomes available for reinterpretation. To change the medium is to challenge the story.

Griffin’s narrative lends itself to visual transformation because his intervention in racial looking



Glenn Ligon, *Black Like Me or, The Authentic Narrative of Glenn Ligon a Black Man*, from the portfolio *Narratives*, 1995. Etching with chine collé on paper, 28 1/8 x 21 1/8 in. (71.44 x 53.66 cm.). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © Glenn Ligon, gift from the artist, courtesy of Regen Projects.

relations is already highly visual. Whether seeing his image in the mirror looking back at him or watching himself being scrutinized in public and monitoring his ability to pass, Griffin is acutely aware of being seen. In incorporating Griffin's verbal material, Ligon and Wilson gain the advantage of being able to play with its visual orientation.

My overall approach is to situate the analysis of Ligon and Wilson's works that focus on the "black like me" motif in the context of the exhibitions in which they emerged—in Ligon's case, *To Disembark* at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1993–94 and, in Wilson's case, *Black Like Me* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005–06. However, my first step is to assess the initial catalyst—the problem of blackface in John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*.

"night coming tenderly"

The front of the original book jacket for John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961) announces: "A white man learns what it is like to live the life of a Negro by becoming one!"¹ The device by which this exclamatory proposition is to be realized is a combination of drugs, ultraviolet rays, and dye that change the author's skin from white to black. The premise is that such means allow unimpeded white access to black life and that blacking up is equivalent to being black. Yet Griffin's black disguise is an updated form of blackface.

Griffin can remain oblivious to any connection between his project and the tradition of blackface minstrelsy because he construes his political aims as progressive and his motives as therefore pure. Yet blackface performance by whites is not restricted to minstrelsy but extends to other venues in which white writers' good intentions toward blacks are confounded by the complex operations of blackface representation. The common denominator is that, for whites, the black role is removable, reversible, and temporary. The presence of whites in blackface reveals less black reality than white identity. As Eric Lott puts it, a more accurate title for Griffin's book would be "White Like Me."² The literal "re-presenting" of blackness filtered through white imagination introduces a gap between those being represented and those doing the representing. Crossing the gap may provide opportunities for sympathetic

identification, but it equally opens up surreptitious avenues for projection, fantasy, anxiety, and misrepresentation—possibilities that remain conspicuously unexamined in Griffin's account.

Griffin's title illustrates the problem. The book begins with a bold act of cross-racial appropriation as he takes his title from the final line of Langston Hughes's poem, "Dream Variation," in *The Weary Blues* (1926).³ This adoption tacitly assumes that both the phrase itself and essentially the same "me" apply equally to Hughes the black poet and Griffin the white writer in blackface. The intertextual connection implies a direct psychological affinity. Yet Hughes's "Proem" to *The Weary Blues* gives reason to question and qualify this affiliation because Hughes proposes a definition of blackness that is not automatically attainable and well beyond Griffin's easy reach. Griffin could not plausibly pronounce these words in his own voice: "I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black, / Black like the depths of Africa."⁴

Each of the two stanzas of "Dream Variation" celebrates blackness by following the cycle from day to night, with emphasis on the association with the invitingly sensuous night. The variation in color words heightens the contrast: in the transition to the second stanza, "white" is diminished to "pale," while "dark" is enhanced to the more striking "black" in the climactic last line. Griffin twice quotes the key phrase "black like me." The first occasion is in the book's epigraph citing the final four lines of Hughes's poem: "Rest at pale evening.... / A tall, slim tree.... / Night coming tenderly / Black like me." The epigraph functions as an exempt space outside the main body of the text: here Griffin provides no explanation and has no inhibition about his immersion in the black poet's erotically saturated lyricism. However, in the second instance, the epigraph is brought inside the book, where Hughes's lines place more pressure on Griffin's story.

The uneasy conflict Griffin feels in the split between his assumed black identity and his white wife produces stress: "When my wife answered, the strangeness of my situation again swept over me. I talked with her and the children as their husband and father, while reflected in the glass windows of the booth I saw another man they would not know.

At this time, when I most wanted to lose the illusion, I was more than ever aware of it."⁵ Yet immediately upon leaving the phone booth, Griffin eagerly resumes the illusion. He embraces the night—"The night was always a comfort"⁶—and slips into Hughes's lines: "Night coming tenderly / Black like me."⁷

Griffin's troubled perception of his wife and family now frames and constrains the poetic desire to which he is nevertheless drawn. But the undercurrent of tension between the two sides of this divided self remains elusive. His vague sense of complication does not impede Griffin's estimation that he has successfully completed his mission as an advocate and political ally of blacks. In the next two sections, I turn to Glenn Ligon and Fred Wilson's inventive disruptions of Griffin's feeling of achievement. The two black artists' intervention in Griffin's prior appropriation of Hughes, I argue, is both racial and sexual: Ligon and Wilson reclaim not only Hughes's blackness but also implicitly his homoeroticism.⁸

"almost, if not quite, a perfect fac simile"

In two works from the same time period but in different media and dimensions, Glenn Ligon reappropriates Langston Hughes's key phrase from Griffin's *Black Like Me*. Ligon's *Black Like Me* (1993) is one of nine etchings with chine collé in the series of *Narratives* displayed as a group in his 1993 exhibition *To Disembark* at the Hirshhorn Museum.⁹ *Black Like Me #2* (1992), a larger-scale, stenciled painting with oil stick and acrylic gesso on canvas, is one of five Ligon works purchased by the Hirshhorn in 1993.¹⁰ I shall argue that the second piece extends the first and in doing so develops further the themes of the exhibition as a whole.

The exhibition title not only establishes the literary tone and texture but also hints at the thematic complexity by presenting us with the puzzle of a volume title without a corresponding poem inside. Gwendolyn Brooks's volume *To Disembark* surfaces, without the author's name, both as the title of one of the *Narratives* and as the title of the overall exhibition. Within the original source, there is no poem by that name. The missing poem evokes the motif of teasing absence that runs through the entire exhibition. Ligon had previously introduced

this theme in *Untitled (I Am A Man)* in 1988 through the haunting absence of Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated in the context of the 1968 sanitation workers' strike in Memphis: when one imagines the voice of King speaking the words on the sign, King's absence and presence are both strongly felt.

Brooks's *To Disembark* contains new poems in only one section out of four, the third section called "To Diaspora," which begins with a relevant poem of the same name.¹¹ This poem suggests that, beyond literal arrival after the Middle Passage, disembarkation has a psychological meaning as interior travel to diasporic sites so deeply lodged within that they must be defined as "rough places to reach": "You did not know the Black continent / that had to be reached / was you." In the latter definition, "to be reached" becomes future "work," as the final line repeats, "to be done." Brooks's direction aptly articulates Ligon's own uncompleted and very much unfolding inward exploration dramatized by the exhibition. Moreover, Brooks's imagery of diaspora sets the stage for the issues of dispersal and fugitiveness that Ligon engages.

To Disembark consists of four sets of works separated into two groups in two different galleries. In each space, the two groups take on meaning from their overlaps and interactions. Across the floor of the first room, Ligon displays nine wooden boxes representing the spectacular scene in *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (1849). Brown escaped slavery by having himself shipped out in a box and then proclaimed his success both by publishing his story and by performing it through a traveling panorama and lecture tours.¹² This creative feat entitles Brown to triple authorship: he is the author of his own escape, the author of his literary account, and the author of the theatrical reenactment. Yet Ligon's exhibition does not reproduce Brown's escape by opening the box to let him out: the multiplication of crates mocks our effort because Brown is in none of them. Instead, Ligon interrupts Brown's story of freedom by forestalling the exhilarating climax. The narrative high point and conclusive closure are never reached, and this stop action reopens and complicates the question of Brown's freedom.

At just this point, Ligon inserts himself into the drama through the matching set of nine *Runaways*

on the surrounding walls, which feature verbal descriptions that identify the artist himself. The framed borders around the texts put Ligon, or the serial Lignons, in a box that threatens to encapsulate and confine him. By casting himself, however fancifully, in the image and format of advertisements for the return of runaway slaves, Ligon contemplates the possibility of a recapture that cancels the move to freedom, and considers how counter-moves of entrapment might take less literal forms. Together, the crates and the *Runaways* complete the oscillating circuit of escape and capture; Ligon enters this circularity by filtering it through the ironic medium of his own fragmentary self-presentation. In a further twist, the juxtaposition also holds out the prospect of a symbolic parallel between Brown and Ligon, whereby Ligon's evasive tactics might allow him to escape through permanent flight. Hence the questions are shifted onto Ligon as an analog for Brown. The terms of Ligon's dilemma of self-representation—the ways in which he absents himself in order to elude capture, the ways in which his presence is manifested to assert freedom—are transferred to the exhibition's second room.

In the next gallery, the pursuit of literary form as a visual medium is even more striking. The space is empty except for the art on the walls, where we see the series of ten *Narratives* and four stenciled paintings. The former emphasizes the literary connection both in the title *Narratives* (which echoes Box Brown's work) and in the title-page format; the latter is completely filled with quotations. The two components continue to express and elaborate the metaphor of the box. The *Narratives* evoke the box structure in the solid black exterior frames, as well as in some cases the interior boxed insets; in addition, the title page and the book as a container of unseen contents suggest a relation of outside and inside that mimics the shape of a box. The quoted passages from Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight" make explicit the problem of frames: "Where is . . . / . . . the window I can look from that frames my life?"¹³ By contrast, the wall paintings appear frameless. For these works, the metaphor of the box expands to the white cube of the gallery, and the door-sized shape of the painting raises the idea of an exit, as though the quoted matter, if fluid enough and properly manipulated, could provide a

way out.¹⁴ One might be able to open the door and walk through.

The piece entitled *Black Like Me* provides an illuminating example of how Ligon avoids entrapment in the *Narratives* series.¹⁵ John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* functions as a box from which Ligon must enact his escape. The title is enough to identify the book; Ligon does not dignify the author by mentioning his name, which is in effect rendered invisible. The frontispiece, which has no visual image, dismisses the contents of ordinary linguistic enterprises, "such as no lectures, books, or colloquial correspondence can produce." The only direct quotation from Griffin's book is the three-word title, which Ligon undoes with irony. The fictional frontispiece probes the preposition that presumes to connect, and to equate, the two terms on either side. The similitude that "like" conveys is exposed by the mocking phrases "perfect fac simile" and "real *life-like*." The reference to "MIRROR OF OPPRESSION" comically undercuts Griffin's hyperbolic reactions to seeing his imitation blackness in the mirror.¹⁶ Through the lens of Ligon's rewriting, we see Griffin's crises with the mirror in Griffin's *Black Like Me* as sheer melodrama when the initial shock—"the face and shoulders of a stranger—a fierce, bald, very dark Negro—glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me"¹⁷—leads to the near breakdown—"Suddenly I knew I could not go back up to that room with its mottled mirror, its dead light bulb and its blank negatives."¹⁸

Ligon displaces the white Griffin by investing himself as the named author identified as "A BLACK MAN." Ligon's individual name is expressly used by the authenticating voice of the anonymous white person, which implicitly invokes Griffin's role as witness and spokesperson for black men. But Ligon's parodic emptying out of white testimonial rhetoric reclaims his name and reasserts his entitlement to the formulation *Black Like Me* as having a specific, nontransferable meaning when applied to a black person.

The sharp, clear lines of Ligon's demonstration in *Black Like Me* are, however, complicated by the proximity of the *Narratives* to the four stenciled works with texts drawn from Zora Neale Hurston painted directly on the wall.¹⁹ The juxtaposition



Glenn Ligon, View of exhibition Directions: To Disembark. Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Lee Stalsworth.

confronts us with contrasting modes of lettering. For all the decorative embellishment and variation in the fonts of the *Narratives*, the typeface remains neat and crisp. These precise, chiseled letters seem visually constrained next to the messy, indistinct lettering in the more fluid format of the adjacent wall paintings. Ligon's *Black Like Me* in the form of a title page achieves a critical perspective, but not without a lingering sense of confinement because limited by heavy reliance on purely verbal wit. Rendered in the medium of a stenciled painting, *Black Like Me #2* develops its own intricate method of reading.

As Thelma Golden observes, the "early text paintings," which constitute Ligon's "spiritual core," are "as much about reading as about seeing."²⁰

Ligon is a reader not only outside his work; he also actively reads within his art. If we think of a quotation according to the metaphor of the box, then the quotation Ligon manifests as his starting point is the exterior surface, and the focus turns to what can be found by burrowing inside the quotation. This model envisions the interior of the quotation not as a vacuum or absence but rather as an inner depth to be elicited and transmuted. Obliteration or disintegration is not an inadequate image for Ligon's strenuous procedure of rereading. Rather, the process involves insistent verbal play to the point of excess and overflow, with a view to creating a transformative space. As Ligon puts it, he aims to "tease the traces of other meanings out of the sentences."²¹ The word "tease"—not only to provoke



Glenn Ligon, *Black Like Me #2*, 1992. Paint stick and acrylic gesso on canvas, 80 1/8 x 30 in. Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; museum purchase, 1993. Photo: Lee Stalworth.

but literally to pull apart—nicely conveys the tactile quality of working in this medium. Ligon’s text pieces never cease to be verbal. The original sentence is too firmly established for total erasure to be possible, and the viscosity produced by the textured materiality of the lettering, even when blurred, releases additional linguistic meaning. Repetition contributes to this mode of rereading by continuously multiplying, tweaking, and inflecting the possibilities. Ligon’s ironies accumulate as thickly as the paint.²²

I approach *Black Like Me #2* in the context of an installation, in spring 2005, of all five Ligon works in the Hirshhorn collection.²³ In the group of four etchings on paper, *Untitled (Two White/Two Black)*, the two Hurston texts on white background alternate with the two Ralph Ellison texts on black background.²⁴ Approaching from the entrance to the previous large room (201), one sights, from a distant angle, only the first white piece and part of the first black piece. Upon entering the narrow corridor-like space (202), one sees the full four-part set of etchings spread out in a horizontal band on the left wall. While examining the etchings, one is aware of the vertical height of *Black Like Me #2* as a single piece in the alcove (203A) directly ahead, perpendicular to the line of etchings and potentially in conversation with them.

Untitled (Two White/Two Black) stages a series of interchanges in cross-racial looking relations. The third etching addresses the visibility expressed in Hurston’s sentence, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” In art historical terms, this visual dynamic speaks to the standard motif of the ancillary black attendant whose function is to provide maximum ostentation.²⁵ In Ligon’s equivalent textual display, visual emphasis is magnified by the use of black capital letters. If the black author’s words stand out conspicuously, what remains momentarily invisible is the “white background” that creates the contrast.

Ligon recalibrates this contrast by translating it into a more malleable medium, unlike the normal page, with its own format and syntactic moves. The oversize font and the narrow width of the frame necessitate a frequent wraparound that makes the sentence keep turning back on itself when it drops to the next line. This motion not only breaks up the

text but also reorganizes it by producing new flows. The constant permutation of line breaks and word splits slows the winding text and gradually builds a force field that makes the rhetorical impact of words like “thrown” and “sharp” stand out more vividly.

The adjective “white” in Hurston’s sentence appears six times—four times as a complete unit, twice in broken form. The term begins to change a little over halfway down when, as though breaking apart, it splits into two separate clusters “whi” and “te” with the turning of the line. The second instance of fracture occurs in the final appearance of the word when it breaks in a different place to become “whit” with the “e” sheared off. These dispersals call attention to the word by triggering a reflex attempt to put it back together and, simultaneously, deplete its power by forcing us to recognize its splitting apart. In addition, the very end of the text cuts off in mid-sentence just at the point when we know the next phrase would be “sharp white.” The double adjective is implied and we can silently pronounce it, but there is no corresponding visual confirmation; the words are arrested and sentenced to permanent suspension.

The preposition “against” undergoes a different metamorphosis. As if extremely vulnerable, it instantly breaks up in its first and third appearances. Through the course of its various modulations, which include vigorous smudging, the performed meaning of “against a white background” changes from “contrast” to the sense of “being opposed to.” As the text gradually works its way from top to bottom, the piece as a whole signals its opposition to the authority of the white background by replacing it with a background that approaches blackness. We can hear the shift of meaning in Ligon’s use of the word “against” at the time of his 1993 Hirshhorn exhibition: “I am positioning myself against a certain historical experience and trying to find the connections between it and who I am.”²⁶ Although Ligon’s “I” is not the same as the first-person speakers of the Hurston and Ellison texts that Ligon cites, he is nonetheless present in the textual transactions through which his own identity is mediated.

The white-to-black shift of ground within the Hurston etching is enacted on a larger scale in the two versions of the same Ralph Ellison quotation on either side. Ligon’s metamorphic play with the

theme of invisibility takes the assertion in Ellison’s opening sentence—“I am an invisible man”—and renders the text more invisible, not less. In an ironic turn on the white refusal to see that renders the black man invisible, as explained in the novel’s opening lines,²⁷ Ligon actively chooses black invisibility by placing Ellison’s text on a black background that makes it unreadable and thus withholds it from view. The assertive invisibility produced by the black-on-black effect of black print on black paper challenges white avoidance by forcing the issue: the black field is all we are permitted to see.

In another ironic turn, Ligon redeploys Ellison’s term “spook” by canceling its derogatory, slang connotation for blacks and applying to whites its meaning as ghost. The black in the two Ellison pieces is not uniform because Ligon’s technique produces a spectrum of different black colors. In the first piece, the ultramarine mixed with black ink makes the text a darker black than the comparatively lighter black of the background. In the second piece, the background is darker than the letters printed in graphite.²⁸ The graphitized letters give off a metallic glow, a spectral glimmer, which marks another step in Ligon’s play with the metaphors of color: this ghostlike pallor is all that remains of whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness, which is the source of its normative authority, is redefined vis-à-vis the notion of half-life, as its energy is decreasing and its power is diminished.

The fifth piece, *Black Like Me #2*, pursues this undermining of white-skin privilege by graphic means. The text in question is a reiterated one-sentence excerpt from John Howard Griffin’s hyperbolic account of the moment of his transformation from a white man to a blacked-up white man passing as black. Ligon’s artistic process, using Shiva Artist’s Paintstik of ivory black, captures the paradoxical action of the verb “wipe” in “All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence.”²⁹ The “wiping” that seemingly nullifies Griffin’s white identity takes the form of layering, applying a black covering that is not indelible but actually removable and reversible, as Griffin’s narrative eventually reveals and concedes. In Griffin’s pithy summary: “I was a Negro for six weeks.”³⁰ Even during this abbreviated timeframe, he is able

to recover his white identity so as “to pass back into white society.”³¹ It is this ability to return at will to whiteness that Ligon’s art nullifies.

In the initial moment, Griffin claims for himself an invisibility akin to Ellison’s invisible man—“The Griffin that was had become invisible.”³² Ligon takes Griffin at his exaggerated word by endowing him with permanent blackness. At the bottom of the painting, the final line ends abruptly with an “I” now enveloped in black. In an ironic echo of Griffin’s word “traces,” Ligon radically reduces the traces of Griffin’s previous white existence to the narrow white borders down the sides of the painting and the tiny, floating flecks of white ghostlike wisps. Redirected by Ligon’s art, the respective black and white invisibilities are crossed. In the case of Ellison’s first-person speaker, Ligon transforms the invisibility of blackness from a negative condition into a resource, while white invisibility turns into Griffin’s fixed black “I.” However, these images of Ellison’s blackness and Griffin’s blackness do not match: the two versions of blackness have different consequences.

Ligon’s labor-intensive, hands-on working method enacts its own meaning: “one senses the gestural presence of the body pressing the waxy crayon onto the canvas, rubbing and smearing as it moves.”³³ Ligon’s presence, recorded in the applied pressure, leaves the physical imprint of Ligon’s body on the canvas. Through his imprint, he illustrates the point that Griffin is not black like Ligon.

Ligon’s black text fields anticipate and inform his massive subsequent project based on James Baldwin’s 1953 essay, “Stranger in the Village,” a title inconspicuously indicated in one of two references to Baldwin in the series of *Narratives* in *To Disembark*.³⁴ In particular, Baldwin’s essay includes a section on blackface that enables Ligon to continue his deconstruction of this motif in John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*. The quotation involving the allusion to blackface occurs in a passage in which Baldwin refers to himself, the only black person in the village, as “a stranger here” and concludes: “But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites.”³⁵ This quotation is the subject of Ligon’s *Untitled (Stranger in the Village #17)*, 2000.³⁶

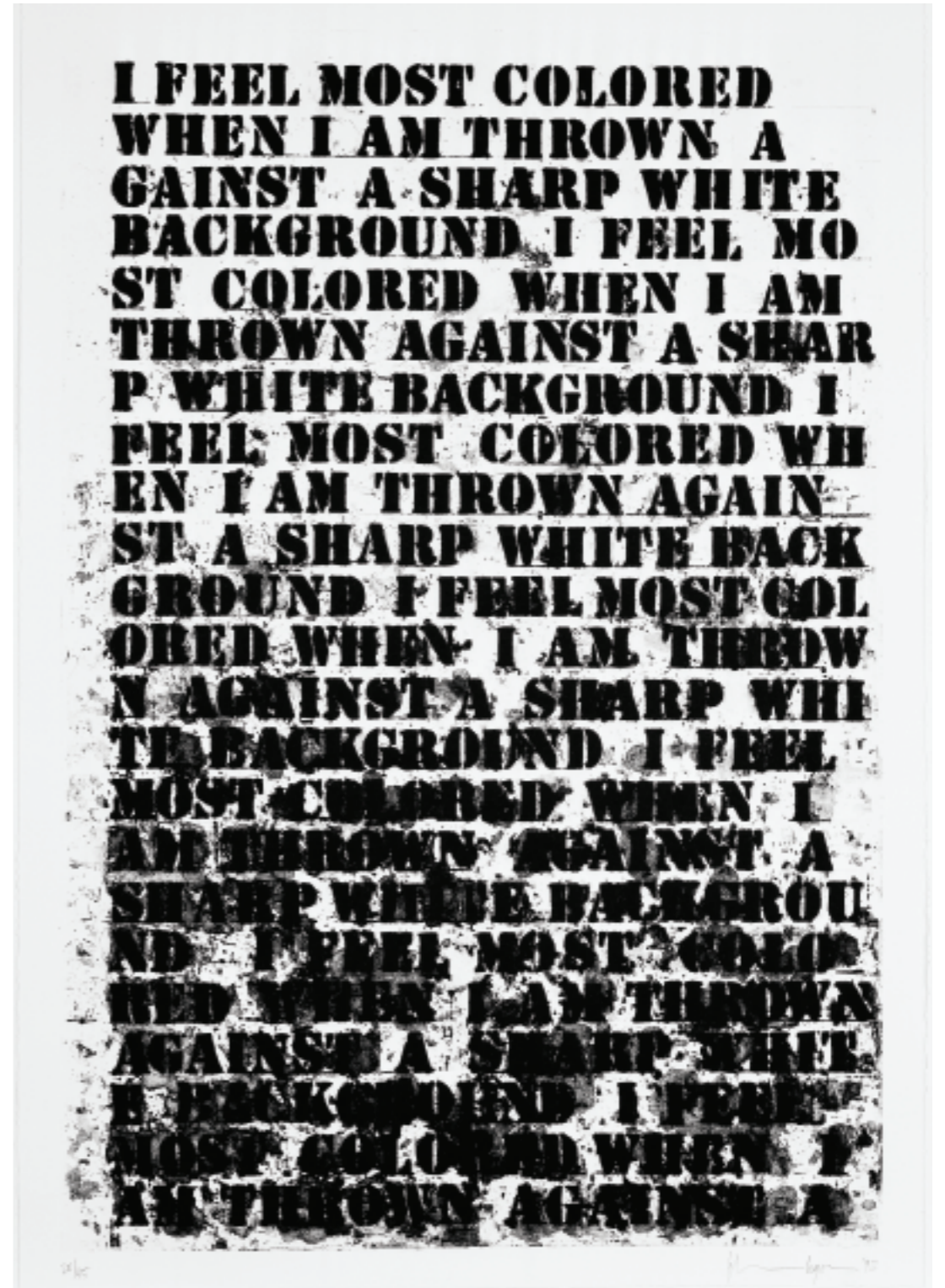
Ligon explicitly connects the practice of blackface to its metatheatrical replication in his own artistic technique: “One of the paintings uses the passage about the masquerade of the Swiss children with the blackened faces we spoke about earlier. I used that part of the text because it is about doubling and obscuring, and the text itself is being obscured by the material that it’s being rendered in.”³⁷ This description applies retroactively to the process developed in *Black Like Me #2*. In effect, Ligon undoes the potency of blackface by his own doubling move of putting black on blackface to make his point stick. In this context, Ligon speaks about “wanting to withhold things and the aggression of that withholding.”³⁸ What is being withheld is the power of whiteness as a privileged racial color. It is important to register the full artistic force of the word “aggression,” albeit aggression in the service of Baldwin’s insight in the essay’s final line: “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”³⁹ Ligon’s work literally fulfills Baldwin’s vision.

Ligon’s concept for the *Stranger* project encompasses Baldwin’s “entire text” and therefore, however deeply embedded in Ligon’s glittering coal dust, includes Baldwin’s assertion of estrangement from Shakespeare: “The most illiterate among them [white European villagers] is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me.”⁴⁰ I now turn to Fred Wilson, who opposes blackface by connecting the dots between John Howard Griffin and Shakespeare’s blackened Othello within a single exhibition.

“Someone knows me—but not you”

Fred Wilson’s black glass conveys a liquid flow comparable to Glenn Ligon’s dissolving black texts. As with Ligon, the implied malleability and flexibility of Wilson’s material is crucial to its shape-shifting capacity and its metamorphic power.

Wilson’s *Black Like Me* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, which directly addressed John Howard Griffin’s book, had a total of nine pieces distributed among three distinct spaces.⁴¹ The two pieces from 2001 played prominent roles in Wilson’s 2003 Venice Biennale exhibition Speak



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background)*, 1992. Etching on paper, 25 ¼ x 17 ¾ in. Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1993. Photo: Lee Stalworth.



Fred Wilson, *Dark Dawn*, 2005. Blown glass and plate glass, overall installed: 120 x 240 x 84 in.; five drip elements, each: 14½ x 4½ x 2½ in. to 22 x 4 x 2½ in.; thirteen drop elements, each: 7½-in. diameter x 2 in. high to 10½-in. diameter x 19 in. high; five plate glass elements, each: ¼ x 39 x 49½ in. to ¼ x 39½ x 75¼ in. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: Ellen Labenski.

of Me as I Am.⁴² The other seven pieces are new, with one from 2004 and six from 2005, the year of the Aldrich exhibition. As I shall ultimately argue, the overlapping term “me” in the titles “Speak of Me as I Am” and “Black Like Me” connects the two exhibitions. In both cases, the “me” is quoted from another author, and the new work presented at the Aldrich Museum continues the exploration of what it means to have one’s first-person identity channeled through such textual filters.

Wilson’s reflexive investment in “me” is explicit: “I’m exploring questions that no one can answer but me”; “it has so much to do with who I am and how I have been able to survive in the real world.”⁴³ Yet Wilson’s “me” is as guarded as Ligon’s. A declaration in a related exhibition at the Hood Museum⁴⁴ blocks the intrusive access to the revealed

black self that John Howard Griffin takes for granted. On the pedestal for one of the life-cast busts of non-Western, nonwhite racial types at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair is an imagined sentence: “Someone knows me—but not you.” The assertion draws a line between “me” and “you” that sets strict limits to what “you” can know and appropriate. Because the haunting text is written by Wilson himself, we can hear it as spoken in the artist’s own voice. Wilson’s “me” proves to be as conceptual and elusive as Ligon’s.

Turning to the detailed itinerary through Wilson’s Black Like Me exhibition at the Aldrich, I begin with the overall layout. The majority of the nine pieces is clustered in the middle section, the largest of the three spaces. The first space, a small introductory area containing a single piece, feels so

unassuming that it functions like an anteroom. The second space opens out to encompass seven pieces, all of which use variations of the black-drop form. The entire area cannot be seen in one sweeping look because an added wall jutting out blocks our view, but the spatial flow is nonetheless continuous and driven by the consistent formal links among the pieces. The third space, with the two culminating pieces, is a separate room enclosed by glass doors.

We start in the first room with *Black Memory* (2005), a chest-high display case that appears to be part of an antiquarian collection of artifacts when we look inside, where we see a fascinating array of differently shaped ink bottles and oilcans. Only in retrospect do we realize that this piece introduces major themes that the rest of the exhibition tackles with visual flair. The blond wood and dark glass of the display case hint at the black-white color dynamic that soon surrounds us. The emptiness of ink bottles and oilcans is a modest prelude to the black liquid about to fill the next room in the medium of black glass, and to the actual ink that appears at the end in the graffiti writing on the wall of *Turbulence* (2001). The open mouths of the bottles and pointed spouts of the cans suggest an inside-outside reversal that anticipates the two-sided inverse form of *Mhole* (2005). Slight disruptions in the general pattern of ink bottles on the left side and oilcans in the right compartment—one ink bottle shows up just over the line on the right and the two largest oilcans have moved over to the left—raise the issue of mixing. One oil “can” is actually a bottle. *Black Memory* sets us up for a spectacular transition from the self-contained display case to the profusion of black drips oozing from white walls.

The entryway to the next space provides a framed view of *Drip, Drop, Plop* (2001) straight ahead. However, as soon as we cross the threshold, we are inundated. The drips have multiplied and metamorphosed into new arrangements in *Viscous Risks* (2005), spilling out of the corner to our immediate right, and *Dark Dawn* (2005) spread out on the left. The excitement and danger of these amplifications of the *Drip, Drop, Plop* format are mischievously prompted by the playfulness of the titles. *Viscous Risk* asks us to hear its visc-risk rhyming.

Dark Dawn teases us with its metaphorical association with *Dusk of Dawn*, in which W. E. B. Du Bois’s “wider hope in some more benign fluid” offers a possible gloss for Wilson’s use of black glass as a liquid medium.⁴⁵ The two new pieces produce a sensation of expansion, even spawning. *Drip, Drop, Plop* is relatively compact and tightly compressed with only two shapes. By comparison, *Viscous Risk* and *Dark Dawn* take up more space and have bigger forms and more varied shapes.

To the perfectly rounded shape of the black forms on the floor of *Drip, Drop, Plop*, the two new pieces add vertically protuberant forms. In *Viscous Risk*, one larger form looms in the back corner amidst the eight rounded forms. *Dark Dawn* has four protrusions on the floor in increasing size, the largest emerging like a seal from ocean depths. All four large forms have eyes that make them seem alive. In terms of associations with the human figure, the symbolic meanings of black drips and plops are no longer restricted to images of body fluids but now begin also to suggest polymorphous body parts.⁴⁶

Compared to *Drip, Drop, Plop* considered in isolation, the three pieces together have a far greater impact by collectively enveloping the viewer in a black-and-white environment that involves not only the objects but also the entire space. All the surfaces—ceiling, walls, and floor—are employed as active parts of the artistic effect. Drips in *Viscous Risk* and *Dark Dawn* are now shown at the point of contact touching and spilling onto the floor, thus visually joining wall and floor. From the ceiling comes the spotlighting that creates shadows and enhances reflections. The black drips are made to cast shadows on the white walls—pendulous double shadows can be seen in *Drip, Drop, Plop*. In *Dark Dawn*, the wall as an active visual element is indicated by the altered windows on either side—the left one covered in black, the right covered in white—with both diminishing the light from outside. *Dark Dawn*’s flat, plate-glass cutout on the floor simulating a liquid black pool expands the reflective property of the highly polished plops. The black sheet turns the white ceiling dark and the white wall gray. As an individual viewer, I am reflected wherever I turn; immersed in the overall interplay of black and white, I see my skin color



Fred Wilson, *Vanity*, 2005 and *Turbulence*, 2001. *Vanity*: wood, plate, glass, glass hardware, 60 x 45 x 22 ½ in. *Turbulence*: tile wall, graphite, ink, two audio recordings, electronics, light; overall installed: 9 ft. x 10 in. x 18 ft. Installed in Fred Wilson: Black Like Me at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut, July 10, 2005–January 8, 2006. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: Ellen Labenski.

change from white to dark.

The concept of the mirror is explicit in *Mhole*, whose title “M” evokes mirror, as well as “me.” When peering into the mouth of the narrowing tunnel, the “hole” of *Mhole* inserted in the wall, I see myself in the tiny apex as upside down and black, and hence inadvertently reenact the upsetting scenario John Howard Griffin describes at the beginning of *Black Like Me*. In a further ironic twist, we find that *Mhole* has two sides that reverse each other: the same piece that is an indentation on one side of the wall becomes, on the other side, an extruded form. Upon closer examination, the blown glass turns out to be translucent so that one can see through obscurely to the other side. From the opposite side, the perpendicular protrusion looks like one of the elongated vertical masses on the floor but now moved upward to stick out of the wall horizontally at the viewer’s level, as though coming alive as a breast or penis or, because of the

two eyes at the tip, a face. *Mhole* is the turning point in the exhibition because it so clearly implicates us in its doubleness and thereby prepares the way for *Drop, Dripped* (2003) and *Vanity* (2005).

The two remaining pieces in this section continue the principle of reversal through their crisscrossed interaction. *Pssst!* (2005) portrays a lone black form engulfed by the long white shelf on which it sits close to the floor. The five pairs of eyes mounted on the black form are not enough to protect it, to return the stares of those who have called mocking attention to it with the loud whispering named in the exclamatory title. Yet, located diagonally across from *Pssst!* in the corridor leading to the final room, *Drop, Dripped* undoes the primacy of whiteness by converting it to black. For the first time, white is cast in the role hitherto exclusively black: a long white drop is suspended on the wall, about to be released. Below, on a small white shelf, is a large two-eyed black plop. The relationship of

white and black is signaled by the past tense of the title word “dripped.” The action is to turn white into black, as the white drop, impelled by gravity, inevitably descends. The tip of the white drop already reflects the blackness beneath poised to receive and absorb it. Imagined as sexualized, the drop becomes a white breast with a black nipple or a white penis with a black head. Against the logic of strict racial separation, the piece’s white-to-black transformation offers a counterdemonstration of intermixture. The suggestion of a specifically interracial sexual exchange is soon elaborated in the Othello-Desdemona marriage.

The line from *Drop, Dripped* to *Vanity* in the exhibition’s third space is direct. The piece of furniture is totally black: not only the prominent mirror but all the reflective surfaces, when looked at close up, turn white people black. What makes this experience more than a visual joke is the deeply contextualized background Wilson provides for the vanity’s implications of cosmetics and makeup by linking two classic moments of whites in blackface—John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961), which is present from the beginning in the echo chamber of the exhibition title, and Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604), which emerges at the end as the focus of *Turbulence* (2001). Long before we reach the final room, we hear its frenetic sound, which, however, we can identify only upon entering the third, enclosed space.

The implacable presence of the high, black-and-white tiled wall blocks our forward movement. One of the tiny, hand-printed inscriptions on the wall of *Turbulence* that Wilson adapts from slave narratives expresses the sense of entrapment: “I’m beginning to think escape is impossible.” From behind the wall, accompanied by strobe-like flashing light, comes the deliberately blaring and chaotic mix of two sound tracks from the concluding death scenes of *Othello* and *Otello*. The garish effect is carefully calibrated by a color organ that coordinates the heightening and lowering of the sound with increases and decreases in the light.⁴⁷ The garishness is also a function of the “forcefully opulent” quality that Wilson associates with opera, which is literally present in Verdi’s *Otello* but also metaphorically expressed in the “grand scale” of Wilson’s use of glass and in the exhibition’s overall “theatricality”—a

“kind of operatic quality” conducive to high-spirited critical parody.⁴⁸

The conundrum of blackface catches up with whites in this exhibition. *Turbulence* and *Vanity* work together in the final room to allow whites viscerally to register the significance of Othello’s role being played as a blacked-up white actor by turning from the scrambled sounds of *Othello* in *Turbulence* to face the black mirror of *Vanity*. The final room is a climax of mixing on all levels. First, the aural assault mixes the genres of drama and opera by playing the spoken voice, with its full range of volume and vocal noises, off against operatic singing and orchestral crescendos. Second, the interlocking black-and-white tiles signify the racial mixing of Othello and Desdemona. Third, the museum visitor is drawn into the mix: when approaching *Vanity*, the viewer sees the black-and-white tile grid reflected from the nearby wall onto the countertop in combination with the associated mottled reflection of his or her own face in the black mirror illu-



Fred Wilson, *Drop, Dripped*, 2003. Blown glass, two elements: 15 x 3 ½ x 3 ½ in. (white) and 3 x 12 x 12 in. (black), overall installation dimensions variable. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of PaceWildenstein. Photo: Catherine Vanaria.

minated by the overhead spotlight. This direct involvement transforms the viewer from observer to participating subject.

The titles “Speak of Me as I Am” and “Black Like Me” raise the question, who is “me?” In both cases, the quoted “me” is a black character played by a white impersonator wearing blackface. In the meandering itinerary through the exhibition, Wilson answers that this “me” is not me. By disclaiming this identity, Wilson places the burden back on its rightful inheritors, the white viewers, whose forebears created and maintained blackface. But he returns the problem to us with wonderfully inspired visual encouragement for whites also to renounce the emotional shortcuts that their blackface indulges.

Me

Despite the substantial differences in their artistic methods, Glenn Ligon and Fred Wilson pursue blackface through involvement with black materiality as the vehicle for entering this cultural phenomenon and transmuting it from within. Ligon comments on the emotional multivalence of the black material: “I am drawn to it because of all the contradictory readings it engenders. Worthless. Waste. Black. Beautiful. Shiny. Reflective.”⁴⁹ Tracing the range from the beauty of black Murano glass in his *Chandelier Mori* (2003) to the degradation embodied in his black-drop forms, Wilson uses a similar vocabulary for “black substances,” including “representation of whatever drips that is black... oil, tar, ink, etc. Literally, I thought of the body disintegrating into something as debased as drips and spots.”⁵⁰ Yet the performative value of the material is the way it enables the art to move from being a medium of opposition to becoming a medium of change.

The reworking and reconstituting of the material is what we experience so viscerally in the presence of this art: the impact makes us feel that the process of material reconfiguration has direct implications for black identity. Although both artists are cagey about being trapped in overt, limited autobiographical interpretations and are careful to maintain a surface impersonality, at another level the work conveys a deeply personal investment in individual exploration. For example, Glenn Ligon’s

2002 *Self-Portrait* marks the convergence of the black text field work with Ligon’s explicitly named self.⁵¹ This merger is a culminating moment in the sense that, as Ligon puts it, “I consider all the work I’ve done self-portraits, filtered through other people’s texts.”⁵²

Self-Portrait (2002) makes clear both that the self is at stake and that portraiture has to be reconceptualized to accommodate that self: in one step, Ligon simultaneously asserts, “I am,” and asks, “Who am I?” Hence the paradox that Ligon can seem to be hiding and giving at the same time. In Ligon’s words, “What does it mean, then, to try not to move at all, not to speak, for a body to be unreadable? Stillness and interiority can function as a critical stance, as a kind of resistance.”⁵³ Through unreadability, his art communicates stillness and interiority; they are not mutually exclusive.

An example from Ligon’s recent work overlaps with Fred Wilson’s use of the “me” word. *Give Us a Poem* (2007) consists of the two words “Me” and “We” rendered in white neon letters outlined in black polyvinyl chloride backgrounds.⁵⁴ The inverted images of “M” and “W” and the flashing lights’ insistent oscillation keep the viewer moving not only between individual and collective but also between white and black. This continual motion is a productive place to be and it emphatically makes room for Ligon’s specific “me.”

After *Black Like Me*, Fred Wilson’s subsequent exhibition *My Echo, My Shadow, and Me* extends the string of his exhibition titles using the term “me.”⁵⁵ The allusion to the song recorded in 1940 by both the Ink Spots and Frank Sinatra continues the tension between black and white artists.⁵⁶ The difference is that, in the transition from the earlier venue at the Aldrich to the PaceWildenstein gallery, the references to John Howard Griffin and to *Othello* are minimized. The removal of this burden allows the expressive form of Wilson’s black glass, and his “me,” more freely to establish their own syntactic flows and meanings, and playfully to luxuriate in the reverberating layers of their echoes and shadows.

Two examples show how working through the “black like me” motif helps lead Wilson to a release that opens up new possibilities. First is *The Unnatural Movement of Blackness* (2006), in which Wil-



Fred Wilson, *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!* (detail), 2006. Blown glass and marbles, overall installed: 81 ½ x 171 x 77 in.; blown glass elements, each: ½ x 2 ½ x 1 ¾ in. to 8 x 2 ½ x 4 in.; marbles, each: ½- to 1-in. diameter. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: Ellen Labenski.

son brings together forms traceable to *Chandelier Mori* (2003) and *Drip, Drop, Plop* (2001) and takes them out of an abstract vacuum by relocating them across the surface of an actual globe.⁵⁷ This act of coordination and contextualization creates a powerful political image because of its global scale and specificity. Second, in an alternate direction, Wilson riffs on his own *Drip, Drop, Plop* to produce a wry, impish, seemingly whimsical breakout work, *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!* (2006), in which the familiar black-drop forms burst open and hatch a new, brightly colored world of forms.⁵⁸ This next generation of multicolored drops goes beyond any real imagery of skin color. This utopian realm is a parallel universe, where all color is possible all the time; for a moment, we can simply welcome the palette’s span and laugh.

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Notes

¹ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

² Eric Lott, “White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of White Identity,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 474–95.

³ Langston Hughes, “Dream Variation,” *The Weary Blues* (1926), in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, The Poems: 1921–1940*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia:

University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 33.

⁴ Hughes, "Proem," p. 22. The particular force of "me" as black-authored creation is registered in the repetitions of "my" and "me" in Langston Hughes's poem "Note on Commercial Theatre," where the final line, "Yes, it'll be me," refers not only to the subject but also to the creator of the work. Versions of the poem appear in *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943) and *One-Way Ticket* (1949), in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 2: The Poems: 1941–1950*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 93–94, 197.

⁵ Griffin, *Black Like Me*, p. 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸ A crucial precedent is Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* (1989), with its linked tributes to Hughes and James Baldwin.

⁹ The exhibition is documented in *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark, November 11, 1993–February 20, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1993), an unpaginated brochure containing Phyllis Rosenzweig's interview with Ligon (hereafter cited as Rosenzweig interview). The most detailed analysis of this exhibition is Darby English's account in *Black Artists, Black Work?: Regarding Difference in Three Dimensions* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2003), pp. 285–97.

¹⁰ The five items are nos. 92–96 in *The Hirshhorn Collects: Recent Acquisitions, 1992–1996* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1997), p. 60.

¹¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, *To Disembark* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1981), p. 40.

¹² Detailed discussion of the literary sources and cultural contexts for Brown's *Narrative* is provided in the valuable contributions by Marcus Wood, "Rhetoric and the Runaway: The Iconography of Slave Escape in England and America," *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 78–142; and Daphne A. Brooks, "The Escape Artist: Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery," *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 66–130.

¹³ The texts of *Narratives* are available in Glenn Ligon, "Narratives," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1994): pp. 31–40. Ligon has split the four-line passage from Walcott into two pieces (32 and 40). The shift from "nation" to "imagination" in Walcott's key line—"I had no nation now but the imagination"—accords with Ligon's own emphasis on the metaphorical and inward natures of his inquiry. For the unified four lines, see Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), p. 350.

¹⁴ See Ligon's discussion of actual doors and their metaphorical implications in the final paragraph of the Rosenzweig interview.

¹⁵ Early commentary on *Black Like Me* includes Richard Meyer, "Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language," in *Glenn Ligon: un/becoming* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1997), pp. 12–35; see pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ The "MIRROR OF OPPRESSION" also serves as a back ref-

erence to Henry Box Brown's panorama *The Mirror of Slavery*.

The latent link between Brown and Griffin intimates Ligon's opposition to all forms of literary sensationalism.

¹⁷ Griffin, *Black Like Me*, p. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁹ Although the checklist lists three, Phyllis Rosenzweig reports in e-mail correspondence that Ligon added a fourth ("I am not tragically colored") after the exhibition brochure had been printed. All four quotations come from Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," first published in the May 1928 issue of *The World Tomorrow*. Hurston's "Colored Me" counters Griffin's use of "me" in *Black Like Me*.

²⁰ Thelma Golden, "Everynight," in *Glenn Ligon: un/becoming*, pp. 36–47; quotation from p. 41.

²¹ Rosenzweig interview.

²² In the section on Glenn Ligon in "On the Couch," *October* 113 (Summer 2005): pp. 39–76, Mignon Nixon critically portrays the therapist in the video piece *The Orange and Blue Feelings* (2003) as "hung up on the fact that Ligon copies," a practice that she encourages the artist to abandon—in Ligon's words, "to throw your stencils on to the fire" (67). But in the activist medium of Ligon's "thick citation" (70), to quote is not to copy but to transform the quotation.

²³ The timing of the installation coincided with Ligon's appearance on April 14, 2005, in the Hirshhorn "Meet the Artists" series just before the mid-career survey, Darby English, Wayne Baerwaldt, Huey Copeland, and Glenn Ligon, *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes* (Toronto: Power Plant, 2005).

²⁴ The entry in *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 24, no. 1 (March–April 1993), p. 21, gives the title with the parenthetical "(Two White/Two Black)" used in the 2005 wall label. In *Some Changes*, the etchings are shown in a different order with the four displayed in pairs, two white followed by two black (pp. 140–41).

²⁵ For the black attendant motif, see my essay "Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): pp. 23–61, and especially pp. 50–51 on Ligon's reworking of this motif.

²⁶ Rosenzweig interview.

²⁷ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 3.

²⁸ The technical information on the variations in black color is from the article in *The Print Collector's Newsletter*.

²⁹ Griffin, *Black Like Me*, p. 11. The detail about Ligon's paint stick is from the Hirshhorn's curatorial file on this piece.

³⁰ Griffin, *Black Like Me*, p. 175.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³³ Johanna Drucker, "The Art of the Written Image," in *The Dual Muse: The Writer as Artist, the Artist as Writer*, exhibition catalogue (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), pp. 83–126; Drucker's discussion of *Black Like Me* #2 is on pp. 90–92.

³⁴ The project appears in Glenn Ligon, Thelma Golden, and Hilton Als, *Glenn Ligon: Stranger* (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 2001); and *Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition, Catalogue* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002),

pp. 388–91, 576.

³⁵ The text of "Stranger in the Village" is cited from James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 117–29, quotation on pp. 119–20.

³⁶ *Documenta 11*, pp. 390–91. Ligon's excerpt begins "There is a custom in the village . . ." and ends with the sentence cited in the main text above.

³⁷ Ligon, Golden, and Als, *Glenn Ligon: Stranger*, p. 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁰ *Documenta 11*, p. 576; and Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," p. 121.

⁴¹ *Fred Wilson: Black Like Me* (Ridgefield: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006). My description of the exhibition, based on two visits to the Aldrich in 2005, was written independently of Huey Copeland's excellent account, "Out of the Well" (pp. 23–30), which became available when the catalogue was published in June 2006.

⁴² I discuss the Venice Biennale exhibition in chapter 7, "Re-speaking Othello in Fred Wilson's *Speak of Me as I Am*," in my *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 119–50.

⁴³ *Fred Wilson: A Conversation with K. Anthony Appiah* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2006), pp. 4, 9.

⁴⁴ *Fred Wilson: SO MUCH TROUBLE IN THE WORLD*—Believe It or Not!, ed. Barbara Thompson (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, 2006).

⁴⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940). Du Bois explains the imagery of the title in "Apology," pp. vii–viii.

⁴⁶ Body parts are also a visual motif in Fred Wilson's concurrent exhibition at the Hood Museum of Art, in which a table and two platforms display accumulations of hands, an arm, and heads, setting the stage for Wilson's selection of violated, fragmented bodies from Goya's *Disasters of War*. In contrast to the dismembering in Wilson's Hood exhibition, the forms resembling body parts in Wilson's Aldrich exhibition seem to take on new life, as though having a capacity to regenerate themselves. In the context of a discussion about the abstract formalism of the Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, Fred Wilson also emphasizes the reverse effect at the Aldrich: "The associations are not just about generation, but also about entropy. They're reductive, not just something being born, but something dissolving away into its essence." Richard Klein and Fred Wilson, "Pssst!: A Conversation with Fred Wilson," *Fred Wilson: Black Like Me*, p. 16. In both directions of generation and entropy, Wilson's metamorphoses free up blackness for reinterpretation.

⁴⁷ Copeland, "Out of the Well," p. 29.

⁴⁸ Richard Klein interview, pp. 17, 19.

⁴⁹ Ligon, Golden, and Als, *Glenn Ligon: Stranger*, pp. 26–27.

⁵⁰ *Fred Wilson: Speak of Me as I Am* (Cambridge: List Visual Arts Center, MIT, 2003), pp. 23–24.

⁵¹ English, Baerwaldt, Copeland, and Ligon, *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, p. 30.

⁵² Ligon interview with Gary Garrels (unpaginated), *Glenn*

Ligon: New Work (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996).

⁵³ Glenn Ligon, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," *Artforum International* 43, no. 1 (September 2004): pp. 242–49, quotation from p. 246. More recently, Ligon evokes his activation of invisibility as a positive principle in his note "S is for Shadows" in *Untitled* (2008), as follows: "To make a career out of being fascinated with one's own disappearance is quite a feat. I realized that if disappearance could be a subject matter, I could be an artist." *30 Americans* (Miami: Rubell Family Collection, 2008), pp. 14–17.

⁵⁴ Nico Wheadon, "Glenn Ligon: Give Us a Poem," *Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine* (Summer 2007): pp. 26–27.

⁵⁵ See http://www.pacewildenstein.com/Uploads/Exhibitions/Wilson_2006.pdf. This site does not have a complete list of exhibited objects.

⁵⁶ On the black singing group, see Marv Goldberg, *More than Words Can Say: The Ink Spots and their Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998).

⁵⁷ *The Unnatural Movement of Blackness* is catalogue number 25 in *Crossing the Line: African American Artists in the Jacqueline Bradley and Clarence Otis, Jr. Collection* (Winter Park, FL: Cornell Fine Arts Museum, 2007), p. 41. For further commentary on this piece, see pp. 59–61 in my article, "The Black Atlantic in the Twenty-First Century: Artistic Passages, Circulations, Revisions," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 24 (2009): pp. 56–70.

⁵⁸ *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!* appears in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society, 2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Seville, 2006), pp. 274–75.