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4Columns

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon

James Hannaham

52 Walker's cross-generational pairing of the composer and the visual artist defies easy interpretations.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon*: Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, far left: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, 2024.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger*, curated by Ebony L. Haynes, 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, New York City, through March 22, 2025*

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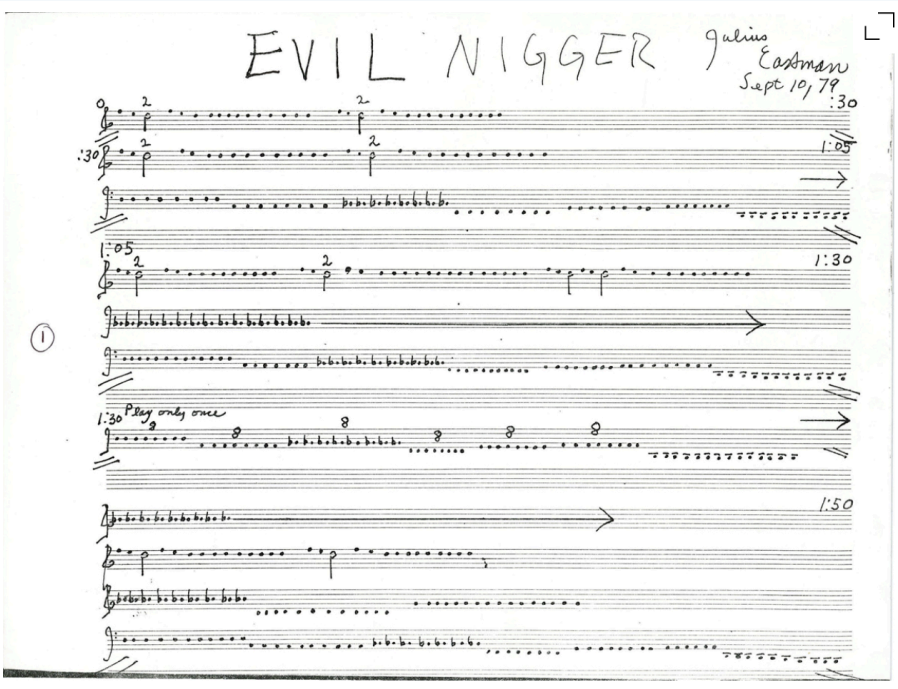
First there's the matter of the title. Nigger warning—excuse me, *trigger* warning: if the N-word categorically offends you, there's little chance that an art show called *Evil Nigger* will flip your feelings. Even if you're not uncomfortable with the title, it's still likely to spoil your ability to (a) casually praise and promote the show in cocktail conversations; (b) admit to liking it by name, even privately. Not even when one of this two-hander's anchor stores is one of your idols, humble genius–Black queer conceptual artist Glenn Ligon, who has co-opted and reinvented such words as "America" and "negro sunshine" in numerous notable neon and coal-dust artworks.



Julius Eastman, *Evil Nigger*, 1979. Courtesy 52 Walker. © Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Eastman Music Publishing Co. (ASCAP).

The other half of this dangerous duo—and the supplier of its outrageous marquee—is the lesser-known Black gay composer Julius Eastman (1940–90), who barged into the hyper-Euro-straightman world of concert music in the 1970s, unafraid to sling around similarly provocative names —"Crazy Nigger," "Nigger Faggot"—leading to his eventual ostracism, marginalization, and death in obscurity after struggles with mental health issues, drug abuse, homelessness, and possibly HIV. Before his downfall, however, he had studied (on full scholarship) at the Curtis Institute, performed as a pianist at Town Hall, and apprenticed with highly regarded musicians and some of the preeminent composers of his time.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker.

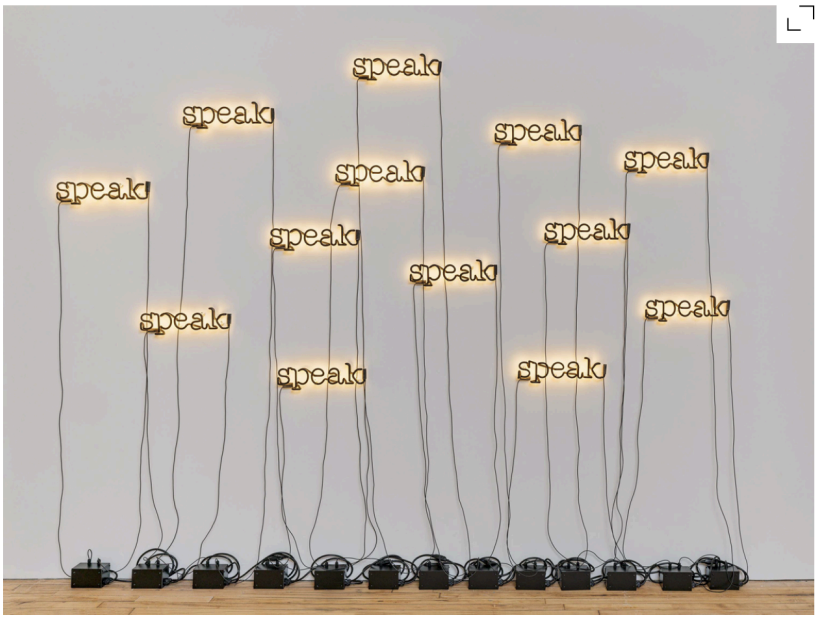
His story—that of an ambitious outsider who got inside and tried to be what he was (as he put it, “Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest”), only to die early and tragically—has ironically set Eastman up for a renaissance. In the thirty-five years since his death, numerous programmers in alternative and mainstream venues in the US and abroad have “discovered,” “rediscovered,” and championed his music, despite all the potential nomenclature controversy. Led by John Adams, the Los Angeles Philharmonic actually performed *Evil Nigger* in 2018, which kind of blows the mind.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, right: Glenn Ligon, *Redacted #11*, 2023.

The exhibition *Evil Nigger* seems designed, in part, to further boost Eastman's reputation and its eponymous composition (though strangely only that one) by drawing in Ligon's audience and encouraging us to make connections between their work. The emphatic, brash Blackness and LGBTQIA-ness Eastman promises are a welcome contrast with our current political context, but if this show carries a political message, it's the perennial one of Black queer people—that the assertion of our existence in public space is a political statement all by itself, no matter what art we produce or what other messages we wish to (or would even prefer to!) convey. Black queer people could make balloon animals and viewers (American ones especially) would try to parse the significance of Black queer balloon animals before proposing any less lazy analysis. At any rate, being in the room with *Evil Nigger* feels like a relief from everything going on outside—not an escape so much as a stop on the underground railroad during our flight from Mar-a-Lago.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured on back wall, left to right: Glenn Ligon, *Stranger #98*, 2023; Glenn Ligon, *Pirate #1*, 2024; Glenn Ligon, *Pirate #2*, 2024.

Along most of the walls at 52 Walker, curator Ebony L. Haynes has installed nine relatively new Ligon works, from 2023–24, plus one from 2005 and another from 2012. Most of them fit so neatly into his oeuvre that at first the room looks like a mini retrospective. Two large coal-dust and oil-stick on canvas compositions rendering unintelligible texts—*Stranger #98*, which uses James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" as its basis, and *Redacted #11* (who knows what text that is?)—mix seamlessly with Ligon's newer approaches, like in the *Pirate* series, two mysterious collages (primarily black) made from digital prints, etching ink, and acrylics, and that, like many other Ligon works, obscure something. In this case it appears to be an image of some kind behind black paper arranged like peeling paint. The blackness/Blackness is a secret code here, deliberately frustrating easy interpretation, possibly a critique of legibility itself. The *Pirate* pieces may also have some connection to De Kooning's painting of the same name, which Ligon has mentioned admiringly, but the link remains unclear.



Glenn Ligon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. © Glenn Ligon.

Sparse Shouts (For Julius Eastman) is an assemblage of neon signs, all of which say "speak"—there are thirteen; Ligon is probably encouraging us, and Eastman, from the grave, to speak evil. Another neon piece, with the letters "STH" repeated twice in red and "TSH" once in blue, hangs on a small metal support grid in the center of the room. "STH," the press release tells us, is the transcription of the dismissive tooth-sucking sound familiar to anyone who has a Black mother, has read the first word of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, or both, throwing yet more Black sonic shade.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, foreground: Julius Eastman, *Fifty-Two Niggers*, 1979/2025. Three player pianos, one piano, Mac mini, computer monitor, audio interface, audio file, MIDI cables, and extension cords.

Toward the back of the gallery, four pianos have been arranged in a semicircle. On the left are three self-playing black (Black?) Yamaha Disklavier pianos, and on the right, one antique brown Weber. Once every hour, the player-pianos erupt into Eastman's twenty-one-minute composition *Evil Nigger* (1979), a spooky (pun intended), gloomy tune, though surprisingly tonal and repetitious (i.e., listenable), featuring a creepy motif of seven descending notes that leans further toward the sounds of avant-friendly composers like Meredith Monk (with whom Eastman briefly worked) or Steve Reich than Milton Babbitt or Pierre Boulez (with whom Eastman also worked).

Eastman, in addition to bringing Black gayness where it was not welcome and paying the price, turns out to have been one of the first composers to incorporate techniques from popular and world music, which would have been a very unwelcome gesture until white composers like Philip Glass and John Adams came to prominence a few years later. (Glenn Burke comes to mind—the Black gay baseball player who popularized the high five, was ruined by his profession, and died in similar circumstances.)

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured: Julius Eastman, *Fifty-Two Niggers*, 1979/2025 (detail).

The absence of real musicians during the performance of *Evil Nigger* heightens the fact that Eastman's ghostly presence presides over the exhibition. With no fingers pressing the keys, three black pianos frenetically trade the notes of his macabre piece, while the fourth piano—the non-black one—remains silent. I suppose we can read into that whatever we want.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker.

To further erase any barriers between the visual artist and the composer, one wall is papered with Eastman's scores and a few framed prints of them hang on that same wall. Like the strategies of several mid-twentieth-century composers, including John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, and Dieter Schnebel (another Boulez collaborator), Eastman's scores do away with traditional notation in order to highlight chance operations and encourage performers to collaborate through feeling and improvisation. In some cases, they look more like Sol LeWitt drawings (especially Cardew's) than anything designed to preserve the integrity of a piece of music for posterity.

Evil Nigger doesn't seem to mind if you think that the main reason to show these artists together has to do with their shared Black gayness, especially if that's part of what gets your ass in the room. Fine. But they come from different generations, worked in different media, and never crossed paths. Also, their careers could not have diverged more sharply, a fact that seems to suggest the culture has made significant steps toward equality, but possibly only in the visual art world. The connection stronger than identity arises from the works themselves, the way each artist uses language to reclaim the power that would otherwise be denied them as Black gay men; Eastman with good old-fashioned Richard Pryor–style epithet co-optation, a nice contrast to Ligon's cool, minimal, literary sophistication, whose sensuous surfaces draw us near and then reeducate us. Each artist plays a type of now-you-get-it, now-you-don't game with meaning, warning us against easy conclusions. Call it an evil enigma.