

Liz James

Glenn Ligon and Frederick Douglass:

Nearly Three Centuries of Black Male Identity in America

“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” stands out as one of the most striking sentences in Zora Neale Hurston’s essay, “How it Feels to be Colored Me.” This sentence also becomes the subject and content of one part of Glenn Ligon’s 1992 print series, “Untitled (Suite of 4).” Ligon’s print is one of many prints based on larger paintings of the same content (DeLand). It became a part of the collections at the Spencer Museum of Art through a purchase with the Lucy Shaw Schultz fund. Ligon’s print brings a different life to the sentence by taking it out of context, amplifying it to 25 1/16 inches by 17 3/8 inches, and repeating the words into a blurred infinity. Ligon’s work illuminates not only his own experience, but also the experiences of African Americans throughout the history of our country. For example, “Untitled (Suite of 4)” is one lens through which to view Frederick Douglass’ 1845 narrative. In his narrative, Douglass recounts his experiences beginning with the start of his life, and ending with his escape from slavery. Douglass’ interactions with white people throughout his narrative illuminate the quote from Hurston and the print by Ligon, so that all three gain a deeper meaning through their interaction.

Ligon’s print and Douglass’ narrative strike a similar tone of resistance and defiance. However, Zora Neale Hurston’s essay takes a vastly different stance. Ligon’s print is one of four in a series in which the others include one that states “I do not always feel colored,” (also a quote from Hurston’s essay), and two which feature the same quote from Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*. Both prints which cite Hurston feature black text on a white background. The words begin legibly at the top of the print, but as they repeat they become blurred and difficult to read, to the point where the last line of text is almost entirely illegible. The Ellison quote prints feature black

text on a black background and are similarly blurred, but to a greater degree, so that the prints are completely illegible by the end of the text. The interaction of the four prints provides a narrative completely its own.

Ligon's prints tell the story of an African American in the United States. The narrator of this story feels simultaneously thrown into a spotlight, and invisible. Their skin color does and does not define them. The individual whose story emerges in the prints departs from Hurston's essay and also from Ellison's novel to become a new and universal character and part of discourse. The quotes from Ellison state that the man is invisible, and the quotes from Hurston state that the person feels as if they are "thrown against a sharp white background." Though these images contrast, the idea that the speaker grapples with the meaning of being African American in the United States remains constant.

Just as Ligon cites established African American authors in order to address his identity, Douglass cites African American spirituals as revelatory for him in his understanding of enslavement and his position as an enslaved man. Babb says that "Perhaps his greatest nod to the power of the spirituals and the vernacular tradition from which they derive is that Douglass credits them, not literacy, with his realization of slavery's wrongs" (Babb 375). In Douglass' privileging of spirituals over literacy, he places his trust in African American expression rather than dominant white culture. He trusts his fellow enslaved people to understand his state more than he trusts white abolitionists' sentimental views of his lived experience. Douglass writes, "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do" (Douglass 324).

Ligon's artwork similarly places trust in African American voices through his decision to quote an author from the African American literary canon. In his choice to quote Zora Neale Hurston, Ligon takes a stance that somewhat mirrors Douglass' life decisions. He recognizes the importance of literacy in his choice to quote a lauded and well-read author, but also chooses an African American author in a decision that Lauren DeLand likens to writing "an 'autobiography' of which the subject has written not a single word" (DeLand 507). Ligon finds parts of himself in authors of his race who have made names for themselves in their creative pursuits. He asserts himself among the talented and elite of his race, and reaffirms the importance of supporting those outside of the white majority. He follows the same path that Babb ascribes to Douglass in his narrative, saying "It is as if he sought to correct the perception that self-actualization could only be achieved through adopting the forms of the dominant culture" (Babb 367). He rejects the dominant culture to the extent that he rejects whiteness, but embraces it in order to uplift those of his race who have permeated it. Ligon and Douglass both find parts of themselves in the writing of others that have come before them, and in the synthesis of these, they create an art form that is wholly their own, which challenges the constraints that society sets out for them.

Ligon's work privileges both traditional literacy and cultural literacy. One must be able to read English in order to understand the print, but also, knowledge of its source enriches the understanding further. Douglass' narrative also places great importance on literacy in his eventual escape from enslavement. Though Ligon does not seek to escape slavery, his works seek understanding and validation within a country that privileges white supremacy. Karekezi's analysis of another of Ligon's prints based on Hurston's work also applies here:

The declaration is arresting and unexpected, though likely not unfamiliar to many in 1928, 1990, or 2012. These words, signifying a transformative moment in the life of its

author, speak of an unfortunate truth of a society still wrestling with a history built on the separation of the races—a topic Hurston defiantly addressed in much of her writing.

(Karekezi 2)

The country “built on the separation of the races” is Douglass’ America. He lives under slavery for the first part of his life, and then lives under the threat of enslavement even as a free black man.

Douglass gains his freedom because of his ability to read. He finds a copy of *The Columbian Orator* at the age of twelve, and in his reading, he finds utterance of thoughts and feelings he always had, but never found validation for (Douglass 342-3). In the conversations and dialogue he reads in this book, he finds that others oppose slavery and that there are those who do not just regard it as a natural system. He writes that, “The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared to disappear no more forever” (Douglass 343). After learning of the possibility and validation of his freedom, Douglass can no longer stand his enslavement. His first taste of freedom comes from the text, and he determines at age twelve that he will someday attain it. Douglass’ experience with this book mirrors Ligon’s experience with the African American authors that he cites in his prints. Ligon finds authors who write about their black identity, as opposed to reading only the more well-known and advertised white, straight, male canon who have little in common with Ligon, a gay black man. His familiarity with black authors provides him with an outlet for his art and the expression of his identity within the twenty first century United States.

Thus literacy and knowledge provide validation and knowledge to both Ligon and Douglass. However, they do not provide comfort. Though literacy lead to Douglass’ freedom and became a great asset to him during his life, he also became aware of many unpleasant truths

because of his education. Yun Lee's analysis of Douglass' rise to literacy and education draws yet another connection between Douglass' life and narrative and Ligon's print.

[His mistress] offers to teach him to read, and Douglass seizes the opportunity to enter the power structure. He thus begins to escape the repression, the totality, and breaks the silence. What ensues is a true feeling of his "difference"—Douglass becomes acutely aware of his denial by the world around him and thus becomes more acutely aware of his own identity (Yun Lee 55)

Douglass writes of this moment: "That very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish" and also, "In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity, I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own" (Douglass 343). His knowledge plagues him—now that he understands that others have the same opinion as his own, he can hardly convince himself to suppress it. He gains the means necessary to assert himself amongst those who would further oppress him.

Douglass uses this discovery and education to eventually become an abolitionist. His life's work is to ensure that others in his position escape and gain the same freedom he attained. He finds freedom to be absolutely necessary and decides to help other because he finds that "presence in itself is not sufficient to differentiate oneself. Identity must be made present by self-expression" (Yun Lee 55). He finds the outlet to express himself in the writing of his narrative and in the speeches he gives for the abolitionist cause, and inspires generations after him to express themselves and challenge oppressive systems.

Douglass becomes aware of his identity in a singular moment, similarly to how Hurston writes of discovering her own. Both use their moments of discovery to fuel careers in writing. In

her essay, “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” Hurston writes that she “did not always feel colored” (another source for a Ligon print) (Hurston 828). She also writes, “Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again” (Hurston 828). Hurston feels herself inundated by whiteness, but she does not lose herself in it. She, like Ligon and Douglass, holds a strong identity in the face of a country that seeks to eliminate her. Her recognition of her own identity differs from Douglass’ in that she was not always aware of difference based on her skin color. Her discovery of identity stems from her recognition that she was treated differently because of her skin, whereas Douglass’ derives from his discovery that others believe him to be as capable and intelligent as others *despite* his skin color.

Though Hurston has a similar moment of discovery in her identity as Douglass, she does not identify the same issues in white supremacy that Douglass explicitly outlines in his narrative, and that Ligon implies through his work. Her quotes become a basis for Ligon’s prints, but her greater essay does not present the same viewpoint. Karekezi writes of Ligon’s visual representation of Hurston’s quote, saying,

The erasure of letters kills the monotonous effect of the reiteration, forcing the viewer to reengage with the words and thus with its meaning as she stares and squints to make out the next letter. She is no longer gripped by the shock of the startling statement but now grapples with it, going through the reels of her mind’s memory bank, searching, really searching for her own inaugural moment of racial self-awareness. (Karekezi 4).

Clearly, Ligon transforms the text, not only by taking the sentence out of its greater context, but also in the way that he represents it, repeating, and eventually blurred and illegible. Ligon’s print

forces the viewer to reflect on the statement in such a way that challenges the dominant narrative of racial hierarchy and separation. However, Hurston's work does not hold the same goal. She writes, "I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored" (Hurston 830). Though this could be taken out of context to be a critique of America alongside her oppression as an African American woman, she also writes, "My country, right or wrong" and "But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it" (Hurston 830, 827). In her essay, Hurston acknowledges her position as an African American person in the United States, but works toward sublimating that identity within her other identities, whereas Ligon reveals only that aspect of himself in his print.

Hurston chooses a different goal in her work than Ligon or Douglass. Rather than point out the issues that lie within the racism of America in 1928, she makes the decision to prove herself as a strong individual despite and in spite of the problems. Douglass and Ligon directly challenge the white majority and create works that aim to alert the reader or viewer to the issues at hand. Hurston appears to concern herself more with a problem that DeLand identifies in her essay about Ligon's works: "The actions of individual black subjects are routinely scrutinized and judged to be indicative of qualities endemic to their race..." (DeLand 509). Hurston paints herself as a carefree and passionate person, bursting with life and energy. She writes to break the stereotype of African Americans as downtrodden, and appeals to a different audience and goal than Douglass or Ligon.

Glenn Ligon transforms a quote from Zora Neale Hurston into a work of art that takes on a completely different life than that of its source. His print more neatly aligns with the work of

Frederick Douglass in his 1845 narrative than its 1928 source. Ligon's work on this print gives him voice through the use of others' words. Ligon's print illuminates Douglass' narrative in the comparison of anti-racist work in 2016 to anti-slavery work in 1845. Nearly three hundred years separate the two works, but the dialogue between the two enriches them both.

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