BLACK IS, BLACK AIN'T

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“NEGRO SUNSHINE”: FIGURING BLACKNESS IN THE NEON ART OF GLENN LIGON
THE PHRASE "NEGRO SUNSHINE," wrought in deceptively polite American font typescript, greeted visitors to the *Black Is, Black Ain't* exhibition at the Renaissance Society. Sixteen feet long and three feet wide, the words radiated a clear ambient white light against a darkened wall. The piece, by artist Glenn Ligon, seemed from afar the familiar illumination of neon lighting—a script of letters forged through industrial tubing—appearing both singular and soldered together, hand- and machine-made, free-standing and plugged in. Indeed, approaching viewers might even have anticipated that buzz, that sonic static, which sometimes accompanies the visual electricity of neon signs that have been part of the American landscape since 1923. But as viewers neared the silent work, titled simply and suggestively *Warm Broad Glow* (2005), they might have observed that the two words were not lighted neon, but its obverse. In fact, the letters themselves were black, spray-painted in a dark-colored industrial compound known as Plasti Dip, which produces a matte finish that is the opposite of shine. Only the back of the neon tubing was not subsumed in the rubber coating, allowing a gentle white light to emanate against the wall behind it.

What viewers of Ligon's work, in fact, saw were the contours of black letters made visible by a tempered glow of light behind them, a kind of halved silhouette. At first glance, the work appears to make blackness—the absence of light—legible. The work interestingly reverses the "optics of seeing" from Isaac Newton's studies of light and the color spectrum in 1666. It was Newton who first surmised that "It was white light that contained all other colors, rather than, as had been believed before, black." Thereafter, through Newton's and other studies, as film theorist Richard Dyer maintains, light was associated with whiteness, universality, and visibility, and blackness with absence and invisibility. What do we make of Ligon's black neon and its representation of blackness and light? What form of visibility does it reproduce, reflect, and refuse? What might it reveal more broadly about the representational context in which contemporary African-American artists create their work and its reception and legibility in the twenty-first century?

*Warm Broad Glow* is the first neon piece by Ligon, an artist well known for his text paintings, works that quote—through the thick materiality of paint—the words of writers and orators as diverse as Richard Dyer and Richard Pryor. In this essay, I consider Ligon's neon turn and his specific choice of medium: of light and Plasti Dip. Ligon's use of black light and his production of shine, I maintain, highlight the historic and contemporary conditions and technologies, the always allusive processes, through which blackness is seen. More specifically, the work spotlights how blackness comes into view through commodification—how it becomes visible as it is packaged for consumption.

Ligon's particular form of neon and the ways it plays with the relations of visibility and invisibility also may speak specifically to the status of blackness in the contemporary art world. Currently, African-American artists, as Ligon notes, have unprecedented visibility—precisely at the moment when interest is waning in the politics of identity and race in mainstream American art. Ligon's work inhabits and reflects the ambivalent status of blackness, its spotlighting and elision in contemporary art and, one might argue, in the United States more generally.

Standing before the wall-mounted letters of *Warm Broad Glow*, which announce

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themselves in that insistent way that neon invades the perceptual field, viewers might naturally try to understand the relation between “negro” and “sunshine.” In small caps, and without so much as the now mandatory quotation marks surrounding the antiquated “negro,” suspended on the wall above loosely hanging wires, the words seem polar opposites brought into uneasy proximity. How did these words come together, as if they flowed sequentially from an author ardently at work at a typewriter? If the neon phrase were a commercial sign, what product would “negro sunshine” be? What would it do? What would it cost and who would buy it? How would or could such intangible things take commodity form?

The words, which immediately put into play the possibilities and impossibilities of their meaning and materiality, in fact issued from the pen, if not the typewriter, of early twentieth-century author Gertrude Stein. They appear in Stein’s “Melanchta,” published as one of three stories in her first book Three Lives in 1909.5 Understanding something of how “negro sunshine,” as well as the term “warm broad glow,” were brought together in Stein’s writing allows us to begin to outline how Ligon approaches the figuration of blackness in his neon work.

“Warm broad glow” and “negro sunshine” appear three times in Stein’s book and are used to describe African-American characters. In the introductory paragraphs of the novella, Stein describes Rose Johnson, the female protagonist’s friend who had been raised by a white family, as “never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes.”6 The author elaborates, “Rose laughed when she was happy but she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine.” Stein’s text is interesting in that the words she uses to characterize her figures never quite represent her subjects.

More specifically, Stein’s efforts to define her characters’ racial traits, their blackness, are constantly defeated and exceeded in the text. This is evident in her opening sketch of Rose. Stein describes the “joy of negroes” as “boundless” and then moves to offer laughter as representative of this unlimitable quality. Then, almost immediately, Stein frames laughter, the sonic utterance, itself this intangible thing, as emblematic of blackness, but concedes that it does not characterize Rose. The type of blackness she tries to construct is not applicable to the very figure she aims to bring to fictional life.

One of the other instances in which Stein introduces the term “warm broad glow” comes late in the text. Stein describes Jeff Campbell, the protagonist’s suitor, as “a robust, dark, healthy, cheery negro. . . . He always had a warm broad glow, like southern sunshine.”7 In this instance, she describes the man as “always” displaying this sunny temperament (connected here to geography as well as cheery negro character). Stein immediately goes on to describe a scene in which Campbell is “scorning” and “bitter,” again undermining the habitual claim asserted a few sentences earlier.8 Blackness in “Melanchta” constantly eludes literary capture.

Ligon’s Warm Broad Glow seems to represent Stein’s efforts to represent blackness. The glowing words embody his interpretation of what negro sunshine would look like. Precisely what temperature of light would best characterize it? Would it be a warm glow or stark glare? Taking up and recasting Bruce Nauman’s neon signs from the 1960s through 1980s (some of which he obscured with paint, oil, or fiberglass) and his Neon Templates (1966–1967), Ligon plays with the materiality of language, its
literalization, its perception, and its role in the surrogation of the body, particularly of bodies seen as black. By reproducing Stein's text in two parts, with "negro sunshine" occupying the wall and its title the more modest space of the work's label, the relation and disjunction of language and image, word and the thing described, sign and signifier, is further highlighted. Viewers encountering Ligon's interpretation of Stein's words in the gallery space engage in their own efforts to understand the work, to fix its meaning in place (whether or not they are familiar with Stein's use of the term). Warm Broad Glow in all these ways spotlights what the artist refers to as the "fugitivity" of blackness, the attempts to give it form that highlight its unfixity and intangibility.

We might see the neon signage as a metaphor for these efforts, literary and otherwise, to give blackness a delineated and fixed shape. Neon lighting functions precisely by trapping an inert gas, which is otherwise invisible to the human eye, or detectable through smell or taste, for that matter, in glass tubing. Its outer structure—which in the case of Ligon's work is handmade blown glass—gives neon gas a physical structure and visual form. Under low pressure, when an electrical current passes through the gas in the glass tubing, it emits a bright orange-red light. Typically the exterior of the glass may be painted to give the appearance of different colors. The artist's specific use of neon spray-painted black highlights the processes through which black joy—negro sunshine—which has no singular, definite, or detectable form, comes to be visualized and materialized through the optics and technologies used to give form to ideals of race.

Ligon also specifically highlights the commercial conditions that structure how blackness comes into view—how blackness comes spectacularly to light. His use of Stein's "negro sunshine" quotation, with its relationship in her mind to black cheer and laughter, calls attention to the longstanding use of jovial black figures to sell consumer goods—from pancakes to novels—in, and beyond, the United States. Through such images, blackness became visible in popular culture only if in a palatable, consumable, form. In a sense, Ligon's Warm Broad Glow—which uses neon, the visual language of advertising—spotlights the fact that when blackness began to appear in mainstream media and commercials, it did so only if it fit into a sunny, happy mold.

We might also consider Ligon's attention to Stein's writing of the jovial negro against the background of Saidiya Hartman's scholarship on the concept and legal definition of enjoyment during slavery and post-emancipation. Hartman notes how notions such as the one that blacks were filled with "boundless joy" were intrinsic to the erasure and normalization of the structures of violence that often governed everyday life for blacks during and after slavery. Spectacles of black enjoyment seemed evidence that slaves and their descendants were not only satisfied with, but derived pleasure from, their stations. Ligon's eclipsing of the neon in dark Plasti Dip produces this visible invisibility of blackness, highlighting what the spectacularization of blackness banished from perception the moment it appeared to put it most plainly on view.

For Hartman, this right to enjoy slaves defines what blackness is. Anyone identified as black was legally designated as property that could be enjoyed, which according to Black's Law Dictionary meant, "to have, possess, and use with satisfaction;
to occupy and have the benefit of.” As Hartman puts it, “Indeed, there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of; entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery.”13 Intriguingly, she views the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, the performance tradition in which white performers donned shiny black paint and mimicked black characters, as another example of the way blackness was a fungible commodity, an abstract thing that could be enjoyed, or possessed. Hartman’s work offers an interpretative framework in which Ligon’s neon may be understood not only as calling attention to the shape blackness took through commercial goods, but highlights how, in some legal formulations, the very notion of blackness gave visual form to the idea that blacks were property—commodities to be consumed. The black Plasti Dip compound, made out of a flexible synthetic rubber compound that can be molded into an array of things, seems to materialize that malleable blackness that Hartman describes, which can be enjoyed for all purposes.

But what of the relation between these modes of visibility/invisibility and light? Why does light, shine, glow become the means through which Ligon explores the commodification and materialization of blackness? One could make the case that blackness has taken commercial and visual form precisely through light—in particular through shiny blackness—which Stein partly invokes in her characterization of negro sunshine. Ligon has long been attentive to the relation between the objectification of blacks—their visual consumption—and shininess. In his Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book” (1991), Ligon took a book of highly homoerotic black-and-white photographs of black male subjects taken by the artist Robert Mapplethorpe and wrote, with the magic-markered authority of a school teacher, comments on the borders of the pages. Above a photograph of a head shot of a black male pictured with his dark skin aglow, the handwritten words “why are we always greasy?” appear. Below the image, another question: “why are we always shining?” How greaseiness and shininess (and glow and shine, for that matter) relate to each other, or how Ligon thinks of these degrees of glossiness, is unclear. What these questions call our attention to, however, is the seemingly habitual way that shininess (or its various permutations), which Dyer identifies as particular to the representation of non-white bodies in advertising,14 accompanies the form and production of a consumable blackness.

One could make the case that if we were to somehow muster a response to Ligon’s question, if we were to track, in a way the artist didn’t seriously intend, a prehistory of black shine, it might start during slavery itself. Indeed, it was not uncommon for slaves to be greased, to have their bodies covered with a substance known as sweet oil, at the point of sale—the moment at which their status as exchangeable goods was especially pronounced. Slave sellers had multiple reasons for wanting their human property to shine. It covered up, for one, malnutrition, and glossed over any wounds or scars. Slave owners sought to increase the salability of their slaves, to heighten, and even perfect, their status as commodities.15 Shininess, of course, was also the physical attribute of minstrel makeup—whether pomatum and burnt cork or black greasepaint—which heightened the visibility of minstrel characters, especially after gas lighting illuminated theatres in the nineteenth century.16 While I do not want to overdetermine the multiple meanings of shine, this earlier

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history reiterates the point that people defined as black, and blackness more generally (as manifest in minstrel paint), were seen and actively produced as commodities through the optics of light.

Although Ligon’s Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book” underscores shininess, and his illumination of the words “negro sunshine” exudes this quality, Warm Broad Glow reveals how efforts to package blackness never quite succeed in doing so. The soft luminous light, for one, notably exceeds the bounds of the sign’s glass structure, becoming most visible on the back wall and in the surrounding space. Ligon’s choice of lighting ultimately did not reproduce the harsh glare of some neon, the cool crisp light of commercial photography, or the stark, glistening, almost liquid white light of Mapplethorpe’s photographs. The work’s warm glow creates a more organic-seeming light. While not quite the natural glow of sunshine, its softness recalls the glamour lighting used in Hollywood films since the 1920s—the back-lit, haloed effect long reserved for white movie stars.17 Ligon’s neon also tempers the more spectacularized forms of blackness with the use of the black Plasti Dip. The dull plastic compound does not shine, and indeed, inhibits the perception of glass’s shininess.18 While invoking the historic ways blackness has been confined to a “shellacked shine” structure, Ligon’s work casts light on the structures of visibility that typically bring blackness into view, producing a new optic—a visual space through which blackness may be differently perceived.

Intriguingly, Warm Broad Glow will alter over time, like constructions of blackness itself. Subject to the changing conditions and environments in which it is placed, to time, and to its particular physical configuration, its fragile glass structure might fracture ever so slightly—or it might produce sound, which, the artist explains, happens when the piece’s wiring is not working properly.19 Sound signals the dysfunction of the visual. This mutability of the physical object itself, as well as the changeable way it is experienced, this shifting ground between visibility and invisibility and the visual and the sonic reflects the artist’s interrogation of the fluctuating visual frame of blackness in the work: What appears most spectacularly visible disappears, what seems the most plastic dematerializes, what looks white is black, what pronounces shine is matte, what gives the impression it is delimited exceeds its representational structure.

I want to conclude by shifting and broadening my analysis. I aim to suggest that Warm Broad Glow might also provide the backdrop against which we might catch a glimpse of the ever-changing social, political, and aesthetic contexts in which African-American art appears to be seen and consumed. I want to take this wider purview on Ligon’s new neon work, in part based on his own writings on light and contemporary art practice, and more specifically, on his exploration of the work of artist David Hammons.

In “Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness,” Ligon reads what he describes as the “lightness” of Hammons’s work in the early twentieth century as related to a moment in which the elder artist felt less constrained by expectations “policed from both sides of the fence” that often surround African-American art—namely, that it should figure, represent, and address African-American culture.20 My concluding inquiry is this: If Hammons’s use of light responded to
the lessening burdens of representation felt to be placed on African-American artists, how might we understand the contemporary moment, the movement toward light, in Ligon’s neon work? Is it speaking from the same space of representational freedom in which Ligon situates Hammons’s work, or does it differently reflect on the stric-
tures surrounding African-American art in the twenty-first century?

Hammons is an interesting figure to introduce into this discussion. Once an ad
man, trained in commercial art, he has steadily produced work that plays with the
form, materiality, and salability of objects. As he put it in an interview with Deborah
Rothschild in 1993, he was interested in producing art where there was “no object
in the transaction.” He went on to explain, “I’ll dabble in it, but I’m not in it
exclusively in that European way of art as commodity.”21 Since the early 1980s,
Hammons produced work that dematerialized the art, as in his 1983 work Blizzaard
Ball Sale, for which the artist peddled snowballs on the streets of New York City, or
Cold Shoulder (1990), composed of blocks of ice with coats thrown over them. The
artist is also widely known for taking disregarded objects and turning them into highly
regarded works of art, as in his Higher Goals of the 1980s, which he composed using
bottle caps on utility poles.

Intriguingly, as Ligon notes in his article, when discussing issues of art commod-
ification in the Rothschild interview, Hammons maintained that he “was not free
enough yet” to use light to make art. As he elaborated more fully:

There’s other ways of doing it. Like [James] Turrell, he’s on a different
wavelength. . . . But it’s beautiful to see people who have a vision that
has nothing to do with presentation in a gallery. I wish I could make
art like that, but we’re too oppressed for me to be dabbling out there.
. . . I would love to do that because that also could be very black. You
know, as a black artist, dealing just with light. They would say, ‘How
in the hell could he deal with that, coming from where he did?’ I
want to get to that, I’m trying to get to that, but I’m not free enough
yet. I still feel I have to get my message out.22

Eleven years later, after expressing earlier hesitation about dealing with light,
Hammons created Concerto in Black and Blue (2002), which Ligon regards as
emblematic of Hammon’s ongoing process of “radical dematerialization” in his
work. Concerto, which took place at the Ace Gallery in New York, consisted of a
vast, empty, darkened gallery space into which visitors wandered with tiny, touch-
activated flashlights. Entrants formed and co-produced the work as they navigated
through the 20,000-square-foot venue, searching with flashlights that cast a blue shaft
of light. All viewers became equal participants in, and navigators of, a collectively and
socially produced blackness—a public and perpetually changing construction of the
concept.23

Hammons’s use of darkened space and light is both striking and pertinent to this
eSSay’s look at blackness and its visual forms. Concerto figures blackness outside of
the production of objects or marketable products, representing blackness as not
bound, not lit up, not visually accessible, not tangible, not confined, not obtainable,
not commodifiable in the way, for Hartman, blackness has been. In this respect, the word “free” in Hammons’s Rothschild interview can be interpreted as referring to that which is not bound in space, transactional, and exchangeable for money.

So, given Hammon’s influence on Ligon, the elder artist allows for a broader historical perspective on Ligon’s taking up of light as medium. It is fitting to interpret Ligon’s new interest in neon, as he views Hammon’s, as emerging at a moment in which African-American artists are working outside of certain representational constraints that have structured the reception of African-American art since at least the 1920s. In one of the earliest scholarly articles addressing Warm Broad Glow, art historian Richard Meyer views Ligon’s neon work precisely in these terms, examining them in the context of “post-blackness.” Ligon, of course, coined the overused—and often mischaracterized—term in conversation with curator Thelma Golden in the 1990s. Post-black characterized “artists who were adamant about not being labeled ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” While I do not aim to venture into the debates that surround the term, in light of Meyer’s contextual framing and Ligon’s writings, I do want to consider how Warm Broad Glow may speak to particular forms of visibility and marketability that surround African-American art in the contemporary art world.

More specifically, the black neon may reflect what Ligon identified in the Washington Post as the increased visibility of African-American artists—the way their work has been spotlighted. This era has also coincided with a waning interest in, if not distaste for, art that explicitly deals with racial politics. As Meyer perceptively points out, Ligon was producing his neon when critics like Holland Cotter were pronouncing explicitly race-engaged art as “out at the moment.” While detailing or gauging the shifting investments in racial politics in the art world is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to outline the complex and ambiguous ground that African-American art occupies (especially for artists who might not have subscribed to the argument that racial politics were “out”). This new visibility for African-American artists—with the concurrent invisibility of race as subject matter—seemed evident, for example, in the 2008 exhibition of the Rubell Family Collection in Miami titled simply 30 Americans, which featured the work of African-American artists, including the neon piece Untitled (Negro Sunshine) (2006), by Ligon, without mentioning the race or ethnicity of any of the artists. I do not want to analyze the merits or pitfalls of such exhibitions. But I do want to suggest that Ligon’s black neon highlights the complex status of blackness in relation to the art object—blackness’s visible invisibility, the way it is accentuated yet disappeared, spotlighted and yet eclipsed, in contemporary art. Unlike Hammon’s unbound use of blackness and light and his representational freedom, Ligon’s neon work takes a decidedly material and commercial form, one that calls attention, both historically and in the present day, to the forces of commodification that continue to bring blackness in and out of view.
Thanks to Glenn Ligon for taking the time to reflect on his work with me and to Huey Copeland for his thoughtful comments on an early draft of this essay.


3 Ibid., 103–116.


5 Gertrude Stein, Three Lives (New York: The Modern Library, 1933 [1908]).

6 Ibid., 47.

7 Ibid., 113.

8 Ibid., 114.


12 Ibid., 23.

13 Ibid., 25.

14 Dyer, White, 122–142. Dyer also explains how white women are represented through “glow,” not “shine.”


16 Thanks to Tara Rodman for this information on minstrel make-up.

17 Dyer, White, 82–144.


19 Glenn Ligon, in discussion with the author, New York, September 27, 2010.


21 Deborah Menaker Rothschild, Yardbird Suite (Massachusetts: Williams College Museum of Art), 51.
22 Ibid., 51.


