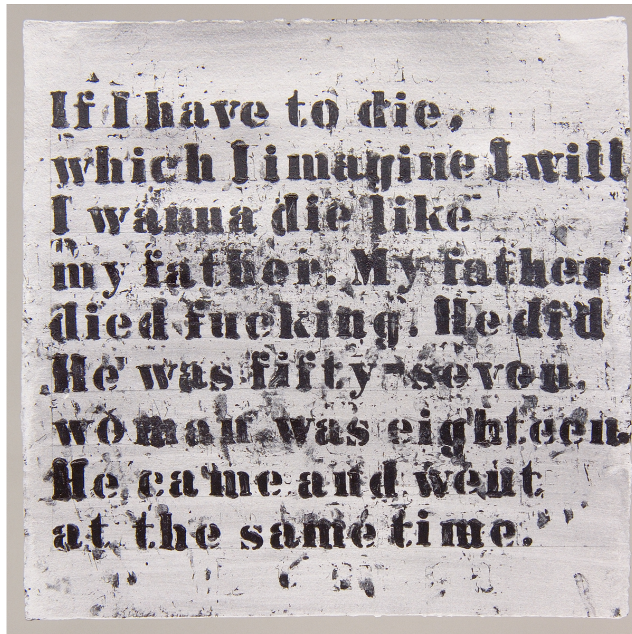

Figure 1: Glenn Ligon, *Came and Went Drawing*, 2008.
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Glenn Ligon

I. Waiting

It is the classic tightrope walk, Richard Pryor deftly balanced between refusing the basic fact of human mortality (*If I have to die*) while inviting our empathy on precisely those terms (*which I imagine I will*), all the while "imagining" his own death, which may be the one thing he can't do with it – and we haven't yet gotten to the punch line. To come across the joke in this form, or a gallery full of similar works drawn from the Pryor catalogue, which I had the opportunity to do at the Whitney Museum retrospective *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* some years back, is to feel invited to breath a little easier, freed for a brief moment from contemporary art's oh-so-serious matters of concern. In that sense, the painting seems at first glance to be a mere prop for the joke's propositional content (*C'mon man, lighten up!)*; but then, imagining that the artist must surely value something more than the joke's bawdy humor, one struggles to discern within it a meaning that could point, if even in an oblique way, toward painterly concerns. I would argue that there is an element in the joke that is formally and conceptually interesting to Ligon, not solely as it pertains to this painting, but in and for his art more generally.

I might begin with the punch line, around which there appears to be a difference of opinion. Pryor's unabridged version of the joke reads: "If I have to die, which I imagine I will, I wanna die like my father. My father died fucking. He did. He was fifty-seven, woman was eighteen. He came and went at the same time. Everybody just said 'Lucky motherfucker.'

And nobody else would fuck the girl for two years." But it's "came and went" that resonates for Ligon. A two-way verbal pun, signifying the "little death" and death as such, but both signifying a kind of departure, a momentary leaving of oneself, in the one case, and a second leaving from which there can be no return, in the other. Coming and going.

Something approximating this oscillation, which is really a kind of stasis (a failure to either come or go), or the possibility of inhabiting no place in particular, can be heard in Ligon's description of his own art practice: "So much of my work has been about disappearing. It's about visibility and legibility being a metaphor for certain kinds of historical disappearance."[1] One has some difficulty figuring out what Ligon's relationship is to that word "disappearance." Does he mourn it or does he long for it? What could it mean for visibility and legibility to be metaphors for it? And how can his work be both "about visibility" and "about disappearing," coming and going – or, better, under what conditions could the work be about both things simultaneously?

In a lesson one might take from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as I am sure Ligon has, given that the novel is one of many he has transformed into visual art, invisibility can be an effect of appearing as others expect you to.[2] One can find it difficult, in fact, to cut the border between emergence and disappearance, visibility and invisibility, coming and going, so centrally does one term serve as a trope for the other in Ligon's work. In *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)* (1991), the canvas reproduces much of the unforgettable opening to the prologue of Ellison's novel, but ends one knows not where, as the words themselves disappear beneath the encrustations of the work's impasto. The novel's very memorable launch is cut short, foundered on the shores of the work of art. In *(miserable) life #17* (2008), a text painting in the same vein as the others, where the phrase "SLEPT AWOKE SLEPT AWOKE" repeats so often that each term undercuts the others' meaning, undercuts the others' claim to be the subject's normative state of being; and *Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice* (1991), which repeats its phrase to similar effect. Or, to take one last and slightly different example, in *Hands* (1996), based on a photo from the Million Man March, where the hands seem simultaneously to emerge from and recede into the darkness. The impossibility of locating the border between states of being, or between appearance and disappearance: this is what makes the "came and went" punch line aesthetically interesting and a sort of conceptual statement of all Ligon's work. It is a paradox of Ligon's art that in the work itself he often takes up the conjuncture of race and the visual, and yet despite all that his subjects never simply appear.

Huey Copeland asserts, in his magnificent new book, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*, that the high-water mark of this complex visuality occurred during the Black Renaissance of the 1980s – a period of frenetic artistic activity, centered in New York and identified by many (Copeland included) with the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987; a moment, as well, in which artists such as Ligon, Renée Green, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Wilson, the subjects of *Bound to Appear*, initially made their

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[1] Peter Goddard, "Film's Future Gets the Silent Treatment," *Toronto Star*, 13 September 2008. http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/FilmFest/article/497524 (accessed on 20 June 2014).

[2] Khalil Gibran Muhammed has recently suggested how this paradox of invisibility might apply in the case of a black artist (such as Ligon): "whether we look at the invisibility of a Travon Martin, or the invisibility of a Magic Johnson in light of the most recent controversies over Don Sterling, or even the ways in which the contemporary art world, for black visual artists, turn on whether they have a responsibility to depict blackness through traditional narratives, are all themes that Ralph Ellison brought to his work." Khalil Gibran Muhammed, interview by Tom Vitale, "Ralph Ellison: No Longer the 'Invisible Man' 100 Years After His Birth," 30 May 2014, National Public Radio.
http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/05/30/317056807/ralph-ellison-no-longer-the-invisible-man-100-years-after-his-birth (accessed 11 June 2014).

mark. Copeland reasons that the novel came to influence contemporary art practice on account of two factors. First, the novel's formal experiments into trauma and collective memory made it "a central touchstone for subsequent revisitations of slavery."[3] Second, the novel (or, the be more accurate, Morrison) completely redefined the politics of racial representation, broadly expanding the repertoire of responses to slavery by predicating the aesthetic ones on slavery's absence from the representational field.[4] Morrison, rarely outmaneuvered when it comes to offering a critical context for her work, provided the following framing for the novel and its moment of production:

> "There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves. . . . There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. . . . And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to."[5]

The projects Copeland discusses, all installation works, "resonate with Morrison's invocation of slavery," and each in its way extends her logic of presence and absence to "summon up the ghosts of the past."[6] Before I turn to discuss how contemporary art summons this past, it would help to place *Bound to Appear* in a scholarly context.

Bound to Appear can be categorized as the most recent in a long line of scholarly investigations into what has come to be called "the afterlife of slavery" -- the general scholarly and political preoccupation with establishing the authority of the slave past in contemporary black life -- and the first to explore that subject in the field of contemporary art. The projects that fall within this subfield are too many to mention here, but among them I would include Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*, Colin Dayan's *The Law Is a White Dog*, Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*, Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery*, and the *Representations* special issue on "redress" edited by Hartman and myself, all work underwritten, to some degree or another, by traumas of slavery and middle passage that appear unknowable, irrecoverable and yet able to account for the *long durée* of slavery. There is much to distinguish these works methodologically, and yet they share an inclination toward the melancholic view that history consists in the taking possession of such grievous experience and archival loss. As I've put it elsewhere, the vanished world of the black Atlantic comes into existence through loss, and can only be sustained through more tales of its loss.[7] This work, in addition to making an affective claim for continuity, to which a debt to Morrisonian ethics is owed, shares as well a belief in the political ontology of slavery, in the repetition of its structural inequalities in the present, a thesis offered in critical solidarity with Michel Foucault's "historical ontology"

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[3] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 3.

[4] Were space to permit, I would anatomize the broad range of concerns in "racial representation" that frame these questions of presence and absence. I will instead direct your attention to the introduction to Darby English's *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), which provides an incredibly useful account of the "interpretive paradigm" that governs what English calls "black representational space": "a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character" (6).

[5] Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road," *World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 3, no. 1 (January/February 1989): 4; qtd. in Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 3.

[6] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 9.

[7] Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," in "Realisms After Modernisms: Views from the Literary Periphery," eds. Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye, special issue, *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 453-474.

-- a portmanteau term that sums up his lifelong interest in the conditions and the possibility of certain objects coming into being and sustaining their own unique temporal force, indifferent to historical context, historical period, or even, as in the case of American slavery these scholars would point out, the act of emancipation or the event of civil war.[8] Structure and affect frequently affirm the authority of the slave past.

Copeland offers the visual as yet another register for this ontology, underscoring his affinities with this generation of scholarly work when he observes, for example, that Ligon's project is to engage "the regimes of viewership that subtend the afterlife of slavery." One in fact picks up deeper soundings of the logic of historical ontology in Copeland's "carceral" vocabulary: "Can blackness ever appear other than through the scrim of its debilitating visual, institutional, discursive, and physical *constraints*," he asks at one point, "the at once *censoring* and spectacularizing frameworks in which black being has been presented for public consumption," "the *mastering* conceit from which African Americans have *sought refuge*?"[9] This is the lingua franca of a dominant strain in contemporary criticism, possessing dual origins in the thinking of Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault, and one need only take a moment to consider official policies of "stop-and-frisk" and the ambient experience of "driving while black" to be convinced of the validity of the thesis of slavery's visual afterlife.[10] It will be my claim, however, and I will get to it presently, that when we reverse the thesis of slavery's afterlife and re-conceptualize it as the basis for a historiography of slavery, we can tend also to hypostatize aspects of the slave past as missing from the visual field and in need of recovery – or, as one would have it, bound to appear. I would contend that this last entailment is not always tenable or justified by the historical record, and would invite us to reconsider this way of predicating of loss. First, a bit of a confession.

In my own prior attempts to address the afterlife of slavery, where my focus was on a problematic of historical injury in the political project of reparations and the political vocabulary of redress, the goal was, as Hartman and I would write, "to interrogate rigorously the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present" – those rough cognates of the slave revealing the underlying work of political ontology.[11] We asked: What is the time of slavery? Is it the time of the present? What is the story about the slave that we ought to tell out of the

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[8] For a critical elaboration of Foucault's method of historical ontology, see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1-27.

[9] Copeland, *Bound to Appear,* 149, 132, 129 (emphases mine).

[10] I mean that contemporary criticism registers the specifically linguistic force of what Michel Foucault termed "the carceral continuum" -- a network for the policing and administrative control of populations beyond the walls of the penitentiary that arose once methods of discipline and surveillance forged in the prison swarmed throughout the social body. Thus, not one but several "peculiar institutions" have successfully operated to define, confine, and control the lives of African Americans (i.e., chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system of racial segregation, the urban ghetto, and the prison in its neoliberal, newly-privatized form), and with the general penalization of poverty, the penal system has been called upon to contain the social disorders created at the bottom of the class hierarchy by neoliberal policies. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans., Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 30. The broad field of work in this vein would include: Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Ruthie Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Loïc Wacquant, *Prisons and Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[11] Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," in "Redress," eds. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, special issue, *Representations,* no. 92 (Fall 2005): 1-15.

present we ourselves inhabit? In taking up these questions, we were concerned to elaborate neither "what happened then" nor "what is owed because of what happened then," but rather the particular character of slavery's violence that appears to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom.[12] However, of late, I have felt the urge to dissent from my own earlier investments in this historical ontology, and to question what might be considered the epistemological "frames" this view of history compels on me, not least a tort historicism that views slavery as a site of wrongful injury – i.e., the assumption that our birth into relation (our admittance to the social order) is the result of an injury from which we have yet to recover; that the social is historical in the sense of being structured by a present past of suffering and injury, so that in order for me to understand myself today I must necessarily believe myself (or, better, my historical proxy) to have been someone else (or potentially someone else) in the past; that the person I was prior to my wounding can in fact be known, and though missing from the field of knowledge, the scholar's recovery of knowledge of those dispossessed by history paves the royal road to a kind of tolerance or repair of damaged life. These sorts of historical and political investments (the acquisitive urges, strong claims-making, perfective activity) are common to agonistic critique, and while I cannot do full justice here to the terms of my dissent from this epistemology, for the moment I would like to observe, in line with the thinking of Stanley Cavell, that the agon of wrestling with the failure, resistance, or impossibility of something that was lost to history making an *appearance* often carries with it fears and desires about social *acknowledgment*. (To which I would add the minor note that at this precise conjuncture my past orientation intersects with that of Copeland and, by extension, others in the "afterlife of slavery" camp.) I hold that it does not always serve the project of critique to limn appearance to the social, or to conceptualize the social as ideally structured around a sense of mutual acknowledgment, and that at the very least it ought to concern us that a number of expressions of loss in the history of slavery do not serve that conception. These last exceptions I will take up more extensively in the next section of this essay.

I mentioned Cavell because no one has been more committed to exploring how the problem of appearance gets infused with the need for acknowledgment than he, and I have often found his queries into the psychological dimensions of skepticism supremely helpful in my efforts to think critically about the habit of positing a return to appearance from archival oblivion as a salve for damaged life. Cavell's project can be summarized as follows (the description is Rei Terada's):

> "Interpreting the mutually irritable conversation between the skeptic ['who seems to care inordinately about appearance and reality'] and her or his – almost always, his – interlocutors, Cavell explains that the skeptic is perceived as wanting something fundamentally unreasonable, something more than conditions on our planet can provide. Cavell interprets the skeptic's language as a request for social acknowledgment in the guise of a failed epistemic statement. In his account, skeptical scruples about appearance and reality transmit fears and desires about interpersonal understanding: '*acceptance* in relation to objects' corresponds to '*acknowledgment* in relation to others'."[13]

[12] Best and Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," 5.
[13] Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2. See also Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 39-124; and Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Both Terada and Cavell mean by "acceptance" that moment when the skeptic no longer disputes the givens of the phenomenal world, a moment that, forever foreclosed from arrival on account of his dissatisfaction, nevertheless carries both his hope and his fear of acknowledgment in the final instance, of the end to his "antagonism toward a world that prevents [him] from joining [his] own being."[14] My concern is not to burrow deeper into the problem of appearance as it has been formulated within this precise strain of philosophical skepticism. Rather, taking Cavell's correlation between appearance and acknowledgment as axiomatic, that is, assuming that he never means their relation to be causal and instead sees them as specifying two poles of a philosophical entailment, I would like to propose that the correlation has something to teach us about a concern with appearance that persists in work on race and slavery.

I pointed earlier to a general interest in the traumas of slavery and middle passage during what might be called the Morrisonian moment, and would add that specific traumas have figured most prominently in this period -- the Margaret Garner infanticide in which she killed her children rather than see them returned to slavery, or, as well, the massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* in which Captain Luke Collingwood ordered that 132 slaves be thrown overboard in the attempt to collect on the voyage's insurance contract. When one gets right down to it, scholars of slavery have been drawn not simply to death as such, but to lives made visible only at the point of their erasure and obliteration. As a consequence, these scholars have had to split their concerns, evenly, as if in an inverse mirror, between the deconstructively elusive and the historically grounding: on the one hand, finding themselves keen to discuss lives that are "spectral" in the sense that Jacques Derrida gives us to understand that word, i.e., departing at the moment of their apparition;[15] on the other, finding it hard to resist the allure of the encounter with power, with "lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few sentences that struck them down."[16]

> All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces – brief, incisive, often enigmatic – only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power . . . . Lives that are as though they hadn't been, that survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them . . . . [T]hey are no longer anything but that which was meant to crush them – neither more nor less."[17]

A broadly shared enthrallment with the "touch of the real," a desire to be drawn into the vortex of lives lost in the very moment when they are found, a desire to bear witness to violent extermination in the hope that such witness may occasion compassionate resuscitation: such propensities have kept critics returning to the scene of the crime, and a crime most often imagined as the archive itself, whether ship's logs, planter's journals, or coerced confessions. This is neither a problem nor a surprise; but the practice of structuring slave historiography around an archive understood as the scene of a crime allows for the emergence, as Mark

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[14] Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 646.

[15] "There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed." (Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* [New York: Routledge, 2006], p. 6). See also Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[16] Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," in James D. Faubion, ed., *Power*, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 158.

[17] Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," 161-4.

Seltzer has observed, of centripetal social bonds (my use of the term *vortex* was no accident), ones "formed at the scene of the crime or at the impact point of a collective disaster, one at which witnessing is mutually witnessed and so forms a momentary social encounter and joint world."[18] Witnessing promises mutuality, and that mutuality, in turn, a kind of intimate acknowledgement. But as I have written elsewhere, even Morrison in her more recent (post-*Beloved*) novels has abandoned this project, turning her attention away from solidarity and mutual acknowledgment and toward the conditions of abandonment as such, as this last registers in the past's recalcitrance and moments when it fails to speak to us or mirror our concerns. Thus even Morrison has found reason to accent the centrifugal energies in historical moments, as I phrased it, "not when things come together but when things fall apart."[19]

As Copeland makes clear, his four artists make their own departures from the *Beloved* project, most crucially by way of their work's facture (i.e., workmanship, the execution of its surfaces) and what Copeland calls a style of "antiportraiture," the response of black artists who have long been objectified on account of their race "refus[ing] the gaze," denying access to their interiority, and generally claiming "an opacity and inscrutability" long denied them by choosing to conceal or obscure the surfaces of their art (Lorna Simpson's turned-away self-portraits arguably exemplify this style).[20] What is more, the *Beloved* moment was so thoroughly structured by the paradigm of the revenant (the imperative to "summon the presences" or "recollect the absences" of slaves), so committed to a logic of appearance, like the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movements before it, and committed too to "a replaying of the trauma of slavery [with the implication] that repressed horrors have somehow been recovered or bubbled up from a temporal interregnum," that to say that these artists produced antiportraits hostile to a logic of appearance is essentially to say that their work was not a part of its historical moment.[21] I see no problem in saying that, and in fact wish that Copeland had, but I also understand that in doing so one risks descending into a kind of meaninglessness (*how can art not be a part of the historical moment in which it was made?*).[22] Such a claim requires that we

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[18] Mark Seltzer, "The Official World," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 726.

[19] Best, "On Failing," p. 472.

[20] Copeland, *Bound to Appear,* 9, 205. Copeland gets the term "autoportraiture" from Lauri Firstenberg. See Firstenberg, "Autonomy and the Archive in America: Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center for Photography and Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 317-319.

[21] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 9.

[22] I actually believe what I am saying here, regardless of how paradoxical it sounds, and mean to court a skepticism regarding the methods of the discipline of art history, one largely French and philosophical in orientation, proffered in the writings of Hubert Damisch, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Ernst von Alphen. Each points to doubts as to the epistemological reach of the discipline's core axiom -- "that the meaning of art can only be formulated historically. . . [that an] artwork, therefore is always an expression of the historical period or figure that produced it." Damish maintains that it is impossible to possess the "period eye" (a term attributed to Michael Baxandall) of another time in history. (See Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Hubert Damisch, "A Conversation with Hubert Damisch," *October*, vol. 85 [Summer 1998]: 9.) Damich and von Alphen, drawing largely on theories of the artwork's autonomy indebted to Theodor Adorno, argue for a view of the artwork as "an act of thought," that "works of art appear to full advantage only if we deal with them as ways of thinking." See Ernst von Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2009).

take a moment to think through the conditions under which this flurry of artistic activity, this shared interest in slavery and its representation, might be said not to have congealed into an "event" historically understood. The vocabulary of presence and absence, the logic of appearance, the idea that black art in 1980s New York signaled a turning point in the structure of racial representation – these are the principles and conceptual postures that have been fundamental to the exploration of blackness in the aesthetic realm, but they all build on the assumption that there is (or was) something *missing from* the visual field, something that contemporary art at a particular moment in time found itself in a unique position to recover and represent.

I aim in the remainder of this essay to sketch the outline of an alternative tradition and to propose that some of the artists discussed in *Bound to Appear* are a part of it; to suggest that the turn away from appearance goes back a long way, that, in essence, there has been and continues to be a long genealogy of sustained and practiced antipathy to appearance in the black tradition -- a kind of "antiportraiture," if you will, in the sense of a longstanding commitment to representation-against-appearance, but a tradition of profound philosophical and ethical significance. I will do so by sketching the genealogy of a *black ascesis*, borrowing the latter term from Michel Foucault, who characterized it as "the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, *one never attains*" – significance falling on that anticipation of failure, of an appearance that one never attains.[23] (Copeland in many respects engages that tradition, but my contention would be that to recognize that this tradition was not predicated on a sense of lack, specifically on a sense of something being missing from the visual field, ought to have consequences for our method, in something of a reversal of the Heisenbergian principle that viewing the object changes the object. I would argue, on the contrary, that viewing the object changes the *method*, and these consequences manifest on the scholarly practices that we use to "discipline" art: either the attempt to explicate the artwork's meaning be restating what it *represents*, to explain it historically through recourse to its moment of production, or to restore its fragments to the *context* from which they were taken.) I will make the case for black ascesis in contemporary art practice by turning to an artist at a remove from the time and place of artistic activity attended to in *Bound to Appear* -- Mark Bradford -- in whose canvases I espy an invitation to what I like to think of as a philosophical project of self-divestiture, a project that often involves the failure to make an appearance. But, before I get to the appearance "one never attains" in Bradford's work, I feel it necessary to first dig in to what Copeland means by that word *appear*.

II. Bound to Appear

Copeland takes his title from Cedric Robinson's critical tour de force, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, and specifically a synoptic passage in which Robinson explains the ways in which the effects of racism and nationalism ("racialism" in his language) will expand throughout the modern capitalist world:

> As an enduring principle of European social order, the effects of racialism were bound to appear in the social expression of every strata of every European society no matter the structures upon which they were formed. None was immune . . . . It was . . . a quite natural occurrence . . . . But to the . . . radical intelligentsias – it was also an unacceptable one, one subsequently denied. Nevertheless, it insinuated itself into their thought and their theories. And

[23] Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Key of Life," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. I of *The Essential Works of Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 137 (emphasis mine).

> thus, in the quest for a radical social force, an active historical subject, it compelled certain blindnesses, bemusements . . ."[24]

Robinson's carefully chosen words lend an air of the inevitable both to racialism's appearance ("every strata," "no matter the structures," "none was immune," "natural occurrence," "compelled"), and to the Western scholarly and political ignorance ("blindnesses," "bemusements") of an ongoing philosophically coherent and ideologically committed movement among blacks – what he terms the *black radical tradition*.[25] And while Western society, on account of this enduring racialism, provided a "social cauldron" of black radicalism ("its location and its objective condition"), it would not prove to be its "specific inspiration," "the foundation for its nature or character."[26] In short, racialism is never the cause for which the black radical tradition is the effect. It is on the basis of these premises that Robinson makes the case that slavery did not define the black condition.[27]

Copeland, in twisting the phrase "bound to appear" into his titular figure, gives it the agility of a two-way verbal pun (that again!), one that serves the purposes of both visual studies and the study of slavery: "the black body is bound to appear due to its vital place in the American cultural imaginary."[28] Bound in the sense of inevitable, once again, but bound as well in the sense that the body that commands such privileged psychic space does so on account of slavery. In crafting this particular turn of phrase, Copeland wishes for a pun that dances above the apparently more solid ground of appearance. But given the causal disjunct that Robinson posits between Western radicalism and the black radical tradition (that is, the claim that black radicalism "cannot be understood" in terms of the context of its genesis; that it "is not a variant" of Western radicalism), one might raise the question of whether or not, and if so how, slavery could "appear" in contemporary art, at least in the ways in which that term makes sense to visual art, while staying true to (or remaining apprehensible within) the terms that Robinson sets forth. I think it makes sense for us to push harder on that verb – *to appear* – and to ask whether Robinson expected the black radical tradition, with which Copeland aligns his four artists, would ever make an appearance of the visual sort.[29]

I don't feel it would be overstating the matter to say that *Black Marxism* is a curious source from which to draw one's title if the goal is to foreground the specifically visual resonances of the phrase "bound to appear," for evidence of the black radical tradition seems to have been recondite, more felt than seen, its presence more intuited than witnessed, its actualization more paradoxically present than empirically given. As Robinson, who invented the phrase, would go on to describe it, in the black radical tradition revolutionary activity was focused on "the structures of the mind," where defeat or victory were largely "internal affair[s]" – it was a tradition that "more easily sustained suicide than assault."[30]

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[24] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 28.
[25] "Before the African and New World Black liberation movements of the post-Second World War, few Western scholars of the African experience had any conception of the existence of an ideologically based or epistemologically coherent historical tradition of Black radicalism" (Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 72).
[26] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.
[27] Robinson's *Black Marxism* thus presents a riposte to the idea that black people are products of a unique historical legacy rooted in slavery. See Robin D.G. Kelley, "Foreword," in *Black Marxism*, xix.
[28] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 205.
[29] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 12.
[30] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168-9.

Some origins to the tradition. The followers of Nongquawuse, the Xhosa prophetess who claimed in 1856 that the ancestral spirits told her that the Xhosa should slaughter all their cattle and destroy their crops (the repository of all their wealth), in return for which the spirits would banish their British occupiers into the sea -- a millennialist prophesy that would result in a cattle-killing of such apocalyptic proportions that three quarters of the Xhosa nation would die of the resulting famine.[31] The enslaved Africans, mulattoes, and poor whites who throughout much of the seventeenth century escaped to the Palmares, a region of steep and precipitous mountains on the coast of Brazil, where they established settlements, a republic consisting of smaller palmares (or *quilombos*), and a king with the power to negotiate treaties with the colonial governor of the state of Pernambuco – but a society of fugitives who would abandon and burn their settlements to the ground each time Portuguese armies approached, melting away into the surrounding forest, their state reclaimed by wilderness like some post-crash subprime suburban development.[32] The rebels who in 1915 struck valiantly, though futilely, against British colonial rule in Nyasaland, upon hearing the following entreaty from their leader, John Chilembwe, a millenarian Christian minister: "we have determined to strike a first and a last blow and then we will all die by the heavy storm of the whiteman's army."[33] These are the roots out of which the black radical tradition emerges, and none can be understood in the terms of class conflict or individual resistance most common to Western rationality ("the individualistic and often spontaneous motives that energized the runaway, the arsonist, the poisoner"), not to mention in terms of a desire to bring about positive social change. These origins (curious, to say the least) provide evidence, on the contrary, of a "very different and shared order of things," of a tradition founded on a "very different role for consciousness than was anticipated in Western radicalism."[34]

With violence "turned inward" rather than directed at their oppressors, these rebels "lived on their terms, they died on their terms, they obtained their freedom on their terms . . . . [and they] defined the terms of their destruction."[35] What lends this tradition its "radical" accent is as much the inwardness of the violence as the violence itself, the tradition's actualization through self-abnegation rather than against it. But, as a politics, if politics is what we want to call it, such communities sought to achieve not a positive set of social outcomes (e.g., the attenuation of the objective power of the enemy, the overthrow of slavery, the actualization a new world;), but instead sought to prioritized "the renunciation of actual being for historical being," the community's successful mobilization "against its material aspect."[36] Victory and freedom make their appearance in disappearance. The people stake their claim on and as community in the moment of its dissolution – an ethics (a far more accurate term, in my view) committed to "the integral totality of the people" against their "material aspect." In Robinson's succinct view, this ethics involved a "shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."[37]

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[31] See J. B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophesy in South African and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[32] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 132-36.

[33] R. I. Rotberg, ed., *Strike a Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa by George Simeon Mwase* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 48-9.

[34] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 169, 168, 68.

[35] Robinson, *Black Marxism,* 168.

[36] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168.

[37] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 171.

What kind of tradition is this?[38] By what logic does one "preserve" the collective being in acts of self-destruction, self-renunciation, inwardness, and collective disappearance? What is that? (Robin D.G. Kelley sees the change inspired by the black radical imagination as having roots in the surreal.[39]) Some observers, knowing the level of violence the situation warranted, and knowing too who ought to have been its proper recipient, dismissed those who chose this plan of action as an "outlandish people"; and though this description was intended to disparage and dismiss, it seems in fact to be the most accurate.[40] Black radicalism is quite literally the consciousness of those who remembered another land, those with distinct imaginings of an elsewhere, or those with a superior moral claim on "home."[41] Returning to the paradox of the black radical tradition with that distinction in mind, the logic of appearance-in-disappearance starts to make a great deal more sense. To assert that self-destruction "preserve[s] the collective being," "the integral totality of the people," is to understand that *self-annihilation presents a primary figure for diaspora*. (Ask again the question *What is that?* and the answer is *diaspora*.) It would be falling short of the mark to designate this collective being "missing," for though clearly absent, the only evidence of its actualization is its self-destruction.

So what could it mean to say, then, as Copeland does, that "it is within this lineage that the four practitioners examined in this book belong"? What does it mean to say that Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Fred Wilson, and Renee Green, all committed in their unique ways to the visualization of slavery's effects, to "the visual structures, logics, and modes of speaking arising from it that continue to inform the present," that they share a tradition with African millennialists and Palmares fugitives?[42] And what could it mean to say that these artists "made clear that the black body is bound to appear due to its vital place in the American cultural imaginary" (205), that they restored something that was missing from the visual field, when under Robinson's dispensation the black radical tradition signifies not something missing from our understanding but something that "cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis"? I think Copeland is right about the connection, but not always for the right reasons.

III. Failure, painting as

To draw into focus my own sense of what links the black radical tradition to the practice of contemporary art requires going back and recovering a resonance in Pryor's joke that I deliberately repressed. "Came and went": the conjuncture of sexuality and death. I mean not that sexuality broadly construed provides a model for understanding the trope of appearance in disappearance, of an order actualized in death, that I espy in the black radical

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[38] David Scott feels degrees more discerning when he asks of the critical commonplace "the black radical tradition": what makes us think that we can string these words together? See his "On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March 2013): 1-6.
[39] A surrealism *avant la lettre* in Afrodiasporic culture recognized "the imagination as our most powerful weapon"; and the Europeans who would claim the name realized that "entire cultures had methods of thought and communication that transcended the conscious." Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 159-60.
[40] Robinson uses the phrase "outlandish Africans" (*Black Marxism*, 169-70), and he gets it from Gerald Mullin's *Flight and Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 18.
[41] Significantly, Robinson fails to draw a single example of the black radical tradition from the North American context -- which absence suggests that creolization effectively snuffed out this revolutionary consciousness.
[42] Robinson, *Bound to Appear*, p. 205.

tradition, but rather that specifically queer theories of sexuality as antisociality do.[43] I will have more to say about sexuality in a moment. At this juncture it's important to turn back to the art and to observe that a number of the artists in this ostensibly black tradition (the Black Renaissance) are producing queer objects – queer not on account of the artist's assumed sexual identity (though there is that), but queer as a way of distinguishing the object's inadequacy to sustain the representational claims made on its behalf, queer in the sense of offering "a disruption that thwarts efforts to determine political goals according to a model of representation," queer to the extent that "refusing to accept the adequacy of given forms, which is also to say, the sufficiency of any social positivization, grounds antinormative politics."[44] The queer objects that are of interest to me set themselves up to fail and in a way that I find signally relevant; they are queer in the sense of producing their own failure, and in that way adequate to the appearance-in-disappearance that is the crux of the black radical tradition.[45]

In my effort to understand how an artwork might afford such a form of derealized social relation, how it may be the only means of making those relations apprehensible, I have found Leo Bersani supremely helpful, specifically his essay "Sociality and Sexuality."[46] Bersani observes that contemporary criticism frequently works on the assumption that relations are grounded "in antagonism and misapprehension," which gives rise to a reactive politics focused on the past where the best one can hope for is the "transgressive reversal" or "antithetical reformulation" of social hierarchies.[47] For Bersani, this is the critical habit of psychoanalysis; it applies as well to the multicultural trinity of "race, class, and gender" gestured toward in *Bound to Appear*'s subtitle. Homosexuality, on the contrary, he associates,

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[43] In my attempt to make suicide and self-abnegation in the black radical tradition legible as a forms of negative sociability, I take direct inspiration (perhaps, better, indirect challenge) from David Kurnick and his quite astute observation that, when it comes to identifying examples of the annihilation and self-shattering so generative for queer theories of antirelationality, "such experiments [remain] rare outside the confines of certain bounded zones (works or art, analytic sessions, sexual subcultures)." In the genealogy of this mode of thought, one is often faced with "a necessary paucity of real-life examples." Sex remains a prime source and laboratory (witness the critical turn to barebacking), while race and self-shattering are more often felt to be anathema. David Kurnick, "Carnal Ironies," *Raritan*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 109. Darrieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010) provides a brilliant exception to the sundering of blackness and self-shattering in African diasporic work.

[44] The first quote is taken from Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 1. The second quote is from Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 98. Other forms of the queer object that serve a project of derealization are Daniel Tiffany's "lyric substance" (a lyricism that points to "the obscurity of its particular medium") and Rei Terada's "looking away" (an attachment to "mere" appearance – to "transient perceptual objects" that are "below or marginal to normal appearance" – "because only they seem capable of noncoercive relation.") See Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 55-6; and Terada, *Looking Away*, 3-4.

[45] Heather Love has recuperated "the strain of failure that runs through all modernism" for both modernist studies and the critical project of queer theory. See Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56. See also Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[46] Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 641-656.

[47] Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," p. 648-9.

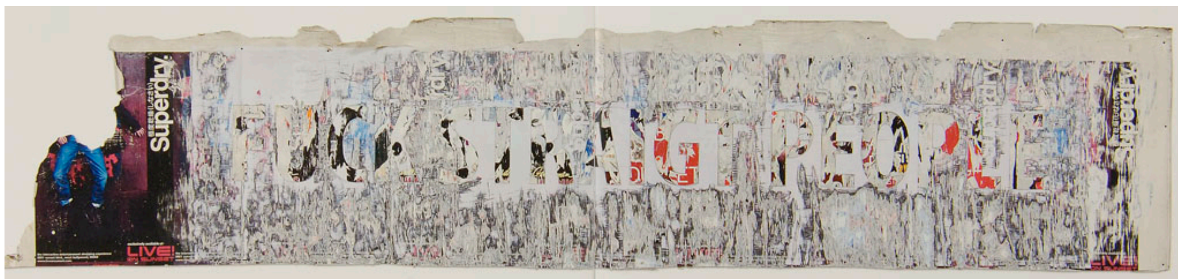
following Michel Foucault, with "new relational modes" that are for the most part "unforeseen." Positioned "slantwise" in the social fabric, the homosexual introduces an always "improbable" set of relational possibilities: "the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light."[48] Such relations can be arrived at neither adaptively nor transgressively, but only by taking a foundational approach to relationality, that is by way of a search for beginnings. And yet, this birth of relation is not historical and cannot be said to have ever existed ("there was never any moment when we were not already in relation"); it therefore cannot be recovered. A "genealogy of the relational. . . a certain threshold of entry into the relational": this "moment" is so purely hypothetical that it can only be arrived at through the *performance* of antirelationality.[49]

To Bersani's way of thinking, abstract art plays a significant role in making this performance happen. The nearly "unpunctuated whiteness" of a late-Turner canvas, the uniform darkness of a Rothko: a will to abstraction epitomizes the erasure of figurality that the entry into relation demands. It is as if "the lines of movement in space that art represents could, as it were, be ontologically illuminated as they almost disappear within a representation of their emergence from nothing."[50] Coming and going. Bersani continues:

> "Origination is designated by figures of its perhaps not taking place; the coming-to-be of relationality, which is our birth into being, can only be retroactively enacted, and it is enacted largely as a *rubbing out of formal relations*. . . . If art celebrates an originating extensibility of all objects and creatures into space – and therefore our connectedness to the universe – it does so by also inscribing within connectedness the possibility of its not happening. Relationality is itself related to its own absence."[51]

Bersani requires a figure of nonrelationality to project the "still improbable" forms of connection that homosexuality augurs. To my mind, that figure can be mortgaged to describe the form of the improbable that interests us here -- the negative sociability spawned by the black radical tradition – for it is this appearance-in-disappearance that contemporary black art's "rubbing out" of formal relations seems intent on making possible.

I said earlier that in the canvases of Mark Bradford one can espy an invitation to a philosophical project of self-divestiture, one embedded in the surface's actively working out of a crux, a critical thought happening in its very form. That formal divestment often comes in the suggestion that we have been deprived, that there is less for us to see here than perhaps confronted the artist in the making of the work.



[48] Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136, 138.
[49] Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 642.
[50] Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 643.
[51] Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 643 (emphasis mine).

Figure 2: Mark Bradford, *Paris Is Burning*, 2010. Courtesy Hauser and Wirth, London, United Kingdom © Mark Bradford

In Bradford's work, much of the critical activity is given over to textual fragments drawn from the accumulated detritus of the artist's South Central LA neighborhood. The fragment in Bradford triggers a dialectical process: on the one hand, it introduces a logic of part and whole that encourages a recovery of the fragment's past, but on the other hand, it defies and resists this desired historical recovery by reminding us that the putative "more" to which it points can never be recovered or fully experienced. Fragment is thus not limited to a dynamic of part and whole, but corresponds to notions of disturbance, interruption, performance -- it is "a question of function, a philosophical concept, a manifestation of a theory. . . a self-labeled 'thought'."[52] From the perspective of the fragment, the goal is deliberately to frustrate, derange, and disrupt the project of historical reconstruction. A Bradford canvas can thus be understood to have taken on its history in the form of the fragments it has had embedded, encrusted, and enfolded within its surface; and that surface, by ensuring our failure to get either outside of or beneath it, by demoting to inconsequence anything that is not it, forecloses the possibility of its being conceptualized as a surface that hides a depth accessible to thought. To phrase this in the language of formal relation, a Bradford canvas, often consisting of a great deal of text, attempts to forestall any further textualization of its surface, inhibiting its appropriation by those projects that would "ad[d] an explanation" to it or "pu[t] it into a frame" as a way of suturing its meaning – a process we scholars, on account of our training, tend to take for granted.[53] The work strives to close itself off, in short, and this is how it fails.

To fully appreciate the fragment as "performance" we might be called on to consider the artist's material practice as an expression of it. Bradford builds his canvases by first gathering up various kinds of found paper, such as advertisements from the underground black economy, comic book pages, concert announcements, wheatpaste posters, advertising copy, album covers, and the like. He soaks this paper in water and other agents, rendering the rigid materials pliant; and, finally, adds further bleaching agents, caulking, plastic mesh, mason's string, polyester cord, packing cord, and other materials to generate effects of relief within the surface itself. Once the surface sediments, acquiring its bulk and solidity, Bradford then power sands the result to reveal the hidden strata underneath. Let me add this: there is no appreciating the artwork apart from this violence against the semiotic order, no mere looking at the work outside the struggle to perceive how its effects have been made to come about. The work commands you to see and experience its effects in light of the forms of obliteration that have caused them to appear.

In *Paris Is Burning* (figure 2), the artist has taken a series of cardboard advertisements for Superdry jeans, lined them up horizontally, and attacked them with a belt sander to reveal the stenciled (and mis-spelt) phrase "FUCK STRAIGT PEOPLE" underneath. The ghostly traces of the original advertisements suggest a palimpsest; but, in something of a visual paradox, the stenciled letters appear to be both on the same surface plane as the sheets of Superdry ad copy, and to be the negative space created where a different type of print copy has been allowed to come through an overlying surface. There is a layer of found paper sandwiched between the layer that is closest to the viewer and the one on which everything else hangs, and this inner layer provides the negative relief that the eye needs in order to read

[52] Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 4.
[53] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

the stenciled message ("Fuck Straigt People"), but whatever writing that paper may have had imprinted on its surface, as language it is now obscured and indecipherable, forever lost to us.

On the observation, then, that Bradford's surfaces consist less of multiple layers of writing than of multiple layers of paper itself, I would propose that we see these surfaces less as palimpsests (a prevailing trope in critical theory since Freud) and more as structured according to a logic of immurement.[54] W*hat if we saw the surfaces themselves as part of a process of building a history, of archiving fragments from our everyday world and then walling them up, sealing them off, imprisoning, and entombing them within layers of paper?* How does the politics of the artwork shift if, rather than a palimpsest, we thought we were looking at a deliberate act of immurement?

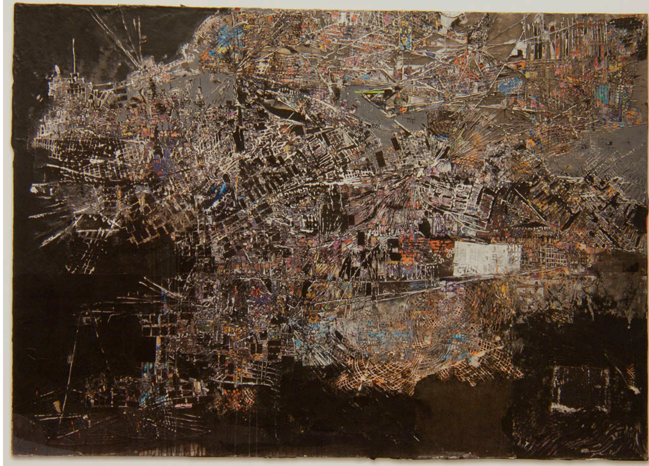


Figure 3: Mark Bradford, *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run Into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty*, 2008. Courtesy Hauser and Wirth, London, United Kingdom © Mark Bradford

In *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run Into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty*, one begins to see what is made available by a structure of immurement. As the belt sander clears away the various layers of the painting, we recover not so much an underwriting as an under*painting,* or rather not paint per se, but a writing that has been turned into paint through the very act of erasure.[55] What was originally "print" finds itself transformed into "paint," what was once a language has been drained of its semantic content. And in this manner, in this movement back through the surface via erasure and obliteration, the work isn't so much recovering a history, repairing a sense of damaged relation, or reconstructing writing and syntax, as one would in a palimpsest. Rather, it is drawing forth new relations, ones signaled by the image's transformation into something resembling a map, which in this case, significantly, corresponds to no territory

[54] The metaphor of text as palimpsest has both a deconstructive genealogy in Derrida's writing "sous rature" and a psychoanalytic one in Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad." The figure of writing as palimpsest has meant for post-structuralism that "the authority of the text is provisional," "the origin is a trace," and language is "inaccurate yet necessary to say"; and, in Freud's example of a wax slab imprinting itself on the layer of paper above, it has meant, among other things, that "no consciousness is possible without the unconscious reaching out to the receptive apparatus." On the deconstructive palimpsest, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xii-xviii; on the psychoanalytic palimpsest, see Richard Galpin, *Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest*. http://www.richardgalpin.co.uk/archive/erasure.htm (accessed 21 February 2013).

[55] Paper will be obliterated in such a way that the revealed color suggests a singular planar surface. String or cord will trace the shape of letters, but upon sanding just as easily obscure as reveal that shape. Neon polyester cord (from Home Depot) either red, orange, yellow, yellow-green, or deep blue combines with a silicone caulk (also from Home Depot) that, either white, black, or clear, reveals its own color upon sanding while obscuring the color of the cord it hides underneath. See Richard Shiff, "Move with Chance," in *Mark Bradford* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), *77*.

currently in existence, and thus remains unnavigable for sure, though not for that reason unavailable as an object of hope. It maps, in a way, Foucault's "improbable" "new social relations."

Once sandpapered, the surface will on occasion reveal orphaned bits of writing, words that appear to have been part of some proposition or advertisement or sentence: broken syntax, orphaned phonemes, solitary syllables. To understand the fragment's performance, we might take our cue from Mieke Bal: "as we look – teased by the representational illusion of the bits of glossy magazine – and try to hold the object each of them carries as its past before it was torn up, and as we try to surround it with a projected narrative that gives it meaning, *we fail*."[56] There is every hint that these fragments may find completion in what exists just beneath the surface; but everything that suggests the possibility of more depth is cut off from you, and as soon as you attempt to supplement for missing depth by attempting to link the fragments to a missing context, *you have left the work, and therefore failed*. Failed in the sense that it is quite impossible to "hold the object" on a scale larger than the object itself without that entailing a venture at reading far past the edges of the fragment, and thus past the limits of the work. The whole purpose of the work it seems, again, is to help you to fail.

Accept Bradford's canvases as structures of immurement rather than palimpsests and it becomes hard to understand their purpose as one of returning to the plane of appearance something that has been lost; rather, the accent seems to be on what is occasioned by loss, by disappearance. For when I stand before one of these canvases I feel enjoined to imagine a relation to the written word that would not involve signification or the working out of meanings, a thought experiment that feels fundamental on account of its feeling so "improbable" (this feels like an invitation to rethink my relation to the written *world* – to rethink relationality as such). A Bradford canvas instigates and directs an inquiry into what it is saying by "holding in reserve the power to defy, resist, and derange the very process of discovery it engenders."[57] These are its conditions of aesthetic immersion. But even if I were able to resist the work's power to derange, even if I were able to restore all these fragments to their myriad historical contexts in a way that told a narrative of the origin of the work of art, and in a way that made that repressed and forgotten history "appear," the ineluctable demand spawned by the sheer beauty of its surface would still seem to be: why should any of that matter?

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[56] Mieke Bal, *Lili Dujourie – Early Works 1969-1983* (Munich: Kunstverein München, 1998), 126.
[57] Elias, *The Fragment*, 190.