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Facing Trauma:

An Exploration into the Aestheticizing of Black Trauma in Fine Arts Institution

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Introduction

Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*, imbued with both poignancy and pain, speaks to a moment in American history unlike any other art piece. What is known as a painful cry in response to extreme racial terror that immediately followed Reconstruction, is poetic and thought provoking. As her voice topples over notes that pay homage to the numerous black bodies that once swung in “the southern breeze”, once the bodies of loved ones, and are now “strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees” (*Billie Holiday—Strange Fruit*).

Holliday’s voice clearly cries out in pain and horror at this tragedy. So too, do the graphically honest lynching postcards that make up the exhibition *Without Sanctuary* (an example of a postcard is seen in figure 1).

Interpreted as both artistic and historical objects, the postcards of *Without Sanctuary* found their home in galleries and museums all over the country. While Holliday’s iconic song illustrates a significant period of black trauma through language, *Without Sanctuary* holds a different power, as the images are able to crystallize black trauma in a way that speaks to a cultural experience and collective memory that is both painful and important. To have these postcards—a literal commodification of the black body, used for casual consumption and financial profit—line the walls of art museums and gallery’s influences the work done by the viewer to engage with the image. *Without Sanctuary* holds a special place in the narrative of...
racial terror during post Reconstruction years because of way it was displayed. The meaning of these objects are influenced by their context in a fine arts establishment. What was once a means of sending messages through words and family sentiment, is now sending new messages through the aestheticizing of its visual qualities and historical significance. In this instance of aestheticizing black trauma, one wonders how this influences public discourse around black trauma and collective memory. Through an exploration of trauma in art historical theory, collective memory, black trauma and what the viewer has to say about it all, this paper will explore how images like those of Without Sanctuary hold such power as images within fine arts institutions and how that power is yielded.

This paper will examination trauma, collective memory and counter memory in regards to two specific pieces: Michael Richard’s Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian, and Glenn Ligon’s show Blue Black, specifically his installation A Small Band. Both of these works speak to a trauma that is cultural and historical with very clear implications in contemporary black America. Both works will be evaluated with these key aspects of art historical and cultural theory. These works will not only be in conversation with theory, but professional and novice perspectives of the works as well. Together they illustrate the power these images hold, not only within art historical circles, but in the greater public at large—demonstrating the real work art does as a starter of conversations, a provoker of discomfort and a catalyst for action.

**Theory**

**Trauma**

When investigating how blackness has been experienced throughout time, encounters with trauma are not only inevitable, but the understanding of its role in black history is
imperative. As this understanding of trauma relates to both blackness and art history, it can be defined and explored (El-Alam Representing National Traumas). However, what sets trauma apart in memory is its unresolved nature. Cathy Caruth, a scholar of trauma studies, describes trauma as, “the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world…. [Trauma] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (El-Alam, Representing National Traumas). Trauma necessitates repeated experiences with the traumatic event because, according to trauma expert Johnny El-Alam, “unlike regular memories, traumatic memories remain raw, unprocessed, and beyond the confines of the subject's conscious state” (El-Alam, Representing National Traumas). This reliving of the traumatic moment is a foundational principle of trauma studies. Trauma is inevitably relived by those inflicted by its pain. A common reliving of trauma is through the experience of art. Traumatic moments are relived both in the creation and viewing of a work that tackles traumatic subject matter and these works allows for the important process of mourning and moving past the traumatic memory (Hickey, In the Wake of Trauma).

Yet one wonders how the trauma of blackness and black history can ever be overcome. As peoples who face both structural and determined trauma that is compounded by experiences over time, black trauma only changes its face, not its effect. Yesterday’s slavery is today’s prison industrial complex, and last week’s Jim Crow is this week’s urban school systems. What

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1 According to trauma studies scholar Dominick LaCapra, structural trauma is a moment in which subsequent traumas derive—often because of systemic causes (Hickey, “In the Wake of Trauma”). Meanwhile determined trauma traces back to an individual and specific event (Hickey, “In the Wake of Trauma”). Moments of black trauma, because they are historical in nature, while it pertains to specific isolated instances with individuals, are often related to larger moments in history that most certainly were causes of subsequent trauma.
should also be considered, is that while trauma is unending, so too is perseverance and survival. As trauma changes its face so too do methods of resistance—illustrating a resilience that is more intrinsic to blackness than the pain that caused it. Art fully reflects this unending trauma and resilience, both in its subject matter and in its interpretation.

Every work that tackles the plight of black pain in its subject matter brings the pain into the present. It acts as a constant reminder of trauma. And characteristically of trauma, its relationship with time is not finite. Not only is it a constant reminder of trauma for the viewer, the viewer often makes the mistake of perpetuating violence as they view the work. This is why there is no “moving past the trauma” (Hickey, In the Wake of Trauma). Numerous viewers interviewed about Michael Richard’s Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian felt as if the work illustrated nothing different about history, and did not speak to anything specific about black history or blackness itself. One viewer even disregarded the pain of the subject entirely, claiming it instead as “pride” (John). Every viewer that does not fully understand the history being shared, pain being expressed and blackness being explored is enacting violence on the memory of black trauma and perpetuating it in the present. The danger that the viewer presents to the work has led to conversations on ethical viewing.

Cultural historian Dr. Jonathan Bordo stresses the viewer’s ethical obligation, when experiencing a work of traumatic art, to become a witness to the trauma and participate in the healing process (Benbassat, An Eye for an I). However, researcher Karen Benbassat makes a crucial point: “the viewer is not bound to a code of ethics or responsibility” (Benbassat, An Eye for an I). This is where the contention arises when it comes to the relationship between images of black trauma and those that view these images. Whether people are witnesses, spectators, viewers or consumers of black traumatic images, people have been historically irresponsible and
continue to be, as proven through the interviews about *Tar Baby* vs. *St. Sebastian*. From the denial of the subject’s trauma to the commodification of it—as illustrated by the legacy of lynching postcards—viewers have been a part of the infiniteness of black trauma. This legacy of disrespect and irresponsibility on the part of the viewer is why these works act as healing tools for a wound that will never close. They are used to explore and express the reality of the collective trauma that has encapsulated blackness at times. Yet acts of violence persist, even as artists try to facilitate healing. This consistent experience of trauma throughout history and perpetuated by viewers, is the cause of a collective trauma and collective memory of trauma that black Americans continue to not only harbor but transfer to future generations.

**Collective Memory**

The specific trauma this paper addresses—black trauma—is collective in nature. Black trauma in this paper is defined as a collective trauma experienced by Americans of African descent. The collective aspect of this definition addresses the communal experience of this trauma. Because of trauma’s tumultuous relationship with memory, it is inevitable that a peoples plagued with ages of collective trauma and oppression, would also be plagued by its memory. J.C. Alexander notes the connection between collective trauma and memory by defining collective trauma as a process that “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (*Institutionalizing Counter-Memories*). Collective memory, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as memory experienced by a social group that typically passes memories down through generations.
This cause and effect relationship between Collective Trauma and Collective Memory is illustrated through literature such as that about Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome was developed by Dr. Joy DeGruy. In efforts to explain the “consequences of multigenerational oppression” Dr. DeGruy connects how historical trauma (interchangeable with collective trauma for our purposes) is passed down through actual memories—specifically through DNA (George, *Do You Have Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*). The key to this study, as well as my own, is the concept that current generations hold on to previous generation’s pain, compounding trauma on an individual as they not only work through their contemporary pain, but that of their predecessors all at the same time. People are going through this because collective trauma leads to the collective memory that is being passed down to them.

This connection between collective trauma and memory is relevant to the perception of artworks that address moment of collective trauma. By addressing this subject matter, they are both documenting collective memory and participating in its perpetuation. As another work is made, it is also acting as another intervention in the process of processing traumatic memory. As Johnny El-Alam mentioned, trauma is relived as one witnesses something that connects back to the original trauma. Art in this scenario, acts as the trigger. With every image and object that addresses trauma, it acts as a trigger to the original moment in which it is addressing.

While an object or image acts as a trigger back to the original traumatic experience, it also acts as the witness to that experience—documenting the pain so that it be continually observed and remembered. The creation of the work in itself is an act of witnessing or re remembering the experience it is addressing.
When it comes to moments of black trauma however, these works of art, while both triggers and witnesses of trauma, also hold another special significance. For generations, the truth of black plight has often been omitted from historical texts and teachings. These artworks thus act as narrative tools as well; specifically, for counter narratives. Pieces that work to illustrate and commemorate moments of black trauma hold the special place of also validating those experiences in ways that history texts have been negligent. In doing so, they are acting as tools of counter narrative.

**Counter narrative**

A counter narrative tool is one that works to help tell a story that challenges, or rather counters, a popular narrative. This more popular story is typically understood through a teaching of history, media and/or pop culture. Counter narrative tools are stemmed from counter memory. Counter memory is intrinsic to collect trauma memory. Cynthia Pelak explains the connection between the three this way:

“Cultural trauma is a specific type of collective memory that produces countermemories and meaning struggles that animate the interplay of social, political, and cultural agreement and disagreement about the past and present” (*Institutionalizing Counter-Memories*).

So, artworks that address collective traumas like black trauma, because they are illustrating a collective memory, this collective memory also acts as a counter memory to the public memory of a specific historical event or cultural experience. While counter memories, are powerful, the key to their power is in their recognition. This is where the role of fine arts institutions matter. Fine arts institutions connote a certain prestige and hold a certain standard
that instills trusts in viewers. When viewers see something in a museum, its assumed to be important, worthy of contemplation and true.

For example, paintings of Jesus as an African American have been commonly found in personal spaces, such as residences and some black owned small businesses. Placed there, the image may be a reflection of the owner’s personal views and of nothing more. However, if the same work is placed in an art museum, as opposed to the owner’s personal space, it gives the viewer permission to analyze, critique and contemplate about the work and the artist’s intention. It is the power that context has that matters for works of black trauma. Because they often work as counter narrative tools, in order for that counter narrative to become the new narrative, or even be valued as an alternative perspective, it needs to be valued, something that the walls of fine arts institutions are able to facilitate. It is not just the aesthetics of an image that give it power as a counter narrative tool, but an aesthetic within a context.

The aestheticizing of black trauma in fine arts institutions works to illuminate and validate counter memories of black trauma as true, real and worthy of remembrance. Both Michael Richards and Glenn Ligon are able to illustrate the power of an “aesthetic within a context” through their works *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* and *A Small Band.*
Examples

Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian

*Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* (see figure 2) is a work that tells a story that is haunting, traumatic and empowering. The multiple meanings layered in this piece have made it Michael Richard’s most famous work. Hovering above the ground, this sculpture—a cast of the artist himself—beams a deep gold. The sculpture represents a pilot that is being penetrated from all sides by small planes (*Remembering through Contemporary Art*). The pilot’s eyes are closed and head faces forward, while the pilot’s hand are open and pushed slightly forward, as if he is surrendering to something. The muscles in the pilot’s arm are tensed, while his legs are pressed together tightly. There is a submissive element to this work, that causes a great deal of conversation. The work is meant to represent the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, a group of men who fought tirelessly for their country in foreign air, but were not met with the same sense of respect on their own home soil. This idea of a complicated pain is carried through the planes. As pilots they are meant to control planes, yet here the planes are hurting them—the thing they love does not love them, but purposefully hurts them. A visual metaphor for the relationships black veterans have had with America for generations. Richards was very “drawn to the complexity of [black veterans] triumphs in the face
of segregation and discrimination” (Francis M. Nauman Fine Art. Michael Richards: Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian.). Another layer of complexity is added to the Tuskegee reference when one thinks of the Syphilis experiments unknowingly done of black men at Tuskegee University. To be purposefully deceived by someone whose expertise you trust to engage in an experiment that was detrimental to your body is traumatic physically to the body, as well as psychologically because of the deception.

The deep psychological trauma of these two events is emphasized to an even greater extent when they are referenced simultaneously in this work. Richards intentions to explore complexity of pain, trauma and race, is further explored through his reference to St. Sebastian. The way the planes impale the pilot’s body are reminiscent to the arrows that once impaled St. Sebastian, the Christian martyr. St. Sebastian has been historically represented in agony, punctured by multiple arrows. Known as the patron saint of soldiers, “a sense of faith and fate are brought together here, as the 18 airplanes that puncture Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian place the Tuskegee Airmen in dialogue with the biblical story of martyrdom” (Francis M. Nauman Fine Art. Michael Richards: Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian.).

This work’s conceptual value is connected to its references to the Tuskegee Airmen, the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment, connections to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian as well its reference to Tar Baby. Tar Baby is a fictional character in Joel Chandler Harris’ 1881 Uncle Remus story (Francis M. Nauman Fine Art. Michael Richards: Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian.). Tar Baby in a contemporary context is a derogatory term used in reference to African Americans. Richards choice to include this reference in the title points to America’s problems with racism. It references a martyr, a hero, with disdain—another connection to the complexity of trauma experienced by many black veterans. Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian is supposed to be an emblem of
heroism. Richard’s art dealer Genaro Ambrosino explains that *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian*, "although it was about death, it was more about liberation, freedom, being able to escape. It was a sad message because of what it meant historically. But it was a very positive message at the same time because it represented a step ahead from slavery. It was like redemption from all that." (Mis*ssing Sculpture Found). Richards goal, in the way he visually represents this concept and uses of historical references, is to illustrate a heroism birthed from trauma. Richard’s himself stated that he used his body as an entry point into the work in attempts to make “this pain and alienation concrete” (On Curating Michael Richards). A pain and alienation that connected to the social injustice of black trauma, that while painful, birthed beauty and triumph.

Of these intentional visual references, the piercing planes juxtaposed with subject’s physical cues of submission create an interesting platform for trauma to be discussed. The subject is clearly in pain, as the planes impale the pilot from all sides. However, the pilot’s peaceful facial expression, matched with open palms connotes submissiveness. These two elements of the sculpture juxtaposed against one another led to interesting answers to the question, “Do you see trauma in this image?” Most museum goers said yes, noting the pilot’s impalement as a clear illustration of pain, or “extreme shock” to the body (El-Alam, *Representing National Traumas*). While there is physical evidence of trauma, the timelessness nature of trauma also encounters the work. When asked if one viewer in particular saw trauma, his response was no. Noting the pilot’s position as a serviceman, the viewer decided the subject was not experiencing trauma, but was evoking valor and pride instead. This answer, and others like it, are how this sculpture encounters the timelessness of trauma. This viewer, while fully entitled to their own opinion of the work, was negated the trauma of the pilot and in doing was so inflicting trauma on the subject all over again. The timeless nature of the work as a sculpture,
allows for timeless trauma. Not only in the way the image is portrayed, but in how it is perceived. This constant reoccurrence of trauma is rooted in this piece’s connection to collective memory.

As mentioned before, collective memory continues to persist because of the way current generations hold on to the trauma of previous generations. Michael Richard’s choice to do this piece, and another works of his, is motivated by his investment in past traumas, specifically the memory of black veterans and the complexity of serving for the freedom of a nation that does not invest in you being free. In this exploration of black veterans and their trauma, *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* also works as a counter narrative tool by exposing the trauma they experience. Both through the physical depiction of the pilot and the way it exposes people who disregard or do not believe in the trauma experienced by the Tuskegee Airmen, *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* exposes trauma through its historical references and also acts as a timeless reminder of trauma as well.

Professionals and Richards himself explore these complexities and so do museum goers. *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* is situated in the middle of the Contemporary section at the North Carolina Museum of Art. Illuminated in the middle of the floor this piece is a clear focal point of the room. People stop and stare at the sculpture, taking in every aspect. To many museum goers, whether they are aware of the backstory or not, the pain Richards illustrates comes across clearly. They point to the penetration of the planes and rigid body as evidence to this, yet there is a submissiveness that parallels this pain. “I see sacrifice”, says Miralisa. She compares the simultaneous pain and peace to the sacrifices of Jesus. This type of martyrdom connects directly to the St. Sebastian reference. While some museum goers saw this as a piece to honor black history, other viewers did not see color. “Because it’s gold, you don’t know the skin color, it could be black, white, anybody” says Alyssa. Those who did not see this as a connection to black
history, saw this as a symbol to celebrate all American military members and the sacrifices they make for freedom.

This diversity of opinion on this work exemplifies the limitations art works have as tools of counter narrative. While often used to provoke thought reflection, the subjective nature of art works leave room for misinterpretation and improper viewership. This room for misinterpretations and improper viewership are most prevalent in the answer to the question: “Does this image make you think differently about this specific historical moment?” With the specific historical moment being World War Two and the Tuskegee Airmen, all of the interviewees unanimously said the image did not make them think differently about this historical moment. For some, this was because they were very familiar with the plight of black veterans, for others, they simply did not see it. It is those that simply did not see the trauma, that not only perpetuate trauma on the image once again but illustrate the limits the art work has. The goal of the counter narrative is to validate black trauma, but the image alone does not validate the trauma. It is the interaction of the image itself and the interpretation of the viewer that work together to validate trauma. But, depending on viewer interpretation of a subjective image leaves room for interpretations that do not validate the exact experience the work was meant to validate.

While viewer’s interpretations of the work were diverse in some regards, and consistent in others (such as the acknowledgement of physical trauma), these viewers, in conjunction with those of art historians comprise the public discourse surrounding the work. These opinions work together to illustrate the way people talk about *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian*. From these views it can be concluded, that this work is politically charged and poignant in its approach to pain. Through literary, historical and religious references, Michael Richards creates a thought provoking peace that pushes black trauma to the forefront of the dialogue. While used as a tool to
validate trauma, its success in this endeavor is debatable. The pain is clear, the trauma present, but the severity of the matter, and its connection to black history, is not always the main take-away.

**Blue Black**

In the fall of 2017, at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri, was a groundbreaking show curated by Glenn Ligon that in its exploration of blackness, had an inextricable link to black trauma and pain. *Blue Black* is a show that through its title, St. Louis context and thought provoking pieces, “poses timely and nuanced questions, touching upon notions of language, identity, and perception” (*Blue Black Curated by Glenn Ligon*). The show clearly plays with the title “Blue Black”, not only does every piece in the show include those colors, but brings together works that connect to those colors in relation to blues music, bruised bodies and dark skin people. While all of these interpretations of the title and more connect back to black trauma, Ligon says “it would be a mistake to read the entire show through that lens” (Ligon, “Re: QUESTIONS”).

Originally inspired by Ellsworth Kelly’s wall sculpture, *Blue Black* is a testament to Ligon’s fascination with language. The title not only references Ellsworth Kelly’s piece, but through the many interpretations and connections that can be made between those two colors as well. The show is divided into three parts, the first responds directly to Ellsworth Kelly’s piece, the second refers to pieces that blur the lines between those two colors, and the third “is partially inspired by Toni Morrison’s 1992 Guardian interview in which she articulates the heart of American identity: “In this country, American means white. Everybody else have to hyphenate.” The slippage of language inspired Ligon to utilize a poet’s ability to sublimely marshal simple words with debilitating force” (Sargent, *The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon’s*
Blue Black). This division of works leads to rooms with complex conversations between works and intense moments of emotion and contemplation. Such as the first room, which consists of Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (policeman)*, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s *Messages from Elsewhere*, Carrie Mae Weem’s *Blue Black Boy (1997)* and Simone Leigh’s *Dunham*. Ligon’s choice to place these pieces not only together, but in the beginning of the show was about welcoming the viewer “into a space of conversation between different kinds of representations of blackness” (Ligon, “Re: QUESTIONS”). “It is a complicated conversation those works are having with each other”, he says. Complicated, is correct. Arts writer Antwaun Sargent, in his examination of the work, noted a particular complex connection between some of the works in the room—specifically about police brutality. The St. Louis context is very essential to one’s understanding of the show, as the home of the Michael Brown verdict and the birthplace of the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement. Ligon was sensitive to this in his curating, and Sargent is keenly aware of it in his analysis of the relationship between Kerry James Marshalls’ *Untitled (policeman)* and Carrie Mae Weems *Blue Black Boy (1997)* in the first room, stating that:

“The peering of the boy represents an image born out of black cultural looking and the white historical gaze. The first is perceived if you focus on the officer’s eyes which make present the knowing glance of a black father at his son. The other image this looking relationship produces, in my mind, is what happens when the effects of the white gaze is recognized to be more than a theoretical construct but something representative of systemic power structures that have real life consequence. Under the white gaze, the black child becomes another black boy, like Michael Brown and the officer, representative of the history of law enforcement as an institution that polices
black bodies unjustly, his race evaporates, he is simply an agent of the state, like the white patrolman, Darren Wilson”.

The juxtaposition of these works causes black trauma rise to the surface. In this instance alone, the relationship between Kerry James Marshall’s Untitled (policeman) and Carrie Mae Weem’s Blue Black Boy (1997) has brought trauma up immediately by conjuring up questions of state violence, the abuse of black bodies and the tumultuous history that links the two. While the 70+ pieces that comprise of Blue Black range in subject matter, the trauma of black life is unescapable. From Byron Kim’s Innocence Over Blue, to Michael Bailey’s Untitled to Glenn Ligon’s A Small Band Ligon’s curatorial choices prove the necessity of pain and trauma in a narrative of black life. Ligon’s own work grapples with issues of black trauma, especially his neon work A Small Band.

A Small Band (see figure 3) is a neon piece, done by Glenn Ligon in 2015. Placed directly in front of the Ellsworth Kelly Blue Black piece in the exhibition, this work is part of the first section of the exhibition. The power of this work comes from the words depicted, their monumental size, their backstory, and their location.

The words “blood”, “bruise” and “blue” used in Glenn Ligon’s A Small Band are words selected from the testimony of Daniel Hamm. Daniel Hamm was a member of the “Harlem Six”, a group of young black men wrongly accused and convicted of murder in the
mid 1960’s (*Glenn Ligon, A Small Band*). After Hamm was released he spoke out against the police brutality he experienced, specifically during the “Little Fruit Stand Riot” and Harlem Riots of 1964, sharing that “I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the blues…bruise blood come out to show them” (*Glenn Ligon, A Small Band*) (*A Small Band—Glenn Ligon*). According to Pulitzer Arts Foundation member Maggie Stanley mentioned that the reason Mr. Hamm had to “open the bruise up” was because he was refused medical treatment because he was not bleeding. The legacy of trauma and brutality is literally illuminated for the public through Ligon’s artistic choices with the work.

The words “blood”, “bruise” and “blue”, while typically displayed in that order, have been displayed in different places. The connotation of the work changes with each location. This installation has found all over the world, from the façade of the Giardini-Central Pavilion in Venice, Italy to the foyer of the Rebuild Foundation in Chicago, Illinois. With each location, whether it was indoors or outdoors, displayed stacked or linearly or flat or elevated surfaces, each choice in the installation of the work influences meanings perception by the viewer. As for its current installation at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri, the work is installed in the foyer right in front of Ellsworth Kelly’s “Blue Black”. The installation takes up the whole hallway and requires that the viewer walk in between the words in order to view them. The words are stacked in front of each other, but at an angle. This choice was based on necessity, in order to ensure the words would all fit in the space. This choice, was born out of necessity, requires a more confrontational viewing process between the work and the viewer, which matches the tone of the testimony these words were pulled from. The size of the words is also influential. Their monumental size in comparison to the space emphasizes the largeness of the story they tell. While the words act as fragments of
a larger testimony, together they string together ideas of pain, brutality and trauma. This is not only emphasized by the way the installation uses spaces but the nature of the medium. In the choice to use neon Ligon is literally bringing a dark moment to light.

All this metaphor and intention in Ligon’s work is not missed by the public either. In a public conversation with world renowned art historian Thelma Golden and curator and artist Glenn Ligon the two talked about the show, and took questions from the audience. What was clear from the audience was the intentionality behind Ligon’s use of language. From the multiplicity of meanings and connections made from the title of the show “Blue Black” to the installation *A Small Band* Ligon makes it clear that language is being utilize in his work to the same degree, if not more so than the visual elements he manipulates. In regards to *A Small Band* he emphasized the power of how the work is installed, and how its ability to change with each showing is influential in the interpretation of the piece.

While the interpretation of *A Small Band* is dependent on multiple pieces like placement and context, the way this piece contends with trauma is inescapable. The work takes the spoken words of a victim and memorializes them, making the words last for decades beyond when they were spoken. This memorialization is again a strategic tool used to highlight the contentious relationship with trauma and time. In facilitating a way for the moment to be relived and re-experienced, *A Small Band* acknowledges and participates in the timelessness of trauma.

What Ligon’s work also reveals is that image alone does not convey emotion. *A Small Band*, while visuality is essential to experiencing the work, the power comes from the meaning of these words. Instead of picking apart a visual depiction of trauma, or an aesthetic that uses less direct means than representation to evoke trauma, Ligon’s work is relying on
language. In doing so, Ligon creates an intervention between trauma and visual culture. The literature makes the argument that part of the timelessness of trauma relies on visual cues of the original instance(s). However, *A Small Band*, without visually illustrating any violence or trauma, is able to facilitate contemplation on violence, trauma and brutality because of the imagery the words “blood” “bruise” and “blue” are able to evoke. In doing so, Ligon is also expanding our concept of trauma, not only how it can be triggered (through words as well as images) but how it can be experienced. Trauma is often thought to be caused by physical violence, but in Ligon’s emphasis on language, he is able to connect trauma to language and ways that trauma can be induced non physically. Ligon’s intervention is both innovative, yet necessary in how he chooses to communicate pain, trauma, and the multiplicity of connections in between.

**Conclusion**

Both Richards’ and Ligon’s work rely on viewer interpretation to achieve their goal as counter narrative tools. A testament to their skill and creative genius is the way that both art historians and museum goers alike are able to pick up on the major themes they pursue and nuances they explore. Both artists’ works have an intrinsic connection to trauma and blackness that allow them to illustrate this experience thoughtfully and respectfully. They engage the viewer in a dialogue on black pain that connects to trauma’s tumultuous relationship with time. Both works illustrate unique experiences that connect back to larger aspects of systemic oppression. With *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* it is the way black soldiers have often fought and died for an American freedom they were never granted. And in regards to *A Small Band*, the story touches on police brutality that still finds its place in a contemporary American context. Both stories are uniquely unoriginal because of the way that
trauma persists. The traumatic experiences that currently plague today’s black lives are the
same traumatic experiences that plagued previous generations’ black lives, the only difference
is that this pain is now permanently public, as it finds home in Facebook Live streams and
Twitter feeds across the country. And in the way social media allows people to never forget,
art too forces audiences to acknowledge the black trauma that persists. This persistence is why
these pieces are so important. They force viewers to remember. And while this is a typical
aspect of trauma, there is a power in forcing viewers to never forget. It forces a community to
remember this story, this trauma and to grapple with its contemporary face.

While remembering is essential, and both works lend themselves as counter narrative
tools, the question is, were they successful as counter narrative tools? *Tar Baby vs. St.
Sebastian* in an immediate sense is working to tell a narrative of Tuskegee airmen that is
inclusive of the trauma not written in history books. *A Small Band* illuminates the perspective
of the Harlem Six that newspapers did not want to report. Both works have intentions of
telling stories that have the power to transcend, telling stories of plight that while pertaining
to a specific event, are also so similar to the stories of other black veterans and victims of
police brutality and injustice. While full of possibility, their success as counter narrative tools
is limited because they give too much responsibility to the viewer. It is up to the viewer to
understand the visual cues and historical references. It is up to the viewer to know the original
story in which the artists are countering, and their responsibility to make sense of it all. While
an interesting intellectual exercise; giving the viewer the power to decide what narrative is
being told is a price too high to be paid. It is an illustration of the artist’s priorities. If artistry
and intellectual engagement are the priority, a certain level of ambiguity is necessary and the
artistic cues are essential. However, one risks losing its power as a counter narrative tool
because of the room given for misinterpretation. If the artist prioritizes counter narrative above all else, the message in the work will be simple, direct and clear. Yet even that is subjective, as to what is “simple”, “direct” or “clear”? What can be gained from this is that while art is a powerful tool for counter memory, counter narrative and intense contemplation, working through these issues requires more than just artwork alone. Art, rather than serve as the only tool to help work through these issues, serves as a powerful facilitator and critical first step towards change.

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