(Unrelated)

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ABSTRACT

(Unrelated), a series of language-based works made up of chalkboard drawings, dictionary erasures and accumulations of text, highlights the inability of language to fully capture notions of modern racial identity. Rather, in (Unrelated), definitions are hidden, revealed, allowed and humored, but rarely settled.

It is natural to seek delineation between oneself and all else, but it is a particularly persistent urge for those who engage in the pursuit of racial clarity. In To Be Real, an essay which heavily influenced this body of work, Danzy Senna writes: “Growing up mixed in the racial battlefield of Boston, I yearned for something just out of my reach- an ‘authentic’ identity to make me real. Everyone but me, it seemed at the time, fit into a neat cultural box, had a label to call their own.”¹ (Unrelated) quietly explodes the “neat cultural box.”

INDEX WORDS: Drawing, Charcoal, Identity, Race, Biracial, Chalk, Chalkboard, Blackboard, Black, White

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012
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Bethany Joy Collins
2012
(UNRELATED)

by

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
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May 2012
DEDICATION

To my Dad who showed and my Mom who told me how to be.

To Kristian, for growing up the same and yet turning out so wonderfully different.

And to W.K., for the light bulbs and chalk dust.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to the faculty members, artists and peers who pushed, nudged and challenged my work. In particular, thank you to my Thesis Committee for generously sharing their time, insight and relentless encouragement.
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1 INTRODUCTION TO IDENTITY

“And always, this double truth, as unresolvable as in any other passion, the paradox: she is me/not me; he is mine/not mine.”

In the 1990s, as my family left a Habitat for Humanity work site, a reporter for The Montgomery Advertiser asked each of my parents for a quote summing up our volunteer experience as my sister and I stood close by. The next day, the paper printed each of their comments, carefully identifying each of us as all somehow “unrelated.”

To be Biracial in a region and country so precisely defined by binary racial distinctions is to be ceaselessly called upon to define and re-define one’s own racial identity. This endless call to definition is evident in the treatment of language in the exhibition, (Unrelated). Questions of identity, such as “Do people ever think you’re white?” are dissected, broken apart, and re-formed into nebulous abstractions. Dictionary definitions are repeatedly printed, erased and torn. And each of these re-worked marks represents yet another attempt to navigate the black/white paradigm of race in the American South.

Both in this exhibition and throughout my larger body of work, literary references are equal to visual influences. In Danzy Senna’s essay To Be Real, the author recalls “Growing up mixed…I yearned for something just out of my reach- an ‘authentic’ identity to make me real.” Senna goes on to express a deep-seated absence of her own “neat cultural box” or a “label to call” her own. Similarly, author Rebecca Walker, in her autobiography Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, recalls longing for “a memory that can remind me at all times of who I definitively am… [without which] I feel

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amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body that everyone else seems to have.”

The conceptual power and physicality of these two images—the box and the outline—represent an insistence on clear boundaries and simultaneous rebuttal of any such clarity’s existence, both of which are evident in this exhibition.

2 INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE

“Freedom can feel overwhelming. I would not trade it, but sometimes I want to be told what to do. I want to know constraints, boundaries; I want to know the limits of who I am. Tell me what I cannot do. Let me master myself within articulated limitations. Without these, I feel vast, out of control. Like I can too easily slip outside of my own life and into someone else’s.”

By design, definitions are intended to be exact, each included word carefully selected and precise. The numerous depictions of textual definitions seen in (Unrelated) allow us to tackle complex notions of racial categories and distinctions through a shared terminology. In American Heritage Dictionary, 1977, the text “mixed,” “joined or mingled into one mass…confused; muddled,” is layered into the shape of a floating cloud, intentionally disrupting the careful precision of the original meaning by stretching and reforming the boundaries of each line. Words, once selected for their precision in capturing complex notions (including identity), undergo yet another editing process to highlight, reveal and extract troublesome portions. Despite the process of erasure through accumulation, American Heritage Dictionary, 1977 remains one of the more legible texts in the exhibition, albeit edited into a new definition with a distinctly amorphous edge.

Similarly, Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951 begins with six variations for the term “mixed,” including café au lait, yellow, fifty-fifty, gray, half and half and beige. Each definition is

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5 Walker, 4.
transferred onto American Master’s Arctic White paper which undergoes a physically evident form of erasure, leaving not only the residue of text behind, but also of the process itself. The raised, tactile remnants of erasure define a new boundary for the pre-existing definition, now less precise, less closed-in, and definitively more ambiguous. In both of these large-scale works, *American Heritage Dictionary, 1977* and *Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951*, the geometric precision of each definition’s outer boundary is made less rigid by either an accumulation or a removal of text. Both processes succeed in leaving a more ambiguous border around the “neat cultural box” of racial labels.

*American Heritage Dictionary, 1977* and *Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951* both represent a fixation on an “obsessive repetition” of text, particularly labels, categories and boxes. The visual result references the work of two primary artistic influences on both my practice and this particular body of work: Lorna Simpson and Glenn Ligon. Both create poignant, sometimes monochromatic and oftentimes textual works, placing text on par with image. In Lorna Simpson’s 2005 Serigraph on nine felt panels, *Cloud*, the semi-transparent subject permanently hovers, unable to or refusing to disperse, and casts an impossibly white spotlight onto the gray ground below. In *9 Props*, Simpson’s waterless lithographs repeatedly depict whole black objects, formally and singularly composed atop delicately handled text. Title aside, each singular prop appears complete within its own “unbroken black outline.” The imagery in *Night*, a set of twelve, framed sheets of silk-screened Japanese newsprints, emerges mysteriously, as if out of memory, semi-translucen yet eerily grounded in detail. Each of these works depicts the quietly evocative aesthetic qualities I admire and seek to evoke in *(Unrelated)*. In particular, Simpson’s *Cloud* captures the graceful cloud form with equal potential to form or dissolve. Likewise, the subtle accumulation of text in *American Heritage Dictionary, 1977* intentionally references *Cloud*, while drawing new associations between definitions as settled facts and constantly evolving. The clouded mass in *American Heritage Dictionary, 1977*, as in Simpson’s print, appears caught mid-transformation, yet far from settled.

8 Walker, 1-2.
2.1 WHITE NOISE

“As my father says, one side is unusually—even compulsively—documented, and the other is a black hole that, when you call into it—Who are you?—it only swallows the very question.”

"There is a kind of white that is more than white, and this was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything. This was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach. This was that kind of white. This white was aggressively white. It did its work on everything around it, and nothing escaped. “

While dictionary definitions are as exact as language is capable of being, categories, labels and definitions often remain inadequate to fully capture complex, ambiguous terms. Specifically, fitting combinations of identity within the binary relationship of Black and White rarely provides the intended clarity. Identity fails to lie neatly within one box or another. Rather, the edges of black and white forms, as in the layered letters in “Do People Ever Think You’re White?” III or chalk dust bursts in “I Wish I Was Black,” overtake or succumb to one other. As the title of Rebecca Walker’s autobiography, Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, implies, a clearly defined sense of self veers toward ambiguity the moment we attempt to fix it. And as conceptual artist Glenn Ligon states, “repetition is about the change in the meaning of the words.”

The second primary artistic influence found in both this exhibition as a whole and, in particular the White Noise series, is the work of Glenn Ligon, who often returns to topics of language, race and identity within his work. Of his interest in text, Ligon writes, “I do take great delight in the way people

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11 Ligon, 81.
say things and in writers who use language in beautiful and unexpected ways….I am much more interested in borrowing and reframing what already exists, which, I guess, makes me a ‘found’ poet.”

Dissimilar to Simpson’s 9 Props, Ligon’s text not only supplements the image, but becomes image as well. In Untitled (I Am a Man), Ligon appropriates signage from the 1968 Sanitation Worker’s strike in Memphis with only a few gentle edits to alter our reading: a cracked surface, a resizing of text and altered spacing. In Ligon’s Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background), the artist stencils the title line, extracted from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay How It Feels To Be Colored Me, in stark, black oil stick over and over again until the words lean towards illegibility and impenetrableness. In particular, this work demonstrates Ligon’s fixation on an “obsessive repetition of the words.” By layering text into blocks of impenetrable, indecipherable black, Ligon’s subtle edits question typical notions of race, identity and the capability of language to encapsulate either.

The White Noise series originated from awkward and sometimes stilted conversations concerning race and racial identity during my graduate school experience. During my second year of graduate school, I created a mixed media work, Provin It, of overlapping brown paper bags, each displaying one solid, black brushstroke. The mixed media piece referenced the historical and modern implications of the Paper Bag test, visible identifiers of Blackness and, more precisely, what it means to be “black enough.” Neither the imagery nor the historical implications of Provin It were immediately recognizable to many of my graduate peers. In fact, one of the crucial questions from their critique of Provin It, which later directly lead to the White Noise series, was “Don’t you think that’s a little elitist?” that having never heard of the Paper Bag test, we then are excluded from its meaning and subsequently, the meaning of your work as well. This question was the first to be incorporated into the White Noise series in the similarly titled “Don’t You Think That’s a Little Elitist?” Other questions and statements emerging from graduate

12 Ligon, 97.
13 Ligon, 81.
critiques, studio visits and casual encounters include “Maybe You Should Make It Into a Slaveship”, “Well, Obama is President Now, So...” and “Aren’t You Afraid You’re Going to Offend Us?”

As the White Noise series continued, the titles and corresponding text in each work evolved to include statements or questions from outside this particular graduate school setting, questions asked in lunch-lines, college dorms, conversations among friends, or inquiries by strangers. Regardless of origin, the title of each work from the White Noise series (including “Do People Ever Think You’re White?” III and “(Unrelated)”) are questions asked or statements made by those attempting to isolate a simple solution to the binary paradigm of race in the U.S and thus neatly decipher my own racial background.

In the work of Simpson and particularly Ligon, repetition is often elegantly and relentlessly executed. As Marie de Brugerolle asserts while interviewing the artist, “In [Ligon’s] work, the obsessive repetition of the words shakes their meaning. The truth is certainly in the words, but it moves.”15 Similarly, the obsessively re-written questions and statements used in the White Noise series are an attempt by the originator of that question/statement to achieve the same precision and clarity evident in the original dictionary definitions of Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951 and American Heritage Dictionary, 1977. As an exhibition, (Unrelated) presents the potential that no such rigid clarity exists by stretching boundaries, shifting meaning, and re-forming racial definitions.

3 PROCESS

Challenging notions of identity, each White Noise chalkboard begins with an unsettling statement or probing question and eventually ends with an equally unsettled composition. The slow and tediously deconstructive process through which each work is cycled reveals as much of the conceptual basis for the work as the resulting, visual aftermath.

On a starkly black chalkboard background, each piece begins with the title question or statement written across the blackboard in a fashion referencing the now-outdated form of punishment students

15 Ligon, 81.
often endured for misbehavior within the classroom. Such punishing statements would admonish the writer against poor behavior, possibly including “I will not chew gum in class” or “If I cannot say anything nice, I will not say anything at all,” repeated endlessly until the lesson is learned. This text, then erased, undergoes an intense process of deconstruction into disoriented, singular letters written over and over again. What begins as an illegible grouping of deconstructed words into individual letters eventually begins to re-shape itself, finding new connections into biomorphic forms hovering above the punishing and erased text.

In earlier works from the *White Noise* series, the process still began from a small clumping of letters spiraling outward, which ended when a new shape emerged, oftentimes reminiscent of landmasses, particularly a dissolving United States. As the text spirals outward from that initial patch of deconstructed title, the eventual forms may resemble the destructive path of a bomb, a cloud of hovering chalk dust, an astrological occurrence, or a field of white noise. However, for the chalkboards included in this exhibition (including *Do People Ever Think You’re White? III* and “(Unrelated)”), the partial deconstruction of text and obsessive re-writing of letters concludes only when the process becomes physically too laborious and mental meditation on the original text exhaustive. Once the writing became too painful for my hand, I knew not only the piece, but also my obsession with its text, was complete, not to be revisited. And so, each chalkboard represents an incredibly familiar process of deconstructing meaning behind language, but also a conscious letting go, which was a newly introduced step into a, by now, well-worn process.

This letting go of an obsessive preoccupation with text is also evident in the making of the large-scale photographs of chalk dust, including *(Unrelated)* and *I Wish I Was Black*. Both images push the *White Noise* series a step further by erasing the obsessively repeated chalk letters, clapping erasers together and photographing the subsequent bursts of soft chalk dust. For these photographs, text is quickly erased, hurriedly released and instantly documented through digital photography. What once was a laboriously slow process of breaking and re-making language, or meaning, in the *White Noise* series, now accelerates into a split-second moment of capturing floating, descending bursts of chalk dust. All of

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16 Ligon, 81.
that intensely deliberate effort once evident in the multitude of tiny letters suddenly becomes an urgent moment of release, unfettered and uncontrollable. This decidedly more rapid process brings a certain completion to each work by cycling each question or statement from the White Noise series through processes of punishment, deconstruction and release.

While the photographs of chalk dust residue release not only the chalk trapped within the erasers but also the corresponding text, I must admit the choice of photography over performance as a media for these pieces may represent only a partial release of the initial offending text. The photographs document an ultimately ephemeral moment, representing a permanently “for-shifting space.”17 And so, as in the erased definitions of Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951, something always remains.

3.1 CURATIORIAL

“I must have a ticket. I must have identification. I must not carry a weapon. Beyond these qualifications, I do not have to define this body. I do not have to belong to one camp, school or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else’s experience. I do not have to remember who I, or anyone else, thinks I am. I am transitional space, for-shifting space, place of thousand hellos and a million goodbyes.”18

In this particular display of (Unrelated), the title for the exhibition plays double-duty as the title for a key chalkboard work from the White Noise series as well. This focus on unrelated-ness appears again in the approximate balance evident upon entering the exhibition. Each large, rectangular chalkboard on one wall is balanced by an equally imposing square photograph of chalk dust on the opposing wall, interrupted by either two or three erased dictionary definitions in the middle. The mirror-like balance within the space continually propels the viewer to the furthermost wall of the gallery where the most intact text— the dictionary definition for “Mixed”— resides in American History Dictionary, 1977.

17 Walker, 4.
18 Walker, 4.
The two digital photographs of chalk dust included in the exhibition depend so heavily on process—the conceptual process of erasing the original chalkboards and literal process of clapping erasers—that in order to be fully understood, the photographs require not only the existence but also the presence of the original *White Noise* chalkboards in close proximity. Likewise, the intentional mirror-like placement of work within the gallery (chalkboard, paper and photo on one wall facing photo, paper and chalkboard on the opposing wall) forces relationships, interactions and conversations between all the present, seemingly disparate media. The presence of the viewer between the works is then required in order to “mirror” one wall’s reflection onto the other. This curatorial decision to force the viewer to act as a reflective surface represents a kind of in-the-middle viewpoint rarely seen in any individual piece. Each work from this exhibition and my larger body of work draws more lines in the sand between the polarized opposites of black and white more than they ever allow for the presence of a gray, in-between space.

Nonetheless, this in-the-middle viewpoint, which visualizes an alternate construction of the “transitional space, for-shifting space, place of thousand hellos and a million goodbyes” Walker references in her autobiography, was a welcome curatorial surprise. In an attempt to achieve a less staid and more intriguing sense of balance, I rather enjoyed the small shock of certain metaphors which arose—in-between, halfway, in the thick of, caught in the middle—that I otherwise consciously avoid. Still, I do not envision this being the only possible manifestation of this exhibition. And so I wonder how the impact of the work may change, and hopefully not diminish, if rearranged or shown as individual pieces—particularly whether the photos will in any way “read” as a completion of the *White Noise* series without their originator in tow.

4 MATERIALS OF EDUCATION

Each work included in (*Unrelated*) makes use of traditional educational materials—chalk, chalkboards, paper and erasers—to convey a now-outdated form of knowledge sharing and acquisition.

19 Walker, 4.
White chalk on crisp black chalkboards still evokes images of collective education, group communication and the student being called upon to test her absorption of information. As a medium, chalk on chalkboards has also been a steady material of the contemporary artist, from Cy Twombly’s repetitious line drawings to Gary Simmons’ smudged architecture.

In (Unrelated) and throughout my work, chalk and blackboards inherently reference the binary concept of race through a reduced, starkly monochromatic palette. Throughout the exhibition, black and white remain distinctly individual even as their presence simultaneously contrasts the presence of the other. In addition to chalkboards, slightly faded black text printed on over-sized, white paper provides plenty of empty space on which to focus definitions from the classroom’s shared dictionary. This overwhelmingly empty, white surface also references the blank page, which serves as a prime ground for test taking. And tactile, pink eraser residue references the trial and error learning environment where one is compelled to erase over and over again until the correct answer has been reached.

5  PERCEPTIONS

“It is perhaps because of, not in spite of, the intense confusions of my childhood and adolescence that I have come to embrace feminism in my twenties. Today I no longer yearn for a ‘real’ mother. I can see now that I had one all along. I also no longer believe in a single ‘authentic Negro experience.’ I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it, and that none of my ‘identities’ are distinct from one another. To be a feminist is to be actively engaged in dismantling all oppressive relationships. To be black is to contain all colors. I can no longer allow these parts of myself to be compartmentalized, for when I do, I pass, and when I pass, I ‘cease to exist.’”

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20 Senna, 18.
Whether the text erasures, bursts of chalk dust, or layered chalk letters are perceived as clouds, stars or an actively exploding bomb, this exhibition and corresponding writing are an attempt, in this moment, to define once again the contours of my own racial identity, an identity which has been clearly claimed by and claimed Blackness. As Touré writes in Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now, “Who I am is indelibly shaped by Blackness, so I have to examine Blackness to know who I am.” And so, this work is by no means an attempt to claim both sides of the Black/White paradigm. Rather, I consider each work a navigation and exploration of the transitional space Walker references in her autobiography. Singularly and as a whole, this work takes note of the peculiarities of that embodied sense of transition, which author Jane Lazarre frames as “…the lifelong tension between the need for clear boundaries and boundless intimacy.”

“(Unrelated)” and Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951 share not only an aesthetic treatment of textual erasure, blurring, smudging, and overlapping, but also a common conceptual link as well. The clouded appearance of American Heritage Dictionary, 1977 and astrological appearance of “Do People Ever Think You’re White?” III each convey a deconstruction of text from its original form, remaking the boundaries of a previously fixed definition. And the ability of (Unrelated) to take on multiple shapes and meanings in the viewer’s mind reinforces my continued preoccupation with multiple meanings, dual perceptions and limitlessness in the seemingly binary. Likewise, the chalk dust in (Unrelated), though perpetually caught mid-fall, appears more serene and settled than its chalkboard precursor. So while I see this work successfully highlighting the inability of language to fully capture notions of modern racial identity, this exhibition represents not just another step in the navigation of identity, but somehow, a much more conclusive one.

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21 Touré, 17.
22 Lazarre, 24.
Figure 1. Bethany Collins, “(Unrelated)”, 2012, Chalk and charcoal on chalkboard, 48 x 70 inches.
Figure 2. Bethany Collins, *Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1951* (detail), 2011, Photo transfer on American Master’s paper, 30 x 110 inches overall.
Figure 4. Bethany Collins, “Do People Ever Think You’re White?” III, 2011, Chalk and charcoal on chalkboard, 48 x 70 inches.
Figure 5. Lorna Simpson, *9 Props*, 1995, Waterless lithographs on 9 felt panels, 47 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches overall.
Figure 6. Lorna Simpson, *Cloud*, 2005, Serigraph on 9 felt panels, 84 x 84 inches overall.
Figure 7. Bethany Collins, *I Wish I Was Black*, 2012, Digital photograph of chalk dust, 42 x 42 inches.
Figure 8. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, Oil and enamel on canvas, 40 × 25 inches.
Figure 9. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990, Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood, 80 × 30 inches.
Figure 10. Bethany Collins, *Provin It*, 2010, Acrylic on brown paper bags, 40 x 55 inches.

Figure 11. Bethany Collins, “Don’t You Think That’s a Little Elitist?”, 2010, Chalk on chalkboard, Site-specific installation, 36 x 68 inches.
Figure 12. Bethany Collins, “Maybe You Should Make It Into a Slaveship”, 2010, Chalk on chalkboard, 40 x 52 inches.
Figure 14. Bethany Collins, *(Unrelated)*, 2012, Digital photograph of chalk dust, 42 x 42 inches.