

How Quenton Baker and Danny Giles are (re)(con)figuring the archive pages for black futurity from excavated histories

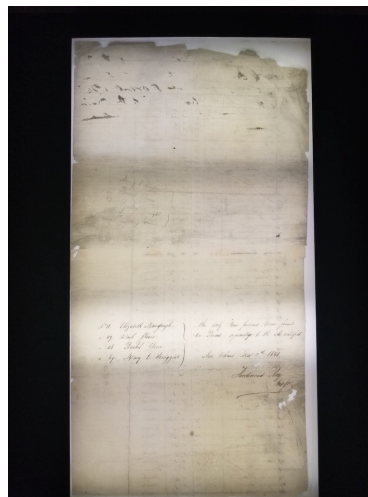
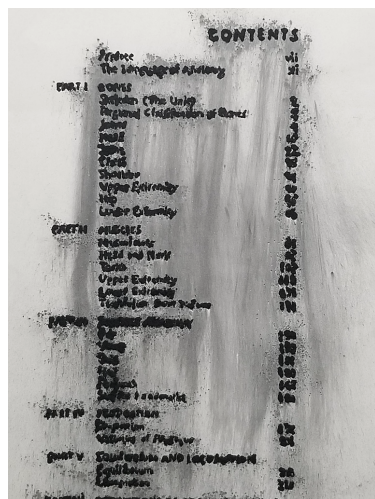
By Berette Macaulay, March 20, 2019

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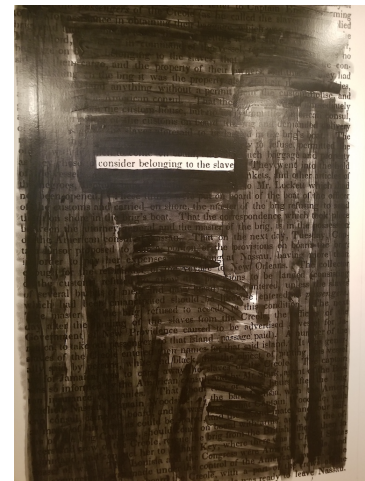
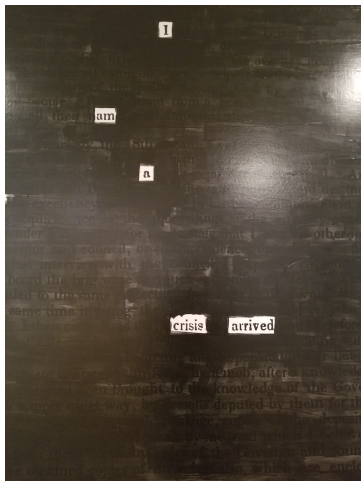
Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno- linguistic groups as possible. If they can- not speak to each other, they cannot then foment rebellion and revolution.

English is
my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language, therefore English is
a foreign language not a mother tongue.¹
~ M. NourbeSe Philip

Two artists, from different North American urban topographies.
They invoke historical texts through different mediums.
Unknowingly, metaphysically they encounter each other here in Seattle, through intentional monochromatic mappings of panoptic, pellucid assertion.
You would almost think it was planned.
But it was not.



Quenton Baker's exhibition *BALLAST*² at the Frye Art Museum and Danny Giles' exhibition *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background*³ at Jacob Lawrence Gallery both confront, in inventive abstraction, the violence of erasure by the dominant force of whiteness. They both directly take on the dismissal of ontological black existence by inverting its removal from western world histories. Local writer Emily Pothast contextualizes the title of Giles' work⁴ with Glenn Ligon's 1990 titled work (which quotes Zora Neale Hurston), *I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background*⁵. I posit that both exhibitions bring to mind similar aesthetics and interrogations, that are not only descriptive of Black life in America, but sharply so in the Pacific North West as geographically insulated from the culture of color.



Upon first entering Quenton Baker's *BALLAST* at the Frye, we are lulled into a quiet dimly lit space, as if being led below deck into the bow of a ship, where no one can see or hear anything but the breath. The walls are mapped with painted renditions of heavily redacted pages of text that Baker blacked out in large 10' by 6' panels, with a scant selection of words seemingly embossed in contrast, levitating outwardly like ghosts. Two floating mesh scrims diagonally section off the small railroad gallery space, limiting our paths of entry and exit. Using appropriated texts as *invented* poetry, Baker gives us haunting lines projected rhythmically in brief intervals, passing through the mesh, reaching for walls and spilling out onto the floor before disappearing. The feeling and figuration of this space is loud with silent loss and counter-weighted with whispers of survival.

A short summary of wall text informs of us of what we should have already known, - the story of the most successful known slave revolt in US history. In 1841, a cook named Madison Washington commandeered the Creole ship sailing from Virginia to New Orleans. 135 men, women, and children including himself, were due to be sold as part of the domestic coastwise slave trade. Washington along with 17 others, were able to take over and command the ship be sailed to Nassau, Bahamas. Because Britain had already abolished slavery in 1833 – anyone who landed on their territories would automatically be declared free. Despite US government demands for their 'property' to be returned, the British government granted free passage for all those who wished to remain in Nassau. Most of them did, but curiously, 5 decided to stay aboard the ship and return to the US and to a life of slavery.

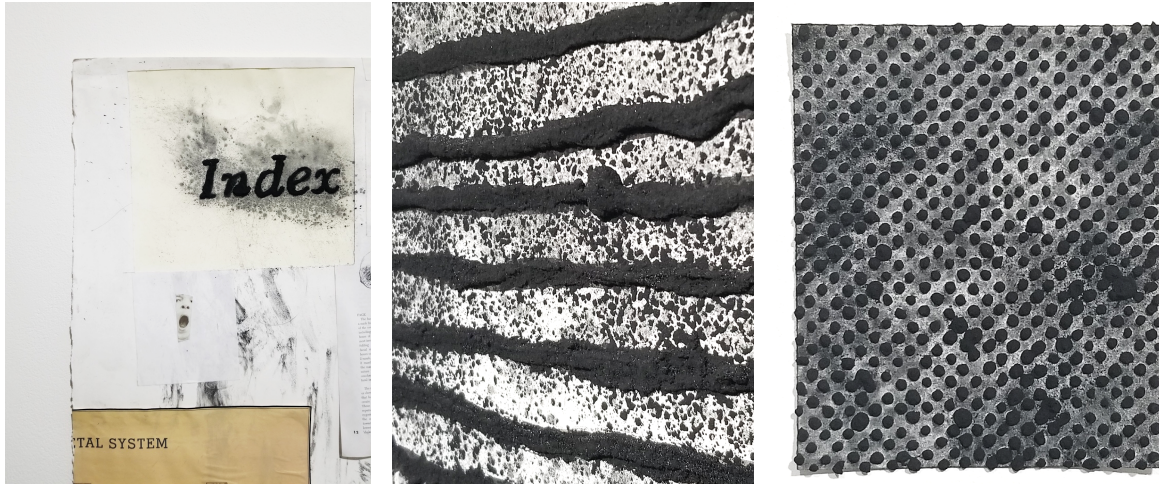
Baker credits personal poetry heroes like Claudine Rankine (*Citizen*, 2014) and M. NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*, 2011) as advocates of writing the *collective-self* into the archive. He too is as a deeply invested researcher and employs the practice of appropriation to infuse temporal meaning into missing or misguided narratives in black history. In what is his first museum exhibition, Baker uses the only records available – cargo ship manifests, Senate papers, and court documents - to conjure the spirits of those who stayed in Nassau. But he also creates questions: Why is there no other record of who these people were? Are there surviving descendants in the Bahamas? Why did 5 of them decide to return to being enslaved? What more can we learn about Madison Washington? Even Frederick Douglas wondered – creating an archive of his existence through his historical fiction titled *The Heroic Slave*.⁶



As if channeling the same abstractions of hidden pasts, this year's Jacob Lawrence Gallery Legacy resident artist Danny Giles also produced work with both physical and cerebral suspensions lacking historical closure. The monochromatic palette Giles uses in *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background* strike not only as intentional, but confrontational. In what appears to be a black washing of white paper in the pristine white gallery space named for master African American painter Jacob Lawrence, he renders a blatant message in illegible scripting. All the works on paper hang suspended in vast white space contrasted by dark cement floors. The pieces, irregular and relatively small, range from approx. 11" x 14" up to 36" x 48", and hang unframed and rough edged, as if torn from a book and then repurposed. Giles made his works in the space over the course of his residency, inventing brail textured narratives as textual scribbles and drawings with charcoal, acrylic gel medium, pumice, print paper collage, and India inks. We enter facing a blank white wall bordered and contained in black line, to closely reading content lists, an index page, scribbles and period points – the density of markings increased on ever grayer pages in the 3 gallery rooms. The fullness of the most densely black washed pieces, however, still hang suspended and overwhelmed in whiteness.

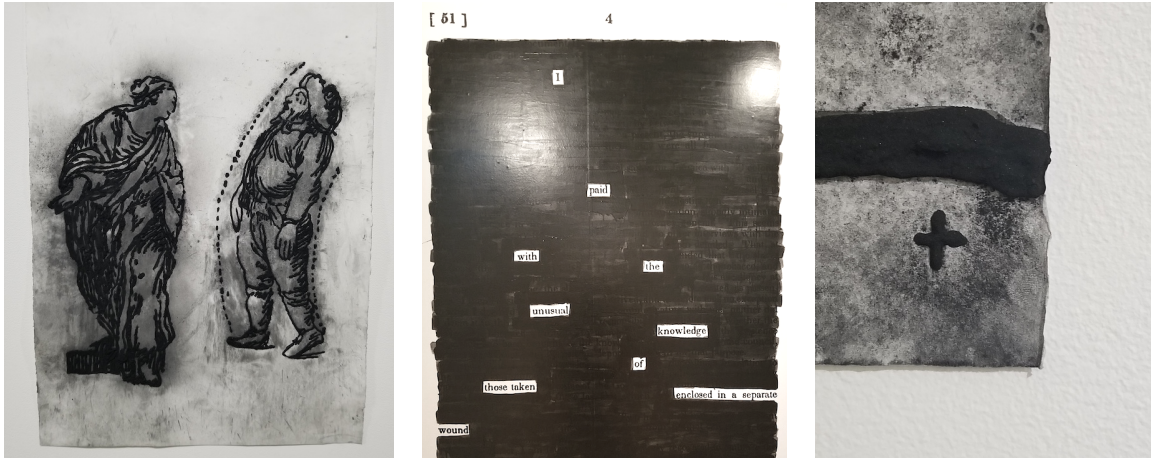
In his opening night talk, Giles spoke of how he worked in real time, responding to the aesthetics, physicality and dominant weight of the space – which, in a broader sense of universities universalizing knowledges, has ironically done so by the distinct appropriative

devaluation of non-white histories. It is palpable upon entering the space how diminutive the works appear, while they also seem to bleed beyond the edges, disrupting our navigation therein. He specifically uses and rescripts the gallery itself not only as an exhibition space, but as one of the pieces of examination.



Giles, who is based in Chicago, balances his studio practice as a lecturer at SAIC, and consulting director at Oxbow. He is a multidisciplinary artist who also works in dance and sound sculptures, live and video performance works, all of which he uses to explore how visual languages inform our view of *blackness*, how we assign beauty or value to black bodies, and how this creates tropes that reaffirm racialized structures of power. Giles draws connections between visual and sculptural histories that place greater value on Eurocentric aesthetics of beauty that in turn contribute to the dangers black bodies navigate today.

As if to create a collaborative performance with us – he creates more questions than answers about violence, oppression, and erasure of black identity. Citing Saidiya Hartman in his talk as one of many important literary ethnographers, I find another bridge in the subversive use of anonymity to further assert the effects of these erasures. In her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* where she attempts to trace her roots on a cold trail back to Ghana, she weaves in images without captions or any other definitive information, imposing on the reader the same frustrations she endures not only as a researcher, but also as a daughter of a lost history. “My graduate studies hadn’t prepared me to tell the stories of those who had left no record...”⁷, Hartman writes. Doing much the same, Giles offers no titles or placard guides to his work throughout the gallery, committing us to create a narrative through these cold hard walls.



While both Baker and Giles conjure meta-spiritual actions of bringing forth the dead and the invisible using the authoritative “*master’s tools*”⁸ of appropriation, they also seem to be exploring memory as a creative act, exposing history as an interpretive art of invention. This kind of *archival activism* works together with intersectional social justice efforts to increase value and visibility of black bodies and reanimates the utility and power of language. Words rendered as provocative art objects. But something else is afoot. Words that were once directly confrontational, revolutionary, even polemical are now in the wheelhouse of what is or was, gasp- ...*trending*. And trend is not as sustaining. We know some of those now hackneyed words, *decolonization, diversity, gaze, identity, marginalization, representation*, which at essence speaks directly to *erasure*, - bodily, culturally, historically, spiritually. Another, whose advocative value is currently being contested by hyperbolic and hackneyed use is, *diaspora*. It seems, the black diaspora is trying to find a decolonized understanding of itself, and in that process it must find or create presence, a new existence, a new determination, not in spite of or because of the erasures of the Trans-Atlantic and regional Americas slave trade, but because black existence in all geographies was already there and so can be resurrected and narrated within re-appropriated living archives. Giles and Baker address this subversively in their work, for and about black folk – which effectively performs as mastery of a *new tool*. “It cannot be complete” however as Stuart Hall⁹ soberly notes, but the archive can be re-made and “re-read in light of the present and the future.”

While Quenton Baker’s work of redaction and invention is undergirded by the historical accounting of revolt and escape of a violent life in bondage, Giles’ work is a subversive cartographic gesture, invoking us to co-map near undetectable, unreadable, ineffable nuances of temporal missing. Both artists account for the ongoing cost of surviving colonialism and the burdensome remapping of identities. The reason why the history Baker unveils can haunt so viscerally is because such erasures affect contemporary visual and written narratives, systemized, normalized so much so that we don’t even know where to look for (re)connections like the ones he and Giles challenge us to seek out. But more directly their work conjoins our imaginative desires with appropriative revisions to create new archival connections.



Both artists restoratively breathe presence into black interiority, a place once reduced to nonexistence. They underscore the effectiveness of doing research-based work, invoking literary interpretations to find new ways of injecting black particularities in universal histories, which may help to negotiate the present reality of anti-blackness, that Sara Ahmed so aptly notes as a very current danger because of these histories. “You can be stopped by perception; you can be killed by perception. You can be managed out of existence.”¹⁰ The subtle performance of their work strategically reveals how we can co-create new readings of power and how to source inventive tools of (re)(con)figuring that power within ourselves to manage our way back in.

¹ Philip, M. NourbeSe, and Evie Shockley. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/42004>.

WordsAloud. *M. NourbeSe Philip Reads “Discourse on the Logic of Language” from She Tries Her Tongue*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=424yF9eqBsE>.

² Quenton Baker. *Ballast*. Frye Art Museum. Seattle. Oct 2018 – Jan 2019. <https://fryemuseum.org/exhibition/6864>.

³ Danny Giles. *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background*. Jacob Lawrence Gallery. School of Art + Art History + Design | University of Washington Seattle. Jan - Feb 2018.

<https://art.washington.edu/news/2019/01/03/danny-giles-practice-and-science-drawing-sharp-white-background>.

⁴ Pothast, Emily. “Danny Giles Draws a Black Frame Around Whiteness.” *Art Practical*, Feb 20, 2019.

⁵ Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990. Whitney Museum of Art. New York. <https://www.whitney.org/WatchAndListen/720>.

⁶ Douglass, Frederick. *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*. Yale University Press, 2015.

⁷ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (pp. 16). Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

⁸ Lorde, Audre. *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*. Penguin Classics, 2018

⁹ Hall, Stuart. “Constituting an Archive.” *Third Text*, vol. 15, no. 54, Mar. 2001, pp. 89–92. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*

¹⁰ Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. (Chapter 8). Duke University Press Books, 2017.