REFLECTING ON BLACKNESS:
CONCEPTUAL ART, RACE, AND RACIAL ISSUES IN
THE ART OF ADRIAN PIPER AND GLENN LIGON

Paula Yahaira Lopez
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Conceptual art can be defined as art that places more emphasis on the ideas and concepts that constitute a work as opposed to the way it is imaged or aesthetically presented.¹ Conceptual art can be materialized as performances, installations, and textual based works, such as instructions. It is the focus on ideas and concepts that leads to conceptual art having the potential to explore and question ideas and concepts of identity, social institutions, and communication. My analysis on the conceptualist exploration of social, historical, and cultural issues concerning race will be discussed, so it is important to consider how effective conceptual art is in addressing these issues. Through a semiotic framework, I argue that conceptual artists Adrian Piper and Glenn Ligon’s works are effective because the use of language, the signifying of racial stereotypes and perceptions, and references to social, historical, and contextual lexicon and contexts reveals the presence of racism, racial perceptions, and creation of race identity within social and cultural institutions. This forces the audience to personally confront, acknowledge, and possibly challenge them.

Before discussing Piper and Ligon’s work, I will provide specific background on conceptual art, especially in the area and timeframe of conceptual art that pertains to Piper and Ligon. As mentioned earlier, conceptual art places emphasis on the idea that constitutes the artwork over the aesthetic of the artwork. By the 1970s, conceptual art was the prevailing art practice, and conceptual artists considered themselves cultural critics who “sought to establish a link between art practice and the ideological an institutional structures in which it is embedded.”² Conceptual artists did seek out institutional critique in their art. Yet, when the social and political movements of the late 60s and 70s, like the feminist and civil rights movements, started pointing

out further oppression and ideological control in social institutions, conceptual artists were reluctant to directly engage in political reality in their work. As a result, feminist artists and artists of color, like Adrian Piper, became skeptical of conceptual art because of their reluctance on making political issues explicit in their art while claiming to engage in institutional critique. Yet, they recognized the potential in modifying conceptual art’s strategies and methodological premises, which would “advance the fundamentally different critical ethos informing their work.”

Therefore, these artists still sought to use conceptualism to address their issues. Piper explains that her conceptual work addresses race in a manner that is focused on racism, stereotyping, and xenophobia. The reason her conceptual work deals with these is because she chose to work with

language and conceptual symbols, that can refer to content beyond themselves: It forces a choice of content, and therefore a recognition of what content is most pressingly important. And the indexical present has provided the major strategy of my work, which is direct, immediate, and confrontational. Racism is not an abstract, distanced issue out there that only affects all these unfortunate other people. Racism begins with you and me, here and now...

The strategies of conceptualism dealing with language and conceptual symbols, as opposed to representations of the body, is significant in pointing out the sign systems that are connected to race. The visuality of concepts like racism and their relation to viewers is important in the area of conceptual art that I am working with, especially on how it connects to address political and social issues like race. Glenn Ligon’s work comes after conceptual art practices are applied to political realities. Ligon originally focused on Abstract Expressionism, but later moved on to

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3 Ibid., 44.
conceptual work, as he had a desire to address his identity as a black and gay man. For Ligon, conceptual art had the potential to bridge his ideas and his mode of conveying those ideas. The modifications to conceptual strategies had opened exploration of feminist and racial issues, and the use of language being tied to the critique of institutions related to these issues led to Ligon embracing the use of language in his art. For Ligon, language is “both historically specific yet oddly universal, utterly simple yet obdurately abstract.” Language allows Ligon to explore his identity outside the constraints of the representational image because of the flexibility of language to convey ideas and experiences on racial identity. In fact, Ligon was heavily inspired by Piper and her work on racism and its relation to viewers through language and conceptual symbols. Like Piper, Ligon uses text and conceptual symbols to deal with “issues of identity construction in relation to race and gender” and bring them to the foreground. Since language is a universal and brings out historical contexts, Ligon is able to make issues of identity visible and accessible to his audience, and have his audience be aware of these issues by engaging in obscured and ignored topics of racism through a common ground.

The use of language is a common tool for conceptual art through the use of written text. The use of language is significant as it makes the viewer confront their perception of race and upholding of racial construction and institutions. Adrian Piper’s 1986 work *My Calling (Card) #1* is part of a performance in which Piper is amidst an exclusively white group, like a cocktail party or a dinner, and no one know she is black (Piper is a light-skinned black woman). As a

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6 Ibid., 20.

result, they may feel comfortable saying racist remarks. If this were to happen, Piper would hand the card to the people saying these remarks. The small card has no representational imagery. In one side of the card, there is a small typed note for the recipient. The card reads:

Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance...my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when the believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do. I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

The use of words in a performance is an effective conceptual art tool that calls attention to the institutional role of social and cultural sphere in perpetuating racism and maintaining perceptions of race through the invoking of stereotypes via slurs and insults. In his essay, “Rhetoric of the Image,” French semiotician Roland Barthes invites us to consider two forms of representation, *denotation* and *connotation*. “Denotation” implies a pure meaning that is basic, descriptive, and comprehensive to most people. “Connotation” refers to signifiers that need to be decoded to “read their meaning, enter a wider, second kind of code...which connects them to broader themes and meanings, linking them with what, we may call the wider semantic fields of our culture.”

The calling card denotes a formal card given to someone to create a connection--it is an item used within polite society. As a result, the calling card connotes politeness and a strict set of etiquette where manners and reserved behavior leads to a conviviality of different groups because of their use and the formality of events where they are exchanged. This connotation is further heightened by being presented at cocktail parties and dinners were mostly upper-class

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8 See Figure 1.
10 Ibid., 38.
people attend (and are most likely to follow protocols like etiquette). The calling cards can, therefore, constitute a breach of etiquette, where there is an insulting remark that needs correcting. Within those parameters of etiquette, the recipient, the viewer of this work, is now a participant of the performance as they have broken etiquette and must reflect on why their action was wrong. The connotations of politeness and treating a different group of people (black people) with respect frames the performance in which the recipient must decide whether they should apologize and mend their behavior or stash the card away with another act of impoliteness. Regardless, this work is still effective in addressing racism as it point out the racist and hurtful behavior of the recipient as rude and unacceptable.

At the same time, the card has to be given privately to the recipient in order to avoid making everyone uncomfortable, since Piper herself is tied to etiquette. Piper concedes in her discussion of her work that in the situations she hands the card to people, there are options she has to consider: mentioning that she is black and making everyone uncomfortable or angry or being quiet about it, which would make her feel guilty or complicit in allowing racism. The limits of language as well as the effectiveness of language are explored in the piece. Piper does not have the ability to ask for respect and call out racism. The polite tone and accommodating content of the calling card evokes the cultural lexicon of the calling card to read into this aspect of the work. “Lexicon,” according to Barthes, is “a portion of the symbolic plane (of language) which corresponds to a body of practices and techniques,” that can allow access to different readings. The calling card, corresponding to formal behaviors of etiquette, calls upon reactions

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12 Ibid., 219-220.
and interactions that adhere to its symbolic plane. The calling card is an engagement to be heard or noticed, but it is a passive form of engagement. There is reciprocation, an acknowledgment, that is needed to go beyond the exchange of the card. Piper has to wait for the recipient to respond, and is not free to confront racist commentary in the open. She has to play along with the etiquette by using a polite means of communication that spares the racist from embarrassment. The social institution of etiquette and politeness within upper-class white people makes it difficult for serious public conversations to occur in order to address socio-political issues. Additionally, the avoidance of confrontation that drives the use of a calling card “enables the hateful innocence of racist speech to be maintained in the absence of any moral or civic responsibility toward others.”

Thus, although etiquette can be used to point out the lack of respect a racist remark can evoke, etiquette is also restrictive. The need to not bring up socio-political problems or problems that can cause discomfort allows racism. The fact that Piper has to spare the racist recipient embarrassment further shows the presence of racism in social and cultural settings. Yet, the recipient still being confronted and forced to acknowledge the discomfort and harm his commentary and behavior does, which heightens the effectiveness of My Calling (Card). The connotations with etiquette call upon a “rule-governed policy that governs its presentation convert the message that the offending individual is behaving in typical and predictably racist ways. It fights a stereotype by giving the offender a concrete experience of what it is like to be the object of one.”

The card is a generic card for a wide array of all types of racist remarks. Piper understands that the perceptions of race allowing the mistreatment of blacks and rampant racism exists in various social spheres. Thus, she anticipates her need to

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react to a nearly inevitable experience. The need for giving this card for every racist remark and the content of the card that fits various scenarios shows that this racism is not unique or accidental. It is commonplace and the offending recipient is in fact, acting in a racist manner. The calling card denotes the recipient themselves as a racist. The recipient has to acknowledge that and is thus compelled to change and transform their attitudes towards race. Additionally, the generic and overarching language of the card for the everyday racist places this person in fitting a stereotype or myth of the racist. Drawing upon Barthes’ semiotic theory, connotations can create myths and uphold them because connotations naturalize histories that make a given culture seem “eternal and inevitable.”\(^{16}\) The stereotypical racist has been mythologized as a redneck white man with little education and tolerance for people of color based on the media representation of the Jim Crow South. An upper class white man or woman does not fit with this stereotype as they are not “that” type of racist. Reversal occurs with the calling card: the recipient is subjected to stereotyping as Piper and other black people have been subjected. As a result, the recipient has to acknowledge and become aware of how that feels and their responsibility to not subject anyone to that sort of feeling.

Similarly to Piper, artist Glenn’s extensive use of language in his paintings is effective in pointing out the construction and perceptions of race and blackness. \(\textit{Stranger #20}\) is a painting from Ligon’s Stranger in the Village series.\(^{17}\) The painting is pitch black with a rough and grainy texture as it is mixed with coal dust. The mica makes the painting sparkle. The middle of the painting has a stenciled selection from James Baldwin’s essay, “Stranger in the Village.” The essay is about Baldwin's visit to a Swiss village where no black person had ever been in before.


\(^{17}\) See Figure 2.
The words of the essay on the painting can barely be discerned as they blend in with the coarse paint. It takes effort to make out the words of *Stranger #20* since the words tend to blur and blend with the background. It is the straining and scrutiny of making the words legible that “renders his viewers analogous to the Swiss villagers in Baldwin's essay—transfixed by a spectacle of blackness, but ultimately uncomprehending of what they see.” The act of trying to decipher words and understand them prompts the viewer to engage in the act of spectating or looking at blackness but not learning anything about black experiences. In essence, the viewer is engaging in the relationship between races where one is subjected to the scrutiny and misunderstanding of the other, which leads to false or oppressive perceptions that disregard the realities of black experiences. However, Ligon’s work with language can be seen as “reflecting upon it as a series of readerly, writerly, and speakerly responses to acts of reading, writing, and speaking a subject into presence.” Art historian and critical theorist Kaja Silverman defines readerly and writerly text from Barthes’ discussion on the classic text. The presence of a code in a text retains a presence in all other texts where it is applied along with cultural reality, and these codes are also repeated and this repetition creates the illusion of stability and continuity of what is stated by codes. The codes can be found in the two type of texts: readerly (classical) texts and writerly texts. The readerly text is a text that seeks homogeneity and “limits the number of oppositions which can come into play at any juncture.” As a result, the readerly text leads the reader to a specific interpretation that does not prompt change to the existing cultural order. The writerly text, on the other hand, “exhumes the cultural vices or codes responsible for the latter’s

[readerly text] enunciation...the reader or viewer has obliged to reveal the terms of its own construction." As a result, the writerly text has a multiplicity of signification that is meant for the reader to have an active role in interpreting and interacting with the text. Meanings are in constant creation and there is a possibility for the viewer to escape the symbolic field by knowing and then refashioning codes for a cultural change (through a new symbolic field). Baldwin’s essay excerpt in Ligon’s work can be seen as a readerly text. This does not mean that the essay itself is a readerly text, rather the way it is presented as an illegible and muddy text makes it readerly by having the social order of black subjugation obscure Baldwin’s attempt to share his experiences and resist racial discrimination. The readerly response to this nearly illegible text can show how in the act of reading the subject’s presence, the existing cultural order of race perception, where the black experience is foreign and largely misunderstood, is maintained. What is written in Stranger #20 cannot be read. We know what the text is about because of the title, which refers to James Baldwin’s account of visiting a Swiss village, but we do not know what specific part of the text is being used for this work. The content of the words are illegible on purpose because of the coarse black mica and the glitter, which makes the letters blur and mix with the background of the painting. However, the content of the work alone is not where the meaning of this text is grounded. Meaning is also grounded in the the words themselves--specifically, it is the way the words are visually presented. The visuality or lack of visuality the words have evoke the erasure and invisibility of the black man and his experience, as his issues and subjugation are not being read and understood. Yet, the difficulty to read the readerly text because of its visual presentation that forces the viewer to break the singularity of

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21 Ibid., 246.
meaning and attempt to read Baldwin’s account as a writerly one. The painting embodies the black being and the difficulties of understanding black experience. Both text and background of the painting are black, rendering it illegible and obscured. The text goes beyond its meaning as an account of Baldwin’s experiences in Switzerland into meanings of racial identity amidst social relationships and communication. The frustrations from these difficulties reveal what social and cultural perceptions and treatment of black people have done to the understanding of the racial Other. The writerly text challenges the idea of the black man as a perpetually isolated and misunderstood being. With the viewer extracting meaning and understanding how black experience is being disregard by straining to read the text’s message, the viewer, especially the non-black viewer, is not adhering to that perception. There is a semblance of an interaction where that isolation is broken and the viewer is challenging these codes and the symbolic field by making the illegibility of the painting into one of connection and understanding. This holds the potential for changing and challenging the social order and escaping the symbolic order the readerly text adhered to.

Furthermore, since the passage being used in the painting and what the passage is about is illegible, Ligon “concedes that language is an impoverished representational system, incapable of fully expressing black subjectivity and cultural otherness, and hardly a substitute for lived experience.”22 The symbolic field of written language is not enough to address institutional racism and racial construction. As a result, the presentation of the words as visually difficult explains an aspect of black experience that encourages the viewer to look beyond anecdotes and visual culture. Black experiences in relation to their own experience is what should be ultimately,

looked into, and that encourages an acknowledgment of one’s role in upholding certain stereotypes, behaviors, and ideas on race. Once one starts looking at one’s own experience in relation another’s, there are connections made and a self-awareness that can lead to further and more effective challenge to the symbolic field that perpetuates those ideas and actions.

The signifying of racial stereotypes and perceptions, which reveals the racism and construction of race in social and cultural institutions, also prompt the viewer to see these constructions within these institutions and acknowledge their own role in upholding them. The Mythic Being is a performance character that Adrian Piper uses for a variety of works: performance, advertisements, drawings, etc. The Mythic Being is essentially Piper dressed as a black man with sunglasses, auburn Afro wig, and a fake moustache. In one performance, Piper sits and walks around her college campus “cruising” or looking to date and interact with white women for romantic and/or sexual reasons. The three photographs that make up The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women show Piper dressed as the Mythic Being sitting down below steps near a college campus and watching people go by. As women pass him (I am discussing the Mythic Being himself with these pronouns), the Mythic Being makes eye contact and follows their movements. In the third photograph, a man walking with a woman looks at the Mythic Being. The Mythic Being is not a fictional character, as his appearance is appropriated from the popular imagination. The very name, “Mythic Being,” can be tied to Barthes’ ideas of myth, in which connotations can create myths and uphold them because connotations naturalize histories that make a given culture seem “eternal and inevitable.”

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23 See Figure 3.
stereotype of a black man; his hair and sunglasses call upon the lexicon of media’s representation of black identity, where the representation of the highly sexualized and masculine black man is used in film. Piper wears the props that are needed to be combined to connote that stereotype. The signifying of racial stereotypes through Piper’s costume and the ability to read this performance character as signifying a stereotypical black man points out how people of certain races are conceptualized by the artist choosing what to wear to become the Mythic Being. The audience recognizes what the Mythic Being is representing, even when Piper is actually a black woman dressed in drag because of the myth that comes from the popular imagination and representation of black identity. The fixity that supports the myth of the black stereotype can also be connected to Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the stereotype. In “The Other Question,” critical theorist Homi Bhabha discusses how the colonial discourse supports a fixity, a mode of representation that connotes rigidity an an unchanging order. The same occurs with the stereotype as it focuses on something that is fixed and repeated.26 The fixity of the black male stereotype is seen in the representation and recognition of the Mythic Being, as what connotes the Mythic Being as fitting within the characteristics of black identity, which has been repeated enough for the stereotype to continue having an impact in social and cultural institutions and personal perceptions of race by passing as a naturalized fact.

To further bring Bhabha into the reading of the Mythic Being, he can be read as a stereotype that is a fetish. Bhabha defines the stereotype as a fetish that masks cross-cultural desire by creating difference in order to make a person inhuman and to uphold the power relation between races. As a result, the stereotype falls into fetishism because it “gives access to an

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‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. Stereotyping is not simply a setting up of a false image that allows discriminatory practices. The stereotype is a “much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection...the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledge to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.” The stereotype is received with mixed feelings and as a result, the stereotype is focused on both loved and hated stereotypes--on what is accepted of a racial group and what is not accepted. As a stereotype, the Mythic Being is the figure whites feared meeting and middle-class blacks dreaded being compared with—the naturalized justification for an unspoken racist ideology that cast blackness as masculine, heterosexual, and working-class. For the white viewer, he is the figure against whom all blacks are judged, and, as fantasy, he establishes a racialized norm for blackness in the American imagination.

This further derives from the representation of the macho black man from Blaxploitation films where the black man is depicted as angry, macho, violent, and predatory. The manifestation of this stereotype through the Mythic Being in relation to Blaxploitation imagery and perception of black hypermasculinity affects the response to the Mythic Being’s act of cruising. The Mythic Being fits into the ambivalent fetish as the actions of the Mythic Figure cruising for white women signifies the fear of blackness mixing with white women. In the third photograph, the two white people (a woman and a man) walk pass the Mythic Being. The Mythic Being is not looking at them, nor is the white woman. It is the white man who looks at the Mythic Being. In most of the photographs, the people pass by Piper, yet the white man looks directly at him while

27 Ibid., 75.
28 Ibid., 81-82.
30 Ibid., 110.
walking with his companion. The racist social and cultural identification of predatory black masculinity along with the fear of blood mixing can be seen as having an effect by the subtle yet noticeable reaction of the man. This can be read as signifying the fear of miscegenation. The Mythic Being can also be read as representing a stereotype that can be read and revealing of the racial self perception and internalized racism towards black people. The middle-class black person, who could be in the campus the Mythic Being is doing is cruising as a student, would be both repulsed and content with the representation. There may be a recognition of one’s racial identity within the Mythic Being, but the stereotype of the black male, which also affects self-identity, also reflects internalized racism. The urban and potentially aggressive black male signifies the black man that does not fit in, that prevents the middle-class black male from being taken seriously. They don't want to be lumped with the stereotypical male but at the same time, their identity and how they may identify their blackness is tied with that representation. There is a resentment towards that representation that is tied to their self-perception and the perception of others. The act of race mixing is also ambivalent for the middle-class black male. On one hand, there is a “whitening” of the black race that allows an escape from the stereotype, but on the other hand, there is the the horror of one having having the audacity to think of reproducing with a group of people perceived to be better than themselves. The performance of seeking a sexual or romantic partner carries meanings that can be read by both black and whites, but these readings share the common theme of the fear of misgenecation and a distaste towards perceived hypermasculine blackness. The implications of the performance and the myths effectively reveal the presence and impact of racist ideologies and perceptions by pointing out the power of the
stereotype towards racial perceptions and the endurance of racist concepts, like the fear of miscegenation.

The earlier works concerning the Mythic Being were circulated through the newspaper, *The Village Voice*. In issues of *The Village Voice*, there is one box depicting Piper dressed as the Mythic Being with a speech bubble. The text in the speech bubble comes from a passage of her personal diary was written. The work was placed amidst the art advertisement section of *The Village Voice*. In the September 27, 1973 The use of alternative locations for exhibitions like newspapers are “among the standard strategies Conceptual artists employed to critique the gallery-museum system and the commercial art market it supports.” The institutional critique of the conceptual movement through communicative exhibition is being used for racial critique. The use of the conceptual strategy makes Piper’s Mythic Being effective as it breaks away from the ideological limits of the museum space, an institution that can be seen as lacking racial diversity and racist attitudes that uphold racial perceptions and define black identity. By breaking from the museum space, Piper is able to show her critique of racism. The use of the single panel comic in the advertisements can be seen as a way to make the work “‘potentially as accessible as comic books or television.’” The printing of advertisements and newspapers on cheap mass-produced paper and a panel format denote an accessibility and mundaneness of the work. Not only is this work better able to reach people in order for them to tackle and reflect issue of racism through its medium, its mundaneness also connote the everyday aspect of racism. The advertisements themselves are not explicitly discussing race. The chosen diary entries focus on

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31 See Figure 4.
32 See Figure 5.
34 Ibid., 49.
topics of love and friendship as opposed to an anecdote about racial prejudice. However, the appearance connotes racial perceptions of the black male as discussed in the *Cruising* series. As a result, his words are connected to his blackness and he is under the scrutiny of viewers who apply their perception of blackness to him and treat him as such. The personal tie created by the viewer and the Mythic Being is affected by race and that leads to the unpacking and connection to race. The mundane nature of the entries and the medium the Mythic Being words are being spread to the audience addresses the fact that institutional racism is something that occurs between everyday people as well--not just a powerful institution. Racism is upheld in day to day relationships where stereotypes and racial constructions affect how people treat others. The need to make commentary on institutional racism as accessible as possible brings about the question: “Why is there an urgency to show this to a large audience?” The answer is that because racism itself is accessible and well-spread, the awareness of it must be broadcasted to large audiences in order to motivate a larger group to question and change racial institutions and racial perceptions. Additionally, the personal aspect of these advertisements and its effects on the viewer is further heightened as they “encourage engagement by reader-viewers because they contain floating signifiers that render open and inhabitable the positions of ‘I’ and ‘my.’”\(^{35}\) In *Village Voice Ad #1*, the Mythic Being says, “The only decent boys in my class are Robbie and Clyde. I think I like Clyde.” Piper is using passages of her personal diary for her *The Village Voice* pieces, an intimate text on personal feelings and thoughts. By reading these passages the reader-viewer is able to understand and sympathize with the experience of the Mythic Being because they are positioning themselves a sort of dialogue with the Mythic Being, who is discussing personal

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 50.
things with them. The Mythic Being is looking straight to the reader and the speech bubble connotes a discussion, a sign that calls to be heard. This personal engagement with the viewer prompts an understanding that coaxes the viewer to unpack the commentary on racism and race, and be more willing to accept and move towards change. Change comes about with personal connections and sympathy, and this personal gesture points to that possibility. The mass spread of these advertisements are an effective use of an alternate exhibit space since it points out to institutional racism and its endurance in order to to inspire acknowledgment and change from the audience.

References to social, cultural, and historical lexicons highlight the role and presence of racism and racial constructions, which has the audience acknowledge and take responsibility for their role in upholding these. This can be seen in Glenn Ligon’s To Disembark installation. To Disembark is an installation of wooden crates scattered throughout the gallery/exhibit space. The crates are shipping crates, as designated by the marks of glass flutes which point out the need to handle the crates with care. From within the crates, sounds of heartbeats and music, from traditional African rhythm music to gangsta rap, can be heard. The boxes are an allusion to the experience of Henry "Box" Brown, who gives an account in his Narrative of Henry Box Brown-Who Escaped from Slavery on how he escaped slavery by hiding out in a box being shipped North. The reference to the historical narrative of Henry Brown aligns itself with the lexicon of slavery and the subjugation of the black individual under the institution of slavery. The fact that there are many boxes as opposed to one box representing Brown can be read as drawing representing other people, who have their own narratives on dealing with racist

36 See Figure 6.
institutions and experiences. The closed boxes point out to the idea that there is still a transition going on--that the black body is not free from slavery as their journey is still happening, parallel to the journey Brown took. The box carries many other connotations aside from bodily freedom from slavery. There is a identity that is being defined by racial stereotypes, an actual boxing in of black identity. The boxes that hide whoever is inside further connote the erasure and ignorance of black experiences under racism and the construction of stereotype racial identity. The boxes look the same and there is focus on the experience of one person as representative of the experience of many. Experiences remain boxed in. The cultural lexicon of boxing something in and the historical lexicon of slavery continue to strengthen these readings through the auditory aspect of the installation. The mixing of different songs spanning from traditional music from Africa during the days of the Transatlantic slave trade to Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” about lynching to “Sound of Da Police,” about police brutality, not only reference African-American musical culture, they also refer to themes, topics, and histories “through a barely audible sound, a weak but enduring presence that like so many African-American voices speaks from the margins and is heard if one listens carefully.”38 The intertwinedness of cultural practices in music reveals a lexicon of cultural, social, and historical issues like institutional racism, racial hate crimes, and slavery whose effects remain strong and felt through time. The familiarity of songs and what these songs denote (slavery, lynching, etc.) allow the audience to read further meaning into the song selection: a testament to the racial violence and subjugation of black individuals that continues to occur and persist. The low volume encourage the audience member to strain to listen and thus, pay attention to what is going on within the box. Interacting with To Disembark

38 Ibid., 42-43.
and its references to a socio-cultural and historical lexicon means “positioning oneself in relation to the history of slavery...To disembark, then, is to assume responsibility for the production of meaning.” Interaction and excavating connotations from the installation is acknowledging the existence of issues of race that go beyond slavery. That acknowledgement leads to an acceptance of awareness and understanding of the endurance of stereotypes, racist institutions, and painful histories that the viewer has to take responsibility for. Black identity and black bodies cannot leave the box that confines them on their own. It requires help from the outside, from us. By interacting with the box, there is the responsibility to take out what is in there because the viewer is listening to the sounds and people inside. The audience, black or not, has the responsibility to aid in the freeing, the disembarking, of racism. The importance of this responsibility is further denoted by the boxes being stamped with “international symbols that denote fragility...[which] remind us to ‘handle with care’ the people who will be represented.” The handle with care symbols encourage the audience to take this responsibility seriously because people deserve to be treated well. The task of unraveling racist institutions and racism requires a calculated and careful approach. The conceptual emphasis of this work on self-reflection and references to history and culture, this makes the work effective in encouraging action form the audience in acknowledging and addressing these racial issues.

>To Disembark is usually displayed with art that further references the historical and social lexicon of Henry Brown and pre-Civil War America. The Runaways series, for example, is a series of lithographs that imitate a 19th century slave bulletin for runaway slaves. Ligon actually

researched the specific fonts used in the slave bulletins to reproduce them in his series.\textsuperscript{41}

*Runaways (A Loner)* features a white bulletin with an image of a black man dressed in a loose shirt and pants holding a bundle on a stick.\textsuperscript{42} The man is in a running position, and based on the running position of the man, he is denoted as a runaway slave based on the historical lexicon of the fleeing slave. Additionally, the bulletin’s call for information on a runaway named Glenn along with physical descriptions of his height and build and characteristics, like being well-articulated, further denotes this bulletin as a runaway slave bulletin. The use of the historical reference on pre-emancipation slave bulletins links the description and the content of the bulletin as being a product of the past. However, the description used for the print was provided by Ligon’s friends, whom he asked to describe him without telling them why he was asking; the friends comments are “limited to physical descriptions, which is typical of how African Americans were regarded by slaveholders-their value located in their morphological construction.”\textsuperscript{43} These are contemporary descriptions of Ligon. Visually, the words describing Ligon fit the pre-emancipation era, which can lead one to assume it is an artifact of the past. Yet, the contemporary descriptions reveal the persistence of the past, especially in relation to the definition of the black body, the perception of black identity. The physical description of Ligon is specific about his color: “medium complexion (not ‘light-skinned,’ not ‘dark-skinned,’ slightly orange).” This focus on specific skin tone points out the importance of race towards identity. Specificity denotes importance. As the description brings out a central image on how Ligon may look like, the specificity on skin color goes into the construction of the runaway slave. The


\textsuperscript{42} See Figure 7.

mental image formed by the words in the bulletin have the audience participate explicitly on the racial definition of black identity. By doing this, the audience is implicated in applying racial stereotypes and norms of racial construction to their image of Ligon, which encourages a reevaluation of one’s racial biases and beliefs. Ligon is also described as being “very articulate, seemingly well-educated.” The degree of articulation of speech a black person has is a way in which the stereotype of the black person was further created. The stereotype is that the black person cannot speak good English, as they use incorrect grammar. This can be linked to the Mamie and the “Y’a bon Banania” advertisement man, which was studied by writer and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon. These representations revealed the perception of black people as uneducated and incapable of proper communication, and were repeated throughout popular culture. The stereotype’s fixity is revealed as it was used by one of Ligon’s friends to describe him. The emphasis on Ligon’s speech is a repetition of this racist perception, and Ligon’s deviance of that stereotype is seen as commendable and enough to make him be identified. This type of language fits in a slave bulletin, and further shows the persistence of these racist attitudes as it continues to be applied to black people.

I want to address the counterargument that the confrontational aspects of this work can alienate audiences, which hinders the addressing of racism. Art historians and critics have characterized Piper as blaming her audience for the lifetime of racist and sexist discrimination she has endured. Such accounts typically imply that Piper’s work is divisive...white viewers may experience only guilt or outrage. Some of Piper’s critics respond by diagnosing her as the distraught victim, lashing out unfairly at liberal museumgoers who would otherwise take her side.  

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Alienation of the white viewer is a possibility through the use of black skin and bodies along with pointing out the effects and inner workings of racism and race construction in works like the Mythic Being series. The exploration of these topics, especially for a white audience member, can connote not a need to change for racism perceptions and the institutions that perpetuate them but rather, connote a feeling of guilt and being blamed for the issues that Piper is bringing forth. This alienation, especially for the liberal museumgoer, can be seen as hindering the anti-racist aspect of the work because a sympathizer is being lumped with the “real” racists. Consequentially, if it can alienate the liberal white person, it can alienate the most racist of them all.

These criticisms miss the implication that alienation and guilt is not necessarily counterproductive. By feeling guilty and alienated, the viewer is having to deal with their role in a social structure that allows racism to persist. Like My Calling (Card), the viewer has to be confronted with their actions to be motivated to change their behavior. Piper’s 1980 installation, Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems addresses this. Four Intruders is an installation consisting of a small black cylindrical room. Inside are four dimly lit boxes holding a photograph of a black man looking straight at the viewer. The funk song “Night People” by War plays through speakers. A headphone set is attached to each box, which transmits one of four monologues when the viewer puts on the headphones. Every monologue is a manifestation of a visitor’s possible reaction to the piece. Monologues 2 and 4 focus on being made feel guilty. Monologue 2 focuses on someone feeling antagonized by the hostility of the piece because the artist is representing “all blacks as completely hostile and alienated...I’ve never had any trouble with

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45 See Figure 8.
blacks myself. I treat everyone equally,” but then the speaker goes on to say that he would not advise their daughter to marry a black man. Monologue 4 deals with a speaker saying that they feel attacked by this piece, and it is unfair because they have never done anything to make the lives of black people difficult, but then again, black people are difficult and are responsible for their circumstances (drugs, violence, etc.). The speaker concludes by saying that they “resent being made the focus of that kind of anger, as though somehow it was my fault.” Viewers may feel alienated, but that alienation and the reasons behind it connote the often ignored responsibility people have in contributing to racism. The disembodied voices in the monologue and the content of the monologue denote certain white people who do not see themselves as being a problem based on phrases of backhanded racism. These words may be familiar to the viewer, whose thoughts may be echoed back to them. The recognition connotes their own role in racism, which leads to an awareness of that role as they are forced to confront how their words contribute to the subjection of the black person whose photographs looks at them angrily. The viewer has to grapple with the impact of their words in relation to the subject of their thoughts, black people as represented by the photographs (the stereotype of the angry threatening black man). The way they read the black body is put into questioning--is the angry black man a social construction and what is the role of their thoughts in maintaining this construction? The need to answer this leads to self-reflection.

Even someone who does not perceive themselves as racist and finds themselves sympathizing with black experiences is not let off the hook. Monologue 3 features a viewer who sympathizes and even encourages the racial and political message of the work:

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47 Ibid., 185.
Oh, this is...this is really right on[...] like really off the pigs, you know what I mean? Like, yeah. Yeah, I can...I can really get into this. I mean these, you know, these are really angry people, and...and like, this is to me like really socking it to the man. Yeah, really like you know, telling them, uh, them, uh, white honkies where it’s at. Yeah, I mean, you know, like, me personally...I...I'm not one of those jive white dudes...I mean I can really identify[...]I can really understand black anger, because like, I'm real angry, too. I mean...I’ve...I’ve had some real bad problems, you know. Like for example, my parents, my parents, they..they really bug my ass[...]That’s what’s really hard. So I, you know, like I say, more power to ‘em, y’know?

The viewer is denoted as a liberal white viewer based on the way the way this monologue is spoken. Reading the monologue itself evokes the stereotype of the liberal “woke” student in the college classroom who claims to understand the struggles of the poor and marginalized even if he is well off socially and economically. The superficiality of this understanding is further denoted by the pauses and interjections of “Yeah” and “like,” as it supports the implication that the speaker has not put much attention to his thought. The content itself supports the superficiality as the white man equates centuries of black struggle and racial subjugation to his own issues with his parents. They are not the same--one is an institutional issue and the other is a domestic issues that only affects the speaker. It is an ignorant comparison. The insistence of understanding when in reality the speaker is not fully taking into account the effects of racist institutions targets the liberal who sees themselves as being aware enough. The ignorance of the comparison serves as a reflection to the viewer who may harbor the same thoughts as the speaker. A perceived liberal white museumgoer must also recognize themselves and their role in upholding institutional racism, as unflattering this representation may be. It is necessary to know that they still play a role because they don't understand black experiences and struggles, and that they must face the same confrontation as the racists of Monologues 3 and 4 to change their

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48 Ibid., 184.
habit. Regardless if the viewer ends up changing their mind, they are made aware of their habits when it comes to dealing with the issue of race even if they perceive themselves to be good people with no racial prejudices. As discussed earlier in the paper, Piper has mentioned that conceptual art uses language and conceptual symbols to refer to content beyond itself, and it is meant to be confrontational. Racism is something that begins with everyone involved in social and historical spheres. Not making the viewer uncomfortable would not bring this self-awareness. By making the viewer uncomfortable and having the viewer's action and thoughts mirrored back at them, they cannot plead ignorance to their role in racism, and are thus, encouraged to reevaluate their role. Whether they do anything about it is up to them.

Conceptual art’s exploration of ideas allows an understanding of what supports certain thoughts and beliefs, including those on identity and social structures, which can lead to a further questioning of those ideas. It encourages the viewer to actively acknowledge ideas they harbor, and grapple with their implications. Therefore, Adrian Piper and Glenn Ligon, as conceptual artists, are able to effectively address issues concerning race. As seen through a semiotic framework, their work succeeds as it uses language, references to social, historical, and contextual lexicons. This encourages audiences to think about their role in institutions and perceptions of race by facing their own biases, which may inspire change or a denouncement of racism.
Works Cited


Marriott, David. “On Racial Etiquette: Adrian Piper’s My Calling (Cards).” *Postmodern Culture*

Piper, Adrian. *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*, 1980. Cylindrical room, light boxes, silkscreen photographs, speakers, headphone set, and sound, varied dimensions. Wexner Center of Ohio State University, Columbus.


Dear Friend,
I am black.
I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed
at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to
alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunate-
ly, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy,
manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to
assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when
they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute
this card when they do.
I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I
am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Figure 1: My Calling (Card) #1, by Adrian Piper, 1986. Offset lithograph on brown paper.

Figure 2: Stranger #20, from Stranger in the Village series, by Glenn Ligon, 2004. Oil stick, gesso, coal dust and acrylic on canvas.
Figure 3: *The Mythic Being Cruising White Women #1-3*, from Mythic Being series, by Adrian Piper, 1975. Performance.
Figure 4: Village Voice Ad #1 and Village Voice Ad #6 from The Mythic Being series, by Adrian Piper, 1973-1975. Newsprint.

Figure 5: The Village Voice, September 27, 1973 from The Village Voice (New York, NY), 1973. Newsprint.
Figure 6: Installation view of *To Disembark*, by Glenn Ligon, 1993. Ten lithographs and nine wood crates with sounds.
Figure 7: Runaways (A Loner), from the Runaways series, by Glenn Ligon, 1993. Lithograph.

RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5’8”, very short hair cut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155-165 lbs., medium complexion (not “light skinned,” not “dark skinned,” slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50’s style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He’s socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he’s somewhat of a loner.
Figure 8: *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*, by Adrian Piper, 1980. Cylindrical room, light boxes, silkscreen photographs, speakers, headphone set, and sound.