

jahlbutahkhapnida

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**Abstract**

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Photomedia

The act of stretching and experimenting with the malleable properties of language is fundamental to my practice. I often criticize the supposed neutrality of language, especially Standard American English, and question the inherent power structures that are embedded in everyday exchanges. I aim to create new relationships and meanings in the simultaneity that exists in the spoken and written forms of English and Korean.

My artistic expression is based closely on the incidents of my own lived experiences, and re-examining those incidences. I challenge the ideas and structures around the prevalence of white supremacy steeped into our everyday lives, and questioning what it means to fight for justice through small acts of resistance. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Phoebe, Glazer, Ilana. *Sooo Many White Guys*, WNYC Studios.  
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/shows/whiteguys>.

## Introduction

Language, spoken and written, is critical within my practice. My sculptural and video works are explorations of the materiality of language and exploring textuality. I am often creating new relationships and meanings in the simultaneity of these forms.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, an artist fluent in Korean, English, and French, “literally takes apart language or languages in her work.”<sup>2</sup> Words are processed through one’s mind differently to that of a monolingual individual versus a multilingual individual. Using text as a material, a subject, and a conceptual device— many concerns come to mind:

1. How does one read and perceive text and language within an art piece?
2. How does the text operate within the institution in which it is performing?
3. Are the words to be *read* or *viewed* as aesthetic objects?

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<sup>2</sup> Constance Lewallen, Lawrence Rinder, Thi Minh-Ha Trinh. *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982)*, 2001. p. 9.

## Language and Art



Fig. 1. Alex Ye Kang. *jahlbutahkhhapnida*, 2018. hand-carved medium-density fibreboard, pressure-sensitive maple veneer. (Mid-installation image at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, Washington.)

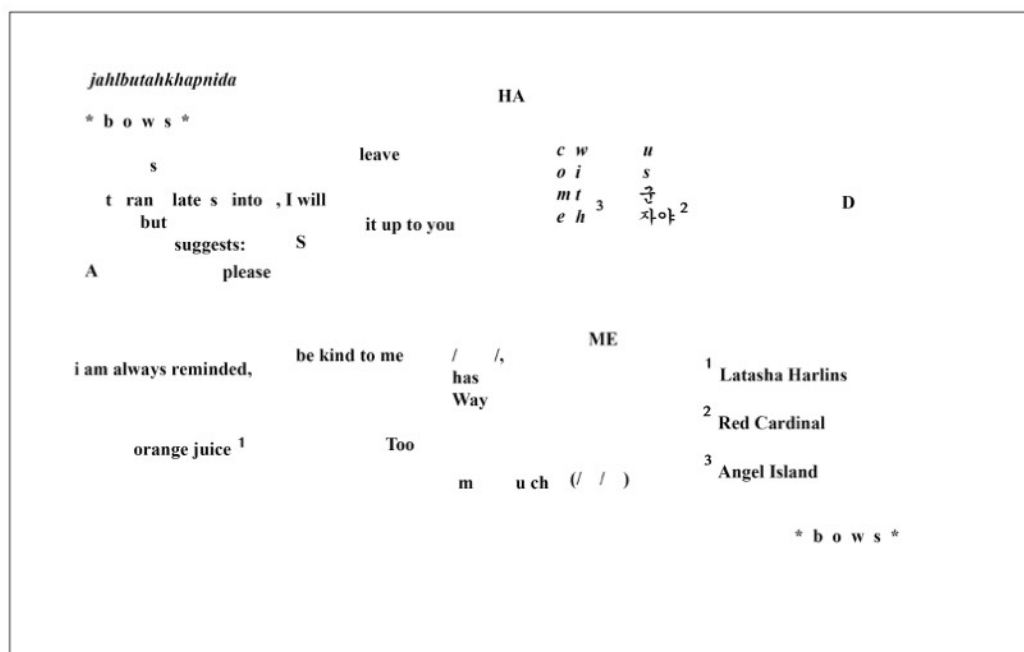


Fig. 2. Alex Ye Kang. JPG text of *jahlbutahkhhapnida*, 2018.

Fig. 1 would only be accessible within this public space and on the walls of an institution that may contradict the intent of how this poem should be read and internalized, but the dimensionality of the words may engage and manipulate the audience in a manner that Fig. 2 cannot. Figure 2 can be consumed privately, two dimensionally, and without the inherent power structures looming over the work.

My concerns regarding the inherent power structures within institutions being embedded within my works are rooted from my intentions as a woman of color and a politically-aware artist. I wish to examine white privilege, and call attention to it on both micro and macro levels. my work endeavors to challenge the entitlement of the individuals who are privileged and do not have to navigate the murky waters of multilingualism.



Fig. 3. Alex Ye Kang. *mommy, do not disappear*, 2017. hand-carved padauk, 3-channel video, four frames of multiple maple leaves, mp3 audio. (Installation image at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, Washington.)

*mommy, do not disappear* is a multi-media installation that aims to provide a poetic lens to understand the disorienting process of learning and unlearning a language, as well as the heartbreaking reality of the sentiment lost in translated words. Again, I am revisiting and questioning the neutrality and inherent power of language. Understanding and experiencing an artwork will result in different outcomes for each individual's encounter with the work—impacted by contexts, times, settings, and personal experiences. I believe the engagement of the audience activates an artwork beyond its original intended meanings.

## Language and Identity Politics

In my role as a Korean-American woman who is perceived as a “perpetual foreigner,” actively creating art in the United States, I am driven by the urgency to use my platform to increase cultural awareness and expand the discourse surrounding gender and race.

As used by dissident groups, art may create awareness of social issues. In this context, it provides a rallying cry for action and social change. To be sure, art can be used for decoration and enhancement; but to fulfill its total function, art has to achieve communication with its audience. If art has no communicative role, then it cannot maintain or change cultures.<sup>3</sup>

The term “race” was first created to describe lineage. However, Pierre Paul Broca instigated the idea of eugenic and dysgenic; arguing in favor of craniometry, and biological determinism.<sup>4</sup> These detrimental beliefs led to racial rankings because anthropologists such as Louis Agassiz and Broca continuously announced measurements of the brain and body in favor of whites, furthest from the apes, and African-Americans closest to the apes. This encouraged the false idea that the whites have purer, superior, and smarter genes, leading to racial taxonomy. The process to create social rankings has never been a matter of biological entity, genealogy, or physiognomy, it has been a matter of hierarchy. The notion to not believe its existence does not justify the fact that many people still see race, this imaginary, socially constructed idea. Ta-Nehisi Coates explains:

Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable

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<sup>3</sup> Chalmers, F. Graeme. (1987). Cultural versus universal understanding of art. In Blandy, D. & Congdon, C. (eds). *Art in a democracy*. New York: Teachers College Press, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. p. 63.

feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men.<sup>5</sup>

Fetishism of “the gaze,” and the act of highlighting “racial otherness” is prominent particularly within the history of image making. This act of archiving and categorizing is a violent act of erasing identities, while wounding stereotypes are emerged. Does understanding the lineage and history of how these ways of “othering” has formed, perpetuate this violent nature of exploitation, or help obliterate ways of racial thinking?



Fig. 4. Byron Kim. *Synecdoche*, 1991-1993. (Installation image at the Whitney Biennial in 1993. Photo by Dennis Cowley.)

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<sup>5</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, an Imprint of Random House, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2015. p. 7.

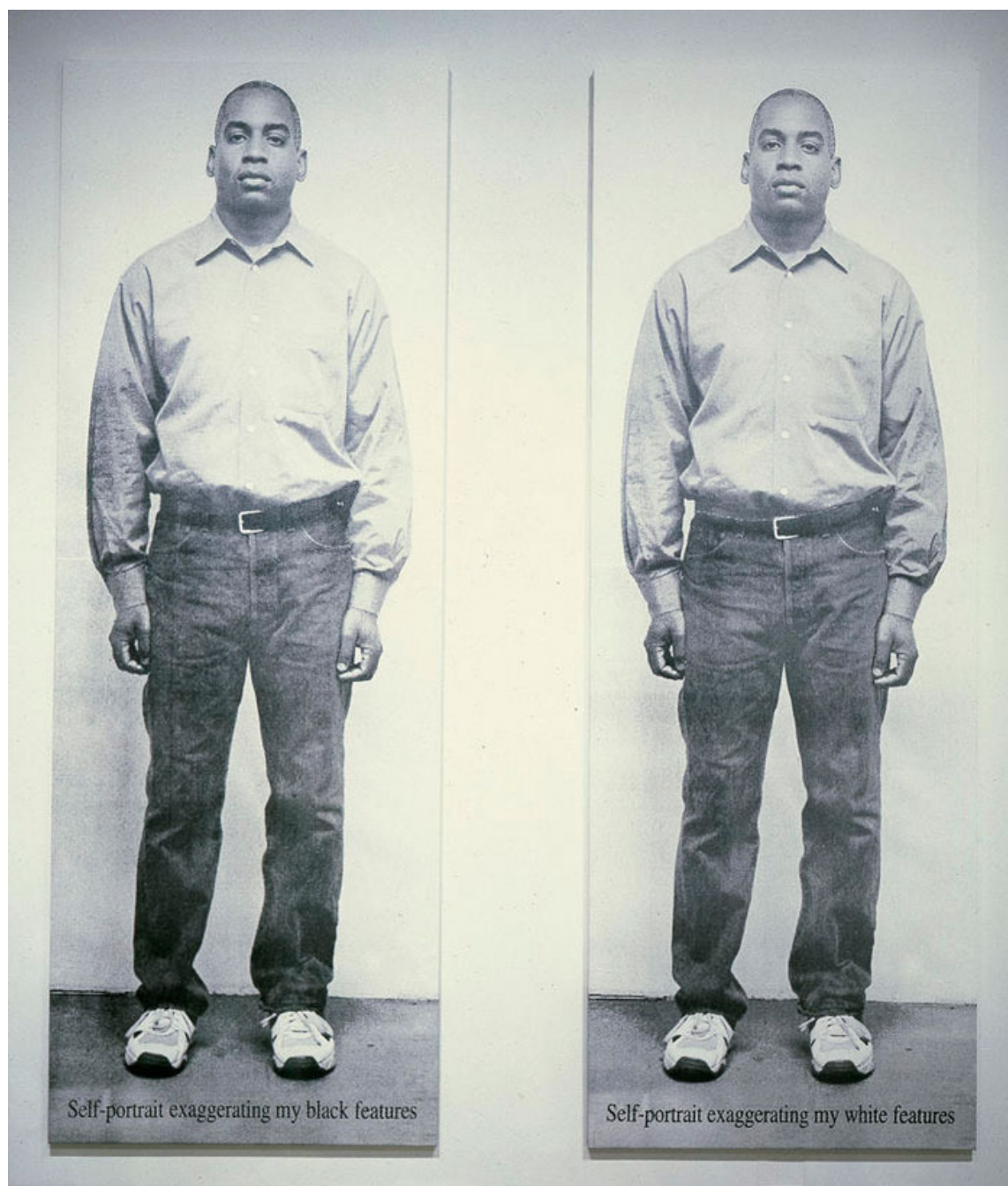


Fig. 5. Glenn Ligon. *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features / Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*, 1998. silkscreen on canvas

“It’s then that Hennessey’s <sup>6</sup> suggestions about “how to be a successful artist” return to you: be ambiguous, be white.” <sup>7</sup>



Fig. 6. Alex Ye Kang. *Untitled (whitewashed)*, 2017. Single-channel video still (00:00:06).

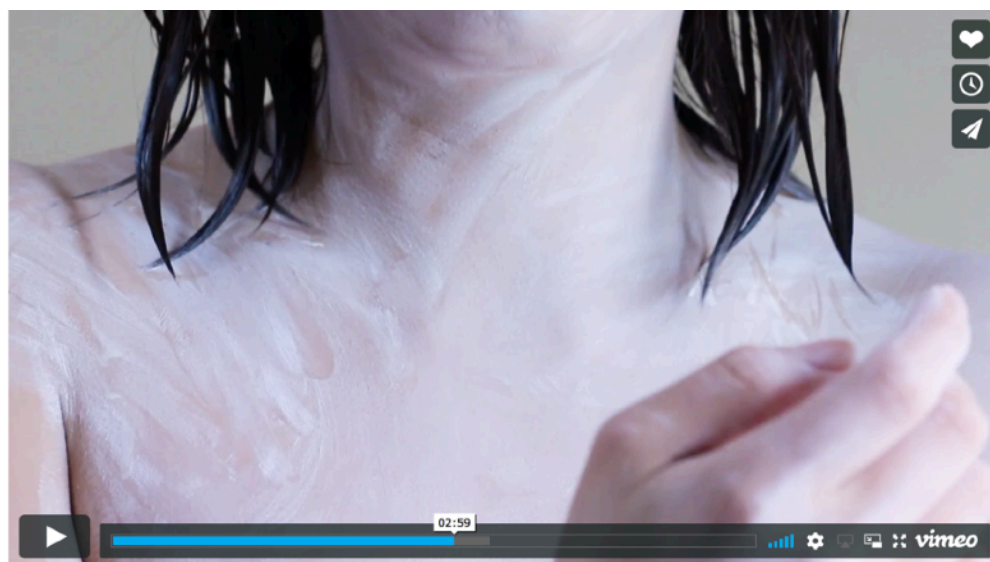


Fig. 7. Alex Ye Kang. *Untitled (whitewashed)*, 2017. Single-channel video still (00:02:59).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNXL0SYJ2eU>

<sup>7</sup> Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014. p. 34

In reference to Fig. 5, Glenn Ligon interrogates the beliefs still embedded in critiques of fetishism: “that identity could be conveyed visually, that it could only be articulated in binary terms based on singular categories of identification, and that if “visualized” it could somehow be understood as singular and static.”<sup>8</sup> Ligon is also using the text in Fig. 5, as a directional way of engaging with its audience. “By marking the two photographs with a textual racial signifier, Ligon places the viewer in a perforative space where they are playing with their own view of race with his body as the stage.”<sup>9</sup>

The use of text in Fig. 8 elicit and prompt the viewer to create their own visual imagery; it remains unclear whether we’re *reading* or *seeing*.

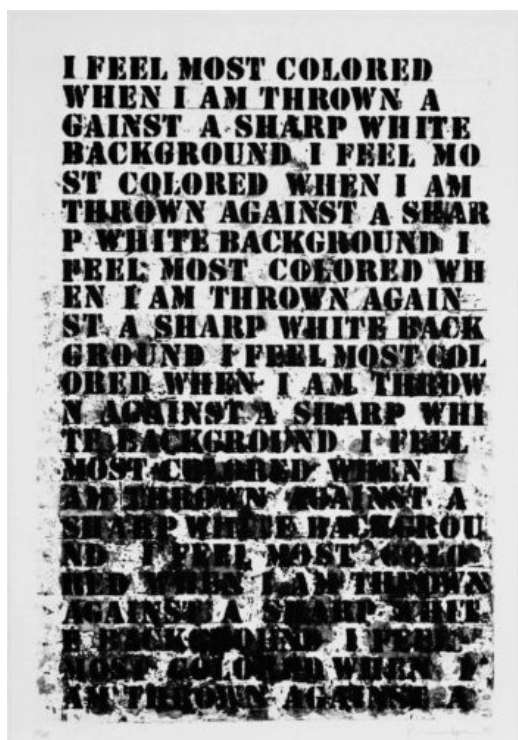


Fig. 8. Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990-91. oil stick, gesso and graphite on wood panel.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Amelia. *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*. London: Routledge, 2012. p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, Jade. "Glenn Ligon, Self Portrait." The Alcohol Pharmacology Education Partnership. November 12, 2012. Accessed May 15, 2018. [https://sites.duke.edu/vms590s\\_01\\_f2012/2012/11/12/glenn-ligon-self-portrait/](https://sites.duke.edu/vms590s_01_f2012/2012/11/12/glenn-ligon-self-portrait/).

## How Black Lives Matter is an Asian American Issue

I am interested in expanding and elevating this process of text and allowing the punctum<sup>10</sup> of the artwork, left for the audience to interpret. In Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, the punctum of the piece for me, is the name, Latasha Harlins. My intentions are to highlight the violence of silence and erasure, and a reminder that Black Lives Matter is an Asian American issue. Let me first be transparent and state that I do not wish to compare the Asian American experiences of oppression to that of African American experiences of oppression. My intentions are to call attention to the Asian American communities that remain apathetic towards these injustices while reveling in the privilege under the model minority myth.

Soon Ja Du, a Korean liquor and grocery store owner, accused Latasha Harlins of shoplifting when Latasha stuck a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice in her backpack. This confrontation led to Soon Ja Du killing Latasha Harlins by shooting her in the back of the head with a .38 caliber revolver. This murder incident marked a beginning of the awareness for first generation Korean-American merchants to be more aware of the need to have better relations with African Americans for the economic survival. In *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du*,<sup>11</sup> the presiding Judge Joyce Ann Karlin suspended a ten-year prison sentence of the jury's conviction of voluntary manslaughter and placed Soon Ja Du on five years probation.

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<sup>10</sup> denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

<sup>11</sup> <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/ca-court-of-appeal/1769555.html>

Anti-black feelings are prevalent in Asian American communities. Asian Americans are taught to associate themselves more with the promises of whiteness, than to see ourselves as people of color. However, Asian Americans have faced a long history of oppression and racism.

Originally coined in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson to profile the socioeconomic success of Japanese Americans, the myth of the “model minority” has become a collection of stereotypes about Asian Americans, presenting them as an “ideal minority group” in the eyes of White Supremacy... Peterson’s use of “model minority” was to study the success of Asian Americans contrasting them with what he termed “problem minorities.”<sup>12</sup>

...If you want to fight racism in America, you have to fight the model minority myth. Far too often, this wide-reaching form of racism is left out of our discussions on issues of racial oppression and discrimination. Far too often our Asian American friends and neighbors are not offered a seat at the equally and ant-racism table, and far too often their own efforts at combating anti-Asian racism are ignored by the broader social justice community.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Oluo, Ijeoma. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Seal Press, 2018. p. 193

<sup>13</sup> Oluo, p. 200.

## Conclusion

Accountability is a more expansive concept because it opens a field of possibility wherein we are all compelled to move beyond blame to see where our responsibility lies. Seeing clearly that we live within a dominator culture of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, I am compelled to locate where my responsibility lies. In some circumstances I am in a position to be a victimizer. If I only lay claim to those aspects of the system where I define myself as the oppressed and someone else as my oppressor, then I continually fail to see the larger picture. Any effort I might make to challenge domination is likely to fail if I am not looking accurately at the circumstances that create suffering, and thus seeing the larger picture. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. p. 30-31.

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