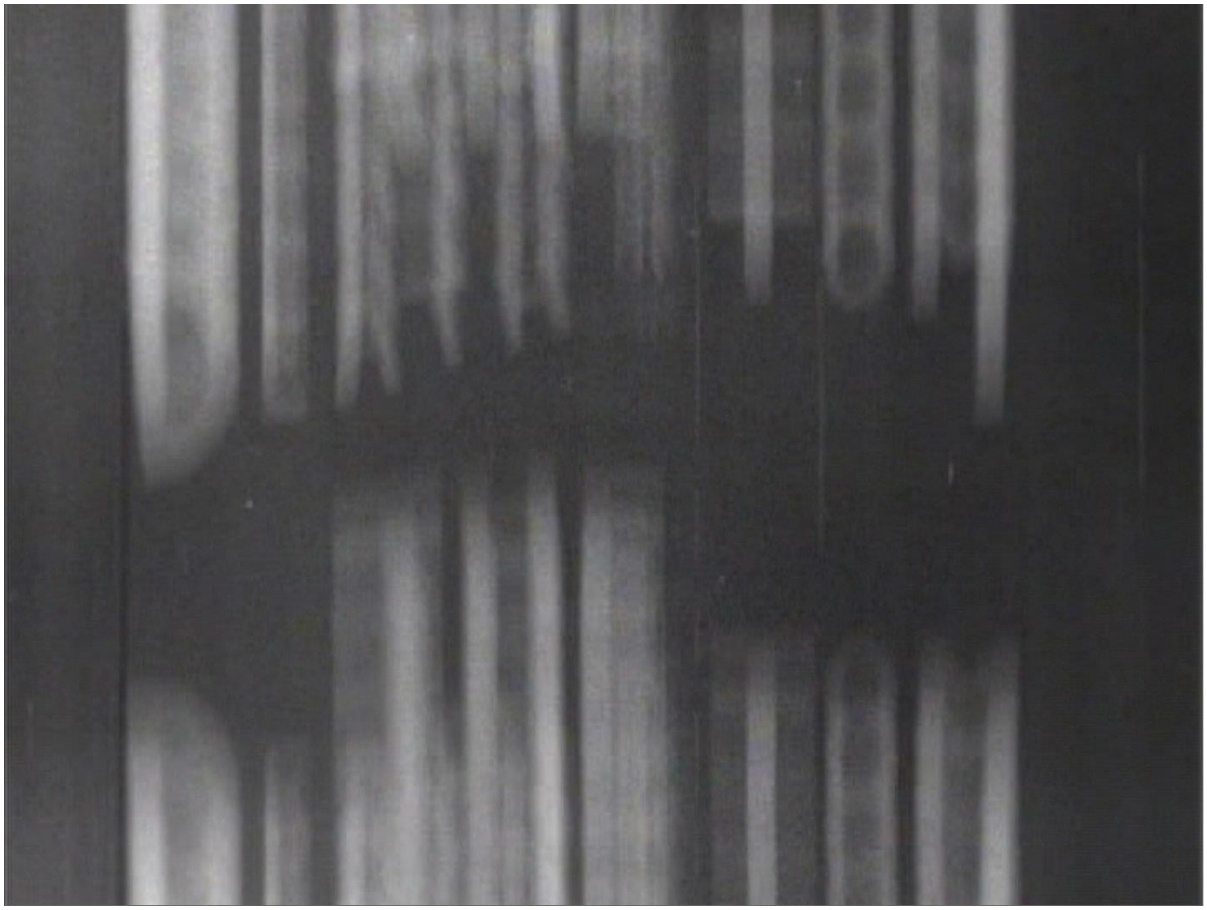

Plate 18 Glenn Ligon (American, born 1960). *The Death of Tom*. 2008. 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound). 23 min. 1/3. Gift of Agnes Gund, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Ninah and Michael Lynne. 63.2009.

Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008)

-Swagato Chakravorty, Museum Research Consortium Fellow, MoMA / Yale University
swagato_chakravorty@moma.org

Glenn Ligon (American, b. 1960) was educated at Wesleyan University, Connecticut and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. By the early 1990s, he had developed a distinctive artistic practice, combining textual appropriation and painting by drawing from the writings and speech of a range of figures, many within the African-American cultural canon. In the text-paintings that emerged (on paper, linen, canvas, or wooden panels), Ligon used stencil, oilstick, paint, and sometimes coal dust to repeatedly inscribe fragments of text, allowing the accumulating mass of dense material to exceed the stencil's limits. The process produced initially clear, legible text that eroded and bled into an illegible black mass as one's gaze moved down the work (figs. 18.1-18.2). Ligon recalls that he had originally wished to keep the stencil and the surface "pristine" but found the failure of his attempts to do so unexpectedly productive.[1]

This "failure" effectively underscores Ligon's personal ambivalence—resistance, even—toward strains of art historical discourse that tend to read art produced by African-American and black artists as "black art," thus obscuring the specificity of such works under what Kobena Mercer has identified as the "burden of representation."[2] Ligon characterizes his approach as "more open-ended, more about questioning positions than establishing a single position," emphasizing that "[L]ack of location is [his] location."[3] We find something of this indiscriminatory spirit across his text-paintings, words for which come from Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin just as readily as from Jean Genet and Gertrude Stein. The absence of a specific position from which Ligon's text-paintings "speak" arguably also signals the artist's own threshold position: a black, gay artist who has nonetheless exhibited at many of the world's leading art institutions. Such resistance to self-identification with(in) a specific discursive position, as articulated through his text-painting work, helps contextualize *The Death of Tom* (2008).

The Death of Tom (23 min., 16mm., black and white) is a record of Ligon's efforts to recreate the final scene from Edwin Porter's 1903 adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852). At the turn of the century, traveling stage adaptations—"Tom Shows"—featuring a mix of white actors in blackface and supporting black actors were a performance staple across America.[4] In the eponymous scene, Tom's death segues into a series of images that envision future black emancipation. Ligon created *The Death of Tom* in collaboration with several art students at the Alberta College of Art and Design, where he had been invited in 2008 by curator Wayne Baerwaldt to a four-day residency. Working with cinematographer Deco Dawson and three students, Ligon cast himself as Tom to recreate the scene.[5] However, the 16mm black and white film "[had not been] threaded properly and the result was a fluttering, out of focus image."[6] Nonetheless, he decided to use the footage, transferring it to tape and subsequently DVD for exhibition purposes. Commissioned to contribute a score, the jazz composer and pianist Jason Moran adapted vaudeville performer Bert Williams' "Nobody" for the purpose.[7] The work is, according to Ligon's highly precise instructions, intended to be screened within a light-tight "black box" environment.[8]

In conversation, Ligon emphasizes first that *The Death of Tom*—his first foray into moving-image art—be considered an *installation* rather than a *film*, and second, that it be understood as an *expansion* of his text-painting work rather than a *departure* from it. Although his positions may appear counter-intuitive, closer consideration of two aspects of his text-paintings mentioned earlier—failure and illegibility—offers clarification, even as they underscore the threshold position *The Death of Tom* occupies within MoMA's institutional context.

The stencil's failure to contain the marks Ligon inscribes onto the surface of his text-paintings, that is to say the impossibility of keeping the surface "pristine," indicates a coincidence of technique and subversion of stated intent. This failure articulates the messiness of history, memory, and narrative, as though insisting that boundaries invite transgressions. Commenting on *Untitled (1776-1865)* (1991, fig. 18.1), in which Ligon stencilled on paper each year from 1776 (which witnessed the declaration of American independence) through 1865 (the putative abolition of slavery), Huey Copeland remarks that "Ligon's work not only points to the lapses of memory that have been required for the republic to imagine itself but also suggests how the selective occlusion of the past continues to falsify our imaginings of the present."[9] Certainly, the failure of recording and representation in *The Death of Tom* extends Copeland's analysis, linking historical erasures with the historical illegibility of the black body. More pertinent to Ligon's insistence upon the work's status as installation instead of (as well as?) film, we might read Copeland's assertion of "selective occlusion of the past" in relation to institutionalized narratives that variously circumscribed cinematic spectatorship as well as film's fraught relation to the other arts.[10] *The Death of Tom*, embodying technological failure, illegibility, and occupying a space between the thinness of the projected image and the fullness of architectonic form, challenges us to rethink the history of race and representation in cinema, the history of cinema vis-à-vis museums, and, especially, the history of race, cinema, and exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

The Death of Tom comprises numerous retakes and rehearsals, but its images elude identification of any bodies or concrete forms (fig. 18.3). We might think about this by recalling Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of *acinema*. Framing cinema in terms of a libidinal economy of movement, Lyotard suggests that "bad" movement—moving images that are "dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear…" comprises cinema's intolerable excess.[11] Acinema is resistance and therefore also political; it refuses assimilation into or compliance with the dominant representational order, thereby calling into question the right to look.[12] Midway through the work, an extended sequence appears in which the entire screen is flooded with dazzling white luminance (fig. 18.4). For the spectator, ensconced until this point in the darkness of the black box of the theatrical *dispositif*, it is a distinct shock. Its unexpected duration can produce some discomfort, a sense of being exposed, all-too-suddenly-conscious of one's fellow spectators. Previously indistinct shapes in the theatre abruptly resolve into sharp visibility. This sequence and its effect remediate a pair of Ligon's text-paintings from 1990: *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)* and *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (figs. 18.5-18.6), in a sense literalizing their implied duality.

Mobilizing failure and illegibility toward critical ends, *The Death of Tom* intercepts basic spectatorial curiosity: “What am I seeing?” and redirects it: “What am I *not* seeing?” “*Why* am I not seeing it?” An alternate line of thinking thus initiated, the *conditions of exhibition* become the object of curiosity. The work’s sole concession to legibility perhaps constitutes a kind of response: the title, repeated eight times throughout the screening: “The Death of Tom” (fig. 18.7).

FIGURES

Figure 18.1: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (1776–1865)*, 1991. Oilstick and paint on paper, 76.2x55.9cm.

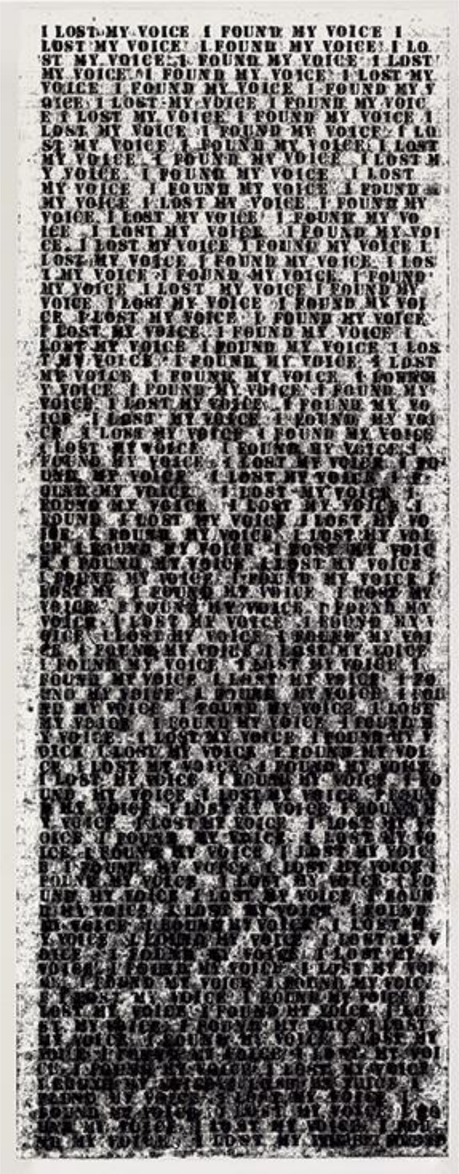

Figure 18.2: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice)*, 1991. [Details, dimension]

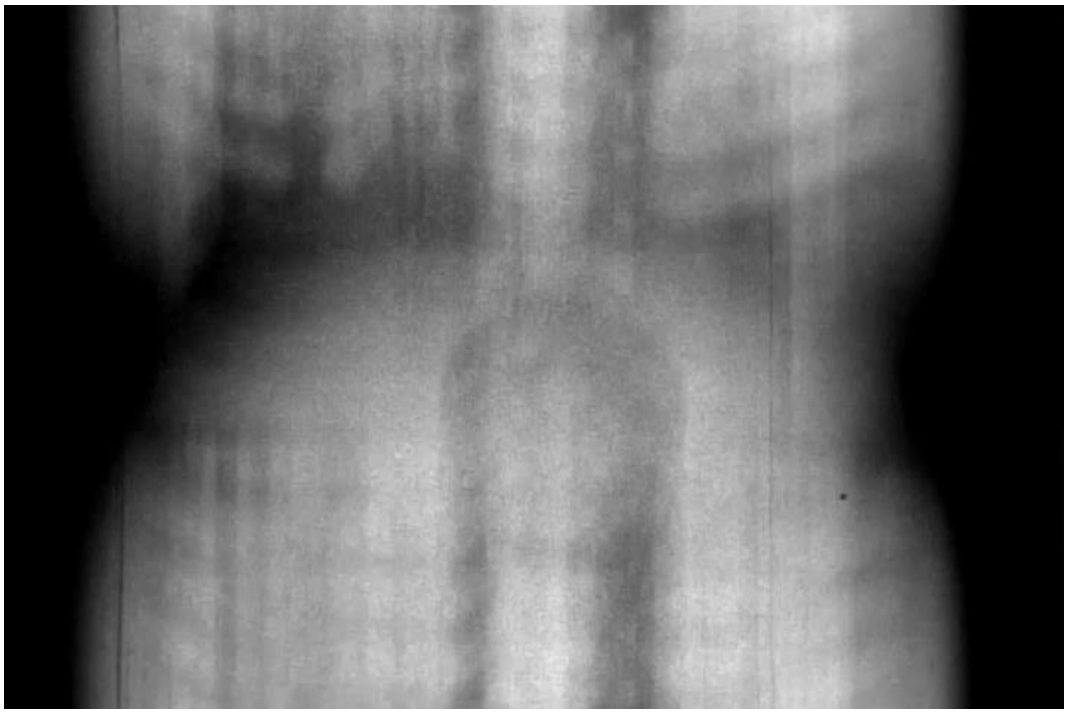

Figure 18.3: Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008). 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound). 23 min. Film still courtesy Peter Oleksik, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

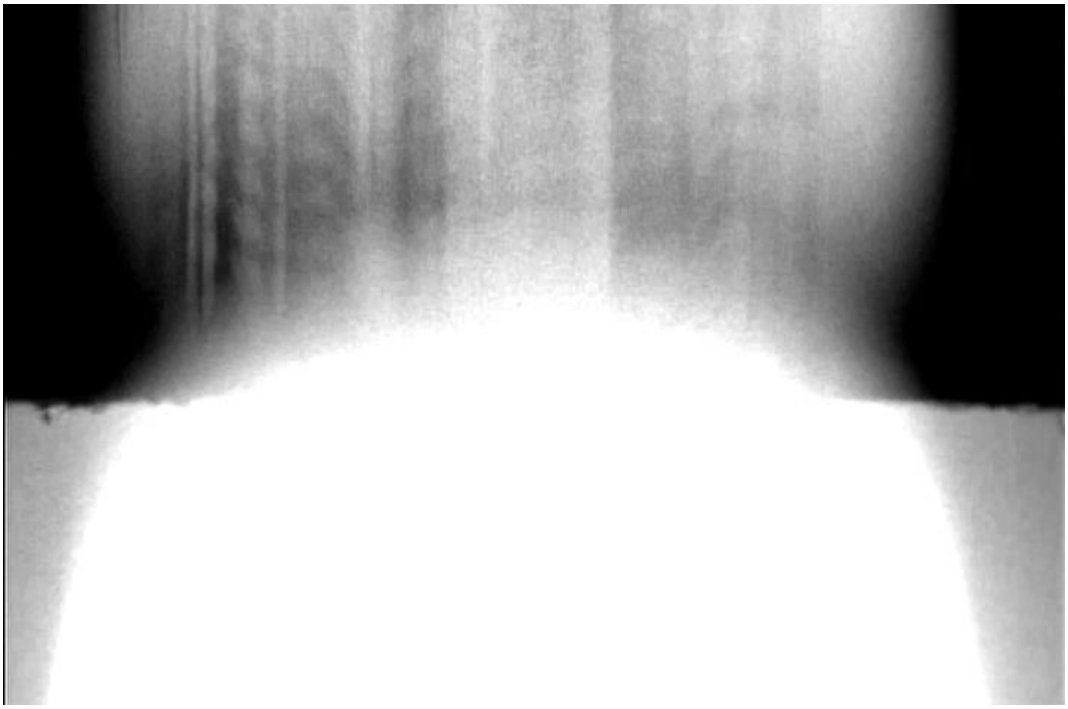

Figure 18.4: Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008). 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound). 23 min. Film still courtesy Peter Oleksik, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

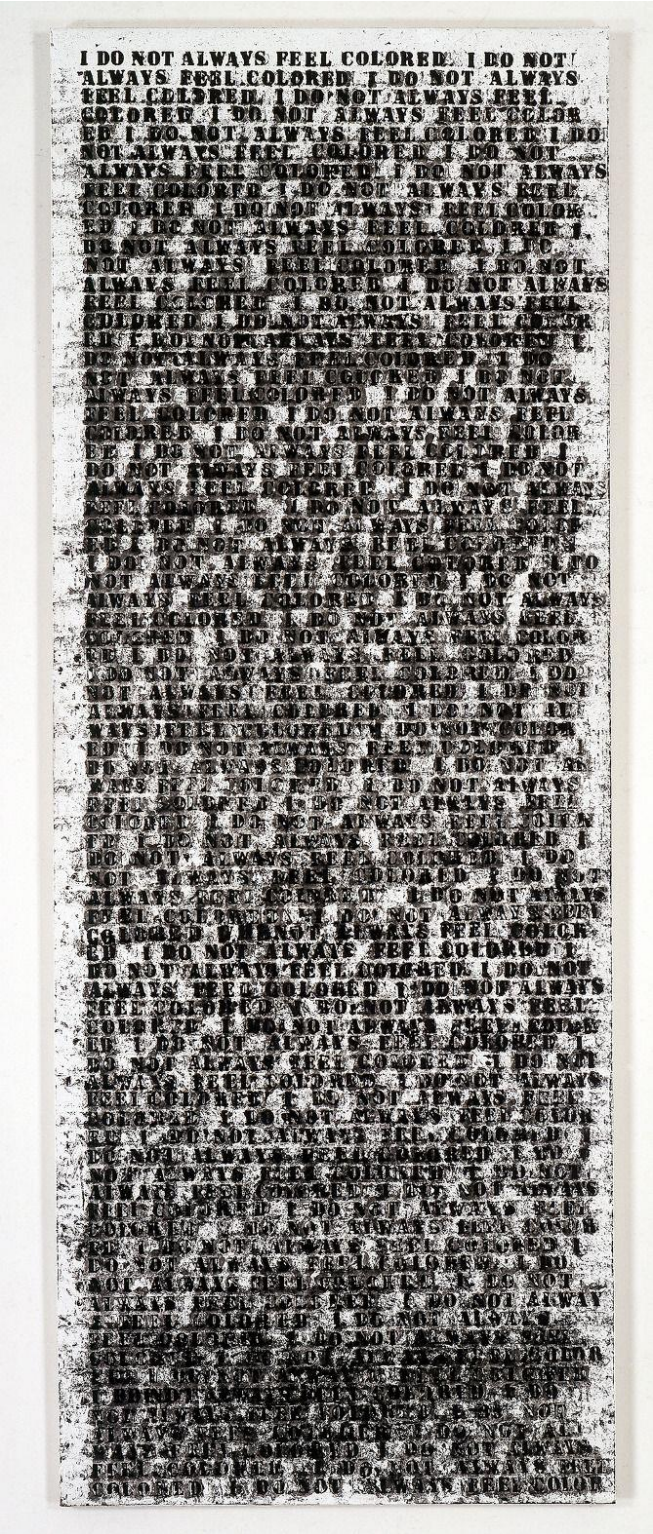

Figure 18.5: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*, 1990. Oil stick and oil on wood. 203.2x76.2cm.

Figure 18.6: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background)*, 1990. Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood. 203.2x76.2cm.

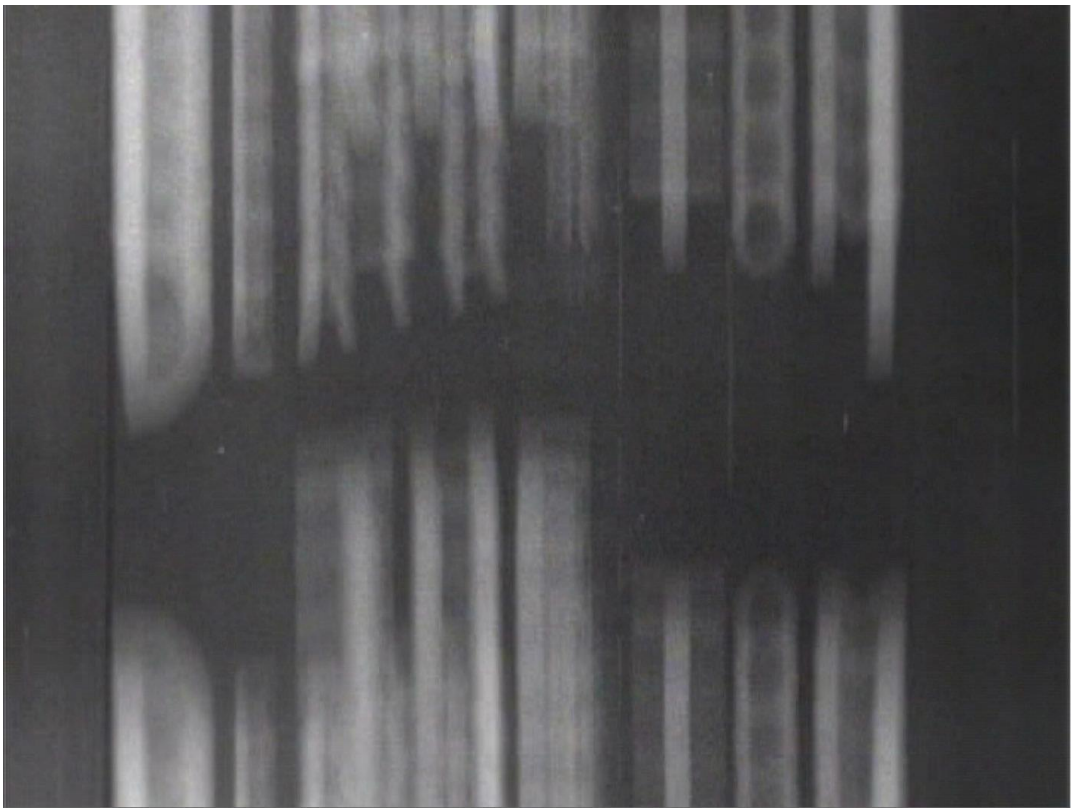

Figure 18.7: Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008). 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound). 23 min. Film still courtesy Peter Oleksik, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[1] Glenn Ligon, conversation with author, 4 May 2016.
[2] Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 4:10 (1990): 61-78.
[3] Roberta Smith, "Lack of Location is My Location," *New York Times*, 16 June 1991.
[4] The historical context, including Porter's own work for Thomas Edison's studio, is discussed at length in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990). For the many presentational aspects of Porter's take on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991): 242-245.
[5] Glenn Ligon, conversation with author, 4 May 2016.
[6] See the object file for this work.
[7] Egbert Austin ("Bert") Williams (1874-1922) was among the earliest black comedians on Broadway to find national stardom. "Mr. Nobody" was his best-known stage persona, first introduced in 1905. The character's signature song, "Nobody," is tellingly self-effacing to the point of rendering the speaking subject all but absent. See Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880-1924* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[8] Due to the institutional constraints, *The Death of Tom* was screened in a gallery alongside other artworks under study in the seminar convened on Feb. 11-12, 2016. The work was projected on a free-standing screen.
[9] Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113:1 (Winter 2011): 73.
[10] For an account of the development of cinematic spectatorship as a cultural formation in the American context, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For a critique of the cinematic apparatus and its constitution of spectatorship, see Jean-Louis Baudry, "Effets idéologies produits par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique* 7/8. For an exploration of film's and film culture's anxiety concerning its relation to the other arts, see Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[11] Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Acinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Phil Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
[12] Nicholas Mirzoeff has written that "the right to look is not about merely seeing. [...] The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity." See his *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).