

Rashaad Newsome: "How Black artists use citational art to build upon one another's legacies"

By Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare

February 1, 2022



"Citational Ethics (Toni Morrison) 1987" (2021). © Ja'Tovia Gary. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Black women scholars have been talking a lot lately about citation. (Check out the [Cite Black Women podcast](#) which aims to visibilize Black women's knowledge production, or read Queen's University professor Dr. Katherine McKittrick's [poetic tweets](#) that complicate a seemingly straightforward practice.) But what about citation as art? Outside of academia, Black artists make creative use of citation to touch viewers who relate to the references. Black citational art is a kind of code that allows artists to speak in secret: most works do not immediately identify the quotation. If you know, you know.

**JESSICA**  
**SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Ja'Tovia Gary's sculpture ["Citational Ethics \(Toni Morrison\) 1987"](#) (2021) debuted at Art Basel in Miami last November. The neon 9.5ft piece mimics the shape and style of the motel signage where Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, but the text is altered. In its place, Gary inserted a quote from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*: "There is no bad luck in the world but white folks." Gary effectively cites twice – someone who knows the iconic sign could be transported back to 1968, while the quote could resonate from Vietnam to Vancouver even if you don't remember Suggs and schoolteacher. But everything comes together for the viewer who "reads" all the references.

Art is often referential, but citation specifically employs quotation, literary or otherwise. Take Glenn Ligon's ["Untitled \(Four Etchings\)"](#) (1992): four canvases, two black on white, two black on black. The former canvases riff on a Zora Neale Hurston quote from her 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," while the latter two repeat the first lines of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Viewing these on a white wall of the gallery, even if you read the didactic, you would not know the references unless you were familiar with those authors' works.

Or consider Martine Syms's single-channel video ["Notes on Gesture"](#) (2017), in which artist Diamond Stingily performs expressions, gestures and lines quintessential to Black women. Short, close-up clips of Stingily's face or hands appear against a rich purple background. At times informed by text, the loops last a few beats then switch. Rashaad Newsome's ["Shade Composition"](#) (2005-present) similarly focuses on the vernacular of Black women and femmes. The artist appears as the conductor of a gorgeous choir in which each voice is assigned its own saying or sound like an instrument in an orchestra performing in precise harmony. For those viewers intimately familiar with these references, the act of representation is relatively new in this setting. In form and content, these works reshape old ideas of who and what belongs in a gallery.



Project file for jamilah malika abu-bakare's soundscape "listen to Black women (again)". (jamilah malika abu-bakare)

In my own art practice, I think of citation as dedication. Much of my work centres the words of Black women, written or spoken. My latest piece, ["listen to Black women \(again\)"](#) (2021), combines the voices of Angela Davis, Amara La Negra, Azealia Banks, Jully Black, Keke Palmer and Rihanna, all speaking to the stakes and risks of speaking up as Black women. (You can hear the soundscape [online](#), and if you are in Prince George, B.C., you can experience the full installation at Two Rivers Gallery with [The Politics of Sound](#) curated by Tyler J. Stewart.) The Azealia Banks interview I pull from [went viral](#) in 2014, but I wonder who, if anyone, will visit the gallery and know it

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

to hear it. Or do you recall Jilly Black [checking](#) Jeanne Beker on Canada Reads in 2018? Imagine hearing it in an art setting! Every clip can be understood on its own, but the experience will be distinctly meaningful for someone who recognizes a soundbyte. Different listeners will be surprised for different reasons because the piece intentionally operates on multiple levels: for Black women, for non-Black women, for those familiar with a reference, for those who are not.

One room over at the *Politics of Sound* exhibition, Michèle Pearson Clarke's "[Suck Teeth Compositions \(After Rashaad Newsome\)](#)" (2018) is on view. Clarke's three-channel video installation focuses on steups — sucking or kissing teeth — an expression that could take a viewer who knows the sound back to an island or their childhood. The work attests to the range of emotion possible in one gesture as shared by 17 different Black people. Clarke uses citation in the title to point to her inspiration, Newsome's "Shade Composition" (2005-present). By doing so, she makes plain a treasured artworld catchphrase: the artist decides and declares with whom they are *in conversation*.

In all these instances, the work of art quotes or cites a person or group. The artwork is a response that recontextualizes the excerpt. Form is an additional layer to impact an audience, whether it's print, performance, video, neon, ink, sound, sculpture or anything else — these transformations are reincarnations of sorts. It's worth noting that the traditional, military definition of citation is "a praiseworthy act." This meaning works here, too: the artist chooses a contribution they find commendable, whether acclaimed or informal. *We* decide what deserves honouring.



Installation view of Michèle Pearson Clarke's "Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)" at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. (Steve Farmer)

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SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

When Black artists bring texts, expressions and responses of Black figures into gallery settings across the world, the artwork circulates and centres Black people in ways that can undo the representation that often fails us elsewhere in the media. On platforms like TV, radio and magazines, so much Black culture circulates without Black people getting credit or compensation. We have Black ballroom culture to thank for endless slang, but does that translate into material support, love and care for Black trans women? No, because sayings like "Yasss Queen" are attributed to Jonathan Van Ness from *Queer Eye* or Ilana Wexler on *Broad City*. Black aesthetics and vernacular circulate profitably with ease and success on white bodies. However, when Black artists cite Black figures, we might understand the effect of art like a musical sample: you are obsessed with a song, so you look for the original. When I saw a photo of Gary's sculpture on Instagram, I immediately searched the text. I am now rereading *Beloved*. This is the power of citational art.

Ceramicist Simone Leigh [recently announced](#) that at this year's Venice Biennale, she will host the second iteration of the Loophole of Retreat conference. This gathering of Black women thinkers is named in reference to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. The Venice Biennale has never included an event like this — Black women artists and academics discussing the theory that weaves them together. The event's name and function are citation on citation in a renowned, high art setting. Some attendees may think this event out of place, but to others, it will make complete sense.

I understand Leigh's plans implicitly. My work centres Black women. I collect and compose sounds with immense care. I mean to elevate and honour the speakers I reference. I wonder: what would Angela Davis think of appearing alongside Rihanna, if either knows how their words mirror one another's? Listening to and layering together these women was healing for me, and I hope it is for the Black women who hear it. For the non-Black women listeners, I hope their next exchange with a Black woman — whether famous or familiar — will shift toward her freedom. By citing these six women, their words will reverberate through spaces that are usually silent. I hope their voices loop in the listeners' minds long after they leave.

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