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Ligon, Glenn

Ligon, Glenn. Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett
Interviewee: Glenn Ligon
Date: November 8, 2008

Dr. Oneka LaBennett (OL): Today is November 8th, 2008. We are Fordham University in the Department of African and African-American Studies. And we're conducting a Bronx African American History Project, with Glenn Ligon. My name is Oneka LaBennett, I'm the interviewer and I'm going to ask Glenn to spell his name.

Glenn Ligon (GL): G-L-E-N-N, L-I-G-O-N.

OL: Thank you. Glenn could you start off by telling us when and where you were born?

GL: I was born in 1960 in The Bronx. Well actually I was born 1960 in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. And I make that distinction because once read a press release for a art exhibition I did and the writer said that I was born in a housing project, well no actually I was born in a hospital.

[Laughter]

GL: But I thought that was some kind of Uncle Tom's Cabin kind of—oh he just grew right out of the Earth. No at a hospital.

[Laughter]

OL: So when you went home from the hospital, where did you live then?

GL: My parents lived in the Forest Projects which were—so we lived at 1000 Trinity Avenue, which is the corner Trinity and 165th Street in South Bronx. And my parents separated fairly young, so from age 2 it was just my mother, my brother Tyrone who's a year older and I.

OL: And what did you parents do for a living?

GL: My father started as a cook at the General Motors plant in Tarrytown and worked his way up a foreman, and my mother worked as a nurse's aide, first at Goldwater Hospital, which was on Governors Island, and then at Bronx Psychiatric Center which is in the Northeast Bronx.

OL: Okay, so that's what your mom was doing--.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

[Interruption]

OL: And is that what your mother was doing in your early childhood after she and your father separated?

GL: Actually I'm missing one job. My mother worked at the Natural History Museum. For—maybe between Goldwater Hospital and Bronx Psychiatric, so I think she worked there for a good 7 or 8 years. So that would've been to '67, something like that or '68. And she worked in the cafeteria there.

OL: Tell me what your apartment was like and your early childhood memories of that home that you first went to?

GL: Well we lived, as I said, we lived in a public housing project, it was a 2 bedroom apartment, it was on the 11th floor of one of the buildings in the Forest Houses, and the Forest Houses were a typical Corbusier kind of towers in the park. So they were 15 buildings all about 15 stories high. And in the middle of them was a giant green oval. And then there were various playgrounds and things around that. And we lived on the 11th floor and I remember, there were bars on the windows, but somehow I wasn't scared of heights then, though I am now—so I used to climb onto the window sill and hang out of the windows over the bars.

OL: Wow.

GL: Not literally out of the windows, but as far out of—and of course my mother wasn't there to witness these things. So we would do them in secret. But it was kind of thrilling to be that high up. Because none of my other relatives lived in high-rise buildings. They all lived pretty much in tenement buildings or in single-family houses, so being that high up was a treat for us as children.

OL: Where were your parents from originally and how did they come to settle in The Bronx?

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: My father grew up on a farm in Virginia, Farmville. My mother grew up on a farm in Bishopville, South Carolina. After World War II, my grandparents moved to Washington, D.C. but my mother was the oldest of 11 brothers and sisters and I think she decided that she was tired of being the babysitter. And so when they moved to D.C., she moved to New York to live with an aunt on her mother's side of the family who lived in Harlem and ran a fish store. So my mother actually moved when she was about 18 or 19 to Harlem and lived with my aunt and worked in a fish store. And my father, I'm not sure actually when he moved to New York. But they met here in New York, and my mother said that she went psychic one day in Harlem who told her that the man, it was a ridiculous story but—sometimes ridiculous comes true. She was told that the man she was going to marry would buy her a pair of shoes as his present. Which is sort of silly thing for--.

OL: Very specific.

GL: Very specific, and a silly thing for a guy to buy a woman on, you know, the 2nd or 3rd date. But that's exactly what my father did.

OL: You're kidding?

GL: So they actually got married. And had my brother Tyrone, who is a year older than I am, and had me--. That marriage didn't last so when we were 2, I was 2 or so, they separated, they never got divorced, so they separated. But my father still lived in The Bronx, and we would be sent—whenever we were misbehaving or something, we would be sent to him.

[Laughter]

GL: Because my mother somehow—as strong as she was, somehow thought that he would have some influence on our behavior. Which he did not. But I think just another parental voice was supposed to cure us of whatever--.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

OL: Or maybe just to get you out of her hair for a while?

GL: Get us out of her hair, exactly.

OL: Did you feel close to your dad then, were those visits frequent or--?

GL: My father was—I liked him and I actually liked him more and more when I got older. But he was a bit of a playboy. And so, long, long, long after I'd grown up and—he, my mother passed away and he'd remarried, my stepmother told me a very funny story. They'd been going out, she and my father for about 2 years or so and he had a very serious heart attack. And my father had one of those old time work ethics of you go to work no matter what. He never missed a day of work and so the plant that he was working at, the General Motors plant was in Tarrytown. That was maybe a 45 minute drive in Upstate New York. So he got in his car, he wasn't feeling well, but he got in his car, he drove up there, and apparently there's a fork in the road, when you get near the plant and if you go left you go to the plant and if you go right you go to the hospital. And for some reason he decided, I'm going right. And when he got to the parking lot of the hospital, he had a heart attack. So my stepmother, after he'd gotten better and gotten out of the hospital—she'd met my brother and I and we were friends, friendly, even though they'd only been going out a couple of years, but we were friendly and I liked her—and she told me that she'd asked my father if something serious like this happens again, who do you want me to be in contact with first? Like who of, you know, your family do you want to contact? And he said oh you know, you can talk to one of the kids and she said oh, you mean Tyrone and Glenn? He's like yes, you can talk to them, or you can talk to the other kids. And she didn't realize that he had 5 other children from 3--.

OL: Did you know that?

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: I knew that. But they'd been going out for 2 or 3 years and she didn't realize that he had 5 other children from these various relationships.

[Laughter]

GL: So that was my father. In some ways, when I hear stories like this, I understand why my mother didn't last in that relationship, there was too much competition. And--.

OL: What was it like for your mother raising the 2 of you then--? I mean it sounds like from the kind of work she was doing, she was probably working long hours.

GL: Right, she—when she first started working at the Natural History Museum—I may be getting this chronology wrong but I think this is right. She was working at the Natural History Museum and that was probably and house commute on subway and bus. And we were going to public school that was across the street from our house. And the public school, was a terrible school and my brother and I both, basically had run out of things to do, because the expectations for the kids in that school were so low, that even in kindergarten they basically ran out of work because they just figured these kids can't handle more work, so we'll just kind of keep them busy. It was basically babysitting, in school. And one day, my mother got a call from the principal of the school. And she came down for, she thought something bad had happened so she came in the next day for parent, teacher, principal conference. And what had happened was, I was in one of my classes and—and this is kindergarten class, and we were given 4 letters of the alphabet to fill in, like A is for apple, B is for bear, but only 4 letters. And the class was 40 minutes long. But this was supposed to take 40 minutes, because that was the expectations of how smart the kids in the school were. So I finished it, you know, in a minute, like everybody else, and I just thought well why should I sit here, you know, so I asked the teacher to write out the rest of the alphabet for me and I would try to fill in words. So I did that, and the teacher gave

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

it to the principal and the principal called my mother because this was such a miraculous feat, for a child in this school that they really needed to talk to my mother about maybe getting my brother—both my brother and I into another kind of school. And my mother at this point, was a single parent, and she was working in you know, jobs that didn't pay very well and she thought well I can't afford to send them to Catholic school or a private school, and then she said one of the teachers said something that pissed her off so much that she decided I'm going to find a way to send them to another school. The teacher said, "your kids may be smart here, but if they get into a real school, they would just probably be average kids".

OL: Oh my goodness.

GL: This kindergarten teacher.

OL: Oh my goodness.

GL: So that's when she decided, you know, whatever the cost, she was going to find a school that was going to take us. And she—maybe courageously, because my mother never finished high school, started working very early on. But she had this sort of, you know, Black working class ethic of education was the way. You know, even though it wasn't available for her. But she really felt that, that was something that was priority for her kids. So she literally called around and found the school that would give us the most scholarship money. And it happened to be much to her horror later on, one of the most liberal private schools in New York City. It was a school called Walden, which was very engaged in the civil rights movement. Ann Goodman went there as a kid. And, in a way, that was why, they had scholarship for you know--.

OL: And around what year was it that you started going to Walden?

GL: I started going to Walden in 1966.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

OL: '66. I want to come back to that and the civil rights movement. But when you mentioned the sort of that elementary school. One of the things when we talk to people who grew up in The Bronx in the '50s and '60s they make a separation between what The Bronx was like in the '50s, '40s and '50s, and then what starts happening in the '70s. And invariable people tell us that, the housing projects were very well maintained. That there were families, they knew everyone--.

GL: They were, they were.

OL: So why don't you tell me a little bit about that.

GL: Right, well you know it's, it's ironic because when you talk to people of my parents generation about the projects, they say when they moved in those projects were beautiful. And it's very hard to believe given, over time, the South Bronx was considered one of the most notoriously dangerous, poverty and crime-ridden neighborhoods in the entire country. But our perception of it, and my mother's perception of it was that when we moved into the projects, they were beautiful. And they, for her, were a relief given the kind of housing that they were in before, tenement housing with erratic landlords. And so I could see in some ways why she felt that the projects were kind of a huge step forward, and we did know our neighbors. We knew every neighbor on our floor, and I remember this would often happen when we were going to school, there were people that I didn't know but who knew us. And so when we would come home, my mother said oh, you know, I heard you did a very nice thing at the bus stop today with Mrs. So and So. Like how do you know that? Well, I have spies everywhere. It's just because people knew us, you know?

OL: Right.

GL: And so there was this sort of, in a way, this old fashioned sense of community in the projects and I think that started to change by the early '70s. The crime became more, it became a

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

much more crime ridden neighborhood and people were much more afraid to be outside and so it was sort of—the neighborhood got locked down. Also I remember that was the moment when there started to be more gang activity in The Bronx. More drugs and the sort of violence that came with that. And so I think that sort of causes deterioration of the neighborhood.

OL: People have made it—a distinction between heroin use the crack epidemic and talked about changes that they saw after crack hit The Bronx. Did you notice that? Were you aware of that?

GL: I wasn't aware of it because I think—because I was going to school so far away from where I lived and most of my friends and my social life became centered around the school, I think I wasn't as aware of what was going on in the neighborhood as, as if I—if I'd stayed and gone to school in the neighborhood I would've been more aware of it. But I was basically in a little bubble because of--.

OL: You probably didn't have time to play outside very much because by the time you got home from school--?

GL: It was late and you had a lot of homework and it was just easier. But also I wasn't—my brother was very social, he liked to go outside. I hated to go outside. My mother would force me to go outside to play and she would say you have to go downstairs for an hour and I would go downstairs. And the back door of our building was an office for the maintenance department and they have a time clock down there, so I'd prop the back door of the building open and watch the time clock for one hour and then go back upstairs.

[Laughter]

GL: And that's when I knew that—that parents were not—sort of justice was a relative concept. Because she'd say you haven't been outside long enough, go back outside.

OL: Wow.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: And we'd have this fight about, I've been outside for an hour and she'd say I don't care, go back outside.

OL: So, that tells me a little bit about my next question. I was going to ask what you were like as a boy? It sounds like you were intellectually curious, I mean that you actually went to the teacher and said write out the whole alphabet for me.

GL: And I don't know where that came from exactly. I mean my mother wasn't a big reader, but she placed a lot of value on it. And somehow that just got transmitted. And I think also she prioritized it because, you know we were growing up in a household that didn't have a lot of money. And there was always a debate about what toys to get and things like that. But whatever book we wanted would be bought immediately. That wasn't a debate.

OL: Interesting.

GL: There was a debate about sneakers, toys, other kinds of things. But books were never a debate for her.

OL: You mentioned your mom's work ethic. What other cultural influences do you recall in the house growing up. Whether religious or musical.

GL: We weren't big churchgoers, though it was a part of our upbringing. My father, my grandfather sorry, was a bit of a self-described preacher. Very strict, the kind of man that would have a jacket and tie on in his own house.

OL: Wow, that's--.

[Laughter]

GL: And expected discipline and order. And so my mother in some ways left that environment to just get away from that but I think a lot of those values, the kind of, respectfulness and not talking back to elders and this came from her father, my grandfather. Musically, I remember a lot

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

of, not jazz records, mostly gospel and soul singers. A lot of Ray Charles. Though I had younger, relatives, like one my Aunt Rose, who was maybe 10 years younger than my mother but they were good friends and I remember seeing pictures of my Aunt Rose with James Brown, backstage at the Apollo. So there was that influence too. The younger hip relatives.

OL: What was it like going to school at Walden and leaving The Bronx and going to a different neighborhood than--? What were the kids like there?

GL: Walden was a very, it was a strange school in that it was very, very liberal. It was founded—I think in the early '20s, early '20s I think. Very interested in kind of alternative theories of education. You could go from 1st grade to 12th grade which is what I did. So a lot of the people that I met in 1st grade I graduated with, which is kind of amazing. The school is very small. There were 50 people in my graduating class, which is the most they'd ever had. It was on the corner of 80th Street and Central Park West and so a lot of the kids that were there were from middle and upper middle class families. So I went to school with the children of movie stars, Matthew Broderick, whose father was on TV, and he became a movie star. Toni Morrison's sons went there and who else? Barbara Streisand daughter, and Gene Wilder's daughter. So there's that, so you can imagine parent teacher conferences in that school when Billy D. Williams would be sitting--.

[Laughter]

GL: And then the very, very strong involvement in the civil rights movement. But, but in terms of class there were very few people from lower class families in the school and the percentage was, maybe the school was 4 or 5% Black students. Higher percentage in the upper grades, but for the lower grades, very small percentage. And we also had this hour, hour and a half commute from The Bronx each way. So it was a bit difficult. And I remember talking to my brother about

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

it and he—I was saying how my mom, because she at the time—we first started school was working at the Natural History Museum and she would drop us off and pick us up. And he said no, that didn't happen—and he said no that didn't happen, and I asked him well how did we get to school? He was like well, we took the subway. But I have no memory of that. And so 7—he was a year older so you know, I was 7, he was 8 and we were on the subway by ourselves, that was the only way to do it. It's amazing, because I can't imagine sending some 7 year old an hour and half by themselves now, but you can imagine that, we're talking 1967, '68 in New York City. A little deep.

OL: What was—did your mother worry about the 2 of you like playing hooky or not going to school, I mean were you the kind of boys who just did what she said—you got on the train you went to school, you came back home.

GL: We were pretty disciplined, you know. I don't think she ever worried about us. I mean also she thought we were going to school together, which we did for a year or 2, and then I decided that I didn't want to be my brother's—be in my brother's shadow, so we would leave the house together and get to the bus stop together, but somehow we would end up on a different bus or different subway, so we would arrive 5 minutes apart.

OL: Really?

GL: And it's just this way of me maintaining a certain independence from my brother, not being in my brother's shadow. But my mother never knew anything about that.

OL: That's really interesting.

GL: So we knew enough to hide that fact—we did it but we didn't tell her that we did.

OL: Were you and your brother both good students?

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: My brother was capable but lazy. So he just wouldn't do his work even though he could do it, he just didn't do it. And I was the, kind of, did everything on time, handed in.

OL: How did the Civil Rights Movement figure into your, your education at that time? Did you think about what was going on with the movement, as you were going to school and taking your classes, was it something conscious?

GL: Well it was very conscious because the school was so involved in it. Andrew Goodman of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, the civil rights workers that were killed--. Andrew Goodman went to my high school and when the high school—when Walden built a new building it was named after him. So there was this, every year there was a memorial service for Andrew Goodman and I remember his mother coming to speak and so there's a huge involvement and awareness of the Civil Rights Movement. But also because half the, half the teachers in the school were old lefties so the emphasis in our history classes was on, you know, that kind of history--. You know history of labor movements and so it was very much part of my education. I mean I suppose Black students in that school were a bit of a experiment in some ways because they were--. Generally the ones that were there were generally from working class families and going to the school on 88th Street and Central Park West with the children of very wealthy people. So there was tension in the school but not—I wouldn't so racial tension, but more class tensions, you know, more kind of like, okay you come late every day but you live around the corner in a penthouse, you know? And I get up at 5:30 in the morning and I get here on time, you know and so one was aware of those kinds of disparities, very early on. But it was a great school, a really great environment.

OL: Did you feel like a part of the neighborhood life in The Bronx when you were a kid?

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: No, I think I felt because of the sort of—because of the long commute to the school and the amount of time I spent at that school, I felt kind of disconnected from the neighborhood in some ways. My brother less though, my brother—but also my brother's much more social than I am, so he was happy to be outside and I just, I wanted to stay inside and read a book. So it became more and more pronounced the older I got and the more independent I got because I couldn't actually stay out longer. And so my social life became sort of centered on Manhattan and less on The Bronx. But I had cousins who lived in the neighborhood we lived in, so I remember we'd go over to their house to play which was maybe 5 or 6 blocks away. They lived on Stephens Avenue which was about 6 blocks from 165th Street and Trinity so between them, that's how I kept in touch with the neighborhood, their friends but, but in some ways there was still this kind of distance.

OL: This was your mother's sisters?

GL: This was my—who was this? No, this was my grandfather's, sister's, children's, children.

[Laughter]

GL: Something like that yes, yes. But they were cousins who were my age. And also we had—because most of my family moved to Washington, we had a lot of cousins down there too. So we also had some cousins that lived in the Northeast Bronx and so on the weekends, it was sort of like going to the suburbs. They lived in a house in the Wakefield section of The Bronx so that's 2—they lived on 219th Street and Paulding Avenue. But it was really—they had a dog and a backyard. You know it was like going to a whole different experience.

OL: I want to ask you about your teenage years and whether you thought of yourself as becoming a—when did you first think of yourself as an artist? Is it something that you always did or did you think you were going to grow up to be something entirely different?

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: Well, I think I never really thought of myself as becoming an artist because there was no role model for that. Nobody in my family had ever, had ever been an artist. In fact, my mother said the only artists she'd ever heard of were dead. By this she meant Picasso, you know--. And you know so it just wasn't a practical option. And so I sort of channeled my artistic ability and I think I did have an artistic abilities that sort of manifested themselves fairly young. But I channeled them eventually into architecture. So when I graduated from high school I thought I wanted to be an architect. But all during elementary school and high school, I took art classes, my mother paid classes, pottery classes and drawing classes outside of school. So we'd go to after school programs. I was in a course at the Metropolitan Museum I think when I was about 13 or 14, after school classes. Drawing classes at the Met and I still have some of the journals from that, it's amazing to me because they're basically—what I would do is draw paintings. And looking at them, they're all the places that I had never been. I was drawing from the paintings. All these landscapes and--.

OL: You mean you would reproduce other people's paintings?

GL: Exactly. So ironically, you know, so much of my practice now is about quotation, but I think it started very early on.

OL: That's interesting.

GL: Literally draw Matisses and draw--.

OL: That's really interesting that you were doing that at the Met.

GL: Right, exactly, exactly.

OL: And what about your early—when you were a child were you drawing and sketching or—you said you were taking the pottery classes?

GL: Probably drawing and sketching. One year I made Christmas cards for all of my relatives in

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

Washington. And my uncle said something like, to my mother, the boy needs to get outside more.

[Laughter]

GL: Which is probably true. But somehow, the sort of artistic activity was suspect. It was just not something--.

OL: Oh, how nice--.

GL: No, it's kind of like he needs to do more male things. Not sit in his room and make Christmas cards for everybody. So it was very funny, kind of--. But yes, that was always there and I think my brother drew too but he was sort of more—in some ways more conventional, more interested in sports and we were both big readers. But I think he sort of turned out to be more guy, guy than I did.

OL: So you said when you were graduating high school you thought you were going to become an architect? How did that sort of—how did you decide that that wasn't going to be the thing.

Was it when you were in college at Wesleyan or--?

GL: Right, now well—when I got to college at Wesleyan all the—there was an architecture major but the prerequisites were all these advanced chemistry and physics, calculus courses and so I enrolled in some of those and I—after about a week I realized, like I can't do this. It's impossible, I'm going to flunk the Intro to Calculus. And this is just one of the many very hard math classes I'm going to have to take so, so I was already in Art History and studio art classes, so I just thought, well I'll just do those and get a degree in studio art and then decide about architecture and it just never happened. Basically I just decided I'm not an architect. Interested in it—actually more interested in how people live in buildings than building them I think. And at some point you know, I just kept making artworks after I graduated from school and at some

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

point I got a grant. I think this was in maybe 1989, I got a National Endowment for the Arts grant for drawing and when the check arrived, I sort of said to myself, I must be an artist. But I had graduated from college 10 years before. So it really was that moment when I decided like, I guess I'm an artist now, somebody gave me some money. And it's funny how that, you know sort of exterior, kind of, approval kind of made me decide what I was already doing was legitimate.

OL: Was it—were you choosing between other schools when you went on to that track to how you decided to go to Wesleyan? And is that where your mom wanted you to go—was that something--?

GL: No, I wanted—I knew I didn't want to stay in New York. I wanted to go somewhere. And because my—Walden, the school I went to—for my entire 12 years of undergrad, not undergrad what do you call it?

OL: Elementary--.

GL: Elementary and high school was such a small school I thought I wanted to go to a small school. But I applied to maybe 4 or 5 other schools and got into all of them. And so it was a very hard choice. Because Wesleyan was not—objectively not on the top of that list you know? Why go to Wesleyan when you can go to Yale? So when I decided to go to Wesleyan just thought I was insane. But I somehow knew that that was the right thing for me. I think I knew that because probably I knew I wanted to be an artist even though I wasn't allowing myself to do that. And I sort of felt like, if I went to some big school that had a very small art department that I would just be diverted. That it just wouldn't happen and so it sort of—I think I knew subliminally that Wesleyan was a better choice for me. Also because it was small, it was like my high school and I sort of felt like I knew what my high school was about—I knew how to negotiate that kind of

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

space. And Wesleyan seemed like a parallel to it. And a lot of people in my graduating class either went to Wesleyan or they went to Oberlin which felt like Wesleyan--.

OL: How about your brother? Did he go to college?

GL: He went to many colleges. He went to BU and BC, I mean he just kind of. He was again, bad student, and then eventually he turned around. He kind of figured it out. But he just was not interested in grades and so I think in Boston College, one semester he passed bowling. That was it. Then he moved on to some other school. I mean it's funny that he would pass bowling and still be able to talk his way into Boston University after that so—he had—I think people saw the potential there, but it just, it took him several years to figure out, like I'm just wasting my time, I should either be in school or not be in school so--.

OL: What did your mom think that you chose Wesleyan and started taking all these art classes? I think in the end, you know, she's just happy I was in college. Whatever college that was. And I sort of hid being an artist from her too. Like I was taking art classes but, you know, I was still, thinking I was going to be an architecture major. When I got out of school I started working for a law firm, proofreading in the middle of the night. But the firm used their proofreaders basically as, as like mini-lawyers, so they would send you to, put you on a plane and send you to Los Angeles to file documents with the court or something. So it all seemed like very real and glamorous.

OL: Right, so you were doing legitimate work?

GL: I was doing legitimate work and I could sort of use that, like, I'm doing this and now they're going to send me here and there. And so I could sort of use the law firm as a cover for this other activity that was very you know—what was being an artist? It just didn't make any

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

sense. So I could use the law firm as my, my wig so to speak. Like here's my legitimate activity.

And then, so I just sort of did that.

OL: Since I'm an anthropologist I feel I don't have the language to ask you the questions about your work, so I'm going to ask them from my own perspective. When I happened upon the two installations of yours at the Met, earlier this week, I noticed that in the description of one of them, it said that you had been influenced by Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, and [inaudible], I'd like for you to talk about how what you read figures into your art. Like those authors, but then also how your personal identity is reflected in the work.

GL: Well, I started doing paintings, paintings and installations with quotations in them I think in the early '90s. And it was a way for me to get away from doing abstract painting. And I mean in some ways, I feel like all the sort of big breaks I've made in my painting practice, or my artistic career have come about from really simple minded things. Like you're reading all this fantastic material, reading these Baldwin essays, reading novels by Hurston and you think how do you get these ideas into abstract painting? And I realized, you can't. Or I couldn't figure out how to do that, so I thought well how do I use these ideas? And I thought well, why don't I just quote from the things I'm reading, and make that the work? And it seems very simple minded when I say it--

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OL: I don't think that sounds simple minded at all.

GL: It was a huge break for me. I mean there are lots of people who, you know Jasper Johns, for one, who's a big hero, using text in their artworks, you know there was precedent for it, but I think what was interesting for me was that kind of content, hadn't—I hadn't seen that kind of content in the space of contemporary art before. I hadn't seen Baldwin quoted, or I hadn't seen Hurston. And so that kind of insertion of that material, into these gallery and museum spaces

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

became really important to me. And which is not to say that I only quoted African American authors. There's work using, Walt Whitman, Mary Shelley, John Jene. So but it was really sort of a big break for me to start, sort of, inserting the text directly, making the text the paintings. Rather than trying to figure out how to get the content of the text into the paintings.

OL: Is that what you were working on when you got that first NEH grant?

GL: Yes, but it took a long time to get to that. I was doing abstract work up until about '85 or '84 and then I got into the Whitney Museum independent study program, which is a studio program in Lower Manhattan run by the Whitney Museum. And it was very anti-painting. Tiny little studio so you couldn't physically work there. But also very anti-painting, very Marxist, suspicious of painting. So I was basically the only painter there. And it changed my practice because it's too hard to make paintings there but also it sort of opened up the possibility for other ways of making artwork so that's when I started experimenting with using text. And—but also a very kind of pivotal moment for me was in those tiny little studios we had, which were shared studios, the person that I was sharing a studio space with was doing all of these photographs based on Charcot and these poses of hysterics from the 19th century. And we were talking about the reading list for the program, which was very, very long and very kind of heavy on psychoanalytic theory, so 4 part lectures on Lecan and I was telling my studio mate it was difficult for me, because I really didn't have any background in this kind of theory, and so it was kind of new for me and she was saying, oh well I've studied this before, this is easy. Well, nice for you.

[Laughter]

GL: And then she asked me, what I was reading, I was like well I've been reading these James Baldwin essays just as a sort of palate cleanser, you know, just to get my mind off of these dense

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

theoretical texts and she said oh, James Baldwin who's that? And I realized, oh not only does she—has she never read Baldwin, which is fine, lots of people haven't read Baldwin, but she'd literally never heard of him before and I thought this is a person that's read every obscure psychoanalytic text there is, and has just no, there's this whole body of knowledge that never heard of—and not embarrassed to say never heard of---. And I thought well, I want to make that part of my work, you know?

OL: That's a great moment. I mean terrible--.

GL: Terrible but great.

OL: That's really interesting. So aside from what you were reading, I was looking at The Runaways 1993 installation at the Met and I thought it was so interesting that you put the personal descriptions of you that your friends—how your friends described you in these ads for runaway slaves and the part that I thought was the most interesting was that the descriptions of you were contemporary descriptions and so there was a juxtaposition between a real life Black man living in the '90s with these older---. How did you come to start intertwining those aspects of your identity into your work?

GL: Well I always felt there was, for me, a friend told me—we were doing an interview and a friend told me as we were doing an interview, he's like oh did you hear what you just said? I'm like no, no, no, we were talking about something, what was it exactly? It was about a explosion in a shipyard in San Francisco during World War II where a number of Black servicemen were killed and my friend Byron was interviewing me for a book, said oh, you know, I haven't heard about this, and he said oh this happened, did this happen in your lifetime? I was like yes, it did. And then he realized, like, but you said it happened during World War II, and I realized there was always for me this kind of odd sense of time. Like things that happened before I was born,

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

still seem very present to me. There wasn't this sort of clear distinction of like, oh that happened a long time ago, that has nothing to do with me so I've always had this sort of sense of things being much more contemporary than they actually are. And that translated into a work, and to those runaway prints, because I thought there's a continuum between how Black people in this country in the 1800s and now. And one of the things that's interesting to me is how do you talk about that continuum? How do you talk about slavery as an institution that is, you know, there as this sort of elephant in the room, it was there when our constitution was being written, it's when our laws are being formed, it's there, it structures how we relate to each other then, and it structures, in some ways how we relate to each other now. And so how do you make work that's about that continuum. So that's about what those prints were about, was this juxtaposition between very contemporary descriptions of me from my friends but in this format that looks like a runaway slave poster. It was about these kinds of, making this kind of continuum.

OL: Sure, and also that—those runaway slave posters were so impersonal and they were basically like a, you know, the weight the height, the measurements of the slaves, the original ones, and these were these much more personal-- I thought about people like W.B. DuBois and Ralph Ellison talking about sort of the humanity of Black people and trying to present them as fully human and I thought that's also something that's going on in the narratives.

GL: Right. Actually what's interesting was when I was working on the series, I did a lot of research just looking at the form of these runaway slave posters and slave narratives and one of the things I found in the runaway slave posters was there were lots of them that were just simply physical descriptions, and then very detailed descriptions of clothes too. I'm like why would they describe the clothes in such detail? And then I realized the clothes are property, the person's property. So if I don't get the person back bring me back the clothes, you know. So there was

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

that kind of thing, but also there were lots of them that were very much about the personality, you know? He's very clever--.

OL: He's a blacksmith.

GL: You know, and he laughs this way and be careful he's a trickster and you know, I thought, well that's an interesting kind of. It says—tells you volumes about the relationship between master and slave you know?

OL: Definitely.

GL: And the sort of intimacies that were there. And so when I asked friends--.

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

GL: And so when I asked friends to write these descriptions of me, you know, some of them were very much, he's wearing this, he has this kind of glasses, he's got a blue shirt on and some of them were these kind of like, you know he laughs loudly and sometimes he calls himself mother. You know, these kind of descriptions, oh I realized oh they mirrored in some ways, the descriptions I saw on the originals that this whole series is based on. A range of things.

OL: Were you in the Whitney, that Black man exhibit, I remember that.

GL: Black male, yes right, in '94.

OL: When was the first time, I mean the NEH grant was like a pivotal moment, but when was the first time your work was recognized and exhibited?

GL: Well, I think the 2 most important shows were one that was at the NYU's Grey Art Gallery, and it was done by Tom Sokolowski who's been director of that gallery and Kelly Jones, who's an art historian at Yale I believe. And Kelly is someone that I knew because I had a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. A curatorial residency, internship I guess in '80—right when I graduated from college. So it must've been, 1982 and Kelly was working there at the time and I

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

remember going through the hallway with her and they had you know, the hallway was

decorated with things out of the collection and we walked past this portrait of, Leroy Jones and she says oh, why do they have this picture of my father up in the hallway for? And I thought, oh haha, your father Leroy Jones, Imamu Baraka--.

[Laughter]

GL: Oh, that is your father. So we were sort of friends from there, and then 7 years later she did this show called, Interrogating Identity, at the Grey Art Gallery which was I think, kind of one of the most important early shows I was in. A whole range of artists nationally and was really looking at kind of the range of ways that people thought about Blackness, nationally and internationally. And then in '91, I was chosen—had some paintings in the Whitney Biennial and that was a huge deal because it was you know, it sort of started everything. And sort of went on from there. A lot of galleries that same year or actually right before that had a gallery. I wasn't doing anything particularly special for me—until I walked in—and suddenly I got all excited and everything was in gear and you know, that's the way it works in the art world.

OL: You mentioned that one person who described you as having been born in a housing project, I'm wondering how your identity as someone from The Bronx figures into how you are seen in the art world? And how you, how you negotiate sort of, your own identity, how you want your work to be presented, and how people try to present it.

GL: Well, I think the assumption is for a lot of artists now, that they don't come from working class backgrounds. Because there's a lot of—it's very hard to be an artist, you know, unless you have some kind of family support behind you. And I have family support in terms of emotional support but I didn't have it financially. But I think nowadays people assume that there's a sort of financial cushion around working artists, because how do you live in New York City without

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

that? It's next to impossible. And I don't think I really, in some ways, ever made work about my specific upbringing, you know? Though I did make work about, generally, sort of questions of identity. But it's, in thinking about how I want my work positioned—it's always a hard question because I feel like—I don't even know how to answer that. Clearly I am a Black artist, or am I an artist that's Black, you know, it's the Obama question. Obama sort of said, I'm an African-American—I'm like well, yes, but you've chosen to call yourself that and that's always I think the question that looms over artists of color. Is are they artists, that just happen to be artists, colored people, or is that identity crucial in the formation of how they think about how their work is positioned. And I don't know if it's really solvable for me, you know? It's part of what drives the work, but it's also something that is never quite resolved.

OL: I certainly don't expect you to solve it here.

[Laughter]

OL: You said that your mom passed away. Did she see your success as an artist? Did you feel like you were able to like let her know now that you're finally an artist, because you said for a while you were kind of hiding it.

GL: Yes, she lived long enough to see me start showing things and—she passed away before I was in the Whitney, so it was sort of—or in *Interrogating Identity*, in '90 I think I said it was. So that was a shame. But I have, I have all these relatives in Washington and I had a show at the Hirshhorn in '93, actually that's the first time that the *Runaway Prints* that you were talking about were shown and it was very funny because my relatives. I don't know if they got any of the work at all, but my name was on the outside of the Hirshhorn Museum. It was a huge deal. It was huge. Whatever you had inside was okay, that's another story, you're an artist, we don't get art, we really don't get to museums we don't get it, but my name was on the building--.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett
Interviewee: Glenn Ligon
Date: November 8, 2008
OL: They knew that was important.

GL: Right. On the corner of 7th and Constitution, there was my name, it was amazing for them, you know.

OL: That's incredible.

GL: I'd forgotten about that, that's sort of funny.

OL: You said that you weren't very social as a child. I think of the art world so social and I feel like every time I see you, you know everyone, everyone knows you so is that something where you feel like you've grown out of that or are you still like that boy who wants to not--?

GL: I'm still very shy. You know, I don't like public speaking. I hate it actually. I hate doing interviews. I have to drag myself to all those things that you have to go to--. Because you're right, the art world is incredibly social and half the shows that I've ever gotten into are just because I'm somewhere and I meet somebody and they decide, oh let me look at his work and put me in. So I realized that there's a huge social component to it. It's a little cottage industry, in a way and you have to show up in order to be in things but it's always a struggle for me. And you know, in some ways, I feel like a friend of mine, a curator who's African American, we have this joke, we—after we go to some event in the art world, we call each other and say okay, how many? And we do the count, which is basically how many Black people were there.

[Laughter]

GL: And you can't include, you know, people who were working at the venue. And sometimes it's been like, okay maybe there were 500 people at that dinner and there were 2 Black people. And so--. It's not surprising but it's always funny to me because I feel like people know me more than I—you know like, all these people come up to me and they know me and I'm like, how come they know me? And I realize like oh, because I'm in the art world by Black.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

OL: You stand out.

GL: I stand out pretty easily, which is not to say that there aren't tons and tons of, you know, artists of color, but often because you know, at this point I guess I'm a mid-career artist and I'm in collections all over the place, I get invited to things that I feel like oh, Black people aren't in these spaces, you know there are very few of them. And so I can look around the lobby of MoMa, the Museum of Modern Art, and I'm like hmm, 3 other Black people here. You know?

OL: Right. Wow, amazing.

GL: And that's just the reality of the art world. I mean it is—in some ways it's this incredibly liberal construct, you know, like hard pressed to find someone who didn't vote for Obama, but on the other hand it's still the way the power runs in there and the decisions that are made, it's still very, in some ways very segregated.

OL: We talked about some of your literary influences, do you have artists, either contemporary or not who've been influences? And maybe even talk about some of your contemporary—some of your peers in the art world.

GL: Well the first huge influences were all those abstract expressionist artists. Jackson Pollack, Franz Klein—so those are the first loves. Second wave was Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, an artist using text. Third wave I think were artists using texts in photography. Like Barbara Kruger and then my peers, people like Lorna Simpson, you know, or Carrie May Weems, and should I tell this story?

OL: Yes.

[Laughter]

GL: I remember when I was in undergraduate at Wesleyan, one of my professors was Robert O'Meally. He's a huge Ralph Ellison scholar, written Zorna Neal Hurston, written a lot on jazz

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

too. And Wesleyan was only maybe 20 minutes away from Yale, and he said Glenn there's a artist that I think you'd really like, Rosemary Beardon, he's speaking at Yale, he's doing a lecture. And like you know, I'm like tickets, if you want to come with me. It was very nice of him to invite me, but he knew that I was interested in art and he thought this was an important artist I should meet. So we get to the lecture hall at Yale and I don't remember what college it's in, but in one of those big sort of chapel like kind of lecture halls. Very grand and stuff. And there's a guy at the front in sort of coveralls, you know, kind of moving podium over and adjusting the microphone and I'm waiting for the lecture to start and we're sitting there, and then he starts speaking and I thought oh my God, I thought that was the janitor.

OL: And that was Beardon?

GL: That was Beardon. And so really, I remember that moment very clearly because it was almost as if Black artists didn't exist for me. You know, in the same way that my mother thought only artists that she'd heard of were dead. Artists existed for be, but Black artists didn't exist for me. And so I couldn't even imagine that the guy at the podium was the guy who was going to be speaking.

OL: Wow.

GL: You know and so, every time I think like oh, I don't want to go do a lecture I don't want to talk to students I remember that story and just think like, I know that times have changed but it's still important for me to get out there and just be like okay, I'm here, you know? It's possible you know? I've done it, other people have done it you know? So—but also my peer group, there are artists like Gary Simmons and Lorna Simpson who I mentioned before. A younger group of artists, who are actually more conceptually based like David Kinsey, a lot of whom I've met through their showing at the Studio Museum in Harlem. I'm also on the board of an art school

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

named Skowhegan, which is a summer program in Maine. And a lot of those services come through there. And so they kind of inspire me, in that, whenever you think that you've got shtick down, you know what you're doing, and then someone does your shtick better than you?

[Laughter]

GL: And then you're like oh, got to change up a little bit. Somebody's doing it better. So it's always interesting to kind of be in touch with younger artists and feel like I kind of—they kick me in the butt. In a nice way.

[Break in Tape; Crosstalk]

OL: So you were talking about your contemporaries. I was going to ask you a bit about what your process—you were also talking about kind of, staying on your toes and keeping-- I was going to ask what your process is like now? Are you in a place in your life where you have space to work now and are you disciplined about it? Do you get up and say I'm going to work for this many hours? What's your artistic process like?

GL: Well, I have a space—I live in Lower Manhattan in Chinatown. I have a space in, just maybe the edge of Park Slope in scary Brooklyn.

OL: Dark Slope.

GL: Dark Slope. So I used to be more kind of, 9 to 5 artist. Get up go to the studio, I'd treat it like a job. But in the last couple of years, I've done more and more work that's required fabricators. So I started working in neon. My last show was in a gallery in Paris and it was all installation work. They built a cobblestone street for me in the basement of the gallery, there was a neon piece. And so it requires a different kind of studio practice. You have to go places, and go check on things, you're on the phone or your trying find, find supplies and materials. And so it's become less about—it's still 9 to 5 but it's sort of 9 to 5 at my desk at home sometimes. As much

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

as it is 9 to 5 in the studio. And so that's kind of—that's been interesting because I've had to adjust working. And I think I'm most comfortable when I'm just—when it's just me by myself making something. And—but over the past couple of years I've had to collaborate more just to get the work done, and so it's sort of changed my practice a bit. But I think sometimes I go back to—okay I'm just going to make—for the next month I'm just going to go to the studio, I'm going to make drawings. You know, I don't need anyone else, I don't—I'm just going to go to the studio and make drawings. But I've had studios all over the place. You know my first studio was in my house basically. I had an apartment that I was subletting and one wall of my bedroom was the studio, you know? And as the work—you know and when I got a gallery, or as the work became known more I could start to afford to rent studio space that's separate from where I lived and—but the studio I have now is sort of a big proper studio.

OL: You've experienced so much success, do you still pinch yourself? I mean especially since you don't think of yourself as becoming an artist—you didn't conceive of that being something that you'd make a living—but you've done that.

GL: Yes, but I think I've done that because I haven't focused on doing it. So it sort of feels like—I know that I work very hard for things, but I also on some level, they just happen you know? So for instance the first time I was in the Whitney Biennial, the curator that year was Lisa Phillips who's now the director of The New Museum and I asked her—she did a studio visit and she's like okay, you're in. You know? And I asked her, oh where did you see the work first? And she said oh, I saw the work at this little show you did at a space called Locha, which is in Downtown Brooklyn and it's so funny to me because that show was curated by an artist who's a friend. Paul Ramirez Jonas and I wasn't even the main attraction. I was in the little room in the back, you know? But I'd shown some paintings that were very based on Zorna Neal Hurston

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

writings and the gallery space was underneath a theater space and in the theater was a play by then they're just starting out playwright named Susan Lori Parks, who went on to win a MacArthur and everything else you can win. And so I became friends with her because I would go up and see the play and then I met her. And then while my show was up and while her play was running, this theater director came to see her play and that was George Wolf and so George Wolf, you know came a little early and went into my little room at the back and saw these paintings by—you know with Zorna Neal Hurston text and it was just at the moment when he was adapting Zorna Neal Hurston's short stories for a play that was going to be at the Public Theater. So he bought one of the paintings. And then, I was at a going away party for Kelly Jones, this curator that I knew from the Studio Museum and it was at this art writers house in Brooklyn. And I always liked his writing, he wrote for Art News and Art America, I thought he was a really good writer and he asked me what I was working on and I said oh well I have this little show in Downtown Brooklyn, and you know I don't expect anyone to go but if you're down there-- Well, no no, I'll definitely go. And then a week later I'm reading the New York Times and this guy, his picture is on the front, new curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Robert Store.

[Laughter]

GL: And so I'm asking Lisa Phillips where she first saw my work, she says oh that show that you did at Locha. I thought it is so amazing to me that the show that I thought nobody's going to see this show—so many things happened from that. But they just happened, you know, it's like I didn't call anyone to come see it. I didn't—you know I was just kind of like stuff just happens with—the lesson there was like, always have your best work. Can't do half things. Because you never know. But it is—I still have these moments where I'm kind of amazed. Like I was walking

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

through the Museum of Modern Art and they had re-hung their permanent collection and there was a drawing of mine that was up and I thought, oh it's next to Jasper Johns and that's amazing. You know? That's kind of amazing.

OL: It's really something. That's incredible. I usually end interviews by asking people my last question and then asking them—you know tell me anything else that they haven't had a chance to say and my last question is usually a question about how—what you think of The Bronx today as opposed to when you were growing up and how The Bronx figures in your life, if at all, because you're not living in The Bronx anymore. So tell me what you think of The Bronx today as compared to when you were growing up? What The Bronx means to you, how it figures into your life and do you have relatives here, do you still come to The Bronx?

GL: Well, I have, I have funny memories of The Bronx because when I was living in the first houses the church that we went to was—it was on 169th Street, I don't remember the exact corner. But we used to go there—my mother started going there and it was in the mid '60s and so over the next 10 years I basically watched everything around that church burn down. And then we moved out of the neighborhood in '73, '74, my mother would still sometimes go to church services there because she knew a lot of the congregation. But we started going to another church in the Northeast Bronx but I would go and visit relatives that still lived around there and at a certain moment, maybe in the late '70s, maybe in the early '80s, they started rebuilding in that neighborhood and now that church is surrounded by townhouses with white picket fences and so my idea of The Bronx is sort of like that. In some ways it's fixed in this moment of trauma, you know, because I lived through the burning of The Bronx, you know? And in some ways because I went away to school, even when I was in elementary school, it's sort of like I went away to school because going from The Bronx to Manhattan was like going to another city in certain

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

ways. So there was a certain kind of distance I had from The Bronx but I still have relatives here.

When I see them it's mostly, in some ways out of town. Family reunions in other cities, things like that. So I have a bit of a distant relationship to The Bronx and a bit of nostalgic relationship I think because of that, you know? When I was coming here to do this interview, I'd forgotten that the D train stops on the Grand Concourse, and so I'm walking down the hill, and thinking like oh, I used to do this when I was a kid. Like this was a big outing to come to Fordham Road and go to the stores. And so I was very nostalgic about it, but I just thought but that's kind of not my life anymore, you know? But it was interesting to kind of, feel a bit of what I must've felt like when I was a kid, you know? Like it was still kind of exciting in certain ways. Like the kind of, you know, it's different than Brooklyn. You know, it's like Fulton Street and Fordham Road aren't the same. And it's hard to explain what that difference is but they don't feel the same and so when I was just walking here today, I was just like oh I miss this somehow, it's you know.

OL: Yes, it feels a lot like--more like old New York than other parts of New York today. I mean there's Starbucks and--.

GL: And there's the Gap and all of that, but somehow yes, it retained something that I remember from the '70s you know, when we used to come up here to shop for my school clothes, you know. That Sears that's there was the Sears we used to go to, you know?

OL: It sounded to me a lot like, I don't want to put words in your mouth but when you were talking about how your mom was trying to get you to go outside and play and you didn't want to and when you said when you were a teenager you found yourself hanging out more and more in Manhattan. It sounded a lot like, who you were as a child and as an adolescent was sometimes in conflict with what kids from The Bronx were supposed to do.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: Right, you're right. No, that's true. I mean I think I, in some ways, chameleon like, adapted to my environment. I remember getting on the bus on the corner of 163rd Street and Trinity to take the bus to the subway to take the subway to school and I'd forgotten my bus pass and the driver just looked at me and said, oh you look like a rich kid, you know, pay me tomorrow. And I just thought, it's just funny that like a kid getting on the bus in the middle of the South Bronx and the driver would say that to me. But I think there must've been something about me that was, you know, the environment that seemed important was my school. So I needed to fit in there. And so I sort of like put on this shell like, I'm just like you, you know though I wasn't. And I think in some ways that caused a kind of emotional rift, you know, between who I was most of the day at school and what I was when I came home you know? And but yes, it's just funny to me that little thing, that I remembered is so emblematic of this kind of split between my school life and my home life.

Unidentified Person (UP): Did you dress more like the kids, like in Manhattan--?

GL: Yes, but they were hippies. You know, so there was even that was, you know like in the '70s the kind of style of my neighborhood was not really what I was wearing. You know, so I was sort of halfway in between like—my mother would always say I can't believe, you know you'd go out of the house like that, you know like--? And what she meant was like you know, you dress like a white guy, you know? You look like a white hippie guy.

OL: The rich kids dressed poor and the poor kids tried to look rich.

GL: Exactly, exactly. But I was never comfortable kind of like, '70s fashions didn't really work for me.

UP: They didn't work for anybody.

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

GL: Exactly, exactly. So I had to sort of—but also you know, you had to dress, coming home to a rough neighborhood so you sort of—maybe it was sort of like, I could adjust my attitude, even though I dressed, like you know, oh you look like a rich kid, I could somehow like blend in.

OL: Well you knew where you were going and you weren't lost or--.

GL: Right, right, right, right, right.

OL: Well, is there anything else you want to talk about that we haven't talked about?

GL: I can't think of it. I mean the only thing maybe is just when, when we—in '73, '74 we moved to the Northeast Bronx and that's such a different version of The Bronx, it was really suburban. I mean we talked about this a little bit. But I sort of relaxed when I got there.

OL: And what facilitated that move? Why did you--?

GL: Social work. Social worker from my mother's job writing a letter. Because in the '70s the project that we moved to was a very small housing project, called the Shefflin Houses. 6 stories, maybe 12 buildings and it was integrated. It was Black families, Italian families, Jewish families, but in the '70s it was very difficult for Black families to move to a project that wasn't primarily already. And so my mother got a social worker on her job to write a letter basically saying you know Mrs. Ligon has young children, you know she has to commute all the way to the Northeast Bronx because she's working at Bronx Psychiatric Center, like it would be so much easier for her, you know, if she lived in a project in the Northeast Bronx, the commute would be 20 minutes instead of an hour, you know so basically the only ways we got to move was the social worker's letter. Because it wouldn't happen on our own.

OL: Wow, that's interesting.

GL: But it did change a lot of things. So it's just a calmer neighborhood, you know. Commute, longer commute, calmer neighborhood. Like it was so far away from The Bronx, it's the number

Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Interviewee: Glenn Ligon

Date: November 8, 2008

5 subway line, it was a commuter stop. It was a train line that was supposed to go to Boston and they ran out of money, so the station said to City and from City on them as if you were on a commuter train.

OL: Oh, that's interesting. So a little light would go on, it's like oh it's going to the City, but that was our relationship to Manhattan. Manhattan was the City and you wished, wherever—whether you lived in Brooklyn or Queens, that you were going to the City. But it was literally in the subway station, to City and from City.

OL: So you commuted from there to Walden? And then when you went to Wesleyan did you come home for breaks and--?

GL: Yes, I came home for breaks and you know, summer and worked summers. I worked at a social service agency in the Upper East Side called Boice Harbor and internships. My internship with Studio Museum was one of my summer breaks yes.

OL: Thank you so much Glenn.

GL: Oh, it was fun.

[END OF SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]