

PAULA COOPER GALLERY



Ja'Tovia Gary

*Citational Ethics (Toni Morrison, 1987), 2021*

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*Citational Ethics* (Toni Morrison, 1987) is the second work in Ja'Tovia Gary's *Citational Ethics* series. Each sculpture illuminates the words of a Black woman in neon, emboldening their voice and ideas. The work's title serves as a citation for the quote, venerating its author and encouraging viewers to learn more about its source.

“Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” she said, “and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks.”<sup>1</sup>

This line is a quote from *Beloved*, 1987, by Toni Morrison (1931–2019). The novel is set in Ohio shortly after the end of the Civil War and tells the story of a formerly enslaved woman, Sethe, who ends her own child's life rather than see her enslaved. The line is spoken by Baby Suggs, a respected elder, preacher and healer, to her daughter-in-law, Sethe, as she reflects on her life and losses from her deathbed.

Toni Morrison was a prolific writer and teacher, revered for her poetic telling of stories of Black America and her particular attention to the experience of Black women and children. While Morrison's luminous prose won her the highest accolades, her honest telling of painful histories and her devotion to Black stories has also made her work the subject of heated debate that continues to the present day. Morrison remains a threat even in death, as her writing continues to erode the narrative of white America.



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1 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, Vintage Edition, 2004), pp. 104–105.

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The form of the sculpture cites another Black American icon, Martin Luther King Jr., by recalling the sign outside the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he was murdered. A safe haven for Black travelers since 1945, the motel is the infamous location of the assassination of the activist and minister in 1968. Through the signature turquoise sign, Gary points to a precise place and time in American history, referencing King, his murder, and the long history of white supremacist violence.



Civil rights leader Andrew Young (L) and others on balcony of Lorraine motel pointing in direction of assailant after assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who is lying mortally wounded at their feet. Photo: Joseph Louw.



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Born in Dallas, Gary is influenced by Southern culture and history, and her use of light in the *Citational Ethics* series is integral to her critique of the glaringly bright American dream. The Lorraine Motel is now the home of the National Civil Rights Museum, and at just under ten feet tall, *Citational Ethics (Toni Morrison, 1987)* is an anti-monument that builds on the work of Morrison and King to redress the dominant narrative of America.







Ja'Tovia Gary

*Citational Ethics (Toni Morrison, 1987)*, 2021


metal, neon, acrylic

114 1/2 x 75 x 68 in. (290.8 x 190.5 x 172.7 cm)

Edition of 3, +2 APs







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**L I T**



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**Ja'Tovia Gary** (b. 1984, Dallas, TX) uses documentary film, experimental video, sculpture and installation to address representation, race, gender, sexuality, and violence. Her critically-acclaimed immersive multimedia piece *THE GIVERNY SUITE* (2020) was the subject of one-person exhibitions at the Hammer Museum, LA, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in 2020. Gary's other films have been screened at festivals including Houston Cinema Arts Festival; BlackStar Film Festival in Philadelphia; the American Film Institute Festival in LA; the Montreal International Documentary Festival; International Film Festival Rotterdam; Frameline LGBTQ Film Festival, Edinburgh; New Orleans Film Festival; and Ann Arbor Film Festival. In 2016, Gary was a Terra Foundation Artist Resident in Giverny, France, and in 2018 she was a Radcliffe Institute Fellow at Harvard University. Gary's work is in the collections of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester, and the Thoma Foundation.