

# CARRIE MAE WEEMS

## Strategies of Engagement

edited by Robin Lydenberg and Ash Anderson  
McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

C A R R I E   M A E   W E E M S  
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This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement* in the Daley Family and Monan Galleries at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, September 10–December 13, 2018. Organized by the McMullen Museum, *Strategies of Engagement* has been curated by Robin Lydenberg and Ash Anderson and underwritten by Boston College with major support from the Patrons of the McMullen Museum and Robert '63 and Ann Marie Reardon P '91.

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Front: *Profile 2* (left) from *All the Boys*, 2016, plate 11.2  
Back: *A Considered Space*, 2013, plate 14.2



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# PREFACE

The McMullen Museum is honored to present this major exhibition devoted to the work of celebrated artist Carrie Mae Weems. Her dedication to creating work of considerable aesthetic power relevant to the most urgent issues of our time makes this exhibition an occasion for deep meditation and dialogue on the relationship of the arts to social justice.

The project originated in the summer of 2014 when Robin Lydenberg and I met to discuss ideas for an exhibition that she would curate to mark her anticipated retirement from teaching at Boston College. Over more than four decades as a distinguished professor of English at Boston College, Lydenberg has introduced many students to the historical avant-garde and contemporary experimental literature. She has contributed to numerous exhibitions at the McMullen, including curating *GONE: Site-Specific Works by Dorothy Cross* and writing its accompanying book in 2005. In recent years her scholarship has focused on the relationship between text and image, with research on several artists who construct visual narratives. One of these artists, Carrie Mae Weems, emerged immediately from our conversation as a compelling figure around whom Lydenberg could curate a retrospective. Indeed, Weems was well known to the McMullen, having been one of six artists featured our 1997 exhibition *Original Visions: Shifting the Paradigm, Women's Art, 1970–1996*.

Immersing herself in Weems's work, Lydenberg wrote a long essay on the artist that came to be the thematic basis of the exhibition. When Lydenberg approached the artist with her ideas for curating an exhibition organized by the McMullen, Weems responded with enthusiasm. Lydenberg then arranged with Boston College's Institute for the Liberal Arts and its Lowell Humanities Series to sponsor a residency for Weems at the University that would coincide with the exhibition. Thus, it is to Lydenberg that we owe our greatest debt of gratitude for this visionary project. She has steered this complex endeavor with the energy, erudition, generosity, and grace for which she has always been known at Boston College.

One of Lydenberg's first tasks was to enlist as a co-curator Ash Anderson, who teaches Weems's work in his history of photography courses at Boston College and who had curated the McMullen's exhibition *Paris Night and Day: Photography between the Wars* in 2014. Anderson has played a key role in crafting the exhibition with Lydenberg and Weems. The exhibition and catalogue have benefited in no small way from Anderson's vast knowledge of the field and curatorial practice, experienced eye, and thoughtfulness.

Lydenberg and Anderson also attracted an exceptional group of contributors from a broad range of disciplines to write essays for this publica-

tion. We thank Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, Angela Ards, Kyrah Malika Daniels, Rhonda D. Frederick, Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Jeremy McCarter, Leigh Patel, Stephen Pfohl, José Rivera, Faith Smith, and Maren Stange for their insightful dialogue.

Needless to say, such a project would never have been possible without the investment of the artist. Carrie Mae Weems could not have been more helpful at all stages of shaping and strengthening the presentation. Our appreciation for her generous participation and support remains boundless. At the Carrie Mae Weems Studio in Syracuse, New York, Pamela Vander Zwan and Petra Szilagyi graciously collaborated with the Museum on all aspects of production and planning *Strategies of Engagement*. Jack Shainman, Elisabeth Sann, and Ruth Phaneuf of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York too played an important role, loaning photographs and coordinating logistics with the artist.

*The Hampton Project*, Weems's monumental installation created for the Williams College Museum of Art, generously was loaned by that institution with the support of Lisa Dorin, Pamela Franks, Diane Hart, and Rachel Tassone. Additionally, we thank Hava Gurevich of art2art Circulating Exhibitions for arranging subsequent venues to host *Strategies of Engagement*.

The project has been managed adroitly by the McMullen staff and others at the University. Assistant Director Diana Larsen designed the complex installation in our Daley Family and Monan Galleries. Assistant Director John McCoy designed this publication and the exhibition's graphics. Manager of Publications and Exhibitions Kate Shugert copyedited this volume and oversaw the loan process, and Manager of Education, Outreach, and Digital Resources Rachel Chamberlain arranged an array of programs for audiences of all ages to engage with the exhibition. Jessica Lipton, BC class of 2018, served as research assistant. We are grateful also for the assistance of Anastos Chiavaras and Rose Breen of the Office of Risk Management; Peter Marino, Jacqueline Delgado, and Gaurie Pandey of the Center for Centers; Ginger Saariaho, Joanne Goggins, and Natalie Hachem of the Office of Advancement; Jack Dunn and Rosanne Pellegrini of the Office of University Communications; Mary Crane, director of the Institute for the Liberal Arts; and James Smith and Shaylonda Barton of the Lowell Humanities Series.

We remain grateful for the following Museum endowments that provide vital support for all our projects: Linda '64 and Adam Crescenzi Fund, Janet M. and C. Michael Daley '58 Fund, Gerard and Jane Gaughan Fund for Exhibitions, Hecksher Family Fund, Hightower Family Fund, John F. McCarthy and Gail M. Bayer Fund, Christopher J. Toomey '78 Fund, and Alison S. and

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William M. Vareika '74, P'09, '15 Fund.

As always, the McMullen Museum could never have undertaken this ambitious endeavor without the ongoing support of the administration of Boston College and the McMullen Family Foundation. We especially thank Jacqueline McMullen, President William P. Leahy, SJ; Provost David Quigley; Vice Provost Billy Soo; and Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences Dean Gregory Kalscheur, SJ. The Peggy Simons Memorial Publications Fund underwrote part of the cost of this catalogue. Major support for the exhibition was provided by the Patrons of the McMullen Museum, chaired by C. Michael Daley, and Robert '63 and Ann Marie Reardon P '91.

Nancy Netzer  
Director and Professor of Art History

# INTRODUCTION

Ash Anderson

In the second minute of Carrie Mae Weems's film *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, as the camera moves through a darkly lit classroom, the artist's voice intones:

This is a story within a story; how to enter this history, what to show, what to say, what to feel. It was a creation myth, how things came to be as they are. In this constructed place, our classroom, we revisit the past. The students examine the facts and will participate in the construction of history, a history that has been told to them by others. But now, with their own bodies, they engage their own dark terrain, their own winter. Some of the children are young, learning about civil rights, human rights, for the first time. A teacher will guide them through lessons. For many of them the day will be long and hard, and for others, painful. Some things will be difficult for them to see.

It is appropriate that this video appears in the first gallery of the exhibition that is the occasion for this catalogue. Weems's authorial voice is often that of a teacher, and the words spoken in the video set us up for the difficult education we are about to receive as viewers of her work and visitors to the exhibition. Weems both deconstructs and recontextualizes the history we are familiar with, and presents us with new readings, new discomforts, and ultimately new illuminations, all driven by her own desire to understand how things came to be as they are. For Weems, the way things are encompasses the present seen through a range of lenses: political, social, spiritual, theoretical, emotional, and aesthetic. In a similarly diverse array of materials, including black-and-white and color photographic prints on paper, canvas, and muslin, as well as combinations of video, sound, etched glass, and mixed-media installation, she confronts, among other concerns, the long history and horrific effects of anti-black racism in the United States. In so doing, she gives us a new set of interpretive tools to participate in the history we construct going forward.

This invitation to engage is at the core of Weems's practice, and has guided the logic by which *Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement* took

shape. Each work of art contained in the exhibition and reproduced here represents a strategy for engaging with history and the present. It is typical of Weems's generosity as an artist that the tools she developed to better understand how we arrived at this moment—political, social, artistic—are not just demonstrated in the works themselves, but offered to viewers, equipping us for an ongoing cultural education. Among the most powerful of these strategies is the invitation to engage physically with history. In the *Constructing History* photographs and video this embodied engagement is modeled by students inhabiting the postures of figures in well-known representations of tragic events from the late 1960s (plates 1.1–10). In *The Hampton Project* she invites viewers to literally immerse themselves in an encompassing landscape of historical photographs on sheer banners and an ambient recitation examining the intersection of education, cultural identity, and forced assimilation, and the particular kind of loss and violence that can result (plates 2.1–25). In *American Icons* (plates 9.1–3) and *Ain't Jokin'* (plates 10.1–6) her strategy involves making viewers aware of their complicity in perpetuating seemingly superficial racist practices and language, what Weems calls “little packages of consumer racism.”<sup>1</sup> These artworks go beyond interactivity to help viewers experience the reverberations of Weems's art in their relationship to the world and to others, fulfilling the artist's early desire to get “off the walls”<sup>2</sup> and offer us more intense and productive modes of engagement with her work.

The exhibition came together during a period of national reckoning over racial inequality and its violent effects. There is perhaps no other artist so adept at articulating and clarifying the truths and consequences of our nation's treatment of its citizens of color during the last two centuries. In order to deal with our troubled present, Weems utilizes and transforms photographic material dating back to the 1850s and casts her gaze back even further while exploring the visual records and cultural memories of the intervening years. *Strategies of Engagement* includes works from as early as 1987 up to 2016, the most recent projects deepening her analysis of the present, exposing the roots and broad effects of police violence, and exploring the ways it both contradicts and critiques our presumption of a universal shared humanity. The penultimate section of the exhibition, which includes *All the Boys*, *Usual Suspects*, and *People of a Darker Hue* (plates 11.1–4,

1 Qtd. in Andrea Kirsh, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color,” in *Carrie Mae Weems*, Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993), 14.

2 “Carrie Mae Weems: YoungArts Master Class,” YouTube video, 1:03:05, posted by YoungArts, Apr. 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWseogIu8L8>.



12.1–9, 13), all made in 2016, and responding in different ways to these incidents and their sickening bureaucratic aftermath, combines information and imagery that is already painfully familiar from the news with beautiful evocations of strength, fear, and mourning.

The exhibition ends with a moment of explicit hope and beauty, a triptych of photographs that features Weems's muse figure flanked by representations of *The Hope Peony* (plates 14.1–3) that Weems designed in honor of W. E. B. Du Bois with the American Peony Society and Hollingsworth Peonies to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the NAACP founder's death. Conceived as part of a larger desire to create contemplative spaces to honor African American leaders, Weems invites gardeners to “plant hope in your very own garden.”<sup>3</sup> In the same way that she invites viewers to be her students, and students to be her actors in the *Constructing History* project, *The Hope Peony* invites us to participate in ways that at first seem familiar. Full engagement, however, requires of us a more rigorous and dedicated perception and self-examination.

Like all exhibitions at the McMullen Museum of Art, this one is the result of faculty research and is addressed to diverse audiences of all ages. Its myriad pedagogical intentions extend to the catalogue. We invited contributors from a wide range of disciplines and areas of expertise to add new perspectives to the already diverse literature on Weems.<sup>4</sup> Many of the essays thus follow Weems's example, taking stock of both our history and our present circumstances, and helping readers inhabit new vantage points, new ways of seeing that serve and expand our understanding of both the artist's work and the wider world as well. All these writers are teachers, and we are confident that this catalogue will both enrich the experience of the exhibition it accompanies and have an important afterlife to serve as the basis for new conversations about, among other things, the power dynamics around race, gender, history, education, and art.

The research for Robin Lydenberg's essay on one of Weems's most celebrated series, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (plates 3.1–33), formed the basis for the exhibition. It examines in detail the strategies Weems has developed to engage with an ongoing history of violence and to involve her audience in pedagogical and collaborative encounters. A professor of English, Lydenberg treats this complex project that appropriates and transforms a historical archive of images of African Americans, tracing its roots in Weems's early work and its impact on subsequent projects in which she uses an increasingly diverse range of material, performative, and social practices.

One example of Weems's expanded field of practice is manifested in a very different intervention in an existing archive. Exploring the entanglements of institutional history and the larger cultural forces represented by those institutions and their values, professor of African and Afro-American studies and English Faith Smith analyzes Weems's installation *The Hampton Project* as an indictment of the notion that a person's humanity is contingent on the institutions that seek to judge or define it. Smith reassesses the 2000 work through the lenses of activism and literature, finding parallels in the critical treatment of historically black institutions in the novels of Ralph Ellison and Nella Larsen and noting how related archives demand critical deconstruction to expose their negative lessons.

Many of the writers in this collection offer models of an alternative progressive pedagogy. In keeping with Weems's commitment to collabora-

tion and dialogue, scholar of pedagogy Leigh Patel and English professor Rhonda D. Frederick use the format of an extended conversation to explore the promise and attendant difficulties in using photographs to help students engage with race in the classroom. Drawing on Weems's work, including *From Here I Saw What Happened* and *Ain't Jokin'*, and Ken Gonzales-Day's *Erased Lynching* series, they describe their desire to unsettle students, to use their pedagogy to intervene in the normalized voyeurism of black suffering, and ultimately to make students aware not just of what they are seeing, but of how and why they see the world in the predetermined ways they do.

If we are to unlearn negative or destructive ways of seeing that we have absorbed from our surroundings, we must also attend to the different kinds of seeing that we encounter. Stephen Pfohl and Maren Stange each explore the particular demands and effects of Weems's work in video and live performance. Sociologist Pfohl reflects on the growing importance of video in Weems's work during the last fifteen years, and questions what her videos ask of their viewers through their representations of a violent historical past. The sharing of visual DNA that characterizes all of Weems's work carries over to these moving images as well, where videos remix other videos and build on one another. Pfohl describes this practice as a kind of life-sustaining ritual, designed to inspire thoughtful mourning of the dead as well as celebrations of life.

Stange, historian of photography, explores Weems's use of her own body as an important strategy in her creative and critical process. She traces these effects through still photographs and video, but primarily in *Grace Notes*, the evolving live piece that Weems has performed since 2016, and which shares imagery, including the muse figure, with several series in *Strategies of Engagement*. This performance is both a particular momentary event and a broad exploration of music, memory, history, and present politics that calls on its audience to engage civically and critically.

The body and performance are also central to the essay written by Kyrah Malika Daniels, a professor of art history and African and African Diaspora studies. She explores the affinities between Weems's use of masks and masquerade and related traditions of Africa and the African Diaspora. Taking into account the importance of the body as a source of knowledge perception and production in African cultural traditions, and such varied reference points as the minstrel in blackface, the conjure woman, the dandy, and the Haitian spirit Legba, Daniels provides a rich context for understanding Weems's relationship to a long heritage of African maskers in *Missing Links* (plates 4.1–6) and *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demonstration* (plates 6.1–8).

Another source of power exerting a formative influence on Weems's work is delineated by English and journalism professor Angela Ards in the black feminist roots that shaped her relationship to her viewers, and the development of her muse figure. Ards considers in particular the influences of novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston and literary critic and theorist Barbara Christian, who helped Weems define the dynamic relationship of herself to the larger world, and her treatment of the black subject as universal.

Honoring the particular and claiming for it not only humanity but universality is an important aspect of Weems's vision. Theologian Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones uses icon theology as a lens through which we see the artist's work from yet another perspective, in particular the powerful series of photographs *All the Boys*. She challenges us to expand our ways of seeing:

3 “*Fresh Talk: Carrie Mae Weems: Can an Artist Inspire Social Change?*,” YouTube video, 1:20:50, posted by National Museum of Women in the Arts, Jan. 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBxwugaFRhg>.

4 The scholarship on Weems is vast, but our contributors are especially in conversation with Dawoud Bey, Huey Copeland, Kathryn E. Delmez, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Christina Sharpe, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Laura Wexler, and Deborah Willis.

## INTRODUCTION

What can you tell by looking? What can you not tell by looking? The icon bridges the gap between humanity and divinity, changing us radically.

This collection of essays concludes with the transcript of a roundtable discussion between Weems, art historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, playwright and screenwriter José Rivera, and theater producer and director Jeremy McCarter that begins with a consideration of Frederick Douglass and his belief in the profound power of pictures to shape opinions, to enact change both good and bad. Weems explains that an artist's mission is to stretch toward the truth about the world, and how truth can thereby become intertwined with beauty, with power, and with what it means to be human. Essential to our humanity is our ability to appreciate beauty, our ability to engage in a particular kind of sight. And for Weems, beauty, like love, is defined by a profound impact that enables "a moment of clarity when something allows you to see yourself far more deeply than you would in any other way or through any other means." In the closing moments of the panel discussion, Weems expresses her commitment to be part of something larger than herself, and to engage in her artistic work and activism with what she calls "interested bodies." It is a reminder that, for Weems, the work aims for—more than merely engagement with the mind—engagement with the body, getting to a new kind of understanding through physical as well as mental means.

Weems has said of the election of President Obama that it represented "a change in the American imagination," that added "complexity to the making of history."<sup>5</sup> Here Weems describes the effects one might hope for after an encounter with her work: a change to the boundaries of the imagination, the welcome complication of our conception of history and its construction, the laying of groundwork for an expanded set of possible futures for humanity.

Humanity, complete with its terrible faults and ultimate grace, ends up being an important thread connecting the stories told by Carrie Mae Weems and this catalogue's contributors. We were aware from early on in planning the exhibition that amongst themes of violence, racism, forced assimilation, and mourning, joy was in short supply. But any regret at its absence was supplanted by the distinct presence of grace, in the form of an unshakeable hope for humanity against the burden of experience and history. We are, all of us, fully invested in that hope, and find our way to grace through the power of pictures, the power of language, and the power of education.

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5 "Left of Black with Carrie Mae Weems and Thabiti Lewis," YouTube video, 59:46, posted by John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University, Feb. 15, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g7QyomaEBI>.



# CARRIE MAE WEEMS: STRATEGIES OF ENGAGEMENT

Robin Lydenberg

Carrie Mae Weems has spent over thirty-five years producing a unique body of work distinguished by its theoretical sophistication, its formal elegance, and its commitment to social justice. Her art has been widely recognized for its critical deconstruction of both the master narratives of history and the conventions of visual and textual representation. In her major contributions to cultural debates about the racial dynamics that dominate American culture, Weems has expanded those discussions to encompass the even more complex power relations at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Bridging the gap between the particular and the universal, she reveals through the specificity of the varied lived experiences of black bodies in the world the common humanity shared by us all.

Weems has developed a range of strategies to engage with a global history of oppression and resistance as it relates to our present moment. One of her early strategies involved presenting the past from the perspective of a critical witness, accompanying photographic images with textual narrative. She soon developed more active modes of intervention: questioning the photograph's status as evidentiary document; appropriating and transforming verbal and visual archives; negotiating with the persistent effects of the stereotype; and animating his-



1. Carrie Mae Weems, *Dad with Grandkids* (detail) from *Family Pictures and Stories*, 1978–84. Gelatin silver print, 12.8 x 8.5 in.

tory in the present as performance. Her aim is to disrupt the smoothness of official accounts of the past, immersing herself and her viewers in the “tangled web just beneath the veneer of order.”<sup>1</sup> Weems’s process is at once pedagogical and collaborative, as she enters history in the fullness of her humanity and brings her audience along with her.

The common goal that drives all of Weems’s work is to bring about what bell hooks calls “a revolution in the way we see, the way we look.”<sup>2</sup> For Weems, this is an ongoing revolution that is continually revitalized by new aesthetic and political strategies. The fulcrum for my analysis will be the 1995–96 photo/text series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (plates 3.1–33), a mid-career piece that fully realizes Weems’s early photographic practices and anticipates the expanded field of her subsequent projects in video, performance, installation, and community activism.<sup>3</sup>

Weems began her artistic career with a broad background in photography, dance, folklore, and radical politics. In her earliest work, however, her focus was personal. Challenging the distorted characterization of black family life given official sanction by the 1965 Moynihan Report,<sup>4</sup> Weems presents a lively and intimate portrait of her own family history in the images and accompanying narrative of *Family*

1 Denise Ramzy and Katherine Fogg, “Interview: Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project*, ed. Vivian Patterson, exh. cat. (New York: Aperture; Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 2000), 78–80.

2 bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 4.

3 Other critics have recognized the pivotal importance of *From Here I Saw*. Celeste-Marie Bernier sees it as paradigmatic of major issues in the larger field of contemporary African American visual art: *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 14–17 and Thelma Golden locates it as an “interesting axis” of “the historic past of the Black Arts Movement and the yet to be named black aesthetic present”: “Some Thoughts on Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: Recent Work, 1992–1998*, ed. Thomas Piché Jr. and Thelma Golden, exh. cat. (New York: George Braziller; Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1999), 31.

4 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

*Pictures and Stories* (1978–84, fig. 1). In subsequent photographic series she confronts more directly and with biting wit the racist caricatures that persist in popular discourse (*Ain't Jokin'*, 1987–88, plates 10.1–6) and are made familiar in the kitsch collectibles that decorate domestic interiors (*American Icons*, 1988–89, plates 9.1–3). By the early 1990s Weems begins to seek out in the muted history of slavery in America the remnants of ties to Africa (*Sea Islands Series*, 1991–92 [fig. 2]; *Africa*, 1993; *Slave Coast*, 1993), leading herself and her viewers into “diasporic landscape[s] of longing.”<sup>5</sup> These early strands of Weems’s development converge powerfully in *From Here I Saw* in which she confronts directly the relationship of her medium, photography, to the position of the black subject in history.

### QUESTIONING DOCUMENTARY

Weems’s thoughtful engagement with the history of photography looks back to the nineteenth century when photography was one of the most effective tools used for various systems of classification. The early perception of this medium as a transparent recording of reality gave weight to the claims to objective fact made by the developing sciences of criminology, anthropology, ethnography, and physiognomy. As John Tagg and others have demonstrated, however, the supposed accuracy of documentary photographs, especially those used for surveillance and prosecution, is actually a “reality effect” artificially produced by a set of codes and conventions. In the early twentieth century these techniques were sometimes marshaled to promote positive social reforms, but even in that context documentary photography often supported ideologically distorted notions about race, gender, and class.<sup>6</sup>

Inspired by the invention of the daguerreotype, Frederick Douglass argued that photography could be used to counter distorted racist characterizations from the popular and scientific press. By the beginning of the twentieth century, an alternative archive of portraits of and by African Americans, like the ones assembled by W. E. B. Du Bois for the Paris Exposition (fig. 3), challenged anti-black visual representations in circulation. The work of black photographers familiar with the everyday lives and aspira-

tions of their subjects could function more like participant/observers than detached investigators.<sup>7</sup> Breaking out of the distorting frames of scientific and social classification, photographs could present African American individuals as worthy citizens.

In addition to such alternative evidentiary archives, black photographers also produced highly aesthetic works that established black lives as worthy subjects of art. One influential example of this movement from the evidentiary to the aesthetic is the 1955 book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* in which photographs of Harlem residents by Roy DeCarava were combined with a fictional narrative by Langston Hughes (fig. 4). This hybrid work presents its audience with a view of Harlem life that acknowledges its inhabitants’ struggles, honors their labor, and celebrates their vibrancy, beauty, and dignity. The sequence of photographs is narrated by a fictional character, Sister Mary Bradley, who witnesses and comments on the lives of those depicted in DeCarava’s images.

DeCarava’s work had a formative impact on Weems’s art. Her critical disruption of the conventions of documentary photography puts her in a group of contemporary artists who emphasize “the inauthentic, the staged, the fictional...[interrogating] the institutional formations, means for exchange and social stereotypes that position subjects in photography.”<sup>8</sup> Weems describes how she was initially attracted to the potential of the genre: “There was something appealing about it, the whole idea that you were somehow describing the complicatedness of the human condition. That’s what documentary was...to me.” But she also understood the form’s negative implications: “Part of documentary had a lot to do with the notion that you would go into somebody else’s backyard and capture it and bring home the ethnic image, as trophy...In your passion to document you encounter a tragic reality that transforms, so that you can come back even bigger, with your prize, and be praised for that.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of merely rejecting the documentary genre, Weems decides to use her art to “make a direct intervention,



2. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Praise House)* from *Sea Islands Series*, 1991–92. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 20 in.

5 hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 73.

6 On the “reality effect” of the photographic medium see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). On the complex evolution of documentary photography see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

7 Weems encountered this participant/observer model of anthropological research in her formal folklore studies with Alan Dundes at Berkeley and in the work of anthropologist/folklorist/novelist Zora Neale Hurston.

8 Brian Wallis, “Questioning Documentary,” *Aperture* 112 (Fall 1988): 60.

9 Qtd. in hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 80.

extend the form by playing with it, manipulating it."<sup>10</sup>

### WITNESSING THE ARCHIVE

Weems had an opportunity for such an intervention in 1995 when she was commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum to create a work in response to its exhibition of an archive of mid-nineteenth-century photographic images of African Americans, *Hidden Witness: African-Americans in Early Photography*. In the resulting work, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Weems expanded the original selection (from the Getty's holdings and from the private collection of Jackie Napoleon Wilson) to include several more contemporary examples. As several critics have noted, by overlaying these images with her own narrative, Weems practices what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "signifying,"<sup>11</sup> a mode of critical reading in which the meaning, intention, and effect of the original image or concept is radically transformed.<sup>12</sup> Weems reads the Getty's photographic archive against the grain of viewers' acceptance of its status as a repository of documentary evidence. Her sequential narrative, etched in glass over the images that have been tinted red, acts as a running commentary on the violence committed by systems of racial classification and representation.

The impulse to assemble and to believe in the veracity of the archive has been identified by Pierre Nora as characteristic of contemporary systems of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida argue that far from being a neutral assemblage of information, the archive legislates what can be known or said and produces effects of objectification and subjection.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, there are contemporary artists like Weems who engage in critical play with the archive, intervening and disrupting its power.<sup>15</sup>

The strategy Weems utilizes here is to remove the Getty archive from its institutional isolation by introducing a witness to expose its alleged neutrality. Like the voice of Mary Bradley in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a narrative voice witnesses and guides how we see the archive in Weems's

re-presentation of it. The function and authority of witnessing are displaced from the camera lens to the photographed subject. Weems's series opens with the figure of the witness: a young African woman in profile, facing right; the same photograph printed in reverse, looking left, closes the series. This figure provides a verbal as well as a visual frame: the first image bears the phrase "From here I saw what happened" and the final one concludes with "And I cried." This photograph was originally part of a 1925 collection of ethnographic photographs taken by George Specht on an expedition to central Africa. Exhibited in colonial expositions and natural history museums, this portrait was often presented as a primitive "type." Perhaps because she was the wife of a high-ranking chief, she retains her name in the original photograph's caption: "Nobosodru: Femme Mangbetu." Widely circulated on postcards, stamps, and even as a car hood ornament, Nobosodru became a decorative image of the "exotic other." In a different vein, her beauty was also celebrated by some Harlem Renaissance artists as emblematic of a modern black aesthetic seeking to honor its African heritage.<sup>16</sup>

Weems opens her work, then, with an image that already has a complicated history, and she adds yet another layer to the palimpsest of its varied and even contradictory significations. The profile pose that is a classic convention in ethnographic display (used in this case to emphasize the skull elongation practiced by the Mangbetu tribe) is doubled and reversed by Weems, so that the two profiles face each other across the intervening representations of American race relations past and present. Traditionally made the object of the classifying gaze of Western science, the ethnographic subject here exercises her own power to see and to *see through* the abuses of that allegedly superior civilization.

"From here" (in Africa), "I saw what happened" (in America).

Nobosodru's function as the witnessing gaze of the work is reinforced by her voice guiding viewers through the series. Weems tints her bookend portraits blue, perhaps suggesting Nobosodru's sad response to what she



3. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro Exhibit at Paris," *Colored American*, Nov. 3, 1900, 1.

10 Qtd. in Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Bomb*, no. 108, July 1, 2009, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/>. For an illuminating analysis of the critique of documentary photography see Cherise Smith, "Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Willie Robert Middlebrook at the Art Institute of Chicago," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 24, no. 2 (1999): 244–59, 271–72.

11 See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xix–xxviii.

12 Smith, "Fragmented Documents," 254; Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 16.

13 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," in "Memory and Counter-Memory," ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, special issue, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 13.

14 Michel Foucault sees the archive functioning as "the first law of what can be said": *The Archaeology of Knowledge; and The Discourse on Language*, trans. Rupert Swyer (1972; New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 129 and Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) argues that "there is no political power without control of the archive" (4) that "produces as much as it records the event" (17). For an overview of theories of the archive see Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital," in *Visual Culture: A Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Press, 1999), 181–92.

15 See Sven Spieker, "The Archive at Play," in *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 173–93.

16 For a discussion of how artists like Aaron Douglas "countered [the] ethnographic and pseudo-scientific view" of photographs like Specht's with "art works that spoke directly to a new racial and cultural consciousness" see Richard J. Powell, "Re/Birth of a Nation," in *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Richard J. Powell and David A. Bailey, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 25–29.

sees, and that melancholy note is echoed in the narrative's reference to Billie Holiday "cr[ying] strange fruit tears." Through Weems's intervention, this young African woman is empowered with an active gaze, a critical voice, and a complex emotionality. She escapes the constraints of ethnographic photography and presides over this work as a witness to and commentator on the history of racial struggle.

In her later work, Weems often plays the role of witness herself. As she explains, "Maybe because of my experience in theater, I had a great sense of how to use my body, not as Carrie, but to stand in for more than myself, for a black female subjectivity and subject, who was thinking and acting according to her own will."<sup>17</sup> Recording her own presence in various historically charged locations, Weems bears witness to slavery's past and its aftermath in *The Louisiana Project* (2003) and *Dreaming in Cuba* (2002). She also stands in as the challenging presence of the racial "other" inserted into classical and modern scenes of Western European culture and power in *Museum Series* (2007) and *Roaming* (2006), and most recently on the sets of mainstream American television dramas in *Scenes & Take* (2016). An anonymous everywoman, this peripatetic figure "can stand in for the audience."<sup>18</sup> As the strategic function of witnessing extends to include viewers of her work, Weems replaces the detachment of the documentary or ethnographic gaze with a more intimate interaction.

Just two years after first exhibiting *From Here I Saw*, Weems was creating works in which her audience is literally immersed in a world history made present and palpable. In the installation *Ritual and Revolution* (1998), viewers wander among layers of diaphanous cloth banners printed with enlarged photographs representing political struggle and suffering throughout history (fig. 5). Their journey is accompanied by the artist's distinctively mellifluous voice in an ambient audio recording in which she responds to those images: "From the four corners of the world / I saw you bewildered, startled & stumbling / Toward the next century / Looking over your shoulder / With fingers crossed / From the ruins of what was and what will be / I saw your longing / Felt your pain / And tried to comfort you."<sup>19</sup> Weems sees and speaks from multiple points of view, "from the four corners of the world," transcending her personal singularity to identify and empathize with the oppression and resistance of many.

*Ritual and Revolution* enacts the power of witnessing as projection and

identification across racial, gender, ethnic, geographical, and temporal divides. Differences are bridged in the communal experience of history as continuous struggle. In her incantation, the artist witnesses events ("I saw you") but also actively enters into them ("I was with you") in the Bastille, in the Middle Passage, in the death camps. As viewers of this installation wander through suspended images, they experience a similar entry into past conflicts. In such works witnessing is transformed into active participation by artist and audience alike.



4. Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 58.

images, the narrative voice laments the impact of their objectification: "You became a / Scientific profile," "A negroid type," "An anthropological / Debate," "& a photographic subject."

Weems's use of the Zealy daguerreotypes gives the postmodern aesthetic practice of appropriation a particular urgency. There are many appropriations at play here: enslavement as an appropriation of the Africans' bodies and labor; ethnography as an appropriation of images of those bodies for ideologically motivated classification; and finally Weems's appropriation of the evidence of those abuses in what has been described as a "poetics of

## APPROPRIATING AND TRANSFORMING THE ARCHIVE

In *From Here I Saw* Weems begins to actively appropriate and transform archives of images. Appropriation can be understood here as not merely incorporating but recontextualizing and multiplying the meanings of selected images. Through enlarging, cropping, tinting, reframing, and captioning Weems opens images to new and critical readings.

The opening of *From Here I Saw* enacts a particularly powerful and articulate transformation. The first images Nobosodru witnesses in the series are two African men (Renty from Congo and Jack from Guinea) and their daughters (Delia and Drana). The four daguerreotypes by Joseph T. Zealy that Weems's piece reproduces and alters were originally commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850 to support his theory of "separate creation" or "dual genesis"—his belief that Africans were not just another race but a different species with an entirely different origin from the white race. In Weems's reproduction and textual labeling of these images she makes explicit the complicity of the photographic medium in supporting a racist science that justified slavery by dehumanizing its victims (plates 3.2–5). Addressing directly the individuals exposed in these

17 Qtd. in Kristin Braswell, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems on 30 Years of Genius," *Ebony*, Feb. 5, 2014, <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/artist-carrie-mae-weems-on-30-years-of-genius-999#axzz3z3KdxCAU>.

18 Qtd. in Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

19 Quotations from the *Ritual and Revolution* audio are from Piché and Golden, *Carrie Mae Weems*, plates 75–76.



resistance.”<sup>20</sup> As Brian Wallis observes of the original Zealy daguerreotypes, “If colonialism and ethnographic exploitation depend on appropriation, one must acknowledge that what is taken can always be taken back.”<sup>21</sup>

Weems takes back these images by transforming them: they are re-photographed, enlarged, saturated with a dark red tint, and overlaid with a critical text etched into the glass. Although Celeste-Marie Bernier notes that this inscription-effect recalls the branding of slaves as property,<sup>22</sup> that practice is displaced here by an alternative inscription on those bodies of an oppositional voice that recognizes their humanity and their potential critical agency. Although they are silent, these four individuals and others who follow in the series, are addressed directly by the narrator, Nobosodru, suggesting a possible communication with her across space and time. She asserts later in the series that everything “You became” was “Anything / But what you were,” reminding viewers of the relentless denial of the subjecthood and humanity of enslaved persons.

In our modern systems of representation and communication any individual can be emptied of his or her lived experience and turned into a signifier of something else. Roland Barthes’s semiological analysis of how such ideological myths are produced provides some useful insights into Weems’s work. In his essay “Myth Today” Barthes examines a 1955 cover of *Paris Match* showing a young black soldier saluting the French flag. In this particular photographic “myth” the young man is not only made to “stand for” French imperialism, he is also used to justify it, and ultimately to assert its presence as something that simply goes without saying. A situation that is, in fact, contingent, historical, and political is overlaid with what Barthes describes as the “alibi” that naturalizes the concept.<sup>23</sup> The black soldier’s lived history must be emptied out so that his image can be filled with its new ideological meaning: the naturalness of French imperialism. As Barthes emphasizes, however, that black soldier’s life cannot be totally evacuated, because the parasitic myth needs the host image to retain just enough life, just enough presence, to give “nourishment” to the new meaning projected onto it.<sup>24</sup> In Weems’s appropriation of the Zealy daguerreotypes this process is laid bare. These men and women have been robbed of their individuality and their history in the

service of racist “science,” but the layer of critical commentary added by Weems reanimates them and suggests the possibility of resistance.

Viewers encountering the original Zealy daguerreotypes often try, like Weems, to counteract their dehumanizing classification of these enslaved Africans. Determined to see past the objectification of the black body as specimen, they intimate “tales of slave sorrow and humanity [communicated] through the expressive individualism of their eyes and forcefulness of their gaze.”<sup>25</sup> Wallis detects an even more active resistance in these same images, in the mask-like non-gaze of individuals who have been forced into passive display: “In what seems to be a deliberate refusal to engage with the camera...they stare into the lens, their faces like masks, eyes glazed, jaws clenched.”<sup>26</sup> That non-gaze is seen as a defense against precisely the sort of

violation of their inner life committed, although with the best intentions, by the viewer sympathetically seeking “the hidden lives...hover[ing] just beneath the surface.”<sup>27</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg points out that the individuals in Zealy’s daguerreotypes, isolated from any relation to family, profession, or community, “are permitted no social persona.”<sup>28</sup> The individualizing elements of the portrait mode have been stripped from these enslaved people along with their clothing. In *From Here I Saw*, Weems situates them in relation to the framing figure of the free African woman, restoring them to social interaction and to a historical context independent of the ethnographic archive. What is staged here is not a definitive triumph over pseudoscientific myths, but a palimpsest in which we see both the persistence of racist

characterizations and the ongoing struggle against them.

Later in the series Weems introduces another daguerreotype with a very different history from those in the Agassiz archive. This image shows a “contraband” subject, identified by researchers as “Gordon,” posed to display his scarred back, leaving his face in shadow (plate 3.17). This photograph was taken as part of the medical examination required for Gordon’s enlistment in the Union army, but it also records the evidence of the abuse he suffered as an enslaved worker. It was in this latter context that the photograph was appropriated by white abolitionists who reproduced it on *cartes de visite*. Gordon’s anonymous image was displayed on the front of the card under



5. Carrie Mae Weems, *Ritual and Revolution* (installation view), 1998, P-P-O-W Gallery, New York.

20 Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 17.

21 Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz,” *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 59.

22 Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 15.

23 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 128–29.

24 Barthes, 118.

25 Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 16.

26 Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science,” 40.

27 Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 16.

28 Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photography: Images as History; Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 56. On the useful distinction between the type and the portrait see Wallis, “Questioning Documentary,” 54–56.



the caption “The Scourge,” its reverse side revealing the image’s function as a fundraising device for “the education of colored people.”<sup>29</sup> An 1863 article in *Harper’s Weekly* entitled “A Typical Negro” juxtaposes “The Scourge” with other images that show Gordon “in his uniform as a U.S. soldier,” dignified and strong (fig. 6). While the format and title still reduce him to a “type,” the article does recognize Gordon in his role as an active citizen.<sup>30</sup> Eschewing the representation of the black individual as victim in need of rescue, such positive images would not have been effective in a fundraising campaign for salvation through education and assimilation.

In contrast to the sort of appropriation that reduces Gordon’s suffering to a marketing ploy on *cartes de visite*, Weems’s transformation of the image restores his humanity in the powerful voice etched over his wounded body: “Black and tanned / Your whipped wind / Of change howled low / Blowing itself—ha—smack / Into the middle of / Ellington’s orchestra / Billie heard it too & / Cried strange fruit tears.” The flat declarative critique that accompanies the first four photographs (“You became a / Scientific profile,” “A negroid type,” “An anthropological / Debate,” “& a photographic subject”) escalates here into a powerful poetic cry. Weems has protectively covered Gordon’s wounded body with a description of descendants who give expression to his survival and resistance. His whipped body becomes the “whipped wind / Of change” demanded by the powerful “howl,” “blow,” and “smack” of suffering, anger, and resistance evoked in the music of Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. No longer isolated in a medical frame or serving a propagandic function, Gordon is connected to a present that remembers and feels the violence of his lived experience—even as Weems recognizes the impossibility of fully articulating its impact beyond the explosive “ha” that runs throughout *From Here I Saw*.<sup>31</sup>

Weems’s practice of etching text over image in this series obstructs the viewer’s access to the bodies on display, casting a literal and metaphorical shadow over photography’s claim to fully illuminate and comprehend those bodies. In addition to the etched text that intervenes between the viewer and the photographed subject, Weems also adds a layer of color, tinting the images a deep red, perhaps evoking, as one critic suggests, “the life’s blood

still flowing through the memory of their enslaved experience.”<sup>32</sup> Dehumanizing representations are left in place, but disrupted and transformed.

One transformation not to be overlooked here is Weems’s metamorphosis of a documentary archive into an artwork. In 2000 she was invited by the Williams College Museum of Art to do just that, to bring her contemporary artist’s eye to the 1899 archive of photographs by Frances Benjamin Johnston documenting the mission of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute to educate and assimilate Native Americans and formerly enslaved Africans.<sup>33</sup> In *The Hampton Project* Weems liberated some of these archival images from their frames and from the wall, enlarging and hanging them as banners; and she liberated them as well from their function as a celebratory historical record or public relations vehicle. Johnston’s photographs were

commissioned for the “American Negro” exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1900, where they were displayed alongside albums of photographs assembled by W. E. B. Du Bois as evidence of the dignity and accomplishments of African Americans. Shawn Michelle Smith points out that while Johnston’s photographs “forwarded the American identity of Hampton students over their racial identities,” that emphasis shifted in the context of Du Bois’s exhibit to suggest that “the African American could indeed be both an ‘American’ and a ‘Negro.’”<sup>34</sup>

Weems acknowledges the important role played by Southern black educational institutions in shaping African American leadership, and she respects Johnston’s contribution and commitment to the economic survival of the Hampton Institute. However, she sees her own relationship to Johnston’s archive as necessarily informed by an important contemporary critique of “the very nature of representation, about who makes and who looks.”<sup>35</sup> In her intervention in the archive, original photographs of “before and after” transformation are enlarged, reproduced on canvas, and overlaid with textual commentary in bold red letters. Sometimes the narrative voice is that of the students themselves, sometimes that of a critical witness, but always there is a recognition of losses suffered in the process of assimilation: “With your missionary might / You extended the hand of grace / Reaching down & snatching me / Up and out of myself” (plate 2.3); “You checked in one way / And came out another // Educated



6. “A Typical Negro,” *Harper’s Weekly* 7, no. 340 (July 4, 1863): 429.

29 Although she does not pursue the issue explicitly in *From Here I Saw*, Weems takes up the problematic aspects of education-for-assimilation in *The Hampton Project* (2000). See Weems as quoted in Patterson, *Hampton Project*, 29–30.

30 On the black soldier as embodiment of “patriotism and manhood” (301) see Deborah Willis, “The Black Civil War Soldier: Conflict and Citizenship,” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 2 (May 2017): 331–38.

31 For a detailed analysis of Gordon’s image and its accompanying text see Smith, “Fragmented Documents,” 255.

32 Deborah Willis, “Carrie Mae Weems: A Look Back on Three Decades,” *Time*, Sept. 20, 2012, <http://time.com/52802/carrie-mae-weems-a-look-back-on-three-decades/>.

33 On Weems’s aesthetic transformation of the Johnston archive see Sarah Bassnett, “From Public Relations to Art: Exhibiting Frances Benjamin Johnston’s Hampton Institute Photographs,” *History of Photography* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 152–68.

34 Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 158.

35 Ramzy and Fogg, “Interview,” 80.

away from yourself.”<sup>36</sup>

The provocative juxtaposition of an early photograph of a Native American being baptized in a river (plate 2.23) with the more contemporary image of Birmingham demonstrators blasted with water canons (plate 2.24) rewrites the narrative of peaceful assimilation of non-whites into American society. Contemporary viewers cannot miss the irony of the image of a classroom of Native American and African American students in European formal attire clustered around a man in Native American dress, examining him as a specimen of the very culture they are being trained to leave behind (plate 2.13). With her transformation and strategic arrangement of its images, Weems makes Johnston’s album into a space haunted by diaphanous portraits and a poetic critique that brings past and present into powerful dialogue.

### NEGOTIATING THE STEREOTYPE

The photographs in Du Bois’s “American Negro” exhibit, including Johnston’s archive, were meant to counteract degrading stereotypes of Native Americans, African Americans, and their cultures. Such negative representations were used to justify forced assimilation even as they implied that such efforts to “civilize” the “savage” would never be totally successful. The troublesome question remains: if documentary photography can enact an “epistemic violence,”<sup>37</sup> exposing its subjects to a “double act of subjugation” as victims of social injustice and of mechanical reproduction,<sup>38</sup> can the artist appropriating those images and the audience viewing them escape complicity with its effects?<sup>39</sup> Brian Wallis argues, for example, that the widespread circulation of images of abused enslaved people attests to an almost pornographic preoccupation with the beaten black body in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

Asserting the persistence of such attitudes into our contemporary culture, Elizabeth Alexander traces the consumption of “black bodies in pain” for entertainment from “public rapes, beatings and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing.”<sup>41</sup> In her art, Weems seeks strategies for negotiating productively one’s relationship to this legacy of anti-black

actions, images, and narratives.

The challenges of such negotiation have been an important part of Weems’s work throughout her career. Critics have recognized her struggle to find “ways in which [the] farcical returns [of racist representations] might be negotiated.”<sup>42</sup> Weems sees the situation as a question of survival: “I’m always trying to figure out how to have a conversation with myself around the materials and ideas that are deeply troubling for me....How do we negotiate and make it through this complicated maze of life that we are involved in?”<sup>43</sup>

One useful model for understanding the ethical challenges of Weems’s

work is an essay entitled “White Metonymy” by Siona Wilson. In her analysis of Jo Spence and Terry Dennett’s image *Colonization* from the series *Remodelling Photo History* (fig. 7), Wilson raises the question: “what might an ethical negotiation look like?”<sup>44</sup> Productive negotiation, she argues, first requires an acknowledgment of the inevitability of our own complicity in the effects of negative generalizations about race, class, and gender. From the perspective of a “non-complicit recognition”<sup>45</sup> one can trace the genealogy of the stereotype, identifying what needs gave rise to its invention and what anxieties seem to necessitate its repetition. Internalized and unconscious negative representations must be drawn out into the open where their invisible power (as something that goes without saying) can be challenged. This is the work of negotiation.

As theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and others have argued, the stereotype is an ambivalent form, expressing both desire for and fear of the other.<sup>46</sup> Its compulsive repetition is motivated by an anxiety arising from that ambivalence. The myth of white superiority depends on a structure in which a myth of whiteness is set up as the opposite of a fantasy of

blackness riven by contradiction: evil yet childlike, sinful yet dangerously seductive, the terrifying monster and the entertaining clown. Weems negotiates with these fears and fantasies in the interactions of image and text that constitute *From Here I Saw*.

In her treatment of the Agassiz daguerreotypes, Weems exposes how white dominance depends on the reduction of the black body to a scientific



7. Jo Spence (1934–92) and Terry Dennett (1938–2018), *Colonization* from *Remodelling Photo History*, 1982. Gelatin silver print, 13.8 x 10.2 in.

36 Ambient recording of Weems’s voice in the installation of *The Hampton Project* quoted in Patterson, *Hampton Project*, 72.

37 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 280.

38 Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 176.

39 For a thorough critical overview of the risky terrain of the repetition of negative representations of minority subjects in Weems’s project and of the question of the inherent violence of documentary photography see Claire Raymond, *Witnessing Sadism in Texts of the American South: Women, Specularity, and the Poetics of Subjectivity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). On the very problematic use of images of racially motivated violence as a means of education see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

40 Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science,” 49, 54.

41 Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 78–79.

42 Huey Copeland, “Close-Up: Specters of History; Carrie Mae Weems’s *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, 2012,” *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (Sept. 2014): 344; emphasis added.

43 Edward Rubin, “The Many Shades of Black: Three Decades of Carrie Mae Weems at the Frist Center for the Arts in Nashville, Tennessee,” *dArt International* 31 (Fall 2013): 3; emphasis added.

44 Siona Wilson, “White Metonymy: A Discussion around Jo Spence and Terry Dennett’s *Colonization*,” *Third Text* 10, no. 37 (Winter 1996/97): 5.

45 Wilson, 16.

46 Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66–84.

specimen. In deconstructing the myths of white superiority she also lays bare the ways in which whiteness defends itself by exploiting the black body as a source of entertainment and jokes. Early in her career Weems exposed this strategy in her series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987–88, plates 10.1–6) in which racist jokes are paired with photographic portraits in which the dignity of the sitters defeats the degrading intentions of “humorous” anti-black stereotypes. For example, a portrait of a mature, serious-looking, and well-dressed African American man sitting on his porch (plate 10.1) bears the caption, “What are the three things you can't give a black person?” The viewer must slide aside a panel to reveal the punchline: “A black eye, a fat lip and a job!” As viewers are lured into this direct participation in the riddle's “message” they are made literally complicit with its racist humor.

Weems's study of an archive of American humor during her graduate work in folklore at Berkeley reinforced her consciousness of the “insidious nature of the devastatingly real effects of humor on a race of people.”<sup>47</sup> *From Here I Saw* builds on the bold early work of *Ain't Jokin'*, analyzing further the aggressive racist humor generated by white anxiety. One photograph shows what appears to be a group of entertainers including three African women seated next to a clown in whiteface (plate 3.26). The overlaid text laments the loss of dignity suffered by Africans who “became / The joker's joke.”

Another example of this series' use of racist humor refers to the perceived threat of racial mixing. Over a photograph by Garry Winogrand of an interracial couple with their chimpanzee “children” Weems etches a text that highlights the forced tone of these attempts to cover up eugenic anxiety with racist humor (plate 3.28): “Some laughed / Long & hard & loud.” The aggressive laughter accompanying these racist jokes is drowned out in Weems's work by the intermittent explosive “ha” that appears throughout the series. That “ha” of contempt, derision, and even triumph gives these silenced black subjects the last laugh. For Weems this is another strategy for survival: “we don't laugh to keep from crying, we laugh to keep from slapping the inventor of these crazy-ass images upside his head.”<sup>48</sup>

Addressing further white anxiety about racial purity and superiority, Weems appropriates several formal portraits typical of those produced for family albums that came into fashion in the mid-nineteenth century. Laura Wexler describes the mid-nineteenth-century white family photo album's production of “saccharine fictions of the ‘good darkey’ who happily served the family's interests from his or her ‘place’ just outside the focus or the frame.”<sup>49</sup> *From Here I Saw* includes one domestic group posed in clear descending order of importance: the white patriarch, his two daughters, and, last in line, the household servant, whose contrasting blackness is further emphasized against her stark white shawl (plate 3.25). Weems derails the myth of white masters and their contented slaves with an inscription

that activates the power of the marginalized maid: “Your resistance / Was found in / The food you placed / On the master's table—ha.”

Overlaid with this subversive defiance, the power dynamic within the photographs shifts dramatically. The purity and dominance of the white race certified by the family photographic album<sup>50</sup> is undermined when Weems pairs the white family portrait with a family group exhibiting a wide range of skin tones (plate 3.24): “Out of deep rivers / Mixed-matched mulattos / A variety of types mind you—ha / Sprang up everywhere.” Weems's allusion here to racial mixing adds an ironic note of revenge—blackness has not been contained and the white dream of racial purity and segregation is challenged “everywhere”—“ha.” The power of the subaltern is embodied with particular force in the portrait of the “Mammie” figure who transcends that persistent caricature with the recurring “ha” (plate 3.6): “You became / Mammie, / Mama, / Mother & / Then, yes, / Confidant—ha.”<sup>51</sup> This imposing figure looks down at the camera and at any viewer from the superior position of the servant who knows everything about the master while remaining unknown to him or her.<sup>52</sup>

The “Mammie” figure is just one of several caricatures of black women exposed in *From Here I Saw*. For example, Weems draws attention to the contradictions of a racist system that denounces the imagined innate sinful sexuality of the black woman, yet entrusts her with its children. Weems places an erotic image of a naked black woman lying on a bed next to a portrait of a black nursemaid holding a white infant (plates 3.20–21). The text running across these two photographs declares, “You became / Playmate / To the / Patriarch” “And their daughter.” Myths of black female hypersexuality are juxtaposed with the history of the reproductive labor of enslaved women, making explicit and legible the contradictions at the heart of the stereotypes that are continually repeated and reinforced.

Weems recognizes that the most challenging obstacle to negotiating with racist myths may be their unconscious internalization. Although she describes some of her work as a “feverishly toned polemic,”<sup>53</sup> the artist also insists that it cannot be reduced to the drama of helpless victims and guilty perpetrators. Weems positions herself against what she sees as a tendency to blame injustices on “them over there” rather than accepting one's own complicity for having “allowed a certain amount of victimization to take place.”<sup>54</sup> In *From Here I Saw* this issue comes up explicitly in relation to the figure of Josephine Baker. Baker's performances in Paris in *La Revue Nègre* in the 1920s, half-naked in a banana skirt, were seen by some as reinforcing fantasies of racial primitivism, and she was denounced for letting herself be marketed as an exotic “other” for the entertainment of white audiences.<sup>55</sup> Weems's text etched over a photograph of Baker seems to echo that critique (plate 3.22): “You became an accomplice.” Interestingly, Weems has not used

47 Qtd. in Susan Canning, “Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, ed. Glenn Harper (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 62.

48 Qtd. in Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 190.

49 Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9.

50 On the role of the nineteenth-century white family album as an evidentiary tool in establishing racial purity of the line, see Shawn Michelle Smith's “Baby's Picture Is Always Treasured: Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photographic Album,” in *American Archives*, 113–14.

51 Weems also used this expressive “ha” in the texts of *The Kitchen Table* and *Slave Coast* series.

52 The original 1932 photograph by Prentice H. Polk, a black photographer, bears the appropriate and ironic title, “The Boss.”

53 Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Foreword,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez, exh. cat. (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), vii.

54 Weems qtd. in Canning, “Carrie Mae Weems,” 59.

55 A recent resurgence of interest in Baker's performances has produced new critical assessments that attempt to see beyond any easy denunciation of their reinforcement of primitivist stereotypes to recognize their possible subversive effects. See Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) and Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (Oct. 2003): 433–50.

any of the widely circulated images of Baker in her pseudotribal costume, grinning for her audience, but has chosen, instead, a candid photograph in which Baker is elegantly attired, demurely seated, and lost in a moment of private reflection. The accusation of complicity is tempered by Weems's choice of an image that hints at Baker's lonely isolation behind her public roles and the stereotypes that shaped them.

## PERFORMING HISTORY

Moving beyond *From Here I Saw*, Weems externalizes and animates internalized racist caricatures, making them available for purposeful manipulation that will neutralize their power.<sup>56</sup> By strategically "playing" those prescribed roles, and playing *with* them, Weems exposes the artificial and theatrical constructions that constrain black subjects: "[This black body is] laid with a certain kind of history that's almost insurmountable. I'm always attempting to push against it, to insist that there be another kind of read."<sup>57</sup> In her performance-oriented works, the corporeal image, activated by its accompanying text, becomes a powerfully animated presence.

Weems often acts out with her own body multiple roles in the historical narrative of race, gender, and class relations. In *The Louisiana Project* (2003), for example, she photographs herself in period garb in various locations including a historic grand plantation house (fig. 8), modest slave quarters, and a contemporary working-class apartment house. In the same project, she also performs in *Missing Links* (plates 4.1–6), a set of stunning portraits of figures in fancy dress tuxedos and white gloves incongruously wearing animal heads (zebra, donkey, ape, elephant, sheep, chicken). James Gill describes the 1873 origin of a Mardi Gras performance entitled "The Missing Links to Darwin's *Origin of Species*," a masquerade through which, giving particular attention to the figure of the gorilla, the white elite reassured itself of its superiority through this evolutionary satire.<sup>58</sup> With the stunning images in *Missing Links*, each illuminated figure posed against a stark black background and striking an

elegant pose, Weems counters the degrading animalistic caricature of Louisiana's black citizens enacted in this white ritual, hijacking the performance in an arch parody of defunct elitism and power. In another portrait, *If I Ruled the World* (plate 6.8), Weems appears as a clown/trickster figure delicately dangling a world globe from her fingers, her mouth wide open as if expressing that familiar triumphant "ha." By performing with her own

body the roles of both the enslaved and the master, Weems levels the class and race hierarchies on which the unequal distribution of power depends.

Exposing in her performances the artificiality and constructedness of racial, gender, and class stereotypes, Weems also makes them available as strategies of resistance. She finds one inspirational model for this work in a Nina Simone song, "Four Women," in which the singer evokes four "types" of black womanhood, giving each one her own strong voice as she names herself, humbly, sadly, defiantly, bitterly. In her turn, Weems animates four female "types" of her own era: *Peaches*, *Liz*, *Tanikka*, and *Elaine* (1988, plates 8.1–4). Dramatizing the individual's power to manipulate, construct, and continuously redefine her identity, she shows how "the self-conscious styling of 'blackness' [has a] long history...as a strategy of self-determination."<sup>59</sup> The grip of anti-black and anti-female caricatures that tighten, as Weems



8. Carrie Mae Weems, *A Single Waltz in Time* from *The Louisiana Project*, 2003. Pigment ink print, 20 x 20 in.

puts it, "like a noose about the neck"<sup>60</sup> of every black woman is loosened here by her playful enactment, a theatrical embodiment that paradoxically disempowers and disembodies racial and gender stereotypes.<sup>61</sup>

In the last ten years Weems has turned increasingly to performance-oriented video and installation work in which she uses not only her own body but the bodies of her students, friends, and viewers as active agents in an encounter with history. Performance, as she understands it, entails "using one's body as a site of protest...as a focus for critique."<sup>62</sup> What Weems has in mind here is something more than being present as a witness or even posing in various guises for the camera. In *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demon-*

56 See Jeff Kelley, "The Isms Brothers, Carrie Mae Weems at SFAI," *Artweek* 23, no. 15 (May 7, 1992): 4 on Weems activating the stereotype within.

57 Qtd. in Hilarie M. Sheets, "Photographer and Subject Are One," *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/arts/design/carrie-mae-weems-photographer-and-subject.html>.

58 James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 101–4. Gill also cites an article in the *Daily Picayune* making the racist observation that the gorilla in the parade float was "amazingly like the broader-mouthed variety of our own citizens, so Ethiopian in his exuberant glee, so at home in his pink shirt collar, so enraptured with himself and so fond of his banjo that the Darwinian chain wanted no more links" (104).

59 Robert Storr, "Carrie Mae Weems: Anyway I Want It," in Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems*, 31.

60 Weems qtd. in Willis and Williams, *Black Female Body*, 190.

61 Deborah Willis, "Photographing between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," in Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems*, 35.

62 Audio from Carrie Mae Weems in reference to *Hopes and Dreams*: "Interview with Carrie Mae Weems" (Aug. 2013), *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, accessed Feb. 9, 2018, [http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page\\_id=664](http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page_id=664).

stration (2004–07), for example, she takes her art into the streets (plates 6.1–8). Reanimating the clown/trickster figure from *The Louisiana Project*, she appears dressed in white striped pants, tuxedo jacket, white gloves, and top hat, riding the subway or set up on street corners in Harlem. In response to the Republican National Convention underway in New York, she wanted to draw attention to the manipulations and false promises of political discourse. In her trickster guise, Weems advertises to passersby with bullhorn and signage: “Hopes & Dreams in a bottle *only* \$19.99”—empty promises reenacted with satirical bitterness and élan.

Weems appears again as this trickster/clown figure in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts* (2012, plate 7) where it is one of several “characters” she conjures up with a nineteenth-century technique of illusionistic projection called the “Pepper’s Ghost” effect. This unique installation has a mysterious allure; in a darkened room visitors stand behind a red velvet rope in front of what appears to be a luxurious red velvet-curtained stage, watching ghostly figures appear and disappear. No longer hawking “hopes & dreams in a bottle” to those in need, here the trickster/clown speaks for them, expressing anger and foreseeing a dramatic change in structures of power: “Revenge is a muthafucka,” she hisses.<sup>63</sup>

In a different register, Weems has taken her art and activism into the streets not as some contrived “character” but as herself—one member of a community working for social justice. Several community projects in her hometown of Syracuse, New York demonstrate the artist’s commitment to engagement and change. In collaboration with three other women—Tanya Rice, Jo Shonalda Jackson, and Petra Szilagyi—Weems formed the collective Social Studies 101. That group initiated *Operation: Activate* (2011), a project that saturated her neighborhood with billboards against gun violence. One sign declares “Our failure to respond is the problem!”; another warns, “As militants you were feared, as thugs you are only despised! Stop the violence!” Weems also created the Institute of Sound and Style, a summer program to give high school students from underserved communities experience and education in the arts, a project that looks to the creative and productive life of future generations.

This commitment to activism and education is at the heart of one of Weems’s most powerful animations of the historical archive: *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (2008, plates 1.1–10). Working with art students and community members as actors, the artist staged a series of moments of historical crisis often fixed in our collective memory by widely circulated media images. Among the moments staged and mourned in this project are the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Benazir Bhutto, and the tragedies of Hiroshima and Kent State. Her student collaborators are engaged in what one critic describes as “embodied research [that] brings historical archives back into focus in the present.”<sup>64</sup> Weems herself explains how “through the act of performance, with our own bodies...we live the experience; we stand in the shoes of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”<sup>65</sup>

Rather than creating an illusion of reality in the resulting stills and video

sequences, Weems foregrounds the theatricality of these staged representations; lighting equipment and raised pedestals are left exposed, reminding viewers of the mechanisms by which these images and the historical moments they record are constructed. One image depicts a classroom, staging the institutional mechanism used to convey that constructed history as fact, but which might be repurposed for a more critical engagement with the past. If histories and identities are constructed, Weems seems to suggest, they can be reconstructed, redirected for a different present and future. In “Woman in Winter,” one section of the project’s video, Weems’s voiceover insists on the necessity of looking back in order to move forward: “to get to now, to this moment, she needs to look back over the landscape of memory.”

Weems is fiercely committed to the truth, no matter how bleak. In *Constructing History* the recitation of those lost to assassination seems relentless. In the final section of the video, “The Fall: The Assassinations,” the visual image flickers on and off, broken, and Weems’s voice stalls on the repeated phrase “the assassinations...the assassinations...the assassinations.” Although the narrative also directs the viewer to look to the horizon for “little sightings of hope or dreams,” there is no guarantee, no neat resolution. “The thing hoped for,” she warns in “Woman in Winter,” is always “just out of reach.” In their embodiment of iconic moments of historical tragedy the participants in *Constructing History* collaborate with the artist to reanimate and enter a history that preceded many of them. The resulting photographs and videos enact a haunting beauty that does not deny but helps us endure the reactivation of those painful events.

## SORROW SONGS

When image and language break down in the face of a history of violence and oppression that lives on in the present, it is often the power and beauty of music that can lift us out of the paralysis of defeatism. Weems describes moments of despair when “music has saved my life, more than once.” She finds inspiration in the voice of Abbey Lincoln, “a woman of yearning and of longing”<sup>66</sup> like herself and in the foresight of Sam Cooke who “had been seriously on the money when he said ‘a change is gonna come.’”<sup>67</sup> Following their lead, Weems is renewed in her commitment to face up to the injustices of the past and the inadequacies of the present while remaining determinedly hopeful for the future.

More than a century earlier, W. E. B. Du Bois heard in the “sorrow songs” sung by enslaved people many tales of “death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world.” In *The Hampton Project* Weems appropriates David Wojnarowicz’s photograph *Untitled (Buffalo)*, superimposing her own figure as viewer, and the text: “From a great height I saw you falling / Black and Indian alike / And for you I played / A sorrow song” (plate 2.25). Du Bois prefaced every chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* with a different spiritual, finding in each one not only an expression of “the message of the slave to the world,” but more broadly, “the most beautiful expression of human experience.”<sup>68</sup> Weems, too, has insisted that the multiple forms of African American experience make connections across all differences, yielding com-

63 For a very insightful reading of *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* see Copeland, “Specters of History,” 342–45.

64 Tirza True Lattimer, “Carrie Mae Weems @ Cantor Arts Center,” review of *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Squarecylinder, Nov. 13, 2013, <http://www.squarecylinder.com/2013/11/carrie-mae-weems-cantor-arts-center/>.

65 Qtd. in Laurie Ann Farrell, “An Opus: Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, exh. cat. (Savannah: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2009), n.p.

66 Weems qtd. in Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

67 Qtd. in Andrea Kirsh, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color,” in *Carrie Mae Weems*, Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993), 16.

68 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 197–98.

mon ground and universal lessons. Often integrating music into her work with image and text, she demonstrates its power as a strategic implement in communicating those shared losses, longings, and hopes.

Weems was already using musical references in *From Here I Saw* to express a complex range of feelings, from despair to the rising up of hopes and dreams on a not-so-distant horizon. Music cannot soothe Gordon's wounded body, but Weems's inscription on his body breaks the silence of the "specimen" with the musical eloquence of Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday voicing his pain. Another image in the series shows a young girl formally posed in white and holding a bouquet of white flowers, a studio portrait typical of the positive images of African Americans put into circulation in the late nineteenth century (plate 3.23). Over this portrait the artist has etched the sheet music of the song "God Bless the Child": "Yes, the strong gets more / While the weak ones fade / Empty pockets don't ever make the grade / Mama may have, Papa may have / But God bless the child that's got his own." The hopeful innocence and potential of this young girl's life are cast in shadow by lyrics reminding us of the struggles that await her in the harsh cultural context outside the controlled setting of the photographic studio.

Music gives voice to pain and struggle, but Weems also finds in it a source of strength and hope, a strategic resource for resistance. The penultimate image in *From Here I Saw* shows a dense crowd of people of color gathered together but looking off in different directions (plate 3.32). The accompanying text quotes a popular spiritual: "In your sing song / Prayer you asked / Didn't my Lord / Deliver Daniel?" Although Weems does not include the final lines of the song in her inscription, they hover just beyond the work: "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel / But then why not you and me?... / Can't you see it coming? / Can't you see it coming?" Weems's use of this spiritual contrasts with an earlier image in *From Here I Saw* in which several older men, heads bowed, wait patiently for their reward in heaven: "For your names you took / Hope & Humble" (plate 3.16). Weems recognizes that, beyond this passive stance, the spiritual "sorrow songs" in which Du Bois found one of the enslaved Africans' great gifts to the nation could also turn one toward action. The next lines of the spiritual Weems references here express a demand for justice ("Why not you and me?") and anticipate its advent on earth. The figures captured in the penultimate image of *From Here I Saw* constitute a community of individuals no longer looking meekly down but looking up and beyond the injustices of the past and present.

One might hope that in sharing their music with an audience, performers like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone might feel lifted out of their isolation, embraced by a community of listeners who share their pain, longing, and joy. Weems laments that many black female singers have faded from our historical consciousness, and she wants to remind her audience of the

tremendous "gift and...legacy" of their artistry.<sup>69</sup> To that end Weems created a piece called *Slow Fade to Black* (2014) in which she drew from an archive of publicity photographs representing artists including Billie Holiday, Eartha Kitt, Mahalia Jackson, and Betty Carter, not statically posed, but animated in the act of performance.<sup>70</sup> Weems has blurred these images so the singers are out of focus and out of reach—we can barely see them through the fog of history and the overlay of contrived identities. Weems brings these figures back to us, but they return to us *as lost*.<sup>71</sup> The sadness of this loss is mitigated in *Slow Fade to Black* by Weems's wordplay. She explains that as a cinematic cue "slow fade to black" signals a definitive ending, but it is also an indicator of movement, "to black," promising a new generation of black artists emerging from and nourished by the earlier tradition.<sup>72</sup> Weems has mastered the art of making beauty out of loss, finding hope in disaster, and music is one of the tools that helps her accomplish this.

Weems often incorporates music into her videos and installations, but she also looks to it as a model and metaphor for her strategies as an artist. She explains that she set out to study how composers and performers use voice and meter to bring ideas and feelings to life for an audience. In her own work she aspires to make her visual art "sing" for her audience: "When you hit it, there's something that really sings, and I think the thing that sings is that I create a space for not only myself but for the viewer to inhabit. It is this shared space of habitation where the magic happens."<sup>73</sup> Weems's "magic" is never an idealized evasion of hard truths, but an expression of suffering and longing that ultimately gives courage, strength, and vision.

## SEDUCING WITH BEAUTY

For Weems the aesthetic pleasure of music or visual art or poetry is not merely an embellishment of the truth but a strategy for drawing her audience into the complex thoughts and feelings with which her art engages: "I'm very interested in how I map something, how I enter it....And then, I'm always aware that I need to take somebody with me, that I don't want to experience any of this by myself....So if there is a beauty and elegance that allows my self and the viewer to be engaged, then I have a sense that you'll be more willing to enter the terrain and ask the difficult questions....I think a certain level of grace allows for the entry."<sup>74</sup> Thelma Golden has recognized this strategy in Weems's work: "She seduces the viewer through the very process of creating luscious prints, or beautiful images, without ever using beauty purely to seduce. Beauty is always tempered by other concerns that take the viewer beyond aesthetics. But no matter what...the religion of beauty always undergirds Weems's vision and informs her work."<sup>75</sup>

Directing us beyond aesthetics, while never abandoning beauty, Weems brings along on this journey not only her audience but many artists past and present whose work gives her courage and joy. As viewers wander

69 Weems qtd. in Maurice Berger, "Black Performers, Fading from Frame, and Memory," *New York Times*, Jan. 22, 2014, [http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/black-performers-fading-from-frame-and-memory/?\\_r=0](http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/black-performers-fading-from-frame-and-memory/?_r=0).

70 In Berger's analysis of *Slow Fade to Black* he recognizes the effect of the images Weems has chosen as presenting these women not as "static icons of racial martyrdom or stereotypes of black divas" but appearing almost animated in the midst of the "flourishes of performance." Berger, "Black Performers."

71 In a related piece, Weems creates an album cover bearing the title *Dee Dee Live at the Copa* (featuring herself in the role of the singer), and a gold record with the label "Ode to Affirmative Action." The lyric featured on the album cover, "If you should lose me," stops short of the rest of that line that some listeners may recall: "...you'll lose a good thing." It is not only black female performers of the past who are at risk of disappearing from our memories, but contemporary black creators in all fields who often suffer invisibility in the present. With this "affirmative action" Weems shares the stage with them all.

72 Weems qtd. in Felicia R. Lee, "Two Artists Salute a Legacy," *New York Times*, June 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/arts/design/slow-fade-to-black-at-celebrate-brooklyn-in-prospect-park.html>.

73 Braswell, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems."

74 Weems qtd. in Susan Sollins, "Carrie Mae Weems," in *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marybeth Sollins, vol. 5 (New York: Art21, 2009), 47.

75 Golden, "Some Thoughts," 33.

through the labyrinth of photographs printed on thin fabric in the installation *Ritual and Revolution* they hear her voice naming a community of artists from Vladimir Tatlin to Lorna Simpson, artists who have also faced the music and pointed a way to the future. Caught in the spotlight of her recent exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2014, the first solo retrospective on the work of a black female artist at the institution, Weems responded with characteristic generosity by inviting others onto her stage. She organized a three-day celebration of events at the museum, “Carrie Mae Weems LIVE: Past Tense/Future Perfect,” featuring sixty African American artists, musicians, poets, and dancers whose collective creative energies were gathered in an elite cultural space in which they have so long been underrepresented.

In 2017 she organized an ambitious ten-hour convening of artists, performers, poets, scholars, and activists to share strategies for confronting “The Shape of Things” in the ongoing history of violence we inhabit. Hosted within the imposing architecture of the Park Avenue Armory, among the most extravagant accouterments of military power and prestige, the arts emerged as a precious resource and strategy for desperately needed change. It is the gift Weems brings with her wherever she goes.

In much of her work Weems’s aim has been to “storm the barricaded doors,” to open a pathway to the archive of history, to guide her viewers, who are sometimes her collaborators, into the “mess of a messy world”<sup>76</sup> from where a different future might be glimpsed and constructed. Her ongoing evolution as an artist is fueled by her belief in the potential of creative communities, of interdisciplinary work that would include the broadest range of participants. Her politically inflected art is never reduced to a polemical harangue delivered by the artist to a passive audience; her commitment is to collaboration and dialogue, her yearning is for connection. Moving forward from the mournful witnessing of *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Weems has offered her audiences the experience of animated and embodied immersion in a shared history of struggle, in the ongoing effects of injustice, while drawing their attention always toward those “little sightings of hope or dreams” on the horizon. As her audience, we are grateful for the invitation and mindful of the challenges of the journey.

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<sup>76</sup> Weems qtd. in Patterson, *Hampton Project*, 22.

# “AND FOR YOU I PLAYED A SORROW SONG”: LOOKING AT FRANCES JOHNSTON’S PHOTOGRAPHS WITH CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Faith Smith

Rather than conceiving of photography as a mere repository of the past, both individual and collective, we might follow Walter Benjamin’s lead and think of photography as dialectical. In this view, the indexical, reflective function of the photograph is imbued with a living engagement with the past.... What we might call a practice of critical black memory is one of many tools New World blacks and African Americans in particular have employed as a response to the dislocation, subjection, and dehumanization that has marked their experience of modernity.

—Leigh Raiford<sup>1</sup>

Encountering Carrie Mae Weems’s *The Hampton Project* (2000) in 2018 is an uncanny experience. The artist’s textual and acoustic engagement with the late nineteenth-century photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston and others feels newly relevant in our contemporary moment of Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock, and it reminds us, as Leigh Raiford does in the epigraph above, that each generation has its own “living engagement with the past.”<sup>2</sup> Commissioned by the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute and shown as part of the “History of the American Negro” section of the US exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Johnston’s photographs elicit recognition of a particular kind. The starched rigidity of her sitters’ poses is meant to convey the efficiency and morality of the conjoined national projects of, on the one hand, the internal colonization of Native Americans, and on the other, an African American “emancipation” that was “less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection.”<sup>3</sup> Weems responds to the implications of this complex double archive: “From a great height I saw you falling / Black and Indian

alike / And for you I played / A sorrow song.”<sup>4</sup>

Weems’s resignification of these images in terms of “falling” and “sorrow” questions the integrity of these late nineteenth-century projects and their aftermath. Indeed, as is well known, Hampton University found it troubling that she saw “conformity” where she should have seen “liberation.”<sup>5</sup> We might say, following Wayne Modest, that Johnston’s photographs elicited the *wrong feelings* from Weems—an inappropriate response that she has passed on to viewers of her work.<sup>6</sup> What does it mean to look at Johnston’s images (and Weems’s interaction with them) today, when we know only too well that neither the visual, juridical, nor other forms of representation and evidence on which we have grounded our freedom struggles can guarantee justice, let alone freedom? Perhaps the arrested poses and gestures of Johnston’s sitters offer strategies and resources on how to live with conquest in the present.

By the time Frances Johnston was commissioned to take photographs of Hampton’s campus, its institutional history was deeply immersed in the seizure of land and the upheaval of communities across the US and the globe. Hampton’s founder, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, was born on Maui, part of the *Mokupuni o Hawai’i* archipelago, where his New England missionary family was engaged in the fruit cultivation and Christian conversion that would help to secure formal US annexation generations later at the end of the nineteenth century. When Armstrong moved from Honolulu’s Punahou School (attended by Barack Obama in the 1970s) to Williams College in Western Massachusetts, he was moving between institutions with deep ties to the Congregational Church and the American Missionary Association: abolitionist organizations involved in educational work among African Americans in the post-abolition South. It is these educators, we are taught, who embody the spirit of the post-Civil War era as one of benef-

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Many thanks to my brilliant spring 2018 Brandeis students in Black Looks: The Promise and Perils of Photography.

<sup>1</sup> Leigh Raiford, “Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 119.

<sup>2</sup> Raiford, 119.

<sup>3</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>4</sup> As part of *The Hampton Project* Weems added this inscription on a photograph of herself standing in front of a David Wojnarowicz photograph, *Untitled (Buffalo)* (plate 2.25).

<sup>5</sup> Jeanne Zeidler, “A View from Hampton University Museum,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project*, ed. Vivian Patterson, exh. cat. (New York: Aperture; Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 2000), 77.

<sup>6</sup> See Wayne Modest, “The Affective Photograph: Museums and the Emotional Afterlife of Colonial Photography,” in *Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Sigrid Lien (London: Routledge, 2016), 21–42.



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icent reform, of the transformation of the otherwise “uncivilizable” into fully human persons capable of telling right from wrong. They are the New England schoolteachers who are celebrated in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, and they are also the army colonels (such as Armstrong himself) who supervised African American soldiers and Native Americans in captivity.

That *this* is the story of the later nineteenth century, and not, say, *theft of land, resources, and spirit on a grand scale*, is due to the tremendous ideological work of sentiment and domesticity. Here photography does not only *reflect*, in keeping with the indexical claim to record objectively only what is captured by the photographer’s lens. Rather, photography is a consolidating engine of sentiment, of the process by which conquest is transmuted into beneficence and the conquered are taught to express gratitude for being rescued. Laura Wexler’s conceptualization of “tender violence”—a term that she takes from Armstrong’s own description of his work at Hampton—is very helpful here.<sup>7</sup> Johnston’s photographs of the Hampton campus and of US marines in the Pacific in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, as well as the “Missing Links” photographs of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair by Emme and Mayme Gerhard (fig. 1) who had a studio in St. Louis, become, for Wexler, a powerful demonstration of the work of sentiment: “Acting as the visual equivalent of ventriloquists, turn-of-the-century white women photographers in the United States found they could have satisfying careers if they used their photographs to mirror and enlarge the white man’s image of himself as custodian of civilization just as the white mistresses of their mothers’ generation had used softened tones to amplify his voice.”<sup>8</sup>

Looking at photographs of newly arrived Native American students at Hampton, or of Filipinos forced to turn themselves inside out in booths at the World’s Fair, the presumed purveyor of such images comes to know her normality as a white middle-class US subject whose time is ahead of, rather than shared with, the subjects of such photographs. The sheer proliferation of such images, in tandem with other genres such as the novel and books of conduct, reinforces the non-coeval status of those deemed to be “outside the magic circle of nineteenth-century domesticity.”<sup>9</sup> The very presence of these images transforms the abode into a respectable home.

But it is not white consolidation in the context of black abjection that Weems’s sorrow song mourns, even if this critique is also implied. Non-whites, too, look at photographs to reassure themselves that they fall within this “magic circle,” and that by looking they can become subject rather than object. Photographs by Johnston, the Gerhards, and others confirm their difference from a purportedly savage “other” by depicting either this “other,” or the respectably clothed and posed nonwhite (or not-yet-fully-white) sub-

ject on the road to full humanity.

Stuart Hall, for example, describes his grandmother’s front room:

Every corner of my grandmother’s front room was loaded with photographs of family, friends and relations. I remember a centre table covered with lace crochet that she had made, but you couldn’t put a glass down on the table because it was crammed with these photographs, frame after frame, of formal self-representations of older relatives, of young people getting married and first born babies. There was something very “Victorian” about all this, which is mainly about packing out a space with objects. That in turn had probably been influenced by Britain’s role as the marketplace of the world, connected by trade to the far flung corners of its colonial world, the centre of this cornucopia of commodities and goods which somehow also circulated from one colony to another and with the Victorian period as the high watermark of the practice of collecting things and cramming them together in a display space—the aesthetics of *bric à brac*.<sup>10</sup>

For Hall, his grandmother’s living room in colonial Jamaica in the 1940s becomes a way to understand Jamaican respectability as deeply entangled with Englishness, and thus to resist notions of a pure, unmarked Caribbean “authenticity”: “To what could it be ‘authentic’ when so much of Caribbean culture is precisely this amalgam of traditions, modifications, borrowing, adaptations, resistances, transcriptions, translations and appropriations, locked in an unequal relationship? The front room represents precisely a creative cultural act or form of that doubly-inscribed, hybrid or creolized kind.”<sup>11</sup>

I understand Weems’s work as an attempt to linger with the consequences of such historical entanglements. Her sorrow songs are an indictment of the suggestion that the enslaved and captive subjects and their descendants who are in such photographs, or who are looking at them, do not already have innate humanity, that this must somehow be inculcated and developed by the strenuous effort of institutions such

as Hampton. While Johnston’s photographs may well have had an afterlife in a loving relative’s album or sitting room, they were commissioned by Hampton’s principal, Hollis Burke Frissell, to do the work of similar photographs commissioned by Tuskegee’s principal, Booker T. Washington, and by W. E. B. Du Bois: to demonstrate Native American and African American emergence from moral and cultural debasement under the tutelage of their Talented Tenth instructors and of kindly Northern white patrons. Images in *The Hampton Project* such as the juxtaposed before-and-after photographs of Native American students (plates 2.4–5), the photograph of Hampton’s



1. Emme Gerhard (1872–1946) and Mayme Gerhard (1876–1955), *The Missing Link* #1, c. 1904. Color film copy transparency, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, LC-USZC4-11488.

7 Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 52, 108.

8 Wexler, 92.

9 Wexler, 66–67.

10 Stuart Hall, “The West Indian Front Room,” in *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home*, ed. Michael McMillan (London: Black Dog, 2009), 18–19.

11 Hall, 19.

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president with his family (plate 2.3), and a photograph of Native Americans (plate 2.23) being baptized at a river,<sup>12</sup> are all placed in dialogue with—sometimes inscribed by—text, as well as by audio commentaries that probe the underlying premise of these projects, and that register the assault on personhood: “With your missionary might / You extended the hand of grace / Reaching down & snatching me / Up and out of myself.”

In critiquing such ideological assumptions, Weems’s artistic practice is in conversation with the fictional protagonists of Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*, and Ralph Ellison’s 1952 *Invisible Man*; they find the historically black institutions in which they are studying or teaching to be pretentious, hypocritical, and deeply ashamed of African Americans who have not had a formal education, and whose homes on the edge of the premises are considered the embarrassing foil against which the students’ progress is being measured. Ellison’s unnamed protagonist wonders if the statue of the school’s founder depicts a veil being lifted from a student’s eyes, or more securely placed over them. This casts the ideological and cultural work of such institutions as harmful, when we are taught to see it not only as benevolent, but as discontinuous from the violence of conquest. Such violence *that is not always understood to be violent* is fixed in photographs such as that of the Oba of Benin (Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, who ruled Benin from 1888 to 1897), captured in the British “Punitive Expedition” of 1897, and of members of that expedition posed with the bronzes and other artifacts now housed in museums across the global North (fig. 2). The very space of the museum is meant to inculcate gratitude for the opportunity to view these objects in an environment of aesthetic pleasure. Weems’s exhibition refers to museum vaults “crammed...with your baskets and beads and bones,” underscoring this institutional violence. Among the images in her *Hampton Project* is a photograph of a Ku Klux Klan parade float (plate 2.18), and another of water cannons turned on civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s (plate 2.24) that is juxtaposed with the photograph of the baptism of Native Americans make explicit the connection between those events and processes that we are willing to name as violent, and others, such as museum acquisitions and religious and cultural “conversions,” that we are not. In addition, Weems insists that the violence continues after Johnston’s era: we are urged to connect more recent and familiar images to Johnston’s historical moment of the turn of the twentieth century.

I read Weems, as well as Larsen and Ellison before her, as showing us how violence operates in its *intimate* contours. Think of the “magic circle of domesticity” implied by one photograph in the exhibition, *Hampton Graduate at Home* (plate 2.7), and the way in which a companion photograph, *Old Folks at Home* (plate 2.6) is meant to be read as existing outside of this

circle. But I am also thinking about the narrative of affinity and familiarity that seems to be at work in Hampton University Museum’s objection to Weems’s decision to sing her sorrow song for “Black and Indian alike.” Speaking for the institution, director Jeanne Zeidler describes the genesis of the project, originally conceived of as a two-part exhibition: “The first part would present a selection of Johnston’s work; the second would be the work of a contemporary African American or American Indian female photographer....The Williams College Museum of Art chose Carrie Mae Weems as that photographer. Our suggestion that an American Indian photographer be included as well, because of Hampton’s history and the fact that the current student body includes people of both heritages was rejected.”<sup>13</sup> I read this to mean that Hampton coded Weems as not only representative of one “side,” but as incapable of doing justice to a project that required representation by and of two sides. The implication seems to be that an African American was not qualified to speak for Native Americans, especially if that speaking for was a critique of the institution.<sup>14</sup> Zeidler argues further that the photographs in Weems’s exhibit do not use the names of students and staff, and thus commit the violence of generalization and anonymity. Zeidler restores some individuals and their histories: “Frank Dean Banks, Hampton class of 1876, at home with his family,” his son Leonard, bookkeeper and then Hampton Institute dentist, and “Louis Firetail (Sioux, Crow Creek) photographed that same year wearing tribal clothing, standing in front of Jane Worcester’s class in American history.”<sup>15</sup> Here, Zeidler attaches names and contexts to the photographs that Weems has used (Weems does use names in the textual and audio components of the exhibition, but not to identify persons within a photograph) and this is surely a powerful objection, on the face of it; without such frames of reference, Zeidler asks, are these members of our institutional family not reduced to anthropological objects?

But is the intimacy implied by the knowledge of names of students and administrators, and the identification of students’ tribal nations, necessarily incompatible with complicity? I think that Weems’s work exposes the myth that intimacy and familiarity are inherently good for us. (After all, the Southern plantocracy always accused the North of being cold, and cast plantation life as familial.) When Weems’s exhibition shows traditional Indian masks alongside children playing with cardboard masks, or when we hear Weems’s audio for *The Hampton Project* intone the words, “Before the Washington Redskins, the Atlanta Braves, and the Cleveland Indians,” we are asked to reflect on the violence of the sporting events and other rituals that constitute the quotidian rhythms and deep attachments of our lives. I have often wondered if part of Hampton’s implicit objection to Weems’s work was that her betrayal, as an African American artist mounting



2. Benin Expedition, 1897. Gelatin silver print, 6.5 x 4.7 in., British Museum, London, Af.A79.13.

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12 This is not a Johnston photograph but an 1875 image of the baptism of the Shivwits Band of Paiutes by Daniel D. McArthur and Augustus P. Hardy.

13 Zeidler, “View from Hampton,” 76.

14 Ironically, Weems identifies her paternal grandfather as part Native American.

15 Zeidler, “View from Hampton,” 77.

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an objection to African American institutional values, was intensified by the context of *geography*. Even if Hampton University collaborated with Williams College in the original conception of the project, her criticism could well have been perceived in terms of a Southern institution being chastised by Northern liberalism. Indeed, Williams’s historical ties to Hampton, by way of Armstrong, could underscore this impression of perceived Northern paternalism, and it is certainly the case that Hampton, Tuskegee, and other institutions were sponsored by and thus answerable to the Northern personnel who sat on their boards of trustees. Not just individuals such as Armstrong and (West Virginia-born and New York-raised) Johnston, but the *institutional* histories of Williams College and of Northern elite institutions more generally, are steeped in histories of conquest even as they have historically been understood as morally superior to the slaveholding South. This has been the revelation of Craig Steven Wilder’s recent work—that Northern educational institutions were not only financially and ideologically mired in enslavement, but were culturally so, as well, in their daily operations.<sup>16</sup> It should not be possible to read Weems’s work, or its affiliation with Williams in 2000, as in any way an indictment of Southern institutions or HCBUs to the relative benefit or praise of Northern institutions.

In addition to their entanglement with Southern histories of enslavement, New England institutions should also be viewed in the context of the regional process by which Native Americans were “disappeared” in the oldest sermons, fiction, poetry, and other rhetorical maneuvers of the republic. As Jean M. O’Brien has put it, with their “narration of Indian extinction,” “non-Indians actively produced their own modernity by denying modernity to Indians.”<sup>17</sup> If Hampton is one trajectory of these histories of conquest, we must name the place where we are standing to view this exhibition in 2018 as another: *New England* rather than *Ndakinna*, the Abenaki word for that place “to which we belong,” or Wopanaak/Wabanaki, “the land where the sun is born every day.”<sup>18</sup> When non-Indian New Englanders termed “rebellions” the “ongoing, multifaceted Indigenous resistance, led by an uncontrollable network of Indigenous leaders and families,” they contained ideologically what was being achieved militarily across the country.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the work of disappearance involved legal determinations of purity; proximity to blackness, for example, could undercut claims to Indian purity. The ultimate beneficiary, however, was a colonizing regime that wished to deny Indian claims to anything at all. This returns us to questions raised by Hampton about their perception of Weems’s work as “placing all Hampton African American students and all Hampton American Indian students in homogeneous groups so as to make generalizations about them.”<sup>20</sup> In raising issues of homogeneity, Hampton poses issues of authenticity and purity, of proximity and relationality, that are worth pausing to tease out by sitting still with one of the photographs.

In Johnston’s *A Class in American History* (plate 2.13), fifteen Hampton

students sit or stand in a classroom turned toward another member of the class whom Jeanne Zeidler’s essay allows us to identify as Louis Firetail (Sioux, Crow Creek), and who is dressed in what I would describe as traditional and ceremonial Native American dress. A stuffed American eagle, and a Frederic Remington painting of troops riding off to conquer Native American people in the West, help to frame, as it were, the students’ stiffly collared poses as they regard their classmate, who is dressed in full (Sioux, Crow Creek?) regalia, his own gaze turned away from them.

In a brilliant discussion of this photograph, Judith Fryer Davidov attends to the “visual triangle” formed by Firetail at the head of the class, by the eagle and Remington’s painting, and by a portrait of a young man dressed in a starched collar, coat and tie entitled “John Wizi, Sioux, 1899” (also by Johnston and not included in Weems’s exhibit) whom Davidov identifies as the same student. These images together are meant to suggest both that his “savageness has been tamed” and that this indicates “the benefits as well as the totality of the transformation effected by Hampton.” Wexler, reading the same photograph, alerts us to the “ambiguity” of Louis Firetail, who is at once fully available to be objectified, but who also manages to “[outwit] the camera.”<sup>21</sup> I am very interested in taking up Weems’s invitation to think about what it means for “Black and Indian alike” to be convened in the same room. To riff on Ellison’s question: Are they lucky to be in the room, rescued from the company of the Great Unwashed, or are they trapped, mutually unable to escape? If their classmate’s dress can be saluted as noble, it is at the terrible cost of now being understood as merely ceremonial: in performing his “last”-ness, according to the ideology of benign conquest, he is allowed to solicit admiration and even nostalgia. What has been lost can be given retrospective value now that it has been conquered. In a related though not identical way, photographs such as *Hampton Graduate at Home* (plate 2.7) and *Old Folks at Home* (plate 2.6), juxtaposed with each other, can reinforce this sense of a temporal difference: with the latter as a past that must necessarily give way to the future represented by the former. I say “related though not identical” because I agree with Davidov that the presumed “pastness” of a Native American student in ceremonial regalia is not accorded the same cultural value as the pastness in *Old Folks at Home*. Davidov notes, “I find more troubling the far larger number of African American students who, as citizens in training, gaze upon the otherness of the Indian, whose history is now ennobled in contradistinction to their own, which must be forgotten.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the dubious benefit to Native American students of this ascribed superiority is to be similarly constrained—to sit side by side with those whose specific conquest was enslavement. All of the students are being trained to wait patiently and submissively for a future in different modes of servitude.<sup>23</sup> With Dipesh Chakrabarty we might view this classroom as the “imaginary waiting room of history” as proposed by John Stuart Mill and other proponents of gradualism, for colonized subjects to cool their heels,

16 Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

17 Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxi, xxiii.

18 Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip’s War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 8.

19 Brooks, 8.

20 Zeidler, “View from Hampton,” 77.

21 Judith Fryer Davidov, “Containment and Excess: Representing African Americans,” in *Women’s Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 172; Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 170–71. Note that Davidov is discussing the photograph in relation to the 1996 MoMA exhibit and related catalogue *The Hampton Album* edited by Lincoln Kirstein. I am aware of the irony of Davidov’s definitive identification of the student standing at the head of the class as John Wizi, son of Chief Wizi of Crow Creek, South Dakota, while Zeidler identifies him as Firetail in the context of appearing to rebuke Weems for not being interested in identifying individuals by name. Perhaps the point is that Firetail and Wizi are understood to be the same person.

22 Davidov, “Containment and Excess,” 172.

23 On modes of servitude and subjection see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

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since “some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait.”<sup>24</sup>

Waiting in that room together in the full consciousness of being keenly observed, regarding each other or averting their gazes, these students of history remind us of the forcible relocation and dislocation of groups kept apart or brought together in order to guarantee the best conditions of accumulation and order; one group conceptualized as insubordinate, transient, captive, in relation to the other’s alleged free and industrious endurance, and the enforced labor of both guaranteeing the privacy and virtue of the middle class domesticity that they themselves were denied. Describing this process in relation to Chinese and African laborers in the nineteenth century, Lisa Lowe reminds us to train our eyes on the value of the contiguity of different groups for colonial management. She also reminds us to attend to the often unremarked evidence of “intimacies as cross-racial alliance,”<sup>25</sup> intimacies unremarked but ironically evident in an otherwise puzzling law banning congress between these groups, or belated legislation in the wake of an outbreak of a jointly planned uprising. Lowe also cautions against reproducing the very terms of equality and freedom that have been undergirded by these *tenderly violent* processes of conquest, when we move too quickly to affirm, to “recover and recuperate,” urging that we make space for mourning: “There is an ethics and politics in struggling to comprehend the particular loss of the intimacies of four continents, to engage slavery, genocide, indenture, and liberalism as a conjunction, as an actively acknowledged loss within the present.”<sup>26</sup> It is in this space that I can hear Weems’s sorrow song.

I want to think about these students of history going off into a future after Hampton, having regarded each other in that room. What would their proximity to each other in that room mean, later on? Since students from the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Central America, and the African continent attended Hampton and Tuskegee, then it is possible that some of them are in the room.<sup>27</sup> When Robert R. Moton visited Jamaica in 1916 as the newly installed president of Tuskegee after Booker T. Washington’s death, he was hosted by members of the colony’s middle class, whom he had earlier taught at Hampton as the dean of students. As I have argued elsewhere, the “conformist” education of historically black institutions that was criticized at the turn of the century by W. E. B. Du Bois and others, and that was, as we have seen, later criticized by novelists, provided good training for functioning in a colonial society.<sup>28</sup> Moton was welcomed by a constituency that might have chafed under white colonial rule, but that constituted an emerging body of lighter- and darker-skinned professionals and business people who could welcome and toast the new president, much to the chagrin of Marcus Garvey, who had hoped to demonstrate his diasporic credentials.

One difficult conclusion to draw here is that shared blackness in a Southern educational institution fostered diasporic ties that facilitated and strengthened (rather than transcended) contexts of colonialism and imperialism. Imagining Caribbean subjects in Johnston’s history room alerts us

to the intraracial contexts of the proximities that we have just been discussing with regard to African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Just as photographs of young African men and women attending mission schools were shared in global circuits as proof of the goodwill of religious, educational, and administrative prongs of the imperial project, we must imagine that Johnston’s photographs of students at Hampton were viewed by congregations, students, and administrators all over the world. These photographs were taken at a moment of important imperial shifts, such as the Boer and the Spanish-American Wars.

Poised as they are to reenter these national and global currents upon graduation, occupying various positions along a continuum of servitude and power, we also see the students in that American history classroom sitting and standing still alongside one another: as (possibly) Haitians and Crow Creek and South Carolinians and South Africans alike. What can their tense postures communicate to us, besides rigidity, confinement, assimilation, respectability? Tina M. Campt urges us to regard such postures in terms of “effortful placement,” as “responses (rather than submission) to colonization” as “depictions of stasis rather than stillness” or “motionlessness” that produce “an effortful equilibrium achieved through a labored balancing of opposing forces and flows.”<sup>29</sup> If the students in *A Class in American History* are not free (including freedom from the intrusion of the gaze that wants to use them to prove the morality of conquest), they are also more than the stilled, arrested subjects offered to us as visual objects.

For one thing, we can surmise that they experience stillness together, and have the opportunity to regard each other. What might they teach us about sitting still and regarding each other in the midst of catastrophe? The Canadian First Nations (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asks: “How do I recognize my relations? How am I recognized? What if the driving force in Indigenous politics is self-recognition rather than a continual race around the hamster wheel of settler colonial recognition?”<sup>30</sup> What if there are circuits of regard to which Johnston has no access, and to which we also, since Johnston is our mediator, have no access? This is always the complication of advocacy, of a speaking for the other that is particularly attached to the realism of photography.

Weems’s use of second- and first-person registers in her inscriptions on photographs and in the installation’s ambient audio, holds out the promise of rerouting the script of speaking for the other, since she is standing in the legacy of that classroom. This is a realignment, a fiddling with the circuit of recognition: cutting through the politics of assimilation and recognition that re-scripted “you” as paragon of virtue in captivity, I look back and see you differently. I root myself in the present in the seeing of you in the past. I link my thriving in the present to your mighty struggle: “Against the wind... and against the odds,” as Weems’s text puts it. Drawing strength from her regard of them regarding each other, Weems questions the distributive justice of “reserved land, peanuts, and twenty acres and a mule.”

But it is still photographs that are being utilized to do this work, and

24 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

25 Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 203.

26 Lowe, 207.

27 See Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) and Faith Smith, “Good Enough for Booker T to Kiss: Hampton, Tuskegee, and Caribbean Self-Fashioning,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jxoz2xq>.

28 Smith, “Good Enough.”

29 Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 51–52.

30 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 258.

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primarily Johnston’s photographs, at that. Challenging representation always threatens to reproduce it, as Shawn Michelle Smith has proposed with regards to Du Bois’s use of photographs of Georgia’s Talented Tenth to respond to depictions of African Americans that implied criminality.<sup>31</sup>

Weems negotiates the risks of repetition and complicity that are part of the history of violence wrought by the camera by transforming the appropriated photographs: enlarging and reproducing them on canvas or on suspended diaphanous muslin panels. These transformations supplement the powerful lament that catalogues the harms done and that also salutes the harmed for their courage: “Against the wind I saw your quest for more.” Larger than life, the cloth panels, together with the sound of Weem’s incantatory voice, promise a spectral intervention, a disruption of photography’s power to fix, and of Johnston’s visual legacy. Visitors entering the exhibition experience the photographs as transparent layers through which we can see and make connections to other images—depending on how they are arranged in relation to each other—but also through which we must pass, working through the experience (fig. 3).

Weems has said of this project: “By moving into and through the work, I wanted to give the viewer permission to invade the work of art, to invade history, and thereby claim it as one’s own; to feel that one is a part of history and, therefore, one makes history. In this way, the viewer is transformed from audience to participant/observer.”<sup>32</sup> As with other projects, Weems engages the archival legacy by enlarging, adding words, marking up a surface; she distorts as a way of drawing attention to archival distortion, of making explicit the ways in which the “originals” were never innocent representations of a given reality.

One last scenario of “Black and Indian alike.” In a poignant recollection of the impact of Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” on the listeners in the world of her childhood in Zimbabwe, Tsitsi Ella Jaji theorizes the promise and limits of a diasporic affinity that is tethered to historical amnesia. Whether they were so named because they were identified visually with buffalo, or because they were pressed into the service of destroying buffalo and thus the food supply of Native Americans at the zenith of the extermination and relocation of Native Americans in the mid-nineteenth century, these “dreadlocked Rastas in the heart of America” are brave and erect in the music video that accompanies Marley’s 1983 song. The Jamaican singer celebrates these African American soldiers as a symbol of courage and resistance, a gesture of diasporic solidarity that occludes their terrible conscription into the project of Indigenous upheaval, and later in the hispanophone Caribbean when many of these cavalrymen

were assigned to serve in Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Spanish-American War. Jaji notes that Marley’s song and its celebration in her childhood “stopped short of a full accounting for the continuing structures of coercion and ambivalences of national belonging for African Americans in the nineteenth century.”<sup>33</sup>

We could add that, as with many who have looked at Frances Johnston’s Hampton photographs, we are seduced by the postures of striving and achievement, living as we still are in contexts of black surveillance and premature death. I understand Weems’s sorrow song to be part of an unfinished project of acknowledging this longing for what appear to be images of successful and desirable striving. But I also read her as enjoining us to refuse, with her, the invitation to justify conquest as the necessary condition of success and recognition. If the students in Johnston’s photographs and their families have fallen “from a great height,” this places a value on their cultural origins and personhood that is called into question by the colonial assumptions of Hampton, Williams, and other institutions, whereby Hampton’s students and their communities needed to be rescued from such origins.

Weems mourns the loss of these traditions, but perhaps even more so the ways in which we continue to be grateful for the trinkets traded in exchange. Weems inserts herself in the frame of a photograph, as she has done in other projects, so that we see her, for example, looking at the demise of the buffalo in David Wojnarowicz’s photograph (plate 2.25). Reading these now in multiple layers—Native American decimation, Native American and African American ideological labor at Hampton, Wojnarowicz’s meditation on the devastation wrought by AIDS, diasporic communities’ unwitting celebration of Native American annihilation—we can hear Weems inviting all of us to stand with her

and bear witness: “From a great height I saw you falling.” We are asked to join her in what she calls a “full accounting,” as she refuses to be corralled into the etiquette of segregated mourning.



3. Carrie Mae Weems, *The Hampton Project* (installation view) 2007, Williams College Museum of Art.

31 Smith argues: “Du Bois’ 1900 Georgia Negro photographs present contemporary viewers with a startling surprise. [They] present closely cropped, paired portraits of young men and women, one image frontal, the other in profile...many pair a direct frontal position with a hard profile, resembling unmistakably the photographic archives of early race scientists, as if Du Bois’ albums are haunted by those forms.” Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 44. Leigh Raiford makes a similar point about the use of lynching photographs to do the work of anti-lynching: “The deployment of similar, and at times the same photographs for such radically different purposes in the same historical moment reveals a crisis of representation.” Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 17.

32 Denise Ramzy and Katherine Fogg, “Interview: Carrie Mae Weems,” in Patterson, *Hampton Project*, 79.

33 Tsitsi Ella Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

# AIN'T JOKIN': UNSETTLING VOYEURISM THROUGH ART AND AFFECT

Rhonda D. Frederick and Leigh Patel

Funny "ha-ha," or funny "strange"?

This is a story within a story; how to enter this history, what to show, what to say, what to feel. It was a creation myth, how things came to be as they are. In this constructed place, our classroom, we revisit the past. The students examine the facts and will participate in the construction of history, a history that has been told to them by others. But now, with their own bodies, they engage their own dark terrain, their own winter.

—Carrie Mae Weems<sup>1</sup>

Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been "discovered" actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves....We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come into contact. We are not, in fact, "other." We are choices.

—Toni Morrison<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The art of Carrie Mae Weems and Ken Gonzales-Day unsettles the relationship between who sees and who is seen. Their respective works destabilize the positions traditionally assigned to the subject (voyeur), his or her object, and the well-patterned power relations between them, offering no clear lessons or resolutions. Both artists' powerful work establishes a black authorial presence and power, mobilized against the negative imprints that whiteness has etched onto blackness. A white-centered voice, threaded through global anti-black discourse, presumes to speak of, about, and for

black peoples; still, in encountering the art of Weems and Gonzales-Day, one hears the complex, transgressive voice of blackness. Acknowledging that language and visual symbols are used and interpreted for myriad purposes, we (Rhonda D. Frederick, scholar of literature, and Leigh Patel, scholar of education) are specifically concerned with when they are used to uphold, solidify, and perpetuate anti-blackness. Students respond to these artists' images in complex ways, but Weems's and Gonzales-Day's destabilizing practices ask that particular attention be paid to the seeing self. Thus at the heart of our investigation is a critical investment in unsettling commonly used viewing strategies to invite discourses on how we are with each other, beyond well-worn patterns of object and voyeur.

Because our pedagogical work is rooted in dialogue and exchange (both inside and outside the classroom), we developed our arguments in conversation with each other, and approximate that format in this essay. We share here what we have learned from classroom practices using visual texts (specifically Weems's *Ain't Jokin'* [plates 10.1–6] and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* [plates 3.1–33] and Gonzales-Day's *Erased Lynchings*<sup>3</sup>). The impact of these works is manifold: they unsettle all too well-worn white-centered vocalizations and annotations of black life, and upend white supremacy's traditional roles of subject and object, author and text. Both Weems's and Gonzales-Day's images demand a reordering of such durable power relations, provoking discomfort, defensiveness, and confusion in viewers, including our students. Ultimately, this reordering reshapes how students interact with blackness; once they can see that—though blackness has been inscribed by whiteness—it always had authorial power unto itself. As educators, we found that our communications via phone, in person, and over email kept returning to several key problems: how does voyeurism perpetuate traditional power relations; how do certain visual artists engage these relations in radical ways; and what pedagogical tools unsettle and rearrange the affective ways learners are with and relate to each other. In what follows, we piece together our respective pedagogical approaches and reflections on using visual art in the classroom to purposefully upend the

1 Carrie Mae Weems in *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (digital video, 2008). See plate 1.10.

2 Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Tanner Lectures on Human Values, University of Michigan, Oct. 7, 1988, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf), 133.

3 Ken Gonzales-Day, "Erased Lynchings," Ken Gonzales-Day, accessed Apr. 4, 2018, <http://kengonzalesday.com/erased-lynchings/>. Although Gonzales-Day identifies himself as Mexican American and recognizes that the victims of lynching included various dispossessed peoples, in the work discussed here, he prioritizes the silenced spectacle of black suffering.

prevailing and normalized dictates of who can see and who can only be seen, of whose pain is the object of voyeuristic pleasure.

## I. OUR MOTIVATIONS FOR BUILDING A PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION INTO THE NORMALIZED VOYEURISM OF BLACK SUFFERING

**RHONDA D. FREDERICK:** On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was murdered. The police neither protected nor served him, and his murderer faced no just consequence.<sup>4</sup> The fallout after the trial made it clear to me that none of those involved in his murder, or the arrest and trial of his murderer, saw him as a human being, as someone who *could* (or *could justifiably*) respond to a stranger stalking him in the night. Instead, Trayvon Martin embodied threat, danger, crime, and violence. Trying to make sense of this, or to delay the manifestly obvious injustice being perpetrated, I shifted my attention to grammar. Honing in on the words “threat,” “danger,” “crime,” “violence,” I noticed they were all functioning as nouns rather than as adjectives that modified a noun (“a word...used to identify any of a class of people”). But Trayvon Martin, in the eyes of his murderer and the criminal justice system, could not be a noun (a subject, an agent): this is clear in the behaviors of the police who balked at arresting the perpetrator, of the prosecutors who overcharged as a strategy to *not* charge, or the behaviors of the jury who did not consider that Martin could respond to a stalker by standing *his* ground. The verdict indicated that, in the fullness of the jury’s gaze, Trayvon Martin could not have felt fear in a situation where reasonable people would be afraid. Their gaze marked him as “other than” and unworthy of considerations that we often extend to (white) teenaged boys: innocence, bravado, “boys will be boys.”<sup>5</sup>

These grammatical musings unhinged me: for weeks after the verdict I could not leave my house. I did not trust myself around anyone because I was terrified that I would confront the gaze that condemned a seventeen-year-old boy. I was just as terrified that I would *not* witness the same terror and rage that I felt. Five years later, I have not recovered from what Martin’s murder and the jury’s judgment revealed.

Who I am after the decision that transubstantiated Trayvon Martin *into* threat, danger, crime, violence is dramatically different from who I was before, and this new me was faced with a potentially debilitating problem: Could I continue to teach black literature at my majority white university as I had before? How could I teach students that engaging with diasporic black people and experiences imagined by black authors could be as enlivening as I once believed it could be? Before April 2013, I worked hard to develop a teaching self that was an impartial guide, committed to helping students reach their intellectual heights. I believed that I was *supposed to be* an objective guide and that I *was* such a guide, but lurking in my memory whenever I graded papers was one paper in which a student wrote that US “slavery [began as] a benign system of free labor.” When I read that phrase,

my objective-teacher-self registered a failure: this self failed to teach the student how to read carefully. Now, when I recall that phrase, I remember how much the words—and the implication of them—wounded me: intellectually, affectively, and physically.<sup>6</sup> My still visceral response to the memory of that student paper, and the profound feelings aroused by Trayvon Martin’s murder and the trial that vindicated his murderer, make it very clear that I never had—and could not have—a separation of selves: I was *always* myriad selves in the classroom. Realizing that I could not leave the trauma of the murder of young, black Trayvon Martin outside of that space, I had to learn how to be my self, and to teach black literature, in productively transformative ways.<sup>7</sup>

My pedagogy at my predominantly white institution was grounded by depictions of complexly imagined black people, black life, black experience, and I believed that this grounding could challenge the kind of unseeing, stereotyping, and negativity that led to Trayvon Martin’s death. I believed that nuanced teaching and learning about blackness could provide students with critical skills and tools that could lead them to think differently about the most durable anti-black narratives both within and outside of the university. This pedagogy, I believed, could chip away at anti-black stereotypes. After Martin’s murder and the trial that left *him* convicted, I lost faith in that perspective. Instead of focusing on the one who is stereotyped, I now want to focus on the one who stereotypes.

The verdict made me see what I could not see before: there is something seriously wrong if black humanity *had* to be taught. I could not escape the belief that presenting complexly imagined black people in my classrooms, and believing this presentation helped counter simplistic representations, was somehow complicit in affirming anti-black narratives that made my kind of teaching *necessary*. In other words, dominant narratives commonly reject the full meaning of black humanity and I taught my classes as if that rejection was reasonable. The implication of the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer indicated that my approach was insufficient. If even one student could describe chattel slavery as “a benign system,” perhaps I needed something more than literary representations of the suffering and endurance of black subjects to break through the violent structures of power that designated them as objects, as property. I needed a new pedagogy.

**LEIGH PATEL:** One of the first spaces in which I incorporated visual art that sought to unsettle white voyeurism was in a qualitative research methods course. Qualitative research, with its history in anthropology, is well steeped in researching the “other,” as noted in the opening quotation by Morrison. In fact, without the creation of the other, the researcher and her inquiries have a questionable existence. The qualitative research class discussed here was multiracial and multiethnic, bringing together aspiring scholars from doctoral programs in education, social work, and sociology. Some came from communities that have been the subject of research and some came from communities whose members have traditionally held the

4 Trayvon Benjamin Martin was murdered on the night of February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida; he was seventeen years old. I honor Trayvon Martin by not speaking the name of his murderer. No charges were filed for over two months because police originally claimed that no crime was committed. On April 11, 2012 charges for second degree murder were filed; there has been some debate about whether this charge was appropriate. On July 13, 2013, the jury declared the murderer of Trayvon Martin not guilty. See “Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts,” CNN, updated Feb. 8, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/index.html>.

5 I do not condone this phrase nor its implications, but draw attention to what is acceptable for white boys (white male rapist sentenced to six months’ jail time for raping an unconscious woman) that is unacceptable for black boys. See Ashley Fantz, “Outrage over 6-Month Sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford Rape Case,” CNN, updated June 7, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/06/us/sexual-assault-brock-turner-stanford/index.html>.

6 The student misrepresented Daniel Littlefield’s assessment: “Slavery as it existed in the colonial period was not the same institution as developed in the nineteenth century or even the same in the eighteenth as in the seventeenth century” (202). See Daniel Littlefield, “Colonial and Revolutionary United States,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Mark M. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 201–26.

7 Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, which is focused on works by Weems that I have used in the classroom, it should be noted here that Weems’s *All the Boys and Usual Suspects* (plates 11.1–4, 12.1–9) also respond to the death of Trayvon Martin and others, suggesting further pedagogical experiments to be made.

role of researcher. Much of qualitative research uses up-close, textured data, specifically what people say and do, and then applies broader theoretical analyses. This sequencing and framing has meant that the analysis applied by the researcher, usually an outsider in relation to what is being researched, draws from published, mostly Eurocentric theories. The field itself can and often does imbue whiteness with the ability to voice for and annotate "the other." Christina Sharpe deftly uses the verb "annotate" in her indictment of yet another well-received young white sociologist's decoding of black male behavior.<sup>8</sup> The related effect of some white auteurs, sometimes as researchers, sometimes as artists, having free rein to annotate black life is that, as Sylvia Wynter writes, it becomes narratively impossible in those social traditions.<sup>9</sup> This connects directly to what you say about the extralegal murder of Trayvon Martin. Nowhere in the myriad accounts of him and his murder was his agency and selfhood recognized. He and his life had become narratively impossible because of the white annotation of black death. Wynter's core project about who is narratively possible or impossible corresponds directly to the question of who can be, at core, human, and who has been cast as the underside of humanity.

## II. BECAUSE NEITHER ART NOR PEDAGOGY IS STATIC, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE USE THE VISUAL ART OF WEEMS AND GONZALES-DAY TO INTERVENE AGAINST THE FIXED STRUCTURES OF VOYEURISM

**RDF:** Yes, Wynter and Sharpe speak directly to the place blackness occupies—outside of and inside our classrooms, so much so that I found it difficult to imagine a way of teaching that was not wholly circumscribed by dominant anti-black narratives. I obviously needed a new approach, one that could model a way to imagine that encourages students to consider, as Carrie Mae Weems puts it, "how things came to be as they are." If, as I said previously, depicting complexly imagined black experience affirms dominant—and the dominance of—narratives of anti-blackness, then I need to ask different questions. And I need my teaching to ask different questions.

What if, rather than offering students complex "things" to see, this new pedagogy could offer them a way to examine how and why students see as they see? What if this teaching could offer students strategies that challenge familiar whites-as-"subjects"/blacks-as-"objects" tropes? What would this kind of reconceptualization look like?

I chart my pedagogical evolution—from representations of complexly imagined blackness, to critical attention, to how and why student-viewers see as they see—through my approaches to two visual art projects by Carrie Mae Weems: *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, which I taught in 2011/12, and *Ain't Jokin'*, which I taught in 2016/17. The way I taught the former best exemplifies my investment in depicting complexly imagined blackness that critically *reengaged* with dominant narratives of anti-blackness. Teaching *Ain't Jokin'* five years later marks my shift toward student-viewers as self-consciously seeing subjects.

**LP:** Yes! I also connect with the heavy lifting required, without anything close to an established path, in order to rearrange how we actually see ourselves in the work we do, and more so, how we do the work to remake how we literally live, with each other. Our social locations are all touched by

historical forces, and that is part of what both Weems and Gonzales-Day sample and remix in their art. But we also have agency, and in some cases we have the opportunity *and* will to rearrange how we function within these complicated semiotic histories and contemporary realities. In retrospect, I think that this kind of unsettling and rearranging is what I was hoping for by using visual art in a research methods course. It yanked all of us out of algorithms of how to do this or that kind of research project. I was seeking a pedagogy, in essence, to humanize the science of knowledge building.

**RDF:** You so nicely articulate what I was struggling with: the relationship between my self, my social contexts, and my work. My ideas about blackness are threaded through each of these. I was unsettled after Martin's murder...and struggled with how to live with it. Part of this struggle included thinking back on what I taught before, and how I might teach it again, in the future. In the fall of 2012 *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* was a primary "text" in Narratives of Slavery,<sup>10</sup> a core literature class for first year students. I prepared for this lesson by researching Weems's biography, her choice of materials, and (as much as I could discern) her hopes and intentions for the piece. I learned that in 1995 the Getty Museum commissioned Weems to create a work based on its archive of nineteenth-century photographs of black people. Weems added some contemporary images to those in the Getty archive, and created a narrative that she etched into the glass that lay over each piece in the entire sequence. The resulting series of images visualizes US racial history as envisioned by Nobosodru, a young Mangbetu woman.<sup>11</sup> Her right-facing profile opens the installation and her left-facing profile appears at the end. These two images are also distinct because of their color (tinted blue when all of the other images are overlaid with red) and because the piece's title is etched across the bottom of both images: on the first, "From here I saw what happened" and on the last, "And I cried."

After inviting my students to share their initial responses to *From Here I Saw What Happened*, I drew their attention to the way the images of the Mangbetu woman frame the entire piece, creating a context that "sees" the intervening images both *through* and *as* Nobosodru. Students were then able to perceive what those images "look like" from this different perspective.

In many ways, viewers are called to witness the seeing in *From Here I Saw What Happened*, a truth that its framing establishes. Nobosodru as well as Weems herself govern student-viewers' perceptions of the sequence's narrative. This jointly female and black perspective is, critically, "in conversation" with and responds to the Getty Museum's archive. Immediately after Nobosodru's opening image are four nineteenth-century ethnographic images that were not only intended to define African archetypes but also to determine how they were and were supposed to be seen (plates 3.2–5). Guided by Nobosodru's witnessing and Weems's assertive vision, student-viewers were invited to see blackness differently, both as Weems and Nobosodru see it and in the context of the dominant ways of seeing to which the piece responds.

The deliberateness of the series' black-and-female lens is vital: contemporary student-viewers situate Nobosodru in the past, and they perceive her seeing into and through the future ("From here I saw what happened"). With the sequence of images so framed, student-viewers considered Nobosodru's "and I cried" in myriad ways—as tears of joy, sadness, pain, regret,

8 See Christina Sharpe, "Black Life, Annotated," *New Inquiry*, Aug. 8, 2014, <https://thenewinquiry.com/black-life-annotated/>.

9 Sylvia Wynter, *No Humans Involved*, On the Blackness of BLACKNUSS (1994; Hudson: Moor's Head Press, 2015).

10 Featuring film, visual art, and popular fiction, *Narratives of Slavery* explores histories and legacies of slavery in the United States. In addition to looking at narratives of slavery in this range of creative forms, the class plays with the definition of "slavery" to imagine how the institution allows us to think differently—and more critically—about drug dealing, gender oppression, history, and intra-/interracial relationships.

11 This image was originally part of a 1925 collection of ethnographic photographs that documented, among other things, the Mangbetu cultural practice of skull elongation.



and laughing-to-keep-from-crying. They could also begin to understand that her affective response was complicated by her being forced to see as she was “supposed” to see, despite the fact that she sees differently. Her emotional response to her seeing is simultaneously critical and assessing, and no one is exclusive of the other.

So armed, student-viewers encounter the first four red-tinged images, ones intended to *be—not* to represent—“‘pure,’ unmiscegenated examples of the [black] race.”<sup>12</sup> As Christina Sharpe argues, the four daguerreotypes Weems selected from a series commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850 “are meant to reveal what blackness looks like and how to look at blackness” and they “are meant to make visible separate development and separate species.”<sup>13</sup> Yet positioned under the witnessing gaze of Nobosodru and seen through the red overlay and critical commentary added by the artist, these images are re-seen, their original function changed. Acting as viewer, Sharpe re-sees “the daguerreotypes [as] of Renty (Congo) and Jack (Guinea), the Africa-born men, and the ‘country-born’ daughters Delia and Drana,”<sup>14</sup> not as evolutionarily stunted African archetypes. Sharpe’s seeing differently responds to Nobosodru’s affective coloring of the images in the series when she writes that she was *struck* when she first saw these images, a word choice that is physical and emotional: “I was *struck* on first seeing those daguerreotypes of Jack, Delia, Renty, and Drana, as I was by my encounter with a photograph taken 160 years later.”<sup>15</sup> Sharpe’s emotional response is certainly heightened by Weems’s visual and textual framing of these images, by the affective red tint, producing an experience that leads her to ask different questions: “Given that the law of slavery was *partus sequitur ventrem*, one might ask why it is fathers and daughters who are photographed here and not fathers and sons, mothers and sons, or the mothers (through whom slavery legally passes) and the daughters through whom, if they give birth, it will also pass?”<sup>16</sup>

These first four images witnessed by Nobosodru, but arguably all of the intervening images, corroborate and implicate viewers in a certain already established way of knowing—*how to see blackness/the only way to look at blackness*. Weems’s aesthetic and affective choices put both the knowing and disseminating of this lesson—one that is always in process: a given and giving, known and knowing, taught and teaching of black people—in conversation with another kind of knowledge: how black and female people look/re-look/look again at “how to look at blackness.” Student-viewers learn to “read” the artist’s choice of the red overlay as communicating resonance, rage, strength, power, vitality, and engagement with the racist narrative that Agassiz made dominant. Student-viewers can see the photographs in this primary source as palimpsests, images cast under Agassiz’s direction and then recast by Weems and Nobosodru.

**LP:** Palimpsests are so powerful; they are everywhere, but the trick is in seeing their layers, and respectively, seeing how our vision is never direct but always overlaid with the influence of various texts and readings. What transpired for your students given this opportunity to explore those layers, some of which confronted and interrupted normalized voyeurism?

**RDF:** While the skills they gained through this process were significant, and generated material for rich class discussion, I found that student-viewers replicated an Agassiz-like relationship to blackness: they gazed upon blackness from the outside, even as they ascertained the meaningful lay-

ers that intervene in this unidirectional seeing. It was still difficult to get student-viewers to “see” or unpack the direction of their gaze: as viewing subject examining the viewed object. Though now more complicated, their relationship to the images collected in *From Here I Saw What Happened* remained voyeuristic.

Weems’s introduction of Nobosodru’s framing role and affective narratives challenges dominant ways of seeing by casting/recasting the black woman as one who sees, as one who sees affectively, and as one aware of the meanings that became attached to blackness and became durable. The images that Weems transformed took on the tradition of ethnographic photographs of black people as well as the more popular anti-black stereotypes that reinforce the ideology behind that racially biased “science.” I presented student-viewers with the idea that a consequence of Weems’s artistic choices is that blackness is “seen” differently.

But returning to this 2012 lesson plan for *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, I could not shake the notion that what I was asking my students to do was look at black women (Weems, Nobosodru) looking/looking again at black people, and attend to and remain aware of how each “she” did her looking. I did ask them to put this process of “looking at” and “looking at how” in critical conversation with dominant anti-black narratives. Yet I did not pay enough attention to how the direction of their gaze, as largely white and affluent viewers of images of black people, affirmed the norms of unidirectional perspective. Students’ habits of seeing, even if they became more sophisticated, were still not reciprocal.

When I consider this 2012 lesson from the perspective of who I have become after Trayvon Martin’s murder, and thinking through the concept of voyeurism (as you describe it, Leigh), I want to consider who student-viewers are, what they see, and why they see what they see, and why they see as they see. These musings lead to considerations of strategies for teaching not only *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, but also other works in Weems’s oeuvre. And, since the mere depiction of imaginable and complex blackness is no longer enough, I also want to think through what students can take away from these encounters with visual material.

**LP:** Yes, ultimately, we are talking about what students, people, more broadly, can redo and remake about themselves and how they are with the world. Each of our disciplines has its own harmful traditions to unearth, to decode in the palimpsests. Qualitative research is replete with annotation and retelling, acts that are in and of themselves, justified. Though when those in long-standing social positions of power are the ones to annotate and retell others’ stories, research can become an unseemly and exploitive act. Although I wanted my students to become responsible researchers, I more fundamentally wanted them to be answerable to the forces of historical power relations from which no one is immune. I wanted them to trouble the idea that they could be comfortably apprenticed into a knowledge production project that has long labeled Indigenous people as savage in order to treat them savagely, labeled black people as criminal to treat them criminally, and labeled Asian and Latino people as liminal to threaten their humanity carelessly.

**RDF:** Yes, I hear what you are saying. When we are not thoughtful or conscious about how these kinds of power relations operate, it is really easy

12 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 43.

13 Sharpe, 43.

14 Sharpe, 43.

15 Sharpe, 44; emphasis added.

16 Sharpe, 43.

to duplicate them.

LP: Right, and to ask my students to trouble this unthinking kind of duplication, I shared photographs from an installation by Ken Gonzales-Day, entitled *Erased Lynchings*. In this series, Gonzales-Day literally erases the victims and foregrounds celebrants at the lynchings of black Americans, Indigenous, Mexican, and Chinese peoples in the twentieth century. In this class, we viewed portions of the installation that made prominent the lynchers of black Americans. The effect, for the viewers, is that their gaze must more steadily attend to the celebration of violence, instead of experiencing the deliberate human pain caused by that violence. In *East First Street*, a black-and-white postcard of the lynching of a black man has been altered so that the viewer sees a tree lit up at night, many white men wearing fedoras facing the tree, and a few white people turning to look at the photographer (fig. 1). Several onlookers are blurred, perhaps to suggest that there was motion and noise in that setting of horror. The lynching was a social event. A social horror show.

Gonzales-Day interrupts what Abigail Solomon-Godeau describes as the double victimization of first physical objectification and then semiotic objectification through photography.<sup>17</sup> Similar to the way Weems's *Ain't Jokin'* shifts our attention from racist stereotypes to those who find entertainment in such representations, the *Erased Lynchings* series interrupts the familiar focal point of these photos, the lynched human being, and makes those who have pursued, completed, and feted the lynching the object of our uncomfortable gaze. This reordering of things destabilizes patterns of who can speak for and depict whom, in addition to exposing affects that are backgrounded when the pornography of black people's pain is ubiquitous. In other words, this simple erasure of the object of lynching brings into focus a new object, one that is rarely made into an object of inquiry: the all-too-familiar white lust for lynching violence. More simply put, white violence is the object of inquiry, rather than a revulsion at the horrors of, allegedly, violence from the past.

In the class session when we collectively viewed Gonzales-Day's work, there was a palpable silence. When I asked for reactions and thoughts, the first student to contribute was a young black woman who said that she had never seen an image that so powerfully alleviated her typical burden in discussions of lynching and racial terrorism. She explained that in her courses at Boston College, a predominantly white university, she was consistently, implicitly asked to speak on behalf of "The Black Experience" (emphasizing each word with sarcasm in her voice) while at the same time not doing so

in a way that might upset her white classmates or white professors. These images, she said, flipped the table upside down. This moment in the discussion was not necessarily an easeful one, for this student or anyone else. Being able to speak from a non-objectified position, the student was also rather tentative in this new experience in what had been a white-dominated educational experience for her. In several different sections of this course, this reaction was consistent among many black women and other students of color. There was a complicated mix of relief and discomfort in exercising

a new authoritative voice in the classroom space, and yet still an acute awareness of being closely watched by white peers while sharing their reactions.

Of course, white students also had varied reactions. Many times they were able to comment intellectually on the "alternative" approach that Gonzales-Day used in the series. More challenging for many of them was what this alteration meant for them as aspiring researchers, particularly given the extractive patterns that Western social science has created in communities of color. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in the introductory pages to her highly influential book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, research is in fact a rather dirty word to many Indigenous communities.<sup>18</sup> In a classroom conversation about the ongoing extractive nature of university-based research in communities that have been made to be and then labeled "at-risk," as if the riskiness is unto the communities themselves, one white student commented, "Ok, I understand the history, but what are we supposed to do with it?" Her affect was also one of discomfort, but that discomfort was coupled with a desire to escape it. Of note is that this student also made reference to research harm in the past. As with the *Erased Lynchings* series, but even more so with lynching photographs that are more familiar to students, the past is often indexed in order to feel the less complex and intense emotions that come with distance, a seductive move "forward" and away from

those scenes of violence and complicity. This student's question contained all of that chronology—an unseemly past that is relegated to the past and an imperative to move forward to our allegedly more harmonious present. At the moment of the student's question, "What are we supposed to do with it?" we were discussing the work of an Indigenous woman (Smith) who had carefully catalogued the violence done to Indigenous peoples in the name of research. I responded to the student that it was perhaps an inappropriate expectation that the author also take responsibility for sketching out new, productive ways for white researchers to "move forward." As I continued to reflect on this class session, though, I saw this student's question as an incom-



1. Ken Gonzales-Day (1964–), *East First Street (St. James Park)* from *Erased Lynchings*, 2006. Lightjet print on board, 6 x 3.8 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

17 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 113–50.

18 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 8.

plete part of what could be a reordering of ontology. Instead of asking "what are we [purportedly white researchers and white people] supposed to do with [this history]," we should be asking how can we be differently with ourselves and each other. This, fundamentally, is the goal of any pedagogical engagement I have designed for my students, using the histories and ongoing logics of how whiteness creates itself through the denoting and denigration of the other. And the incorporation of the works of visual artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Ken Gonzales-Day helps me approach those pedagogical goals.

### III. USE OF VISUAL ART AS A VEHICLE FOR UNSETTLING VOYEURISM

**RDF:** The way you describe Gonzales-Day's work, the way it disrupts what we typically see when we look at photographs of murdered black, brown, and yellow people. It is profoundly disruptive; I did not know where to go after the disruption.

I felt similarly unsettled when I saw *Ain't Jokin'* on Carrie Mae Weems's website.<sup>19</sup> But when encountered in a museum, some of the pieces in this same collection are interactive: viewers see a photograph with a caption in the form of a riddle, and then they must slide open a panel to reveal the riddle's "answer." For example, a photograph of a respectable-looking, middle-aged black man (plate 10.1) bears the caption "What are the three things you can't give a black person?" and the response uncovered by the viewer reads, "A black eye, a fat lip and a job!" By sliding open the panel, museum viewers become complicit in the caption's racist joke and anti-black stereotypes as well as in the histories that gave rise to and the identities enabled by them. In my classroom, however, images in *Ain't Jokin'* do not have sliding panels, and I found that student-viewers were unfamiliar with the anti-black stereotypes Weems was challenging. So I was faced with the problem of how the lessons of the museum installation could be taught in the classroom.

**LP:** This is a fantastic point. No pedagogical framing or piece of visual art alone can inspire a reordering of how we are with normalized anti-black violence. And, moreover, we are interacting with these works of art in specific classroom spaces, with specific people, at specific moments. How did that interaction of artifact, setting, and participants come together, and not come together, in your class?

**RDF:** *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* encourages stu-

dent-viewers to consider Weems's artistic inclusions and framing, Nobodru's affective and critical response to what she sees, and to see each piece in the installation as palimpsest (each image seen through the meanings and intentions of the artist and the frame). But I did not think the same approach was appropriate for *Ain't Jokin'*.

I incorporated *Ain't Jokin'* in a course for first year students entitled *Narrating Black Intimacies* (spring 2017). The syllabus was organized around four themes (GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BACK TO GRAY) with the expectation that what students learned in previous sections would assist their learning in subsequent ones. Our readings began with essays that underscored ambiguities in early US racial categories and the evolution of these categories into more rigid forms (GRAY). The next section emphasized the

need for/uses of these rigid racial categories, demonstrating how whiteness is constituted by and because of particular representations of blackness (WHITE).<sup>20</sup> These readings prepared for the introduction of *Ain't Jokin'* in the third section (BLACK). This thematic organization helped students embrace the idea that if racial categories are fluid, subject to historical, geographical, and social contexts, then what they perceive as normal and fixed in the twenty-first-century US might be unsettled.

**LP:** Were those racial categories unsettled? I am positive that part of the engagement that Weems and Gonzales-Day desire, and perhaps we as educators desire, is to unsettle what is problematically settled and normalized. Unsettling does not have a set result, which also challenges us, as the designers of the pedagogical space, to be in action and reaction to what is unsettled and remixed.

**RDF:** I think it did rock them. I wanted this kind of mix: emotional

and intellectual thinking/rethinking as we moved into the BLACK section of the class, since it was dedicated to investigations of how blackness functions in contexts of anti-blackness.<sup>21</sup> By examining the ways in which blacks (writers, artists, and characters in fiction) internalized, reproduced, and challenged dominant narratives of blackness that manifest intra- and interracial, this section "demonstrated the intricacies of racial categories and how blackness is 'done,' 'undone,' and 'redone.'" I originally wanted students to observe the photographs in *Ain't Jokin'* as examples of a black artist responding to and reframing objectified blackness, but I did not want to impose my way of seeing *Ain't Jokin'* onto students, nor did I want my white students to "see" as if they were black people. Doing so, I thought, would



2a. What do you see?

19 Carrie Mae Weems, "Ain't Jokin', 1987–1988," Carrie Mae Weems, accessed Apr. 6, 2018, <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/aint-jokin.html>.

20 In the GRAY section, we read Littlefield, "Colonial and Revolutionary United States," Brent Staples, "Editorial Observer: The Shifting Meanings of 'Black' and 'White,'" *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/15/opinion/editorial-observer-the-shifting-meanings-of-black-and-white.html>, Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), and Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008). In the WHITE section we read Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger," in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), and Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1999).

21 Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975), Stacey Patton, "Who's Afraid of Black Sexuality" (2012), and Weems's *Ain't Jokin'* composed the BLACK part of our class.

overemphasize the gazed-upon object and cast/recast student-viewers as voyeurs and position the seeing subject as safely removed from any responsibility in the process of seeing/interpreting the images.

However, without the sliding panels or punch lines and with little familiarity with some of the stereotypes referenced in *Ain't Jokin'*, it was less visible/instructive for my students than *From Here I Saw What Happened*. While I could provide the genealogy of the stereotypes behind *Black Woman with Chicken* (plate 10.3) and *Black Man Holding Watermelon* (plate 10.4),<sup>22</sup> I still did not know how to recreate the interactive aspect of the museum installation, the impact of which sparked my pedagogical imagination.

Rather than lecture to the class about anti-black stereotypes and jokes, a strategy that would leave them at a safe and comfortable distance from the real impact of these racist manifestations, I preferred to lay bare students' immediate affective experience of *Ain't Jokin'*, starting with their bewilderment over the jokes and the stereotypes. If student-viewers are unaware of the fried chicken stereotype, how might that image be seen and interpreted? Or, put another way, could I devise a lesson plan that approximated the experience of the museum installation of *Ain't Jokin'*, making students aware of the processes through which they see the photographs and read the captions?

**LP:** This brings up a delicate but significant point. The classroom is drastically different than a museum or gallery. Museum educators design programs to accompany installations, but they do not have ongoing interactions with a set group of people, typically. In the university setting, we are working together for a certain number of class sessions, so we have both more opportunities and different constraints on what we can do. We are also shaped by a higher education culture that expects outcomes, and unsettling is not prescriptive.

**RDF:** Absolutely, I hear you. But can we work toward a pedagogical approach that would unsettle a unidirectional gaze, shifting the focus from viewers taking in an obscure, captioned image (black object) toward a contemplation of what and why they see what they see? Ultimately, I wanted this lesson to put students' unsettled gaze in conversation with dominant anti-black narratives, a process that might allow the former to assess how and why racist stereotypes became normalized. I hoped this shift would disrupt familiar hierarchies (white/black, actor/acted upon), and highlight seeing as a process that did more than interpret specific image/text pairings. As you just said, Leigh, I think this lesson could foreground how viewers

become implicated in durable, racist narratives and become thoughtful about how they are implicated. Ultimately, I was invested in teaching *Ain't Jokin'* to Boston College students in a way that would make them conscious of self in relation to anti-black narratives, a pedagogical approach enabled by the work of Weems, a "brown woman taking brown photographs."<sup>23</sup>

I devised an in-class exercise that encouraged students to look closely and to render their seeing as a list of nouns and adjectives. I used the black-and-white photograph that was paired with the caption "black woman with chicken" (plate 10.3). I replaced the caption with two questions, and cut-and-pasted the same image onto two eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch sheets of paper. The first sheet included the question "What do you see?" (fig. 2a) with the image, and the second used the same image with a different question: "WHY do you see what you see?" (fig. 2b).

**LP:** So, the question of "WHY do you see what you see?" is, in and of itself, a palimpsest prompt. Palimpsests, as we have both said, are hard to approximate if basic recognition is not there.

**RDF:** Yes, I think so. My *Ain't Jokin'* lesson was not only intended to introduce undergraduate students to the attentive reading of visual forms, but also to encourage them to process critically the dissonance that the photograph/text pairs evoked. As Weems originally composed these works, a museum viewer might experience the dissonance between the image of a figure delicately holding a piece of chicken and the caption's association of blackness with a certain crudeness. In the classroom encounter with this work, students unfamiliar with the referenced stereotype could still experience dissonances that could be unpacked, whether that dissonance stemmed from lack of knowledge (of



2b. WHY do you see what you see?

jokes, stereotypes) or from inattention to normalized racial hierarchies/binaries (white superiority/black inferiority). I hoped to guide students to engage with form and content, and teaching black creative works to students at Boston College, I expected them to become self-conscious about the viewing process: how they felt and thought about their relationships to blackness. Framing *From Here I Saw What Happened* through Nobosodru's perspective encouraged viewers to empathize with her and her view (and, perhaps, feel authorized by this empathy); with *Ain't Jokin'*, I wanted to worry this kind of connection by foregrounding less conscious processes.

The first step in this process was "simple knowledge": students were given time to conduct "basic identification of the subject or elements in

22 There is history behind associations of black people with fried chicken and watermelon discussed in an NPR article. In it, Claire Schmidt "said like watermelon, that other food that's been a mainstay in racist depictions of blacks, chicken was also a good vehicle for racism because of the way people eat it....It's a food you eat with your hands, and therefore it's dirty." "Table manners are a way of determining who is worthy of respect or not." But significant questions derived from this history: if the association between black people and fried chicken was created, and made negative, then can we also see race and gender as "made"? And, if so made, then what purpose does this making serve? Who does this making serve? See Gene Demby, "Where Did That Fried Chicken Stereotype Come From?," NPR, May 22, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/05/22/186087397/where-did-that-fried-chicken-stereotype-come-from>.

23 Charmaine Picard, "A Q&A with Carrie Mae Weems," *Modern Painters* 26, no. 1 (Jan. 2014): 67.

a photograph, work of art, or graphic.”<sup>24</sup> With regard to fig. 2a, the most common words students used to describe the image were: black-and-white photograph, young, woman, black, texture of hair, sweater, holding chicken leg, holding fried chicken leg. Other responses qualified and elaborated these observations: color of the young woman’s skin (light), texture of her hair (straight, straight-ish, wavy), sweater (baggy), the young woman looked directly into the camera, the position of her hand(s), angle of her head as well as chicken leg, starkness of image (nothing to distract), light from the right.

Reviewing their listed responses to “what do you see?” I noticed how *certain* they seemed to be about what they saw, and their confidence in the language they used to describe it.

The class discussed their lists until a consensus, as represented by the above list, was achieved. I then passed out the second sheet, and asked students to consider the question intently: “WHY do you see what you see?” I found that students had some difficulty in conceptualizing this question, so I provided a clarifying question: “WHY is the figure in the photograph ‘woman?’”

**LP:** This is a fantastic question and gets to the heart of that durability of race as a construct. To name this person as a woman, and moreover, as a black woman is one thing. To articulate how we made those identifications prompts a reckoning with the amateur biology, as Dorothy E. Roberts has put it, that has relaunched race and gender as biological, immutable truths.<sup>25</sup>

**RDF:** I like the way you put that! I think you are right. This is how students responded to fig. 2b: black because...(skin color, shape of nose); woman because...(features, hairstyle, jewelry); young because...(texture of skin, hairstyle, no gray in hair); fried chicken because...(texture). In their introduction to visual literacy Melissa Thibault and David Walbert insist that “while accurate observation is important, *understanding* what we see and comprehending visual relationships are at least as important.”<sup>26</sup> I wanted the question on fig. 2b to assess this understanding by unsettling what students perceived as innate and obvious (determined by their confidence in adjectives for fig. 2a). And then I asked them: since the image was black and white, and the color of skin is literally a shade of gray, and the most obvious markers of femaleness are absent, how do you “see” black and woman? What, exactly, are you seeing?<sup>27</sup> I wanted the students to recognize how much their contexts (raced, classed, gendered; historical and social) determine what they see.

By consciously recognizing the subject of “black woman with chicken” as black and woman, the class considered what work race and gender do in the observation of this image, and for whom.

## CONCLUSION: UNSETTLING AIN'T NO JOKE!

The work of unsettling what has been presented to us, from our first days, as settled is no small task. Our relationship to each other, the land, the histories we have been told, our relationship to ourselves, and ultimately how we see ourselves are all up for grabs when we truly unsettle who gets to look and who can only be viewed. A common goal of our different pedagogies and of the work of Weems and Gonzales-Day is to unsettle how whiteness has created otherness in order to have whiteness be a legitimate

social location. These two artists go about this work with different kinds of agency in their own artistic frames and what they put in those frames. Across our different pedagogical spaces of a core literature class and an advanced research methods course, we also provided different prompts to our students. Yet there is a common thread that joins the pedagogical and artistic practices discussed in this essay: the desire to unsettle and reorder our ways of being with each other, so that we may imagine new ways to be together.

One challenge that we discussed was the fact that reordering how we are with ourselves, altering our ontologies, cannot be predetermined through a lesson plan and certainly not measured through an end-of-semester course evaluation. We imagine that Weems and Gonzales-Day might also share a healthy detachment from the “outcome” of their viewers’ experiences. Their work seeks to unsettle, perhaps, with the brave stance that we cannot delineate how things will reorder themselves. As educators, as intellectuals, we take up this work in our classroom spaces but we are strengthened by reminding each other that despite what the semester structure and routine may convey to us, the durability of racial and gender stereotypes cannot be undone in one fell swoop.

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Thibault and David Walbert, “Reading Images: An Introduction to Visual Literacy,” Learn NC, accessed Mar. 7, 2018, <https://www.oercommons.org/courses/reading-images-an-introduction-to-visual-literacy/view>.

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Thibault and Walbert, “Reading Images.”

<sup>27</sup> *6 Photographers, 1 Man, 6 Perspectives* is a great video that depicts how much preconceived notions inform what we see. See Michael Zhang, “6 Photographers Asked to Shoot Portraits of 1 Man...with a Twist,” PetaPixel, Nov. 4, 2015, <https://petapixel.com/2015/11/04/6-photographers-asked-to-shoot-portraits-of-1-man-with-a-twist/>.

# SCREENED MEMORIES, A CHOREOGRAPHY OF GRACE: THE VIDEO ART OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Stephen Pfohl

"You write something not because you have the answer," muses Carrie Mae Weems. "You write something because you know you need to work through it."<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I endeavor to work through aspects of Weems's video art, moving pictures situated at the crossroads of aesthetic pleasure and global struggles for justice. A critically acclaimed photographer, Weems has over the last fifteen years also worked extensively in the medium of moving pictures, producing videos that mash up iconic cultural imagery with elements of dance theater. Weems began to work with video in 2003 with the production of *Coming Up for Air*, a series of visual-textual meditations on the complexity of human relationships—troubled interactions between siblings; tensions between a white male slave owner and the women, white and black, in his antebellum life; an ode to a beloved father, memories of whom travel across time on wings of a sliding trombone; the passion of lovers undone by the violent hand of the state. As Kathryn E. Delmez observes, "The influence of Chris Marker, Maya Deren, and Federico Fellini can be seen through her... nonlinear assemblage of poetic scenes that create a dream-like sense of fantasy.... Typically, there is a musical score and sometimes there is a poetic narrative recited by the artist in her deep and controlled voice."<sup>2</sup>

Whether as stand-alone visual works, elements of site-specific installations, or aspects of live performance, Weems's videos challenge us to reckon—intellectually and in the flesh—with haunting screened memories, each rooted in wintry circuits of power, while yearning for spring and the lush revolutionary heat of summer. Reflecting on aesthetic-political practices at play in Weems's video work, this essay begins with a meditation on

demands made by Weems's moving pictures on the viewing audience (fig. 1).

## I. WHAT DO WEEMS'S MOVING PICTURES WANT?

What do moving pictures want? What demands do they make on those who watch them? For several decades, theorists of film and video have answered these questions by reading cinematic images like a language—as coded, if largely unconscious, ideological texts. Accordingly, the "gaze" of the "viewing subject" was said to be structured by one's location within entangled symbolic webs of power and desire. The viewer is called out—or inter-

pellated—to identify with certain dramatis personae and narratives, but not with others. As productive as this critical approach has been, it is important to recognize that moving pictures are never simply coded texts. In addition to being visual conduits of meaning, film and video are also suggestive technologies of fascination (or repulsion) that captivate our senses in a haptic manner.

As representational filters, cinematic media channel viewers' attention down narrowly defined optical corridors of meaning. They shape our ways of seeing and edit out competing interpretations of

what appears on screen. But this is not the only thing that moving pictures do. Films and videos also carry viewers beyond the lonely limits of egoistic subjectivity into enchanting circuits of imaginary identification and contagious affect. This is to enter a suggestive visual web, a dreamy twilight zone of images in excess of everyday consciousness and the confines of language. The video art of Carrie Mae Weems operates in both realms at once. As critical visual texts, Weems's videos raise profound questions about the politics of memory-making and memory-loss. As entrancing visual choreographies, they transmit resonant (or dissonant) emotional vibrations. Weems's mov-



1. Carrie Mae Weems, *The Power of Your Vote*, 2016 (video still).

<sup>1</sup> "Art21 Exclusive: *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*," YouTube video, 7:22, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, July 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bP3TwJ539xE>. Many of Weems's videos and performances discussed in this essay are viewable on YouTube; citations will be given where available.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn E. Delmez, "Coming Up for Air, 2003–4; Italian Dreams, 2006; Afro-Chic, 2009," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, exh. cat. (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 206.

ing pictures invite us to engage poetically with sensuous vectors of remembrance, loss, and yearning. In keeping with her early work in street theater and training in dance, every gesture—every step on a treadmill, stride down Flatbush Avenue, stroll through a corridor, or subtle movement of a shoulder, hip, hand, or eye—conjures up, not simply a story, but also vibrant waves of feelings. Three black women singers stand stage left before the audience. A large screen extends upward behind the performers. The singer in the middle wears a flowing, ankle-length white tunic, composed of many layers. In a sonorous plea for justice and healing, she demands a proper burial for her missing brothers. This is *Past Tense*, a 2016 performance by Weems and an ensemble of singers and musicians at the Onassis Festival Antigone Now in New York (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> This is a rite of remembrance, a refusal of fleeting comforts purchased by denial.

The singer's long black hair is pulled behind her head. Perhaps she is an ancient goddess or a mythic heroine conjured up to grace the present. The two women accompanying the singer stand a step up on a riser behind her. The staging is constructivist, Brechtian, elegant but minimal.

It reminds us that we too are part of the drama, and that our lives are also theatrical—ritual performances that repeat, transgress, or transform scripts enveloping us since birth, social scripts rooted in a contested history that is never ours alone. Call and response: haunted fields of history and the fascinated self. Weems's videos direct attention to performances of meaning and emotion in the dramaturgy of daily life. The woman on the riser to the singer's left is tall and wears a modest mid-length black dress. She is draped, head to knee, in a white headscarf or prayer cloth. The woman to the singer's right is dressed in a long black gown. Her arms are bare. "Here I am again," the singer declares, in an outpouring of verse that is both operatic and Pentecostal, resilient and soulful. "How did I get here? Played by all the rules. Then they changed." *Whose voice is this?* "Lost here in the dark. I can't see my foot to take a step....It hurts so bad I can hardly breathe."

These moving images prompt us to ask, "Whose voice is this?" Maybe it is a voice expelled from memory, a subterranean voice pushed to the margins of consciousness? The singer repeats, with uncanny resonance, a phrase that is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. "I can hardly breathe." Call and response: "I can hardly breathe." Maybe this is Eric Garner's voice, choking, gasping for air. "I can hardly breathe. I can hardly breathe. I can hardly breathe." Repetition and ritual: ritual and revolution: "How did I get here?...I can hardly breathe." A mixed-media performance, *Past Tense* includes a remix of some of Weems's most compelling video work to date. The same is true of *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, first staged at the Spoleto Festival in 2016, which also incorporates a video remix with Weems's poetic recitation, dancers, singers, and poets performing.<sup>4</sup> A documentary about *Grace Notes* entitled "Art21 Exclusive: *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*" adds a further layer of scenes of the performers discussing the piece backstage

with Weems. In *Past Tense*, the thematic and aesthetic-political concerns of *Grace Notes* are replayed in a slightly different register. This makes reflection on these interrelated works an immersive entry point into the corpus of Weems's video art. The following analysis will often move in and among several works simultaneously as they relate to each other dialogically.

These works want the viewers to ask questions: questions about how our troubled pasts overshadow the present, whitewashed questions pushed to the margins of memory, questions about how we have arrived together in this knotted space in time, and questions about what to do next. "Please hear my call....Death has burned me raw. I need a healing, please" (*Past Tense*). A theatrical montage of storytelling and choreography, Weems's video performances invite us to reckon critically with the official story that America tells about itself. This is a thick-skinned story, ritually cleansed of the fibers of lived history and shrouded in myth. As Weems suggests in her 2008 video *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, this is "a story within

a story"—a racialized, capital-intensive, and masculine story, a story set in motion by the violent trade winds of *The Black Atlantic*.<sup>5</sup>

Weems's provocative videos reopen this contested tale. They also remind viewers of the performative character of all rituals of remembrance and forgetting. Returning to *Past Tense*, we hear the following verse:

Oh, my black brother....Oh, oh, I love you....They hurt me when they hurt you.... But I'm here for you, forever true....So, let the killers know they can't play us this

way. Oh, these black bodies undone by the blue. But when we sing pain down, that's how we make it through.

The singer's voice is joined by plucky piano keys, a tense violin, and a chorus of snapping fingers. "They hurt me when they hurt you....But I'm here for you, forever true." Weems next appears center stage. She informs us that what we are witnessing is not a play but a series of ideas or concepts—a collage of visual, textual, and musical reflections on the story of Antigone. Why Antigone? The idea for this performance came, Weems explains, while she was working on a piece about the relationship between grace and the pursuit of democracy, a project inspired by President Obama's moving rendition of "Amazing Grace" at a church service in Charleston, South Carolina, following a deadly outburst of white supremacist hate. Reflecting on a recent spate of police killings of unarmed blacks and why so many young US black men never reach age twenty-one, Weems declares in *Grace Notes* "the thing to me that is remarkable about our history, about who we are, about how we have conducted ourselves in the onslaught of history, has been to maintain the core of our dignity, our ability to still sort of evoke and offer and to give that generosity, to share it with others, is one of our greatest strengths. And to me, that is the ultimate call of grace."

Later, looking back at *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* in the Art21 docu-



2. Carrie Mae Weems, *Past Tense*, 2016 (video still).

<sup>3</sup> "Past Tense: Onassis Festival 2016 Antigone Now," YouTube video, 35:28, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, July 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pouMju47YM>.

<sup>4</sup> *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* was subsequently performed at Yale University in September 2016 and at the Kennedy Center in November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See plate 1.10. The reference here is to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

mentary Weems realized that it was, in truth, a contemporary version of the ancient tale of Antigone—"the story of a woman, a community, who's trying to figure out how to bury her brother. And they are denying her the right to do that, because they're denying that it has even happened or that warrants our attention. And she says 'I'm going to bury him, I'm going to bury him, I am going to bury him right.'" In *Past Tense* she takes up the story of Antigone more explicitly. Antigone is sentenced to be buried alive for refusing King Creon's edict against publicly mourning her brother, Polynices. Antigone's brother was slain, as Weems tells the story, for *rightly or wrongly* resisting the inhumane imposition of impersonal state law. And following his death, the body of Polynices was to lay exposed until nature took its course. Antigone transgressed the king's order by burying her brother, pledging allegiance to a higher law than that of the state—the law of the heart, a law demanding generous rituals of remembrance, reciprocity, and mutual recognition. Antigone's punishment was tragic. It also symbolized a profound shift in the Northwestern imagination of what, as humans, we owe one another, instituting an "irreplaceable" loss of "reciprocal recognition."<sup>6</sup> Weems pictures this loss, and its collective disavowal, as a wintry fall from grace. Repeatedly, in her videography, we see an image of a beautiful, young, black woman, in a beige silk kimono, gazing at snow falling on a cherry tree in full bloom (see plate 1.10). As Laurie Ann Farrell describes the scene, "Turning clockwise like a metronome set to the reflective cadence of the piece, the stoic woman remains expressionless as she stands next to the cherry blossom tree in full bloom and surveys the falling snow."<sup>7</sup> Why is snow falling on a blossoming tree? Should it not already be spring? And why is the woman wearing a kimono? This figure appears first in the video *Constructing History*, where she is paired sequentially with the image of a distraught Japanese woman in a kimono cradling another woman on the brink of death in the aftermath of a US nuclear attack. Weems's voice on the audio explains:

In the 1940s, a startling thing happened—a bomb more powerful than life itself, was dropped on Japan. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. And we knew that the world was now completely, completely ours to destroy, and if left in the wrong hands, would be destroyed. Life gone in a moment in the flash, in the blink of an eye.

The video art of Carrie Mae Weems, like her photography, challenges us to reckon with troubling matters at the global intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality, excised from memory by the gatekeepers of official history. "A woman stands in the thaw of winter, the beginning of spring, reflecting, considering, imagining, contemplating the past, imagining the future," we are told, as we contemplate the woman in the kimono in *Con-*

*structing History* studying the blossoming tree covered with snow: "With one step she could be in the future in an instant, or in the past, or in the moment, the now. But to get to the now, to this moment, she needs to look back over the landscape of memory. Lost in memory, the woman faces a history, a history with a story that has been told a thousand times before. If you look on the horizon, here and there, first seen, now hidden, are little sightings of hope or dreams, of memories. If you look closely, through the corridors of time, even within the horror, one could see the fluttering wings of doves, wings like time, batting out beats of hope. Hope was the thing missed, the thing hoped for. You could almost taste it, but it was just out of reach, just above your head."

In commenting on *Constructing History*, critics have interpreted the young woman gazing at the snow-covered tree as a figurative "everywoman," a guide to the video's central concerns. Elsewhere, Weems bestows the role of guide on a teacher in the *constructed space* of a classroom, the video's primary setting. "She tells the students that the bright lights of history are now shining down on them, on them, on her, on them and us together. And now all things are unavoidable. Perhaps in shame we'll turn away, but the crime remains. The age of innocence has passed, and you are now responsible for your own future." Hearing these words sends the students into a fugue state. Dazed by uncertainty, they twist, turn, and stagger about in a cloud of mist. "But now, with their own bodies," Weems informs us, "they engage their own dark terrain, their own winter." After watching *Constructing History*, I wonder if learning to

dance through disorientation might be a requisite step in remaking the dominant choreography of history.

In *Grace Notes*, the teacher's words morph into Antigone's, as Weems performs a twenty-first-century version of Sophocles's tale. Weems's engagement with Antigone puts her art in conversation with the critical thought of philosopher Judith Butler. Like Weems, Butler re-spins Antigone's ancient tale as a contemporary political allegory. Reflecting on "dehumanization" brought about by the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Butler asks, "What is the relation between the violence by which these ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Are the violence and the prohibition [on discourse] both permutations of the same violence?"<sup>8</sup> Butler here "injects into contemporary public debate something that was thought to have been lost forever"—the "shameless impurity" of Antigone, "who, in the end, preferred death to irresponsibility, the unrequited passion of love to self-preservation."<sup>9</sup> Weems does something similar. In *Past Tense* and *Grace Notes*, she makes discerning connections between Antigone's story and the Black Lives Matter movement today (fig. 3). Weems announces in *Past Tense*, "the country was slowly, persistently changing. Traditions were dying and colliding. Demographics were shifting. The evidence and the anger were



3. Carrie Mae Weems, "Art21 Exclusive: Grace Notes," 2016 (video still).

6 Victoria I. Burke, "The Substance of Ethical Recognition: Hegel's Antigone and the Irreplaceability of the Brother," *New German Critique* 40, no. 1 (118) (Winter 2013): 27, 8.

7 Laurie Ann Farrell, "An Opus: Carrie Mae Weems," in *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, exh. cat. (Savannah: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2009), n.p.

8 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 36.

9 Arthur Kroker, *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 29–30.



everywhere. It was so strong, you could taste it.”

Weems provides a poetic snapshot of a nation divided by mutual accusations of blame. As she speaks from her lectern in *Past Tense*, a sepia-toned photograph of the artist herself appears on screen, an image made for the 1998 installation, *Ritual and Revolution*. Standing between rows of ancient stone columns, Weems wears a long gown, composed of plunging layers, with a river of gauze cascading off her right shoulder. Her eyes are closed and her head is tilted in reflection, or, perhaps, prayer. Her hair is laced with flowers and a large white blossom adorns a skirt gathered at her waist. Critics have interpreted this image in various ways—Weems as Queen of the May, a pagan symbol of rebirth and hope; as a symbol of International Workers’ Day, celebrated on May 1; or as Black Athena, a visual icon of the African origins of all human life.<sup>10</sup> In *Past Tense*, Weems gathers all of these associations in the image of Antigone, a visual conduit for countering historical amnesia.

Weems’s recitation evokes the divisive landscape of contemporary America: “Tongues were wagging, fingers were pointing here, there, and everywhere, blaming you, blaming me, blaming them, blaming us. But trapped by forces beyond their control, white men...are disaffected and disenfranchised” and “black men...are disaffected and dying.” In the eyes of the state, observes Weems, both groups are “devoid of power. And, yet, blinded by rage and by historical circumstances, they each blamed the other.” Weems’s concern with troubled relations between disadvantaged whites and blacks links her art to the critical sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois.

In *Black Reconstruction in America*,<sup>11</sup> Du Bois provides a glimpse into the racialized economy of the US South in the aftermath of the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved Africans. Why, he asks, did dirt-poor Southern whites refuse to ally themselves with impoverished former slaves? Were both groups of “free” laborers not condemned to grovel at the bottom of a low-wage capitalist marketplace? If so, why did they not join together in hopes of collectively enhancing their economic well-being?

According to Du Bois, the reason was clear—in exchange for submitting to an economic system that paid them poorly, low-income whites were offered “psychological” compensation—a “wage” of whiteness that “drove a wedge between the white and black workers.”<sup>12</sup> Regardless of class, whites were “given public deference and titles of courtesy,” and also access to public-sector employment, the best available schools, police protection, and even flattering stories about themselves in newspapers that ignored blacks except when writing about matters of “crime and ridicule.” In this, the “political success” of the “doctrine of racial separation” exceeded its economic results.<sup>13</sup> Pairing economic hardship with rites of public degradation and an

omnipresent fear of white terror, Reconstruction was a precarious time for African Americans. As such, wrote Du Bois, following Emancipation, “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”<sup>14</sup>

Inspired by Du Bois, Weems examines the survival in the present of such ritually orchestrated divisions between poor whites and blacks. Visually, this story is retold in *Cornered*, a short video juxtaposing split-screen documentary footage of embattled whites pointing vicious fingers at children of a darker hue riding school buses, with poignant images of blacks protesting the 1963 murder of children in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>15</sup> What pits these two groups against each other so fiercely? Set to the somber tones of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* (music also used in *Constructing History*), *Cornered* invites careful visual attention to gestures of seething white rage and the steely resilience of blacks struggling for survival, dignity, and justice (fig. 4).

Several images used in *Cornered* reappear in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts* (plate 7) and also in several of Weems’s live performances and lectures. In all of these iterations what do Carrie Mae Weems’s moving pictures want from those who watch them? This much is clear—Weems’s videos

call upon us to reckon imaginatively with a violent historical past that warps our present relationships and limits our chances of together creating an equitable, beautiful, and sustainable future.

## II. DU BOIS IN CHINA

In February 1959 Dr. William E. B. Du Bois, sociologist, writer, activist, editor, and founder of the NAACP and the influential Pan-Africanist movement, along

with his wife, the writer Shirley Graham, visited China at the invitation of the Chinese Peace Committee. The couple was greeted at the airport by Kuo Mo-Jo, minister of culture, and other Chinese dignitaries, including Madame Li Te-ch’uan, minister of health, and their visit was documented in a film made by the Central News and Documentary Films Studio of the People’s Republic. In addition to coverage of Du Bois and Graham meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai, we see Du Bois addressing over a thousand professors and students gathered to celebrate the sociologist’s ninety-first birthday (fig. 5).

As a sociologist, I find it striking to see Du Bois, a “scholar denied” in the US, greeted by such a large and enthusiastic Chinese audience.<sup>16</sup> A digitized version of this film, *Du Bois in China*, was posted in October 2015 on YouTube by Carrie Mae Weems.<sup>17</sup> *Du Bois in China* was not made by Weems but her hosting of the film online reflects the numerous affinities between her art and Du Bois’s critical sociology. In addition to examining historical divisions between the black and white working classes, each also complicates the legacy of Marx by refashioning critiques of capitalism to



4. Carrie Mae Weems, *Cornered*, 2016 (video still).

10 Kerry Cardoza, “Carrie Mae Weems Reshapes History in Her Image at the Block Museum,” *Chicago Reader: Arts and Culture*, Sept. 26, 2017, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/carrie-mae-weems-ritual-revolution-block-museum/Content?oid=31343359>.

11 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Atheneum, 1992).

12 Du Bois, 701.

13 Du Bois, 700.

14 Du Bois, 30.

15 “*Cornered*,” YouTube video, 3:44, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RotSnqXQmy8>.

16 Aldon D. Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of American Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

17 “*Du Bois in China*,” YouTube video, 3:15, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Oct. 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiowjxaOSE>.

better grapple with the vicious materiality of colonialism and the violent enforcing of the color line.<sup>18</sup> Both Weems and Du Bois call attention to the transnational character of racialized formations of power and the global roots of racialized violence.

These themes are already evident in several photographic series that precede Weems's turn to video work. *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, for example, contains an image of a tilted globe and the words, "A hot spot in a corrupt world" (plate 5.6). Imagine, if you will, an ocean of tears connecting the west coast of Africa with the Americas. In her *Sea Islands Series* (1991–92), Weems visualizes traces of African life and folklore in the Gullah Island communities off the southern US coast, while her 1993 exhibition, *Africa*, involves stark photographs of fortresses in Ghana and Senegal that once served as ports of transport for captured Africans.

These dramatic geographical movements are reflected materially in *Ritual and Revolution* for which Weems printed enlarged stills on sheer fabric hung throughout an exhibition space. Viewers wander amidst these printed banners underscoring global contradictions lodged at the core of Western modernity. Signifiers of the French Revolution are juxtaposed with images connoting the terror unleashed by the French against enslaved Africans in Haiti, exposing the hypocrisy of celebrating the supposed universal "rights of man" at home. Other images in this installation suggest the abject horror of the Middle Passage, while photographs depicting the artist with Hopi women in the Southwest remind us of the violence of US colonial settlement. *Ritual and Revolution* also makes visual references to the Holocaust, the US nuclear attack on Japan, and the murder of black children in Birmingham, underscoring the genocidal underside of "enlightened" modernity. The maze of suspended photographic banners through which viewers move is further animated by an ambient audio of Weems's voice: "I was with you / In the ancient ruins of time // Out of the shadows / From the edge of a new world / I saw your slow emergence & / Saw you spinning jenny's cotton into gold."<sup>19</sup>

These global and political concerns are literally embodied and set into motion in *Constructing History*, produced by Weems in collaboration with students from the Savannah College of Art and Design. This video is book-ended by closeups of 2008 presidential primary candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. In between, viewers are invited inside a classroom, where a globe on the teacher's desk once again serves as an important prop. Within the classroom, children are asked to contemplate the nuclear nightmare rained down on Japan, the US's imperial war against Vietnam, and the assassination of progressive leaders and revolutionaries worldwide, includ-

ing the murder of Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, and the killings of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Che Guevara, Salvador Allende, Patrice Lumumba, as well as student demonstrators. Images of these violent events are interspersed with iconic representations of struggles for racial justice and human rights in the US. Weems's abiding concern with global political matters, her focus on assassinations in *Constructing History*, particularly those of the 1960s, grounds her prescient analysis of the repressive silencing of radical black leadership over the last several decades. *Constructing History* resonates strongly with *The 13th*, Ava DuVernay's critically acclaimed documentary about racialized mass incarceration, both works exposing the crippling effects of targeted assassinations on efforts to counter racism and advance the cause of social justice.

In addition to the influence of Du Bois's critical social theory on Weems's global perspective, their visions also converge in the psychological dynamic of "double consciousness." "It is a peculiar situation, this double consciousness," writes Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>20</sup> Double consciousness often results in "self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals," but this feeling of "twoness" is not without its epis-



5. Du Bois in China, 1953 (video still).

temological advantages. When reckoned with reflexively, it can also bestow what Du Bois refers to as the gift of "second sight." As such, a critical understanding of distorted social mirroring can aid "the black artisan" in struggling for "the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire."<sup>21</sup>

Double consciousness and the gift of second sight are recurrent themes in Weems's videos, where they are often focused on the intersection of gender and race. In *Italian Dreams* (2006), for instance, Weems embodies this estranging sense of "twoness," making herself a noticeably absent presence—an invisible woman—before the camera of Federico Fellini.<sup>22</sup> At issue is the compromised situation of the black woman artist in masculinist Eurocentric art history.

As Weems's video unfolds, we watch from behind as the artist roams through the oneiric landscape of Cinecittà, Fellini's film studio in Rome: down hallways decorated with portraits of dead white men, through manicured gardens and architectures that radiate wealth (fig. 6), past aging male

18 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Radical Black Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

19 "Ritual & Revolution, 1998," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Recent Work, 1992–1998*, ed. Thomas Piché Jr. and Thelma Golden, exh. cat. (New York: George Braziller; Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1999), plates 69–70.

20 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Dover, 1990), 1.

21 Du Bois, 2, 7.

22 "Italian Dreams," YouTube video, 9:32, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Mar. 28, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9\\_s5NINeFlk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_s5NINeFlk).

artists who mentor young women in exchange for sex and the pleasures of mirrored approbation, then up a spiraling staircase into a cinematic heaven (or hell). This is a rite of aesthetic deconstruction and reconstruction. Echoing the concerns of her photographic series *Not Maner's Type* (1997), *Italian Dreams* extends Weems's poignant critique of the voyeuristic male gaze to Fellini, a filmmaker important to Weems's own cinematic eye.

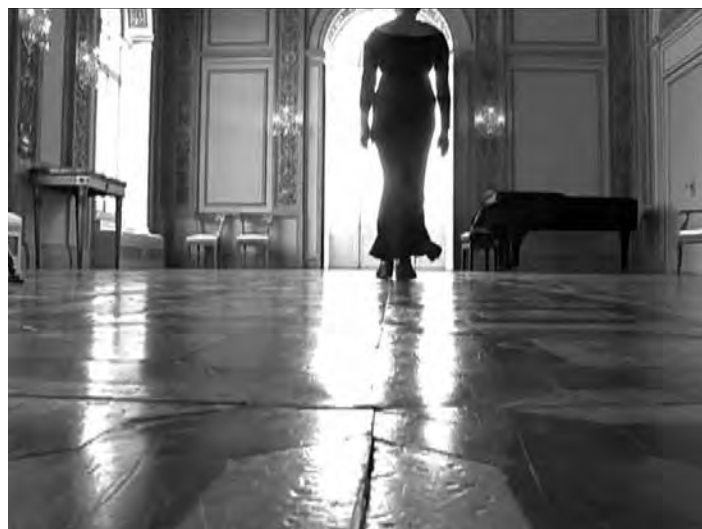
"As much as I loved Fellini," Weems remarks, "I knew that Fellini didn't necessarily love me, that I wasn't a part of his imagination...and so I had to... make myself [appear] in his space."<sup>23</sup> Inserting her own image into Fellini's cinematic space, Weems visually breaks down, then reframes, the heralded filmmaker's gaze. At various points in *Italian Dreams*, we see a young black woman poised before a typewriter and, through a window, flakes of snow descending to earth. Apparently, it is still winter. But not for long. Weems enters the scene and places her hand on the young woman's shoulder, joining her perhaps in rewriting Fellini's script. Later, Weems appears with two female companions in Afro wigs, a scene that brings to mind her video entitled *Afro-Chic*, a playful homage to an iconic look that traveled the globe.<sup>24</sup> Bearing connotations of both fashion and politics, a racially and ethnically heterogeneous group of female models in Afros strut a designer runway beneath huge posters of first, Angela Davis, then, Bobby Seale. Near the end of *Italian Dreams*, Weems appears in a burglar's mask behind a steering wheel, wildly piloting a car of women through the streets of Rome at night, women taking back control of the action.

One of the ways Weems exercises control over the filmic landscape is in her coordination of music and text, and this is another aspect of her affinity with Du Bois. Du Bois prefaces his essay on double consciousness with a bar of music and lyrics from a "Negro spiritual" by Arthur Symons—"O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand / All night long crying with a mournful cry / As I lie and listen, and cannot understand / ...is it I, is it I?" Here, and throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*, music sets the tone for the words that follow. This is also a key element in Weems's video work, where emotional soundscapes create an affective context for the spoken words. "Weems believes in using music," writes Laurie Ann Farrell, "when words will not suffice."<sup>25</sup>

Reflecting on the importance of music to her art, Weems informs us that she first began experimenting with sound when beginning to make videos. For example, *Constructing History* opens with the unsettling vibrations of a didgeridoo mixed with a chorus of trembling strings. The more recent installation *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* uses the melancholic chords of Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground." Plucking strings and gospel verse set the tone for *People of a Darker Hue*, and *The Mad-*

*ding Crowd* is haunted by a discordant duet for piano and oboe.<sup>26</sup> Dissonant tonality provides an affective backdrop for Weems's poetic meditation in all of these pieces on the politics of memory and forgetting. Right away we know we have lost something—the lived history we are part of.

Weems has collaborated with a variety of notable musicians, including, among others, composers Jason Moran, Craig Harris, and James Newton; jazz artists Graham Haynes, Yayoi Ikawa, Juliette Jones, Hamiet Bluiett, Geri Allen, Calvin Jones, Jawwad Taylor; as well as singers Eisa Davis, Alicia Hall Moran, and Imani Uzuri. "Like most Black musicians of any consequence," writes critic Greg Tate, "Weems reproduces and triggers the eruptive aphasia and glossolalia of Black Noise, those forms of racially coded harmonic dissonance that demand to be understood as both musical and unmusical alike... taking up space in the world's most culturally contested and monolithically congested places."<sup>27</sup>



6. Carrie Mae Weems, *Italian Dreams*, 2006 (video still).

A final connection between Du Bois and Weems involves the artist's 2013 collaboration with Hollingsworth Peonies, the American Peony Society, and landscape architect Walter Hood in creating *The Hope Peony* for the Du Bois Memorial Garden at University of Massachusetts Amherst, to coincide with the exhibition *Du Bois in Our Time* (plates 14.1, 14.3).<sup>28</sup> Examining historical divisions between blacks and whites, complicating Marxism, attending to the global character of racism, exploring the impact of double consciousness, juxtaposing music with text, and the creation of a "Peony of Hope"—each of these matters connects the cultural work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Carrie Mae Weems.

### III. ALWAYS STOPPED, ALWAYS CHARGED, ALWAYS DANCING

In *Past Tense*, as Weems continues her poetic invocation of the spirit of Antigone, the singers repeat mournful verses of remembrance and the phrase—"how do you measure a life?" A black man is running on a treadmill. Running and running; he is quickly going nowhere. In Weems's 2016 *People of a Darker Hue* (plate 13), in which this video dance theater image first appears, it is accompanied by the strained pitch of what sounds like an electrified harpsichord and these words intoned by Weems:

The man was rejected, the woman was denied, time and time again. They were always stopped, always charged, always convicted. The numbers tell the story. She was twenty-five. He was twenty-two. She was thirty-one. He was twenty-five. She was thirty-four. He was thirty-seven. He was twenty-seven.

23 "Carrie Mae Weems Speaks at Anderson Ranch," July 21, 2016, YouTube video, 1:03:37, posted by Blouin Artinfo, Aug. 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbNDSjS7ScE>.

24 "Afro-Chic," YouTube video, 5:27, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Mar. 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5ZkOw9aKVM>.

25 Farrell, "Opus," n.p.

26 "The Maddening Crowd," YouTube video, 7:35, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRXmfwtqQKg>.

27 Greg Tate, "The Belonging of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Social Studies*, ed. Elvira Dyangani Ose, exh. cat. (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 2010), 184.

28 "Du Bois in Our Time," University of Massachusetts Amherst, Sept. 9, 2013, <https://www.umass.edu/gateway/feature/du-bois-our-time>.

He was twelve. He was eighteen...

Weems recites the numbers with flat affect, but tension mounts with each count. How do you measure a life, she asks, when the numbers tell the story?

*She was twenty-five. He was twenty-two. She was thirty-one. He was twenty-five. She was thirty-four. He was thirty-seven. He was twenty-seven. He was twelve. He was eighteen...*

She was a mother, a sister, a daughter, a wife, a child. He was a father, a brother, an uncle, a cousin, a son, a child. He was thirty-seven. He was twenty-one....The numbers tell the story.

Number after number, a crescendo of mounting affect. We hear a gunshot fired blue to black. Shock, sorrow, and outrage: then slow-motion images of black people protesting, beating breasts in unison, a prayerful ritual of mourning and resistance, row after row, refusing to pretend what is happening is not (fig. 7).

Scenes of this synchronized protest are cut by a series of red-lettered dates and places, documentary images of police killing unarmed blacks, and, in the *Past Tense* version of this footage, a sorrowful trumpet rendition of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit": "March 3, 1991, Los Angeles. October 20, 2014, Chicago. July 17, 2014, New York City. July 5, 2016, Baton Rouge. July 6, 2016, Falcon Heights, Minnesota."

The mournful video soundscape explodes with the voice of Diamond Reynolds trying to converse with the police officer who just killed her boyfriend, Philando Castile: "He was trying to get out his ID, and his wallet, out his, um, out his pocket, and the officer just shot him in his arm....He just shot his arm off." "I told him not to reach for it," the officer shouts. "I told him to get his hand out." "You told him to get his ID, sir, his driver's license," says Reynolds. "Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead. Please don't tell me my boyfriend just went like that. Yes, I will sir. I'll keep my hands where they are. Please don't tell me this Lord. Please Jesus don't tell me that he's gone. Please don't tell me that he's gone. Please officer, don't tell me that you just..."

This unsettling exchange captured on video is prefaced in *People of a Darker Hue* by an extended slow-motion sequence of black people walking to work or to school along Flatbush Avenue. This is followed by a series of images of black males, teenaged and older, with short hair or dreads, each running on a treadmill enveloped by mist. Running and running, each running for his life. Time and again, the refrain, "how do you measure a life?" This is Antigone speaking, calling to us from the ruins of time. "In shame some will turn away, but the crime remains." A grieving mother appears. Her child has been assassinated. The sorrowful mother's image is lifted from *Constructing History* and dropped into *Past Tense*. "Remember me," soars the voice of the singer with the prayer cloth. Five times: a sonorous repetition, followed by Weems's voice. "Remember me. Remember me." This is video performance art, visual cultural ritual. "Remember me. Remember me."

Accompanied by the singers and musicians, Weems asks the audience of *Past Tense* to imagine, both intellectually and physically, the experience of

unprovoked and deadly violence. She narrates a series of scenarios:

Imagine. One evening, you are out strolling with your wife, your girl, your child, or perhaps your friends. A police car speeds by, its red strobe flashing. And just imagine, it comes to a stop right in front of you....For no apparent reason and they demand to see your ID....When you reach into your pocket to pull out your wallet, a nervous police officer assumes that maybe you are reaching for a gun, and then boom. Before you know it, unfortunately, shots are fired and you can feel now traveling through your body, a bullet....

Imagine that you are out strolling, chatting on the phone, kicking it with your friends, and a neighbor, a vigilante out protecting his neighborhood, decides, hum, what's he doing here in my neighborhood, and he stops you, and a struggle ensues, and boom, just like that a shot is heard, and you feel the bullet entering the left side of your temple....

Imagine that you are constantly questioned, insulted, frisked, for reasons unknown....Imagine Michael Brown. Imagine Eric Garner. And then imagine the grief that his mother is feeling, that his father is suffering.

One after another, the running men glance back over their shoulder, hoping to elude a script of capture written in blood, but ritually whitewashed from collective mem-

ory. This makes the explosive images of racialized police violence at once viscerally upsetting and aesthetically powerful. *People of a Darker Hue* ends with a black screen and a ritual commemoration, a long list read of innocent black citizens recently killed by the police. In *Past Tense*, the images of police killings are followed by three women singers performing a sorrowful rite of remembrance, voices soaring high above the thick clouds that now appear on screen. "Remember me. Remember me. Remember me. Where is he? Where is he? Where is he? Gone. Gone. Gone. Oh, he's gone!" Weems calls upon her audience to respond to the drama enacted on stage, and across the country by considering "beauty in all its bounty...while we can." As we listen, a buffalo gallops across the screen in melancholic black and white, running to the beat of a Native American drum cut by a sweeping symphonic score (fig. 8).

Several Indigenous men move across a prairie on all fours, dressed like buffalo, following the buffalo, becoming buffalo. A large herd runs wild, the buffalo-men close behind. The buffalo run off a perilously steep cliff, leaping into the air, suiciding. Watching the buffalo dash to their deaths fills me with sadness. Maybe it is the end of the world. The next scene is shot from the deck of a ship, a fossil-fueled vessel cutting a path through Arctic ice. Maybe it is the end of the world. Or perhaps this is an urgent invitation to both mourn and reimagine history while there is still time.



7. Carrie Mae Weems, *People of a Darker Hue*, 2016 (video still).

#### IV. THE OBAMA PROJECT, RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY

In the closing sequence of *Constructing History*, Weems revisits the close-ups of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama that open the video. The presidential primaries are over and Obama, “an unknown, an unexamined, a man who appears almost out of the void,” has won. “Opportunistic and a woman,” Clinton at first struggles, then accepts fate, and decides to get behind the man. She gathers friends around her and poses a series of questions: “Is it absolute power resolving itself to the changing landscape, changing demographics, or a new face on an old game—the politics, the surface, the power, the cool, the distant, the ability to bide one’s time? Is it proof that the sun is setting on the empire, she asks? Evidence that the president is a mere figurehead?...Evidence of conspiracy? Evidence of acquiescence? Evidence that the popular vote doesn’t matter? Evidence of backdoor politics?”

On screen, a middle-aged white man listens intently. Maybe he is an adviser. The screen fades to black. Seconds pass. Then, out of the black, a young woman stands poised, gazing at snow falling on the blossoming cherry tree. Winter lingers. This is video dance theater. The questions continue: “Evidence of a proper education? Evidence of the declining significance of race? Evidence that change has come? Evidence that democracy has won? Evidence that tyranny has won?” The video ends abruptly as the screen returns to black. What does this mean?

Weems has on numerous occasions expressed her admiration for Obama and the challenges he faced serving as the country’s first African American head of state. Obama’s election, she remarks, represented “a change in the American imagination,” adding “complexity to the making of history.”<sup>29</sup> Near the end of Obama’s second term, Weems solicited works from over twenty-five artists, musicians, and poets to be included in a “gift box” she prepared for the president. Subsequently, during the 2016 elections, she created a compelling short video, *The Power of Your Vote*, featuring Obama’s voice and moving pictures of people of various hues, walking alongside one another on a big city sidewalk.<sup>30</sup> “Hope is on the ballot and fear is on the ballot, too,” warns the former president. He asks voters to affirm the legacy of changes begun during his time in office, changes that “advance the cause of justice and equality and prosperity and freedom.” Why this did not happen is hinted at in Weems’s video, *The Obama Project*, produced several years earlier.<sup>31</sup>

*The Obama Project* explores how Barack Obama became a screen for competing cultural projections and anxieties. After a short introduction—“He was like me. He was like you. He was like us. He was other. He was different”—the video repeats the series of questions posed at the end of *Constructing History*. Accompanied by Samuel Barber’s somber musical score, Weems suggests that, “In the spiral and decline of Western power, he was too little, too late and he had come to represent the failure of a failed system. He was a last resort, the only option, the last hope, the only hope, the people’s choice. He represented the beginning of the end, the end of manifest destiny, the

end of the American dream, the end of the American way of life. He was both a symbol of our failure and a symbol of our freedom, a symbol of our loss and symbol of our highest aspirations.” But Obama was, of course, also a contested figure and, as Weems points out, some thought him “a weakling, a demigod, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a snake, a liar, an alien, a charlatan, a zebra, a joker, a joker’s joke, a Jesus, a jester, a jiver, a socialist, a communist, a doctor, a lawyer, and an African chief.”

Visually, *The Obama Project* involves a stunning set of digitally altered photographs, each casting a shadow across the other, before taking its place. The effect is transfixing. We see a series of digital makeovers, at once monstrous and beautiful: Obama as a communist with hammer and sickle pin on his lapel; as a silver alien with a vertical stripe down his face; as a spotted leopard; as a raccoon-eyed joker in white face followed by Obama in black face, with buggy eyes and bulbous red lips. Obama as a series of charismatic leaders: Mao, Hitler, Jesus, and a painted tribal leader. The

cumulative effect of Weems’s transubstantiating iconic images is devastating. In closing, however, the artist reminds us that, despite the plague of screened images projected upon him, Obama has given many a reason to believe, forget, hope, play, and pray; and, likewise, a reason to question, resist, trust, hate, as well as a reason to reason. Before fading to black, in the video’s final sequence, Obama returns as his presidential self. This time, he is wearing an American flag on his lapel. Constructing history continues.



8. Carrie Mae Weems, *Past Tense*, 2016 (video still).

#### V. WINTER IN AMERICA, “ODE TO LIFE,” MAY DAY RITUALS

Weems’s videos double back upon everyday cultural landscapes, making familiar things seem visually strange, helping us to reimagine things we otherwise take for granted—the effect of ritual performances of power. By means of studied repetition, musicality, iconic doubling, and startling moments of beauty, Weems’s videos imagine history as a site of ritual—a performative locus for contested memories and forgetting, pleasures and suffering, nightmares and hope. This is to reckon aesthetically with the power of ritual, including the aesthetic repetitions in Weems’s own video art. We see in various contexts and with different effects the same images of black men running on a treadmill, sometimes wearing Black Lives Matter t-shirts; men of a darker hue stepping together in a disciplined dance of resilience; black women roaming uninvited amidst the ruins of colonized architecture, taking in the sights, discovering pleasure in moving through spaces one is not supposed to be in, making unexpected turns around marvelous runways of subversive beauty, or dancing joyously around a maypole draped in the colors of spring. Weems’s videos often return to the image of a woman sitting before a typewriter and the “bright lights of history,” or contemplating snow falling out of season, or worse yet, mourning the assassination of yet another child. This is video dance theater. This is ritual.

A clock hangs on a wall between two windows in *Constructing History*,

<sup>29</sup> Weems quoted in Elvira Dyangani Ose, “Studies for a Social Project: Carrie Mae Weems; The Artist as Intellectual,” in *Social Studies*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> “*The Power of Your Vote*,” YouTube video, 3:41, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Sept. 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atLe1KoTjR4>.

<sup>31</sup> “*The Obama Project*,” YouTube video, 7:14, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Oct. 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dc9MzLdbqSg>.

*Grace Notes*, and *People of a Darker Hue*. The clock tells us that it is always three. But is it afternoon or night? "It's always night or we wouldn't need light," Thelonious Monk told *Time* magazine in 1964. Monk's words preface Robin D. G. Kelley's essay, "Keepin' It (Sur)real: Dreams of the Marvelous," a meditation on the radical poetics of anti-colonial African diasporic art and its relation to surrealism. Energized by "the revolts of the colonial world" and the "marvelous" rhythms of jazz and the blues, according to Kelley, in interaction with each other these artful social movements plunge "below the surface" of European modernity in "a relentless attack on colonialism, capitalism, the clergy, the black bourgeoisie, and genocide."<sup>32</sup> It is easy to picture Weems's art as part of Kelley's story. Weems's videos conjure up dreamy images that depart from the colonizing confines of dominant masculinist Euro-American ways of seeing. They also always begin at night—not simply in the metaphoric black night of Africa, but in the digital technological night of the filmic black leader that visually frames each of Weems's moving pictures. In Weems's videos, before seeing anything we must first gaze into the night, look into nothing but blackness for as long as fifteen seconds. Sound, music, noise, the artist's poetic voice—these repeatedly come before sight in Weems's videos. This is ritual.

Some types of ritual are life-sustaining; they inspire discernment, generosity, and hope. Weems's poetic videos are rituals of this kind. They endeavor to dispel the binding effects of rituals of a more troubling sort—repetitious social practices that reproduce hierarchical forms of power; rituals that provoke anxiety, despair, and resentment; rituals that maim the flesh and mess up the mind. Weems's artistic concern with ritual resembles the theoretical focus of sociologist Stuart Hall.<sup>33</sup> In *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Weems places a quote from Hall alongside a photograph of a rolling pin and the phrase "By any means necessary" (plate 5.4). Hall envisioned rituals as performative vectors of power, dramaturgical ceremonies that "set in motion...certain ideological presuppositions or tendencies."<sup>34</sup> As artful social practices, however, rituals are never simply a one-way street. They also animate resistance: subverting hegemony and sparking desires for previously unimagined futures. This is the aesthetic function of ritual in Weems's video art—the use of moving pictures to dislodge dominant constructions of memory (and forgetting) and to inspire history making of a more just, hopeful, and life-sustaining sort.

In *I Look at Women*, a remix of scenes from *Constructing History* with images from *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* and *Italian Dreams*, Weems directs visual attention to rituals that shape women's lives—stylized ways of moving, dressing, looking, and relating to others.<sup>35</sup> "I look at women," Weems announces, "I look at them carefully. I look at women in troubled spaces, the troubled space of desire, their unrequited love, their identity shattered

and whole." One woman holds a mirror up for the other; a woman dancer, Francesca Harper, draped in fluffy white faux fur and not much else dances in slow motion, undulating, rolling her hips, eyeing the viewer; Weems's face appears in a close-up. Her eyes are pensive and her lips move in the shape of unheard words. What we do hear: "It's an open territory, one with many doors, some leading to paths that dissipate, to women, here and there, who on the journey, lost their way home..., or failed to understand the true price of the ticket and the related consequences, or who mismeasured themselves, others, and the situation at hand...or who have been driven, if not out, certainly mad."

A woman tosses herself on the man's lap, but he pushes her away and she slides to the floor like a discarded rag doll. Three other women, dressed in evening gowns and heels, sit behind the couple, each gazing into a looking glass. Fascinated by their mirrored images, the women do not notice the couple's troubled dance. This is not a pretty picture. Nor should we expect it to be. This is ritual. This is burlesque. This is dance theater.

The viewer experiences this ritual burlesque of history perhaps most fully in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*. Weems, in a black tuxedo, white-face, and a black mask, appears and disappears into the black of a "Pepper's Ghost" projection framed by thick red velvet stage curtains. In one sequence she is stepping side to side, humming in a hushed but aggressive manner. Weems points a clowning finger in our direction, beckoning us to approach the screen and join in history's perilous dance. "I have seen you for a long time. And I know you. I know you,"

Weems declares with edgy laughter. This is not the only one of Weems's videos that assumes an aggressive tone. In *Comedy*, one of Weems's two works with this title, the other being an homage to a long lineage of black comedians, two silhouetted African American women sit facing one another in rocking chairs.<sup>36</sup> The women jokingly deflate the "absurdity of racism" and "the fragile and strange world of white supremacy" with the poisoned darts of humorous word play. This suggests affinities between Weems's radical art and the subversive surrealism of "the wild and wacky world of black humor."<sup>37</sup> Weems's conjuring clown figure in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* communicates a more ominous message.

I have seen you....I know you....I'm gonna shred you....I'm gonna destroy you....You don't believe me? Huh?...But I'm gonna take you, and I'm gonna break you....Because I want you to feel the suffering that I know.

A white flower is pinned to Weems's tuxedo and her voice cackles with dis-



9. Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, 2012 (video still).

32 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 160.

33 Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London: Holmes and Meier, 1976).

34 Hall as quoted in Weems's installation *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*.

35 "I Look at Women," YouTube video, 7:17, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Mar. 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMe7obyEzok>.

36 "Comedy," YouTube video, 2:26, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Oct. 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TUthBbCUfl>.

37 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 165.



quieting laughter. *It's not going to be pretty! It's not going to be pretty!*

The focus shifts from race to gender when Weems returns barely clothed and her back is to the camera. She labors to fit into a confining Playboy Bunny outfit, slowly and deliberately, then sits on the floor. Leaning backward toward the viewer, Weems dissolves into the night. The Playboy Bunny is a modern popular version of the conventional representation of an ideal female beauty. The constraint of that tradition is conjured up in the video by an image from Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, a nude with her legs spread across the annals of European art history. She looks dead on arrival. Perhaps she has been murdered. The dead woman's hand lies in repose at the base of a lamp. The "Pepper's Ghost" projection changes once again and soon we see a woman sitting on the floor, gazing into a hand-held mirror (fig. 9).

Mirrors appear frequently in Weems's art. What does the woman see in the looking glass? Is her self-image shaped by double consciousness? Or, as an optical technology of redoubling, does the mirror offer the woman a glimpse into a different future—a view of herself on the other side of winter, blossoming like a peony on the first day of May? The image fades to black.

Near the end of *I Look at Women*, Weems speaks of a history that binds us, if unequally. This history leaves "little room for her," she tells us, "so she invents. She carves a space for herself in a world dominated by men, men with muscle. The path is not straight, but there are signposts in the form of echoes, stored in the deep recesses of the mind, that can be gathered and harvested when need be, like now." This is ritual dramaturgy: a visual cultural gateway into counter-hegemonic performances of memory and history. "If you focus," states Weems, "you can see it clearly, your memory, your historical memory, your cultural memory. Reinscribing, reinforcing what you know, what you believe, what you imagine, what you want, what you need, what you missed, what you said, what you did, what you heard."

In the closing scene of *Past Tense*, the labor of focusing, of seeing clearly, now belongs to Antigone. "Antigone is sent to her doom but I want to live," Weems proclaims. But first she must become Antigone. Weems descends into the "cavernous prison" where Antigone has been condemned to be buried alive for honoring her murdered brother. There, she pledges allegiance to a law higher than that of the state—the law of God, the law of grace. "It was I who with my own hands washed and adorned you," Weems proclaims. "But for attending to your body, death is my reward." Channeling Antigone, Weems's voice is carried heavenward by the sonic reach of Hamiet Bluiett's baritone saxophone performing Don Pullen's moving "Ode to Life." On screen, we see a marvelous choreography of birds, winged messengers of grace spiraling across the sky. "What justice of the gods have I transgressed," Weems cries out, becoming Antigone. This is ritual.

Weems's videos call upon us to reckon in a *deep* and *serious* manner with ritualized practices of injustice the globe over. They also hasten our yearnings for spring and the warmth of summer. *Past Tense* concludes with "Ode to

Life" as Weems translates Pullen's complex jazz into straight-ahead, no chaser, prose: "every man, every woman deserves to live the full length of their natural lives." *Ode to Life*: this is also a way of imagining the striking beauty of Weems's moving pictures, videos that communicate, not only artful social critique, but also vibrant evocations of joy, resilience, and hope. This is nowhere more evident than in Weems's 2002 *May Days Long Forgotten*, a mesmerizing visual study of young African American girls dancing wide eyed in slow motion around a flowered maypole.<sup>38</sup> Cumulus clouds float across a blue sky as the girls, neighbors of Weems in Syracuse, New York, swing round the maypole, playfully twirling in the breezy spring air with bright smiles. The young dancers' thick hair is adorned with flowers and green leaves as they move to the muffled soft sounds of Bluiett's transcendent saxophone. Like the maypole itself, the girls are draped in red, yellow, white, and pink ribbons with occasional sunlit splashes of purple. At several points in Weems's beautiful video,

the young women dancers make direct eye contact with the viewer, inviting resonant attunement and wonder. The girls hold our gaze for as long as fifteen seconds (fig. 10).

The choreography of *May Days Long Forgotten* recalls interpretations of Weems's photograph of herself in *Ritual and Revolution* as Queen of the May, a figuration of the Black Athena, or even an icon of International Workers' Day. This same image has also been used by Weems in reimagining Antigone as a political allegory for our times. For me, these several interpretations meld together when watching the entrancing dance of the young girls in *May Days Long Forgotten*. As Weems's video ends, her camera lingers on a dreamy profile of one of



10. Carrie Mae Weems, *May Days Long Forgotten*, 2002 (video still).

the girls gazing beyond the screen into the future. Shortly thereafter the young woman's image disappears into the sky. A few seconds later, the sky itself fades to black. In homage to Weems's performative video choreography this essay does the same.

38 "May Days Long Forgotten," YouTube video, 7:45, posted by Carrie Mae Weems, Dec. 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qoqxvh2DNxE>.

# CARRIE MAE WEEMS: GUIDE TO CIRCUMSTANCES SELDOM SEEN

Maren Stange

“What is grace?” Carrie Mae Weems was asked, midway through a performance of *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* in October 2017. Three echoing trombone notes hung the question in the air, until Weems, a black-robed seer, pointed toward its beating heart. Contemplating grace and how to know it, she spoke of struggle, violation, humanity, and generosity, and she spoke of art.

*Grace Notes* premiered at the Spoleto Festival in June 2016, a piece conceived in response to escalating violence and to commemorate black lives lost to it. Weems continued to develop the project over subsequent months, so that its nearly two-hour presentations at Yale University in September 2016 (figs. 2–3) and the Kennedy Center in October 2017 showed *Grace Notes* in its most developed, fully staged form to date. The piece comprises a sequence of loosely linked but non-narrative segments performed in dance, music, and spoken word; video and film projections are central to its staging, as is Craig Harris’s live orchestral accompaniment. In keeping with much of her recent practice, Weems draws on forms and themes long present in her work, such as her black-robed muse-like figure. As newly structured and deeply imbricated performance elements they energize the generative possibilities of *Grace Notes*; as visually familiar tropes they inscribe a present moment and its shared experience into Weems’s long-sustained, embodied, and engaged creative practice, so that the whole of *Grace Notes* performs its doubled situation. It is at once a uniquely instantiated, eloquently immediate performance for a specific, gathered audience and a proposal, extended by its recursive structure, to explore the resonance of its music, dance, and spoken roles, along a trajectory that Weems has traced and that evokes a history of African American expressive culture. In what follows here, I hope to indicate the contours and engagements of a necessarily fluid and explorative response to Weems’s practice, attending especially to her muse-like self-depiction in *Grace Notes* and elsewhere. Over time, across mediums, and onstage, she is, ineluctably, “a guide into circumstances seldom seen.”<sup>1</sup>

Weems’s attractively provocative work has long invited viewers to involve ourselves in repositioning both our bodies and our ways of seeing. She had been “dying to get off the walls” for a long time, Weems explained

to a YoungArts Master Class in 2015.<sup>2</sup> She was ready for alternatives that could disrupt the gallery’s “linear use of space, where you encounter one thing after another,” and so she moved and multiplied the sites from which to see her images: in galleries and museums, we have studied words on pedestaled ceramic plates, opened levered panels to find captions, and drifted among fabric-printed images, absorbing an ambient whispered text. By using sounds, texts, and music to wreath and embed her images, Weems inscribed vernacular speech and mass culture tropes into high art display traditions. If her creative process involves “jumbling things up, throwing things into the mix and twisting things around,” as Weems told the master class, these terms apply as well to our encounters with her work. Addressing all our senses, Weems situates our viewership amid the jostle of emotions and experience.

Just as Weems’s images destabilize their gallery locations, their compositions often work to disrupt—and reconstruct—the sites they represent. Throughout her practice, photographic series name and thematize a place or setting, from the early *Kitchen Table Series* to those made in Cuba, Africa, and Europe. Against the fixedly denoted places that define each series, Weems can convey a doubled representation of her presence there—referenced as the series’ artist-author, she is also an embodied subject in its images. Her self-depictions, Weems has said, are not self-portraiture; rather, they perform “a character,” that is, a role inscribed within the meaning of a single image and inflected by the larger context of the series to which it belongs. “She’s a character,” Weems says; “I use my body as a stand-in, but I never think of it as being about me. Rather, the character helps to reveal something that is more complicated.”<sup>3</sup> Using her body as a “constructed” element of her work, Weems has performed elaborately costumed and in outdoor settings, as for *The Louisiana Project (Missing Links)* (plates 4.1–6) and *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demonstration* series (plates 6.1–8), and in other projects featured a small cast.

Creating images in this multi-character tableau tradition resembles being “a moving-picture auteur,” notes curator and critic Robert Storr, describing a production process in which Weems, “stepping in and out of multiple

1 Dawoud Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems,” *Bomb*, no. 108, July 1, 2009, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/>.

2 “Carrie Mae Weems: YoungArts Master Class,” YouTube video, 1:03:05, posted by YoungArts, Apr. 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWseogIu8L8>.

3 Robin Pogrebin, “In a New Show, Carrie Mae Weems Takes On Hollywood,” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/arts/design/in-a-new-show-carrie-mae-weems-finds-monuments-on-tv.html>.



roles,” “is the director, set designer, costumer, and star of her own unmoving pictures.”<sup>4</sup> Storr’s cinematic references point toward Weems’s work in video, underway since the early 2000s, and to the live events and staged productions that have followed her 2013 MacArthur award and 2012–14 traveling retrospective *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. This long-deserved recognition gained Weems a “profile [that] has never been higher,” notes art historian Huey Copeland, but it has yet to prompt “a full accounting of her recursive and affecting practice.” Such an accounting, for Copeland, would respond to specific pieces and also trace their “spiral” structure. It would clarify Weems’s “uniquely feminist African-diasporic perspective” by showing how new projects, “cannibalizing” and “remixing” elements of earlier work, both inscribe a “larger history” and illuminate anew “the realms opened up” in previous pieces.<sup>5</sup>

As Copeland suggests, responding to the meanings of Weems’s recent work requires us to take note of strategies that renew and vivify both form and content, as do personae such as the black-robed muse central to the photographic series *Roaming* (2006), *Museums* (2006), and *Scenes & Take* (2016), and to the video *Italian Dreams* (2006); and the clownish yet sinister character seen in *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demonstration* (2004–07) and in the video *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts* (2012, plate 7). A “Faustian figure of deception and subterfuge”<sup>6</sup> sporting top hat, striped shirt, and baggy trousers, the clown appeared initially in streets uptown and downtown during the much-protested 2004 Republican National Convention in New York.

However Faustian, she is also a “muse,” Weems says; her enactment in New York concerned “a certain kind of duplicity...that had to do with voting” in the United States, where our vote “only counts in a block,” in contrast to the country’s “one-man vote” ideology. In *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, the vivid affect of a spooky sonic register complements the otherworldly atmospherics created by the “Pepper’s Ghost” device employed throughout the video; characters emerge like shadowy, smoke-wreathed phantoms suited to a nineteenth-century “phantasmagoria” exhibit. Weems’s top-hatted clown, her face obscured and spectral body writhing, vows to take a chilling revenge that “won’t be pretty” against, it seems, her viewers, who are positioned as the objects of direct address. Powerful cadences that issue from a half-seen source, they terrify because they represent what can be wrenched,

over centuries, out of history’s trauma.

The muse in black conveys her portent less kinetically. She appears consistently in *Roaming*, begun in 2006. The series of architectural and urban scenes, primarily in Rome, comprises large-scale, uniformly sized black-and-white prints whose balanced compositions register buildings and cityscapes in fine detail, as if evoking traditions of architectural photography (fig. 1). Each image shows a solitary black-clad figure standing with her back to the camera, halted within her often-monumental surroundings. She could be a modern *Rückenfigur* meant to update Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and *The Monk by the Sea* except that Weems’s wanderer halts amid unyielding concrete and stone instead of pondering Friedrich’s inchoate misty swirls.

Contained, and elegantly self-contained, within the walled spaces filling each nearly square composition, the muse is also firmly vertical and forward oriented, seemingly engaged with something deeper in the frame. The architectural forms and spaces that surround her manifest a state’s or ruler’s power, in Weems’s view; their presence, and their changes over time, remain consistent in displaying power’s sedimented history. And so each image in the *Roaming* series, at each Italian setting—in Matera, at Rome’s Jewish ghetto, before its Fascist-era Palazzo dei Congressi—shows as well a subject-citizen who is present to feel, face, and, as muse, confront the past. She represents, Weems says, “an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power.”<sup>7</sup> Weems’s sustained depiction of a woman engaged “with looking, [and] with being” indicates a further



1. Carrie Mae Weems, *Piazza del Popolo I—Ancient Rome* from *Roaming*, 2006. Digital c-print, 73 x 61 in.

iteration in the series: consistently, Weems situates her self-depicted figure at just the spot where something—a fence, a curb, a step, a shadow—cuts horizontally across the frame and across her path. No less consistent than the muse herself, this arresting line or form is everywhere in her way. Once seen, the detail fills our eyes, a trope as compelling as the muse herself. And like her it also points: echoing other lines and edges, intersecting the frame that determines each image, it marks within the image the agency of a second Weems, the one outside the picture who wields the creative power that made it. In the artist’s generous conception, the muse “can stand in for me and for you,” be our guide to “circumstances seldom seen,” Weems says, although she claims the muse’s imaged presence as solely her own work. In *Roaming*, the figure is “a black woman leading me through the trauma of his-

4 Robert Storr, “Carrie Mae Weems: Anyway I Want It,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez, exh. cat. (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 24.

5 Huey Copeland, “Close-Up: Specters of History; Carrie Mae Weems’s *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, 2012,” *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (Sept. 2014): 342–45.

6 “Interview with Carrie Mae Weems” (Aug. 2013), *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, accessed Feb. 9, 2018, [http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page\\_id=664](http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page_id=664).

7 Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

tory”; she is “carrying a tremendous burden.” To represent her journey and her burden, says Weems, “It’s essential that I do this work and it’s essential that I do it with *my body*.<sup>8</sup>

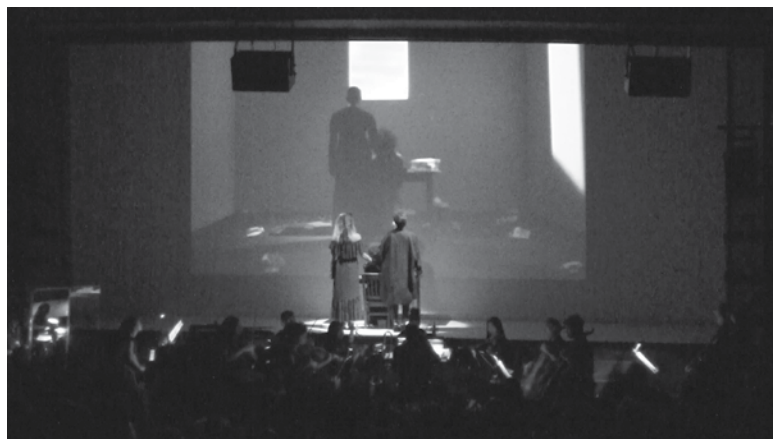
Throughout history’s trauma and despite her heavy burden, the black woman leads. Interviewed during her 1998 Berlin installation *Ritual and Revolution*, Weems described the black body’s—her body’s—lived hyper-visibility in the West as “articulat[ing], by its very nature...a resistance. Whether that is my intention or not doesn’t matter, but my presence is a disruption and a reminder of something that has happened.”<sup>9</sup> She spoke more recently of encountering the “shocking” implication “that I have no place in Europe...that I’m ‘out of place.’” And yet she was in Europe nonetheless, a black woman artist existing as “the unintended consequence of the Western imagination,”<sup>10</sup> performing there her body’s challenge to its spaces. Unintended yet implacable, *Roaming*’s robed figure makes the “mark of someone who looks like me”; each image describes a black body used to “mark what a space might mean.”<sup>11</sup>

The accomplished and highly original video work that Weems produced increasingly in the early 2000s calls for both an accounting of the self-contained pieces available online, and a recognition of the medium’s generative function in her practice. Video allows the artist to preserve and collate variously sourced visual and sonic components and to maintain them as an archive of potential reinscriptive possibilities. Video segments help to build the “spiral” structure that Copeland perceives generally and that resonates in Weems’s performance work. As audiences move with Weems between projections and embodied onstage presence, we participate affectively in her creative propulsion, at once unsettled and attentive. When projected video imbricates its indexicality alongside Weems’s onstage authenticity, the mix can double-charge the truth claim that already endows cell phone, dash cam, and newsreel footage. To make our way across the juncture between past and present liveness is to feel their sometimes-jagged linkage sharply present too. Especially since 2012, Weems’s creative and affective trajectory describes another timeline—it marks out the painfully linked chain of white supremacist murders of African Americans that lies across too many years.

Expansive and magisterial in its fullest iteration, *Grace Notes*’ large yet calibrated scale draws on multiple black histories and cultural traditions. Weems’s persona underscores the evening’s commemorative solemnity and evokes the muse’s longtime roles: inventor and collaborator, she is also guide and witness. Accordingly, the project’s very title, *Grace Notes*, upends the meaning of the phrase, reminding us how to value what might seem at first to be a “mix,” or “jumble.” The grace note in a musical score appears in half-size superscript to signal where a performer may insert a momentary “orna-

ment” or “embellishment” to the melody’s main line. But Weems’s title takes up the grace note on its own to name and mark a moment, stripping away the (literally) marginalizing relationship that denotes ornamental superfluity. “Twisted around,” moved out of the margin and into the center, grace notes—and all their implications of performative, embodied expression—extend their metaphoric work across the project as a whole.

Another script is flipped as *Grace Notes* opens, showing Weems seated onstage before a desk and typewriter, her back toward the audience. Silent throughout a brief ensuing pantomime, or double pantomime, she watches with us a video projection of herself, identically black-robed, striding down a corridor and through double doors to find, inside a small, bare room, an identically dressed woman at a similar typewriter table, her back to the camera. In the video, Weems puts a hand on her double’s shoulder as, onstage, two performers approach the embodied Weems to stand alongside her, each with a hand on her shoulder (fig. 2). The similarly sized figures, echoing each other’s collaborative gestures across stage and screen, are halted and framed in the shallow space of the video’s small room, so that the scene resolves, for a moment, into tableau. The lighting changes, the stage empties, and the retracted video screen reveals a deeper space. But we have



2. Carrie Mae Weems, *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, 2016 (video still).

seen the artist flash her power; we have just been witness to the making—and unmaking—of her mark. When Weems reappears, welcoming art and its ever-present generative possibilities, we join her.

As *Grace Notes* unfolds over nearly two hours, its sequences masterfully display each dedicated form and practice, and their accruing impact amplifies the evening’s profound themes—grace enacted, commemoration dignified. Moving from one sequence to another along its associative structure, the project shows as well the spaces in between; sometimes, when unadorned and

silent, they seem like momentary openings in the evening’s text, spaces perhaps intended for our own imaginative work. As if to demonstrate that work, Weems claims such a moment to fill with her account of understanding grace. Its meaning exceeds any she could “locate in [herself],” for to have grace is always, she says, to “extend it as a gift to others,” so that, in “the midst of the storm,” African Americans “have not lost ourselves” and, “maintain[ing] the core of our dignity and our humanity,” have “extend[ed] it and recognize[d] that in others.” The artists performing *Grace Notes* tonight, Weems says, are “in some way continuing to offer our generosity, our humanity, through our very presence; asking this question [about grace] in this very way is, I believe, an extension of our grace.”

At the close of *Grace Notes*, the full company, a fluid, dancing crowd, fills the stage with movement and the orchestra seems unstoppable (fig. 3). But the glorious sound does ebb and the stage slowly clears, leaving Weems to present her collaborators and thank her audience to much applause. At

8 Bey.

9 Qtd. in Maren Stange, “Memory, History, and Universal Narrative in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems,” in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. David Holloway and John Beck (London: Continuum, 2005), 280–81.

10 Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

11 “Carrie Mae Weems: An Artist Reflects,” YouTube video, 1:29:03, posted by Portland Art Museum, Feb. 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiPL1GPhpgU>.

the very end, Weems halts her exit for a moment, turning to the audience as it quiets to hear one more thing: “In the tumultuous time in which we live, remember to vote,” she says. Amid more clapping, and some laughter, there seems to be a tentative note—perhaps it is the sound of an audience caught off guard.

How best to respond to Weems’s deft final pivot? In seconds, turning away from her previous performance but retaining her onstage black-robed majesty, Weems speaks like a next-door neighbor—the engaged and thoughtful one—and delivers what can only be an epilogue, for Weems’s plain speaking points both ways. Her liminal exhortation reminds her audience to reflect on why we are here, and to claim the evening’s meanings for ourselves in actions, because *Grace Notes* asks not for closure but for connection with our lived contingencies. Weems speaks as we have half-resumed our singularity; leaving our seats and dissolving our collective presence, we are hailed, interpellated, from the stage—we are called out as voters! In a half minute of imaginative work, Weems assembles us as civil subjects who will enact this right we each possess, or should possess, in common.

We will do so, at least, “while we can,” to apply a phrase that *Grace Notes* previously emphasized. The mundanity of a voting reminder, or of voting itself, cannot diminish the charged history of voting rights, and their denial, in the United States. Nor is discriminatory disenfranchisement a thing of the past. Despite young people’s infinite energy, despite the disbandment of Trump’s so-called Voter Fraud Commission, mass incarceration continues to disenfranchise vast numbers for years beyond incarceration and sometimes for life. More than six million Americans are unable to vote because of a past criminal conviction, including one in every thirteen voting-age African Americans, four times the rate for all other Americans.<sup>12</sup> In these tumultuous times, Weems calls on our embodied selves and assembles her enfranchised audience. Her extended grace constructs our critical engagement.



3. Carrie Mae Weems, *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, 2016 (video still).

<sup>12</sup> “Restoring Voting Rights,” Brennan Center for Justice, accessed May 13, 2018, <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/restoring-voting-rights>. Florida permanently bars about one and a half million ex-felons from voting, including twenty-one percent of all voting-age black residents (“Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Florida,” Brennan Center for Justice, Feb. 18, 2018, <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/voting-rights-restoration-efforts-florida>). One in five African Americans in Kentucky are estimated to be disenfranchised, and ex-felon disenfranchisement will cause an estimated three in ten African American males to lose voting rights in their lifetime (“Kentucky Governor Creates New Process to Help Restore Voting Rights to 170,000 Citizens,” Brennan Center for Justice, Nov. 4, 2015, <https://www.brennancenter.org/press-release/kentucky-governor-creates-new-process-help-restore-voting-rights-170000-citizens> and Carson Whitelemons, “How Restrictive Voting Laws Block Ferguson’s Citizens from Having Their Fair Say,” Brennan Center for Justice, Aug. 21, 2014, <https://www.brennancenter.org/blog/how-restrictive-voting-laws-block-ferguson-s-citizens-having-their-fair-say>).

# SHE WEARS THE MASK: BLACK ATLANTIC MASQUERADE IN THE WORK OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Kyrah Malika Daniels

As a child with secret artistic aspirations, I was always drawn to masks. There is an image from ancient Greek theater that I have always liked, a mask with half a laughing face and half a sorrowful one. This mask has always seemed to me a representation of the country where I was born, especially during carnival.

—Edwidge Danticat<sup>1</sup>

In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.

—Ralph Ellison<sup>2</sup>

As many ways as humans have learned to present ourselves to the world, we have found just as many manners in which to disguise and obscure our identities. This act of shrouding our being allows us to take on the characters and characteristics of “new” selves. Ritually speaking, the practice of donning a mask may have first begun as a method by which to conceal our human identities while hunting by posing as fellow creatures of the animal world; other traditions of masking may have emerged as early forms of storytelling and theater. Later, these rites likely developed into orchestrated ceremonies whereby spirits manifested their power in masked performers and mediums.<sup>3</sup> In so many parts of the world, people passed down the language of masks to children in initiatory rites so that they could assume new responsibilities as adult citizens of society, while trained healers and priests acquired masquerade authority as integral to their ontological role as community caregivers.

Within the Black Atlantic world, traditions of masking boast a long history in West African and Central African rites of masquerade, Caribbean and Latin American carnival traditions, and parades and public festivals of

the African Diaspora. West African masquerades may occur in honor of festivals, sacred and secular ceremonies, funerals, healing rites, and moments of crisis.<sup>4</sup> In Caribbean carnival traditions, art historian Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz suggests, masquerade serves as the “ultimate form of participatory public art.”<sup>5</sup> Literary scholar P. Jane Splawn thoughtfully remarks that in the North American context:

The wearing of masks within African-American literary history, to be sure, has deep roots. The idea first gained American literary attention in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” (1896); the trope of the mask in this poem acknowledges the practice of dissembling to whites....Dunbar’s image of the “mask that grins and lies” symbolizes the protection of the self through the creation of a false one.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, masking traditions in Africa and the African Diaspora have played central roles as methods of communication and concealment, techniques of community-building as well as self-individuation. Regarding the artistry of Carrie Mae Weems and her interest in themes of carnival and masquerade, art historian Elvira Dyangani Ose has poignantly stated, “For Carrie Mae Weems, as for Claudia Jones—who is also attracted to the carnival as a strategy of representation—the affirmation of American Black Consciousness from which intellectuals can address the world is absolutely essential.”<sup>7</sup> This essay examines the theme of masking and masquerade in the work of visual and performance artist Carrie Mae Weems, with close attention to masked figures featured in *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demonstration* (2004–07, plates 6.1–8) and *Missing Links* (2003, plates 4.1–6), which comprises part of her larger work *The Louisiana Project*.

Weems explains her preference for photography and documented

1 Edwidge Danticat, *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (New York: Crown, 2002), 16.

2 Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (1964; New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 55.

3 Mircea Eliade, “Masks: Mythical and Ritual Origins,” in *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 64–71.

4 Osita Okagbue, “Mmonwu: Igbo Masquerade Theatre,” in *African Theatres and Performances* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18.

5 Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, “Visual Encounters with Africa in Jamaica,” in *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, ed. Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art in association with Yale University Press, 2007), 105.

6 P. Jane Splawn, “‘Change the Joke[r] and Slip the Yoke’: Boal’s ‘Joker’ System in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls...* and *spell #7*,” *Modern Drama* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 387.

7 Elvira Dyangani Ose, “Studies for a Social Project: Carrie Mae Weems; The Artist as Intellectual,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: Social Studies*, exh. cat. (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 2010), 20.

performance as mediums that capture a moment for artist and viewer to cohabit a space together. In an interview with *Ebony*, Weems expounds further, noting:

If you are going to do still photos you think about very specific moments that need to be articulated, but all of them are different, all of them have their own mode of operation. Photography has the ability to distill many things into one moment. It's one reason it is exciting and tricky. You think you have it and don't, but, when you hit it, there's something that really sings, and *I think the thing that sings is that I create a space for not only myself but for the viewer to inhabit. It is this shared space of habitation where the magic happens.*<sup>8</sup>

Considering the many masks that Weems wears and the many “selves” that she presents in works such as *Hopes and Dreams* and *Missing Links*, I assert that her performance creates a carnival stage closely resembling masquerade traditions of Africa and the African Diaspora. In this “arena” of Africana masquerade, viewers are invited to participate as witnesses and actors in *shared spaces of habitation* where transformations of self and other may occur. While many scholars have importantly highlighted Weems's themes of memory, history, and representation in an African American cultural context, few have regarded her work as part of the broader canon of Black Atlantic artistic legacies. Donning masks and slipping into costume, Weems personifies a long heritage of Africana maskers, as her photographs simultaneously signal the particularities and universalities of being Black and a woman (and certainly, a Black woman). As Huey Copeland has stated, “For, whether holding out eloquent fabulations of black intimacy or critiquing the visual construction of racialized subjectivity, Weems's art has consistently blended vernacular and high-cultural traditions from a uniquely feminist African-diasporic perspective that is nearly without parallel in the visual arts.”<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, I introduce Africana notions of embodied knowledge and the shape-shifting energies of the minstrel in blackface, the conjure woman, the dandy, and the Haitian spirit Legba as theoretical frameworks to better understand and engage

Weems's many masks.

## KINAESTHETIC THEORY

In the Western world, carnival was first seriously theorized by linguist and cultural philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who introduced the concept of the *carnavalesque*. The carnivalesque has served as a trope for literary analysis, signaling, among other things, *inversions of the social order* that emerged during carnival festivities. Bakhtin identified four distinct elements of carnival: 1) free and familiar contact among people; 2) eccentric behavior and

new modes of interrelationships; 3) carnivalistic misalliances; and 4) profanation or sacrilegiousness.<sup>10</sup> In this way, he suggested Europeans operated between two non-intersecting realms: a life of the quotidian, in many ways a hierarchical and disciplined world, and a life of carnival, where the laws of chaos and inversion reigned.

Within the Black Atlantic world, however, festivals and masquerade rites were intricately braided into the fabric of the “quotidian” realm; even more, the body expressed various ways of knowing featured during these season(s) of festivities (fig. 1). As performance theorist Esiaba Irobi has asserted, “African societies consciously fashion a corporeal semiology through which the body becomes the symbolic repository of transcendent and expressive as well as philosophical ideas associated with religion, worship, the divine, ritual ceremony, celebration, war, weddings, funerals, royalty, politics, and so on.”<sup>11</sup> Irobi further argues that while nineteenth-century European philosophers had just begun developing the field of phenomenology<sup>12</sup> (the study of lived experience), Africana communities had long foregrounded empirical knowledge as a source of wisdom. In particular, Black Atlantic dance and performance presented coded



1. Zulu costume, likely inspired in part by Haitian Vodou sequined flags (*drapò*) and colorful Mardi Gras Indian costumes. Louisiana Historical Museum, New Orleans, 2009. Image courtesy of Jeffrey David Ehrenreich.

knowledge to be deciphered by laypeople and specialists of corporeal signals, demonstrating that “the ultimate source of signification is the human body.”<sup>13</sup> As such, it is not every viewer or audience member who is granted access to the *body's* body of knowledge, but rather those citizens familiar with a tradition of proverbs and riddles, those initiated to *see* signs from the invisible realm, and those trained in the technique of decoding the performer's body.

The etymological origin of *literacy* reminds us that Western systems of knowing have historically centered on the written form, emphasizing the production of knowledge as a process that involves reading and inscribed

8 Kristin Braswell, “Artist Carrie Mae Weems on 30 Years of Genius,” *Ebony*, Feb. 5, 2014, <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/artist-carrie-mae-weems-on-30-years-of-genius-999#axzz3a3KdxCAU>; emphasis added.

9 Huey Copeland, “Close-Up: Specters of History; Carrie Mae Weems's *Lincoln, Lonnice, and Me*, 2012,” *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (Sept. 2014): 344.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival and Carnavalesque,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 1998), 254.

11 Esiaba Irobi, “What They Came With: Carnival and the Persistence of African Performance Aesthetics in the Diaspora,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 6 (July 2007): 899.

12 As Irobi explains, “what Merleau-Ponty and the other European philosophers are trying to say is that the ultimate source, site, and center of perception and signification, physical or transcendent, is the human body.” Irobi, 898.

13 Irobi, 910.

text.<sup>14</sup> While several African cultural traditions include written histories, many knowledge systems have been encoded through oral history and in the body through graphic writing systems printed on fabric for dress, cicatrization marks embedded with medicine on the body, bundles or amulets worn on the individual person, and expressive modes of performance. As such, Irobi insists on the need for a new definition of *literacy* or knowledge production, explaining, "But suppose we shift our examples of literacy to sculpture, dance, music, attire, gesture, dreams, space, and tattoos? What emerges is a new definition of literacy that resides in semiotic intelligence...[and] iconographic literacy."<sup>15</sup> Examining the body as a primary site of knowledge *perception* and knowledge *production* thus allows us to center Africana philosophies into our analysis of photography, performance, and the Black body. Even further, I argue that we must regard the dancing body, the performed ritual, and the theatrical carnival as comprising key elements of what I call *Black Atlantic festival epistemologies*.

In the context of Weems's photography, we bear witness to her body as signifier and centerpiece. Decoding her posture and poses, her direct gaze or averted glance, her fully visible body or her masked identity, we are encouraged to regard her work as still moments of an ongoing and particularly festive performance. The characters that Weems embodies may be named or "untitled," but as Dyangani Ose has stated, "the artist's own body is one of the most significant aspects of her work. Her body stands for anonymous figures, women, black women, and also specific subjects."<sup>16</sup> Weems's characters personify places, conceptual ideas, and mythic characters that require us to journey with her into the exploration of Self and Other behind the mask.

### FIRST FRONTIER: MARDI GRAS BALLS AND BLACKFACE IN NEW ORLEANS

Two sites form the backdrop of Weems's photographs in *Missing Links* and *Hopes and Dreams*: New Orleans, city of Mardi Gras,<sup>17</sup> and Harlem, New York, city of dreams. Examining Weems's masking practices in situ, it is helpful to consider these two cities' unique relationships with race, masks, and masquerades. How did Weems choose these sites for her photography and performance work? I argue that as historically Black communities in the US, New Orleans and Harlem offer Weems the opportunity to engage in broader conversations about home and displacement, legacies of belonging,

and conflicted "frontier" spaces of racialized encounters.

To commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase in 2003, the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University commissioned Carrie Mae Weems's *The Louisiana Project*, which included photographs, video projection, and laser prints on canvas and featured works pertaining to "race, beauty, class, style, fashion, the land, and architecture."<sup>18</sup> Intrigued by the artistic possibilities of Mardi Gras, Weems conceives of carnival as a lens through which to explore the disparate realities and polarized communities of Blacks and Whites in New Orleans.<sup>19</sup> Noting her investment in Louisiana's charged and controversial histories, Phil Oppenheim explains that Mardi Gras appeared to Weems as:

A theatricalized condensation of a web of relationships between white and black, rich and poor, elites and masses. Finding that "popular forms speak very deeply about the culture and society, and that the costumed extravaganza of Carnival" thus becomes a "wonderful way of thinking about what's veiled in the culture," Weems argues that Mardi Gras comprises ritualized theatrical practices that recapitulate the history of New Orleans' oppressive race relations, thus normalizing the city's racism and sexism in a festival that masquerades as a wild, fun free-for-all.<sup>20</sup>

The colorful nature of New Orleans Mardi Gras is not lost on Weems who sees it not as a careless cathartic moment,<sup>21</sup> but rather as a method of expressing joy and meaning-making as well as masking/revealing racial pain, gender discrimination, and marginalization. (Consider, for instance, the "masked" tragic character featured in Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' 1967 hit song "The Tears of a Clown.") Parade festivities such as second line bands, jazz funerals, Carnival Krewees, and Baby Dolls, among many others, demonstrate what Stephen C. Wehmeyer has mused about the Crescent City: "New Orleans is indeed a city constantly in procession."<sup>22</sup> While carnival includes vibrant performances, maskers' high-spirited theatrics often present critical stances about race, belonging, and ownership of cultural traditions.

New Orleans boasts a long history of masquerading in public balls and street festivals. In the mid-nineteenth century, upwardly mobile free women of color attended these balls, entering into romantic liaisons with

14 Irobi further explains, "Literacy, as we have inherited from the Western tradition of education, is cast in a cryptographic or typographic form. To be literate means to be able to read and write in a particular form of gnosis, logocentric gnosis, with a specific orthographic or calligraphic structure, origin, and history." Irobi, 910.

15 Irobi, 910.

16 Dyangani Ose, "Studies for a Social Project," 14.

17 As Susan Cahan explains in the catalogue for Weems's *Louisiana Project*, "Mardi Gras (or 'Fat Tuesday') is the culmination of Carnival, the period of feasting and celebration that begins on Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, and ends at midnight on Shrove Tuesday. This period of indulgence is supposed to leave the faithful in good shape to face the self-denying rules of Lent." Susan Cahan, "Carrie Mae Weems: Reflecting Louisiana," in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Louisiana Project*, exh. cat. (New Orleans: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, 2005), 7–8.

18 Deborah Willis, "Photographing between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez, exh. cat. (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 38.

19 Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 by the United States, enslaved African Americans and free people of color became monolithically classified as "Black" due to the British "one-drop rule" decreeing any person with African descent as Black. After Emancipation in 1863, formerly enslaved Blacks and free people of color created a counter-history in New Orleans with their own parades and street festivals.

20 Phil Oppenheim, "A Little of Everything: Carrie Mae Weems and the Stuff of African-American Experience," *Art Papers* 28, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2004): 10–12.

21 This assumption would be understandable, as Susan Cahan states, "To an outsider, someone not raised in New Orleans, and particularly not from the South, the rituals of Mardi Gras can seem strange—at best a childish world of make-believe, at worst a public celebration of antebellum values cloaked in a masquerade of pomp and circumstance." Cahan, "Reflecting Louisiana," 8.

22 Stephen C. Wehmeyer, "Feathered Footsteps: Mythologizing and Ritualizing Black Indian Processions in New Orleans," *Social Identities* 16, no. 4 (2010): 437.



the White gentry who became lovers, benefactors, and even husbands.<sup>23</sup> However, as cultural historian Kim Marie Vaz explains, such festive occasions introduced several matters of concern: namely, these masked women of color who attended private balls and working class women who dressed as men in street parades could surveil “their” men—whether strangers of interest or unknowing husbands and lovers—while White upper class women remained observers on balconies from afar.<sup>24</sup> In response to anxieties about racial mixing and miscegenation, White men decreed that women could only attend balls unmasked, and in 1857, they established elite social krewes that developed new traditions of parading and private balls where men dictated the behaviors and dress of women.<sup>25</sup>

Around the turn of the twentieth century, African American men began forming their own krewes, such as the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club founded in 1909 that provided social services for Black communities. Zulu members typically performed in blackface (fig. 2), a long-standing White theatrical tradition from the nineteenth century. Certain members of the Black community—particularly 1950s civil rights protesters and 1960s Black Power activists—found this use of blackface offensive and proof of Black people’s willingness to “shuck and jive” or “coon” for White audiences. However, Zulu performers themselves (as well as nineteenth-century Black vaudeville actors before them) suggested that the satire allowed Black people to reclaim a jeering performance tradition based on their own cultural realities.<sup>26</sup>

This adaptation of blackface allowed Black performers a chance to reform somewhat the tradition and make it their own. As Felipe Smith states of Black minstrelsy’s evolution in the twentieth century, “Ultimately,

these black performers came to dominate the blackface genre, gradually combining the contrived nineteenth century minstrel theatrics with the authentic music and dance of modern African American culture, discarding blackface when industry pressures relaxed.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, Zulu members in blackface participated in several layers of signifying, as *Black performers imitating White performers imitating Black communities*. Moreover, these blackface performances simultaneously exalted and ridiculed European royalty<sup>28</sup> and Western gender and race conventions.<sup>29</sup> Black krewes performed privately and publicly in Mardi Gras, and as with the Mardi Gras Indians (with largely Black and Native American-descended members), wearing head-dresses and face paint—including blackface—permitted African Americans to “circumvent the local laws that made it illegal for blacks to wear masks.”<sup>30</sup>



2. Mardi Gras Zulu king crossing bridge with his attendants, 1939. *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans.

Indeed, a *painted* face could not technically be regarded as a “masked” face, and as such, Black men and women of New Orleans subverted the status quo while successfully transforming (if not entirely concealing) their identities during periods of festivity in the city’s social scene.

In *The Louisiana Project*, Weems conjures these histories of “raced masking” as a manner of interrogating racist histories and festive carnival traditions.<sup>31</sup> One particular installation involves a large ballroom with music and ominous voices heard overhead. As Susan Cahan reminds us, members who belong to these krewes to this day are inducted into an elite society that affirms their status and eminence in New Orleans: “As images float across

the screen, the sound of Weems’s deep, mellifluous voice fills the gallery space, deconstructing the role of the old-line krewes. She speaks directly to the aristocracy, pointing out the codes and symbols of their ‘bizarre notions of heritage.’”<sup>32</sup> Here, Weems relies upon soundscape in the ballroom (rather

23 Kim Marie Vaz, *The “Baby Dolls”: Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 78.

24 Vaz, 79.

25 Vaz, 79.

26 Felipe Smith further explains, “It took gifted black performers, able to enact and yet also subtly to challenge the racist underpinnings of both blackface minstrelsy as a performance genre and the ‘Darkest Africa’ theme, to avoid perpetuating the racist assumptions that restricted their own professional opportunities.” Felipe Smith, “‘Things You’d Imagine Zulu Tribes to Do’: The Zulu Parade in New Orleans Carnival,” *African Arts* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 25.

27 Smith, 25.

28 As Smith remarks, “Zulu’s inaugural approximations of European royalty in accessories and pose...were crucial to the satirical blackface genre, achieved by simultaneously ‘dressing up’ and ‘dressing down’: black turtleneck shirts and royal robes, grass skirts, face paint, and rhinestone crown and scepter; Afro wigs, mock solemnity, and cross-dressing male Queens.” Smith, 27.

29 Splawn has even suggested that European theatrical characters such as the historical Harlequin drew inspiration from enslaved Africans who were later mimicked by White and African American minstrels. In a fascinating narrative of origins, she recounts that, “According to tradition, Harlequin was an African slave who received his first set of clothes from the remnants of a tailor’s ells of cloth. This black-and-white-clothed figure of Harlequin is not only the mythological source of the European harlequinade, but also...the source for the black and white symbolism of Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo in African-American minstrelsy.” Splawn, “Change the Joke[r],” 393.

30 George Lipsitz, “Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans,” in “Popular Narrative/Popular Images,” special issue, *Cultural Critique*, no. 10 (Fall 1988): 104.

31 Dyangani Ose thoughtfully notes, “[Weems’s] work constitutes an introspective look into the past which helps us to understand the conflicts of the present: the coming-of-age balls, the Mardi Gras carnival celebrations in the Southern United States of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cultural inheritance, class differences, are all revealed to or hidden from the spectator by means of shadows of silhouettes or behind a carnival mask. This is all explained in *The Louisiana Project* (2003).” Dyangani Ose, “Studies for a Social Project,” 20.

32 Cahan, “Reflecting Louisiana,” 10–11.

than simply visuals) to critique the strait-laced “old guard,” many of whom ironically consider themselves to be the keepers of local culture. This is, of course, despite the fact that New Orleans’s most renowned cultural activities have been the street festivals upheld by working-class populations and people of color communities. Remarking on the city’s deeply entrenched and racialized power dynamics, Oppenheim explains, “Weems reveals how masquerade becomes a ‘playing out of power among a set of social constituents,’ how the elaborate, arcane structures of the Mardi Gras krewes, their costumes (closely related to the Ku Klux Klans’ robes) and their private rituals reinforce their domination of the social hierarchy.”<sup>33</sup> I argue that such taunting imitation of White krewes empowers Weems to perform a radical act of *whiteface*, in which she as a Black woman parrots and emulates White New Orleans actors who in turn mimic European social elitism.

As part of *The Louisiana Project*, *Missing Links* riffs on one of New Orleans’s most controversial themes from its 1873 Mardi Gras parade. That year, Mistick Krewe of Comus masked as “The Missing Links to Darwin’s *Origin of Species*,” which featured barbaric depictions of the “evolution” of Africans and African descended people (fig. 3), Asians, Indigenous Americans, and even Europeans. It would be difficult to engage Weems’s same-titled work without considering it a response to Comus’s ignoble masquerade. Weems’s *Missing Links* offers six portraits of dapper-looking figures dressed in variations of the same black suit or tuxedo with white gloves, dress-shirts, and formal suit jackets (plates 4.1–6). These characters could be mistaken for any member of high society, except for one notable detail: all of the heads take the form of domestic or wild animals, including an ape, a chicken, a donkey, an elephant, a sheep, and a zebra. Several of the characters include names and titles, such as *Despair* (ape) and *Happiness* (zebra), as well as *Justice* (elephant) and *Liberty* (donkey), the latter of which suggest allusion to “carnavalesque versions of a Democrat and a Republican.”<sup>34</sup> Recalling that the Pledge of Allegiance ends with the refrain “with liberty and justice for all,” Weems seems to tease us with the “faces” of Western democracy in their finest bestial form.

What might Weems’s ape and zebra signal? *Despair* and *Happiness* make a suitable, if contrarian, pair, and require us to consider the history of rac-

ist depictions of African Americans as apes, monkeys, and gorillas. Comus Krewe’s 1873 gorilla clearly delineated African Americans as depraved and subhuman, yet Weems’s ape, Elizabeth Leavitt points out, “plays on both the racial and gender discrimination fundamental to the hierarchy of Mardi Gras. Weems turns the tradition of masking in on itself: it is now the black woman who can direct her gaze at anyone while hiding her identity behind a mask.”<sup>35</sup> Her ape’s widely splayed hand resembles that of performing minstrels but Weems’s mask remains fixed and unsmiling, reminding viewers who remains in control. The Black woman now masks as a White person



3. Charles Briton (1841–84), *Gorilla* (costume design from Mistick Krewe of Comus parade), 1873. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 8 in., Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.

masking as a bestial being, thus revealing the absurdity of racist debasement. The zebra in contrast, represents a majestic, even “mythic” wildlife creature, as a horse-like entity with “exotic” features from the African continent. In some ways, the ape and zebra appear the most distinguished, as the only two characters sporting tall top hats (plates 4.3–4). Finally, the chicken and the sheep carry no names or titles, yet offer perhaps the most contrasted poses: the chicken stands confident and erect, poised with hat in hand (plate 4.5), while the sheep appears in a state of consternation, hands cradling his head in a gesture of dismay (plate 4.6). Weems’s assemblage of six zoomorphic portraits suggests a morphing of the animal figures featured, calling to mind the remarkable okapi or Congolese giraffe (which also features donkey and zebra traits). Observing this collective, we are reminded that neither members of the animal kingdom nor masks from sacred arts traditions exist in isolation; rather, these entities typically live together, depend on one another, and “perform” together.<sup>36</sup>

Knowing that these characters are masked by the artist herself, we are presented with images of Carrie Mae Weems simultaneously *gender-bending* in masculine dress and *adopting zoomorphic form*. In

this way, Weems conjures both gendered New Orleanian Black traditions of concealment: women of color’s ball masking and men of color’s street festival masking. Viewers must consider whether the figures are themselves aware of how they present to the world, as either anthropomorphized animals or zoomorphic humans. In a nearby wing of *The Louisiana Project*, viewers encountered a host of mirrors, which encouraged them to reflect on “true” selves and re-presentations of self.<sup>37</sup> Do these characters recognize their dis-belonging in formal attire, or are they in fact revealing their

33 Oppenheim continues by noting, “The second gallery more directly confronts the Mardi Gras spectacle. Large shadowy images for a Carnival King, Queen and servant form a mural-sized narrative of ritualized domination and subjugation, symbolically shrouded in secrecy (both via silhouette and the impression of a chain-like fence veil). Weems’s critical, confrontational voice-over (together with her Super 8 cinematography) undermines the pageantry of a contemporary Krewe of Rex ball—complete with the presentation of debutantes.” Oppenheim, “Little of Everything,” 11.

34 Cahan, “Reflecting Louisiana,” 9.

35 Elizabeth Leavitt, “Southern Royalty: Race, Gender, and Discrimination during Mardi Gras from the Civil War to the Present Day,” From Slave Mothers & Southern Belles to Radical Reformers & Lost Cause Ladies, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://civilwarwomen.wp.tulane.edu/essays-4/southern-royalty-race-gender-and-discrimination-during-mardi-gras-from-the-civil-war-to-the-present-day/>.

36 Richard B. Woodward muses, “Masks or other images danced in groups during celebrations, initiations, or divination rituals create more complex and subtle meanings through their interrelationships than they hold as separate items.” Richard B. Woodward, “Carrie Mae Weems: Africa Series/African Affinities,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: Africa Series*, exh. cat. (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), 6.

37 Here, Oppenheim thoughtfully reflects, “In the first gallery pictures of carnivalesque iconography (a figure with an elephant-head mask, another with a donkey-head mask) join images of the Muse, forcing men and women to confront their images in a hand-held mirror and guiding spectators on the way to self-reflection and contemplation.” Oppenheim, “Little of Everything,” 11.



true selves that we are guilty of not seeing clearly in each other? As George Lipsitz reflects on New Orleans's Mardi Gras maskers, "Under the aegis of carnival, they form secret societies, wear flamboyant costumes, speak a specialized language, and celebrate a festive past."<sup>38</sup> In Weems's transformative art, playful masks recall this "festive past" while masks recalling minstrelsy personify haunting specters of the past.

## SECOND FRONTIER: HARLEM'S CONJURE-HOODOO WOMAN AND DAPPER DANDIES

In the city space of Harlem, Weems's *Hopes and Dreams* presents another character, smartly dressed and "installed" in various settings of the urban landscape. This time, however, the figure interacts (albeit indirectly) with perplexed observers and passersby. Noting literary inspiration for her artistry, Weems recollects, "I discovered Faust many years ago, and it's stayed with me. I developed my own Faustian characters. One of them appears in *Selling Hopes and Dreams in a Bottle* [2004]. I developed this character and brought her out in the streets in Harlem. She sold hopes and dreams in a bottle; downtown she carried banners and signs about voting."<sup>39</sup> Our masked character resembles the zoomorphic "people" of *Missing Links*, with tall black top hat, white gloves, suit jacket, and a flower in full bloom tucked into the lapel (plate 6.1). Weems has applied a layer of white powder or paint to her face and close examination reveals a small black eye mask fitted over her face for further concealment. The character wears a black-and-white striped shirt that resembles prisoners' uniforms from the twentieth century, while the white pinstriped pants echo the apparel of Uncle Sam. (Recalling Weems's mention of voting banners makes this allusion quite understandable.) The contrast of associations conjured by different elements in the figure's costume effectively places US major power players and its most vulnerable citizens in conversation with one another. As with *Missing Links*, we are faced yet again with paradoxical figures: this time, perhaps a jailbird Uncle Sam or a patriotic prisoner. However, I offer yet another reading of Weems's character as neither prisoner nor patriot, but rather conjure woman and dandy.

Positioned in front of a small grocery store and deli (also recognizable as a Harlem bodega), the same character laughs out loud, irreverent before her spectators (plate 6.2). Two observers stand by bemused, uncertain of

how they should react and how to situate this peculiar figure who appears both *out of time* and *out of place* in the heat of New York's concrete jungle. In another photograph from the series (plate 6.4), we find the same masked figure seated on the street calmly reading a newspaper behind a small wooden table, which includes a sign both in front of and above the desk advertising "Hopes & Dreams in a bottle *only* \$19.99." Dyangani Ose comments on the character's performance, noting, "Later, Weems invaded the public space with performances like...*Selling Hopes and Dreams in a Bottle* (2004), in which the artist, dressed according to traditional Con Man aesthetics, reflects ironically about whether the spectators' desire is in any way represented in the public space."<sup>40</sup> In this photograph, a gentleman walks by hurriedly, his attention drawn to the unusual street peddler of hopes and desires. Weems's character certainly raises questions about whether wishes may be captured, and what a Black vendor of dreams might look like.

However, rather than a con man, the figure presents as an African American *conjure woman* or *hoodoo man*,<sup>41</sup> whose clairvoyance allows them to ward off evil<sup>42</sup> and whose curious vials of "lotions and potions" frequently rest atop ritual work stations. Closer inspection of Weems in this role reveals a peculiar pair of embroidered "Aladdin" slippers on her feet, further contributing an exotic mystique to the "Hindu [elements] in Hoodoo."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, many African Americans in major Northern cities such as Chicago and New York City falsely represented themselves to both White and Black clients as knowledgeable yogis and experienced swamis who could offer rituals, remedies, and healing techniques acquired during their training in India and the "Far East."<sup>44</sup> For instance, Prof. Noi Ram presented himself as a turbaned "seer" who offered Harlem residents a dream book in which they could find the corresponding numbers to certain dream motifs (i.e., Marcus Garvey, "Voodoo," opium) and hope-

fully win the lotto (fig. 4). Like many Black conjure workers and White performers of the twentieth century, Ram identified himself as an ambiguously ethnic/exotic fortune teller to give greater authority to his mystic powers. The formal attire of Weems's character thus resembles that of a Black American magician and mystic "foreigner," a root worker and soothsayer whose ritual powers assist clients in manifesting their "hopes and dreams" and restoring balance to their lives.

Another interpretation of Weems's Harlem character may suggest the



4. Prof. Noi Ram [Marion Van Walker Jr.], *The Black Cat Dream Book* (New York, 1937), frontispiece. Collection of Philip Deslippe.

38 Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians," 101.

39 Robin Pogrebin, "In a New Show, Carrie Mae Weems Takes On Hollywood," *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/arts/design/in-a-new-show-carrie-mae-weems-finds-monuments-on-tv.html>.

40 Dyangani Ose, "Studies for a Social Project," 20.

41 See Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

42 Discussing the symbolism of Jola/Diola horned initiation masks in Senegambia, art historian Peter A. Mark explains that "the horned mask has served as the physical embodiment of the *kutokoñerit bukan*, individuals who put their clairvoyant powers at the service of the community to offer protection against the *kussay*." Peter A. Mark, "Iconography of the Horned Mask," in *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest: Form, Meaning, and Change in Senegambian Initiation Masks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110.

43 Philip Deslippe, "The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic," *Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 34–56.

44 See Deslippe.

gallant dandy. In the first exposition of global Black dandyism, Shantrelle P. Lewis curated a photography exhibition in Harlem featuring urbane dandies from regions as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo (where they are known as *Les Sapeurs*<sup>45</sup>) as well as France, Belgium, and the United States.<sup>46</sup> On a strictly aesthetic level, the Black dandy behaves like a gentleman, dresses in debonair fashion, and “intentionally co-opts and then complicates classical European fashion with an African Diasporan aesthetic and sensibilities.”<sup>47</sup> Lewis elaborates on the dandy however, clarifying that the flamboyant style of dress signals a philosophy, a culture, and a mode of being that boldly proclaims one’s presence as a (Black) man of integrity. Following Lewis’s analysis, we might relate Weems’s dandy figure to the Yorùbá spirit Esu, a playful “agitator” confronting stereotypes, “his contradictory black self in combination with his fashionable dress serving to instigate, agitate, amaze and confound his audiences.”<sup>48</sup> In the quartet of images comprising *Performance Studies #1*, Weems’s character achieves remarkably distinct forms of “self”: she alternately relies upon white face paint (recalling the ritual use of white kaolin clay in West African ceremonies) and a bullhorn to announce her proclamations. One painted mask resembles the visage of an innocent-looking, elderly grandmother, a folded mask with an angry face dramatically signals a French musketeer with a brandished rapier, and an unadorned white Venetian mask taunts and jeers at its observers (plate 6.6). In an African style of masquerade, the performance is used not to conceal human identity, but rather to illuminate the powerful possibility of spirit manifestation/transformation.<sup>49</sup>

There is a gender-bending aspect to the hoodoo man/conjure woman of Weems’s *Hopes and Dreams* that resonates with what Lewis sees in the tradition of female dandies and queer masculine of center dandies:<sup>50</sup> new insight into the “elasticity of masculinity.”<sup>51</sup> The unconventional dandyism of female and queer people may allow them to transcend normative experiences of gender altogether as *nouveaux* dandies. In this way, Weems’s hoodoo/conjure woman and female dandy figure offer us a manifestation of Legba, dynamic Haitian spirit of the crossroads, change, and mistaken (gender) identity.<sup>52</sup> And while Legba and Esu spirits embody playful ener-

gies (even “clown-like” in their penchant for jokes, riddles, and confusion), it is clear that they are the keepers of paths and crossroads. Detailing Mardi Gras Indian street processions, Wehmeyer writes that performance theorist Joseph Roach “sees the march...as an articulation of themes of ‘frontier space—and its control by nomads’ in which participants willfully occupy a space of ‘constantly shifting borderlands,’ reenacting what Roach calls a ‘rite of territory repossessed, not to assert permanent ownership, but temporary use.’”<sup>53</sup> If we presume that Weems’s conjure woman has indeed set up shop to sell dreams on the streets of Harlem, we can understand how her hoodoo woman “mask” in this site of transfer, exchange, and transportation serves as ultimate arbiter of the urban “frontier space.”

Further rooting this notion of the “frontier” in a Black Atlantic ritual context, Weems’s Legba resides at the crossroads known as *kafou*, where all varieties of masked characters may appear. Harlem provides an interesting site where spirits and performers may congregate; as Wehmeyer notes, “The streets, as urban ‘frontier space,’ are the natural environment for manifestations of the Indian spirits, whether metaphysical, as in the examples above, or mimetic, as in the performances of the Indian tribes.”<sup>54</sup> In *Hopes and Dreams*, our Legba-conjure woman (Weems has identified her character as female) is both mortal performer and mystic character. As conjurer and hoodoo woman, Weems’s masked character navigates the space as an intermediary between visible and invisible realms, laughing at jokes and scenes that other observers do not seem able to perceive with the ordinary senses of this world.<sup>55</sup>

With this contextual history, it becomes clear how New Orleans’s masking traditions (including masked women of color in private balls, Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club’s minstrelsy and blackface, and Mardi Gras Indians’ face paint and costume) as well as Harlem’s masquerading (comprising African Americans presenting as “Hindu” hoodoo men and “exotic” conjure women) all signal ways in which Black communities historically engaged with Whites in their cities as a liminal space and crossroads.<sup>56</sup> Behind their respective masks, Weems’s New Orleanian zoomorphic people and Harlem crossroads clown/conjure woman embody Black Atlantic notions of “the cool,” posing with formidable presence and powerful ges-

45 La Sape (which stands for *La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*) has grown enormously popular as a subculture, philosophy, and way of life in the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa). For more on *les Sapeurs*, see Natalya Kadyrova’s RT documentary film *The Congo Dandies* (2015) and Héctor Mediavilla’s short documentary, *Sapeurs* (2014).

46 In 2010, New Orleans native Lewis was invited to curate an exhibition in a Harlem pop-up gallery. She titled this exhibition *Dandy Lion: Articulating a Re(de)-fined Black Masculinity*.

47 Shantrelle P. Lewis, “Fashioning Black Masculinity: The Origins of the Dandy Lion Project,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 37 (Nov. 2015): 55.

48 Lewis, 56, 59.

49 Here, Lewis poetically states, “Pulling from masquerade traditions of West Africa, where an individual is transformed into otherworldly beings, the black dandy sees that, in a performative context, even when a body is encased in the confines of a ‘suit,’ expectations of what is ordinarily humanly possible often become exceeded as the masked or ‘suited’ individual performs his or her dress.” Lewis, 56, 59.

50 As founding member of the Brown Boi Project, B. Cole coined the term *masculine of center* (MoC) to express the diverse gender identities of “womyn, queer and trans people, and people of color.” See “Mission and Values,” The Brown Boi Project, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.brownboiproject.org/mission-and-values>.

51 Lewis, “Fashioning Black Masculinity,” 57.

52 Esu/Legba figures may present as either hypersexual or asexual, as definitively masculine or ambiguously gendered.

53 Wehmeyer, “Feathered Footsteps,” 429. See Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

54 Wehmeyer, 434.

55 Woodward reminds us that in many works of African art, “Masks and figures often mediate between these worlds by summoning the power of a deity, signifying a major transition in a person’s life, or effecting a tangible presence of otherworldly spirits.” Woodward, “African Affinities,” 7.

56 Richard Brent Turner asserts that New Orleans festival culture, especially Mardi Gras traditions, allows Black people to “creat[e] their own social spaces in order to experience the African ancestral memory, the communal music, and the healing and resistance arts celebrated in the jazz street parades and African diasporist culture from Congo Square to the Lower Ninth Ward.” Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans: After Hurricane Katrina*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), xiii.

tures.<sup>57</sup> In this manner, I argue that Weems's two series, *Missing Links* and *Hopes and Dreams*, operate squarely within the traditions of New Orleans Mardi Gras and Harlem conjure "masquerade." Furthermore, drawing upon the Haitian notion of the *kafou* to refer to both the physical and spiritual crossroads, these masks create a metaphysical intersection<sup>58</sup> that requires audience members to think beyond the parameters of human-conceived racial and class boundaries.

### RACISM BEHIND THE MASK

Another key element of Weems's masked characters is their dance with visibility. The hoodoo/conjure woman of *Hopes and Dreams* appears to be seen by observers but not equally equipped to see and fully engage with these observers herself. A duality presents itself here, as it is not clear whether the figure understands herself to be performing on an invisible stage, or whether she is simply conducting her life in an urban setting, unconcerned with onlookers and passersby. Noting a similar occurrence in Igbo masking traditions, performance theorist Osita Okagbue explains that, "Igbo masking...like all theatres around the world, involves the performance paradox of 'invisible presence and present absence': in a masking encounter, there is the visible character (an ancestor, a spirit, an animal, etc.) and the invisible performer (the masker)."<sup>59</sup> This paradox brings to light the fact that masquerade requires an *established understanding* between performers and audience members: a stage has been set, characters have been chosen, and ritual or unrehearsed interactions will take place. Not unlike the ambiguity produced by a flash mob, Weems's *Hopes and Dreams* performances identify a scene and commit to a character, but it is not evident whether bystanders are aware of this event as "performance" or "reality." On the other hand, her photographs of these performances clearly depict Weems's role as a visible character performing on an invisible stage in real life. Okagbue's attention to an "invisible presence and present absence" provides an especially helpful metaphor when considering troubled race relations and Black Atlantic traditions of masking and masquerade.

Arguably the quintessential African American performance style has been folklore, which includes "masquerade" rites of its own. Weems's advanced degree in folklore, and her particular interest in folk humor, is evident in many of her works. Tall tales, riddles, jokes, "lies," and epic legends all form the foundation of folklore, and yet, "Folklore always tells it like it is...indicating what is on a people's mind and in a people's heart."<sup>60</sup> Despite the truths embedded in folklore traditions, however, researchers (and inquisitive children) are quite familiar with the numerous layers or masks of meaning. As gifted ethnographer and novelist Zora Neale Hurston explains, "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. *They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by.*"<sup>61</sup> Hurston's last line reminds us that even within

their own community, Black Americans may choose to "mask," artfully and surreptitiously coding the meanings behind their facts, fictions, and fables.

Folklore traditions have greatly influenced Black artistic genres such as jazz, blues, R&B, poetry, theater, as well as visual and performing arts. Commenting in particular on the visual arts, Kathryn E. Delmez remarks, "Carrie Mae Weems, like other artists of color ranging from Faith Ringgold to Kara Walker, is interested in this mode of expression and incorporates elements of folklore related to African Americans into her work as a way of both recognizing a unique heritage and deconstructing derogatory stereotypes."<sup>62</sup> Drawing from African American traditions, Weems's work both affirms cultural pride and negates cultural degradation of Blackness in White America. Portraits such as *Peaches*, *Liz*, *Tanikka*, and *Elaine* (1988, plates 8.1–4) require us to face the ugliness of Black women's caricatures and stereotypes. Echoing Nina Simone's 1966 song "Four Women," this series portrays four caricatures of Black women, including: 1) *Elaine*, the Angry Black Woman (based on Black Panther member Elaine Brown); 2) *Tanikka*, the Afrocentric mother archetype; 3) *Peaches*, the scantily clad woman looking for a sugar daddy; and 4) *Liz*, the disgruntled, suburban housewife. In Weems's own words:

No, really I am shocked. I mean the images of black women are just downright strange. In some cases the images are so monstrously ugly that they scare me!...These images are so unlike me, my sisters or other any women I know—I didn't know it was supposed to be me. No really in history, in media, in photography, in literature. The construction of black women as the embodiment of difference is so deep, so wide, so vast, so completely absolved of reality that I didn't know it was me being made fun of. Somebody had to tell me. To lift the voice in laughter is saying something...We don't laugh to keep from crying, we laugh to keep from slapping the inventor of these crazy-ass images upside his head, cause you can bet they're made by men.<sup>63</sup>

Relatedly, *Ain't Jokin'* (1987–88, plates 10.1–6) unearths the offensive nature of White "folklore" as the series investigates racist imagery and text in postcards and advertisements, myths and fairy tales, poems and novels, joke books and textbooks. In many ways, the characters from these series serve as *masked subjects* themselves, with Weems dressed as a burlesque Black woman and unsmiling Black people posing with watermelon or fried chicken (as in *Ain't Jokin'*). While her biting wit and wry humor were not always appreciated by artists or audiences,<sup>64</sup> on a wider scale contemporary critics have recently lauded Weems for her artistic boldness in recasting racist images, yet another example of what I identify as Weems's *whiteface*.

Black American masqueraders highlight another prominent duality in

57 For more on the concept of Africana "cool" see Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1973): 41.

58 For more on masquerade as the creation of liminal space see Z. S. Strother, "'Dancing the Masks': Introduction to the World of Pende Masquerading," in *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 16.

59 Okagbue, "Mmonwu," 19.

60 Alan Dundes as quoted by Kathryn E. Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People': Folklore in the Early Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems*, 11.

61 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 2; emphasis added.

62 Delmez, "'Real Facts,'" 11.

63 Willis, "Photographing between the Lines," 35–36.

64 Shawn-Marie Garrett remarks, "The visual artist Carrie Mae Weems, for example, is now regarded as a sharp interpreter of the ironies and hurts of America's legacy of racism, but she was attacked for some of her early black-and-white photographs of models dressed and posed as stereotypical black figures." Shawn-Marie Garrett, "Return of the Repressed," *Theater* 32, no. 2 (2002): 41.

their performance styles: that of humor and solemnity. Indeed, as Barbara J. Bloemink points out, “For author and cultural critic Ralph Ellison, the notion of ‘masking’ and humor are two essential elements of American character.”<sup>65</sup> This has been especially evident in blackface and vaudeville of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an interview about her video installation *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts* (2012, plate 7), Weems reflects on her long-standing interest in vaudeville performance, asserting:

There’s this really great saying that within seriousness there is very little room for play, but within play there is tremendous room for seriousness. And so I’m trying to figure out these sort of platforms on which to play...with historical figures and...with historical circumstance, [allowing] me to engage the world in a very abstracted form in order to get at something that is more deeply realized.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, her New Orleanian zoomorphic characters and Harlem conjure woman generate several uncanny, playful, and humorous aspects in an otherwise somber setting. The animals’ spectacular presence in a portrait studio and clown/conjure woman’s peculiar appearance by the waterfront or in front of a bodega suggest that Weems sensed these characters would be regarded as comically *out-of-place* in most contexts, not unlike Black people’s sense of “displacement” or “misplacement” in White America and also in Europe, as demonstrated in *Roaming* (2006) and *Museums* (2006). These performance rituals offer Black people the opportunity to disguise social critique and mimicry as “performance play” (as with the honorific titles of Weems’s zoomorphic characters) and to elevate “light-hearted” topics to the status of grave discussions (indeed, where are Black people’s dreams deferred to?).

What have these retentions and reinventions of masking traditions reflected about Black experience in the Americas? Weems’s images teach us that while each mask boasts its own unique persona, the smokescreen of performance may in fact reveal more about the actor than it conceals. In his influential article “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Ralph Ellison suggests that adopting the mask allows African Americans to “slip the yoke of oppression.”<sup>67</sup> I would argue further that Black masking allows marginalized communities to create new possibilities out of play, to revel in unruliness, and to expose their humanity and further claim a sense of belonging in the Diaspora. And yet, even as we recognize the African legacies of masking traditions in the Americas, it is critical to acknowledge the masking that all of us perform. As Ellison declared, “America is a land of masking jokers.... In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, Black minstrels and “tricksters,” wisely ascertained that masking in their performances allowed them to reveal ugly truths about the difficulty of transitions from rural to urban life, about

poverty and violence, class and gender inequality, and about being Black in America.

Indeed, masquerade rites allow one to simultaneously dissemble and display identity, whether they are Jamaican Jankunu performers masking as European colonial officials with African aesthetic influences, or White vaudeville actors applying blackface in imitation of enslaved African Americans, or an American Black woman masquerading as a hoodoo/conjure woman in a historically Black (yet rapidly gentrifying) Harlem. A striking difference emerges between these several examples, however: inasmuch as minstrelsy performances reinforce the status quo of White supremacy, subversive masquerades such as Jankunu and Weems’s *Missing Links* and *Hopes and Dreams* challenge existing power structures and offer counter-narratives of (masked) resistance in the analogs of history. The layered history of “race performances” leads us to conclude that donning a disguise may not necessarily hide one’s identity in the same way that casting off a mask may not actually divulge one’s identity in as clear-cut fashion as we imagine. In this way, revelations of a person’s “true self” may emerge through her dramatic (un)masking, since a person often undergoes profound transformation following an experience of masquerade. In her reflection on Jacmel *kanaval* in Haiti (her first official carnival celebration in her home country), novelist Edwidge Danticat carefully explains, “I have also always linked the French expression *jeter le masque*, which means to show one’s true colors, to Haitian carnival.”<sup>69</sup> Here, Danticat insightfully points out that the most dynamic aspects of carnival may in fact be the uncertainty surrounding *when* a mask has been removed and how the unveiled face/body emerges after its transformation.

## TO REVEAL, CONCEAL, AND TRANSCEND

Weems often seems to wink at her viewers in her artwork. There is a sense that uncovering visual layers of her masking parallels the experience of looking into two mirrors that face each other: *endless ritual echoing*. In a collection that catalogues three decades of Weems’s work, artist and art historian Deborah Willis comments, “The art critic Holland Cotter believes that ‘Weems understands that political art is about asking questions, not delivering answers.’ However, Weems has found ways to allow her viewers to define their own answers or to imagine new solutions to some of the questions and riddles found in her work.”<sup>70</sup> We might also recall that in many ways, a mask serves as a riddle unto itself, playing hide-and-seek with presence and power.

Carrie Mae Weems’s masks take many forms, and at times “concealment” involves the character’s placement in relationship to the camera. Faces may be clearly visible in her photographs, though just as often her gaze faces the opposite direction, turned in defiant gesture away from the viewer. If breaking the fourth wall in theater or film involves the actor gazing into and directly addressing the camera and/or audience, Weems’s photographs

65 Barbara J. Bloemink, *Re/Righting History: Counternarratives by Contemporary African-American Artists*, exh. cat. (Katonah: Katonah Museum of Art, 1999), 12.

66 “Corbis Interviews Carrie Mae Weems at 2013 LOOK3,” YouTube video, 17:37, posted by CorbisContributor, Oct. 30, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcuGoOtfifU>.

67 Ralph Ellison reflects, “Very often, however, the Negro’s masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity.” Ellison, “Change the Joke,” 55.

68 Ellison, 55. Splawn also notes that, in fact, “The connection between Ellison’s ‘joke’ and Boal’s ‘Joker’ lies in the wearing of the mask of deception.” In Boal’s “Joker” system “a central character acts as a master of ceremonies by inviting the audience to join in the action....[Ellison] argued that wearing a mask, or the guise of the trickster/manipulator, has become a part of American culture—both white and black.” Splawn, “Change the Joke[r],” 386–87.

69 Danticat, *After the Dance*, 16. Later, she further reflects, “So it did happen after all. I had really been there. Even as others had been putting on their masks, just for one afternoon, I had allowed myself to remove my own” (158).

70 Willis, “Photographing between the Lines,” 40.

at times hauntingly break the “first wall” with her back facing the viewer: audience members become de-centered as they recognize their inability to witness all of a performer’s actions. Weems thus suggests to viewers that she does not intend to serve as the object of another’s gaze but as a *seeing subject* in her own right, as more intriguing matters concern her (see *Beacon*, 2005 and *Roaming*, 2006) (fig. 5). However, these works are by no means her only portrait series. Many characters from *Missing Links* “confront” the camera head-on, capturing the viewer’s eyes in an arresting gaze (as with *Despair*, *Happiness*, and *Chicken*). *Hopes and Dreams* suggests an in-between approach, with the “clown”/conjure woman not entirely turned away from viewers, but also enjoying several private moments to herself while reading, laughing, and posing powerfully. With their bold eye contact (*Missing Links*) and playful averted gazes (*Hopes and Dreams*), Weems does not simply expect her characters to mask or reveal themselves to viewers, but demonstrates how these figures transcend reality with their masquerade regalia. Costumed maskers convey messages at the *kafou* (crossroads), transmitted horizontally amidst humans and vertically among spirits.

In this way, masks do not simply *conceal* and *reveal* people’s “true” identities, they also permit people to *transcend* individual realities and experience alternate forms of consciousness. Irobi remarks that in the process of creatively constructing a mask or performance, “the actants and participants of Carnival literally, performatively and philosophically, transcend themselves. They enter into a realm of imaginative and experiential possibilities often denied them by their everyday social, economic, political, and religious reality.”<sup>71</sup> With her zoomorphic characters and as the conjure woman/clown, Weems transcends herself, offering a narrative much larger than her individual story, a narrative about Black people’s ongoing suffering and their persistent survival. Adorned with twenty-first-century masks of rubber, plastic, and face paint, adding costumes and accompanying instruments, Weems makes us laugh and critically reflect as we consider the difficulty of not knowing our true selves (*Missing Links*); she urges us to dream expansively and wonder how we might react when given the opportunity to purchase (our own?) hopes and dreams from a conjure woman at the crossroads. When adopted by people initiated into artistic, political, and/or religious societies, masks allow us to connect with a quiet inner being, with the community to which we belong, and with larger (divine) forces outside of the self. Ultimately, it is these masks that allow us to slip between dimensions and step out of the pool of time, and perhaps come to recognize self/other in the mirror of the mask.

## POSTSCRIPT

Upon the Hill Carnival Monday morning breaks upon the backs of these thin shacks with no cock’s crow, and before the mist clears, little boys, costumed in old dresses, their heads tied, holding brooms made from the ribs of coconut palm leaves, blowing whistles and beating kerosene tins for drums, move across the face of the awakening Hill, sweeping yards in a ritual, heralding the masquerader’s coming, that goes back centuries for its beginnings, back across the Middle Passage, back to Mali and to Guinea and Dahomey and Congo, back to Africa when Maskers were sacred and revered, the keepers of the poisons and heads of secret societies, and such children went before them, clearing the ground, announcing their coming to the huts before which they would dance and

make their terrible cries, affirming for the village, the tribe, warriorhood and femininity, linking the villages to their ancestors, their Gods, remember even now, so long after the Crossing, if not in the brain, certainly in the blood; so that every Carnival Monday morning, Aldrick Prospect, with only the memory burning in his blood, a memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary Hill felt, as he put on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with an ancestral authority to uphold before the people of this Hill, this tribe marooned so far from the homeland that never was their home, the warriorhood that had not died in them, their humanness that

was determined not by their possession of things. He had a desire, a mission, to let them see their beauty, to uphold the unending rebellion they waged, huddled here on this stone and direct hill hanging over the city like the open claws on a dragon’s hand, threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings.

—Earl Lovelace<sup>72</sup>



5. Carrie Mae Weems, *Pyramids of Rome—Ancient Rome* from *Roaming*, 2006. Digital c-print, 73 x 61 in.

71 Irobi, “What They Came With,” 902; emphasis added.

72 Earl Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* (1979; New York: Persea Books, 1998), 120.

# CARRIE MAE WEEMS: THE MUSE AND HER MUSES

Angela Ards

My girl, my muse, dares to show up as a guide, an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power. She's the unintended consequence of the Western imagination. It's essential that I do this work and it's essential that I do it with *my* body.

—Carrie Mae Weems<sup>1</sup>

Since *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Carrie Mae Weems has used a black woman avatar in her photography, a persona she variously describes as an alter ego, artistic muse, spiritual guide, and witness to history. The technique of being both photographer and subject developed, she says, out of the participant-observer methodologies learned while studying folklore with Alan Dundes at Berkeley in the mid-1980s. The story of how an artist who was first a Marxist organizer, then a dancer in Anna Halprin's postmodern studio, before becoming a recognized MacArthur "genius" for, among other things, the performative use of her body to inspire social change, is now legendary. But less has been said about the black-feminist roots of the provocative encounters Weems engineers.<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw calls the transformation of "Weems's body into a vehicle through which we are made to see, and at other times a body that we are made to see *through*" her "wandering gaze."<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I place this signature strategy of engagement within a larger black-feminist critical project and history.

A transformative encounter with novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston inspired Weems to pursue that master's degree in folklore.<sup>4</sup> While at Berkeley, she also worked with literary scholar Barbara Christian, whose foundational *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985) was published shortly after Weems arrived on campus. Echoes of these two mentors can be found in elements that have defined Weems's muse over the last four decades: from

Hurston, the use of the black subject as universal; from Christian, a politically attuned use of self to inspire social change. The muse figure changes in role and significance according to the narrative frame in which she appears, but she is always exploring "the idea of power and the consequences of power."<sup>5</sup> I will consider those themes in relationship to *Peaches, Liz, Tanikka, and Elaine* (1988, plates 8.1–4), an update of Nina Simone's classic 1966 song, "Four Women," and the video installation *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts* (2012, plate 7), where Weems uses a Faustian persona alongside her muse to explore her own role as artist.

## I.

In 1976, Carrie Mae Weems "decided that the camera was going to be [her] voice"<sup>6</sup> amid a renaissance of black women's cultural production. Debut novels by Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker opened the decade, alongside Toni Cade's *The Black Woman*, an anthology of essays, poetry, and short stories from emerging writers soon to be household names. This creative outpouring, unprecedented in scope but certainly not singular in black literary history, sent critics within the academy and beyond in search of a larger tradition, "in search of our mothers' gardens," as Walker put it.<sup>7</sup> From the pages of *Ms.*, where Walker's essay first appeared, to *Black World*, probably the most popular publication on black literature, culture, and politics at the time, Zora Neale Hurston emerged as that foundational foremother. Her literary daughters brought her writing out of obscurity and back into print. As Farah Jasmine Griffin describes it, "a generation of young black women intellectuals [were] sharing photocopies of her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, passing it around as if it were contraband."<sup>8</sup>

A recent New York City transplant from San Francisco, Weems

1 Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Bomb*, no. 108, July 1, 2009, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/>.

2 Ladi'Sasha Jones, "The Radical Power of the Black Feminine Gaze," *Aperture*, accessed July 6, 2018, <https://aperture.org/blog/carrie-mae-weems-black-feminine-gaze/>.

3 Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Wandering Gaze of Carrie Mae Weems's The Louisiana Project," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <http://journalpanorama.org/the-wandering-gaze>.

4 Kathryn E. Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People': Folklore in the Early Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, exh. cat. (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 13.

5 Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

6 Bey.

7 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

8 Farah Jasmine Griffin, "That the Mothers May Soar," in *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*, ed. Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Feminist Press, 2009), 338.

immersed herself in this black-feminist artistic fervor, frequently attending events at the Studio Museum in Harlem, then known as “a place not only for artists but for the black intelligentsia of the city.”<sup>9</sup> Weems recalls attending Michele Wallace’s talk on *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, her controversial book about sexism in the civil rights and Black Power movements, now considered a black-feminist classic. “There must have been 500 people there, folks standing in the rafters. Debates went on for weeks after.”<sup>10</sup> Sometime between 1976, when she walked into a Studio Museum workshop, asking instructor Dawoud Bey, “Do you think I could be a photographer?” and 1984, when she entered the graduate program in folklore at Berkeley, Weems also read Hurston, declaring, “The first line had me, the first sentence. When she got off the bus, Carrie Mae Weems was a changed girl.”<sup>11</sup>

Before then, she had been working in the long-standing twentieth-century project of using the arts to combat racist representation, what Deborah Willis calls “Visualizing the ‘New Negro.’”<sup>12</sup> The New Negro movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance, began as a kind of civil rights initiative, a concerted effort among black leaders and their institutional literary organs—such as W. E. B. Du Bois and the NAACP’s the *Crisis* magazine—to counter caricatures that flourished on the nineteenth-century minstrel stage and turn-of-century vaudeville acts.<sup>13</sup> In that vein, Weems’s first photography series, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84, fig. 1), took on the Moynihan Report’s “tangle of pathology”<sup>14</sup> assessment of the black family. In the style of a family album—according to Willis, one of the few places to find authentic black representation—*Family Pictures* documented her family’s move from Tennessee and Mississippi to Oregon during the Great Migration. The “intimate but unvarnished”<sup>15</sup> portraits captured loving moments alongside discordant ones, recalling Langston Hughes’s movement manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Rather than as the social problem Du Bois lamented (and Moynihan perpetuated), Hughes urged Harlem Renaissance

artists to present black people and culture in full humanity, with the “beautiful. And ugly too.”<sup>16</sup> Weems began in that documentary tradition.

Sometime in the early 1980s, however, that documentary impulse took on a conceptual, critical edge. “For my photographs to be credible, I needed to make a direct intervention, extend the form by playing with it, manipulating it, creating representations that appeared to be documents but were in fact staged. In the same breath, I began incorporating text,

using multiples images, diptychs and triptychs, and constructing narratives.”<sup>17</sup> That new, more conceptual approach emerged with *The Kitchen Table Series*, and that “direct intervention” was the insertion of her own body into the narrative frame (fig. 2). Many critics assume her work is autobiographical, “because I so often use myself, my own experience—limited as it is at times—as the starting point,” Weems acknowledges. “But I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power, and following where that leads me to and through. It’s never about me; it’s always about something larger.”<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, that “something larger” is a meditation on black womanhood, an idea reinforced by the series’ title echoing that of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, a publishing house that Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde co-founded a decade earlier to publish writings by women of color. On the other, it is a meditation on the collective human experience. A core black-feminist tenet posits that, given “systems of oppression are interlocking,”<sup>19</sup> liberating the most oppressed among us, seeing the world from the lowest social standpoint, frees us all. Most often a reverse portrait, with her back to the camera, the muse figure allows Weems to stand in for individuals beyond herself. As Kathryn E. Delmez writes, the persona is “a black subject...

meant to resonate across racial and class boundaries, reflecting Weems’s desire for the personal to become universal and for the black figure to represent humanity as a whole.”<sup>20</sup>

In Hurston’s Janie Crawford, the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching*



1. Carrie Mae Weems, *Dad and Me* from *Family Pictures and Stories*, 1978–84. Gelatin silver print, 12.8 x 8.5 in.

9 Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

10 Bey.

11 Delmez, “‘Real Facts,’” 260.

12 Deborah Willis, “Visualizing the ‘New Negro,’” in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project*, ed. Vivian Patterson, exh. cat. (New York: Aperture; Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 2000), 66–67.

13 See *Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, directed by Amber Edwards (Trenton: New Jersey Network, 1994).

14 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), 47.

15 Kathryn E. Delmez, “Introduction,” in *Carrie Mae Weems*, 11.

16 Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *Nation*, June 23, 1926.

17 Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

18 Bey. I would argue, and have argued elsewhere (see *Words of Witness: Black Women’s Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016]) that autobiography is always a constructed performance, a fiction.

19 Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (Apr. 1977), in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 232.

20 Delmez, “Introduction,” 2.

God, one can see perhaps a muse for Weems's muse, a persona who embodies blackness both in its particularity and its universality. Like *The Kitchen Table Series*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a semi-autobiographical work. Hurston claims she wrote the novel in six weeks, recovering from the end of a love affair with a younger man who resembles Janie's life-changing love, Tea Cake. *Their Eyes* takes the Harlem Renaissance imperative to focus on black life and its cultural forms: black vernacular traditions—from dialect and playing the dozens, to speechifying and telling tales—structure the novel. In the text Weems incorporates into *The Kitchen Table*, Hurston's folk sayings are updated as plays on popular lyrics: "She felt like she was...in a lonesome graveyard, like she had many rivers to cross...like nobody knew the trouble she'd seen."<sup>21</sup> Both artists deploy black folklore to mark a distinct cultural heritage.

Words that have been used to describe *The Kitchen Table*—a seeming "stage for a *tableau vivant* starring African American individuals" that is ultimately a "reflection on what is universal"<sup>22</sup>—equally apply to *Their Eyes*. The novel's setting recalls Hurston's hometown, Eatonville, Florida, the oldest black incorporated town in the United States. Growing up in all-black Eatonville, Hurston did not experience what she saw as Du Bois's tragic vision of double-consciousness: "There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes."<sup>23</sup> So, in her novel, as in her life, white people and their racism, while present, are peripheral to everyday existence. Rather, black storytelling traditions suffuse the novel and are equated throughout with divinity, "thought pictures"<sup>24</sup> that make the world anew like God in Genesis. In the hurricane scene, for instance, Tea Cake, Janie, and the other workers down in the Florida muck spin tales of Big John de Conquer, the folklore hero who conquers "heben" and hell after doing "everything big on earth."<sup>25</sup> But as they ignore nature's warnings to seek higher ground, they soon find them-

selves at the storm's mercy, "their eyes...watching God." In an instant, like the floodwaters that threaten to overtake them, a scene that seemed yet another local-color set piece about the richness of black folklore manifests as a larger commentary on an enduring question about the human condition: fate versus free will, hubris versus humility. Black cultural specificity comes to represent the universal.

Weems, too, has been drawn to the specificity and the universality of Eatonville's history. In January 2002, she, Bey, Willis, and Lonnie Graham spent time there, "taking photographs in an effort to provide a meaningful reflection of the town's spirit and character, while concentrating on its social, political, and cultural landscape. In response to the unique character of the community and its history, these artists produced a diverse portrait of Eatonville."<sup>26</sup> Weems's contribution to this collaborative project is another reverse portrait of herself, walking down a country road, the muse figure recognizing her own muse and guide in Hurston (fig. 3): "You appeared as / My guardian angel / Leading me along / The dust tracks / In the road & / Back to the meaning / Of myself." The allusion to Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, an "autobiography" widely regarded as a complete fiction, nods to another model for the seemingly autobiographical constructed performance as a lens through which others may better see the world and themselves.

## II.

While Weems was feeling the influence of and reestablishing a connection to an earlier time and distant place through Hurston, she was also experiencing the impact of her contemporary moment and cultural environment. Under Barbara Christian's tutelage at Berkeley, Weems learned the tenets of an evolving black-feminist criticism. Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism* built on earlier articulations of an emerging field.<sup>27</sup> Her singular



2. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children)* from *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27.3 x 27.3 in.

21 Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems*, plate 6.20.

22 Vivian Patterson, "The Hampton Project," in *Hampton Project*, 24.

23 Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 1031.

24 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 51.

25 Hurston, 157.

26 Text from the *Embracing Eatonville* exhibition, created by Light Work and sponsored by the CNY Community Foundation, which was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery in Syracuse University's Schine Student Center from February 1 to May 29, 2009.

27 In an August 1974 *Black World* issue with Hurston on the cover, Mary Helen Washington urged her audience to read, absorb, and pay attention to writers attuned to black women's lives and creativity. Barbara Smith's pivotal 1977 essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," insisted critics expose interlocking "systems of oppression": the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In 1980, as this critical discourse forged in the social movements of the sixties and seventies entered the academy, Deborah McDowell argued that critics consider *context*—history and culture—alongside the text itself. See Barbara Christian, "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History," in *Changing Our Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 59–67.



contribution was to remind scholars “to let go of their distanced and false stance of objectivity and to expose their own point of view,” allowing a sense of purpose and audience to guide this critical practice, asking continually: “What do we want to do anyway and for whom do we think we’re doing it?”<sup>28</sup>

These questions of purpose and audience animate in Weems’s work what Huey Copeland calls “a uniquely feminist African-diasporic perspective that is nearly without parallel in the visual arts.”<sup>29</sup> To inspire social action, Weems places her “politically attuned self-portraits”<sup>30</sup> within consciously crafted narratives, geographies, and terrains. “I’m very interested in how I map something, how I enter it,” she says. “I’m always aware that I need to take somebody with me.”<sup>31</sup> Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw explains the impact of this engineered encounter on the viewer: “To experience [how] Weems constantly positions herself as witness...is to be confronted by one’s own position as a viewer and to acknowledge the ever-present power of the gaze and the perpetual struggle by women artists, in their work and in their persons, to control it.”<sup>32</sup> While one strain of Weems’s self-presentation takes the form of her muse figure, often with her back to the camera, another strain that appears in both early and more recent work involves the performance of other personas who more directly confront the audience, as the quartet of women in *Peaches*, *Liz*, *Tanikka*, and *Elaine* and the joker figure in *Lincoln*, *Lonnie*, and *Me*. The more aggressive, confrontational stance prods viewers not only to develop a critical gaze but to become agents of change.

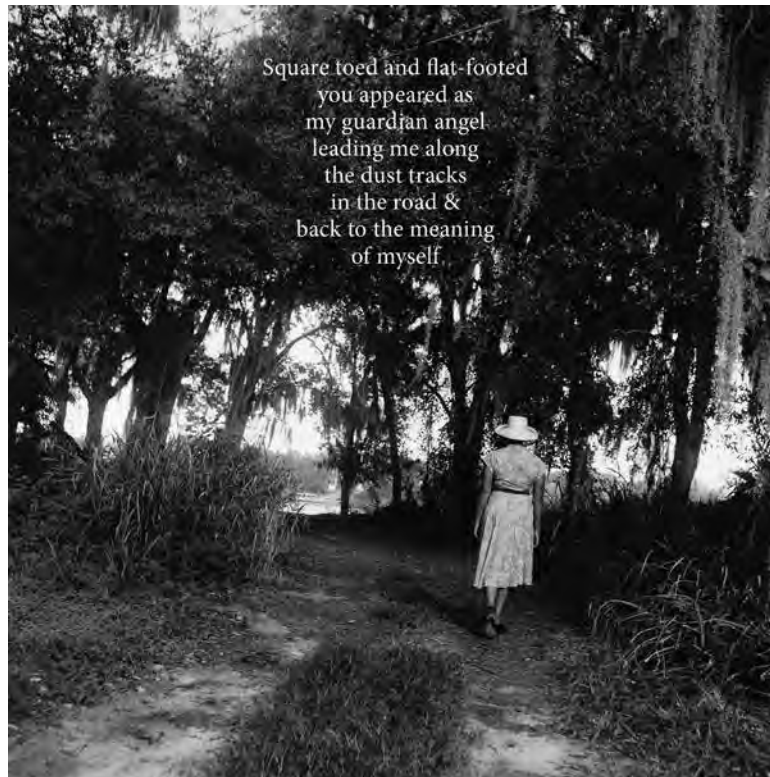
In *Peaches*, Weems updates Nina Simone’s 1966 song “Four Women,” composed of four verses narrated by figures who reflect well-known stereotypes: Aunt Sarah (“Mammy”), Saffronia (the “tragic mulatta”), Sweet Thing (“Jezebel”), and Peaches (“the angry black woman”). The names and inflection of the first three narrators correspond to their heartrending lyrics. Aunt Sarah is “Strong enough to take the pain / Inflicted again and again.” Saffronia lives torn “between two worlds.” Sweet Thing belongs “to anyone who has money to buy.” But Peaches’ verse jars. The rageful lyrics (“I’ll kill the first mother I see / My life has been rough”) clash with the

cute nickname common among nice, docile Southern girls. When Peaches defiantly screams her name at song’s end, she reminds, as Thulani Davis wrote in a *Village Voice* tribute to Simone after her death in 2003, “that in slavery and patriarchy, your name is what *they* call you”—and that we resist the misnaming by first calling it out. For a generation of black women artists, Davis goes on to note, “‘Four Women’ became the core of works to come, notably Julie Dash’s film of the same name, and it should be regarded as a direct ancestor of Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. This Simone song was a call

heard by Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and countless artists who come to mind as women who gave us a whole generation of the stories of Aunt Sara, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches.”<sup>33</sup>

With her *Peaches* series, Weems stakes a claim to this black-feminist legacy. The series juxtaposes idealized images with types: Elaine (an homage to former Black Panther Elaine Brown) and Tanikka (a gelee-wrapped Afrocentric “queen”) versus Peaches (the primitive in a leopard-print bra and wrap skirt) and Liz (a bourgeois matron in a slanted blonde wig and fake pearls).<sup>34</sup> In a text accompanying this work, Weems says that she so little identified with these representations that she did not know to be offended: “No really in history, in media, in photography, in literature. The construction of black women as the embodiment of difference is so deep, so wide, so vast,

so completely absolved of reality that I didn’t know it was me being made fun of....We don’t laugh to keep from crying, we laugh to keep from slapping the inventor of these crazy-ass images upside his head, cause you can bet they’re made by men.”<sup>35</sup> The jarring element in *Peaches* is that, rather than imposed from without, these images have been constructed from within, out of hagiography as much as patriarchy. The politics of icons like Elaine and Tanikka have been so commodified as to be completely compromised, reduced to fashion and hairstyles. And Peaches and Liz, emblems of ratchet and respectability politics, respectively, reflect contemporary class dynamics pitting generations of women against each other. Willis argues that, in embodying these images, Weems “begins [the] construction of this voice-



3. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Square Toed and Flat-Footed)* from *Eatonville Series*, 2003. Pigment ink print, 10 x 10 in.

28 Christian, “But What Do We Think,” 67, 74.

29 Huey Copeland, “Close-Up: Specters of History; Carrie Mae Weems’s *Lincoln*, *Lonnie*, and *Me*, 2012,” *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (Sept. 2014): 344.

30 Peter Erickson, “Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 49.

31 Weems qtd. in Susan Sollins, “Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marybeth Sollins, vol. 5 (New York: Art21, 2009), 47.

32 Shaw, “Wandering Gaze.”

33 Thulani Davis, “Nina Simone, 1933–2003,” *Village Voice*, Apr. 29, 2003, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2003/04/29/nina-simone-1933-2003/>.

34 Deborah Willis, “Photographing between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems,” in Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems*, 35.

35 Willis, 35–36.

less black female fighting back.”<sup>36</sup> And her direct, face-to-face gaze with the viewer demands we join her.

### III.

Weems’s eighteen-minute video installation *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* reflects her constant strategizing to move viewers into social action: “I think the *how* is the most difficult and rewarding. Sometimes my work needs to be photographic, sometimes it needs words, sometimes it needs to have a relationship to music, sometimes it needs to have all three and become a video projection.”<sup>37</sup> Originally commissioned by the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh as part of the exhibition *Feminist And...*, this interdisciplinary project draws on visual imagery, popular and blues music, and voiceover. Through the use of a nineteenth-century technology called “Pepper’s Ghost,” a precursor to the hologram, Weems projects a succession of phantom images onto what looks like a vaudeville stage: a tap dancer; a boxer “who keeps fighting, who keeps on duking it out, keeps punching it out no matter what”;<sup>38</sup> and Weems herself as the Faustian joker character from *Selling Hopes and Dreams* (2006–07, plate 6.4) and dressed in an ill-fitting Playboy Bunny suit. These ghosts serve to reinterpret history but also question her own role as artist.

From the installation’s title, the history under question is framed primarily by two voiceovers: an actor reciting Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and a recording of artist, activist, and sometime-collaborator Lonnie Graham lamenting the hopelessness of social change. The Gettysburg Address—a eulogy for soldiers who lost their lives at Gettysburg, where the Union army defeated that of the Confederacy—reiterated the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, warning that the Civil War imperiled not only the Union but the idea of democracy throughout the world. Lincoln’s plea that the soldiers should not have died in vain resonates with ongoing struggles for racial justice. Graham’s despairing voiceover—“I’ve given up hope on making serious change”—plays during footage of a 1960s demonstration, in which black marchers and white hecklers have angry encounters. The split screen formalizes what seems to be their irreconcilable conflict. Weems created *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* before the rise of Black Lives Matter and this current authoritarian-aspiring administration, but her “wandering gaze” presciently connects the past to the present. The juxtaposed histories remind that contemporary struggles, like the Civil War and the civil rights movement, have their own list of dead who need to be mourned and should not have died in vain.

In the title essay of *Some of Us Did Not Die*, a collection of political essays published posthumously, June Jordan meditates on “what it means to fail to find and preserve the connection with the dead whose lives you, or I, want or need to honor with our own,” what she calls “the moral meaning of memory.”<sup>39</sup> The “me” of *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* suggests Weems considers where she herself, as artist and activist, fits into this reconstructed history and its moral memory. As one reviewer notes, her shifting personas within the video “[reveal] her struggle to make sense of [contemporary events], as well as the ethical touchstones that guide her response.”<sup>40</sup> While playing the Playboy Bunny makes viewers see the sexism of the stereotype and the

sinister joker threatening revenge conveys her rage at society’s enduring “systems of oppression,” the boxer who “keeps punching it out no matter what” counters Graham’s despair and provides hope for the future. Jordan believed, as Thulani Davis wrote in tribute, “there is no death to the ideals that shape [our] fights,”<sup>41</sup> and that spirit of faithful resistance infuses Weems’s incomparable muse.

36 Deborah Willis, “The Black Female Body in Photography” (1999), The Photography Institute–National Graduate Seminar, <http://www.thephotographyinstitute.org/www/1999/willis.html>.

37 Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

38 “Carrie Mae Weems: An Artist Reflects,” YouTube video, 1:29:03, posted by Portland Art Museum, Feb. 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiPLiGPhpgU>.

39 June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan* (New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002), 374.

40 Matthew Biro, “Carrie Mae Weems,” *Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, Dec. 6, 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/12/artseen/carrie-mae-weems>.

41 Thulani Davis, “June Jordan, 1936–2002,” *Village Voice*, June 25, 2002, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/06/25/june-jordan-19362002/>.



# “THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY”: THEOLOGICAL [RE]VISIONING WITH *ALL THE BOYS*

Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

—1 Corinthians 13:12

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.

—W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup>

Blurred portrait, mugged mugshots...amputation and the range of echo it induces: spooky resonance, phantom hapticality, haptical sociality, communicability's constant contact in missed communication. Network failure.

—Fred Moten<sup>2</sup>

## I.

“Would you like the retina screen?”

“I’m sorry—what?”

“The retina screen, the display?” he asked again.

I’d lost my train of thought. Standing amidst a crisply lit meadow of monitors, neatly planted rows of displays and cases and tablets parted only by organized accessories, the clarity of the decision became more muddled by the moment. I had not purchased a new computer...well, *ever*...and the occasion of banging out a dissertation required an upfront investment in the technological means to an intellectual end.

“I’m sorry, sir.” (It was a time I still made polite apologies for things I had not done wrong.) “Could you please explain to me the difference again?”

“Absolutely!” His words were continuous but only hit my cognition in stops and starts. Pixel clarity, the realness of the image, so clear as to be real—real, as if to trick the eye, enough to trick the self—no, actually, *better*

than real. His friendly demeanor could not obscure the script he had memorized, reminding me that the upgraded display would dazzle, indeed, a competitive champion that could “rival the smooth curves and sharpness of printed text and immediacy of photographic prints.”

As he rattled off more details, I did not mention that theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “Immediacy is a delusion.”<sup>3</sup> Finally taking a breath, he paused, before asking the more obvious of questions: “Can’t you tell by looking?”

To tell by looking. Indeed, that day spent evaluating the resonance of screens capturing realities was an exercise in what is presumed relationally obvious. To *tell by looking* intimates something familiar, something known, something revealing and reveling in the truths that lie behind images. To *tell by looking* is to exact difference, extract meaning from what we recognize, we presume, we interpret through the lens of what is most omniscient in our lives, our own optometry. This process of looking and seeing, an episteme both of evaluation and requisite action, is a standpoint from which one can stand one’s ground. Even if uncertain, unclear, the unction subtends our moments of encounter—if you see something, say something. And yet, enunciation, articulation, have become too often mechanisms not of logic or rationale or thinking (if left preempted), but of inhabiting the idle wild of a particular theory of black *bodies*—as, we are not speaking of black *people*—whose judgment is self-righteously meted out in bullet holes and prison cells.

*What can we tell by looking?* The descriptive nuances of the difference a retinal screen makes, of the ways we seek to see more clearly, work to heighten what Carrie Mae Weems so expediently explores artistically in a moment where the mattering of black life, the interpretive gaze upon black bodies, the cyclical figuring of death dealt to those bodies, are in 2018 near quotidian occurrences without recourse or remand. Through lenses, beneath monitors, across screens—our ways of seeing have been conflated with our ways of knowing, with our professions of a certain kind of racial *belief*. The conditions of production and the historical context for Weems’s vision and social commentary—enunciated through the serial juxtapositions of blurred photographs in *All the Boys* (2016, plates 11.1–4) (“immediacy of photographic prints”)...repetitions of (un)seeing in *Usual Suspects* (2016, plates 12.1–9) (“the smooth curves and sharpness of printed text”)—are clear.

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *Crisis* 32, no. 6 (Oct. 1926): 295.

2 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 201.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 95.

In a 2016 interview with Antwaun Sargent, Weems notes the genesis of the series:

Four years ago, I was working on a film project, and I invited a group of young men—musicians—to play music for me and they all arrived in hoodies....Trayvon Martin had just been killed, maybe several months before and I had done a small piece around the tragedy of that. I asked the young men if I could photograph them....When I made those photographs, I just lived with them for a long time. And then, last year, I decided after the killing of the Emanuel 9 [in Charleston], I wanted to say something about the moment in which we live.<sup>4</sup>

*Can't you tell by looking?*

What does it mean to meditate on the moment in which we live, when people's lives have been so recklessly extinguished? This essay surveys Weems's work in *All the Boys* (and requisitely, *Usual Suspects* and *People of a Darker Hue*, 2016, plate 13) through the lens of Christian iconography, and offers a preliminary sketch of the ways Weems's work refracts the disciplinary theological lens toward icons, and subsequently toward the question of race, back upon itself. In other words, Weems's work presses me to theologically consider: What *can't* we tell by looking?

## II.

The cover of my Introduction to Christian Theology syllabus is an icon, specifically, *Our Lady of Ferguson and All Those Killed by Gun Violence* (fig. 1). Written by iconographer Mark Dukes, *Our Lady of Ferguson* depicts a Black Madonna—sonorous umber skin, spherical eyes, pronounced cheekbones, and broad nose round out the features far more full than what the typical Byzantine style has made dogma. She is in the *orans* position of prayer, hands lifted up in both veneration and revelation of the Christ who is usually positioned in an orb at the center of her body. But instead, here in *Ferguson*, where the face and body of Christ would usually be, there is instead only a silhouetted son, full shadow, pure black, without feature. The gilded nimbus haloing his body—a signature of divinity—is breached by the crosshairs of a gun. The *orans* positions of both mother and child genuflect to the gestures and shouts of protesters in the aftermath of the 2014 murder of Michael Brown: *Hands up, don't shoot!* When teaching this piece, it usually takes my students some time to realize that they, too, are part of the icon—that they are the

source of the target, that they hold a gun in their hands, that they, like every viewer, are bound up and complicit in contemporary violences and injustices (or the conditions of possibility for such) in America, even in 2018.

In Christian theological thought, the place of the image, of the icon, is critically present as a framework for anthropology, ontology, and relation. Humanity is created in the image of God (the *imago Dei*), all creation is fashioned in God's love and desire, and the lives we live, the stories we tell, the joys and pains we face, *together* have the capacity to draw us back in some way to the fundamental truth of human dignity. We are not only made in God's image, modeled in such a way to maintain the capacity for God's likeness through Jesus Christ. Christian thought understands that in the Incarnation, Jesus is the Word of God, the Word made flesh; in Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), divinity is bound up

with humanity in this God-Man. It is the Incarnation—God's very embodiment, presence, being with humanity—that grounds the justification for holy images. Christ is *the* Icon, the singular punctuation of discourse, who *disrupts* the *interruption* between things seen and unseen, and changes the way we look out from and toward our selves. Every icon is a window illuminating and, bit by bit, eliding the space between divinity and humanity.

In the introduction to her work, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Marie-José Mondzain asks an intriguing question: “The visible world, the one given to us to see: is it liberty or enslavement?”<sup>5</sup> Mondzain's analysis of the place of the icon and iconography in the Christian tradition as a philosophy of the sacred image, teases out the relation between the realms of visible and invisible meaning. For Mondzain, the image belongs to the category of the visible, while the icon points beyond the visible realm to the invisible from which the visible derives meaning.

Like Christ, holy icons are haptic, breathing, active, the visual of faith and doctrine corresponding to the Word made flesh (this is why one *writes* rather

than *paints* an icon). Icon theology teaches that there are no passive images; rather, we are constantly being acted upon, being drawn closer to God or pushed further away, making meaning. In encountering a holy icon, we are not meant to simply observe; we do not come to it, reach into it, bring ourselves to it. Rather, it is the icon, in its sacredness, that reaches out to us, changes us, brings us into an economy of Relation.

In his classic study *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W. J. T. Mitchell considers the “rhetoric of images” through two modes of inquiry, first to con-



1. Mark Dukes (1958–), *Our Lady of Ferguson and All Those Killed by Gun Violence*, 2015. Acrylic collage, Trinity Church, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Antwaun Sargent, “Carrie Mae Weems on a Career of Challenging Power and Black Representation in Art,” *Artsy*, Oct. 31, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-carrie-mae-weems-on-a-career-of-challenging-power-and-black-representation-in-art>.

<sup>5</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3.

sider, “what to say about images,” and second, “what images say.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to explain that “the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created ‘in the image and likeness’ of their creator and culminates, rather less grandly, in the modern science of ‘image making’ in advertising and propaganda.”<sup>7</sup> The continuum is one that makes meaning at every end. While icons reach out to us, drawing the worshiper closer to God, this economy, this field of relations, does not find a bounded or pure manifestation in relationship to the icon alone. Other images, immeasurably powerful, also reach out, also ask to participate in their offering of the imaginary, in exerting an iconic force, an iconic function. Alas, in the wrong hands, without a sacred community, left to her own devices, even the icon, like anything, can become idol, in person, or through a screen. What have we been taught, through image, through death? Are the things we see moving us toward liberty, or enslavement?

### III.

A printout of *Our Lady of Ferguson* graces the front of my office door, and it is surprising how many people have commented that in walking by, they did not at first “see” the overt references to race, to blackness, to the claims about racism, around anti-blackness, to police violence, to gun violence, to racism, to injustice, in the image. I have pointed out to many an admirer of this “beautiful” image, the unnamed, unseen, remembered shadow of a black body held in Mary’s chest. They simply saw a praying Mary, rich with color, positioned according to an already formed expectation of her likeness. Their veneration was anticipatory of the moment. One would expect the opposite—that years of encountering holy icons would make even the most subtle of nuances stand out, not blend in.

In *All the Boys*, perhaps what is most profound is held in the blend, the blur, the soft lack of focus that tires the eye and is left unrectified for even the most laborious observer. The camera fires a test shot, no, this shot is real time. A disconcerting notion that one, in fact, cannot see clearly even if the attempt is expected and exerted. These young, hoodie-donned men are nondescript, and yet, familiar, juxtaposed with the affronting police report, a redaction story.

They are not all the same, and yet, here they are, as one. As an article from the *New York Times* once described, “When you’re young and you’re black, no matter how you look you fit the description.”<sup>8</sup> Such a refrain is already at visual work in *All the Boys*, carried even further as Weems synthesizes a neat panopticon of police violence reports in *Usual Suspects* (plates 12.1–9):

Matching the description of the alleged, perpetrator was stopped and/or apprehended, physically engaged, and shot at the scene. Suspect killed. To date, no one has been charged in the matter.

There is liminal space between arrest and release, between conversation and confrontation, between life and death. *All the Boys* suspends us, hangs

us, harangues us in the balance of repetition. The repetition is the effect of a chorus line, one hooded young man indistinguishable from the next, hazy, the fog of race that objectifies dark skin in a dark hood on a dark street as complete representation. The tilting and shifting, the escaping of visibility, the edging is set against the clarity, brevity, and clinical nature of the police report, the statement of facts, a matter of bureaucracy.

The blur indicates a problem of sight, an imperfect vision whose lack of details works to detail—black constructions of white constructions of blackness. Weems’s images tear the veil, ripping chunks of thread with a relaxed ease that belies the poor construction of the beginning, the supposed delineating between that which is inhuman, inhumane, in the optic of whiteness: “representations of blackness as absence, as nothingness, as deformity and depravity.”<sup>9</sup> Our sightedness is off, near or far. The closer the lens comes to the young men’s faces, we find the blue hues blocked in pure red (see plates 11.3–4). Seeing “color” obscures the full face of humanity. The blur also indicates the dulling of our senses, the normalizing of these images, their quotidian familiarity, the fate of black and brown bodies in the United States unrequited.

As Ladi’Sasha Jones writes in her review of a 2016 exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery that included *All the Boys*, “Weems conspicuously displays the fruit, the evidential repetition, of racial injustice.”<sup>10</sup> But more than repetition, it is “repetition with a difference and direction by indirection,” as Shawn Michelle Smith puts it, by which Weems presses against a rendering of the hoodie, the mugshot, the catalogue, as iconic symbols affirming the *inhumanity* of black life.<sup>11</sup> Exploring W. E. B. Du Bois’s photographic practice as a visual means by which he subverted a normalized discourse of black criminality through an inversion of signs, Smith notes that Du Bois intentionally “evoke[d] the images that would fix African Americans in the lowest levels of social, economic, and evolutionary scales, reproducing the imagery of assumed scientific truth, in order finally to produce new images of the American Negro.”<sup>12</sup> *All the Boys* reads against the archives of photography intended to instantiate an inherent criminality of the black body, to create and enshrine a recognition of blackness in service to a broader rubric of white supremacy. In contradiction and opposition to that anti-black archive, the artist shifts the gaze of the viewer by virtue of the same methodology. Ultimately, whatever the viewer first makes as meaning from a given photograph, that same viewer can be taught to look and see differently. Those that come to my door and do not recognize the political lament of *Our Lady of Ferguson* may need to look more closely. But what has sprouted from the blur even of misrecognition, is the assumption of black bodies as inherently holy. Weems shows us the ways that attempt capture, but also the means of an escape route.

As Fred Moten concludes, “The blur is the point.”<sup>13</sup>

### IV.

Oh my God, please don’t tell me he’s dead.  
Please don’t tell me my boyfriend just went like that.

6 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1–2.

7 Mitchell, 2.

8 Julie Dressner and Edwin Martinez, “The Scars of Stop and Frisk,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2012. Cited in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 86n28.

9 Henry Louis Gates Jr. quoted in Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 43.

10 Ladi’Sasha Jones, “The Radical Power of the Black Feminine Gaze,” *Aperture*, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://aperture.org/blog/carrie-mae-weems-black-feminine-gaze/>.

11 Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 181.

12 Smith, 46.

13 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 235.

Yes, I will sir. I'll keep my hands where they are.  
Please don't tell me this Lord.  
Please Jesus don't tell me that he's gone.  
Please don't tell me that he's gone.  
Please officer, don't tell me that you just did this...<sup>14</sup>

The *imago Dei* is considered pure gift, given freely out of God's desire to be in relation with creation. In *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe writes of an artist's art as gift, and asks, “What kinds of relationships are established in this giving? And receiving? It depends on what is on one's retina.”<sup>15</sup> To speak of “the retina and attachments,” she invokes the poet Dionne Brand who writes in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, “the door of no return (and hence the centrality of slavery) is on her retina.”<sup>16</sup> But, as Weems's art suggests, there is freedom from cataract incarceration.

In the Sargent interview, Weems exposes the depravity of our contemporary social condition, but holds out the possibility for transformation, for some, in an unlikely source: “I also wanted to produce a work that explored the question of grace. And in exploring the question of grace you have to explore the question of humanity. The thing that really struck me about the ways in which people have handled this tragedy, whether we are looking at the young people who have started Black Lives Matter or the President singing ‘Amazing Grace,’ is we are continuing to ask for our humanity to be recognized. And at the same time offering the generosity of spirit even as our young men are being murdered. That's kind of extraordinary and what really motivated the piece.”<sup>17</sup>

Can't you tell by looking? Blurred vision. How does one see through tears? Through a veil; through a glass, dimly? What, or perhaps, who, mediates our sight? Who relieves the burden thrust upon our retina? Weems pushes every imagination, but in particular the Christian imagination—an imagination patriotic to the foundations of white supremacy—to the extent of her edges and the depths of her folds. The aim, in Sharpe's words, “to try to look, to try to really see.”<sup>18</sup> What makes an icon? What makes someone, something, iconic? Who carries iconicity in their blood? The ongoing murder of black people in the US at the hands of the police, without recourse, reflects a nation whose “Christian” constituents continue to hold self-interest, racism, sexism, classism, and more as patriotic values ordained by God. As an enterprise, Christian institutions have baptized themselves in the name of greed and hate, but there remains the Christian theological premise of the icon subtending the idolatrous projects of white supremacy, a premise that attends to a different way of seeing. What we cannot tell by looking is how we have been taught to see, our optics trained and formed, redacted in places where we need re(vision). Instead, we need a sight free from the cataracts of chains and incarceration, a vision that perceives virtue in flesh and blood, an image that draws us closer to God when we honor the presence of God in creation. It is this Christianity that can recognize, as so eloquently articulated by the great theologian, James Cone, that Jesus is black.

*Can't you tell by looking?*

14 Diamond Reynolds's voice on videotape of the police murder of Philando Castile, heard in *People of a Darker Hue*.

15 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 99.

16 Qtd. in Sharpe, 99.

17 Sargent, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

18 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 117.

# PUBLIC FORUM: “PICTURES AND PROGRESS”

Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Carrie Mae Weems, José Rivera, and Jeremy McCarter

**SARAH ELIZABETH LEWIS:** It's such a pleasure to be here with Carrie Mae Weems and José Rivera to speak with them afterwards about a topic that has ignited my life: the power of aesthetic force to change the world.

In the face of the Civil War an audience had come to Boston's Tremont Temple to hear Frederick Douglass speak about what the path toward true union might mean. What the orator was about to tell them seemed like a mere trifle in contrast, but Frederick Douglass was sure that the transportive, emancipatory force of “pictures,” and the expanded, imaginative visions they inspire, was the way to move toward what seemed impossible. He went on to describe “the whole soul of man,” when “rightly viewed,” as “a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama,” contrasting the sweep of life with the potential for progress in every moment.

I was so stunned when I came across this speech that Douglass gave in 1861 and again in 1865 during the Civil War, alternately called “Life Pictures” or “Pictures and Progress.” I was stunned in part because of the bravery that was required to speak about this at the time. The course of our lives, Douglass argued, resembles “a thousand arrows shot from the same point and aimed at the same object.” The arrows are “divided in the air” with only a few flying true, as he put it, “matched when dormant” but “unmatched in action.” Bridging the gap between sight and vision, which often comes through aesthetic force, is part of what made the difference.

When we're overcome by aesthetic force, a propulsion comes from the sense that, until that moment, we have been somehow incomplete. It can make us realize that our views and judgments need correction. It can give these moments “elasticity” and “plasticity”; as Elaine Scarry writes about the force of being moved by beauty—“momentarily stunned by beauty, the mind before long begins to create or to recall and, in doing so, soon discovers the limits of its own starting place, if there are limits to be found.”

Douglass knew that the key to change lies in the thought pictures we carry born out of contrast: “Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.” This penetrating vision went far beyond a theory of our response to pictures. It described the chrysalis nature of

becoming.

Aesthetic force is not merely a reflection of a feeling, a luxury, or respite from life. The vision we conjure from the experience can serve as an indispensable way out from intractable paths.

Nothing is more exemplary of this force than the work of Carrie Mae Weems.

**JEREMY MCCARTER:** The quote from Douglass: “Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.” I wonder what you make of that. Does that ring true for you, José? Do you think Douglass was right about the way that the artistic process works?

**JOSÉ RIVERA:** Well I think that you ask yourself what is the purpose of art in any kind of civilization, and there are religious purposes, moral purposes, political purposes. Perhaps the simplest is that it's a reminder that there is something that fills us with awe, and that art is the bridge that takes us from the mundane things we do just to survive, to something that fills us with an unspeakable, frightening, and ultimately dream-like sense of awe. That is, in my mind, what art is and what art does beautifully. Suddenly space and time cease to exist, we cease to exist. We don't know who we are or where we are, and we are in the presence of something beyond our comprehension.

I saw a play recently at the Actors Theatre of Louisville called *The Christians*, and there's an argument in the play about whether or not there is hell. The preacher is talking about how there can't be a hell, and a woman in the congregation says, “What about Hitler? Where is Hitler?” This woman had lost a child to a murderer, and she asked, “How can the murderer of my child and my child both be in heaven?” And the preacher says, “Well you know I think it's because what is heaven is simply unimaginable, and I wouldn't want a heaven that is imaginable.” That sense of the impossible-to-think-of is what makes heaven. And so I think in a lot of ways that is what makes the impossible-to-think-of possible, and that is why we do it. And I think the Douglass quote gets to the very same thing.

**CARRIE MAE WEEMS:** I'm not sure. You know, the older I get, the less I know, and the more questions I have about what's possible. I had a con-

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The Public Theater's Public Forum series brings together exciting combinations of artists, experts, and audiences to explore and discuss the issues and ideas on the Public's stages. This April 7, 2014 event in Joe's Pub at the Public Theater in New York City began with a talk by Sarah Elizabeth Lewis incorporating a chapter on Frederick Douglass from her book *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery* (2014). She was then joined by Carrie Mae Weems and playwright José Rivera for a conversation hosted by Jeremy McCarter. This transcript is an edited version of that reading and the ensuing conversation.



versation recently with the extraordinary artist John Outterbridge out in California, a wonderful sculptor who ran the Watts Towers for a number of years, and we talked about what it means to be human. And he said, "Well we don't know yet. We don't know yet because we're still crawling towards that." I've been thinking about Douglass and thinking about this very specific delivery that he made, which was the beginning of formulating his notion of aesthetic force, where he in fact talks about heaven. And he says essentially that because we have no other sense, no other capacity for understanding who we are, we make images that revere ourselves because we don't know any better. That's all we know right now. He was talking very much to Sarah's point about the limits of our possibility because we hadn't yet grown to a fuller capacity of what we understood to be the depth of ourselves. And so this project, which is really anchored in a new way of seeing, a new way of being, questioning the failures of democracy itself, is really tied up into, as he says, America being still just a big boy. It's just a big boy on the planet trying to figure out what it is, even with all its magnitude it's trying to figure out what it is. And again to Sarah's point, even at this very moment we are still attempting to figure out who we are. And so I absolutely agree with this idea that, yes, we stand in awe and we tremble before ourselves because we are still trying to understand the complexity of ourselves in the midst of the storm. That's what I think.

**JM:** Sarah, you gave a beautiful presentation of what Douglass thought about these questions, and you've diligently and with inspiration written about art. Do you think his assessment of the power of art is right?

**SEL:** The chapter on Douglass, "Beauty, Error, and Justice," became the soul of *The Rise* for a reason. I realized that any study of how we have overcome collective failure and societal failure requires looking at the often unheralded function of the arts. What I like about Douglass's speeches on this topic—and he gave several, redrafted versions of his initial attempt—is that he left room for the idea of lineage. Douglass was aware that he was working in a lineage with others who have been trying to understand the power of aesthetic force. Douglass is not stating that he has the answer. He said, quite humbly, that people would come along better equipped than he was to describe this concept. You can feel that he's kind of grasping at an idea that he knows will always be with us and that—what is that proverb about people in a town all feeling an elephant, describing it differently, and realizing they've all been feeling different parts of one thing? Douglass is describing one piece of a much larger idea.

**CMW:** Well I have to say a couple of things. One is, in this room, we know that Sarah is on the rise. There have been a few people writing in the last few years about Douglass and about this work and about his ideas about aesthetics, and I think it's wonderful, Sarah, how you really brought up the contradiction that Douglass saw very early: that aesthetics has the power to change the world. We all know that. But it can also change in several different directions. It's not going in one straight line. It depends on who's looking. He was really aware of the idea of the maker, the perception of the maker, and the projection of the maker, and indeed one of the things that's really interesting about his delivering this particular talk was that it was a failure. People came to it and said "wait, no, no, no, we did not come to hear you talk to us about aesthetics. We came here for you to talk to us about this war, about race and this conflict." Even while he's there on stage pleading with people about what we needed to marshall ourselves towards aesthetically, the audience is saying "listen, we're leaving in about five minutes if you don't get on the stick and tell us about what we really came to hear." Even as he's making this argument, he is having this near failure moment because the audience refuses to allow him to be that kind of human, beyond his skin.

**SEL:** Before we came on Carrie said, "I'm going to be taking copious notes." You have taken copious notes on the topic because you understood

what so few people do when they write about this speech by Douglass. In the 1860s, the response to the speech—silence, even confusion—wasn't what he wanted. It's why that comment at the very end, "those better able than I" can furnish an explanation of this, it wasn't mere self-deprecation. He knew that he might not be doing the best job of it. But I wonder if in that silence there was a moment in which they were reflecting and not walking out, and that's what keeps me interested.

**CMW:** I think all of us are involved in image making and image construction. We are still in some ways, as Amiri Baraka would say, in that space of the changing same, so that even as we are attempting to fashion a new kind of image, constructing other worlds to live in and think about, we're still asked to speak about it in a very narrow way.

**SEL:** Writing this book has shown me what that feels like, too.

**JM:** José, when you are sending something out into the world do you have this voice inside your head saying "well, I don't know"? You've written about Che Guevara. I wonder how you feel about this responsibility that is conferred on you as someone who is throwing your aesthetic force around.

**JR:** The interesting thing about this is that Douglass was a nineteenth-century American and he wrote at a time when art was quite a different species than it is today. And I wonder what he would think of German expressionism, where art wasn't about what is the most beautiful thing in the world, it was "let me show you how horrible existence can be." Or what Douglass would have made out of *Waiting for Godot* for instance, what he would have thought about the fracturing of experience through the lens of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That would be an interesting discussion to have.

I think there's a kind of exploration that I embark on when I write anything, whether it's a play or screenplay. There are certain political and moral ideas that fascinate me. I try to get them across on the page, but what happens beyond that moment is not in my control. There were people when *The Motorcycle Diaries* came out who told me I should get my phone number unlisted because the right wing presence in the United States would be violently against my film. I just had this incredible experience recently, where I was on my way to visit Ingrid Betancourt, who was kidnapped by the FARC in Colombia while she was running for president. I was with her stepson and I said, "Is there anything I should avoid when I talk to Ingrid?" And he said, "Yes, don't talk about *The Motorcycle Diaries*." I thought, oh no, that's the best thing I've got. I asked why, and he said, "Well, because when Ingrid was held captive for six years in the Amazon jungle by the left wing guerrillas, they allowed her to watch one movie, and that was *The Motorcycle Diaries*." That was her hell, and I thought holy cow I never thought about that—they were using it for propaganda purposes, Che is their hero, and I never ever would have intended that.

**CMW:** I think what artists do and what people who care about things do is to stretch towards the truth, and the truth is a complex thing with many shades and contours, and that's what we find powerful and engaging and moving. Something that gets us closer to what we understand in the deepest parts of our self to be true about what we see in the world, in relationship to ourselves. And I think that's also the deciding factor in a way—that none of this is universal. It's all very, very specific, which is the reason that you can experience something very, very differently than I do, depending on your background, your understanding, who you are, what memories you have. All of those things are really playing into what we come to understand to be beautiful, what we understand to be true, what we understand to be powerful, what we understand to be transformative.

And I want to say one other thing about this. Yesterday I spent a lot of time reading lots of things. I was looking at something about art and money, because I'm always interested in art and money. I was just at a conference

at Yale about economics and the arts, about the nature of investing. It was very interesting. So I'm reading lots of different things, and I stumble on a website that is looking at how the collections at the Detroit Institute of Arts are being currently assessed for their value, because art might finally have to save the city. This is really fascinating. Art might have to save the city. About a year ago, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History was built, designed by the same person who designed the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. So I'm reading along, and the title of the blog was "Things That Black People Don't Like," and I thought, oh, this is interesting, let me read this. So I start reading this text and it was a group of people writing about the benefit of finally getting rid of the Detroit Institute of Arts because who needed those Matisse's, and who needed Rembrandt, and who needed Degas? It was also this racist spin on the Charles Wright Museum as one of the writers ended with: "We'll get rid of Magritte, we'll get rid of Rembrandt, and then we can go to the Charles Wright Museum where nothing has been produced of value and we can look at photographs of poor black people." Here is that idea of who is looking. We come to Degas, we come to Rembrandt, we come to these notions of what is powerful, what is beautiful, what is true, what is transformative, and there's a whole group of people on the other side of that thinking that art actually has no value. They are further away from themselves than anyone can imagine, at least I can imagine. But there is a huge force in the world that operates in that way, and so what we're up against as artists, as seekers of dynamic truths, we're up against incredible forces, an incredible tide. Our dear brother Frederick Douglass recognized that we would be up against a huge tide of opposition, even as you attempt to speak truth and beauty to power.

**SEL:** I've said so much already about Douglass, but what I would add, what I don't think we remember or focus on enough, and Carrie's alluding to this point, is the context in which Douglass was speaking at the time. The Democratic Party, when it wasn't the Democratic Party that we know now, was trying to make an argument that African Americans didn't deserve universal suffrage because they/we didn't have an appreciation for pictures, for art. He was trying to undercut that argument by talking about the amount of images that "disfigure" our dwellings, he said. So no matter how much we say we need our Degases, we need our Matisse's, there's still this undercurrent tied up with the argument about who is human and how human you can be if you don't appreciate art. I wonder if Douglass was partially overstating the case to drive that point home.

I want to go back to this idea about beauty. The reason I use the term aesthetic force is to emphasize how the arts impact our hearts and minds and maybe even souls, we hope. This dynamic doesn't have to do with this kind of Kantian view about beauty. It's not so much about a normative sense of what is beautiful. I think the reason why I'm in the field that I'm in, the reason I wake up every day, is because I want to be able to give a platform for and give honor to those who are changing the world, not necessarily by beautiful means, but by means that impact us. It is not just in the Civil War; it is a nineteenth-century idea, but we are living it out through the Arab Spring, through revolutions. In some ways beauty becomes sidelined in this discussion, and we end up instead with "impact."

**CMW:** I think that's what beauty is actually—profound impact. It's not just a vague notion, but it's really what love is. It's this moment of illumination, a moment of clarity when something allows you to see yourself far more deeply than you would in any other way or through any other means. When I say that I love you, I'm actually thanking you for the grace, I'm thanking you for the illumination, I'm thanking you for the experience of being able to see me differently than I had ever seen myself before. I think that's a really wonderful idea. I think beauty "functions," if we can use that

term, in very much the same way.

These ideas about how we as artists use this idea, going back to Sarah's book and beyond Douglass, I think that there's something really powerful about it. I'm very interested in this idea of the rise and the near win and was wondering, for instance, for you, José, as a writer who deals with this subject area, what are your near misses? What are your near wins? What are your failures and how do you get up and over them?

**JR:** They often all feel like failures. They are never quite the ideal image that you started out with as you created and you wrote. I love what you said earlier about the connection between art and love. Sometimes you think, coming from a Catholic religious family, that God created the earth and heaven in seven days, but he left a lot out. He left out poetry, he left out the symphony, he left out the novel, he left out Frederick Douglass. Our jobs are in a way to finish creation, to finish the things that were begun and the seeds that were planted. I once wrote a children's play. God had created the world, and he created rabbits, and the rabbits are looking at a sunset and they're asking, "Where's my carrot, where's my food?" And God realized there was no one there to appreciate the sunset, so he created an artist, and the artist said about the sunset, "Wow that's beautiful." And I think that's what we do. We go around and we say, "Wow that's beautiful." In relationship to what love is, we say, "Wow, I am worthy of love. Wow, I understand what love is because your poem helped me frame it." Or, "the notes on your clarinet made me feel how I feel when I am in love." I do think that the aesthetic force you talk about is in a way the force of finishing creation, or at least evolving creation to the next level, because when I see a beautiful work of art, when I see a beautiful film for instance, or play, I am so grateful to be part of the species that made that.

**CMW:** But there are those moments, when you are working, when I'm working, and I know when it has all come together. Whether it's a sentence, or a photograph, you've been working all day and you know when you've just hit it. You talk about aesthetic force—you know when it's right and all you can do is get up and walk around the room.

**JR:** And then you say, "That will never happen again."

**CMW:** And you start to use other artists, other sounds, other entities to get you there. When I'm about to seriously work on something I go to Toni Morrison first, or I go to Louis Armstrong, "Stardust Memories," and I listen to that all day long, or Abbey Lincoln, the same song all day long. Do you know what I mean? There are these sounds that begin to create spaces of habitation for you to live in, and I think that is the way in which we are really moved by and embrace other artists, other writers, other thinkers around us. We are not floating out here as individuals on our own, we are in context. I think that it's really important to think about the way in which we are in context with one another, how we aid one another, how we shore up one another. And that's what I think really powerful art is. It really lives way, way, way beyond the artists that create it, which is why it's usually much deeper than we are, more important than we are.

**JM:** I want to leave a few minutes at the end for questions, but something I read in the paper this morning, you might have read it too, it got me thinking. There's a new and controversial figure in the art world. George W. Bush is devoting hours a day, every day, to painting. People are not quite sure if we should take this seriously or not, or what to make of the fact that this man is now attempting to do the things that we've been talking about. He's trying to find some kind of beauty, he's trying to capture the world as he sees it, he's trying to share something of his soul. What do you make of this?

**CMW:** Well, it's his near miss. No, no, just joking. I think in some form or fashion, we are all just trying to deal with being human and to understand what that is. So I don't have to agree with him politically in order to

understand that he has a right to make and to be. I don't have to like it. I don't like a lot of things, but that's ok. He has a right. I think it's absolutely important to have a sense that we all have the right to express the complexity of ourselves, that we are all just trying, really at the end of the day, to be human.

**JR:** Yeah, what can I say? I maybe would feel better if he were painting a bombed out building in Iraq, or if he were painting an orphan child who was made destitute by the war. I would love if he were actually examining the consequences of his decisions and his actions through art. I think that would be kind of powerful and beautiful. If he's going to make glorified, idealized images of himself, that's where I would have a problem. I agree with what you just said, let the man be human and see what he does. I'd rather have him paint than drop bombs.

**SEL:** The one thing I would add, how brave, actually. How many of you would show me your paintings? There's a bravery involved that makes me feel badly when we mock it, to be frank. I think there's a courageousness involved in showing what he must know are maybe deliberate amateur works, and I actually feel "shame on us" for making fun of that. Because regardless of what I think of him politically, I believe in some ways that it's fitting to end a discussion about Douglass with Bush, because here Douglass was also taking photographs, and there's a book coming out from Norton about what he did photographically. I wouldn't want to judge the work that he was doing, but honor the impulse. That's what's interesting to me, that there's an irrepressible impulse to show what Bush thought Putin looked like, regardless of how many images we see of Putin, that his view of the world is something that he wants to explore, and show as complex, shifting, and changing. That to me is a human impulse that I think we're celebrating.

**JM:** Well said. So we have a few minutes left to take some questions from the audience...

**AUDIENCE:** In response to the last comment, I do feel that art matters. Art matters in what's beautiful, it matters in terms of what we have to say, but it's not all neutral. In fact, right now we're dominated by a revolting culture, just an absolutely revolting and disgusting culture. And there are bright spots in it, and they're on the stage. I just saw the exhibit at the Guggenheim of Carrie Mae Weems's work. It's beautiful, but it's on display with futurism, much of which, whatever you may think about it aesthetically, was a misogynist and eventually fascist form of art that created a great deal of harm and legitimated a great deal of harm. The question here is something I want Carrie to go a little further on. She was talking about how the meaning of art, the content of art, is, to put it this way, historically conditioned. I'd like you to talk a little bit about it because I think it's really important for us to understand that it's not just timeless, it actually has meaning, and it's a question of who it's for and what it serves.

**CMW:** In a way, I think you've answered your own question. I'm showing in a museum. I'm not showing in a gallery, I'm not showing in a narrow space. I'm showing in a space that has to consider any number of artistic outputs over the course of time, that's what they do. I think it's sort of wonderful to have the work pitted against that, to have the work situated within that, between Christopher Wool's work and a futurist show, two little rooms. It's really wonderful to be positioned, and that's one of the things that I was talking about earlier, about seeing oneself in context, that we're not out here floating by ourselves. You're absolutely right. None of this is really neutral, it can go in any direction depending on one's political position, persuasion, background, and so forth. To that extent, I think we all have to think about how images are constructed, and how they're used and who they are for. This question comes up again and again and again, this idea about audience. On the one hand, you have very specific audiences in mind, but when you place something on the table and you say, "I

am looking at the notion of shift, I am looking at the notion of shift and disruption," I automatically assume that I am not unusual in that position and that there are any number of people who are interested in shifting as well. How they shift we don't know, but I make the assumption that I'm a part of something that's larger than myself and that I'm therefore going to have a kind of dialogue with interested bodies, not disinterested bodies, with interested bodies.

# PLATES

## *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment, 2008*

“Through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and to connect the historical past to the present—to the new, to the moment. By inhabiting the moment, we live the experience; we stand in the shoes of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”<sup>1</sup>

“One of the reasons that we are at this sort of incredible apex, this sort of brilliant moment, and disruptive moment, and crazy moment in American politics and policy has to do with all the assassinations that took place in the country. Assassinations that made it possible for us to actually begin to have these kinds of conversations.”<sup>2</sup>

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All works appear courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and belong to the artist, unless otherwise noted. All quotes are from Carrie Mae Weems; some have been edited slightly.

<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Laurie Ann Farrell, “An Opus: Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, exh. cat. (Savannah: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2009), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> “*Fresh Talk*: Carrie Mae Weems: Can an Artist Inspire Social Change?,” YouTube video, 1:20:50, posted by National Museum of Women in the Arts, Jan. 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBxwugaFRhg>.



1.1 *A Class Ponders the Future*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



1.2 *The First Major Blow*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.

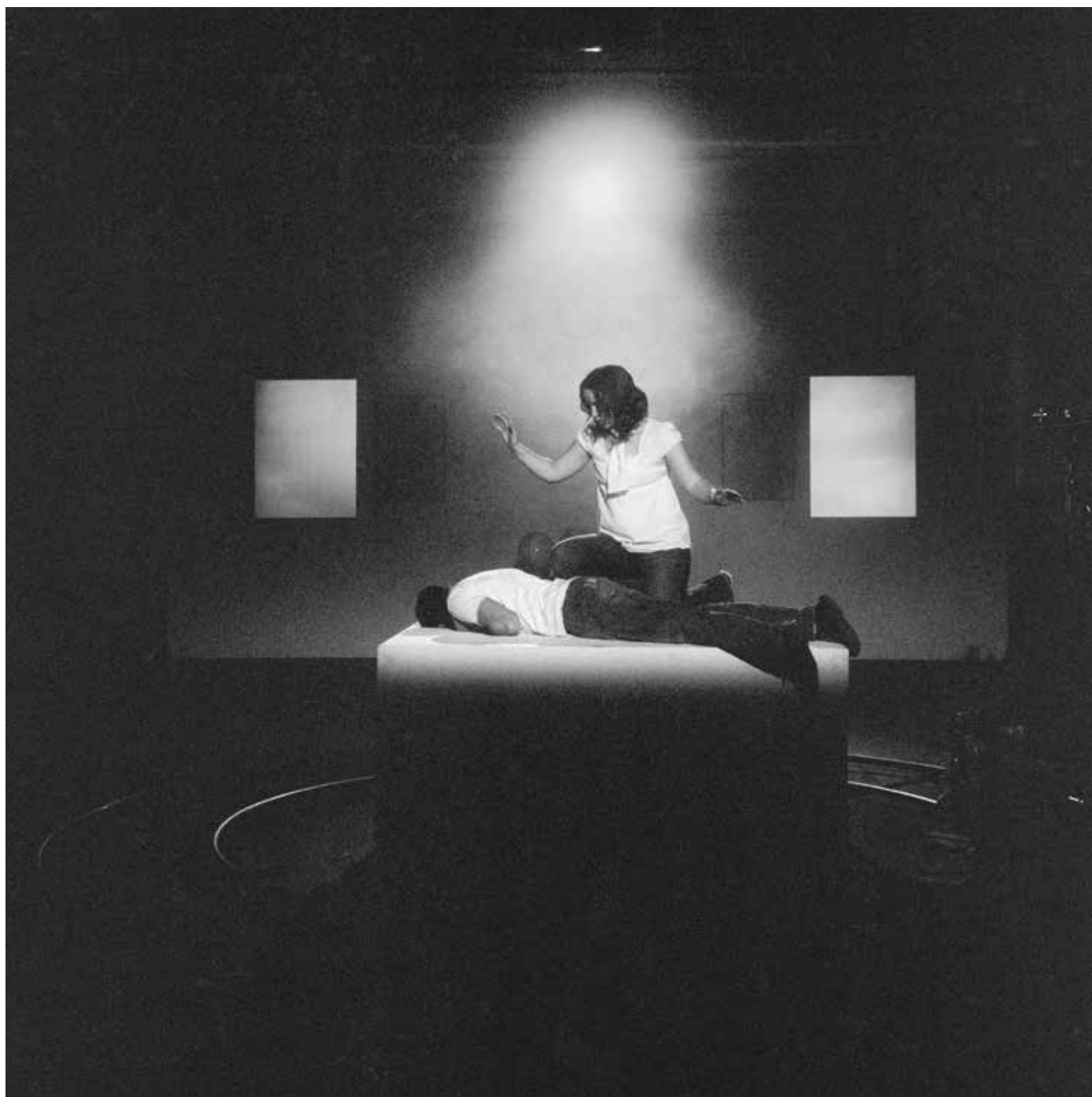


1.3 *The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.





1.4 *An Assassin's Bullet*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



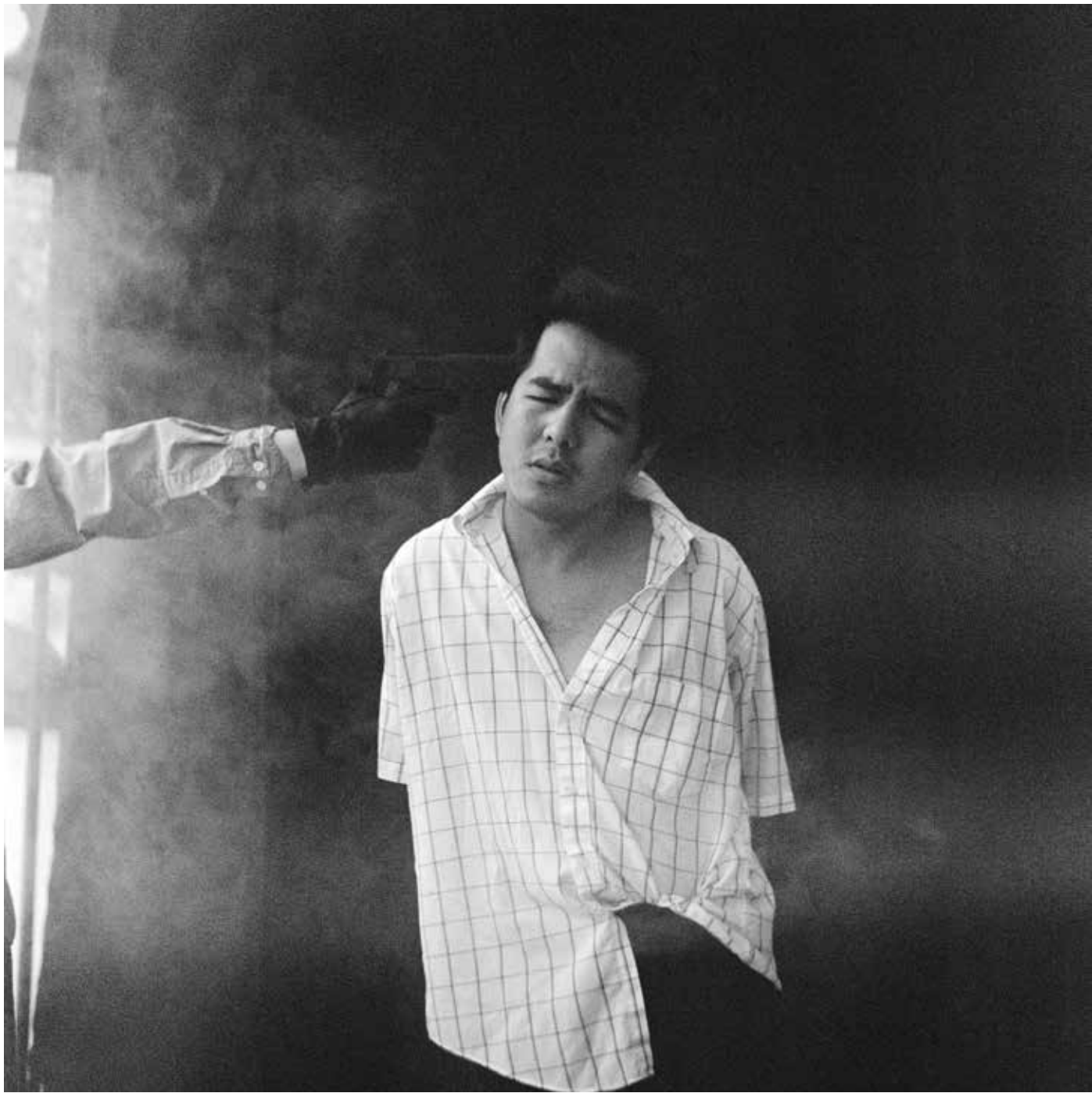
1.5 *Suspended Belief*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



1.6 *Mourning*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



1.7 *The Tragedy of Hiroshima*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



1.8 *The Execution of Innocence*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.



1.9 *The Capture of Angela*  
pigment ink print, 40 x 40 in.

*Constructing History:*  
*A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (video), 2008

“This is a story within a story; how to enter this history, what to show, what to say, what to feel. It was a creation myth, how things came to be as they are. In this constructed place, our classroom, we revisit the past. The students examine the facts and will participate in the construction of history, a history that has been told to them by others. But now, with their own bodies, they engage their own dark terrain, their own winter.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Narration from *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, digital video, 20:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4VevU2LpQo>.



1.10 *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (video still)

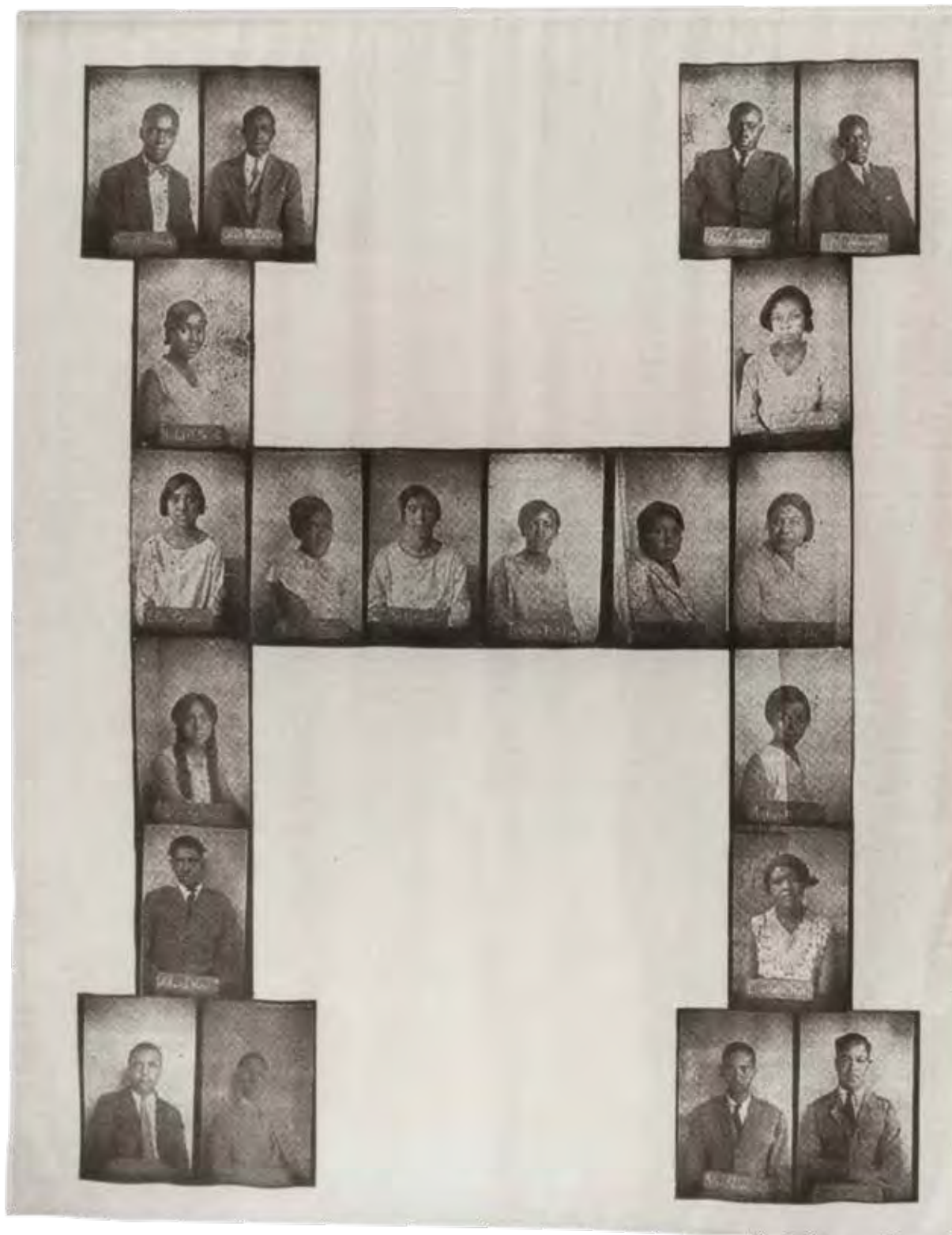


## *The Hampton Project, 2000*

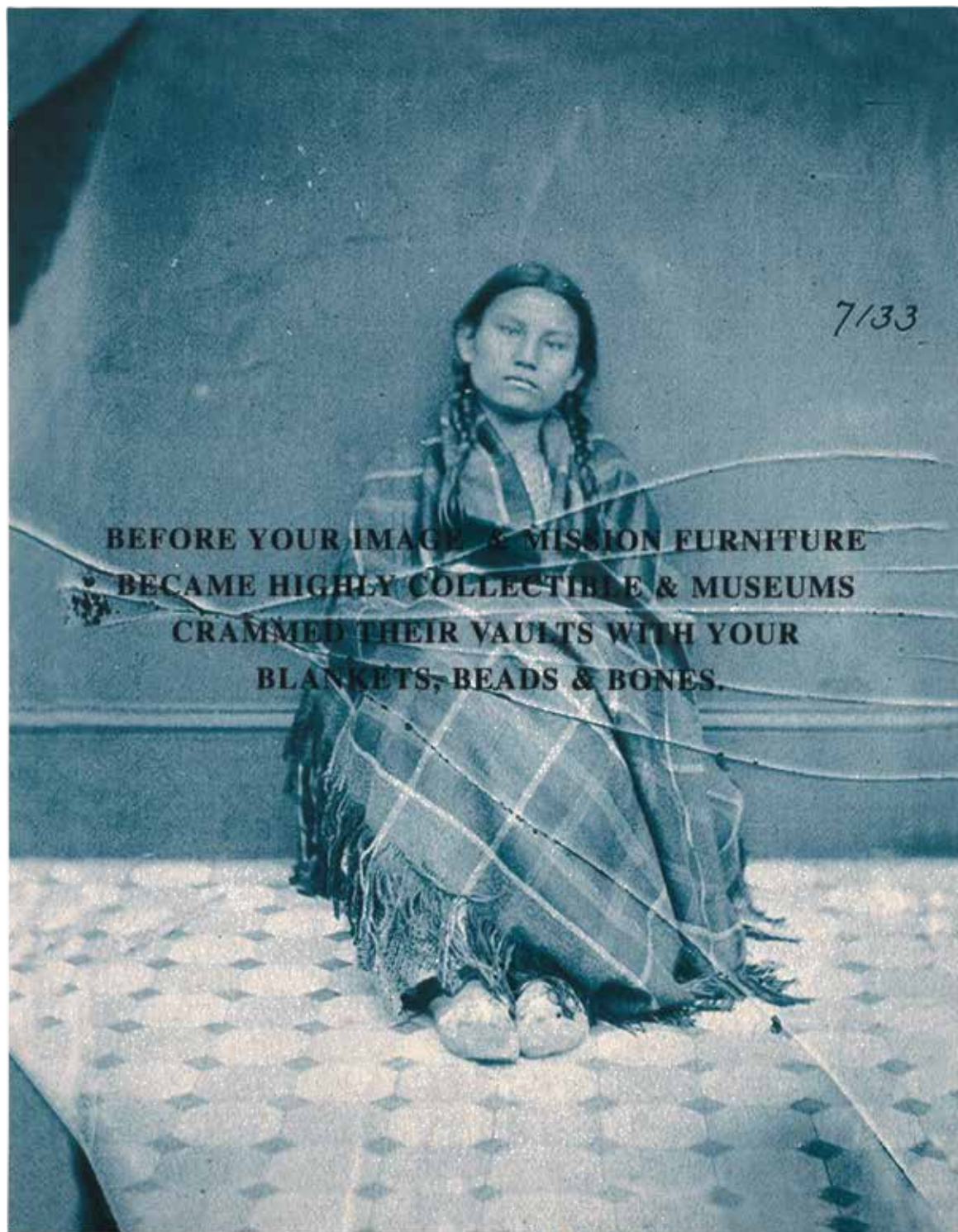
“By moving into and through the work, I wanted to give the viewer permission to invade the work of art, to invade history, and thereby claim it as one’s own; to feel that one is a part of history and, therefore, one makes history. In this way, the viewer is transformed from audience to participant/observer.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Denise Ramzy and Katherine Fogg, “Interview: Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project*, ed. Vivian Patterson, exh. cat. (New York: Aperture; Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 2000), 79.



2.1 Hampton: Yearbook Page "H"  
 digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 95.5 x 75.5 in.  
 Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.M



*2.2 Indian/Broken Plate Glass*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 97 x 72 x 1 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.F





2.3 *Armstrong and Family*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 103.3 x 120.3 x 1.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.E



*2.4 Indians-Before*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 72 x 97.8 x 1.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.C





*2.5 Indians-After*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 72 x 97.8 x 1.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.D



2.6 *Old Folks at Home*

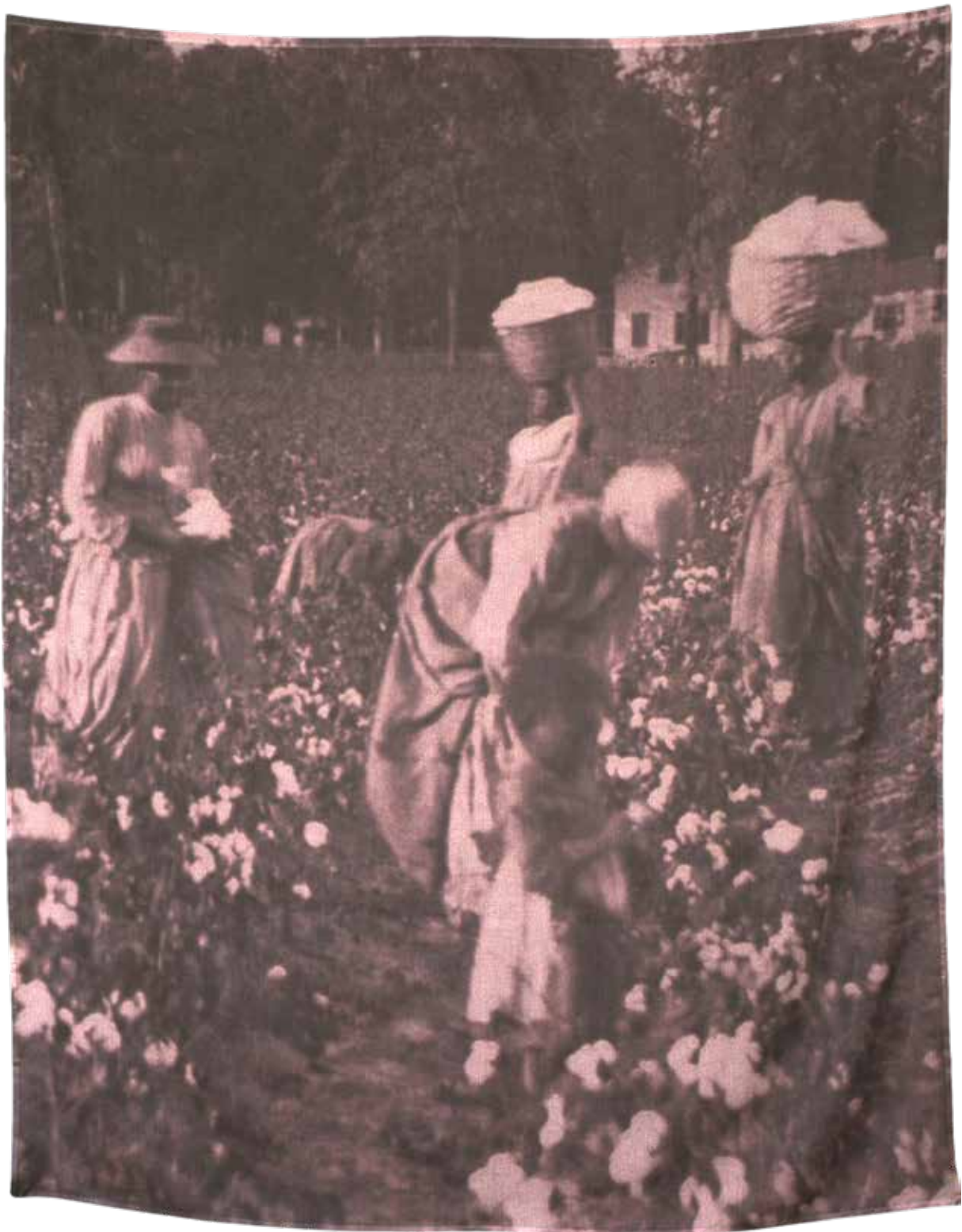
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 84 x 97 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.G





2.7 *Hampton Graduate at Home*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 83.3 x 101 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.H





*2.8 Cotton Picking*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 96 x 76.3 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.Y



2.9 *Group Portrait in Garden*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 71.8 x 93.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.V



2.10 *Sappho* by Dupré  
 digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 119 x 175 in.  
 Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.1





2.11 Hampton: *Students in the Library*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 71.5 x 86 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.N



2.12 Hampton: *A Class in Drafting*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 71.5 x 90 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.J

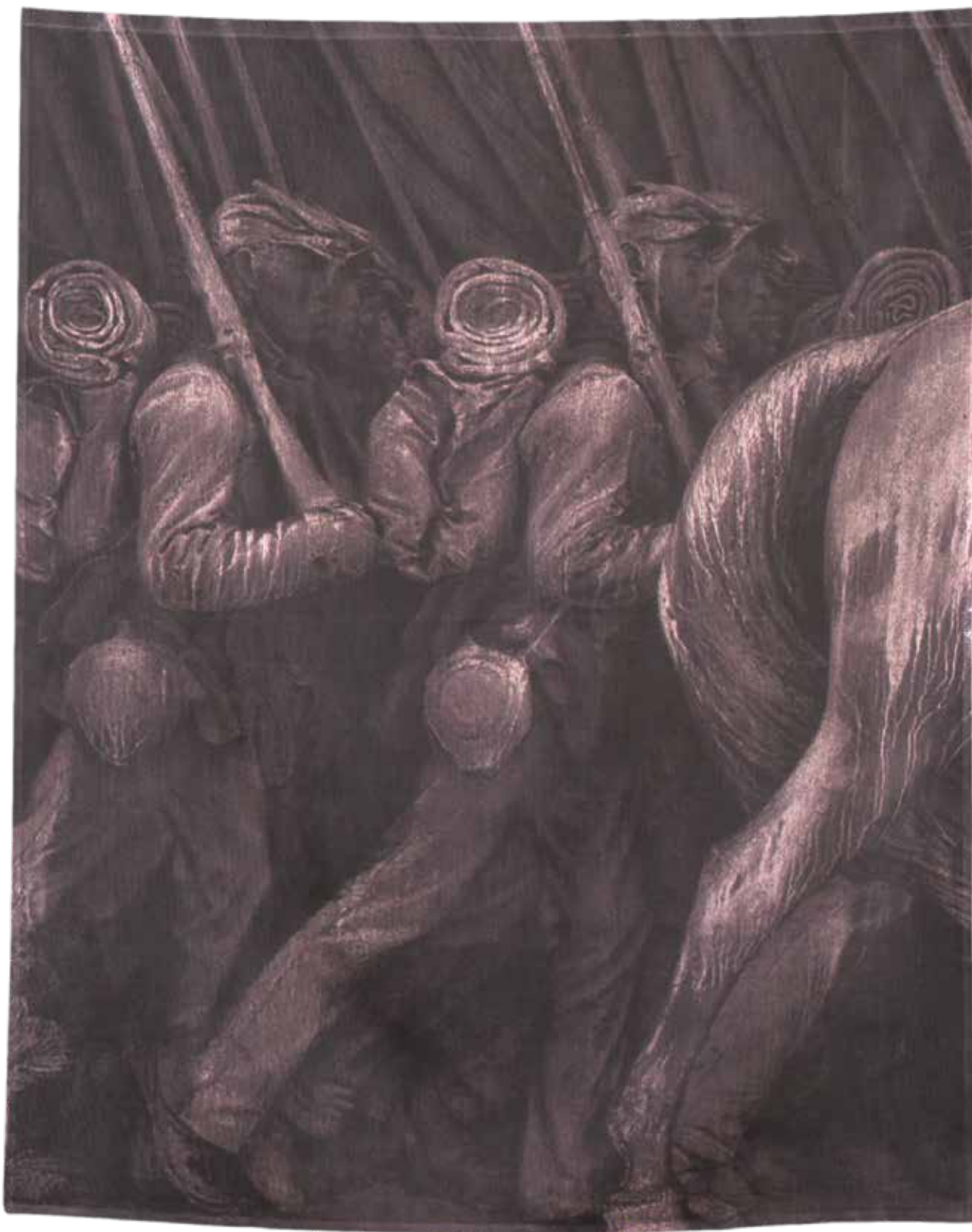


2.13 *Hampton: A Class in American History*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 72 x 90 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.L



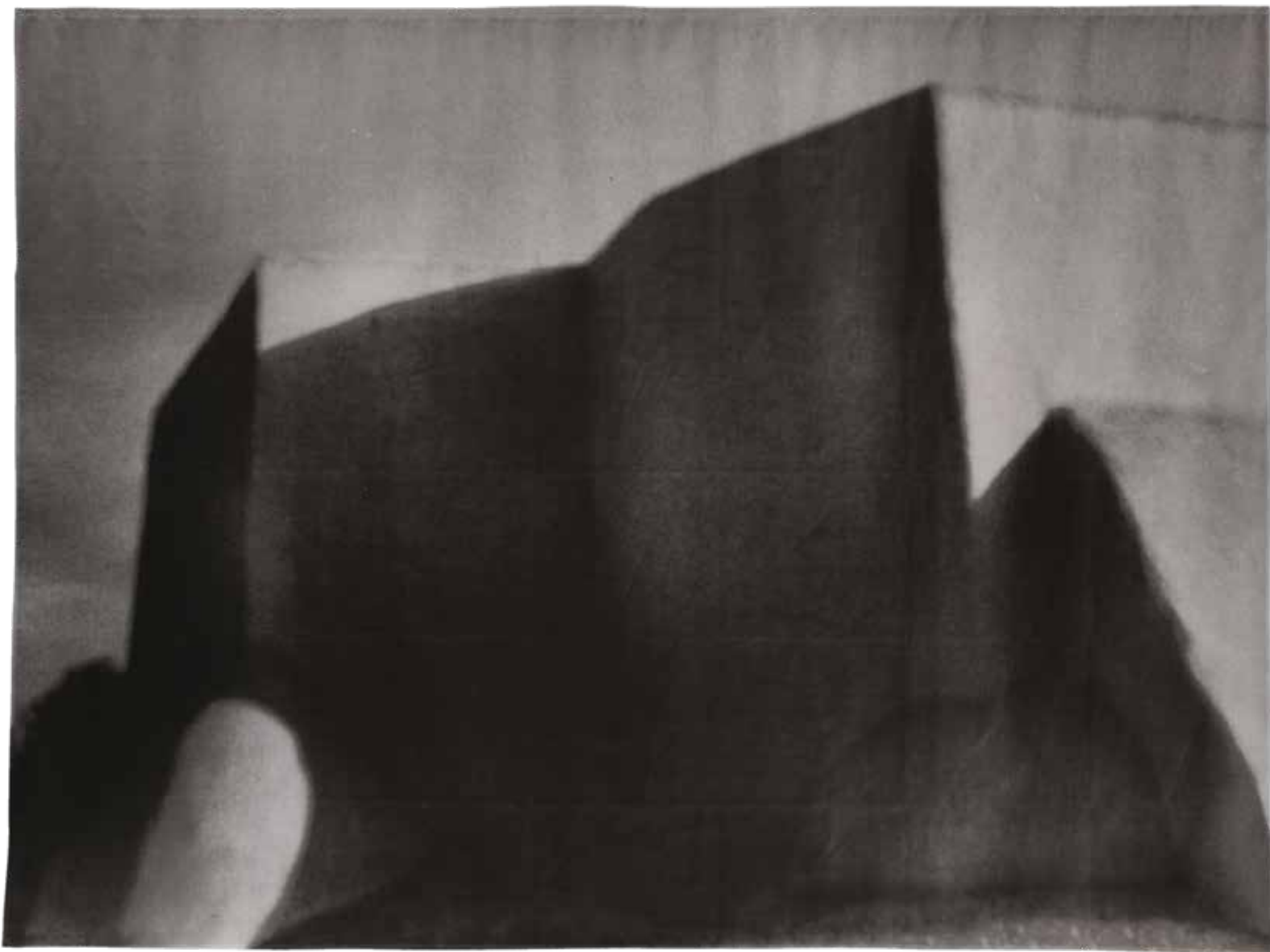


2.14–15 *Bugle Boys I–II*  
 digital photographs printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 72 x 39.5 x 1.5 in. (each)  
 Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.A–B

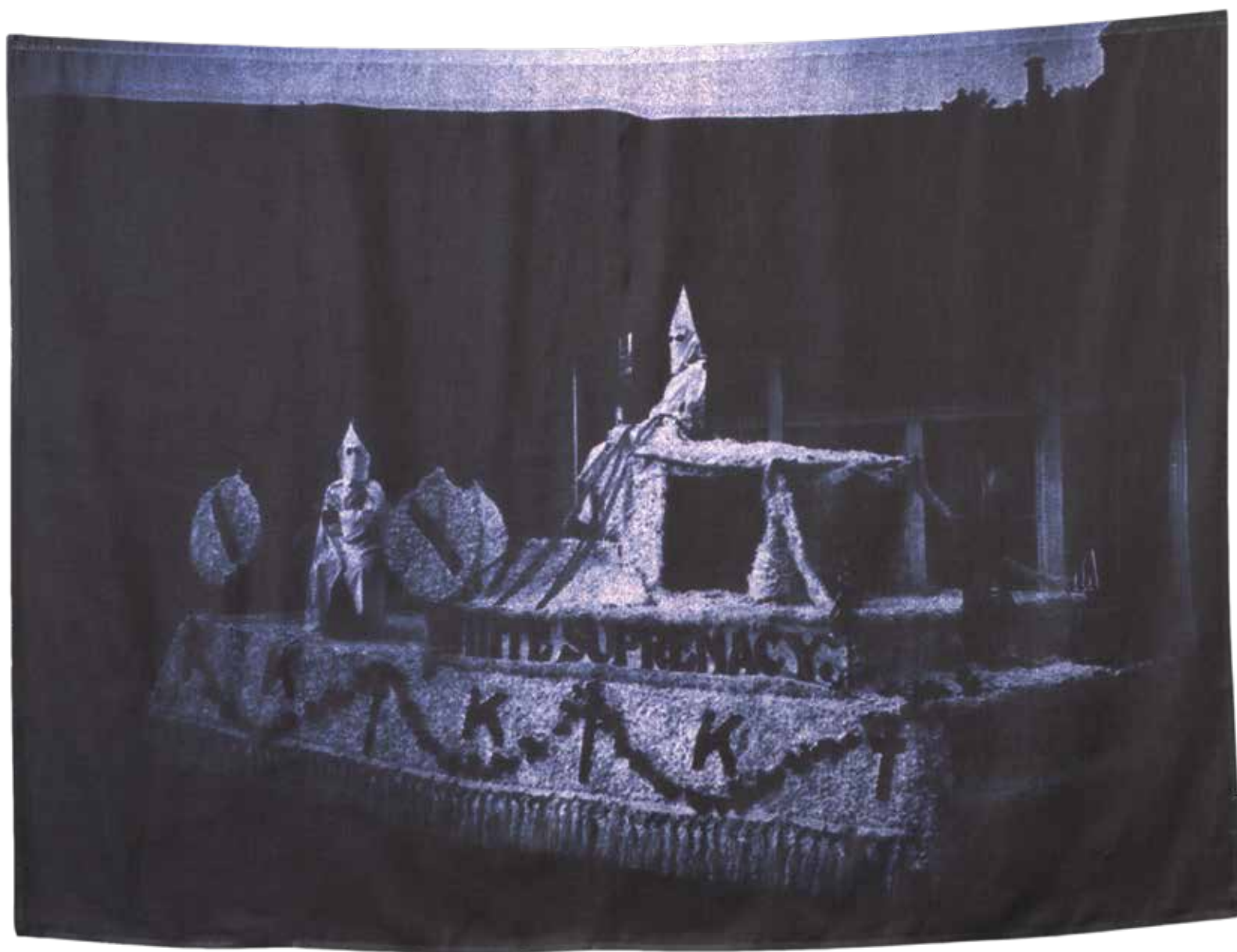


2.16 *Detail from the Shaw Monument*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 59.5 x 47.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.X





2.17 *Adobe Church (New Mexico)*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 96 x 129.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.T



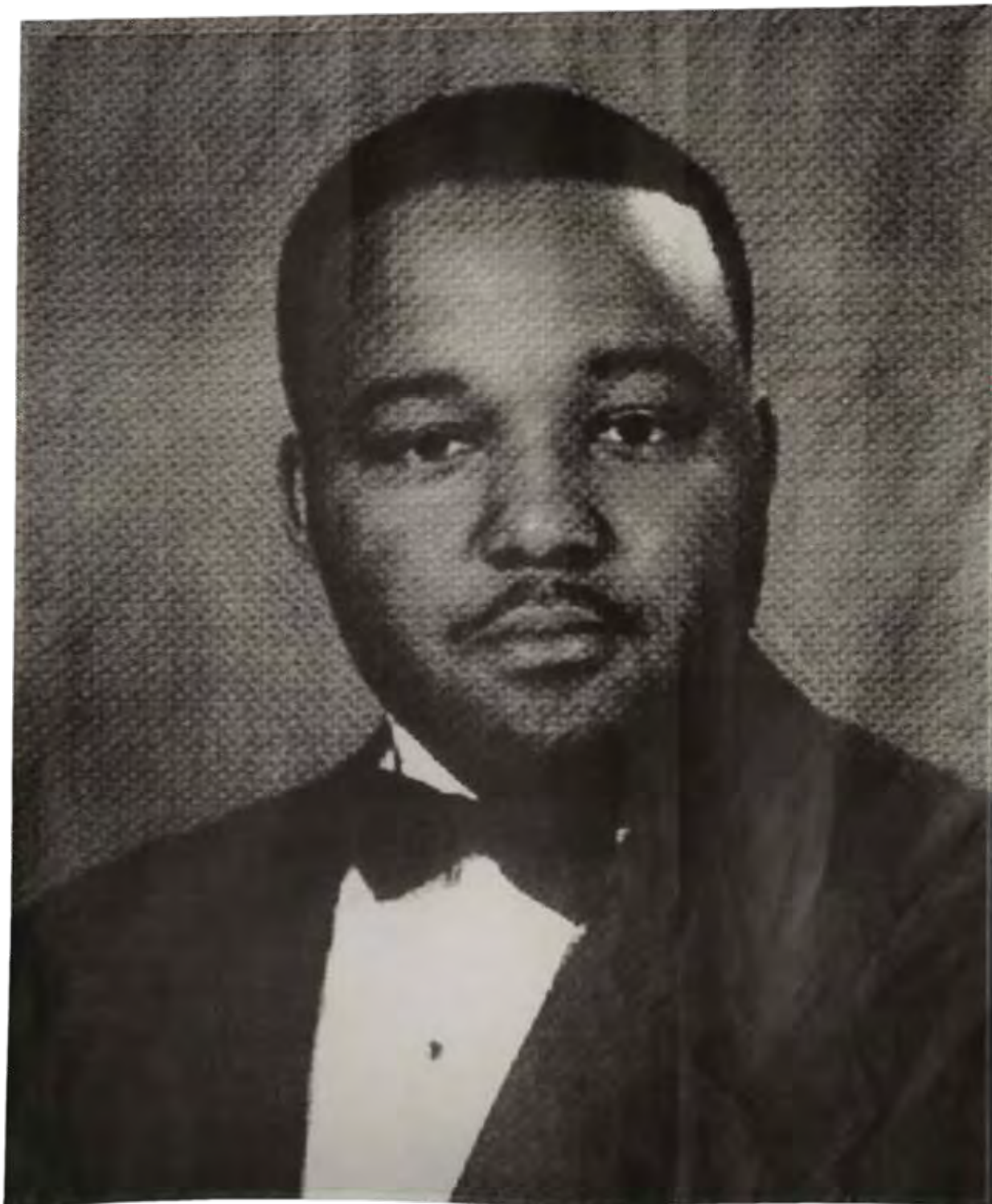
2.18 Ku Klux Klan Parade Float: "White Supremacy"  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 59 x 81 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.W



2.19 *Hampton Alumna*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 72 x 59 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.P





2.20 *Hampton Alumnus*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 72 x 59 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.O



2.21 *Indian Shaman Figure*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 95.5 x 68 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.Q



2.22 *School Kids Masking*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 95.5 x 71 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.R





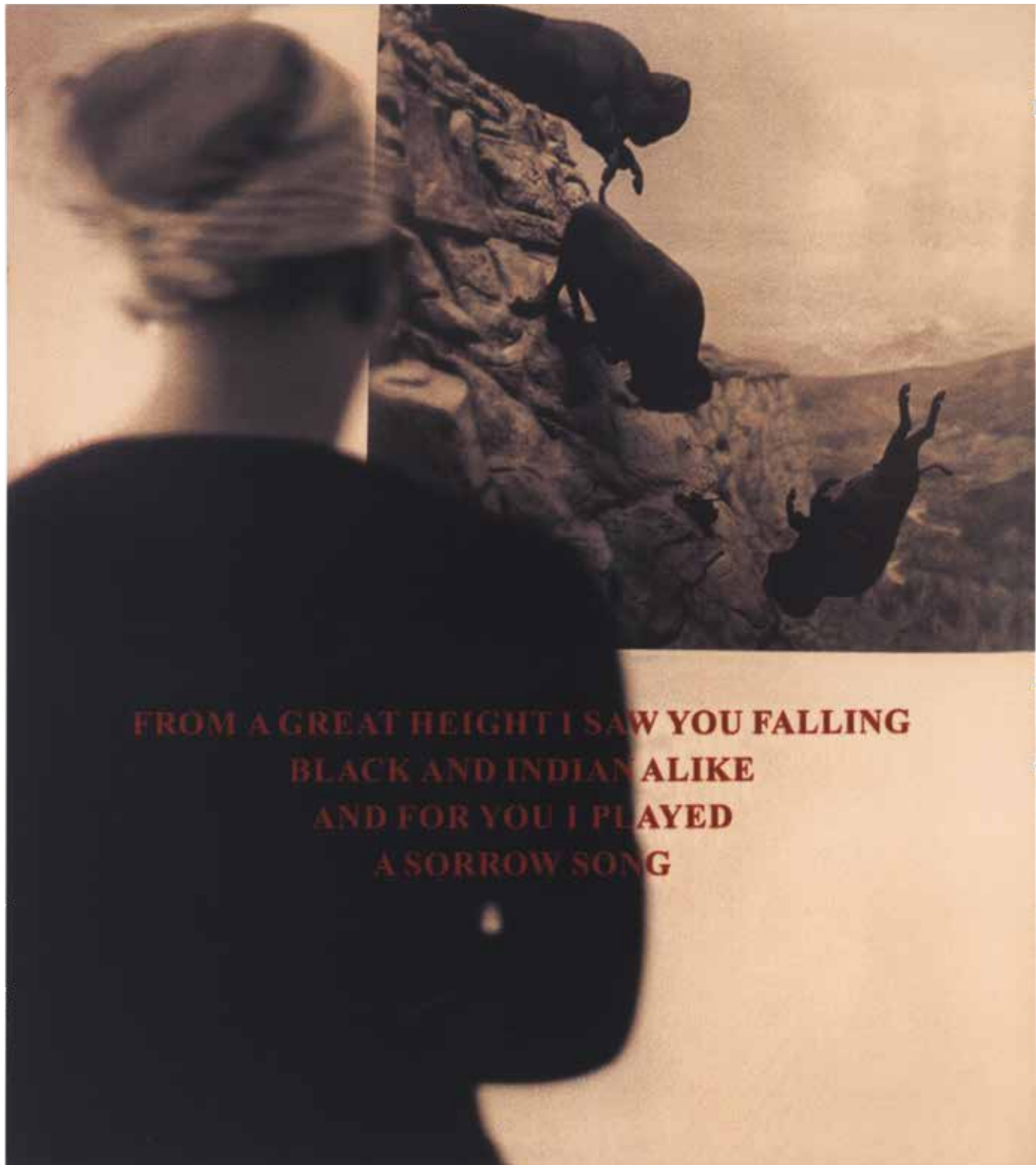
2.23 *Indian Baptism*

digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 83.5 x 103 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.U



2.24 *Civil Rights Encounter (Hosing)*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on muslin banner, 95.5 x 134 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.S





2.25 *Weems and Buffalo Jump*  
digital photograph printed with water-soluble pigmented ink on canvas, 83 x 76.5 in.  
Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund, M.2005.15.K

*From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,*  
1995–96

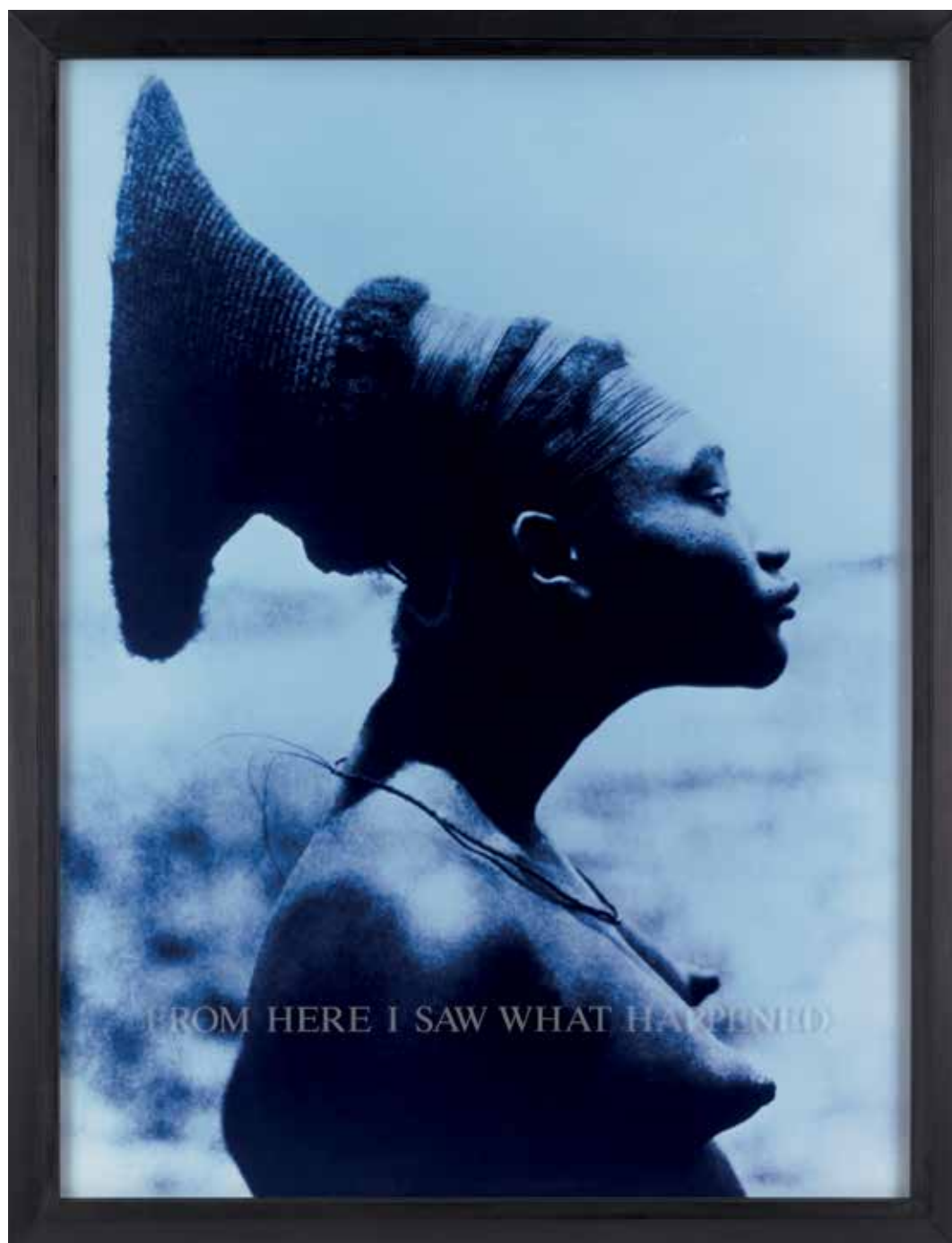
“How do I organize the material, how do I handle it and make it more than perhaps it may have been meant to be? If you can add a layer of criticality and investment and questioning to the work, then for me I think it has come to another place of consideration and possibility.”<sup>5</sup>

“I’m interested in the historical past as well as the historical present, and how the past has a kind of hold on the present, how it shapes us.”<sup>6</sup>

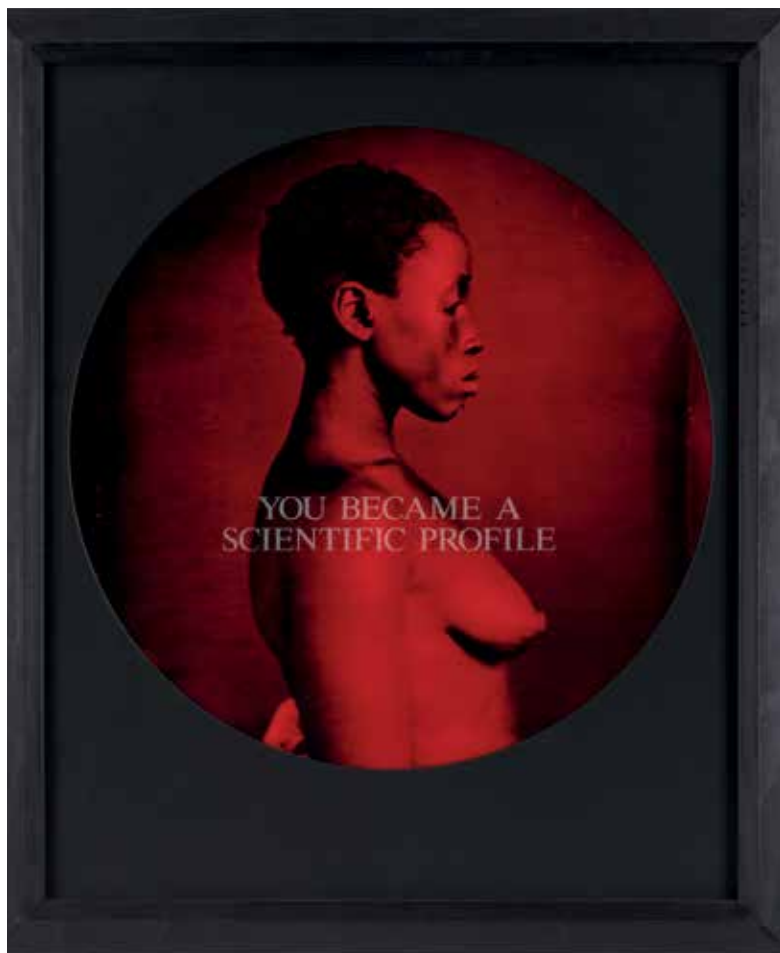
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5 “Keynote Address: *Carrie Mae Weems: An Artist Reflects*,” YouTube video, 1:19:49, posted by Frist Art Museum, Oct. 19, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqq6dMaWG4g>.

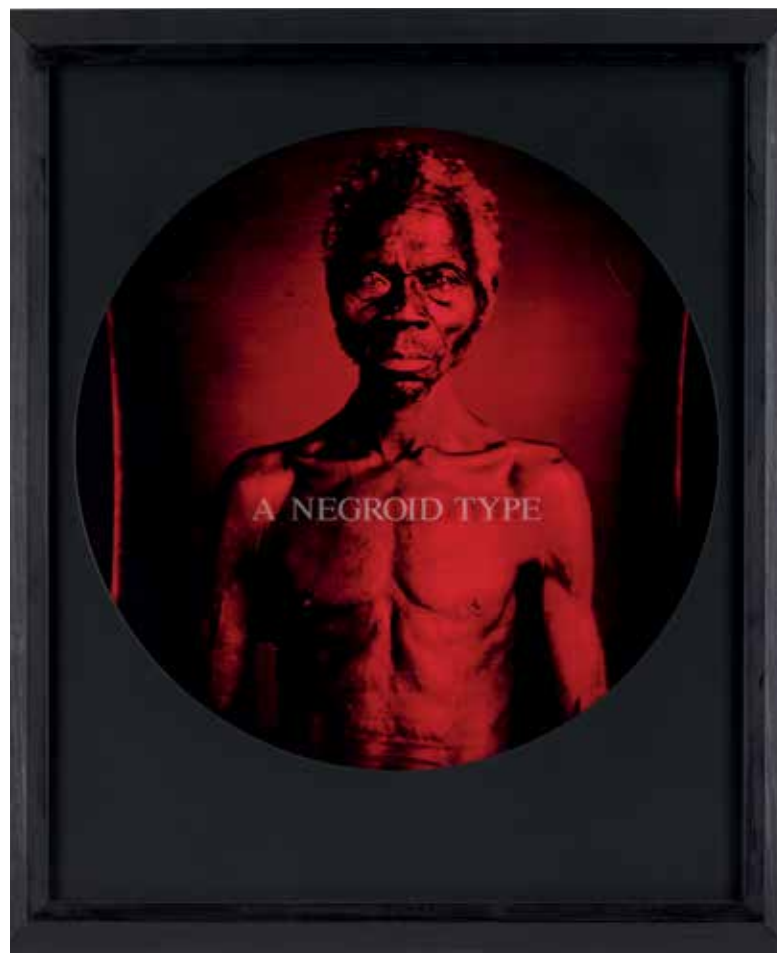
6 “Corbis Interviews Carrie Mae Weems at 2013 LOOK3,” YouTube video, 17:37, posted by CorbisContributor, Oct. 30, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcuGoOtfifU>.



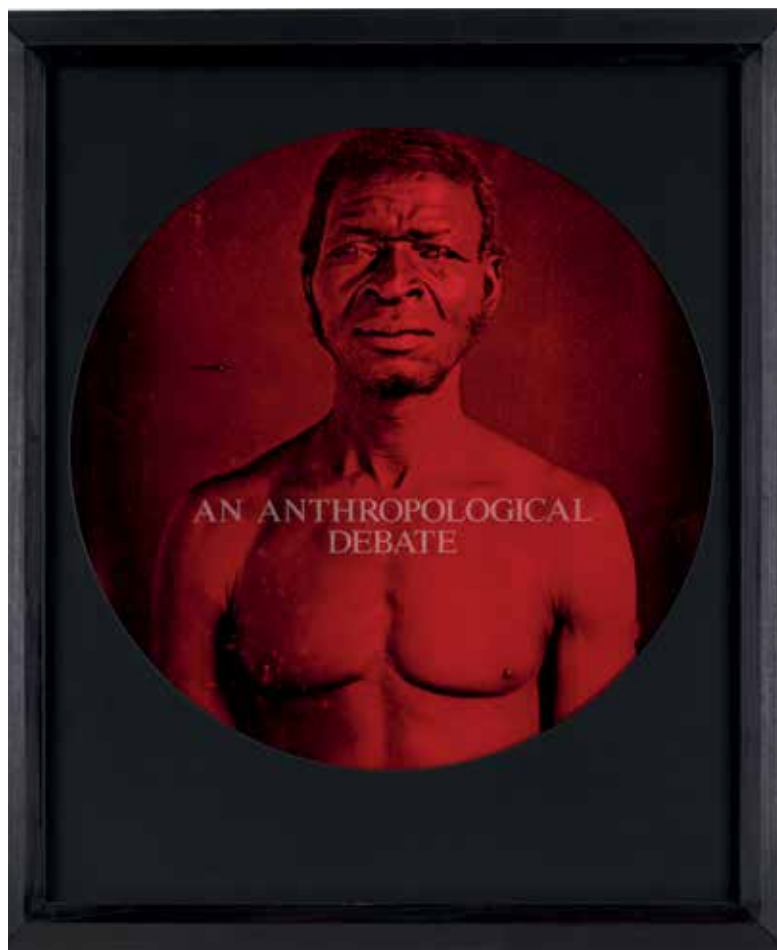
3.1 *From Here I Saw What Happened*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 43 x 33 in.



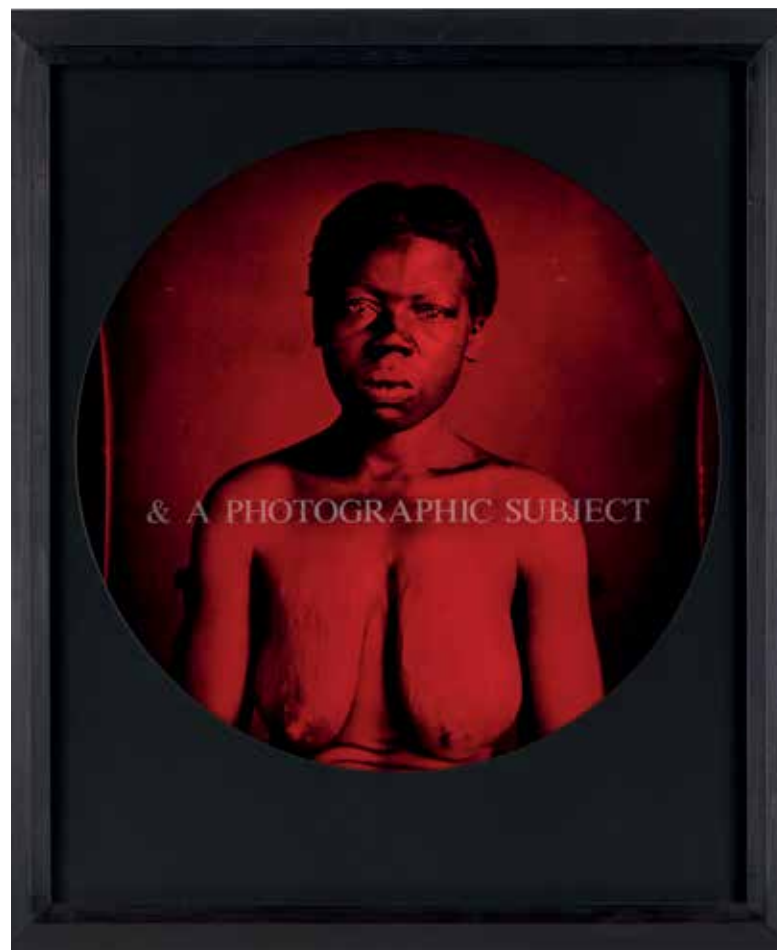
3.2 *You Became a / Scientific Profile*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



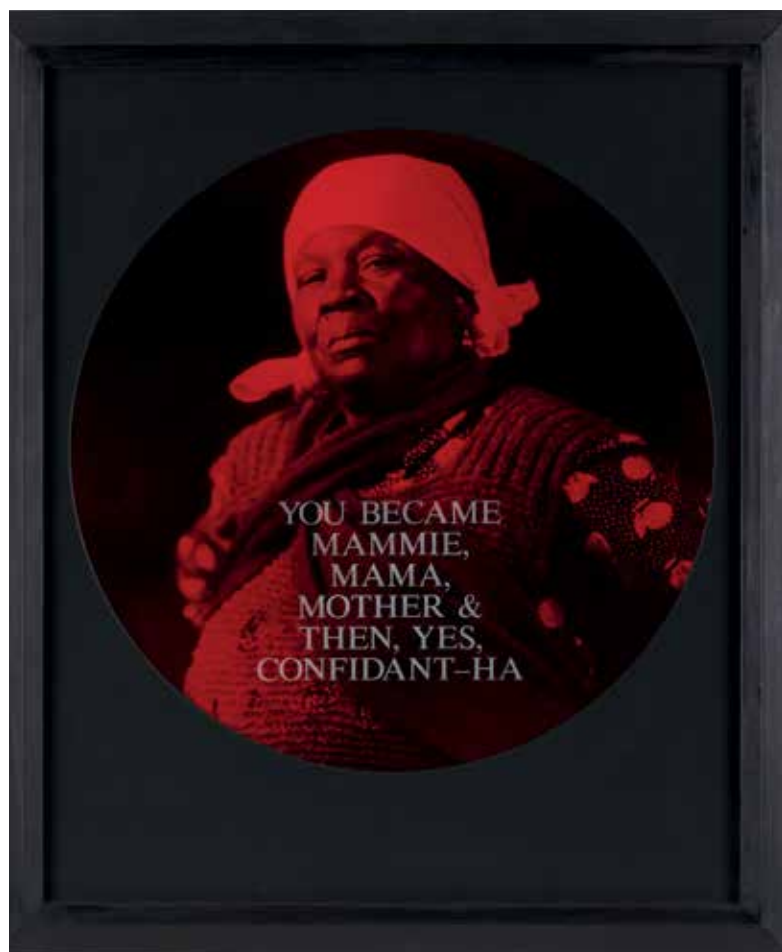
3.3 *A Negroid Type*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



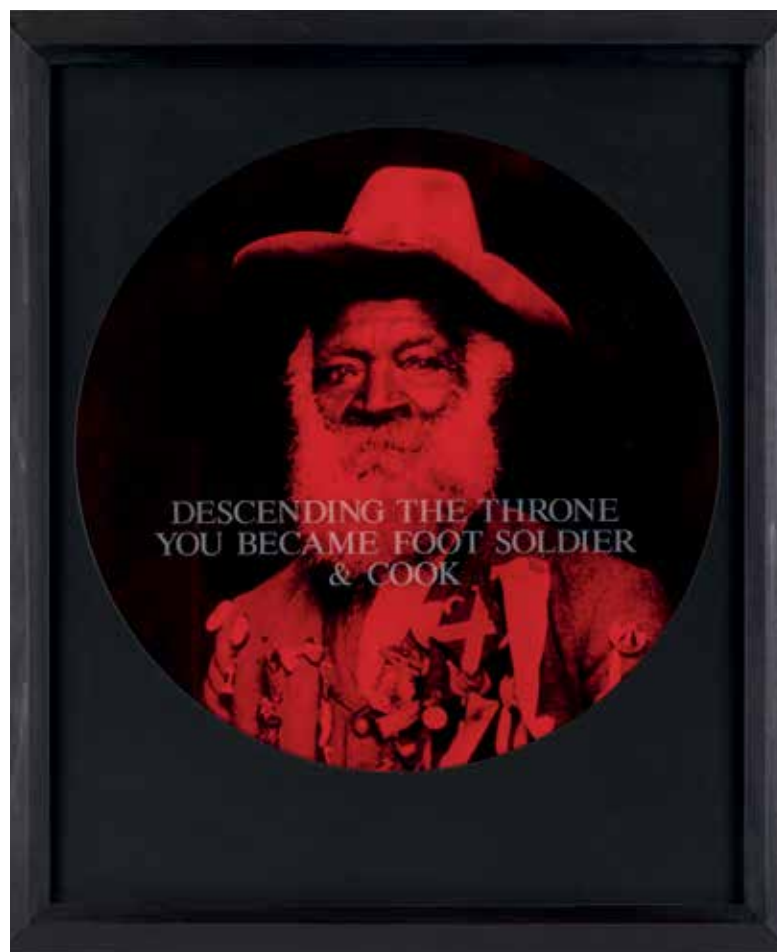
3.4 *An Anthropological / Debate*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.5 *& a Photographic Subject*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.6 *You Became / Mammie, / Mama, / Mother & / Then, Yes, / Confidant—Ha*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

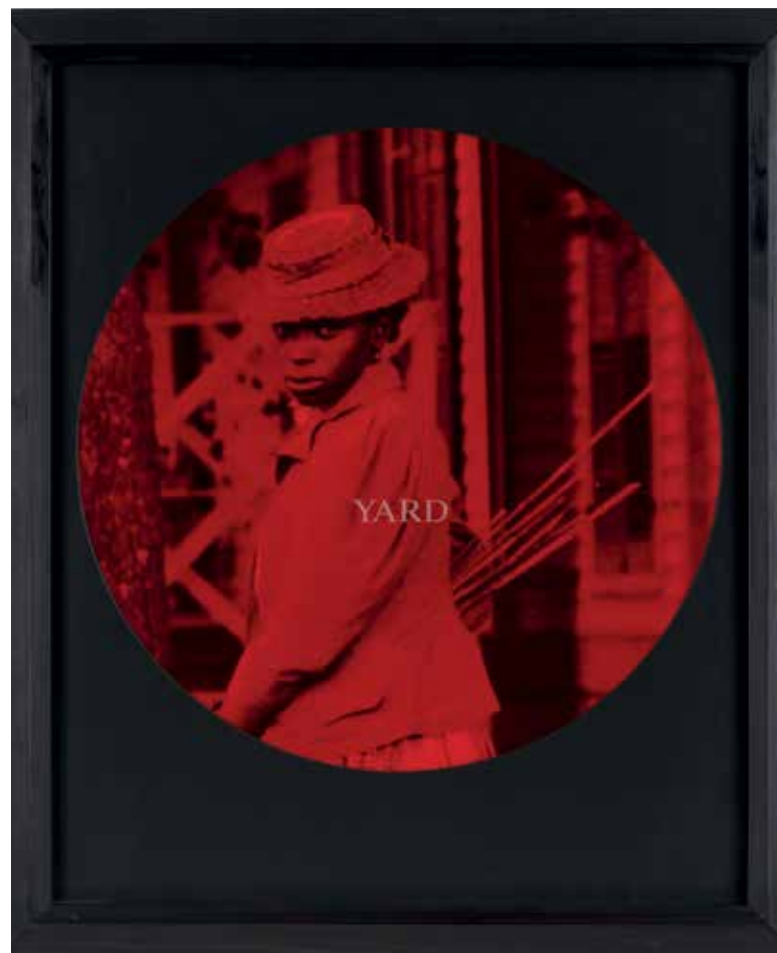


3.7 *Descending the Throne / You Became Foot Soldier / & Cook*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

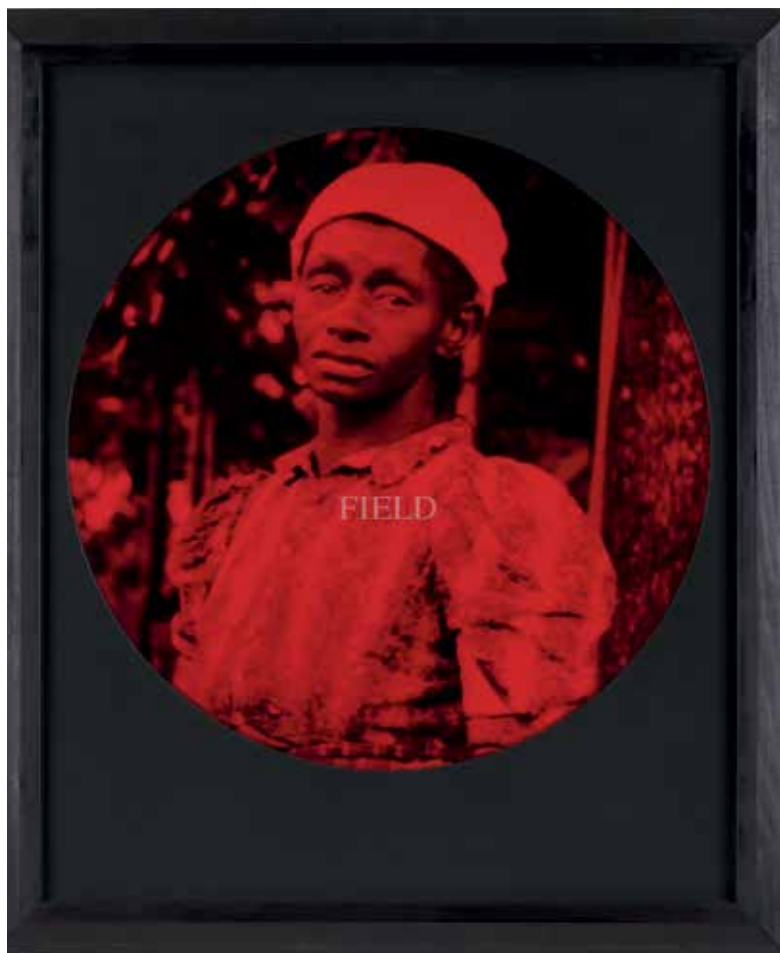




3.8 *House*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.9 *Yard*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

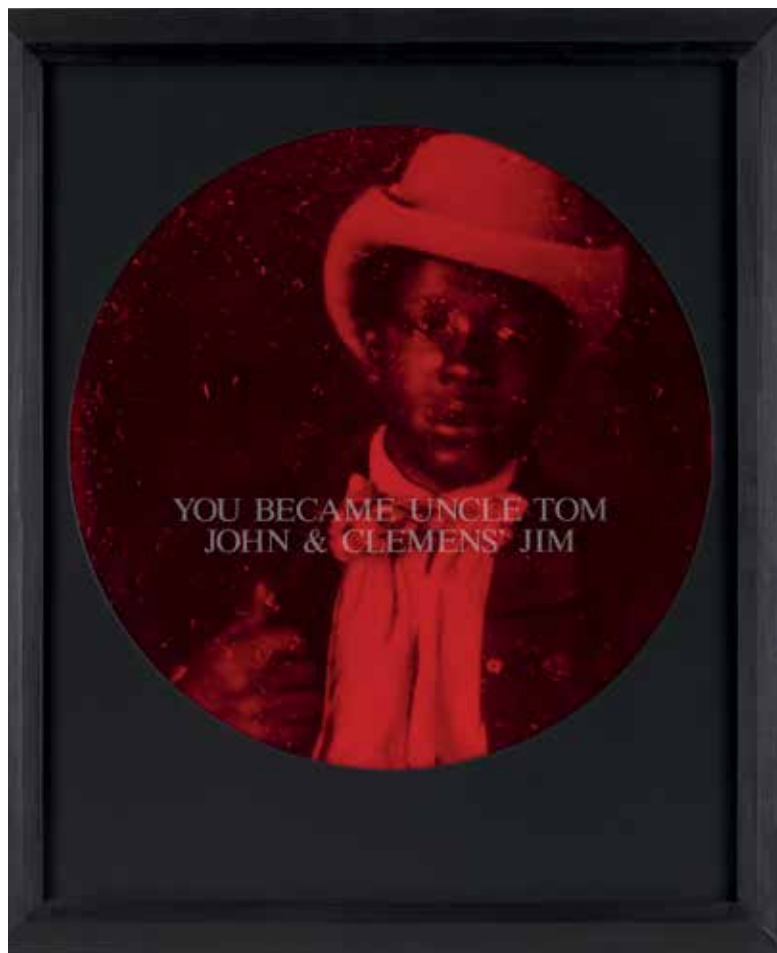


3.10 *Field*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

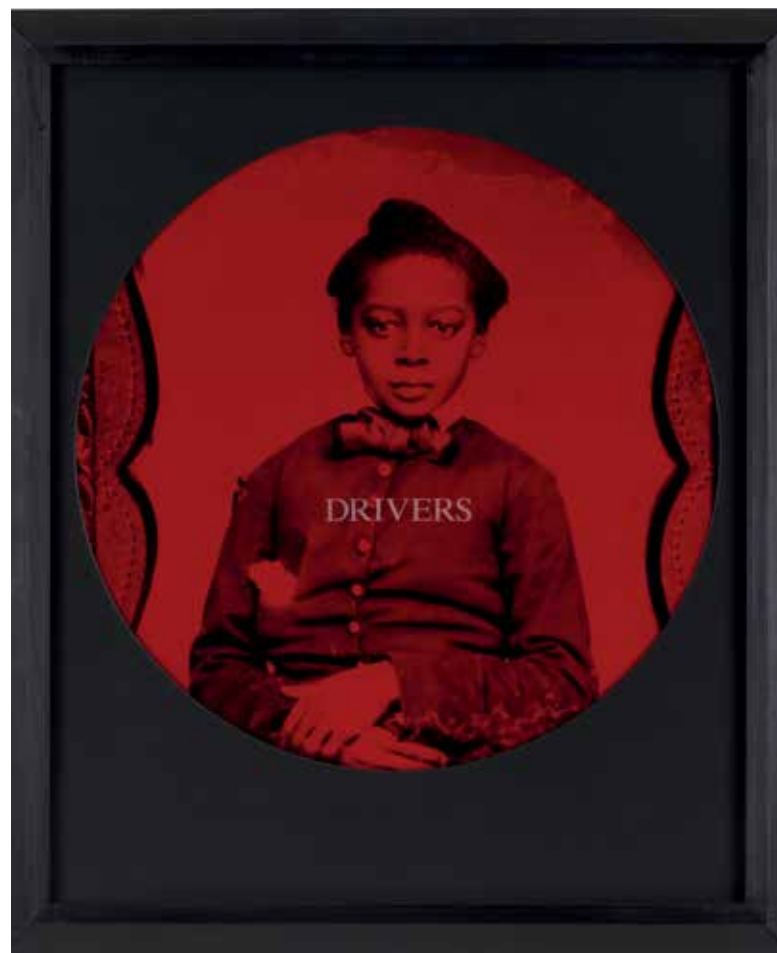


3.11 *Kitchen*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

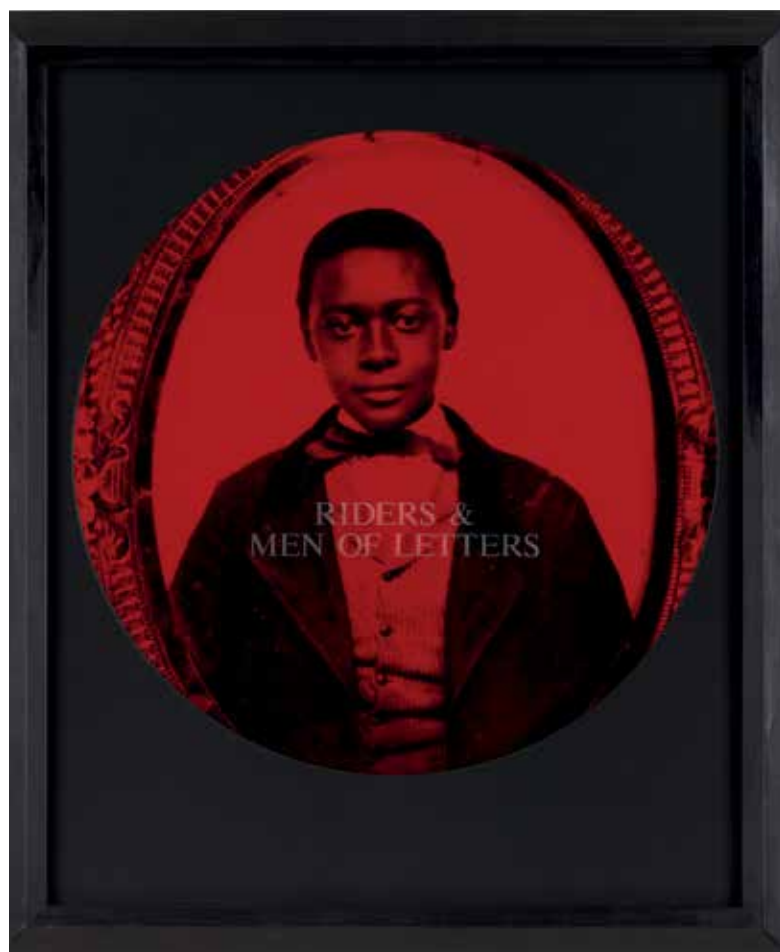




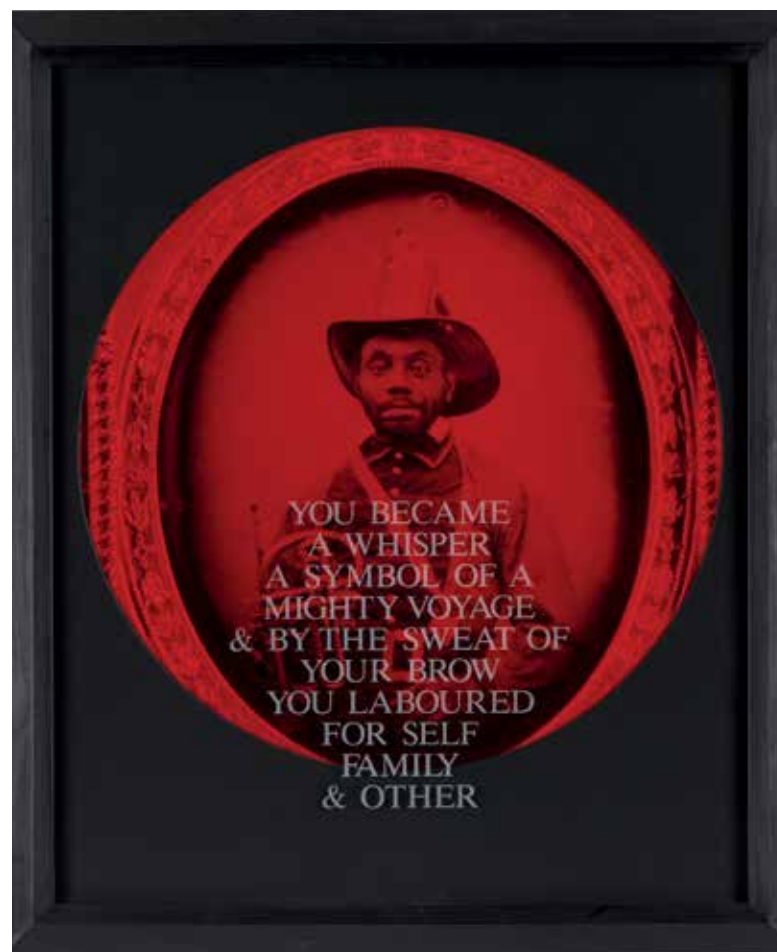
3.12 *You Became Uncle Tom / John & Clemens' Jim*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



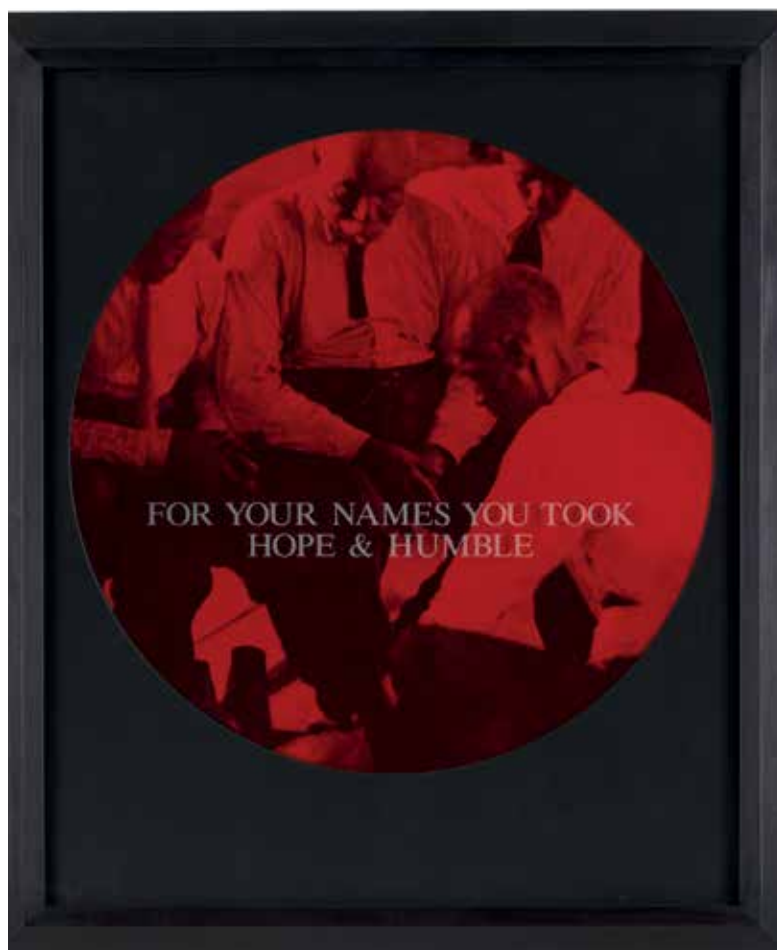
3.13 *Drivers*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



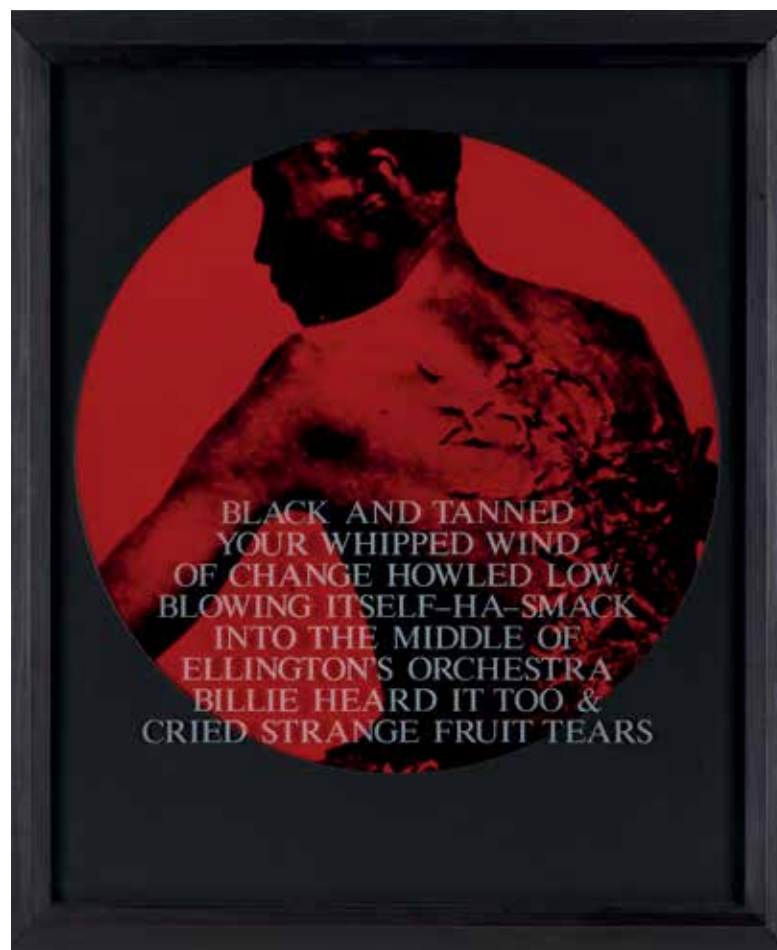
3.14 *Riders & / Men of Letters*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



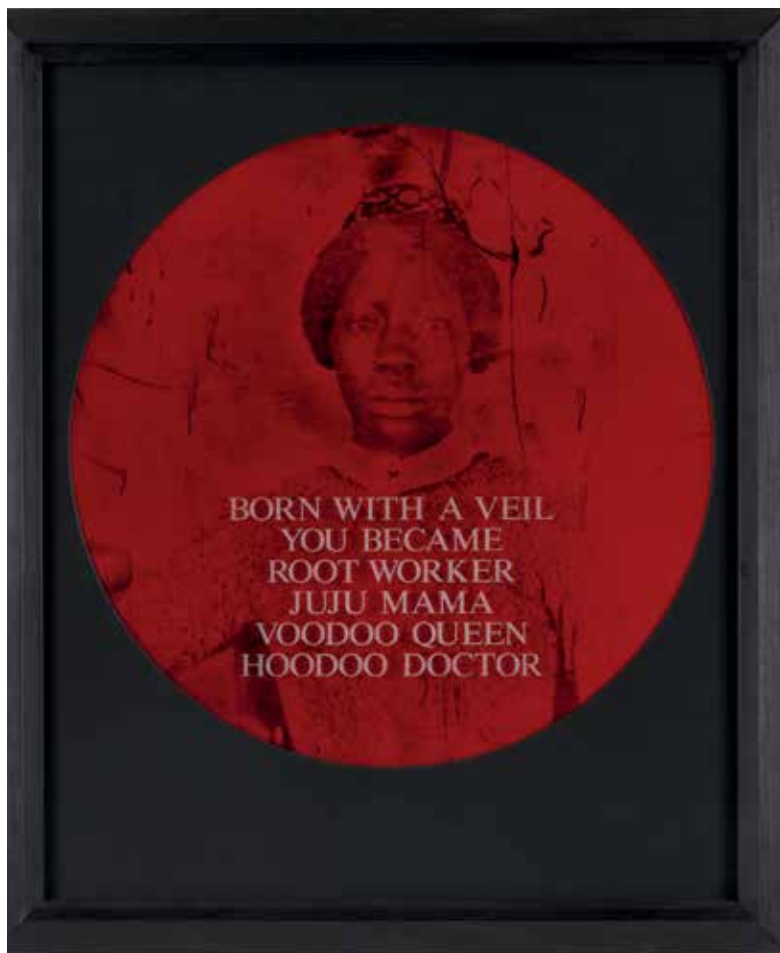
3.15 *You Became / A Whisper / A Symbol of a / Mighty Voyage / & by the Sweat of / Your Brow / You Laboured / For Self / Family / & Other*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



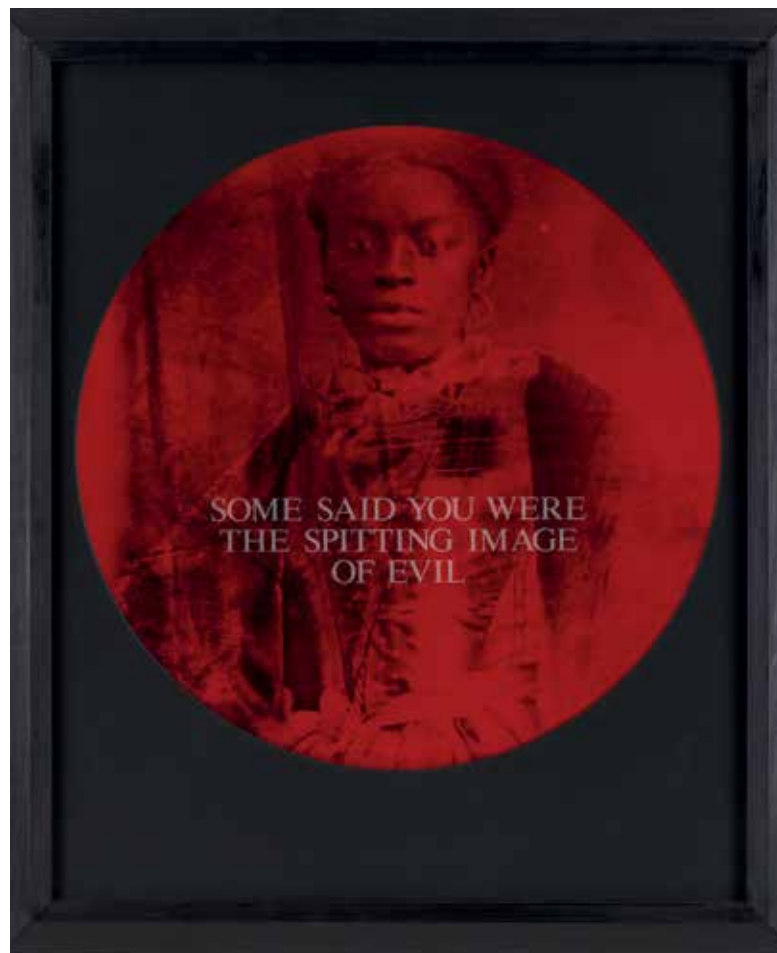
3.16 *For Your Names You Took / Hope & Humble*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



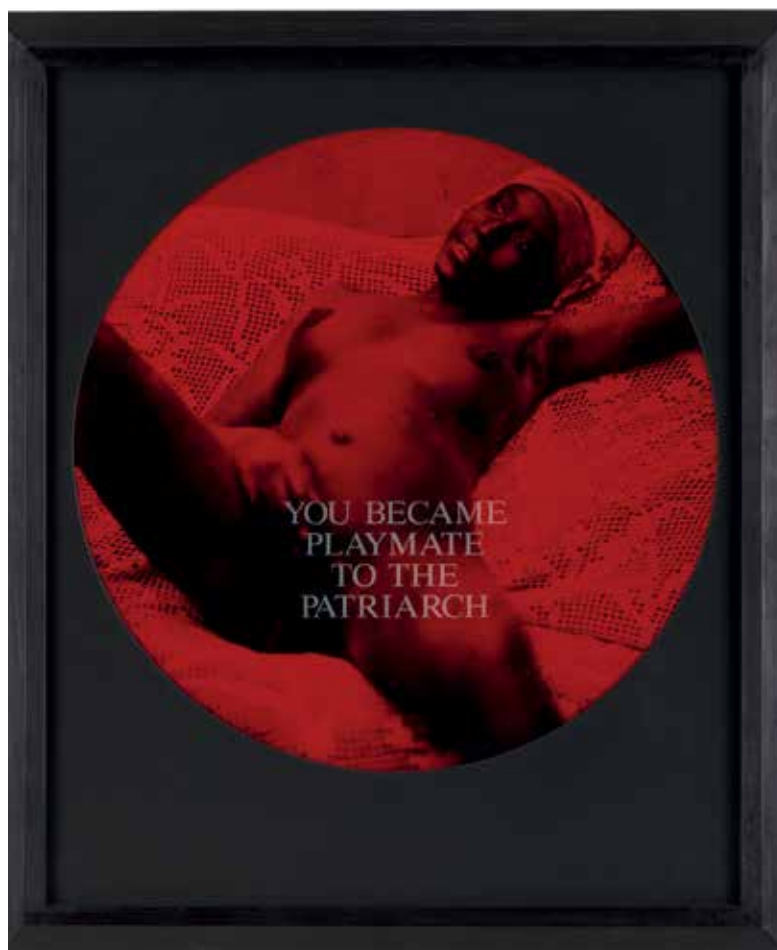
3.17 *Black and Tanned / Your Whipped Wind / Of Change Howled Low / Blowing Itself—Ha—Smack / Into the Middle of / Ellington's Orchestra / Billie Heard It Too & / Cried Strange Fruit Tears*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



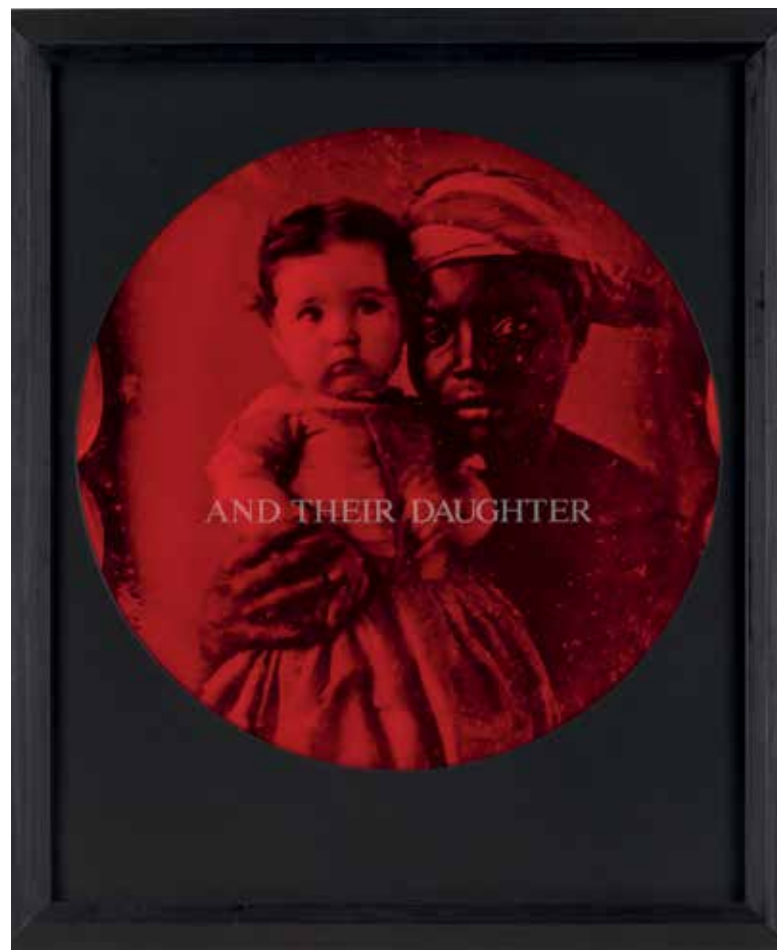
3.18 *Born with a Veil / You Became / Root Worker / Juju Mama / Voodoo Queen / Hoodoo Doctor*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.19 *Some Said You Were / The Spitting Image / Of Evil*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

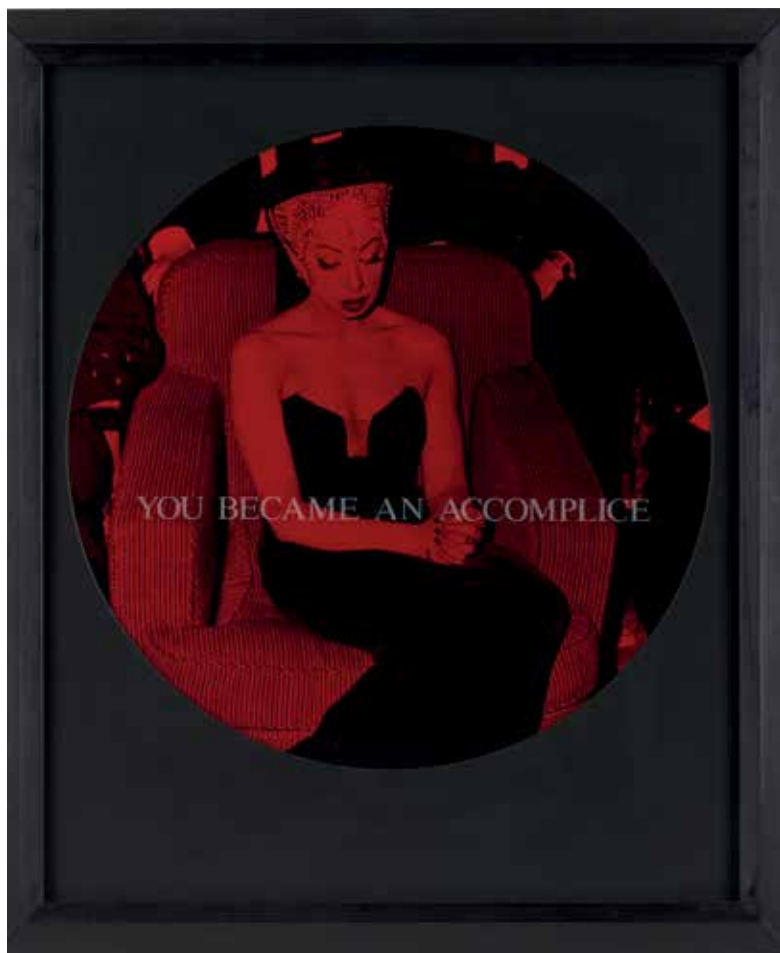


3.20 *You Became / Playmate / To the / Patriarch*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.21 *And Their Daughter*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



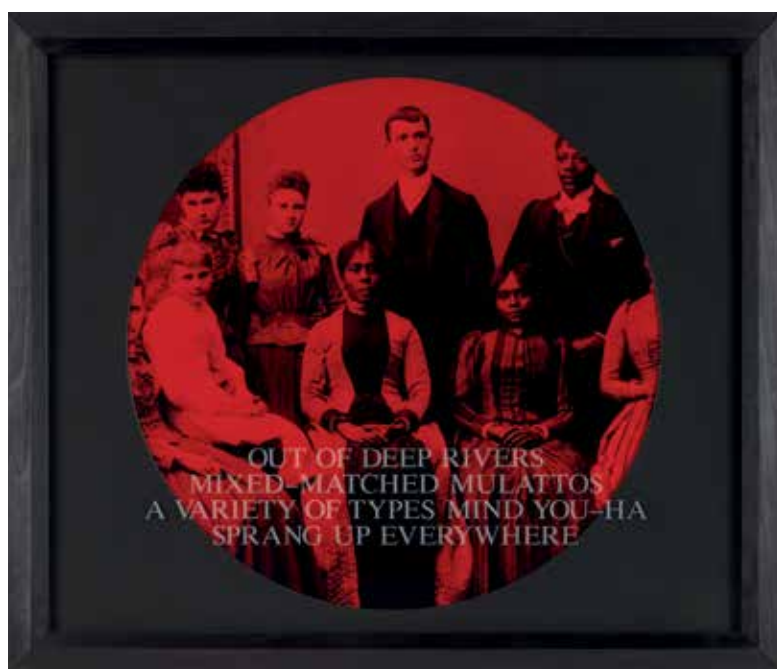


3.22 *You Became an Accomplice*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.23 *God Bless the Child*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.

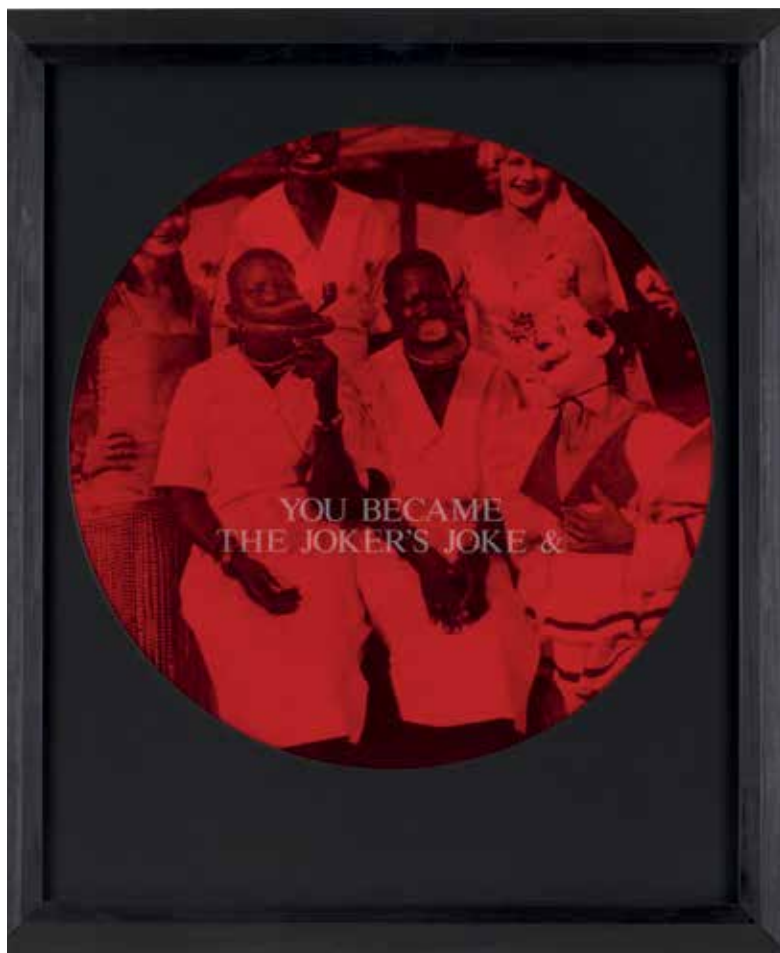




3.24 *Out of Deep Rivers / Mixed-Matched Mulattos / A Variety of Types Mind You—Ha / Sprang Up Everywhere*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 22.8 x 26.5 in.



3.25 *Your Resistance / Was Found in / The Food You Placed / On the Master's Table—Ha*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 22.8 x 26.5 in.



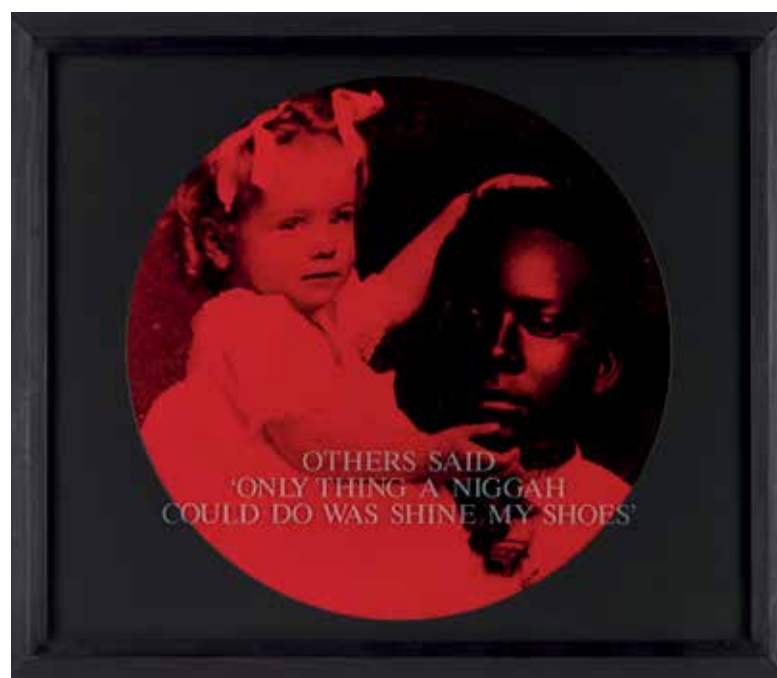
3.26 *You Became / The Joker's Joke &*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.27 *Anything / But What You Were / Ha*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



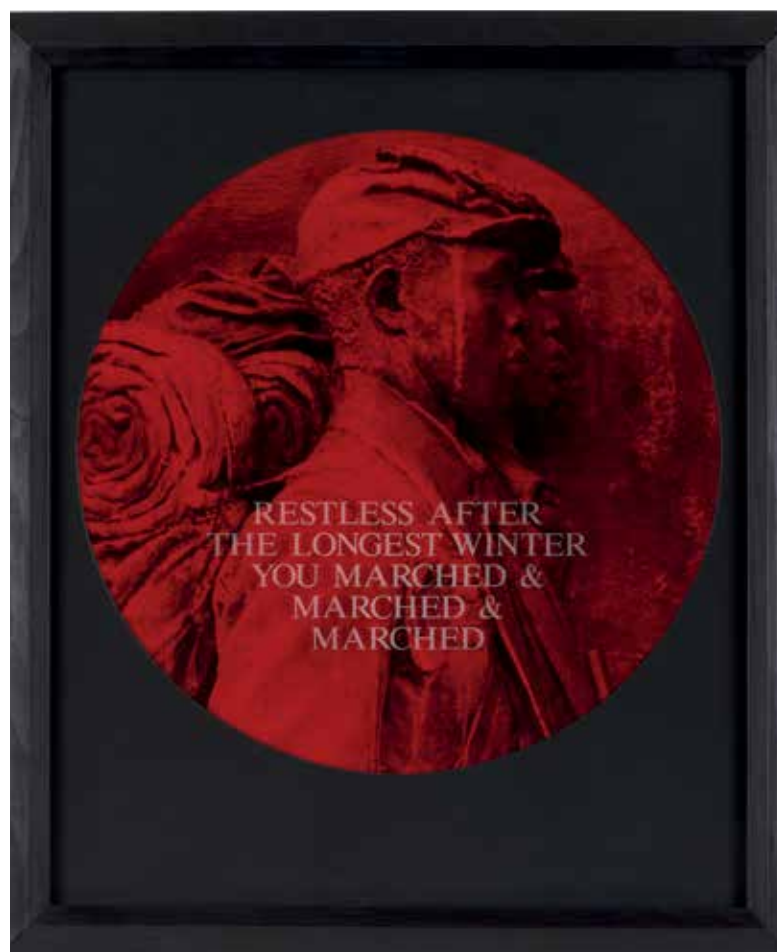
3.28 *Some Laughed / Long & Hard & Loud*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 22.8 x 26.5 in.



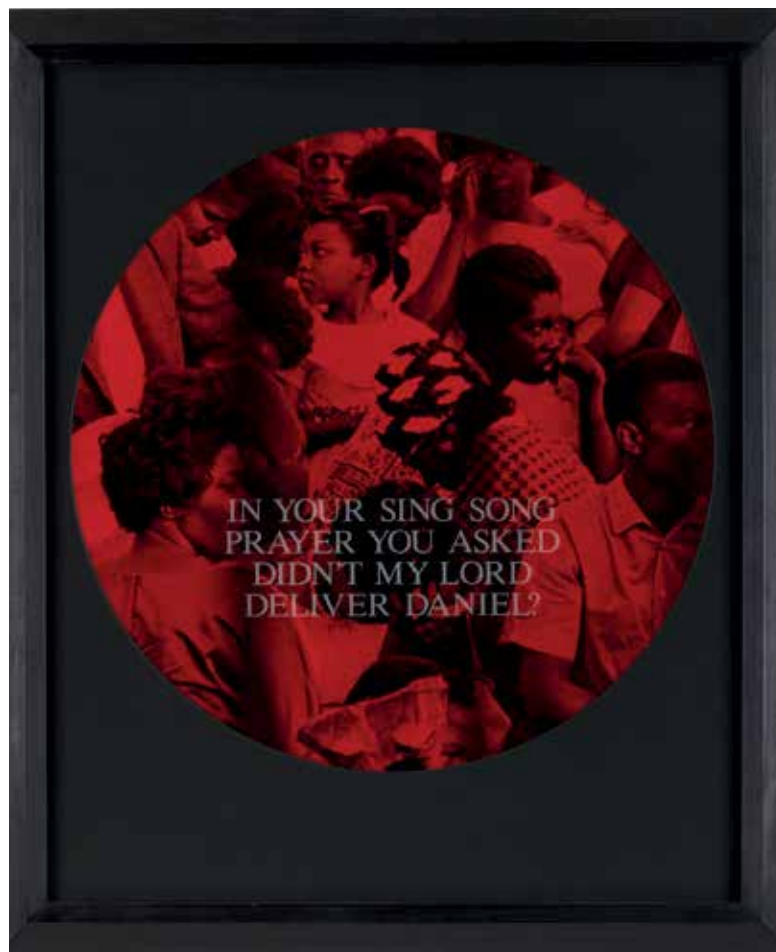
3.29 *Others Said / 'Only Thing a Niggah / Could Do Was Shine My Shoes'*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 22.8 x 26.5 in.



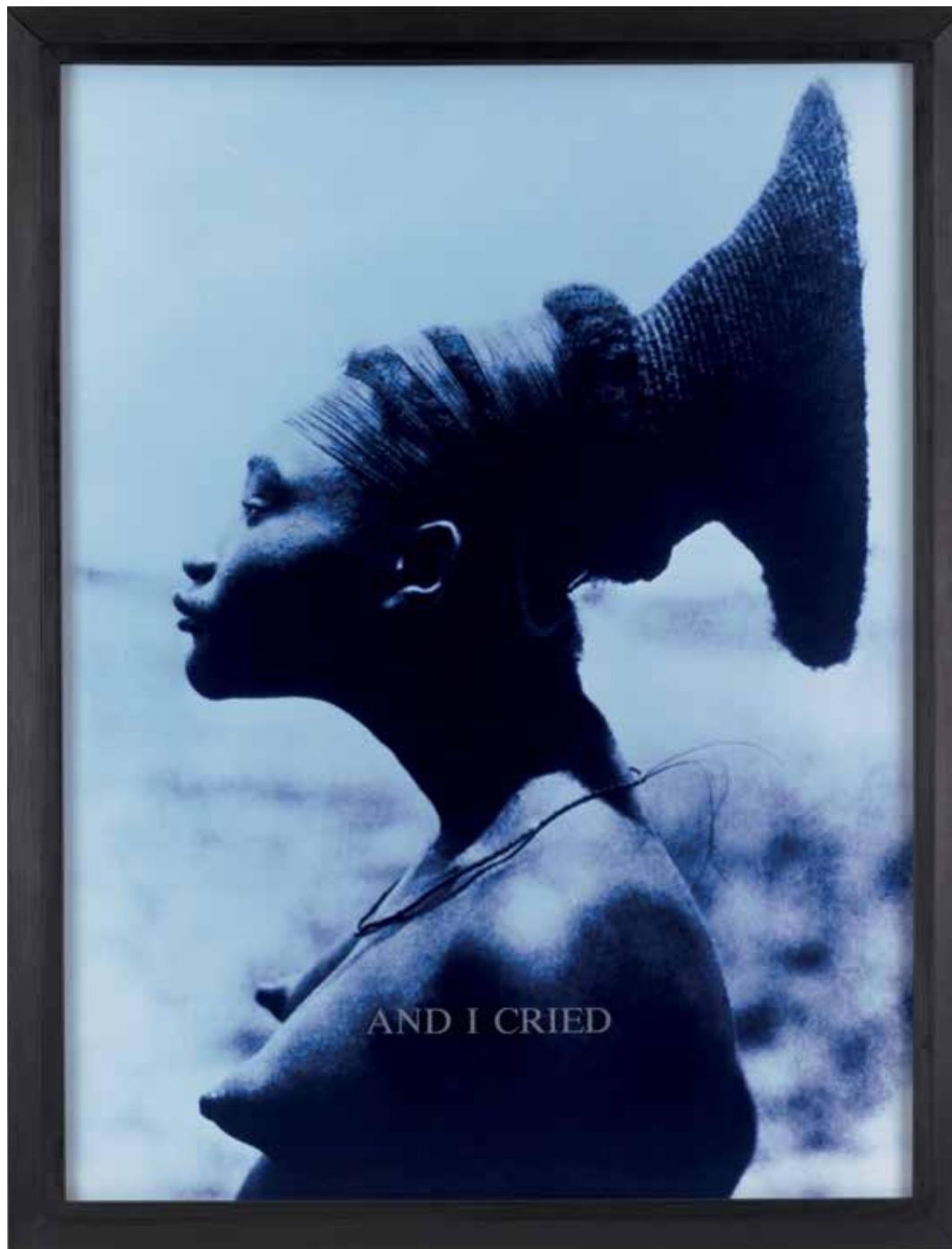
3.30 *You Became / Boots, / Spades & / Coons*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.31 *Restless after / The Longest Winter / You Marched & / Marched & / Marched*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.32 *In Your Sing Song / Prayer You Asked / Didn't My Lord / Deliver Daniel?*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 26.5 x 22.8 in.



3.33 *And I Cried*  
chromogenic color print and etched text on glass, 43 x 33 in.



## *The Louisiana Project (Missing Links), 2003*

“I wanted to think about the way in which the whole society is completely veiled and masked, the way in which the mask is traditionally used usually through carnival, what it really means, what it really tries to subscribe or circumscribe for that matter.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Carrie Mae Weems: Speaking of Art*, produced and directed by Edgar B. Howard and Muffie Dunn (New York: Checkerboard Film Foundation, 2012).



4.1 *Missing Link (Liberty)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.



4.2 *Missing Link (Justice)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.



4.3 *Missing Link (Happiness)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.



4.4 *Missing Link (Despair)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.



4.5 *Missing Link (Chicken)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.





4.6 *Missing Link (Sheep)*  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.

## *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People, 1989–90*

“It is always about understanding our relationship to power and how to engage it,  
how to critique it, how to unpack it.”<sup>8</sup>

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8 “Corbis Interviews Carrie Mae Weems.”



A Hammer



And A Sickle

5.1 *A Hammer*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.

5.2 *And a Sickle*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.



A Dagger



By Any Means Necessary

5.3 *A Dagger*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.

5.4 *By Any Means Necessary*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.



A Precise Moment in Time



A Hot Spot In A Corrupt World

5.5 *A Precise Moment in Time*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.

5.6 *A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.



*A Little Black Magic*

5.7 *A Little Black Magic*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.



*An Informational System*

5.8 *An Informational System*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.





Some Theory



A Song to Sing

5.9 *Some Theory*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.

5.10 *A Song to Sing*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.



5.11 *A Bell to Ring*  
Polaroid print, 24 x 20 in.

*Hopes and Dreams:*  
*Gestures of Demonstration, 2004–07*

“There’s something very powerful about using one’s body as a site of protest, as a site of turbulence, as a site of disagreement, using the body as a focus for critique.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Interview with Carrie Mae Weems” (Aug. 2013), *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, accessed Feb. 9, 2018, [http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page\\_id=664](http://radicalpresenceny.org/?page_id=664).



6.1 *Performance Gesture 10 or A Clown in Harlem #1*, 2006–07  
pigment ink print, 20 x 20 in.



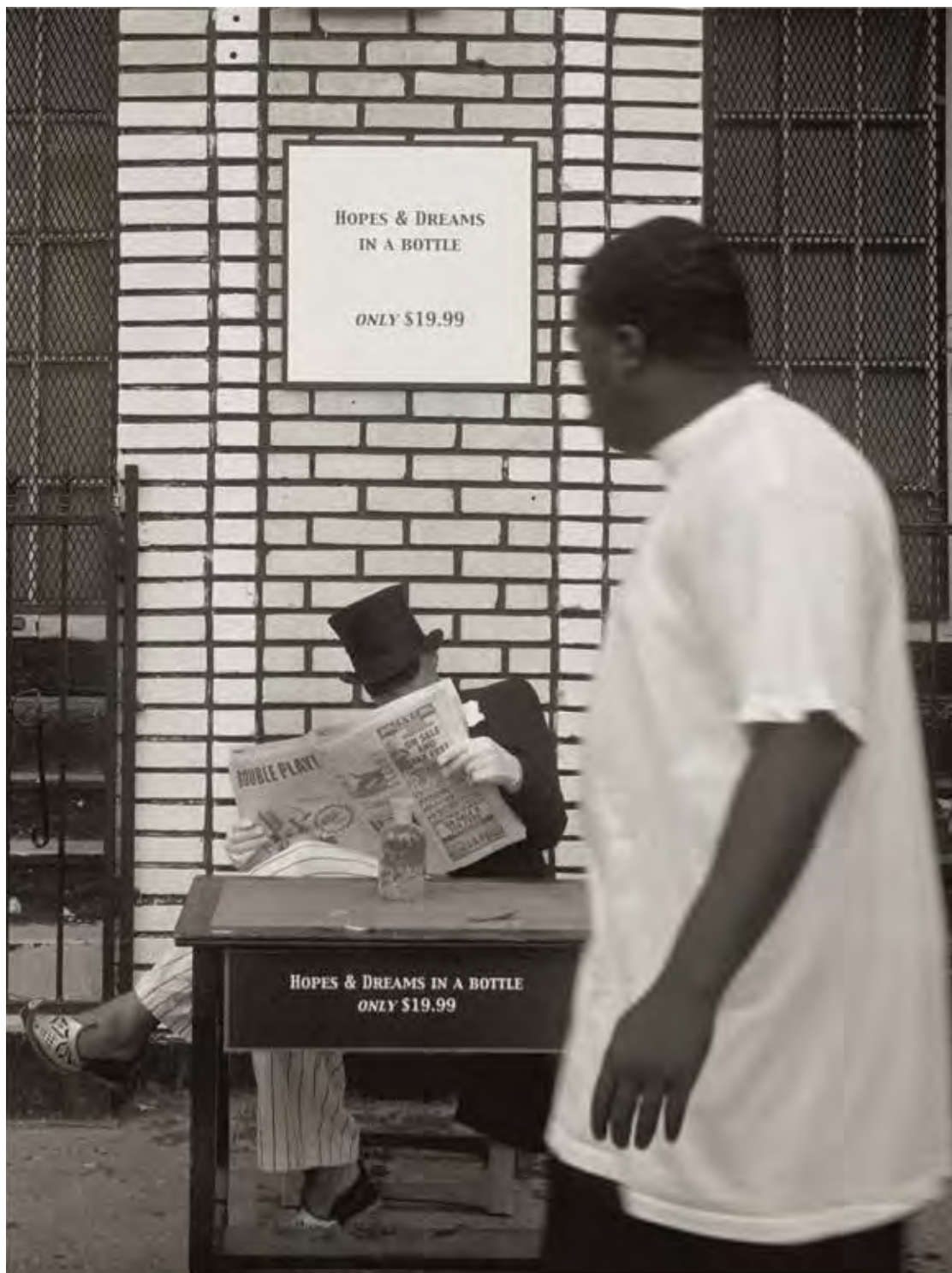
6.2 Performance Gesture 12 or A Clown in Harlem #2, 2006–07  
pigment ink print, 20 x 20 in.





6.3 *Performance Gesture 9*, 2006–07  
pigment ink print, 20 x 20 in.





6.4 *Selling Hopes and Dreams*, 2006–07  
pigment ink print, 22 x 19 in.



6.5 *Performance Studies #2*, 2004  
pigment ink print, 37 x 30 in. (overall)



6.6 *Performance Studies #1*, 2004  
pigment ink print, 37 x 30 in. (overall)



6.7 *Performance Gesture 1 or Let It Be Known*, 2004  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.





6.8 *Performance Gesture 14 or If I Ruled the World*, 2004  
pigment ink print, 38 x 27 in.

## *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012

“I have seen you for a long time. And I know you. I know you. I want a crack at you. I want to know you. I’m gonna shred you. I’m gonna kill you. I’m gonna brand you. And I’m gonna destroy you, cuz I know you. And I see you. You don’t believe me? Huh? No, you don’t believe me do you. But I’m gonna take you, and I’m gonna break you, I’m gonna destroy you. Because I want you to feel the suffering that I know. It’s not gonna be pretty. Revenge is a muthafucka.”<sup>10</sup>

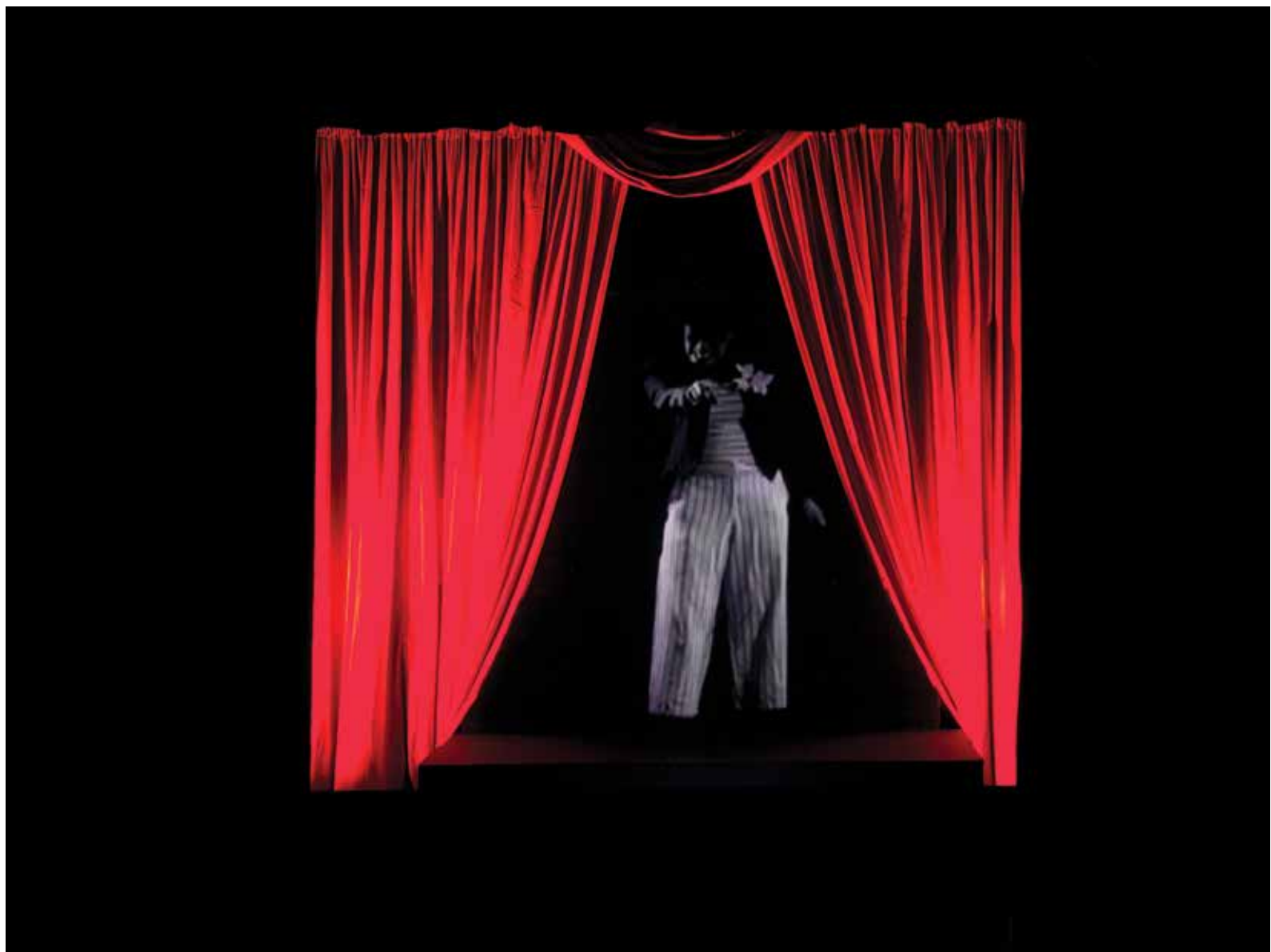
“Some of the best art really takes you by the throat and rattles you. It disrupts your ordinary view of the world and sets you spinning. We really rise to the occasion when everything has been disrupted in our world.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Narration from *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts*, digital video, 18:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xssAQn6dsW4>.

<sup>11</sup> “Carrie Mae Weems: YoungArts Master Class,” YouTube video, 1:03:05, posted by YoungArts, Apr. 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWseoglu8L8>.





7 *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts*  
video installation and mixed media

## *Peaches, Liz, Tanikka, and Elaine, 1988*

“What can this black body project, and how will that projection be understood and received no matter how you attempt to shift it? It’s laid with a certain kind of history that’s almost insurmountable. I’m always attempting to push against it, to insist that there be another kind of read.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in Hilarie M. Sheets, “Photographer and Subject Are One,” *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/arts/design/carrie-mae-weems-photographer-and-subject.html>.



8.1 *Peaches*  
gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 in.



8.2 *Liz*  
gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 in.



8.3 *Tanikka*  
gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 in.





8.4 *Elaine*  
gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 in.

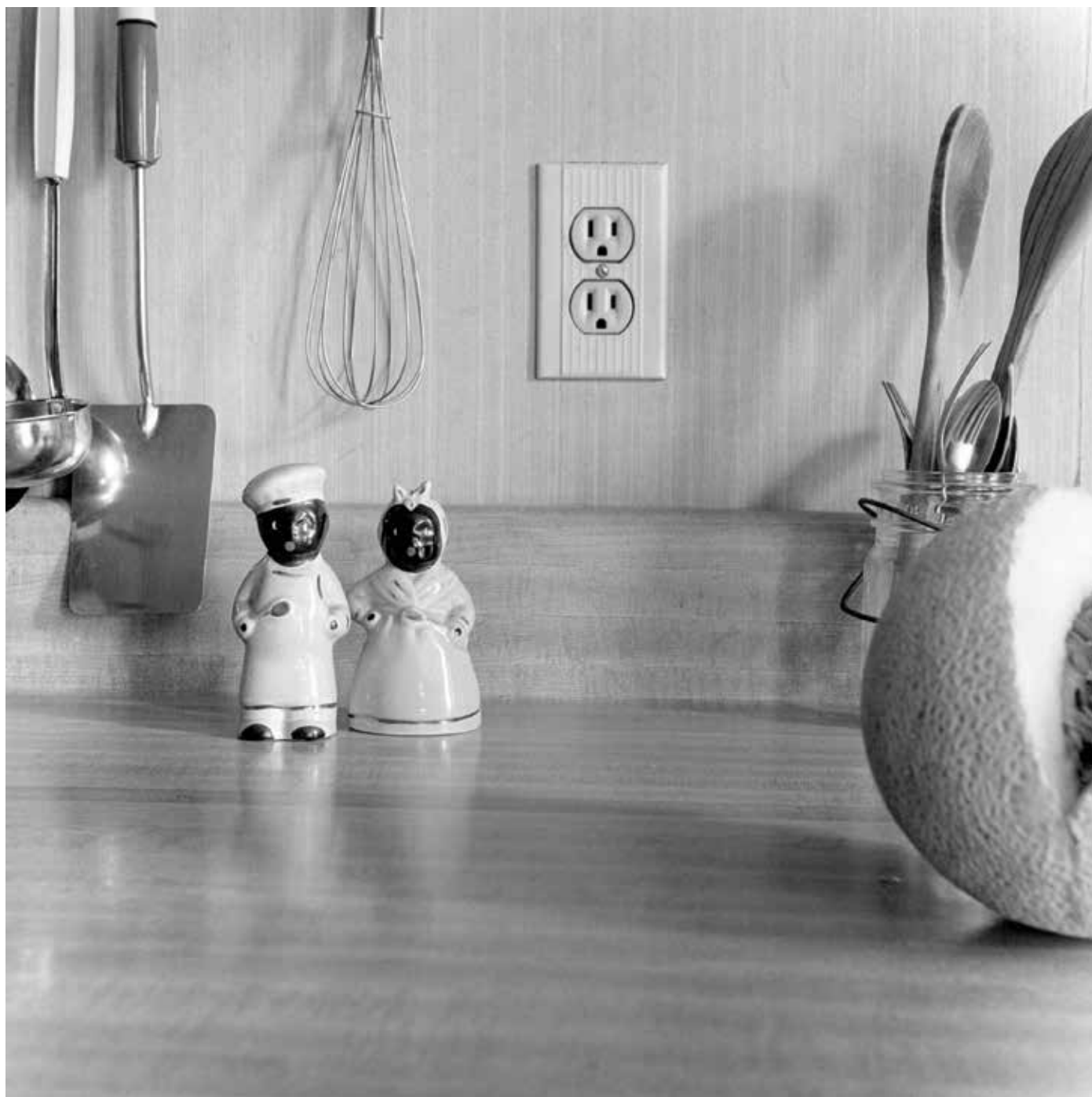


## *American Icons, 1988–89*

“Each of us carries around little packages of consumer racism in the form of neat little characteristics and qualities reserved for specific groups—unlike ourselves—we may encounter along this miserably short course in life. And the unfortunate part of the business is these stereotypes are not harmless expressions, but have real—devastatingly real—effects on the material well-being of those singled out as objects of these expressions.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Andrea Kirsh, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color,” in *Carrie Mae Weems*, Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993), 14.



9.1 *Untitled (Salt and Pepper Shakers)*  
gelatin silver print, 15.3 x 15.3 in.



9.2 *Untitled (Ashtray)*  
gelatin silver print, 15.3 x 15.3 in.



9.3 *Untitled (Letter Holder)*  
gelatin silver print, 15.3 x 15.3 in.

## *Ain't Jokin', 1987–88*

“The humor here is much more wicked because it has much more to do with the insidious nature of humor on a race of people. Because the jokes were not just used as a social barometer to talk about black folk, they have been used as a way of annihilating them and keeping them completely in check.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Susan Canning, “Carrie Mae Weems,” in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, ed. Glenn Harper (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 38.



**WHAT ARE THE THREE THINGS YOU CAN'T  
GIVE A BLACK PERSON?**

**Answer: A Black Eye, a Fat Lip and a Job!**

10.1 *What Are the Three Things You Can't Give a Black Person?*  
*Answer: A Black Eye, a Fat Lip and a Job!*  
gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in.





**LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,  
"MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?"  
THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH,  
AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!!"**

10.2 *Mirror, Mirror*  
gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in.



## BLACK WOMAN WITH CHICKEN

10.3 *Black Woman with Chicken*  
digital c-print, 59.8 x 47.9 in.



**BLACK MAN HOLDING WATERMELON**

10.4 *Black Man Holding Watermelon*  
digital c-print, 59.8 x 47.9 in.



**WHITE PATTY,  
WHITE PATTY,  
YOU DON'T SHINE,  
MEET YOU AROUND THE CORNER,  
AND BEAT YOUR BEHIND.**

10.5 *White Patty, You Don't Shine*  
gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in.





**WHEN ASKED WHAT HE WANTS TO BE  
WHEN HE GROWS UP, THE BLACK BOY  
SAYS, "I WANTA BE A WHITE MAN, CAUSE  
MY MAMA SAY, 'A NIGGER AIN'T SHIT.'"**

10.6 *Black Boy Said*  
gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in.

## *All the Boys*, 2016

“Last year, I decided after the killing of the Emanuel 9 in Charleston, I wanted to say something about the moment in which we live. I also wanted to produce a work that explored the question of grace. And in exploring the question of grace you have to explore the question of humanity. The thing that really struck me about the ways in which people have handled this tragedy, whether we are looking at the young people who have started Black Lives Matter or the President singing ‘Amazing Grace,’ is we are continuing to ask for our humanity to be recognized. And at the same time offering the generosity of spirit even as our young men are being murdered. That’s kind of extraordinary and what really motivated the piece.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Qtd. in Antwaun Sargent, “Carrie Mae Weems on a Career of Challenging Power and Black Representation in Art,” *Artsy*, Oct. 31, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-carrie-mae-weems-on-a-career-of-challenging-power-and-black-representation-in-art>.

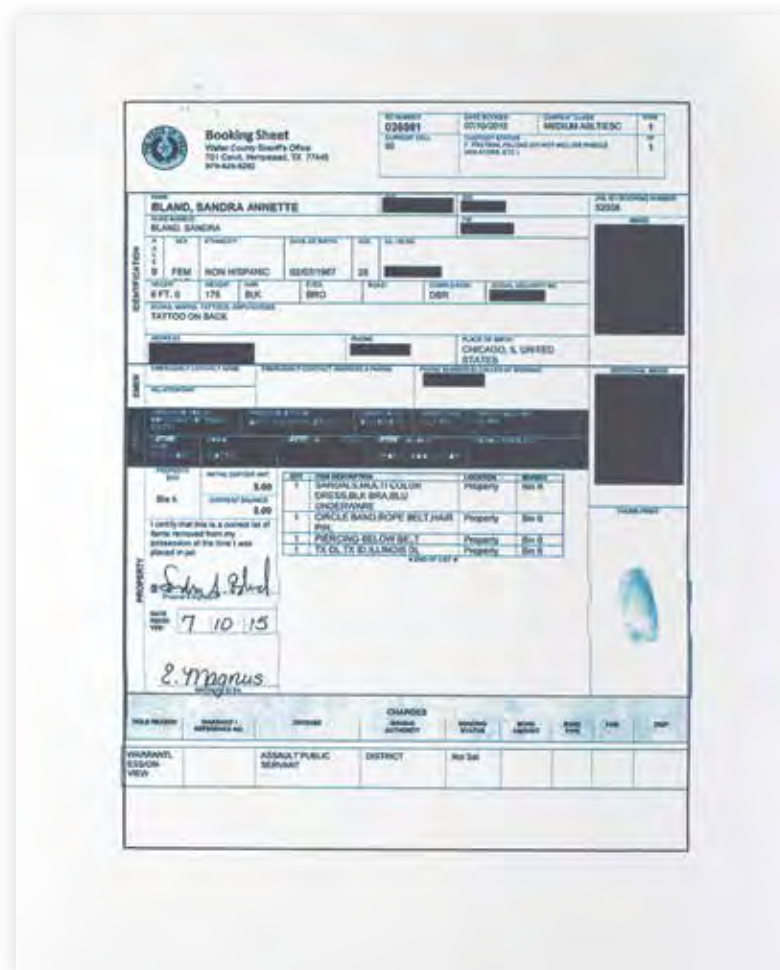




11.1 *Profile 1*  
pigment ink prints on gesso board, 35.4 x 27.4 in. (each)



11.2 *Profile 2*  
pigment ink prints on gesso board, 35.4 x 27.4 in. (each)





Ferguson Police Department  
333 S. Main Street, Ferguson, MO 63105

Offense / Incident Report

Report Date: 08/09/2014 11:51 Type of Incident: ROBBERY(T)  
2ND-STRONGARM-CONVICTION'S STG Completed By: 34-12388 Case Status: EXCEPTIONALLY  
CLEARED

Offender: [Redacted] Submitter: [Redacted] Street: [Redacted] Zip: 63001

Offender (Last, First Middle Initial): [Redacted] Age: [Redacted] DOB: [Redacted] Sex: [Redacted] Height: [Redacted] Weight: [Redacted]

Type: [Redacted] Street Address: [Redacted] City: [Redacted] State: [Redacted] Zip Code: [Redacted] Country: [Redacted]

Phone: [Redacted] Fax/FBI: [Redacted] Email Address: [Redacted]

Driver License: Type: [Redacted] State: [Redacted] Expires: [Redacted] Restriction: [Redacted] Marital Status: [Redacted] Number of Children: [Redacted] Ethnicity: [Redacted] Language: [Redacted]

Height: [Redacted] Weight: [Redacted] Build: [Redacted] Skin Color: [Redacted] Complexion: [Redacted] Hair: [Redacted] Type of Haircut: [Redacted] Eyes: [Redacted] Color: [Redacted]

Sex: [Redacted] Hair Length: [Redacted] Hair Style: [Redacted] Marital Status: [Redacted] Sideburns: [Redacted] Tattoos: [Redacted] Country: [Redacted]

Voice: [Redacted] Teeth: [Redacted] Distinguishing: [Redacted]

☐ Prongs ☐ Bladed ☒ Pronged Bladed ☐ Pronged Bladed ☐ Pronged Short Blade ☐ Pronged Pronged Blade

Item Type: [Redacted] Color: [Redacted] Markings: [Redacted]

Item Type: [Redacted] Color: [Redacted] Markings: [Redacted]

Reporting Officer: [Redacted] Reporting Officer (1): [Redacted]  
(Close Page Only)

Reporting Officer (2): [Redacted] Reporting Officer (2): [Redacted]  
(Close Page Only)

Page 1 of 10 Printed: 08/14/2014 11:51

11.4 *Blocked 3*  
pigment ink print, silkscreened panel on gesso board, 31.4 x 25.4 in. (each)

## *Usual Suspects*, 2016

“How do you measure a life?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Commencement Speaker, Carrie Mae Weems 2016,” YouTube video, 28:21, posted by SVA Commencement, May 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXInQIAoVBU>.

JULY 6, 2016.... ST. ANTHONY, MN

THE SUSPECT

PHILANDO CASTILE

BLACK MALE

AGE 32

5.11

170 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

APRIL 22, 2015.... PORTSMOUTH, VA

THE SUSPECT

WILLIAM CHAPMAN

BLACK MALE

AGE 18

5.8

185 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

12.1 *Castile*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

12.2 *Chapman*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.



AUGUST 5, 2014.... DAYTON, OH

THE SUSPECT

JOHN CRAWFORD III

BLACK MALE

AGE 22

5.9

172 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

AUGUST 11, 2014.... FLORENCE, CA

THE SUSPECT

EZELL FORD

BLACK MALE

AGE 25

6.0

171 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

12.3 *Crawford*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

12.4 *Ford*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

JULY 17, 2014.... NEW YORK, NY

THE SUSPECT  
ERIC GARNER  
BLACK MALE  
AGE 43  
6.3  
350 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

APRIL 19, 2015.... BALTIMORE, MD

THE SUSPECT  
FREDDIE GRAY  
BLACK MALE  
AGE 25  
5.8  
185 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

12.5 *Garner*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

12.6 *Gray*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

OCTOBER 20, 2014.... CHICAGO, IL

THE SUSPECT  
LAQUAN MCDONALD  
BLACK MALE  
AGE 17  
6.0  
180 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

NOVEMBER 22, 2014.... CLEVELAND, OH

THE SUSPECT  
TAMIR RICE  
BLACK MALE  
AGE 12  
5.7  
195 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

12.7 McDonald  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

12.8 Rice  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

JULY 5, 2016.... BATON ROUGE, LA

THE SUSPECT

ALTON STERLING

BLACK MALE

AGE 37

5.11

215 LBS

MATCHING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ALLEGED, PERPETRATOR  
WAS STOPPED AND/OR APPREHENDED, PHYSICALLY ENGAGED, AND  
SHOT AT THE SCENE. SUSPECT KILLED. TO DATE, NO ONE HAS BEEN  
CHARGED IN THE MATTER.

*12.9 Sterling*  
gesso and screenprint ink on board, 30 x 24 in.

## *People of a Darker Hue*, 2016

“They were no strangers to sorrow. Time and time again, the man was rejected, the woman was denied. A man was killed, the body laid in the open, uncovered and exposed. Women wailed and men moaned. I saw him turn with raised hands. I heard a shot. I saw him fall. For reasons unknown. I rejected my own knowledge and I deceived myself by refusing to believe that this was possible.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Narration from *People of a Darker Hue*, digital video, 14:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZNTIpzXfB8>.



13 *People of a Darker Hue* (video still)



## *The Hope Peony and A Considered Space, 2013*

“I developed *The Hope Peony* for W. E. B. Du Bois. I thought that Du Bois/*Hope* should be planted in your garden. Just plant it in your garden. If you don’t have it in your heart, plant it in your garden. It was a wonderful way of thinking about social change, offering gestures and markers towards change that are very simple, very elegant, in a very unmitigated and easy way.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “*Fresh Talk*: Carrie Mae Weems.”



14.1 *The Hope Peony*  
pigment ink print, 24 x 22 in.



14.2 *A Considered Space*  
pigment ink print, 35 x 45 in.



14.3 *The Hope Peony*  
pigment ink print, 24 x 22 in.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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**ASH ANDERSON** teaches the history of photography in the Art, Art History, and Film Department at Boston College. He curated the 2014 McMullen Museum exhibition *Paris Night and Day: Photography between the Wars*. He was a contributor to the ICA Boston catalogue *Leap before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, and co-curated the exhibitions *Again: Serial Practices in Contemporary Art* at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and *From Any Angle: Photographs from the Collection of Doris Bry* and *What is a Line? Drawings from the Collection* at the Yale University Art Gallery.

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